

## Origen on Paul's Authorship of Hebrews

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It is a common notion among modern biblical scholars that Origen doubted Paul's authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This article offers an examination of Origen's writings on this question, and shows that the evidence is wildly misrepresented in contemporary discussions. It does this by beginning with Origen's *Letter to Africanus*, continuing with an overview of his Hebrews citations across his writing career, and concluding with an analysis of his oft-cited comments in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. This examination shows that while Origen suspects Hebrews' composition to involve more than Paul alone, his surprisingly consistent testimony is that the epistle is indeed Paul's.

**Keywords:** Origen, Paul, Hebrews, authorship

### 1. Introduction

It is a common notion among contemporary biblical scholars that Origen doubted Paul's authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> Origen's doubt, usually established with a passing reference to a passage preserved in Eusebius from his lost *Homilies on Hebrews*, is then presented as archetypal for modern scholarly prudence on the question. A few examples among many will suffice to establish the point.

In his Hebrews commentary, George Guthrie notes that '[t]he question of Pauline authorship has been answered with a resounding "no" from virtually all modern scholars, regardless of theological orientation', and cites Origen's recognition that the style of the epistle differs greatly from Paul's acknowledged writings.<sup>2</sup> Guthrie concludes his analysis by commending Origen's position: 'With Origen we confess our ignorance: "Who wrote the epistle, God knows the

1 See e.g. R. Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1982) 16: 'Most commentators on Hebrews quote the third-century Christian scholar Origen in any discussion about authorship; he was sure that as to its writer "only God knows certainly"'; similarly A. Mitchell, *Hebrews* (Sacra Pagina 13; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 3.

2 G. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC 15; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 23 n. 12.

truth".<sup>3</sup> While Bart Ehrman in his *Forgery and Counterforgery* maintains a broader claim that early testimony by patristic writers 'can scarcely be counted as evidence' for identifying authorship, he does make an exception in the case of Origen and Hebrews.<sup>4</sup> Origen is praised as one of the educated elite of early Christians who were 'adept at establishing authorship on the basis of considerations of style,' as he 'recognized that Hebrews could not have been written by Paul',<sup>5</sup> and 'refuses to call [Hebrews] Pauline' in his 'one explicit discussion of the matter' in the Eusebius passage.<sup>6</sup> David deSilva's commentary concludes its discussion of Hebrews' authorship by commending Origen's agnostic position: 'No convincing case can be made for any candidate, however, and Origen's final statement on the question of authorship remains the wisest of all – "But who wrote the epistle? God knows the truth."<sup>7</sup> Christian Grappe's recent study on Hebrews and the Pauline tradition cites the Eusebius passage and praises Origen for renouncing any direct Pauline origins for Hebrews: 'Origen's prudence illustrates his independence of spirit and his rigor', distinguishing him from nearly the entire Eastern tradition, in which 'Pauline authenticity was largely admitted'.<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce's Hebrews commentary describes Origen as cherishing 'reservations ... about its authorship',<sup>9</sup> and cites Origen's agnosticism in the Eusebius passage as paradigmatic for contemporary scholars: "But as to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter." Even today we have not got far beyond Origen's confession of ignorance.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Paul Ellingworth's commentary is noteworthy for going so far as to include a word of thanks to Origen in the preface for his famous quote: 'Every commentary on Hebrews owes a special debt to Origen, who said the last word on the authorship of the epistle.'<sup>11</sup>

3 Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 27.

4 B. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 193.

5 Ehrman, *Forgery*, 139.

6 Ehrman, *Forgery*, 88. Curiously, the Africanus letter is acknowledged in a footnote (88 n. 66), which is perhaps regarded as too brief to be labelled a 'discussion'.

7 D. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle 'to the Hebrews'* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 24–5.

8 C. Grappe, 'Hébreux et la tradition paulinienne', *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity* (ed. J. Schröter, S. Buttica and A. Dettwiler; Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2018) 461–83, at 464: 'La prudence d'Origène illustre son indépendance d'esprit et sa rigueur'; 'l'authenticité paulinienne était largement admise' (my translation).

