

Introduction to the “Letter to the Hebrews”: the Who, What, and Why of the Sermon (Part 2)

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Session 1b

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Keywords

Hebrews, Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians, Rome, Pauline mission, persecution, defection, gratitude, charis, Levitical sacrifices

Abstract

This resource explores the background, demographics, and historical trajectory of the congregation addressed in the Letter to the Hebrews. It argues that the audience was likely a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians from the Pauline mission, experiencing social shaming and a crisis of commitment rather than active, violent persecution. To counter this, the author of Hebrews utilizes three primary pastoral strategies: encouraging the community to despise shame, cultivating deep gratitude for God's gifts in Christ, and urging daily mutual encouragement. Additionally, internal evidence such as references to ongoing sacrificial rites in the Temple suggests that the sermon was composed prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Outline

- I. Identifying the Audience and Demographics of the Congregation
 - A. Internal Clues and Geographic References
 1. "Those from Italy greet you" (Heb. 13:24) suggests Italy or Rome as the place of composition, rather than reception.
 2. Scribal manuscript titles traditionally identify the audience as Hebrew-speaking or Jewish Christians.
 - B. Evaluation of the Traditional Jewish-Christian Audience Hypothesis
 1. Thorough interest in and familiarity with the Old Testament:
 - a. Frequently used to argue for an exclusively Jewish audience.
 - b. Counter-argument: The Old Testament was equally sacred and familiar to Gentile Christians through long socialization in worship.
 2. Focus on the Levitical sacrificial cult and temple personnel:
 - a. Counter-argument: Solving the dilemma of holding onto Old Testament texts as divine revelation without practicing the cult was a pressing issue for both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3. Prevention of reversion to Judaism:
 - a. Counter-argument: The author warns against "turning away from the living God" (apostasy), which is more typical of Gentile converts returning to their former pagan life and idolatry.
- C. Evidence for a Mixed Congregation (Gentile and Jewish Christians)
 1. Primary catechetical topics in chapter 6 (repentance from dead works and faith toward God) are highly characteristic of Gentile conversion from idolatry.
 2. Association with the Pauline mission (a mixed mission focused on reaching the nations and fostering table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles).
- D. Social Level of the Addressees
 1. The congregation was composed of members from various social levels rather than merely the poor or beleaguered masses.
 2. Some members previously possessed valuable property that was confiscated.
 3. The community retained the capacity to offer hospitality and perform acts of charity even after periods of intense pressure.
 4. Exhortations caution against ambition in recovering lost status and possessions, an issue relevant to the "haves" rather than "have-nots."
- II. The Three Historical Windows/Episodes of the Community
 - A. First Episode: The Community's Origins and Conversion
 1. An experiential encounter with the divine presence, marked by signs, wonders, and disbursements of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 2:1-4).
 2. Similarities to charismatic validation patterns found in Pauline churches (1 Corinthians, Galatians).
 3. Motivation to decisively break with prior social, civic, and religious networks (synagogues or pagan temples).
 - B. Second Episode: Socialization and Primary Catechism
 1. Immersion in a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament scriptures and basic teachings about Christ.
 2. Six-part foundational catechism of the new faith (Heb. 6:1-2):
 - a. Repentance from dead works (specifically renouncing idolatry or death-dealing actions).
 - b. Faith toward God (signifying conversion to the God of Israel).
 - c. Instruction about baptisms (in the plural, possibly physical water vs. spiritual/Holy Spirit cleansing).
 - d. Laying on of hands (empowering converts through the Holy Spirit).
 - e. Resurrection of the dead.
 - f. Eternal judgment as a cosmic basis for weighing earthly decisions.
 - C. Third Episode: Hostility and Conflict with Neighbors

1. A historical period of tension, "contest of sufferings," public reproaches, and trials (Heb. 10:32-34).
2. Voluntary solidarity and risk-taking to support marginalized, shamed, and imprisoned believers.
3. Acceptance of the seizure and plundering of property with joy.
4. Outgroup social pressure from neighbors aimed at correcting perceived deviance:
 - a. Gentiles viewed converts as guilty of impiety (atheism toward traditional gods) and political subversion (due to worshiping an executed leader).
 - b. Jewish neighbors exerted pressure through the synagogue to enforce Torah boundaries and distance converts from table fellowship with Gentiles.

III. The Present Crisis and Occasion of the Letter

A. Nature of the Present Challenge

1. No evidence of current active, ramped-up external persecution or violent opposition from neighbors.
2. No evidence of pressing doctrinal deviations (e.g., dismissing the "angel-worship" hypothesis as an over-mirror reading of Heb. 1:5-14).
3. The main crisis is a slow erosion of commitment, weariness, and fading endurance (living in the "space in between" the earthly city and the promised heavenly city).

B. Indicators of a Failure of Commitment

1. Desertion of Christian assemblies ("do not abandon the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some" in Heb. 10:25).
2. Gradual drift, neglect of the message, and a dangerous path of turning away from the living God through distrust.
3. Desire to accommodate non-Christian expectations to reclaim status, honor, and safety in their native cities.

IV. Pastoral Goals and Key Themes

A. Preservation of Christian identity, boundaries, and active fellowship.

B. Warnings against neglecting salvation or falling away like the wilderness generation at the threshold of the promised land.

C. Exhortations to hold fast to the confession of hope and original commitment firm to the end (Heb. 3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23).

V. The Author's Three Pastoral Strategies for Motivating Perseverance

A. First Strategy: Despising Shame

1. Insulating believers from external social control by encouraging them to rise above worldly opinions and honor systems.
2. Emulating historical exemplars of faith who despised shame to pursue divine honor (Abraham, Moses, the martyrs, and Jesus).

3. Reinterpreting social marginalization as a noble athletic contest or divine *paideia* (formative parental discipline).

B. Second Strategy: Cultivating Gratitude (Reciprocity and Charis)

1. Leveraging the ancient socio-cultural system of patronage, grace, and reciprocal obligation.
2. The three-fold meaning of *charis*: favor (grace), the gift itself, and the return of gratitude.
3. The three graces of reciprocity: giving well, receiving well, and returning well (loyalty and public honor to the benefactor).
4. Warning passages recast as warnings against the grave insult of defection and outraging a generous divine benefactor.

C. Third Strategy: Mutual Encouragement and Social Support

1. Stressing collective responsibility for each individual's perseverance.
2. The command for daily mutual encouragement to prevent the hardening of hearts (Heb. 3:12-13).
3. Correcting the failure of mature believers to act as teachers and actively support those wavering or forsaking assemblies.

VI. Historical Date of Composition

A. Terminus Ante Quem (Latest Possible Date)

1. The letter must be written before AD 96, as Clement of Rome cites chapter 1 of Hebrews in his own epistle (1 Clement).
2. Timothy is noted as still active and fit for travel (Heb. 13:23).

B. Internal Evidence for a Pre-70 AD Date

1. Descriptions of ongoing Levitical sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple:
 - a. Hebrews 9 and 10 refer to sacrifices offered "continually year after year" and priests standing "day after day" at their service.
 - b. The rhetorical question in Heb. 10:2 ("would they not have ceased being offered?") strongly implies the rites were still being actively performed.
2. Contrast with post-70 AD writings:
 - a. While Josephus and the Mishnah used the present tense after AD 70 due to hopes of future temple restoration, the author of Hebrews holds no such hope and relegates those rites to a defunct status.
 - b. An author writing after the temple's destruction would not have been reticent to cite its physical fall as the ultimate proof of the covenant's obsolescence.