

The Background and Purpose of Hebrews

Dr. Stephen Um

*Lecturer in New Testament Studies,
Gordon-Conwell Theological
Seminary*



INTRODUCTION

Followers of Christ have suffered persecution throughout history. Stolen property, beatings, imprisonment and martyrdom have been the fate of countless Christians. And by some reports, Christ's followers are being persecuted more than ever in our own day.

For those of us who aren't suffering in these ways, it's hard to imagine the temptations that persecution brings. Christians who live in peace and safety often compromise their faith even without threats. But can you imagine how tempting it would be to compromise what you believe to protect yourself, your spouse, your children and closest friends from serious harm? How could we possibly encourage fellow believers in these conditions?

This was the challenge that faced the author of the book of Hebrews. He wrote to a group of Christians who had suffered in the past and were now threatened with even more suffering. They'd done well years ago, but the author of Hebrews feared that they might now turn away from Christ to avoid further persecution.

This is the first lesson in our series The Book of Hebrews and we've entitled it, "The Background and Purpose of Hebrews." In this lesson, we'll introduce a number of perspectives that should guide our interpretation of this complex book.

As our title suggests, we'll look at the background and purpose of Hebrews in two ways. First, we'll consider the book's background. And second, we'll summarize the overarching purpose for which Hebrews was written. Let's begin with a sketch of some important background issues related to the book of Hebrews.

BACKGROUND

We'll explore the background of Hebrews by considering three interrelated topics. We'll look first at its authorship. Then we'll investigate the original audience. Lastly, we'll examine the date when the book of Hebrews was written. Let's look first at Hebrews' authorship.

AUTHORSHIP

From the earliest times, there have been a variety of positions on the authorship of Hebrews. For our purposes, we'll touch on two issues. First, we'll discuss the identity of the author. And second, we'll construct a profile for the author by focusing on some features of his book. Let's begin by examining the author's identity.

Identity

Identifying the author of Hebrews is not as simple as it is with many other New Testament books because the author never identified himself. As early as the patristic period, Clement of Alexandria, who lived from approximately A.D. 150 to 215, and Origen of Alexandria, who lived from around A.D. 185 to 254, acknowledged that there was a variety of opinions on the authorship of Hebrews in their day. Early on, the apostle Paul was the candidate named most frequently, but scholars also suggested Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, and even Clement of Rome.

Around A.D. 325 the church historian Eusebius in his *History of the Church* referred to Origen's outlook on the authorship of Hebrews in book 6, chapter 25, section 14. As we read there:

But as to who wrote the epistle [of Hebrews], God knows the truth of the matter.

Origen's comment reflects how uncertain he and many others were in his day. And most biblical scholars today concur. Only God knows for certain who wrote this book.

Unfortunately, questions about authorship and the ways some heretical groups misused the book of Hebrews, led some people during the patristic period to doubt if Hebrews should be included

in the New Testament Canon. Of course, notable scholars like Clement of Rome, who died sometime around A.D. 99, treated Hebrews as equal to other New Testament books. And Justin Martyr, who lived from A.D. 100 to 165, did the same. But Hebrews was omitted from both the Marcionite Canon, written around A.D. 144, and the Muratorian Canon, written around A.D. 170. By the end of the patristic period, however, the majority of influential interpreters in the eastern and western church came to recognize Hebrews as part of the Canon. And they generally agreed that the apostle Paul was the author.

Throughout the medieval period, most leading scholars continued to believe that Paul wrote Hebrews. But during the Reformation, Protestant Reformers questioned many ecclesiastical traditions, including the traditional view of Pauline authorship. Martin Luther suggested that Apollos was the author. John Calvin didn't suggest an alternative, but he insisted that the book could not have come from Paul.

Today, the majority of interpreters reject Pauline authorship. We'll touch on three reasons for this stance. First, as we've already mentioned, this book is anonymous, and it was Paul's practice to name himself in his epistles. In fact, as 2 Thessalonians 2:2 makes clear, Paul was deeply concerned that forgeries had spread under his name. So, it seems unlikely that he would have failed to identify himself had he written Hebrews.

Second, the book of Hebrews emphasizes subjects that don't receive much, if any, attention in Paul's letters. For instance, the author of Hebrews mentioned Melchizedek three times. He drew attention to the Old Testament tabernacle. And he dealt at length with Christ as the high priest. Taken together, these themes distinguish the book of Hebrews from books that we know were written by Paul.

