

Hebrews and Its Courier (AD 63)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- Dec. 30, 2012

INTRODUCTION:

A. Thanks, Larry!

B. Let's ask God for His blessings on our study together --

Our Heavenly Father, our Maker and Redeemer, and sustains all things by your Omnipotent Word – we give you all praise, glory, and honor. Your splendor fills the infinite universe. May You and Your Son reign forever and ever. We humble ourselves before You and ask for your guidance of this nation who has forsaken Your Ways. Help us to repent and return to You and seek you like the deer which pants for water. You are the air that we breathe, and the living water that sustains our hearts. Be with us now as we study the history of Your first century saints, and how You worked through them to plant the seed of your gospel into the far corners of the Roman world, and to write it down for all generations to come to be blessed by. Give us a glimpse of Your mighty acts in history, so we can understand Your Word, apply it to our lives in a godly way, and teach it to our children and grandchildren for all generations to come. It is for Your Glory and in the matchless Name of your Son Jesus that we pray. Amen.

C. We do these historical podcasts to help all of us preterists see how the endtime events were actually fulfilled in the first century, and to help us understand the Bible better. If you have benefited from these studies, and our gracious Lord has blessed you with the desire and the ability to help us financially in this teaching ministry, you can make a one-time donation or contribute monthly, either by PayPal or Credit Card. Those who make a donation will receive an MP3 CD of four of these podcasts, plus the PDF lesson outlines that go with them. You can go to our website to make a donation at <www.preterist.org> or simply use PayPal. Our PayPal address is: <preterist1@preterist.org>

D. In our study last time, we spent the bulk of our time trying to nail down the dates for Paul's five prison epistles (**Eph, Col, Phlm, Phlp, Heb**). We traced the movements of two of Paul's couriers, Tychicus and Epaphroditus, as they carried his letters from Rome to the churches in Macedonia and Asia Minor. Near the end of our study we began dealing with Paul's epistle to the Hebrew Christians, scattered throughout the Roman world, including Italy, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Syria, and Palestine. We noted that the book of Hebrews was written by Paul, and that the lesson outline PDF for last session contains some good material defending the Pauline authorship. If you would like to have that PDF, as well as the lesson outline for this podcast, simply email me and request the lesson outlines that deal with the book of Hebrews, and I will send them to you as attachments to an email message. We will be dealing with the book of Hebrews in our next study

as well. It is an extremely important book for the Christian faith, for teaching on salvation and eschatology. It ranks right up there at the top of Paul's most important doctrinal works, alongside the book of Romans. It is Paul's last big book that he wrote before his pastoral epistles and his death in the Neronian persecution. So, you can see why I want to spend a couple of podcasts explaining the historical background behind the composition and content of the book of Hebrews.

- E. One point I forgot to deal with in the previous lessons is the purpose of the general epistles (1,2,3 John, James, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, and Jude). Have you ever asked yourself why these general encyclicals (written to all the churches) were not written earlier? There are lots of reasons for this, but the main ones are:
1. When Paul was arrested and imprisoned, he was no longer able to visit all those churches that he had established throughout Greece, Macedonia, and Turkey. Neither Paul nor Peter wanted those churches to be left without guidance and oversight. That is why James, Peter, John, and Jude went into overdrive with their literary activity, trying to stabilize those churches that were being overrun by false teachers who were taking advantage of Paul's absence.
 2. Those churches were also beginning to feel the heat of the persecution, and there was strong temptation to fall away from the faith and go back into Judaism or paganism. So, the apostles in Jerusalem shifted their literary activity into high gear to undergird those struggling persecuted churches.
 3. Just a few years earlier there weren't very many churches outside of Palestine and Syria. Paul's second and third missionary journeys had established a lot of new churches. So, when Paul was arrested and imprisoned, there were a lot more churches out there in the Diaspora that needed help.
 4. Paul was scrambling to prepare his defense before Nero. His contact with his network of churches was probably limited for security purposes. Until he knew how his trial was going to turn out, he dared not write very many letters to his churches which would put them in danger of arrest and imprisonment. So, the other apostles picked up the slack, and started sending letters to all of Paul's churches, as well as to all the other new churches outside Palestine that had recently been established, and were struggling in the persecution.
 5. That is why these letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude are called "general epistles" or "catholic epistles," because they were not addressed to only one church, but rather to all the churches. The word encyclical was used to describe them because the couriers made the rounds (the circuit) to all the churches with those letters. The couriers would go to one city, read the letter, make a copy of it for that church, and then go to the next church down the road to do the same there, over and over again, until they made the rounds of all the churches.
- F. We are noticing a lot of historical connections between Apostle Paul, John Mark, and Barnabas. This is probably just as new and strange to our listeners as it was to me when I first started studying the Epistle of Barnabas. But the strangeness has been replaced by amazement once I began to see how intricately involved Barnabas is with Mark, Luke and Paul and their writings. The scenario I am reconstructing here is simply one possible way to put the pieces together. It is

