

**The past experience of the Christian community
as an *exemplum* for its present and immediate
future: a study of Heb 10:32-39**

**A experiência passada da comunidade cristã
como *exemplum* para o seu presente e futuro
imediato: um estudo de Hb 10,32-39**

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ABSTRACT

One of the striking features of the Letter to the Hebrews is the use of the rhetorical device called *exemplum* (“example”) to strengthen the arguments the text provides and encourage its addressees to persevere “to the end”. Heb 10:32-39 uses this rhetorical resource as it stresses the community’s commitment and courage when they “endured great struggles and suffering” in the past, and sets it forth as a model for action in its present and immediate future. This paper, after highlighting the real sufferings experienced by the community in “those earlier days”, indicates how the recollection of its endurance that time serves as a basis for an exhortation to endure in the present. The description of the community’s past suffering allows for a perspective look at its current situation. The community must maintain its “confidence”, not silence its testimony or turn away from the people of God.

KEYWORDS

Exemplum. Persecution and Solidarity. The Epistle to the Hebrews.

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RESUMO

Uma das características marcantes da Carta aos Hebreus é o uso do recurso retórico *Exemplum* (“exemplo”) com o objetivo de fortalecer os argumentos que o texto apresenta e encorajar seus destinatários a perseverar “até o fim”. Hb 10,32-39 utiliza este recurso retórico ao destacar o compromisso e coragem da comunidade quando, no passado, ela “suportou grandes lutas e sofrimentos”, apresentando-o como modelo de ação para o seu presente e futuro imediato. Este artigo, após destacar a experiência dos sofrimentos reais experimentados pela comunidade “nos seus primórdios” indica como a lembrança da sua perseverança naquele momento é o fundamento de uma exortação para perseverança no tempo presente. A descrição do sofrimento passado da comunidade permite um olhar em perspectiva para a sua situação atual. A comunidade deve manter a “ousadia”, não silenciar no testemunho e afastar-se do povo de Deus.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Exemplum. Perseguição e solidariedade. Carta aos Hebreus.

One of the conspicuous features in Hebrews is the employment of the rhetorical device named *exemplum* (“example”) to strengthen the arguments it puts forward and encourage its addressees to endure “to the end”. The use of such device in rhetorical discourse was established in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literatures. When discussing examples as forms of induction, Aristotle mentions actual historical figures or events². Cicero asserts the use of examples strengthens or weakens one’s argument by “appeal to precedent or experience, citing some person or historical event”³; and also underscores the persuasive power of historical examples, which indicate both the credibility of the speaker and the delight of the audience⁴. Cicero also advocates the need for studying

² *Retórica* II. 20.4 (1393b).

³ *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 2.29.46; 4.13.18.43.45.56.59.62.

⁴ “[The orator] should also be acquainted with the history of the events of past ages, particularly, of course, of our state, but also of imperial nations and famous kings [...]. To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our an-

literature as it was a source of moral lessons for his own life⁵. Valerius Maximus' work *Facta et dicta memorabilia* (circa 30-31 CE), a collection of "examples" for use in rhetoric, presents them as rhetorical techniques and sources of moral guidance⁶. Quintilian says historical examples are similar to a witness testimony or legal precedent, and they are more powerful because they are not prejudiced: "The most important of proofs of this class is that which is most properly styled example, that is to say the adducing of some past action real or assumed which may serve to persuade the audience of the truth of the point which we are trying to make"⁷. In Jewish literature, the goal when using examples was different from what Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks put forward, but after Hellenism there was a shift in perspective as examples were then used for embellishment and persuasion⁸.

In Hebrews we find three groups of characters worthy of emulation. They are related to the situation the community is in, involving experiences of suffering and death: the community itself, Jewish history figures, and Jesus Christ (10:32-12:3). In the example of the community, their commitment and courage in harsh past events when they "endured a hard struggle with sufferings" is depicted as a model for action in their contemporary setting (10:32-39). In the rereading of the history of Israel

cestors by the records of history? Moreover, the mention of antiquity and the citation of examples give the speech authority and credibility to the audience" (Cicero, *Orator* 34.120).

⁵ "All literature, all philosophy, all history, abounds of examples (*exemplorum*) to noble action, incentives which would be buried in black darkness were the light of the written word not flashed upon them. How many pictures of high endeavor the great authors of Greece and Rome have drawn for our use, and bequeathed to us, not only for our contemplation, but for our emulation! These, I have held ever before my vision throughout my public career, and have guided the workings of my brain and my soul by meditating upon patterns of excellence". Cicero, *Pro Archia* 14 (Loeb Classical Library, 1989).

⁶ MAXIMUS, Valerius. *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*. Text, introduction, and commentary. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019.

⁷ QUINTILIANUS, Marcus Fabius. *Institutio oratoria* 5.11.6. Loeb Classical Library. Ed. and translated by Donald H. Russell. Vol II. Cambridge – Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁸ DYER, Bryan R. *Suffering in the face of death: the social context of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. [Doctoral dissertation] McMaster Divinity College. Hamilton, Ontario, 2015, p. 182-187.

presenting the example of those who “by faith” did not shrink back, Hebrews acquaints its audience of how absurd the idea is to follow a path other than that of perseverance (11:1-40). Jesus Christ, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”, who “endured the cross, disregarding its shame”, the greatest example and paradigm of persevering faith, is presented as the model athlete to be imitated by his followers (12:1-3).

