

Conversion, persecution, and malaise: Life in the community for which Hebrews was written

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Abstract

Hebrews was written for Christians whose situation had developed as a result of several stages. Firstly the readers' community was established when the message of salvation led to conversion and was confirmed by experiencing miracles and a sense of the Spirit's presence. Secondly, during a time of persecution conditions became more difficult but the community remained steadfast in the wake of abuse, dispossession, and imprisonment and was not pressurised into relinquishing their commitments. During the third stage, conditions within the community seemed to deteriorate as ongoing friction with non-Christians and the demands of mutual support within the Christian community evidently moved some to exhibit a diminished commitment to the faith and to neglect the community's gatherings. In response, the author develops the contrast between the seen and the unseen in order to address the apparent contradiction between the promises of glory that drew them to faith and the inglorious experience of life in the world. The author seeks to bolster the readers' confidence by showing that Jesus' suffering was followed by exaltation to heavenly glory and that Jesus' followers can be confident that God will also bring others who suffer into the glory that has been promised to them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hebrews is a "word of exhortation" that calls a group of early Christians to renew their commitment to the faith and the community (Heb 13:22). It seems

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clear that in the eyes of the author, the readers were drifting into a malaise that could, if left unchecked, erode their loyalty to the Christian community and its confession (5:11; 6:12; 10:25). Less certain are the factors that contributed to the malaise, and attempts to understand the readers' situation are closely related to ways of interpreting Hebrews as a whole. Hebrews has variously been read as a message of encouragement for Christians facing a crisis of persecution (Lane 1991:lx-lxvi), and as a presentation of priesthood and sacrifice for Jewish Christians who were trying to come to terms with their sense of sin and need for atonement (Lindars 1991:10). Some propose that the author was responding to the readers' sense of loss after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (Isaacs 1992:67), while others suggest that the book addresses a general sense of weariness among second-generation Christians (Grässer 1990:24-27).

Modern readers do not have direct access to the readers addressed by Hebrews, but must consider how the author construed their situation in his writing. The author refers several times to phases in the community's life, allowing us to trace the way that he understood conditions to have changed over time. The group was formed when Christian evangelists proclaimed a message of salvation and performed miracles to validate their preaching (2:3-4). Later, non-Christians accosted members of the community and denounced them to the local authorities, who imprisoned them and allowed Christian property to be plundered. During the conflict, Christians remained loyal to each other and attended to those in prison (10:32-34). Eventually, overt persecution gave way to a lower level of conflict in which non-Christians continued verbally to harass Christians. Some from the community were in prison and others felt the effects of being marginalized in society. Although some continued to show faith and compassion, others experienced a malaise that was evident in tendencies to neglect the faith and community gatherings (5:11; 6:12; 10:25; 13:3, 13-14). Hebrews was written during this third phase.

The incidents mentioned by the author cannot be connected with certainty to specific events that are known from other sources, but they do reflect common patterns in early Christian life. Reading passages from Hebrews in light of patterns that are typical of early Christian communities and their contexts helps to make explicit some of the dynamics that are implicit in Hebrews' accounts of the community's experience. Other insights come from the way that Hebrews mirrors the situation of the readers when recounting biblical stories. The author reflects the dynamics of persecution against the early Christian community when he refers to Moses being denounced for Christ (11:26). When speaking of Abraham and others seeking a place in the city (11:8-10, 13-16), the author again recasts the biblical narrative to

correspond more closely to the readers' experience. The anachronistic elements in these passages provide further glimpses into the situation of the community addressed by Hebrews. Taken together, the comments about experiences of conversion, persecution, and malaise provide a helpful way to understand how the author construed the challenges confronting the readers, and how the argument of Hebrews was designed to help readers persevere by trusting in a God and a future that they could not see.

2. PROCLAMATION AND CONVERSION

Hebrews recounts the founding of the readers' community in remarks made near the beginning of the book. After an elevated introduction that focuses on the exalted Son of God, the author recalls (Heb 2:3-4; my translation):

[A] great salvation, which was first spoken through the Lord and validated for us by those who heard, while God corroborated the testimony by signs and wonders and various powerful deeds, and distributions of the Holy Spirit according to his will.

To say that the message of Jesus was brought to "us by those who heard", indicates that neither the author nor his audience were eyewitnesses to the ministry of Jesus, but that they received the message from Christian evangelists. The author does not state whether these evangelists actually heard Jesus preach, or whether they were simply transmitters of the message that came from Jesus. Although some translations paraphrase the passage to say that the message was validated "by those who heard *him*," namely Jesus (NIV, NRSV), and others propose that the text refers to "those who heard *it*," namely the message (Attridge 1989:63; Hegermann 1988:62), Hebrews leaves the matter unspecified. The stylized language affirms that the message of salvation came from Jesus, that it was heard and preached by Christian evangelists, and that it was received by those to whom Hebrews is addressed. It is not clear that the author would have distinguished those who personally heard Jesus preach from other early Christians who disseminated the message. The concern in 2:3-4 is to connect the message that the listeners received with what Jesus preached.

Hebrews uses the plural when referring to the founding evangelists, which suggests that two or more of them worked together, as was common early Christian practice.² The evangelists could have been missionaries who

² For example, Acts 13:2-3; 15:30, 39; 16:2; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 3 John 6. The pairs sent out by Jesus in Luke 10:1 may correspond to early Christian missionary practice. Some evidence for solitary traveling evangelists appears in *Didache* 11:3-13:7.

