

Hebrews: A Study in Covenantal Transition

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CONTEXT FOR THIS LETTER:

The letter to the Hebrews provides a profound overview of the dynamics that led to the first century return of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant.

The context for this letter is the first century A.D. shortly before the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The Jews knew from their knowledge of Daniel's prophecies that the time was at hand for the promised Messiah to appear. They expected the Messiah to appear as a conquering king that would deliver them from Roman oppression and reestablish the Davidic Kingdom. Even though Christ demonstrated His divinity through signs and wonders, the Messiah who appeared was not the Messiah they were expecting. Christ didn't meet their paradigm of a conquering King who would destroy the Romans. Because of this, and the threat Christ presented to their positions of authority, the Jewish religious leadership, by and large, rejected Christ.

A great deal of tension had developed between Rome and Judea. The political climate was tense. Many references to a coming judgment against Israel are seen in the New Testament documents. John the Baptist warned the Jews of the coming wrath, (Matt. 3:7: "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"). In the Olivet Discourse, Christ showed what series of events would occur, leading to the destruction of the Temple. Christ made many other references to coming judgement. For example, we have His statement shortly before the crucifixion:

☐ Luke 19:41-44: As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Just as Christ had prophesied, the Roman armies built an embankment around Jerusalem during the war. This embankment prevented escape from the city and led to the death of multiple thousands who tried to escape, or who remained entrapped in the city.

In a work entitled, *The Early Days of Christianity*, written in 1882 by F.F. Farrar, the author wrote the following about the embankment that Christ had prophesied would be built during the war between Rome and the Jews: The word circumvallation in this quote means to "surround with a rampart, to build a wall."

☐ "Fanatically relying on the visible manifestation of Jehovah, while they were infamously violating all His laws, the Zealots rejected with insult every offer of terms. At last Titus drew a line of circumvallation around the doomed city, and began to crucify all the deserters who fled from him. The incidents of famine, which then fell on the besieged, are among the most horrible in human literature. The corpses bred pestilence. Whole houses were filled with unburied families of the dead. Mothers slew and devoured their own children. Hunger, rage, despair, and madness seized the city. It became a cage of furious madmen, a city of howling wild beasts, and of cannibals,—a

hell. Disease and slaughter ruthlessly accomplished their work. At last, amid shrieks and flames, and suicide and massacre, the temple was taken and reduced to ashes. The great altar of sacrifice was heaped with the slain. Six thousand miserable women and children sank with a wild cry of terror amid the blazing ruins of the cloisters. Romans adorned the insignia of their legions on the place where the holiest had stood.”

On His way to being crucified, in anticipation of what was coming upon Israel, Christ made this statement to the women weeping for him: “do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children” (Luke 23:28). Peter in his Pentecost sermon said: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 3:40).

The first century historian Josephus wrote: “I shall therefore speak my mind here at once briefly, that neither did any other city suffer such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, from the beginning of the world.” During his ministry, Christ likened that generation to a man possessed with demons.

After the resurrection, with the powerful preaching of Peter and other of the apostles, a number of Jews, including religious leaders, accepted Christ as Messiah. They began to realize that Christ was the promised Messiah and by placing their faith in Him, they would be saved from their sins and protected from the coming judgment upon Israel. Accepting Christ as Messiah, however, did not automatically result in an abandonment of the Old Covenant (OC) system. Even though Christ made the OC obsolete at the Cross, this system continued to be adhered to by Jewish Christian converts for another 40 years after the ascension of Christ. This is seen in the following history presented by Luke:

❑ Acts: 21:17: When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

Even though the leadership of the Church instructed the Gentile Christians that they were not required to keep the regulations of the OC, many Jewish converts to Christianity felt that the Gentiles turning to Christ were obligated to keep these regulations just as much as they felt they should. Therefore, the Gentile Christians were being pressured by the Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians to keep OC regulations, including the Sabbath and the annual Holy Days. The evidence for this is seen in the letters of Apostle Paul to the Gentile Churches, where he has to constantly deal with the problem of Jews pressuring the Gentiles into embracing OC requirements.