The account of the example of the endurance of the community, which stresses their commitment and courage in bleak past circumstances, recalls the addressees of Hebrews of their strength amidst past suffering, and in the light of such memory, urges them to hope and endure so they will receive the reward. By reminding the community of that experience and using it to exhort them to persevere to receive the reward, Hebrews turns it into a paradigm for action in their present and immediate future. It describes the commitment and courage of the community in grim past events as a model for action in their present and future as follows:

³² But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.³⁴ For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.³⁵ Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward.³⁶ For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.³⁷ For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay;³⁸ but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.³⁹ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved. (10:32-39).

The opening statement of the text “But recall those earlier days” (10:32) contains the adversative conjunction “but”, which implies Hebrews seeks to lead its addressees into acting in a way contrary to how they had previously (10:26-31), that is, they should not do as those “who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant”

(10:29)⁹. The admonition to remember the past experience involves the recollection of events in the period during which the community was persecuted and the fact that they should act in the present as they did in the past¹⁰. The indignities they suffered are stressed, and the allusion to the experience of persecution becomes more specific as the consequences of such experience are detailed: some people were exposed to shame, imprisoned and abused by authorities, but the other community members exhibited solidarity towards the ones undergoing that suffering (10:32-34).

The connections indicating the development of Heb 10:32-39 are important not only because they offer a clearer view of how this paradigm is elaborated but also because it constructs a relation with Heb 10:37-38, where “by faith” is contrasted with “shrinking back”. Heb 10:32-34 is also connected to 10:36 through the cognates “endure” and “endurance”. “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward” (10:35) is linked to “For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (10:36). Endurance is related to “confidence” and the exhortation no to abandon “confidence” is grounded on hope of a future reward¹¹. The development of this idea also leads to another aspect in 10:37-38: “enduring sufferings” (10:32) is correlated to “better and more lasting” goods (10:34) and “confidence” converges to the “reward” (10:35). The need to “endure” (10:36) draws from citations of Isa 26:20 and Heb 2:3b-4 in 10:37-38: “For yet ‘in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.’” The statement “For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised (10:36)”, leads to the assertion “For yet ‘in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay’”

⁹ ADRIANO FILHO, José. Exposição e parênese como problema literário-teológico. A estrutura retórico-literária de Hebreus. *REFLEXUS* – Revista de Teologia e Ciências das Religiões, vol. 6, n. 8, 2012, p. 153-155. Available at: <http://revista.faculda-deunida.com.br/index.php/reflexus/article/view/183>

¹⁰ LANE, William L. *Hebrews 9-13*. WBC. Dallas: Word Book, Publisher, 1991, p. 297-298.

¹¹ VANHOYE, Albert. *La structure littéraire de l'épître aux Hébreux*. Paris/Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963, p. 179-181; LANE, 1991, p. 280-282.

(10:37). That shows the reason why the community must endure in faith until the end (10:39).

The structure of Heb 10:32-39 can be presented as follows:

- A) 10:32-34: The struggles, sufferings and solidarity of the community
 - a.1- 10:32-33a: Struggles and sufferings
 - a.2- 10:33b: The solidarity of the community
 - a.3- 10:34: Imprisonment and plundering of possessions
- B) 10:35-39: Not to abandon confidence, keep the word of promise and endure
 - b.1-10:35-36: Not to abandon confidence and endure
 - b.1.1- 10:35: Not to abandon confidence
 - b.1.2- 10:36: The need to endure
 - b.2- 10:37-39: Keep the Word of God and not shrink back
 - b.2.1- 10:37-38: Keep the Word of God
 - b.2.2- 10:39- Shrinking back brings about ruin, but faith leads to salvation

The sufferings and the solidarity of the community

Hebrews 10:32-34 starts with a description of the sufferings and the solidarity of the community: “But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings” (10:32). The occurrence of the verb “recall”, regularly used in early Christian homily, is a reminder of what the community has experienced. The presence of the adversative conjunction “but” also indicates a strategy which exhorts Hebrews’ recipients to adopt an attitude opposed to the one described in 10:26-31. The expression “you endured a hard struggle with sufferings” emphasizes the experience of the community in those “earlier days”, marked by suffering. The word “struggle”, commonly used to refer to the strenuous effort put forth by athletes in the arena, is used here metaphorically to mean persecution. “You endured a hard struggle with sufferings” is a metaphor about learning through adversity (4 Mac 1:11; 5:23-6,9; 7:9; 15:30-32). The image of struggle and suffering also occurs in Philo and in 4 Maccabees, authors who

identified themselves with a cultural minority subjected to persecution and violence¹².

Heb 10:33-34 specifies the character of the community's sufferings. The statements shaped in the form of contrast: "sometimes... and sometimes" form a chiasm, with meaningful implications for the interpretation of the text:

- A "sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution" (33a);
- B "and sometimes being partners with those so treated" (33b)
- B' "For you had compassion for those who were in prison" (34a)
- A' "and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions... " (34b)

The description of past indignities suggests part of the community was exposed to slander and tribulation and stood helpless against the plundering of their properties (A/A'). Another group from within the community identified themselves with those who had been abused by the authorities (B/B'). The first group experienced verbal and physical abuse and imprisonment, but the other community members showed compassion to the ones being abused. Hebrews stresses the public humiliation inflicted on its addressees: "being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution"¹³. "Publicly exposed to abuse and persecution" means being ridiculed and exposed to public shaming¹⁴. "Abuse" and "persecution"

¹² ATTRIDGE, Harold W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 298; LANE, 1991, p. 298; THOMPSON, J.W. *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1982, p. 63-64.

