

Old Testament Background to Hebrews

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Introduction

Comparisons using the term “better” gain their value from the quality of the entity with which something is compared. If the quality of the first is low the value of the second is not necessarily very high. When you ask a friend about a certain experience they had and they reply, “It was better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick,” you don’t necessarily draw the conclusion that the experience in question was a roaring success or brought inexpressible joy.

Comparisons using the term “better” gain their value from the quality of the entity with which something is compared. If the quality of the first is low the value of the second is not necessarily very high. On the other hand if the quality of the first is high the value of the second must be high – in fact higher. Should your friend, on being quizzed on the value of his or her recent experience replies, “It was better than all your birthdays wrapped into one,” you’d be forgiven for concluding that he (or she) in fact had had a fairly good time, because comparisons using the term “better” gain their value from the quality of the entity with which something is compared.

The writer to the Hebrews tells his readers that a number of things – that a number of significant things to do with Christ and the gospel - are better¹ than their Old Testament precursors, their Old Testament foreshadowings. If in our view these entities with which Christ and the gospel are compared are of low value – if Old Testament revelation and religion are of low value – then to say that Christ and the gospel are better than these says little about the quality of the Christian message. Perhaps this can be our tendency as we stand on this side of the cross – to denigrate or devalue Old Testament religion. Yet on the other hand, if Old Testament revelation and religion are to be highly esteemed then the “better” of Hebrews is much more significant. Then Christ and his gospel are really things to get excited about, and to be committed to whatever the temptation might be to do otherwise.

¹ I.e. κρείσσω (Heb. 1:4; 7:19, 22; 8:6 [2x]; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 40.)

So my task is to do something that is, I suspect, a bit unusual in Christian circles – at least in some Christian circles. My task is to “talk up” Old Testament religion. I am going to tell you how great Old Testament religion was and the benefits that those under it enjoyed. And why do this? This is not to detract from the value of Christ and the gospel. Rather it is so that, when we hear the writer to the Hebrews say “better”, we’ll know that it means something really significant - that the gospel of Christ is not just better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick, not even better than all your birthdays wrapped into one, but better than the magnificent God-given, angel-revealing, prophet-guided, priestly and tabernacle-centred religion of the Old Testament and than the old covenant heroes of faith. If Christ and the gospel are better than all that they’re pretty good!

Now there are five aspects of Old Testament religion, at least five, that are particularly significant for the message of the book of Hebrews. The first are angels. The writer reminds us that, “[i]n speaking of the angels he (i.e. God) says, “He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.”² (1:7) Again he tells us, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (1:14) Then there is Moses. Speaking of Christ the writer says, “He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house.” (3:2) Next there is Aaron and the high priesthood. “No one takes this honour (of the high priesthood) upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.” (5:4) Then there is the old covenant. “Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.” (9:1) Finally there are the old covenant heroes of faith of whom he says, “These were all commended for their faith...” (11:39)

These five, then, are of primary interest to the writer to the Hebrews. Let’s briefly look at each from an Old Testament perspective to see how positive, commendable, valuable each was. Then perhaps we can add two more also mentioned in Hebrews – and see how impressive they are as well.

Yes, for the sake of Christ and the gospel, let us talk up Old Testament religion.

² Scripture quotes are from the NIV.

1. Angels

Old Testament religion was a religion that involved angels. Angels were messengers. This is the meaning of the Hebrew word for angels.³ They were messengers of God – and, unsurprisingly, might bring a message from God to his people. That’s not your everyday occurrence. That’s something fairly impressive. Their message might be rebuke to the rebellious Israelites as in the days of the judges. “You have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them⁴ out before you...” (Jud. 2:2b-3a) It might be giving direction, as to the prophet Elijah. “Go up and meet the messengers of the kings of Samaria...” (2 Kgs 1:3) An angel can give interpretation of prophetic visions, as with Zechariah. The prophet repeatedly asks of various visionary entities like the coloured horses (1:9), the four craftsmen (1:19) or the olive branches beside the golden lamp stand (4:4, 11, 12), “What are these?”⁵ and is answered by an interpreting angel. So angels were messengers who brought messages from God. This is impressive.

