

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Chapter 3

Background to the chapter

After demonstrating resolutely how Yeshua is superior to the angels, in chapter three the author moves on to show how Yeshua is superior to Moses. This point carries greater significance because of the unparalleled regard for Moses within Judaism. This is reflected in the *Mishnah* (the oral tradition that was present during the second temple period), where it states about Moses:

“There is no one in Israel greater than he. . . Who is greater than Moses? No one else but the *Shekhinah* [God’s divine presence]” (*Sotah 9b*).

The Torah, however, makes it clear that Moses was not entirely unique in God’s plan.

- A day would come when there would be a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15-19).
- Just like Moses, but not like other prophets, the prophet like Moses would speak to God directly/”mouth to mouth” (Num 12:6-8).
- The Torah concludes with a statement written after Moses death, perhaps by Ezra the Scribe when he made his copy of the Torah. Deuteronomy 34:10 serves as a reminder to keep looking for a prophet like Moses who would communicate face to face with God.

Thus we have indicators in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) that a very special person would arise who would share similar characteristics and accomplishments with Moses. Many of the ancient rabbinical writings show that this prophet like Moses would be the Messiah (*e.g. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1.9*).

The similarity and superiority of Yeshua to Moses (vv. 1-6)

v. 1 – Yeshua is called in the Greek, *apostolos* – literally “one who is sent.” This is the same word used for those men who had the special office of Apostle. The office is not what is being referenced here; it just means He was sent. In that regard, Yeshua declared that the Father sent Him to dwell on earth (Jn 17:3-18). In comparison, at the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, Moses was instructed to tell the Israelites that he had been sent by Adonai (Ex 3:12-15).

v. 2 – makes a comparison (“as”) between the faithfulness of Yeshua and that of Moses. This is a quotation from Numbers 12:7. The term “house” here is used metaphorically. The “house of Israel” or “household of Israel” is a frequent reference in the *Tanakh* to the Jewish people. Likewise, it is used as a metaphor for the church or Messianic community.

“The household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Tim 3:15).

“You are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household” (Eph 2:19).

Clearly both Moses and Yeshua faithfully accomplished their respective ministry to the Jewish people.

vv. 3-4 – The writer goes on to show how Yeshua is superior in that regard. Moses was just another person among the people. But Yeshua is the one who built the household of God. As He

declared: “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Mat 16:18).

vv. 5-6 – The writer describes Moses as being a servant in the house and Yeshua as the Son of the house. In this metaphor of a household, the difference between a servant and a son is significant. A servant has no authority and does what the family that owns the house says. The servant has no place of honor and no right of ownership. A son, on the other hand, who derives his authority from the father of the household, can give instructions that are expected to be followed by servants. He is a “Son over His house” (v. 6). He gets what he wants and is deserving of honor, and ultimately He will own the house. So because Yeshua is the Son of God, and thus divine and entitled to many privileges, He is superior to Moses, who is only a common man.

The latter half of verse 6 then introduces an application for this understanding of Yeshua’s superiority over Moses. The believers who are the intended audience of the letter, are given the first of several exhortations in the book of Hebrews to “hold fast.” That simply means to have a strong grip on something that prevents being separated from it. It is related to the warning in 2:1 not to drift away, which depicts an untied boat flowing away from a dock. Here in v. 6, believers are given the assurance of remaining in the house of God, if our confidence continues to “hold fast” or to keep a strong grip on Yeshua. We hold fast to Him when our faith remains strong in times of trials and when we face disappointment, when we continue to serve Him and worship Him even when the circumstances around us would make that difficult without faith. The parallel phrase, “hope firm to the end” is another way of restating this exhortation.

3:7-19 Warnings about disbelief

The writer employs a series of quotations from the Tanakh as warnings about failing to hold fast to Yeshua by faith. Verses 7-11 are a full quotation from Psalm 95:7-11. There is one slight variation in translation, however. Psalm 95: 8 reads:

“Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness.”

Our English translation of the Old Testament is based on the Hebrew Masoretic text, and this verse is clearly a reference to events in the wilderness wanderings. Having a grasp of that account is essential for understanding both the Psalm and the passage in Hebrews.

