

Summary: This section has emphasized the parallel between Moses and Messiah, a comparison found in the later Rabbinic writings as well (*Tanhuma* Shemot 8; *Tanhuma* Tazri'a 8; *Ex. Rab* 1:26; *Ruth Rab* 5:6, c.f. *Num Rab* 11:2). We also noted that parallels exist in Qumran (Damascus Document) as well as the Targum to 1Chron 17:10–12. Thus, the concept of a “house” which is restored or rebuilt by a Messianic figure who would receive even more glory than Moses was not a foreign concept in the pre-destruction era.

In this vein, our author wants his readers to know and accept the superior position of Yeshua to Moses, not by diminishing Moses and his work, but by showing that Moses actually foreshadowed, prophesied, and gave witness to the coming Messiah Yeshua. The parallel between the two is one of the lesser (Moses) pointing to the greater (Yeshua), of a servant to the Son. The end of the exhortation, then, is to exalt the person and work of Yeshua. Finally, one's faith in Yeshua as the true Messiah is evidenced by a boldness of witness, both in word and deed, and even in the face of persecution.

**7–11 Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, ....** [vv. 8–11 are a quote from Ps 95:7–11, see below]

This section (vv. 7–11) continues the theme of the previous paragraph, namely, that perseverance is the ultimate mark of true faith. And this is especially important to affirm when it appears likely that remaining faithful to God would bring suffering or being ostracized from one's community. It seems likely that our author fears his readers might be questioning their confession of Yeshua, considering whether they could still be His disciples while retracting their belief that He was the promised Messiah. It appears that our author saw his readers as precariously perched between their open confession of faith in Yeshua as Messiah on the one hand and the pressure of non-believing Jews who were threatening to disenfranchise them unless they were willing to lower their view of Yeshua.

He therefore brings Scripture to bear upon the subject, both to comfort as well as to exhort his readers. He comforts them by showing that even the forefathers in ancient Israel faced the same challenges, indicating that the trials they were facing were not uncommon, and that they could persevere as did the faithful of bygone generations. The exhortation comes, however, in the summons not to repeat the faithless behavior of the people in the wilderness of Sinai, behavior which brought the severe discipline of God upon the nation. As far as our author is concerned, the people he addresses were, like Israel of old, at a crossroads, and the path they chose would prove the reality of their faith.

His method of introducing the quote is revealing: “just as the Holy Spirit says...” (*καθὼς λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον*). This is yet another clear statement of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, and coincides with the rabbinic dictum that true prophecy is the work of the “Spirit of prophecy,” i.e., the *Ruach HaKodesh*. It was the position of rabbinic Judaism that the “*Ruach HaKodesh* ceased out of Israel” with the death of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,<sup>1</sup> a view point that may well have been developed in order to deny any divine authority to the writings of Yeshua's Apostles. But surely no one within the Jew-

1 t.Sotah 13.2, cf. b.Yoma 9b; 48b; b.Sanhedrin 11a.

ish communities of the pre-destruction era would have argued about the divine origin of the Torah, nor of the Prophets. Here, the Psalms (the largest part of the Writings) are specifically attributed to the inspiration of the Ruach, even as Yeshua Himself attributed the character of divine inspiration to David’s words.<sup>1</sup> It is well established that by the time of the 1st Century, the Torah, Prophets, and Writings were accepted as canonized, divinely inspired Scripture and our author emphasizes this divine authority in order to strengthen his exhortation which he bases on Psalm 95:7–11 [Lxx 94:7–11].

