

## The Recipients of the Letter "To the Hebrews"

### *Ethnic Background*

One central question concerning the addressees is their ethnic composition. The majority of extant manuscripts bear the superscription ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ,<sup>5</sup> and ever since Tertullian (*De pudic.* 20) referred to the text by this title, the assumption of a Jewish Christian audience has been predominant. With this assumption in place, numerous aspects of the letter can then be used to "prove" the conjecture.<sup>6</sup> Prominent among these proofs is the suggestion that the author's wide-ranging use of the OT, and the weight he places on arguments from the OT, would have been meaningful chiefly to an audience of Jewish origin. Moreover, the author's use of exegetical methods, which came to characterize rabbinic Judaism, suggests a Jewish environment for both author and recipients. The author's interest in the Jewish cult "would probably have left gentile readers cold."<sup>7</sup> Proving the obsolescence of the Old Covenant is thought to be a matter of importance for Jewish, not Gentile, Christians.<sup>8</sup> The result of this assumption is almost inevitably the suggestion that the problem addressed by Hebrews is a potential reversion to Judaism on the part of Jewish Christians who seek to avoid ongoing tension with their non-Christian Jewish families and neighbors.<sup>9</sup>

There is, however, nothing compelling us to view the Christian addressees as exclusively, or predominantly, Jewish in origin. Unlike the author of the Pauline letters (as well as books like 1 Peter and Revelation), the author of Hebrews identifies neither himself nor his readers. The title "To the Hebrews" represents an early conjecture concerning the addressees based on an estimation of the contents.<sup>10</sup> This ascription could well be ideologically motivated. As the move-

5. With varying degrees of elaboration, e.g., "To the Hebrews written from Rome" or "Italy," "To the Hebrews written from Rome by Paul to those in Jerusalem," and the like.

6. F. Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871-72], 1:4, 20-21) assumes without discussion that the audience is composed of Jewish Christians, and, moreover, that they must be resident in Palestine where the distinction between "Hebrew" and "Hellenist" Jews had meaning. A location near the temple is also inferred from the author's interest in the levitical cult (despite the fact that the author speaks wholly of the desert tabernacle and never the stone temple).

7. Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 25.

8. Thus Gleason, "Old Testament Background," 67.

9. David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 186; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 18-19; Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 11-13; Gleason, "Old Testament Background," 69.

10. Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 21; Thomas Long (*Hebrews* [Interpretation; Louisville, KY:

ment developed and the gap between synagogue and church widened into an irreparable chasm, having a canonical "response" to the parent religion — a sort of indirect manifesto of supersessionism — would have been valuable as a witness to the legitimacy of the sect's existence and ideology. The literature of the early Church attests to the importance of the sect's self-definition over against Judaism,<sup>11</sup> and this letter, with its prominent use of the rhetorical device of *synkrisis* (comparison, here between Jesus and the mediators of the "old covenant"), could reinforce that task admirably. Not much weight, therefore, should be placed on "external attestation" on this point.

Arguments based on what would be appropriate or relevant to Christians of one race over another are even more specious. The Gentile entering the Christian community became an "heir of the promise," a "child of Abraham," the "Israel of God," the "circumcision," and the "royal priesthood, God's holy nation."<sup>12</sup> That is to say, the Gentile Christian was socialized to view himself or herself as the heir to the titles and promises that belonged to God's chosen people (historically, the Jewish people). The Gentile Christian was also enculturated to regard the Jewish Scriptures as the "oracles of God" (cf. Heb. 5:12, where these serve as the primary textbook of the Christian converts), and was taught to read those oracles, moreover, as the divine revelation that legitimated the Christian hope and shaped the Christian ethos.<sup>13</sup>

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John Knox, 1997], 1) boldly but correctly suggests that the person "who attached a title to this document . . . was probably just speculating about its original recipients and was as much in the dark as we are."

11. Compare the *Epistle of Barnabas*; *Epistle to Diognetus* 3–4; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

12. Gal. 3:29; 6:6; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:9. This is not to suggest that every Christian was introduced to all these epithets as the common property of the Christian culture, but merely to show the wide-ranging tendency to create the sect's identity out of the terms and concepts of the parent religion.

13. This point was well made by James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), xvi–xvii: "how much the LXX meant to Gentile Christians may be seen in the case of a man like Tatian, for example, who explicitly declares that he owed to reading the OT his conversion to Christianity (*Ad Graecos*, 29)." Justin (*Dial.* 8) has a similar testimony. William Robinson ("The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Study in the Christian Doctrine of Hope," *Encounter* 22 [1961]: 37–51, 40) posits a mixed congregation, arguing that "the title is certainly misleading. Most probably it arose because of the interest in the Old Testament sacrificial system; but this need not necessitate a Jewish-Christian group of readers, as the Pauline Epistles show that Gentile converts to Christianity were assumed to be familiar with the Jewish Background." P. M. Eisenbaum (*The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* [SBLDS 156; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997], 9) also contends that the volume of use of the OT in Hebrews does not speak to the ethnic identity of the addressees: "That the past for Christians amounts to the biblical history of Israel is indicative of two things not necessarily re-

Christian worship and proclamation involved the reading of these oracles and their exposition in the distinctive Christian manner. The canonical texts provide only a few windows into the lives of the early Christian communities. What happened in Christian communities in the "everyday" rhythm of assembling for worship and teaching was likely to be oriented toward instruction from the OT as well as from the teachings of Jesus (which were, themselves, largely concerned with deriving an ethic from the Jewish Scriptures). We must not allow the plight of so many modern Gentile Christians, with their relative lack of knowledge of the OT, to color our understanding of the first-century convert, for whom the OT was the revelation of God's will, the source (together with the experience of the Spirit) for the legitimation of the sect and the hope to which those converts clung.

Both Galatians and 1 Peter address audiences that are in some major part Gentile. The argument of Galatians (the exhortation against receiving circumcision, which would be a moot issue for those born Jews) is particularly pointed toward Gentile converts to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> That text employs an extended exposition from the story of Abraham in Genesis, as well as texts from Deuteronomy, Habakkuk, Leviticus, and Isaiah, and expounds these texts according to rules familiar from rabbinic exegesis. 1 Peter, addressing those who "no longer join" in with their Gentile neighbors, is even richer in oral-scribal intertexture with the OT, as well as allusions and references to OT figures and stories. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 derives moral instruction from a string of events connected with the exodus generation but does so in an allusive manner that presumes a high degree of familiarity with these stories on the part of the largely Gentile Christian audience.

