

Chapter 4 – The Context of the Letter to the Hebrews

The first questions we should ask when approaching any of the biblical books are “who wrote this?”, “who was the author addressing?” and then “why did the author write this?” These are the questions we will address in this chapter. Putting this another way, we will look at the book’s historical context and then its literary context.¹

Hebrews is, undeniably, a difficult book. The writer talks about angels and describes the tabernacle; he discusses Melchizedek and Abraham’s loins; he writes about sacrificial blood and hyssop branches; he describes a cloud of witnesses and the mountain of fire and smoke; he says that God disciplines us as His sons and tells us we should submit to our church leaders. In addition, the letter contains some of the most severe warnings to be found in the New Testament, and yet great minds have been unable to agree on what they mean or to whom they apply.

The difficulties encountered in this book stem from two principal issues. The first concerns its Old Testament context. The letter was written to Jewish Christians who knew their scriptures well, and throughout virtually the whole letter, the argument depends upon either direct or indirect references to the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. If we are not as conscious as the original readers were of those references, we can mistake the meaning and significance of the argument.

The second issue concerns the original recipients themselves. It is commonly stated that the letter was written to Jewish Christians under severe persecution who were tempted to avoid suffering by rejecting Christ and returning to the non-Christian Jewish fold. The evidence of the letter itself is, in my opinion, strongly against this. I can find no hint of present persecution and no suggestion that the readers were tempted to return to Judaism. These common assumptions distort the interpretation of the text and lead to unnecessary difficulties. My conclusion is that throughout the letter the author addresses Jewish Christian believers whom he wishes to encourage to move on to inherit all God’s promises. I state this now so that you can be especially sensitive to this question in your own study.

The Historical Context of Hebrews

There is no direct evidence to tell us the author, recipients or date of composition of the letter to the Hebrews. We have some indirect evidence to help us make some intelligent guesses. Mostly this is contained within the letter but there is some external evidence as well. We know, for instance, that it was written prior to AD95 because Clement of Rome quotes it around that date. Also we know some things about what was going on in Jerusalem, Rome and other major cities during the first century. This allows us to try and match evidence in the letter with known historical events. Also, scholars tell us, the letter is written in excellent Greek. In addition, the OT quotes are taken from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, which was used by Jews outside Palestine (Palestinian Jews mostly used a Hebrew text). So, we can suggest that the author grew up outside Palestine.

Looking for evidence for historical context

Let us do our own research. Having read through the letter a few times, what clues can we find to help us make an educated guess about the author, the recipients and the date? Have a go and see what you notice. Remember to ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

This is what I have found.

The book starts out like a sermon (there are no introductory greetings etc. that introduce the proper NT letters), but ends like a letter (from 13:1 to the end). The sermon contains much encouragement

¹ In exegesis, *literary context* refers to the context within the bible, not within other historical literature. So it includes its place in the whole revelation of Scripture, and the themes that are found in the book one is studying.

to heed the message preached to them in the past, to persevere, to exercise strong faith, to inherit the promises... The recipients presumably needed such a message!

The first clue about the author is found in 2:3 "... confirmed to us by those who heard Him" tells us that the author did not himself hear Christ.² This would seem to rule out any of the *twelve*, or Paul, who consistently claims to have received his Gospel directly from Christ (Gal 1:12, 1 Cor 9:1).

The lengthy discussions of Jewish worship provides plenty of reason to suggest that the author was Jewish and the recipients were predominantly Jews (NB. The title of the letter "Hebrews" was given at a later date, because of this evidence. The letter itself bears no title at all). Nevertheless, the recipients were clearly true believers in Christ as the promised Messiah. This is indicated in the opening verse of chapter 3 (holy brethren...) the opening of chapter 6 (... go on to maturity) and many references in chapter 10 and 13.

There are several indications that the recipients are a well-established group with leaders that have been around for a while. In 5:12 they are told "by this time you ought to be teachers". In 6:12 and 13:7 they are told to follow the example of their leaders, considering the *outcome* of their faith/conduct. And in 6:10 they are commended for ministering to the saints. In 10: 32-34 their former suffering is recalled.

The redundancy of the sacrificial system is being strongly argued (8:13), yet there is no reference to the destruction of the temple. If this were written after that destruction, we would expect the author to use the destruction of the temple to illustrate and strengthen his argument. The absence of any such reference suggests a date prior to this event in AD 70.³

There seems to be an inclination for the believers not to meet together regularly (10:25). The recipients seem to be in a sizeable community of believers where other leaders in the area have authority over their group (13:7,17,24). Perhaps the letter is intended for distribution around small house churches or groups of believers in the synagogues in an area.