9 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 23. Bruce further asserts that Origen classed Hebrews 'as a "disputed" book', though he himself 'did not doubt its scriptural merit' (Bruce, *Hebrews*, 23).

10 Bruce, *Hebrews*, 20.

11 P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) ix. Ellingworth follows Metzger's assertion that 'in [Origen's] *Homilies on Hebrews*, a late work (c. 245), he questions its authenticity' (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 35).

This article offers an examination of Origen's references and statements on the question of Paul's authorship of Hebrews, and will show that the evidence on this question is wildly misrepresented in contemporary discussions. It will do this by beginning with Origen's *Letter to Africanus*, continuing with an overview of his Hebrews citations across his writing career in comparison with disputed New Testament writings, and concluding with an analysis of his oft-cited comments in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. An examination of these sources will demonstrate that rather than doubting Paul's authorship of Hebrews, Origen appears to be entirely convinced that the epistle is Paul's, though he suspects its composition to involve more than Paul alone, and that biblical scholarship citing Origen in favour of the modern position has not done justice to either the Eusebius passage or Origen's own writings on the subject.

## 2. Origen's *Letter to Africanus*

We begin with Origen's *Letter to Africanus*, written in response to Julius Africanus's inquiries regarding the canon, which is most commonly dated around 240 CE.<sup>12</sup> In the context of explaining material that is unattested within the Hebrew canon to the scholar Julius,<sup>13</sup> Origen furnishes the example of Isaiah the prophet being 'sawn asunder', which is 'guaranteed by the Epistle to the Hebrews'.<sup>14</sup> Origen follows this example with the following statement:

However, someone hard pressed by this argument may have recourse to the opinion of those who reject this epistle as not having been written by Paul; against whom I must at some other time use other arguments to prove that it is Paul's. (*Ep. Afr.* 9)

In this passage, Origen indicates two things: first, that there are some in Origen's time who deny that Hebrews is from Paul; and second, that Origen does think Hebrews is Paul's, so that he is prepared to argue against those who would deny Paul's authorship.

Now, within our extant corpus of Origen's writings, we do not have evidence that this 'some other time' comes to pass, and it is an open question whether or not Origen got around to his stated task. On the one hand, our current corpus has many gaps, including Origen's *Homilies on Hebrews*, in which such a

12 See N. de Lange, 'The Letter to Africanus: Origen's Recantation?', *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985) 242–7, at 242–3; J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. II (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986 [1950]) 74; J. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 40.

13 As McGuckin notes, '[t]he letter from Africanus was probably the only time in Origen's life when he had encountered an intelligence as polymathic as his' (McGuckin, *Handbook to Origen*, 40).

14 Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 9.

demonstration could very conceivably have been found. On the other hand, it would be surprising if we did not find references to Origen's proof in later writers, such as his admirer Eusebius, for whom demonstrating Paul's authorship of Hebrews is a recurring interest.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Origen's statement to Africanus provides a helpful starting point for establishing Origen's own position on the question, as it coheres uniformly with his manner of citing the epistle throughout his writings.

### 3. The Authorship of Hebrews in Origen's Literary Corpus

Turning to these writings, it will be seen that Origen refers to the Epistle to the Hebrews extensively, with Bruce Metzger noting a count of over 200 references across his extant corpus.<sup>16</sup> Within these instances, Origen is consistent in attributing the epistle to Paul, either by name or using his standard epithet of 'the Apostle' in every instance where the author is noted.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the single example of Origen referring to Hebrews' author without providing the name comes from the aforementioned *Letter to Africanus*, where Origen follows his reference to 'the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews' by stating that he will prove it is Paul!<sup>18</sup>

Origen's view can be witnessed by a selection of his citations of Hebrews from across his writings (with more forthcoming in the following section):

*On First Principles* Preface.1: And therefore I think it sufficient to quote this one testimony of Paul from the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which he says, 'By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter ... [etc.]' [Heb 11.24–6].<sup>19</sup>

*Contra Celsum* 3.53: When Paul was writing to the Corinthians who were Greeks and had not yet been purified in their habits, he wrote: 'I have fed you with milk, not meat... [etc.]'. The same writer, knowing that some truths

15 Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.5; 3.38.2–3.

