

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS AND THE SANCTIFICATION OF BELIEVERS IN HEBREWS 7-10

by

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The Epistle to the Hebrews represents a significant milestone in the development of Christology in the early church. The dominant Christological motif is Jesus as high priest, a description unique to Hebrews. This theme is first mentioned in 2:17, which defines the essential elements of Jesus' priesthood: (1) his identification with humanity (he "had to be made like his brothers in all ways"), (2) his divine commission ("in service to God"), and (3) his salvific mission ("he might make atonement for sins"). The goal of the author is to urge the readers to appropriate the full salvation made available through the sacrifice of Jesus, the high priest (7:25).

Although we cannot determine who the author and readers were, evidence within the document suggests that the readers were struggling to accept and appropriate fully the message about Jesus Christ because of internal questions and external pressures (10:32-39; 12:1-11). They were in danger of drifting away (2:1), possibly to return to the old ways of Judaism. The author points them to a "new and living way" through Jesus (10:20). Hebrews articulates vividly and persuasively that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus make it possible for people to be in relationship with the holy God.¹

¹Jesus' resurrection is not a major topic in Hebrews (the only explicit reference is in 13:20), but it is assumed in numerous places through the exaltation of Jesus after his suffering (2:9, 14; 4:14; 5:7; 7:23-24).

The author recognizes the problem of the separation between the holy God and sinful humanity articulated throughout the Old Testament, beginning with the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23) and later vividly experienced in the various divisions of the tabernacle.² Only that which was holy could be in the presence of the holy God.³ God's holiness excludes everything unclean. The author puts it this way: "pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14).⁴ This verse also gives the goal of human existence: to "see" God, that is, to be in divine presence. The author describes this goal in 12:1-2 as following the path to the throne of God already trodden by Jesus. The critical issue is how one achieves this.

The barrier of sin that separates humanity from God, represented in the old cultic system and vividly experienced in human life as the weights and sins that easily trip us along the race to the throne (12:1), has been overcome "by a new and living way" (10:20).⁵ For the author, the new way came through Jesus' identification with humanity as high priest. Jesus' incarnation provides the source for "full salvation" (7:25). Hebrews offers a glimpse of Jesus' humanity like no other New Testament document and interprets this humanity in profoundly theological concepts in order to urge intended change in the readers. Jesus' death not only atoned for sins, thus fulfilling the requirements of the old covenant, but at the same time confirmed a new covenant. In Jesus' self-sacrifice, the requirements of both the old and new covenants converge, providing the author with the theological basis for reading both covenants Christologically.

²The closer one got to the Ark of the Covenant, the "throne of God," the more holy one needed to be. The place closest to God was called the *Most Holy Place*. The farthest place, the most "unholy" place, was outside the camp where the defiled had to go (see Lev. 13:46 as example).

³Everything related to the worship of God in the tabernacle had to be consecrated and made holy, including people, furnishings, objects of worship and the tabernacle itself (Ex. 40:9-10; Lev. 10:10; Num. 1:51).

⁴Translations are author's own unless otherwise noted.

⁵The author's most common word for "sin" (*harmartia*) is a word rich in meaning, involving legal, cultic, and ethical applications (see W. Grundmann, *TDNT*, I, 302-16). Sin leads to defilement, which must be purified (1:3). As transgression sins must be atoned for (2:17). Sin deceives and results from disobedience and disbelief (3:13, 17-19). Temptation is not a sin (4:15). Some sins are due to ignorance and are unintentional (9:7). Deliberate sin of apostasy will not be forgiven (10:26), although the unforgiveness must be conditioned upon the permanence and rebellion of one's rejection of God (cf. 4:11).

By opening the way to the Most Holy Place, Jesus, the high priest, inaugurates a new covenant, resulting in the possibility of holiness and direct access to the Most Holy Place to those who appropriate it through faith. How this perfection is to be experienced is worked out in the paraenetic sections of the letter. One of the key theological contributions of Hebrews is how the author intersects an incarnational understanding of Christ with the need for holiness within believers.

