

# THE ORIGINAL READERS OF HEBREWS

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

*Hebrews is like “the great Melchizedek of sacred story, of which its central portion treats. Like him it marches forth in lonely royal and sacerdotal dignity, and like him is ἀγενεάλογητος; we know not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to probe the frontiers of “whence it cometh” and “whither it goeth” with a view to establishing what can and cannot be said about such matters. If a possible setting can be determined—one that is not based on mere conjecture and which is not accompanied by unanswerable objections, then a working hypothesis may be suggested as a background against which Hebrews may be expounded.*

*There are actually two questions that relate to identifying the original readers of Hebrews: first, what was their socio-ethnic identity, and second, where did they live? Although these two questions are somewhat related, they should be considered separately.<sup>3</sup> The second cannot be resolved with any significant degree of certainty. The first can be specified with greater confidence. Although “few exegetical issues depend on determining the geographical location of the addressees,”<sup>4</sup> their socio-ethnic identity and situation is more critical.<sup>5</sup> A tentative conclusion to these questions can serve to sharpen the focus of the letter<sup>6</sup> by postulating the specific circumstances that the writer assumes. In light of the multiple exegetical perplexities of the book, such a focus is highly desirable even if the final conclusion must remain somewhat tenuous.*

*It can be said that the author of Hebrews wrote to a specific group of readers; this is not a general treatise intended for a broad audience. This is substantiated by the specific life-experiences of the readers that may be seen, e.g., in the reference to a particular instance of persecution in Hebrews 10:32–34.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>This is the first in a series of studies from the book of Hebrews. Scripture citations in English are from either the NIV or are the writer’s own translation. Specific references in Hebrews are cited only by chapter and verse unless confusion would result, in which case the book is also given.

<sup>2</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, transl. T. Kingsbury, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), 1:4.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison’s discussion confuses the issue by mixing both questions together (Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 370–74).

<sup>4</sup>D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 401.

<sup>5</sup>This is particularly true of the purpose of the book. “Any assessment of the purpose of Hebrews is inextricably tied to one’s understanding of who the addressees were: one cannot discuss the purpose without presupposing some things about the addressees, and vice versa” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup>Hebrews will be described in this article as a letter, an epistle, a treatise, or a homily. These terms are not used here in a technical way to designate the genre of Hebrews, but merely as a convenient method of reference. A subsequent article will address the question of genre more directly. A tentative conclusion at this point suggests the attractiveness of William Lane’s classification of Hebrews as a homily (“Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting,” *Southwest Journal of Theology* 28 [1985]: 13–18).

<sup>7</sup>Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 400. Donald Guthrie spells out the specifics in some detail (*New Testament Introduction*, 3d ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 1970], 699–700). See also the discussion by Gottlieb

## INTERNAL EVIDENCE RELEVANT TO THE READERS' IDENTITY

Before considering the specific questions of the readers' identity, it will be necessary to summarize the available internal evidence that provides the limited amount of information available.<sup>8</sup>

The setting appears to be an urban area. This is suggested by the metaphorical reference contrasting their current location with that which they anticipated ("the city that is to come," 13:14). The range of hortatory topics in the letter also reflects concerns most likely (though not exclusively) to be found in an urban setting, including hospitality, prison, and materialism (e.g., 13:1–6).

Since the early church normally met in homes, it is to be expected that a house church setting would also lie behind this group of believers. This may be evidenced in the intentional use of the house figure to describe the church (3:6; 10:21). Some who formerly attended the meetings of this house church had apparently ceased to participate (10:25).

This group of believers had not heard Jesus' preaching in person. They were "second-generation believers" according to 2:3; the gospel had been preached to them by those who had heard Jesus. This could imply only that they had read the apostolic testimony, but more likely implies that they had heard the oral preaching of those who were eye-witnesses of the earthly ministry of Jesus. They were not new believers since sufficient time had elapsed that they should have been teachers in their own right (5:12). Another indication of the length of time involved is the death of those who originally had led them—probably the same individuals who had first preached the gospel in their area (13:7).

Timothy is well-known to the addressees. This is evident from 13:23. Since, however, Timothy would have been reasonably well-known in many places in the Empire due to his associations with Paul,<sup>9</sup> this is not overly helpful for identifying the readers' locale. Nor does it facilitate dating the letter. Since Timothy was a young man during Paul's travels, he could have lived to the end of the century. The reference to his imprisonment is also unhelpful since it is not identifiable with any specific event of which there is record.

The personal words in the closing paragraphs of the treatise also point out that the writer had previously been present with the group of believers addressed (13:19). That he hopes to be restored (ἀποκατασταθῶ > ἀποκαθίστημι) to them may even suggest that he is a former member of their group, perhaps even a former leader (ὁ ἡγούμενος).

The letter is addressed to the members of a group in distinction from their leaders (13:17, 24). This could suggest that there was some tension or rift between them,<sup>10</sup> or it may imply that "the group to which Hebrews was written did

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Lünemann, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. M. J. Evans, ed. T. Dwight, in *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883; reprint, Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1979], 367. Alexander Nairne conjectures that it is "a treatise rather than a letter; a sermon belonging to the age of sermons. It smells of the study, not the open air of life where history is being made" (*The Epistle of Priesthood: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2d ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915], 7). This does not mesh with the intense personal concerns reflected in Hebrews, nor does it reflect a very relevant view of preaching. That a homily need not be hampered by such concerns may be seen in Lane's handling of Hebrews as a representative of that genre: "Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting," 13–18.

<sup>8</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary, 47 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:l.iii. This section will follow the summaries provided by Lane (*ibid.*, 1:l.iii–iv) and George Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 255–56.

<sup>9</sup>It is possible that this is not the same Timothy known from Acts. Nothing in the text requires that identification, though the casual reference without any identification would tend to support the conclusion that this is, indeed, Paul's former associate.

<sup>10</sup>"In Hebrews there is evidence of tension between the audience and those currently recognized as leaders. . . . There is an evident pastoral concern on the part of the writer to bring the two groups together in a social context of shared cordiality" (Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lx). See also, B. Lindars, "Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 386.

not include the leaders of the wider Christian community”<sup>11</sup>—that is, the city-wide church. There are other indications that there were serious spiritual problems present. The warning passages, of course, imply such conditions. Their slowness to learn (5:11–14) relates to spiritual needs. Discouragement may well have been the prevailing mood (3:6; 12:3, 12–13). There is at least one note that implies a doctrinal problem: the strange teaching regarding ceremonial food (13:9) that apparently fascinated at least some in the group.

Some, perhaps many, of them had previously suffered persecution in the form of public insult, imprisonment, and confiscation of property (10:32–34). This had stopped short of martyrdom, at least for the specific house church addressed (12:4). This was some time earlier and their courage in the face of a renewed threat of such treatment was lacking, thus the writer’s exhortation to persevere (10:35–39).

### VIEWS OF THE READERS’ SOCIO-ETHNIC IDENTITY

It is generally agreed that the original readers were Christians.<sup>12</sup> (That this may have been only a profession of faith that was not really genuine remains in dispute.) This is evident from the way they are addressed in several passages (note the first and second person plurals).