16 B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 138.

17 Origen scholars often note the consistency of his conviction that Paul is Hebrews' author (sometimes even showing how the Eusebius quote explains this conviction), but their work has been largely unheeded in biblical scholarship. For examples, see R. P. Lawson, *The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies* (ACW 26; New York: Newman, 1956) 22 n. 5 (313); T. Scheck, *Homilies on Numbers* (ACT; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009) 11 n. 37; see also Spencer's note in *De Principiis in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV: *Fathers of the Third Century* (ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson and A. C. Coxe; Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885) 239 n. 1916.

18 Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 9. Origen similarly mentions those who deny the veracity of Isaiah's death by recourse to denying Paul's authorship of Hebrews in *Com. ser. Matt.* 27.28. Origen explicitly identifies Paul as Hebrews' author elsewhere in *Com. ser. Matt.* 65.66, citing Heb 5.14 as *qui ad Hebraeos dicuntur a Paulo*.

19 See also Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.5, 7, 8; 1.5.1; 2.3.5; 2.6.7; 3.1.10; 3.2.4; 4.1.13, 22; 4.1.24, 28.

are the food of a more perfect soul, but that other truths given to beginners are comparable to the milk of babes, says: '*And you have become such as have need of milk, and not solid food. For every one that partakes of milk is without experience of the word of righteousness; for he is a babe ... [etc.]*' [Heb 5.12–14].

*Homilies on Genesis* 8.1: ... the apostle Paul, who, I believe, was teaching by the Spirit what feeling, what plan Abraham considered, has revealed it when he says: '*By faith Abraham did not hesitate, when he offered his only son, in whom he had received the promises, thinking that God is able to raise him up even from the dead*' [Heb 11.17, 19].<sup>20</sup>

*Homilies on Leviticus* 7.2.8: ... the Apostle Paul is '*the teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth*'. Therefore, in writing to the Hebrews, after he had enumerated all the holy fathers who were justified by faith, he adds after all that, '*But those who had every witness through the faith did not yet obtain the new promise since God was looking forward towards something better for us ... [etc.]*' [Heb 11.39–40].<sup>21</sup>

*Homilies on Judges* 2.1: But in whom is 'Jesus dead'? Without doubt, in those who, for instance, by often repenting and again committing sin, are said to insult the death of Jesus, about whom the Apostle, writing to the Hebrews, says, '*Those crucifying again the Son of God within themselves and making a public spectacle of him*' [Heb 6.6].<sup>22</sup>

*Treatise on Prayer* 27.13: ... the Psalms [say]: '*If you would hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.*' This is made very clear in Joshua, as it says: '*Do not desert the Lord in these present days.*' If 'today' is all this age, is not 'yesterday' the age that is passed? I have understood this to be the meaning in Psalms and in Paul in the Letter to the Hebrews [Heb 3, 4].<sup>23</sup>

*Commentary on John* 2.82: But if [someone] takes offence when we say that the Saviour was made less than the Holy Spirit when he became man, we must approach him from what is said in the Epistle to the Hebrews, when Paul also declared that Jesus was made less than angels because he suffered death. For he says, '*But we see Jesus, who was made a little less than the angels because he suffered death, crowned with glory and honour*' [Heb 2.9].<sup>24</sup>

*Commentary on Romans* 7.1.2: But that there are more spirits, this same Paul also declares when writing to the Hebrews, stating, '*Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?*' [Heb 1.14].<sup>25</sup>

20 See also Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 1.3; 3.6; 9.1; 10.1.

21 See also Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 1.3.2, 3; 2.2.6; 2.3.1; 4.6.5; 4.8.2; 5.1.3; 5.3.2; 5.7.3; 7.1.8; 8.5.3; 9.2.1; 9.9.5; 10.1.2; 11.2.4; 11.3.1, 2; 13.1.1; 16.2.3; 16.7.2.

22 See also Origen, *Hom. Judic.* 8.5.

23 See also Origen, *Or.* 27.5, 15.

24 See also Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 1.11, 106, 141; 2.72, 117; 6.266; 10.84; 13.144; 32.353.

