

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

***Hebrews* and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Jewish Persecution of Jesus Believers**

Appendix #1–B

by

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In this brief paper I shall do two things:

(1) I shall identify texts that I believe substantiate my understanding of the background to *Hebrews*. I am suggesting in Paper #1 that *Hebrews* was written to Jews who had formerly believed the gospel of Jesus, but were reconsidering their belief. Furthermore, I am suggesting that their reconsideration of the gospel was provoked by persecution that they are experiencing. And, finally, I am suggesting that this persecution is by fellow-Jews who have rejected the gospel of Jesus. Are all these assumptions right? Why, for example, should we not read *Hebrews* rather as an “evangelistic tract”—an argument directed at Jews who, though they have never believed the gospel, might be seeking the truth about God’s salvation?

In the first section of this paper I list textual evidence from the book of *Hebrews* for each of the things I have assumed are essential elements of the background. Ultimately, whether or not my reconstruction of the background is valid does not hinge on specific texts. One can be confident that one has rightly understood the background to the book when its arguments become perfectly clear in the light of that understanding of the background. I would maintain that my assumptions with regard to its background make the best sense of the entire text of *Hebrews*. My defense of my reconstruction of its background rests on this fact—namely, that it makes the best sense of the whole book, taken as a whole. However, it will be helpful to list some specific assertions within *Hebrews* that tend to substantiate my assumptions with regard to the background.

(2) Assuming that my assessment of the background to *Hebrews* is correct, I shall briefly respond to the following question: Why would unbelieving Jews care what other Jews believe with regard to Jesus? Why would it bother them if other Jews believed that Jesus was the *messiah*? Even if they believed that such Jesus believers were mistaken, why would that anger them? Why would unbelieving Jews become angry enough to persecute the Jesus believers?

Evidence for my Reconstruction of the Background

Evidence that Paul’s readers have previously believed in Jesus but are being tempted to abandon their belief in Jesus:

- Some of Paul’s statements directly imply that his readers have previously believed the truth of the gospel. For example, he exhorts them to “hold fast” to their confession. This strongly suggests that they have embraced some truth (“confession”) that he is exhorting them to continue believing (“hold fast”). Paul makes several statements

exhorting his readers to "hold fast" their belief—specifically, their belief that Jesus is the *messiah* and that the gospel is true. These statements clearly imply that there exists a significant danger of their abandoning it. Here are some of the more important statements along these lines:

> **Heb. 2:1** For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *{parrareo}* from it.

Can Paul's readers "drift away" from what they have heard if they have not previously embraced it or believed it in some sense? Perhaps. But Paul's language strongly suggests that he is writing to people who have previously believed the gospel. He is warning them not to "drift away" from their belief.

> **Heb. 3:6** ...whose house we are, if we hold fast *{katecho}* our confidence *{parresia}* and the boast of our hope firm until the end. [following the *majority of Greek manuscripts*]

> **Heb. 3:14** For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast *{katecho}* the beginning *{arche}* of our assurance *{hupostasis}* firm until the end,

> **Heb. 4:14** Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *{krateo}* our confession *{homologia}*.

Can Paul's readers "hold fast" to their confidence or "hold fast" to their "hope"—or can they "hold fast" to the "beginning" of the evidence *{hupostasis}* that they are heirs of the promised blessing—or can they "hold fast" to their "confession," if that confidence, hope, evidence, or confession has not already had a "beginning"? These statements strongly suggest that Paul is writing to people who have previously placed their hope in the gospel. He is exhorting them to continue to place their hope in the gospel "to the end," and not to give up on it. This implies that they have started down the road of believing. They just need to continue on.

