

Introduction

WHY was Hebrews written? What was the purpose of the text? The discussion of the purpose of Hebrews is traditionally connected to the discussion of the identity and social context of the addressees. In other words, it is often assumed that to answer why Hebrews was written, it must first be established to whom was Hebrews written. Herein lies a problem for modern readers of the text. There is little, if any, consensus regarding the identity of the addressees. In turn, there is little, if any, consensus regarding the purpose of Hebrews. While most still hold to the “traditional view,” that the addressees were “Jewish Christians” in danger of falling back into “Judaism,” a growing number of interpreters have concluded that nothing can be known regarding the identity of the addressees.¹ And so the debate continues. Who were the addressees of Hebrews? And, perhaps more importantly, what was the purpose of the text? The aim of this project is to provide fresh answers to these questions by employing that branch of social psychology known as social identity theory.

The founder of social identity theory, Henri Tajfel, describes the process of social categorization as the simplifying and systematizing of one’s environment, by placing persons, objects, or events into groups with similar persons, objects, or events.² In other words, when individuals encounter new persons, objects, or events, they evaluate them and place them into a category which makes sense to them. Tajfel further notes that

1. While most biblical interpreters continue to use the terms “Jew,” “Gentile,” and “Christian,” in the discussion of the identity of the addressees of Hebrews, I will argue at the end of ch. 1 that these terms are problematic. As will be seen below, I will use the terms Judean, non-Judean, and Christ-followers in the discussion of the possible identity of the addressees. I will, then, place the terms “Jew,” “Gentile,” and “Christian” in quotation marks to call attention to both the problematic terms used by other interpreters and my disapproval of their continued use.

2. Tajfel 1978b: 61.

this categorization process is controlled by the accentuation effect, which is the tendency to accentuate the similarities between persons, objects, or events which have been placed within the same category.³ Therefore, social categorization helps to structure what would otherwise be a chaotic environment. Individuals are constantly bombarded with new social situations and without a method of simplifying and systematizing these experiences it would be difficult to evaluate and interpret the situation.

Perhaps at this point, a practical example of the social categorization process would be helpful. Shortly after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Scrolls and the group which they were thought to represent were commonly categorized as “Essene.” This categorization simplified and systematized the Scrolls, and helped to make sense of this new information. Further, this categorization assisted in providing structure to the discovery. While many, perhaps most, interpreters still hold to the “Essene-hypothesis,” or a variation of the hypothesis, some have questioned the validity of this initial categorization. Regardless of one’s view concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is little debate over the influence that this categorization has had within the subsequent study of the Scrolls. It is not, however, only in the case of a rare discovery that we engage in the process of social categorization. This process occurs whenever we encounter new persons, objects, or events. Whether categorizing the Dead Sea Scrolls as being “Essene” or categorizing an acquaintance as being a “bookworm,” we tend to simplify and systematize our environment through the process of social categorization.

So, why begin a book concerned with the identity of the addressees of Hebrews and the purpose of the text with a description of the social categorization process? In short, while historical critics have not used the language of Henri Tajfel, the historical-critical method for examining identity is one of social categorization. In terms of the social categorization process, historical critics seek to place the addressees of Hebrews into a category with similar first-century Mediterranean people. In other words, the historical critic seeks to categorize the identity of the addressees of Hebrews. Who were the addressees, were they “Jewish” or “Gentile Christians?” Perhaps they were former Essenes, Samaritans, or Ebionites? Like the straight-forward nature of the question, the historical-critical method for analyzing identity is one of simplicity. What were the various

3. Hogg and Abrams 1988: 19.

groups of the first-century Mediterranean world? What were the unique characteristics of these groups? Does the text point to any of these unique characteristics? While both the question and the method of inquiry may appear simple, the multiplicity of answers and a commonly voiced frustration point to a deeper, problematic level to this question. Perhaps, then, it is best to begin with a follow-up question: Why has it been so difficult to answer the question: Who were the addressees?

Albert Vanhoye, in his text, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, explains that the author does not offer an exact designation of the addressees.

