

THE EPISTLE OF TO THE HEBREWS

WHO IS THE MEDIATOR TO GOD?

THE SON, ISRAEL

OR

THE SON, JESUS

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THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

*[Refer to the **“Introduction to Epistles”** at www.BiblicalStory.org for a broader explanation of how epistles play their unique part in the Biblical Story]*

*[Refer to **The Author of Hebrews’ Use of Melchizedek from Genesis**,² for a detailed study of Melchizedek in Hebrews 5—7.)*

PART I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Solution to the Epistle

Epistles were written by an inspired author to solve a problem that was either, occurring in the church (e.g., Ephesus, Philippi, etc.), or with an individual (e.g., Timothy, Titus, Philemon). This problem was very specific and very serious. This highly controversial problem caused the author to write.

In that light, the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews were facing a very serious problem. Should the readers make the wrong choice, it would have eternal repercussions. Thus, the writer issues a strong epistle to warn them of the dangers of what they were considering doing; returning to the nation, Israel, and rejecting the Christ and His church.

Problem: The unbelieving nation Israel (antagonist) is deceiving the believing Jewish remnant (readers, who have joined the church and rejected Israel) to return to Israel (and reject Christ) based on the theology that rest and blessing can only be obtained by blessing Israel (Genesis 12:1-3).

Solution: The unknown author (protagonist) is encouraging (and warning) the believing remnant (readers) to endure persecution and be faithful to Christ based on the theology that the only means of rest and blessing comes through Jesus the Christ (Psalm 2) as the Priest just like Melchizedek (Psalm 110).

Common Problems in Interpreting the Book of Hebrews

Typically, the interpreter comes to the Book of Hebrews with his preconceived theology, particularly because many of the passages seem so difficult (e.g., 6:4-6, 10:25-30). He assumes that the historical audience and their problems are the same as his congregation or listener, and interprets the warning passages to fit them depending on his preconception of what the book should be saying. Therefore, as might be expected, he comes out with exactly what he had when

² The Author of Hebrews’ Use of Melchizedek from Genesis 14, ThD Dissertation, by Dr. Charles P. Baylis. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989). This may be accessed through the author’s webpage, www.BiblicalStory.org.

he began to read the book . . . his previous theology and the application he wanted to give. His interpretation validates what he already thought, since what he already thought was the basis for interpreting the passages.

The interpreter of the Biblical epistles must be hermeneutically astute. Common principles of hermeneutics are overlooked frequently. The interpreter must be aware of how the genre of epistles communicates its message. If not done, errant interpretations will ensue.

Importance of the Place of Hebrews in the Biblical Story

Probably the most overlooked and important item is how the book relates to its unique place in the Biblical plot. Like trying to understand a scene that occurs in Act III of a play without knowing what came before, so the specific problem of this epistle is entirely related to the place to which the Biblical plot has come, that is, what is known as “the church age.” Everything in this epistle is based on an understanding of the plot that weaves through the Old Testament (the story preceding this age) and has come abruptly into the age of the Christ.

Importance of the Hebrew Scriptures for Definitions of Words and Phrases

One of the most important things in communication is that the listener understands the definitions of the words and phrases used by the speaker. If they are different, then the listener will misunderstand what the author is saying. The author of Hebrews is proving His point by the use of the Old Testament. If the reader does not recognize when He uses words and phrases defined by the Old Testament, and then defines them from his own background, error must necessarily ensue.

Example: Hebrews 10:26

“When we willfully sin³ after having received the full knowledge of the truth, their remains no longer a sacrifice for sin.”

The interpreter frequently assumes that “willful” means “intentional” in the sense of committing a sin when one knows that it is wrong but still proceeds to do it *willfully*.⁴ Yet the meaning of “willfully” is not from one’s westernized definition, but from the text of the Old Testament, particularly Numbers 14 (e.g., 14:30), where it is the “presumptuous” (or “defiant”) sin, or in short, that of rejecting God or His holy men, things, or other (See also Deuteronomy 17). In the case of Hebrews 10:26, it is nothing

³ See Zane Hodges commentary in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition, “Hebrews,” comments on 10:26.

⁴ The NET Bible loses the emphasis of apostasy and the defiant or presumptuous sin, by simply translating it “keep on deliberately sinning.”

short of a believer returning to unbelief (in this case, returning to Israel) and rejecting the Christ, in whom He had once trusted.⁵

Importance of the Changes in the Age of the “Last Days”

The unique events that preceded the writing of the book, and its unique problem, are those that include the massive change brought about in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Among these are the full forgiveness of sins and full son-ship, as well as a new heart and the indwelling Spirit to minister to the believer through the apostolic word. Thus, this new age introduced by the appearance, life, death and resurrection of Messiah had uniquely confronted the nation Israel with a choice which could not be ignored. Israel had the choice of rejecting their Messiah or trusting Him and moving into the fullness of times with all its eternal benefits. To reject Him was to reject their mediatorial role as the national means of blessing. For it was only through the Messiah that Israel would itself be blessed.

