

THE MESSAGE OF HEBREWS

a summary for Messianic teaching and preaching

The Epistle to the Hebrews is probably the second most difficult text of the Bible for today's Messianic Believers to really understand.¹ As many have desired to recapture a forgotten emphasis on the Hebraic and Jewish Roots of our faith, Hebrews forces us to consider a part of the First Century world that many would like to think does not really exist: the Jewish Diaspora.² I remember when I purchased my leather bound edition of the *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* back in 2000, and read a statement for its introduction to Hebrews: "It is certainly a superb, literal Greek masterpiece which is well-organized, logical, and comprehensive."³ Having encountered this, I realized that one day as Messianic engagement with the Scriptures improved, this was going to prove to be a problem because various people in our faith community hold to a steadfast, ungodly prejudice against anything that is not "Hebrew." Several years later my suspicions were confirmed when a particular Messianic false teacher claimed that the text of Hebrews was unreliable, and its inclusion within the Bible should be severely questioned. Those with appropriate training in Biblical Studies could see right through the overblown claims made against Hebrews, which if unfortunately applied across the board could be used to question the integrity of every book of the Bible.

The most significant thing, for any reader of Hebrews to recognize, is that the author of Hebrews relies upon the unique renderings of the Greek Septuagint, the ancient translation of the Hebrew Tanach into Greek, dating three centuries before the ministry of Yeshua. Those unfamiliar with the LXX might think that the author has misquoted from the Hebrew Tanach, when in fact he only uses the canonical Scriptures of the Diaspora Synagogue.⁴ (Of course, the Epistle to the Hebrews is not the only place where the Septuagint is used in the Apostolic Writings, as many Messianic prophecies referenced in the Gospels are quoted from the LXX.) Likewise, a working knowledge of Greek is important for readers *and* teachers of Hebrews, to note any biased translations into English that can be rendered a bit better (8:13), or to detect words added to an English translation that do not appear in the source text (i.e., 8:7, 13; 9:1, 17, 24; 10:1).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

² In my personal estimation, the top five most difficult books for the Messianic movement to understand are: Galatians, Hebrews, Ecclesiastes, Romans, and 1 Corinthians.

³ Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, 1618.

⁴ Cf. summary in Garrett, *Archaeological Study Bible*, 1995.

A useful tool to have, if you are completely unfamiliar with the Septuagint, could be Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

If there is anything that is absolutely true about the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is that its author does believe Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) to be superior to all things. The author is a second generation Believer who is reckoned among those who heard the good news from those of the first generation who encountered the Lord in person (2:3).⁵ He is definitely concerned about the possibility of many of his brothers and sisters leaving faith in Yeshua (2:1; 3:12; 6:6; 10:35). It is rightly concluded that the main audience of Hebrews were Jewish Believers in the Diaspora, with a wide number of interpreters thinking that it was written to those in Rome (cf. 13:24). For some reason or another, these Believers are being tempted to leave faith in the Messiah and return to a previous, Messiah-less experience in the Synagogue. Given the author's observations of the Temple service in Jerusalem still operating (8:13), it is probable that Hebrews was written in the mid-to-late 60s C.E., against a backdrop of the Jewish uprising in Judea soon to occur.

The author of Hebrews knows that something big is soon to occur, and with it there will be no safety net in the minds of many Jewish Believers—who while having faith in Yeshua, still knew that animal sacrifices were occurring in Jerusalem. This was something comforting for them. *What would happen if these sacrifices were suddenly gone?* This would be uncharted territory for many of them, given the relative unestablishment of the Messianic community. Some Jewish Believers would choose to cast aside the Messiah and return to the familiarity of the Synagogue, while others would be forced to recognize the magnanimity of His final sacrifice at Golgotha, providing for a permanent atonement. There would be no more operating Levitical priesthood, but only Yeshua's priesthood operating and interceding before the Father in Heaven (7:25). *Would they be spiritually mature enough to be able to handle this?*

Hebrews is frequently read as sometimes opposing the commandments of the Torah of Moses, yet the author of Hebrews is quite insistent that the Law has not been abolished, *twice* quoting the critical New Covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 that Moses' Teaching is to be written on the hearts and minds of God's people (8:8-12; 10:16-17)—something the Messiah has inaugurated by His priesthood. Much of the argumentation style of the Epistle to the Hebrews has sometimes been taken as being anti-Judaism and anti-Temple, but in actuality he employs a common Rabbinic *qal v'chomer* or classical *a fortiori* approach, demonstrating great respect for the institutions and historical figures of Ancient Israel in order to precisely show **how much greater and grander the Messiah actually is.**

The author of Hebrews recognizes the ongoing plan of not only salvation history, but most especially God's revelation to humanity: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (1:1-2). His treatise is certainly going to include some material that demonstrates how God's plan has moved forward, and that there are some new realities that His people will have to contend with. Soon there will be no more Temple, no more sacrifices, and with it the

⁵ The fact that the author of Hebrews is ultimately anonymous (although persons such as Luke, Apollos, or even Priscilla have been suggested) should not prove to be a problem for its reliability. Over half of the books of the Tanach are strictly anonymous, and there is no doubting that much of the prophetic literature was not transcribed by the Prophets themselves but instead their various followers.

realization that all Messiah followers will have no choice but to look to Yeshua exclusively for their sin covering.