Third, the strongest reason for doubting Pauline authorship is the way the writer of Hebrews distanced himself from the first generation of Jesus' followers. Listen to the words of Hebrews 2:3:

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him (Hebrews 2:3).

Notice here that the author of Hebrews mentioned how salvation was "first announced by the Lord" — in other words, by Jesus himself — and "was confirmed to us by those who heard him." That

is, the author and his audience had the gospel verified for them by people who had heard Jesus directly. The author's admission that he received his Christian faith secondarily contrasts with passages like Galatians 1:1, 11 and 12, and 1 Corinthians 11:23 where Paul insisted that he received the gospel directly from Jesus.

The short answer to the question, "Who wrote the book of Hebrews?" is, we don't know. We have some clues as to who he was. Down throughout church history there have been numerous answers as to that question. So, for many years the church thought Paul had written it. I think probably Paul didn't write it because there are differences between Hebrews and Paul's letters. For instance, Paul often... will always identify himself and then speak to the addressees of the letter. Hebrews doesn't do that. There are themes in Hebrews like Christ as the High Priest that just don't feature very much in Paul's letters. So, Paul's probably not the writer. Other suggestions have been Barnabas or Apollos, — Martin Luther thought maybe it was Apollos — Priscilla. And yet, we just don't know. I think the most we can say is that the writer of Hebrews was a second-generation believer. In chapter 2 he refers to those who heard from Christ and then handed on what they had heard from Christ, so he seems to be putting himself in that second generation.

— Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

We've explored the authorship of the book of Hebrews and seen that the author's identity remains unknown. But we can still construct something of a profile for the author.

Profile

For the sake of time, we'll point out just two rather obvious features of the author's life.

Hellenistic Jew. In the first place, the author of Hebrews was a Hellenistic Jew. Most scholars today agree that Paul did not write Hebrews. In the end, though, it's best to conclude with Origen that only God really knows. Hebrews' authorship has been debated throughout the years, but this shouldn't prevent us from learning as much as we can about the author and his character from clues found in the text.

We can see from the text that both Jewish and Hellenistic influences shaped the author and his book. The author's strong Jewish heritage is evident in his knowledge of the Old Testament. In fact, he quoted the Old Testament at least 31 times in his 13 chapters.

It would also appear that the author had a strong Hellenistic upbringing. In the past, interpreters pointed to the author's use of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as evidence that he was a Hellenistic Jew. In the second half of the last century, however, research into the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed that quotations initially assumed to be directly from the Septuagint, could have come from non-traditional Hebrew texts. For this reason, we can't be certain that the author of Hebrews used the Septuagint.

But despite this discovery, we can still be confident that the author of Hebrews was Hellenistic. His sophisticated Greek offers strong evidence of a Hellenistic upbringing. And his vocabulary and style give evidence of a mastery of the language that even surpasses the writings of Luke.

Passionate Intellectual. Not only was the author of Hebrews a Hellenistic Jew, but we can also add to our profile that he was a passionate intellectual. Interpreters widely acknowledge that the author of Hebrews was an intellectual. The theological arguments in Hebrews are more complex than many of those found in the rest of the New Testament. In fact, the author himself noted the priority of sophisticated theological reflection in passages like Hebrews 5:13-14 where he indicated that to distinguish good from evil, followers of Christ must become doctrinally mature.

From the contents of the letter of Hebrews, there are a number of things we can say about the author. One is that he was brilliant. He knew the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, backward and forward. He knew how to link texts in ways that were very persuasive to traditional Jewish audiences. Probably he was a Hellenistic Jewish author, probably writing to a Hellenistic Jewish audience. When I say "Hellenistic Jewish," I mean Greek-speaking and probably in the diaspora, but very committed to their Jewish traditions and very knowledgeable in Scripture.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Even though the author of Hebrews should be considered an intellectual, he was not a cold, detached academic. He was deeply passionate about the Christian faith. His devotion and passion for his fellow Christians is evident in his writing.

Listen to the way he empathized with his audience in Hebrews 10:33-34:

Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions (Hebrews 10:33-34).

In a similar way, in 12:1-2 he showed his passion for Christ when he said:

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

It's difficult to read these and similar passages without realizing that this author was hardly an impersonal scholar. He was passionate about his audience and Christ. If we miss this passion, we miss one of the book's most prominent features.