MT	Lxx	Hebrews
<p>7 הַיּוֹם אִם־בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ: 8 אֲלֵ־תִקְשׁוּ לְבַבְכֶם כְּמֵרִיבָה כַּיּוֹם מִסָּה בַמִּדְבָּר: 9 אֲשֶׁר גָּסוּנִי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּחַנּוּנֵי גַם־רָאוּ פְעָלַי: 01 אֲרִבְּעִים שָׁנָה   אֶקְוֶה בְּדוֹר וְאֶמַּר עִם תְּעִי לִלְבָב הַ יְהוָה לֹא־יָדְעוּ דְרָכָי: 11 אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּאַפִּי אִם־ יָבֹאוּן אֶל־מְנוּחָתִי:</p>	<p>7 σήμερον, ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούσητε, 8 μὴ σκληρύνητε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς ἐν τῷ παραπικρασμῷ κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ πειρα- σμοῦ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, 9 οὐ ἐπίερασαν οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν, ἐδοκίμασαν καὶ εἶδον τὰ ἔργα μου. 10 τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη προσώ- χθισα τῇ γενεᾷ ἐκείνῃ καὶ εἶπα Ἄει πλανῶνται τῇ καρδίᾳ καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν τὰς ὁδοὺς μου, 11 ὡς ὤμοσα ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ μου εἰ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὴν κατά- παυσίν μου.</p>	<p>7 σήμερον ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούσητε, 8 μὴ σκληρύνητε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς ἐν τῷ παραπικρασμῷ κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ πειρα- σμοῦ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, 9 οὐ ἐπίερασαν οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν ἐν δοκιμασίᾳ καὶ εἶδον τὰ ἔργα μου 10 τεσσεράκοντα ἔτη· διὸ προ- σώχθισα τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ καὶ εἶπον· αἰεὶ πλανῶνται τῇ καρ- δίᾳ, αὐτοὶ δὲ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν τὰς ὁδοὺς μου, 11 ὡς ὤμοσα ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ μου εἰ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὴν κατά- παυσίν μου.</p>
<p>7 Today, if you would hear His voice, 8 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness, 9 when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. 10 For forty years I loathed that generation, and said they are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways. 11 Therefore I swore in My anger, Truly they shall not enter into My rest.</p>	<p>7 Today, if you will hear his voice, 8 harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, according to the day of ir- ritation in the wilderness: 9 where your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works. 10 Forty years was I grieved with this gener- ation, and said, They do always err in their heart, and they have not known my ways. 11 So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.</p>	<p>7 Today, if you hear His voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as when they pro- voked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, “they always go astray in their heart, and they did not know My ways”; 11 as I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter My rest.”</p>

In nearly all respects, the quote in Hebrews is directly from the Lxx, which is itself an accurate translation of the Hebrew. The only changes are minor (and

1 Cf. Matt 22:43; Mk 12:36; cp. Ac 1:16; 4:25. Also note Josephus, *Ant.* 6.8.2 – “But the Spirit of God departed from Saul, and removed to David, who upon this removal of the Divine Spirit to him, began to prophesy.”

interpretive). (1) Like the Lxx, our author uses the names supplied in the MT (מְרִיבָה, Meribah; מַסָּה, Massah) as characteristic of the situation, i.e., “contention, provoking,” and “testing.” (2) Our author inserts the word “Therefore” in v. 10, breaking the line in a different place than either the MT or Lxx. Both the MT and Lxx have “And saw My work(s). For forty years....” Our author attaches “forty years” as the time when the people “saw His work(s),” while the MT and Lxx have “forty years” as the time that God was angry with Israel (3) Thirdly, our author, most likely in an attempt to make the Psalm text all that more applicable to his readers, changes “that generation” to “this generation.” But in spite of these minor differences, the quote in Hebrews is nearly verbatim from the Lxx and accurately represents the Hebrew MT in translation.

An outline of Psalm 95 will aid us in understanding the message our author intends us to receive by his quoting from this text.

- I. **Call to Worship Adonai, vv. 1–6**
  - A. Who is God?
    1. He is our Rock
    2. He is a Great God
    3. He is a Great King
    4. He is our Maker
    5. He is our Shepherd
  - B. Who are we?
    1. We are His people
    2. We are the sheep of His pasture
  - C. What is the proper response in light of these truths? Worship Him!
- II. **Warning About Unbelief, vv. 7–11**
  - A. Listen (=Obey) – God is calling
  - B. Do not harden your heart
    1. Like the fathers in the wilderness
    2. They tested God rather than worshiping Him
    3. They erred in their hearts
    4. They did not know His ways
  - C. God’s anger comes upon such people

The Psalm is an excellent text for our author’s purposes. He shows first that the issue is one of the heart, and secondly that this has always been the case. If there is a sense in his readers’ minds that a competition exists between Moses and Yeshua, this comes from their own misunderstanding or the contrary teaching of those outside the faith. Furthermore, by introducing this Psalm our author has cast the discussion into the realm of belief versus unbelief (where the battle honestly exists) and not in pitting Moses against Yeshua. Long ago, in the days of the fathers, the issue was the same—it was and is one of faith—believing that what God says is true, and acting upon it.