certainly not the only way, but it does fit all the NT facts in a way that makes sense, and gives lots of new meaning to some of Paul's epistles in ways that I never imagined possible. However, if you spot a problem with the historical narrative I am suggesting here, please email me and let me know.

G. I need to repeat the disclaimer that was mentioned last time. Please do not think that I consider **Barnabas** to be an inspired apostle on the level of Apostle Paul or Peter. He absolutely was not. Nor do I believe that the **Epistle** written by Barnabas was inspired like the writings of our New Testament. It is merely uninspired Christian literature, on the same level as a commentary or the Old Testament Apocryphal books between the testaments. They are interesting to read, and have some moral and ethical value, but they are not authoritative or inspired. When we look at some of the things he wrote in his book in this session, we will see real quickly why I say this. His epistle has numerous statements that are questionable and mistaken. Furthermore, as we look at Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Hebrews, we will notice how Apostle Paul seems to be correcting some of those mistakes found in the Epistle of Barnabas. We will try to do some of that kind of study of the book of Hebrews in our next podcast. Now let's take a look at the intended audience to whom Paul wrote the book of Hebrews.

To Whom Was the Epistle to the Hebrews Written?

It seems to me that those who arranged the NT books in their present order, were correct in placing the book of Hebrews among the "General Epistles" or "Catholic Epistles" addressed to all the churches. This would mean that Hebrews was written to the Jewish Christians in all the churches (both inside Palestine and outside in the Diaspora). Since Paul says that he, along with Timothy, intended to soon visit the recipients of this epistle, it implies that at least some of these Jewish Christians (Hebrews) were near Rome, or along the route that he planned to travel on his way from Rome to Colossae:

Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, **with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you**. Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. **Those from Italy greet you**. [Heb. 13:23-24 NAS95]

Notice what Paul said to those fellow Hebrew Christians whom he was "soon" planning to visit :

So, **let us go out to Him outside the camp**, bearing His reproach. For **here we do not have a lasting city**, but we are seeking the city which is about to be. Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. [Heb. 13:13-16 NAS95]

Note how Paul encourages the Hebrew Christians to "go out to Him outside the camp" because "here we do not have a lasting city." This was an encouragement to

all Hebrew Christians to share in the reproach and ostracism that was beginning to be heaped upon them by the Jewish establishment, just like Jesus and the apostles had already suffered. Those Jewish Christians were being cast out of the synagogues, persecuted, and rejected. Paul encourages them to remember that Jesus was cast out of the synagogues and crucified outside the earthly city as well. The earthly city was not the ultimate place to which they were going. Instead, it was the heavenly city which was "about to be" [Gk. *mello*]. It is this very encouragement ("go out to Him outside the camp") which has caused some interpreters of Hebrews to suggest that Paul had already read the book of Revelation by this time, since it contains a similar command to the Christians to "come out of her my people" (Rev. 18:4). When we remember all the other statements about the new heavens and earth and the new heavenly Jerusalem which Hebrews contains, it seems even more probable that Paul either had seen the book of Revelation by that time, or else received an independent revelation of these things which was harmonious with and parallel to what John says in the book of Revelation.