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stayed in a given locale for a period of time, so that they could form a community before moving on to a different area. This was the pattern followed by the associates of Paul, including Timothy, who is mentioned in 13:23.³ The miracle-working and spiritual outpourings that are mentioned in 2:3-4 were also associated with that kind of ministry in other early Christian writings (1 Th 1:5; Gl 3:1-5; Ac 8:4-8,14-17). Some interpreters suggest that the evangelists of Hebrews 2:3-4 remained within the community, assuming responsibilities as the more permanent type of “leaders” mentioned elsewhere (13:7, 17, 24). Although the founding evangelists, like the later leaders, were involved in teaching and preaching, it is not clear that the two groups were identical. Hebrews does not say that the evangelists assumed the pastoral responsibilities associated with “leaders” in 13:17, or that “leaders” were responsible for the spiritual phenomena associated with the evangelists in 2:3-4.⁴ Despite the uncertainty, the request to “greet all your leaders and all the saints” indicates that the group addressed by Hebrews was part of a larger network of Christian communities (13:24).

The author says that the evangelists’ message concerned a “great salvation” (2:3). In the remainder of the book, he assumes that the audience is acquainted with a notion of salvation that has several dimensions, each of which reflects a common theme of early Christian preaching. On one level, salvation is understood to entail deliverance from divine judgment. This is reflected in the author’s comment that readers had already received instruction concerning the “eternal judgment” (6:2) that people face after death (9:27) or on the future Day of the Lord (6:8; 10:25-31). Given the prospect of such judgment, people were to seek salvation by repenting of sin and showing faith in God – ideas that were part of the basic Christian instruction that the readers received (6:1). Connecting salvation with repentance and faith was typical in early Christian presentations of the message of Jesus and his followers (e.g., Mk 1:15; Mt 11:21-22; Ac 2:21, 38, 40, 48).

On another level, the evangelists’ message probably had to do with salvation from evil forces and the hope of inheriting a share in God’s kingdom. According to the gospels, exorcisms brought salvation from demonic power, portending the coming defeat of Satan (Mt 12:25-29; Lk 10:18; 13:16), and the

³ Hebrews 13:23 almost certainly refers to the Timothy who accompanied Paul. There is some question as to whether the passage is historically accurate or pseudonymous, but in either case, the mention of Timothy shows that the author knew of the Pauline mission tradition. On Hebrews and Pauline Christianity see Backhaus 1993:183-208; Hurst 1990:107-24.

⁴ Those who connect the evangelists of 2:3-4 to the leaders of 13:7 include Attridge 1989:391; Lane 1991:527; Weiss 1991:711-12. Those who caution against this connection include Paul Ellingworth 1993:702; Grässer 1990:107. On the “leaders” see Dunnill 1992:18-20; Grässer 1992:213-30; Laub 1981-82:169-90.

message of salvation included the hope of sharing in the blessings of divine rule (Lk 13:23-30; cf 23:39, 42). Hebrews assumes familiarity with the idea that Christ delivers those who are oppressed by the devil (Heb 2:14-15), although the author connects this idea with Christ's death and exaltation rather than with Christ's preaching or miracles. More importantly, the author assumes that readers expect to "inherit salvation" (1:14), which means inheriting a share of God's unshakable kingdom (12:28), where the faithful will receive glory and everlasting life (2:10; 5:9). Salvation is a present possibility for those who draw near to God through Christ in prayer (7:25), but its consummation remains future, when the reign of God will be fully manifested (1:14; 2:5; 9:28; 13:14).

The founding evangelists confirmed their message by performing signs, wonders, and deeds of power (2:4a). The New Testament refers to the miracles performed by the apostles, (Ac 2:43; 5:12; Rm 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12) and other leading figures (Ac 6:8; 8:13). The most common sorts of miracles mentioned are healings and exorcisms (Ac 3:1-10; 5:16; 9:32-42; 14:8-18; 16:16-18; 19:11-12). Early Christian sources take demonstrations of miraculous power to be valuable confirmation of a message that centered on "salvation." By showing that God can save the afflicted from illnesses that they can see, miracles give people reason to believe that God can also save them from demonic power and from eternal judgment for life in a kingdom that they cannot see (Mk 2:1-12; Ac 3:1-26). The author seeks to shape the readers' memories of this formative period by saying that the miracles "validated" the truth of the evangelists' message, using a term that emphasized the certainty of something in the face of counter claims.

In addition to miracles, the members of the community received "distributions of the Holy Spirit," apparently in a manner that they could experience (Heb 2:4). The nature of this spiritual activity is not specified, but some things can be inferred. Hebrews considers the Spirit to be a channel of the grace (6:4-5; 10:29) that comes to expression in a confession of Christian faith (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). Therefore, the author probably understood the group's readiness to believe the evangelists' testimony to be a manifestation of the Spirit's work. Identifying a favorable response to the gospel as a demonstration of the Spirit's power was common among early Christians (e.g., Ac 10:44; 1 Cor 2:1-5; Gl 3:1,5; 1 Th 1:5; 1 Pt 1:2; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:13-15). Other manifestations of the Spirit could have included prophesying, speaking in ecstatic tongues, and similar phenomena, since these were sometimes connected with miracle working, although Hebrews does not make this clear (cf 1 Cor 12:8-10,28-30; Ac 19:6,11; cf 10:46). In calling these experiences "distributions" (*merismoi*), Hebrews employs a term that was sometimes

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used for distributions of inheritance (P Oxy 493.8; P Ryl 65.5). The expression underscores that readers can be sure that they will receive an “inheritance” from God, despite experiences that would call this into question, since those who have received the Spirit have received a preliminary “distribution” of “the powers of the age to come” (6:5).