The use of the OT in Hebrews, then, does not necessitate or even suggest an audience made up primarily of Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians — especially those who have been attached to the Christian community for some time, as it seems likely that these have — would also be familiar with those texts and keenly interested in their interpretation. Since they were instructed to read

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lated to the make-up of the community: the burgeoning religion's Jewish origins and the need of the first missionaries for Jewish scripture in their apologetics." She also concludes (*Jewish Heroes*, 8) that a mixed audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians is the best conclusion to be drawn.

14. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 23) claims that "the argument that Galatians proclaims to gentile Christians freedom from the law of Moses, and that Hebrews could therefore similarly use OT evidence in writing to gentiles, rests on the questionable presupposition that the Galatian Christians were all of gentile origin." This is a false analysis of the argument, however. The argument presumes that the Gentile Christians, who were most directly affected by the outcome of the Galatian debate, would have been adequately instructed in the OT to follow and accept Paul's argument. The presence of Jewish Christians in the audience is not relevant to this point.

them by Jewish Christians like Paul and his team, we should consider the likelihood that Gentile Christians would have been exposed, at least inductively, to rules of interpretation such as *gezera shawa* (which becomes a cardinal rule of Christian interpretation of Scripture as well, as "concordant Scriptures" in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*) or *qal wahomer* (also part and parcel of Greco-Roman argumentation) in the course of this instruction.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the interest in the levitical cultus in Hebrews would probably not, contrary to Paul Ellingworth's suggestion, leave Gentile Christians cold. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians were socialized into a sect that required both an acceptance of the OT as a record of divine revelation *and* a rejection of the contemporary validity of the covenant and priesthood therein described (or, better, commanded).<sup>16</sup> Hebrews strongly reinforces this dual orientation to the Jewish Scriptures. Gentile believers could "warm up" to the central exposition of Hebrews (7:1–10:18), as well as its other comparisons of the advantages of those belonging to the new covenant over those who labored under the old, as relevant for several purposes. First, the author gives them a salvation-historical perspective on their situation. As those who draw near to God through the new covenant, they are more privileged, more secure in their hope, and further along to the goal of God's deliverance and kingdom than the "people of God" had ever been. This enhances the significance of belonging to, and importance of remaining with, the Christian community, as well as stimulates gratitude and loyalty at being favored beyond their inherited predecessors.

Second, it serves the well-known need of sects to legitimate their existence by proposing the failings of the parent body (here, Judaism) and the ways in which the sect members have been given the advantage of "true" knowledge about how to approach to divine, what the divine plan entails, and the like. Hebrews supports group definition and identity through developing a contrast with an alternative group's ideology, stressing the superiority of Christian ideology as a means of sustaining commitment. As the Christian community

15. How the Scriptures are handled, however, says more about the author's background and training than the recipients' ethnic origin.

16. F. F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 6) believes that the author's use of the OT to sustain commitment to the group proves that Gentile Christians are not in view, for if these were tempted to defect from the church, they would also be prepared to throw away the OT as well, whereas Jewish Christians would not. If their temptation to defect, however, is primarily social (yielding to society's shaming techniques at last) rather than ideological (rejecting the message about Christ and the texts in which it was grounded), then the OT would remain a valid body of texts from which to elevate ideological considerations over considerations of social well-being. I do not, therefore, find Bruce's argument necessary, or even likely, on this point. The addressees need reminding that ideological integrity (commitment to the worldview and vision of the group) is ultimately more advantageous than social reintegration.

grows, it continues to engage in this sort of ideological warfare against both Judaism and paganism as part of the ongoing process of justifying why "we" are not "them" and why "they" are the worse for it. Much of the literature of the first three centuries treats the topic of why Christianity is superior to the Mosaic covenant and the teachings of Plato, to Jewish sacrifices and pagan worship. Hebrews responds very well to this need, mainly with regard to non-Christian Judaism.<sup>17</sup> There is no need to assume that, if Gentile Christians are in fact among the intended readers of Hebrews, they would necessarily be subject to the temptation to convert to Judaism in order for the author's message to have relevance.<sup>18</sup> All members of sects need to be assured that their approach to God is the more effective, the more valid, the more secure, and it is precisely this point that Hebrews reinforces.

I find, therefore, no reason to limit our reading of Hebrews as a sermon addressing Jewish Christians or even prominently interested in the Jewish Christians in the audience.<sup>19</sup> Neither would I push this in the opposite direction and suggest that Gentile Christians are either prominent or especially targeted. The letter, unfortunately named, would be equally meaningful to Christians of any ethnic origin, since both Jewish and Gentile converts are socialized into the same Christocentric reading of the same Scriptures. Just as Gentile readers have continued to find in Hebrews justification for their claim on God's promises and access to God's favor even while they worship apart from the synagogue and God's historic people, so the Gentile Christians in the first audience would not have been

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17. We will explore below the purpose of comparison with the levitical cultus, if not to forestall "reversion" to Judaism, as well as the author's choice of facets of Jewish tradition, rather than Greco-Roman religion, for his demonstration of the unique efficacy of the Son's mediation of access to God.

18. Bruce (*Hebrews*, 6 n. 13) and Gleason ("Old Testament Background," 67) read too much into the nonmention of circumcision. The latter claims that "the lack of any reference to circumcision rules out the possibility that he was addressing Gentile Christians attracted to Judaism." Aside from the problematic assumption that all forms of Judaizing involved circumcision of Gentiles (that is to say, were as extreme as those of the Judaizing party encountered in Galatia), there is the more problematic commitment to the view that Hebrews is only meaningful as an attempt to forestall conversion/reversion to non-Christian Judaism. This commitment has long prevented readers of Hebrews from considering that the comparisons in Hebrews serve primarily to shape a communal ideology that would make any defection from the sect (whether to Judaism or traditional Greco-Roman religion) seem unprofitable.

19. A number of contemporary scholars have also expressed strong skepticism concerning the validity of hypothesizing a Jewish-Christian audience. See Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 10-13 for a thorough review of the discussion as well as a balanced assessment of the evidence; Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 28-31. Some scholars, while opting for a mixed congregation, still put the emphasis on a Jewish-Christian majority. See V. C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (ACNT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 25; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 27.

more prone to doze off during the reading of chapters 7 through 10 than their Jewish Christian sisters and brothers. Too much stock in the "Jewish Christian" audience hypothesis prevents us from seeing that the sustained *synkrisis* (comparison) with the levitical cult serves ideological needs of Gentile Christians as well and unduly limits our appreciation for the contribution of this letter to the world construction and group maintenance of the early Church.<sup>20</sup> In this commentary, therefore, we will be looking at how the sermon would be meaningful for Diaspora Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, how the argument would impact and shape both elements of a typical Christian assembly.

