

PART II**DETERMINING THE “ANTAGONIST,” “PROTAGONIST”
AND “READER”****Determining the Opposing Characters
in Epistolary Analysis**

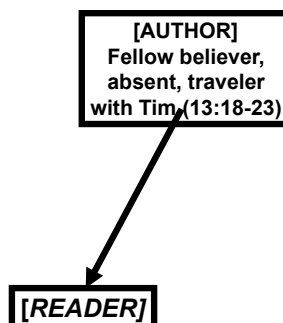
As stated in the “Introduction to Epistles,” the most important thing to determine in establishing the message of an epistle is establishing the antagonist (bad character) and the protagonist (good character).

The protagonist is always God. In the Gospels God is represented by His Messiah, Christ. In the epistles, God is represented by the inspired author, who reveals Christ. The antagonist is always the representative of Satan, whether Pharisees in the Gospels), Judaizers (e.g., Philippians) or Gentiles (e.g., Ephesians) in the Epistles.

Protagonist: The (Unknown) Author (Representing God)

The identity of the author of Hebrews escapes the interpreter since he is not named, there is very little known about him, and he rarely gives any clues to his personal identity. Among the things known about him are, that he wants to be restored to the readers and hopes that he will be able to come with Timothy, who has just been released from prison (13:18,19,23).

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. ¹⁹ And I urge *you* all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner . . . ²³ Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. (Heb. 13:18-23)



Antagonist: Israel
(Persecuting Jewish Believers to Abandon the Church)

Not infrequently, the antagonist in an epistle is not always so easily obtainable since at times he may not be specifically named even though he/she/they is/are clearly present. But he/she/they are always alluded to by the negatives. In the Book of Hebrews, the antagonist is the unbelieving people of the nation of Israel. They are rejecters of the Christ as the means to the Father. Hebrews 13:9-14 alludes clearly to this group, though not naming them specifically. But it is Israel who advocates the keeping of sacrifices to appease the wrath of God, which is clearly the lure with which they are tempting these Jewish believers to return.

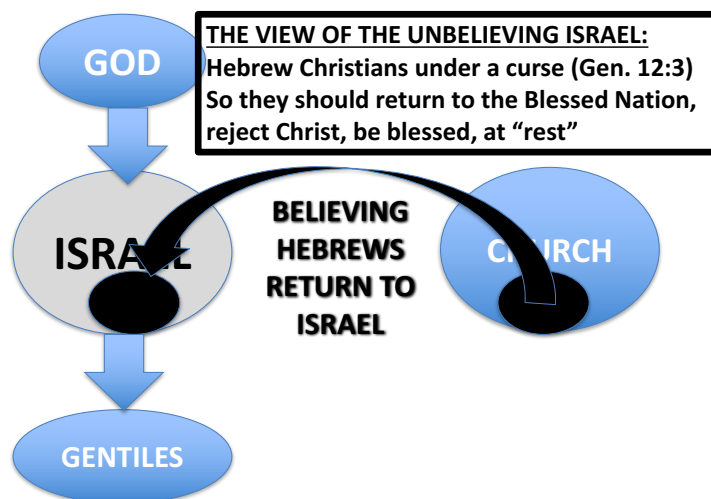
¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. (Heb. 13:10)

The antagonists can also be identified by what they are trying to do to these readers. They are trying to get these believing Jews to return to their nation and reject the Christ in Jesus. This can be seen in what the author is trying to get the readers not to do . . . “drift away,” “fall away,” “forsake the assembling . . .”