Those who accepted the Christian message would have made a confession of faith (Heb 3:1; 4:14; 10:22-23). By referring to “the confession,” using the definite article, and by urging listeners to “hold fast” to it, the author of Hebrews indicates that the confession had content that could be identified and grasped (Dunn 1990:59; Laub 1980:27-27). Central to the confession was that “Jesus is the Son of God,” an idea that Hebrews explicitly links to the confession in 4:14. The opening lines show that divine sonship was understood to include Christ’s appointment as heir of all things in power and glory (1:1-5). The royal connotations of the title “Son of God” (Ps 2:6-7; 2 Sm 7:13-14; Heb 1:1-14) imply that the “confession of hope” had to do with inheriting a share in his kingdom (10:23; cf 1:14; 6:12; 9:15; 12:28). The author does not attempt to demonstrate these ideas, and assumes that readers already affirm them as a part of their confession. In later phases of the community’s history, questions about what it means to call Jesus God’s Son may have contributed to the crisis addressed by Hebrews, since the implications of the confession were not borne out by the listeners’ experience, which fell far short of the kingdom (10:32-34; 13:3, 13).⁵

Making a confession of Christian faith was accompanied by baptism and the laying on of hands (6:2). Baptism was probably understood to involve cleansing from sin, since those who repented were washed with pure water in a manner that entailed purification of body and heart (10:22; Koester 2001:305, 311). Hebrews links this baptismal washing to making a confession of faith and attending the Christian assembly, indicating that baptism marked the person’s formal entry into the Christian community (10:22-25). Although the laying on of hands was done on various occasions in the early church,⁶ its connection with baptism in 6:2 makes it likely that hands were placed on newly baptized Christians during their rite of initiation. According to Acts 8:17-18 and 19:6, Christians laid hands on those who had been baptized when praying that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This might also have been the

⁵ Some scholars have suggested that the title “high priest” was also part of the confession (Käsemann 1984:167-74; Zimmermann 1977:47-52; Attridge 1989:102-3). This seems unlikely, however. If the idea had been familiar to the addressees, the author would not have had to demonstrate it as he does in Heb 7-8 (Laub 1980:27-41; Weiss 1991:244).

⁶ Laying on hands was done when blessing someone (Mark 10:13), setting someone apart for special service (Ac 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tm 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tm 1:6), and healing (Mk 5:23; Ac 9:12, 17; 28:8).

case for those addressed by Hebrews, since the laying on of hands is mentioned in Hebrews 6:2 and the Spirit is mentioned in 6:4.⁷

The first phase of the community's life was a time when belief and experience reinforced each other. If the evangelists' message gave people hope for a place in God's kingdom, the miracles and the community's sense of the Spirit working in their midst confirmed the message experientially. The author's metaphors draw on the senses to show the vivid connection between belief and experience. He says that those who have come to faith have been "*enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of God's word and the powers of the age to come*" (6:4-5). This way of relating faith and experience will become an issue during later phases of the community's history, when tasting the heavenly gift is accompanied by the loss of earthly goods, when sharing the Spirit means sharing suffering, and when the powers of the future age seem overwhelmed by the powers of the present age (10:32-34; 13:13-14).

The community addressed by Hebrews went through a movement from repentance to faith (6:1) that included both a change in their own convictions and a shift in social relations. In the Greco-Roman world a Christian community would include some but certainly not all the members of a given ethnic group or social class. Therefore, the confession of faith (3:1; 4:14; 10:23) may have bound the members of the group together, but it also distinguished group members from the larger society, a society that did not share these same convictions. For the earliest Christians, baptism was not a rite of passage within an established community, but an action that marked the boundary between the Christian community and non-Christian society. Undergoing baptism not only meant purification from sin, but identification with a group of people that was set apart from others.

Acceptance of the Christian message planted the seeds of conflict between the listeners' community and the wider society. When a convert turns away from former patterns of belief, he or she makes a negative judgment on beliefs and values that continue to be held by those who do not share the same faith. Even if this is not explicitly stated, the act of leaving behind certain beliefs in order to accept others can elicit resentment from the group that the convert leaves. The author of Hebrews calls conversion "enlightenment" (6:4; 10:32), thereby implying that the unconverted remain in darkness with its connotations of sin, ignorance, and death (Jn 3:17-21; Ac 13:37; 2 Cor 4:6; 1 Pt 2:9). This idea is evident in 1 Peter, where being called out of darkness into

⁷ It is not clear whether the author of Hebrews thought of the Spirit's coming primarily as a response to the evangelists' preaching, prior to baptism (2:3-4; cf Ac 10:44-48), or as a gift that came through the laying on of hands after baptism (cf Ac 8:16-17; 19:6).

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the light means receiving a new identity among the people of God (1 Pt 2:9-11) and being reproached by those whose beliefs the convert no longer shares (1 Pt 2:11; 4:4). Those addressed by Hebrews experienced something similar, for their “enlightenment” in the Christian faith was followed by hostility from others in society (Heb 10:32).