What we also learn about the author is that he was really concerned about the people he was preaching to and writing for. He was concerned about their spiritual apathy, and so he comes back again and again to the danger of becoming weak or tired, or even apostasized. And so, he was certainly a superb theologian and interpreter of Scripture, but at the same time he was a person who knew his audience very well, evidently personally very well. He really cared about them and was marshaling everything that he could in terms of theology, interpretation of Scripture and application to help them in their spiritual pilgrimage.

— Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

So far in our discussion of the background of the book of Hebrews we've focused on the book's authorship. Now we should turn to our second issue: Hebrews' original audience.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

The book of Hebrews doesn't clearly identify its audience by name, city or region. Still, in general terms, we can be confident that the author wrote to a specific audience with whom he was personally familiar. In 13:19-24, the author assured his audience of his intent to visit them again. He spoke of Timothy, whom he called "our brother," and he also mentioned a group of people from Italy that his audience apparently knew.

We'll look at five important factors about this original audience that we should consider as we study the book of Hebrews.

Jewish

First, there's reason to think that at least a good portion of the original audience was Jewish. Hebrews 1:1 makes this clear:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways (Hebrews 1:1).

Here, the author referred to how God had revealed himself to Israel in the Old Testament. But notice how he called Old Testament Israelites "our forefathers" — the ancestors of the author and his audience.

It's no wonder, that from as early as the time of Tertullian, who lived from about A.D. 155 to 230, the traditional title attached to this book has been "Pros Hebraious," "For the Hebrews."

Hellenistic

Second, it's also likely that the audience was in large part Hellenistic. The content of Hebrews indicates that the audience was familiar with theological teachings that were more common among Jews living outside of Palestine than among more traditional Jewish circles within Palestine.

A number of interpreters have tried to determine where the

audience may have lived outside of Palestine. The fact that the first epistle of Clement of Rome referred to the book as early as A.D. 95 has led some to suggest that the audience was in Rome. Hebrews 13:24 has been used to support this point of view because it mentions “those from Italy.” These suggestions are interesting, but the most we can say, with any degree of confidence, is that the original audience consisted in large part of Hellenistic Jews who lived outside of Palestine.

Immature

Third, the original audience of Hebrews was immature. Listen to the way the author described them in Hebrews 5:12:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again (Hebrews 5:12).

Notice that the audience had been believers long enough for the author to say “by this time you ought to be teachers.” They should have made great doctrinal progress. But as the author noted, they needed to be taught “the elementary truths of God’s word all over again.”

Interestingly enough, even though the audience was theologically immature, the book of Hebrews contains some of the most advanced, sophisticated theological teachings in the entire New Testament. How do these features of the book fit with the immaturity of the audience? The best way to make sense of this situation is to keep in mind that early Christians adopted a common practice used in first century synagogues.

We learn from passages like Luke 4:16, Acts 13:15, and 1 Timothy 4:13 that leaders of synagogues and Christian churches supervised the reading and explanation of Scriptures to their congregations. So, the author of Hebrews wrote some of the most theologically sophisticated New Testament writings because he expected church leaders to teach his book to their congregants. Now, in Hebrews 5:11, the writer of Hebrews reprimanded his audience for being “slow to learn.” So, it’s quite possible that the larger portion of the original audience remained theologically immature because they didn’t properly respect their leaders.

This suggestion is confirmed by Hebrews 13:17 where the author

told his audience:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).

Persecuted

Fourth, the original audience of Hebrews was persecuted. There were two well-known times of persecution for Christians during the first century A.D. that may have impacted Hebrews' original audience, at least indirectly. In A.D. 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from the city of Rome. And around A.D. 64, Emperor Nero persecuted Christians in the vicinity of Rome.

As we read through the book of Hebrews, it becomes evident that the original audience had already faced persecution in the past, some of them were suffering in the present, and the author's expectation was that more of them would suffer, perhaps even more severely, in the future.

In 10:32-35, the author drew attention to the suffering that at least some in the audience had experienced in the past:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering... So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded (Hebrews 10:32-35).

Here we see that the author praised his audience for their strength when they were persecuted in "those earlier days after [they] had [first] received the light." But he also encouraged them not to "throw away [their] confidence." The Greek term translated "confidence" here is *parrësia*, which in many contexts means "courage," "boldness," or "fearlessness" in the presence of dignitaries. This word choice suggests that the audience was facing public or official persecution of some sort, and they were tempted to lose their boldness.

In 13:3 the author also referred directly to present persecutions when he said:

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering

(Hebrews 13:3).