As well angels could take human form as in their visitation of Lot in Sodom. There we see also that angels could exercise unusual powers. “They struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.” (Gen. 19:11) Later they appear as a protective force for Jacob as he returns from Padan Aram and from his rapacious but divinely-frustrated father-in-law and prepares to meet a potentially even more threatening Esau. Here we read: “When Jacob saw them⁶ he said ‘This is the camp of God.’ So he named that place Mahanaim.” (i.e. “two camps”; Gen. 32:2) As protectors they are also remembered in Israel’s worship: “If you make the Most High your dwelling... he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your feet against a stone.” (Psa. 91:9a, 11-12) Or again: “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him and He delivers them.” (Psa. 34:7)

³ מַלְאָךְ in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, reprint 1972), 521.

⁴ I.e. the nations.

⁵ Cf. 5:6; 6:4.

⁶ I.e. the angels of God (v. 1).

Since angels care for God's people it is not surprising that it is an angel who wakens and feeds the Jezebel-hunted and fleeing Elijah. We remember that he'd had enough. We remember that he prayed to die – and then fell asleep. And we read, “All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ After he lay down again the angel came back a second time. ‘Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.” (1 Kgs 19:5b, 7b-8)

That's angelic ministry, and it is impressive.

But although we usually see angels supporting God's people they might also act against them. We remember the angelic devastation of 70,000 in Israel, brought about when David numbered the people. (2 Sam. 24:15) So angels were messengers of God for the comfort of God's people, but, when necessary, also for their chastisement. They interacted powerfully with God's people, often for their protection and care, but at times in rebuke and judgment. In Old Testament religion there were angels – and their ministering for God was impressive.

Now in addition the writer to the Hebrews connects angels with the giving of the law. (Heb. 2:2) This is not explicit in the Hebrew Old Testament. What can we say about this? At least the Hebrew Bible does suggest that angelic chariotry accompanied God at Sinai. In Psalm 68 we read, “The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands. The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.” (v. 17) Then the LXX at Deuteronomy 33:2 makes the connection even more explicit. “The Lord has come from Sinai... on his right hand were his angels with Him.” In addition it is clear from early Jewish literature that it was believed that angels had a part in the giving of the law,⁷ and it appears that it is to this belief that writer to the Hebrews makes reference. However we explain the writer's reference to angels in 2:2, it is clear that angels, those powerful active messengers of God were important for the writer to the Hebrews.

Considering what the Old Testament says about them the question might be raised, who could be better than the angels and their ministry? It is a question the writer to the Hebrews addresses – and answers decisively. “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make

⁷ E.g. *Book of Jubilees* 1:27; 2:1; cf. Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19.

your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ ” (Heb. 1:13) Christ and his gospel are better than the angels.

2. Moses

It is obvious that Moses was extremely significant for Old Testament religion. From the first mention of him it is apparent that he is going to be special. Not many biblical characters have their early childhood mentioned, but Moses does. (Exod. 2:1-10) We read of his royal upbringing, his evident identification with God’s oppressed people, his flight to Midian and his marriage to a Midianite priest’s daughter. (vv. 11-22) We get this background material because Moses is significant for Old Testament religion.

Yet Moses is not significant because he is a nationalistic hero. Moses is significant because of his relationship with and use by the LORD, Yahweh, the God of Old Testament religion. For it is Moses who experiences the theophany of the burning bush.

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. (3:4-6)

It is Moses to whom the special character of God, encapsulated in the title I AM, is first revealed. “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ This is what you are to say to the Israelites. ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” ” (3:14) It is Moses, an unwilling but compelled Moses, who is then commissioned to confront the leader of the Egyptian super power with Yahweh’s demand, “Let my people go...” (5:1 cf. 3:10)

It is Moses, as Yahweh’s instrument who says the word, stretches out staff or hand, or throws the furnace ash into the air and brings on the hard-hearted Pharaoh and his people blood, frogs, gnats and flies, livestock plague, hail, locust and darkness that could be felt. It is Moses who finally pronounced:

This is what Yahweh says: “About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at the hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.” (11:5)

Yes Moses, as Yahweh’s servant, was extremely, foundationally significant for Israel’s religion. Extremely significant, for it is through Moses that the annual deliverance commemorating feast of the Passover is instituted. (12:1-28) Extremely significant, for it is Moses who leads the fleeing Israelites through the Sea of Reeds as on dry land only for them to see the pursuing Egyptian forces engulfed by the returning flood, as we read: “And when the Israelites saw the great power Yahweh displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared Yahweh and put their trust in him – and in Moses his servant.” (14:31)

Moses is extremely significant for Israel’s religion, for Old Testament revealed religion, for it is he who, at Mt Sinai, will be mediator of the covenant there established – the one who conveys God’s laws to his people. (24:3) It is Moses who will oversee the construction of the Tabernacle (chs 25-31, 35-40) – the earthly palace of the heavenly king.⁸ It is Moses who will intercede for God’s rebellious people both at Sinai (31:31-32) and at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14:13-19) – and whose saving intercession is celebrated in Psalm 106.