### *History of the Community*

Although we are without certain knowledge of the city within which the addressees resided, the author of Hebrews reveals several important aspects of the community's history, from which we may gather a solid picture of the formative influences on their identity and their situation. The author speaks of their conversion, the elements of their socialization into the new group, and a particular period of heightened tension between the converts and their neighbors. The rhetorical effects of reminding the hearers of these past events will be treated in the commentary below. For now, these passages will provide us with a window into the life and history of the addressees.

Hebrews 2:1-4 speaks of the conversion of the audience, or at least the core of that congregation, in response to the proclamation of the gospel by the witnesses of Jesus.<sup>21</sup> The author recalls that "God added his testimony by signs

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20. It is frequently assumed that the author compares Jesus with respected figures celebrated in the Jewish Scriptures (angels, Moses, the levitical high priests) out of a polemical agenda. Stedman (*Hebrews*, 11), for example, misunderstands the function of these comparisons, leading him to posit a Jewish-Christian audience contemplating a return to Jewish traditions. As this commentary will demonstrate, these comparisons are not arguments against returning to Jewish practices (which, indeed, Jewish Christians need never have left behind), but rather serve to set up the exhortations, which are usually warnings based on a lesser to greater argument (common to both Jewish and Greek rhetoric). Christ is shown to be greater than the angels and Moses in order to set up the proof that undergirds the author's warnings against breaking faith with God: if the message spoken through the angels (2:1-4) and Moses (10:26-31) was valid and transgressors were duly punished, transgressions of the Word that came through Jesus must carry a proportionately stiffer penalty since Christ is more honorable than both angels and Moses. Careful attention to the author's development of his arguments is required before too much can be read into a comparison.

21. The author's inclusion of himself among those who came to faith through the preaching of the witnesses argues strongly against the attribution of this text to Paul, who vociferously stresses his conversion through a direct revelation and not through human agency (Gal. 1:11-17; 1 Cor. 15:3-10).

and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will" (Heb. 2:4). This brief account is strikingly similar to Paul's reminiscences about the founding of the churches in Galatia and Corinth (Gal. 3:2-5; 1 Cor. 2:1-5), where again ecstatic or miraculous phenomena are emphasized as God's confirmation of the validity of the message. These times of community formation were highly charged with awareness of divine presence and power, an awareness that reinforced commitment to the Christian message as "divine word," God speaking "in a Son" (Heb. 1:1). The congregation should still have a memory, at least, of this time of firsthand experience of the "truth of the gospel." The author's reminders of the initiatory experiences may themselves provide the strongest legitimation for his challenge, as it did for Paul in Galatians (3:1-5).

Hebrews provides further evidence to suggest that the old dictum that sects, in general, "are connected with the lower class"<sup>22</sup> and that Christianity, in particular, recruited "mainly from the labouring and burdened, the members of the lowest strata of the people" and consisted of "slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights" is incorrect or at least overdrawn.<sup>23</sup> Linguistically, Hebrews is composed in very stylish and difficult Greek. The author uses extensive vocabulary (including more *hapax legomena* than any other NT author) and writes in a somewhat Atticizing style, with a syntax more independent of word order than that of other NT authors. This alone suggests an audience capable of attending meaningfully to such language and syntax, unless the author was simply a bad preacher who spoke over the heads of his congregation. The letter tells us also that a number of the community members possessed property worth confiscating, and we know from Tacitus and other historians that local or imperial authorities tended to seek out the well-propertied with poor social networks for confiscation. The community members are capable of charitable activity and hospitality (13:2; 10:33b-34a; 13:16: this is one of Gerd Theissen's criteria for higher social status) and even appear

22. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols.; London: George Allen, 1931), 1:331.

23. Karl Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1964), 334, 316. Extensive critiques to this earlier view, as well as careful reconstructions of the social level of Christians in the Corinthian churches, can be found in Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), and Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). The state of the question is helpfully reviewed in Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Meeks (*First Urban Christians*, 53-72) and Theissen (*Social Setting*, 70-96) develop criteria for the evaluation of social status and apply these criteria to the Corinthian congregation, showing that half of the persons named in the letter come most probably from a higher social level.

to need warnings against overambition, with regard to both possessions (13:5) and status (13:14). The possibility of recovering wealth and prestige in the non-Christian society, which appears to be the principal motivation to hide or sever one's attachment to the Christian group, tells us that at least some of the recipients come from the "propertied" classes; not all came to Christianity as the "labouring and burdened." In all probability, the community was composed of people from a wide range of social strata, as in the congregations about which more is known (e.g., Rome, Corinth, or Thessalonica).<sup>24</sup>

The author refers also to the process by which the converts were socialized into the new group, or forged into a new community, the basic elements of the curriculum being given in 5:11–6:3. They were taught "the basic elements of the oracles of God" (5:12), namely, the Jewish Scriptures,<sup>25</sup> and "the basic teaching about Christ" (6:1), which would naturally involve an exposition of the Scriptures (particularly based on LXX versions) through the lens of the work of Christ. The author refers to a "foundation" of "repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (6:1b-2). The converts thus appear to have been exposed to a rather comprehensive process of socialization. They were inculcated thoroughly into the Christian movement's construction of reality, as seen especially in the temporal dimension of apocalyptic eschatology (resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment, the age to come). While he uses Platonic vocabulary, the author mainly relies on the temporal dualism of apocalypticism (the distinction between the present age and the age to come) in shaping the response he calls for from the addressees, counting heavily on their acceptance of this worldview.

The converts also participated in a number of ritual acts that marked their entry into the new community, the value of which for their self-understanding should not be overlooked. The author refers to "baptisms" in the plural. It remains possible that "baptisms" here includes forms of "ablutions," purificatory rituals that persisted in the early Church from its Jewish heritage (but that are not elsewhere attested in the NT). It remains probable, however, that the hearers would recall their own baptism, which was the initiatory rite into the Christian movement.<sup>26</sup> What did that rite mean for the initiates? John's baptism as well as baptism in Acts (cf. Acts 2:38) is related to the

24. Holmberg, *Sociology*, 75; cf. Pliny (*Ep.* 10.96), who attests that the Christians came from "every social order."

25. Compare Rom. 3:2, which also speaks of the Scriptures as "the oracles of God" with which the Jewish people were entrusted.

26. The author of Hebrews speaks of partaking of the Holy Spirit in close proximity to the mention of baptisms and laying on of hands, which raises the possibility that the double baptisms featured prominently elsewhere in the epistles and in Acts, namely, water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, were part of the community's initiatory experiences.



forgiveness of sins; so also in Hebrews it is at least a sign of the washing away of past sins (10:22).