25 See also Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 1.6.3; 1.18.6; 2.5.5; 3.4.2; 3.8.11; 4.6.3; 4.8.8; 5.1.14, 39; 5.3.7; 5.7.6; 6.7.11; 6.12.5; 7.4.11; 8.10.7; 9.30; 9.36. Elsewhere in Origen's writings, see *Hom. Ezek.* 1.2.2; 5.3.1; 7.10.3; *Hom. Isa.* 7.1; *Pasch.* 33.35–34.1; 35.6–16.

Finally, we should note Origen's reference to Paul's fourteen epistles in *Homilies on Joshua* 7.1: 'Lastly however came he who said, "I think that God hath set forth us Apostles last of all", [1 Cor. 4.9] and thundering on the fourteen trumpets of his epistles threw down even to the ground the walls of Jericho, that is to say all the instruments of idolatry and the doctrines of philosophers'.<sup>26</sup>

Now, perhaps it is the case that Origen's unflinching references to Hebrews as Pauline are due to some sort of uncritical traditionalism on his part. The best way to assess this suggestion would be to see how Origen describes other disputed New Testament writings, to see if such a traditionalism is manifest here as well. Such an examination, however, reveals the opposite to be the case; where Origen holds some suspicions regarding an epistle's authenticity, he freely notes them. For example, while Origen appears to accept the epistles of James and Jude as authentic,<sup>27</sup> he occasionally shows a measure of reserve in his handful of citations of each, referring to James as 'the epistle that is in circulation as the work of James' in his John commentary,<sup>28</sup> and prefacing a Jude citation with 'and if indeed one were to accept the epistle of Jude' in his Matthew commentary.<sup>29</sup> Origen openly acknowledges critical questions regarding 2 Peter: while three attributions of it to Peter are preserved in Latin translations of his writings,<sup>30</sup> Origen also freely states that 'Peter, on whom the church of Christ is built, left one acknowledged epistle; possibly also a second, but this is disputed'.<sup>31</sup> The books of 2 and 3 John are never attributed to John in Origen's writings, and Origen follows his description of the epistle of 1 John by noting that John left 'perhaps also a second and third; but not all consider them genuine'.<sup>32</sup> Thus, rather than carrying a tendency to default to credulity on the writings attributed to various apostles, Origen's typical practice is to acknowledge doubts regarding authorship where they are present – the opposite of his approach to what he consistently testifies to be Paul's epistle to the Hebrews.

26 See also Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 8.6; 8.7; 9.4; 9.9; 16.5; 17.2; 19.3; 23.3, 4; 26.2. This passage is suspected by some to be an interpolation of Rufinus, though this suspicion itself has often been influenced by prior assumptions of Origen's doubts towards Hebrews. On this passage, cf. E. Gallagher, 'Origen via Rufinus on the New Testament Canon', *NTS* 62 (2016) 461–76, at 474–6.

27 See e.g. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 13.2; *Hom. Josh.* 7.1.

28 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 19.152. Origen also notes in *Comm. Jo.* 20.66 that not all accept the saying 'faith without works is dead' (Jas 2.26) as authoritative, without acknowledging the source. Commentators note that no mention is made of this epistle in discussion of James as Jesus' brother in *Comm. Matt.* 10.17 (in contrast to Jude and his epistle), but this should be balanced by Origen's numerous attributions of the epistle to James elsewhere (e.g. *Comm. Rom.* 4.8.2; *Hom. Josh.* 10.2; *Hom. Lev.* 13.2.5; etc.).

29 Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 17.30. Origen expressly attributes the epistle to Jude in *Comm. Rom.* 5.1.29; *Comm. Matt.* 10.17; 13.27.

30 Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 4.9.12; 8.7.7; *Hom. Lev.* 4.4.2.

31 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.8.

32 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.10.

