Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 1b, Introduction to the “Letter to the Hebrews”: the Who, What, and Why of the Sermon (Part 2)

Having given our attention to what we can learn about the author from the contents of the sermon that he has left us, it's also appropriate that we spend some time sifting this text for what it can reveal about the congregation that he addresses. The lack of a letter opening has not helped us at all in this regard. It would have been fabulous if Hebrews had started with so-and-so to the and such a place, filling in those gaps for us.

The only actual geographic reference in the entire document comes from a greeting at the end: those from Italy greet you. And that is not very helpful in terms of locating the you that those from Italy are greeting. A very early conjecture about the audience is that it was composed of Jewish Christians, perhaps even Hebrew-speaking Christians.

The manuscript tradition contains many titles given to this particular document by scribes or copyists producing that manuscript, and these tend to focus on some group of Hebrews as the actual audience. For example, we read in some manuscripts to the Hebrews, written from Rome, to the Hebrews, written from Italy, to the Hebrews, written from Italy through Timothy, to the Hebrews, written from Rome by Paul to those in Jerusalem, to the Hebrews, written in Hebrew from Italy anonymously through Timothy. What all of these scribal titles have in common is the assertion that the document was written for the consumption of Christian Jews.

This traditional identification of the audience continues to receive a great deal of support, but for reasons that I find largely fallacious. For example, it is frequently argued that the author's thoroughgoing interest in the Old Testament is more appropriate for a Jewish audience than a Gentile one, or a variant of this argument is that the degree of familiarity with the Old Testament that the author seems to assume on the part of his audience argues for a Jewish audience rather than a Gentile one. On the contrary, the Old Testament is the body of sacred oracles for Gentile Christians just as much as it is for Jewish Christians.

Gentile Christians would be as interested in the exposition of these sacred texts as Jewish Christians would be. Gentile Christians would also quickly be exposed to and made familiar with a broad range of the Old Testament's contents in the context of Christian worship and hearing Christian teaching over the space of years. If we were to look at two other New Testament texts, Galatians and 1 Peter, we would also have to come to different conclusions.

These two texts are explicitly written for Gentile Christians. Galatians, of course, seeks to stop Christians from allowing themselves to be circumcised. It is a given that this is an issue for Gentiles, not for Jews, for whom that decision was made on the eighth day of their lives.

1 Peter also addresses Christians who turned from idolatry, whose neighbors are now alienated from them because they don't continue to participate in the Greco-Roman religion that they used to. So here we have two texts clearly written to Gentiles, each one of which contains a high percentage, a high concentration of quotations from the Old Testament and also references and allusions that, if they are to have their full impact, need to be recognized by Gentile Christians as allusions and references to the oracles of God. All this suggests to me that Gentile Christians in the early decades of the Church were as interested in and as thoroughly socialized in the contents of the Old Testament as their Jewish counterparts in the congregation.

Another argument that is frequently put forward in favor of a Jewish Christian audience is the author's focus on the sacrificial cult and its personnel. That is to say, his interest in what the Levites and the priestly caste of Israel do in the temple or, before that, in the Tabernacle. It is argued that this is of interest to Jews and not Gentiles.

On the contrary, I would say that Hebrews tackles head-on the chief stumbling block of the Old Testament as sacred scripture for both Jewish and Gentile Christians, namely how to hold on to these texts as divine revelation and authoritative norm without also practicing the ritual cult that they prescribe. That is to say, a Gentile reading through the Old Testament as the word of God would need to hear how he or she, as a Christian, can hold on to these texts while not participating in any of the rites of the Jerusalem temple. This would be as pressing an issue for the first-century Gentile Christian as the first-century Jewish Christian.

It is also often suggested that the author is primarily interested in staving off a reversion to Judaism. But all we really know is that the author seeks to stave off desertion, not in what direction deserters would be moving. If he was thinking only or chiefly of Jewish Christians reverting to non-Christian Judaism, it is striking that he would speak of this as turning away from the living God, as in Hebrews 3:12, rather than simply turning away from Christ.

It was the Gentile who needed to turn to the living God from idols in the first place, and it was the Gentile Christian who would turn away from the living God by reverting to his or her former life. The comparisons of the sun with the angels, with Moses, and with the Levitical cult are clearly intended to promote the value of what Christians now have in their relationship with the sun. It is not nearly so clear that these comparisons are meant to downplay Judaism as a lively alternative.

