

“τελειόω [*teleiōō*] implies the fulfillment of the...goal, namely an access to God which was formerly open only to the high priest.”²²⁵ Our author, somewhat repeating what he has stated earlier (Hebrews 8:8-12), will then once again assert how Yeshua’s work has inaugurated the New Covenant (Hebrews 10:15-17).

HEBREWS 10:19

“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Yeshua.”

Those who have been redeemed and spiritually regenerated through the saving work of Yeshua, can “have boldness to enter into the Holies by the blood of Yeshua” (Hebrews 10:19, TLV), even though such *parrēsia* (παρρησία) or “confidence” does require God’s people to approach Him with respect and not dishonor.²²⁶ People in general being able to approach the Lord, in such a manner, is quite different from the condition present in the pre-resurrection era—especially as the high priest would not linger in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. The Mishnah specifically attests, “He did not prolong his prayer, so as not to frighten the Israelites” (m.*Yoma* 5:1).²²⁷ The high priest would simply enter into the Holy of Holies, perform his necessary duties, and then get out lest the people think that he offended God and God had struck him dead somehow. The high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with a great deal of fear, but Believers should have a confidence, in approaching their Heavenly Father.

HEBREWS 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 the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Yeshua, 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.”

Hebrews ch. 12 shifts the scene, from speaking of figures from Israel’s past, seen previously in ch. 11, to our author now discussing his audience’s present experience.²²⁸ The author of Hebrews will be exhorting his readers and listeners on the theme of discipline, and will ask them to consider the sufferings of Yeshua on their behalf. Lane makes the important point, “The Greek text exhibits elegant, genuinely oratorical word order, sonorous instances of effective word play, the use of alliteration, and carefully balanced clauses...These stylistic and linguistic features display a concern for rhetorical effect...The result is lively and animated discourse.”²²⁹ As you will likely see, there is a great deal of material that readers get to consider.

Hebrews’ audience is first admonished, “we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1, NIV). It is notable that our writer does not employ the term *nephelē* (νεφέλη), often referring to a single “cloud,” but instead *nephos* (νέφος), “a cloud, mass or pile of

²²⁵ Ellingworth, 511.

²²⁶ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

²²⁷ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 272.

²²⁸ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

²²⁹ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13*, Vol. 47b (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1991), 406.

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clouds" (LS),²³⁰ which is synonymous to "host" (WBC).²³¹ Lane states, "The metaphorical use of the word νέφος, 'cloud,' to describe a crowded group of people is a common classical figure."²³²

The cloud of witnesses may be compared to spectators in the stands at an athletic competition. This group of witnesses composes "testifiers" of God's power and work in the lives of His people, and how their example of faith should surround those seeking to be faithful. There may be some parallels between what is seen in Hebrews ch. 12 about Believers in Yeshua being admonished to endure on the path of faith, and the example of the Maccabean martyrs in 4 Maccabees 17:10-24, which may be summarized as, "Truly the contest in which they were engaged was divine, for on that day virtue gave the awards and tested them for their endurance. The prize was immortality in endless life...The tyrant was the antagonist, and the world and the human race were the spectators...The tyrant himself and all his council marveled at their endurance, because of which they now stand before the divine throne and live through blessed eternity" (4 Maccabees 17:11-12, 14, 17-18).

Concerning these verses from 4 Maccabees, Bruce makes the poignant remark, "there are several echoes in the present context of our epistle. The martyrs contend in a context in which the pagan king is their antagonist; and true religion wins the victory by their endurance; the universe and the whole race of mankind are the spectators, while Virtue occupies the president's box. The prize with which the martyrs are crowned is eternal life."²³³ This is not only the basic story of the Maccabean martyrs, but also of many who have had to endure persecution, and even death, for the faith.

Considering the testimony of those who have gone on, our author can then tell his audience, "we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered" (Hebrews 12:1, NEB). A few examiners have suggested that he is actually telling First Century Jewish Believers to throw away a life of Torah obedience, but if this were the case, then why would he likewise possibly be referring to 4 Maccabees—anything but an anti-Torah text? deSilva points out that 4 Maccabees "promotes an ongoing commitment to Jewish values...by claiming that Torah is the best teacher of the virtues prized even by the Greco-Roman world."²³⁴ If the author of Hebrews is appropriating these ideas, then he uses them in the context of describing, to primarily a Jewish, but also a non-Jewish, audience, the critical need to endure with God **because the world is watching**.