The Hebrews are never named in the document. Nor is the name “Jews,” so frequently used by Paul, found in it, nor “Israelites,” nor any reference to the “circumcision.” In fact, the text contains no exact designation of the addressees. It is clearly speaking to Christians (cf. Heb 3:14), and Christians of long standing at that (cf. 5:12). But the author neither indicates the place where they live nor their ethnic background. He does not speak of what they were before their conversion. He does not make use of any distinction between Jew and pagans. The only reality which attracts his attention is their calling to be Christians: with might and main he seeks to foster this call (cf. 2:3–4; 3:1; 4:14; 10:19–25; 12:22–25; 13:7–8).⁴

In this important observation, Vanhoye points to one of the central problems in the present discussion of the identity of the addressees. Namely, Hebrews does not offer the type of information commonly used by historical critics in the discussion of identity.

Vanhoye’s observation is certainly not unique. It has become almost commonplace to refer to the “mystery” of Hebrews, to speak of Hebrews as an “enigma.” It is not only the question of the identity of the addressees that has proven problematic for historical critics, the identity of the author, the date of the text, its literary genre, its place of writing, its destination, the social context in which it was written, its structure, and its very purpose have all been widely debated and difficult to discern. For many, these problems may all be traced to the text’s lack of specific historical data. Therefore, while some continue to attempt to answer the question, “Who were the addressees of Hebrews?,” others voice frustration at the

4. Vanhoye 1989: 2.

perceived impossibility of the task. Perhaps the best example of such frustration is found in the writing of Floyd V. Filson. According to him, the identity of the addressees cannot be known.

It is unfortunate that so much attention has been paid to questions of authorship, destination, place of writing and date. No adequate evidence is available to support a definitive and dependable answer. The frustratingly inconclusive study of Hebrews should make it clear that we cannot find certain answers to the questions: Who? To whom? From where? When?⁵

Frustration, such as that voiced by Filson, is justified. There is an incompatibility of the historical-critical method to the data available in Hebrews. However, this may only be a symptom of a much more significant problem associated with a traditional historical-critical investigation. The larger issue concerns the categories commonly used by historical critics. As noted above, social categorization is a process by which individuals simplify and systematize their environment by placing new persons, objects, or events into categories with similar persons, objects, or events. This means that the individual places the new person, object, or event into a category which the individual deems appropriate, a category that the individual has used before to simplify and systematize the environment. Because the categorization process of historical criticism relies upon categories selected and defined by modern interpreters, the categories may be inadequate. As we will see, the inadequacies of such modern categories include both the use of problematic terminology and problematic conceptions of the nature of the various first-century groups. For example, a modern reader might envision the first-century addressees as having been “Jewish.” Further, “Judaism” might be understood to be a “religion.” For some, the “religion” of “Judaism” is understood to have been in direct conflict or competition with the “religion” of “Christianity.” Attempting to place the addressees into one of the categories with which *we* are familiar, is, after all, a natural part of *our* social categorization process. However, in order to understand the identity of the addressees, we must attempt to understand *their* process of social categorization. In other words, *what categories did the addressees use to simplify and systematize their environment?* In short, the information present in Hebrews does not correspond to the categories proposed by historical critics, not because Hebrews does not

5. Filson 1978: 12.

offer relevant data, but because historical critics have not been employing appropriate categories. This reading will utilize social identity theory to identify and interpret the social categories employed by the author and the addressees of Hebrews and, finally, to identify and interpret the purpose of the text itself.

In ch. 1, I will outline the historical critical process for examining identity. I present a description of each of the eight common proposals concerning the identity of the addressees of Hebrews. Finally, I engage in a critical examination of the categorization process of historical criticism. At the end of the chapter, I will propose the problem of understanding the identity of the addressees is not rooted in a lack of information within the text but with an inadequate conceptual framework for understanding identity. An adequate conceptual framework will seek to answer two essential questions: How did first-century Mediterranean groups form and maintain identity? What social categories were employed by the author and the addressees of Hebrews?

The discussion of the identity of the addressees is inherently connected with the discussion of the purpose of the text. For that reason, ch. 2 will follow the basic structure of ch. 1. I outline the historical critical process for analyzing the purpose of a text. I provide a description of each of the four common proposals concerning the purpose of Hebrews. Finally, I engage in an examination of the historical-critical process for analyzing the purpose of Hebrews. At the end of the second chapter, I will propose that the multiplicity of proposals regarding the purpose of the text reflects the multiplicity of proposals regarding the identity of the addressees. A proposal regarding identity which is based upon an inappropriate conceptual framework will necessarily produce an inadequate proposal regarding the purpose of Hebrews.