There are also several positive indicators in the sermon that Gentile Christians were part of the author's audience as well. For example, the topics of the audience's primary instruction after their conversion are more appropriate to Gentile converts than to Jewish converts. The author writes in chapter 6, verses 1 to 2, that in the process of being socialized in their new faith, the audience was exposed to teaching about repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptism and laying on of hands, and resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

Now, the typical Jew of the Second Temple period would, of course, already possess faith toward God and would know about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. These are very common pillars of Jewish constructions of the cosmos across a wide range of Jewish groups, and even traditional Jews that might not be aligned, say, with one of the famous parties or schools within Judaism, like the Pharisees or the Essenes. It would be very strange for the author to think of repentance from dead works and faith toward God as that which is appropriate for Jews.

Instead, it's probably a clue to Gentile conversion from idolatry. Idols are often called dead works. For example, Wisdom of Solomon speaks about the craftsperson working a dead thing with his hands as he crafts an idol.

And, of course, faith toward God is a way of talking about Gentile conversion to the God of Israel in a text like Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The nature of the Pauline mission itself, to which the author and, therefore, most likely the congregation belonged, also suggests that Gentile Christians would be present among the audience. After all, Paul considered himself to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and even though he included Jews in his audience when he preached, and even though he was committed to developing congregations where Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could have table fellowship together, he identified his work primarily in terms of reaching the nations.

So, if the author belonged to the Pauline mission, it seems likely that he addressed a church that arose out of that mission, and such a church would have a mixed congregation of Gentile and Jewish Christians. As we think about the location where this particular mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile converts lived, we are at something of a loss. The only clue again to geography is provided in 13 verse 24, those from Italy greet you.

Now, this has been taken to mean one of two things: either that the letter is written from Italy or that the letter is written back home to people in Italy from their brothers and sisters abroad. All early scribal conjectures, however, align with the first option, perhaps in keeping with the models of the first Peter and first Clement, two other first-century letters that were written from Rome to Christians elsewhere. The

expression of those from Italy, in Greek, is also a well-attested way of speaking of origin, but not a well-attested way of speaking of separation from a place.

Everything points, therefore, to Italy, perhaps even Rome, as the major center of Christianity in Italy as the place of composition. But having said that, we have very little to say about the place of reception, except that it would likely be somewhere in the belt of the Pauline mission. Scholars are increasingly interested in the social analysis of early Christianity.

Wayne Meeks, for example, wrote a groundbreaking study in this regard on the Corinthian church called The First Urban Christians. Hebrews does not lend itself to the same kind of analysis to nearly the same degree, but we can say a few things about the social level of the addressees. First, the sermon suggests an audience that comes from every social level rather than merely from the beleaguered masses or the poor.

Some members of this community once had property worth confiscating. The congregation still had members capable of offering hospitality and performing acts of charity, even after the period of its most intense persecution. The author also felt it necessary to caution the hearers against ambition in regard to recovering possession and possibly status, an issue more likely for haves, or at least once haves, than for have-nots.

We know something of the audience's story from three episodes of the community's history that the preacher calls to mind. He recalls these particular episodes strategically. Each one serves a purpose in his sermon: positioning the hearers to respond to their present challenges in the way that he would have them.

Nevertheless, they also do serve to open three windows into the life of this community over time. These have to do with the community's origins, the socialization that they received as new converts, and the negative reactions of their neighbors at some earlier time in their history. The first episode that he recalls has to do with the community's origins.

In chapter two, verses one through four, we read in the form of a question: how will we flee neglecting so great a salvation which was spoken at first through the Lord and confirmed to us by those who heard, God bearing witness alongside them with signs and wonders and various works of power and disbursements of the Holy Spirit according to his will. In this experience of conversion, of hearing the word, the hearers also experienced the divine presence and power. This was an experiential encounter with the divine that confirmed for them the truth of the message of the gospel.

This is a common pattern among Pauline churches. If one were to compare the opening verses of r1 Corinthians chapter two or of Galatians chapter three with this description in Hebrews chapter two, one would find quite a number of similarities, particularly in the reliance on God to show up to bring conviction to the hearers. The group, its gatherings, and its foundational worldview and story were thus invested from the charismatic legitimation that came from people being put in touch with the divine, with the ultimate, by virtue of receiving and believing this message.

