

SUFFERING: A KEY TO THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Norman H. Young

INTRODUCTION

The debate over who were the addressees of the Epistle to the Hebrews usually revolves around whether the recipients were Christians of a Gentile or a Jewish origin.¹ Related to this issue is the question of the epistle's pastoral concern. A widely held view is that the readers were Jewish Christians who were in danger of slipping back into their former faith, and that Hebrews was written to counter this threat by disabusing them of their infatuation with Judaism.² Others, however, dismiss this understanding and see Hebrews' references to OT religion simply as a foil against which the author exhorts his sluggish Gentile-Christian readers to a deeper commitment to Christ.³ Some try to solve the problem by arguing for a mixed community of believers from both a Jewish and a Gentile background.⁴

This short paper assumes that the readers are of a Jewish background who have not yet completely detached themselves from the synagogue. The exact location of the addressees is beyond our ken. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that they are second-generation Christians situated somewhere within the ethnic diversity of the Graeco-Roman world. The reasons for their staying connected to the synagogue were practical and emotional, and included fear of abuse if they separated entirely. It is this latter assumption that we wish to explore.

¹For discussion see Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 64-79, 146-8; D. A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2000) 2-7.

²F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 3-9.

³H. F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer: Übersetzt und Erklärt* (KKNT 15. Auflage; Göttingen, 1991) 71-2.

⁴P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1993) 21-9; deSilva, *Gratitude*, 2-4.

*THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS ELSEWHERE
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*

Scott Cunningham draws six conclusions from his study of the theme of persecution in Luke-Acts. His conclusions could apply with minimal adjustment to the theology of suffering found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. His six conclusions are as follows:

1. Persecution is part of the plan of God.
2. Persecution results from the Jews' rejection of Jesus and his followers.
3. The persecuted people of God stand in continuity with God's prophets of the past.
4. Persecution is an integral consequence of following Jesus.
5. Persecution is the occasion of Christian perseverance.
6. Persecution is the occasion of divine triumph.⁵

Each of Cunningham's six points is paralleled in Hebrews. First, Hebrews sees abuse as a discipline from God, and therefore within his plan (12:7-11). Secondly, the rejection of Jesus by the old order is the context of the readers' persecution (13:10-14). Thirdly, the heroes of the past and the suffering of Jesus provide models that the author uses to encourage his disheartened readers (11:1-12:1-4). Fourthly, their suffering is the outcome of following Jesus (10:32; 12:2). Fifthly, the theme of perseverance (note the use of ὑπομένω and ὑπομενή in 10:32, 36; 12:1, 7; 13:13) dominates the writer's many exhortations to faithfulness. Sixthly, trials provide an opportunity for God's power to triumph over adversity (12:6).

Such an understanding of the place of suffering in the purpose of God and the experience of Christians is widely manifest throughout the NT writings.⁶ For example, each of the Gospels has Jesus predicting persecution for his disciples. In Mark, Jesus predicts that his followers will be handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues. He goes on to speak of their arrest and being brought to trial, of family members betraying each other to death, of all people hating them on his account (Mark 13:9-13). John notes that servants are not treated any better than their masters; hence Jesus' experience of ill treatment will be the dis-

⁵Scott Cunningham, *'Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSS 142; Sheffield: Academic, 1997) 337-8.

⁶Note the large number of recent publications on this theme: Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defence of his Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); Charles H. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering: the Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991); Gregory L. Bloomquist, *Function of Suffering in Philippians* (JSNTSS 78; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Eben Scheffler, *Suffering in Luke's Gospel* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993); Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

ciples' lot also (15:20-21). Thus the prospect for Jesus' followers is persecution (16:33).