Exodus 17 describes a time of grumbling when the people had no water to drink, and God instructed Moses to strike a rock that brought forth water. Afterward, we are told:

“He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us, or not?’” (Ex 17:7).

But the writer to the Hebrews uses the Greek Septuagint text for the Old Testament. And the translators of the Septuagint decided not to retain the Hebrew names of the place of testing, instead translating them into Greek terms that match the meaning behind the Hebrew names. So instead of a place named Meribah, it is written as the act of provocation. And instead of a place named Massah, it is written as the act of temptation. That is why we see this distinction between the way it is written in the Old and New Testaments. It is not mistranslation, but simply a different way of translating the original text.

But understanding the story behind this quotation from Psalm 95 is important for helping us to see why the writer to Hebrews is making this warning. The grumbling that took place in Exodus 17

came a short time after Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt. They had just seen how God had parted the waters of the Red Sea in order to provide their escape. But then they ignored that miracle and doubted that God could provide fresh water for their daily needs. Nevertheless, there were no consequences for their grumbling. They just moved on

Later, in Numbers 14, it was two years after the Exodus. God was ready to give the people possession of the Promised Land (Num 13:2). But the whole nation doubted that they could defeat the Canaanite peoples who lived there. Only Joshua and Caleb were courageous enough to agree and to take on that challenge. Doubting God was disobedience and thus sinful in God's eyes. As a result, according to verses 22-23, none of those who hadn't listened to God's voice would see the promised land. And according to v. 29, everyone over the age of 20 would die in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb were spared (v. 38).

Numbers 20 takes place 38 years later, at the end of the 40 year time of wandering. At that point, the disobedient generation had either completely died or the few remaining survivors were about to join them. And it describes another incident in which the people grumbled over the lack of water. Once again, Moses was called to act on behalf of the people. This time he was told to speak to the rock, but instead he struck it twice with his rod.

According to verse 12, because of this act was Moses would not get to lead the people into the Promised Land. It was a personal consequence for Moses, as well as Aaron who assisted Moses in bringing forth the water. Aaron would die later in the chapter (v. 28). And Moses would do the same a few months later (Deut 34:5). But there wasn't a consequence for the nation as a whole. Those people grumbling on that day were the new generation. And they would get to enter the land, just as the earlier generation wasn't punished because of what happened in Exodus 17. In other words, God can handle grumbling. His concern is with disobedience.

To sum this up, the great majority of the nation did not enter the Promised Land because of disobedience. Moses and Aaron did not enter the land because of another kind of disobedience. Only those who obeyed, even though they may have complained, entered the land, or as the Psalmist and the writer to Hebrews, describes it – entered God's rest.

That, then, forms the basis for the warning that we find in Hebrews 3. It is a strong exhortation to hold fast in faith to the very end. Moses walked with the Lord for a long time, and Aaron was right beside him for most of that time. But they missed out on a great blessing.

This does not mean that they lost their salvation. That is always a matter of faith, not works. Their disobedience and the disobedience of the first generation of the people is all about enjoying the full blessing of being part of the family of God. When we don't hold fast and drift away, we miss out on the blessing of fellowship and worship and having a strong support system. It seems to be well characterized as being in a place of rest.

v. 12 –calls those who fall away as having an evil, unbelieving heart. The narrative behind this chapter from the book of Numbers, shows that the evil and unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness was not trusting in God. We have to remember the particular concern that the writer has for this audience. He fears that they are about to abandon Yeshua and return to Judaism that adheres to the Old Covenant of Law alone.

v. 13 – We are given an assignment for preventing falling away from the faith. He uses the Greek verb *parakaleo*, which is translated as “encourage” in the NASB and NIV, and “exhort” in the KJV and CJB. It literally means, “to call beside.” So it's a picture of someone standing

next to you and speaking to you. It is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, including comfort and beseech (KJV, meaning implore or entreat). These are all terms that describe what friends do. It is also used in Scripture to describe the Holy Spirit, who is called a *parakletos*, which is translated as “comforter” in the context of the Spirit (Jn 14:26). But it is also rendered as “advocate” when it is used to describe Yeshua (1 Jn 2:1) because He intercedes on our behalf. So we have several English terms that fit contextually with the original language. And the writer to Hebrews is calling upon believers to act in this regard in order to prevent people from falling away. It is a practical call to encourage, exhort, comfort, entreat and advocate or intercede on behalf of others.