Another possible escape route is furnished by Metzger, who, while conceding that 'in the vast majority of his references [Origen] is content to attribute [Hebrews] to Paul as its author', nevertheless maintains that 'near the close of his life (after AD 245), in a passage from the series of *Homilies on Hebrews* preserved to us [i.e. in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*], where Origen is speaking as a scholar, he admits freely that the tradition of its authorship is wholly uncertain'.<sup>33</sup> The first point to note on this hypothesis should perhaps go without saying, that the *Homilies on Hebrews* were not works of scholarship, but homilies, which were preached spontaneously and not written out beforehand.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, one can assess the possibility of a late scholarly development in Origen's thought by examining his statements in relation to traditional and modern chronologies of his writings. Metzger follows the traditional Eusebian chronology, whereby Origen's homilies were taken down during the reign of Philip the Arab (244–9 CE), along with twenty-five books on Matthew and *Contra Celsum*.<sup>35</sup> The first difficulty Metzger's hypothesis encounters is that within the homilies on Old and New Testament books we do have preserved, Origen is consistent in explicitly attributing Hebrews to Paul, which a sampling from this period illustrates:

*Homilies on Exodus* 9.1: The apostle Paul especially, however, relates to us certain indications of a more excellent knowledge about the understanding of the tabernacle, but, for some unknown reason, perhaps considering the weakness of his hearers, closes, as it were, those very things which he opens. For he says, writing to the Hebrews, 'For a first tabernacle was made which contained the candlestick and the setting forth of loaves. This was called the Holy of Holies. After the second veil ... [etc.]' [Heb 9.2–4].<sup>36</sup>

*Homilies on Numbers* 3.3.3: I cannot ascend there unless Paul goes before me and shows me the way of this new and arduous journey. He himself, then, the greatest of the apostles ... wanting to show that there is in addition a certain church of the firstborn ones, says when writing to the Hebrews: 'For you have not come to a burning and tangible fire, but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God ... [etc.]' [Heb 12.18, 22–3].<sup>37</sup>

*Homilies on Jeremiah* 19.15.9: But what does the Apostle say? 'Anyone who has violated the Law of Moses dies without pity before two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God? Name, O Paul, the punishment [Heb 10.28–9].<sup>38</sup>

33 Metzger, *Canon*, 138; the solution is similarly proposed by Ehrman, *Forgery*, 88 n. 66.

34 See J. Lienhard, 'Origen as Homilist', *Preaching in the Patristic Age* (ed. D. Hunter; New York: Paulist, 1989) 36–52, at 45.

35 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.36.

36 See also Origen, *Hom. Exod.* 9.3.

37 See also Origen, *Hom. Num.* 2.2.5; 4.2.1; 7.5.5; 11.2.8; 24.1.1; 26.6.1; 28.2.2.

38 See also Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 1.8.4; 9.3.2; 18.2.3; fr. 4.

*Homilies on Luke* 31.7: 'And, to know how a lion is trodden underfoot and a dragon crushed, read the letter of Paul in which he says that the sinner treads the Son of God underfoot [Heb 10.29].<sup>39</sup>

While a shift in the midst of this homily cycle would be unexpected, such a change could be still demonstrated if Origen attested to it hereafter in his writings. But this is the opposite of what one finds: the Pauline attributions carry on in his *Commentary on Matthew*,<sup>40</sup> and in the book typically regarded as his last, *Contra Celsum*, Origen continues attributing Hebrews to Paul, identifying the author of 1 Corinthians, 'our Paul', as 'the same writer' when citing Hebrews in 3.53.<sup>41</sup>

Might a revised modern chronology perhaps offer an alternative account? Here we can turn to the work of Pierre Nautin, which, while provisional, represents the most thorough undertaking on the subject.<sup>42</sup> Nautin's chronology places Origen's homilies (including those on Hebrews) in an earlier period, between 239 and 242 CE. Following this comes a succession of works in which Origen explicitly attributes Hebrews to Paul – the commentaries on Romans (ca. 243),<sup>43</sup> Song of Songs (ca. 245),<sup>44</sup> book 32 on John (ca. 248),<sup>45</sup> the Matthew and Luke commentaries (ca. 249)<sup>46</sup> – and finally the identification in *Contra Celsum* at the end of his writing career in 249 CE. Further, Nautin's reconstructed chronology not only cuts off Metzger's already-blocked escape route, but actually completely reverses the developmental narrative, as Nautin dates Origen's *Letter to Africanus* to nearly a decade *after* the *Homilies on Hebrews*, around 249 ('peu avant la persécution de Dèce (249–250)').<sup>47</sup> If Nautin's dating is correct, the statement preserved in Eusebius would represent a brief homiletic treatment from the relative middle of Origen's career, while the *Letter to Africanus* would be written near the close of his life, with Origen in it speaking as one scholar to another!