It must be understood that adherence to the OC was a way of life for first century Israelites. Even though many had accepted Christ as the promised Messiah, it would take some time and some catastrophic events to bring them to the point of abandoning the OC. The Jews were firm in their commitment to the Mosaic regulations.

The Church was made up of Christian Jews who by and large still clung to and observed the Mosaic regulations. There were Gentiles who had become converts to Judaism and who had converted to Christianity but still felt they should continue to keep OC regulations. There were the Gentile converts to Christianity who had not previously kept the OC but were being pressured by Jewish Christians to do so. There was constant friction between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians over this issue. Finally, there was the large non-Christian Jewish community who refused to acknowledge Christ as Messiah. They were fighting the developing Christian community tooth and nail. They saw the developing Christian Church as a threat to Judaism.

There was much persecution going on by Jewish Christians toward Gentile Christians, by non-Christian Jews toward all Christians, and, several years before the war began, from the Roman government toward the Christians. Once the Roman government realized that Christianity was not just a sect of Judaism, but a new religious system, they came down hard on the Christians. It was a time of much tribulation for the developing Christian community.

AUTHORSHIP:

The author does not identify himself. The Eastern Church attributed the Book to Paul from the beginning but the Western Church didn't accept this until the 4th century. The church historian Eusebius (A.D.263-339) believed Paul to be the author but Origen (A.D.185-254) was not convinced. Clement of Alexandria proposed that Paul originally wrote it in Hebrew and that it was later translated into Greek by Luke. Tertullian (A.D.150-230) felt that Barnabas wrote Hebrews. Martin Luther suggested that Apollos wrote the letter. Many current day scholars believe it could not have been Paul because the writing style and thought patterns are different from his other letters. Origen, quoted from Eusebius Ecclesiastical History, said: "Who wrote the Epistle?, God only knows the truth."

There does, however, appear to be some sound internal scriptural evidence for a Pauline authorship. In Hebrews13:19, the author speaks of hoping to be restored to his readers soon. This epistle was written about the time Paul would have been in prison. In Hebrews13:23, the writer speaks of Timothy being released and the writer hoping to come with Timothy. Paul and Timothy appear to have been good friends as other scriptures show. The letter to the Hebrews concludes with "Grace be with you all." Paul concludes his letter to Titus with "Grace be with you all." Paul concludes his second letter to the Thessalonians with "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." These similar endings suggest that Paul may have authored Hebrews as well.

The apostle Peter wrote to Israelites scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Peter1:1). In 2 Peter 3:15, the apostle wrote: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him." Peter is writing to Jews about being patient. He is saying that Paul had previously written to the Jews about the same thing. There is no letter in the New Testament documents addressed to the Jews that shows the author to be Paul. However, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews exhorts them to be patient and Peter speaks of Paul having written a letter in which he exhorts the Jews to be patient. All this provides indication that Paul may have been the author of Hebrews.

DATE OF WRITING:

Hebrews was written shortly before the destruction of the temple in A.D.70. We know this because there are references to the temple still standing and the Levitical priesthood still offering sacrifices. There also are references to a near at hand judgment. Hebrews appears to be written

primarily to Jewish converts to Christianity but may have been circulated among non-Christian Jews as well.

PURPOSE OF THIS LETTER:

Because of great persecution going on, a number of Jewish Christians were beginning to rethink their commitment to Christ and gravitate back to a full embrace of the OC way of living. It was this growing threat of Jewish converts turning their backs on Christ that compelled the writer to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over everything connected with the OC.