The great persecutor of the early church was of course Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1; 9:4-5; 22:4; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6), but as Paul he became the greatest example of Christian suffering (2 Cor 4:7-11; 6:3-10; 11:23-28; Gal 6:17; Col 1:24). In 1 Thess 2:14, Paul speaks of the churches in both Macedonia and Judea as suffering at the hands of their own countrymen. He says he boasts about their steadfastness in the persecutions and trials they were enduring (2 Thess 1:5). He urges the Roman Christians to be patient in affliction (Rom 12:12). The Pastoral Epistles use the image of the suffering of a soldier to urge the readers to endurance (2 Tim 2:3; 4:5). The Christians of Asia Minor were being refined by the trials and tribulations that they were enduring (1 Peter 1:6; 2:19-20; 4:12-19). Revelation gives a similar picture of prison, tribulation and even death (1:9; 2:10, 13; 6:9-10; 7:14; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:2; 20:4). Given, then, the presence of the motif of suffering throughout the rest of the NT, it is no surprise to find the same theme occurring in Hebrews.

Is this motif of suffering in Hebrews and the other strands of the NT simply a literary device, or perhaps a figment of a paranoid mind? Or is it rooted in historical fact and the actual experience of the early Christians? Provided we allow for some exaggeration in the reports, and for the use of vivid language drawn from both biblical and extra-biblical texts (which may go beyond the severity of the readers' current abuse), there is little reason for doubting the historicity of the accounts of persecution in the apostolic period. There was a widespread distrust, even hatred, of the early followers of Christ, and this no doubt gave rise to acts of abuse against them.⁷ The parent-religion, Judaism, was immediately hostile towards its latest offspring, Christianity, and no doubt this added to Rome's suspicions of Christianity.⁸

Douglas Hare tables five areas of the Christian witness against which Judaism reacted negatively: first, the fact that Christians questioned the

⁷Beyond the NT itself references to persecution in the Apostolic Fathers is frequent: *1 Clem.* 1.1-2; 6.2; 7.1; 39.1-2; 60.3; *2 Clem.* 5.4; 13.4-5; *Ign. Mag.* 9.1; *Tral.* 1.1; *Rom* 6.3; *Phld.* 10.1; *Smyrn.* 5.1; *Pol.* 3.1-2; *Pol. Phil* 8.1-3; *Mart. Pol.* 2.1-4.1; 12.1-13.3; 19.1-2; *Diogn.* 5.11-12, 14-17; 7.7-8; *Did.* 1.3; 16.4; *Barn.* 1.7-8. For Jewish persecution of Christians see C. J. Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics*, 30-150 C. E. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

⁸It is easy to exaggerate the extent and severity of the persecution and the role of Jews in it, but it is also just as easy to minimize it. For the former see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyr and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1965), and for the latter see Judith M. Lieu, "Accusations of Jewish Persecution in Early Christian Sources, with Particular Reference to Justin Martyr and the Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity* (eds. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa; Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 279-95.

central symbols such as the temple, Torah and the Holy City. Second, is their rejection of Jewish nationalism. Third, is their attitude to Gentiles. Fourth, is their denial of the special status of Israel. And fifth, is the compromising of monotheism through their emphasis on the divine status of Jesus.⁹ Hebrews very clearly gives a Christian response to many of these areas of concern (e.g., sanctuary, Holy City, Christology, covenant).¹⁰

The source of the abuse is likely to have been Jewish, perhaps through slandering and even formal charges to the magistrates.¹¹ Commenting on Rev 2:9, Craig Koester notes that "slander could serve as a public denunciation of Christians before the local authorities who could imprison and perhaps kill them."¹² Such abuse was local and sporadic, but nevertheless they were serious and intense for the fledgling Christian communities. The early, scattered Christian assemblies would soon learn of any abuse of their fellow believers that occurred in any part of the Mediterranean world. The addressees' own past experience would make them particularly sensitive to such news.

SUFFERING IN THE READERS' PAST AND BEYOND

In the debate over the ethnic origin of the addressees and the nature of their drifting away (2:1), the data in Hebrews about the suffering of the recipients is often marginalized or even ignored.¹³ It is the contention of this paper that it is in fact a major cause of the readers' religious apathy. This at first may seem a dubious thesis given that *πάσχω* occurs only four times in Hebrews and these refer not to the plight of the readers, but to the suffering of Christ (2:18; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12). The noun *πάθημα* is also infrequent. It occurs three times in Hebrews. In two instances it refers to the trials of Jesus (2:9-10), but on one occasion it describes the past ordeals of the readers (10:32). There are two occurrences of *συμπαθεῖν* in Hebrews, one referring to Christ (4:15) and the other describing the readers' past compassionate behaviour (10:34). This is limited linguistic data,

⁹Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St Matthew* (SNTSM 6; Cambridge: CUP, 1967) 3-13.