Hebrews is one of the most rhetorical and carefully crafted documents in the New Testament, yet we know so little of the author and the situation of the readers, which hampers our ability to analyze the rhetorical situation. The author's method gives a clue to the theology of the epistle. The author alternates between interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (especially Ps. 8; 40:6-8; 95; 110; Jer. 31:31-34),⁶ theological interpretation of the person and work of Jesus, and exhortation of the readers, although not always in this sequence.⁷ The author compares Jesus to some of the key aspects of the Jewish faith, including the law, tabernacle, covenant, priesthood, sacrifices, and other cultic elements. The comparisons are both explicit (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6 [twice]; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24), and implicit (2:2-4; 3:3-6a; 5:4-10; 10:27-28; 12:25).⁸ Through this method, the author adeptly bridges the past and present, interpreting old paradigms to show the superiority of the new way of Jesus Christ.

In the first half of the epistle, the author sets out the essential qualifications of Jesus as the high priest. In chapters 7-10, the author compares the Levitical priesthood, tabernacle, covenant made by Moses, and cultic system to the new way opened through Jesus. With each new section, the author adds further evidence to the newness that Christ brings. The fundamental question of the epistle from the perspective of the readers is, why

⁶William L. Lane points out that the author uses *midrash* to show that "God intended to do something radically new. In each instance he interprets God's new action in terms of his convictions about Jesus" (*Hebrews*, WBC, vol. 47A [Dallas: Word, 1991], cxxx).

⁷A simple perusal of the first few chapters demonstrates this tripartite concern: quotation in 1:5-14 of a number of texts (Ps. 2:7, 2 Sam. 7:14, Deut. 32:43, Ps. 104:4, Ps. 45:6-7, Ps. 102:25-27, and Ps. 110:1); exhortation in 2:1-4; *pesher* on Ps. 8:4-6 in 2:5-10; Christological application in 2:10-17; exhortation in 3:1-3; Christological application and comparison with Moses in 3:3-6 in preparation for *pesher* on Ps. 95:7-11, followed by exhortation, and so on.

⁸Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 47A, cxxix.

would anyone want to remain in sin and follow the old way of doing things when a much superior era has begun? The author uses the image of Jesus as high priest in chapters 7-10 to bridge the past struggle in sin under the old covenant to the hope of a new covenant and how this provides holiness to those who look to Jesus, the one who opens the way and brings their faith to perfection (12:2).

I. The Perfecting of Jesus, the High Priest

Hebrews invites us to think deeply about the implications of Jesus' humanity. Hebrews, perhaps more than any other document in the New Testament, argues against the claims of Docetism, that Jesus only *appeared* to be human. In Hebrews, we see a savior who identified with us at the very point of our raw humanness, at the very juncture between faith and rejection of God's will. The author begins the epistle with the proclamation of Jesus' divinity in 1:1-4, using some of the boldest language in the New Testament to describe the man from Nazareth: (1) his *being*—God's Son, heir of all things, creator, the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's nature, upholding the universe by His power; (2) his *mission*—to make purification for sins (cf. 2:9); and (3) his *exaltation*—sitting at the right hand of God, with all things subject to him (2:8). At the heart of the divine plan was the need to provide a way to restore fellowship with the holy God through the purification of human sinfulness (1:3), which logically necessitated the Son's identification with humanity, which the author begins to explore in chapter 2.