The experience was sufficient to motivate the audience to make a decisive break from their former understandings of how the divine operated and was accessed. This is true whether they were formerly non-Christian Jews or non-Christian pagans. Either way, their encounter with the message and with God through the message convinced them to break with time-honored ways of interacting with divinity and, therefore, also to break with the social networks that were sustained by and that sustained those patterns of interacting with divinity, whether in the synagogue apart from the church or in the temples and the civic spaces throughout the Greek and Roman cities of the territory and the territory of the Pauline mission.

The second episode in the community's history, into which the author gives us a closer look, is their socialization into this new way of life, into this new way of viewing the world that was the gospel. They were immersed in the oracles of God, particularly no doubt in a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament scriptures, and they were immersed in the basic teaching about Christ, as the author puts it at 6:1. This was the foundational story of God's intervention around which the Christian movement was formed, God's intervention in the man Jesus Christ. The author also speaks of six components of their primary catechism, as it were, in this new faith and new way of life.

These included repentance from dead works and faith in God, teachings about baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. Faith toward God is, of course, fundamental to Gentile conversion to Christianity. Paul recalls how the Thessalonian converts, for example, turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God in 1 Thessalonians 1:9. The idea of repentance from dead works, once again, recalls the language of renouncing idolatry, which is typically associated with coming to faith toward God.

Wisdom of Solomon 15 verse 17 speaks about the pagan craftsperson making a dead thing with his lawless hands, and that author frequently calls idols dead things, nekra. So, it's quite possible that the author of Hebrews has in mind here an early Christian teaching about why idolatry is just not the way to interact with divine powers. It's also possible that repentance from dead works could refer to repentance from those works that lead to death, as opposed to works that lead to life.

This would be an interpretation of this phrase consonant with a Jewish background as well, as we encounter it in Deuteronomy 30, verses 15 to 20. There Moses enjoins upon his hearers to choose life rather than death by obeying God's law rather than performing works that are contrary to God's law. One thought about dead works that I think ought to be discarded is that the doing of the Old Testament law or the practice of the Old Testament cult would be the dead works against which the early Christian movement preached.

Now, those might have been ineffective works as far as the preacher of Hebrews was concerned, but certainly not dead works or death-dealing works. That would represent a distortion of this author's view of the Old Testament law and even the Old Testament cult. The author is also here strategically coloring pre-Christian life.

He contrasts the dead works of their life apart from Christ with the noble works that converts are now able to perform in connection with Christ at two other points in his letter, Hebrews 10:24 and Hebrews 13:21. This kind of strategic coloring helps Christians want to hold on to their current identity rather than return to a less noble and certainly less fruitful identity. Baptism is, of course, the primary and fairly universal right of entrance into the Christian movement.

It's significant as a mechanism that helps people make the transition from one identity and one primary social group into another. As Paul, for example, would say in Romans, baptism is all about dying to the old life and coming alive to a new life. There is an element of renunciation in the ritual, as well as attaching oneself to a new life and a new community.

What's puzzling about the text in Hebrews is that he refers to teaching about baptisms in the plural, and it is frankly not yet certain whether the author was alluding to some other early teaching that contrasted baptism with pagan or Jewish purificatory rites or that added baptism to some other distinctive practice of purification that is otherwise unknown in the early church. Or perhaps the author was speaking in a different way here of the double cleansing that he discusses more fully later at chapter 10, verse 22, where the body is washed with clean water, a physical baptism, but the conscience or the heart is washed from a bad conscience by Jesus' death, a spiritual effect of baptism. Another possibility, given that the author speaks of receiving a share in the Holy Spirit quite soon after this passage in 6-4, is that the author was thinking of baptism in water as the entrance right into the community and also a baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Laying on hands is very common in Acts, which is also a text that is connected with the Pauline mission. It appears in connection with facilitating the convert's reception of the Holy Spirit, being divinely empowered for the journey from conversion to consummation. The final two elements of their socialization had to do with the

resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, which are principal facets both of the Jewish worldview and the Christian worldview.

The author emphasizes this because it remains important as the basis for weighing the advantages and disadvantages of courses of action in this life. It relativizes these worldly consequences and maximizes post-mortem consequences. Thus, it encourages our Christian congregation to pay whatever short-term costs are necessary to avoid post-mortem costs, as it were, which will last much longer and be much greater.