> **Heb. 10:23–25** Let us hold fast *{katecho}* the confession *{homologia}* of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking *{egkatalaipo}* our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Once again we see Paul counseling his readers to "hold fast" to their "confession," implying that they have already made the confession. Paul's concern is that his readers will not continue in the confession that they have already made. Furthermore, he counsels them not to "forsake" assembling with other believers. Apparently, it has become "the habit of some" to do just that—presumably because assembling with other believers is marking them as targets for persecution. But if Paul's counsel is not to "forsake" assembling with other believers, then, presumably, assembling with other believers is a practice that they have theretofore been engaged in. And why would they do that unless they have, until recently, freely numbered themselves among the Jesus believers?

> **Heb. 10:35–36** Therefore, do not throw away *{apoballo}* your confidence *{parresia}*, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance *{hupomone}*, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

That fact that Paul is urging them not to "throw away" their "confidence" suggests that it is something that they have had such that it could be thrown away. Once again, it is "endurance" that he is urging. They have begun the race; but they need to persevere in running it so as to finish it. Paul wants them to endure in their belief and hope.

> **Heb. 12:1–3** Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance *{hupomone}* the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured

{hupomeno} the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured {hupomeno} such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary {kamno} and lose {ekluo} heart.

Once again, Paul is urging them to "endure"; he urges them not to "grow weary"; he does not want them to "lose heart" or get discouraged. They have begun the race. He wants them to persist in their believing to the very end of it. He wants them to get the reward. He cites Jesus as an example to follow. Jesus "endured" to the end of his assigned task. He continued in belief and obedience, even in the face of significant hardship for doing so.

> Heb. 12:12-13 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

This is an exhortation to not grow weary, but to find the strength and resolve to persist in running the race to the end. But what race is in view? Very simply, the race of believing the gospel. This statement strongly implies that Paul's readers are currently running that race. It is phrased in a manner consistent with exhorting someone who is already in the middle of running a race, but is growing weary. He is encouraging them to keep running. But if they are currently running the race, then they have already, in some sense, believed the gospel.

• Other statements Paul makes in *Hebrews* make best sense if we assume that his readers have previously believed the truth of the gospel and have started down the path of discipleship.

> Heb. 5:12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

Paul's statement here strongly suggests that his readers have made some sort of start down the path of faith. Otherwise, why would Paul say that "by this time" they ought to be able to teach others? Paul seems to be suggesting that, given the amount of time that has passed (as disciples of Jesus?), he would expect them to have learned enough (about the gospel and its implications?) to be able to instruct others in it. Does this not clearly imply that, outwardly at least, Paul's readers appear to be on the path of discipleship?

> Heb. 6:10-12 For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Paul says that his readers have demonstrated a "work" and a "love toward his name" that God would not be so unjust as to forget. The "diligence" he recommends to them is so that they might "realize the full assurance of hope until the end." How might they fail to realize it? By abandoning their hope before reaching "the end" of their journey. This would seem to imply, once again, that they are in possession of a hope that they could abandon. Paul counsels "patience." Presumably, the issue is whether they will patiently persist in belief. Again, this implies that there is some sort of faith already there to persist in. In other words, Paul is counseling them to add "patience" to the "faith" they already appear to have.

> Heb. 13:1 Let love of the brethren continue {meno}.

Paul's choice of the verb "continue" (or "remain") suggests that his readers' love of the brothers has, in fact, been evident among them. Paul is urging them that it needs to continue.

Evidence that Paul's readers are being PERSECUTED for their belief in Jesus:

- Some of Paul's statements explicitly and directly assert that his readers have experienced hardship at the hands of people who are persecuting them. Other statements seem to make best sense on the assumption that persecution exists in the background. Here are some of the more important statements of both kinds:

>Heb. 10:32-34 But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

Paul seems to be explicitly describing the experience of his readers here. Granted, he does not explicitly label it "persecution," but there is no better interpretation of what he is describing. And, in the broader context of *Hebrews*, it is likely that the persecution is due to their belief in Jesus.