3. PERSECUTION AND SOLIDARITY

The second phase of the group’s history was marked by violent conflict with those outside the community and intense solidarity among those inside the community. In order to introduce his extended discussion of faith in Hebrews 11, the author summarizes an incident when the readers’ community had exhibited faith during this difficult period in the past (Heb 10:32-34; my translation):

Recall the former days, in which after you were first enlightened you endured a great contest with sufferings, in part by being made a public spectacle through denunciations and afflictions, and in part by showing solidarity with those who were treated that way. For you showed compassion for the prisoners and accepted the seizure of your property with joy, knowing that you yourselves have a superior and abiding possession.

The author uses stylized language to recall an outbreak of violence against the Christians at some point after their conversion. Describing their suffering as “a great contest” and a “public spectacle” draws on imagery from Greco-Roman athletic and theatrical performances to transform the audience’s perceptions, so that they remember the experience as one in which they were not hapless victims, but valiant participants in a contest, who endured severe trials for the sake of a greater goal. The imagery stresses the public character of the incident, and the author’s comments identify four main elements in the persecution: denunciation, affliction, imprisonment, and the loss of property. These elements enable us to discern some of the dynamics involved.

The actions taken against the Christians apparently involved two groups: members of the non-Christian populace and some of the local officials. The role of the non-Christian populace can best be seen in considering how “denunciation” (*oñeidi smoi*) of Christians led to their imprisonment (10:32-34).⁸ In the first century most communities had only a

⁸ The word *oñeidi smoi* was used for various kinds of verbal abuse (e.g., Ps 68:8, 10 LXX; Mt 27:44; Rm 15:3; 1 Pt 4:14). Although it was not a technical term for making a criminal charge before the authorities, the kind of verbal abuse mentioned in Heb 10:33 apparently led to some persons being imprisoned. Translating *oñeidi smoi* as “denunciation” highlights the connection between verbal abuse and imprisonment.

rudimentary police force, and apart from flagrant violations of law, authorities depended upon citizens to bring wrongdoers to their attention. Acts, for example, tells how people verbally and physically accosted Christians before denouncing them to city magistrates who could choose to imprison (Ac 16:16-24; cf 21:31-36; Rv 2:9-10) or release them (Ac 17:1-9; 18:12-17). The reference to imprisonment in Hebrews 10:34 makes clear that one or more local officials cooperated with those who denounced the Christians, because only a person in authority, such as a governor or magistrate, would have been able to place the Christians in jail.

It is significant that the Christians lost property and were subjected to abuse, yet it was they and not the perpetrators of the violence who were imprisoned. Under Roman criminal law, officials did not sentence people to specific prison terms as a form of punishment. Magistrates sometimes incarcerated people for short periods in order to coerce them into obeying their orders, and persons accused of crimes could be detained in prison for weeks or even years while they awaited hearings before the authorities. Criminals sentenced to death also could be imprisoned until the sentence was carried out (Rapske 1994:10-20). Since Hebrews does not speak of Christians being killed as a result of this persecution, it seems likely that the prisoners were kept in coercive detention or perhaps held in custody for questioning.

The “afflictions” mentioned in Heb 10:32 almost certainly involved physical abuse, although it is not clear whether the actions were carried out by the crowd or by the authorities. Since the author couples “afflictions” with “denunciations,” he might imply that both were carried out by members of the populace. This would be comparable to the incidents in Acts, where mobs beat Christians while denouncing them to the authorities (Ac 17:6; 18:17; cf 14:19). Alternatively, it was also common for officials to use physical force against prisoners. To maintain public order, officials had the power of *coercitio*, which allowed them to authorize beatings without following judicial norms when gathering evidence or exacting punishment (Ac 14:5; 16:22-23, 37). Physical affliction could also have been part of the experience of the prisoners during this phase, since Hebrews associates abuse with imprisonment in 13:3. Conditions were grim in the jails of major cities and smaller towns. Stone walls, often without windows, created a dark, suffocating enclosure where prisoners lived in squalor and cramped space. During the day they wore a collar and a manacle on one hand, while at night they slept on the ground with their legs in stocks, so they could not stretch them out. Jailers had a reputation for harshness. Such conditions might have been included in the suffering mentioned in 10:32 (Rapske 1994:244-76; Wansink 1996:27-95).

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The seizure of property could have been done through legal confiscation by the authorities, through unofficial plundering by a mob, or both. On the one hand, property of those convicted of major crimes or who went into voluntary exile on such charges could be confiscated by officials. This was also true in cases of *maiestas*, which was the crime of offending the authority of the emperor (Koester 2001:460). On the other hand, plundering by a mob was common during outbreaks of violence.⁹ During pogroms against the Jews in Alexandria, for example, the mob pillaged houses, broke open shops, and dealt “with other people's property as freely as if it was their own” (Philo, *Flaccus* 56). Less dramatically, the property of a Christian was carried off from his home while he was in prison in the second century (Lucian, *Peregrinus* 14). The evidence is ambiguous because official confiscation could be construed as plunder by the victims, and the lines between legal and illegal action were not always clear. In the first century, for example, illegal seizures of Jewish property at Alexandria were condoned by the magistrates, and in the second century, some turned governmental decrees against Christians into opportunities to pillage Christian communities for personal gain.¹⁰

Since confiscation was normally done alongside other punishments, and Hebrews implies that property was lost even by those who were not imprisoned, it seems likely that the seizures were not fully legal, but that they might have been tolerated by the authorities. Such a loss of property inflicted manifold harm upon a community. Economically, it subjected the victims to both immediate and long-term poverty, because pillaging not only made victims penniless, but took away their means of making a living, thereby making recovery more difficult (Philo, *Flaccus* 57). Culturally, the loss of property was degrading, since the ability to provide for oneself and others gave people a sense of dignity in the eyes of others (deSilva 1995:161-62).