¹⁰For a strong defence of Hebrews as a polemic against Judaism see Iutisone Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe* (JSNTSS 219; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2002).

¹¹For Asia Minor at least see Pliny *Ep.* 96; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge U.K.: Eerdmans, 2001) 63-5.

¹²Koester, *Revelation*, 64.

¹³For example, there is no article on Hebrews in William Horbury and Brian McNeil (eds), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981). The six references to Hebrews in the book's index are nearly all found in footnotes.

but to dismiss the idea that the readers were suffering because of a paucity of certain terms would be a mistake.¹⁴

The writer knows the readers, as is clearly intimated in 13:22-24, and he is familiar with their past sufferings, which he catalogues in detail in 10:32-39. He refers to their enduring "a hard struggle of sufferings" (πολλὴν ἀθλήσιν ... παθημάτων, v. 32), to their being publicly exposed "to abuses and persecutions" (ὀνειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν, v. 33), to their suffering with those in "prisons" (δεσμίοις, v. 34), and to their joyful acceptance of the "plundering of their possessions" (τὴν ἀρπαγὴν τῶν ὑπαρχόντων, v. 34). In 13:3 he again urges them to continue to identify with those in "prison" and with those being "tortured" (τῶν κακουχουμένων). The author's reminder in 12:4 that they "have not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood" (οὐπω μέχρις αἵματος ἀντικατέστητε πρὸς τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι) also indicates familiarity with the community's history of hardship, and that it fell short of martyrdom.

The subsequent admonition in 12:8-12 with its reference to parental discipline shows that the writer expected his readers to experience more suffering in the future. The writer in other words agrees with his readers' apprehension that their life as followers of Christ was not destined to get any better for them in the future than it had been for them in the past. He does not therefore attempt to allay their fears of persecution, but rather to exhort them to brace themselves for it. This comes out in the way he picks up on his use of ὀνειδισμός in his description of the readers' own abuse (10:33) when he exhorts them to go outside the camp bearing the same abuse (ὀνειδισμός) that Jesus endured (13:13). Jesus' abuse was of course Calvary. Their going outside some safe structure such as Judaism, invited the same kind of pain that Jesus experienced.¹⁵ This is the future prospect of their heeding the writer's admonition "to go outside the camp", but not their actual situation at the time of his writing.

The conjoining of suffering and a future hope in chapter 11 also reflects the writer's conviction that abuse is a real possibility for those who heed his call to affirm Christ publicly and boldly (παρρησία, 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35). Equally, the writer invites his readers to look by faith beyond the present exigencies to a future made secure by the achievements of Christ. Faith is that capacity to see and be certain about God's invisible future (11:1, 3). Thus Noah when warned about things not yet seen prepared an ark (v. 7). Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, yet looking forward to the city of God (vv. 8-9). The Patriarchs saw the promises of God from a distance, and longed for the future city of God

¹⁴The theme of suffering in Hebrews is emphasized by Craig R. Koester ("Hebrews, Rhetoric, and the Future of Humanity," *CBQ* 64 [2002] 103-23).

¹⁵See my "Bearing His Reproach (Heb 13.9-14)," *NTS* 48 (2002) 243-61.

(vv. 13-16). Moses suffered hardship with the people of God (συγκακουχέσθαι τῷ λαῷ τοῦ θεοῦ) eschewing the comforts of Egypt, preferring the reproach of Christ (τὸν ὀνειδισμόν τοῦ Χριστοῦ) because he saw him who is invisible (vv. 25-27).