There are a couple of references to persecution. First, in 10:32-34 we learn that the recipients had (some years?) previously endured great struggles and suffering with some being imprisoned. Then in 13:3 they are exhorted to remember the prisoners. This suggests they are no longer facing serious persecution in their locality, but that persecution is continuing elsewhere. 10:36ff and 12:4 may suggest that more severe persecution is anticipated in the near future and that this might be the reason for the letter.

There may be a suggestion of Gnostic or some other heretical influence in 13:9.

The author knew his recipients and had been among them, but was now unable to be with them as he wished (13:19). He seems to have a place of authority amongst them (13:22). He was a companion of Timothy (and therefore almost certainly of Paul) and was writing shortly after Timothy had been set free. The author does not seem to be imprisoned since he says he will travel back to them with Timothy (13:23).

There is some connection with Italy. Perhaps he is in exile with a number of other exiled Italian believers (13:24) – it doesn't sound like he's writing from Italy (also believers in Italy had been martyred in AD 64, contrast with 12:4). Claudius expelled Jews, including Priscilla and Aquilla, from Rome in AD40 (Acts 18:2). Perhaps he was one of this group.

² Some commentators suggest that in writing this, the author is simply identifying himself with his readers, who had not heard from Christ directly. That is possible, but it is usual for the apostles to say that they are passing on what they heard from Christ. See for example 1 Cor 11:23 and 1 John 1:1-4.

³ This is an example of arguing from silence where we have strong reasons to expect something that is missing.

Matching the evidence with historical events

We now want to try to match this internal evidence with known historical events. If we look at the table of events in Chapter 3, we can suggest a date after AD 63 when Paul and Timothy went to Rome and before AD 70 when the temple was destroyed. We don't know anything about Timothy's imprisonment, but perhaps he was released when Paul died in AD 67. Around this time things were hotting up for believers in Jerusalem; there was mounting pressure upon the Jewish religious leaders to expel the *Nazarenes*⁴ from the synagogues. The *Nazarenes* had already been excluded from the synagogues in Rome following the great fire of AD 64. The mounting pressure for exclusion from both Rome and Jerusalem was no doubt felt in synagogues across the whole region. In the light of this we can suggest a date close to AD67 and a context of increasing pressure to eject the *Nazarenes* from the synagogues.

Who were the leaders?

Some of the references to leaders seem a little strange to me. The leaders sound a bit remote - not an integral part of the groups(s) being addressed. They are never addressed directly, but the readers are exhorted to "remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you" (13:7), and "greet all your leaders and all God's people". Perhaps there is nothing in this, but it suggests to me that the recipients are small groups with a citywide leadership. Perhaps they have been meeting in their groups but not with the wider body of believers (10:25). Since there is such a strong and detailed argument through the letter against the continuation of the Old Covenant, with many OT quotes, I wonder if these believers were still part of the Jewish synagogue system. In that case they would have had synagogue leaders (who may not be believers), but also citywide believing leaders who would encourage the witness of the believers within their various synagogues. This scenario seems to fit the letter well. The fact that this letter is so full of arguments from OT scripture suggests to me a Jewish synagogue audience. A church that had been established outside the Jewish faith would hardly need such lengthy and detailed arguments about Jewish ritual. Paul, writing to gentile congregations, touches on OT scriptures occasionally, but never in a comparable way. Where Paul confronts Judaism he is almost entirely concerned with legalism, whereas Hebrews is much more focused on the supremacy of Christ and the call to leave the Jewish religious order behind and press on.

The Nazarenes

At this point in my studies I wanted to find out more about the *Nazarenes* to see if my feelings that the letter could have been addressed to them had support. I turned to F. F. Bruce "The Spreading Flame" which is a mine of fascinating early church history. Here, I learnt that Jewish believers did indeed continue as part of their local synagogue, and were known as *Nazarenes* (most likely because Jesus was called "Jesus the Nazarene")⁵. Luke tells us that believers met together in the temple and in their homes and were much in favour with the people (Acts 2:46). There was some opposition, but also accommodation (Acts 5:17-42). Trouble arose because the synagogues would not admit Greek believers and they were never properly absorbed into the Jerusalem church. Soon the Greek believers along with some Jewish believers were expelled from Jerusalem by the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 11:19f) leaving an almost exclusively Jewish church in Jerusalem.⁶ During Paul's missionary journeys he very quickly concluded that forming new communities of believers was preferable to nurturing believers within Jewish synagogues, especially as the majority of converts were gentiles. However, we know from Paul's letters that there were also many Jewish evangelists (including Peter) who preached the gospel to Jewish

⁴ Jewish believers in Christ were known as *Nazarenes* since they followed the Jesus the Nazarene.