What pushes me further in the direction of an AD 62 date for the book of **Revelation** are the statements by Peter in both of his epistles (1 Pet. 5:13 and 2 Pet. 3:7-16), where he states that he was writing to the churches outside Palestine in the Diaspora (implying that he was in Palestine at the time of writing). Notice in 1 Pet. 5:13 that Peter claims to be writing from a church that was "in Babylon" where Mark was. We know that Mark's mother had a home in Jerusalem. Peter's reference to Jerusalem as being "Babylon" tells us that either he had read the Apocalypse already, or had received a parallel revelation about Jerusalem being "Babylon." Since both Paul and Peter show awareness of the contents of the Apocalypse in AD 63, before the Neronian persecution began, I am inclined to believe that **Revelation** had already been written and put into circulation in late AD 62, just as Paul was working on his epistle to the **Hebrews** (late 62 and early 63), and just before **Peter** wrote his first epistle (AD 63).

Paul (in Hebrews) seems to be writing not only to the same Diaspora Jewish Christians to whom Barnabas, James, Peter, John, and Jude wrote their epistles (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia), but also to ALL Hebrew Christians, including those inside Palestine and Judea who were probably upset by the **epistle of Barnabas**, and being persecuted for what it taught (i.e., that the Jews never received the Old Covenant in the first place). This general circulation for Hebrews seems confirmed by the fact that it did end up in the hands of Peter in Jerusalem. Peter almost certainly alludes to it in his second epistle to the Diaspora churches (2 Pet. 3:7-16) written in AD 64. Paul's letter to Philemon in Colossae had stated that he intended to visit Colossae (in Asia) after his release. The churches in Achaia, Thessalonica and Macedonia are fairly close to Italy, while the churches in Asia were further away. Paul evidently left Timothy in Ephesus on his trip to Colossae, after they had passed through all the churches in Achaia and Macedonia (i.e., Corinth, Thessalonica, Berea, Philippi, Troas, et al). Paul went on to Colossae, while Timothy stayed at Ephesus. Since I believe John Mark was the courier for the book of Hebrews, it would be easy to understand how Hebrews could find its way into all the churches of the Diaspora and inside Palestine.

It is difficult to know for sure what Paul meant when he said, "Timothy has been

released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you" (Heb. 13:23). It could mean that Timothy had just been released and was on his way to wherever Paul was at the time. Or, it could mean that Timothy had been released some time ago and had gone on a courier trip for Paul, and was expected back from that trip shortly, at which time they would leave Italy together to visit the various churches in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor on Paul's way to Colossae. It is this latter option that seems most likely to me.

The general epistles (like **Hebrews**, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude) seem to have been "encyclicals", intended for duplication and wide circulation among all the churches inside and outside Judea.

Paul sent several letters on ahead of him (Eph, Col, Phlm, Phlp) before he sent the Hebrews epistle. One of the purposes of all those letters, including Hebrews, was to alert his churches in Greece, Macedonia, and Turkey of his plan to visit them soon.

Tychicus and Onesimus had been dispatched to Ephesus and Colossae, while Epaphras had been dispatched Philippi. That left only Mark, Luke and Timothy with Paul. Since Timothy and Luke were planning to travel with Paul, it seems that Mark must have been the courier whom Paul dispatched with the book of Hebrews to go ahead of him to visit all of the churches not only in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor, but also the rest of Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Judea.

Why Do I Believe Mark Was the Courier for Hebrews?

Paul does not tell us who the courier was for the book of Hebrews, but it was almost certainly one of his co-workers who were still there in Rome with him at the time of his release. We know who they were, since both Colossians and Philemon list them for us (Col. 4:10-14; Philem. 1:24): **Mark, Aristarchus, Justus, Demas, and Luke** (not Timothy, Epaphroditus, or Tychicus, who were already gone on other assignments). What else is interesting about this list, is that **Justus** disappears from the list somewhere between the writing of Colossians and Philemon. So, it appears that Justus was not around by the time Hebrews was sent out by courier. That leaves only Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

Luke stuck pretty close to Paul and did not go on any courier trips, as far as we know. He did separate from Paul and stay in Philippi for a few years, as is evident from the "we" and "they" passages in the book of Acts. And Luke was still in the company of Paul a year later when Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:11). So, that rules out Luke as a candidate for the courier job with Hebrews.

