

## Who Wrote *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*?\*

I noticed something funny while watching a video put out by Symbolon, *The Bible: God's Love Letter to Humanity*. In it the narrator broke up the epistles of the *New Testament* into those written by St. Paul to specific churches and those written (by others) to the universal (catholic) church. The list of Pauline epistles did not include *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*...and neither did the catholic list. It was not on any displayed list of the *New Testament* documents.

I then looked at the list of books in the USCCB, *New American Bible* (<https://bible.usccb.org/bible>, November 6, 2020). It broke the *New Testament* epistles into two groups, "New Testament Letters" and "Catholic Letters"—basically dodging the question. The title given to the epistle is *The Letter to the Hebrews*," and the introduction to the epistle (<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/0>, November 6, 2020) makes two interesting statements:

Usually Hebrews was attached in Greek manuscripts to the collection of letters by Paul. Although no author is mentioned (for there is no address), a reference to Timothy (Heb 13:23) suggested connections to the circle of Paul and his assistants. Yet the exact audience, the author, and even whether Hebrews is a letter have long been disputed."

Among the reasons why Pauline authorship has been abandoned are the great difference of vocabulary and style between Hebrews and Paul's letters, the alternation of doctrinal teaching with moral exhortation, the different manner of citing the Old Testament, and the resemblance between the thought of Hebrews and that of Alexandrian Judaism.

These statements only point out that the authorship is doubted and do not mention whether the Church has a formal position on the matter.

### **So, who wrote this epistle? What does the Church say?**

The canon of Sacred Scripture was not settled until the late fourth century. Until then, more pressing matters, such as the recurrent persecutions of Christians, delayed the Christian Church from identifying which writings were permissible for use in worship and which were not. That's right, the selection of the canon was made to identify truly inspired texts that would be acceptable as readings in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. That fact is sometimes lost during discussions of the determination of the canon. Historians claim that there was agreement in the east that St. Paul had written *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*, but that there was disagreement in the west. Regardless of whether that is an accurate description of the situation in the fourth century, it is clear that when Pope Damasus I issued the decrees from the Council of Rome in 382 A.D. the epistle was declared to have been written by St. Paul to the Hebrews. [<SEE TEXT>](#) Any reasons and discussions that led to that conclusion are lost in antiquity, but it is possible (and I think likely) that if any Church leaders had serious objections to that statement they would have been raised and the evidence on both sides considered. If the disputes were settled, there would have been little need to keep records of the discussion. In fact there are no council records regarding debates of origin, authenticity, or faithfulness to doctrine. We are just asked to agree that since the pope accepted the decrees, that they are true. With the issuance of the decree Pope Damasus I commissioned St. Jerome to translate the selected books and epistles into Latin, which led to the creation of the *Latin Vulgate*.

\* This is the title given to the epistle in *The Holy Bible, the Douay Rheems Version*.

The legitimacy of the canon (not specifically the authorship of *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*) was again challenged with the Protestant Reformation. In response to that and many other challenges and concerns, the Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563 A.D.). The “Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures” clearly states that the epistle was written by St. Paul. [<SEE TEXT>](#) Once again, no justification for this determination (or any other determination in the decree) is given.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the authorship of *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews* was challenged sufficiently for the Pontifical Biblical Commission to issue a document to address the doubts. [<SEE TEXT>](#) The document made four statements, summarized below:

1. It is not legitimate to doubt that the epistle was written by St. Paul.
2. The Pauline origin of the epistles is not undermined by real or apparent differences in style or substance of the letter from other Pauline epistles.
3. Similarities in style and substance between the epistle and other Pauline epistles confirm its Pauline origin.
4. It is not necessary to believe that the epistle was given by St. Paul in the form that we now possess it.

So, when the Church has spoken with any authority on the subject she has maintained that the epistle was written by St. Paul. Those documenting the disagreement on this point (including commentary in the *New American Bible*) frequently cite unnamed scholars, do not mention that the Church has spoken with *some* authority on the subject, and further do not note that we no longer have available the justifications for the old tradition on this matter, either in the fourth, sixteenth, or twentieth century.