All of this, taken together, reflects a powerful process of re-socialization, combining teaching and ritual in the formation of a new identity and a new sense of belonging for these early Christians. In Hebrews chapter 10, verses 32-34, the preacher takes the addressees back to an episode, perhaps indeed an extended period, of great tension and hostility in regard to their relationship with their neighbors. Now remember the earlier days in which, having been enlightened, you endured a great contest of sufferings, in part being made a by reproaches and trials, and in part making yourselves partners with those thus treated.

For you showed sympathy with those who had been imprisoned, and you accepted the seizure of your property with joy, knowing yourselves to have better and lasting possessions. We don't know how long ago these former days were at the time this sermon was delivered. We do, however, get a clear and poignant picture in which the Christian group's honor was in jeopardy as a result of their identifying themselves with this Jesus and with the movement that was spreading through the cities of the Mediterranean in his name.

In these former days, their neighbors responded to them with reproaches and with some sort of harassment that could be called a trial of some kind. And the author highlights their experience of shame by calling this being made a spectacle of by virtue of the reproaches and the harassment to which the community was subjected. But he also points out how they voluntarily stepped out in courage toward those sisters and brothers who had been targeted most by their non-Christian neighbors, showing sympathy for those who had even been thrown into prison as a result of their new patterns of behavior and their new allegiance.

In doing so, they accepted great risks to willingly go and show themselves publicly to be a partner of these people who had been most shamed and would invite similar shame, harassment, and even legal actions against themselves. The author also speaks of the seizure of property, and it is unclear whether this was some official act of confiscation, for example, fining the believers on some related charge or simply the plundering of possessions as frequently happened in the ancient world if a group was out of favor. If a group had no recourse to the protection of powerful patrons or the legal system, they were fair game, as it were, for pillaging.

The point of the author's example is that in the past, the community was able to endure all these things with fortitude and even with a sense of joy, knowing that their investment now counted so much in God's eyes. Now, honor was a core social value in the Greco-Roman world. Seneca, that first-century Roman senator and philosopher, observed that that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable.

Therefore, honoring or shaming are primary means of reinforcing group values. This is the fundamental pivot of values or axis of values upon which other considerations could then be built. The Christians' neighbors sought to make the Christians feel degraded, shamed, and less valuable as a result of their moving away from their old way of life into this new and questionable allegiance.

These neighbors' motivation in doing so was to correct what they perceived to be deviant behavior. They wanted to reclaim their own neighbors who had defected to this strange eastern cult and win them back. Or if they were Jews, pressure from the synagogue would be aimed at winning them back to a closer observance of the law of Moses, the Torah, which might include not associating so closely with Gentiles as Paul and his mission had Jewish Christians do.

It was also a means by which the Christians' neighbors could discourage further conversion if they could show that if they joined this group, this is what would happen to them. There might be some element in which these neighbors' reaction was an attempt to reaffirm their own commitment to their own worldview and values, which they would find to be threatened as their neighbors defected to this strange cult. There are a number of reasons why a non-Christian outsider would regard joining the Christian group to be an anti-social and potentially subversive action, a choice meriting correction.

As Gentiles watched some of their own join the Christian group, what they would have seen would have been a move toward impiety, even atheism. What Paul would celebrate in 1 Thessalonians as turning from idols to serve a living God, most Gentiles would look at as dishonoring the majority of gods for the sake of adherence to one admittedly tribal God of the people of Israel. Gentiles would probably also regard joining the Christian movement as potentially revolutionary or subversive.

After all, if Gentiles knew anything about this group at all, they knew that its leader had been duly executed by a Roman governor for sedition by virtue of being crucified. Jews, on the other hand, would regard this Christian movement growing up as a movement that threatened to erode the boundaries around the holy people of God as it led formerly good boundary-maintaining Jews to eat with Gentiles, to fellowship with them, to enter their houses perhaps as a location for Christian worship, and in many ways to threaten the boundaries that God had placed around

God's holy people in the law of Moses itself. They would also regard Jewish converts as followers of a person who is at best a messianic pretender, at worst a blasphemer, and a sorcerer in league with Satan.