¹³ The language used in Hebrews echoes Tacitus' portrayal of the persecution of Christians under Nero (64 CE), when some people were tortured to amuse the population to show a crucial way of dealing with that group (*Annales* 15,44). Philo also narrates the public nature of punishment by chronicling the attacks against the Jews in Alexandria (*In Flaccum* 74-75, 84-85, 95; 173). In 12:4 it says the recipients "have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood". Although that is not a direct reference to martyrdom, it shows there was public humiliation in the mentioned persecution. See DeSILVA, David A. *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Studies in Biblical Literature. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995, p. 159-160; ATTRIDGE, 1989, p. 298-299.

¹⁴ ELLINGWORTH, P. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, p. 547.

indicate the nature of the humiliation the community underwent. “Abuse” stands for “disgrace”, “shame”, “scandal”; and it additionally means insult. It describes several types of verbal abuse. Its use in 11:26 and 13:13 suggests it was a real and constant aspect of the experience of the addressees. The meaning of the term, however, varies from reproach to curse, and also affront, derision and outrage, along with sarcastic remarks often coupled with degrading comments¹⁵.

The shame inflicted by persecutors often derived from a disgrace associated with a crime or was a result of a public conviction. It involved verbal attacks to the honor and character of a person, and it was apparently something Christians often experienced in different social contexts because of their association with Christ (1 Pt 4:14-16; Mt 5,11; Lk 6:22). Inflicting disgrace and censure on Christians shows the group was rejected by society, which reacted with negative sanctions on the behavior of the community which refused to take part in its life, but the bitterest element of their experience was being exposed to public shame¹⁶. Verbal abuse is also linked to physical attacks. Aggression to one’s body meant more than causing physical pain, as it was an attack to their honor as well¹⁷. Also, the word “suffering”, used in the Septuagint to describe the suffering of Israel (Ps 4:1; 9:9; 10:1; 37; 50:15), indicates diverse types of persecution Christians underwent. “Suffering” is also one of the

¹⁵ SPICQ, Ceslas. *L’Épître aux Hébreux*. Vol. 2. Paris: Gabalda, 1952-1953, p. 328; SCHNEIDER, Johannes, ὀνειδισμός. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, p. 241-242.

¹⁶ MOFFATT, J. A. *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1952, p. 153, says, “The meaning is that they had been held up to public derision, scoffed and sneered at, accused of crime and vice, unjustly suspected and denounced. All this had been, the writer knew, a real order, particularly because the stinging contempt and insults had had to be born in the open [...] They had been exposed to ὀνειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν, taunts and scorn that tempted one to feel shame (an experience which our author evidently felt keenly), as well as to wider hardships, both insults and injuries”.

¹⁷ Public punishment was considered something shameful, and it was impossible to regain lost honor back. Philo, *In Flaccum*, 72, 77, provides an account of the suffering of the Jews in Egypt under Flaccus, where he uses words indicating “disgrace” or “insult” when talking about physical aggression. According to him, some Jews “were arrested, whipped, tortured and then punished with crucifixion”. See deSILVA, 1995, p. 158-159.

most common terms used in the New Testament to describe persecution (Mt 13:19,24; Act 7:10; 14,22; Rm 5:3; 8:35; 2Co 4:8; Rev 2:9)¹⁸. The text does not identify or attack those persecuting Hebrews' addressees, and although it states they "have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4), it was their commitment to Christ that exposed them to slander and physical abuse. Being exposed to public shame, that is, to a "ritual of status degradation", means those who turned away and posed a threat to the political and social order were subdued and the current order reinforced as primary and definite¹⁹.

We cannot establish clearly when that happened, and the reported experiences of suffering belong to a past age of the community. It is also likely the intense experience of disgrace and harsh disapproval from society might have aroused in Christians a feeling of shame, that is, they felt once again tempted to respect society's traditions, relationships and values. But it was their resistance to those attempts of social control in the past that made them the best examples for the present. Therefore, Hebrews considers the remembrance of that moment necessary for the response of its addressees in the present, whose honor was being attacked individually and collectively and increasingly exposed to degradation (10:33)²⁰.

Besides that, some community members had their properties seized and were arrested. It is not certain whether there was an official judicial action by magistrates to levy heavy fines or they confiscated properties because of suspected infractions, or houses were looted after the owners had been imprisoned or banished, as it happened to people affected by the decree of expulsion from Rome in 49 CE, when they had to leave their properties (Act 18:1-4)²¹. Losing wealth, especially as part of the

¹⁸ SCHLIER, Heinrich, θλίβω, θλίψις. In: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3, p. 143-148; LANE, 1991, p. 299; THOMPSON, L. "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John". *Semeia* 36, 1968, p. 146-176.

¹⁹ MALINA, Bruce; NEYREY, Jerome. Labelling and Deviance Theory. In: *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models of Interpretation*. Jeromy Nerey (ed.). Massachusetts: Peabody/Hendrickson, 1991, p. 97-122.