Yeshua as the Son of God represents His Father fully (1:3a), and His intention was to enter into this world and provide permanent purification for sins, later to return to Heaven and sit at His Father's right hand (1:3b). Because of Yeshua's supremacy as the Son, He is to be regarded as superior to angels (1:4-5; cf. Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13), and the angels are actually directed to worship Him as Divine (1:6; cf. Deuteronomy 32:43, LXX). While the angels are to be regarded as important servants of God (1:7, 14; cf. Psalm 10:4), the Son is directly regarded as being "God," whose "throne will last for ever and ever..." (1:8-9; cf. Psalm 45:6-7). The ultimate end of the Earth and greater cosmos is contrasted to the great power and permanence of the Messiah (1:10-12; cf. Psalm 102:25-27). None of the angels are to be considered as ever having sat down at the Father's right hand (1:13; cf. Psalm 110:1). Similar to the angel worship problem at Colossae (Colossians 2:18), there were some among Hebrews' intended audience who may have only thought of Yeshua as being a nominal intermediary force, but not God Himself.

Our author notes that angels were present in the giving of the Torah to Moses (2:2; cf. Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:54). If violation of God's Law was met with severe penalties, then "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away...[H]ow shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" (2:1, 3a). The gospel message that Hebrews' audience has encountered has been attended by the great miracles and the presence of the Holy Spirit (2:3b-4). As serious as dismissing the Torah is, dismissing the good news would bring with it even more severe consequences! Yeshua the Messiah has come into the world to bring a realization to humanity of the great things in store for the redeemed in the future (2:5-8; cf. Psalm 8:5-7). Yeshua Himself participated in the human experience (2:9), precisely so that many may be brought into glory. Yeshua's identification with humanity in His ministry service is critical, not only so that we might emulate Him and look to Him for guidance, but that we might understand His priestly service before the Father in Heaven (2:10-18; cf. Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17; 8:18).

One of the most important figures in the Bible is undeniably Moses, and the author of Hebrews has a very high view of him. Still, in demonstrating great respect for Moses and what he did for the Lord, the more significant person to whom Believers must direct their attention is obviously Yeshua the Messiah:

"Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Yeshua, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in God's house. Yeshua has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Messiah is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (3:1-6).

There is no denigration at all of the figure of Moses in these statements, but Moses was a servant contrasted to Yeshua Himself who is God's Son. While proper honor is due to Moses, our faith and confidence are to be placed in the Messiah. If not, the author of Hebrews warns

that people might fall into the same predicament as the Ancient Israelites who rebelled at Meribah and Massah did (3:7-11; Psalm 95:7-11). This important scene is used to communicate how severe it would be to reject Yeshua—especially if for a previous generation God “declared on oath in my anger, “They shall never enter my rest” (3:11). The writer urges, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:12-13). The need to persevere in one’s trust in Yeshua is clear: “We have come to share in Messiah if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (3:14). He repeats the need to learn from this past incident, because if a generation of Ancient Israelites did not enter into the Promised Land and its rest because of unbelief, what will face those who reject God’s Messiah (3:15-19; cf. Psalm 95:7-8)?

Learning from the errors of previous generations is imperative to the author of Hebrews, and those in the First Century will be held every bit as accountable as those in Israel’s past. He observes how “since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (4:1). This rest, however, is not entry into the Promised Land but entry into the Kingdom of God itself. The Ancient Israelites apparently “had the gospel preached” to them the same as Hebrews’ generation, but they are to be regarded as those “who heard [but] did not combine it with faith” (4:2). The basic news that redemption and blessing would be brought by the Lord is the same for any time period; the specificity that this is to come about in Yeshua the Messiah requires the stakes to be higher. Those who know Him and believe in Him enter into the promised rest (4:3; cf. Psalm 95:11), something which has been typified by the institution of the Sabbath day (4:4-7; cf. Psalm 95:7-8). While there is surely a great eternal “rest” to be experienced by those in the Messiah, it would be difficult to argue that the author of Hebrews is “anti-Sabbath”—given the fact that by resting once a week, Believers can experience a *small taste* of future eschatological realities (4:8-11). The message of the Word of God, in what it communicates and how it challenges His people, is something that cannot go unheeded (4:12-13).

