

## CHAPTER 2

### RHETORICAL SITUATION OF THE READERS

In general, to discover the situation of the readers from the letter sent to them is not an easy task. We must use the text written by the author as a mirror reflecting the situation of the readers. As Barclay (1987, 74) points out, "such mirror-reading is both essential and extremely problematic." It is essential because we have no other independent source for the situation of the readers. But it is problematic<sup>1</sup> in the sense that we are liable to misinterpret because we make inference from indirect information. This problem becomes particularly serious when "we have an idea fixed in our minds" (Barclay 1987, 74).

As we might expect, there are diverse opinions about the situation of the readers of Hebrews. Going into its detail is beyond the scope of this chapter. Furthermore, the following verdict of Vorster seems to be true: "It is impossible to say with certainty who the readers were for whom the writer originally intended his document" (1993, 84). Maybe the only thing we can be sure of about the readers is the fact that they were already Christians (3:1-6; 6:4-9; 10:19-31; most explicitly 12:23-24). Instead of trying to achieve a detailed reconstruction of the situation, we proceed with caution and

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of both the problems related to mirror-reading and possible solutions suggested, see Barclay (1987, 73-93).

just want to highlight a few aspects of the readers' situation which forced the author of Hebrews to respond the way he did in Hebrews.

First, there may have been an internal cause for the crisis of the readers. The readers may have become morally lethargic as time passed, perhaps due to the delay of the parousia. In other words, they may have lost the initial enthusiasm of their Christian commitment. Schnackenburg takes the problem of the readers as "the decay of the spirit of faith, piety and moral endurance" (1965, 372). Recently, Schmidt also comments that "the stress on obedience in the epistle requires that we consider seriously whether the author has moral lethargy in view as he writes" (1992, 169).<sup>2</sup>

For example, in 3:7-4:13 the problem is "a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (3:12). The readers must not be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (3:13). Sin is defined by unbelief (3:19; 4:2) which is thought to be equivalent to disobedience (3:18; 4:6, 11).

Also in 5:11-6:12<sup>3</sup> the author is mainly concerned with the readers' maturity which makes them able to distinguish good from evil (5:14). They need to be righteous (5:13). As land

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. D. G. Peterson who comments: "The writer of Hebrews was seeking to deal with a problem of spiritual lethargy on the part of his readers, involving loss of zeal, lack of confidence and faltering hope." But he thinks that the fundamental problem is "an inadequate grasp of the person and work of Christ." Thus his emphasis is on progress in understanding rather than on progress in obedience (1982, 186; cf. 1976, 14-21); also McKnight who says that "the readers were not at all being tempted to return to Judaism; rather, they were apostatizing into moral apathy and irresponsibility" (1992, 41). The first part of this statement is overstated, as we will see later.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. G. Peterson (1976, 14-21).

must produce a crop, not thorns and thistles (6:7-8), so also the readers must produce a crop of work and love in helping the saints (6:9-12; cf. a harvest of righteousness and peace in 12:11). They have done this in the past (6:10; cf. 10:32-34) and must continue to do so until the very end (13:1-5, 16). Then they will be a part of those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised (6:12; cf. the obedient men of faith in chap. 11 and Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who himself was perfected by obedience: 2:10; 5:7-10; 10:5-10; 12:2).

In 10:19-31 drawing near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (10:22) needs to be expressed through spurring one another on toward love and good deeds (10:24). If they deliberately keep on sinning instead of showing love and good works, they must expect God's fearful judgment.

In 10:32-13:17 (even in 13:18-25) we see our author's similar emphasis on obedient acts through faith. In many ways the readers are exhorted to express and continue to express their faith through obedient, faithful actions. A lifestyle marked by righteousness, peace, holiness, thanksgiving, praise, good works and sharing is the goal the readers need to pursue.

