

Hebrews - General Background

What we don't know about Hebrews:

We don't know who wrote this book. We don't know who it was written to. We don't know when it was written. Possibilities regarding author, recipients and the reason for writing can only be guessed at through analysing the content and characteristics of the book .

What we do know about Hebrews:

Hebrews is written to a group of (probably) Jewish Christians to encourage them to hold fast to their faith. They had successfully and heroically withstood persecution once (Heb. 10:32ff). But now they seem disillusioned with their experience of Christianity. This disillusionment is shown by the fact that some of their group have started to withdraw from meeting with the wider fellowship (Heb. 10:25).

Note that in Semitic culture the avoidance of shame is a powerful social motivator. These Jewish Christians had been publicly shamed by the persecutions they had endured (publically exposed to insult and persecution, imprisoned, property confiscated 10:33-34). They had therefore lost their social position, their good standing within the community. They had become detested and scorned.

These Christians have therefore given up a great deal in order to remain faithful to the cause of Christ - social status, social recognition and appreciation, the reassurance of being part of a tightly knit Jewish community, their place in the synagogue - the centre of Jewish community life, their involvement in the Judaic worship with its spiritually deep and sensory ritual the fruit of several millennia of religious heritage .

In comparison to what they had given up they may feel that they had lost out. Christian worship was a pretty basic affair. No Christian liturgy had been as yet developed. Christians met in ordinary homes or outdoors. Most Christians seem to have been drawn from the lower social classes. Few great scholars or rabbis had embraced the Christian faith. The disciples themselves were for the most part unschooled fishermen. It is St. Paul rather than any of the twelve who is responsible for most of the theological thinking of the N.T.

In this context we can perhaps understand the possible motivation for someone being tempted to turn their back on the Christian Church and return to Judaism;

- to avoid further persecution - thus the attractiveness of a return to Judaism, which in contrast to Christianity was a permitted religion under Roman law.
- to return to a more refined worship experience.
- to regain social acceptance within the Jewish community, with family members, friends, etc.

From the Greek rhetorical style of Hebrews most commentators think it was a written sermon intended to be read out to its recipients.

The Message of Hebrews:

The writer seeks to encourage this group of struggling Christians, firstly by impressing upon them the glorious supremacy of the Christian revelation, the Christian Saviour and the Christian faith.

The writer makes his point by demonstrating the ultimate supremacy of Christ and therefore Christianity over Judaism. But he also takes great pains to try and show how Christ and Christianity are in full harmony with the OT rightly understood. He goes back to the OT time and time again to back up his claims that Christ both fulfils and supersedes the OT Judaic faith.

*«Hebrews is an assurance of the superiority and finality of Christ and is a clear insight into the Christian interpretation of O.T. history and forms of worship ...
it meets the fundamental need of man;
it speaks of a way of approach and a method of worship which is superior to all others,
and which is unaffected by the march of time.»*

[N.T. Introduction, D. Guthrie, IVP, 1965, p728.]

In hammering home the supremacy of Christ the author shows how Christ -

- brings from God a better revelation (1:1-3),
- is better than the angels (1:4-2:18),
- is better than Moses (3:1-3:19),
- is a better high priest (4:14-10:18).

He challenges them that their response to this should be better than that of the men and women of God in the O.T. who responded in faith to the lesser revelation, to lesser leaders, to lesser priests etc.

The examples of the faithful in history is powerfully used to inspire and motivate the present generation of Christians. He brings in the cosmic dimensions of the Universal Christian Church. A Church which is gloriously one. A Church who's essential fellowship is unhindered by geography and unbroken by time. The author of Hebrews wonderfully pictures this by showing our heroic ancestors in God - far from being cut-off from us by death - are still eternally present with us. They, like a crowd in an amphitheatre, are watching us and cheering us on as we struggle to gain the prize, to build the Kingdom of God. The dead in Christ are not therefore spiritually separated from us. They remain spiritually with us. They spectate on the working out of the coming of the kingdom. They wait for our - and their - final union in the glorious body of Christ, at the final and definitive coming of the Kingdom.