It is much more difficult for modern people, who live in an age when animal sacrifices seem out of place and largely taboo, to identify with our writer’s description of Yeshua as High Priest, than First Century Jews, Greeks, and Romans for whom these things were far more commonplace. Yeshua, as the Son of God in Heaven (4:14), is to be regarded as the High Priest with whom we can relate, precisely because He has participated in humanity and can convey our needs before the Father (4:15). Messiah followers should be able to “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16).

The author of Hebrews recognizes the value of the Levitical priesthood in stating, “Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people” (5:1-3). Yeshua’s service as High Priest before the Father is consistent with Aaron’s own appointment (5:4-5; Psalm 2:7). Yet, Yeshua serves as a priest after the order of Melchizedek (5:6; Psalm 110:4),

something validated by His own Earthly ministry and obedience to the Father through suffering (5:7-10). For some reason or another, though, the author of Hebrews expresses doubts that his audience can really understand all of the details and significance of this, still needing to be fed from proverbial “milk” rather than “meat” (5:11-14).

There are many things classified as being “elementary teachings about Messiah” that the writer lists, including: “the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment” (6:1-2). Hebrews’ audience did not have an adequate understanding of these things *and* many Believers today do not either. (Even our own Messianic community has divergent opinions on some of these foundational subjects.) Still, the key is to advance beyond the essentials of faith into the more complex and detailed issues (6:3).

One of the most disputed areas of the Epistle to the Hebrews is where the author asserts, “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:4-6). Those who believe in a doctrine of eternal security, more popularly called “once saved, always saved,” have tended to have difficulty with this. Those who believe in the possibility that the spiritually regenerated can lose their salvation look here for support, although they would commonly emphasize that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit would be grounds for redemption lost (Matthew 12:31). Someone would really have to declare that the salvation experienced in Yeshua is really something worthless. Eternal punishment can only await (6:7-8).

The author of Hebrews is confident that his audience will do the right thing: “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation” (6:9). They have already been faithful to love, help others, and demonstrate proper works becoming of true saints (6:10). They are encouraged to continue doing the good things they have been accomplishing (6:11-12). God’s nature requires Him to be faithful, just as He was to Abraham (6:13-15; cf. Genesis 22:16-17). He Himself had to be the Guarantor of Abraham’s blessing (6:16-17). With God being incapable of lying, the hope that is offered to people is found in Yeshua, who serves as a high priest before the Father, similar to Melchizedek (6:16-20).

Melchizedek is a very interesting, albeit elusive figure, who is encountered in Genesis 14:18-20. He was a priest of the Most High God, to whom Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils after freeing Lot from captivity (7:1-2a). He is testified to be a “king of peace” (7:2b), with some kind of mystery surrounding him as nothing is stated regarding his origins (7:3). Abraham acknowledged Melchizedek’s significance in tithing to him, something to be regarded as the Levites having paid a tithe to him as Levi was present in Abraham’s loins (7:4-9). The importance, more than anything else, is to highlight that there has been a transition of priesthoods from Levitical to Melchizedekian, because of the arrival of the Messiah (7:11-17; cf. Psalm 110:4). The author of Hebrews speaks about there being both “a change of the priesthood” and “a change of the law” (7:12). While Moses’ Teaching as a whole—especially statutes like the Ten Commandments—is not to be cast aside as irrelevant or unimportant,

changes regarding animal sacrifice, the Levitical priesthood transitioning to Yeshua's priesthood, and most especially the Messiah's permanent atonement have been enacted, as salvation history has progressed forward.

The author of Hebrews could observe how "The former regulation [of the priesthood] is set aside because it was weak and useless" (7:18a), with *asthenes kai anōpheles* perhaps better translated as "weak and unprofitable" (HCSB). The further observation "the law made nothing perfect" (7:18b) is not a negation of Psalm 19:7,⁶ but rather an assertion of how "the *Torah* did not bring anything to the goal" (CJB) as it is powerless in and of itself to bring final redemption. The audience of Hebrews is told, "a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (7:19c), this Hope being none other than the Messiah Yeshua Himself and His Melchizedekian priesthood (7:20-22):

"Now there have been many of those [Levitical] priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Yeshua lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once and for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever" (7:23-28).