The addressees' response, the Christians' response to this earlier period of experiencing their neighbors' shaming and corrective pressures, is especially important. They accepted rejection. They accepted the attempts to ascribe shame upon them and disregarded that, clinging instead to fellowship with one another and to continued loyalty to this Christ whom they had discovered and the God who had taken them under his wing as far more valuable than their neighbors' acceptance.

This, in turn, will be why the author holds up this previous period before them to encourage them not to give up their former boldness. Perhaps even more important than information about the author of an ancient text or the audience of that ancient text is information about the situation of those hearers at the moment of receiving that text. One of the very important questions that we must ask about Hebrews is, what challenges does its author address? There is no evidence of a new or ramped-up opposition to the Christian movement reflected in this text.

Indeed, there's no evidence that their neighbors are even continuing their energetic shaming efforts. A cool disregard on their part may have replaced the heated acts of degradation and harassment from that earlier time. This would set Hebrews apart from 1 Peter, for example, where the author speaks of the present and ongoing pressure from outsiders.

There's also no evidence of doctrinal deviation as a pressing cause for the author composing and sending this sermon. Hebrews chapter 1, verses 5 to 14, has from time to time, been taken as a sign that the addressees are starting to worship angels or to think too highly of angels. This is almost certainly not the case, but rather a bad instance of over-mirror reading a text.

If the author were indeed concerned with the addressees beginning to worship angels or some such thing, such as we do have evidence for in Colossians, the exhortation that followed 1:5 to 14 would reflect this rather than the concern that it actually does reflect. Hebrews seems to have been occasioned largely by a simple failure of commitment. Earlier attempts at shaming the deviant Christians may have failed in the short run, but they are beginning to gain traction in the longer run.

One firm piece of evidence that we have about the audience's situation is that some of their members, not necessarily many, but some, have begun to withdraw themselves from meeting together with a larger Christian group. In Hebrews 10:25, the author says, do not abandon the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some. Now, that last phrase shows us that the author has clearly received

word that some of the converts have begun to think that showing up at the Christian meetings is not worth the price that it has occasioned.

These believers have begun down the dangerous path of accommodating themselves once more to the expectations of their non-Christian neighbors, seeking to be at home once more in their native city, growing tired of longing for the appearance of this heavenly city that they were promised. As we read through Hebrews from beginning to end, it seems that the immediate danger facing the hearers is a failure of commitment and its effects, namely leaving the Christian group and giving up their focus on the prize that the Christian message holds before them. Thus, we read of the danger of drifting away from the message that they heard at their conversion in 2 1, or the danger of neglecting the message of deliverance spoken by Jesus and certified not only by Jesus' witnesses but also by God himself in chapters 2, 3 to 4. We read about the danger of turning away from the living God through distrust in 3 verses 12 and 13, or the danger of failing to attain entry into the promised place of rest in chapter 4, verse 1 or falling short in the same way as the wilderness generation fell short at the very threshold of entering their promised land on account of a failure of trust in 4 12.

Or we read about the dangers of growing weary and losing heart in chapter 12, verse 3, or again falling short of attaining God's gifts in chapter 12, verse 15. We find repeated emphasis throughout the sermon on this same basic danger and, therefore, the same basic challenge. In the community, there are some members who falter in their commitment and who falter in the assurance that the word they received is reliable.

In their conviction that they have indeed encountered the divine as a result of joining this group and in their certainty that the rewards promised them are real and worth the price they have paid to remain associated with the group to whom such rewards were promised. The believers have lived too long without honor in the world and without having received the glory that was promised to God's sons and daughters. They have gone too long without seeing the day of the Lord, ever drawing near but never dawning.

They have faced the difficulty of living in the space in between. They have left their place and status in their earthly city, but they have not yet entered into their honor and status in the abiding and lasting city of God's foundation. Therefore, some members of this congregation have begun to see defection from the group as a path to recovery, as the way back to reclaiming what remained of this life in the bosom of their neighbors who no doubt would have welcomed the penitents and the reformed.

If the author seeks to accomplish one thing in this text, it is to encourage the hearers not to succumb to this faltering in commitment but rather continue to move in the

same direction in which they started heading when they first joined themselves to the Christian movement and to do so with the same confident boldness that they formerly displayed. He writes in chapter 3, verse 6, that we are Christ's house if we hold on to our boldness and the boast that comes from hope. Or again, in 3:14, we are Christ's partners if we hold on to our original commitment firm to the end.