Second, there may have been external causes for a crisis among the readers. One cause seems to be the suffering and persecution they must undergo as Christians. Because of this hardship in following Christ, they may have lost their initial enthusiasm and become lax in their commitment to Christ. It

seems fairly certain that the readers<sup>4</sup> are members of a specific local community which has its own history (cf. 5:12; 6:10; 10:32-34). Especially 10:32-34 mentions their endurance of persecution in the earlier days. They seem to be undergoing similar persecution (13:3) and anticipate further persecution which may cost them their lives this time (12:4).

The reference to the need of "endurance" (*ὑπομονή*) in 10:36, immediately following the reference to their former endurance (*ὑπομένω*) in 10:32, may not necessarily imply that the readers are currently experiencing persecution. As Schmidt points out, "it may also imply the state of obedience itself which grows out of hardship (Rom 5:3; Jas 1:3) or exists without reference to hardship (Luke 8:15; Rom 2:7; 8:25; 15:4-5)" (1992, 168). Also the exhortation not to grow weary and lose heart (12:3) "may be taken as preventative" as well as "corrective" (Schmidt 1992, 168). Also the reference to "not resisting to the point of shedding blood" in 12:4 "may simply refer to their earlier trials (10:32-34), which did not involve bloodshed, and imply nothing at all about their current experience of persecution" (Schmidt 1992, 168).

But as we will see later in the detailed analysis, suffering and persecution are not only limited to the past or simply anticipated in the future, but also mold their current lifestyle. As Attridge comments, "part of the background to

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<sup>4</sup> For helpful surveys about other introductory problems such as the author, the date, the destination and the background of thought, see Kümmel (1975, 389-403); Attridge (1989, 1-32); D. Guthrie (1990, 668-721); Lane (1991a, xlvii-clv); Carson (1992b, 391-407); Ellingworth (1993, 3-85). It is well known that no definite answer can be given to these problems.

Hebrews is certainly a situation of some sort of social conflict" (1990, 219-20). He further comments: "A major aim of Hebrews is to strengthen a community of believers in Christ in the face of opposition" (1992, 100).<sup>5</sup> If the readers do not accept suffering and persecution as an inherent part of their pilgrimage, they will grow weary and lose heart and eventually give up following Christ.

Third, it may be that the readers are tempted to go back to Judaism. It is well expected that just mentioning Judaism may invite a controversy because some argue for Gentile or mainly Gentile Christians<sup>6</sup> and others remain undecided.<sup>7</sup>

The main arguments for Gentile or mainly Gentile Christians are as follows:

1) The prevalent OT ideas in Hebrews cannot be used as a proof for Jewish Christian readers because the OT was very early accepted as the Bible of the church. As an example, Kümmel mentions Galatians where Paul uses "difficult scriptural proofs to simple Gentile Christians" (1975, 400). Furthermore,

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<sup>5</sup> But when Attridge (1992, 100) characterizes Hebrews as "the first exhortation to martyrdom," he goes beyond the evidence. The author may have thought that even martyrdom could be the fate of the readers, but he never exhorted them to martyrdom.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Moffatt (1924, xvi); Kümmel (1975, 399-400) who comments that "much more probable is the proposal ... that the readers were predominantly Gentile Christians or simply Christians"; Braun (1984, 2); Weiß (1991, 70-72); cf. Ladd who comments that the readers could be Gentiles if they are "former Jewish proselytes who would be very familiar with the Old Testament" (1974, 572).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Hughes (1979, 2-3, 25-28, 54); Borchert (1985, 325-27); Gräßer (1990, 24); Attridge (1988, 89; 1989, 10-11); Vorster (1993, 84-85); cf. Ellingworth (1993, 22-27) who argues for a mixed community.

the writer deals with OT ritual rather than Jewish cultic practices.

2) If the readers were Jews, the author would not have mentioned "the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment" (6:1-2), which are "the fundamental articles of the Gentile missionary preaching" (Kümmel 1975, 400).

