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Introduction to Hebrews **from a Jewish Perspective**

*To Gary and Georgia, co-workers in ministry.
Through their spiritual gifts, their skills and heart,
they are true friends and mighty warriors for Yeshua.*



Hebrews is a stunning portrait of **Yeshua Messiah** seen through the lens of the TaNaKh. The author's intent, under the influence of **the Ruach**, is to show the superiority of **Jesus** over the prophets, angels, Moshe, priests, and the entire Levitical system. **Christ** is the new priest with the new sacrifice that establishes a new covenant between **YHVH** and **His** people.

The Use of the New International Version

Because I am writing this commentary on **Hebrews** from a Jewish perspective, I will be using both the New International Version (NIV) and also relying heavily on the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) by David Stern. There is a good blend between the two.

The use of ADONAI

Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **God**, and this remains the rule in most modern Jewish settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** or **Ha'Shem** where **YHVH** is meant.¹ In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase **the Name**, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** was lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no syllables. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*.

The use of TaNaKh

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," or the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuvim," or the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase the Old Testament throughout this devotional commentary.

The Use of the phrase, "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than using Old Testament saints

Messianic synagogues, and the Jewish Messianic Community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a Jewish perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, "righteous of **the TaNaKh**." Therefore, I will be using "the righteous of **the TaNaKh**," rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.

Author

The human author is unnamed and unknown. How fitting, since the book's purpose is to exalt **Jesus Christ**. I stand with Origen, one of the great teachers of the early Church, who simply said, "No one knows." Many have speculated about his identity, but we do know that it was written by an inspired believer to a suffering, persecuted group of Jews living somewhere in the East, outside of Isra'el. We also know that he was a dynamic preacher, he was knowledgeable of the TaNaKh and its interpretation, he was highly educated, he was a committed minister of **Yeshua Messiah**, and he was deeply concerned about the spiritual state of the congregation of Jews he was addressing.²

Date

It is impossible to fix an exact date to the composition of the letter. However, it seems likely that it was written prior to the destruction of the Temple (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Mt - The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple on Tisha B'Av in 70 AD**), since the author consistently refers to it in the present tense. The seeds of the Jewish revolt were being sown, but the full-scale revolt had not yet begun. Therefore, the book was probably written somewhere between AD 64 and 66 [Jewish revolt AD 66-70].

The use of Midrash by the Human Author

The author's method was to show the superiority of **the Messiah** over the Levitical system. That which they had in **Yeshua** superseded what they had in Judaism. The contrast was not between what was good and what was bad because **YHVH** had given the whole Levitical system. The contrast was between what was good and what is better. Biblical Judaism was good, but **Messiah** is better. As the author gives further details about the good and the better, he takes the three main pillars of Judaism of the day - angels, Moshe, and the Levitical priesthood - and shows what the readers now have in Yeshua is superior to all three pillars of Judaism. This is a concept also found in **the Midrash** (an ancient commentary on part of the **Hebrew** scriptures).

The book of **Hebrews** attempts to demonstrate that **Jesus is the Messiah**, that **He** is greater than **the prophets (1:1-3)**, greater than **the angels (1:4-2:14)**, and greater than **Moshe (3:1-6)**. **A parallel Midrash is found in Tanhuma (Buber's edition, Toldot 134-135; and Vulgar edition, Toldot 14). The Midrash is on Isaiah 52:13: My Servant will accomplish His purpose. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. The Messiah will be raised up more than Moshe, lifted up more than**

Abraham, and more higher than the angels. This Midrash is found in a late collection; but it is clear that the book of **Hebrews** proves that it had existed already at the time of the Second Temple or soon after its destruction. **The fact that this Midrash existed in the ancient past is also demonstrated by a Tannaic Midrash, namely *Sifre*, on Numbers 12:3-7. There, the rabbinic tradition states that Moses is greater than the Patriarchs, including Abraham, and the Archangels. This is a Midrash we find in both Tanhuma and in Hebrews.** It is interesting that a medieval Jew who converted to Christianity, Friar Paul Christiani, noticed the similarity between **the Tanhuma Midrash** and the book of **Hebrews**, and tried to prove that the Talmudic Sages had known the truth about Yeshua, but had concealed it from the Jews. In his debate with **the Jewish Rabbi Nachmanides**, this convert to Christianity said, “Indeed, your own Sages have said that the Messiah has more honor than the angels, which cannot be anyone other than Jesus.” Then he quoted what was written in the Midrashic legend, **“Raised up more than Moshe, lifted up more than Abraham, and more high than the Archangels.”** Nachmanides, of course, had his answer at hand (**The Writings of Rabbi Moses be Nahman, Chavel’s edition, Volume I, page 311**).³

Quotations from the TaNaKh

Throughout the book of **Hebrews** the inspired human author quotes liberally from the TaNaKh. In an effort to show which portions of any verse are direct quotations, I have **put the quote in purple** and **the scripture quoted in parentheses in purple**. In that way, it is easy to get a feel for how often **the Ruach** uses the TaNaKh to make **His** point that **Yeshua** is **better** and more superior than all that came before **Him**.

Literary Form

Hebrews is commonly referred to as a letter, though it doesn’t have the typical form of a letter. It ends like a letter (**13:22-25**), but it begins more like an essay or sermon (**1:1-3**). The author does not identify himself or those addressed, which letter writers normally did. And he offers no manner of greeting, such as is usually found at the beginning of ancient letters. Rather, he begins with a magnificent statement about **Jesus Christ**. He called his work **a message of exhortation (13:22)**, the conventional designation given to a sermon in a synagogue service (see **Acts 13:15**). Like a sermon, **Hebrews** is full of encouragement, exhortations and stern warnings. It is likely the author used the materials that made up his sermons and sent them out in modified letter form.⁴

Key Words

There are five key words in **Hebrews**. One is **perfection**, not meaning sinlessness, but maturity in contrast with immaturity (**2:10; 5:9; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 10:14; 12:1-2**). The second key word is **eternal** in contrast to what was temporal such as the 365 prohibitions and 248 commandments of the Torah to be obeyed, the sacrifices, and the Levitical system in general (**5:9; 6:2; 9:12, 14-15; 13:20**). The third key word is **forever**, which is a corollary to eternal (**1:8; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 28; 13:20-21; 8:1; 9:24; 12:25-26**). The fourth key word is **heavenly** in contrast to what is earthly (**3:1; 6:4; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16; 12:22**). And the fifth key word is **better** in contrast to what is good (**1:4; 6:9; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:4, 16; 11:35, 40; 12:24**).⁵

Theme

The theme of the book of **Hebrews** is the superiority of **Yeshua Messiah**.