3:1	τὸν ἀπόστολον καὶ ἀρχιερέα τῆς ὁμολογίας ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν	“Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession”
3:6	οὗ οἶκός ἐσμεν ἡμεῖς	“we are his house”
3:14	μέτοχοι ... τοῦ Χριστοῦ γεγόναμεν	“we are ‘sharers’ of Christ”
4:14	κρατῶμεν τῆς ὁμολογίας	“let us hold fast our confession”
6:9	Πεπίσμεθα δὲ περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀγαπητοί, τὰ κρείσσονα καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας	“We are persuaded of better things concerning you, brothers, even the things concerning salvation”
10:23	κατέχωμεν τὴν ὁμολογίαν τῆς ἐλπίδος	“let us hold fast the confession of our hope”
12:22, 24	προσεληλύθατε Σιών ὄρει ... καὶ ... Ἰησοῦ	“you have come to Mt. Zion ... and ... to Jesus”

Although several of these occur in the apodosis of a conditional sentence (e.g., 3:6, 14), it is still obvious that the writer addresses them as professing believers. Their socio-ethnic identity is not as clear-cut, however. The traditional identification has been that of Jewish Christians (i.e., Jews who have trusted Jesus Christ), but some have also argued for a Gentile background.

### Gentiles

The suggestion that Hebrews is addressed to Gentile Christians was first advocated by Roeth in 1836 and has been adopted by a number of other scholars since that time.<sup>13</sup> Kümmel argues that the frequent use of the Old

<sup>11</sup>Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 26.

<sup>12</sup>Thus Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 402: “All agree that the book is written for Christians.”

<sup>13</sup>Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. J. Mattill, Jr., 14th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 280. Others who hold this or a similar view include Jülicher, Wrede, Windisch, Michaelis, Alertz, Henshaw, Schierse, Michel, Oepke, Feine-Behm, Käsemann, Kuss, Pfleiderer, McGiffert, Moffat, Scott, Dods, Theissen, and Vos. (See the list in Kümmel, *ibid.*, and the documentation in Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 402, n. 33.) Some of these scholars suggest that the address is simply to Christians with no reference to any particular ethnic background. This variation is close enough to be associated with the Gentile view due to the traditional view placing such a great weight on the Jewish background, both in terms of the purpose of the book and the location of

Testament is fully in accord with a Gentile audience since “the mission of primitive Christianity generally made the OT into the Bible of the new congregations, in which they were thoroughly steeped.”<sup>14</sup> This is a valid point,<sup>15</sup> but it only allows a Gentile audience and does not require one.

He also suggests that the reference to Jewish food laws in 13:9 as “something strange and unfamiliar” would not be consonant with an audience from a Jewish background. This depends on seeing those involved with such practices as distinct from the addressees. The third person reference would allow this: οὐκ ὠφελήθησαν οἱ περιπατοῦντες (“the ones who practice these things are not profited”). Such is not, however, required by the text.

His third argument is the absence of any contrast between Jews and Gentiles in Hebrews—the words Ἰουδαῖος and ἔθνη do not even occur in the book.<sup>16</sup> As an argument from silence, this carries little weight since a Jewish audience would not require any such reference either. All these arguments are limited in that they only allow the possibility of a Gentile audience; they provide no positive argument that requires such a conclusion. In addition to the problems noted above, it may also be suggested that “a major weakness of this position is that no allusion is made, as in Paul’s letters, to the beliefs and practices of pagan society. Christianity is set over against the Jewish religion exclusively.”<sup>17</sup> Most scholars have not been convinced by this line of argument.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of any compelling reasons for accepting a Gentile-Christian audience the traditional position of a Jewish-Christian audience must be examined.

## JEW

A number of arguments in support of the more traditional Jewish background have been offered.<sup>19</sup> Most of these points may be summarized by saying that the conceptual associations of both writer and recipients of Hebrews are most likely to be found in the context of Diaspora Hellenism.<sup>20</sup> This argument may be detailed as follows. The authority on which the argument of Hebrews is based is the Old Testament, particularly the LXX. There is “an easy

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the original readers (Jerusalem).

<sup>14</sup>Kümmel, *Introduction*, 280.

<sup>15</sup>Carson, Moo, Morris (*Introduction*, 402) point out that, “although the book is steeped in Old Testament allusions and Levitical ritual, it does not necessarily follow that either the author or the readers are Jewish Christians; doubtless some Gentile believers immersed themselves in the Greek Old Testament. . . . The author’s knowledge of Jewish ritual, like the knowledge he presupposes of his readers, is a literary knowledge: it is drawn from the Old Testament . . . , not (so far as the epistle shows) from any close observation of or participation in the temple ritual in Jerusalem.” In other words, a Gentile could have this knowledge as readily (though perhaps not as commonly) as a Jew.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. James Moffat presents essentially the same arguments (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924], xvi–xvii).

<sup>17</sup>Harrison, *Introduction*, 373.

<sup>18</sup>For a representative bibliography, see Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 22, n. 67.

<sup>19</sup>Reference to a Jewish-Christian audience need not imply that the group was exclusively Jewish. It means rather that the group was dominantly of that provenance without excluding the possibility of a Gentile element. Ellingworth’s conclusion at this point is similar, though his argument implies a more significant Gentile element than others who hold a Jewish-audience position (at least he spends far more space trying to establish the feasibility of a Gentile component): “It is therefore best to conclude that the first readers were a predominantly but not exclusively Jewish-Christian group, well known to the writer, but not including all members of a local Christian community, or its leaders” (ibid., 27).

<sup>20</sup>This is the essence of Lane’s argument (*Hebrews*, 1:liv–lv). Those who maintain a Jerusalem destination would, of course, phrase this differently, but their argument would remain centered in the thought world of Judaism.

familiarity with the stories of the Bible, to which the writer can refer without elaboration.”<sup>21</sup> The writer also uses the vocabulary of the LXX, whether simply from long familiarity or perhaps deliberately to sway his audience who knew it so well.

The writer also introduces the book with a formulation that is clearly reminiscent of the “hellenistic-Jewish wisdom tradition” which was “apparently current and meaningful for the audience.”<sup>22</sup> In doing so he is establishing “emotional contact with his audience” by using divine Wisdom categories to portray Jesus as the royal Son (1:2; cp. Psalm 2) and royal Priest (1:3; cp. Psalm 11) as well as including reference to his “role in creation, revelation, and redemption [which are] recited in creedal fashion.”<sup>23</sup> Such descriptions would be foreign to a Gentile audience and less common in Palestinian Judaism.

The role of angels in the giving of the Law finds closer parallels with hellenistic Judaism than with the Old Testament—an emphasis that would most likely have found a point of contact in the hellenistic synagogue of the Diaspora.<sup>24</sup> The centrality of Moses also substantiates this conclusion.