Important Note:

Christ came to make those who believe, “perfect,” by imputing His righteousness to them (a righteousness demonstrated by His perfect life). That righteousness is the righteousness of His character, no less. Thus, believers now walk as full sons of God, and as such are to give out the mercy given in Christ. Believers have no righteousness (i.e., mercy) of their own, only His. And thus, everything they do is either sourced from Satan (self-righteousness, good works, etc.), or from God (demonstrating the mercy of Christ given to them, extending mercy to those who need it).

Believers are to “follow” their “leader” as He clears the way for them to the Kingdom. He equips them as “sons” fully, and thus they are to suffer as He did and follow Him into His glory, which will be completed at the bodily resurrection when they will be seen to be fully “like Him.”

So, the age has changed everything in the believer to Galatians 2:20 and Hebrews 11:28. These words could not be stated by an Old Testament believer, who, by faith, anticipated this age.

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. (Gal. 2:20)

⁵ This can be seen by the illustration following, that is, that anyone who went against (*ἀθετήσας*, literally, “reject” or “treat as nothing”) the Law of Moses was killed. This is speaking of rejecting the (whole) Law of Moses and its authority, not just committing a sin which the Law prohibited.

³⁹ And all these (*i.e.*, Old Testament believers in the coming Messiah), having gained approval through their faith (*i.e.*, *in the revelation of the Christ in the Scriptures*), did not receive what was promised (*the new life, forgiveness of sins*),⁴⁰ because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made complete. (Heb. 11:39-40)

Thus, while believers are complete in Him, they wait to follow Him in resurrection of the body into the earthly kingdom.

For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also *in the likeness* of His resurrection, (Rom. 6:5)

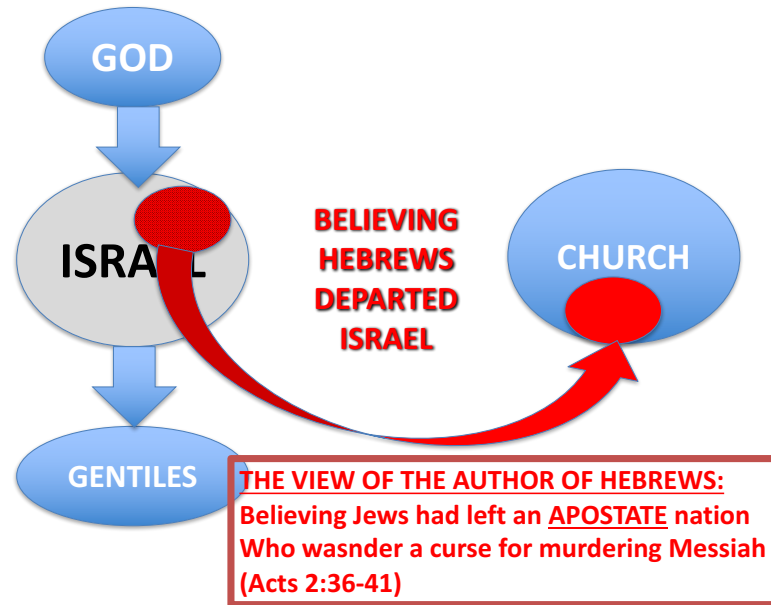
Importance of the Old Testament's Anticipation of the Last Days

What the Old Testament had anticipated from the God's promise of the Messiah in Genesis 3:15, and the nation's inception in Genesis 12:1-3, had occurred in the appearance of Jesus in the Gospels. The long awaited full forgiveness of sins due to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 53, Jeremiah 31:31-34), and His bodily resurrection (which confirmed His bodily return to set up the Kingdom of God in Israel at Jerusalem), had both occurred.