So he said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him
to keep his wrath from destroying them. (v. 23)

Yes, it was Moses who stood in the breach – and Israel was preserved.

Furthermore it is Moses who is a prophet like no other. He is the paradigm prophet. To Moses Yahweh said, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers...” (Deut. 18:18) “A prophet like you.” And

⁸ “When Israel was encamped during the wilderness wanderings, the tabernacle was set up in the middle of the camp. Each tribe had its location surrounding it. The center of the camp, according to ancient Near Eastern tradition, was the place for the king’s tent. Since God was king of Israel, his tent was in the center.” (Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Leicester: Apollos, 1995], 69)

when Moses' jealous siblings, Aaron and Miriam, ask, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? ... Hasn't he also spoken through us?" the LORD firmly confirms Moses' preeminent position.

When a prophet of the LORD is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.
But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.
With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses? (Num. 12:2, 6-8)

We could also speak of water from the rock (Exod. 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13), the bronze serpent (Num. 21:4-9), the defeat of Sihon and Og (Num. 21:21-35) and the renewal of the covenant in the plains of Moab as recorded in Deuteronomy.

Yes, Moses is a big man in the Old Testament – in the life, history and religion of God's people. When you think of it, aren't Moses and his ministry awesome? Magnificent? Overwhelming? So the question might be raised, legitimately – who could top Moses and his ministry? Yet we hear the writer to the Hebrews again: "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house ... But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house." (Heb. 3:5, 6) Moses, a *servant in*, is compared with Christ, a *son over* - a comparison not to denigrate Moses, but to exalt Christ. Christ and his gospel are better than Moses.

3. Aaron

Then there is Aaron. What an important person in Old Testament religion was Aaron, the first high priest and the God appointed atonement maker. What a necessary person in Old Testament religion was the high priest as atonement maker. For there was no doubt that God's people would sin, would not keep the covenant perfectly, that this sin would damage the relationship between them and God, and that it would need to be dealt with, to be atoned for, so that harmony might be restored.

That Aaron had a high office and a significant role is signaled by the rich and elaborate garments of the high priesthood – a breast piece, an ephod or sleeveless apron-like garment, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash (Exod. 28:4) made of gold and blue, purple and scarlet yarn and of fine twisted linen (Exod. 26:6, 15), chains to hold the breast-piece to the ephod were to be of gold. (vv.14, 22) Also there were to be five onyx stones engraved with the names of six of the tribes on each, attached to the ephod shoulder straps with gold settings. In addition twelve precious stones, each engraved with a name of one of the tribes, were attached to the breast piece. Furthermore artificial pomegranates, alternating with gold bells were to decorate the hem of his robe. A plate of pure gold inscribed with the words “Holy to the LORD” was to be attached to his turban. That was impressive. As Wenham comments: “In a religion the principal doctrine of which was the holiness of God, the high priest, who mediated atonement between God and man, was an extremely important person. His glorious clothing symbolized the significance of his office.”⁹ This is the thrust of the LORD’s instruction to Moses: “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honour.” (Exod. 28:2)

Yet we shouldn’t think that all this finery was mere decoration. One does not approach an earthly monarch unannounced how much less the heavenly king. So we read: “The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the LORD and when he comes out, so that he will not die.” (Exod. 28:35) In addition Aaron, and the later high priests, represented the Israelites before God. So we read that the golden turban-plate inscribed with *Holy to the LORD* “will be on Aaron’s forehead continually so they will be acceptable to the LORD.” (Ex 28:38b) As well, because the names of the tribes in precious stones were doubly present on the high priest’s vestments, God’s people as his covenant people were brought before him in this way too whenever the high priest entered the Holy Place of the Tabernacle, thus, as it were, to remind Yahweh that these people were his.

