

HEBREWS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

J.K. MCKEE



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by John Kimball McKee

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by TNN Press. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	LXX: Septuagint
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	m. Mishnah
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	MT: Masoretic Text
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	NIV: New International Version (1984)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NT: New Testament
Ger: German	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world
GNT: Greek New Testament	OT: Old Testament
Grk: Greek	PreachC: <i>The Preacher's Commentary</i>
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2001)	Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Heb: Hebrew	Thayer: <i>Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible	TDNT: <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>	TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>	TNTC: <i>Tyndale New Testament Commentaries</i>
ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>	TWOT: <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
IVP: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>	UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)	v(s). verse(s)
JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)	Vine: <i>Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words</i>
KJV: King James Version	Vul: Latin Vulgate
Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)	WBC: <i>Word Biblical Commentary</i>
LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)	Yid: Yiddish
LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Lidell & Scott)	YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
	Williams: Williams New Testament (1937)

PROLOGUE

Various teachings have come forth in the past year that have disturbed a fair number of Believers in the Messianic movement as to what the message of Hebrews actually is. Some of these teachings not only have planted seeds of doubt into the minds of some people, but they have led them to conclude that the Epistle to the Hebrews is not inspired Scripture and should be removed from the Bible. I believe these teachings are based on a misunderstanding of the overall message of the text, failure to consult the Greek text that stands behind our English translations, failure to understand the historical setting of the text, and above all is based in some kind of subjective criteria that attempts not only to denounce the inspiration of Hebrews, but ultimately to dismantle the entire Apostolic canon and discredit Yeshua the Messiah and His atoning work. These occurrences are quite serious and the only way that any criticisms of Hebrews can be properly examined is in a commentary of the entire book.

The current state of the Messianic movement is somewhat unique because we are a growing *and* a maturing movement. When we come across what appear to be contradictions in the Biblical text, we are forced to ask ourselves one of two questions: **Is there a problem with the text? Is there a problem with how I am examining the text?**

Conservative theologians often ask the latter question. How we examine the text and our approach to Scripture can and does change with how we interpret it. If God indeed inspired this writing, via the work of human men, then certainly there cannot be problems with it. We have the responsibility to discover why there are no problems with it, even though on the surface there may appear to be problems. We have at our disposal a vast array of English Bible translations, Bible encyclopedias and dictionaries, Hebrew and Greek lexicons and grammars, and today Bible software to aid us in our understanding of the Scriptures. We have no excuse if all we are simply doing is reading from one English Bible translation and force-feeding what we want the Scriptures to say.

Liberal theologians often ask the former question. They presuppose that the Bible is a work entirely of human origin. The writing contained in Scripture is merely our human “response” to God, they may argue. Liberals contend that not only is Scripture full of contradictions, but texts have been manipulated, changed, or even destroyed by religious authorities attempting to maintain a position of power. While these texts are inspirational and moving, and we should learn from them as Jews or Christians, they say, they were never meant to be taken literally. Do we really believe that Jesus was born of a “virgin”? Do we really believe that David killed “a giant”? Do we really believe in a “Red Sea Crossing” or “Noah’s Flood”? Do we really believe that God made Adam and Eve out of dirt, when science has proven that we exist because of millions of years of evolution? This is what **liberal** theologians often argue.

One of the important premises in what is often termed “higher criticism” by liberals is that we really do not know who wrote the books of the Bible. As higher critics attack the New Testament, they will say things like, “The Gospel writers do not once identify themselves in the text; they are anonymous. Maybe Paul wrote some of his letters, but we don’t know if James was really written by the brother of Christ, or that Peter really wrote Peter. We don’t know which ‘John’ wrote John, or Revelation.” When they attack the Tanach or Old Testament, they will readily say that there have to be many, many textual changes between what was preserved before the Jews’ exile to Babylon and after it. Higher critics will say that we do not know which Scriptures are original and which are inauthentic. And concerning the Torah, the Torah is viewed by higher critics as being *entirely* a product of the post-Babylonian exile. Higher critics will readily point out that there is no stated author of Genesis in Genesis itself, indicating that it had to have been written or compiled by someone other than Moses.

Many teachers in the Messianic community today have not been exposed to liberal views concerning the composition of the Scriptures, of both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings. I believe that if some of them had, that some of the Hebrews controversy circulating today would not exist because they would see through the higher criticism that has been used. The exact same subjective criteria that are being used to discount the message and veracity of the Epistle to the Hebrews has been used by the liberals to more easily discount the Book of Genesis. It is claimed that we do not know the author of Hebrews; the author of Genesis does not identify himself once in the text. It is claimed that Hebrews was written after the First Century; how did Abraham pursue Lot’s captors as far as “Dan” (Genesis 14:14), a place that would not have been named until *after* the Israelites’ conquering of the Promised Land? How did Abraham know to call God by the Divine Name YHWH (Genesis 21:23), which was not revealed until Moses saw Him before the burning bush (Exodus 3:15)? It is claimed that Hebrews does not accurately reflect the information we see in the Torah; how do we know that

the Ancient Israelites did not borrow the Flood narrative from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh? These are only a handful of what could be considered “contradictions” in Genesis and the rest of the Torah that liberal theologians point out.

I hope you understand that I consider both Hebrews and Genesis to be Divinely inspired books of the Bible. I accept what they say as being true and historically accurate. But I think that it is very sad to see Messianics discrediting Hebrews, based on what appear to be contradictions, when there appear to be even *more serious problems* in Genesis—the veracity of which such people would never question. Thankfully, God has enabled many conservative theologians, both Jewish and Christian, to address what appear to be contradictions in Genesis. But just as the so-called contradictions in Genesis can be easily answered, so can the so-called contradictions in Hebrews be even more easily answered. Beware of those who are subjectively seeking to discredit a text in the Apostolic Scriptures, claiming that it is “no good” or “uninspired,” using liberal tactics, while at the same time holding to a strict fundamentalist line that the Torah has been preserved perfectly letter-by-letter and stroke-by-stroke from Mount Sinai. There is something seriously wrong with this grossly uneven scale.

Our examination of the Epistle to the Hebrews is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate some theological maturity on the part of the Messianic movement. Unlike our previous study in James (2005), we have to employ *all weapons* from our theological arsenal in this study, including:

1. Inductively approaching the Biblical text, considering Hebrews as a whole, and examining multiple English Bible versions.
2. Consultation of the Greek source text that lies behind Hebrews, not only taking into consideration the definitions of various words from scholastic lexicons, but also grammatical forms (i.e., parts of speech, verb tenses). This includes examination of possible quotes from the Greek Septuagint, and the Hebrew Tanach that lies behind the LXX.
3. An extreme consideration for the historical context that is demonstrated by the composition of Hebrews. This includes consultation with extant Jewish and Christian works such as the Mishnah, Talmud, and the writings of the Church Fathers that attest to the historicity of Hebrews, any traditions that the author refers to, and how early Hebrews was considered authoritative.
4. Consultation of critical commentaries on Hebrews that represent a fair consensus of scholastic opinion. These commentaries, even though Christian in orientation, will often explain what appear to be difficulties or contradictions in the text with ease.

