

The Audience for the Letter to the Hebrews

For whom was the letter to the Hebrews written? Who were its original, intended recipients?

Most scholars believe that the letter is addressed to Christians who were attracted to the Jewish religion and that it aims to forestall apostasy and/or compromise: the author wants to dissuade Christians from abandoning their faith and/or adopting Jewish practices that would be inconsistent with that faith.

This much seems clear. But can we be more specific?

Jewish Christians

The letter might be addressed to Jewish Christians: the emphasis on “descendants of Abraham” in 2:16 suggests this, as does the traditional ascription (“To the Hebrews”) that was applied to the letter by the early church. If the letter is in fact addressed to Jewish Christians, then those believers might be thinking about returning to the fold from which they had supposedly been converted. Why would they do that? Perhaps they missed the liturgical grandeur and the historical grounding that such a long-established religion had to offer. Or maybe they had suffered too much government-sponsored persecution leveled against Christianity (as a new, unsanctioned faith) and realized that Judaism was more widely recognized and tolerated. Maybe they wanted a relief from tensions that their Christian faith produced with Jewish relatives and neighbors. Or perhaps they had grown impatient and frustrated by the fact that Jesus had not returned as expected. The letter to the Hebrews can be read as addressing all these concerns.

Gentile Christians

The letter might be addressed to Gentile Christians. The list of items on which the readers were instructed when first coming to the faith includes some matters (resurrection of the dead, final judgment) that would not have been new for Jews (6:1–2); there would have been no reason for Jewish Christians to have been instructed in such matters. If the letter is addressed to Gentile Christians, then, the readers would have been Christians converted from paganism who were beginning to think of Christianity as a stepping-stone to the older, deeper religion of Judaism. The author wants to tell them that Jewish faith is preparatory for Christian confession, not vice versa.

Christians Attracted to “Jewish Christianity”

It is also possible (whether the recipients were ethnically Jewish or Gentile or both) that the attraction was not to the non-Christian religion of Judaism but rather to some version of Jewish Christianity that the author of Hebrews considers a breach with the true faith. If so, then the intended recipients might not have thought that they were flirting with apostasy by incorporating more Jewish elements into their religion: they saw themselves converting not from Christianity to Judaism but rather from one form of Christianity (Gentile Christianity) to another form of Christianity (Jewish Christianity). The author of Hebrews,

however, wants to convince them that such a change will constitute a falling away from Christ and, indeed, a turning away from the living God (3:12).

Specific Proposals for Location

Palestine

- Were the letter's recipients the sect of Jerusalem Christians who are contrasted with "the Hellenists" (Acts 6:1)?
- Were they converted Jewish priests who had been barred from offering sacrifices after confessing faith in Christ (Acts 6:7)?
- Were they converts from the sect at Qumran?
- Were they Jewish Christians who had fled Jerusalem rather than join in the revolt against Rome?

These guesses are intriguing, but none has carried the day. Notably, all of these guesses assume that the readers were Jewish Christians and, further, that they were in Jerusalem or Palestine. This idea that the letter to the Hebrews was written for believers in Palestine is based on the assumption that all of the attention to the Jewish priesthood and to sacrificial practices would be especially appropriate for readers in that part of the world (where the ancient tabernacle and successive temples had been erected). But would an author write a letter in elegant Greek to a setting where Hebrew and Aramaic were the native languages?

Rome

In recent years, more scholars have thought that the letter might be written to Christians in Rome. These points are noted:

- The Jewish Christian heritage was strong in Rome.
- Timothy (who is mentioned in 13:23) would have been well known to Roman Christians.
- The gospel had been preached in Rome by people who had known Jesus (cf. Heb. 2:3).
- Believers had been persecuted in Rome (cf. Heb. 10:32–34).
- There are parallels between the thought and style of Hebrews and Paul's letter to Roman Christians.
- Our first references to Hebrews outside the New Testament come from Clement, who was the bishop of Rome in the late 90s.

But such factors do not allow for certainty, and most scholars will grant that the intended recipients of this letter could have been located in almost any city of the Roman Empire (Ephesus and Corinth have also been suggested). In fact, if the letter was written some time after the mid-60s, its comment that so far no one in the community had suffered bloodshed for the faith (12:4) would make no sense in a letter addressed to Rome.

A side note: The letter does offer one reference that seems to provide a clue for situating its readers (or at least its author) geographically, but in actuality this clue has not proved very helpful. At the end of the letter the author says, "Those from Italy send you greetings" (13:24). Some scholars have said this means the author is writing to Rome and offering greetings from people who have trav-

eled from Rome to wherever the author is. That interpretation is possible. Or, the author could be writing from Rome and extending greetings on behalf of all Roman Christians. For that matter, the author could be writing from almost anywhere to almost anywhere and simply passing along greetings from some associates who were popularly known as “the Italians.”

Letter to the Hebrews: Facts about Its Intended Readers

The letter to the Hebrews does not specify who its original readers were or where they lived, but it does reveal a number of facts about them:

- They are Christians (3:6; 4:14; 10:23).
- They are Christians with a strong interest in sacrificial practices and other matters of Jewish faith.
- They heard the message of salvation from people who heard it from Jesus (2:3); thus, they are second-generation Christians, but not third- or fourth-generation Christians.
- They have witnessed signs and wonders and various miracles and have received diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4).
- They are sufficiently educated and astute to understand arguments that employ both Hellenistic rhetoric and allusive reasoning based on the Jewish scripture.
- They have gone through a hard time that required them to endure abuse, persecution, and suffering (10:32–33).
- Some of them had their property plundered (10:34), but thus far the abuse has not involved bloodshed (12:4).
- They have been exemplary in good works (6:10), such as showing compassion to those who suffer (10:34).
- They nevertheless have now become “dull in understanding” (5:11) and potentially “sluggish” (6:12; cf. 12:12).
- They seem to be in danger of apostasy, renouncing their faith or drifting away from the truth (2:1–3; 3:12–14; 4:1; 10:35–36); some are already neglecting to meet with the community (10:25).