So the high priest, the atonement maker, with Aaron the first in that line, was a very important person in Old Testament religion. He was so important that, when he died, those guilty of manslaughter went free and safe from the cities of refuge to which they had fled for safety from the avenger of blood, (Num 35:25, 28) This suggests that the death of the high

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 139.

priest was to be understood as an atonement for the offence of manslaughter.¹⁰

So some might ask of Aaron and the high priests: Who could be more valuable than they were, with their important role? Here also the writer to the Hebrews has a response. Pointing to Christ he says:

Such a high priest meets our need-- one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. (Heb. 7:26-28)

Christ and his gospel are better than Aaron and the high priesthood.

4. The Old Covenant

The writer to the Hebrews is also interested in the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant.

Many things about the old covenant could be discussed – the moral law as it is summarized in the ten commandments, the moral aspects of the many specific laws for Israel’s social life, the laws concerning that which was clean and that which was unclean, the food laws, the health regulations and so on. But the writer to the Hebrews focuses on the sacrificial system. And we might say what a sacrificial system! Even though there is much that is not clear, we do have presented in the old covenant five main offerings for dealing with sin whether in general or specific, providing a means of fellowship with God, for consecration to God, for giving thanks or fulfilling vows to God; the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering. Furthermore, the bulk of these sacrifices involved the shedding of blood. “For the life of the creature is in the blood,” says God, “and I have given it to you to make atonement for one’s life.” (Lev. 17:11)

¹⁰ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 422.

We note here, first, that the blood to make atonement was given by God. The way of being right with God then ultimately was not dependant on humanity or human devising but on God. Salvation is by grace alone!

Second, with respect to the use of animals we can have the idea that biblically animals are in a category far removed from humans. In fact they are not presented this way in the Bible. In Genesis 2:7 we read that Adam is a נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה or a “living being” as the NIV translates Then in v. 19 every animal is also a נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה or a “living creature”, as the NIV inconsistently translates. Both man and animal are נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: Animals are close to human beings. It is consistent with this view of animals that God, in refraining from destroying Nineveh, shows concern not only for the humans but also the many cattle. (Jon. 4:11) So while animals are less than human beings, there is a genuine affinity between the two. This gives animals a certain suitability to represent humans in the sacrificial system as they do.

We can see many other principles in this Old Testament sacrificial system as well. The best is for God, since usually the animals were to be male and without blemish. There is a gradation of sacrifices so that the sin even of the poorest could be dealt with. “If however, he cannot afford two doves or two young pigeons, he is to bring an offering for his sin a tenth of an ephah (just over two litres) of fine flour for a sin offering.” (Lev. 5:11) Also the hands of the offerer were to be pressed on the head of the sacrificial animal so that it took his place – the principle of substitution. All this was inherent in the old covenant sacrificial system.

Yet the most important ritual of the sacrificial system, including the high priest, was the Day of Atonement ceremonies. These were not irrelevant for the book of Hebrews either.

Wenham explains the significance of the Day of Atonement ritual thus:

The main purpose of the day of atonement ceremonies is to cleanse the sanctuary from the pollutions introduced into it by unclean worshippers... Without a purpose such as this there would have been little point in the high priest putting his life at risk by entering the holy of holies. The aim of these rituals is to make possible God’s continued presence among his people.¹¹

¹¹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 228.

That which makes possible the continued presence of God among his people has to be important.

The Day of Atonement ceremony is described in Leviticus 16. Here is not the place to go through all the details but rather to focus on some points significant for Hebrews.¹² With respect to the high priest: first, he is not to enter the holy of holies at times of his own choosing; if he does, he will die. (v. 2) Second, when he does enter the holy of holies on that one day of the year it must be with the blood of a sin offering and the blood of a burnt offering – “to make atonement for himself and his household” (v. 11). Third, when he does enter it must be with smoking incense to cloud the mercy seat – “the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die.” (v. 13)

Yes, the high priest was the God-appointed atonement maker. Yet even for him, less than perfect as he also was, entering into the presence of a holy God was no light or easy matter. So what about the ordinary Israelite, the common man or woman among God’s people? Access to the close presence of God was not easy. Far from it. It was in fact closed off.

Note also that the high priest’s Day of Atonement ministry was designed to deal with the sins of God’s people, an absolute necessity for them. Dealing with their sin was symbolized most clearly by the scapegoat.