Demas would not seem to be a good choice either, since his true apostate colors may have already been evident to Paul, so that it was no surprise to see Demas abandon Paul a year later in the Neronian persecution (2 Tim. 4:10). Evidently Demas had remained with Paul after their release from Rome, but deserted him when the Neronian persecution broke out and Paul was arrested. So, Demas does not seem to be the one who carried the book of Hebrews.

Since **Aristarchus** was originally from Thessalonica (Acts 19:29 and 20:4), and Paul was planning to visit Thessalonica and Philippi after his release from Rome, there is a good chance that Aristarchus stayed with Paul and Luke until Timothy arrived, and then went with them to visit the churches, including Thessalonica where

he most likely stayed after Paul, Luke, and Timothy traveled further toward Asia Minor. Luke may have stopped at Philippi or Troas (his home area?) while Paul and Timothy traveled onward toward Ephesus, where Timothy would locate, while Paul went on to Colossae.

Some have suggested that **Timothy** may have been the courier for Hebrews, or that Paul and Timothy took the book with them and delivered it personally on their way to Colossae. They probably did take a copy of Hebrews with them, but they were not the main courier for it, nor especially the courier who took it to Peter in Jerusalem. We know from Philippians and Hebrews both that Timothy traveled with Paul toward Ephesus where he was left by Paul to minister to the church there (as First and Second Timothy also show). So, Timothy could not have been the courier who took Hebrews on beyond Asia Minor to all of the other Jewish Christians in Syria, Cyprus, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Judea.

That leaves **John Mark** as the most likely candidate for the job of courier for the book of Hebrews. Notice that he is mentioned first in the list (Philem. 1:24). That does not always indicate primacy, but it does in a significant number of cases, especially in the book of Acts and in Paul's writings. Whether it had that significance here or not, is anyone's guess. Regardless of that consideration, we have eliminated all the others on the list, leaving Mark as the only choice left. But he would have been my first choice anyway, even before eliminating the others, for reasons that I will now explain:

In a previous podcast, we talked about how Paul and Barnabas split up and went their separate ways after Paul refused to take Mark with them on the second missionary journey (AD 50). Paul chose Silas and was sent on his way by the Antioch church. However, **Barnabas took Mark** and sailed away to the island of Cyprus (Acts 15:39). From that point on, **Barnabas** disappears from the NT historical record, except for a brief mention in 1 Cor. 9:6, indicating that he was still alive and doing mission work at the time First Corinthians was written in AD 57. Evidently his work was confined mostly (if not almost exclusively) to the island of Cyprus.

Mark likewise disappears from the New Testament historical narrative after Barnabas took him to Cyprus in AD 50 (Acts 15:39), until he shows up in Rome with Paul in AD 62 (Col. 4:10; Phlm 1:24), after which Peter mentions him in Jerusalem (1 Pet. 5:13), and Paul mentions him again during his second imprisonment at the time of the Neronian persecution (2 Tim. 4:11). Mark had apparently worked with Barnabas there on Cyprus for a whole decade, from AD 50 until Barnabas' death in AD 60 or 61.

So, **John Mark** was evidently the courier for the book of Hebrews, and carried it to the rest of the churches beyond Paul's sphere of influence (such as Cyprus, Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Judea).

Mark's Courier Trip With the Epistle to the Hebrews

This easily explains why Paul chose **Mark** as the courier to take the epistle of Hebrews to all the churches in Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, and Palestine. I believe Paul may have hinted at this idea when he told the Colossians that Mark might come through their area ("if he comes to you, welcome him" – Col. 4:10). Colossians was on one of the major Roman highways that stretched from

Ephesus through Turkey to Antioch. There is a good chance that Mark would have traveled through Colossae if he delivered the epistle of Hebrews to all the Pauline churches in Turkey (many of whom lay along that Roman trade route).