The Messianic believers to whom our author appeals are not that different from their ancestors who came out of Egypt. Both had witnessed the miracles and wonders wrought by the hand of the Almighty, both had seen the enemy subdued, both had witnessed redemption, and both had come to a place where it appeared they would fall under the hand of those who were against them. By quoting this Psalm, our author places his readers at their

own Meribah—their own place of contention, and their own position of having to commit themselves in faith to the God who had delivered them. What is more, our author has clearly delineated his position: to draw back from confessing Yeshua to be the promised Messiah is equal to unbelief, the same kind of unbelief which kept the fathers from entering the promised land, the very place of rest to which God was leading them.

Furthermore, our author's choice of Psalm 95 helps him go directly to the core issue, i.e., that of a hardened heart. Our author is intent on warning his readers, who are his friends and family in the Lord, that hardness of heart can occur in small increments, evidenced in hardness toward each other, but that it inevitably leads to resisting God Himself. The Psalm is clear: to go astray in heart inevitably leads to this conclusion: "they did not know My ways." Here, in one sense, we have the *Shema* (Deut 6:4ff) woven into the argument. What does it mean to love Adonai? To walk in His ways? To keep His covenant? These are the very things that are bound up with our author's message, the themes that will continue to be expounded as the epistle unfolds.

But the conclusion of the Psalm must not be skipped over. Israel, her slavery, her redemption, her subsequent sin and rebellion, and her failure to enter the Land as a nation have much to teach us about God's method of saving sinners. The point is not whether those individuals who died in the wilderness were "saved" in the sense of "born again." Doubtlessly many were. Rather, Israel's redemption from Egypt, their being rescued through the Red Sea, receiving the covenant at Sinai, and the wilderness journey all function as a type or illustration of God's plan to save eternally those who are His. Ultimately, the salvation God has fashioned brings His chosen ones to a place of rest, where the turmoil and death brought into the world by sin is overcome and where true, eternal rest is established.

But how does the history of Israel from Egypt to Kadesh Barnea reveal important truths about God's plan of salvation? Among many things, it makes one principle clear: God does not honor or reward unbelief, nor does He tolerate it. To have rewarded Israel by bringing her into the promised land after she displayed a rebellious, wicked heart toward God, would have been to give a picture muddied beyond repair. Instead, of those men who left Egypt, only those who demonstrated faith in the face of unbelief (as did Caleb and Joshua) were allowed to enter the promised land. This story thus demonstrates the very point of our author, and the exhortation he is giving to his readers: perseverance in faith (i.e., faithfulness to God and thus to His Messiah, Yeshua) is the true mark of those who have eternal salvation and who will therefore enter into the rest purchased for them by the death and life of their Redeemer and Messiah, Yeshua.

**12–13 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.**

Having quoted Ps 95 and its mention of hardened heart as they grumbled against God and Moses, our author now exhorts his readers (including us) to be on the alert lest a similar hardness of heart befall them. Apparently he thought it a real possibility that some of them could, like their fathers of old, fail to enter into the rest secured through saving faith because of an "evil, unbelieving

heart.” The word for “evil” here is *πονηρός* (*poneros*), a word that can be applied both to the physical as well as the non-physical realm. Physically, it means to “be sick, ill, in poor condition” or “spoiled, worthless.” In a non-physical sense, the meaning is “degenerate, wicked, evil, base” and generally denotes that which is morally or ethically wrong, being ungodly and contrary to the standards of righteousness revealed by God.