Hebrews seems to refer to a local outburst in 10:32-34, rather than to a systematic persecution of Christians. If the incident began when some non-Christians attacked Christians and denounced them to the authorities, the pattern would fit what is known from other sources. In Rome, the emperor Claudius (49 AD) seems to have taken action against some Christians in response to disturbances in local synagogues, but he did not carry out a wider

⁹ Josephus, *Jewish War* 3.177; 4.168; *Testament of Judah* 23.3; 4 Macc 4:10; Polybius, *Histories* 4.17.4.

¹⁰ For the first century see Philo, *Flaccus* 54, 76-77; *Legatio* 121-23; Josephus *Jewish War* 2.275, 305-306; 4.335. For the second century see Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.5.

campaign against the church.¹¹ In Asia Minor (ca 95 AD, people in some local synagogues denounced Christians, who then faced the prospect of imprisonment and death, but Christians in other communities were apparently left alone (Rv 2:9; 3:9, 17). During his term as governor of Bithynia and Pontus, Pliny the Younger (110-12 AD) took action against persons who were denounced to him, but neither he nor the emperor Trajan favored any government-sponsored search for Christians (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97). Nero (54-68 AD) did instigate a persecution of Christians, but this is almost certainly not the persecution mentioned in Hebrews, since the readers' community had not been subjected to the lethal bloodshed associated with Nero.¹² Christians suffered during the reign of terror that took place at the end of Domitian's reign (81-96 AD), but his actions were directed against all those who were seen as enemies of the throne, not only Christians (Achteimer 1996:30-32).

Hebrews does not make clear whether the persecution mentioned in 10:32-34 was initiated by Gentiles or Jews. When considering the situation, it is helpful to note that those addressed by Hebrews almost certainly lived outside of Palestine, in a town or city in the Roman Empire. The greeting extended by "those from Italy" in 13:24 suggests that some Christians who had left Italy sent greetings to a group readers who remained in Italy (Koester 2001:48-50), or perhaps that Hebrews was sent from Italy to Christians living at another location. In any case, the elegant Greek style, the use of the LXX, and the absence of any direct reference to the temple make it unlikely that the intended readers resided in Jerusalem. Christians living at various places in the Roman Empire were sometimes denounced by members of local synagogues (Ac 17:1-9; Rv 2:9; 3:9), and this could have been the experience of those addressed by Hebrews. Yet if Hebrews was written for Christians living outside of Palestine, those who actually placed the Christians in a municipal jail would almost certainly have been non-Jews. In order to imprison Christians, non-Jewish officials had to be persuaded that the Christians posed a threat to Roman social order (Ac 16:21; 18:12-17). Therefore, Hebrews reflects a situation in which Christians are not simply estranged from the Jewish community, but from their city and society (Heb 13:14).

The distinctive faith commitments of the Christians seem to have been the main factor in creating friction between their community and the wider

¹¹ The incident is mentioned by Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4), who says that the disturbance had to do with "Chrestus". Although some have questioned whether this refers to a disturbance over "Christ" (Benko 1980:1059), it seems probable that it did (Lampe 1989:4-8).

¹² Tacitus says that Nero had Christians crucified, torn apart by dogs, and burnt (*Annals* 15.44), whereas Hebrews addresses Christians who had not had their blood shed (Heb 12:4; Rose 1994:34-44).

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public. The author of Hebrews suggests this by a creatively anachronistic depiction of Moses as a Christian (D'Angelo 1979:17-64). In this passage the author retells the story of Moses in a way that reflects the situation of the early church. First, the loss of possessions is connected with being denounced for Christ. When Moses left the house of pharaoh's daughter he is said to have given up wealth in Egypt for the hope of a future reward (11:26b), just as members of the early Christian community willingly gave up their possessions during the persecution because they had the hope of a heavenly inheritance (10:34). His reason for doing this, according to Hebrews, was that Moses endured "denunciation for Christ" (11:26a), just as the Christian community suffered "denunciation" for Christ (13:13). The intriguing expression τὸν ὀνειδισμόν τοῦ Χριστοῦ can suggest that Moses was denounced "like Christ," since the verbal opposition that Moses received from the king of Egypt and from some of his own people was similar to the reviling that Jesus endured during his public ministry and crucifixion (Ex 2:14; 5:4, 21). At the same time, the Greek expression is suggestive enough to depict Moses as the precursor of those Christians who were denounced "like Christ" and "for Christ," since they maintained their Christian confession despite hostility from others. In his portrayal of Moses, the author of Hebrews mirrors a situation in which the charges leveled at his readers' community had specifically to do with their relationship to Christ.