A. Identification. We cannot understand the Christology of Hebrews without taking seriously the humanity of Jesus and his solidarity with the human race. The author begins describing this solidarity by quoting Psalm 8:4-6 in 2:1-8, with the key thought being, "you made him for a little while lower than the angels," which is repeated in 2:9 and begins the theme of Jesus' death, including his suffering, and how this makes salvation available to everyone. Two points show the need for Jesus to be made completely human. First, after 2:9, the reader is left with the paradox of Jesus' sinlessness as God's Son and his utter humanity. How can he be both human and divine? For the author, the answer comes in the logical need for someone to bring God to humanity and humanity to God. As 2:17 says, "He *had to be made* like his brothers" in order to qualify as high priest. In order to have an eternal solution to sin, a perfect sacrifice was needed, and that sacrifice needed to be sourced from outside of

imperfect creation. Thus, Jesus had to be divine. In order to deal with death on its own terms and to provide the path for humanity, Jesus had to be human (2:14-15). The author touches here upon the divine logic of salvation.

Second, some of the identification is one-directional: Jesus' identifies with us, but how much can we identify with him? We cannot completely because of his exalted status as Son, a level that even the angels cannot reach. Since we cannot ascend to heaven, we need someone from outside of human sin, someone who knows the human side of the equation, yet remains untainted by the contamination of sin. That someone must descend to earth. Only such a person would qualify as both a perfect and adequate sacrifice and mediator to bring us to God.

For the author, the most profound way Jesus showed his humanity was through suffering—both the pain of living and the pain of dying. Two passages develop the suffering of Jesus, 2:9-17 and 5:7-10, both ending with the qualification of Jesus as our high priest because of his suffering as a human. The author begins discussing Jesus' suffering in 2:9, which states that Jesus' exaltation was *because of* his suffering of death. Suffering was necessary to fulfill the purpose of incarnation and for incarnation to be truly complete. The only way for humanity to experience glory was through the suffering of Jesus (2:10). Jesus' death had two effects: (1) to free humans from the fear of death (2:14-15), and (2) for the Son to be perfected as high priest (2:17).

The key phrase in 2:10 is "to make perfect through suffering." There has been much discussion on the use of the *teleios* word group in Hebrews.⁹ *Teleios* (and its cognates) is one of the more significant word groups in the New Testament to describe the goal of the Christian (e.g., Phil. 3:14), but also one of the more difficult to interpret because it can mean perfect, complete, mature, goal, finish, and achievement, and these words are easily misunderstood because of their English usage. The word can be used in various contexts, for example, to describe moral, physical, temporal, spiritual, and cultic situations. At its core, *teleios* refers to something that has completed its intended purpose, has reached its aim, end or fulfillment. Ultimately, the literary and theological contexts should

⁹One of the more significant studies is David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the "Epistle to the Hebrews"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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be carefully considered to interpret the nuance of the word. In 2:10, the key idea is that Jesus' goal as the founder of our faith was related to his suffering. Suffering was the condition of Jesus' *fulfilling* his mission of bringing "many sons to glory." Without suffering, there would have been something lacking in this mission.

The goal of the Son's mission on earth, opening the way to the holy God (4:16; 10:22; 12:1-2), was accomplished as he progressively identified more and more with humanity until he reached the point of death (13:12). He shared in the "flesh and blood" experience of suffering and death (2:11, 14). When Jesus came to the point of identifying with humanity at our greatest point of fear (2:15), his identification was complete. Through his resurrection and subsequent exaltation, he was able to overcome the devil, the holder of death (2:15), thereby freeing the way to eternal salvation (5:9) and becoming *perfect* as high priest. For the author of Hebrews, Jesus' suffering was more than substitutionary and more than the death of a martyr. His suffering and death demonstrate a "suffering with" (4:15), a standing alongside, successfully coming out on the other side of death to exaltation (12:2). If he made it, so can we with his help as our high priest. The infinite Son became one with us so that we might share in his glory.¹⁰