The awesome importance, of not only Yeshua's **single sacrifice for human sin providing permanent atonement**, but also His priestly service in Heaven, is explained as "The point of what we are saying" (8:1a). Our writer explains the greatness of the Messiah, who is "a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (8:1b-2). It is asserted that Yeshua serves as High Priest of the Tabernacle in Heaven, because the Levitical priests on Earth actually serve a copy of the true Heavenly Tabernacle (8:3-5; cf. Exodus 25:40). The author of Hebrews will explain how the ministry in which the Messiah serves is superior (8:6), precisely because Yeshua's Melchizedekian priesthood has brought about the promised New Covenant.

A translation challenge is present in 8:7, though, because as the NIV renders it, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." The Greek *Ei gar hē prōtē ēn amemptos* actually reads "for if that first were faultless" (YLT) with no associated noun. While "first" can be *diathēkē*/covenant, the feminine *prōtē* could also speak of the *skēnē*/tabernacle, *hierōsunē*/priesthood, or even *leitourgia*/ministry. It is far better, given the limitations of the human priests who occupied the Levitical service (7:28), for *prōtē* in 8:7 to be associated with the Earthly Tabernacle, priesthood, or ministry of the Levitical service—not the covenant made by God. The problems that God had are asserted to be with the people (8:8). With a second tabernacle/priesthood/ministry established, the result is that the New Covenant has been enacted. The author of Hebrews quotes from

⁶ "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7).

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (LXX) to substantiate that the time when a permanent forgiveness for sins would be available **has now arrived**:

“The time is coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.⁷ This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (8:9-12).

No one can honestly argue from Hebrews 8:9-12 that the New Covenant is something separated from the commandments and instructions of God’s Torah. The essence of the New Covenant is not only the promise of permanent forgiveness for sins—something clearly available in the sacrificial work of Messiah Yeshua—but that **“I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts”** (8:10). It is a sad fact that when many good Christian people read about the New Covenant in the Bible, they jump right over this fact.

Similar to 8:7 preceding, 8:13 and 9:1 following are another location where “*covenant*” (NASU) has been added to most English translations, where the subject matter from 8:13-10:18 largely concerns the limitations and transitory nature of the Levitical priesthood to the permanence of Yeshua’s priesthood. 8:13 especially has some transmission issues into English. Its opening clause *en tō legein kainēn* is simply “in the saying ‘new’” (YLT), with no noun provided. *Kainēn* should be understood as applying to the tabernacle/priesthood/ministry of the Levitical service, given what 8:13b says: *to de palaioumenon kai gēraskon engus aphanismou*. While often rendered with “what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear,” the verbs *palaiōō*⁸ and *gēraskō*⁹ both mean “to age.” To regard the Levitical service as “obsolete” is too strong, whereas the NEB offers the much better rendering, “growing old and ageing.”¹⁰ The Levitical service would have been older in its time of service than Yeshua’s priestly service in Heaven (although it has been based on Melchizedek’s priesthood), and it would disappear at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a timestamp on when Hebrews was composed in the late 60s C.E.

It is much easier to detect in 9:1 that the subject matter is not “the first covenant” (NIV), but rather how *Eiche men oun [kai] hē prōtē*, “Now even the first...” pertains to the Levitical priesthood and with it its “earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up” (9:1b-2a). The author

⁷ Hebrews 8:9b follows the Septuagint rendering of Jeremiah 31:32:

“not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day when I took hold of their hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; for they abode not in my covenant, and I disregarded them, saith the Lord” (LXE).

⁸ “to be old or antiquated” (LS, 586).

⁹ “to bring to old age” (Ibid., 164).

¹⁰ Similarly appearing as “growing old and aging” in Bruce, *Hebrews*, 187.

lists some of the main pieces of the Tabernacle furniture (9:2b-5a),¹¹ but mentions that for the sake of his audience “we cannot discuss these things in detail now” (9:5b). Within the Levitical priesthood the high priest had to enter into the Holy of Holies once a year, but could not offer a permanent cleansing of the conscience (9:6-10). In contrast to this, Yeshua entered into the Heavenly realm and presented His own blood to obtain eternal redemption for all who would believe in Him (9:11-14). By this priestly work “Messiah is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised inheritance” (9:15a).

Speaking of a covenant made (*diathēkē*), the author of Hebrews expresses, “it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it” (9:16). 9:17 is a most difficult verse to detect a mis-translation, appearing in the NASU as “For a covenant is valid...when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.” While to some readers it may seem that a last will and testament which people make is in view, *nekrois* is simply a plural noun for “dead (ones).” What is more in view here is “dead victims” (YLT) in reference to animals, and William L. Lane’s paraphrased offering in his *Word Biblical Commentary* volume captures what 9:17 is communicating a little better: “for a covenant is made legally secure on the basis of the sacrificial victims.”¹² In instances like Genesis 15:9-21, those who made the covenant had to agree to be like the animals broken up into pieces, if the *b’rit/diathēkē* were ever broken.