Why would Catholic scholars challenge a statement that seems to have been made authoritatively by the leaders of the Catholic Church?

Possibly because scholars receive more recognition and even a greater sense of accomplishment when they prove something new or present an idea that is controversial. Additionally, these scholars are either unaware or unconcerned that the Church has spoken on the subject.

### **Why does it matter?**

The Church has said (in an ecumenical council) that it knows which documents were written by the Holy Spirit and who the human authors were for those same documents. It is generally accepted that the claims for canonicity, although guided by the Holy Spirit, were made based on knowing the human authors, general acceptance in the universal church, and faithfulness to Catholic doctrine.

If the Church *really does not know* who wrote one of the documents it for which it has claimed knowledge of authorship, then it does not necessarily know who wrote *any* of them. If it makes such claims in a council document and is *incorrect*, then every statement in such documents has less credibility. The Canon of Sacred Scripture moves away from a big T Tradition and closer to a small t tradition.

In 1907, Pope Pius X issued [Pascendi Dominici Gregis](#), which addressed the problem of modernism in the Church. In Section 34 he describes, “How the Bible is Dealt With,” and states that one of the results of modernist actions is that “the Scriptures can no longer be attributed to the authors whose names they bear.”

Doubt about the human authorship of *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews* has the result of undermining trust in Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium.

# Council of Rome

(382 A.D.)

## **The Canon of Sacred Scripture**

[From the same decree and the acts of the same Roman Synod]

84 Likewise it has been said: Now indeed we must treat of the divine Scriptures, what the universal Catholic Church accepts and what she ought to shun.

The order of the Old Testament begins here: Genesis one book, Exodus one book, Leviticus one book, Numbers one book, Deuteronomy one book, Joshua Nave one book, judges one book, Ruth one book, Kings four books, Paralipomenon two books, Psalms one book, Solomon three books, Proverbs one book, Ecclesiastes one book, Canticle of Canticles one book, likewise Wisdom one book, Ecclesiasticus one book.

Likewise the order of the Prophets. Isaias one book, Jeremias one book, with Ginoth, that is, with his lamentations, Ezechiel one book, Daniel one book, Osee one book, Micheas one book, Joel one book, Abdias one book, Jonas one book, Nahum one book, Habacuc one book, Sophonias one book, Aggeus one book, Zacharias one book, Malachias one book.

Likewise the order of the histories. Job one book, Tobias one book, Esdras two books, Esther one book, Judith one book, Machabees two books.

Likewise the order of the writings of the New and eternal Testament, which the holy and Catholic Church supports. Of the Gospels, according to Matthew one book, according to Mark one book, according to Luke one book, according to John one book.

The Epistles of Paul [the apostle] in number fourteen. To the Romans one, to the Corinthians two, to the Ephesians one, to the Thessalonians two, to the Galatians one, to the Philippians one, to the Colossians one, to Timothy two, to Titus one, to Philemon one, to the Hebrews one. <BACK>

Likewise the Apocalypse of John, one book. And the Acts of the Apostles one book.

Likewise the canonical epistles in number seven. Of Peter the Apostle two epistles, of James the Apostle one epistle, of John the Apostle one epistle, of another John, the presbyter, two epistles, of Jude the Zealot, the Apostle one epistle, see n. 162 ff. \*

The canon of the New Testament ends here.

(<https://sensusfidelium.us/the-sources-of-catholic-dogma-the-denzinger/council-of-rome-382-the-canon-of-sacred-scripture/>, November 6, 2020)

# Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent

## The Fourth Session

*Celebrated on the eighth day of the month of April, in the year 1546.*

English translation by James Waterworth (London, 1848)

### **Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures**

The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent,—lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein,—keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.