Notice also in verse 13 that he calls us to do these things day after day and also to do them today. And in case that wasn’t enough, in verse 15 he repeats the first part of his quotation from Psalm 95 that calls for action today. It’s always today. Every day become yesterday at the end of that day. But then a new today begins. So when he says “as long as it is ‘today,’” that means never stop encouraging, exhorting, comforting, entreating, interceding.

- v. 14 – Here, a specific reason is given for helping others resist falling away. He wants those who name Yeshua as Lord to be partakers or sharers in Messiah. The Greek *metochos* has the sense of being commonly involved in something and having the same purpose. In our modern context, it might better be stated as partner. We see it used that way in Luke 5:7 where Simon Peter, James and John are described as fishing partners.

Another word that we have to have a clear understanding about, is translated as “assurance” in the NASB, “confidence” in the KJV and NIV, and “conviction” in the CJB. The word is *hupostasis*. It comes from two roots meaning “under” and “stand.” It sounds like it should be translated as “understand” but it is not about knowledge. That is a completely different set of Greek words. *Hupostasis* refers to something beneath the surface, like a foundation. It is about that which makes you who you are.

This word is used only five times in Scripture, and three of them are in the book of Hebrews. In 1:3 *hupostasis* is translated as “nature” (NASB), “person” (KJV), “being” (NIV), and “essence” (CJB). All of those choices convey the concept that Yeshua has the same inner quality as God. Alternatively, it wouldn’t make sense that Yeshua is the exact representation of God’s assurance or confidence., as it is translated in 3:14.

In 11:1 *hupostasis* is translated as “assurance” (NASB), “being sure” (NIV), “confident” (CJB), and “substance” (KJV). In this case, the KJV is the only translation that captures the meaning of *hupostasis* accurately and in a consistent manner with 1:3. Substance is all about your inner nature or your foundation.

So when this word is used in 3:14, we need to see it as a reference to our nature or substance of who we are. It’s about holding fast to who we are. And that is consistent with being a partner or partaker or sharer with Messiah. Successful partnerships happen when the persons involved share a common substance in character and nature. That’s what he is getting at here, not assurance or confidence.

Notice especially how the verse is phrased. He doesn’t automatically assume that everyone in the body is a partner of Messiah. And he is not saying that you can be a partner and then stop being one. This is about evidence existing that we *are* partners and will *continue* in that state. Greek grammar is particularly helpful in this case. The phrase, “we have become partakers

(partners) of Messiah” is written in the Greek perfect tense. Whenever that tense is used, it means that the progress of an action has been completed and the results of the action are continuing on, in full effect. In other words, the progress of the action has reached its culmination and the finished results are now in existence. That is an extremely important point when it comes to understanding this verse. It is saying that our partnership in Messiah has been completed and the results will continue on indefinitely. But this state of partnership does not apply to everyone. The action of spiritual transformation has not been completed in everyone’s life, and thus there are no results that will continue. So the question becomes, how can we know if the action has taken place in someone’s life? This verse tells us that if we hold fast to our nature as a believer from the beginning to the end, that is evidence that we are partners in Messiah. It is evidence that a spiritual transformation has occurred, not some kind of transient religious experience.

There are many passages in Scripture that support the fact that if we truly are born again or spiritually transformed, we will remain firm to the end.

- In Deut 31:6 and Heb 13:5, the Lord has promised never to leave or forsake us.
- “If anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17)
- “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (Jude 1:24).
- “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you.’” (Mat 7:22-23)

In verses 16-18, the author returns to his practice of asking rhetorical questions. But in this case, even his answers are in the form of questions.

- Who provoked Him? – All who came out of Egypt (except Joshua and Caleb).
 - With whom was He angry? – With those who sinned.
 - Who would not enter His rest? – Those who were disobedient.
- v. 19 – Those consequences were all about unbelief. And the implication is that the same kind of negative consequences will occur when the audience of his letter or any believers in any generation do not hold fast in their belief in the Messiah.