The author of Hebrews highlights the significance of shed blood to secure an agreement between God and His people, making light of the Sinai Covenant (9:18-21). The Torah certainly did offer a degree of cleansing by its prescribed animal sacrifices (9:22-23), but not the permanent cleansing offered in the sacrifice of the Son of God. Yeshua died in humanity’s stead for violation of God’s statutes, providing for there to be a one-time offering for final atonement:

“For Messiah did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was...a copy¹³ of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Messiah would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:24-26).

As important as Yeshua’s offering is for the progression of salvation history, and with it the inauguration of the New Covenant—more is still to come. The Lord will return, and the salvation of persons is to be consummated at the resurrection (9:28).

Once again as Twenty-First Century readers, we have to be reminded that the Epistle to the Hebrews was not written directly to us; Hebrews was written to an ancient audience for whom animal sacrifices were quite important. 10:1 in the NASU again adds unnecessary words in attesting, “For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come...,” as

¹¹ Do note that while often rendered as “golden altar of incense” in 9:4 (most versions), *thumiaterion* is actually “a vessel for burning incense, a censer” (LS, 371). The KJV/NKJV correctly has “censer.”

¹² Lane, 47b:229.

¹³ Grk. *antitupa tōn alēthinōn*; “figures of the true” (YLT).

The NASU adds “*mere*” in *italics*, followed by other versions which add “only” (NIV), “mere” (NRSV), or “merely” (CJB).

the Greek source text simply has *Skian gar echōn ho nomos tōn mellontōn agathōn*, lacking “only.” Still, it is very true that the Torah has shadows of “the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (10:1b). The author asks, “If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:2-4). If the Torah’s animal sacrifices could offer what the sacrifice of Yeshua has provided, then a single, one-time sacrifice would be all that was needed for redemption.

Yeshua the Messiah entered into the world to accomplish His Father’s will, because of the ultimate limitations of the animal sacrifices (10:5-9a; cf. Psalm 40:6-8, vs. 6, 7 again). It is attested how “He sets aside the first to establish the second” (10:9b), with the old order of sacrifices put away in order for Yeshua’s own sacrifice to stand. Note that the issue is not the commandments of God’s Law regulating human ethics, morality, or even things like the Sabbath, Biblical holidays, or kosher. *The issue in view is what the Messiah’s sacrifice has specifically done for the atonement of sin*, and how “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Yeshua the Messiah once for all” (10:10). The author of Hebrews compares and contrasts the Levitical priest who has to offer up sacrifices constantly, while the Messiah has ascended into Heaven waiting only to return to the Earth and defeat His enemies (10:11-14; cf. Exodus 29:38; Psalm 110:1). The validation of the Messiah’s work is found in the essence of the New Covenant, of the Lord writing His Law onto the hearts of His people and forgetting all of their lawless acts against Him (10:15-18; cf. Jeremiah 31:33-34). **To give up these things** not only for Hebrews’ ancient audience—but even for us as today’s Messianic Believers—**would be most reckless**. The author exhorts his readers to have the steadfast assurance that they can approach the Father via the work of His Son:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Yeshua, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (10:19-23).

The attention of Messiah followers should be “how we may spur one another to love and good deeds” (10:24), with regular times of fellowship and accountability most important (10:25). The challenges of denying the Lord Yeshua, His permanent atonement, and regarding what He has accomplished as utterly worthless—are even more severe than what happens to those who disregard Moses’ Teaching:

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of

grace? For we know him who said, 'It is mine to repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:26-31; cf. Deuteronomy 32:35, 36; Psalm 135:14).

For some reason or another, not stated in the text explicitly, many within Hebrews' audience had grown a little tired or weary of their Messiah faith and were tottering. So the author naturally asks them to "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in great contests in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and everlasting possessions" (10:32-35). These Believers were steadfast and eager in their faith, willing to endure whatever was required for the cause of the good news. They endured some degree of insults and beatings, and even illegal procurements of what they owned. Now with the Second Temple soon to be gone, some were wondering: Is belief in Yeshua really valid?

The author of Hebrews does not even entertain that his largely Jewish audience will apostatize, and return to a Synagogue experience *without Yeshua*.¹⁴ He just says, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (10:35-36). Yeshua will return to the Earth, and ultimate salvation will be found in those who enter into His Kingdom (10:37-39; cf. Habakkuk 2:3-4; Isaiah 26:20).