He seeks to exhort his hearers in chapter 4, verse 11, let us hasten on to enter into that rest lest anyone fall by the pattern of disobedience that the wilderness generation had displayed. He urges them in 4 verses 14 to 16, let us hold on to what we confess. Let us keep drawing nearer to the throne of grace with boldness.

He expresses his wish in chapter 6, verse 11, that each of you should show until the end the same eagerness for the full assurance of hope. And he urges them in chapter 10, verses 23 to 25: let us continue to draw near to keep holding unwaveringly to the confession of hope. And further, at 10:35, don't throw away your boldness, which holds a great reward.

For you need endurance in order that, having done God's will, you may receive what was promised. Even further instances of this could be cited. So, in exhortation after exhortation in this sermon, the author shows his primary desire to keep the hearers committed to maintaining the identity, the practices, and the boundaries that led to their experience of tension with society in the first place.

Everything in his sermon, from beginning to end, can be understood as a rhetorical incentive or a rhetorical constraint aimed at achieving this goal of motivating the hearers' perseverance, loyalty, and gratitude to God and God's son. What are the key strategies for achieving his goals for his audience? As we work through the full text of Hebrews, we'll find that the author gives attention to three principal strategies for motivating perseverance, urging the hearers to adopt three responses to their situation. The first is despising shame.

The second is showing gratitude to God for all that they received. The third is encouraging and supporting one another as they continue to press on in the face of the hardships and difficulties that their neighbors have thrown their way. This first strategy of seeking to motivate the hearers to despise shame tackles head-on the problem of the Christian neighbor's negative response to their conversion and to their new allegiances and new practices.

These neighbors have been trying to shame the converts back into their prior activities, those activities that they could affirm. For example, on the part of Gentile neighbors, participation in the worship of the traditional gods undergirded and preserved everyday life as they knew it. Or, in the case of non-Christian Jewish neighbors, attention to those boundaries that preserved the holy people of God and set them apart from the nations in obedience to God's commission to them.

The author encourages the hearers to despise shame so that they will not feel that social pressure so that they will be insulated from their neighbor's attempts at social control. A very important component of this strategy will be found in Hebrews 11 as the author presents praiseworthy examples of people who themselves had to despise shame in order to attain greater honor before God and before God's people. Thus, especially the examples of Abraham, Moses, the martyrs, and the crowning example of Jesus himself are all examples of those who, by faith, had to set aside the opinion of worldly-minded people in order to be free to pursue the honor that God had set before them.

And the author's remembrance of the community's own past example also falls into this train. We will also find the author reinterpreting experiences of being shamed or marginalized as actually honor-producing experiences before God. This, for example, lies behind his casting of the hearer's situation as a noble contest in which they are called to compete and potentially win, specifically by rising above the social pressure of their neighbors.

It is also behind his metaphor of divine paideia, the formative discipline that God has set around them to make them honorable and virtuous citizens of the homeland that they are about to receive. Another major component of the author's strategy is to fix the hearer's eyes on showing gratitude to God for all the benefits they have received and hope yet to receive. This is really at the heart of the author's rhetorical strategy to keep the addressees focused on the matchless gifts that have come to them, and that will yet come to them through Jesus' mediation of God's favor.

In this way, the author also hopes to keep the value of remaining connected with Jesus as their mediator in God's favor fixed in their hearts. The author energetically reminds people who may be beginning to think that they have lost too much by sticking it out with the Christian group of just how much they have gained and stand to gain because of this connection. He redirects their focus thus away from what they've given up and toward what they've received, as well as toward their debt of gratitude and their divine benefactor.

In this way, the author elevates the ultimate importance of acting in a way that honors and preserves this benefactor-beneficiary relationship with the God of the cosmos above every other incentive or goal. Patronage and reciprocity were the bedrock of the social and cultural world in which the author and his audience moved. Access to what a person needed was inevitably to be found in the hands of someone else in society.

Thus, someone can get what he or she might need, for example, seed to sow a new crop after a harvest or access to some opportunity in those few places where upward mobility was possible in this world. For that to happen, another person had to be

willing to show favor, to show grace. And such a gift, such a display of grace, actually initiated more of a relationship between the recipient and the giver.