Hebrews uses the portrayal of Moses to show that belonging to the community of faith brings estrangement from the wider society. The author says that Moses left the royal household "to be maltreated with the people of God," and that by identifying with God's people, Moses rejected "the fleeting pleasure of sin" (11:25). The implication is that belonging to the people of God sets one apart from a society that is perceived to be sinful. These comments about Moses again reflect the situation of the Christian community addressed by Hebrews. During a past period of persecution, Christians were maltreated, as the people of God in Moses' time had been, and members of the Christian community exhibited the same kind of faith that Moses had shown by sharing the affliction of others. The author's portrayal of Moses also indicates that those who abandoned the community in order to avoid maltreatment were seeking a more pleasant social and economic situation at the price of unfaithfulness, which was a sin. From the perspective of Hebrews, the benefits gained from unfaithfulness are "fleeting," since true security is found in relationship to God and the community of faith.

The pattern in Hebrews seems to be like the one reflected in 1 Peter, which speaks of Christians being "reviled for the name of Christ" (1 Pt 4:14, 16). Available evidence does not make clear whether it was actually illegal to

be identified with the name of Christ, since the letters exchanged by Pliny and Trajan show that even in the early second century Roman officials did not have a general policy about how to deal with Christians (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97). Significantly, 1 Peter indicates that denunciation was done by non-Christians, who were “surprised that you [Christians] no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme” (1 Pt 4:4). Those whom God calls “out of darkness into his marvelous light” belong to a new people (1 Pt 2:9-10). Therefore, in Hebrews and 1 Peter, enlightenment means social realignment and at least an implicit judgment against the convert’s former society.

The concluding verses of Hebrews include greetings from persons who came from Italy (Heb 13:24). By the middle of the first century Christians in Italy were evidently charged with showing “hatred against humankind” (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.2). The same things were said about Jews: “Toward each other they observe strict fidelity and mercy, but the rest of humankind they hate,” for “they separate themselves from others” (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 34.1.2). In antiquity Jews did not engage in civic activities that required honoring deities other than the God of Israel. Gentiles regarded them as a people that “made its own life apart and irreconcilable, that cannot share with the rest of humanity in the pleasures of the table nor join in their libations or prayers or sacrifices” (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 3.33). Jewish distinctiveness was tolerated because it was based on traditions that they had received from their ancestors (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5). Christians were also recognized as different, but their faith lacked the same sense of ancient tradition. They were accused of promoting “a new and mischievous superstition” because they did not honor Greco-Roman religious customs (Suetonius, *Nero* 16; Ac 16:20-21).¹³

The actions taken against Christians were probably designed to accomplish at least two things. One would have been to pressure Christians into giving up their beliefs. When people were publicly denounced they were dishonored and deprived of the personal value that most people sought from society. Experiencing abuse and the loss of property were painful both physically and emotionally. Conditions in prison were harsh and degrading, and many people would have abandoned their convictions in order to avoid such hardship. Second, the actions might have been intended to isolate those who persisted in their faith from the wider society, and to dissuade others from

¹³ Although Christians were sometimes accused of wrongdoing (1 Pt 2:12), disloyalty to the emperor (Ac 17:7), and posing an economic threat (Ac 16:19; 19:24-27), such allegations are not reflected in Hebrews (see generally Achtemeier 1996:28-36; Goppelt, 1993:39-41; Keresztes 1980:247-57).

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joining the Christian group. If people learned that belonging to the Christian community brought the threat of being beaten and imprisoned, and that it jeopardized one's honor and property, they would probably be less likely to adopt the Christian faith.

The result of the persecution, however, was to bind the Christian community together, so that its members remained supportive of those who were imprisoned. Prisoners commonly had to provide much of their own food. A small ration of bread and water was to be distributed once each day, but officials could withhold it as punishment, so that those who had to rely on this ration lost weight and weakened. Those who showed compassion toward the prisoners probably performed simple actions like bringing in additional food and seeing that other physical needs were met, in so far as possible. Visiting the prisoners would also have given them encouragement during the time of incarceration. Other writings from the first and second centuries say that Christians were known for visiting believers in prison.¹⁴

The response of the Christian community to the crisis of persecution corresponds to a common social pattern in which a heightened sense of cooperation within a group results from conflict between groups (e.g., Philo, *Flaccus* 72). Conflict with outsiders can help to establish and reaffirm the group's distinctive identity, while promoting internal cohesion. Although persecution can weaken affiliation to a religious group, it can also confirm and reinforce the bonds of loyalty among those who are persecuted, serving to define and deepen religious commitments. Attacks by outsiders help to define loyalties and mobilize the energies of people within the group to support one another (Elliott 1990:114-18). This was the case of the community addressed by Hebrews during its second phase.

4. FRICTION AND MALAISE

The outburst of hostility gave way to ongoing, but less intense friction between Christians and non-Christians. The violence discussed above took place in "former days" (10:32), but at the time that Hebrews was written, the author could still exhort readers: "Therefore, let us go out to him [Christ] outside the camp, bearing denunciation for him, for we have here no abiding city, but seek the one that is to come" (Heb 13:13-14; my translation).

The passage does not suggest that the readers are being subjected to the kind of violence and dispossession that their group had experienced earlier, but tensions persist between the Christian community and the non-

¹⁴ On Christians visiting prisoners see Phlp 2:25; 4:14-18; Lucian, *Peregrinus*, 12-13; Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1:2; *Magnesians* 2; *Trallians* 1:1-2; *Philadelphians* 11:1-2. On prison conditions, see Rapske (1994:195-225, 243-81, 313-67).