One of the most important and encouraging parts of the Holy Bible for Believers since the First Century has undeniably been Hebrews 11, commonly referred to as the "Hall of Faith" or the "Hall of Fame of Faith." It begins with the assertion, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (11:1-3). Faith regards those realities that we cannot fully understand as limited human beings, those aspects of our lives and experiences on Earth which require us to place our trust entirely in the hands of an Eternal Creator—the One who made the universe not out of some pre-fabricated elements as Greco-Roman mythology taught, but out of nothing.

To argue that "faith" (*pistis*) is just some New Testament concept, while popular among many Christians today, is something that the author of Hebrews would utterly reject. To substantiate his view that his audience, with all of the unknowns they would be facing, must turn to God like never before, he makes considerable effort to reference figures from the Tanach or Old Testament who expressed complete trust in Him. As he says, "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (11:6). These include: Cain (11:4), Enoch (11:5), Noah (11:7), Abraham and Sarah (11:8-12, 17-19), Isaac (11:20), Jacob (11:21), Joseph

¹⁴ Keep in mind that elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures, the temptation for a non-Jew to become a Jewish proselyte and be a part of a much more established Synagogue, than a still-developing group of Yeshua followers, was very much present. The dynamics in play in Hebrews could just as easily regard non-Jewish Believers not really knowing what to do with the changing circumstances in Jerusalem as well, with many just wanting to go with their fellow Jewish Believers into a Messiah-less Synagogue experience.

(11:22), Moses (11:23-28), the Ancient Israelites in the Exodus (11:29), those who witnessed the fall of Jericho (11:30), Rahab (11:31), and various other figures from both Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism (11:32-38). These were people who knew that they needed to look beyond the current terrestrial sphere and to a greater Heavenly reality for God's promises to be truly realized (11:13-16). As the author describes, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (11:39-40). **Ultimate redemption can only come when God's people from all ages, of both the departed and the living, are brought together at the Second Coming** (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Giving up on Yeshua means failing those who have preceded us in the legacy of faith. The author of Hebrews, as a good exhorter of the Messianic community, will not allow this, and so he says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Yeshua, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:1-2). Giving up on the Messiah means utterly insulting everything that He endured to secure final redemption for fallen humanity, and would mean that His ascension into Heaven is utterly meaningless. So the writer poignantly directs, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:3).

The author of Hebrews wonders how much his audience has really endured for the cause of Messiah. He probes them: "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons" (12:4-5a), acknowledging from the Tanach how God only disciplines His true children (12:5b-6; cf. Proverbs 3:11-12). Discipline from the Heavenly Father is never something that is pleasant, but nevertheless true Believers are to "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons" (12:7-8). Those who are true children of the Holy One of Israel undergo His chastisement (12:9-11), but such discipline via hardship is much preferred to eternal punishment. The objective of those Believers in Yeshua who may undergo temporary rebuke is to "strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed" (12:12-13).

It should not be surprising that the author of Hebrews, likely a colleague of the Apostle Paul, sounds very much like him in terms of the instruction he issues about general morality, including: being at peace with all (12:14), realizing the power of God's grace (12:15), and avoiding sexual immorality (12:16-17).

Our author is quite keen on his audience understanding the realities of God beyond this dimension. As significant as it is for Messiah followers to understand, respect, appreciate, and heed what the Torah instructs about the Ancient Israelites at Mount Sinai—even more critical to heed are the realities of the Heavenly Jerusalem, angels, *and* departed saints worshipping before the throne of God:

“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’ But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the [congregation] of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Yeshua the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks of a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:18-24; cf. Exodus 19:12-13).

Rather than focus on a Jerusalem Temple and Levitical priesthood about to fall, the attention of Hebrews’ audience needs to instead be considering the Heavenly Jerusalem where not only Yeshua the Messiah and the Heavenly host reside, but all of those who have preceded them in faith. If members of Hebrews’ audience were to give up on Yeshua, then they would not only *never* see the Lord, but they would also *never* see their departed predecessors and loved ones again. Such persons, while “made perfect” (12:23), obviously await the next stage of salvation history when Yeshua returns “with all His saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13, NASU) at the Second Coming and resurrection of the dead. The author’s logic is quite sound: if one were to reject the Lord’s words from Sinai, *how much worse* is it to reject His words from Heaven? He describes,

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (12:25-27; cf. Exodus 19:18; Judges 5:4; Psalm 68:8).

The author’s confidence in his audience is once again noticed as he only says “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God with reverence and awe” (12:28). While “God is a consuming fire” (12:29), the significant majority of Hebrews’ readership will never have to experience this firsthand. Even if they may have to be temporarily chastised via certain Divine means, the writer ultimately expects his readers to make the right decision in choosing Yeshua the Messiah.