“ . . . for this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away (Heb. 2:)

“ . . . and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. (Heb. 6:6)

²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some . . . (Heb. 10:25)



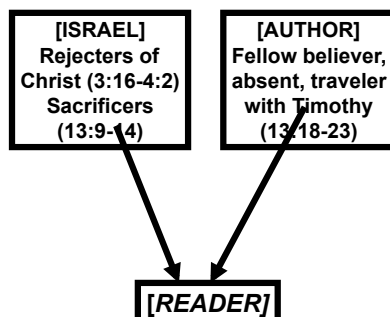
In chapters 3 and 4, the author establishes that the rejecters are the present nation of Israel, who have rejected their rest⁷ in Christ just like the nation rejected Moses at Kadesh-Barnea. Thus, the believing Jews (who have rejected the nation's errant decision to reject Christ) are like Joshua and Caleb (who rejected the nation's choice back then), and like them, these believers will enter the rest. Thus, the unbelieving first century nation Israel is the antagonist, whom the author makes clear are not related to God and will not enter the rest.

¹⁶ For who provoked *Him* when they had heard (*ancient Israel*)? Indeed, but not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses (*Joshua and Caleb*)? ¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that *they (ancient Israel)* were not able to enter because of unbelief.

Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it (*believers who return to present Israel will seem to be like them as rejecters of Christ*). ² For indeed we (*Hebrew believers*) have had good news preached to us, just as they (*Present day Israel*) also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. (Heb. 3:16-4:2)

Thus, it is quite clear to see that the antagonist is first century unbelieving Israel. They are luring these Hebrew believers to return to the nation and reject Christ.

⁷ "Rest" is to be defined from the Old Testament. It is rest from one's works, which in this age, is suffering for Christ. The reason that Christians suffer is because of the dominion of Satan as he rules through the Gentiles. Thus, "rest" is, in short, the time following the return of the rule to God when Jesus returns and eliminates the enemies in the Kingdom.



In addition, the whole of the argument of the author is to convince them that the sacrifices of Israel and the Old Testament are no longer valid, thus taking away their incentive to return to this antagonist nation, abandoning the church and Christ.

¹⁰ By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; (Heb. 10:10-11)

The Reader: A Believing Hebrew (Who Has Left Israel and Joined the Church)

It is necessary to be very precise in identifying the reader based on the specific historical problem related in the book. Since unbelieving Israel is the antagonist, it is the Jewish believers⁸ who have left Israel to join the church.

⁸ They are believers in that he calls them “holy brethren” (3:1).⁸ The only exhortation for these readers is to endure suffering for the Christ. If there were unbelievers in this assembly, the author would be expected to invite them to “get saved.” Yet there are no imperatives like that. Only believers are requested to endure suffering, never an unbeliever. In addition, they are to “encourage one another,” which again is never an imperative to unbelievers. (The motivation for interpreters to declare these readers as unbelievers is because of the difficulty of the warning passages. They errantly claim theologically that the warnings are too severe to fit the case of believers).

However, the most prominent view of interpreters is that the readers are a mixed group, that is, that there are some unbelievers among the believers in the church. This is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of this group. They had not simply joined the church because the church was a group of social people or for other benefits. They had come to the church because

(Note: To assume that this book could be equally written to Gentiles is to muddy the waters and make the interpretation too general and thus include error. While Gentiles certainly could abandon their once-held faith, interpretation must follow the exact historical message and recipient of the letter before application is made to others.)

Jewish Believers: Considering Abandoning Christ and Returning to Israel

Jewish believers had declared that the nation of their birth (Israel) had killed the Messiah and was thus under the curse of God (Acts 2, Psalm 22). They left their identity with this unbelieving apostate nation and joined the body formed by the apostles. The church began in Acts 2 where Peter told the Jewish audience to depart from this cursed, apostate, nation and join the body formed by the apostles.

