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THE HOLY BIBLE **NKJV** REFERENCE GUIDE

NEW TESTAMENT

BOOK 58

HEBREWS



Michelangelo's Pietà Saint Peter's Basilica

SUMMARY

After the Christian community had existed for a few decades, the enthusiasm that characterized its earlier years began to wane.

The expected return of Jesus had not taken place, opposition to the movement had developed from different quarters, and doubts were beginning to arise concerning any permanent significance that Christianity might have over other religious sects and parties.

To counteract these tendencies and to strengthen the faith of Christians who were associated with the new movement are the chief purposes of this letter. The author is unknown, but many guesses have been made concerning his identity.

Authorship has been attributed to the apostle Paul; in many editions of the New Testament, this idea is expressed in the title given to the letter. However, the contents of the letter indicate that Pauline authorship is not likely.

The ideas set forth in the letter are unlike those found in the genuine letters of Paul. In fact, Hebrews' interpretation of Christianity in many respects is foreign to the thought and work of the apostle.

Whoever the author may have been, we can be certain that he was someone who believed that Christianity was something more than just another religious movement.

Convinced that Christianity is the only true religion, he wanted to show its superiority over all the religions that were competing with it, and he was especially anxious to show its superiority over Judaism.

To do this, he makes a series of comparisons between conceptions that he finds in the Old Testament and corresponding ideas in his interpretation of Christianity. In each of his comparisons, the Christian view is presented as the more advantageous of the two.

Hebrews begins with the statement that God, who in ancient times revealed himself through the prophets, has in these last days revealed himself through the life and teachings of a Son.

This Son, who is identified with the person known as Jesus of Nazareth, is said to be greater than Moses or any of the prophets. He is superior even to the angels of heaven, for no one of them has ever been called a Son, nor did any of them have a part in the creation of the world.

Because the messages delivered by angels have been valid and any transgression with reference to them has been justly punished, it is all the more important that people should heed what has been delivered to them by the Son.

Calling Jesus the Son of God does not, for the author of this letter, constitute a denial of Jesus' humanity. On this point he is quite emphatic: Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity.

And again, For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way. It is because of Jesus' humanity that it can be said of Jesus, Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

SUMMARY Continued

Throughout the letter, Jesus is referred to as the great high priest whose ministry exceeds in importance the services performed by the priests of ancient Israel. The greatness of the priesthood of Jesus is emphasized in a number of different ways, one of which concerns the priesthood of Melchizedek.

The author refers to a story in the Book of Genesis in which Abraham encounters Melchizedek, who was a priest and the king of Salem. Abraham, returning from a battle, received a blessing from Melchizedek, to whom he paid a tithe of all the spoils he had obtained from the battle.

This is the substance of the story as reported in Genesis, but from this meager account a number of conclusions can be drawn. One conclusion is that what happened to Abraham in this encounter affected the entire Levitical priesthood since the priests were all present in the loins of Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people.

Asserting that the lesser is always blessed by the better, the author infers that the Levitical priesthood is necessarily inferior to the priesthood of Melchizedek; because Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, he is therefore greater than any of the priests of the Old Testament.

Quoting from Psalms 110, the author assumes that it was Jesus about whom the statement was made, You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Although Jesus is believed to have been a human being with actual flesh and blood, he is also the Son of God insofar as he is the incarnation of the divine Logos, or Spirit of God.

This aspect of Jesus' nature is eternal and has neither beginning nor end in the processes of time. The author of Hebrews draws another comparison between Jesus and the priests of the Old Testament:

The narrative in Genesis says nothing concerning the parentage of Melchizedek, and from this silence the author draws the conclusion that Melchizedek had no father or mother. In other words, he was an eternal rather than a temporal being.

All of the Levitical priests were men who were born and who died, but Jesus, who was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, had eternal life. In addition, the work that Jesus performed as a priest exceeded in importance that which was done by the men who ministered under the Levitical priesthood.