We can see from this verse that the author exhorted his audience to “remember those in prison as if [they] were their fellow prisoners.” And to remember those “mistreated as if [they themselves] were suffering.” It’s clear that not all of his audience’s persecution was in the past.

In addition to persecution in the past and in the present, the author of Hebrews acknowledged in 12:3-4 that his audience was facing the threat of more persecution in the future. Listen to this exhortation:

Consider Christ who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (Hebrews 12:3-4).

As this passage indicates, the author expected more persecutions to come against his audience, and he was deeply concerned with this feature of their experience.

The original audience of Hebrews faced a number of issues... as the author mentions in chapter 10, they had faced various forms of suffering; some of them had lost property, some of them had been imprisoned, they’d been subjected to public ridicule of some sort. And he still is urging the readers at this point, as he writes, to be willing to bear the reproach of Christ to face exclusion from the camp, which he’s describing in Old Testament terms but probably means to be excluded from the synagogue, and if they were to go to Jerusalem, to be excluded from the temple, which I believe was still standing as he wrote. So there are those forms of persecution they were facing. He says in chapter 12 that their sufferings had not escalated to the point of shedding blood, and yet he seems to be aware of their need to be assured that they have been set free from the fear of death, as he says in chapter 2, by the victory of Jesus Christ. So, it may be that even a more intense, violent persecution is on the horizon.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Near Apostasy

Fifth, as the audience of Hebrews faced persecution, at least some of them were near apostasy. Rather than simply being discouraged or weakened by sufferings, they were in danger of turning away from Christ entirely. For instance, in Hebrews 10:26-27 we read this warning:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:26-27).

We need to be clear here that the author of Hebrews was not concerned about peccadillos or small sins. He warned his audience severely because for those who utterly turn away from Christ, “no sacrifice for sins is left.” When people reject the Christian faith, like some in the original audience of Hebrews were tempted to do, they prove that they never had faith that saves. And for this reason, they can only have “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire” reserved for “the enemies of God.”

As we’ll explain in our next lesson, this and similar passages don’t imply that true believers can lose their salvation. Rather, this verse refers to those who profess faith and experience many of its blessings, but without regeneration and justification. In all events, it’s evident that some in the original audience of Hebrews were sorely tempted to leave the faith.

Now that we’ve investigated the background of Hebrews by considering the book’s authorship and the original audience, we should turn to our third issue: the date when the book of Hebrews was written.

DATE

Although the exact date for Hebrews remains uncertain, the earliest and latest dates for this book can be established rather firmly. We’ll look first at the earliest possible date for the book, or terminus a quo, and then at the latest possible date, or terminus ad quem. Both of these dates can be determined with some degree of confidence using scriptural and historical evidence.

On the one side, Hebrews 13:23 helps confirm the earliest possible date for the book. In this verse the author wrote:

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you (Hebrews 13:23).

Here we see that “Timothy [had] been released” recently from prison. We don’t hear of Timothy’s imprisonment anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, in the book of 2 Timothy, Paul’s last letter written shortly before his death, Timothy was free to travel and bring Paul supplies. Yet, this verse tells us that by the time Hebrews was written Timothy had been imprisoned and released. For this reason, the book of Hebrews must have been written after Paul’s death, which took place sometime around A.D. 65.

On the other side, the latest likely date for the book would be around A.D. 95 shortly before Clement of Rome referred to the book of Hebrews in his letter, 1 Clement.

In addition, many commentators have observed that, in passages like Hebrews 5:1-3, the author used the present tense to describe the sacrificial duties of the high priest. This is important because in the rest of his book the author consistently used the Greek past tense when referring to past events. So, it’s likely that these priestly activities were still going on when Hebrews was written.

Also, in 8:13 the author encouraged his audience not to turn back to the “obsolete” sacrificial practices established by God’s covenant with Moses. He explained that in light of the new covenant, these practices would “soon disappear.” We know that the high priest’s activities, and the Levitical sacrificial system as a whole, came to an end in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. So, these evidences suggest a date for Hebrews sometime after Paul’s death around A.D. 65 and before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

In our lesson on the background and purpose of Hebrews, we’ve looked at several features of the background of the book of Hebrews. Now, we’re in a position to address the overarching purpose of the book. Why was Hebrews written?

PURPOSE

It's fair to say that any book as long and complex as the book of Hebrews is written with many different purposes in mind. But for this lesson, we're primarily interested in summarizing the overarching purpose of the book. Each part of this book has its own emphases, and we'll explore these emphases in our next lesson. At this point, we want to see how the book as a whole was designed to impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of the original audience.