And it has thought it meet that a list of the sacred books be inserted in this decree, lest a doubt may arise in any one's mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod. They are as set down here below:

Of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, to wit, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon, the first book of Esdras, and the second which is entitled Nehemias; Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, the Davidical Psalter, consisting of a hundred and fifty psalms; the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias, with Baruch; Ezechiel, Daniel; the twelve minor prophets, to wit, Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias; two books of the Machabees, the first and the second.

Of the New Testament: the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles written by Luke the Evangelist; fourteen epistles of Paul the apostle, (one) to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, (one) to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, (one) to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two of Peter the apostle, three of John the apostle, one of the apostle James, one of Jude the apostle, and the Apocalypse of John the apostle. [<BACK>](#)

But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately contemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema. Let all, therefore, understand, in what order, and in what manner, the said Synod, after having laid the foundation of the Confession of faith, will proceed, and what testimonies and authorities it will mainly use in confirming dogmas, and in restoring morals in the Church.

*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, The Fourth Session, Celebrated on the eighth day of the month of April, in the year 1546., English translation by James Waterworth (London, 1848) (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/trent1.html>, November 6, 2020)*

**THE AUTHOR AND METHOD OF COMPOSITION OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS**

To the following doubts presented, the Pontifical Biblical Commission has decided to respond as follows:

I. Whether so much force is to be attributed to the doubts which in the first centuries possessed the minds of some in the Occident regarding the divine inspiration and Pauline origin of the Epistle to the Hebrews, because of the special abuse of heretics, that, although aware of the perpetual, unanimous, and continued affirmation of the Oriental Fathers, to which was added after the fourth century the full agreement of the entire Western Church; weighing also the acts of the Highest Pontiffs and of the sacred Councils, especially of Trent, and also the perpetual practice of the universal Church, one may hesitate to classify it with certainty not only among the canonical--which is determined regarding faith--but also among the genuine epistles of the Apostle Paul?

Reply: In the negative.

II. Whether the arguments which are usually drawn from the unusual absence of the name of Paul, and the omission of the customary introduction and salutation in the Epistle to the Hebrews--or from the purity of the same Greek language, the elegance and perfection of diction and style,--or from the way by which the Old Testament is cited in it and arguments made from it,--or from certain differences which supposedly existed between the doctrine of this and of the other epistles of Paul, somehow are able to weaken the Pauline origin of the same; or whether, on the other hand, the perfect agreement of doctrine and opinions, the likeness of admonitions and exhortations, and also the harmony of the phrases and of the words themselves celebrated also by some non-Catholics, which are observed between it and the other writings of the Apostle of the Gentiles, demonstrate and confirm the same Pauline origin?

Reply: In the negative to the first part; in the affirmative to the second.

III. Whether the Apostle Paul is so to be considered the author of this epistle that it should necessarily be affirmed that he not only conceived and expressed it all by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but also endowed it with that form with which it stands out?

Reply: In the negative, save for a later judgment of the Church. [<BACK>](#)

*On 24 June 1914, in the audience kindly granted to the undersigned Most Reverend Secretary Consultor, our Holy Father Pio Pp. X ratified the above responses and commanded them to be published.*

Lorenzo JANSSENS, O.S.B.  
*Consultant secretary*

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19140624\\_epistola-ebrei\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19140624_epistola-ebrei_it.html), November 6, 2020.

The above document is only available in Latin and Italian on the Vatican Web site. The English text (above) for the expressed doubts and replies was taken from *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, translated by Roy J. Deferrari, from the thirtieth edition of *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, by Henry Denzinger, revised by Karl Rahner, S.J., published in 1954 by Herder & Co., Freiburg. Nihil Obstat – Dominic Hughes, O.P., *Censor Deputatus*, Imprimatur – Patrick A. O’Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, April 25, 1955. (<https://archive.org/details/DenzingerTheSourcesOfCatholicDogma/page/n589/mode/2up>)

The formatting, the introductory phrase, and the closing information (from the date of the letter to the end) was provided by running those portion of the Italian document from the Vatican Web site through Google Translate.