One of the reasons given to support this claim of Jesus' priestly superiority is that the priests of the tribe of Levi had to perform their services at repeated intervals. Even the sacrifice made on the great day of atonement had to be performed once every year.

In contrast, Jesus as high priest offered the sacrifice of himself, which was done only once, but this one sacrifice was sufficient not only for all time to come but even for those who had died prior to the time when the sacrifice was made.

The real significance of Jesus' sacrifice rests not merely on the fact that it was made once rather than repeated at regular intervals, but that it was qualitatively different from the ones made by the Levitical priests.

SUMMARY Continued

The priests' sacrifices involved merely the blood of bulls and of goats, but Jesus' sacrifice was that of his own blood. By insisting on this difference, the author of Hebrews does not mean to infer that the priests' sacrifices offered in ancient times had no value at all, for they did mean something to the people of Israel.

His point is that the sacrifice made by Jesus has even greater value, not only for Jews but for all humans insofar as they believe in Jesus Christ. In fact, the real significance of the entire sacrificial system as set forth in the Old Testament stands in a very definite relation to the death of Jesus on the cross.

As the Hebrews writer sees it, these sacrificial offerings were but shadows that pointed toward another and greater sacrifice to be made in the future and apart from which all of the Old Testament services would have been in vain.

Pursuing the subject of Jesus' priesthood still further, the author of Hebrews gives his own explanations concerning the necessity for a new type of priesthood to replace the older one associated with the tribe of Levi. Again he regards the question of duration as important.

The office of priest was hereditary among the Levites; when a priest died, it was necessary for him to be replaced by another, whose right to the office was determined by whether he was a descendant from that particular tribe.

Because it was generally recognized that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, one that was not designated as a tribe from which the priests were chosen, it could be inferred that Jesus' right to the priesthood was based not on physical descent but by the power of an endless life.

Furthermore, we are told that Jesus' appointment to the priesthood was confirmed by an oath, whereas no such oath was used in the appointment of any of the Levitical priests.

The author finds support in his interpretation of a passage from Psalms 110, which reads, The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever.

Assuming that the psalmist was referring to Jesus, the statement gives added support to the author's conviction concerning the superiority of the Christian priesthood of Jesus.

This conviction is illustrated again in the assertion that the services performed by the Levitical priests were a part of the system referred to as the Old Covenant. In contrast, the priesthood of Jesus belongs to the New Covenant.

Mention of these two covenants is made in a reference to the passage in the Book of Jeremiah in which the prophet contrasts the idea of obedience to a set of external laws with the type of conduct that is motivated by the right desires and purposes within an individual.

The former constitutes the basis of the Old Covenant, the latter the basis for the New Covenant.

SUMMARY Continued

The author of Hebrews tells us that the imperfections of the Levitical priesthood were due, at least in part, to the attempt made to regulate conduct according to the requirements of the Mosaic Law.

The failure of this attempt was one of the reasons that made a new and different type of priesthood necessary, which, the author holds, was accomplished in the priesthood of Jesus in accordance with which Jesus became a minister of the New Covenant.

The work of Jesus the high priest is further elaborated in the author's conception of the heavenly sanctuary. The writer holds that the tabernacle made by Moses and used by the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness was a kind of miniature copy of the true tabernacle, or sanctuary, that exists in heaven.

He bases this belief on a statement found in the Book of Exodus describing the instruction that God gave to Moses concerning the construction of the tabernacle. The statement reads, Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.

Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you. The most important service performed by the Levitical high priest in the ancient tabernacle took place on the day of atonement, the time when the priest entered the most holy place and sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat of the ark in order to obtain forgiveness for the sins that people had committed throughout the year.

The Hebrews author, believing that these services were intended to foreshadow things to come, contends that the work of Jesus as high priest is now declared to be the reality that fulfills the meaning intended by the ancient services.

Following his resurrection and ascension to heaven, Jesus enters into the most holy place in the heavenly sanctuary and offers his own blood in atonement for the sins of humanity.