Interpreters have summarized the overarching purpose of the book of Hebrews in a variety of ways. But for this study, we'll describe the original purpose of Hebrews in this way:

The author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and to remain faithful to Jesus.

This description of the author's purpose helps orient us to the main ideas found in the book of Hebrews.

As we've just suggested, the author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience. Listen to the way the author himself characterized his book in 13:22:

Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation (Hebrews 13:22).

Notice here that the writer "urge[d]" his audience to receive his book as a "word of exhortation." The words "I urge" derive from the Greek verb *parakaleō*, the verbal form of the Greek noun translated "exhortation" in the same sentence.

The terminology of exhortation implies "to summon to the speaker's side" or "to call for someone to take the speaker's point of view." The same expression is used to describe John the Baptist's urgent, persuasive call for repentance in Luke 3:18.

Interestingly, the phrase "word of exhortation" also appears in Acts 13:15 where the men of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch invited Paul and his companions to give "a message of encouragement" after the reading of Scripture. It's quite possible that the expression "word" — or message — "of exhortation" was a first-century technical designation for what we call a sermon today.

Well, the author identifies his work as a word of exhortation — this is in 13:22 — and what this means is that Hebrews is an exhortation; it's like a sermon. And so the use of rhetoric is basically a tool for persuading the audience to be faithful in their commitment to Jesus as the Son of God and as their Lord and Savior. So, the rhetoric in the letter of Hebrews, or the homily of Hebrews, allows the author to elaborate on themes, to exegete Jewish Scriptures — that is, interpret Jewish Scriptures in a way that is meaningful — and then present it in a very forceful way so that the audience understand clearly what the author wants him to do, wants them to do. He wants them to adhere to the salvation that Christ has offered to them, that God has offered in Christ.

— Dr. Frederick Long

Every epistle or letter in the New Testament contains exhortations to its audience. But the book of Hebrews stands apart from other New Testament epistles due to the intensity of its exhortations.

To explore the author's purpose, let's look more closely at the intensity of the exhortations that are so prominent in the book. And then, we'll examine the goal of these exhortations, how the author hoped his audience would respond. Let's look first at the intensity of the author's exhortations to his audience.

INTENSITY OF EXHORTATIONS

To look further at what we mean by the intensity of the author's exhortations, we'll look at two issues: first, the frequency of exhortations in the book, and second, the author's rhetorical style associated with his exhortations. Let's begin by examining the frequency of exhortations.

Frequency

The frequency of the author's exhortations helps us understand the urgency of his message. These exhortations are implicit at times, but at least 30 times they appear explicitly. On many occasions, the author used what Greek grammarians call the "hortatory subjunctive." These verbal forms urge or implore and are often translated "let us" do this or that. For instance, in 4:14,

16 we read two such exhortations:

Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:14, 16).

The author also exhorted his audience by using imperatives, which we often translate as direct orders. For example, in 12:12-16 we read this series of exhortations:

Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet ... Make every effort to live in peace with all men ... be holy ... See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up ... See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau (Hebrews 12:12-16).

One of the reasons it's important to keep in mind how often the author directly exhorted his audience is that the book's complex theological reflections often obscure the author's purpose for writing. He didn't simply want to inform his audience of theological doctrines. He informed them doctrinally in order to persuade them to adopt different attitudes and actions. This is what he meant when he called his book a "word of exhortation." If we don't keep this urgency in mind, we'll miss a crucial dimension of the book of Hebrews.

We've seen how the intensity of the author's exhortations is reflected in the frequency with which he exhorted his audience. Now, let's consider how the author's rhetorical style also reveals his desire to exhort his audience.

Rhetorical Style

The book of Hebrews has often been characterized as highly rhetorical. By this we mean that it employs many literary devices that were associated with persuasive oratory or urgent debate in the first century. Many of these rhetorical devices appear now and then in other New Testament books, but we find them far more often in Hebrews.

