

HEBREWS
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC COMMENTARY SERIES

by **J.K. McKee**

A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic

A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic

The Apostolic Scriptures Practical Messianic Edition

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Hebrews for the Practical Messianic

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FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

J.K. MCKEE



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2012 printing

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Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

P.O. Box 516

McKinney, Texas 75070

(407) 933-2002

www.outreachisrael.net

www.messianicapologetics.net

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
Ara: Aramaic	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ASV: American Standard Version	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	KJV: King James Version
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Lidell & Scott)
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	LXX: Septuagint
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	m. Mishnah
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	MT: Masoretic Text
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Ger: German	NIV: New International Version (1984)
GNT: Greek New Testament	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
Grk: Greek	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
Heb: Hebrew	NT: New Testament
	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world

OT: Old Testament

PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*

REB: Revised English Bible (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TEV: Today's English Version (1976)

TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)

TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)

TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*

Yid: Yiddish

YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

Various teachings have come forth in the past year (2005-2006) that have disturbed a fair number of Believers in sectors of the Messianic community as to what the message of Hebrews actually is. Some of these teachings not only have planted seeds of doubt into the minds of some people, but they have led them to conclude that the Epistle to the Hebrews is not inspired Scripture and should be removed from the Bible. I believe these teachings are based on a misunderstanding of the overall message of the text, failure to consult the Greek source text that sits behind our English translations, failure to understand the historical setting of the text, and above all is based in some kind of subjective criteria that attempts not only to denounce the inspiration of Hebrews, but ultimately to dismantle the entire Apostolic canon—leading to a discreditation of Yeshua the Messiah and His atoning work. These occurrences are quite serious, and the only way that any criticisms of Hebrews can be properly examined is in a commentary of the entire book.

The current state of the broad Messianic movement is somewhat unique, because we are a growing *and* a maturing group of people. When we come across what appear to be contradictions in the Biblical text, we are forced to ask ourselves one of two questions: (1) **Is there a problem with the text?** (2) **Is there a problem with how I am examining the text?**

Conservative theologians often ask the latter question. If God indeed inspired this writing, via the work of human beings, then certainly there cannot be any major problems with it. Readers have the responsibility to discover why there are no major problems with it, even though on the surface there may appear to be problems. Examiners have at their disposal a vast array of English Bible translations, Bible encyclopedias and dictionaries, Hebrew and Greek lexicons and grammars, and today Bible software to aid them in our understanding of the Scriptures. People really have no excuse if all they are simply doing is reading from one English Bible translation, and force-feeding what they want the Scriptures to say.

Liberal theologians often ask the former question. They presuppose that the Bible is a work entirely of human origin. The writing contained in Scripture is merely our human “response” to God, they may argue. Liberals contend that not only is Scripture full of contradictions, but texts have been manipulated, changed, or even destroyed by religious authorities attempting to maintain a position of power. While these texts are inspirational and moving, and we should learn from them as Jews or Christians, they say, they were never meant to be taken that literally. Do we really believe that Jesus was born of a “virgin”? Do we really believe that David killed “a giant”? Do we really believe in a “Red Sea Crossing” or a “Noah’s Flood”? Do we really believe that God made Adam and Eve out of dirt, when science has proven that we exist because of millions of years of evolution? This is what **liberal** theologians often argue.

One of the important premises in what is often termed “higher criticism” by liberals is that we really do not know who wrote the books of the Bible. As higher critics attack the New Testament, they will say things like, “The Gospel writers do not once identify themselves in the text; they are anonymous. Maybe Paul wrote some of his letters, but we don’t know if James was really written by the brother of Christ, or that Peter really wrote Peter. We don’t know which ‘John’ wrote John, or Revelation.” When they attack the Tanach or Old Testament, they will readily say that there have to be many, many textual changes between what was preserved before the Jews’ exile to Babylon and after it. Higher critics will say that we do not know which Scriptures are original and which are inauthentic. And concerning the Torah, the Torah is viewed by higher critics as being *entirely* a product of the post-Babylonian exile. Higher critics will readily point out that there is no stated author of Genesis in Genesis itself, indicating that it had to have been written or compiled by someone other than Moses.

Many teachers in the Messianic community today have not been exposed to liberal views concerning the composition of the Scriptures, of both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings. I believe that if some of them had, that some of the Hebrews controversy now circulating would not be present, because they would see through the higher criticism that has been used. The exact same subjective criteria that have been used to discount the message and veracity of the Epistle to the Hebrews, has been used by liberals to more easily discount the Book of Genesis. It is claimed that we do not know the author of Hebrews; the author of Genesis does not identify himself once in the text. It is claimed that Hebrews was written after the First Century; how did Abraham pursue Lot's captors as far as "Dan" (Genesis 14:14), a place that would not have been named until *after* the Israelites' conquering of the Promised Land? How did Abraham know to call God by the Divine Name YHWH (Genesis 21:23), which was not revealed until Moses saw Him before the burning bush (Exodus 3:15)? It is claimed that Hebrews does not accurately reflect the information we see in the Torah; how do we know that the Ancient Israelites did not borrow the Flood narrative from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh? These are only a handful of what could be considered "contradictions" in Genesis and the rest of the Torah that liberal theologians point out.