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of Moses in hellenistic Judaism . . . [for] he is the supreme exemplar of perfection in the sense of immediacy and access to God. If such views were the common property of . . . the hellenistic-Jewish community, this explains why Moses and Jesus are yoked and compared throughout the argument developed in Hebrews.<sup>25</sup>

Overall it appears likely that the author of Hebrews writes from a hellenistic-Jewish-Christian perspective to those who have a similar background.

Mention should also be made of two minor positions that would agree with the conclusions just summarized, but who seek to be even more specific and identify a particular group of Jews, either former priests or former members of the Qumran community.

Sandegren proposes that Hebrews was written to a particular section of the Palestinian church: former Jewish priests who had become Christians. He bases this largely on the exhortation that they should be (but were not yet) teachers. Who else, he asks, could be expected to fill this role if not those who knew the Old Testament and had previously filled the role of teacher in Judaism? Of Christians who “had been (say) farmers, artisans, possibly slaves, and still were so, it could not be said that they ‘ought’ to be teachers.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, says Sandegren, these believers still owned their houses (demonstrated by the fact that they were exhorted to exercise hospitality, 13:2) despite having previously suffered persecution, including the confiscation of their goods (13:34). This can only be, he argues, because the Law forbid priests being deprived of their houses (Lev 25:29ff). To demonstrate the existence of such a group he appeals to the statement in Acts 6:7 that many priests had become believers. As an additional argument, he suggests that the traditional title to the book was corrupted by an early scribal error, ΠΠΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ being mistakenly written for ΠΠΟΣ ΙΕΡΕΙΣ (“To the Hebrews” thus should have been “To the Priests”).<sup>27</sup>

In response, there is no necessary reason why only former Jewish priests might be expected to be teachers. (Peter and his Galilean fellows managed quite nicely in this role.) Second, the responsibility to extend hospitality does not require home ownership. It can be conducted just as well from rented quarters or under a tree alongside the road.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., liv.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. See Lane’s more detailed discussion in “Detecting Divine Wisdom Christology in Hebrews 1:1–4,” *New Testament Studies* 5 (1982): 150–58.

<sup>24</sup>See also Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 23–24.

<sup>25</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:liv.

<sup>26</sup>C. Sandegren, “The Addressees of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (1955): 222.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 221–24.

Third, if these priests had become Christians, it is highly unlikely that Jewish authorities would feel obligated to apply Mosaic regulations to those who would be, from their perspective, apostate Jewish priests. In any event, the passage referred to relates to laws for the Year of Jubilee, not general practice, and especially not when a crime (again from their perspective) had been committed. Last, the possible scribal confusion of the book title does not at all appear likely: the similarity is so remote that it takes a good deal of imagination to see how these two words could be confused, especially since the error must have occurred very early when a copyist would most likely have known who the recipients were.<sup>28</sup>

Research into the Qumran community has prompted a number of scholars to draw parallels with the biblical records. Often these relationships are hypotheses built on rather slender evidence. Although the idea arose from several different sources at nearly the same time, the two most influential discussions of Hebrews in relation to Qumran are the French commentary by Spicq and the work of Jewish scholar Yigael Yadin.<sup>29</sup> Spicq suggests that the epistle “was addressed to Esseno-Christians, to certain Jewish priests—among whom a number of ex-Qumranians could be found—whose doctrinal and biblical training, spiritual presuppositions, and religious ‘prejudices’ he knew.”<sup>30</sup>

Yadin theorizes that Hebrews is directed specifically against Qumran doctrines. The addressees “must have been a group of Jews originally belonging to the DSS Sect who were converted to Christianity, carrying with them some of their previous beliefs.”<sup>31</sup> Hughes adapts Yadin’s theory by suggesting that a group of Christians may have been attracted to this “Esseno-Christian” (to use Spicq’s term) doctrine (or perhaps to a pure Essene position which they desired to syncretize with their own Christian faith). Hebrews is thus a polemic to vindicate the supremacy of Christ against the Qumran-influenced eschatology that included both priestly and royal Messiahs, a second-Moses prophet, and the supremacy of Michael the archangel.<sup>32</sup>

Bruce has evaluated a number of the proposed parallels between Hebrews and Qumran, concluding that none of the concepts pointed to in Hebrews are distinctive of Qumran. All have parallels in the Old Testament or in first-century Judaism outside the Dead Sea community.<sup>33</sup> The ideas treated in Hebrews were common to a wide range of groups in hellenistic Judaism. If that is so, then there is no positive evidence to support the theory of a Qumran connection in Hebrews.

#### VIEWS OF THE READERS’ GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>A similar argument was made earlier by J. Vallance Brown (“The Authorship and Circumstances of ‘Hebrews’—Again!” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 80 [1923]: 505–38. Brown proposes the original title as ΠΡΟΣ ΙΕΡΑΙΟΥΣ—a difference of only two letters. This is a theoretical word, the verbal adjective of *ἱεράζομαι* or *ἱεράομαι*. The complicating factor, as Brown admits, is that the form *ἱεραῖος* (and the accusative in the theoretical title, *ἱεραίους*) is not an extant form.

<sup>29</sup>See the discussion by F. F. Bruce, “‘To the Hebrews’ or ‘To the Essenes’?” *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963): 217–18, and Philip Hughes, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 10–15.

<sup>30</sup>C. Spicq, “L’Épître aux Hébreux, Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les Hellénistes et Qumrân,” *Revue de Qumran* 1 (1958–59): 365ff., as cited by Hughes, *Hebrews*, 12.

<sup>31</sup>Yigael Yadin, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1965): 36ff., as cited by Hughes, *Hebrews*, 14.

<sup>32</sup>Hughes, *Hebrews*, 14–15.

<sup>33</sup>Bruce, “‘To the Hebrews’ or ‘To the Essenes’?” 217–32.

<sup>34</sup>“The abundance of hypotheses [regarding the addressees and their location] surpasses even the plethora of conjectures about Hebrews’ author” (Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 9). The discussion in this section focuses only on the two major proposals: Jerusalem and Rome. For a detailed listing of a dozen additional proposals by various commentators as of 1874, see Lünemann, *Hebrews*, 367–70. A more recent survey is included in Guthrie, *Introduction*, 711–15. Note should be made of the creative reconstruction that Hugh Montefiore has set forth at length, proposing that Hebrews

Lane acknowledges a “considerable risk” of postulating too precise a social setting for the original recipients of Hebrews. The question is one that cannot be finally proven because of a lack of explicit statement or reliable external testimony. The purpose of suggesting a tentative answer is to attempt to provide a concrete setting against which the epistle may be viewed.<sup>35</sup>

### Jerusalem (or Palestine)

The traditional view as to the geographical destination of Hebrews is Jerusalem (or at least some location in Palestine).<sup>36</sup> There are several arguments offered to support this thesis.

