

The Letter to the Hebrews: Cut Off For Messiah

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/h29pO508LIQ>

The scripture reading is Hebrews chapters 1 & 2

Many changes had come to the followers of the Way from the time of Paul's arrest in 58 CE. Peter and John were sent to the diaspora to encourage the believers, specifically the Jewish believers. In 62 CE, during a gap between Roman procurators appointed to rule over Judea, the Sanhedrin, under the high priest Eleazar son of Ananias, executed James. James, known as James the Just, had been the leader in Jerusalem for nearly thirty years. He was highly regarded by both believing and non-believing Jews. With his death, the leadership of the Jerusalem body of believers was open. Who would be strong enough to lead the believers through this time of persecution by the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin and the priesthood? And in the background of all this, rebellion against Rome was fomenting among many factions of Jews.

The body of believers in Jerusalem had been firmly and steadfastly led by James since the resurrection of Yeshua. His appointment seems to have come from Yeshua himself following Yeshua's personal appearance to him. Clement of Alexandria relates that James along with Peter and John received a divine appointment from Yeshua.

After the resurrection the Lord imparted the higher knowledge to James the Just, John and Peter. They gave it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the Seventy, one of whom was Barnabas.ⁱ

It seems odd that James would have been selected instead of one of the twelve apostles. The followers of the way seem to have selected James at least in part because, as the brother of Yeshua, he also was descended from King David. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles writes:

Only a man from among the Master's near kinsman could fill the seat of steward over the throne of David. Even if Simon Peter was present (he probably was not), he could not take up the scepter of leadership in the place of James because he did not hail from the house of David.ⁱⁱ

In order to select a successor to James, the candidate had to be of the line of David, specifically from the family of Yeshua. Eusebius describes the selection of Symeon son of Yeshua's uncle Clopas.

After the martyrdom of James and the conquest of Jerusalem that followed soon after, tradition has it that those of the apostles and disciples of the Lord who were still alive gathered from everywhere with those who were, humanly speaking, relatives of the Lord, for many of them were still alive. They all discussed together who ought to succeed James, and all unanimously decided that Symeon, son of the Clopas mentioned in the gospels, was worthy of the bishop's throne.ⁱⁱⁱ

Symeon did not inherit an easy position. Ananias, the father of five former high priests, father-in-law of Caiaphas, and himself a former high priest led the persecution against the followers of the Way. Josephus records Ananias' lavish bribery of the procurator Albinus to hold on to his position of power over the Jewish people in Book twenty of his work Antiquities of the Jews. After orchestrating the execution of James under his son Eleazar, Ananias set out to remove the believers from the habitual meeting place in the temple. Since the resurrection of Yeshua, the disciples had been in the habit of meeting daily in the temple at Solomon's porch. We see Peter and John teaching there in Acts 3:11

Acts 3:11 NKJV 11 Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed.

When proposing a building project to Albinus to remodel Solomon's porch failed, Ananias turned to the Torah. He extended the charges made against Paul that Paul was teaching Jews to forsake Torah and bringing Gentiles into the Temple to include all followers of the Way. Ananias apparently influenced the Sanhedrin to declare all followers of the Way who believed that Yeshua was the Messiah to be "karet" or cut off from Israel! First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explains.

"Apparently the Sadducean leadership of the Sanhedrin managed to assign the believers with the status of "karet" (כרת), i.e., cut off from Israel. The ban remained in effect only so long as they clung to their confession of the Master. To return to fellowship within the Temple, they only needed to renounce their faith in the crucified one.^{iv}

Imagine the shock and disbelief of the Jewish believers not only in Jerusalem but all across the diaspora. The temple in Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish life even those in the diaspora. Any time Paul came to Jerusalem, he did so at one the yearly feasts and fully participated in the temple festivities. Temple worship was especially important to Jewish believers as everything they practiced had deeper meaning because of the fulfillment through Yeshua. Being cut off from the Temple, was like being cut off from God. Yeshua had spoken about this eventuality.

John 16:1-3 NKJV 1 "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. 2 "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. 3 "And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.