I hope you understand that I consider both Hebrews and Genesis to be Divinely inspired books of the Bible. I accept what they say as being true and historically accurate. But I think that it is very sad to see a few Messianics discrediting Hebrews, based on what appear to be contradictions, when there appear to be even *more serious problems* in Genesis—the veracity of which such people would never question. Thankfully, God has enabled many conservative theologians, both Jewish and Christian, to address what appear to be contradictions in Genesis. But just as the so-called contradictions in Genesis can be easily answered, so can the so-called contradictions in Hebrews be even more easily answered. Beware of those who might subjectively seek to discredit a text in the Apostolic Scriptures, claiming that it is "no good" or "uninspired," using liberal tactics—while at the same time holding to a strict fundamentalist line that the Torah has been preserved perfectly letter-by-letter and stroke-by-stroke from Mount Sinai. There is something seriously wrong with this grossly uneven scale.

Our examination of the Epistle to the Hebrews is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate some theological maturity on the part of the Messianic Bible reader. We will have to employ *all weapons* from our theological arsenal in this study, especially including:

1. Inductively approaching the Biblical text, considering Hebrews as a whole, and examining multiple English Bible versions.
2. Consultation of the Greek source text that lies behind Hebrews, not only taking into consideration the definitions of various words from scholastic lexicons, but also grammatical forms (i.e., parts of speech, verb tenses). This includes examination of possible quotes from the Greek Septuagint, and the Hebrew Tanach that lies behind the LXX.
3. An extreme consideration for the historical context that is demonstrated by the composition of Hebrews. This includes consultation with extant Jewish and Christian works such as the Mishnah, Talmud, and the writings of the Church Fathers that attest to the historicity of Hebrews, any traditions that the author refers to, and how early Hebrews was considered authoritative.
4. Consultation of critical commentaries on Hebrews that represent a fair consensus of scholastic opinion. These commentaries, even though Christian in orientation, will often explain what appear to be difficulties or contradictions in the text with ease.

Sadly, these four hermeneutical skills have not been employed by those attempting to discredit Hebrews. The Messianic expositor has the awesome responsibility of employing these proper skills. Hebrews can be a difficult text to understand if one is armed with nothing more than an English Bible translation, likely published from the perspective that Yeshua the Messiah abolished the Torah. We have the responsibility of seeing that the message of Hebrews truly is anything but this. Can we do it with ease? I believe we can do it with ease, and we can also learn much from what the author of Hebrews is trying to tell his ancient readers

about their spiritual condition. As we examine the text of Hebrews, and the author's message for both his original audience, you are going to see how nonsensical it is to throw Hebrews out of the Bible. Hebrews is probably one of the most pro-Torah texts in the entire New Testament, when understood properly and exegeted responsibly. It is inspiring to us all to consider the superior nature of Yeshua's sacrifice and atonement for our sin, and how high the author really considers Moses and the Tabernacle to be—**to be able to be compared to God in the flesh**. The author's message is not anti-Torah by any means, but demonstrates how incomplete the Torah is without the Messiah Yeshua. Our own faith will be entirely incomplete, if we fail to place the Messiah and what He has accomplished for sinful humanity, at the very center of who we are and how we live.

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INTRODUCTION

The text known as “Hebrews” is one of the most unique, highly spiritual, highly intellectual, multi-dimensional books in our Bible. If there is any text that the Messianic community should have a strong handle on, Hebrews should be it. It enables the expositor to employ all of the weapons of his or her hermeneutical arsenal, as Hebrews begs many questions that cannot merely be answered by simply reading the text over and over again, or for that same matter reading it over and over again in multiple English Bible versions. It requires us to examine original language texts, determine what some of the possible history necessitating its composition was, and place ourselves into the position of a First Century Jewish writer who was extremely well-educated and cultured. Perhaps most importantly, Hebrews requires us to live out the essence of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6): **to love God with our entire beings**. However, as Yeshua (Jesus) quotes the *Shema*, we are to “LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND” (Matthew 22:37; cf. Mark 12:30). When examining Hebrews, we are called into a place of worship that causes us to seek our Heavenly Father with *both* our hearts and our minds. We are forced to come to the place where the Psalmist declares, “Examine me, HASHEM, and test me; scrutinize my intellect and my heart” (Psalm 26:2, ATS).