The rite of baptism was calculated to have an even more profound impact on the consciousness of those entering the waters. Paul's interpretation of the significance of baptism demonstrates that the ritual can effect a powerful change particularly in self-perception. Paul develops the significance of baptism through the language of dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:3-12), and it is probably with reference to this identification with the crucified Christ in baptism that he says "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20, NRSV). As Mary Douglas explains, the ritual provides a way for the initiates to "die to their old life" and be "reborn to the new."<sup>27</sup> Mircea Eliade expresses this in rather poetic phrases: "In water, everything is 'dissolved,' every 'form' is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water. . . . Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth."<sup>28</sup>

Victor Turner's analysis of the "ritual process" provides a helpful cross-cultural perspective.<sup>29</sup> In his model of how rituals work (particularly status-transformation, status-reversal, or status-elevation rituals), the status and identity that a person had before the ritual began is broken down and abolished. He or she is now "marginal" or "liminal" with regard to society, not fitting into any of that society's lines of classification. During the ritual, a new status and identity is formed (sometimes in the context of a strong, common bond with other initiates), and the person is reintegrated into society at the completion of the ritual with this new status or identity (as well as the sense of camaraderie with the fellow initiates). Rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, or from common status to chieftain, fit this model very neatly.

Baptism also functions as a rite of passage separating initiates from their past life and associations — symbolically enacting their death and rebirth to a

27. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 96. The author of Hebrews does not himself bring out this aspect of the significance of baptism, and there is some danger in introducing Pauline concepts at this point. We are not, however, here investigating the significance of baptism for the author, but rather for those converted by the witnesses (2:3) and subsequently. It appears likely from a number of data that the congregation was founded as part of the Pauline mission (the similarity of the description of its founding with the description of the founding of the Galatian and Corinthian churches and the indications that the author belongs to a Pauline circle together with Timothy, a close associate of Paul), and thus the addressees' understanding of the significance of their baptism need not be limited to what the author of Hebrews specifically includes.

28. Cited in Douglas, *Purity*, 161.

29. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94-165.

new life and set of associations. It possesses a quality of mortification, as the baptized are purified of that part of their past that they no longer wish to own. It enacts symbolically the renunciation of former allegiances, affiliations, and relations.<sup>30</sup> Whatever status or identity initiates had before the rite, the waters of baptism washed it away (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11). As they emerged from the waters, they were joined to a new community, the "sanctified," who are "washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). The main difference from Turner's model, however, is that this reintegration leaves them marginal or liminal with regard to the larger society. Their new identity and status is status within the sect, not a new status recognized by the society. The early Christian movement compels the converts "to inhabit the fringes and interstices of the social structure . . . and to keep them in a permanent liminal state, where . . . the optimal conditions inhere for the realization of *communitas*."<sup>31</sup> This is especially significant for the book of Hebrews, which develops at great length the theme of a pilgrimage faith and emphasizes the "passage quality of religious life,"<sup>32</sup> and so reveals as a major concern acceptance of the tensions surrounding and resisting "liminality" with regard to the larger social body as a "permanent condition."

Not only were the converts "ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew" in water baptism, however, but they were also "endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life,"<sup>33</sup> namely, baptism in the Holy Spirit (2:4; 6:4). This new access to the power of God and experience of the "gifts of the Spirit" (2:4) served as a reminder that something significant had changed in the converts' lives. This immediate presence of the divine provided for a different experience of the world as far as the converts were concerned, such that the world could no longer be seen as objectively identical to what it was for the converts before initiation.<sup>34</sup>

The addressees, therefore, had undergone a rigorous process of socialization into the worldview of the sect and had experienced ritual and ecstatic markers of transition from their old identity and status to their new identity as the sanctified "people of God." Their rejection of their former values and associations, however, provoked significant counterreactions from their non-Christian neighbors. The community's confession brought them into a time of conflict with the larger society. While this did not lead to the deaths of the believers (12:4), they still "endured a severe contest of sufferings" (10:32). Some

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30. R. M. Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 73.

31. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 145.

32. *Ibid.*, 107.

33. *Ibid.*, 95.

34. M. J. Neitz, *Charisma and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987), 153.

of the congregation were subject to reproach, and their trials were made a public spectacle. Others demonstrated solidarity with those who were so treated (10:33), even with those in prison (10:34). Some also suffered the seizure of their property, as a result either of an official decree or of looting and pillaging while the owners were in prison, exiled, or otherwise occupied (10:34).

What would motivate neighbors to respond in such negative ways to the Christians' newfound religious commitments? Those Gentiles who committed themselves to Christianity inherited Judaism's restrictions on participation in the Greco-Roman world. On account of their exclusive devotion to the One God and the accompanying refusal to acknowledge any other deity, most Christians avoided any setting in which they would be exposed to idolatrous ceremonies (see the stress laid on this abstinence in 1 Cor. 10:14-22; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 1 Thess. 1:9). Since some form of religious worship comprised a part of almost every political, business, and social enterprise in the Greco-Roman world,<sup>35</sup> Christians adopted a lifestyle that, in the eyes of their pagan neighbors, would have been considered antisocial and even subversive. Loyalty to the gods, expressed in pious attendance at sacrifices and the like, was viewed as a symbol for loyalty to the state, authorities, friends, and family. Worship of the deities was something of a symbol for one's dedication to the relationships that kept society stable and prosperous. By abstaining from the former, Christians (like the Jews) were regarded with suspicion as potential violators of the laws and subversive elements within the empire. Those who did not acknowledge the claim of the gods on their lives and service could not be counted on to honor the claims of state, law, family, and the traditional values of the society. Christians were subjected to prejudice, rumor, insult, and slander and were even made the targets of pogroms and local legal actions. It was thus both dishonoring and dangerous to be associated with the name of "Christian."

Gentile Christians would be subject to the "discipline" of their Greco-Roman neighbors on account of their flagrant violation of the values of piety, gratitude, and civic unity; Jewish Christians would come under pressure from their non-Christian Jewish family and associates. The goal of all non-Christians was the same — to correct the dangerous and vicious errors of their former colleagues by any means necessary.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it was essential to the commitment of

35. The pervasiveness of cultic activity throughout all aspects of life in Greco-Roman society has been demonstrated in such works as Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 38-39, 47.

