

A Commentator's Perspective: Occasion for the Writing of Hebrews

Commentators often suggest that the book of Hebrews was written to Jewish followers of Jesus who were reconsidering their commitment to Jesus and returning to Judaism. If a mid-60s date is assumed for the writing of Hebrews and the recipients are *Jewish* followers of Jesus living in Rome, events happening during that time period will need to be taken into consideration. While we can only suggest a historical occasion for the writing of Hebrews, it seems reasonable to propose that whatever occasion is offered for Hebrews, there must be a recognition of the socio-political turmoil in Judea between A.D. 58–66 just prior to Judea's revolt against Rome. Jewish people throughout the Roman world, especially those who practiced Judaism, were strongly linked with their Judean homeland. They traveled to Judea regularly, celebrated Passover in Jerusalem, and faithfully paid their temple tax. Furthermore Barnabas, along with Paul, was sent from Antioch of Syria with monies to assist the Jewish Christians in Judea (cf. Acts 11:27–30). Later, other Jewish-Gentile churches sent money to Judeans to meet their needs (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–5; 10–12; 9:1–5). So, there can be little doubt that the followers of Jesus living in Rome were attuned to their kinsman: their dissatisfaction with Roman governors, the lack of morality among the Herods, and the corruption of Jewish religious leaders. Furthermore, they were more than likely attentive to the Zealots and their self-proclaimed “messiahs” that were stirring Judeans to rise up against Rome during the mid-60s. Finally, Rome's heightened concern and eventual military response to Judea's disruption of Roman peace must be considered as a *possible* underlining factor behind the persecutions mentioned in Hebrews 10:32 and 12:4.

It also seems reasonable to suspect that the happenings in Judea had an impact on the beliefs of Christians in Rome as well as contributed to their doubts about Jesus. Perhaps they began to think the prophets and the later interpretations of the prophets that anticipated a warring “messiah” to defeat Judea's enemies were right after all (cf. 1:1). Perhaps they began questioning the message they heard about Jesus (cf. 2:3b–4). Perhaps they began entertaining doubts about their confession of Jesus (cf. 3:1–2). Perhaps, due to a lack of clarity, they were questioning teachings about Jesus's messiahship (cf. 5:5–6:3). Perhaps the Jewish followers in Rome began to think that there might be something to this national movement happening in Judea (cf. 13:14).

As a result, Barnabas wanted to reassure his Hebrew Christian readers in Rome about Jesus who is God's appointed messianic Son of promise (cf. 1:2–13; 3:2; 7:28), stress Jesus's preeminence over angels (1:4–14), emphasize the inauguration of God's New Covenant through Jesus (cf. 9:15–17), reveal the inadequacy of the Levitical priesthood (7:11–16, 23–24), and underscore the obsolete nature of the Mosaic sacrificial system (10:1–4). Barnabas also wanted to warn his readers, rather sharply, against the dangers of lapsing back into Judaism and thereby committing apostasy (drifting away, 2:1–4; falling away, 3:7–4:13; dullness of hearing, 5:11–6:20; retain boldness and patience until the end, 10:19–39). He writes, “bear with my message of encouragement, for in fact I have written to you briefly” (13:22).

Thus, it seems more than reasonable to suggest the occasion for Barnabas's writing Hebrews was due to the instability of Nero and the intense socio-political situation in Judea during the early to mid-60s. As messianic movements grew in Judea during the mid-60s, they not only disrupted the peace of Rome, they may have raised questions and doubts about Jesus's messiahship among the Jewish Christians in Rome. The residual results were threefold: confusion, doubt, and persecution.

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