Hebrews is probably the best example in the New Testament of an author who has strong literary and rhetorical skills, and those rhetorical skills really help to accomplish the author's purpose. He's trying to demonstrate the superiority of Christ and the new covenant over the old covenant, and he does so in part with a very convincing strong

literary argument. And he uses lots of different structural features to accomplish that... So, beautifully structured, using rhetoric to draw his readers in, and then to convince them of the argument that he's making.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

One rhetorical device, called synkrisis in Greek, is a detailed comparison between two or more things designed to convince audiences to affirm the speaker's point of view. For example, synkrisis appears in the book of Hebrews in 7:11-28. There, the author argued that Jesus was a royal priest like Melchizedek, a priest and king mentioned in the book of Genesis. But rather than simply asserting his belief, the author of Hebrews gave his audience a compelling, eight-point comparison between Melchizedek and Christ: their parentage, genealogy, birth, death, office, actions, status and achievements. These detailed comparisons were designed to settle all doubts about the claim that Jesus is the great, royal High Priest.

Another rhetorical device in the book of Hebrews is known as exempla. Exempla are lists of illustrations or examples that follow one after the other to build a persuasive argument for a particular point of view. This oratorical technique appears in the familiar list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. \

There the author listed by name: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. This long list was designed to persuade the audience that servants of God should remain faithful throughout their persecution.

A third rhetorical device used by the author of Hebrews is known by the Hebrew expression qol wahomer. This expression is well known from both Greco-Roman and rabbinical traditions and may be translated "light to heavy," "less to great," or "simple to complex." This type of argumentation begins with a simple premise that isn't disputed by the audience. It then builds to a more complex conclusion that the audience initially doubts, but can now more easily accept. Simply put, this argument says that because the simple premise is true, then surely the more difficult conclusion must also be true. Listen to the way this rhetorical device appears in Hebrews 10:28-29:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the

testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot? (Hebrews 10:28-29).

Here the author began with a premise that the audience understood: the punishment for those who rejected the law of Moses was death. Then he pressed his audience further by arguing “how much more” punishment should come to those who “trampled ... under foot” one greater than Moses — “the Son of God.”

These examples help us see the urgency of the author’s intentions. He was convinced that his audience faced a very serious situation and that it was time for them to make some very difficult decisions. So, he did all he could to urge and persuade them to make the right choices.

Now that we’ve seen how the author’s purpose was strengthened by the intensity of his exhortations, we should turn to a second feature of the book: the goal of these exhortations.

GOAL OF EXHORTATIONS

We saw earlier that the overarching purpose of the book of Hebrews can be defined in this way:

The author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and to remain faithful to Jesus.

As this definition affirms, the goal of the author’s exhortations was twofold. He wanted his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and he wanted them also to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah. Let’s consider how the author urged his audience to reject local Jewish teachings.

Reject Local Teachings

We’ve noted that the audience of Hebrews had suffered persecution and that this persecution was tempting them toward apostasy. But this temptation was not what we might first imagine. It seems that at the time Hebrews was written, Christians could find safety from persecution if they rejected their distinctively Christian beliefs and identified more closely with their local Jewish community.

In the first century, Jews often had to pay special taxes, and they suffered persecution from time to time. But often, Jewish communities in the Roman Empire were free to observe their faith. Early on, the same was true for Christians because they were closely identified with Judaism. But as time passed, Christian identification as a Jewish sect began to disappear. In fact, the book of Acts reports that even in the days of Paul, Jewish synagogues rejected followers of Christ and encouraged local authorities to mistreat them. In all likelihood, this was the kind of situation facing the original audience of Hebrews. And their prolonged sufferings tempted them to accept teachings in their local Jewish community that were contrary to the Christian faith.

Interestingly, the author of Hebrews didn't address the sorts of issues normally associated with Jewish hypocrisy and legalism. As crucial as these matters were, they're not a major concern in the book of Hebrews. Rather, the author dealt primarily with erroneous beliefs and practices, specifically those that developed in Jewish communities outside the mainstream of Palestinian Judaism. Listen to what the author of Hebrews wrote in Hebrews 13:9:

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them (Hebrews 13:9).

In this verse, the author contrasted being “strengthened by grace” with being strengthened “by ceremonial foods.” This specific focus sounds familiar enough. But notice also that this was just one example of what he called “all kinds of strange teachings.” In other words, unusual or strange teachings taught by local Jewish communities. So, what were these “strange teachings” that the audience was tempted to follow?

In the second half of the last century, a number of helpful insights into this question came to light with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. This long-lost collection of documents included Old Testament texts, but also extra-biblical writings that represented the distinctive teachings of a disenfranchised Jewish community living near the Dead Sea.