Since an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding identity is needed in order to move forward in the discussion of the addressees of Hebrews, I offer a thorough overview of social identity theory, the theoretical framework with which I come at the problem in a new way. Social identity theory is a social psychological theory that was first proposed in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and which has undergone two decades of helpful critique and development by subsequent social psychologists. This theory not only offers insight into the social categorization process, but more importantly, helps to describe how social groups form and maintain identity. Therefore, ch. 3 describes not only the social categorization process, but

also defines social identity, the role of social comparison in identity formation and maintenance, and the function of time within social identity. In addition, and of particular importance to the study of Hebrews, I discuss the nature of outgroups according to social identity theory. I consider, for example, whether an outgroup must be a *real* group, and whether an ingroup might compare itself to a *symbolic* outgroup.

While social identity theory helps to describe how groups form and maintain identity, an important question remains unanswered. Is social identity theory an appropriate conceptual framework within which to examine the identity of the addressees of Hebrews? In ch. 4, I consider the cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world, including in the discussion the dynamic of temporal orientation. The chapter's main thesis is that unlike the future temporal orientation of most twenty-first century North Atlantic interpreters, the addressees of Hebrews were likely to have had a present temporal orientation. I propose that social identity theory integrated with a working model of present temporal orientation serves as an appropriate conceptual framework within which to examine the identity of the addressees of Hebrews.

The first step in reading Hebrews within the framework of social identity theory involves the consideration of whether or not the addressees of Hebrews understood themselves as having been a social group. In other words, did the addressees understand themselves to be a distinct group, an "us"? I argue that an affirmative answer to the question arises from data within the text. The social categories employed by the author and the addressees of Hebrews are identified. Further, these social categories are shown to reveal how the addressees of Hebrews understood themselves. Rather than rely upon the categories of "Jewish Christian" or "Gentile Christian," ch. 5 argues that the addressees of Hebrews understood their own identity in terms of *faithfulness*.

The addressees of Hebrews understood themselves to be "the faithful." The author develops this primary identity descriptor in his description of the faithfulness of Jesus. Repeatedly, the faithfulness of Jesus is understood through comparison. The faithfulness of Jesus is compared to that of Moses (Heb 3:1-6). Likewise, his faithfulness is compared to that of the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1-2). In ch. 6, I employ two relevant areas of social identity theory—the theory of shared life stories and the theory of prototypicality—in order to understand the author's use of comparison and his emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus.

Throughout *Hebrews*, the author thoroughly integrates issues of identity, faithfulness, and time. Therefore, to understand more fully the social identity in *Hebrews*, it is necessary to consider the role of time within the text. Specifically, ch. 7 addresses four questions regarding temporality. First, what was the role of the antecedent in *Hebrews*? Second, what was the role of the forthcoming? Third, what was the role of foresight? Fourth, is there evidence of imaginary time in *Hebrews*? In addition, this chapter will include a description of the meaning of the promised “rest.” We find that the addressees are encouraged to “look forward by looking back.”

In ch. 8, I broaden the discussion from the identity of the addressees of *Hebrews* to the purpose of the text. The discussion of the purpose of *Hebrews* has traditionally been connected to the discussion of the identity and social context of the addressees of *Hebrews*. Chapter 1 shows there is both a multiplicity of proposals regarding the identity of the addressees and a growing frustration over the question of purpose. Chapter 2 highlights the multiplicity of proposals regarding the purpose of *Hebrews*. However, if we take seriously the conclusions made in chs. 5–7 regarding the identity of the addressees, it is possible to present a new proposal regarding the purpose of the text. The proposal of ch. 8, based upon the culturally appropriate conceptual framework of social identity theory and present temporal orientation, can serve as a helpful tool for the interpretation of *Hebrews*.

Henri Tajfel could have had no concept of the far-reaching influence of social identity theory he first developed in the 1970s. Sadly, Tajfel died only a decade after it was first proposed. However, social psychologists around the world have continued to test and develop this important tool. In this book, social identity theory and a model of present temporal orientation provide the conceptual framework within which to understand the identity of the addressees of *Hebrews* and the purpose of the text. While such interdisciplinary projects are rarely imagined in the early stages of the development of such theories, subsequent projects such as this can be informative beyond the boundaries and limitations of both New Testament interpretation and social identity theory.