The application of Jesus' suffering to the daily lives of the readers comes through victory over temptation, a victory we win not through individual effort but because our high priest has already opened the way (12:1-2). The temptations Jesus faced were a form of suffering, and the positive outcome of these temptations was the ability to help us when we are tempted (2:18). Jesus had to participate in everything human to qualify as a high priest, including temptation. Facing temptation speaks to the base human predicament of whether or not to obey God's will, a critical issue for the readers (see especially 3:7-4:13). The author quotes Psalm 40:6-8 in 10:5-7 and restates in 10:9 the phrase, "Behold, I have come to do your will." In this context, the "will" of God meant "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). Although Hebrews does not mention a temptation to walk away from impending crucifixion, 2:18 says that Jesus suffered when tempted, and in 5:7 that he "offered prayers and

¹⁰The early Christian hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 comes close to this idea, though lacking is the element of the affect upon us. Paul adds this element in 2 Corinthians 8:9.

supplications with crying and tears,” a possible allusion to Gethsemane, where Jesus asked for the cup of suffering of death to be removed, but even at that point, chose to conform his will to the Father’s (Matt. 26:39, 42, 44). Jesus determined that it was God’s will for him to suffer, or as Hebrews says, “it was fitting for [God] . . . to perfect through sufferings the founder of their salvation” (2:10).

In 2:14 the author states that Jesus “partook of the same things,” and in 4:15 that he was tempted “in all things” like us. These are strong statements and not easy to interpret theologically. For Jesus’ temptations to be real and for him to be tempted like us, there had to be the actual possibility of sin, otherwise the temptations would be meaningless. Jesus had to have been in the same condition of human weakness as we are, or he could not fully sympathize with our weaknesses. Oscar Cullmann writes, “. . . Hebrews understands the humanity of Jesus in a more comprehensive way than the Gospels or any other early Christian writing. This follows from the idea that the High Priest not only completely enters the realm of humanity, but within that realm must participate in everything that is human.”¹¹

Therein lies the crux of Hebrew’s Christology: how could Jesus be both fully human and sinless at the same time? Does not being a descendant of Adam mean that all humans are bound by a “sin nature”? The author keeps a distinction between the nature of Jesus and fallen humanity in 7:26 (“holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners”), but is this distinction intrinsic or something that came about through the obedience of Jesus to God’s will for him? The author does not appear to be concerned about a fallen condition of “original sin” inherited from Adam, like Paul does in Romans 5-6. Rather, as Gordon Thomas suggests, “It seems truer to the book of Hebrews to affirm that all humans are fallen, that Jesus shared our fallenness and our temptations completely, but that in him fallenness did not lead automatically to sinfulness.”¹² The only point at which Jesus differed from humanity was the committal of sin (4:15), which meant that he did not have to offer a sacrifice for himself (7:27). Giving in to temptation would have disqualified him from being

¹¹Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 94.

¹²Gordon J. Thomas, “The Perfection of Christ and the Perfecting of Believers in Hebrews,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. by Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 298.

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the needed perfect sacrifice. Failing to be completely human would have meant (1) that he could not have shown us the way through our own temptations (an external experience, 2:17), but more profoundly, (2) that he could have not brought about a new covenant and the perfecting of believers (an inward transformation, 10:14). Both Jesus' humanity and sinlessness are needed in the logic of the author.

B. Perfection through Suffering. Returning to 2:10, the question remains, in what way was Jesus perfected through his suffering? The condition of his perfection was victory *through* his suffering. To put it another way, in his complete identification with the human condition, Jesus did not let human weakness triumph but gained victory over the very condition that traps all people. In other words, Jesus became "perfect" by being victorious through his humanness, thereby becoming fit to be high priest. What enabled Jesus to remain sinless through his suffering? The author writes that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). It was a process of constantly conforming to God's will. Luke Timothy Johnson offers an interpretation worth consideration:

. . . the human Jesus progressively grew into his stature of divine Son. Through his human faith and obedience, he progressively opened himself to the mystery of God. Such opening to mystery inevitably involves pain or suffering, just as pain and suffering have the capacity of opening humans to the mystery of God. . . . the divine within him progressively found more explicit expression in the freedom of the human person Jesus. Viewed in this fashion, the moment of death, which appears from the outside to be the final and ultimate closure, the shutting down of existence, became for Jesus the ultimate opening of his humanity to the presence of God.¹³