⁵ F. F. Bruce "The Spreading Flame", p70

⁶ F. F. Bruce p75.

communities throughout the whole region, some of whom tried to get the gentile believers to return to Jewish observance. Meanwhile the Nazarenes grew under James' leadership until, at the time of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem in AD 57, there were "many thousands" who believed, all of them "zealous for the Law" (Acts 21:20).

Around this time, James wrote from Jerusalem to encourage faith amongst the Jewish communities abroad (James 1:1). James was highly respected amongst all the Jews in Jerusalem, not just among the believers⁷. He was known as "James the Just"⁸. As such, he could expect his letter to be read in the synagogues abroad where, as in Jerusalem, Nazarenes formed a group within the synagogue of unbelieving Jews. Much of his letter is addressed to believers, but the first parts of chapters 4 and 5 seem to be addressed to unbelieving Jews. Therefore it seems likely, considering the content of Hebrews, that this letter also was written to the Jewish synagogues abroad.

Bruce writes:

The death of James must have been a devastating blow for the community that he led, and many of them, particularly those who were zealots for the Law, must have begun to wonder whether, after all, they were right in espousing a cause that was widening the breach between themselves and their fellow Jews. Jesus ... had been gone a long time; there was no sign of His return ... The temple, whose downfall He had predicted, still stood as stable as ever. ... In other cities too, there were Jewish Christians who were tempted by the deferment of their hopes and the heat of persecution to turn back to the fold that they had left, instead of pressing on with Christ.⁹

F. F. Bruce thinks the letter to the Hebrews was written to these Jewish believers. Of course we cannot be certain, but it seems a good place to start as a possible historical context for our exegesis.

Religious context

One of the things that strikes me about the letter is the emphasis that is given to "the promises" but the relative lack of explanation as to what these promises were. The implication is that familiarity with these promises could be assumed by the author. What would these promises have been? We know from Hebrews 6 that the foundational promises were those given by God to Abraham, and from chapter 10 that the New Covenant promises were also in view. However, the frequent references to the Mosaic covenant suggests we look also at the Mosaic promises. We find these summarised for us in Deuteronomy 30. Here Moses sets out the promises of blessing on those who return to the Lord after the exile that Moses has prophesied (28:63-66, 29:28). These restoration promises are for the people to be gathered from the nations amongst whom they have been scattered and to repurchase their land, their hearts will be circumcised, they will prosper in their labours and in their child-bearing, live long lives and the curses will fall on their enemies. Although there was a partial return of exiles to Jerusalem and the temple and city walls were rebuilt, the Jews never regained their freedom from control by a foreign power. Control passed from the Babylonians to the Medes, to the Persians, to the Greeks and finally, by New Testament times, to the Romans. Despite this, the promises were not forgotten, and the continued oppression of the nation were interpreted as resulting from their continued unfaithfulness. For example, during the terrible persecution under the Greeks, the following was recorded, "Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. In fact, not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately, is a sign of great kindness. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish

⁷ However, the Sanhedrin opposed him because of fear that the Nazarene movement, so full of zealots, would foment revolt against the Romans with whom the Sanhedrin were allied. In AD 61 they killed him. His cousin Simeon took his place at the head of the Nazarenes. F. F. Bruce p150.

⁸ F. F. Bruce p150.

⁹ F. F. Bruce p152.

them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people” (2 Maccabees 6:12). Faithful Jews did not doubt God’s promises of restoration that they read in then Law, for instance, in 2 Maccabees 2:10 we read “It is God who has saved all his people, and has returned the inheritance to all, and the kingship and priesthood and consecration, as he promised through the law. For we have hope in God that he will soon have mercy upon us and will gather us from everywhere under heaven into his holy place, for he has rescued us from great evils and has purified the place.”

Summary of historical context

So to summarise our observations, assuming Nazarenes at Jewish synagogues in some foreign city as the recipients, we can suggest:

The author was a Greek speaking Nazarene, writing to encourage Nazarene congregations in a city outside Jerusalem to remain faithful to the Gospel, leave the Old Covenant behind and to make real progress in their faith. As friction between the orthodox Jews and Nazarenes increased, they were to press on, imitating the faith of both their present leaders, and the saints of old, rather than sit quietly and keep out of trouble. They were encouraged to meet regularly with their citywide leadership to receive encouragement and teaching, and to use the letter in their witness to their fellow Jews.

The literary context of Hebrews – its theme.

We now move on to consider the purpose and content of the letter, looking first at its overall theme and then at its structure.