Hebrews 8:13 sums up the focus of this letter. "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Greek (Gr): "Is near to passing away"). The writer shows that the OC was still around but would soon pass away. This passing away took place when the means to facilitate the requirements of the OC were removed with the destruction of the temple in A.D.70. This destruction and judgment ended the sacrificial system and priesthood. The author of Hebrews sees the OC scripture as all pointing to Jesus. In so doing, he sees Judaism not as being abrogated by Christianity, but brought to its climax because of what Christ did. This is the whole focus of this letter.

ESTABLISHING THE TIME FRAME:

The writer begins his letter by establishing the time frame in which the events and issues he is about to address are taking place.

☐ Hebrews 1:1-3: 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. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

The Greek for "last" is Eschatos. The word signifies the point of termination, that with which something closes or ceases, describing what is absolutely final. Wuest, in his "Word studies in the Greek New Testament," defines Eschatos as "the outermost, the extreme, the last in time or in place. Peter identified "last days" as the time frame in which he was living by showing events current to first century Christians as associated with the last days. Paul and the writer to the Hebrews do the same as seen in the following scriptures:

☐ Acts 2:14: Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last (Gr.eschatos) days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

☐ 1 Peter 1:18-20: For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last (eschatos) times for your sake.

❑ Galatians 4:3: So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

❑ Hebrews 9:26: “But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

Peter shows events associated with the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost and the sacrifice of Christ as events that take place in the last days and last time. Paul associates the time fully coming with the incarnation. We know the incarnation took place in the first century. Therefore, the time fully coming occurred in the first century. The writer to the Hebrews makes the same association. These events took place 2000 years ago.

It would appear that the last days spoken of here were a specific last days time frame which pertained to the coming of Christ and the bringing to an end the OC system. Several commentaries show “These last days” to mean “In the last of these days,” meaning that God had been speaking in the past through the prophets, but now in the termination of those days, He has spoken by His very own Son.

As seen in Hebrews 1:1-3: the writer shows Christ to be superior to the prophets. Now the writer begins to emphasize Christ’s superiority to angels, (Hebrews 1:4-14). Angels played a big role in the history of Israel. The Hebrew word for angel is Malak. The Greek is Angelos. Both words have the basic meaning of messenger. These messengers often spoke on behalf of God and carried out his will. Angels prevented Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and appeared to Moses in the burning bush, (Genesis 22:15-18 and Exodus 3:2-5). Angels are seen over and over again as intervening on behalf of Israel in their escape from Egypt and their defeat of enemies that stood in the way of their entering the promised land. Stephen indicates it was an angel who spoke to Moses and put the law into effect.

❑ Acts 7:37-38: "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us." Verse 53. “You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

The writer shows that despite all the things angels do and have done, Christ is far superior to them and they are merely sent to serve those who will inherit the salvation that Christ is bringing “So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:13-14).

The writer speaks in terms of “those who will inherit salvation?” The Greek for “who will inherit” is a present active participle of the Greek word mello. This phrase properly translated means, “those who are about to inherit salvation. Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, defines mello as “to be about to do anything” and “to be on the point of doing or suffering something.” The Arndt, Gingrich, Bauer Greek -English Lexicon defines mello as “Be on the point of, be about to.”

There are 110 places where “mello” is used in the Greek New Testament. In many places, by context, it can be seen to mean something about to take place. We find in Acts 11:28, that the prophet Agabus signified that a great famine would (mello) come upon the Roman world. The scriptures show that this famine happened during the reign of Claudius. Here we find the writer using mello in an obvious context of something that was about to take place and did take place as

the scriptures report and as secular history confirms. In Acts 20:3; it's recorded that "Because the Jews made a plot against him (Paul) just as he was about to (mello) sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. Again we see mello used by the writer to describe an about to occur event.

In Acts 27:10, Paul is quoted as saying, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going (mello) to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." Here again we see mello used in the context of something about to occur. We see mello used several dozen times in the book of Acts. A review of the context wherein this word is used will over and over again show an event that was about to take place and subsequently did take place. It is apparent the writer is looking at salvation as a yet uncompleted process at the time he wrote this letter to the Hebrew Christians. Yet he sees salvation as about to be inherited. Since the focus of his letter is the superiority of Christ over the OC and the process of transition to the NC, it would appear that the full inheritance of salvation is tied to the completion of this process, an event that was about to take place.