The catalogue of indecencies in vv. 35-38 was not randomly selected simply for rhetorical purposes. The list reflects the degree to which, and the direction in which, the writer expected the community to go in living out its faith in Christ. The list is fearsome: tortured, jeers, flogging, prison, stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The language in vv. 35-38 is largely drawn from Maccabees, as is often noted.¹⁶ The reliance on Maccabees is readily observed:¹⁷

HEBREWS 11:35-38	1-4 MACCABEES
33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed [acts of] righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions ,	1.2:60 Daniel, because of his innocence, was delivered from the mouth of the lions .
34 quenched the power of fire	4.9:20 and the heap of coals was being quenched by the drippings of gore,
escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong ,	1.3:18 Judas replied, "... in the sight of Heaven there is no difference between saving by many or by few .
became mighty in war, put foreign armies (παρεμβολάς) to flight .	1.4:20 They saw that their army had been put to flight , and that the Jews were burning the camp (παρεμβολήν).
35 Women received their dead by resurrection.	2.7:23 Therefore the Creator of the world...will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again." Cf. 7:14
Others were tortured (ἐτυμπανίσθησαν),	3.3:27 But those who shelter any of the Jews ... will be tortured to death (ἀποτυμπανισθήσεται) with the most hateful torments.

¹⁶N. C. Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1-13 in its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 38; D. A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBL Diss. Series 152; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1995) 196-202.

¹⁷Surprisingly the only reference to Maccabees in the list of allusions and verbal parallels in the 4th edition of the UBS text is 2 Macc 6:18-7:42 (Heb 11:35).

HEBREWS 11:35-38 (ctd)	1-4 MACCABEES (ctd)
refusing to accept release , in order to obtain a better resurrection.	2,6:30 "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I [Eleazar] might have been saved from death , I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating (μαστιγούμενος), but in my soul I am glad to suffer (πάσχω) these things because I fear him."
Others suffered mocking and flogging (ἐμπαυγμών καὶ μαστίγων),	2.7:7 they brought forward the second [brother] for their sport (ἐμπαυγμόν).
and even chains (δεσμῶν) and imprisonment.	2.7:1 seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs (μάστιξιν καὶ νευραῖς).
... they were killed by the sword ; ... destitute, persecuted, tormented,	4.12:2 [Antiochus] felt strong compassion for this child when he saw that he was already in fetters (τὰ δεσμά).
38 ... They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.	1.12:48 the people of Ptolemais closed the gates and seized him [Jonathan], and they killed with the sword all who had entered with him.
	2.10:6 ... remembering how not long before, during the festival of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals.

The parallels demonstrate how dependent the Christian doctrine of martyrdom was upon the example of the Jewish resistance against the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.¹⁸ The language obviously exceeds the readers' experience, hence there are few terms in common between the passages describing the readers' pain (10:32-34; 11:1-12:1; 12:2-4; 12:5-11; 13:13) and the trials of the (Maccabean) heroes of the past (11:32-38).¹⁹ The exemplars of faith from of old, who have run their race, now surround these tiring Christians and urge them to keep on running

¹⁸G. W. H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and Inspiration," in Horbury and McNeil, *Suffering*, 118. Lampe goes on to make the distinction that the Maccabees were more a defensive action whereas the Christians saw the public trial as an opportunity to witness to Christ.

¹⁹Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 58, 69-70.

with perseverance. However, the major means of encouragement for the writer is not the worthies of the distant past, but the example of Christ in the immediate past.

THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

Having established from Scripture that Jesus is superior to the angelic messengers of God (chap. 1), the writer turns in chapter 2 to Jesus' identity with the members of the Christian community. For the writer the promise of Psalm 8, that God crowned humans with glory and honour and put everything under their feet, has not yet been universally fulfilled.²⁰ The exception is Jesus. He has been crowned with glory and honour (v. 9), but the route to this status was through the suffering of his death (vv. 9b-10).²¹ With but slight change he quotes the LXX version of Ps 22:22 (21:23 LXX) and Isa 8:18 to prove that Jesus identified with Christian believers as his siblings (vv. 12-13). Furthermore, in v. 13a he quotes Isa 8:17b (LXX) to establish the view that Jesus endured suffering through his confident trust in God (cf. the worthies of chapter 11). Clearly the readers are to follow the same path of suffering and trust that Jesus their forerunner trod.