But in our text, this wickedness is further defined by the word “unbelieving” (*ἀπιστία*, *apistia*), “a wicked, unbelieving heart.” The term “unbelieving” in the Greek is simply the word for “believe” with the alpha-privative attached, which functions like our English prefix “un” on the word “unbelief.” This wickedness, then, is characterized as a failure to believe what God has said and to adopt a contrary way of thought and action. In fact, this is the core characteristic of all sin: a refusal to accept as true what God has said, believing falsehood instead, which results in living contrary to God’s will.

How is such a wicked, unbelieving heart recognized? The next phrase tells us: “in falling away from the living God” (*ἐν τῷ ἀποστῆναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζώντος*). The Greek text here is revealing. Literally, it could be translated “in having apostasized from the living God.” This word “apostasized” is found only here in the Book of Hebrews. In the other places where it occurs in the Apostolic Scriptures,<sup>1</sup> it has the basic sense of “leave,” “depart,” “fail,” etc. In the parable of the sower, the seed sown on rocky soil sprouts quickly but because there are no firm roots, they soon “fall away.” Paul, in 1Tim 4:1, uses the word in a similar way as does our author.

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.... (1Tim 4:1)

Here then is the mark of an unbelieving heart: in an ultimate sense, it makes itself known when it turns from God in Whom it had formerly confessed belief and denies any allegiance to Him and to His Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Some might argue one could deny that Yeshua is Messiah and still confess the God of Israel to be their God. But, of course, our author would not agree, nor would Yeshua or His Apostles! To deny Yeshua is to deny the Father Who sent Him.<sup>3</sup> And this may be at the heart of our author’s exhortation: the strong emphasis throughout this epistle upon the divine nature of Yeshua and His equality with the Father in terms of authority and power, strongly suggests that some within the community to which this epistle is addressed may have been hedging toward diminishing the place of Yeshua in order to regain acceptance in the wider Jewish community that had rejected Yeshua.

But our author’s position is clear: failure to enter into God’s rest is the result of turning away from Yeshua, and this is nothing less than “falling away from the living God.”

Referring to God as the “living God” (*θεοῦ ζώντος*) is a favorite of our author,<sup>4</sup> no doubt because it is not uncommonly used in the Tanach to distin-

1 Luke 2:37; 4:13; 8:13; 13:27; Acts 5:37–38; 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2Cor 12:8; 1Tim 4:1; 2Tim 2:19.

2 Cp. Matt 12:43–45; 2Pt 2:15f; 1Jn 2:19.

3 E.g., Jn 3:36; 8:42; 15:23.

4 Cf. 9:14; 10:31; 12:22.

guish sharply between the one true God and the idol gods of the nations. In similar fashion, Paul and Barnabas, while exposing the idolatrous superstition of the people of Lystra, exhort them to “turn from these vain things to a living God Who made the heavens, the earth, and sea, and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15). Thus, in using the phrase “living God” in our current text, our author is reminding his readers that they have only two alternatives: to worship the God of Israel through accepting His Son, Yeshua, or to give way to the worship of idols, which are actually demons. There is only one Living God, and Yeshua is His Messiah.

The issue of “apostasy” (falling away) is central to this passage. “Apostasy” may be defined as “a resolve of unbelief by one who formerly confessed to believe to the extent that repentance is no longer possible.” The Greek word (*ἀποστασία, apostasia*) from which the English “apostasy” is derived, has as a root or base meaning “to abandon one’s post or station in life.” It is used in the Lxx (Josh 22:22) of “revolt against the Lord.” In the Apostolic era the word group was used primarily of “passing over to unbelief” with the added sense of “rebellion” or “abandonment.”

The Epistle of Hebrews will return to this issue of apostasy again and again (cf. 4:1; 6:6; 10:25-27; 12:15). If we look at each of these passages in order to gain an overall perspective on the subject of “apostasy,” we may note the following contrasts:

Lost	Saved
unbelief	faith
disobedience	hearing; obedience
neglect	steadfastness
apostasy—turning away	entering into life
hardening	reception – salvation

*But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,”* – Verse 12 opened with the imperative “See to it, brethren...,” emphasizing that it was the responsibility of the whole community to guard against a hardened heart of unbelief settling in any one of the members. The current verse goes on to describe positive activities by which the community could guard against an unbelieving heart. These activities are summed up in one word: “exhort.”