>Heb. 11:35b-38 ... others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men of whom the world was not worthy*), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

Paul is not describing his readers' experience here. He is describing the experiences of Old Testament saints and their perseverance in believing God's promises even when their belief brought them nothing but persecution and hardship. Why is Paul describing the experience of Old Testament believers? The most reasonable explanation is that Paul knows that there is a significant parallel between his readers' circumstances and those of the Old Testament saints he is describing—namely, that his readers are being persecuted by godless men as well. And, presumably, it is because of their obedient belief in Jesus.

>Heb. 12:1-3, 5-11 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

This passage makes best sense if we assume that Paul is addressing people who are undergoing some sort of hardship. Paul does not explicitly state here, in this passage, that their hardship is persecution. But the context certainly suggests it. Paul compares the “race” that Jesus had to run with that of his followers. He compares the hardship that Jesus faced with that of his followers. In describing the hardship that Jesus had to endure, he writes, “For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” The hardship at the center of Paul’s attention is that which results from the hostility of godless people directed against those who are seeking to obey God. In other words, it is persecution.

>Heb. 13:3 Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

This passage seems to suggest that the imprisonment of fellow-believers is an aspect of the circumstances in which Paul’s readers find themselves. Such imprisonment—assuming it is not for criminal activity—is most likely a form of persecution directed against believers in Jesus.

>Heb. 13:13 So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach

In the context of the history of Israel and of the Mosaic Covenant, being “outside the camp” symbolizes of being cut off from and ostracized by the people, being scorned, rejected, and being held in contempt by the community. Jesus was rejected by Israel, his community. Paul is encouraging his readers to join Jesus there, “outside the camp.” In other words, he is encouraging his readers to accept the contempt and hostility that the unbelieving community is directing toward them. By doing so, they would be identifying themselves with Jesus. This exhortation makes the most sense if Paul knows his readers to be currently facing the reproach of other men, to be facing persecution, because of Jesus. (Paul is exhorting them to “bear his [Jesus] reproach.”) Paul is saying, “Accept willingly the hostility of sinners toward you because of your belief in Jesus. If they hated and rejected Jesus, then it makes sense that they would hate you. But it is a good sign if you are being hated for your belief. It means that you are with Jesus; and it is better for you to be with Jesus than to be with the persecutors of Jesus.”

Evidence that the persecutors are unbelieving Jews:

- Nothing in *Hebrews* makes it indisputably clear that their persecutors are fellow Jews. Nevertheless, the following considerations make it likely that this is so:

- (i) In the book of *Acts*, most of the acts of violent hostility toward Paul and other representatives of the gospel are perpetrated by Jews, not by Gentiles. Even when Gentiles are involved, Jews are typically the instigators. (The major exception is the riot in Ephesus described in Acts 19.)

- (ii) The only description in the New Testament of ongoing, systematic persecution of believers is the persecution of believing Jews by unbelieving Jews. See the book of *James*, especially 1:1, 2:1–7, and 5:1–6.

- (iii) Traditionally, the intended audience of *Hebrews* is taken to be Jewish. This understanding of the audience makes a great deal of sense. It is virtually demanded in order to make good sense of the arguments of the book of *Hebrews*. Now, historically speaking, it is significantly more likely that Jews would face concrete, tangible hostility from their fellow-Jewish neighbors than from Gentiles. Jews at this time—no matter where in the Roman Empire you find them—were prone to live within their own communities, buffered from the Gentiles surrounding them. Hence, if a Jewish believer faced persecution, it is significantly more likely that it is from his Jewish neighbors, who were close at hand, not from Gentiles, who were further removed from him.