For the Jewish believer, it seemed like access to God had been cut off! When God took the children of Israel to be His own, He commanded them to build a house for Him to dwell in according to the pattern that God gave Moses. God also gave David the pattern to build the temple in Jerusalem that would replace the tabernacle. At Mt. Sinai, once the tabernacle was complete and God's presence filled the tabernacle, God gave instructions for how a person could approach or draw near to Him.

Leviticus 1:1-2 NKJV 1 Now the LORD called to Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting, saying, 2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of the livestock-of the herd and of the flock.

The word "offering" in this passage is "korban," number 7133 in Strong's Hebrew Concordance meaning something brought near from the root word "kaw-rab'," meaning to approach. The means to draw near to God in His earthly dwelling place was through offerings mediated by God's priesthood.

Now, with the Jewish believers cut off from access to the temple and from God's dwelling place on Earth, how could the Jewish believers approach God?

The epistle to the Hebrews was written from Italy at just about this time. The author of this letter is unknown although various possible writers have been proposed including Paul, Clement of Rome, and Barnabas. Any of these possible writers after having heard of the Jewish believers being cut off could have written this letter of encouragement. Paul left Jerusalem for Spain in 62 CE and didn't return until his arrest in 65 CE, so unless, he wrote this letter before the decree that the Jewish believers were cut off or later while in chains between his arrest in 65 and his death in 67, Paul is not likely to be the author. Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians in the 80's that has a similar style to that of Hebrews. He was known to be with Peter in Rome

between 62 and 67. Luke records in Acts chapter four that Barnabas was the nickname for a Cypriot Jew named Jose. Barnabas was present in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit fell on the Feast of Shavuot and Clement mentioned him as one of the disciples of Yeshua. Like his name suggests, Barnabas epitomized the role of encourager and had the background as a Levite to write about temple practices.

Whoever the writer of Hebrews was, the letter seems to be an encouragement to Jewish believers that even though they no longer had access to the temple and the sacrificial system that had been their means of drawing near to God, they had greater access not to the earthly temple but the heavenly temple through Yeshua the Son of God!

The book of Hebrews begins by introducing Jewish believers to Yeshua the Son of God. The entire case for access to God through Yeshua is based on the identity of Yeshua.

Hebrews 1:1-4 NKJV 1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

The writer of Hebrews begins his introduction by stating that Yeshua is a prophet with credentials unlike any other. First, He is the prophet spoken of by Moses. Moses was one of the greatest prophets through whom God spoke to the fathers. Moses said a prophet like him would come.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19 NKJV 18 'I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19 'And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.

Anyone who does not receive the words of this prophet would be answerable to God! The writer of Hebrews explains that this prophet is the Son for whom and through whom the worlds were created. The word "worlds" is the Greek word "ahee-ohm," number 165 in Strong's Greek Concordance meaning age, perpetuity or world. This indicates that this is the creation of all physical matter throughout all time.

We learn that Yeshua is the brightness of God's glory! The word "brightness" is the Greek word "ap-ow'-gas-mah," number 541 in Strong's Concordance meaning "off-flash" as of a beam of light is an off-flash of the source. The phrase "express image" is the word "charakter," number 5481 meaning an engraver, an exact copy or stamped figure and from which we get the English word character. Yeshua is the exact representation of God coming as a beam of light whose source is God. Yeshua has the power to sustain all of creation and He chose to cleanse us from all our sins!

God had spoken in the past through prophets and angels with angels understood to be higher than the prophets. The writer explains that even as the angels as messengers of God are considered higher than the prophets, so Yeshua is higher than the angels by his right of inheritance. Seventeenth century theologian Matthew Poole explains the concept of the inheritance of His name:

"This was his peculiar, hereditary lot, due to him by natural right, as the heir and first-born of God, justly acquired by him, and actually possessed of him, not as a mere title but a name descriptive of his person, distinguishing him from, and setting him above, all others.^v

The writer of Hebrews backs up his claim that Yeshua is the Son of God and higher than the angels with several back to back quotes from the prophets. He begins with the evidence that Yeshua is the Son of God.

Hebrews 1:5 NKJV 5 For to which of the angels did He ever say: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You"? And again: "I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son"?

He, then, places the angels in the proper hierarchy in regards to Yeshua. The angels minister to and serve Yeshua.