The word “exhort” (*παρακαλέω, parakaleō*) literally means “to call along side,” as in the Greek word *paraklete*, often translated “comforter” when referring to the Ruach HaKodesh. Someone who is “called along side” comes to “encourage,” to “help,” and to “strengthen.” This same word group is also used in 10:25; 13:19, 22. This command, “to exhort,” must be carried out by each member of the body, not just a few, for the text reads “but exhort each other.” It is the responsibility of each member within the believing community to be on guard against a heart of unbelief and to encourage and help others within the community not to give into a hardened heart.

Such guarding through exhortation is to be done “while it is still called ‘today,’” a reference to the previous quote from Psalm 95. In the wilderness there came a time when God called the people to act in faith. This “time of decision” is labeled “today” by the Psalmist, for a decision of this import cannot be put off. In the same way, our author sees the community to which he writes as

standing at the point of decision—they have come to their “today.” As such, he exhorts them to urge each other to a positive faith and confession of Yeshua.

The trap which our author sees hidden in the path of his readers is the deceitfulness of sin which inevitably hardens the heart. In fact, it is this very thing, the deceitfulness of sin, which absolutely requires the presence of and participation in *community*.

Deception is, more often than not, a matter of perspective. A single line of sight may appear to give the beholder a true picture of reality, until the object is seen from another angle. What appeared flat turns out to be round; what appeared curved ends up being straight. The same may often be true of sin. When sin finds a welcomed repose in our lives, we find very rational explanations to explain why it isn't sin, and why it is therefore “okay” for us. What's more, the longer we allow this sin to dwell within us, the more convinced we are of its rightness. As our hearts are becoming hardened (which means our hearts become convinced that what God calls sin is actually not sin after all, or to put it another way, a re-play of the serpent's question “has God said?”) our hope is that those with whom we share community will objectively see the situation and bring it convincingly to our attention. Thus, a believer existing outside of working community may well fall prey to the deceitfulness of sin, and often with dire consequences. God never intended that His children should live in isolation, but that being knit together in the body of faith, each would aid the other to mature in their faith and their service to God and His Messiah, Yeshua.

The word “hardened” is the Greek *σκληρύνω* (*sklērunō*), which means “to make stubborn” and in the passive (which we have in our text) “to be stubborn, hardened.” The Lxx uses the active form to describe God's action in hardening the heart of Pharaoh (Ex 7:3 ;9:12, etc., cf. Rom 9:18). An example of the passive usage is Ac 19:9, where those who were speaking out against “the Way” are described as “becoming hardened.” The obvious characteristic of a hardened heart is the unwillingness to listen and reason with those who are giving exhortations to change. A hardened heart is the result of unbelief.

**14–15 For we have become partakers of Messiah, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”**

The opening “For” (*γάρ*, *gar*) connects our verse with the previous verses and the admonition of v. 12 to guard against apostasy, *for* perseverance is that which marks our true interest in Messiah and His work.

The author of Hebrews has already voiced his assurance that those to whom he is writing are “partakers of a heavenly calling” (3:1). In v. 14, he returns to this same theme, now using the phrase “partakers of Messiah”<sup>1</sup> as offering a further explanation of “partakers of a heavenly calling.” The import is obvious: being partakers of a heavenly calling means to be in union with the Messiah, which likewise means to be united with Him in His death,

1 The same word, *μέτοχος* [*metochos*], “partaker” is used here as in v. 1. It will be used also in 6:4 and 12:8.

resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of the Father.<sup>1</sup> This corresponds with Paul's words in Colossians:

Therefore if you have been raised up with Messiah, keep seeking the things above, where Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Messiah in God. (Col 3:1–3)

Thus, while our author was convinced of the genuine, saving faith possessed by the recipients of his epistle, the sure proof would be their perseverance—remaining faithful to their confession of Yeshua as the risen Messiah Who has ascended to the right hand of the Father and Who now is the true High Priest Who intercedes for His people.