³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36)

⁴⁰ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"⁹ (Acts 2:40)

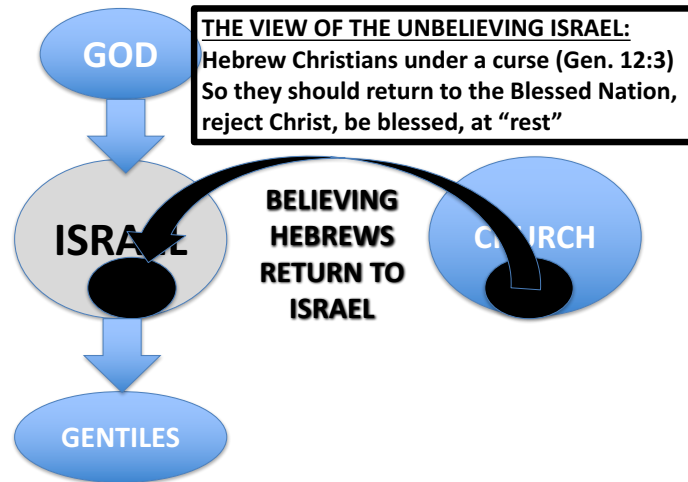
their nation had killed the Messiah and they wanted to identify with the Messiah at the cost of their own suffering and perhaps even their lives. So, these were not just surface Christians by any means. They had already made a costly decision. This is reflected in 10:32-34.

³² But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴ 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 an abiding one.

In addition, the misunderstanding of many of the passages in the book is made due to the wrong definition of terms and phrases. Many modern interpreters tend understand meaning by inputting their own cultural understanding into the verses. Yet these verses are actually defined from Old Testament Scriptures. Errantly they often see the reader much like their own church membership and do not see the uniqueness of the Hebrew readership. But these historical readers are being pulled by their physical brothers and sisters back to the nation. Yet these interpreters apply the book to Gentile believers when it is meant for an unbelieving nation.

⁹ This is a reference to Deuteronomy 32:5, 20, where Moses lectured them in the plains of Moab opposite Jordan. He told this generation that they would ultimately reject YHWH and come under a curse, which they did, and God sent them into exile. They were still in exile under Rome when Jesus appeared, and later as Peter addressed them. Since they were still in exile Peter told them, as John the Baptist and Jesus before, to repent and receive their ultimate forgiveness of sins through the prophesied Messiah who had appeared and been killed. Thus, they were the same evil people that Moses referenced. And now Peter exhorted them to leave and be bonded to the church of the Messiah.

But now Israel was telling them they were wrong, and since they were cursing Israel (Genesis 12:3), it was they who were under the curse. Thus, they were reconsidering their move since, fearing they were wrong, they were now being tempted to return to the nation and abandon the church, and Christ.



That the readers were these Jewish believers is obvious from the choices that they were offered. They were told to endure in their faith and encourage other believers to do the same. The alternative was to return to unbelief and fall away, forsaking the assembly of the church.

“ . . . for this reason, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away (Heb. 2:)

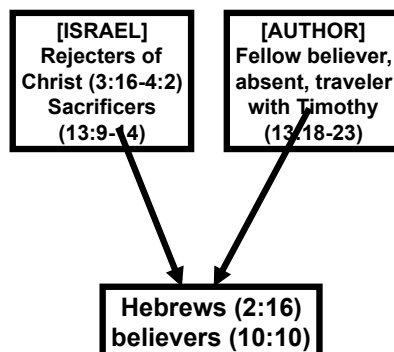
“ . . . and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. (Heb. 6:6)

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In addition, the characteristics of these readers are those of true believers. Hardly could these things have been said of those who have not believed. To say that this is the case of unbelievers who are participating in the assembly as false professors is to create a category of unbelievers that is not validated from the Scriptures.¹⁰

¹⁰ This would create a category of unbelievers who are different from unbelievers who have not heard or considered Christ. These would have to be unbelievers who had personally sampled the supernatural understanding of the gospel, but not believed in what they knew to be true (which other unbelievers did not do). Thus, there would be a difference in unbelievers who knew the gospel was not true, and those who knew it was true, but didn't trust truly, only trusted

⁴ For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, (Heb. 6:4-5)



partly (whatever that means), but apparently not enough. To actually grasp this in detail is impossible, since how does one trust, but not truly trust? One either trusts, or one does not. And this is what defines believers from unbelievers . . . trust. Trust is always a positive. One cannot not trust and trust.