CHRIST BROUGHT SALVATION TO LIGHT:

In chapter two, the writer begins to warn his readers of the consequences of ignoring what Christ did. He writes, "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" The Greek pronoun we is very emphatic and refers to the first century readers of this letter. The writer speaks of the world to come (Hebrews: 2:5). The Greek "to come" is mello and signifies a world about to come. The physical earth is not under consideration here. The Greek word for "world" here is oikoumene, which refers to the world as inhabited. The habitation of the NC world is what the writer is pointing to.

In verse Hebrews 2:14, Satan is seen as holding the power of death. The death of Christ is shown to destroy Satan and free humanity from their fear of death.. The word "destroy" is from the Greek katargeo, which means: "to make ineffective, powerless, abolish, wipe out" (Arndt, Gingrich, Bauer, Greek-English Lexicon). Apostle John wrote that the reason for Christ's coming was to destroy the Devil's work.

❑ 1 John 3:8: He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy (Gr. Lue: which means to loose, breakup, demolish and destroy.) the devil's work.

Paul shows that the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). The law defines what behavior is sin. Satan being the instigator of sin held the power of death because sin leads to death. Christ came to free man from the power of Satan and thus facilitate freedom from death. Paul wrote to the Romans that "The God of peace will soon ("soon" is the Gr. takos which means something imminent) crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). Remember, this was written 2000 years ago and directed to first century Christians who are being told that Satan is about to meet his doom.

EXHORTATION TO FOCUS ON CHRIST:

In chapter three, the writer continues to exhort his readers to focus on Christ. "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (Hebrews 3:1). Moses in God's house is compared with Christ over God's house. The writer shows how those Israelites who initially left Egypt failed to enter the physical rest of the promised land. Since these Israelites were unfaithful, they were made to wander in the

desert for 40 years. It was a 40-year time frame between the ascension of Christ and the termination of the OC system in A.D. 70, when the temple was destroyed. It was during this time frame that much of first century Israel rejected Christ and failed to enter the spiritual rest of the NC.

The writer uses the example of ancient Israel's lack of faith to motivate first century Christian Jews to be responsive to the truth of Christ and tells them "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3:14). What "end" is the writer talking about? "End" is the Gr. telos which means termination, cessation. In Greek writing, the word means, "always of the end of some act or state, not of a period of time (Thayer's Greek Lexicon). I submit that the end being spoken of is the termination of the OC system which was to take place in association with the A.D. 70 judgment upon Israel. The writer is exhorting the Jewish Christians not to harden their hearts, but to remain faithful to Christ so that they will not repeat the mistake of ancient Israel.

ENTERING GOD'S REST:

❑ Hebrews 4:1: Therefore, 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. Hebrews 4:3: Now we who have believed enter that rest.

The gospel preached to Israel in the wilderness was the good news of escape from Egyptian slavery into the rest of the promised land. The good news being preached to first century Jewish Christians was the coming out of spiritual slavery to sin and death and into the NC of rest in Christ. The Greek word for "enter" is in the present tense in Greek. This signifies that they were in the process of entering that rest. The New Jerusalem Bible translates Hebrews 4:3 as, "We, however, who have faith, are entering a place of rest."

Some in the Christian community believe that the phrase, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" in Hebrews 4:9, indicates that we, as Christians, should be keeping a seventh-day Sabbath.

The Greek Sabbatismos in Hebrews 4:9, occurs in this form only this once in the entire NT. It does not appear in other Greek literature of the time. Therefore the Greek Lexicons have little to say about this word other than it signifies some kind of rest. It is almost as if the writer made up this word as an offshoot of Sabbaton which is the word commonly used in the NT to signify the seventh-day Sabbath. In all other places in Hebrews where we find the word rest used, it is the Greek word Katapausis, which means "a putting to rest or place of rest." Katapausis is not used in conjunction with the seventh day Sabbath in the NT.