²⁰ ADRIANO FILHO, José. A nuvem de testemunhas. Um estudo de Hebreus 10,32-12,3. *REFLEXUS* – Revista de Teologia e Ciências das Religiões, vol. 6, n. 8, 2012, p. 151-152, 2012. Available at: <http://revista.faculdadeunida.com.br/index.php/reflexus/article/view/92/135>

²¹ Also see SUETONIUS, *Claudius* 25,4.

attack against honor and the people themselves, led to a loss of status. In the Ancient World accumulation of wealth and possessions was not an end in itself, but prestige and honor through a system of private or public assistance. Losing wealth entailed potentially losing prestige. Honor was associated with display of wealth, even the little wealth of a peasant. Wealth, no matter how big or small, was an important sign of a person's prestige. Loss of wealth might also involve a corresponding loss of honor and would elicit contempt from others if it were considered a result of the victim's fault²².

The situation of reproach and rejection described in 10:32-34 indicates Hebrews addressees could bring about their own disgrace by refusing to abide by the obligations imposed by current standards. The loss of property, whether official or not, linked with their degradation as Christians, would involve additional disgrace, as it could put them in a more vulnerable economic situation, making it more difficult to regain their former economic position. In any event, the general effect of that experience was social marginalization, rejection and degradation. The place of those people in society was challenged, and they lost their status as stable and reliable citizens. They could also be confronted by people who knew of their degradation, who could remind them of their place in society; and they started feeling ashamed, that is, they started worrying about their reputation before society representatives. It might have been easier during the difficult moments of persecution, in the fervor of religious solidarity, to be unaffected by the opinion of people outside the community, but now living with their loss was becoming increasingly harder²³.

Then, Hebrews develops a contrast which is rhetorically effective as it mentions possessions that can be lost and the permanent possessions Christians have because of their relationship with God through Christ: "For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting" (10:34). The adjective "better/superior" is used in Hebrews to express the quality of the reality Christians possess (6:9; 7:19; 9:23; 12:24). In 11:16, "bet-

²² ADRIANO FILHO, 2012, p. 152-154; DeSILVA, 1995, p. 175-176.

²³ DeSILVA, 1995, p. 175-176.

ter” is defined by the explicative clause “heavenly”. The correlative term “permanent” indicates the superiority and stability that characterize the heavenly world (12:27; 13:14). The confidence of the early Christians that they possessed “better and permanent possessions” in the heavenly world allowed them to develop a proper perspective on the deprivation suffered amidst persecution²⁴. Whatever the circumstances might have been, Hebrews’ addressees accepted those losses because they knew they had “better and more lasting” possessions (10:34c). They knew they had a superior reality, for like the heavenly high priest and city to come, their possession is a permanent reality (7:3; 11:14-16; 13:14)²⁵.

Despite the situation of contradiction experienced by his addressees, the writer of Hebrews stresses the willingness of the ones who had not suffered the same punishment to show solidarity towards those treated that way. The people who were not personally affected by the hostility to which some community members had been subjected openly identified with their brothers and sisters. The statement of 10:33: “sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated”, highlights the persistence displayed by the addressees in sharing the suffering of their fellows. Besides enduring afflictions, they became “partners” with the ones treated that way. Heb 10:25 warns against the danger of neglecting fellowship, but now it stresses the broadest fellowship of the community, expressed completely in times of necessity. The recollection becomes more specific as it tells of the compassion and personal suffering the recipients had experienced. Their fellowship with the others who were afflicted was manifested in the compassion towards prisoners, which is undoubtedly more than mere sympathy, and involved concrete support needed by those in prison (13:3)²⁶.

²⁴ THOMPSON, 1982, p. 65-66, 72; LANE, 1991, p. 300-301.

²⁵ The idea of a heavenly treasure or eschatological reward was a common place in early Judaism and Christianity; and it grounded the attitude of detachment from earthly properties. This concept had other bases in contemporary philosophy. See LANE, 1991, p. 301; ATTRIDGE, 1989, p. 299-300.

²⁶ “Prison” was a common characteristic of religious persecution. According to the conditions of the prisons that time, prisoners needed help from their families or friends (2 Mac 14:27.33; Josephus, *Antiquities* 10.150; 13.203; 16.8; 18.119; Philo, *In Flaccum* 74; Act 16:27; 23:18; 25:14,27; Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim 1:18; Phm 1.9; Mt. 25:36).

The community members who were not persecuted exhibited solidarity to those in prison by visiting them and bringing food to them, and undoubtedly seeking their release²⁷. Those who came to help the people directly plundered gave testimony they preferred the company of their faith companions rather than the company of a society hostile to them. They came to help the needy ones and were not afraid of possible reprisal from society, for the display of compassion and support to those who were considered deviants could be dangerous for those sympathetic towards them. The involvement with the faith companions was not without cost, and the solidarity they displayed is similar to the way Christ identified himself with the human condition (2:14; 4:15). The community acted in solidarity with the ones needing support, which made visible the solidarity Christ shared with his people.