It contained books like The Rule of the Community, The Damascus Covenant, the War Scroll, The Midrash on Melchizedek, as well as sections of 1 Enoch called “The Book of the Watchers” and “The Book of Dreams”. These books have a number of teachings that closely parallel the theological issues addressed in Hebrews.

Now, it’s important to note that these teachings were not exclusive to this community. Other Jewish groups in the Mediterranean world held to similar views. In fact, the books of Ephesians and Colossians deal with comparable issues in their locations. Yet, it will help us understand many of Hebrews’ exhortations against local Jewish beliefs if we note some of the similar subjects found in both Hebrews and the books found at Qumran.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are fascinating documents found, of course, in the desert in Qumran, and they are the works of a radical Jewish sect who defined themselves over and against the Jewish mainstream, particularly the temple complex. And so, somewhat analogously to the book of Hebrews, the sectarians at Qumran seem to have regarded themselves as a new temple under a new covenant. Now, there are just as many dissimilarities particularly because some of the more ritual aspects of the old covenant, the Qumran group really wanted to revitalize those rather than let them obsolesce in the way that the writer of Hebrews suggests.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

For this lesson, we’ll briefly mention just four topics found in both the book of Hebrews and the documents at Qumran.

Ceremonial Foods. In the first place, we’ve already noted that in Hebrews 13:9, the author spoke against a particular example of eating ceremonial foods.

Many practices at Qumran are described in the book entitled The Rule of the Community. Among many other things, the community at Qumran regularly held sacred communal meals in which they ate specially consecrated food.

Basic Teachings. In the second place, an assortment of basic teachings addressed in the book of Hebrews also appears in texts at Qumran.

For instance, in Hebrews 6:1-2, the author mentioned repentance, faith, cleansing rites (or baptisms), laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Interestingly enough, The Rule of the Community and the War Scroll at Qumran give a great deal of attention to these and similar matters in ways that differed from the mainstream of Palestinian Judaism.

Angels. In the third place, the literature at Qumran helps us understand the focus on angels in the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews addressed beliefs about angels in a number of passages. This focus was in response to the kinds of beliefs that were similar to teachings in books like The Rule of the Community, The Damascus Covenant, and the War Scroll, as well as the sections of 1 Enoch called “The Book of the Watchers” and “The Book of Dreams.” These books extolled the powers of good and evil angels, their roles as messengers of divine revelation, and the influence they had on inferior human beings. Apparently, the original audience of Hebrews had become attracted to these kinds of teachings.

Melchizedek. In the fourth place, the documents at Qumran help us understand the unusual interest that the author of Hebrews had in the Old Testament character Melchizedek.

For the longest time, interpreters had difficulty explaining why the comparisons between Melchizedek and Jesus were so important to the author of Hebrews. But one text found at Qumran, often called 11QMelchizedek or The Midrash on Melchizedek, falsely taught that Melchizedek was a heavenly figure who was going to appear in the last days to proclaim the Day of Atonement and make final atonement for God’s people. From all appearances, the original audience of Hebrews was tempted to hold these or similar false beliefs.

Identifying the kinds of false teachings that circulated within Jewish communities helps us to understand why the author of Hebrews exhorted his audience to resist these teachings and remain faithful to Jesus.

There’s a number of interesting parallels between the teaching of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the teaching in Hebrews. The most significant would be perhaps that both communities recognized that they were, or believed they were, living in the end times, that God’s final salvation was about to take place. Of course, the difference is in He-

brews we see that God's salvation has arrived, whereas at Qumran — or the Dead Sea Scrolls — they're expecting it to happen at any time. But perhaps the most interesting comparison between the two is the role of the figure of Melchizedek. Melchizedek, of course, in Hebrews, the author develops this theology of Melchizedek as Jesus' high priesthood is not according to the order of Aaron, not the traditional Old Testament one, but according to the order of Melchizedek, because we see Melchizedek was a legitimate high priest who met Abraham in the book of Genesis — and so, this Melchizedek comparison. Well, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is one of the Dead Sea Scrolls — known as 11Q Melchizedek because it was discovered in cave 11 of the Dead Sea Scrolls — portrays a figure, this Melchizedek, as a mighty heavenly, glorious, Messiah-like figure who brings salvation. So, it's an interesting comparison since, of course, Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the book of Hebrews, that in the Dead Sea Scrolls he becomes a messianic figure. And so scholars puzzle over this relationship between the Melchizedek figure in Hebrews and Melchizedek as he appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Interesting comparison.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

The goal of Hebrews' exhortations was not only to urge the audience to reject the local Jewish teachings. Even more, the author wanted them to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah.