The rest that the Israelites failed to initially enter was the land of Canaan. This was a physical rest from their enemies and the slavery experienced in Egypt. This is contrasted with a new kind of rest now being offered to the Jewish Christians. This was a rest different from the rest Joshua gave to ancient Israel after the 40 years of wondering in the wilderness.. This could not have been a seventh-day Sabbath rest. The seventh-day Sabbath rest was in operation since Mt. Sinai. It was an integral part of the OC system which was being kept by the very Jewish Christians being addressed in this letter. There would have been no reason for the writer to be trying to convince these Jewish Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. They were already doing this and had been all their lives.

Even the Seventh-day Adventist's understand this. In their Bible Commentary we find this explanation for Hebrews 4:9 on page 423: "Certainly, in writing to Jews, the author of Hebrews

would not consider it necessary to prove to them that Sabbath keeping "remaineth." If the conclusion of the extended argument beginning with ch. 3:7 is that Sabbath keeping remains for the people of God, it would seem that the writer of Hebrews is guilty of a non sequitur, for the conclusion does not follow logically from the argument. There would have been no point in so labored an effort to persuade the Jews to do what they were already doing -- observing the seventh-day Sabbath."

The very Israelites who left Egypt and were given the Sabbath at Mt. Sinai failed to enter God's rest. Now in the first century there were Israelites who kept the Sabbath but who were also in danger of failing to enter God's rest. The rest being considered here is not the weekly Sabbath but the rest being offered in Christ through the NC.

CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD:

The writer to this point has been driving home the message of Jesus Christ being superior to the prophets, angels, Moses, and Joshua. Now, in chapter 5, the focus shifts to Christ being a High Priest who is superior to the Aaronic Priesthood. It was firmly established in the minds of the Israelites that the priesthood was associated with the tribe of Levi and the high priest could only be of that tribe. Now they are being told that Christ, who descended from Judah has become their high priest. The writer then makes the point that Christ is of a different order, the order of Melchizedek.

The purpose of the writer is to show the Jews that Christ, who is of the Melchizedek priesthood, is greater than the Aaronic priesthood and even greater than their father Abraham, seeing that Abraham paid a tenth to Melchizedek. The Aaronic priest had to have a specific recorded genealogy in order to be a priest. Melchizedek does not. To be in the Aaronic priesthood, you had to be at least 25 years old and retire at age 50. Melchizedek is forever and, therefore, Christ is forever.

In Hebrews 5:10-14, the writer chides his readers for being dull of hearing and slow to learn regarding the matter of Melchizedek. The writer tells them that they need someone to teach them the elementary truths of God's word all over again. The word elementary is from the Greek word, *stoicheion*, which means the basic parts or components of something. Then the writer tells them to "leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again 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 of the dead, and eternal judgment."

Most who read Hebrews 5:10-14 and 6:1-3 assume the writer is speaking about leaving the fundamental teachings about Christ as found in NT teaching, and going on to maturity. The question that must be asked, however, is what would that maturity be? Would not an understanding and practice of repentance, faith in God, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment be maturity in Christ? Since the writer of this letter is focusing on having his readers embrace Christ and not return to the sacrifices and other Mosaic regulations, it is felt, by some Biblical scholars, that what the writer is admonishing the Jewish Christians to do is to abandon the Old Covenant teachings, which pointed to Christ, and embrace the New Covenant teachings which fulfill and reach the goal of the OC teachings. The Greek for "maturity" is *teleios*, which means to complete by reaching the intended goal.