Hebrews 1:6-9 NKJV 6 But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him." 7 And of the angels He says: "Who makes His angels spirits And His ministers a flame of fire." 8 But to the Son He says: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions."

Next, the writer cites evidence, again from the prophets, that Yeshua is eternal.

Hebrews 1:10-12 NKJV 10 And: "You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 11 They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; 12 Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail."

Finally, he concludes that Yeshua has authority as the right hand of the Father.

Hebrews 1:13-14 NKJV 13 But to which of the angels has He ever said: "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool"? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

Based on this evidence direct from the prophets of old, Yeshua is a prophet greater than Moses and the angels. Therefore, His words are true and to be followed.

Hebrews 2:1-4 NKJV 1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?

The Jewish believers, discouraged and disheartened by being disowned by their own leaders, the priests and rulers, began to doubt the message of salvation that they had heard and received. It seems that turning back from believing that Yeshua was the Messiah was a reasonable course of action. How could He be the Messiah if His followers were cut off from worship of God? Through this introduction of the identity and authority of Yeshua, the writer rebukes this line of thinking! With such a Messiah, witnessed to by both past and current prophets, as well as angels and signs and miracles from God, there can be no doubt that Yeshua is the Messiah.

The writer established that Yeshua is higher than the angels, now he turns to establishing the humanity of Yeshua. Dominion over God's creation was given to man not angels.

Hebrews 2:5-8 NKJV 5 For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. 6 But one testified in a certain place, saying: "What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? 7 You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands. 8 You have put all things in subjection under his feet." For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him.

At the creation of Adam, God gave him dominion over the living beings of God's creation.

Genesis 1:26 NKJV 26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

But, as we know, Adam failed in his service to God as tender and keeper of God's creation. It was then necessary that man's position in the creation must be restored. The writer of Hebrews tells us this is why Yeshua, who was higher in authority and position than any other eternal being, humbled himself taking a position lower than angels so that mankind could be redeemed.

Hebrews 2:9-12 NKJV 9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. 10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 saying: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You."

It is through Yeshua's mortality and humanity that salvation is possible for all people. Yeshua didn't die for the sake of angels, but for the sake of mankind.

Hebrews 2:14-16 NKJV 14 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham.

The release from bondage to sin and death is offered to the seed of Abraham to whom it was promised that he would be a father of many peoples and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed!

These are Yeshua's qualifications for acting as God's priest to mediate between God in His heavenly dwelling place and those desiring to draw near to God.

Hebrews 2:17-18 NKJV 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

The writer of Hebrews introduced his readers to the full identity of Yeshua, the eternal Son of God higher than the angels yet fully human redeeming and fulfilling the purpose of Adam. Yeshua came in response to the promise to Abraham and Abraham's seed to be the father of many nations and a blessing to all the families of the earth. As we continue through the epistle to the Hebrews, we will build on the concept that, rather than

being cut off from access to God, Jewish believers as well as their Gentile brethren have eternal access to God through Yeshua!

Study Questions:

1. Why do you think that only relatives of Yeshua were considered for the position of leader of the Jerusalem assembly?
2. Yeshua said in John 16:1-3 that he spoke the words of warning about being put out of the assemblies so His followers would not stumble. What would cause the followers to stumble? How do these first two chapters of the epistle to the Hebrews address this situation?
3. Hebrews 1:1-4 introduces us to Yeshua. What are Yeshua's credentials cited in these verses? Why is it important that we recognize Yeshua as the Son?
4. In what way does Yeshua give aid to the seed of Abraham (Heb. 2:16)?
5. Why is it necessary that Yeshua be "flesh and blood"? (Heb. 2:9-18)
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?
7. Bonus: The writer of Hebrews refers to Yeshua's qualifications to be and role of high priest in Heb. 2:17-18. Compare Yeshua to Aaron, the first high priest.

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ⁱ Eusebius The Church History. Translation by Paul L. Maier. Kregel Publications. ©1999, 2007. Page 53.

ⁱⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016. Book 3, Page 978.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eusebius The Church History. Translation by Paul L. Maier. Kregel Publications. ©1999, 2007. Book 3.11. Page 92

^{iv} Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016. Book 3, Page 1063.

^v A Commentary on the Holy Bible. Matthew Poole. 1685.