Jesus' suffering and death not only achieved salvation (Heb 2:14-15, 17b), it also conditioned him to be a merciful intercessor (v. 17a). Jesus was made perfect through suffering (v. 10), in the sense that the sanctifier and the sanctified are united in a shared humanity and a shared experience of suffering. Through his sufferings, Jesus was thoroughly prepared (perfected) to be a sympathetic high priest. His own experience of suffering and testing qualified him to be a gracious priestly intermediary to those who themselves were suffering and being tested (v. 18). Such assurance of a sympathetic high priest who had himself endured the same reproach that they were experiencing was calculated to encourage the readers to persevere in their Christian life no matter what the cost.

The exhortation in chapters 3-4 that there remains open to all those who persevere a future rest for the pilgrim people of God also concludes with an assurance that Jesus is a sympathetic fellow sufferer. Like them, Jesus faced severe testing, but he never flinched from his commitment to God (πεπειρασμένον δὲ κατὰ πάντα καθ' ὁμοιότητα χωρὶς ἁμαρ-

²⁰Some interpret 2:5-9 as consistently applying to Jesus rather than as a reference to God's ideal for humans contrasted with God's ideal man. I think the latter is more convincing than the former. However, see David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: CUP, 1982) 51-55.

²¹In its original context Ps 8:6 expresses a synonymous parallel between "a little lower than the angels" and "crowned with glory and honour," but Hebrews interprets the two phrases as contrasting opposites.

τίας, v. 15). It is for this reason that the readers are encouraged to approach the throne of grace confident that they will find there mercy and grace to help in their time of need (v. 16). There is no reason then to restrict the description of the high priest found in 5:2 to the Aaronic priesthood ("He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness," NRSV).²²

The wider implication of the description in 5:2 of the high priest's empathy based on his sharing in the common frailties of humanity is brought out in vv. 7-10. In vv. 7-10 Jesus' vulnerability is stressed by reminding the readers that in his earthly life he too recoiled from the prospect of death. He offered, we are told, prayers, petitions, loud cries and tears at the threat of death, yet in the end he submitted to the will of God. His suffering had the same disciplining purpose (καίπερ ὡν υἱός, ἔμαθεν ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν, v. 8) that the author envisages God, as any father, has for his children (sons) (12:5-11). Jesus' perfection then is again the qualification that his suffering gives him to help or to save others in their struggle to be faithful to God in a context of ill treatment (v. 9).

Very relevant then for a marginalized and dispirited minority is the vision of Christ as a superior high priest who, having offered himself, is now enthroned at God's right hand to serve the faithful worshippers on earth. Just as Acts gives Stephen, at the point of his death, a vision of the exalted Son of Man at the right hand of God (7:56); and just as Revelation directs the eyes of the suffering churches of Asia Minor to the exalted Lamb (Rev 5), so the author of Hebrews encourages his readers to look to their champion within the veil (6:19-20). The future then is secure (12:22-24), and the present bearable, provided the readers keep their eyes focused on their forerunner, the one who has finished the race and is now seated triumphantly at God's right hand.

THE NATURE OF THE ABUSE

The graphic language of 11:32-38 may imply that the author contemplated an escalation of ill treatment in the future, but at the time of writing he knew that none of his readers had died for their faith. Though some of the readers had been in prison, which in the Roman era meant being on remand, none of them had apparently received a capital sentence. To limit the persecution to shame and social marginalisation, however, would be to go too far.²³ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that verbal abuse was a

²²In the case of Christ this weakness excluded sin (4:15).

²³DeSilva, plays down the author's contemplation of future physical abuse, though his emphasis on shame and loss of status is valid (deSilva, *Gratitude*, 7-20, 504).

major element in the readers' trials. "Reproach", "insult" and the like are the basic meanings of *ὀνειδισμός*, which is a word that Hebrews uses in three crucial passages (10:32; 11:26; 13:13). This does not make the persecution trivial, for contrary to the common adage ("sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me"), verbal abuse does break bones.