Christian society. In 13:13 the author begins speaking of the “camp” – a point to which we will return – but in 13:14 he quickly shifts to speaking about the “city” that does not abide. A transient city is an earthly city, presumably like the city in which his readers live. Therefore, this passage confronts the readers with two alternatives: they can suffer verbal abuse while remaining loyal to Christ and his followers, or they can seek a more secure place in their earthly city by ceasing to follow Christ. Although hope for a place in the city “that is to come” is appealing, the prospect of ongoing friction and verbal harassment in one’s own earthly city is dispiriting. Given these alternatives, some might prefer to relinquish their faith commitments and to conform to the norms of the non-Christian society in the hope of obtaining some visible improvement in their situation, instead of holding on to their distinctive beliefs for the sake of a future that they could not see.

Along with verbal harassment, the community was burdened with the responsibility of continued care for those who were in prison (13:3). Attending to prisoners may have strained the community’s material resources, since guards and local officials could demand bribes in addition to expecting prisoners’ family and friends to support those in custody. Accordingly, those wishing to see prisoner often had to provide payment to the jailer as well as supplying food and other necessities for their friends (Rapske 1994:369-92). Prolonged support for prisoners also burdened morale. Custody could continue for an indefinite period, and delays occurred because of inefficiency, callousness, and the backlog of court cases. The passing of time compounded the discouragement of the prisoners and the caregivers alike. Finally, supporting prisoners had an element of risk. Attending prisoners brought the risk of shame – many ancient writers mentioned prison and disgrace in the same breath – and visits to prisoners threatened to taint the caregivers with guilt by association. Many would have found it easier to stay away to preserve their own safety (Rapske 1994:288-98, 317-20, 388-92).

Some members of the Christian community continued caring for others (6:10; 13:1), but others showed signs of fatigue and indifference. The author warns readers not to “drift,” using a term that implies a gradual, perhaps unnoticed movement away from the faith (2:1). He refers to the problem of “neglecting” the Christian faith and community (2:3; 10:25), and says that his listeners have become “sluggish” (5:11; 6:12). Although the author says that apostasy could be the outcome of these patterns (3:12; 6:4-6; 10:26; 12:16-17), it seems clear that the readers had not actually fallen away, since the author can assume that they still held on to their basic Christian beliefs. For example, he does not try to convince the readers that Jesus died and was exalted to God’s right hand, but assumes that they will grant these points as

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the basis for his argument (1:1-4). Moreover, the exhortations to “hold fast” and not to abandon the Christian hope and confession of faith (3:6; 4:14; 10:23, 35) assume that the readers have not relinquished their beliefs altogether.

Some interpreters have suggested that those addressed by Hebrews were about to leave the Christian community in order to return to Judaism, perhaps because the Jewish community was legally protected and would offer Christians shelter from persecution (Bruce 1990:382). It seems unlikely that legality was a factor, however. Organized groups or *collegia* were supposed to receive legal approval, but in practice they were often allowed to meet without legal recognition as long as they did not seem to present a problem to society (Achte-meier 1996:25-26). Significantly, the author of Hebrews implied that the Christian gathering was declining not because it was suppressed by government officials, but because it was being neglected by the community’s members (10:25). Other interpreters have suggested that the Jewish community would give people a clear sense of identity and well-defined religious practices, so that the author had to warn listeners against seeking shelter in the “camp” of Judaism and its teachings about food (13:9-13; Lindars 1991:4-15; Lane 1991:545-46). Such warnings are general, however, and other passages do not suggest that identifying with a local Jewish community was a major problem. When the author points out the parallels between the wilderness generation and the Christian community, for example, he reproves those who fall away from the company of “those who actually listened” to the good news (4:2), but he does not warn them about the consequences of joining another community. Similarly, he faults Esau – another example of apostasy – because he gave up his blessing for the sake of physical gratification, not because he changed religious communities. More importantly, the imagery in 13:9-13 shifts from speaking of the Israelite “camp” to speak about the “city,” which is the readers’ situation.

The third phase of the community’s history was a discouraging one, and its situation is reflected in the way Hebrews tells the story of Abraham. Earlier we noted that the author speaks of Moses in a manner that fits the situation of his Christian readers, and especially the persecution that broke out during the second phase of their history. When referring to Abraham, however, the author recounts the biblical narrative in a way that mirrors the third phase in the experience of his Christian readers. Where Genesis says that God promised to give Abraham and his descendants a *land* (Gn 12:1; 15:7; 17:8), Hebrews says that God promised Abraham and his descendants a *city* (11:10, 16). Just as Abraham received promises of an inheritance from God (6:13-14; 11:8-9), the listeners now share in this promise and anticipate

receiving their full inheritance from God (1:14; 6:12). Just as Abraham is said to have sought a home in *the city* whose builder and maker is God (11:10, 13-16), the listeners seek a place in *the city* that is to come (13:14).