Finally, we would be remiss if we failed to note the newly discovered (in 2012) homilies of Origen on the Psalms,<sup>48</sup> which Lorenzo Perrone suspects to postdate *Contra Celsum* and which may now represent the end point of Origen's literary corpus (post-248–9 CE).<sup>49</sup> Could these offer any evidence of an end-of-life

39 Note also fr. 186 from *Comm. Luc.*

40 Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 15.4; 16.15 (Lat.); cf. also 10.18; 11.12.

41 See also Origen, *Cels.* 7.29.

42 See P. Nautin, *Origène. Sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) 409–12.

43 See the *Comm. Rom.* references at n. 25 above. Metzger places the commentary ca. 244–6; cf. Metzger, *Canon*, 140.

44 *Comm. Cant.* Prologue.1; Prologue.4; 1.4; 2.8; 2.9; 3.5; 3.12; 3[4].14.

45 *Comm. Jo.* 32.353.

46 See the *Comm. Matt.* references at n. 40 above; for *Comm. Luke*, see fr. 186.

47 Nautin, *Origène*, 182.

48 L. Perrone, ed., *Die neuen Psalmenhomilien: Eine kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (Origenes Werke XIII; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015).

49 L. Perrone, 'The dating of the new *Homilies on the Psalms* in the Munich codex: The ultimate Origen?', *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 67.3/4 (2017) 243–51.



conversion away from Pauline authorship, and provide a dramatic rescue for the Metzger hypothesis? Origen's answer is unmistakable: 'Hear Paul saying, "But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and myriads of angels, to the assembly and church of the firstborn enrolled in heaven"' (*Hom. Ps. 77.7.7*, Heb 12.22–3). Origen refers to Hebrews as Pauline multiple times in this series, including the 9th homily on Psalm 77, which – in view of Origen's reference to his Hosea commentary, which Eusebius places in the last period of his writing activity – is the very homily that for Perrone decisively supports a dating at the end of Origen's career.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4. Origen's Comments in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*

Equipped with the testimony from Origen's writings elsewhere, we are in a position to turn to the oft-cited Eusebius passage to identify what Origen is and is not saying in it. Eusebius cites as follows from Origen's otherwise lost *Homilies on Hebrews*:

Everyone who is familiar with judging the differences of phraseology will acknowledge that the linguistic character of the Epistle titled *To the Hebrews* does not have, in expression, the commonplace style of the Apostle, who confessed himself to be a commoner in expression (this is, in phraseology), but the epistle is superior Greek in linguistic arrangement. And again, that the thoughts of the epistle are astonishing and not second in rank to the acknowledged apostolic writings, this too everyone will agree to be true who is paying attention to the apostolic reading. (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.11–12)

Here Origen states what is commonly recognised in modern scholarship, and what was even more readily recognised by all of Origen's contemporaries who read and heard the text in their native tongue, that the Greek style of the epistle differs greatly from Paul's typical idiom.

Origen then proceeds to state his view that it is Paul's thoughts and spoken words that are written in Hebrews, and that this authorship must be recorded or mediated in a way that explains the obvious stylistic differences:

Now if I should give my opinion, on the one hand the thoughts (τὰ νοήματα) are the Apostle's, and on the other the phraseology (φράσις) and the arrangement (σύνθεσις) [are] of one having recorded (ἀπομνημονεύσαντος) the apostolic material and, as it were, of one having written notes (σχολιογραφήσαντος)<sup>51</sup> of the things spoken (τὰ εἰρημένα) by the teacher. Therefore, if a church

50 See Origen, *Hom. Ps. 77.9.1*; 77.8.4. See also 37.1.1 and 38.2.2 in the previously known Psalms homilies.

51 This is the only instance of σχολιογραφέω in this period, and so translation is dependent on context; Lampe's rendering of 'make notes on' is followed here (G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 1361).

holds this epistle as Paul's, let this one be commended indeed in this; for not in vain have the ancient men passed it down as Paul's. And who wrote the epistle (ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολήν), God indeed knows the truth, and there is the report that has come down to us by some saying that Clement, who became bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and by others that it was Luke, who wrote the gospel and the Acts. (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.13–14)

Here Origen's two main points are made clear in successive sentences: while he is convinced of Paul's authorship from a material standpoint (and thus confirms the ancient tradition as correct), the precise way it has been composed with regards to who commits the material to writing probably involves a collaborator, whom Origen regards as far more difficult to identify ('God indeed knows').