The author reminds of them of some particular O.T. heroes of faith. Men and women who were faithful and committed in their response to the lesser O.T. revelation. These O.T. believers suffered intensely and gave whole-of-life commitment in order to be and to remain, faithful to God. Sometimes the outcome of their faithful commitment was glorious victory, sometimes it was crushing defeat.

The author calls upon the Hebrew Christians to follow the example of these O.T. heroes and heroines. He seems to warn them that the coming persecution may be more intense than that which they have already endured and may include martyrdom (Heb. 12:4).

[IMPORTANT NOTE - We must not fall into the trap of reading Hebrews in an Western individualistic manner. The community of the faithful is addressed here. We suffer corporately, we persevere corporately, we will be perfected corporately.]

He motivates them in the light of this coming suffering, by showing them how it is used by God in the discipleship process. He reminds them that, as Christ our Lord had to suffer, so we his disciples will also have to suffer in this life on earth.

Suffering is described as being essential to the process of maturity and growth. In Greek culture all advancement in human life was seen as being the fruit of suffering. Athletes must suffer to get stronger and faster. Students must suffer to get knowledge and understanding. Children must suffer to develop moral standards and good character. The author makes the point that in the spiritual realm things are no different.

Even Christ had to suffer in order to be perfected by it (in his humanity);

in his prayer life - cries, petitions and tears.

in his life of faith and trust towards God.

in his suffering and death (from Heb 5:7-9)

The perfection of Christ's humanity was finally completed in his death and resurrection.

The author's point is that suffering is not an unnatural phenomenon in the Christian life. Rather it is a normal experience in the process of discipleship. It is God's only means of perfecting human persons in their faith and bringing them to spiritual maturity - a maturity expressed in character and commitment.

The author challenges these struggling Jewish Christians to accept the coming suffering, to see it in its positive light as an agent of God in their spiritual growth and to therefore bless it and be transformed by it.

Along with this challenge comes a warning. They are seriously warned of the terrible consequences of giving up and turning away from God. He reminds them of the awesome majesty and splendour of God and that

human beings cannot turn their back on such a God with impunity. He reminds them of Esau who despised the blessing of God of that his birthright represented. Later, when Esau saw reason, he begged with tears for that blessing to be restored. But Esau was refused. He had to live with the terrible consequences of his rejection of God.

The Contemporary Challenge of Hebrews:

Hebrews challenges contemporary Western Christians in the following ways:

1. *To accept the spiritual realities of the unseen world as more real, more powerful and more attractive than the world that can be seen and touched.*
2. *To comprehend the true nature of Christ. Who was fully God and fully man. Who was crucified and exalted. Who as our great high priest sacrificed himself for us in his obedience and death and who thereby obtained for us the possibility of salvation.*
3. *To make a response to Christ of unqualified commitment, unflagging perseverance and the willingness to suffer as a consequence of faith.*
4. *To acknowledge that suffering is God's only strategy for bringing us, like Christ our model, into full spiritual maturity.*

The last of these is particularly difficult for us. Most contemporary western Christian worldviews see suffering as completely negative.

For the "gospel of success" a faith response to Jesus leads to blessing in every area of life. Suffering is therefore a sign of ignorance (a failure to understand the promises of the new covenant) or of failed faith (insufficient faith to 'believe' in order to appropriate the promises of the new covenant).

For the "social gospel" Christians are called to engage in the transformation of their society in order that suffering might be removed from the lives of everyone. Suffering's continued presence is therefore again perceived as a sign of failure (a failure to understand or engage in our Christian duty of social action against injustice), or an incomplete accomplishment of that task.

Hebrews confronts these views head-on and hammers home that suffering is an essential and continual factor in the Christian experience -

"It is the sound of the human spirit opening itself to the presence and power of God.

It is the very path by which humans become transformed, as was Jesus, into fully mature children of God."

[Hebrews, Luke Timothy Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p60]

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