Frequent reference to the sacrificial system and the associated cultus is, prior to A.D. 70, most easily associated with Jerusalem and the temple. Westcott appeals to the “dominant conception of the Old Testament Institutions as centered in sacrificial and priestly ordinances” as necessitating a location where temple service would be familiar. From this he argues that only Jerusalem and Leontopolis (Egypt) qualify because “nowhere else would the images of sacrifice and intercession be constantly before the eye of a Jew.” He rejects the Jewish temple in Leontopolis as ever exercising “the same power over the Alexandrian Jews as that at Jerusalem exercised over the Palestinian Jews.”<sup>37</sup> Weiss pursues the same point:

[Only in Palestine could there be] an attachment to the worship of the temple . . . such as the Epistle presupposes, while it treats only incidentally of those acts of worship to which in the Diaspora the greatest importance was naturally attached . . . , this destination of the Epistle is in fact the only possible one.<sup>38</sup>

Lünemann takes the same approach in his assumption:

The readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews regarded the continued participation in the institutions of the Jewish temple-service and sacrifices so necessary, that without this they thought they could obtain no complete expiation of their sins. Such a form of Judaism . . . [applies] only to those who had their dwelling-place in the immediate vicinity of the Jewish temple.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that the author of Hebrews refers only to the tabernacle and not to the existing temple presents a major stumbling block for this view.<sup>40</sup> Lünemann’s assumption is overstated. There is an obvious priority given to the

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was written by Apollos to the Corinthians prior to Paul’s writing of 1 Corinthians. According to this novel approach, it was the Corinthian’s misunderstanding of Hebrews that precipitated the controversy with Paul (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries [New York: Harper & Row, 1964], 9-28). Francesco Lo Bue also advocates a Corinthian destination (“The Historical Background to the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 75 [1956]: 52-57).

<sup>35</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, lviii–lix.

<sup>36</sup>Chrysostom, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 63:9–14; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays*, 2d ed. ([London]: Macmillan, [1892]; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), xxxix–xli; Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. M. W. Jacobus, trans. J. Trout, et. al. 3 vols. (Reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977), 2:293–366.

<sup>37</sup>Westcott, *Hebrews*, xxxix.

<sup>38</sup>Bernhard Weiss, *A Manual of Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. Davidson, 2 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889), 2:28–29.

<sup>39</sup>Lünemann, *Hebrews*, 369; see also 374, 380.

<sup>40</sup>The author of Hebrews uses σκηνή exclusively, never ἱερόν. The usual word to refer to Herod’s temple in the New Testament is ἱερόν. It is used 71× in New Testament: it refers to the Jerusalem temple 45× in the Gospels and 24× in Acts. (The only other occurrences are to a pagan temple in Acts 19:27 and a figurative use in 1 Cor 9:13.) By contrast, σκηνή has a wider reference, including an ordinary living structure (Matt 17:4 and parallels), a pagan shrine

sacrificial system, but that this is assumed to be necessary for salvation by the readers is nowhere stated in Hebrews or demonstrated by Lünemann. Not only that, but there were many Jewish Christians among the Diaspora who would have been just as familiar with Jewish ritual as those who lived in Jerusalem. It has been suggested that this knowledge of Jewish ritual was not a firsthand acquaintance gained at the temple in Jerusalem, but was rather “book knowledge”—familiarity with the Old Testament.<sup>41</sup> “His eye is on the text of Exodus, not on what was happening at Jerusalem.”<sup>42</sup> Although this would be difficult to prove, it is a reasonable conclusion. The reference to the tabernacle instead of the temple would substantiate it, as would the fact that all the ritual references are to items described in the Old Testament. (There are no references to traditional practices that developed in Judaism.) This would preclude basing any argument for a Jewish destination on frequent references to temple practices.<sup>43</sup> As a matter of fact, the dominance of the temple in Jerusalem and the lack of any mention of it in a treatise so directly related to such matters, would probably argue *against* a Jerusalem destination.<sup>44</sup>

Westcott seeks to answer such objections by arguing that the writer “goes back to the first institution of the system” as the authoritative basis of the practices in the Jerusalem temple contemporary with his readers.<sup>45</sup> Since there is no direct appeal to or connection with the Jerusalem temple, this reply must be judged inadequate. The reason for the writer selecting the tabernacle rather than the temple is to be considered in relation to the old and new covenants, and the contrast between the two. It was only natural, therefore, for the writer to refer to the tabernacle rather than to the temple, because of the association of the desert sanctuary with the establishment of the old covenant at Sinai.<sup>46</sup>

Westcott’s second major argument for a Jerusalem destination is the traditional title of Hebrews: πρὸς Ἑβραίους (“to Hebrews” or “to the Hebrews”).<sup>47</sup> The oldest known Greek manuscript of Hebrews, P<sup>46</sup> (late 2d C.), contains this

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(Acts 7:43), the Davidic dynasty (Acts 15:16), a heavenly residence (Luke 16:9), and either heaven itself or a temple there (Rev 13:6; 15:5). It occurs 10× in Hebrews and may refer to an ordinary living structure (11:9), the Old Testament tabernacle (8:5; 9:2, 8, 21; 13:10), the holy place in the tabernacle (9:6), the most holy place in the tabernacle (9:3), or a heavenly tabernacle (8:2; 9:11). The reference in 13:10 might be viewed as the only reference to Herod’s temple, but the reference to the camp in the following verse clearly sets the reference in the wilderness context. This survey clearly shows that the author of Hebrews refers only to the tabernacle and not to the first-century temple.

<sup>41</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), xxv, xxxi. This would also weigh heavily against Lünemann’s assumption of continued participation in the Jerusalem cultus.

<sup>42</sup>E. C. Wickham, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen, 1910), xviii.

<sup>43</sup>Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 400–01. “The writer of Hebrews shows no interest in the temple in any of its forms nor in contemporary cultic practice” (Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lxiii).

<sup>44</sup>Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxxi. Bruce contrasts Hebrews with Stephen’s prominent references (also addressed to a Jerusalem audience) to the temple in Acts 6:13f (the implied content of his preaching prior to being seized) in contrast to the tabernacle in 7:44–50. It should be noted that the references in chapter six are part of the false witness presented, but it may indicate reference to the temple in Stephen’s preaching—even if he did not say exactly what they charged him with saying.

<sup>45</sup>Westcott, *Hebrews*, xl.

<sup>46</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lxiii.

<sup>47</sup>Westcott, *Hebrews*, xli. The only title found in the manuscript tradition is πρὸς Ἑβραίους. This has not prevented other conjectural emendations. Klostermann, e.g., postulates πρὸς Βερυαίους (to the Bereans) on the basis of metathesis of the first two letters and Harnack makes the even more unlikely guess πρὸς τοὺς ἑταίρους (to the others?!). See also the proposals of Sanegren and Brown in nn. 27, 28 above. The lack of any external testimony to either effect points to the ill advisability of such theses (Zahn, *Introduction*, 2:305, n. 2).



