

24.11

Hebrews in the Christian Canon

That Hebrews is anonymous proved to be something of an obstacle to its being accepted into the canon of Scripture. It was not included in our earliest list of New Testament Scriptures, the list that scholars call the “Muratorian Fragment” or “Muratorian Canon” (ca. 170–200). As time went by, however, the letter gained a broad audience, and it was especially favored by church leaders who found its christological teaching helpful in combating various sectarians whom they held to be heretical. Increasingly, the letter came to be ascribed to Paul, but this seems to have been motivated by a desire to help it achieve canonical status. The scholars of the church protested such ascriptions, but not too loudly. Origen (mid-third century) said, “The thoughts of the epistle are marvelous and in no way inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle” (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25). A canonical list from the mid-fourth century, called the “Mommesen Catalogue” (or “Cheltenham List”), did not include Hebrews, but in the late fourth century Jerome said that it should be accepted as canonical because it is “honored daily by being read in the churches” (*Epistle* 129.3).

In short, Hebrews seems to represent a case in which canonical acceptance influenced decisions about authorship rather than the other way around. It came to be widely recognized as authoritative

on the basis of intrinsic merit in spite of being anonymous. The prevailing opinion seemed to be that this book comes from the same time period as other New Testament books, and it testifies brilliantly to matters that are wholly compatible with what is said in works attributed to apostolic witnesses. Thus it should be accorded a place among them even if we do not know the identity of the author.