3) Both the reference to the necessity of believing that God exists in 11:6 and the warning against "turning away from the living God" in 3:12 also point to the Gentile Christian readers.

4) We can find no trace of the Jewish-Gentile controversy. Except a few ambiguous references (e.g., 13:9, 13<sup>8</sup>) there seems to be no passage of explicitly polemical character.

As we can easily see, these arguments for Gentile Christian readers do not necessarily imply that the readers must be Gentile Christians, but rather suggest that the readers could be such Christians.

When considering the primacy of paraenesis in Hebrews and lack of polemics (except few ambiguous ones), the purpose of Hebrews may be understood as rekindling the faith of the readers which became lethargic and encouraging faithfulness in the face of suffering and persecution, regardless of whether the readers are Jewish Christians or not. But as we will see below, if we consider the readers as Jewish Christians, "the

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed exegesis of these passages, see section 5 of chapter 5.



method of argument and general aim of the epistle" (D. Guthrie 1990, 687) can be better accounted for.

The following arguments for Jewish Christian readers do not necessarily either imply that the readers must be Jewish Christians or exclude that the readers could be Gentile Christians. Rather they illustrate that the points at which the writer was driving could have been felt and understood more easily and powerfully if the readers were Jewish Christians.<sup>9</sup>

Even though the title, "To the Hebrews,"<sup>10</sup> is not original and could simply be the early readers' estimate on Hebrews, it "expressed at least the common belief at an early period concerning the destination" (D. Guthrie 1990, 683).

Although it is true that there is no trace of Jewish-

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<sup>9</sup> For the views favoring Jewish Christian destination, see D. Guthrie (1990, 684-85); Caird (1966, 90); Oudersluys (1975, 149); Helyer (1976, 3); Spicq (1978, 183); Rayburn (1989, 1125); Bruce (1990, 8-9); Lane (1985, 16-18; 1991a, liv); Johnsson (1979, 15-17), who favors Jewish Christians as the readers, but with some room for doubt; R. Brown (1985, 28); Mugridge's comment that the readers are "presumably Jewish" (1987, 80); Hagner (1990, 1-6); Ellingworth, who says that "Hebrews was primarily addressed to Jewish Christians" (1991, xi); Isaacs (1992, 67), who thinks that Hebrews are written to reinterpret "Judaism's established means of access to God" after the destruction of the Temple; Lindars (1991a, 4, 14-15, 17-19; 1991b, 415), who thinks that the readers are "Hellenistic Jews, probably in the Diaspora"; similarly, Dunnill (1992, 22-29), who specifies the readers as "a series of small churches of predominantly Jewish Christians, most probably in Western Asia Minor"; cf. Dahms, who agrees that the readers were Jews but thinks that "they were in danger, not of lapsing into Judaism, nor of merely being slack in their Christian devotion, but of embracing a version of Christianity characterized by serious error" (1977, 365).

<sup>10</sup> Rayburn points out that "'To the Hebrews' is the only title the letter has ever had" (1989, 1125); also Ellingworth (1993, 21).

Christian controversy<sup>11</sup> and Christ is compared to what is represented by the Old Testament tabernacle rather than by the Jewish temple, the heavy use of the Old Testament and "the manner of scriptural proof ... which presupposes precise knowledge of Jewish view and concepts" (Kümmel 1975, 398) seem to favor a Jewish Christian destination.

Much of the first and central part of the epistle (1:1-10:31) may be considered to be devoted to the argument against the tendency of the readers towards the cult established by the Old Testament law. All the painstakingly argued comparisons<sup>12</sup> either between Jesus and other figures who were associated with the establishment of the old covenant and its community, that is, Israel (angels, Moses, Joshua) or between the old covenant and new covenant (7:11-12, 18-19, 28; 8:3-13; 9:8-15; 10:1-4, 11-18) may have their full impact when we assume the readers'

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<sup>11</sup> As D. Guthrie argues, it is more likely that "this omission of the controversy would, on the whole, favour Jewish Christians rather than Gentiles, since it was for the latter that the controversy was acute" (1990, 686).