title, though it cannot be demonstrated to be original.<sup>48</sup> A second-century title, however, could carry evidential weight as an early traditional designation that reflects in some way the original recipients (who could well have been known by a second century copyist).<sup>49</sup> The possible significance of this title is the frequency with which the church at Jerusalem is identified as Ἑβραῖος. Eusebius describes the early church in Jerusalem as being composed entirely of Hebrews (σύεσταναι τὴν πᾶσαν ἐκκλησίαν ἐξ Ἑβραίων) until the time of the Jewish revolt under Hadrian (A.D. 132–35).<sup>50</sup> In the Clementine Homilies, James is described as πεπιστευμένος ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴν τὴν Ἑβραίων διέπειν ἐκκλησίαν (“entrusted with the administration of the church of the Hebrews in Jerusalem”).<sup>51</sup> Clement of Alexandria probably also knew Hebrews under the title πρὸς Ἑβραίους for, although he does not use that exact phrase, he does refer to it as being written Ἑβραίοις (“for Hebrews”).<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Tertullian uses the Latin equivalent in referring to the epistle (which he attributes to Barnabas): *extat et Barnabae titulus ad Hebraeos* (“there is extant [a letter] to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas”).<sup>53</sup>

The designation Ἑβραῖος has several possible referents. In its narrowest sense it refers to Aramaic-speaking Jews in contrast to those who spoke Greek.<sup>54</sup> This is the meaning it must have for Westcott’s argument to carry any force. It can also, however, refer to Jews in contrast to Gentiles—even those who spoke Greek (e.g., Philo and Aristobulus).<sup>55</sup> It could also be used as a designation of Christians (probably Jewish Christians), as it is in the Paris magical papyrus: ὀρκίζω σε κατὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν Ἑβραίων Ἰησοῦ (“I adjure you by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews”).<sup>56</sup> Although the word is frequently connected with the church in Jerusalem, it is also used of groups elsewhere. There is inscriptional evidence of its use from both Corinth (σύαγωγὴ Ἑβραίων) and Rome (σύαγωγὴ Ἀιβρέων).<sup>57</sup> It is, in general, a descriptive name, not a local one.<sup>58</sup> The word seems to be of sufficient breadth to preclude resting an

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<sup>48</sup>Westcott could appeal to this title only as far back as the fourth century (N and B; also fifth-century A) since the P<sup>46</sup> had not yet been discovered. Most (if not all) New Testament book titles are probably later editorial additions for convenience in reference, not original designations by the writers. Moffatt suggests that the early addition of the title is supported by the fact that the book was never known by any other title. He also argues that the choice of πρὸς Ἑβραίους demonstrates that whoever added the title *did not know* the original recipients, or else he would have used a local term (*Hebrews*, xv).

<sup>49</sup>Westcott argues that “it may therefore be fairly concluded that, when the title πρὸς Ἑβραίους was added to the Epistle, it was an expression of the belief that the letter was addressed to the Church of Jerusalem or some sister Church in Palestine dependent on it” (*Hebrews*, xli).

<sup>50</sup>*Ecclesiastical History* 4.5.

<sup>51</sup>*Clementine Homilies* 11.35; the letter of Clement that is prefixed to these homilies describes James in almost identical words: διέποντι τὴν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴν ἁγίαν Ἑβραίων ἐκκλησίαν.

<sup>52</sup>Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200), *Hypotyposes*, cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.3.

<sup>53</sup>Tertullian, “On Modesty,” 20 (ca. A.D. 200).

<sup>54</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed., rev. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 213; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Literary Sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 178. Philo contrasts Ἑβραῖοι with “ἡμεῖς who speak Greek.” This is its use in Acts 6:1, where it is contrasted with Ἑλληνιστής, a Hellenist or Greek-speaking Jew.

<sup>55</sup>Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 178.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*; Ἀιβρέων would be a variant form of Ἑβραίων.

<sup>58</sup>Wickham, *Hebrews*, xv.

argument on its occurrence alone unless there is contextual evidence to indicate which referent is intended—something that an editorially appended title does not have.<sup>59</sup>

Others have suggested that the reference to leaders in contrast to the addressees in 13:7, 17—and thus a two-party, adversarial setting—supports a Jerusalem location in light of the known rift in Jerusalem due to the controversy over legalism.<sup>60</sup> Although this might be compatible with a Jerusalem view, it certainly does not demand it. There were sufficient leader-follower splits in the early church to present several possible settings (e.g., Corinth). Moreover, the reference to leaders is not particularly an adversarial reference. The exhortation is as appropriate to a unified context as it is to a fractured one. Finally, as Harrison points out, the writer addresses both leaders and followers as a unified group in the same context as these exhortations (13:24).<sup>61</sup>

Some see an imminent crisis referred to in several passages from Hebrews—a crisis that is identified with the approaching siege of Jerusalem.<sup>62</sup> The evidence cited includes 1:2 (“in these last days”); 3:13 (“as long as it is called Today”); 10:25 (“as you see the Day approaching”); and 12:27 (“the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things”). If these references referred to a specific historical event in the first century, then this might be a valid argument (though it would not necessitate Jerusalem—Guthrie also accepts the approaching Neronian persecutions as an adequate explanation if a Roman destination is accepted<sup>63</sup>). If, however, these are eschatological references that include a range of times from the entire present inter-advent era to the destruction of the present earth, then this argument loses all force.

It is also proposed that the absence of any Gentile-Jewish controversy can only fit an all-Jewish church—the only example of which is Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup> To have force, it would be necessary for this argument to demonstrate that there were no other churches that either had avoided a Gentile-Jewish controversy or that there were no other churches comprised of all Jewish Christians. Either option is highly improbable. (That Jerusalem had no Gentile-Jewish controversy might also be challenged.)

Perhaps of greater significance is the suggestion that no other church ever laid claim to this epistle—and Jerusalem’s destruction was sufficiently soon after the receipt of this letter that the church there had no time to do so.<sup>65</sup> Since the letter itself survived, however, there must have been those who preserved it who would have known the original destination and could well have pointed this out. (Some might argue that this was the point of the early title attached to the letter: πρὸς Ἑβραίους, but see above.)

Based on 12:22, Buchanan argues for an explicit reference to Jerusalem as the location of the recipients: “you have come to Mount Zion.”<sup>66</sup> This results in the necessity of creative explanations for the following context: “the heavenly Jerusalem . . . myriads or angels, etc.” To refer this to the first-century, physical city of Jerusalem requires Buchanan to allegorize the land as the church:

Zion was the capital city of the promised land. It was the city which had foundations. It was the heavenly city in the heavenly fatherland which was the goal of Abraham’s migration. In the author’s judgment, it was the ultimate

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<sup>59</sup>“The error that this title taken alone indicates Palestine cannot be too often contradicted” (Zahn, *Introduction*, 2:297).

<sup>60</sup>Ramsay, cited by Harrison, *Introduction*, 371.

<sup>61</sup>Harrison, 371.

<sup>62</sup>Guthrie, *Introduction*, 711.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 718. On the basis of this argument, other locations are also possible, e.g., Smyrna (Rev 2:10) or Philadelphia (Rev 3:10).

<sup>64</sup>G. Salmon, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 427; as cited by Guthrie, *Introduction*, 711.

<sup>65</sup>Guthrie cites this argument (*ibid.*, 711); it is probably another of Salmon’s arguments.

<sup>66</sup>Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 255–56.

goal of all sons of Abraham.<sup>67</sup>

The hermeneutical legitimacy of such exegetical ingenuity is highly questionable, if for no other reason than, as Robinson has pointed out,<sup>68</sup> it involves an internal contradiction with 13:14, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Buchanan resolves the problem by excising chapter 13—it is written by a different author with a different view.<sup>69</sup> Such extremities are not necessary.

