

SESSION THREE

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Audience, Destination, and Use of the Old Testament

Session Objectives: By the end of this session, the student should . . .

1. Be aware of the means by which the author quoted from the OT.
2. Understand the makeup and circumstances of the original audience receiving the letter.
3. Be aware of some of the issues related to the destination of the letter.

I. USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. The Book of Hebrews contains some 34-40 quotations from the Old Testament.¹ The author drew most extensively from the Psalms (12-14 quotations), the next highest being Genesis (five).

Primary Psalm Quotations:

Pss 2, 45, 102, 104 and 110 in ch. 1.

Ps 8:4-6 and 22:22 in ch. 2.

Ps 95:7-11 in ch. 3-4.

Ps 110:4 in ch. 5:6-10; 6:20; and 7:24.

Ps 40:6-8 in ch. 10:5-7.

- B. Hebrews and the Greek Septuagint

1. The Old Testament quotations are drawn primarily from a Greek Septuagint text.
2. The author apparently worked with a Greek recension which we do not presently have, for his quotations do not consistently agree with either Codex A or Codex B. About twice as many of the quotations agree with the A text as with the B text.

¹37 are listed on pg. 890 of the UBS⁴ Greek New Testament.

Codex A = Alexandrinus (5th century)

Codex B = Vaticanus (4th century)

3. Despite the tendency to quote directly from a LXX text, some of the quotations are influenced more by the Hebrew MT. In fact, some quotations will favor the LXX, some the MT, some both, and some that seem to differ from any of these.² George Howard concludes,

It appears from the preceding statistics that it is incorrect to characterize the quotations in Hebrews as always Septuagintal. A great many of them do not correspond exactly to any Septuagint, and some agree with a known Hebrew text, either whole or in part, against the Septuagint.³

C. Hermeneutical Clarification

The author engages in Messianic typology, but not allegorical exegesis that characterized the Alexandrian school. Regarding the author's theological motivation for the OT quotations, he is not simply out to win support from a Jewish audience. Rather, he wants to build a case that the OT itself clearly establishes the ministry and superiority of the New Covenant and Christ's kingly-priestly role (see Clements, 45).

France ("Hebrews," *EBC*, 29) states, "There are, however, also places where his use of the OT surprises us. In such instances it is worth remembering that his interpretive methods, while less 'scientific' than the exegesis expected in an academic commentary today, would have been quite familiar in the world of the first-century Jewish interpretation, which was typically freer and more imaginative than what we are used to The key to his use of the OT is that it is in Jesus that it now finds its fulfillment, and therefore it is in the light of the coming of the Son that he now understands all that went before. In other words, what he is doing with the OT text is often not exegesis (in the sense of trying to draw out the original author's meaning) but Christological interpretation."

II. THE AUDIENCE

A. The Question of Jew or Gentile

1. Introduction

Throughout most of church history, the prevailing view has been that the original audience receiving this book was Jewish. In 1836, E. M. Roeth proposed the thesis of a Gentile audience.

2. The Title: Πρὸς Ἑβραίους

²For a discussion of nine quotations which seem to show Hebrew influence, see George Howard, "Hebrews and the Old Testament Quotations," *Novum Testamentum* 10 (1968): 208-216.

³Howard, 215.

The title itself does not prove a Jewish audience, since we cannot be sure that this was part of the original document (could be a conjecture). The title may simply be a reflection of the nature of the letter. The earliest mention we have of it is by Tertullian in the 3rd century.

3. Insufficient Proofs for a Jewish Audience
 - a. Not just because of numerous OT quotations
 - b. Not just because of emphasis on OT persons, institutions, and rituals
4. Possible rationale for a Gentile element
 - a. The writer avoids negative references to Israel — things which might awaken Jew-Gentile tensions.
 - b. The writer avoids distinctly Jewish and distinctly Gentile language outside of quotations.