I speak here not of public benefaction as when a very rich citizen might give a feast or provide the money for games for a whole city, but in the personal day-to-day interactions between individuals. Patronage and reciprocity created long-lasting social bonds. We find the ethic of this relationship encapsulated in the meanings of the word charis, which is often translated as grace.

But this Greek word charis actually has three distinct but related meanings. Favor, the disposition to give, hence the translation grace. The gift itself, and the gratitude that is returned to the giver.

This one word charis holds together three meanings that together create the web of reciprocity that keeps this social fabric tightly woven together. A classical image that frequently appears in frescoes, bas-reliefs, and statues is the image of three women dancing in a circle together, often hand in hand or with one hand upon the other's shoulder. This image presents the three graces.

Seneca, speaking about this image, talks about women, these three graces or goddesses, in terms of the three facets of reciprocity. There's one grace for giving well, a second grace for receiving well, and the third grace represents returning well. That is to say, making a response of gratitude as a means of enhancing the giver's honor, showing loyalty to the giver even when costly, and looking for opportunities to return some gift or service when the time is right.

This is the socio-cultural logic that the author and his audience bring to the composition and to the hearing of Hebrews. Thus, as the author dwells on the benefits that the addressees have received as a result of God's favor toward them in Christ, he is also laying the foundation for encouraging a proper response to God and to Christ, tying continued loyalty to Christ and to the household of God, the church, to the response of gratitude that they are beholden to make. Their ongoing connection with this Jesus, moreover, assures them of continued enjoyment of access to God and finding all the resources they need to persevere on the road to enjoying the fullness, the final benefactions that God has promised for them in the eternal realm.

It's also in connection with this strategy that we should hear the warning passages of Hebrews, some of which are quite strikingly strong. But the author is simply warning his hearers against outraging so generous and so powerful a benefactor by publicly dishonoring him and his gifts by defecting, by bearing witness to their neighbors that the favor of other human beings is worth more than the favor of God that was won for them at such personal cost to God's own son. The third major component of the author's strategy that runs throughout the fabric of Hebrews is to motivate the

hearers to encourage one another and provide the social support that each individual needs for perseverance, particularly in an unsupportive society.

The author recognizes the importance of one's fellow Christians for any individual Christian's perseverance in the faith. Therefore, he urges believers from beginning to end to energize their interactions with one another in positive, perseverance-nurturing ways. This would provide an important compensator and counterbalance for the erosive effects of the responses that they have been enduring from their non-Christian neighbors.

The author stresses their collective responsibility for each individual's perseverance. For example, in the exhortation from chapter 3, verse 12 and following, keep on the lookout, brothers, and sisters, in case there be in any one of you a wicked, distrustful heart inclined to turn away from the living God, but keep speaking encouragement to each other every day, as long as it is called today, in order that no one of you may become hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Or, just a few verses later, at the beginning of chapter 4, let us be afraid then, lest while a promise of entering God's rest remains, any one of you thinks it best to stop short.

And again, toward the conclusion of his sermon, he urges, keep watching out, lest anyone of you fall short of God's gift, lest any root of bitterness sprouts up, and through it, many become defiled. Lest anyone become carnal and godless like Esau, who sold his rights as the firstborn for the sake of a single meal. The author's complaint about the failure on the part of many in the audience to become teachers by this point, as we read in chapter 5, is a failure on the part of the more steadfast believers to take this active role in helping their sisters and brothers who are less committed, less confirmed to maintain their commitments to the worldview and the practices of the Christian group, as the most sensible and advantageous course of action.

If all the group members took a more active role in the perseverance of the wavering, fewer would now be forsaking the assembling of themselves together. These withdrawing individuals, on the other hand, have also failed their fellow Christians. Their departure diminishes the whole and erodes the commitment of those who remain behind, who might be thus led to think, if they no longer find this Christian enterprise compelling, why exactly do we? The author is thus concerned from beginning to end to keep the remaining members moving in the direction of drawing near to each other, assuring them that this same motion means drawing near to God and to their heavenly inheritance.

He's also concerned throughout with motivating believers to provide for one another whatever any one of them stands in need of receiving, so they will sense God's provision and the reality of family, of brotherly and sisterly love in and through the community of faith to which they have committed themselves. We have given

considerable time in the preceding presentation to discerning what can be known about the author, the congregation, the situation in which they found themselves, and the author's pastoral goal and strategy for them. A final question that we might ask is when Hebrews was written. Unfortunately, as with the question of authorship and location of the addressees, we simply do not have firm information to answer this question.