It is interesting to note that where the writer says, "let us leave the elementary teachings," the Greek word for "leave" means to "separate, abandon and forsake." The Greek word translated "elementary" in this passage is *arche*, which means "old, ancient, starting point, first," etc. This would indicate that it is the OC teaching about Christ that is alluded to. One internal piece of

evidence for this is in Hebrews 9:10, where the writer uses the Greek word *baptismos* for OC ceremonial washing, which is the same word he used for baptisms in verse 2 of chapter 6. The ending of *baptismos* indicates the process of washing as opposed to the Greek *baptizo* used for baptism in the usual NT sense.

Elementary teachings (first teachings) are considered to be those teachings about Christ in the OC. They are the symbolisms of the OC regulations such as sacrifices, holy days, washings, etc. which all pointed to and were fulfilled in Christ. The writer is not telling his readers to abandon or forsake NC teaching about Christ but to separate themselves from OC theology and fully embrace and be carried into the NC system. The whole focus of the writer is to convince these Jewish Christians not to go back to the old system but embrace the new. In chapter five the writer chides them about needing to be fed milk as opposed to solid food. The milk would be a correct understanding of the OC teachings about Christ and the solid food would be embracing the fulfillment of those teachings in Christ. What the writer says further along in his letter substantiates this.

❑ Heb. 7:11: If perfection (Gr. *teleios*) could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come--one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?

❑ Heb. 7:19: (for the law made nothing perfect [*teleios*]), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

The writer is saying that the OC system could not make anything complete. A new priest after the order of Melchizedek was needed to bring about perfection/maturity. The once and for all sacrifice of Christ brings completeness. Therefore, follow Christ. Abandon the old and embrace the new.

In chapter 6, the writer gives dire warning of what will happen to his readers if they turn their backs on Christ. He gives the analogy of "Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned." The writer is warning his readers about their fate if they reject the truth about the Christ event. Both John and Christ spoke of being destroyed by fire. Christ spoke of the chaff being burned in the fire. The soon to come judgment upon Israel is in view here.

THE POINT OF THIS LETTER:

In chapter 8, the writer says: "The point of what we are saying is this: (Gr. "the chief point" "Now this is the main point" NKJ, "the chief point is this" ASV). He goes on to show that the point of everything written so far is to demonstrate that Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood and the OC is being replaced by a better NC. Under the old system, only the priests had communication with God on behalf of the people. Under the new system, all Israelites would have access to God through the indwelling of God's spirit. Under the sacrificial system their sins were brought to remembrance every year at the feast of Atonement. Under the grace system being established, sins are forgiven and forgotten. The writer concludes this segment of his letter by stating, " By calling this covenant new, he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear."

While the death of Christ made the sacrificial system obsolete, it continued to function and be adhered to by Israel. The aim of the writer to the Hebrews was to show that Christ's sacrifice had brought an end to this system, and that the very means to facilitate it would shortly be brought to an end as well. That is why he writes of this system aging and soon to disappear. The 40 years between the ascension of Christ and the destruction of the temple was a transition period during which time the NC system advanced and the OC system faded. Paul alludes to this as well.

☐ 2Corinthians 3:7-11: Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was (the word was is in the present passive participle Greek tense and therefore should be translated is) fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. (NKJ). (For since that which is passing away was with glory... (Wuest: translation).

CHRIST IS ABOUT TO APPEAR:

In chapter 9 the writer goes into some detail as to the makeup of the tabernacle and the priestly function of offering blood sacrifices under the OC. The writer then shows how these sacrifices could not cleanse us from sin but that the sacrifice of Christ does. This chapter concludes with two profound statements:

Number one: "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages (Gr. aion) to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." The end of the ages is identified as the time when Christ appeared to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. This appearing took place two thousand years ago. Unless one is willing to stretch the "end of the ages" into a period of two thousand years and counting, it should be apparent this period was a specific time frame that occurred two thousand years ago.