Jesus' perfection began morally through his victory over sin, not any sin that he ever committed, but the potential for sin that has existed since Adam and Eve were first created and placed in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16-17). Jesus was able to do what no other human has ever been able to do—to be the perfect human in obedience to the Father's will. This perfection was not simply something that happened inherently because he

¹³Luke Timothy Johnson, "Hebrews' Challenge to Christians: Christology and Discipleship," *Preaching Hebrews*, eds. David Fleer and Dave Bland (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 2003), 21.

was the pre-existent Son who created the universe, because as Son he still had to learn obedience (5:8). If we are to take Jesus' humanity seriously, like the author of Hebrews, we have to recognize that the personal holiness of Jesus came through his decision to conform to the will of God—in *all ways*. We are still left with the problem, how did Jesus do what we cannot? Therein lies the uniqueness of Jesus as Son and perhaps why the author begins his epistle with reminding the readers of the deity of Jesus, why no one else in all creation can qualify as high priest except the Son of God.¹⁴ Nils Dahl wrote, "The flesh of Jesus is the point where the heavenly and the earthly worlds meet, but meet in a way which leaves the heavenly world hidden."¹⁵

Through his obedience in life, Jesus showed his moral qualifications to be high priest, but he was not perfect as a high priest until he experienced the suffering of death. David Peterson concludes, "In the final analysis, it is his redemptive death that qualifies Christ to act as heavenly high priest since the primary function of priesthood is 'to expiate the sins of the people' (2:17; cf. 5:1; 7:27; 8:3; 9:28)." Peterson then agrees with Spicq, who states:

. . . his incarnation and his piety render him physically and religiously capable to offer the only sacrifice fully acceptable to God, being at the same time priest and victim. When it is said that God makes this priest "perfect through suffering" (2:9-10) and that effectively the Saviour offers himself to his Father (10:1-18), it is necessary to understand that it is solely to realize the object of his priesthood: to obtain pardon for sins, to unite men to God (5:9).¹⁶

This makes Jesus' suffering more than simply exemplary or as a model of perfect morality, though these are still a part, but sets the idea of *teleios*

¹⁴It is at this point that one can talk of Jesus being the "second Adam" for the author of Hebrews, someone who came just as Adam was created, perfectly human yet still with the potential of sinning. The one difference between Adam and Jesus is that Adam lived in a perfect paradise—he had it all; Jesus lived in the mundane world of pain and misery found in first-century Palestine. This makes Jesus' humanity even more significant because his world was very much like our world. His was not a Garden of Eden but a Garden of Gethsemane.

¹⁵Nils A. Dahl, "A New and Living Way: The Approach to God According to Hebrews 10:19-25," *Interpretation* 5 (1951), 405.

¹⁶Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 102-103, quoting C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, *Études Bibliques*, vol. II (Paris, 1952), 222.

more in the context of mission: to enable others to experience God's glory as well. Jesus' suffering of death (1) provides atonement for sins (our past, 2:17), (2) delivers from life-long slavery (from this point onward, 2:15), (3) offers the way out of temptation (the present, 2:18), and (4) gives assurance of eternal salvation to those who are sanctified through him (7:25; 10:14).

C. Mediation through Death. Jesus' attainment of perfection qualifies Him to mediate a new covenant between God and humanity. Jesus is called a mediator three times in the epistle, each time in association with a new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). The concept of mediator has the basic idea of one who goes between two parties, an intermediary, someone who establishes a relationship between two parties. It may also have the connotation of a guarantor, one who acts upon the mediation to confirm the relationships involved.¹⁷ Jesus' suffering and death qualified him to bring together two parties separated by human sin by making "atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). In 8:6, Jesus' ministry as mediator of a new covenant is far superior to the old covenant since it was enacted on better promises. These promises are described in the quotation of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in verses 8-12. The critical issue at this juncture is how these "promises" were enacted. The very fact that the old covenant and its sacrificial system failed to bridge the void between God and humanity showed that a new way was needed (8:7). The author does not make explicit the link between Jesus' sacrifice and his mediation of a new covenant, although he earlier wrote of Jesus offering himself once for all (7:27), and the concept is still fresh in the readers' minds.