<sup>12</sup> This comparison is expressed by the use of the term "better" (*κρείττων*) which occurs in 1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6 (twice); 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24. In addition, there are other terms which continue the theme of comparison - *διαφορώτερος* (1:4; 8:6), *ἐλαττώ* (2:7, 9), *μᾶλλον* (9:14; 12:25), *μείζων* (9:11), *περισσοτέρως* (2:1), *πλείων* (3:3 - twice), *τελειότερος* (9:11), *ὑψηλότερος* (7:26), *χείρων* (10:29). The last example in 10:29 makes clear that "because what God has done through Christ is better than what he did in Old Testament times, we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard (2:1)" (Fenton 1982, 176-77); cf. Evans who comments that "the method of *synkrisis* [comparison] was one factor, and perhaps the dominant one, in the ordering of its material and the prosecution of its argument" (1988, 11). He continues that these comparative statements may "have point as countering what the author considered to be error" and that "this is a proper, indeed necessary, approach in default of any solid evidence from outside the text, though it is also a hazardous one" (1988, 11).



inclination to Judaism. The dire warnings (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13, 6:4-8, 10:26-31, 12:14-17, 25-29; 13:9-13)<sup>13</sup> may also be easily understood from this point of view. The third part of Hebrews (10:32-13:17,<sup>14</sup> especially, 10:35-39; 12:14-29; 13:9-14) seems to continue this argument.<sup>15</sup> While he emphasizes Christ and what he has done (12:2-3, 24; 13:8, 12-13), it seems that our author continues to have his concern about possible apostasy.

It is true that throughout the epistle the author was not overtly either apologetic or polemic, but rather focused on the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice. Nevertheless the pervasiveness of the comparison or even the contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant and seemingly confessional statements like 8:1 (cf. 4:14); 10:10 may not be easily explained without reference to the readers' inclination towards Judaism (especially its cultic provision).<sup>16</sup> The passionate plea of the author in 13:13, which is the climax of 13:9-13, makes explicit that the readers must go out to Jesus, but at the same time it seems to implore with metaphoric, even

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<sup>13</sup> Note the trend of trying to understand these warning passages, as "not unrelated texts . . . , but as an organic whole" (McKnight 1992, 22-23); also Carlston (1959, 296).

<sup>14</sup> This division will be argued for in the next chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Woods (1972, 140-48) who surveys four eschatological motifs (the sabbath rest, the heavenly sanctuary, the new Jerusalem and the invincible kingdom) and comments that the author of Hebrews stresses the fact that the Jews' cherished realities of the sabbath, the sanctuary, Jerusalem, and Israel as God's kingdom are fully realized in Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> Note that "when the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the old covenant, he is referring, not to a book, but to one aspect of its contents" (Ellingworth 1991, x). In other words, only cultic regulations in the Old Testament belong to the old order (cf. 7:18; 8:13; 9:10).

ironic language that the readers must abandon their inner inclination towards Judaism.

Above all, the readers' Jewish presuppositions may be specifically exposed by the three contrary-to-fact conditional statements in 7:11; 8:7; 10:1-2. In these statements we may delve into the readers' mind and see their inner inclination to think that perfection can be achieved by sacrifices through the Levitical priesthood which was instituted by the Old Testament law.<sup>17</sup> It is probable that our author painstakingly tries to expose the falsity of that assumption and argues that such an assumption makes Christ's work superfluous.

Although internal moral lethargy and external persecution and suffering are contributing factors in the crisis of the readers, another deep-seated, fundamental problem seems to be that their thought process is still steeped in the Jewish way of thinking which they learned from their former belief of Judaism. Therefore it is probable that our author wants the readers to resist the temptation to return to Judaism<sup>18</sup> and to

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning the question in 7:11 ("If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood . . . , why was there still need for another priest to come?") Bruce comments: "Had he been addressing Gentiles, their natural response to the conditional clause would have been, 'We never thought that perfection was attainable through the levitical priesthood!'" (1987, 3503).