Indeed, the final proof of genuine faith for all believers is nothing more or less than perseverance. Thus, in John's Revelation, it is the one who overcomes<sup>2</sup> who is saved.<sup>3</sup> And here in our text we are taught that those who are truly partakers of Messiah are those whose lives are marked by perseverance in the faith.

Persevering in the faith is described here as “holding fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως μέχρι τέλους βεβαίαν κατὰσχόμεν). In this phrase we are met again with the Greek word *ὑποστάσις*, *hupostasis*, which we encountered in 1:3, there referring to the very “nature” of Messiah, i.e., the foundational character of His being. This is the primary meaning of the Greek word: “foundation, support,” and by extension “confidence, assurance.” Thus, one's confidence or assurance is expressed in what one confesses to be true, and this is the meaning in our verse: we know that have become partakers of the Messiah's work as we continue faithfully to proclaim Him as our Lord and Savior and to live in accordance with that confession.

We see again that the person of Yeshua—the very heart of the Gospel—stands as the bedrock of saving faith. True faith in every age has had the Messiah as its object. What the Apostolic message did in advancing the faith, however, was to proclaim that Yeshua, born to Miriam, was in fact the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Whereas in ages past a true believer would place his or her faith in the promised Messiah and the work He would accomplish on behalf of His people, the Apostolic message made specific the identity of this Messiah. True faith from that point on must have as its object Yeshua ben Yoseph, born of a virgin, crucified, risen, and ascended to the Father. Thus, what our author enjoins upon his readers is that they maintain the confession they had at the beginning, i.e., their confession that Yeshua was, and is, the Messiah and that salvation, i.e., being accepted as righteous before God, is possible only through Him. He must be confessed as Immanuel—God with us, even as the prophet Isaiah foretold (Is 7:14).

1 Note the Peshitta's translation: *כִּי מִיֵּשׁוּעַ אֲנִי מְשֻׁבָּח* (עַם יִיִּטְחַתֵּן אֵל מִשְׁחָה), “For we are mingled with Messiah....”

2 The Greek word John uses, which is translated as “overcome,” is *νικάω*, *nikaō*, “to conquer, be victorious.” This corresponds in concept to “persevere” in the sense of not running from the battle, nor surrendering to the enemy, but remaining valiant in faith in order to gain the victory.

3 Cf. Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7.



Moreover, attempting to diminish His unique and eternal status as the Son of God likewise makes salvation through Him an impossibility. To maintain the confession they had from the beginning of their faith in Yeshua meant that they must confession Yeshua to be one with the Father, having all authority in heaven and earth, and thus the only One by Whom salvation is possible. As Yeshua Himself proclaimed:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” (Jn 14:6)

*TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME* – Our author repeats the first verse of his previous quote from Ps 97:7–11, only now with an application to his own exhortation: “Today! Now! This message comes to you as it came to the Israelites of old.”

So the story of the wilderness rebellion comes again to the writer’s aid. Like the Israelites, themselves the symbol of redemption, it appears possible in our author’s mind that members of this Messianic community could likewise shrink back from believing what has been revealed and acting upon what they know to be true. He exhorts them to be on guard lest they turn from the truth to unbelief and deny the fullness of Yeshua’s person and work. To own Him as one of many messiahs, or to consider Him to be less than Immanuel would bar them from entering the rest which, like their forefathers, has been promised to those who persevere in faith.

The message has been sounded—the voice of God must be heeded. Here our author equates his message with that of God’s voice. His exhortations at this point come to the readers as God’s own message, and they, like the ancient nation, stand at the crossroads of decision. It was fear and rebellion which governed the choice of the nation before so that they failed to enter into the promised Land, symbolic of rest.

“Today”—once again this word links the text together. Our author presses the urgency of the moment. “Today”—the present time, now is the period in which the writer’s community of faith will evidence their “holding fast” or their rejection of Yeshua as Immanuel. He sees the deceitfulness of sin working its evil craft upon the hearts of his brothers and sisters, no doubt flourishing in the fertile ground of fear. Persecution has opened them to question the veracity of their faith and their heads are turning back, longing (as it were) for “Egypt.”

