

# Priscilla and Plausibility: Responding to Questions about Priscilla as Author of Hebrews

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## Introduction

My field of research is Adolf von Harnack's hypothesis that Priscilla is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> I argue *for* the theory. There are two main objections to the Priscilla theory that I want to state and refute in order to assure its plausibility.

First, I will acknowledge a couple of minor objections—minor in the sense that they will not compromise my case. I often encounter the question of why the author, who named and alluded to women in the roll call of heroes of faith in the eleventh chapter, failed to mention Deborah and certain other women of the Old Testament. There had to be a process of selection, and the women named were exemplars of faith who coincided with the author's intention. J. Rendel Harris has replied elegantly, noting the many references to women in chapter 11, that “what we have found is positive evidence, which silence on certain points hardly affects any further.”<sup>2</sup>

Another objection, this time minor in the sense of being unworthy, is that women in the apostolic church did not exercise spiritual leadership such as that evinced in the letter. This is circular reasoning that begins with a conclusion. It is reminiscent of Junia being demoted from apostle to one “of note among the apostles,” or being given a whole new male identity because, allegedly, women could not be apostles. My response is that we must work our way through the evidence in order to reach a sustainable conclusion.

The first major objection to which I will respond, stated briefly, is that the use of a masculine participle in Hebrews 11:32 eliminates Priscilla as a possible contender for authorship of the letter. I will review the reason why dismissal of Priscilla on the basis of 11:32 cannot be justified on grammatical and other grounds and then reply to challenges to my explanation.

The second major objection is that Hebrews is not a letter, but an essay or sermon addressed “to whom it may concern.” Uprooted from its moorings in the history of the mid-first-century apostolic church, Hebrews is set adrift in uncharted seas of the late first century. There, a multitude of potential authors, essentially unknowable, stake their claim. I will show that the sermonic qualities of Hebrews do not invalidate its epistolary nature.

## The gender of the participle in Hebrews 11:32

Hebrews 11:32 reads, “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .”



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(NRSV). The controversial participle *diēgoumenon*, or “telling,” in the phrase literally translated “time will fail me telling,” is routinely cited as masculine—routinely in the sense that not much thought is given to it, giving the impression that one commentator copies from another. The participle allegedly disqualifies a female author—as one source declares, “*disposing of Priscilla*.”<sup>3</sup> “*Disposing of*” is strong language. Upon more nuanced reflection, we will see that Priscilla is not gone.

As we know, a participle is a verbal adjective. In Greek as in English, an adjective modifies a noun or pronoun. In 11:32, *telling* modifies the pronoun *me*; *me* is in the accusative case, so *telling* is in the accusative case. This is significant because, in the accusative case, the masculine and neuter forms of the participle are identical.

If we had the pronoun *I* or *egō*, thus the nominative case, the masculine form would be *diēgoumenos* and the neuter form *diēgoumenon*, the feminine being *diēgoumenēn*, differing by one letter, *eta*, in the next-to-last position. However, we do not have the nominative case here. We have a participle that is *either masculine or neuter*.

When I wrote my 1997 book, *Priscilla's Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, I knew that the masculine and neuter forms were identical, but did not realize that the neuter might have been intended. In November 1997, two events occurred. First, through serendipity, I met L. Bernard LaMontagne, a professor of New Testament Greek (St. Mary-of-the-Woods College, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana), at the annual Society of Biblical Literature convention in San Francisco. He later informed me that he had new evidence concerning the participle in Hebrews 11:32. Second, my newly published book was removed from general circulation, paving the way for its eventual reprinting by another publisher in 2000, with inclusion of the new material.

In brief, he said the participle *diēgoumenon* may have been neuter in intention as well as form. According to good classical usage, when the individuality of the author is not crucial in a sentence, the use of the neuter has ample precedence.

Tracing the grammar, we recall that a participle is both a verb and an adjective. According to Blass and Debrunner, “When the predicate stands for the subject conceived as a class and in the abstract, not as an individual instance or example, then classical usage puts the adjectival predicate in the neuter singular, even with subjects of another gender.”<sup>4</sup> In Hebrews 11:32, time would fail *anyone* in telling. An earlier work, Herbert Weir Smyth's *A Greek Grammar for Colleges*, concurs.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, objections have been raised to the explication of *telling* as an adjectival predicate intended as neuter. One objection asserts that the participle is not an adjective, but an adverb. My response is that it is indeed an adjective. An adverb modifies a verb. Where is the verb? If the participle has an adverbial quality to it, referring to duration of time (“Time will fail me telling”) that is an issue in English translation.