Sadly, these four hermeneutical skills have not been employed by those attempting to discredit Hebrews. The Messianic expositor has the awesome responsibility of employing these proper skills. Hebrews can be a difficult text to understand if one is armed with nothing more than an English Bible translation published from the perspective that Yeshua the Messiah abolished the Torah. We have the responsibility of seeing that the message of Hebrews truly is anything but this. Can we do it with ease? I believe we can do it with ease, and we can also learn much from what the author of Hebrews is trying to tell us about our spiritual condition. As we examine the text of Hebrews, and the author’s message for both his original audience and Messianics in the Twenty-First Century, you are going to see how nonsensical it is to throw Hebrews out of the Bible. Hebrews is probably one of the most pro-Torah texts in the entire New Testament, when understood properly and exegeted responsibly. It is inspiring to us all to consider the superior nature of Yeshua’s sacrifice and atonement for our sin, and how high the author really considers Moses and the Tabernacle to be—**to be able to be compared to God in the flesh**. The author’s message is not anti-Torah by any means, but demonstrates how incomplete the Torah is without the Messiah Yeshua.

I would like to sincerely thank Tim Hegg of TorahResource who gave me a copy of his unpublished commentary on Hebrews. This one Messianic commentary helped me greatly in my study and gave me many important insights to consider. I would also like to thank the many commentators and specialists from all over the theological spectrum who have given their unique thoughts and insight to the text. Without their work, this commentary would not be as thorough as it is. They dealt with many of the textual issues that can appear to be confusing. I pray that this volume adds to our knowledge and understanding of this important text

J.K. McKee
Editor, TNN Online

INTRODUCTION

The text known as “Hebrews” is one of the most unique, highly spiritual, highly intellectual, multi-dimensional books in our Bible. If there is any text that the Messianic community should have a strong handle on, Hebrews should be it. It enables the expositor to employ all of the weapons of his hermeneutical arsenal, as Hebrews begs many questions that cannot merely be answered by simply reading the text over and over again, or for that same matter reading it over and over again in multiple Bible versions. It requires us to examine original language texts, determine what some of the history behind the text was, and place ourselves into the position of a First Century Jewish writer who was an extremely well-educated and cultured man. Perhaps most importantly, Hebrews requires us to live out the essence of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6): **to love God with our entire beings**. However, as Yeshua (Jesus) quotes the *Shema*, we are to “LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND” (Matthew 22:37; cf. Mark 12:30). When examining Hebrews, we are called into a place of worship that causes us to seek our Heavenly Father with *both* our hearts and our minds. We are forced to come to the place where the Psalmist declares, “Examine me, HASHEM, and test me; scrutinize my intellect and my heart” (Psalm 26:2, ATS).

The Epistle to the Hebrews¹ presents Believers in Yeshua with many uplifting and spiritually edifying words. Upon an individual’s first reading of the text, you should be able to notice that Hebrews uplifts Messiah Yeshua and His completed work in a very unique way. The author defines the importance of His final sacrifice, His priestly service, and the New Covenant in very eloquent and persuasive language. **Yeshua the Messiah—without any doubt—is the central focus of Hebrews.**

While our Lord and Savior in all His glory is a wonderful focus to behold, Hebrews nevertheless asks its readers a very important question: **How are we as human beings to approach the Supreme Creator?** We discover that the author compares his audience to the rebellious generation of Israelites in the wilderness, who see the actual presence of God in the Tabernacle and His manifestations to them. He urges them not to fall into these same mistakes, and certainly not to approach the Lord without a sense of reverence.

When examining Hebrews, students of the Bible are most certainly confronted with a variety of difficult questions to answer. We do not know, in spite of educated and well-informed speculation, who wrote Hebrews. We do not fully know who the audience was that originally received the letter, nor do we know where they were. We do not fully know the historical backdrop that necessitated the writing of this letter. But what we do know is that what Hebrews teaches us forms a substantial part of our Messianic faith. We possibly know more about the great mystery of the Divinity and humanity of Messiah Yeshua from Hebrews than any other book of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament). We know more about what the New Covenant actually is from Hebrews than any other text as well. And, we possibly know more about the restoration of all Israel from Hebrews directly *than what the Gospels and Pauline Epistles tell us combined.*

Because we do not know for certain who wrote Hebrews, or the original audience of the letter, there can be a tendency to downplay or ignore its message among some theologians and Bible teachers. However, A.M. Stibbs makes the important observation that “Our ignorance on such points does not, however, prevent right understanding or minimize the spiritual and theological value of a document which has from the first commended itself as authoritative by its own intrinsic worth.”² We are called to take many issues on faith. Yeshua said in John 20:29, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed.” The biggest thing that Believers often take for granted is believing in the existence and eternal power of God. Yet, we believe that God controls the universe with great precision and skill, and keeps Planet Earth the right distance away from *and* close to the sun. We believe that God controls the atoms and cells in our bodies so that we do not “fall apart.” When we examine a text of Scripture like Hebrews, we do have to make some assumptions, and do our best to reconstruct what we believe the setting was that necessitated its composition, and then interpret what the text meant for its original audience.

¹ Please note that in spite of the common reference to Hebrews as “the Book of Hebrews,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Hebrews or the letter to the Hebrews, and not use this reference. While theologians are in general agreement that Hebrews is not a letter of the same style as Paul’s Epistle to the Romans or the Epistle of 1 Peter, it nevertheless best falls into the epistolic category, as opposed to a text of history and narrative like the Book of Genesis or the Book of 1 Kings. Referring to our text as “the Book of Hebrews” is anachronistic.

² A.M. Stibbs, “Hebrews,” in D. Guthrie, et. al. *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1191.

It is an absolute fact that in the Christian world the Epistle to the Hebrews is overlooked by far too many people. Lloyd J. Ogilvie writes, “Over the years, my conversations with pastors and teachers about their expository communication of the New Testament has revealed that the Epistle to the Hebrews has been overlooked. It is one of the least appreciated and utilized books of the New Testament for comprehensive, thematic, or verse-by-verse study and preaching.”³ **The Messianic community today, sadly, is actually not that far behind.** While the Messianic movement has probably not overlooked Hebrews for the same reasons that the evangelical Church has, Messianics who are pro-Torah often have difficulty reconciling what they believe to be anti-Torah statements by the author of Hebrews. Thus, while Hebrews may not be discounted as invalid instruction, sometimes it is not always given a high priority. In a movement where we are supposed to “bridge the gap” between the Tanach (Old Testament) and Apostolic Writings (New Testament), this is a problem—especially given the great richness of Hebrews and its clear reliance on the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets.