The Fullness of the Last Days Rejected by the Nation, Israel

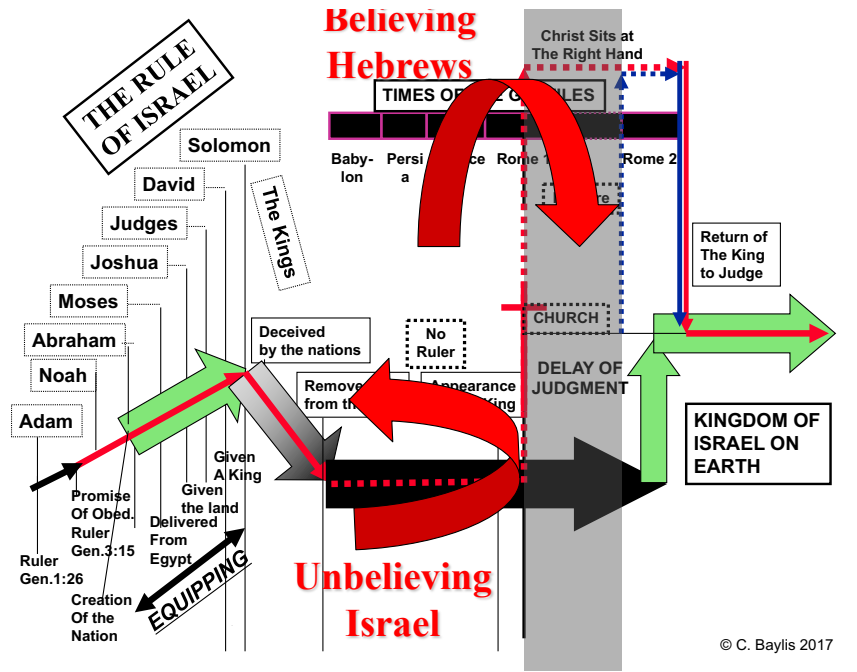
However, the nation Israel rejected this appearance of the King (Matthew 12) that brought in these last days (2 Tim. 3:1, Hebrews 1:1-3), also known as the fullness of time (Eph. 1:10, Gal. 4:4). They chose to stay in their (errant) perception of the Old Testament era, living under the Law, perceiving their own self-righteousness (Romans 9—10) as well as assuming their physical heritage from Abraham (Romans 2) would give them the right to enter the Kingdom. Of course, those credentials had never been adequate to provide entrance to the Israelite kingdom on earth. Only receiving imputed righteousness through the King (like their father, Abraham in Genesis 15:6) would give them full son-ship and entry (Genesis 15:6, Romans 3—5, 10). So, Israel rejected moving into the next stage of the story, the age of Messiah.

“For indeed we (*Hebrew believers to whom the author is writing*) have had good news preached to us, just as they (*the Nation, Israel, who rejected at Kadesh-Barnea, and who continues to reject the hope in Messiah*) also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.” (Heb. 4:2)



Thus, these believing Jews had moved from the partials (sacrifices, symbols, prophecies) of the Old Covenant into the fullness of times and the New Covenant (real righteousness, sonship, forgiveness of sins) under the King who had appeared, then ascended, and was at the Right Hand of the Father in heaven (Psalm 110). There He would wait until the time when He returned in judgment (Psalm 110:1). He had brought full righteousness and now these believers were fully sons of God (Galatians 4), waiting for the return of their Savior (Romans 8) who would usher them into the Kingdom.

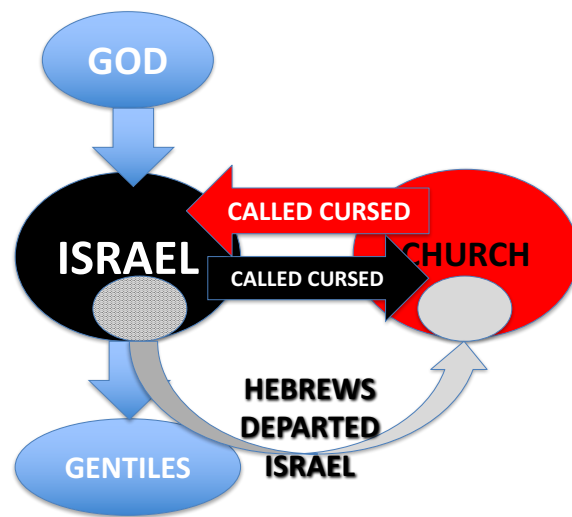
The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit (*i.e., having completed the final sacrifice*) at My right hand, Until (*the Son will be in heaven until He returns to visibly conquer*) I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." (Ps. 110:1)



Summary of the Response to the Age of the Last Days

Thus, the summary is this.

- Israel had rejected the new age brought on by the appearance of Messiah and had stayed in the Old Testament seeking their righteousness through the Law and the sacrifices.
- A believing remnant of Jews had moved into the new age, embracing their Messiah as their only access to the Father apart from the works of the previous age.



HEBREW CHRISTIANS VS. ISRAEL:
WHO IS CURSED?

Thus, Israel rejected the remnant, while the remnant rejected Israel. Each one felt the other one was cursed. The remnant believed that Israel was cursed due to their murder of Messiah and His rejection prophesied by Isaiah 53:3-4.

³ He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. (Isa. 53:3-4)