Mark evidently took a copy of **Hebrews** to Peter in Jerusalem, since Peter's second epistle (AD 64) shows awareness of the eschatological contents of Paul's epistle to the Hebrews (2 Pet. 3:15-16; cf. Heb. 12:18-29 and 13:13-14). **Mark** is the most likely candidate for that courier job, since Hebrews was probably written in response to the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which Mark brought to Paul after Barnabas was killed on Cyprus (AD 60-61). Mark would certainly have had a vested interest in how the book of Hebrews was spread to all the churches where Paul and Barnabas had labored, if it was, in fact, a response to the *Epistle of Barnabas* (his cousin and co-worker on Cyprus). And since Mark was with him during the whole time Paul was writing Hebrews, he would have understood the book well, and would have been the perfect courier to deliver it to the churches.

We can be sure that Paul would have wanted Mark to take a copy to Peter in Jerusalem, and that Mark would have welcomed the opportunity to visit his home church in Jerusalem. This may explain why Hebrews seems to address the saints in Jerusalem (Heb. 13:10-16). It also explains how Mark happened to be in Jerusalem at the time Peter wrote his first epistle in late 63 where he mentions Mark being there with him (1 Pet. 5:13). Then Mark may have served as Peter's courier to take his first epistle back to all of the same churches in Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece that Mark had passed through on his way to Jerusalem.

This would have been a perfect way to bring the churches established by the Apostle to the Gentiles (Paul) into closer contact with the Apostle to the Circumcision (Peter), and thus unite all the churches into one body, both Jew and Gentile, just as Paul had prayed in Eph. 4.

While Mark was on that courier trip for Peter, the **Neronic persecution** probably broke out, and Paul was arrested and sent to Rome the second time. Paul was aware of Mark being in the region, so he wanted Timothy to bring Mark with him to join Luke and him there in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11). We do not know if that reunion ever took place. Paul and Luke may have been killed before Timothy and Mark ever arrived, or Timothy and Mark could have been killed before they got to Rome. The only thing we know for certain is that the Neronic persecution killed a **"great multitude"** of the remaining Christians (Rev. 7:9-17 and Matt. 24:21-22), including the apostles Paul, John, and Peter, and most of their co-workers. That is why there were no more writings after AD 64. The apostles were either dead, or in hiding. It would not have been safe to write any more epistles. It would have exposed the writer, the courier, and the recipients to mortal danger. Plus, most of the churches were devastated by that time, and either wiped out completely, or a small remnant in hiding. There were few writers left, few couriers left, and few Christians left. As John indicates in the book of Revelation (22:11), right there at the end it was no longer safe to continue literary and missionary activity. No one would listen because it was an outlawed religion. Preaching would only get you killed. That is why Rev. 22:11 says, "Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy..." Leave them alone if you want to "live and remain until the Parousia."

This is fascinating stuff. It would take a lot of time to fully explore all the

possibilities and reconstruct them with any high degree of probability. But the historical reconstructions I have shared with you here are definite possibilities that need to be kept in mind and further analyzed in the future. They make a lot of sense, and helps explain a lot of historical facts in the New Testament that I always wondered about. That is why we do these studies -- to connect the dots for all of us.

Well, that will just about wrap it up for this time. Next time we will look more at the traditions surrounding Barnabas and the activity of Mark in relation to Apostle Paul and the book of Hebrews. We will actually read a few selections from the *Epistle of Barnabas* to get a taste of his allegorical interpretative methods and his anti-Judaistic polemic. If you would like to read the *Epistle of Barnabas* right along with me next time, simply send me an email this week requesting the PDF of that epistle, and I will send it as an attachment for you.

Thank you so much for listening. Next time we get together it will be in the new year. May all of you have a very healthy and prosperous New Year.

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There are a lot of great supplementary articles posted on our website, plus books and audio/video media for purchase. Go there and browse all you want. Here is the link: <http://preterist.org>

If you would like a couple of great books which detail all of these events, I would recommend **ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS** by F. F. Bruce, which is available for order at our website (www.preterist.org), and **JEWISH BACKGROUNDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** by J. Julius Scott, which is available from Amazon.com. Be sure to get a copy of my book, **First Century Events**, which deals with the Roman, Jewish, and Christian events of the first century. We will be using it as a study guide here in our studies of the first century. You can purchase it from our website: www.preterist.org

Some further recommended reading:

Josephus *Antiquities* and *Wars* (sections which deal with the Herodian rulers)