Number two: "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Here, and also in the writings of Paul and Peter, we see a looking forward to salvation being brought at the second appearing of Christ. Most Christians assume Christ brought salvation at His first coming. Here the writer is saying that Christ will bring salvation with him at his second appearing. What is the writer talking about? Let's look at what Paul wrote:

☐ Romans 13:11: The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Paul tells the Romans to wake up because their (these first century Christian Romans), salvation is closer than when they first believed. Is Paul suggesting that they will be dying soon and at that point receive their salvation or is he talking about some other event that was soon to take place that would reveal salvation. Let's look at what Peter wrote:

☐ 1 Peter 1:5: who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

The Greek word used in 1 Peter 1:5 which is translated “is ready” is *hetoimos*. This word is used 17 times in the NT and by context it is seen over and over again to mean something ready to happen. (For several examples, see Matthew 22:8, Mark 14:15, 1 Peter 3:15). Thayer’s Greek Lexicon defines 1Peter 1:5 as, “on the point of being revealed..” The Greek word translated “last time” is *eschatos* which means “a point of termination, something absolutely final.” As we move into chapter 10, this issue will be clarified.

❑ Hebrews 10:1: The law is only a shadow 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.

Why did the writer say “are coming.” Hadn’t the “good things” already come with the sacrifice of Christ and the bringing of the NC of life to replace the OC of death? What is the writer talking about? He continues to stress the supremacy of Christ over the sacrificial system and encourages the Hebrew Christians to hold fast because Christ is faithful and will deliver what He promised. What is it that Christ promised?

In Hebrews 10:25, the writer says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Remember: this was written 2000 years ago to first century Christians who are being told not to abandon meeting together, especially as they see the day approaching. What did this mean to them? What day was approaching?

❑ Hebrews 10:26-31: If we deliberately keep on sinning (Gr. *hamartano*, to miss the mark) after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will (Gr. *mello*, “is about to”) 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 avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Here the writer gets right into the face of these Hebrew Christians and tells them flat out what will happen to them if, after receiving the knowledge of the truth, they turn their back on Christ. The writer speaks of the about to occur judgment that will consume the enemies of God. The writer then goes on to reflect on the tremendous persecution suffered by his readers and exhorts them to hang on because what was promised is about to be delivered.

❑ Hebrews 10:32-37: Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly 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 lasting possessions. 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. For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.

The Greek here is very emphatic. Bullinger, in the Companion Bible, shows the Greek phrase *mikron hoson hoson* to mean: “in a very, very little while.” “He who is coming,” undoubtedly

refers to Christ. The writer is addressing first century Christians and telling them that in a very, very little while, Christ is coming, and He is not going to delay that coming. The writer had previously told his readers that Christ would appear a second time to bring salvation (Hebrews 9:28). The writer was constantly exhorting his readers to hang tough in the face of persecution and to not forsake meeting together as they saw the day approaching. I must remind you that this is a first century context.

The writer is addressing first century Christians and dealing with first century issues. The issue being addressed here is an imminent coming of Christ. By context, this cannot be referring to a coming thousands of years into the future from when this was written. The coming being addressed here is a first century coming in judgment against Israel for their refusal to accept Christ as the promised Messiah. Remember what Christ said shortly before His crucifixion:

☐ Luke 19:36-44: As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

There are multiple dozens of warnings found throughout the NT narrative that speaks of a coming judgment upon Israel. That judgment came in the great war between A.D. 66 and 73. In the midst of that war, the temple, along with the sacrificial system and priesthood, were destroyed. Over one million people died in that war and over a hundred thousand were taken into captivity by the Romans and their allies.

Christ came in judgment against Israel through the armies of men just as He had done in Old Testament times when He used nations such as Assyria and Babylon to judge Israel. A review of Old Testament history will clearly reveal God coming in judgment against a variety of nations. The prophets used a great deal of apocalyptic/hyperbole language (rhetorical exaggeration) to describe these events. God is often seen as riding on the clouds, as He uses one nation against another to accomplish His purpose.