The fact that Hebrews is overlooked by far too many people is evidenced in the fact that few know what is actually being communicated by its author. Christian ministers, who often do not take into consideration Jewish methods of interpreting Scripture, often struggle with having to interpret Hebrews and how the Apostolic writers apply texts from the Tanach. Furthermore, an additional struggle ensues for many readers because we do not live in a society that practices animal sacrifice, and it is difficult for many people to place themselves in the life setting of someone from the First Century. Christian ministers who attempt to preach or exposit from Hebrews often have to fight an uphill battle, in a Christian Church today that largely focuses on social justice more than practical holiness. **Obviously, the need for a sound, Messianic examination of Hebrews, that does take into consideration the Jewish background of the text, and the presumed historical framework from which it was written, cannot be overstated.**

The Epistle to the Hebrews has some major themes that have affected theologians’ opinions about the Bible, and perhaps more importantly, the results of Yeshua coming to die for us. The overwhelming theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the superiority of Yeshua’s sacrifice and blood atonement over the animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood. Yeshua’s atoning work for mankind is permanent, compared to animal sacrifices that at best could only provide a temporary covering for sin. The author of Hebrews writes, “He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises” (8:6). The New Covenant initiated by Yeshua’s blood is better than the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:7-9), which demanded death for those who violated the Torah, because Yeshua’s blood covers our sin. Yeshua’s sacrifice on the cross at Golgotha (Calvary), and His initiation of the universal priesthood of Melchizedek, supercedes the limited priesthood of Levi. However, in spite of these important truths, Hebrews is often interpreted through the theological lens of the “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant,” as opposed to the *two priesthoods* of Levi and Melchizedek. Many do not understand that the New Covenant is prophesied in Jeremiah 31, and is the promise of God to write the Torah or His Law onto the hearts of His people.

One of the major issues of interpreting any Biblical text is trying to remember the text as it was originally written. This is especially true of the Epistle to the Hebrews. There is much that anyone can gain from a simple reading of the text, and careful prayer and meditation on it. Indeed, these factors are absolutely imperative to gain the proper understanding of what our author is trying to convey. However, no matter how much the Holy Spirit is blessing us via our personal reflection, we still have to develop definitive interpretations of the text. Donald Guthrie makes the important observation, “What is most important for the commentator to discover is the present message and relevance of the letter, but he can only do this when he has investigated the historical setting.”⁴ How many of us fail to do this in our reading of Scripture? How many pastors or Bible teachers—be they Christian *or* Messianic—fail to do this and think that it is “okay”?

Once we can determine with some accuracy what a text actually means for its original audience, then we will be prepared to interpret and apply it in a modern setting. The biggest mistake that many Bible readers make is reading one’s modern life circumstances and prejudices into an ancient text. This is especially true of Hebrews, where we have to reconstruct many more things than we would when compared to texts like the Gospels, the Book of Acts, or the Pauline letters. As Messianic Believers, when we do this we have the awesome opportunity of incorporating many of the Jewish resources available at our disposal, that give great depth and character to the actions and traditions of Yeshua and the Apostles. Yet at the same time, in a developing Messianic movement, we also have to take responsibility for some of the teachings circulating in our midst. **In our examination of Hebrews, in particular, it will be necessary to discount some urban myths that have been allowed to perpetuate in Messianic circles—things that are assumed to be, but are not true.**

³ Lloyd J. Ogilvie, “Editor’s Preface,” in Louis H. Evans, Jr., *The Preacher’s Commentary: Hebrews*, Vol 33 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 9.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letter to the Hebrews*, Vol 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 15.

Our goal needs to be to have as full and as practical a view of Hebrews as possible, one that properly weighs the value of exegesis, history, and incorporated tradition, with how Messianic Believers can live out the message of Hebrews in a Twenty-First Century world.

WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS?

One of the controversies surrounding the Epistle to the Hebrews is that the authorship of the text cannot be determined with one-hundred percent accuracy. The Eastern Church held to a tradition that the Apostle Paul wrote Hebrews, based on the testimony of Clement of Alexandria from the late Second Century. The Fourth Century historian Eusebius records this tradition as follows: “The epistle to the Hebrews he asserted was written by Paul to the Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue, but it was carefully translated by Luke and published among the Greeks since one finds the same character of style and of phraseology in the epistle as in Acts” (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.2).⁵ Challenges to this view are the facts that Hebrews does not reflect the same writing style of Paul as demonstrated in his known epistles, Luke does not mention the composition of Hebrews in either his Gospel or Acts, and there is no extant original “Hebrew text” of Hebrews to which Clement refers.

Prior to the 1600’s, the text was often referred to as “the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,” and is still reflected as such today in some editions of the King James Bible. While the Apostle Paul has historically been a popular candidate for Hebrews’ authorship, it has been recognized by most scholars since the Reformation, first suggested by men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, that Paul could not be the author. Today, virtually no one in the evangelical Christian community favors Pauline authorship for Hebrews. In the text of Hebrews itself, the author identifies himself as hearing second-hand about Yeshua. He writes that the good news of salvation “was first announced by the Lord,” and “was [then] confirmed to us by those who heard him” (2:3, NIV). This disqualifies Hebrews as having been written by any of the Twelve Disciples or the Apostle Paul, who was given a revelation of Yeshua on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). It can, however, be determined that the author was in the inner circle of Paul, as he attests to knowing Timothy (13:23). Theologically, this would account for streams of thought in the Epistle to the Hebrews that are Pauline in character, but not Pauline in composition.

Pauline authorship can also be discounted because of theological and linguistic studies that compare the writing style and vocabulary of Paul’s known letters to Hebrews. Origen of Alexandria was forced to observe in the Third Century, “The style of the Epistle with the title, ‘To the Hebrews,’ has not that vulgarity of diction which belongs to the apostle, who confesses that he is but common in speech, that is in his phraseology” (*Ecclesiastical History* 11.25.11).⁶ It is often argued that whoever wrote Hebrews was an expert in oratory or rhetoric, and composed Hebrews to originally be read as a sermon in the congregations or fellowships to which it would be delivered. The author of Hebrews is very “to the point” in his writing style, and as Guthrie remarks, “He does not, as Paul sometimes does, go off on a tangent.”⁷ Whereas Paul might go on diatribes for entire chapters of his letters to exhort his audience, the author of Hebrews may pause momentarily to do so, but does not get lost in his train of thought.