Using an athletic theme as his frame of reference, the author says in Hebrews 12:1 to throw off every "weight" (KJV, RSV). The Greek *ogkos* (ὄγκος) simply means "bulk, size, mass," but could also refer "metaph. [to] weight, trouble" (LS).²³⁵ As an athlete trained for a marathon in ancient times, he would make sure that he would shed any excess weight that would impede proper performance. Morris indicates, "Athletes carried nothing with them in a race...and the writer is suggesting that the Christian should 'travel light.'"²³⁶ Spiritually, Believers are admonished to remove what The Message paraphrases as "spiritual fat." This would require Messiah followers, being trained up in Him, to remove superfluous things that hinder their ability to compete in the race of life. Take important note of the fact that the author of Hebrews links the pronoun "we" to his readers; he is competing along with them in this race and does not remove himself from the training.

²³⁰ LS, 530.

²³¹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47b:397.

²³² *Ibid.*, 408.

²³³ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 335.

²³⁴ deSilva, 430.

²³⁵ LS, 542.

²³⁶ Morris, in *EXP*, 12:134.

It is notable that a few, in our Messianic faith community, might consider the allusion by our author to athletic contests to be full of “Hellenistic paganism.” Historically, it is true that there were often pagan rituals involved in Greek games, and many of the athletes even competed naked (1 Maccabees 1:10-15). However, to assert that our author is appealing to these practices is a bit much, as he only uses the concept of a race in a general sense to appeal to the human experience. Appealing to athletic competition also appears to be common throughout Diaspora Judaism of the First Century. Lane informs us, “The frequency with which it occurs in hellenistic-Jewish sources, especially Philo and 4 Maccabees, suggests that it was a commonplace in synagogue preaching throughout the Greek-speaking Diaspora.”²³⁷ In fact, the allusion to athletic contexts similar to what we see in the Roman world are made several times in the Midrashim:

“VOICE OF THY BROTHERS BLOOD CRIETH UNTO ME FROM THE GROUND. R. Judan, R. Huna, and the Rabbis each commented. R. Judan said: It is not written, ‘Thy brother’s blood’ (dam-singular), but ‘Thy brother’s bloods’ (deme-plural): i.e. his blood and the blood of his descendants. R. Huna observed: It is not written, ‘Surely I have seen yesterday the blood (dam) of Naboth, and the blood (dam) of his sons,’ but, ‘Surely I have seen yesterday the bloods (deme) of Naboth, and the bloods (deme) of his sons’ (II Kings IX, 26), which means, his blood and the blood of his descendants. The Rabbis said: It is not written, ‘His own servants conspired against him for the blood (dam) of the sons of Jehoiada,’ but,...‘For the bloods of (deme) the sons of Jehoiada’ (II Chron. XXIV, 25), namely, his blood and the blood of his descendants. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: It is difficult to say this thing, and the mouth cannot utter it plainly. **Think of two athletes wrestling before the king;** had the king wished, he could have separated them. But he did not so desire, and one overcame the other and killed him, he [the victim] crying out [before he died], ‘Let my cause be pleaded before the king!’ Even so, THE VOICE OF THY BROTHER’S BLOOD CRIES OUT AGAINST ME. It [the blood] could not ascend above, because the soul had not yet ascended thither; nor could it go below, because no man had yet been buried there; hence the blood lay spattered on the trees and the stones” (*Genesis Rabbah* 22:9).²³⁸

“[F]or the wealth I had, how could I have built all this country for my glory?” – for it says, The king spoke and said: Is not this great Babylon, etc. (ib.27). ‘Now if I squander all my wealth, there will be no glory left me.’ So he locked his coffers. When he said this, a voice from heaven answered him, as it says, While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven (ib. 28). What enabled him to dwell securely for twelve months? Charity. Well, if this is what it does for the wicked, then how much more does it do for Israel? Hence ‘Keep ye justice and do righteousness’ (Isa. LVI, 1). **It is like a man who came to a city where he heard that a gladiatorial exhibition was about to be held.’ He asked a gladiator, ‘When will the show take place?’ He replied: ‘It is far off yet.’ Then he asked the one who was to give the show and he replied: ‘Soon.’ He then said: ‘Did I not ask the gladiator this, yet he said, “It is far off”?’ He replied: ‘Is this your sense, to ask the gladiator? Is he then anxious for me to stage the gladiatorial exhibition, knowing as he does that he may be slain when he descends into the arena?’** Similarly, when Israel asked Balaam: ‘When will salvation come?’ He replied: ‘I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh’ (Num. XXIV, 17). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to them” (*Exodus Rabbah* 30:24).²³⁹

Both of these quotations should reveal that the author of Hebrews did not go beyond Jewish cultural norms of the broad First Century. Competition is a theme that anyone should be able to easily identify with.