It is now widely accepted that whatever the trauma of the readers in the past, their current harassment was basically verbal.²⁴ If the nature of the persecution was largely verbal, what was its content? Who was harassing the readers? Why did they do it? What kind of insults were being cast against the community? What was their effect? By cautiously mirror-reading the text it may be possible to ascertain something of the nature of the readers' affliction.

Apparently one charge was that the Jesus-faith was a recent phenomenon, and lacked the antiquity of Judaism.²⁵ The author's stress on Jesus as the last in a long line of God's messengers (1:1-2), as well as his eternal divine status (1:10-12) is calculated to refute this charge. Another barb was to point out Christianity's lack of historical heroes. The claim that Jesus is superior to Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and even Abraham is designed to put this challenge to rest. For the same purpose, the author climaxes his catalogue of the faithful heroes with a reference to Christ's mistreatment (12:1-4), and thus transforms the Israelite past into a Christian history.²⁶

On the basis of a covenant between God and Israel, Judaism claimed a holy land, a holy temple, and a holy people, as the hallmarks of God's election.²⁷ Christianity's small, back-room gatherings would have seemed impoverished in comparison. The appeal to the heavenly realities and to the new covenant that Jesus had opened up was calculated to overcome such jibes (7:22; 8:13; 9:11-12; 13:14). By incorporating the small Christian communities into the innumerable heavenly assembly that is to be manifested in the future (11:39-40; 12:22-25), the writer gives them an august status. Christians then are God's true house, provided they hold onto their courage and hope (3:6). The sacrifices that Aaron and the other

²⁴Koester refers to their current situation as "phase 3", in which the previous hostility "gave way to ongoing, but less intense friction between Christians and non-Christians" (*Hebrews*, 71).

²⁵This is a charge made by the Jew in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* and one that Celsus quotes (see n. 28).

²⁶Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* (SBLDS 156; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 10; Salevao, *Legitimation*, 190-93.

²⁷This implies but does not require that the temple was still operative. The fact that the Biblicist author concentrates on the Mosaic tabernacle does not necessarily exclude an application to the temple.

priests ministered were but shadows that the surpassing potency of the death of Christ had made redundant (8:5; 9:9-10; 10:1, 11-18).

So the taunts were seemingly aimed at Christianity's apparent lacks compared to Judaism. The source would most logically be Jewish: "You have no holy place, no ancient tradition, no holy land, no priests, no covenant, and no sacrifice, in a word, no past and no future." Hebrews counters by asserting that Christians have all these things in a new and elevated sense. Hence no taunt concerning the glory of city, land, people, or temple was a worry to a group whose hope was centred elsewhere.²⁸

THE PROMISE OF REST AND THE HEAVENLY TABERNACLE

The emphasis in Heb 3-4 is upon "entering"; specifically "entering God's rest". The verb εἰσερχομαι occurs eleven times in these two chapters. This reflects the author's frequent quotation of Ps 95:11 in these chapters. The future divine rest is set before the readers as a goal to strive for. This is the purpose of the author's exhortation, namely, that the addressees maintain their boldness and hope (3:6), as firm at the end of their pilgrimage as they were at its beginning (3:14). The stress on a future rest implies present distress, and this is probably referred to in 4:16 with its allusion to timely help (χάριν εὐρωμεν εἰς εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν).

The writer often encourages his readers' perseverance by alluding to the future. He uses verbs like μέλλω (1:14; 2:5; 6:5; 10:1; 11:8, 20; 13:14), πρόκειμαι (6:18; 12:1, 2) and ἀποβλέπω (11:26) to remind his readers that present distress is outweighed by future reward (10:35) or even punishment (10:27). Chapter 11 reiterates throughout that faith is that which presses on *because it sees the otherwise invisible divine future* (vv. 1, 7, 8, 13, 18, 20, 26-27, 39-40). The call then in chapters 3-4 is for perseverance with the implied situation that the readers are facing abuse. Consequently, their temptation, because of the threat of abuse, is to draw back from boldly affirming their Christian faith. The author urges them not to shrink back from their calling no matter what the personal cost.