The author of Hebrews is much more organized in his writing style than Paul is, and his terms are somewhat more complex. Louis H. Evans indicates, “Where Paul will use one word, such as ‘law’ in Romans 7, to mean several different types of law, our writer will use several different words for the same thing, showing an immense vocabulary that continues to build all through this epistle.”⁸ Furthermore, Pauline authorship can be discounted because of the author’s extensive use of the Greek Septuagint for Tanach (Old Testament) quotations, whereas Paul fluctuates between the LXX and using his own Greek translation of the Hebrew text. F.F. Bruce makes the observation, “The author was a second-generation Christian, well versed in the study of the Septuagint, which he interpreted according to a creative exegetical principle.”⁹ Studies into Hebrews, as we will examine further, demonstrate that the author was very familiar with First Century Rabbinical forms of argumentation, but could present them in ways appealing to a broad Diaspora audience.

Theologically speaking, the author of Hebrews has a different focus than the Apostle Paul’s works. Whereas themes such as the Believer’s justification and his relationship to the Torah, the proper place of circumcision, and the relationship of Jews and non-Jews in the Body of Messiah feature prominently in Paul’s works, these themes are not readily addressed in Hebrews. Paul, for example, says nothing about the priesthood of the Messiah in his letters, comparing and contrasting it to the Levitical priesthood, a theme that predominates much of Hebrews. It is safe to say in

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷ Guthrie, in *TNTC*, 20.

⁸ Evans, 19.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 20.

the final analysis that while the author probably knew Paul, and was influenced by him in his theology, his writing style is not Paul's. While there are many similarities between what the author of Hebrews writes in his letter to Paul's letters, the style is not the same. As Pauline authorship for Hebrews is largely discounted today, there have been many proposals made throughout history suggesting different authors. They are largely pieced together from the various extant traditions from Church history, and educated guesses made from clues in the Scriptures.

Tertullian of Carthage suggested Barnabas for the authorship of Hebrews. He wrote in the late Second Century, "For there is extant withal an Epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas—a man sufficiently accredited by God, as being one whom Paul has stationed next to himself in the uninterrupted observance of abstinence" (*On Modesty* 20).¹⁰ Of course, whether or not Paul and Barnabas remained unmarried during their lives will remain a mystery, but there is much to suggest that Barnabas could be the author of Hebrews. Guthrie indicates that "it may possibly be the oldest [view] attested."¹¹

In support of Barnabas being the author of Hebrews, he is said to have been a Levite (Acts 4:26-37), which would have made him familiar with the Levitical priesthood and order of worship that is demonstrated throughout Hebrews. Barnabas was known to Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) from Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, and was considered to be an apostle (Acts 14:4, 14), meaning that his words carried authority. Barnabas had direct contact with those who heard and saw Yeshua firsthand (Hebrews 2:3), even though he had not witnessed Him firsthand. Barnabas, being in the inner circle of Paul, would have reflected many of Paul's opinions and points of view in his writing style. Barnabas was from Cyprus (Acts 4:36) and was a member of Diaspora Judaism. Many evangelical theologians today, and likewise many in the Messianic community, believe that Barnabas wrote Hebrews.

After Barnabas, the next frequently proposed author of Hebrews is Apollos, a Jewish man from Alexandria who is described as being "well versed in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24, RSV), or having "a thorough knowledge of the *Tanakh*" (CJB). Apollos was an acquaintance of Paul (1 Corinthians 16:22), and was tutored by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26). Apollos' potential authorship of Hebrews was first proposed by Martin Luther during the Reformation, and as Guthrie states, "has been strongly supported by those wishing to retain some Pauline connection to the epistle."¹² Many scholars are of the opinion that the author of Hebrews employs an allegorical method of interpretation similar to that of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher who attempted to make the Hebrew Scriptures palatable to Greeks in philosophical form. *NIDB* indicates that "The vocabulary, figures of speech, and manner of argument show an Alexandrian and Philonic influence" on Hebrews.¹³

In 1 Corinthians 16:12 the Apostle Paul speaks highly of Apollos, writing, "But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all *his* desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity." Based on this verse, there is an intriguing theory that suggests that Hebrews was written by Apollos just prior to Paul's composition of 1 Corinthians. Robert H. Gundry summarizes this theory in his textbook *A Survey of the New Testament*:

"H. Montefiore has proposed that Apollos wrote Hebrews in A.D. 52-54 at Ephesus and sent it to the church in Corinth, especially to its Jewish Christian members. He draws many parallels between Hebrews and Paul's Corinthian correspondence. In his view, 'those from Italy' (13:24) are Priscilla and Aquila, who originally moved to Corinth from Rome but subsequently accompanied Paul from Corinth to Ephesus."¹⁴

The challenge to believing that Apollos was the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that there is no extant tradition to substantiate it, except speculation based on internal Biblical evidence. Apollos is a very popular choice for Hebrews' authorship in evangelical circles, but not as much in the Messianic community because of him being a Hellenistic Jew.

Other candidates for the authorship of Hebrews include Luke, Silas, Philip the Deacon (Acts 6:5), and Clement of Rome. There are some major factors that disqualify each of these men from being the author. Some believe that Priscilla wrote Hebrews, but this is discounted easily by the fact that the author uses a masculine participle in Hebrews 11:32, *dieigoumenon* (διηγούμενον; "recounting," YLT).¹⁵ One possibility, though never having been proposed by anyone, is that there were two or three from the Pauline inner circle who wrote Hebrews. But aside from all of the speculation as to

¹⁰ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff, ed.; [Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection](#). MS Windows XP. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software. 2002.

¹¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 674.

¹² Guthrie, in *TNTC*, 21.

¹³ A. Berkley Mickleson, "Hebrews, Letter to the," in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 427.

¹⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 424.

¹⁵ A more detailed analysis of the potential authors of Hebrews is addressed by Guthrie in *New Testament Introduction*, pp 671-682.

Hebrews' authorship, even Origin of Alexandria was forced to say in the Third Century, "who it was that really wrote this epistle, God only knows" (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14).¹⁶ This conclusion is our best option for now. **However, the majority of conservative theologians favor Hebrews having been written by either Barnabas or Apollos, and we will agree that the likely author was either one of these men.** In my opinion, any Messianic exegesis of Hebrews should be focused around the author being a Diaspora Jew.

There are many things that can be inferred from the writing style of Hebrews and the allusions that our author makes in his composition. The writer of Hebrews demonstrates a style that is consistent more with First Century Diaspora Judaism, than with the Judean Judaism¹⁷ of the time. There are many references that the author makes which are consistent with the Hellenistic Judaism of the Mediterranean basin, as opposed to that of the Land of Israel.