He (i.e. the high priest) is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head... The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place. (vv. 21a, 22a)

So how important was the sacrificial system for the old covenant people of God? How important was that system and especially the Day of Atonement for dealing with sin and restoring a positive relationship between God and his people? How important also was the role of Aaron and the high priests who followed him for that God given religion? We must answer to all three questions – not merely very important. Absolutely essential.

So we can see that the Old Testament sacrificial system was multifaceted and instructive. Yet good as it was, impressive as it was, useful as the old

¹² The *NIV Study Bible* sets out the order of the Day of Atonement ceremony usefully in its notes on Leviticus 16.

covenant and its sacrificial system were, and they were all these things, was this as good as it gets? The writer to the Hebrews has something to say here too:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:11-14)

Christ and his new covenant gospel are better than the old covenant.

5. Old Covenant Heroes of Faith

In the well-known and much used chapter 11 of Hebrews the writer points his readers to the old covenant heroes of faith. They are presented to encourage, to strengthen, and to fortify his readers in their faith. They are, perhaps to the chagrin of the rigidly redemptive historical, examples to follow. The principle set out is that Old Testament faith is true faith and to be emulated.

What are the characteristics of this faith? First, it acts. Notice the verbs. By faith Abel *offered*; by faith Noah *built*, and Abraham *obeyed*, Moses *refused*, and the people *passed through* the Red Sea. By faith Rahab was not killed because she *welcomed* the spies. True faith acts as exemplified by the Old Testament heroes of faith.

Second, faith acts with its eyes on God's future. "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen... built an ark..." (v.7). The weather forecast had been good for 500 years, and God says, "I'm bringing a flood. Build an ark." So Noah acts with his eyes on God's future. Also at Jericho: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people marched around them for seven days" (v. 30). Now marching mute around Jericho thirteen times over a week, following trumpet blowing priests and without firing a shot is

not your standard way of capturing a walled city. But the people acted with their eyes on God's future – and the walls of Jericho fell.

But whether things went well for the chapter 11 heroes of faith or not, they all had their eyes on God's future. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that “they did not receive the things promised: they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance” (v. 13b) and “others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection” (v. 35b). They hung in there against the odds because they had their eyes on God's future. That's true faith – standing on the promises of God my Saviour – or rather acting on the promises of God my Saviour – with eyes on his future.

Couldn't we also mention others who exercised the same faith whom the writer to the Hebrews passes over? Job said: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. May the name of the LORD be praised.” (Job 1:21b) “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” (Job 13:15a) Ruth pleaded with Naomi: “Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16b) Esther declared: “If I perish, I perish” (Est. 4:16b)

So the old covenant heroes of faith, with their faith in God's future are great examples, inspiring, encouraging, and strengthening resolve. And might we not ask, what more do we need? But then the writer to the Hebrews exhorts: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...” (Heb. 12:2a) The Christ of the gospel is the ultimate hero of faith.

Angels, Moses, Aaron and the high priesthood, the old covenant sacrificial system and the heroes of faith are five aspects, five positive, impressive even outstanding aspects of Old Testament religion particularly significant for Hebrews. To conclude let us add to those two more.

6. The Prophets

First, let us look at how the writer to the Hebrews commences his book. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways....” (1:1) Old Testament religion is a religion of

prophets. From Moses to Malachi the Old Testament religious scene is sprinkled with men of God, seers and prophets.¹³

What was a prophet? First, a prophet was God's spokesman, God's mouthpiece. This relationship between God and the prophet is made clear in Exodus. In 7:1-2 we read: "The LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go...'" Moses is like God. Aaron as prophet passes on the message from Moses. So the prophet is God's spokesman. This is reinforced in Exodus 4:14-16. Moses is hesitant to take up the God-assigned task. So we read:

Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother Aaron the Levite? ... You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth... He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.

Moses is like God. Aaron, in the prophetic role, speaks on Moses' behalf – "as if he were your mouth." A prophet, then, was God's spokesman. He was God's mouthpiece. This is Old Testament religion, guided by prophets with the very words of God himself.