Facing a situation of degradation and reproach, Hebrews' recipients "endured", that is, they resisted society's assaults of their honor, and did not "shrink back". They persevered in the confession of Christ and solidarity with those who belonged to him. That is the action the writer of Hebrews recommends. The world of the ones who do not belong to the community is described by the first time: those who are part of it are portrayed as hostile and the cause of many calamities for the believers. "Recalling" the past hostilities of the society reinforces the desire to endure in faith and not capitulate to outside pressures. "Remembering the abuse and injustice they suffered" reinforces the boundary between society and the community. But, positively the community must remember the mutual help and support shown to the group, which will now foster the feeling of friendship, helping them to commit to one another, and not seek their own interests and leave the community (10:25). Reawakening mutual favor and friendship grounds the calls for mutual help going on within the community. The ones who were helped are stirred to gratitude,

²⁷ When in prison, Paul received encouragement and support from the churches (Phil 2:25). On his journey to Rome, Ignatius of Antioch was visited and supported by Christians. Lucian, *Peregrinus* 12-13, gives a description of the type of support Christians could offer to help one of their own, including food, clothes, friendship and company. See deSILVA, 1995, p. 159; BRUCE, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964, p. 269-270; LANE, 1991, p. 299-300.

old partnerships are renewed, and those who helped the needy ones before were stimulated to do it again²⁸.

“Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours” (10:35a)

The past actions and commitment to solidarity among community members – their previous acts of de courage, the generosity to one another, their wisdom in regarding earthly goods as of less worth than the heavenly permanent goods – are presented in such a way that that experience, instead of provoking shame, is turned into a source of praise and respect. Because of that, Hebrews’ recipients are exhorted to do the same in the present and praised for their endurance of that experience of dishonor and suffering. The significance of the past actions and commitment of the community is indicated by the pastoral directive of the declaration in 10:35-36: “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised”.

In these verses, the particle “therefore” establishes a connection with the preceding verses. Heb 10:32-34 underscores the example of the community in its past of suffering, but now the text focuses on their present and immediate future. The community must keep up its boldness, its courage. Both in the negative (10:35) and positive statements (10:36), Hebrews’ addressees are admonished not do deny confidence in the divine promise. The community must adopt in the present the same attitude of commitment to Christ as they did in their earlier days of harsh suffering²⁹.

Heb 10:35-36 presents the following movement:

- Demand (negative): 10:35a: Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours
- Demand (positive): 10:36a: For you need endurance

²⁸ DeSILVA, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: W B. E. Publishing Company, 2000, p. 364.

²⁹ DeSILVA, 2000, p. 364.

- Result (positive): 10:35b: it brings a great reward
- Result (positive): 10:36b: so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised³⁰.

The indignities and deprivation suffered in the past are now interpreted as a demonstration of “confidence”. The word “confidence” expresses the self-assured attitude of a person of faith before God and the world. As believers are granted free access to the presence of God through Christ’s sacrificial death and ministry of heavenly intercession (4:16; 7:24-26; 10:19.21), they can confess their faith before the world. “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours” expresses in a negative way what is positively expressed in 3:6: “Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope”. “Confidence” is the distinctive feature of those who are members of the house of God, and along with the expression “do not abandon” it means not to cast aside a precious gift. The writer of Hebrews beseeches his audience to be faithful and not to abandon “confidence”³¹.

“Confidence” (3:6; 4,14-16; 10,19-22), this right to free expression and access to the presence of God, is at risk among those who shy away (6:4-6; 10:26-31). In 10:35, confidence indicates a declaration of hope reflected in the endurance of society’s attempts to shame the faith community, and it involves the commitment to the people who have lost their goods or were imprisoned (10:32-34). After Hebrews’ recipients “had been enlightened”, they openly and confidently demonstrated the importance of the gifts they received from God through Christ and the benefactions they still hoped for. The community displayed confidence in the face of society’s disapproval and its sanctions of reproach and punishment. They did not cave in to the pressures applied by their neighbors, but they disregarded society’s efforts to expose them to shame by enduring and persevering in commitment to those who were part of the community. This is the “confidence” the author of Hebrews wants the community to keep displaying. They are called to continue in that

³⁰ ROSE, Christian. *Die Wolke der Zeugen*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994, p. 45.

³¹ LANE, 1991, p. 301-302.

“confidence” in their confession and association with the name of Jesus, with other Christians and their hope, so they can receive the reward³².

The relative clause “it brings a great reward” (10:35b) is a reason not to abandon confidence. The manifestation of Christian confidence is a guarantee assuring the future enjoyment of the “great reward” in the consummation of the new age. Just as the courage demonstrated in adversity is oriented eschatologically to the enjoyment of “better possessions” (10:34c), confidence is oriented to the eschatological reward. “Reward” is an important word in the vocabulary of Hebrews. It means punishment when used negatively (2:2); and positively in the sense of reward (10:35; 11:26). Hebrews also names God as “the rewarder” of those who seek him (11:6). The idea of reward stems from the Old Testament and other Hellenistic Jewish texts³³. In Heb 10:35, it means the blessings of salvation God has promised to those who wait for Christ (9:28; 10:23.25). The promise of the great reward is linked to the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1)³⁴.

“Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours” (10:35) underscores the need to endure: “For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (10:36). The inferential conjunction “for” (10:36) looks back not only to the statement: “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours” (10:35), but also to 10:32-34, where the verb “endure” describes the courage displayed by the community in face of persecution. The need to “endure” is also connected to the fulfillment of the will of God, which suggests the measure of endurance is obedience to God. In this regard, the temporal clause of the statement: “when you have done the will of God”, looks back retrospectively to 10:5-10, where it says the Son of God came to the world to fulfill the Scriptures, to accomplish the will of God. He regarded his body as a gift God prepared for effecting the divine will. Christ’s sacrificial death in conformity with God’s will is the basis of the Christian experience of consecration to the service of God (10:10).