36. 1 Thess. 2:13-16 provides an interesting correlation of pressures endured by Jewish and Gentile Christians from both the Roman citizens of Thessalonica and the Jewish residents of Judea. For more detailed analysis of the dishonorable stigma attached to the label "Christian" in the first-century Greco-Roman world, see D. A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 152; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 146-54.

the non-Christians to their own ideologies to undermine the critique of their worldview implicit in the conversion of their neighbors and explicit in the proclamation of the gospel. Their own sense of being "right" with God or the gods was at stake in the defection of their peers to this new sect. The recipients of Hebrews certainly felt the full force of this discipline. In the one experience of the community most fully described by the author, we find that these Christians have suffered significant loss of status and dignity as a result of their confession. This passage is all the more significant given the author's reticence in providing details about the community's history:

But remember the former days in which, having been enlightened, you endured a hard contest with sufferings, in part being publicly exposed to reproaches and afflictions, in part having become partners of those being thus treated. For you both showed sympathy to the imprisoned and accepted the seizure of your property with joy, knowing that you possessed better and lasting possessions. (10:32-34)<sup>37</sup>

We cannot know how long ago the events of the "former days" transpired. All that we can say is that this period of public rejection, humiliation, and dispossession belongs to the community's past, and that the author perceives that the community must recover the same dedication and endurance that they displayed then but lack now. This description, moreover, shows that what was chiefly at stake was the honor of those who identified themselves with the Christian community in the eyes of their neighbors. These believers became the target of society's deviancy-control techniques, most notably shaming, which aimed at coercing the believers to return to a lifestyle that demonstrated their allegiance to the society's values and commitments.

The experience is described in terms of a public show: some portion of the Christian community was subjected to open reviling, being held up to ridicule and shame.<sup>38</sup> The term used to describe the experience evokes the image of the theater (arena), where games, contests, and public punishments occurred.<sup>39</sup>

37. All translations of passages from Hebrews are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

38. Commentators have consistently recognized this aspect of the addressees' experience (cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 299; Ceslaus Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* [Paris: Gabalda, 1952], 2:329).

39. Compare G. Kittel, "θεάομαι," *TDNT* 3:43: "The θέατρον is by human standards, not a proud [spectacle], but a sorry and contemptible [one]." Philo (*Flacc.* 74-75, 84-85, 95) recounts a vivid example of the public nature of punishment in his narration of the brutal actions taken against the Jewish inhabitants of Alexandria. Flogging and crucifixion of Jews formed a spectacle and show (ἡ θέα, τὰ πρῶτα τῶν θεαμάτων). Similarly, the record of Nero's execution of Christians in Tacitus's *Annals* 15.44 shows that derision was as crucial an element as pain in dealing with that marginal group. The recipients of Hebrews, of course, had not yet experienced such excesses (12:4).

The public imposition of disgrace constituted a device of social control by which the society sought to dissuade the afflicted from continuing in, and others from joining, the Christian counterculture. The Christians were subjected to "reproach" and "affliction" (τοῦτο μὲν ὀνειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν). The first term suggests verbal assaults on honor and character, an experience shared by many early Christian communities.<sup>40</sup> Shaming and reviling were society's way of neutralizing the threat Christians posed to their view of the world and constellation of values and allegiances. The burning experience of humiliation and rejection was geared toward "shaming" the deviants into returning to their former convictions and obligations as members of the dominant culture.<sup>41</sup>

The society reinforced verbal "correction" with physical abuse, which not only involved the inflicting of physical pain but also underscored the degradation of the victim. Cultural anthropologists and their students have noted the close connection between a person's honor and the treatment of that person's body.<sup>42</sup> That such was the case in the first-century Mediterranean world is demonstrated, for example, in the way Philo of Alexandria speaks of the physical punishment suffered there by the Jews as a "disgrace" or "insult." ὕβρις, usually translated "outrage" or "insult," is used also to refer to "assault and battery." Exposed to verbal and physical attacks on their honor, the recipients of Hebrews had been subjected to what has been called a "status-degradation ritual,"<sup>43</sup> by which a society neutralizes the threat posed by deviants to the absolute and ultimate character of that society's values and social arrangements.

A noteworthy aspect of this experience was the solidarity shown by those who had escaped being singled out for this public punishment with those who were subjected to public humiliation. They voluntarily became "partners with those thus treated," that is, partners with the disgraced. This manifested itself in the care shown by the community to those members who were imprisoned. Prisoners in the Greco-Roman world relied on family and friends from the outside to provide even the most basic of needs (food, clothing, medicine). Lucian of Samosata, a second-century-A.D. writer of satirical prose, provides a moving (if somewhat mocking) description of the resources a Christian group would mobilize for one of its own (*On the Death of Peregrinus* 12-13). The community

40. Compare 1 Pet. 4:14-16 and Matt. 5:11.

41. John Chrysostom, commenting on 10:32, notes the power of such disapproval and grants of dishonor to affect judgment: "Reproach is a great thing, and calculated to pervert the soul, and to darken the judgement. . . . Since the human race is exceeding vainglorious, therefore it is easily overcome by this" (NPNF1<sup>1</sup> 14:461; PG 63:149).

42. Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 25.

43. Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, "Conflict in Luke-Acts: Labelling and Deviance Theory," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. J. H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 107.

brought food and changes of clothing for their imprisoned brother, bribed the officers for special treatment, and kept the prisoner company, cheering him day and night. What Lucian describes in fiction can be seen in truth from Ignatius of Antioch's journey to execution at Rome. The apostle Paul, who was frequently in prison, similarly received gifts and encouragement from his communities.<sup>44</sup> Rather than be concerned for what the unbelieving society would think of those who identified with such criminal deviants, the believers consistently supported and maintained their bonds with their sisters and brothers who were in prison or who were suffering society's other "correctional" procedures.<sup>45</sup>

A final component of the addressees' experience alluded to by our author is the confiscation of the believers' property. The Greek term refers most often to plundering, the looting to which abandoned properties often fell victim.<sup>46</sup> Even an officially sanctioned act, however, could be regarded as "plundering" by those suffering the loss.<sup>47</sup> It is also difficult to assess from this passing reference what sort of property was taken. A court or local official might have ordered the seizure of land and house, or simply the imposition of a fine; unofficial plundering (while the believers were involved in trials or imprisonments) would involve the loss of movable property, but might nevertheless represent a substantial loss of wealth. "Plundering" could also indicate driving people from their homes in the context of a riot or pogrom.<sup>48</sup>

Whether the loss of property was occasioned by official or unofficial seizure, the loss of material wealth translates into a loss of honor and status. Inhabitants of the ancient world did not accumulate wealth and possessions for the sake of ownership or pleasure, but bartered material wealth for prestige and honor either through display at private banquets or through benefaction. When one lost material goods, one also lost the raw materials for building pres-

44. This was the mission, for example, of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25).

45. The imprisoned were aware of the sacrifice made on their behalf, as both "Paul" (2 Tim. 1:16) and Ignatius (*Smyrn.* 10) are aware that their visitors had to set aside the disgrace attached to the prisoners' bonds and risked further injuring their own reputation by associating with prisoners. Such association could even lead to the sympathizers falling prey to the same treatment, as it did for many Jews in the Alexandrian riots recounted by Philo (*Flacc.* 72).