**16 For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?**

The exodus and wilderness wanderings, providing as they do such an excellent example for our author’s exhortations, become now the focus of attention. What happened there, and what lessons can be learned?

Nearly all of the modern English translations (including the NKJV) take this verse as beginning a series of questions which continues through v. 18. The older translations (Geneva, Bishops Bible, Tyndale, KJV), however, translate this verse as a statement, emphasizing that while *most* of those who left Egypt rebelled, there were some (i.e. Joshua & Caleb) who did not. Note the KJV, for example:

For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. (KJV)

The Greek, however, would indicate quite conclusively that this verse contains a question,<sup>1</sup> and we can only presume that the older translations were influenced by the Vulgate, which translates the verse as a statement rather than a question.<sup>2</sup>

The first question offered by our author to his readers relates to the identity of those who provoked God in the wilderness. Who were they? First, they were those who “had heard,”<sup>3</sup> most likely a reference to Sinai when the people heard the thundering voice of HaShem and pleaded with Moses that such a frightening experience not be repeated lest they die (Deut 5:22–27; cf. Heb 12:19). Thus, they knew that God Himself was the One Who spoke to them and gave to them the Torah, the very instrument which has as its goal the person and work of the Messiah (Rom 10:4).

Second, they were those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, those who made up the nation as a whole (i.e., “all those who came out...”). They had experienced the bitter bondage of Egypt, as well as the miraculous hand of God in rescuing them and delivering them from their bondage, setting them free.

The comparison to the original recipients of this epistle is clear. They too have witnessed the mighty hand of God in their own redemption. They have believed in Yeshua, the incarnate One, and trusted that His death and miraculous resurrection and ascension are for their own eternal salvation. Some may well have witnessed the mighty works done by His hand, the miracles and wonders which He performed and by these confirmed that He was the Servant of God sent to proclaim the truth of God. How could they deny what they had themselves received by incontrovertible testimony?

### 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies<sup>4</sup> fell in the wilderness?

The second question in this series focuses upon God’s righteous anger toward His wayward people: “And with whom was He angry for forty years”? The period of forty years is often symbolic of a period of divine long-suffering or of a period of testing which culminates in judgment for the unrepentant.<sup>5</sup> The provocation of God by their lack of faith has issued in His anger upon them. They wondered in the wilderness for forty years, awaiting that generation’s demise. It is not that every individual of the nation participated in the rebellion: Moses is an obvious exception, as were Caleb and Joshua. Still, while

1 The opening τίνας (nom. m.pl. of τίς) is an interrogative, thus initiating a question: “Who?”, “Which (one)?”, “What?”

2 quidam enim audientes exacerbaverunt sed non universi qui profecti sunt ab Aegypto per Mosen – “For some who heard did provoke: but not all that came out of Egypt by Moses.”

3 ἀκούσαντες, aor. participle.

4 The Greek has κῶλον which is literally “corpse,” thus giving an even more dreadful description: “whose corpses fell in the wilderness.” See Owen, *Hebrews*, 2.179–81.

5 E.g., Gen 7:4, 17; Deut 2:7;8:2; Josh 14:10; Neh 9:21; Amos 2:10; Jonah 3:4; Matt 4:2; Ac 1:3; 7:30, 36.

Israel as a corporate unity stands symbolically as God's people, so Israel as a whole failed to receive God's reward, for He rewards obedience and punishes disobedience.

Having asked the second question, our author supplies the answer: "Was it not with all those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?" God was not angry with them over some capricious, peripheral preference. God's wrath came as a result of their sin, their sin of unbelief.

It is clear that God does not reward unbelief. Rather, unbelief brings His discipline or punishment. The wages of their sin was death, not only physical death, but (by way of metaphor) spiritual as well, for they failed to enter into the rest God had promised them—the failed to possess their inheritance in the Land. Surely there were those who died in the wilderness who had repented of their unbelief and therefore received God's forgiveness.