When translated from Greek into English, an adjectival predicate can morph into an adverbial clause. In the phrase, “Time will fail me telling,” it is clear that *telling*, which modifies the pronoun *me*, is a verbal adjective. However, English translations sometimes introduce the pronoun *I* and/or change the participle to an infinitive, *to tell*. Thus, in the NAB, we have “I have no time to tell,” giving the adverbial sense of time failing “as I tell.” Professor Martin Culy of Briercrest Biblical Seminary asks,

What syntactic basis (in most cases) remains for viewing the participles as adverbial? I would suggest that the only basis relates to English translation rather than Greek syntax. . . . If “adjectival” elements modify constituents like nouns and pronouns, while “adverbial” elements modify verbs, I prefer to label these participles, which go with a pronoun, adjectival and to then ask how that syntax affects our understanding of the text.<sup>6</sup>

In a 2003 article, Culy writes, “Adverbial participles will always be nominative, except for absolute constructions or when they modify an infinitive.”<sup>7</sup> Our participle thus remains accusative and adjectival.

However, he has posed a different objection: that it is not a predicate. In email correspondence, he wrote to me that the participle, in referring back to the pronoun, is not a predicate and so does not qualify as an adjectival participle covered by the rule in Blass and Debrunner. Bernard LaMontagne notes the participle, being part of a “pat construction,” is an adjectival predicate and is covered by the rule in Blass and Debrunner. In a recent email, Carl W. Conrad of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, indicated that the participle is obviously in the predicate, although he disagrees that it is an adjectival predicate under the rule in Blass and Debrunner.<sup>8</sup>

Bernard LaMontagne recently reviewed the relevant material and observed, “I read Hebrews 11:32 in Greek without any consideration for the English in order to capture the sense of the original. . . . I still do believe that it’s neuter (an impersonal or general reference).”<sup>9</sup>

Along a slightly different line, Culy suggested that the idiom “time will fail me in telling” was so common that it may have become fossilized, such that the masculine form might have been used by an author of either gender. This is the “editorial masculine” that von Harnack and others considered plausible. The author speaks for herself, for herself and another person, or for people in general. Priscilla may have been speaking for herself and Aquila, as von Harnack suggested.<sup>10</sup> Or, the “literary masculine” may have been intended. On three other occasions, the author refers to lack of time on behalf of hypothetical multiple writers: in 2:5, “about which we are speaking”; in 5:11, “about which we have much to say”; and in 9:5, “of these things we cannot speak now in detail.”

Conrad does not consider the participle “decisive for the possibility of authorship by Priscilla.” He writes that one could use “the generic Greek masculine form just as a writer of American English in the past could have written ‘he’ rather than ‘she.’”<sup>11</sup>

It is plausible that the original document may have had the feminine participle, even without manuscript evidence for this

possibility. Soon after apostolic times, when female teachers and leaders were falling out of favor in the church, the suppression of a feminine participle would have been essential to gain acceptance for the letter. The plausibility of this scenario increases in connection with substantive evidence for Priscilla’s authorship.

In setting forth grounds for a grammatical resolution of Hebrews 11:32 in favor of Priscilla, I acknowledge one more differing

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viewpoint. According to one professor of New Testament Greek, we can not ascribe a neuter intention in every such case. He personally thinks the intention was masculine. However, he agrees that the matter has been thrown into uncertainty,<sup>12</sup> in which case Priscilla cannot

be eliminated as a possible author. That is all one needs to show.

Even if the participle were masculine because the writer was masculine, we would be looking at a writer of Hebrews who resembles Priscilla in every point of identification: a gifted teacher, catechist, and evangelist; a colleague of Paul with a career along the Rome/Ephesus axis; a towering figure in the early church who was somehow forgotten, his name inexplicably lost.

### Is Hebrews truly a letter?

Some have suggested that Hebrews is not a letter, but, instead, an essay or sermon addressed to Christians in general. In this scenario, the original destination of Hebrews cannot yield clues to authorship because the destination was not localized. Thus, it becomes difficult to argue, for example, that the destination city was Ephesus, where both Timothy and Priscilla had a ministry.

Yes, Hebrews has sermonic qualities. The author knows rhetoric, the construction is skillful, almost formal, and the document reads well aloud. Would someone write such a letter? Yes, a serious writer or a church leader, when danger of apostasy is imminent and not rhetorical, and when one seeks mightily to avert such a catastrophe. This alone could explain why the letter is so carefully thought out and elegantly constructed.