²³⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47b:408.

²³⁸ *The Soncino Midrash. Judaic Classics Library II.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

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What is most important for readers to keep in mind is what the “race” of life actually involves. The Greek term employed in Hebrews 12:1 is *agōn* (ἀγών), which is “gener. a struggle against opposition, struggle, fight” (BDAG).²⁴⁰ It is by no coincidence that this is the root for our English word “agony,” because the life of faith is often something that involves pain. It is difficult to separate our author’s usage of *agōn* as “race” from the varied usages that Paul employs, including: “conflict” (Philippians 1:30), “struggle” (Colossians 2:1), “opposition” (1 Thessalonians 2:2), and “fight” (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). deSilva observes that a theme being emphasized in the “race” metaphor is that “a person willingly chose to endure physical discomfort, to submit to the reproaches of a trainer, to curb luxury, and to turn aside from many delights enjoyed by the nonathlete or the fully participating member of the dominant culture.”²⁴¹ **The same should be easily said of anyone who chooses to follow Yeshua the Messiah.** The call to “run with perseverance” (NIV) is common throughout the Apostolic Scriptures,²⁴² and those who run the marathon of faith must continually see that they are able to perform well.

Hebrews 12:2 begins with the words *aphorōntes eis* (ἀφορώντες εἰς), “looking (in)to,” as the author of Hebrews places a high priority on this audience focusing their attention upon Yeshua. Guthrie says that it “implies a definite looking away from others and directing one’s gaze towards Jesus. It suggests the impossibility of looking in two directions at once.”²⁴³ **Understanding Yeshua the Messiah as the center of faith is a theme that can never be overstated.** Hegg makes the valid point, “The word translated ‘fixing our eyes’ or ‘looking’ is a present participle, emphasizing that this is a constant action, not something done once. Our constant attention and focus as we run is upon Yeshua.”²⁴⁴ Do we as Messianics ever make the mistake of taking our attention off Yeshua?

The need to always look to God is a theme that is present all the way at the beginning of Genesis, but in Hebrews 12:2 is probably influenced by the example of the Maccabean martyrs. They looked to God and endured tortures to the point of death:

“O mother, who with your seven sons nullified the violence of the tyrant, frustrated his evil designs, and showed the courage of your faith!...Here lie buried an aged priest and an aged woman and seven sons, because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews...Eleazar was the first contestant, the mother of the seven sons entered the competition, and the brothers contended” (4 Maccabees 17:2, 9, 13).

This fits very well with our author’s description of Yeshua as “the pioneer” (NRSV) or “the founder” (ESV) of faith, “who, in exchange for obtaining the joy set before him, endured execution on a stake as a criminal, scorning the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, CJB/CJSB). Yeshua, as the Leader and as the example His followers are to emulate, endured the hardships that His experiences on Earth dealt Him—to the point of dying on the tree. Now He has been exalted at the right hand of His Father in Heaven. But Yeshua is not only the example for those who live *after* His death and resurrection; He is the example *par excellence* even for people who endured hardships before His First Coming. As Bruce observes, “Our author’s answer might well be that they did not really go

²⁴⁰ BDAG, 17.

²⁴¹ deSilva, 427.

²⁴² Acts 20:24; 1 Corinthians 9:24-26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:7.

²⁴³ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 250.

²⁴⁴ Hegg, *Hebrews*, 224.

before him; *he* went before *them* as truly as he has gone before us,"²⁴⁵ notably as it was "Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt" (Jude 5, ESV).²⁴⁶

Yeshua the Messiah, in His humanity, is the perfect embodiment of faith that His followers are to emulate when they face difficult circumstances. He is represented by the author of Hebrews as the *teleiōtēs* (τελειωτής), "**one who brings someth. to a successful conclusion, perfecter**" (BDAG).²⁴⁷ Partaking of the human experience, Quanbeck points out that He "needed the utmost of courage and stamina for his strenuous ministry. He has broken the trail for us, and he also enables us to follow his path. His mission in life required great personal effort. He needed motivation, even as we do. His motivation was the joy of doing God's will."²⁴⁸ As our author has already stated, "Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God'" (Hebrews 10:7, NIV; cf. Psalm 40:7-8). Such obedience to the Father not only involved keeping His Law, but most notably being humiliated and unjustly executed.

