

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 1A

6-min. Video Overview

Introduction to the "Letter to the Hebrews, Part 1

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All right, let's just jump right in. You know, tucked away in the New Testament, there's this incredible piece of writing. It's theologically deep, it's artistically beautiful, and it is completely and utterly mysterious.

It's the book of Hebrews. And while it's shaped Christian thinking for centuries, it's got this massive secret right at its heart. So who actually wrote this thing? It's probably the most elegant, powerful sermon in the entire New Testament.

And you'd think we'd know who the author is, but we don't. And that's our central question. I mean, think about it.

For nearly 2,000 years, people have been trying to crack this case. It's basically one of early Christianity's biggest cold cases. So today, you and I, we're going to put on our detective hats.

We're going to follow the clues and see what we can uncover about this massive literary mystery. Okay, so every good investigation needs a prime suspect. And for a long, long time, everyone was convinced they had their man, the Apostle Paul.

For centuries, this case was pretty much considered closed. And you can totally see why. I mean, look at the evidence.

One of the earliest manuscripts we have from around 200 AD sticks Hebrews right in there with all of Paul's other letters. Then near the end, the author mentions Timothy, and everyone knew Timothy was Paul's guy. And of course, the big one for a lot of people was the King James Bible, literally putting the epistle of Paul right in the title.

So yeah, on the surface, the case against him looked pretty solid. But you know how it is in these detective stories. Once you start dusting for prints and really examining the evidence, the words of the text itself, the whole story starts to change.

Cracks begin to appear in the case. Okay, clue number one, and this is a big one. It's all about where they get their authority.

Paul is adamant in his other letters. He basically swears an oath that he got the gospel straight from a revelation of Jesus Christ himself, no middleman. But the author of Hebrews says the complete opposite.

They explicitly group themselves in with the people who heard the message secondhand from those who originally heard Jesus. That's a huge contradiction. Their stories just don't line up.

And here's clue number two. It's all about their style, their M.O., if you will. Paul goes out of his way to say, look, I'm not here to wow you with fancy words or clever speeches.

He wants faith to be simple. But the person who wrote Hebrews, oh man, it's the total opposite. This text is like a literary symphony.

It's packed with sophisticated, high-level Greek rhetoric and artistic flair. It's like comparing a straightforward memo to an epic poem. They're just not the same writer.

So what's the verdict? When you look at the internal evidence, the case against Paul just completely dissolves. It's like Paul's own testimony from his other letters gives him a perfect alibi. So our prime suspect is officially cleared.

And now the mystery really deepens. All right. With Paul out of the picture, the ancient investigators had to turn to other persons of interest.

It's time to bring in some other folks for questioning. So let's check out the lineup. So a few compelling names pop up.

First, there's Barnabas, an early church writer named Tertullian pointed the finger at him because Barnabas was a Levite from the priestly line, and boy, does Hebrews talk a lot about priesthood. Makes sense, right? Then you have Apollos. The book of Acts says he was an absolute rock star speaker, eloquent and powerful, which sounds a lot like our author.

And then a more modern theory: Priscilla, a really important female teacher in the early church. But this is where we hit a brick wall. The trail goes completely cold.

For Priscilla, the issue is a little grammatical clue in the Greek where the author uses a masculine form to refer to themselves. And for Barnabas and Apollos, well, the evidence is all circumstantial. It's a good story.

It fits the profile, but there's just no smoking gun, no hard proof. And you know, this isn't just us hitting a wall. Way back in the third century, one of the smartest Christian scholars around, a guy named Origen, he looked at all this evidence and basically just threw his hands up.

His final conclusion: only God truly knows. And for a long, long time, that's where the investigation ended. But wait a minute.

What if we've been asking the wrong question all along? Instead of asking who wrote it, what if we ask what kind of person wrote it? See, the author might be anonymous, but they left their fingerprints all over the crime scene. They basically left us a perfect profile in the text itself. So yeah, the search for a name is a dead end, but now we're going to try something different.

We are going to build a profile of our anonymous genius using the textual fingerprints they left all over their own masterpiece. Profile point number one. This person's command of the Greek language was absolutely off the charts.

We're not talking about the kind of Greek you'd hear on the street. No, no. This is like comparing Shakespeare to a text message.

The sentences are complex. They're elegant, just dripping with sophistication. Honestly, nobody else in the New Testament writes like this.

They're in a league of their own. And here's where it gets really cool. This wasn't just raw talent.

This person was schooled. You see this six-step structure? This was literally a textbook exercise from Greco-Roman rhetoric schools. It's the standard formula for building an argument.

And our author follows this pattern perfectly in the text. This is our smoking gun. It proves they had a top-tier formal education.

And you can just see their artistic skill. The very first sentence is a work of art. In the original Greek, it has this beautiful alliteration, a repetition of sounds that just rolls off the tongue.

This tells us something huge. This wasn't just meant to be read quietly in a library. It was designed to be performed, to be heard out loud.

It's an oral masterpiece. Okay, so our profile is coming together. We have a highly educated master of rhetoric.

But what world did they live in? Well, first and foremost, their mind was absolutely saturated with Jewish scripture. But here's the twist. They're almost always quoting from the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

And they knew it so well, they could even build theological arguments based on tiny differences between the original Hebrew and the Greek version. Just incredible. But — and this is the key to the whole profile — they were just as comfortable in the Greco-Roman world.

They casually drop in philosophical sayings, use teaching metaphors that were popular with Stoic philosophers, and they love powerful imagery from sports, running races, wrestling matches. So you see, this person is standing with one foot in the world of Jewish scripture and the other foot firmly in Greco-Roman culture. They're a bridge between two worlds.

So we have our profile, a Hellenistic Jewish Christian, highly educated, a master of rhetoric, probably part of Paul's circle. So what? Why does this matter? Well, it matters because this unique profile is the only reason a book like Hebrews could even exist. Think about it.

This unique blend of skills allowed our author to do something truly extraordinary. They could build a bridge between these two worlds. They could explain Jesus using the deep, familiar language of Jewish priesthood, but argue for it with the persuasive power of a Greek philosopher.

And that fusion, that's what produced some of Christianity's most profound ideas about Jesus, about faith, about suffering, and about community. That's what gives this book its incredible power. So in the end, we're right back where origin was almost 2,000 years ago.

We don't have a name. And maybe, just maybe, that's the whole point. The author's anonymity forces us to stop looking for a person and instead to just wrestle with the power of the message itself.

It's not about the messenger. It's about their magnificent message. And that leaves us with one last thought.

We started this whole thing as a detective story, a search for a name, but we ended up with a profile of a mind. So maybe the real question isn't who wrote Hebrews, but rather, what can we learn from the incredible sermon this brilliant, anonymous person left for us?