<sup>18</sup> For the view that the readers are tempted to return to Judaism, see Moule (1950, 38-39), who argues that Hebrews is "a fine example of the line of apologetic"; J. E. Jones (1955, 517-20); Tongue (1960, 19-27); D. Guthrie (1990, 688-92); Nixon (1963, 25-27); Williamson (1964, 108); Woods (1972, 140-48); Ladd (1974, 571-72); Helyer (1976, 3); Spicq (1978, 184); Hagner (1981, 221-22; 1990, 11); Toussaint (1982, 68, 80); Marty (1984, 225); Perkins (1985, 69); Laws (1989, 332-34); Lindars, who finds the reason for returning to Judaism in the desire "to heal their troubled consciences" which "come from the accumulation of post-baptismal sins . . . in Jewish

persevere in their Christian life of pilgrimage.

It is true that the word "to apostatize" (ἀφίστημι) occurs only once in 3:12. But once we see the tendency of the readers towards Judaism, we may notice many references which may be related to apostasy (although they are not explicit references to apostasy and thus are subject to different interpretations<sup>19</sup>). And the argument that the phrase "turning away from the living God" (3:12) is only appropriate for the Gentile Christians does not carry much weight "since the epistle presents all apostasy as an abandonment of the living God" (D. Guthrie 1990, 686). Similarly, Hagner (1990, 3) comments:

... given our understanding of the author's larger argument, to turn away from the fulfillment brought in Christ is indeed so grievous that, even for Jewish readers, it would be to "turn away from the living God."

The argument for Gentile Christian destination from 6:1-2 also does not provide any conclusive evidence about the readers. As mentioned above, Kümmel comments that the

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purification rites" (1991a, 26, 59; 1991b, 410-33); Chester (1991, 58-59); Dunn (1991, 87, 91); Gordon (1991, 434-49); Carson (1992b, 402-404); Ellingworth (1993, 78-80).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lane who argues that "in the paraenesis there is no differentiation or separation from Judaism" (1991a, cxxvii). He explains away (1991a, cxxv-cxxxv) the presence of comparison (even contrast) between the old and new covenants and the dire warnings and urgent pleas by saying that all those complex arguments are presented simply to underscore the decisiveness of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus and greater responsibility accompanying it; Attridge (1990, 223) also dismisses the anti-traditional elements by saying that "Hebrews cleverly plays with inherited symbols and images" simply to exhort the readers "to accept willingly and to use creatively a marginalized social status." Here, however, we suggest that the author tries to fight against the readers' inclination to Judaism as well as their moral lethargy and the possible compromise in their faith to evade persecution.

foundation in 6:1-2 represents "the fundamental articles of the Gentile missionary preaching" (1975, 400). Specifically, the phrase "faith in God" (πίστις ἐπὶ θεόν) in 6:1 (cf. 11:6) is considered to be unintelligible if the readers were Jewish Christians because it is thought that Jews already have faith in God.

First of all, it is not at all clear whether Kümmel's comment is true. In view of the lack of any distinctively Christian element it is suggested that the list of the elementary teachings in 6:1-2 "was at least inspired by, and is, in fact, a catalogue of Jewish catechesis" (Attridge 1989, 163) although it is perfectly compatible with Christian doctrines. This fact may or may not support Kümmel's comment. Attridge mentions a view asserting that "the doctrines alluded to here [6:1-2] could also be appropriate in the context of a mission to Jews" (1989, 164). Specifically, "faith in God" was "a part of Jewish calls to repentance"<sup>20</sup> (Attridge 1989, 164).