The most significant evidence in favor of our author being a Diaspora Jew is the fact that Hebrews, more than any other book of the Apostolic Scriptures, has over thirty direct quotations from the Septuagint, and many indirect allusions. The LXX was the authoritative Scripture for Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora, and is employed many times by the Apostolic writers. *IDB* explains, "There is a constant rhythm between theology and moral appeal, which reminds one somewhat of passages in IV Maccabees and Philo."¹⁸ Bruce further indicates, "That the writer was acquainted with Alexandrian Jewish literature, like Wisdom, IV Maccabees, and Philo's works, becomes increasingly probable" (*IDBSup*).¹⁹

Hellenistic Jewry of the First Century did embrace a somewhat philosophical approach to examining the Tanach. This was largely forced upon it because of the wide spectrum of people and ideologies Jews in the Diaspora had to confront in their daily lives, as opposed to those who lived in the Land of Israel among a more homogenous population. Consequently, the Book of Acts demonstrates that the progressive nature of Hellenistic Jewry led to there being more success with their evangelization than among those in the Land of Israel. Hellenistic Jewry of the Diaspora did encourage philosophical speculation, and one of a kind that we may see in the Epistle to the Hebrews. William L. Lane, for example, suggests that "The writer was evidently well educated by hellenistic standards. It is reasonable to assume a similar educational background to that enjoyed by Philo."²⁰

Historically, many scholars examining Hebrews have often only been exposed to the possible Hellenistic Jewish background surrounding this text. This has primarily been the case because up until the past century-and-a-half, the ability to examine Jewish literature such as the Mishnah or Talmud has been very limited. As modern Judaism has liberalized and let Christian scholars—and consequently Messianics also—have access to their works, new approaches to the Epistle to the Hebrews are being considered. While the letter does have a significant Hellenistic Jewish influence on it, the traditions of the Oral Torah are interweaved throughout our author's oration. More contemporary scholarship in Hebrews reveals a more consistent balance between Hellenistic Jewish sources, which are well known, and more traditional Jewish sources as evidenced by works like the Mishnah or Talmud. Paul Ellingworth remarks, "Some of the similarities, including particular exegetical methods such as the argument from the silence of scripture and the very widespread *a fortiori/qal wahomer* argument, can be traced to common Jewish exegetical tradition; other similarities to hellenistic Jewish, or more specifically to Alexandrian tradition."²¹

What we know for certain is that the author of Hebrews knew the needs of his audience very well. He concludes his work with the comments, "And I urge *you* all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner... Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you" (Hebrews 13:19, 23). Our author is personally acquainted with those to whom he is writing, and he is concerned for their spiritual well being.

WHERE WAS THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS WHEN HE WROTE THE TEXT?

Consistent with the fact that we cannot determine with accuracy who the author of Hebrews was, we likewise cannot determine where the author was when he composed the text. The one important clue regarding a place appears in Hebrews 13:24, where our author says, "Those from Italy greet you." There are two distinct points of view regarding

¹⁶ *Ecclesiastical History*, 216.

¹⁷ Note that in many theological works, what I have referred to as "Judean Judaism" would normally be called "Palestinian Judaism." While works may be quoted that use this latter terminology, I do not want to give the reader the impression that the Land of Israel was ever called "Palestine" while Jews were living in it. Palestine is a Latin derivation of Philistia, the name given to the Land by the Philistines, one of the archenemies of Ancient Israel.

¹⁸ E. Dinkler, "Hebrews, Letter to the," in George Buttrick, ed. at. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:571.

¹⁹ F.F. Bruce, "Hebrews, Letter to the," in Keith Crim, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 394.

²⁰ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 1-8*, Vol. 47a (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1991), 1.

²¹ Paul Ellingworth, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 47.

how to interpret *apo teis Italiais* (ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας). The first is that the author is in Italy or in the vicinity of Rome, and the reference to “Those from Italy send you their greetings” (NIV) is a reference to an assembly of Believers in Italy. The second point of view, as explained by Warren A. Quanbeck, is that this was “a message sent home by Italians who were with the author and thus as evidence that the book is a letter written from a place outside Italy and addressed to a group inside Italy.”²² This interpretation is reflected in the RSV rendering of “Those who come from Italy send you greetings.”

While we cannot know for certain where the author was when he wrote this document, we can assume that he was certainly in the Diaspora. Possible places of composition that are proposed among theologians, assuming that the letter was not written from Italy, include: Ephesus, Corinth, Alexandria, and Cyprus. Concurrent with this is the belief that Apollos was the author of Hebrews, and that “They of Italy” (American Standard Version) is a reference to Priscilla and Aquila, who were Jews from Rome and who mentored him (Acts 18:2, 24-26).

WHEN WAS HEBREWS WRITTEN?

It is actually much easier to deduce when Hebrews was written, as opposed to who wrote it and where the author was when he composed his work. It is widely agreed among both conservative and liberal theologians that Hebrews was written sometime near the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. Logically, we would assume that if the Temple had already been destroyed prior to its composition, that the author of Hebrews would have mentioned it. The author does consider the sacrificial system to still be in operation as he makes statements like, “there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law” (8:4), “whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (8:13), and “in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year” (10:3). However, in spite of these present references, some are not convinced that Hebrews was written before 70 C.E. because some works that post-date 70 C.E. reflect the opinion that the Temple and sacrificial system are “still operating,” even though they are not. *ABD* comments, “authors writing after 70 C.E., such as Josephus, Clement of Rome, and the compilers of the Mishnah, often refer to the temple as a present reality.”²³

There are some theologians who favor Hebrews’ composition just prior to the Temple’s destruction in either 68-69 C.E., with its impending destruction in the mind of the author, who writes his letter with this as a backdrop. However, the majority of theologians who favor a pre-70 C.E. composition date will generally favor a dating of pre-65 C.E., because no reference is given to the major persecutions that started after that year. Bruce believes, however, “that the epistle was written before, but not long before, the outbreak of persecution in Rome in A.D. 65.”²⁴ This is partially based on our author’s remarks in Hebrews 12:6-7 to being disciplined by the Lord, as being a vague reference to coming persecution:

“FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline?”

There are some conservative theologians who favor a composition date sometime after the Temple’s destruction, in the late 70’s to early 80’s C.E. And, even liberal theologians have to admit that Hebrews was written “Within the broad range of the years 60-95 C.E.” (*ABD*).²⁵ One of the major factors that places Hebrews’ composition before 95 C.E. is that it is quoted by Clement of Rome in his *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, composed in the late First Century. The letter to the Hebrews was known in early Christianity and is quoted as early as 95 C.E., demonstrating that it was written well before the end of the First Century. There are various parallels between Hebrews and *1 Clement*. The following are two of the more direct references:

HEBREWS	1 CLEMENT
By faith Noah, being warned <i>by God</i> about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith (Hebrews 11:7).	Noah, being found faithful, preached regeneration to the world through his ministry; and the Lord saved by him the animals which, with one accord, entered into the ark (<i>1 Clement</i> 9:4). ²⁶
And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by	This is the way, beloved, in which we find our Savior, even Jesus Christ, the High Priest of all our

²² Warren A. Quanbeck, “Hebrews,” in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 897.

²³ Harold W. Attridge, “Hebrews, Epistle to the,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:97.

²⁴ Bruce, in *NICNT*, 21.