³² DeSILVA, 2000, p. 365.

³³ 4 Mac. 16:25. 17;12.18. See THOMPSON, 1982, p. 67.

³⁴ LANE, 1991, p. 302.

The call to endure is an important characteristic of this exhortation. In this respect, Heb 10:36 also anticipates the development of 12:1-13, where the exhortation to endure in the face of hardships and disciplinary sufferings is grounded on Jesus' example (12:1-3). The believers are invited to consider Jesus' example of endurance "so that you may not grow weary or lose heart". "Endurance" (10:36) and "confidence" (10:35) are distinctive features of Christian life in the world. Capitulating in the face of society's shaming and hostility is presented as a failure, not as an adequate action. Instead of acquiescing to outside pressures, Hebrews' recipients must hold fast to their "confession" and not defect from their commitment to God and to one another because of hardships encountered³⁵. Through endurance, they "have done the will of God". Conforming to the will of God is an important part of the theme of *imitatio Christi*, and Hebrews' final exhortation ends with a prayer so the addressees will be fortified to do God's will (13:21). In the context of 10:19-39, the fulfillment of God's will demands a positive response to the exhortations and orientations developed with that pastoral earnestness³⁶. Enduring results in obtaining the promise, a motif previously presented as an allusion to the salvation inaugurated by Christ (4:1; 6:12.17; 8:6) which reemerges now in Hebrews' text, and which is an important guiding thread in Hebrews 11³⁷.

The result of endurance is expressed in the statement: "so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (10:36b). "Receiving what was promised" is equivalent to attaining the "great reward" (10:35), the ultimate goal of the people of the God of the covenant. The believers already possess the realities God spoke about in the form of promise. In this sense, they are a continuity with the faith heroes who did not receive what was promised (11:39-40), but who led their lives in the light of the divine promise. What God promised to the fathers is repeated with assurance to the new covenant people: "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through

³⁵ LANE, 1001, p. 302; ELLINGWORTH, 1993, p. 552; DeSILVA, 2000, p. 366.

³⁶ LANE, 1991, p. 302-303.

³⁷ ATTRIDGE, 1989, p. 301.

better promises” (8:6). Thus, the community of believers can be described as heirs to the divine promise (6:12.17). The author of Hebrews also summons his addressees to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). The same note is sounded in 10:36 with the equivalent term “endurance”, the presupposition for attaining the promise. That way God’s will to fulfill his promise is met with an appropriate response from those who believe and endure³⁸.

“For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay” (10,37a)

The reason for the community to endure is grounded in the biblical citation of Isa 26:20 (LXX) and Hab 2:3b-4 (LXX) in Heb 10:37-38, two verses which are formally introduced by the explicative clause “for”: “For yet ‘in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back’”. The citation fuses Isa 26:20, which counsels withdrawal and concealment “in a very little while” until the wrath of God has passed, and Hab. 2:3b-4, which contrasts faithfulness and withdrawal³⁹. The citation also contains a little portion of Isa 26:20: “for a little while”, but its dominant component is a modified form of Hab 2:3b-4⁴⁰. The time of waiting for the consummation of the divine

³⁸ LANE, 1991, p. 302-303.

³⁹ According to LEWIS, T. W. ‘And If He Shrinks Back’ (Heb. X.38b). *New Testament Studies* 22, 1976, p. 91-93, these verses might involve a situation in which the community, after embracing the word through the Son and exhibiting boldness when originally confronting with the public hostility they encountered, grew weak and dispirited (12:12). The lifestyle or withdrawal and dissimulation presented in Isaiah 26:20 is not seen as apostasy or infidelity to God, but it can be seen as a way of behaving in the time prior to the parousia. Hebrews demonstrates its addressees show “the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end” (6:9-12). Thus, this expression of approval is more adequate to the community crisis, which involves a misinterpretation of faith, not a threat of defection.

⁴⁰ According to LEWIS, 1976, p. 90-91, with the exhortation in 10:32-36, Hebrews presents to the addressees a specific indication of the path of faith in the world. Blending Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3b-4a, which provides a basis for exhorting, allows not only for “exhorting to a living faith” in the meantime prior to the parousia,

redemption is not over yet. The relation between 10:36 and the prophetic oracle mentioned in 10:37-38 explains why “confidence” and “endurance” are demanded from a community who waits in the present for the fulfillment of the divine promise. There is a creative tension between the two passages used to ground the exhortation for the community to keep their fidelity in its present moment⁴¹.

Isa 26:20 LXX, which belongs to the Song of Isa 26:9-20, was one of the biblical passages that were taken from their context and added to the Book of Psalms in the Septuagint as a collection of songs to be used liturgically. This song was also used in the synagogue and in the morning and evening prayers of the early Church. Thus, the allusion to Isa 26:20 LXX could summon back to mind the whole verse, if that is the case, some community people might have sought to justify a lifestyle characterized by “withdrawal” on the basis of this text⁴². The attitude of fidelity the community members are expected to display is defined by the rereading of Hab 2:3b-4 LXX, as shown in the comparison of the two texts:

Hab 2:3b-4 LXX	Heb 10:37b-38
it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.	the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.