When Hebrews says that Abraham “resided as an alien” in the land that God had promised him (Heb 11:9), and that he and his family confessed that they were “foreigners and transients on the earth,” who sought a homeland (11:13), the language enables readers to see their own situation reflected in that of Abraham. According to the LXX, Abraham and his family were resident aliens in Egypt (Gn 12:10; 15:13), in Canaan (Gn 17:8), and among foreign peoples (Gn 20:1). When Abraham sought to purchase a burial plot for Sarah, he confessed that he was “a resident alien and a transient” in the land (Gn 23:4). In the Greco-Roman world of those addressed by Hebrews, resident aliens, transients, and foreigners were socially and legally inferior to citizens. They lacked political rights and in many cases were regarded with suspicion and contempt by others in society (Elliott 1990:34-37; Feldmeier 1992:8-22). It seems clear that those addressed by Hebrews were treated with contempt by some non-Christians. Whatever their legal status, the Christians who experienced continued verbal abuse would have felt themselves to be aliens and foreigners in the place where they resided.

Those addressed by Hebrews could respond to this ongoing harassment by “shrinking back” (10:39) from the Christian community in the hope of obtaining a more favorable judgment from non-Christian society. It would be natural to think that if expressing one’s faith in Christ meant losing possessions, it might be better to seek economic security by giving up one’s Christian confession. If associating with Christians meant being treated with contempt by others in society, it might be better to seek more honorable treatment by leaving the Christian community (10:25). In a strange way, the readers seemed to have found that it was easier to remain committed to the Christian community and its confession during the previous incidents of violence than to remain loyal in a time of less intense friction. In the heat of persecution, people were willing to lose honor, possessions, and even freedom rather than compromise their commitments. Over time, however, the situation evidently began to demoralize the group (deSilva 1995:162-63).

5. THE COMMUNITY’S EXPERIENCE AND THE AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

The apparent contradiction between the claims of faith and a dispiriting social situation emerged as a theme in the preceding sketch of life in the community addressed by Hebrews. According to the author’s comments, the readers initially found that faith in the message of salvation, with its hope of an

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inheritance in God's kingdom, was confirmed experientially by miracles and a sense of the Spirit's presence. When conditions grew more difficult during persecution, the community held fast to the hope of a future inheritance, rather than allowing the experience of verbal and physical abuse, dispossession, and imprisonment to pressure them into relinquishing their commitments. Later, the relationship of faith to experience threatened to reverse itself, since ongoing friction with non-Christians and the demands of mutual support within the Christian community evidently moved some to exhibit a diminished commitment to the faith and to neglect the community's gatherings.

Hebrews develops the contrast between the seen and the unseen in order to address the apparent contradiction between experience and faith. A defining moment occurs after the author has spoken of Christ's exaltation to heavenly glory (1:1-14) and quoted Ps 8:4-6, which says that God created humankind to be "crowned with glory and honor" (Heb 2:6-8a). If God's intention is that people receive glory and honor, the obvious objection is that readers do not "see" this realized in their own experience (2:8b), since socially they are treated with contempt, not honor (10:32-34; 13:13). The author's response to the objection, which establishes the direction that the ensuing arguments will take, points the readers to Jesus, who suffered death before being exalted to heavenly glory and honor. If readers believe that Jesus' suffering was followed by exaltation to heavenly glory – and Hebrews presupposes that readers do believe this – then they can be confident that God will also bring others who suffer into the glory that has been promised to them (Koester 2001:83-89).

Readers "see" the exalted Christ and the implications of his work not through the physical eye, but through faith (2:9). Hebrews recalls that Jesus died by crucifixion outside the city gate, and that this kind of death was seen as shameful by society (12:2; 13:13; Hengel 1977:22-63; Kuhn 1982:758-75); but the author also argues that from the perspective of the unseen God, Jesus was worthy of everlasting honor. Therefore, God overturned society's negative judgment by exalting Jesus to heavenly majesty. Interpreting Jesus' death in light of the Scriptures and Jesus' exaltation, the author discloses dimensions of meaning that challenge readers to resist being dominated by what is merely visible. Hebrews contends that Jesus suffered in solidarity with the people of God before he was glorified (2:10-18; 3:1-6), and that he endured affliction before being given the honor of eternal high priesthood (5:5-10). Christ's death and exaltation bring atonement and establish a new covenant, providing access to God and assurance that God will bring people the blessings for which they hope (6:18-20; 10:12-23).

The final chapters of the book make clear that faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the proof of things *not seen*” (11:1). A battery of examples demonstrates the author’s claim. Noah built the ark in the hope of deliverance from flood that was still unseen (11:7). Abraham and his family journeyed toward a homeland that they could “see” by faith, but did not possess during their lifetimes (11:13-16). Moses overcame loss and affliction by trusting a God who could not be seen (11:24-27), just as Jesus endured the cross and despised its shame by fixing his attention on the joy that was set before him at God’s right hand (12:2). The followers of Jesus are called to do the same, by enduring denunciation for the sake of Christ in the confidence that they will receive an inheritance in the city of God that is to come (13:13-14).

The faith of the community addressed by Hebrews was tied to a God and a future that they could not see, while their social experience was shaped by the negative judgments of people whom they could see. The author sought to bolster the readers’ commitment to God, Christ, and the Christian community, but he did not anticipate a return to conditions of community’s founding, when miracles and ecstatic experience seemed to confirm the truth of the message. He assumed that social conflict would continue calling the claims of faith into question, and therefore sought to revitalize the kind of commitment that the readers had shown during the second phase of their community’s history, when they maintained their hope of receiving an inheritance that was not yet visible, rather than abandoning their faith and community in the face of hostility from a society that was all too visible (deSilva 1995:276-89). The community had remained faithful in the past, and it is this kind of dedication that the author calls his readers to exhibit once again by following the way of Christ (13:1-3, 13-16).

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