An additional problem with a Palestinian setting is the reference to the temporal assistance rendered by the recipients to other believers in 6:10. This does not seem to fit the poverty of the Jerusalem church (e.g., Acts 11:27–30).<sup>70</sup> This might be offset by other examples of churches giving out of their poverty (e.g., the Macedonian churches, 2 Cor 8:1–3), yet the expectation would not be as likely as another location not known for its poverty.<sup>71</sup> Another mitigating factor is that this may not have been financial aid sent to other churches but simply mutual help within their own church. This might be paralleled with their support of others suffering persecution mentioned in 10:33–34.

Jerusalem is also an unlikely destination in view of the references to persecution. That they had suffered in this way is obvious from 10:32–39, but the added note in 12:4 implies that this persecution had not yet resulted in martyrdom for believers in that assembly. This would not have been the case in Jerusalem, for martyrdom began there with Stephen’s death (Acts 7:54–8:1). This would not preclude another Palestinian location, although the dispersion of the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:1–2) might make it less likely.

Guthrie points out that the force of many objections to a Jerusalem destination lose their force if the destination is elsewhere in the Palestinian context, though still near enough to Jerusalem to account for the apparent references to that city.<sup>72</sup> This is certainly possible, but at that point there is no positive evidence, only a plausible guess which, though it might explain most or all of the internal phenomena of Hebrews, falls short of positive proof.

## Rome

Rome was first proposed as the destination of Hebrews in 1752 by Wettstein.<sup>73</sup> The most frequently cited evidence for a Roman destination is the phrase found in 13:24, Ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας (those of Italy send you their greetings). The assumption of this argument is that the individuals so identified are expatriate

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>68</sup>John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 206.

<sup>69</sup>Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 267–68.

<sup>70</sup>Related information may be found in 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:25–32; Gal 2:10. See the helpful summaries of the Jerusalem offering by Robert Stein (“Jerusalem,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, 472–73 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 1993], 472–73) and Scot McKnight (“Collection for the Saints,” in *ibid.*, 143–47). Zahn uses the same argument (*Introduction*, 2:342).

<sup>71</sup>Rome, for example, is known from external sources for its generosity. Dionysius (bishop of Corinth in the late 2d century) says of Rome: “For this practice has prevailed with you from the very beginning, to do good to all the brethren in every way, and to send contributions to many churches in every city. Thus refreshing the needy in their want, and furnishing to the brethren condemned to the mines, what was necessary, by these contributions which ye have been accustomed to send from the beginning, you preserve, as Romans, the practices of your ancestors the Romans” (Dionysius of Corinth according to Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.23.10). The reference is given in Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:lviii. This reference is about 120 years after the writing of Hebrews, however. Lane also refers to the salutation of Ignatius’ Epistle to the Romans (which would be much closer than Dionysius chronologically, written in very early 2d century), but that text, though complementary of the church, does not speak specifically of Rome’s generosity.

<sup>72</sup>Guthrie, *Introduction*, 712.

<sup>73</sup>J. J. Wettstein, *He Kaine Diatheke: Novum Testamentum graece*, 2:386–87, as cited by Attridge, *Hebrews*, 10.

Italians who are sending greetings back home with the letter. The preposition ἀπό can carry either of two meanings in this context: 1) those in Italy, or 2) those from Italy (originally, but now residing elsewhere). The first use is roughly equivalent to ἐν and may be illustrated from one of the Oxyrhynchus papyri: τῶν ἀπ’ Ὀξυρύγχων, which, in its context, can only mean “the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus.”<sup>74</sup> The second use is perhaps more common; it may be seen in John 1:44; and Acts 6:9; 10:23. Ellingworth concludes that the expatriate sense (2) “gives the more natural sense.”<sup>75</sup> Most scholars conclude that this must therefore indicate that they were Italian acquaintances known to the writer who sent their greetings to those “back home.” It is not clear that this is a necessary or logical conclusion. Is it impossible for Italian friends to send greetings to any location other than Italy? The expression could certainly mean that they are sending greetings to Italy, but it certainly does not require that understanding. While certainly reasonable, neither assumption has any objective basis—there is no way to prove either view of the phrase. As Farrar says, “nothing in the way of reasonable conjecture can be deduced from a reference so absolutely vague.”<sup>76</sup>

Another possible connection with Rome is Paul’s discussion of diet in Romans 14—a concern related to the Mosaic regulations. This parallels a similar concern in Hebrews 13:9 (cf. also 9:10). The evidence is not adequate to demonstrate a Roman destination, however. Other New Testament communities had similar concerns (e.g., 1 Cor 8; Col 2:16–17). The argument would only argue for the destination if it addressed a problem known to be unique to a particular location.

The allusion to persecution in Hebrews 10:32–34 may refer to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in A.D. 49–50 (Acts 18:2).<sup>77</sup> Two replies might be offered. First, persecution of Christians was widespread (even if sporadic). From the New Testament record it is known that there was persecution in Palestine (Acts 8:1–3), Macedonia (1 Thess 1:6) and Asia Minor (1 Pet 4:12–19). Second, other than the confiscation of property (v. 34), the description does not match Claudius’ expulsion order.<sup>78</sup> The text refers to these people as standing their ground, not fleeing the city. It also implies a series of events, probably over an extended period of time: τοῦτο μὲν . . . τοῦτο δὲ (sometimes . . . at other times, v. 33).

The reference to the expulsion of the Jews by Claudius raises another question. If Hebrews assumes an audience composed primarily of Jewish Christians, then Rome might be a less likely destination as a result of the Jews’ expulsion. Not all Jews would have been covered by the edict, of course (those who were Roman citizens would have been exempt<sup>79</sup>), but the result could have been to produce a church that was more dominantly Gentile than Jewish

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<sup>74</sup>*P.Oxy.* i.81, ll. 5f, cited by Moffatt, *Hebrews*, 246. He also gives another similar use from a second-century ostrakon. Bruce (*Hebrews*, 415–16 n. 133) and Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 29) accept Moffatt’s evidence. Lane cites Acts 18:2 (Ἀκύλαν . . . προσφάτως ἐληλυθότα ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας, Aquila . . . who had recently come from Italy) as “the sole parallel” in the New Testament (*Hebrews*, 1:lviii). Although the same two words occur together, their syntactical function is different and this gives the same phrase a different meaning in each instance. In Heb 13:24 the phrase is adjectival and is used substantively. In Acts 18:2 the phrase is adverbial and modifies the verb ἐληλυθότα. This clearly shifts the semantic value of the phrase to that of origin.

<sup>75</sup>Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 29.

<sup>76</sup>F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, Cambridge Greek Testament (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1894), xxxi.

<sup>77</sup>Robinson, *Redating the NT*, 211.