46. Compare Lucian *Peregr.* 14; Josephus *J.W.* 4.168; Philo *Flacc.* 5.53-57.

47. Melito of Sardis, in his "Petition to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius" (cited in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.5), bears witness to a sort of open policy for the pillaging of those denounced as Christians: "Religious people as a body are being harried and persecuted by new edicts all over Asia. Shameless informers out to fill their own pockets are taking advantage of the decrees to pillage openly, plundering inoffensive citizens night and day."

48. Compare 2 Esdr. 16:70-73, which includes such dispossession as part of the persecution of the righteous: "There shall be a great insurrection against those who fear the Lord . . . plundering and destroying those who continue to fear the Lord. For they shall destroy and plunder their goods, and drive them out of their houses."

tige. Jerome Neyrey has argued that such considerations applied not only to the wealthy landowner but even to the peasant in a village.<sup>49</sup> Such loss would further provoke contempt from others if the victim had brought the loss on himself or herself.<sup>50</sup> This would have been the case for the Christians in Heb. 10:32-34: through their own neglect of their obligations to society, state, and gods, they had justly earned their misfortune.

This loss of property could also have put the believers in an uncomfortable economic position. The Alexandrian Jews (Philo *Flacc.* 57) lost their houses and workshops in the course of the pogroms against them, with the result that they were at once impoverished but also removed from access to the very tools of their trade and their shops by which they could regain economic stability. The recipients of Hebrews may have suffered similar losses, and they have found themselves in a lower economic status with no means of recovery as long as they remained associated with a suspect group. As part of a disgraced "subversive" culture, they could not expect to regain the security of wealth through partnerships with non-Christian partners or benefactors.

In summary, the former experience of the community to which the author calls attention was one of humiliation, rejection, and marginalization. The Christians lost their place and standing in the society, stripped of their reputation for being reliable citizens on account of their commitment to an alternate system of values, religious practices, and social relationships. While the society intended this experience to draw the deviants back into line with the dominant culture, the believers remained steadfast in their loyalty toward God and the group, not allowing society's means of social control to deflect them from their faith. They sustained one another through mutual assistance and caring ("love and good works," 6:9-10), resisting society's attempts to discourage them in their new hope.

### *The Occasion of Hebrews*

If the community was able to meet so great a challenge as described in 10:32-34, what could have befallen them to occasion the composition of the letter "To the Hebrews"? At the time of writing, the character of the community has changed. Some of them, at least, are in danger of "drifting away" (2:1) from the message that they received, of "neglecting" the message spoken by Jesus and attested by God (2:3), of "failing to attain" the promised rest (4:1), of falling through unbelief

49. J. Neyrey, "Poverty and Loss of Honor in Matthew's Beatitudes: Poverty as Cultural, Not Merely Economic, Phenomenon" (an unpublished paper delivered at the CBA Seminar in October 1992), 4.

50. *Ibid.*, 7.

in the same way as the wilderness generation (4:12), of growing weary and losing heart (12:3). Even more strongly, they are in danger of falling into worse punishment than the transgressors of the Mosaic Law through "trampling underfoot the Son of God, regarding as profane the blood by which you are sanctified, and affronting the Spirit of grace" (10:29). Some have apparently begun to withdraw from the congregation (10:25), many have not lived up to what was expected from mature believers (5:12), and there appears to be a general faltering in commitment (see, e.g., 10:35-36, "Do not cast away your confidence," and 12:12, "Strengthen the weak knees and lift up the drooping hands").

What brought about this change? The letter is not explicit about this point, and scholars have engaged in varying degrees of mirror reading of the evidence in the letter to produce scenarios of varying degrees of plausibility. Some readers argue that the reference in 12:4, "you have not yet resisted to the point of blood," contains a shadowy implication of growing hostility against the believers and a coming persecution that the believers wish to avoid.<sup>51</sup> Others hold that the author's reliance on argumentation from the Hebrew Scriptures and his comparison of Jesus and the angels (who, in Jewish tradition, served as God's intermediaries when the Law was given to Israel), Moses, and the Jewish priesthood indicate that a strategic conversion or reversion to Judaism (which enjoyed a measure of toleration within the empire that Christianity did not) was a lively possibility.<sup>52</sup> Both of these theories, however, are equally intelligible as rhetorical strategies of the author rather than as indications of the nature of the occasion of Hebrews. Other scholars present a less dramatic picture, arguing that "moral lethargy" is the dominant problem that lies behind the epistle.<sup>53</sup> Some scholars prefer to allow a number of factors to stand side by side, understanding the author to respond here to one concern and there to another: "from the response that he gives to the problem, it would appear that the author conceives of the threat to the community in two broad but interrelated

51. Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 28.

52. William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 22-25; Gleason, "Old Testament Background," 68-69. Ernst Käsemann (*The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984], 24-25) strongly argued against perpetuating the old assumption that some Judaizing tendency or temptation to revert to Judaism was the presenting problem of Hebrews.

53. T. Schmidt, "Moral Lethargy and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *WTJ* 54 (1992): 167. A similar emphasis appears in W. G. McCown, *Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΡΑΚΛΗΣΕΩΣ: The Nature and Function of the Hortatory Sections in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Ph.D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1970), 261. Alternative scenarios abound. Jewett (*Letter to Pilgrims*, 10-13) favors the situation of danger from heretical teachings. Buchanan (*Hebrews*, 256) creatively suggests an audience of pilgrims who arrived too late in Jerusalem to witness the ministry of Jesus but who are nevertheless urged to hold onto their Zionist hopes.



categories, external pressure or 'persecution' . . . and a waning commitment to the community's confessed faith."<sup>54</sup>

Of all these suggestions, that of Harold Attridge appears to be closest to the target. Viewing Hebrews against the cultural background of a society that takes as its pivotal values honor and shame leads to a new insight into both the nature of the "external pressure" and the cause of the "waning commitment" to Christian confession and involvement. Such an approach leads beyond the stereotyped picture of Christians being rounded up for execution in the arena, or denying Christ before the emperor's tribunal in order to save their lives, to a more highly nuanced sense of the pressures faced by early Christians in maintaining their confession and commitments to one another, and of the ways in which they might have succumbed to those pressures.