Hebrews ch. 13, as the closing section of our author’s treatise, understandably includes various general instructions and ethical exhortations for his audience to behave properly as due spiritually transformed Messiah followers. The Believers are to love (13:1), be hospitable (13:2), and remember those in prison (13:3). “Marriage should be honored by all...” (13:4), people should not love money (13:5) and be content with what God has given them (13:6; cf. Psalm 118:6). Leaders in the faith are to be respected (13:7), and the ever-present and unchanging nature of Yeshua is to be recognized (13:8). There were evidently some false or strange teachings circulating among Hebrews’ audience regarding what people ate, and while there are various opinions of this among interpreters, we should not regard this as mainline

kosher eating but instead more along the lines of esoteric and/or mystical views of eating in regard to animal sacrifices (13:9-10).¹⁵

What would be among the biggest issues for the audience of Hebrews to consider? The author tells them something that will be difficult to consider: “The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Yeshua also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (13:11-12). The final redemption for all of humanity was accomplished outside of the city of Jerusalem, meaning outside of the main centers of Second Temple Jewish religiosity. With this in mind, the audience is to “go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (13:13). This does not mean that the First Century Jewish Believers were to cast aside their heritage in Ancient Israel, somehow regarding it as worthless or meaningless. **But**, if they were loyal to the Messiah they would find themselves outside of their proverbial “comfort zones,” something that their Lord exemplified in being executed outside of the Holy City of Jerusalem. The ultimate reality is how “here [on Earth] we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:14).

The audience of Hebrews is to surely “Through Yeshua, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for which such sacrifices God is pleased” (13:15-16). By placing Yeshua at the absolute center of their being, they can accomplish all things that the Father intends! This includes a healthy respect and obedience for various leaders, given the reality that they have been committed to the well being of the readers of the letter (13:17).

In the closing salutation, the author of Hebrews asks for prayer for himself, his colleagues, and to remember how he says “We desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon” (13:18-19). Even though the author of Hebrews is unknown specifically by name, he was known by the audience, presumably given his style of communication and the various admonitions that he issued. The final word he issues is one which commits them fully to the Lord,

“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Yeshua, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Yeshua the Messiah, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (13:20-21).

As the Epistle to the Hebrews closes, we get the distinct impression that the author could have said more, and that he has actually kept his message rather short (13:22). He tells his audience that Timothy has recently been released from prison, a good indication that Hebrews’ main audience is the collection of Jewish Believers in Rome (13:23; cf. 2 Timothy 4:9). The author extends greetings to his audience’s main leaders (13:24a), and how “Those from Italy send you their greetings” (13:24b). While this may mean that the letter was written from Italy, “Those from Italy” might also be a reference to Priscilla and Aquila, Diaspora Jews

¹⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *New International Biblical Commentary: Hebrews* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 240 reminds us,

“[B]ecause the doctrines are described in this verse as **strange**, it seems unlikely that the dietary restrictions of Judaism are in view in the present context. More probably, here as in verse 4 the writer may be countering teachings derived from the influence of an early Jewish Gnosticism or the general religious syncretism of the time.”

originally from Rome (Acts 18:2), and that the letter is written to Roman Jews. The author of Hebrews being a colleague of Paul's is confirmed by the similar closing greeting seen in the Pauline letters: "Grace be with you all" (13:25).

What does the Epistle to the Hebrews mean to today's Messianic movement? Admittedly, it is a text of Scripture which asks us many questions that various persons in our midst are unable—and sometimes entirely incapable—to answer. The author of Hebrews places the sacrifice and priesthood of Messiah Yeshua at **the very center** of his message. He warns against any dismissal or abandonment of the Messiah with the destruction of the Second Temple in view, as any return to a Messiah-less Synagogue Judaism could mean some significant consequences to be experienced in eternity. The issue is not First Century Jewish nationalism, nor Jewish Believers expressing an appreciation in their Biblical or ethnic heritage; the issue is casting aside the Jewish Messiah for a more "convenient" and "established" path.