<sup>78</sup>“Iudaeos impulsore Chresto adsidue tumultuantes Roma expulit” (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Life of the Deified Claudius*, 25.4). This may be translated two different ways: “He expelled from Rome the Jews constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,” or “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.” Lane (who provides the text cited, *Hebrews*, 1:lxiv) prefers the first alternative. The date of this edict is given by Orosius (*History*, 7.6.15–16) as A.D. 49.

<sup>79</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 368. It is also possible that not all Jews were included in the order. The Jewish community in Rome was divided into several synagogue districts. It may have been that only those districts affected by the rioting were subjected to the expulsion order.

than it would have been without the expulsion of the Jews.<sup>80</sup> If Hebrews was not written until fifteen or twenty years later (as it probably was), that situation could well have changed. Aquila and Priscilla had returned to the city by the time Paul wrote to the church there, probably in A.D. 56 (Rom 16:3).<sup>81</sup>

An additional factor to be considered is that Hebrews was probably not addressed to an entire church, whether in Rome or elsewhere, but to a specific house church<sup>82</sup>—which may well have been comprised of primarily Jewish Christians. This factor mitigates many of the arguments against a Roman destination noted above. This would be especially relevant to the contrasting description of Claudius’ expulsion order and, perhaps even more so, to the Jewish/Gentile complexion of the congregation. A city-wide church almost certainly would have had a considerable variety of ethnic backgrounds with widely varying combinations of Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians.

These matters do not make a Roman destination for Hebrews impossible, but they do pose questions that lessen its likelihood to a certain degree, if, indeed, the writer of Hebrews assumes a Jewish Christian audience.

A more substantial argument is Clement of Rome’s early use of Hebrews—the earliest known external reference to Hebrews.<sup>83</sup> In his letter to the church at Corinth (about A.D. 96) he weaves excerpts from the first chapter of Hebrews into his text.

1 Clement 36:1–5		Hebrews 1:3ff (NIV)	
Αὕτη ἡ ὁδός, ἀγαπητοί, ἐν ἣ εὐρομεν τὸ σωτήριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν ἀρχιερέα τῶν προσφορῶν ἡμῶν ...	This is the way, loved ones, in which we found our salvation: Jesus Christ the High-priest of our offerings ...		
ὅς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς μεγαλώσυνης αὐτοῦ τοσοῦτῳ μείζων ἐστὶν	Who being the radiance of his majesty is so much greater	The Son is the radiance of God’s glory . . . (v. 3a) So he	ὅς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης ... τοσοῦτῳ κρείττων

<sup>80</sup>“This expulsion, however temporary, must have had a significant impact on the development of the church at Rome. Specifically, the Gentile element in the churches, undoubtedly present before the expulsion, would have come into greater prominence as a result of the absence for a greater or lesser period of time of all (or virtually all) the Jewish Christians” (Douglas Moo, *Romans 1–8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1991], 5). Zahn, however, argues that the Roman church was “made up of a large majority of native Jews and a small minority of Gentiles, so small that the whole Church could be uniformly addressed as a Jewish Christian Church” (*Introduction*, 1:422; 2:345). Zahn’s position seems to be in the minority. In opposition to Zahn, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:17–21; and Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4–5. Both Cranfield and Morris see Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome with (perhaps) the Gentiles holding a slight majority. Neither group would have an overwhelming preponderance.

<sup>81</sup>Since Claudius died in A.D. 54, the impact of the edict may have been blunted, ignored, or even rescinded under his successor, Nero. The first five years of Nero’s reign were known as the “five good years” during which advisors governed for the underage emperor (then only 16). On the other hand, Nero was not known as a friend of the Jews—the Jewish revolt took place under his administration. However, Nero’s second wife, Poppaea Sabina, was interested in Judaism and lobbied for their interests. (Sinclair Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 25–27; and Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:18, esp. n. 5.)

<sup>82</sup>This is suggested by the reference in 13:24, “Greet all the saints,” which would thus be understood as the other house churches in the city.

<sup>83</sup>Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxiii, n. 3.

1 Clement 36:1–5		Hebrews 1:3ff (NIV)	
ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον ὄνομα κεκληρονόμηκεν.	than angels, as he has inherited a superior name.	became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (v. 4).	γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.
γέγραπται γὰρ οὕτως· Ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα.	For so it is written; He makes his angels winds and his servants a flame of fire;	In speaking of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.” (v.7)	καὶ πρὸς μὲν τοὺς ἀγγέλους λέγει· ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα,
Ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ οὕτως εἶπεν ὁ δεσπότης· Υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε·	but of his Son the Master said thus; You are my Son, today I have become your Father.	But about the Son he says, (v. 8a) “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (v. 5b)	πρὸς δὲ τὸν υἱόν· υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε
αἶτησαι παρ' ἐμοῦ, καὶ δώσω σοι ἔθνη τὴν κληρονομίαν σου, καὶ τὴν κατάσχεσίν σου τὰ πέρατα τῆς γῆς.	Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession.	Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession (Ps. 2:8).	αἶτησαι παρ' ἐμοῦ, καὶ δώσω σοι ἔθνη τὴν κληρονομίαν σου, καὶ τὴν κατάσχεσίν σου τὰ πέρατα τῆς γῆς. (LXX)
καὶ πάλιν λέγει πρὸς αὐτόν· Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου, ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου.	And again he says to him; Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.	And again . . . he says, (v. 6) “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (v.13).	ὅταν δὲ πάλιν ... λέγει· κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου, ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου
Τίνες οὖν οἱ ἐχθροί; οἱ φαῦλοι καὶ ἀντιτασσόμενοι τῷ θελήματι αὐτοῦ.	Who then are these enemies? The ones who are wicked and resist his will.		

Although some of these verses come from the Old Testament, the introductory quotation is from Hebrews and all but one of the remaining excerpts are also found in Hebrews 1. This demonstrates that Hebrews was circulated widely enough to be known in Rome by the end of the first century.<sup>84</sup> This could be explained easily if the original

<sup>84</sup>A short time after Clement, Hermas, also of Roman provenance, probably reflects a knowledge of Heb 3:12, Βλέπετε, ἀδελφοί, μήποτε ἔσται ἔν τιμι ὑμῶν καρδιά πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας ἐν τῷ ἀποστήναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος (“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God”). Shepherd of Hermas,

destination was in or near Rome. On the other hand, the early circulation of the New Testament documents (evidenced in Col 4:16) is adequate to account for Clement's knowledge of the letter.<sup>85</sup>

Another parallel with Rome may be seen in the leadership vocabulary employed. Hebrews refers to church leaders as οἱ ἡγούμενοι ὑμᾶς (the ones who lead you) in 13:7, 17, 24. This is not the usual New Testament designation (it occurs only one other time in this way: Acts 15:22).<sup>86</sup> It is perhaps significant that this was a common designation at Rome: 1 Clement 1.3; 11.6; 21:6; 37:2; and Hermas, Vision, 2.2.6; 3.9.7. This evidence is later (the end of the first and early second century), but the parallel is interesting.

That Rome was the original destination of Hebrews is a possible explanation, but neither determinative nor demonstrable. "Doubtless Rome is as good a guess as any, but it is not much more than a guess."<sup>87</sup> It would appear to be a better guess than Jerusalem.