Keep in mind how to the Romans, the cross (Grk. *stauros*, σταυρός) was a sign of great shame. The Senator Cicero would write, "Let the very mention of the cross be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears" (*Pro Rabirio* 5).²⁴⁹ Yeshua the Messiah died as though He were a common criminal, and endured something that was considered to be a complete curse to almost all outsiders. deSilva notes, "The form of execution called crucifixion was calculated to leave the victim utterly stripped of dignity and worth in the eyes of the world. It was the vilest, most degrading death possible, as the crucified was hung up before all the world precisely as an example of how not to act."²⁵⁰

It boggles the human mind how such suffering and death can be considered a joy, yet Yeshua as *the example* emulated joy in His sufferings. He prayed, "these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves" (John 17:13). After being executed and resurrected, He was exalted to the right hand of His Father, a theme our author has already touched (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12). Yeshua promises to share His authority with those who endure on Earth and overcome life's temptations, as He promised the assembly at Laodicea, "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21). Ellingworth summarizes it quite well: "the author wishes to end his period with an emphatic affirmation of the permanent triumph of Christ, and thus perhaps by implication of the permanent effects of that triumph for believers."²⁵¹

The author of Hebrews asks his audience, some of whom may be teetering on denying the Lord, "Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up" (Hebrews 12:3, NLT). The implications of the verb *analogizomai* (ἀναλογίζομαι) are severe, as it can mean "to reckon up, sum up" or "to calculate, consider" (LS).²⁵² He is, in essence, asking his audience to calculate the cost of believing in Yeshua, wanting them to understand that the momentary loss of comfort, status, or even rights on Earth is far outweighed by the future rewards they will experience in glory. Again, the theme of present suffering being

²⁴⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 337.

²⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, fn#37.

²⁴⁷ BDAG, 997.

²⁴⁸ Quanbeck, in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 900.

²⁴⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 338 fn#42.

The Latin version of this text can be accessed online at <<http://thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/rabiripost.shtml>>.

²⁵⁰ deSilva, 432.

²⁵¹ Ellingworth, 642.

²⁵² LS, 58.

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outweighed by future restoration in God's Kingdom is a common one seen throughout the Apostolic Scriptures.²⁵³ Yeshua endured *unbelievable suffering* for fallen humanity, most of which only a few of Hebrews' audience had to even partially experience. Yeshua's tenacity in enduring hardships is the perfect embodiment of Isaiah 40:28-31:

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to *him who* lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up *with* wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary."

While Yeshua the Messiah is represented as Divine as depicted in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1:3-4, 6, 8-11), we need not limit our approach of the Messiah to exclusively this. While Yeshua is God, He is also the ultimate human being, being the example for redeemed men and women to follow. If we are able to truly count the cost of believing in Him, He will share His authority as the reigning King with us.

HEBREWS 12:22-24

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and [assembly] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, and to Yeshua, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the* blood of Abel."

The message, that is to be learned from Mount Sinai, is that God is holy and that He requires respect from His people.²⁵⁴ But faith is also about communing with God and with the generations of others who have committed themselves to Him. If people have faith in Yeshua, they are to definitely understand that we "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering" (Hebrews 12:22, ESV). Our author's previous comparison of Mount Sinai, to now the Heavenly Mount Zion, actually shows how highly he regards Mount Sinai. What Yeshua has now brought about, for the redeemed in Him, should eliminate any of the dread that the Ancient Israelites would have had. While born again Believers are to surely fear and respect God, they are to nevertheless rejoice in His presence.

There are two important ways that we can view the verb form *proselēluthate* (προσεληλύθατε), appearing in the second person plural perfect tense, meaning "you have come." What we must first note is that it indicates a kind of realized eschatology that our author is communicating to his readers. In other words, what Heavenly Mount Zion represents can be experienced now in the lives of the redeemed. Secondly, some have likened this vocabulary to proselytizing language. If we were to stretch the meaning of the verb *proserchomai* (προσέρχομαι), "to approach, draw nigh" (LS),²⁵⁵ then we could render it as "you have converted over." This is because, as Bruce observes, "by virtue of their accepting the gospel, the readers of this epistle had come to that spiritual realm some of whose realities are detailed in the following clauses."²⁵⁶

In a way, the author of Hebrews may be asking his readers why some of them are thinking of going back to a Messiah-less Judaism, when in fact they have converted to the "true faith"

²⁵³ Matthew 5:10-12; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 4:13; 5:1, 10.

²⁵⁴ This entry has been adapted from the author's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

²⁵⁵ LS, 690.

²⁵⁶ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 355.