In the comparison of the oracle in Hab 2:3b-4 LXX and Heb 10:37b-38 the significance of the modifications made in the text by the author of

but also for indicating the mode of endurance which is opposed to that alluded to in 10:32-36. It is only by inverting the order of Hab 2:4a and 2:4b that the author emphatically moves back from the eschatological reference to underscore the alternatives remaining for the “righteous” in the interim (10:38). The first expression is linked to 10:32-36, a paradigm carefully elaborated exhorting to keep enduring in face of the hostility encountered. The second one is inferred from the allusion to Isaiah 26:20 in 10:37a; and it means Hebrews mentions withdrawal and concealment as a mode of endurance.

⁴¹ LANE, 1991, p. 303; DeSILVA, 2000, p. 366-367.

⁴² LEWIS, 1976, p. 91-93.

Hebrews stands out. In the LXX, the subject of Hab 2:3, a vision with an appointed time, is changed to “the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back” (2:3-4). The interpretation of the text in the LXX is totally messianic, and the one who “will come” is the expected deliverer of his people. If he retreats, that action will be irrefutable proof that he is not the expected one. Then, the textual tradition bifurcates, as it states either “the righteous one will live on the basis of my faithfulness” or “my righteous one shall live by faithfulness”. According to the first reading, the basis for the success of the righteous person is the reliability of God. The context, however, favors the second reading: the righteous one will keep faith with God and his messianic task, and will attain life⁴³.

But the author of Hebrews modifies the LXX text significantly to furnish the basis for the exhortation to confidence and endurance presented in 10:35-36⁴⁴:

- a) The sharpening of the messianic interpretation by adding the masculine article to the participle “coming”. In the Septuagint the participle translates the Hebrew infinitive absolute construction meaning “he will certainly come”, but in Hebrews the participle is personalized, thus creating the messianic title “the One who is coming”. “The one who is coming will come” is a reference to Christ and his parousia, and together with Isa 26:20 LXX, the oracle states the certainty and the imminence of the parousia. “For yet ‘in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay’”⁴⁵ is a change presupposing the apocalyptic understanding of Hab 2:3b LXX⁴⁵.

⁴³ LANE, 1991, p. 304.

⁴⁴ GHEORGHITA, Radu. *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews*. An Investigation of its Influence with Special Considerations to the Use of Hab 2:3-4 in Heb 10:37-38. WUNT. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, p. 218-224.

⁴⁵ STROBEL, A. *Untersuchungen zum eschatologischen Verzögerungsproblem auf Grund der spätjüdisch-urchristlichen Geschichte von Habakuk 2,2 ff.* Supplements to Novum Testamentum. Leiden/Köln, E. J. Brill, 1961, p. 127.

- b) The inversion of the clauses of Hab 2:4, so that the theme of the conditional phrase “anyone who shrinks back” no longer refers to the deliverer, but to the faithful one waiting for the arrival of “the one who is coming”. Such inversion was effected by the writer of Hebrews, for it has no support in the manuscript tradition of the LXX. The righteous one is the one who is faithful to God as he moves towards the ultimate goal, eschatologically understood (10:38a). Contrastingly, the one who shrinks back (10:38b) is the one who has lost sight of the goal. God will keep his promise (10:37); the parousia of Christ is certain, and the loyal one must demonstrate faithfulness in face of difficulties, suffering, and maybe the delay in the parousia of the Lord⁴⁶.
- c) The use of “but” before “anyone who shrinks back” (10:38b). “But” is not a part of the prophetic oracle but a connective which antithetically separates the two clauses of Hab 2:4. The resulting form of the text describes alternative ways of behavior in a period marked by hostility. The one God approves (“my righteous one”) obtains life with God by faithfulness while the one He rejects turns away from the covenant community (10:25).

The freedom which the writer of Hebrews uses to resignify the oracle of Habakkuk reflects the importance he ascribed to it. He seeks to correct a flawed understanding on the part of the community by offering in 10:32-36 an explanation of what faith requires. The inversion of the clauses in 10:38 allows the writer to treat of that misunderstanding, but his aim when using the expression “will live by faith” is indicated in 10:32-36, where endurance in face of hostility from the world is required. What “shrinking back” presupposes can be inferred from the allusion to Isa 26:20 LXX in 10:37. A mode of life characterized by “shrinking back” does not please God (10:38), as it leads to the community withdrawing from the anchorage in the gospel (2:1), going astray from the path and the ultimate goal.

The endurance which the prophetic oracle calls for ensures the certainty of the coming of Christ⁴⁷. In this regard, his interpretation is made

⁴⁶ LANE, 1991, p. 305.

⁴⁷ STROBEL, 1961, p. 127; LANE, 1991, p. 306.

clear in 10:39: “But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved”. That resumes the theme of “shrinking back” and “faith/faithfulness” (Heb 10:38), concludes and summarizes the preceding argument, and applies the biblical text to the situation of the community from alternatives grounded in the rereading of Hab 2:4 LXX. Heb 10:38-39 is arranged chiasmatically:

10:38 – A	by faith	will live
	B anyone who shrinks back	My soul takes no pleasure
10:39 B'	those who shrink back	are lost
	A' those who have faith	are saved

The emphatic “we” in the beginning of the verse identifies the author and his addressees as people who are loyal to Christ. He specifies how the faithful ones can be assured of the enjoyment of the final salvation and on what basis they can hope to reach that goal. These questions are answered in 10:39, which reinforces the prepositional phrase “by faith” with the verb “will live”. The goal of the Christian is to attain eternal life. In the interim prior to the parousia, the faithful one will draw strength to move towards that appointed goal through faithfulness.