²⁵ Attridge, “Hebrews, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 3:97.

²⁶ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection.

the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3).	offerings, the defender and helper of our infirmity. By Him we look up to the heights of heaven (<i>1 Clement</i> 36:1). ²⁷
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There are some liberals who have tried to argue that the author of Hebrews may have been borrowing from *1 Clement*, but this has been discredited as impossible by all reputable theologians. Guthrie makes the candid statement, "Suggestions that trace both to a common source or suppose that the author of Hebrews was acquainted with *1 Clement* cannot be seriously maintained."²⁸

There are also possible references to Hebrews in the early Second Century work, *Shepherd of Hermas*, indicating that its author was likewise familiar with it, and considered Hebrews authoritative:

HEBREWES	<i>SHEPHERD OF HERMAS</i>
Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God (Hebrews 3:12)	But you are saved, because you did not depart from the living God, and on account of your simplicity and great self-control (<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i> , Vision 2.3.2). ²⁹
	But those which fell into the fire and were burned? are those who have departed for ever from the living God; nor does the thought of repentance ever come into their hearts, on account of their devotion to their lusts and to the crimes which they committed (<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i> , Vision 3.7.2). ³⁰

These comparative quotations have been provided so we can all understand that Hebrews was known and employed in the theology of the Second Century Believers, indeed indicating that it was compiled in the mid-to-late-First Century. Interestingly enough, in most of the ancient Greek codices Hebrews is placed between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy. Guthrie writes that "In the Chester Beatty papyrus (P⁴⁶), the epistle appears among the Pauline epistles, being placed after Romans."³¹ P⁴⁶ dates from "about 200," placing it in the late Second Century.³² But Guthrie also says that this placement "represents the position not later than the mid-third century."³³ These may be reflections on the priority that some early Christian communities gave to the Epistle to the Hebrews. With the composition of Jerome's Latin Vulgate, the position of Hebrews after Philemon, and before James, became secure. In some commentaries Hebrews is considered to be one of the General Epistles, but much of the time it is rather considered to be an adjunct on to the Pauline Epistles, having been written by an associate of Paul.

As we consider the contents of Hebrews, **we will follow the standard conservative line of opinion favoring a composition date in the mid-to-late 60's C.E., immediately prior to the destruction of the Temple, but likely during the Jewish Revolt in the Land of Israel.** We will assume that the author's audience is aware of the events going on in Israel, and that is one of the factors necessitating Hebrews' composition.

WHO WAS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF HEBREWES?

The specific target audience of the Epistle to the Hebrews can be a bit of a challenge to deduce, especially by those who do not consider the broad context of the First Century Judaisms that existed in the times of the Apostles. The Biblical text itself does not indicate who the audience is, but the oldest Greek manuscripts include the title *pros Hebraious* (ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ). Ellingworth notes, "There is no evidence that the writing was ever known by any other name."³⁴ While there are certain things we can assume about the intended audience of Hebrews, we have to be very careful that we maintain some level of fluidity as well.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 668.

²⁹ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. [Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection](#).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 670.

³² Kurt Aland, et. al., eds., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), 8.

³³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 670.

³⁴ Ellingworth, 21.

One question that we must ask ourselves is whether or not the author has, at least in the back of his mind, a theme in his letter concurrent with the meaning of the word *Ivrim* (עִבְרִים), Hebrew for “Hebrews.” The Biblical Patriarchs are called “Hebrews” all throughout the narrative text of Genesis. Abraham was called the first Hebrew in Genesis 14:3: “Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew.”

B.J. Beitzel notes in *ISBE*, “It is suggested that ‘ibri derives from the root ‘br, ‘cross over, go beyond.’”³⁵ *BDB* says that the word *Ivri* comes from the root word *ever* (עָבַר), meaning “one from beyond, from the other side,” “used to distinguish Isr[aelites] from foreigners,” or “from beyond the Jordan,”³⁶ which has generally come to mean “one who has crossed over.” Abraham is considered the first Hebrew in the Bible, as God called him to leave his own country, Ur, with his family. He had the faith to depart and crossover the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. In the life of Abraham, we see that he first had to venture out spiritually and follow a God whom he had never seen, abandoning the life of polytheism that his father Terah had followed (Joshua 24:2). He then had to cross over physically into the Promised Land that God promised to give both him and his descendants after him.

When we consider the Epistle to the Hebrews, does our author have any of these ideas in mind? As Abraham had to cross over boundaries and new frontiers, sojourning in a new land, does our author appropriate this and apply it to his audience? To an extent, he does. The author of Hebrews writes, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going” (11:8). In a way, because of the tumultuous circumstances under which Hebrews was written—with the impending destruction of the Temple in view—the audience of Hebrews was going to have to have the faith of going to a place where no other generation of people had gone before: a Messianic faith with no operating Temple or operating hub in Jerusalem. This necessitates our author focusing on Yeshua and His completed work, and its superiority over the animal sacrifices of the Torah. For many First Century Jews, having no operating Temple in their religious world would have been a major trauma.

Because of this, many different suggestions have been made by theologians concerning which specific segment of the First Century Judaism he may be directing his letter to. The most common suggestion made throughout history is that the author of Hebrews is writing to the Judaizers or the Influencers,³⁷ who led many unsuspecting non-Jewish Believers astray in Galatia. The second most common suggestion that is made is that our author is addressing priests, and possibly even priests who have already come to faith in Yeshua, but are wavering in that faith in some way. In recent days with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some scholars have extended the inclusion of priests to the Qumran community. However, Guthrie validly remarks that “The theory begins with the initial disadvantage that no mention is made anywhere in the New Testament of Essenes.”³⁸ Of course, there is the possibility that our author is addressing such a broad range of people that he has all of these various groups in mind.

What we know from the Biblical text for sure is that the author of Hebrews is writing to a group of second-generation Believers. He writes that the gospel message “was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him” (2:3, RSV). Both the author of Hebrews and his audience did not have firsthand contact with Yeshua, but heard it from the Apostles and other eyewitnesses. We can also infer that the audience of Hebrews had been Believers in Yeshua for a sufficient time. Our author writes, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food” (5:12). Apparently, they had known the good news and had been trained up in the faith long enough that they should be teachers. Our author likewise reflects on the fact that these Believers have experienced some persecution, saying, “remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings” (10:32).

One of the dangers that many in the Messianic community face today when interpreting Hebrews is understanding the fact that most Jews of the First Century did not live in the Land of Israel. The bulk of First Century Jewry, perhaps as high as two-thirds of the Jewish population, lived in the Diaspora. Bruce indicates that there were major Jewish communities established “from the territories of the ‘Parthians and Medes and Elamites’ in the east to Rome in the west, with Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Crete, Arabia, Egypt and Cyrene receiving special mention between

³⁵ B.J. Beitzel, “Hebrew (people),” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:657.