It is true that, in the final (thirteenth) chapter, the tone of the discourse changes. A series of personal comments are interspersed. Some have argued that the change in tone indicates that the thirteenth chapter is an appendage to the original document. I see it differently. After composing a carefully constructed letter, the author changes tone in order to sum up and wind down. There is no manuscript evidence, or any other kind of evidence, that Hebrews was ever circulated without the thirteenth chapter.

It is futile to argue that Hebrews is a sermon or treatise but not a letter. Its epistolary nature is self-evident; recipients in a specific region are addressed with direct mention of their geographical separation from the writer. The target audience is linked to the author with bonds of shared experience and affection. In chapters 5 and 6, we have extended insight into this ongoing relationship. They are gently chided: “[T]hough by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements . . . and we will do this . . . we are confident of better things in your case” (Heb 5:12—6:12 NRSV).

Adolf Jülicher, who was somewhat sympathetic to von Harnack’s hypothesis, wrote:

[C]omplaints about the dullness of hearing . . . and their lack of progress are . . . only applicable on the assumption that the author was addressing a circle of readers whose moral and religious development he had sympathetically watched for years, and to whom he was attached by ties of old personal relations.<sup>13</sup>

Such a warning could not reasonably be the subject of a general treatise to churches: churches such as Corinth, fast-growing and exuberant; or Rome, renowned for faith.

Whereas the personal references in chapters 5 and 6 could hardly have been inserted at a later time, some have argued that the entire thirteenth chapter was not part of the original, or that the epistolary comments in chapter 13 were inserted at a later time. There is no evidence for either. We can be confident of the integrity of the epistle because chapter 13 is tied to the preceding portion of the document, first, by continuity of thought, and, second, by literary links.

In Hebrews 13:10–16, we see four allusions to the great themes of the epistle: the tent, or Tabernacle (13:10), high priesthood (13:11), the blood of Jesus (13:12), and the heavenly city (13:14).<sup>14</sup> We have stylistic elements that correspond to the first twelve

chapters: linguistic rhythm, play on words, unusual word order for effect, assonance and alliteration, and the use of classical idioms. According to William Lane, “[T]hese stylistic elements constitute a distinct literary signature that serves to identify the writer as conclusively as would an unsmudged set of fingerprints . . . precisely the literary signature written across chaps. 1–12.”<sup>15</sup>

Could epistolary elements have been interpolated at a later time? These elements are intertwined with the chapter, not grouped together. Could someone have interspersed epistolary elements as a ploy to make it appear the treatise was a letter? If, in fact, someone undertook such a subterfuge, he succeeded very well. This is what Roland Paul Cox had to say in his research paper “The Genre of Hebrews”:

Another idea that has been suggested is that the ending was purposefully added to give it the appearance of being written by Paul or another apostolic figure. . . . [W]hy not just claim it is being written by Paul[? . . . ]t seems best to see Hebrews as a letter that was written to a specific audience.<sup>16</sup>

In verse 22, the author states, “I have written to you briefly,” using a form of the word *epistellō*, which commonly means to inform or instruct by letter, or simply to write. In the absence of external or internal evidence to the contrary, meeting the burden of proof, we have a document that is in fact the *Epistle to the Hebrews*.

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## Notes

1. Adolf von Harnack, “Probabilia uber die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebraerbriefes,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 1 (1900), 16–41.
2. James Rendel Harris, *Side-Lights on New Testament Research: Seven Lectures* (London: Kingsgate/James Clarke, 1908), 174.
3. A. T. Robertson, *Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1932). Italics mine. <http://www.ccmweb.org/gsword/bible/cmmt/RWP/Heb/11/32>.
4. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, rev. and trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 72–73, 76–77.
5. Herbert Weir Smyth, *A Greek Grammar for Schools and Colleges* (New York, NY: American Book Co., 1920), 276.
6. Martin Culy, “RE: Acts 22:6 Revisited,” B-Greek blog, <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/b-greek/2004-April/029389.html>.
7. Martin Culy, “The Clue is in the Case: Distinguishing Adjectival and Adverbial Participles,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 4 (2003): 441–54.
8. Carl W. Conrad, email message to author, March 21, 2007.
9. Bernard LaMontagne, email message to author, March 14, 2007.
10. Von Harnack, “Probabilia,” 26.
11. Carl W. Conrad, email message to author, March 21, 2007.
12. Jon C. Laansma, email message to author, October 13, 2005.
13. Adolf Jülicher, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1904), 152–53.
14. John Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM-Canterbury, 1976), 183, quoting Kummel.
15. William Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), lxviii.
16. Roland Paul Cox, “The Genre of Hebrews” (research paper, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2005), 5, 9. <http://cox-net.com/pdf/GenreofHebrews>.

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