The interpretation of Hab 2:3b-4 is built upon the dynamic tension between “shrinking back” and “faith/faithfulness”. “Shrinking back”, a word occurring only in this New Testament text, means lack of steadfastness and confidence. It is equivalent to “turning away from the living God” (3:12) and “willfully persisting in sin” (10:26). “Shrinking back” and being loyal to Christ make a distinction between those who fail to attain the promised eternal life and the ones who “through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). Faithfulness involves steadfastness, and it is related to confidence and endurance (10:35-36). It expresses the steadfastness of those who trust the promises of God, although adversities arise⁴⁸. This understanding of faithfulness derives from the prophetic concept of the righteous person, bolstered by his endurance as he waits for God’s intervention. Thus, the result of those radically opposed attitudes is shown through parallel clauses: “are lost... are saved”. The Day

⁴⁸ THOMPSON, 1982, p. 68-69.

of the Lord (10:25) and the parousia of the One who is coming (10:37) result in judgment. For some it means the reward of life; for others destruction for turning away from the living God⁴⁹.

The contrast between salvation and ruin occurs elsewhere in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism, as in Wis 18:7, which juxtaposes the theme of the deliverance of the righteous and the destruction of their enemies⁵⁰. In Heb 10:39 the argument presented is based on the structure of the covenant. Obedience to the covenant entails the promise of blessing and life while disobedience brings about curse and death (Deut 30:15-20). The antithesis between destruction and attaining life rewords the discussion of Heb 6:4-8, where the reference to blessing and curse alludes to the covenant. Heb 10:38 inverts the clauses of Hab 2:4 LXX, so that the one who “lives by faith” is mentioned before the one “who shrinks back”. In Heb 10:39 the reference to the one who shrinks back precedes the mention of the faithful one. The resulting concentric symmetry faith/shrinking back – shrinking back/faith is rhetorically effective. Placed at the beginning and at the end of the presented contrast, the expression “by faith” is given a prominent position. It clearly propounds the attitude in harmony with what God approves, and at the same time it points to Heb 11:1-40, where the theme of “by faith” is extensively developed⁵¹.

Hebrews’ addressees must identify themselves with the group characterized by faith, not with those shying away. The consequences of those two postures are expressed so as to reinforce their desire to identify with faith. They must consider how to preserve the “better and more lasting” possessions (10:34), which was what drove their previous endurance. They must keep their confidence if they hope to enjoy the “better possessions” they will receive upon entering God’s rest, the city which has foundations, the heavenly homeland (4:1-11; 6,19-20; 11,10.13-16; 13,13-14). If they keep their confidence instead of silencing their witness and hiding their association with the people of God, they will receive the great reward and the promised blessings (10:35-36). At that point,

⁴⁹ LANE, 1991, p. 307.

⁵⁰ STROBEL, 1971, p. 82-83.

⁵¹ VANHOYE, 1963, p. 180-181.

as they had lost their earthly possessions, it would be inconvenient to renounce the eternal goods because of which they had initially surrendered their temporal goods. Walking by faith in loyalty to God leads to the promised joy, avoiding turning back. “Shying away” and “shrinking back” lead to total damnation (10:38-39)⁵².

Conclusion

By depicting the courage and commitment the Christian community displayed under past adverse circumstances as an example for their endurance in the present, Heb 10:32-39 draws upon a Christian tradition seeking to strengthen Christians in a persecution crisis. By encouraging its addressees to imitate their own example, the text highlights both the real sufferings they experienced in the past and their solidarity. At that time, those who came to help the people who had been directly plundered gave witness that they preferred the company of their faith companions. The involvement with the faith companions was not without cost, and the solidarity they demonstrated is similar to the way Christ identified himself with the human condition. The community acted in solidarity with the ones needing support, which made visible the solidarity Christ shared with his people.

The remembrance of the past endurance provides the basis for the exhortation to keep enduring in the present (10:35-39). The current situation of the community requires the same actions and attitudes exhibited in the “earlier days” when they “endured a hard struggle with sufferings”. Such resistance is necessary, “so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (10:36). By highlighting the current context in which the community finds itself, the writer of Hebrews also warns his addressees not to abandon their “confidence”, and points out the great reward they had received and would receive if they remained steadfast and did not turn their backs on their commitment to Christ. The endurance of the community results in receiving the promise. The promise, a motif presented previously in Hebrews as an allusion

⁵² DeSILVA, 2000, p. 369-370.

to the salvation inaugurated by Christ (4:1.8; 6:12.17; 8:6), is stressed again, and is a guiding idea throughout Hebrews (11:13.17.33.39).

The description of the past suffering of the community allows for a perspective view of their current situation. The community was probably undergoing similar ordeals, but their past actions are considered exemplary and its current context requires the same response from them. “Keeping the confidence”, and not silencing their witness or hiding their association with the people of God will lead to the promised blessings. At that point, therefore, it would be inconvenient to shrink back and renounce the heavenly goods for which they had already yielded their earthly goods. “Shrinking back” is a path to damnation, but the course of faith and loyalty to God leads to the enjoyment of the promised blessings: “But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved” (10:39).

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