In this second decade of the 2000s, the second generation of today's Messianic movement has already started to take shape. Many people are being "lured" by Judaism in ways similar to Hebrews' First Century audience. Various families and persons think that they can be a *permanent* part of the Jewish Synagogue and maintain some degree of Messiah faith. While **no one** is asking or should even think for today's Messianic Jews to be totally cut off from the worldwide Jewish community, *or even* for the broad Messianic world to be cut off from supporting the State of Israel—there are those who would prefer to live in an almost homogenous Jewish environment, failing to recognize any attendant problems. If some of today's Messianic Jews prefer to focus their daily and weekly spiritual experiences in a local synagogue that does not recognize Yeshua as Messiah, then there will be definite lures present for families to be taken away from Yeshua if their association is too close—because Yeshua *is likely to be an afterthought* to their daily and weekly routines. There are First Century examples in the Apostolic Scriptures of how groups of Messiah followers (i.e., the Corinthians in Acts 18:1-7) had to leave the local synagogue because of Messiah faith.¹⁶

As we seek to adequately apply the Epistle to the Hebrews, we need not think that its author is anti-Torah, anti-Jewish, or even anti-sacrifice. **He is not!** But, all of these things have their various limitations in view of the all-Righteous One, Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ). Various Messianics who struggle with statements that appear in Hebrews are those who may ultimately not put the Messiah *first* in their lives and in their reading of the Bible, and who frequently wrestle with God's plan of salvation history and what Yeshua **has accomplished on behalf of sinful humanity**. Those who have disregarded the value of the Epistle to the Hebrews are those who have been offended by the truth of statements such as: "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4), "the *Torah* did not bring anything to the goal" (7:19, CJB), and especially "when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (7:12, NASU). These are all statements made

¹⁶ It is also very true that there are various Messianic Believers who try to live a Messianic Torah observant lifestyle while still attending a regular church. While less serious because there are many Christians who recognize that the so-called "moral law" of the Old Testament is still valid for Believers, and Jesus is legitimately recognized as Messiah, it nonetheless presents some serious challenges in order for such people to remain distinctly "Messianic."

concerning Yeshua's sacrifice for humankind, and our widespread mortal inability to attain complete redemption on our own merit.

Reflecting upon Hebrews myself, I know that today's emerging Messianic movement is precisely that: emerging. It is only a faith community that God Himself could put together, and it is only something that He can see come to full fruition as we approach the return of His Son to the Earth. Just as the original First Century audience of Hebrews had to learn to deal with the uncertainties of what it would be like to believe in Yeshua without an operating Temple or sacrificial system in Jerusalem, so do many of us have to learn what it means to basically be a merger of Judaism and Christianity. We need to exhibit great faith as we employ the considerable strengths and virtues of our Jewish and Christian forbearers, as we enter into the final stretch of salvation history before the *parousia*.

There are a wide array of challenges facing the Messianic movement in the Twenty-First Century. Too many, in spite of the diverse Biblical admonitions that one will encounter for perseverance—are going to just give up. They will not be able to consider the example of the faithful men and women who have preceded us in the faith, and eliminate anything that hinders them from accomplishing the Heavenly Father's objectives:

"Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins" (12:1, The Message).

One of the main reasons, why observers claim that today's Messianic movement is "messy," is because too many of our constituents, **most sadly**, cannot handle the strain of the great uniqueness *and* power that is witnessed when *all* followers of the Messiah Yeshua come together. *Religious history proves that it is only in an environment of "conflict" where "progress" can be made.* Too many people, because of various insecurities and a lack of patience, cannot really process the magnanimity of what it means for those, who have at least acknowledged the God of Israel as the Supreme One (Jews and Christians), coming together and implementing all of the gifts and talents and skills of His people to His glory—as they look toward the restoration of all Israel (cf. 8:8ff).

The Epistle to the Hebrews undeniably asks us many questions that we might not be able to answer at this present time. Some have taken the "easy," and what we would rightly call the **chicken, way** out by ignoring or even casting aside this text of Scripture.¹⁷ Those of us who are willing to stand for the truth know what Hebrews admonishes us about faith—"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (11:1)—and how all things will work for God's glory if we simply exhibit the required patience. If Yeshua the Messiah and what He taught us and demonstrated for us are *the most important things*, then those who will make it to the end and endure—in spite of any criticism or naysayers—may

¹⁷ On a personal note, as much as I would deny so-called Solomonic authorship of the Book of Ecclesiastes (which is not explicitly stated in the text, anyway) and be quite skeptical of statements in this text that could be taken as anti-resurrection (i.e., Ecclesiastes 3:18-21), my regard for the canon of Scripture is simply too high for me to just disregard it entirely as deuterocanonical. I am required as an exegete to more carefully examine its verses and triangulate various opinions and positions that have been proposed in contemporary scholarship.

For a further discussion, consult the entry for the Book of Ecclesiastes in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

literally **be unstoppable**. We are to continue running the race, steadily moving forward, never losing sight of the finish line.

The message of Hebrews is **to never quit having faith in the Messiah of Israel!** Indeed, let us remain constant in our faith in Him, and in the objectives that we know are to be achieved *in this final hour*.