God intervened in the first century in a dramatic way to replace the OC system of death with the NC system of life. This is the salvation that the first century Christians were waiting for. This was the fulfillment of what had been promised. The first century church experienced the full transition from the OC to the NC. It began with the birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It ended with his coming in judgment against Israel. This is the coming that the writer to the Hebrews is discussing in his letter. This is why the writer says, "For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and not delay." The coming they were anticipating was a coming in judgment upon Israel and, therefore, a deliverance from the tremendous persecution they were under from the Non-Christian Jews and also the increasing persecution from Rome. The writer was trying to comfort them and encourage them to remain loyal to Christ

In chapter 11, the writer goes into great detail about the need to exercise faith in their continuing struggle to stay faithful in the face of great persecution and the gathering storm with Rome. In chapter 12, the writer again focuses on Christ as the mediator of the NC and compares what was now happening with what had happened under Moses.

❑ Hebrews 12:22-29: 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 church 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 Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 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. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

Once again the writer focuses on Christ as the facilitator of a new covenant, a covenant based on His blood and not the blood of animal sacrifices. Once again the purpose for this letter is made manifest. The writer was determined to demonstrate the great transition that was taking place. The OC system was being replaced with the NC system. The facilitation of the old system was about to be destroyed in the coming judgment upon Israel. The writer contrasts the physical events at Mt. Sinai with the spiritual event of entering the heavenly Jerusalem.

The implication is that the physical Jerusalem with its temple and priestly system should no longer be the focus. The focus now must be on the heavenly. Apostle Paul makes the same point to the Galatians. This church was made up of Gentiles who had become Christians, Gentile converts to Judaism who had become Christians, and probably Jewish converts to Christianity. There were those in their congregation who felt they should continue to follow the OC regulations in addition to believing in Christ. There also was the continuing pressure from the non-Christian Jews. Paul deals with this problem by giving the following analogy:

❑ Gal. 4:22-31. For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

Paul makes it very clear that the OC system is to be tossed out. Paul also shows that just as Ishmael, son of Hagar, persecuted Isaac, son of Sarah, so it was the same then. The OC advocates were persecuting the NC advocates. The slave woman is representative of the OC system of death. The free woman is representative of the NC system of life. This persecution was about to end with the destruction of the means to facilitate the OC system.

❑ Heb. 12:25-29: 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? (Moses and the prophets warned them on earth, but now Christ, who had come from heaven, has warned them). 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. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

The writer speaks of receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. He contrasts this with what can be shaken, namely created things. Therefore, the writer identifies the kingdom as a spiritual entity. The writer again gives warning to his readers to be responsive to what Christ said was to happen, if they hope to escape the coming judgement. The writer concludes his letter in chapter 13 by encouraging his readers to love each other, practice good moral behavior and not be carried away with strange teachings. He reminds them that they do not have an enduring city but that they can continue to look forward to the heavenly city that is about to come.

Various Bible commentaries express the belief that the writer, in speaking about not having an enduring city, is speaking about the city of Jerusalem which was about to be destroyed. They were looking to the heavenly city, the spiritual Jerusalem that would be available to them through Christ.

CONCLUSION:

It should be apparent from reading this letter to the Hebrew Christians that the writer fully expected Christ to return during their life time and bring them the salvation that was promised. This coming would also deliver them from the great persecution they were under from the non-Christian Jews, as well as, the increasing tribulation from the Roman government. When the writer says in Hebrews 10:34: "For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay," this cannot be interpreted to mean a coming thousands of years into the future. It can only be concluded that the return of Christ was imminent in the first century. This coming would bring to a final end the Old Covenant System of death and fully establish the New Covenant system of life.

If the reader wishes to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics surrounding a first century return of Christ, I recommend reading my recently published book, *When Will Christ Return?* This book is available through Presence Ministries at www.presence.tv Please see navigator for a direct link to the Presence website.