Overall Theme

It seems that every commentary and teacher has a different opinion as to the central theme or purpose of the letter to the Hebrews. I have studied the letter many times over the years and each time come up with a different theme! It is not that the letter is particularly complex, but that several related themes run through it. It is very easy to see only what you are looking for. When I think it is about faith I notice all the verses about faith, when I think it is about the New Covenant replacing the Law I notice all the relevant verses.

What we think the book is about will affect how we interpret some parts, what connections we make and what significance we attach to different parts or even individual words. So I think it is worth keeping an open mind and trying to let the letter speak to us without pre-conceived notions of what we are going to find.

The main themes

Nevertheless, (and this may sound contradictory) if we are to keep each section in context, we must try to get some idea of what that context is. So let us have a go at tracing the main themes and logical flow. To do this I try to notice recurring ideas, statements about the author’s intent (for instance 8:1 “The point of what we are saying is this...”) and key arguments or conclusions.

Have a go at this yourself and see if you can trace the flow of the argument. Again, ask the Holy Spirit to help you. He inspired it and it is His job to help us understand it.

Here is my attempt (I use *we* and *us* etc as a way of identifying with the recipients):

The Significant Points

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| 1:1 | God speaks to us through Jesus. |
| 2:1 | We must listen or suffer loss. |

2:12,17	Jesus came as our brother and now helps as our High Priest.
3:7-12	Beware lest we repeat the sins of our forefathers by hardening our hearts against His word to us.
4:6	Beware lest we repeat the sins of our forefathers by failing to enter His Rest.
5:9-10	God made Jesus our High Priest to save and sanctify us.
5:12-6:3	We should be going on beyond the basics to solid maturity.
6:4-8	Those who remain on milk, are in danger of falling away beyond restoration.
6:12	Do not become lazy, but imitate those who have inherited what was promised to Abraham.
6:20	Jesus is our High Priest, giving us an anchor of hope that we may inherit God's promises to Abraham.
7:4,22	Jesus (Melchizedek) is superior to Abraham and the priesthood and established a new covenant that replaces the old Mosaic covenant.
8:1	"This is the main point: We have such a High Priest at the right hand of God."
8:8	He is the minister of the promised new covenant.
8:13	The old covenant is obsolete and ageing and will soon disappear.
9:9,26	The tabernacle and its sacrifices were symbolic of Christ and His blood that was the full and final sacrifice for sin.
10:9	Christ has taken away the shadow (the old covenant) that he may establish the new.
10:22	So now we should draw near to God with confidence and a cleansed conscience.
10:29	Those Jews who reject Christ will be subject to severe judgement.
10:36	You need to endure difficulties and press on in your faith.
11:6	Without faith, it is impossible to please God, so follow the example of our forefathers.
12:1,11	Let us run the race of faith, following Jesus' example, accepting joyfully his discipline when it comes.
12:25	See that you do not refuse Him who speaks from Heaven, for God is a consuming fire.
13:6	Live lives that demonstrate the Lord is your helper.

I wonder how your outline compares. Remember this is just a first attempt. Later, when we have concluded our exegesis, we will be able to repeat this exercise with much greater understanding of the book.

What you feel to be significant in each chapter is, to a certain extent, subjective. I could have picked out the repeated references to angels in the first two chapters as being significant, but there are no other references to angels in the letter, and their presence in the first two chapters is certainly secondary to Christ and His word. The more familiar you become with a book, the easier it is to pick out the central points and follow the theme.

Now we can try to express these significant points in a summary paragraph. Again, here is mine:

Summary Paragraph

God is speaking to us loud and clear through Jesus, His Son. We must learn the lessons of history and not allow our hearts to become hardened to His voice. Those who don't grow beyond the basics are in grave danger. The promises of blessing that God gave to Abraham are given for us to inherit. Having made a perfect sacrifice for our sins, Jesus is now interceding for us as our Great High Priest that we might come with boldness and confidence to God's throne to receive help to live by faith, accepting God's discipline and fully enter the rest that God intends for us.

The Structure of the letter to the Hebrews

Having come up with a summary of a book, it is often helpful to try to work out its structure; identifying themes for each section and tracing how each section leads to the next. Sometimes this can be quite difficult because the biblical authors often wrote without any planned structure. They knew where they were going, but the route is often meandering. Hebrews, however, seems to be very focussed and well structured so let us have a go and see how we get on.

There may be symmetries and other artistic elements to the letter which helped the author to shape his material but, fascinating as these may be, what we are looking for are things that will help us to understand the flow of the author's argument. This is also a very subjective exercise, so you may come up with a very different structure to me, but there should be a large degree of recognisable overlap since we are both looking at the same book! I find it helpful to start with a very broad brush and then fill in the finer detail afterwards.