The author describes the addressees as if some are in danger of "failing to enter" the rest set before them (4:1-2), or of "selling their birthright for a single meal" as did Esau (12:16-17). The examples chosen and shaped by the author are particularly telling. The audience stands on the threshold of the promise (now an "unshakable kingdom" rather than the land of Canaan) as did the wilderness generation, but their lack of trust and obedience (particularly in the face of the hostility of human beings) threatens to rob them as well of their prize. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (11:8-22, 24-26; 12:2) embraced marginalization and loss with regard to status and wealth in society for the sake of the prize of faith. After living a liminal existence for decades, Abraham never went back to the city where he once had status but kept his eyes on the heavenly city that God had prepared (11:13-16). Moses thought the loss of a throne and the endurance of reproach and maltreatment insignificant compared to the reward of God (11:26). Finally, the community's successful resistance to earlier attempts at social control becomes their own best example for their present situation. It is this earlier "assurance" or "boldness," which enabled them to endure loss of status and honor in society's eyes, that is now at stake and must be recovered.

The situation thus presented appears to be a crisis not of impending persecution, nor of heretical subversion, but rather of commitment occasioned as a result of the difficulties of remaining long without honor in the world. The danger of falling away stems from the lingering effects of the believers' loss of status and esteem in their neighbors' eyes, and their inability to regain a place in society, or approval from the outside world, by any means that would allow them to remain rigidly faithful to Jesus and the One God. The believers have experienced the loss of property and status in the host society without yet receiving the promised rewards of the sect, and so are growing disillusioned with the sect's promise to provide. As time passes without improvement, they begin to feel the inward pressure for their society's affirmation and approval. The fervor

54. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 13.

and certainty of their earlier life as a community (the effervescence of the ecstatic and charismatic experiences described in 2:3-4 and 6:4-5) have cooled with their prolonged exposure to their neighbors, the witnesses of their degradation, who no doubt continued to disparage the believers and to regard them as subversive and shameful.<sup>55</sup> They have begun to be concerned again for their reputation before society. Though they were able to resist it at the outset, the machinery of social control is in the long run wearing down the deviants' resistance. While they could accept their loss in the fervor of religious solidarity, living with their loss has proven difficult.

The author writes as if apostasy is a lively option for the addressees: "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3, NRSV); "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away (*ἀποστῆναι*) from the living God!" (3:12, NRSV); "For it is impossible to restore those who . . . have fallen away" (6:4-6, NRSV); "How much worse punishment . . . will be deserved by those who have trampled upon the Son of God, regarded as profane the blood of the covenant, . . . and outraged the Spirit of grace?" (10:29). Neither the threat of violent persecution nor a new attraction to Judaism motivates this apostasy, but rather the more pedestrian inability to live within the lower status that Christian associations had forced upon them, the less-than-dramatic (yet potent) desire once more to enjoy the goods and esteem of their society. The price was now more on their minds than the prize. In the eyes of society, and perhaps increasingly in the eyes of some believers, renouncing the "confession" that had first alienated them from the dominant culture might be a step toward "recovery."

The author encounters his audience at this point of wavering and challenges them with the claim that the real loss is not the deprivation of their place in society but the forfeiture of their inheritance from God. They risk losing the lasting honor that God grants them if they "shrink back" under pressure from society:

Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance in order that, having done the will of God, you may receive the promise. For yet "but a little while" and "the one who is coming will come and not delay; and my righteous one will live by faith, and if he or she shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in that one." But we are not characterized by shrinking back unto destruction but by faith unto the attainment of life. (10:35-39)

55. Aristotle (*Rh.* 2.6.27) indicates that people "are more likely to be ashamed when they have to be seen and to associate openly with those who are aware of their disgrace." That inhabitants of the Mediterranean world (as any society) were not above taunting their undesirables is shown from such complaints as LXX Ps. 108:25: "I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they wag their heads."

The endurance of disgrace in the eyes of society has earned for the believers honor before God. Their commitment to Christ, their benefactor, through times of heavy social pressure will not go unrewarded. He urges them to understand their experience of marginalization as their obedience to God's will. They must continue in their "confidence" if they are to claim the promised "greater and lasting possessions" (10:34) and "glory" (2:10). Παρρησία, usually translated as "confidence," carries more the sense of boldness, candor, and openness. In this period, it often appears as the antonym for αἰσχύνη, or shame.<sup>56</sup> A refusal to feel "shame" before society, and a firm grasp on the certainty of God's promises, will lead the believers to attain greater honor than they could ever enjoy at society's hands.

### *Date and Location*

The discussion of the date of the writing of Hebrews and the location of author and addressees must remain inconclusive due to the lack of internal evidence from the text. The use of Hebrews by Clement of Rome places the latest possible date of composition before 96 A.D.<sup>57</sup> I concur with those scholars who favor a date before 70 A.D. Even though the author is primarily concerned with the archaic cult of the tabernacle rather than the temple in Jerusalem, he asks the rhetorical question, "Would they [the sacrifices prescribed by Leviticus] not have ceased to be offered?" (10:2). After 70, they did cease to be offered, although for a different reason than the decisive removal of sins! Scholars in favor of a pre-70 date also point to the fact that there is no mention of the destruction of the temple, which might have played very well into the author's hands.<sup>58</sup> While arguments from silence (what the text does *not* say) are always tenuous, I would disagree with those who claim that the author would not allude to the temple's destruction out of sensitivity for his (Jewish) hearers. He is so unsparing in his critique of the inefficacy of the levitical cultus and in his affirmation

56. In both 1 John 2:28 and 1 Enoch 97:1, 6; 98:10, these words are placed within the context of standing before the divine Judge at the parousia or the last day. The reward of those who have remained in Christ (or who have continued steadfast in the Law) is "confidence" or "open freedom" before God or Christ, which is contrasted to the shame of the wicked, who are unable to exercise any boldness or openness due to their disgrace before God.

57. P. Ellingworth, "Hebrews and 1 Clement: Literary Dependence or Common Tradition," *BZ* 23 (1979): 262-69; Donald Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 179-95; against G. Theissen, *Untersuchungen zum Hebräerbrief* (SNT 2; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1969), 34-41.

58. Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 32; Ben Witherington III, "The Influence of Galatians on Hebrews," *NTS* 37 (1991): 151.

of the obsolescence of Torah that it is hard to see how he could have made his sermon any more offensive by adding the destruction of the "copy" and "shadow" to his generally unappreciative assessment of the OT cult! While neither the case for nor the objections to a pre-70 date are decisive, Hebrews reads more naturally in a pre-70 setting.<sup>59</sup>

We have already noted that locating the author and audience geographically is even more problematic. The only internal evidence comes from the greeting sent by "those from Italy" (13:24), taken by some scholars to be an indication that the author is sending greetings back to Rome from those now separated from their sisters and brothers.<sup>60</sup> It is equally possible that the author is sending greetings from his Italian compatriots while writing to a church located outside of Italy.<sup>61</sup> Some connection with Rome is favored by the early use of the letter there by Clement, but the correlations between Hebrews and 1 Peter (written from Rome to churches throughout Asia Minor) do not advance, as Harold Attridge suggests, the case that Hebrews was written to Rome.<sup>62</sup> Strangely, none of the added subscriptions claims that the letter was written to Christians at Rome, but they frequently claim that it was sent from Rome or Italy to some other destination.<sup>63</sup> A destination in Palestine is often advanced on the assumptions that the addressees must be a house church exclusively of Jewish Christians, which would tend to be found mainly in Palestine, and that the author writes as if the audience has firsthand knowledge of (and attachment to) the temple cult. The author's purely textual interaction with the cult (i.e., his reliance entirely on LXX descriptions of the tabernacle and its rites) renders the

59. A more thorough review of this insoluble question may be found in Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:253-61; see also Attridge (*Hebrews*, 6-9), who very judiciously refuses to narrow the range of composition down from 60-100 A.D. Lane (*Hebrews* 1-8, lxii-lxvi), building on the hypothesis of a Roman destination rather than Roman origin for the sermon, narrows down the range to some time between 49 A.D. (when the Edict of Claudius would have led to the expulsion of Jewish Christians, as of all Jews, with their consequent loss of property) and 64 A.D. (when Christians were certainly subject to "resisting to the point of blood," Heb. 12:4). Attractive as Lane's hypothesis is, the sheer multiplication of probabilities and possibilities makes the whole merely that — an attractive hypothesis.

60. Thus Lane, *Hebrews* 1-8, lviii; Pfizner, *Hebrews*, 30.

61. Attridge (*Hebrews*, 410 n. 79) provides an impressive list of places where the expression is used idiomatically to indicate place of origin (rather than to indicate separation from their home).

62. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 10. The situation addressed by 1 Peter is not the situation of Roman Christianity, but rather the situation of Christians in several provinces in what is now Turkey. If the situation addressed by Hebrews is similar to that addressed by 1 Peter, and I agree that it is strikingly similar, it would be more likely that a Christian teacher in Rome is writing to a church somewhere in a province for which he feels a special pastoral responsibility.

63. Thus manuscripts A, P, 1739, 1881, 81 (but to Jerusalem!), 104, and 0285.

latter "indication" irrelevant, and we have already explored how the former assumption is unwarranted. Some connection with Roman Christianity remains likely, but quite possibly on the part of the author rather than the recipients. Even the early use by Clement, however, is not conclusive for such a connection given the mobility of early Christians, who could copy and share such poignant and helpful texts as Hebrews with sister churches around the Mediterranean.<sup>64</sup>

While it does seem likely that the author addresses a particular Christian community whose circumstances are personally known to him,<sup>65</sup> and whom he plans to visit in person as soon as he can, attempts to limit this audience further to a particular house church among several or to a small group of teachers are unwarranted. Andrew Trotter, reading Hebrews 5:11-14, finds it "hard to believe that the author would address an entire community as those who ought to be teachers; by definition the office of teacher necessitates a much larger group to be taught."<sup>66</sup> This is a particularly insecure passage from which to reconstruct the condition or situation of the hearers since it constitutes an appeal to an emotion (see commentary). More troublesome, however, is the assumption by Trotter that the author refers to an "office" rather than the role of teacher. Hebrews calls the hearers to be mature in their commitment to the Christian group — not acting as children who need to be led but as adults who take responsibility for one another.

The author seeks to nurture a community where each member reinforces the commitment of the other members, "watching out" for those whose grasp on the Christian hope begins to slip (3:12-14; 12:15), "encouraging" one's fellow members to prepare for "the approaching Day" (10:24-25). Members of minority cultures need to offset the messages received from outside the group with reminders that the sect knows the "true" way to please God. Thus, the author's address becomes less "hard to believe." It is necessary for all members of the sect to continue to "teach" one another through reminder, exhortation, and censure, and thus to form a strong "plausibility structure"<sup>67</sup> in a society unsupportive of the Christian enterprise. Hebrews 5:11-14 thus belongs to the author's socio-religious strategy. It does not provide evidence that the author

64. For more detailed discussion of the arguments for and against various destinations, the interested reader may consult Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:261-65; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 10-14; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 10-11 (his footnotes are a valuable guide to the wider conversation about this question).

65. Thus, rightly, Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 26), if by "part of a wider Christian community" he means the Church as a whole.

66. Trotter, *Interpreting Hebrews*, 31.

67. P. L. Berger (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967], 45-48) introduces the term "plausibility structure" to describe the relationship between holding onto a set of beliefs oneself and having a body of significant others who share those beliefs, the latter being a requirement for the former.

addresses a circle of "teachers" who are falling down on the job, except as this applies to the failure of the community as a whole to act as "teachers" for one another, especially those who are losing sight of the group's vision.<sup>68</sup>

## The Author

### Identity

The author left his work completely anonymous, with only a passing reference to Timothy in the closing greetings (13:23). Scholars from the first centuries on, however, have not been reticent in proposing his identity. Alexandrian Christianity attributed the work to Paul quite early (the 2nd-century manuscript P46 includes it after Romans among the Pauline epistles). The style of Hebrews stands so far apart from the Pauline letters, however, that the Alexandrian fathers Origen and Clement attributed the actual writing to an associate of Paul, whether as an original composition that includes the thoughts of the apostle or as a translation of a Hebrew letter of Paul into Greek.<sup>69</sup>

Pauline authorship was not the view of the Western churches. Tertullian named Barnabas as the author, and Irenaeus and Hippolytus regarded it as non-Pauline. Only after Jerome and Augustine championed the cause of Pauline authorship did that view take hold in the West. Even these scholars, however, voiced their reservations about authorship. Jerome on one occasion calls it irrelevant, given the prestige the text enjoyed in many churches, and Augustine likewise is more sure of Hebrews' acceptance as a core text of Christianity than of the identity of the author.<sup>70</sup> Advocacy of the book's connection with Paul was subservient to their "feeling" that Hebrews deserved to be recognized as canonical.

Pauline authorship is probably the least likely solution to the question. External evidence actually favors non-Pauline authorship, and internal evidence

68. Other views, such as the notion that Hebrews addresses a Jewish-Christian house church in Rome, or a house church of "Hebrew Christians" in Palestine (P. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 18-19), are inextricably bound up with the assumption that this letter is more meaningful to Jewish than Gentile Christians (see discussion above).

69. The hypothesis that this letter was originally written in Hebrew fails to take into account the author's use of the LXX (Greek) version of the OT, specifically grounding essential points of his argument on precisely those words or phrases where the LXX departs from the Hebrew text. As John Calvin rightly pointed out, moreover, the wordplay on "testament/covenant" would not have been possible in the Hebrew language (*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], xxvii).

70. See Bruce, *Hebrews*, 17.