³⁶ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 720.

³⁷ “Influencers” is a more neutral term, instead of “Judaizers,” that was first coined by Mark Nanos in his commentary *The Irony of Galatians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2002). It is used to describe a sector of Jewish people in Galatia who were errantly influencing the new, non-Jewish Believers in their initial maturation in the faith.

³⁸ Guthrie, in *TNTC*, 24.

these limits.”³⁹ While some of these Jewish communities, notably in the East, had been remnants from the Babylonian Diaspora, many others were birthed out of Jewish merchants moving to these areas for economic opportunities, as well as the incessant Pharisaical drive to establish synagogues that could make proselytes out of the nations. The bulk of Diaspora Jewry that we get a glimpse of in the Apostolic Scriptures is Hellenistic Jewry, primarily constrained to the Eastern Mediterranean basin with centers in Northern Egypt, Asia Minor, Corinth, and Rome. It grew rapidly because of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, and was very successful in making converts. Its expansion paved the way for the spread of the gospel.

It is also important for us to understand that the audience of Hebrews was probably not exclusively Jewish. In fact, some theologians believe that Hebrews was not written to Jewish Believers at all, even though this is widely discounted. We have to accept the possibility that there were many non-Jews in the audience to which Hebrews was written, as it was written to be read aloud as an oration in an assembly of people. Sadly, David H. Stern calls the Epistle to the Hebrews “Messianic Jews” in his Jewish New Testament/Complete Jewish Bible translation, giving the impression that only a Jewish audience is addressed. Not even modern Hebrew translations of the New Testament make this faux *pau*, instead employing the correct *Ivrim* (עִבְרִים) for the title of the text.

Can we assume that there were substantial numbers of non-Jewish Believers also addressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews? Perhaps the primary audience was Jewish Believers, who needed to be instructed on what to do with the impending destruction of the Temple and sacrificial system at hand. But this by no means discludes the fact that many non-Jewish Believers would have taken instruction from the letter as well. Some may argue that the extensive use of Tanach quotations in Hebrews presupposes an entirely Jewish audience, but David A. deSilva, in his unique commentary *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* disagrees. He writes,

“Gentile Christians—especially those who have been attached to the Christian community for some time, as it seems likely that these have—would also be familiar with those texts and keenly interested in their interpretation. Since they were instructed to read them by Jewish Christians like Paul and his team, we should consider the likelihood that Gentile Christians would have been exposed, at least inductively, to rules of interpretation such as *gezera shawa*...or *qal wahomer*...in the course of this instruction.”⁴⁰

These statements are interesting, because they concur with the reality that the non-Jewish Believers were instructed to go to the synagogue and hear the Torah taught by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:19-21). If exposed to the Tanach and its instructions in a Jewish setting long enough, these non-Jewish Believers would be familiar, at least in passing, with some forms of Rabbinical interpretation—that we see in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Rabbinical employment of *qal v’chomer* or “light and heavy,” employed frequently throughout Hebrews, is noted by deSilva to have parallels in Greco-Roman society. He comments, “The argument ‘from the lesser to the greater’ was a mainstay of Greco-Roman argumentation as well (*a minore ad maius*). The author of Hebrews makes frequent use of this principle in his exhortation.”⁴¹ We may safely assume that our author is aware of the needs of a diverse audience, primarily made up of Jewish Believers, but not excluded to non-Jewish Believers.

The comments made in Hebrews 13:14 seem to suggest a rather urban audience for the contents of our author’s message. He writes, “For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking *the city* which is to come.” There have been many proposed locations for *what city* the initial audience that received Hebrews was in. Suggestions that are made among theologians is that the Epistle to the Hebrews was sent to a congregation in Asia Minor, Cyprus, Corinth, Cyrene in North Africa, Antioch in Syria, or even Spain and the extreme West. Some believe that the primary target audience was in the Land of Israel, but this seems unlikely when many Jews in Israel had encountered Yeshua firsthand, and the letter is written by those and to those who had not encountered Him firsthand, and only learned of Yeshua from the Apostles and other eyewitnesses. It is very possible that they had the good news proclaimed to them by Diaspora Jews who had been in Jerusalem at *Shavuot*/Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out who then returned to their home city.

The contents and writing style of Hebrews, as previously mentioned, would appeal more to members of Diaspora Judaism than to Judean Judaism. Lane indicates, “The roots of this Christian assembly are in a Diaspora Judaism that has been significantly influenced by the hellenistic synagogue both in theological conception and vocabulary.”⁴² Consequently, the most popular locations among theologians for where the target audience of Hebrews was include Rome and Alexandria.

³⁹ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 135.

⁴⁰ David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp 4-5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² Lane, in *WBC*, 47a:liv.

Theologians who favor Rome being the location where Hebrews was written note that the epistle of *1 Clement*, written from Rome in 95 C.E., demonstrates the first major encounter with the letter. It is logical, then, to assume that Believers in Rome did have early contact with Hebrews. Biblical history does substantiate the fact that there was a huge Jewish population in Rome. Bruce writes,

“[T]he Jews had established diplomatic relations [with Rome] in the days of Judas Maccabaeus, the Jewish colony there was greatly augmented after Pompey’s conquest of Judaea in 63 B.C., and by 59 B.C., according to Cicero, it formed an influential element in Roman society. It is estimated that by the beginning of the Christian era the Jews of Rome numbered between 40,000 and 60,000.”⁴³

In the Messianic community today, it is very easy, with some of the rhetoric spoken against “Rome” by many, to forget the fact that there was a sizeable Jewish community in Rome of the First Century. Lane makes the important remark that “Roman Christianity was originally Jewish, and apparently Jewish in a sectarian sense....The oldest congregation of Jewish Christians in Rome was the household in which Aquila and Priscilla functioned as hosts and patrons.”⁴⁴ We cannot discount the Jewish Believers in Rome as being one of the primary audiences of the Epistle to the Hebrews—especially if the Jewish population was as high as 60,000.

Alexandria is also favored by many theologians as the initial target audience for receiving Hebrews, primarily because the Epistle to the Hebrews demonstrates many theological traits common to Alexandrian Judaism. Those who favor Alexandria also often favor Apollos being the author of Hebrews, as he was a native of this city.

One factor that is often not considered is the fact that the early Believers in Yeshua, and certainly many members of the Jewish community, were highly mobile by First Century standards. deSilva states that the early Believers “could copy and share much poignant and helpful texts as Hebrews with sister churches around the Mediterranean.”⁴⁵ While many commentators today favor Jewish Believers in Rome as being the primary target audience of Hebrews, this does not mean that the letter could not have quickly spread throughout the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, and touched significant quarters such as Alexandria, Corinth, Ephesus, Cyprus, and Antioch.