These references to the Old Testament in Hebrews are significant because they indicate the author's belief that in the events associated with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the stories related in the Old Testament find their true meaning, especially with reference to those portions of the Old Testament that deal with the priests and the sacrificial system of which they were a part.

The discussion concerning faith, toward the close of Hebrews, is in harmony with this same point of view. Enumerating a long list of Israel's heroes, the author maintains that it was by faith that all of these heroes' mighty works were accomplished.

His conception of faith is then identified with a belief on the heroes' part that at some future time, Christ would appear and do those things that have now been accomplished.

Hebrews holds a unique place in the literature of the New Testament. It presents interpretations of Jesus and of the entire Christian movement that are decidedly different from those found in other writings.

SUMMARY Continued

The letter's author sees Jesus as the great high priest of the Christian religion performing services analogous to the ones carried out by the Levitical priests of the Old Testament.

In other portions of the New Testament, Jesus is regarded as a prophet, but only in this letter is he considered a priest. This designation is significant: The prophets usually represented a point of view that in many respects was the very opposite of that of the priests.

The prophets were the great social reformers; the priests, whose work occupied a very prominent place in the lives of people whose religious heritage was in Judaism, attended to the offering of sacrifices and the performing of ritualistic requirements that were necessary in order to obtain forgiveness of sins.

With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the cessation of priestly activities, it seems probable that some individuals felt the need for something to be substituted for the priests' activities.

Perhaps considerations of this kind influenced the author of this letter. At any rate, he interprets Jesus' death on the cross in a manner that not only meets the requirements of Judaism but goes beyond them.

The use of the Old Testament in Hebrews has led some people to refer to the letter as the classical example of the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament. Such a reference illustrates the tendency on the part of some Christians to read their own ideas back into the literature of the ancient people of Israel.

Having arrived at certain convictions concerning the meaning and significance of the life of Jesus, they assume that these same ideas were present in the minds of those who wrote the Old Testament, for it becomes a fairly easy task to find in the Old Testament writings the very ideas for which they are looking.

The author of Hebrews apparently did in many instances in his writing, and especially in his references to the sacrificial system of the Levitical priests and in the passages that refer to the priesthood of Melchizedek.

In the Synoptic Gospels, as well as in other portions of the New Testament, reference is made to the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. In Hebrews, no reference is made to these prophecies.

Instead, the sacrificial offerings made by the priests anticipated the coming of Jesus and his death on the cross. This way of looking at the Old Testament has had an important bearing on the development of Christian doctrine and has led in some instances to the view that the Old Testament is really a Christian rather than a Jewish book.

The people for whom the Old Testament was written did not understand it, and only through Christian beliefs can its true meaning be discerned. The most extreme statement of this position is expressed in the words of one Christian writer who maintained that the Old Testament is but the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.

SUMMARY Continued

The influence of Hebrews is reflected in many of the generally accepted teachings of the Christian church, one of which is the doctrine of the blood atonement, or the idea that the blood of Jesus atones for or pays the penalty for human transgressions.

Likewise, the interpretation of the faith by which people are saved as being identical with the mere belief that Jesus died for the sins of the world has sometimes been supported by quotations from this letter.

This suggestion does not mean that the author of the letter believed that Christian faith involved no more than this belief, but rather that some of the specific things he did say have in many instances suggested this interpretation.

Aside from these peculiarities, several other ideas must be taken into account in evaluating the value of the letter as a whole. The statement The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word explains the relationship between Jesus and God the Father in a most meaningful way.

The humanity of Jesus is emphasized in the assertion that he suffered when he was tempted, and again that he was made perfect through suffering. Because the letter was addressed to Christians who were becoming discouraged and growing weak in the faith, the messages that Hebrews conveys were both comforting and reassuring.