How does Origen conceive of the relationship between Paul and this secondary hand? Commentators are sometimes led into confusion by the common rendering of the collaborator's work as 'remember' (ἀπομνημονεύσαντος), which seems to suggest something besides an author–amanuensis relationship, but then leaves one in aporia when it comes to explaining why Origen commends the epistle as Paul's in the following sentence.<sup>52</sup> The verb, however, can carry the meaning of 'remember' or 'record' in patristic Greek,<sup>53</sup> and 'record' both fits better within the context of Origen's argument (in that it avoids turning Origen's next sentence into a *non sequitur*), and indeed represents the more common translation for the verb elsewhere in Origen's writings.<sup>54</sup> From Origen's standpoint, the Pauline amanuensis in Hebrews functions as more than simply a stenographer who writes down spoken material verbatim, as this content is received and given precise phraseology (φράσις) and arrangement (σύνθεσις) using notes (σχολιογραφήσαντος) of Paul's oral material.

52 See e.g. Mitchell's commentary, which rejects the author–amanuensis reading and states that Origen believes 'Hebrews was written by someone, perhaps a disciple of Paul, who had later recalled his teacher's thought and written it down', then continues: 'Curiously, Origen commends churches that attribute the authorship of Hebrews to Paul ...' (Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 2).

53 See Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 202.

54 Origen employs ἀπομνημονεύω similarly in *Comm. Jo.* 6.172 to describe the evangelists who recorded differing words of John the Baptist (οἱ ἀπομνημονεύοντες διαφόρως 'those whose records differ'; R. Heine, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John Books 1–10* (FC 80; Washington, DC: CUA, 1989) 217), and again when describing how discrepancies in the gospels lead some to think they were 'not written by a divine spirit, or not successfully recorded' in 10.10 (ἐπιτετευγμένως ἀπομνημονευθέντων; Heine, *John*, 256). Heine translates the verb as 'in their recollection' in describing the gospel writers in *Comm. Matt.* 16.12 (ἐν τῷ ἀπομνημονεύειν οἱ γράψαντες), though here too the context is one of recording in writing (R. Heine, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St. Matthew* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 1.249). The final example in Origen is less clear: Origen ostensibly cites Celsus' words in *Cels.* 1.20 which describe Greeks who knew no records of pre-deluge events (οὐδ' ἀπομνημονεύουσιν), which Chadwick renders as 'possess records' (H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 20).

Nevertheless, the actual content of the epistle is Paul's own, both with respect to the thoughts (τὰ νοήματα) and the spoken words (τὰ εἰρημμένα) that form the collaborator's notes, so that the correct attribution of the letter is to Paul rather than the scribal hand. While Origen views the amanuensis in Hebrews as holding a more prominent stylistic role, an analogy for what he has in mind can be found with his description of Tertius, Paul's writer in Romans, who is identified with precisely the same phrase (ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν, Rom 16.22),<sup>55</sup> and whom Origen similarly describes as both having written down Paul's spoken words (*Paulo dicante perscribere*) and taken in the force of Paul's thoughts (*vim sensuum Pauli dicantis exceperat*).<sup>56</sup>