Jewish: περιτομή, συναγωγή, and Ἰσραήλ

Gentile: ἔθνη
 - c. Problem: We really don't have any NT documents that we could assuredly say were written to an entirely Gentile church.
5. Evidence of a Jewish Audience
 - a. The author insists on the Old Covenant and OT ritual as antiquated, and now replaced by the New (seems geared to an audience that would want to continue in the Old).
 - b. The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood and its replacement of the Levitical priesthood would have little significance to pagan converts (note 7:11).
 - c. The author felt a need to argue that Christ was superior to Moses, through whom came the Law (3:1-6).
 - d. The author felt a need to insist on the superiority of Christ's blood (e.g., 9:13-14).
 - e. The book begins with the note that God had spoken unto the "Fathers."
 - f. The author at times will utilize "rabbinic procedures" such as the argument from the silence of Scripture (7:3,14).
 - g. In the closing of the book, the author exhorts the readers to go forth to Christ "outside the camp" (13:13).
6. Conclusion

The audience was certainly predominantly Jewish, if not entirely Jewish.
7. More extreme views:
 - a. Karl Bornhäuser - converts from Jewish priesthood (comp. Acts 6:7)

- b. C. Spicq - The readers were not only converted priests, but former members of a Qumran sect (Essene Christians?).
 - c. H. Kosmala - The readers were Jews on the way to Christianity but who had stopped short of the goal (but who held views very similar to those of the Qumran sect and other Essenes).
- B. Palestinian Jews?
- The fact that the OT quotations are so heavily drawn from the LXX may imply that they were Hellenists (rather than Palestinian Jews). Inconclusive!
- C. True Believers?
- A number of scholars and commentators take the position that the more serious warnings of the book are directed at readers who professed to be Christians but who had never actually been *truly saved*. This is the position of John MacArthur, most Reformed writers (Philip E. Hughes, Roger Nicole), and some dispensationalists (Stanley Toussaint, S. L. Johnson, and more recently Buist Fanning⁴). I tend to agree, however, with Ellingworth and Wm. Lane that the readers being warned were indeed true Christians.
1. In 3:1 they are called "holy brethren."
 2. The analogy is being drawn between the present readers and the wilderness generation (3:16-19), but it is extremely doubtful to think that the wilderness generation were all "unsaved."
 3. The ones who are being seriously warned in Heb 6:4-6 are the same as those who ought to be teachers by now (5:12). [point: the problem is lack of maturing, not a lack of salvation].
 4. Earlier, the readers had demonstrated faithfulness, even at the expense of suffering for their faith (6:10; 10:32-34).
 5. The stress of the book is on endurance, holding fast, and maintaining faith (10:36).
- D. Heb 2:3-4 may imply that the readers had not seen Jesus in person (if so, this might argue for a Hellenistic destination, since there would still be those in Jerusalem and Palestine who would have seen and heard Jesus).
- E. The readers are a *particular community*, not just Jews in general.
1. They have a definite history (6:10; 10:32-34).
 2. The author intended to visit them (13:23).
 3. Apparently some of their original leaders had died off, and the readers are in danger of drifting from their preaching (13:7).
- F. The readers are probably a smaller segment of a larger community of believers.

⁴Buist M. Fanning, "A Theology of Hebrews," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, 369-415 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

1. This smaller segment, despite earlier acts of faithfulness, had failed to mature in their Christian walk (5:12; 6:1).
 2. They seem to have detached themselves from their leaders who had remained faithful (13:7, 17, 24). Donald Guthrie concludes,

". . . they are not the most prominent members of the community, since in that case they would not be urged to submit to their leaders So there is much to support the contention that they were a small house-community, which had broken away from and was at least acting independently of the main group of Christians to which they were attached. This may well be why they are urged not to forsake the general Christian assembly (x.25), i.e. in favour of their own house-group."⁵
- G. The readers had partaken of difficult trials and circumstances
1. The readers are promised that Christ "can come to the aid of those who are tempted" (2:18).
 2. Reference is clearly made to persecution experienced in earlier days (10:32-34).⁶
 3. Nevertheless, they had not experienced martyrdom (12:4).
- H. The readers were growing weary in their Christian pilgrimage and (being immature) were in danger of being tempted to give up their confession.
1. 2:1 - Don't drift away!
 2. 4:1 - Danger of coming short of the "rest"
 3. 5:11 - Dull of hearing
 4. 10:36 - You have need of endurance
- I. The readers were facing the possibility of active (even permanent) rebellion against the will of God.
1. 3:12 - the danger of an evil, unbelieving heart
 2. 4:11 - danger of "falling" (in similar fashion to the Exodus generation)
 3. 6:4-6 - falling away . . . unable to be renewed to repentance
 4. 10:26 - willful persistence in sin
 5. 12:25 - refusing to listen to God's voice
- Ellingworth concludes (80):

⁵Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970), 700.