Broad-brush structure

Hebrews 1-6 Exhortation and warning to receive by faith the promises of God.

Hebrews 7-10:18 The supremacy of Jesus as our Great High Priest.

Hebrews 10:19-13:25 Exhortation and warning to live by faith.

It is not obvious how the argument progresses through these three broad sections, but we can see how this broad-brush structure fits with our summary paragraph above. So far, so good. Now let's try to add the next layer of detail to the structure and see if the connections become clearer.

Medium-brush structure

Hebrews 1-6 Exhortation and warning to receive by faith the promises of God.

1:1-14 Jesus, God's ultimate means of communication with us, is supreme.

2:1-18 A warning to heed God. Jesus suffered in order that he might sanctify us.

3:1-19 Consider the supremacy of Jesus and beware unbelief.

4:1-16 Warning and exhortation to enter God's rest.

5:1-11 Christ is our Melchizedek High Priest – about which he has much to say.

5:11-6:8 The Hebrews were dull of hearing and in danger of falling away.

6:9-20 Exhortation to move on and inherit the promises given to Abraham.

NOTE: 6:19-20 appears to be a key verse, connecting the exhortations to inherit the promises with the middle part of the letter about Melchizedek etc. The High Priestly role of Christ, and our confidence in it, is crucial to our inheriting the promises.

Hebrews 7-10:18 The supremacy of Jesus as our Great High Priest.

7:1-28 We have a new High Priest, Christ, who is superior to the Levitical priesthood.

8:1-13 We have a new superior covenant which replaces the Mosaic covenant.

9:1-28 We have a new superior sanctuary in heaven that replaces the temple.

10:1-18 Christ's death is a superior offering, being effective forever for all.

Hebrews 10:19-13:25 Exhortation and warning to live by faith.

10:19-25 Make use of our new access to God to hold fast to God's promises.

10:26-39 Warning against unbelief.

11:1-12:3 Exhortation to imitate the faith of past and present saints.

12:4-29 Exhortation to hear and heed God's voice.

13:1-8 Live out your faith in practical ways.

13:9-17 Follow Christ who is outside the Jewish rituals.

13:18-25 Concluding personal requests, blessing and greetings.

I think we now have a structure that makes sense of the letter's content. We see a strong focus on "holding fast to our hope" and that the author considers an understanding of the High Priestly role of Christ to be crucial in achieving that. We could add a third level of structure looking at the detailed arguments, but I think we can leave that to the next stage in our study, the actual exegesis, to which we can now proceed.

The author's world view

A third important consideration is the worldview that the author holds. In other words, can we deduce the philosophical viewpoint that the author holds. Is he influenced by Greek ideas such as Plato's dualism¹⁰ or Roman legalism or is he thoroughly Hebrew in his thinking? Some commentators suggest that dualism is evident in his discussion of the earthly tabernacle and the true heavenly one in chapters 8 and 9. But that is not the author's meaning. Certainly there are *some* heavenly things which have an earthly counterpart, but that is because the earthly *shadows* point to the heavenly realities.

This is evidently the author's world view. In chapter 2 he quotes Ps 8 arguing that Jesus is making real on earth the eternal intentions of God. Likewise in chapters 3 and 4 he discusses the Sabbath rest as a promise God has made which we must obtain as a reality on earth. In chapters 5 and 7 he discusses the eternal reality behind the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek. And in chapter 12 the author describes believers coming to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, thousands of angels, the church of the firstborn and to the sprinkled blood. These are all descriptions of heavenly realities which the believers are receiving as realities on earth (12:28) in measure now but will receive fully in "the city which is to come"(13:14). Faith, he says, is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The author sees this world as the place where the realities and promises of heaven are to be made real in part now and fully at Christ's return. In the history and law of his people he sees both the significance of its historical setting and also the greater reality that is being pointed to. This is the subject of the letter – the new Covenant and the High Priestly role of Christ as foreseen in the Hebrew scriptures.

Just as the author reads the Hebrew scriptures in this symbolic way, so he also writes using symbolic language. He talks of the "sword of the Spirit" and of us "approaching the throne of grace". He talks of Christ ministering in a "heavenly tabernacle" as our "High Priest". All this is symbolic, using familiar symbols to describe heavenly realities. This world view and its influence on the authors interpretation of scripture and his own use of symbolism must be born in mind as we study the letter.

¹⁰ Plato taught that each thing that exists on earth has a corresponding "form" or perfect idea. He said, as an example, a simple thing such as a bed would be linked to the perfect idea of a bed that exists independently.