Though a full exposition on letter-writing in antiquity is beyond this article's scope, Reece's work on Paul and ancient epistolary conventions shows how an author-amanuensis relationship such as Origen suggests for Hebrews would have been unexceptional in his context. As Reece describes, letter writers in antiquity 'sometimes gave considerable freedom to their scribes both in the wording and structure of the composition',<sup>57</sup> and Reece's analysis of Paul's writings concludes 'that Paul likely made heavy use of scribes, that these scribes had various degrees of freedom, and therefore that the compositions of his letters were in a real sense collaborative projects'.<sup>58</sup> The conventionality of such collaborative work helps to explain why, despite Hebrews' stylistic distinctions, Origen shows no hesitation in identifying Paul as the epistle's author, and cites it in the same manner as Paul's other writings throughout his corpus. Indeed, even with the secondary figure's literary shaping, Origen understands Paul's connection with the writing process in Hebrews to be such that even referring to him as the epistle's 'writer' is appropriate, a designation that is found across Origen's literary career.<sup>59</sup>

Rather than a disavowal of Pauline authorship, then, Origen's statement in *Homilies on Hebrews* is an explanation of *how* Paul's authorship – which he

55 See also the identical description (ὁ γράψας ἐπιστολὴν) for the scribe Evarestos in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 20.2. I owe this reference to S. Reece, *Paul's Large Letters: Paul's Autographic Subscription in the Light of Ancient Epistolary Conventions* (LNTS 561; London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) 41 n. 1.

56 See Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 10.40.

57 Reece, *Paul's Large Letters*, 43. Reece offers as an example Cicero, who in some cases 'dictated to a scribe who took notes, perhaps in shorthand, and then edited the letter and re-crafted it in longhand in a subsequent stage of composition ... with his scribe Tiro (*ad Atticum* 13.25.3). In such cases the scribe's style, diction, and other linguistic traits blended somewhat with those of the author/sender' (Reece, *Paul's Large Letters*, 204). Cicero also presents an example of a writer who used scribes in widely varying ways, ranging from word-for-word dictation all the way to ghostwriting (Reece, *Paul's Large Letters*, 204).

58 Reece, *Paul's Large Letters*, 207.

59 See e.g. Origen, *Princ.* Preface.1 (*hoc Pauli testimonio debere nos uti ex Epistola quam ad Hebraeos scribit*); *Comm. Jo.* 1.139–41 (ὁ Παῦλος ... πρὸς Ἑβραίους γράφων); *Comm. Rom.* 6.12.5 (*et praecipue Paulus ad Hebraeos scribens*).

maintains consistently both before and afterwards – functions in relation to this epistle. Indeed, that this is how Origen's comments were received is made clear by Eusebius, who identifies the only party that disputes Paul's authorship of Hebrews as the church of Rome, apart from which all fourteen epistles are 'well known and undisputed'.<sup>60</sup> For Origen, it is because the real author is securely identified that the question of the secondary hand can be left to providence as trivia – while some say Luke, others Clement, Origen is happy for God alone to know what is inessential. To quote Origen again:

Therefore, if a church holds this epistle as Paul's, let this one be commended indeed in this; for not in vain have the ancient men passed it down as Paul's. And who wrote the epistle, God indeed knows the truth – [some say Clement, others Luke, etc.]. (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.13–14)

In modern biblical scholarship, we have taken Origen's second sentence, removed it from its context, and mistakenly portrayed it as a denial of the very point Origen is affirming in the first.<sup>61</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In view of Origen's consistent affirmations of Hebrews as Pauline and the common modern notion to the contrary, one is tempted to conclude by offering some explanation for how this curious situation has come about, and while I have my own suspicions, these would amount to no more than speculation here. But if the great Hebrews commentator Ellingworth is correct that Origen has 'said the last word on the authorship of the epistle', then one thing can be said for certain: it will not be the word that most of us are expecting.<sup>62</sup>

60 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.5.

61 The danger of misrepresenting Origen's thought in this passage is noted by none other than Franz Overbeck, who saw how taking the 'God knows' sentence out of context could give the impression that he denied the Pauline origin of the epistle: 'Zweifel an dieser würde nur bei vollständigem Missverständniss aus dem vorletzten Satze gelesen. Nur den Schreiber, nicht den geistigen Urheber des Hbfs. lässt Origenes dahingestellt' (F. Overbeck, *Zur Geschichte des Kanons* (Chemnitz: E. Schmeitzner, 1880) 22; cited in P. Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt* (WUNT 1/145; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 58 n. 2).

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