

# Who Were the Original Recipients of Hebrews?

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## INTRODUCTION

The epistle of Hebrews is a glorious tribute to the incomparable Son of God and an encouragement to the author's fellow believers. The question of the identity of the original readers has great significance in the interpretation of the message of Hebrews. Who were the people addressed in Hebrews? The original recipients are unknown. If there is doubt as to the authorship of Hebrews, so also is there uncertainty as to the identity and the location of the original recipients. The author simply left us little or no overt remarks on these matters. As William Lane notes, "Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles" (*Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, xlvii).

Several dynamics in the text help us to make reasonable conclusions in relation to the original audience. The widespread view reflected in some commentaries that the readers were mere *professors* of the faith have no support in the text. According to this view, they have heard the gospel and were intellectually convinced that Jesus is the Savior and Messiah, and yet were not willing to make a commitment of faith in Him. Many commentators see a mixed group of believers and unbelievers among the audience; both "possessors" and "professors." This is probably the most widespread view. John MacArthur sees three basic groups of people addressed in this epistle – Hebrew Christians, Hebrew non-Christians who are intellectually convinced, and Hebrew non-Christians who were not convinced (*Hebrews*, X -XV). The audience as a mixed company of believers and unbelievers is the most popular view.

But to my surprise, I found that the above views have no support in the text. All the available evidence within the body of the epistle makes it abundantly clear that the audience were believers. No mere professors or a mixed company of believers or unbelievers are envisaged by the author. He is writing to his fellow believers who were certainly members of the Christian community. The title "The Epistle to the Hebrews" which goes to the last quarter of the second century, or even earlier, implies that the people addressed were Jewish Christians. The overall theme and the argument of the book suggest that the original readers were mainly Jewish. Some students of the epistle have concluded that the original readers were probably converts from Jewish priesthood and they were "Esseno – Christians", may be even former members of the Qumran Sect (See F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Xxiii – XXX; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle To The Hebrews*, 10 -15). At any rate, the book of Hebrews was probably written to Jewish Christians.

The identity of the original readers is a critical basis for the right interpretation of the book. I believe many commentators and believers in general tend to see the readers as a mixed company, or as mere professing Christians, to avoid the "tension of the text" in the warning passages. The "professing Christians" view eases the difficulty in interpreting these warnings.

## OBSERVATIONS FROM THE TEXT

The author of Hebrews did not betray the slightest suspicion that his audience might contain people who were not real Christians. A surprising number of clues are strewn throughout the book regarding the first readers. Consider the following observations directly from the text:

1. The readers are addressed as **holy brethren** who are **partakers of a heavenly calling** (3:1). “Holy” because they are sanctified (2:11); “brethren” because of their mutual relationship in the family of God (2:11; 3:12; 10:19; 13:22). They are *partakers* (*metochoi*, *companions or sharers*) in the heavenly calling, because God was bringing them to glory (2:10).

2. The author and the readers shared in the common **confession of Jesus as the Apostle and High Priest** - “Consider Jesus, the Apostle and High priest of our confession (3:1). The author refers to the confession (*homologia*) of the Christian community (4:14: “Let us hold fast our confession; 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering). The believers in following the example of the Old Testament saints are to be “confessors” (11:15) of their faith. The “confession” refers to a public, formal declaration of faith in Christ, usually made at baptism.

3. The writer knew about their past and present **generosity to fellow Christians** (6:10). They carried a good heritage with them. They were not recent converts or new believers. They had a definite history in their Christian pilgrimage. “By this time you ought to be teachers.....you have come to need milk and not solid food.” (5:12).They have become stagnant in spiritual development. Though considerable time has lapsed in their Christian life, they failed to thrive in their spiritual growth.

4. They evidently belonged to a Christian church (or community) and some of their earlier leaders had now departed this life. They were to be remembered (13:7). They should not forget those who influenced them spiritually and keep their legacy alive. They were reminded that human spiritual leadership may change, but Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday and today, and forever” (13:8). In reference to their present leaders, the author instructed his audience to obey and to be submissive to them (13:17). **The readers were a group of believers shepherded by godly spiritual leaders.** The exhortations to draw near, hold fast, encourage one another, not to forsake the gathering of Christians for worship (10:19-25) indicate that the readers were a part of a local company of believers.

5. The readers were believers who were publicly **shamed and persecuted** for their faith, and they had supported others who had similar experiences (10:32-34). “You endured a great conflict of sufferings”, made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations.” They had suffered property loss with joy because they had an assurance of possessing heavenly wealth. But they had not yet suffered martyrdom (12:4) as had so many of the great heroes of faith mentioned in chapter 11.

6. The stern warning in Chapter 6 is followed by warm encouragement and an **expression of confidence concerning them.** “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you,

and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way" (6:9). **The hearers are addressed as "beloved"** (*agapetoi*, "dear friends" as in NIV and HSCB). This term of endearment is a reaffirmation of his relationship with them as members of the Christian community. "Things that accompany salvation" (*erchomena soterias*) literally mean, "having salvation." It is a reference to "things that belong to salvation." The presence of these things in the readers' lives were an indication of **their experience of salvation**. The writer was confident or convinced (*peitho* indicates a strong or absolute conviction) of the genuineness of their Christian commitment.

**7. The author requested their prayers** (13:18-19) because they were believers, fellow-brethren, and beloved to him.

8. Even though they had been Christian believers for a long time, they were **spiritually immature** (5:11-14). They were not making progress. Immaturity and infancy are conditions of believers who have not grown in spiritual life (see also 1 Cor.3:1-3). This condition is not in reference to unbelievers.

The message of Hebrews give us the impression that these Jewish believers were under repeated pressure from their unbelieving fellow Jews to give up their Christian faith and to return to their ancestral faith. They were also enduring various persecutions under Emperor Nero. As a result, they were not paying attention to their spiritual growth and risked forfeiting - not their salvation – but the blessings and rewards God had in store for them. The author warned them in view of their wavering and immature state of mind, and showed them the consequence of spiritual regression. In essence, his message to them was: "Do not go back on the steps you have taken." By his instructions, warnings and exhortations, he evidently hoped to pull them dramatically forward in their Christian faith.

## CONCLUSION

The description of the readers fits true Christians with remarkable ease. To see them as mere professors of faith or a mixed group of believers and unbelievers has no textual support. All the evidence in the text in relation to the identity of the recipients portray them as believers in unmistakable terms. Any assumption contrary to this, is forced upon the text on the basis of preconceived theological ideas. If the readers were believers, all the warning passages were directed to them, and by way of application to all believers, who refuse to go to spiritual maturity, having a rebellious spirit and hardened hearts. Such "fallen" believers will only produce thorns and thistles that are worth nothing (Heb.6:7-8). Their works will be burned but they themselves shall be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor.3:14-15). It is a sobering message, but neglected today, and if heeded will lead to "better things" promised for us.