Atonement language appears more clearly in the other two passages in which Jesus' mediation is mentioned. The author continues to discuss the former covenant in 9:1-10 and shows how it "cannot make perfect the conscience of the worshipper" (9:9). A greater, more perfect sacrifice was needed. Verse 15 begins with "for this reason", showing a causal relationship between verse 14 and what follows. Jesus qualifies as mediator of a new covenant because he offered himself "without blemish" to God (9:14). This is a cultic word that denotes something without fault or blemish. It can be used religiously to describe moral blamelessness, supremely in God himself (2 Sam. 22:31).¹⁸ The author has already established the

¹⁷A. Oepke, *TDNT*, IV, 598-624.

¹⁸F. Hauck, *TDNT*, IV, 829-31.

moral perfection of Jesus (4:15; 7:26) and now shows that the blood of this perfect sacrifice ratified the new covenant. The results are purification (9:14), an eternal inheritance, and redemption for believers (9:15). Finally, in 12:24 the author concludes a comparison between the ratification of the first covenant on Mount Sinai, experienced by great fear among the people, and the joyous gathering of saints and angels in the new heavenly Jerusalem on Mount Zion, a symbol for the presence of God. Under the old system, the people could not approach the holy mountain and the presence of God because of God's holiness.¹⁹ With the new covenant, believers can approach God's presence because of Jesus (4:16) and the new covenant he mediates. Like the first covenant (Ex. 24:8), the new covenant was ratified by the sprinkling of blood. The blood of Christ is a clear reference to his suffering of death (9:12, 14). Just like the first covenant (9:19-21), the blood of Christ has a cleansing effect upon that which receives it (10:19). Jesus' death was the covenant sacrifice that not only objectively brought about a new era, but also inwardly cleanses the conscience of believers (10:22), thereby making it possible for them to be in the presence of the holy God. Verse 23 describes them as "the spirits of the righteous who have been made perfect," a perfect passive participle being used attributively to describe the righteous who at some point received perfection and remain in that state. Those who are part of the new covenant will gain entrance into the heavenly sanctuary through Jesus.

Through his suffering, death, and exaltation, Jesus became not only the perfecter but also the one who opens a new way to salvation. God's purpose for humanity is to bring "many sons to glory," and to do this, God appointed his Son to open the way (2:10). According to J. Scott, this "designates an individual who opened the way into a new area for others to follow, founded the city in which they dwelt, gave his name to the community, fought its battles and secured the victory, and then remained as the leader-ruler-hero of his people."²⁰ Lane suggests that the term be translated as "champion": "Jesus is the 'the champion' who secured the

¹⁹Exodus 19:11-14, 21-24. Although the reason for the people to stay off the mountain is not clearly stated in this chapter, the assumption is that it is a matter of holiness because for them to even approach the mountain, they had to be washed and consecrated.

²⁰J. Julius Scott, "Archégos in the Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *JETS* 29/1 (March 1986), 52.

salvation of his people through the sufferings he endured in his identification with them, and more particularly through his death.”²¹ Scott writes that Jesus is “the one through whose sufferings (the ‘birth pangs of the Messiah’) the new age becomes a reality and whose personal honor and glory, which is shared with his ‘sons,’ is a major characteristic of it.”²² Jesus became the hero and perfecter of faith by “enduring the cross.” His journey of suffering opened the path to the throne of God. As the forerunner, he has already entered the “inner place,” the very presence of God in our behalf (6:19-20). The readers are challenged to respond to this promise of salvation by following in the footsteps of their founder and perfecter by *looking* to him (12:1). The nominative masculine participle is used adverbially to clarify the main verb (“let us run”) and can be taken either temporally (“while gazing”) or instrumentally (“by gazing”). Although neither one can be ruled out, the instrumental helps offset the runners’ need to “look away” from the distractions of temptations (“the sins that so easily entangle”) and “look toward” the one who has already gained victory over the weights that trip up humanity.