In the writer's exhortation, the promise of entering the presence of God in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly tabernacle has an identical role to the promise of a future rest. This is confirmed by the author's use of the same verb for entering the Holiest (6:19-20; 9:12, 24-25, cf. 10:19) as he used for entering God's rest, that is, εἰσερχομαι, even though the

²⁸Some of the suggested Jewish taunts are reflected in Trypho's arguments in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. For a reconstruction of Trypho's contentions see appendix I in T. J. Horner, "Listening to Trypho": *Justin Martyr's Dialogue Reconsidered* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 199-206. Jewish objections to Christianity are also found in Celsus' anti-Christian polemic (H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* [Cambridge: CUP, 1953] especially Book II.

LXX prefers εἰσπορεύομαι and εἰσφέρω for the high priest's entrance into the Holiest on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:2, 12, 15, 17, 23, 27, cf. Heb 13:11).²⁹ The choice of the same verb for both entering the future rest and for entering the heavenly Holiest appears, therefore, to have been purposeful.

The point again is that Christ's suffering has opened the way for the people of God to enter the divine presence (9:24-26). The implication for the addressees is clarified by a series of hortatory subjunctives: "let us draw near with a true heart" (10:22); "let us hold fast to the confession of hope" (10:23); "let us consider ways to provoke one another to love and good deeds" (10:24); and "let us not abandon meeting together" (10:25).³⁰ Hence again by providing a goal to strive for—entrance into the heavenly Holiest—the author encourages the readers to persevere in the face of adversity with the promise of a future reward (10:35-36). They are to do this in the sure knowledge that Jesus, who identified with them, had already blazed the trail ahead of them (ἀρχηγός, 2:10; 12:2).

CONCLUSION

At every point in his homily, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews addresses the situation of his fearful readers. They had suffered physically in the past and their present unpopular status bode ill for the future. The author urges his readers to look vertically to an exalted Christ in an open heavenly sanctuary, and horizontally to a triumphant future. Both the present and the future then belong to God and his Christ. Nothing that men can do either in the present or the future can rob them of the glories that are theirs in Christ.

When the author in his concluding remarks quotes two encouraging texts from the OT (Deut 31:6; Ps 118:6), he is not simply offering the supermarket checkout's customary "have a nice day." His texts are apposite to the actual situation of the readers:

I will never leave you or forsake you.
 So we can say with confidence,
 The Lord is my helper;
 I will not be afraid.
 What can anyone do to me?

²⁹The LXX uses εἰσέρχομαι in Lev 16:3, 23, 27, 28, but with the possible exception of v. 3, none of these refer to entering the Most Holy Place. See John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Dallas, TX: Word, 1992) 226.

³⁰Ἐγκαταλείποντες is a participle of attendant circumstances with κατανόωμεν and therefore has the same hortatory meaning.

The call then is to go outside the camp of Israel "and bear the abuse he endured", knowing that Christians have no enduring city here, but look to the future for the secure city of God (13:13-14).

ABSTRACT

Reference to the suffering of Jesus in Hebrews is quite frequent; both directly (2:18; 4:15; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12) and indirectly whenever his death (2:9, 14; 5:7; 9:15-16, 27-28) or offering of himself is mentioned (7:27; 8:3; 9:14, 28; 10, 12, 14, 18). For Hebrews the suffering (including the death) of Jesus dealt with the problem of sin at a new level of cleansing potency. As well it established the new covenant order through the mediation of a new high priesthood after the Melchizedek pattern. His death also opened up the new and living way into the presence of God in the heavenly sanctuary. But behind all these theological assertions is the practical one of encouraging the recipients to step out boldly for Christ and to accept the resultant abuse. The writer encourages the readers to do this by reminding them of the suffering that Jesus endured. Indeed, the writer's pastoral concern for the readers controls the whole of the Epistle to the Hebrews in that the author directs his arguments against the taunts that are discouraging his readers.