(iv) As we discussed above, it seems likely that the persecution faced by Paul’s readers is caused by their belief in Jesus. In order for his readers to be able to find relief from persecution by abandoning their belief in Jesus, it would have to be their belief in Jesus that is the cause of their persecution. Now it is highly more likely that belief in Jesus would cause persecution by Jews than that it would cause persecution by Gentiles. And the probability that this is what is in view in *Hebrews* is increased when we notice that Paul’s readers are tempted to return to a traditional observance of the Mosaic Covenant in order to escape persecution. Would unbelieving Gentiles stop persecuting Jewish believers because they had returned to traditional beliefs and a more traditional Jewish lifestyle? History would not seem to support this. But it makes all the sense in the world that a return to traditional Judaism would alleviate the hostility of traditional Jews to non-traditional, Jesus-believing Jews. This is a theme in the book of *Acts*:

- It was traditional Jews who conspired against Stephen in order to put him to death. It was unbelieving Jews who “...secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’” (Acts 6:11) It was traditional Jews who “...put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’” (Acts 6:13–14) Notice that Stephen’s accusers consider the prospect of altering the customs “which Moses handed down to us” to be incriminating, to be a crime worthy of death.
- When the Jews in Corinth brought Paul up on charges before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, they said, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the Law.” (Acts 18:13)
- In Acts 21, after Paul has returned to Jerusalem for the last time, he is warned by the other apostles of the danger he is in, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.” (Acts 21:21) Later, when Paul is in the temple it reads, “...the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this place.’” (Acts 21:27–28)

What angers traditional Jews about the gospel of Jesus is that, in their view, it is disrespectful toward and destructive of their traditional religious practices. It threatens to undermine the Jewish way of life. As a consequence, the way to alleviate their anger is to return to a full acceptance of traditional Judaism. This is what makes the best sense as the background to the book of *Hebrews*: Paul’s readers are being tempted to return to traditional Judaism in order to alleviate the pressure that is on them from the unbelieving, traditional Jewish community. Only backtracking—abandoning belief in Jesus and once

again fully embracing the Jewish way of life—can remove the cause of Jewish hostility toward them.

Why would Unbelieving Jews Persecute Jesus-Believers?

The only question that remains is this—"Why would Jews persecute fellow Jews simply because they believe that Jesus is the *messiah*?" Why would traditional, unbelieving Jews be so incensed by a fellow-Jew's belief in Jesus that he would be willing to act toward him violently?

We have already come a long way toward answering this question in the discussion above. As we saw from the evidence in *Acts*, the Jews frequently became incensed at the preaching of the gospel. They believed that some of the implications of the gospel invalidated their way of life as Jews. They believed that it undermined the Law, the temple, and all the customs and practices of traditional Judaism. It seemed to them a terrible and outrageous betrayal of Jewishness itself when a fellow Jew preached "against" the Law, "against" Moses, and "against" the traditions of the fathers. As a consequence, they reacted with intense anger to this perceived negation of Judaism. It was disrespect for their very identity as Jews; and, more importantly, it seemed to them a blasphemous dismissal of all that God had commanded.

Nevertheless, we cannot fully understand Jewish hostility to the gospel without considering their opposition at yet another level. All human beings, Jew or Gentile, are sinful; and, in their sinfulness, they are deeply and inherently hostile to God and to everything that pertains to God. Furthermore, the more a sinful human being's rebellion against God is exposed by the righteous obedience of another human being, the more he becomes hateful and forceful in his reaction. John writes in 1 John 3:11-12, "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised brethren, if the world hates you." John is saying that the evil, disobedient, unbelieving heart of a Cain responds in hatred to the righteous, obedient, believing heart of an Abel. The Jew who rejects Jesus is ultimately a child of the evil one, like Cain. The Jew who believes the gospel is ultimately a child of God, like Abel. Just as Cain killed Abel for the one simple reason that Abel exposed his evil, the unbelieving Jew will be prone to kill the Jesus-believing Jew for the very same reason.

As history shows, unbelieving Gentiles can be just as prone to persecute (or even kill) believers as the Jews of Paul's day were. Hostility to God and truth is not a peculiarly Jewish phenomenon. But, at the time Paul is writing his *Exhortation to the Hebrews*, it was the unbelieving, traditional Jews in close proximity to the Jewish believers who were most prone to forcibly oppose them and act in violence against them.