It is generally agreed that Hebrews was written before the end of the first century. This is because one of the apostolic fathers, Clement of Rome, appears to refer to the first chapter of Hebrews as he writes his own letter to the Corinthian churches. This is usually dated around AD 96, so Hebrews would obviously have had to have been written earlier.

It is also given that Timothy, one of Paul's missionary companions, would still have been fit enough for travel, which again points to some time before AD 96. Scholars have tried to narrow down the range of composition even further. For example, William Lane, in his magisterial commentary on Hebrews in the Word Biblical Commentary Series, sets Hebrews in Rome itself as if addressed to the Christians there.

He discerns from the statement that the congregation has not yet resisted to the point of blood that the letter had to be composed prior to Nero's persecution of that congregation in about AD 64. Unfortunately, that thesis depends on locating the addressees of Hebrews in Rome, whereas the bulk of evidence locates them outside of Italy, and the author is actually in Italy himself, or perhaps also in Rome. Others had looked to the references to Levitical sacrifices in the temple as a sign that Hebrews was written at least before AD 70 when the temple was destroyed.

I find these arguments persuasive myself since the statements that the author makes about the sacrifices in the temple would be more naturally spoken prior to its destruction and the cessation of sacrifices there. At the outset of chapter 10, for example, the author says that the law can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered? The rhetorical question there at the end of that statement suggests that the sacrifices are indeed still being performed according to Leviticus and its regulations.

Otherwise, this rhetorical question would make little sense because, indeed, they would have ceased being offered by this time. The author also says in chapter 9, verses 8 and 9, that the first chamber of the earthly tabernacle, the holy place, as opposed to the second chamber, which will be akin to the holy of holies in the temple, quote, is an analogy for the present period, according to which gifts and sacrifices are being offered that are unable to perfect the worshiper in regard to his or her conscience. Again, such a statement is most naturally read in a situation in

which the author and audience know that these sacrifices are indeed continuing to be offered.

Finally, at Hebrews 10 verse 11, the author says that every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. Such a statement, again, most naturally reflects the ongoing contemporary performance of the Levitical priests of their scripturally prescribed duty, such that in these sacrifices, there continues to be an annual reminder of sins. Some argue against this view, that these passages point to a pre-70 date, based on the claim that the Mishnah and Flavius Josephus, the first-century historian, talk about these Levitical sacrifices as ongoing, or as current, or as present, well after AD 70.

The argument is also made that the author could have written after 70 and is just showing sensitivity to talking about the destruction of the temple. Neither one of these arguments, though, strikes me as particularly convincing or helpful. As for the author's sensitivity to talking about the destruction of the temple, it seems to me that the author would not have been reticent to mention that as the final nail in the coffin, as it were, of the Levitical sacrifices, the temple had been destroyed.

This is the same author who, in his interpretation of the passage concerning the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, 31 to 34, is not reluctant to speak of the old covenant as growing old and near to being abolished. Also, Josephus and the Mishnah have a particular investment in the sacrifices that happened in Jerusalem and a hope that they would one day be resumed in a restored temple. This would probably explain their holding in memory, as it were, those sacrifices by talking about them in the present tense as ongoing or continuing, certainly not decisively broken off.

The author of Hebrews, however, shares no such hope. Indeed, he relegates those sacrifices to the level of being ineffective for one's relationship with God, and he relegates them to a former time, before the death of Jesus. The only sacrifice that he values in the present moment, and for all future moments, is the sacrifice that Jesus made by giving up his life in obedience to God.

Thus, while the question is certainly not settled, it makes sense to me to think about the Sermon to the Hebrews as a communication sent prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Beyond that. However, very little can be said to narrow down the date further. We have now explored as fully as the evidence will allow the author of this sermon, his background, his artistry and skill, his purposes, and his overall strategies.

We have also reconstructed as fully as we can the demographics and the history of the Christian community or communities that he addresses and the presenting challenges that occasion the pastoral intervention that we call the letter to the Hebrews. We are now ready to begin our detailed analysis of the sermon segment by

segment, which we will do consistently with a view not only to the contents of the text but also to the manner in which this text is positioning the audience toward what the preacher believes to be the faithful and advantageous response to the challenges before them.