

Hebrews 10:1

Pastor: Hebrews 10:1: The Law was only a shadow of good things to come.

“For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.”

10:1 Anyone who reads Hebrews 10:1 closely from the NASU should immediately see the addition of the word “*only*” in *italics*, indicating that it was not in the original source text: “For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come.”¹ Hebrews 10:1 actually opens with *Skian gar echōn ho nomos tōn mellontōn agathōn* (Σκιὰν γὰρ ἔχων ὁ νόμος τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν), “For the law having a shadow of good things to come...” (KJV). The addition of the term “*only*” by the NASU translators is entirely unjustified² (although to the NASU’s credit you can easily detect this addition, unlike some other versions),³ and purposefully intends to downplay the significance of the Torah, as though *the only* thing it can do is foreshadow Yeshua the Messiah and not instruct godly men and women in how to live in holiness.

What can also not escape readers’ notice is how *echōn* (ἔχων) is a present active participle: “having.” What this means is that although the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system point to Yeshua’s final sacrifice (Hebrews 10:5-8)—there are still *more good things to come* in the unfolding of salvation history. A definite feature of the author of Hebrews’ argument is that while Yeshua is exalted at the right hand of His Father in Heaven, He still has yet to return with all things subjected to Himself (Hebrews 2:8; 10:13; cf. Psalm 8:5-7; 110:1). Nowhere does our author say “the Law had a shadow.”

The Torah is described as having a *skia* (σκιά) or shadow of the good things to come. We see some parallels to Colossians 2:17, where the Apostle Paul says that the Biblical appointments “are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (ESV). The animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood, and likewise the appointed times of Leviticus 23, can be rightly viewed as being the outlines or sketch of a drawing, that God wants to show His people. With the arrival of Yeshua, color or substance is added to the drawing, revealing our Heavenly Father’s great masterpiece. Alas, though, too many Christians have chosen to discard the outline that the Torah provides, not realizing that **there is still much more** of the drawing left to be completed. It will not be *entirely completed* until the redeemed enter into the Eternal State and New Creation.

The second description, given by the author of Hebrews about the Torah, is that it is said as not having the *eikōn* (εἰκῶν), “the very form,” of what it describes. Our writer has previously detailed how the elements of the Tabernacle are to be regarded as Earthly copies of Heavenly originals (Hebrews 8:5; 9:23). Much of what the Torah communicates, in its instruction pertaining to the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system, involves a limited terrestrial shadow of a much fuller Heavenly substance. Because of the terrestrial nature of the Torah’s instructions regarding sacrifice, “it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year” (Hebrews 10:1, HCSB).

There is not uniform agreement among examiners, whether or not our author’s reference to the Torah as having a “shadow” and “form” of the good things to come through Messiah Yeshua, are to be taken as synonymous. Paul Ellingworth points out, “In earlier Greek usage, *σκιά* [*skia*] and *εἰκῶν* [*eikōn*] were synonyms referring to a lesser reality.”⁴ If the analogy to a work of art is accurate, then the Torah provides an Earthly sketch of the Heavenly reality embodied in Yeshua. This would be concurrent with Paul’s teaching

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

² Many *italicized* words in English Bible translations are necessary, as it is not uncommon in either Hebrew or Greek for a verb or an article to be understood, and as such was not transcribed by the original author. Still, one needs to be aware of theologically-added terms like “*only*” in Hebrews 10:1 (NASU) or “*mere*” in Colossians 2:17 (NASU).

³ Not using *italics* for added words, other major versions have “the law has but a shadow” (RSV/ESV), “The law is only a shadow” (NIV), or “Since the law has only a shadow” (NRSV).

⁴ Ellingworth, 490.

in Colossians 2:17 that the “substance” (Grk. *sōma*, σῶμα), of the appointed times and various Torah practices, is to be found in the Messiah. F.F. Bruce summarizes what our author, and what Paul says, indicating, “both writers think of Christ and his new order as the perfect reality to which the earlier ordinances pointed forward.”⁵ As Messianic Believers desiring to see the Torah as *pointing to* people requiring Yeshua as Redeemer (cf. Galatians 3:24; Romans 10:4), we should have no problem with these words.

Some have noted that there are hints to Platonic influence in our author’s vocabulary, by his usage of *tēn eikona tōn pragmatōn* (τὴν εἰκόνα τῶν πραγμάτων), rendered as “the very form of things” (NASU) or “the true form of these realities” (RSV/NRSV/ESV). We see a slight parallel between his words and what is seen in Plato’s *Cratylus*, in his description of the manufacture of shuttles, or the frame off of which a shoe or article of clothing is made. In Plato’s work, Socrates is accredited with saying, “And whatever shuttles are wanted, for the manufacture of garments, thin or thick, of flaxen, woollen, or other material, ought all of them to have **the true form of the shuttle**; and whatever is the shuttle best adapted to each kind of work, that ought to be the form which the maker produces in each case.”⁶ If indeed our author is employing some Hellenistic philosophical language, he does so only in the broadest of terms, as he makes a general statement on how the true form of things in the Torah is found in Yeshua. This is a statement that anyone in the First Century, Jewish or non-Jewish, needed to understand—and our author is certainly not writing exclusively to Jews in his letter.

The second half of Hebrews 10:1 states that the Torah “can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.” This is because the Torah’s sacrifices cannot offer complete perfection, meaning total reconciliation between human beings and their Creator. It is clear that some kind of cleansing could be offered to individuals in the Torah, as is easily attested by Leviticus 16:30: “for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD.” However, our author says that a sacrifice offered “year after year” (RSV) does not have the power to permanently perfect, because of the very fact that it must be offered again. At best, only a temporary covering is available for the sinner. David A. deSilva fairly summarizes what our writer is trying to say:

“The author of Hebrews might concede that the rites ‘repair’ the relationship but would assert that they do not particularly improve the relationship...Yom Kippur perpetuated the limited, graded access to God prescribed by Torah, but it never served to breach the barriers that separated Israel from God.”⁷

The Torah on its own “can never bring the worshippers to perfection for all time” (Hebrews 10:1, NEB) or “never decisively purge” (*WBC*)⁸ them from their sin. That is why the need for Yeshua is so great, not only in a world today that is fallen and has largely rejected Him, but even in a Messianic community, which at times, can forget or underemphasize who He is and what He has done.

⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 235.

⁶ Plato: *Cratylus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. Accessible online at <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>>.

⁷ deSilva, pp 318-319.

⁸ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13*, Vol. 47b (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1991), 253.