NKJV SELECTED SCRIPTURE

- 2:1** Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.
- 2:2** For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,
- 2:3** 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,
- 2:4** God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?
- 2:9** 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.
- 3:16** For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses?
- 3:17** Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?
- 3:18** And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey?
- 3:19** So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.
- 4:1** Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.
- 4:2** For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

NKJV SCRIPTURE Continued

- 4:3** For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest, although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.
- 4:4** For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: And God rested on the seventh day from all His works
- 4:9** There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.
- 4:10** For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.
- 4:11** Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.
- 4:12** For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
- 4:13** And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.
- 6:4** For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,
- 6:5** and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,
- 6:6** if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.
- 6:10** For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.
- 6:11** And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end,
- 6:12** that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.
- 7:18** For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness,
- 7:19** for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.
- 7:28** For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.
- 8:7** For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.
- 8:8** Because finding fault with them, He says: Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah--
- 8:9** not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord.
- 8:10** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
- 8:11** None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

NKJV SCRIPTURE Continued

- 8:12** For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.
- 9:27** And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,
- 9:28** so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.
- 11:1** Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
- 11:2** For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.
- 11:3** By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.
- 11:6** But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.
- 12:14** Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:
- 12:15** looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;
- 12:28** Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.
- 12:29** For our God is a consuming fire.
- 13:5** Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."
- 13:6** So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"
- 13:7** Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.
- 13:8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.
- 13:15** Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.
- 13:16** But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

CHARACTER Definitions

MELCHIZEDEK - Melchizedek, whose name means king of righteousness, was a king of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of the Most High God. Melchizedek's sudden appearance and disappearance in the book of Genesis is somewhat mysterious.

Melchizedek and Abraham first met after Abraham's defeat of Chedorlaomer and his three allies. Melchizedek presented bread and wine to Abraham and his weary men, demonstrating friendship. He bestowed a blessing on Abraham in the name of El Elyon (God Most High) and praised God for giving Abraham a victory in battle.

Abraham presented Melchizedek with a tithe (a tenth) of all the items he had gathered. By this act Abraham indicated that he recognized Melchizedek as a priest who ranked higher spiritually than he.

CHARACTERS Continued

In Psalm 110, a messianic psalm written by David, Melchizedek is presented as a type of Christ. This theme is repeated in the book of Hebrews, where both Melchizedek and Christ are considered kings of righteousness and peace.

By citing Melchizedek and his unique priesthood as a type, the writer shows that Christ's new priesthood is superior to the old Levitical order and the priesthood of Aaron.

Some propose that Melchizedek was actually a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ, or a Christophany. This is a possible theory, given that Abraham had received such a visit before. Consider Genesis 17 where Abraham saw and spoke with the Lord (El Shaddai) in the form of a man.

Hebrews 6:20 says, [Jesus] has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. This term order would ordinarily indicate a succession of priests holding the office.

None are ever mentioned, however, in the long interval from Melchizedek to Christ, an anomaly that can be solved by assuming that Melchizedek and Christ are really the same person. Thus the order is eternally vested in Him and Him alone.

Hebrews 7:3 says that Melchizedek was without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. The question is whether the author of Hebrews means this actually or figuratively.

If the description in Hebrews is literal, then it is indeed difficult to see how it could be properly applied to anyone but the Lord Jesus Christ. No mere earthly king remains a priest forever, and no mere human is without father or mother.

If Genesis 14 describes a theophany, then God the Son came to give Abraham His blessing, appearing as the King of Righteousness, the King of Peace, and the Mediator between God and Man.

If the description of Melchizedek is figurative, then the details of having no genealogy, no beginning or ending, and a ceaseless ministry are simply statements accentuating the mysterious nature of the person who met Abraham.

In this case, the silence in the Genesis account concerning these details is purposeful and better serves to link Melchizedek with Christ. Are Melchizedek and Jesus the same person?

A case can be made either way. At the very least, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, prefiguring the Lord's ministry. But it is also possible that Abraham, after his weary battle, met and gave honor to the Lord Jesus Himself.

BIBLE TIMELINE

MAP REFERENCES