Furthermore, the context in which these elementary teachings in 6:1-2 are given is that the readers are exhorted to go beyond these teachings unto maturity. When the author says, "let us leave the elementary teachings," his intention is not to dismiss them but to urge the readers to build on and go beyond those elementary teachings. In that context, these elementary teachings may rather imply "the Jewish antecedents of the readers" (Bruce 1990, 6).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Isa 7:9; Hab 2:4; Wis 12:12.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hagner (1990, 87) who suggests that the readers may have been "attempting somehow to remain within Judaism by emphasizing items held in common between Judaism and

It is obvious that these arguments given above do not make it absolutely necessary to conclude that the readers are Jewish Christians and to exclude the possibility of Gentile Christian destination. However, it seems that this hypothesis of Jewish Christian destination is "more successful in accounting for the phenomena of the book as a whole" (Hagner 1990, 3).

A date of composition may be related to the above explanation, but the date of Hebrews is another area where we cannot reach any consensus. We cannot pinpoint the date, but at least we may make a good case for a date before CE 70.<sup>22</sup> It seems that the absence of a reference to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem argues against a date after CE 70 because that event would have provided a conclusive support to the author's argument (cf. 7:11, 18-19; 8:13; 9:9-10, 25; 10:1-2, 11).<sup>23</sup> But we acknowledge that this is just an argument from silence and that "there was no pressing need for him to refer to them [events surrounding the destruction of the temple]" (Vorster 1993, 85) because the author describes OT cultus rather than temple ritual.

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Christianity."

<sup>22</sup> Moule (1950, 37); J. A. T. Robinson (1976, 200, 206); P. E. Hughes (1977, 30-32); Laws (1989, 329); Hagner (1981, 223; 1990, 7-8); Bruce (1990, 22); Lindars (1991a, 19-21); Lane (1991a, lxii-lxv); Carson (1992b, 398-400); Ellingworth (1993, 29-33).

<sup>23</sup> Montefiore says that "the best argument for the supersession of the old covenant would have been the destruction of the Temple" (1964, 3); Also Spicq comments: "It is hardly conceivable that the Temple had already been destroyed, for our author, who insists so much on the provisional character of the old Covenant and on the outdated value of its worship, would have been only too happy to exploit the extinction of Jerusalem's liturgy" (1978, 183); similarly, Lindars (1989, 402-403).

As we have seen above, it is fairly probable that the readers were Jewish Christians. If we assume that the author wrote Hebrews before CE 70, the following comment of Longenecker makes a lot of sense, although his restriction ("only") may be an overstatement (1975, 162):

Only on the supposition that the sacrificial worship of the Jerusalem temple still existed as the heart of the nation's life and an intact Judaism continued to offer a live option for the author's readers does the letter become historically intelligible.

On the whole, the emphasis of Hebrews is positively on the need of perseverance to reach the ultimate goal of the pilgrimage,<sup>24</sup> but it seems that the inescapable corollary to perseverance is not to fall into apostasy. If the readers are, as we argued above, Jews who entertain the thought that perfection is possible through the old covenant cultic provisions and they are under persecution and become morally lethargic for whatever reason,<sup>25</sup> then apostasy to Judaism is a real possibility.

Before going into a detailed analysis of Heb 10:32-13:17 we are going to look at the macrostructure of Hebrews and try to validate the reason why this passage is selected for our analysis.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. D. Guthrie who says that "the warning passages say nothing about apostasy to Judaism, but only apostasy away from Christianity" (1983, 33); Attridge who comments: "It is not what they are drawn to but what they might give up that concerns our author" (1989, 369).

<sup>25</sup> For example, Gräßer (1965, 190) argues that because of the delay of parousia the readers are exhorted to have "faithfulness" rather than "faith in Christ" (based on a late date of composition for Hebrews). Similarly see Arowele (1990, 447) who takes "disillusionment among the members at the non-realization of the parousia expectations" as "the root of the crisis."