## CONCLUSION

It appears quite certain that the addressees of Hebrews are primarily Christians from a Jewish background. This best explains the tone and content of the letter. It is not nearly as certain that these believers comprised a house church in the area of Rome. That, however, accounts for the evidence available and also allows a very realistic and feasible reconstruction of the circumstances of Hebrews. Such a scenario would involve the following events.<sup>88</sup>

The members of a particular house church in Rome suffered persecution in A.D. 49–50 in conjunction with the expulsion order of Claudius. Whether they were among those expelled from the city or only suffered the opprobrium (in various forms) that came from association with those expelled cannot be determined from the evidence available. They had withstood this trial in good faith. At the time Hebrews was written a new situation had developed. Claudius had died in A.D. 54. Nero had been acclaimed emperor. During the initial years of his regency, when events were relatively peaceful (A.D. 55–60), Jews and Christians who had been expelled from the city were able to return. This is evidenced in Paul's Roman letter in A.D. 59 (Aquila and Priscilla had returned to Rome according to Rom 16:3).

Shortly after that, however, the nature of Nero's reign (apart from the guardians who directed the affairs of state in his early years) is becoming evident.<sup>89</sup> It was becoming quite apparent that Nero would soon unleash a wave of

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Vision, 2.3.2, ἀλλὰ σώζει σε τὸ μὴ ἀποστήναι σε ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος ("but your not turning away from the living God saves you"). Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 3.7.2, οἱ δὲ πίπτοντες εἰς τὸ πῦρ καὶ καίόμενοι, οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ εἰς τέλος ἀποστάντες τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος ("But the ones who fall into the fire and are burned, these are the ones who in the end turn away from the living God"). Although not extensive, the parallel phrases (ἀποστήναι σε ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος, and ἀποστάντες τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος) would appear to be dependent on the wording of Hebrews (ἀποστήναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος).

<sup>85</sup>Guthrie, *Introduction*, 714. Perhaps related to this is "the fact that the Roman church, and the West in general, took so long to ascribe it to Paul, [this] may argue that they enjoyed positive information that it was *not* written by the apostle." Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 401.

<sup>86</sup>The most common designation is πρεσβύτερος (about 20× counting related forms). About a half dozen times the ἐπίσκοπος word group is used; ποιμήν also occurs a few times. The last two, though not used more than ἡγεομαι, evidence a much wider distribution.

<sup>87</sup>Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 401. Zahn provides a lengthy defense of a Roman destination, though much of his argument is based on showing that all the internal evidence is compatible with what is known of the history of the Roman church on the basis of other evidence (both internal from Paul's letter to Rome and external history). His thesis is probably adequate to overcome various objections that have been posed to a Roman destination, but they fall short of positively proving that Hebrews must have been the destination (*Introduction*, 2:341–51; see also 2:293–41).

<sup>88</sup>In its basic outline, the setting envisioned here agrees with, and has been influenced by, Lane, "Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting," 13–18; see also Lane, *Hebrews*, li–lxvi.

<sup>89</sup>He had his mother murdered in A.D. 59; the prefect of the praetorian guard died suspiciously in A.D. 62; he had his wife Octavia killed the same year so he could marry Poppaea (a Jewess); Seneca retired from the senate in A.D. 62

terror on the church. This may have been shortly after the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64 when much of the city was burned. Many residents of Rome believed that Nero was responsible for the fire. Despite all his efforts to squelch the discontent by providing shelter and food, popular opinion did not turn their suspicions away from the emperor.

Eventually Nero began diverting attention to others as responsible for the fire. Christians became convenient scapegoats and the imperial police began making arrests. Torture and a variety of unpleasant deaths followed to provide a public spectacle.<sup>90</sup> Such a situation would not have touched the lives of every Christian or every house church immediately. In a city the size of Rome there were many small groups of believers scattered across the city. Especially in the confusion that followed the fire it would have taken a considerable period of time for the government to identify and locate most of the house churches. Even if there was a period of mass arrests and executions (if they may be called that), it is known that “Christians continued to be a convenient scapegoat to blame for political problems and natural disasters for a long time thereafter.”<sup>91</sup> It was probably during this period of persecution that both Paul and Peter were executed in Rome.

This setting may also explain why neither the writer nor the readers are identified in the letter. Were the letter to come into the wrong hands, it would immediately result in a series of arrests. The recipients would have recognized the writer from the incipient clues in the letter even if the letter were not personally delivered by the writer’s messenger.

Exactly where in this period (which continued at its worst until Nero’s suicide in June of A.D. 68) Hebrews is to be located is uncertain. It was perhaps near the beginning when Nero’s plans were becoming evident but had not yet been fully implemented. The particular house church to which it was addressed had not yet suffered directly, but were very fearful of what was to come. Some had ceased to identify with the Christians, hoping perhaps to avoid persecution. Others were wrestling with the thought of doing the same. To this fearful, struggling group of believers the letter of Hebrews comes as encouragement and exhortation not to give up, to hold fast their profession of faith, not to go back to their pre-Christian profession just to avoid persecution.

The preacher knew that these men and women were frightened. They were acquainted with the paralysis that issues from the fear of death (2:14–15). In their fragileness they had considered what measures they might take in order to avoid calling attention to themselves. They began to show signs of regression (5:11–14), and in some instances they withdrew from the house church altogether (10:25). The public acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as the Son of God could cost them their lives. Withdrawal appeared to be an expedient measure. It was in this setting that the remaining members of the house church gathered to listen to this sermon.<sup>92</sup>

This sermon is described in the author’s own words as “a word of exhortation” (13:22) in “response to the sagging faith of frightened men and women at a time when the imperial capital was striving to regain its composure. . .

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and was ordered to commit suicide in A.D. 65 (Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 27).

<sup>90</sup>Tacitus records what happened. “No human aid, no largesse from the Emperor, no supplications to heaven, did anything to ease the impression that the fire had been deliberately started. Nero looked around for a scapegoat, and inflicted the most fiendish tortures on a group of persons already hated by the people for their crimes. This was the sect known as Christians. . . . Those who confessed to being Christians were at once arrested, but on their testimony a great crowd of people were convicted, not so much on the charge of arson, but of hatred of the entire human race. They were put to death amid every kind of mockery. Dressed in the skins of wild beasts, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or were crucified, or burned to death: when night came, they served as human torches to provide lights. Nero threw open his gardens for this entertainment, and provided games in the Circus, mingling with the crowd in a charioteer’s dress, or else standing in the car. These Christians were guilty, and well deserved their fate, but a sort of compassion for them arose, because they were being destroyed to glut the cruelty of a single man and for no public end” (*The Annals of Tacitus*, trans. Donald Dudley [New York: New American Library, 1966], 15.44). A slightly different translation (which may be more easily accessible) is cited by Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 472.

<sup>91</sup>Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 473.

<sup>92</sup>Lane, “Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting,” 17–18.



. It conveys a word from God addressed to the sometimes harsh reality of life as a Christian in an insecure world.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 18.