Remain Faithful to Jesus

To accomplish the goal of calling his audience to faithful service to Jesus, the author of Hebrews organized his exhortations into five major divisions. We'll look in some detail at each of these divisions in our next lesson. But at this point it will help to summarize the central issues in each.

In Hebrews 1:1–2:18, the author of Hebrews called on his audience to affirm the supremacy of Christ over angelic revelations.

We mentioned earlier in this lesson that the book of Hebrews spoke against false beliefs about angels. A number of Jewish writings often exalted angels as powerful, glorious creatures who brought divine revelations to inferior human beings. This honor

for angels raised a serious challenge against those who followed Christ. Jesus was flesh and blood. How then could anyone follow what he said instead of the revelations of angels? The author of Hebrews responded to this local Jewish teaching by demonstrating from the Old Testament, and from Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return in glory, that he is actually superior to the angels.

The second major division of Hebrews, in 3:1–4:13, demonstrates that Jesus is to be held above Moses' authority.

It was obvious to everyone that followers of Jesus were not observing the sacrificial services God had ordained through Moses. The local Jewish community called for Christians to return to Moses and his ways. The author of Hebrews responded by affirming that Moses was God's faithful servant. But Jesus was even greater because he was God's royal Son.

After dealing with angels and Moses, the author of Hebrews turned to Melchizedek's priesthood in 4:14–7:28.

In this division, the author argued that Jesus was the supreme Royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Apparently, the local Jewish community wanted the original audience to reject Jesus as the Messiah because of their beliefs about the appearance of Melchizedek as the great royal high priest in the last days. In response, the author of Hebrews demonstrated that Jesus was the true Royal Priest who appeared in the last days to provide eternal atonement for sin.

In 8:1–11:40, the author of Hebrews explained the supremacy of the new covenant in Jesus.

The teachings of the local Jewish community raised doubts about the Christian claim that Jesus had come to mediate the new covenant promised by Jeremiah. But the author of Hebrews pointed out that Jesus is, in fact, the mediator of the new covenant.

In the last major division, in 12:1–13:25, the book of Hebrews elaborates on a number of ways that the audience needed to exercise practical perseverance.

This division consists of a long series of exhortations, as well as explanations for these exhortations. In light of so many challenges to their faith from the local Jewish community and elsewhere, the

author wrote to inspire and energize his audience. He exhorted them to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah by reminding them of God's promises and blessings in Jesus.

By his many exhortations, the writer to the Hebrews, to put it positively, is encouraging his readers to persevere. And some of his language is very gentle, entreating, encouraging, but some of it is, quite frankly, blisteringly frightening. That starts as early as Hebrews 2 — “If Old Testament saints fell away, how much more dangerous is it if we, who are the heirs of the new covenant, who do know the Lord Jesus, ignore the great salvation that has been provided to us?” And that sort of a fortiori argument, “If this, then how much more that,” keeps showing up again and again in the book. And then there are two passages that are often referred to as “apostasy passages” in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 that warn against the danger of those who have professed profound faith in Christ — and apparently followed for some time — falling away. And so, even in reading the Old Testament narrative, as in the end of Hebrews 3, the author says, don't be like the Old Testament saints who were rescued from Egypt and escaped slavery but never did get into the Promised Land precisely because they didn't persevere. They fell away in the desert. A whole generation was wiped out more or less. And, those are the sorts of pastoral parallels that show that his incentive to encouragement is not merely soft or cuddly, that there is warmth and encouragement and holding up the glories of Christ so as to be drawn to him. But there is also threat and warning that this is serious business and you don't want to play around with it.

— Dr. D. A. Carson

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the background and purpose of Hebrews, we've looked at the background of the book of Hebrews, including the author, the audience and the date of composition. We've also focused on the original purpose of Hebrews by examining how the author wrote his book to exhort his audience to turn from local Jewish teachings and to reaffirm their loyalty to Jesus as the Messiah.

The book of Hebrews is one of the most challenging books of the New Testament. It offers so much that we may never uncover more than a small portion of what it teaches. Yet, we can benefit in many ways from these complex teachings. As modern followers of Christ, we also face temptations to avoid troubles in this life by compromising our commitments to Jesus. But if we'll open our hearts to hear how the author of Hebrews urgently exhorted his original audience, we'll see how crucial it is that we stand strong in our faith, no matter what opposition we may face.