But the lesson of the wilderness wanderings is what our author intends for us to understand: true rest comes through persevering in faith by which the destination is eventually reached. We may at times feel as though we are traveling through the desert, and we may even wonder why God appears to be unconcerned about our needs. But if we are to enter the promised Land of rest, we must not waver in unbelief but we must continue strong in faith, confessing what we know to be true and living in the reality of that truth.

**18–19 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.**

Here we have the final question in the triad: "To whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest?" The answer is given in the form of a rhetorical question: "...if not to those who were disobedient?" (εἰ μὴ τοῖς ἀπειθήσασιν). The words used here have brought the issue into clearer focus.

The demise of those who perished in the wilderness began with *unbelief* (v. 12), characterized by *hardened hearts* (v. 13), which act in *disobedience* (v. 18), now seen as the essence of *unbelief* (v. 19). The point our writer is making is obvious: watch out for unbelief! It will inevitably lead to sinful actions. Bad doctrine is the seed that brings forth disobedience.

We likewise see in this pericope the full circle of unbelief: once a person has entertained unbelief and allows it to take residence in one's life, it brings about a hardening of heart. This is a metaphor for an unwillingness to listen—to reconsider and make an honest appraisal of the facts being presented. The hardened heart is moved by emotion rather than truth and therefore refused to be confronted or even encouraged to rethink that which has been accepted. The hardened heart, then, leads to disobedience. Once the truth is rejected, there remains no reason to live in accordance with that truth, so that sin is no longer considered to be sin. This, in turn, leads to further unbelief and the cycle starts over.

What are the means by which we as believers can safeguard ourselves against the deceitfulness of sin and the destruction it brings? The first safeguard is to practice keeping short accounts with God. Lingering sin in one's life is an open door to unbelief. What is more, harboring bitterness (which is the withholding of forgiveness) gives way to the devil and therefore is an open door to being deceived by the father of lies. Thus, we must make it our regular practice to seek God's forgiveness for our sin as well as the forgive-

ness of those who may have been touched by our sin. A soft heart toward God is ready to ask forgiveness. It is the hardened heart that sees no need to make things right with God and one's fellowman.

Second, we must make meditating upon the Scriptures and spending time in prayer a daily reality. Reading and mediating upon the word of God is the necessary food for the soul for everyone who intends to walk in the footsteps of the Messiah. Moreover, in prayer we commune with the Almighty through His Ruach. Prayer that incorporates both praise and request, the pouring out of one's heart in true thanksgiving, whether in times of hardship or comfort, builds strong faith to trust God for the present and the future.

Third is the importance of community. As our author emphasized in v. 13, we must take seriously the need to encourage one another in the sense of building each other up so that together we will not be turned to the left or the right but will walk, following in the footsteps of our Messiah, Yeshua. It is common, when someone is struggling in their faith, to feel that attendance at community functions is less and less necessary. This is the deceitfulness of sin, that the one who labors under a heart that is becoming hardened not only is unaware of the hardening, but often denies it when confronted. Learning to be challenged, exhorted, and encouraged within one's own community of faith is therefore vitally important in order to foster an environment where the truth can be espoused and where one who is gently yet firmly corrected will receive that correction and be spared the hardness of heart that might otherwise result.

But if we are to take our cue from the wilderness wanderings of Israel, as our author has done, then we will see where the downward spiral begins, which ends in unbelief. For the nation of Israel, it began with a refusal to accept what God had said. And this is where it begins for all who fail to enter into the rest God has provided: a refusal to believe that what God has said is true. This remains the challenge before us today as well. Perhaps as never before, the battle to dismiss the Bible is being waged. Many, not only among the liberal theologians but also among those who consider themselves "evangelicals," the Bible is being presented merely as ancient literature containing myth, legend, wisdom sayings, and pseudo-history. Of course some want to retain some of the Bible as having divine sanction, but whenever its inspired words go contrary to current social and cultural norms, they find a convenient way to marginalize its timeless words by contextualizing its message not to be applicable to our modern world.

But the message of our author is that the word of God is alive and active, and that we therefore do well to pay close attention to it, to take it heart, to let the word of God be the source of our understanding and hope, and the basis for our faith and practice.