The Epistle to the Hebrews¹ presents Believers in Yeshua with many uplifting and spiritually edifying words. Upon an individual’s first reading of the text, you should be able to notice that Hebrews uplifts Messiah Yeshua and His completed work in a very unique way. The author defines the importance of His final sacrifice, His priestly service, and the New Covenant in very eloquent and persuasive language. **Yeshua the Messiah – without any doubt – is the central focus of Hebrews.**

While our Lord and Savior in all His glory is a wonderful focus to behold, Hebrews nevertheless asks its readers a very important question: **How are human beings to approach the Supreme Creator?** We discover that the author compares his audience to the rebellious generation of Israelites in the wilderness, who saw the actual presence of God in the Tabernacle and His manifestations to them. He urges them not to fall into these same mistakes, and certainly not to approach the Lord without a sense of reverence.

When examining Hebrews, students of the Bible are most certainly confronted with a variety of difficult questions to answer. We do not know, in spite of educated and well-informed speculation, who wrote Hebrews. We do not fully know who the audience was who originally received the letter, nor do we know where they were. We do not fully know the historical backdrop that necessitated the writing of this letter. But what we do know is that what Hebrews teaches us forms a substantial part of our Messianic faith. We are possibly told more about the great mystery of the Divinity and humanity of Yeshua the Messiah from Hebrews than any other book of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament). We know more about what the New Covenant actually is from Hebrews than any other text as well. And, it can definitely be said that anyone who encounters Hebrews is challenged in their spirituality, so that they might be able to grow and fully probe many of the mysteries of God.

Because we do not know for certain who wrote Hebrews, or the original audience of the letter, there can be a tendency to downplay or ignore its message among some examiners. However, A.M. Stibbs makes the important observation that “Our ignorance on such points does not, however, prevent right understanding or

¹ Please note that in spite of the common reference to Hebrews as “the Book of Hebrews,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Hebrews or the letter to the Hebrews, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

minimize the spiritual and theological value of a document which has from the first commended itself as authoritative by its own intrinsic worth.”² We are called to take many issues on faith. Yeshua said in John 20:29, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed.” The biggest thing that Believers often take for granted is believing in the existence and eternal power of God. Yet, we believe that God controls the universe with great precision and skill, and keeps Planet Earth the right distance away from *and* close to the sun. We believe that God controls the atoms and cells in our bodies so that we do not “fall apart.” When we examine a text of Scripture like Hebrews, we do have to make some assumptions, and do our best to reconstruct what we believe the setting was that necessitated its composition, and then interpret what the text meant for its original audience.

It is an absolute fact that in the Christian world the Epistle to the Hebrews is overlooked by far too many people. Lloyd J. Ogilvie writes, “Over the years, my conversations with pastors and teachers about their expository communication of the New Testament has revealed that the Epistle to the Hebrews has been overlooked. It is one of the least appreciated and utilized books of the New Testament for comprehensive, thematic, or verse-by-verse study and preaching.”³ Much of the Messianic community today, sadly, is actually not that far behind. While the Messianic movement has probably not overlooked Hebrews for the same reasons that much of the evangelical Church has, Messianics who are pro-Torah often have difficulty reconciling what they believe to be anti-Torah statements by the author of Hebrews. Thus, while Hebrews may not be discounted as invalid instruction, sometimes it is not always given a high priority. In a faith community where we are supposed to be quite able to “bridge the gap” between the Tanach (Old Testament) and Apostolic Writings (New Testament), this is a problem—especially given the great richness of Hebrews and its clear reliance on the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets.

The fact that Hebrews is overlooked by far too many people is evidenced in how few know what is actually being communicated by its author. Christian ministers, who often do not take into consideration Jewish resources when interpreting Scripture, often struggle with having to interpret Hebrews and how the Apostolic writers apply texts from the Tanach. Furthermore, an additional struggle ensues for many readers because we do not live in a society that practices animal sacrifice, and it is difficult for many people to place themselves in the life setting of someone from the First Century. Christian ministers who attempt to preach or exposit from Hebrews often have to fight an uphill battle, in a Christian Church today that can tend to focus more on social justice than on practical holiness. Obviously, the need for a sound, Messianic examination of Hebrews, that does take into consideration the Jewish background of the text, and the presumed historical framework from which it was written, is quite important.