There are, however, some important factors that do not favor Hebrews being originally written to the Jewish community of the Land of Israel. The extensive usage of quotations from the Greek Septuagint, the canonical Scriptures of Diaspora Jewry, does not suggest a large readership in Judea. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews demonstrates that both he and his audience have a distanced connection to the sacrificial system of the Torah, which came from reading the Scriptures, not firsthand encounters of it as would be the case if our audience was living in the Land of Israel. Bruce concurs with these conclusions:

“We may infer from the epistle that they were Hellenists; they knew the Old Testament in the Greek version. It is implied, too, that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from the reading of the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple services in Jerusalem.”⁴⁶

In examining Hebrews, it is certainly very possible that the text ultimately “made it” to the Land of Israel. However, if Hebrews was written during the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 C.E., with the Jewish people in Israel under military siege from the Romans, than a Diaspora Jew who believed in Yeshua, writing to his fellow Diaspora Jewish Believers, seems more likely. **In our analysis of Hebrews, we will assume that the primary audience of Hebrews was located in the Eastern Mediterranean Diaspora, in mixed communities of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers from Rome to Alexandria to Asia Minor.**

These historical facts are important things to understand because it is not uncommon in the Messianic movement to hear the claim that “Hebrews was written to Hebrews who spoke Hebrew.” This is a claim that is extremely simplistic, especially in light of the reality that the Jewish community was spread all over the First Century world. Even Messianic Jewish theologians like David H. Stern flirt with the idea that Hebrews was written in Hebrew, for a Jewish audience in the Land of Israel, when the history of the times bears anything but this.⁴⁷ Some, perhaps not as insistent that the Epistle to the Hebrews be written “in Hebrew,” may suggest that “two texts” were written by the same author under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: one in Hebrew and one in Greek.⁴⁸ What is notable more than anything

⁴³ Bruce, *New Testament History*, 137.

⁴⁴ Lane, in *WBC*, 47a:lix.

⁴⁵ deSilva, 22.

⁴⁶ Bruce, in *NICNT*, 9.

⁴⁷ Consult Stern’s comments on pp 660-661 of his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995).

⁴⁸ Tim Hegg suggests this possibility in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*: “It is even possible that the author wrote two letters, one in Hebrew (or Aramaic) and the other in Greek, in order to accommodate both Hellenistic Jews (who would be fluent in Greek but possibly not Hebrew) and Jerusalemites who may have received a letter in Greek with much suspicion” (Author, n.d.). However, even Hegg is forced to say, “remember, no physical evidence has yet been found to support the idea of a Hebrew original” (p 2).

else is that the Epistle to the Hebrews has some of the most advanced Greek composition in the Apostolic Scripture—if *not the highest*. It bears absolutely no signs of being a translation from Hebrew.

While many in the Messianic community would believe that of all the books of the Apostolic Scriptures, Hebrews would have been written in Hebrew, the fact that there is no extant copy of a “Hebrew Hebrews” speaks for itself. Furthermore, Guthrie attests that the author of Hebrews “writes Greek with a purity of style and vocabulary to which the writings of Luke alone in the NT can be compared” (*ISBE*).⁴⁹ He also comments, “The writer’s method of argument generally proceeds in accordance with the rules of Greek rhetoric. He does not digress the way Paul does in most of his letters” (*ISBE*).⁵⁰ If the author of Hebrews was indeed a Diaspora Jew writing to his fellow Jews in the Diaspora, composing this epistle in Greek would have been expected. In fact, an argument in favor of this letter being written to Jewish Believers in Rome, as Bruce says, is that “The Roman Jews generally were Greek-speaking and bore Greek names.”⁵¹ Even those of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research, an organization largely touted as promoting a so-called “Hebrew New Testament,”⁵² have to admit that “Contrary to what one might expect, however, the book of Hebrews is written in the purest Greek of any book in the New Testament.”⁵³

These conclusions, of course, are mirrored by many in the scholastic community. Lane indicates that “The language of Hebrews constitutes the finest Greek in the NT, far superior to the Pauline standard both in vocabulary and sentence-building.”⁵⁴ Even a lay person who does not consult critical commentaries on the Bible can find similar remarks. Spiros Zodhiates, for example, editor of the *Word Study* series by AMG Publishers, makes the following statement prefacing Hebrews in the *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*: “It certainly is a superb, literary Greek masterpiece which is well-organized, logical, and comprehensive.”⁵⁵

Our analysis of Hebrews will remain consistent with the academic opinion that the letter was written in excellent Greek, with a strong Diaspora Jewish background in mind.

WHAT IS THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF HEBREWS?

What does Hebrews teach us that is so profound? It has been said that “No higher view of the Messiah is to be found anywhere in Scripture.”⁵⁶ How is this borne out in the author’s message? How does the author appropriate themes and verses from the Tanach and apply them to the circumstances of his readers? What do we need to understand before we embark into our examination of the text?

Yeshua is, without a doubt, the major theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The text opens up in ch. 1 with a lauded praise of the Messiah, emphasizing that all things have been given to Him and that all things are to worship Him. The author of Hebrews affirms the Divinity of Yeshua, and the fact that Yeshua is the Son of God, whereas Moses was only a servant. The author certainly does not demean Moses, indeed attesting that Moses was “faithful” (3:5); but Moses as a human man could never do what the Messiah has done as the Son of God. Faith is a theme of Hebrews, as the author describes the Patriarchs and Prophets as “men of whom the world was not worthy” (11:38). One of the overwhelming themes of Hebrews is the New Covenant, with the author offering extensive quotes from Jeremiah 31. While most Christian theologians have interpreted these New Covenant passages as annulling the Torah, the author of Hebrews himself plainly states, “FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE” (8:10; cf. 10:16).

The Epistle to the Hebrews lays the groundwork for the development of some very important Biblical doctrines. We know more about the Divinity and the humanity of the Messiah from Hebrews than any other text of Scripture. The author of Hebrews presents Yeshua as being nothing less than God in the flesh, writing, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (1:3, NIV). Yet at the same time, the author of Hebrews also writes that Yeshua is the High Priest who can sympathize with us, because as a

⁴⁹ Donald Guthrie, “Hebrews, Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 2:666.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 2:664.

⁵¹ Bruce, *New Testament History*, 137.

⁵² We do not believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, in spite of some of the insistent, and often fanciful, rhetoric posed by some in the Messianic community. Consult the publication *Scripture Under Scrutiny: Was the New Testament Really Written in Hebrew?* available from TNN Press.

⁵³ David Biven. *A Gospel Written in Hebrew?. Jerusalem Perspective Online*. Retrieved 03 August, 2004, from <<http://articles.jerusalemerspective.com/>>.

⁵⁴ Lane, in *WBC*, 47a:xlix.

⁵⁵ Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, NASB (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1994), 1618.

⁵⁶ Stuart Sacks, *Hebrews Through a Hebrew’s Eyes* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1995), 4.