⁶Lane (lxiv-lxv) holds that the book is addressed to Jewish Christians at Rome and argues that the suffering of 10:32-34 is an allusion to the hardships borne by those who were expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD 49 (comp. Acts 18:2 - Aquila & Priscilla). For further studies, see Seutonius, *Claudius*, 25.4.

On the contrary, a coherent view of the whole situation can perhaps best be reached by beginning with the severe passages and working outwards to those which raise fewer problems. . . . something had happened in the community which was threatening to sever at its root the faith of at least some of its members; or, to use language close to that of the epistle itself, threatening to interrupt their pilgrimage of faith before it had reached its goal. Once some of the readers had succumbed to this threat, there was a danger that the evil would spread to the rest (12:15).

. . . there could well have been a constant temptation to de-emphasize, conceal, neglect, abandon, and thus in a crisis reject and deny the distinctively Christian dimension of their faith.

The writer meets this danger, on the one hand negatively, by the severest warnings of the permanent consequences of such action; and on the other hand positively, by presenting Christ as the essential and inseparable culmination of God's purposes for his one people, under old and new dispensations alike.

II. THE DESTINATION

A. Introduction:

All kinds of suggestions have been made, both within Palestine and without. Several modern scholars favor Rome (e.g., Ellingworth and Lane). Hodges favors Cyrene in N. Africa.

B. Probably not Alexandria

1. The belief in Pauline authorship first arose at Alexandria. If this is the original destination of the letter, it is difficult to suppose that the Christians there would have so quickly forgotten and ascribed it to another.
2. The early Alexandrian fathers assumed it was addressed to the Hebrew people of Palestine.

C. "Those from Italy greet you" (13:24) = οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας

Possible interpretations:

1. those *in* Italy (i.e., Italians, implying that the letter was not written to Italy)
2. those who come *from* Italy (implying that they had left Italy to settle elsewhere).
 - a. Implication - If option #2 is correct, this would lend weight to the idea that the letter was addressed to those at Rome (there must be some connection of 13:24 to the destination of the letter). Lane, Bruce and Ellingworth favor option #2.
 - b. Support
 - (1) Either interpretation is possible grammatically. For the second, note the use of ἀπο plus a place name in Acts 6:9; 18:2.

- (2) The letter was quoted by Clement of Rome (not conclusive, but does show that the letter had turned up at Rome).
- (3) The reference to "leaders" (ἡγούμενοι) is found outside the NT in early Christian sources associated with Rome (e.g., 1 *Clem* 21:6; *Herm.*, *Vis.* 2.2.6; 3.9.7).
- (4) Timothy was known to the Roman Christians (cf. *Col* 1:1; *Phm* 1).
- (5) The sufferings in 10:32-34 may be connected to the Claudian edict of expulsion in AD 49 (see Lane, lxiii-lxvi).

D. The matter of 2:3-4 (spoken by the Lord / confirmed to us by those who heard)

This could imply that the original audience of Hebrews had not heard the "salvation" message from the Lord directly, but only through apostles (secondhand). If that is true, then this might argue against a Palestinian destination of the letter, since there would have still been people around in the AD 60's who had heard the message directly from Jesus. However, the author's point may simply be that the message was spoken by the Lord and confirmed by others (not that they only received the latter).

E. The Question of Qumran

1. Several articles have been written showing possible connections to the Qumran community.

Example:

DSS 11Q Melchizedek - shows there was 1st century discussion of Melchizedek (in this fragment, he is described as a superior angel).

2. But - Herbert Brown, in perhaps the most thorough study between Hebrews and Qumran, argues there was no close connection between them.⁷

3. Ellingworth (p. 48):

"Where Qumran is a reforming movement, Hebrews is revolutionary; where Qumran reacts against the corruption of the contemporary Jerusalem priesthood, Hebrews seeks to show the inadequacy of the levitical institutions themselves, even as described in the Pentateuch."

F. Conclusion

Although the audience certainly consisted of Jewish Christians, it is almost impossible to determine the destination precisely. Conceivably, it could have been almost any city where there may have been a sizeable Jewish community.

⁷Herbert Brown, *Qumran und das Neue Testament*, 2 vols., Tübingen, 1966.