The Epistle to the Hebrews has some major themes that have affected theologians’ opinions about the Bible, and perhaps more importantly, the results of Yeshua coming to die for sinners. The overwhelming theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the superiority of Yeshua’s sacrifice and blood atonement over the animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood. Yeshua’s atoning work for humankind is permanent, compared to animal sacrifices that at best could only provide a temporary covering for sin. The author of Hebrews writes, “He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises” (8:6). The ministry of the New Covenant initiated by Yeshua’s blood is better than the ministry of the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:7-9), which demanded death for those who violated the Torah’s capital code, because Yeshua’s blood covers our sin and such capital penalties were absorbed by His sacrifice (cf. Colossians 2:14). Yeshua’s sacrifice on the tree at Golgotha (Calvary), and His initiation of a Heavenly, Melchizedekian priesthood, is superior to the limited, although highly valued, Earthly priesthood of Levi. However, in spite of these important truths, Hebrews is often interpreted through the theological lens of the “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant,” as opposed to the *two priesthoods* of Levi and Melchizedek. Many do not understand that the New Covenant is prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34, and that it includes the explicit promise of God to write His Torah or Law onto the hearts of His people.

² A.M. Stibbs, “Hebrews,” in D. Guthrie., et. al., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1191.

³ Lloyd J. Ogilvie, “Editor’s Preface,” in Louis H. Evans, Jr., *The Preacher’s Commentary: Hebrews*, Vol 33 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 9.

One of the major issues of interpreting any Biblical text is trying to remember the text as it was originally written. This is especially true of the Epistle to the Hebrews. There is much that anyone can gain from a simple reading of the text, and careful prayer and meditation on it. Indeed, these factors are absolutely imperative to gain the proper understanding of what our author is trying to convey. However, no matter how much the Holy Spirit is blessing us via our personal reflection, we still have to develop definitive interpretations of the text. Donald Guthrie makes the important observation, “What is most important for the commentator to discover is the present message and relevance of the letter, but he can only do this when he has investigated the historical setting.”⁴ How many of us fail to do this in our reading of Scripture—yet still think that it is “okay”?

Once we can determine with some accuracy what a text actually meant for its original audience, then we will be prepared to interpret and apply it in a modern setting. The biggest mistake that many Bible readers make is reading one’s modern life circumstances and prejudices, immediately into an ancient text. This is especially true of Hebrews, where we have to reconstruct many more things than we would when compared to texts like the Gospels, the Book of Acts, or the Pauline letters. As Messianic Believers, when we do this we have the awesome opportunity of incorporating many of the Jewish resources available at our disposal, that give great depth and character to the actions and traditions of Yeshua and the Apostles. Yet at the same time, in a developing Messianic movement, we also have to take responsibility for some of the teachings circulating in our midst. In our examination of Hebrews, in particular, it will be necessary to discount some urban myths that have been allowed to perpetuate in Messianic circles—things that are assumed to be, but are not true. Our goal needs to be to have as full and as practical a view of Hebrews as possible, one that properly weighs the value of exegesis, history, and incorporated tradition, with how Messianic Believers can live out the message of Hebrews in a Twenty-First Century world.

WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS?

One of the controversies surrounding the Epistle to the Hebrews is that the authorship of the text may be ultimately regarded as anonymous. The Eastern Church held to a tradition that **the Apostle Paul** wrote Hebrews, based on the testimony of Clement of Alexandria from the late Second Century. The Fourth Century historian Eusebius records this tradition as follows: “The epistle to the Hebrews he asserted was written by Paul to the Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue, but it was carefully translated by Luke and published among the Greeks since one finds the same character of style and of phraseology in the epistle as in Acts” (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.2).⁵ Challenges to this view are the facts that Hebrews does not reflect the same writing style of Paul as demonstrated in his known epistles, Luke does not mention the composition of Hebrews in either his Gospel or Acts, and there is definitely no extant original “Hebrew text” of Hebrews to which Clement refers.

Prior to the 1600s, the text was often referred to as “the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,” and is still reflected as such today in some editions of the King James Bible. While the Apostle Paul has historically been a popular candidate for Hebrews’ authorship, it has been recognized by most scholars since the Reformation, that Paul could not be the author. Today, virtually no one in the evangelical Christian community favors Pauline authorship for Hebrews. In the text of Hebrews itself, the author identifies himself as hearing second-hand about Yeshua. He writes that the good news of salvation “was first announced by the Lord,” and “was [then] confirmed to us by those who heard him” (2:3, NIV). This disqualifies Hebrews as having been written by any of the Twelve Disciples or the Apostle Paul, who was given a revelation of Yeshua on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). It can, however, be deduced that the author was likely in the inner circle of Paul, as he attests to know Timothy (13:23). Theologically, this would account for streams of thought in the Epistle to the Hebrews that are Pauline in character, but not Pauline in composition.

Pauline authorship can also be discounted because of theological and linguistic studies that compare the writing style and vocabulary of Paul’s known letters to Hebrews. Origen of Alexandria was forced to observe

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letter to the Hebrews*, Vol 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 15.

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 204.