What's more the prophets had access to the decisions of God's throne room. Think of Micaiah before a rebellious Ahab and a compromising Jehoshaphat: "I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left." (1 Kgs 22:19b) Think of Isaiah, overwhelmed by his temple vision, who hears the Lord: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8) Listen to Jeremiah asking of the false prophets: "...which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word?" (Jer. 23:18a) Rightly the *NIV Study Bible* notes on 1 Kgs 22:19: "A true prophet was one who had, as it were, been made privy to what transpired in God's heavenly throne room...." Because of this the prophets were Yahweh's official messengers. They brought the pronouncements of the Great King, and hence their use of the so-called messenger formula, "Thus says the LORD." This is Old

¹³ The prophet line, in fact, can be pushed back at least to Abraham (see Gen 20:7, Ps 105:15).

Testament religion guided by the prophets bearing the official messages of Yahweh the Great King.

This ministry of the prophets was not just something to be admired disinterestedly or even marveled at dispassionately by God's people. The prophets pass on the very words of God for Israel's good – and, we might add, for our good. No other nation under heaven had this privilege. No other nation under heaven had such a relationship with the true God – and it was mediated by the prophets.

Yes, let us remember the Old Testament prophets, the magnificent prophets. Listen to their thundering accusations: “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left.” (Isa. 5:8) “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.... (5:20) “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion....” (Amos 6:1)

Hear their earnest pleas for repentance:

“Be appalled at this, O heavens,
and shudder with great horror,”
declares the LORD

“My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” (Jer. 2:12-13)

“Seek me and live...”
Seek the LORD and live...
Seek good and not evil
that you may live.
Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you
just as you say he is.” (Amos 5:4a, 6a,14)

“Even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart
with fasting and weeping and mourning.”
Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the LORD your God,

for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity. (Joel 2:12-13)

Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’ (Ezek 33:11)

Tremble at their stern pronouncements of judgment:

Though they dug to the depths of the grave,
from there by hand take them...

Though they hide in the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the serpent to bite them...

I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good. (Amos 9:2a, 3b, 4b)

I will scatter your bones around your altars... Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am Yahweh. (Ezek 6: 5b, 7)

But also rejoice at their blessed promises:

In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. (Amos 9:11a)

In the last days...

They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks. (Isa. 2:2a, 4b)

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:9)

Clearly the prophets, the Old Testament prophets, are significant for Old Testament, and we might add New Testament, religion. Who could be better than they? Yet here also the writer to the Hebrews points to Christ, not so much as one better but rather as the climax of a series, the capstone of a building, yet also possessing qualities and a position that none of the prophets could ever reach.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Heb. 1:1-2)

7. Sinai

Finally, let us consider how the writer to the Hebrews ends his book, or at least almost ends his book. He turns to the Sinai experience. The Sinai experience, by any account, was awesome. Yahweh was drawing near to his people. Yahweh was to speak to his people. Yes, Israel heard the voice of Yahweh himself. Yahweh was drawing near to his people, and they had to treat his presence with great caution. There was to be no approach to the mountain unbidden. There was the death penalty for any who were presumptuous or careless, whether man or beast.

Have we ever watched a thunderstorm approach, or ever been in a thunderstorm. The lightning is brighter than the day, the thunder crashing like a thousand drums. Remember that – and add an ongoing trumpet blast, from no human agency, an ongoing and ever louder trumpet blast. Then add cloud and smoke rolling into a tortured sky, a violent shaking mountain, and God's terrified people trembling at a distance. (Exod. 19:16) This is Sinai.

Sinai is a significant manifestation of Yahweh – significant enough for him to be remembered by it in the songs of Israel. Deborah and Barak exult:

The mountains quaked before Yahweh, the One of Sinai,
before Yahweh, the God of Israel. (Judges 5:5)

This refrain is taken up by the Psalmist:

When you went out before your people, O God,
when you marched through the wasteland,
the earth shook,
the heaven poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the One of Israel. (Psalm 68:7-8)

Clearly Sinai was awesome, and memorable. It also was a significant part of the Bible's impressive Old Testament religion.

Sinai was also of interest to the writer of the Hebrews. But he, while reminding his readers of the awesomeness of Israel's experience at that ancient mountain, makes a contrast with another mountain. To his readers he says:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18-22)

Conclusion

So now we have seven aspects of Old Testament religion particularly significant for the book of Hebrews. All seven are magnificent, awe-inspiring, seriously impressive and far superior to the religion of any other (contemporary) nation. They are God-given and God-used. Knowing these you might well be tempted to ask, "What could be better than that?" The writer to the Hebrews answers clearly with respect to each: "Christ and his gospel."