In summary, the message to the readers is that Jesus, who became one with us in our human struggle, will help us as our victorious great high priest to be able to be in God’s very presence as people who have been made holy by his submission to suffering and death and his exaltation to the highest place of honor before God.

II. Jesus as the Way to Perfection

The author develops the theme of Jesus as high priest in chapters 7-10 using typology to show that the old system of Judaism was insufficient, transitory, and anticipated a new way to approach the holy God. The author looks backwards to the formation of Israel as a people under the leadership of Moses and sees the ancient covenant and its cultic practices as types for a new era brought about by Jesus’ inauguration of a new covenant by his self-sacrifice through suffering and death, and his exaltation through resurrection. The priests, tabernacle structure, and sacrificial system are the “shadows” of greater promises brought through Christ (8:5). Ladd comments, “Hebrews is describing heavenly things in earthly, symbolic language. What Christ did on the cross, although an event in

²¹Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 47A, 57.

²²Scott, “*Archégos* in the Salvation History,” 50.

time and space, was itself an event in the spiritual world. Eternity at this point intersects time; the heavenly is embodied in the earthly; the transcendental occurs in the historical.”²³ This comparison may have had the intended affect upon the readers of convincing them to go on to perfection by appropriating Christ and his full salvation (6:1) rather than remaining bound by an evil conscience symbolized in the old system of Judaism.

A. Jesus as High Priest (ch. 7). The author introduces a new element to Jesus’ priesthood in 6:20 that is developed further in 7:1-10: Jesus as a “high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek serves as the perfect archetype for the author’s purposes because he (1) is king of righteousness and peace (7:2), (2) has an eternal priesthood because he had no identifiable genealogy in scripture (7:3), and (3) was greater than the Levitical priesthood by extension because he received tithes through Abraham (7:4-10).²⁴ Beginning in 7:11, the author builds on the last two premises (the first does not seem to fit into the major point the author wants to make) to show why a new priesthood is needed.

The author begins chapter 7 by describing two key characteristics of the priest-king Melchizedek: (1) the eternity of his priesthood (v. 3); and (2) his superiority over Levi, and hence the priestly descendants of Levi who administer the terms of the old covenant (v. 9). The author then argues that the ministry of the priestly order of Aaron (the Levites) is inadequate to provide a lasting solution to the alienation caused by sin. Importantly, a definition of perfection is implied in verse 19 when the author compares the inability of the law to “perfect” and the better hope by which we are *able to see God*. The former law could not perfect because the barrier of sin still remained; the law could not make a person holy enough to be in God’s presence (vv. 11, 18-19a). A better way to God was needed.

The author addresses the issue of why the former system was inadequate to bring people to God. The first evidence is that God had spoken

²³George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 575. There is debate about the worldview of the author and how influenced it was by Platonism. See Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Scriptural World Of Hebrews,” *Interpretation* 57:3 (July, 2003): 237-250.

²⁴This last argument assumes that “the ancestor embodies, symbolizes, and represents the whole group of his descendants. Abraham is not simply an individual, but a representative figure in this context” (Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 47A, 168).

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(Ps. 110:4) about another priesthood, one from the order of Melchizedek: “you are a priest *forever* after the order of Melchizedek” (v. 17). Jesus qualifies for being in this priestly order because of his “indestructible life,” a reference to his resurrected and exalted status (v. 16). Second, the law was unable to perfect because it could not permanently solve the sin problem (vv. 11, 18-19). The old system was temporary because of its insufficiency. Sacrifices had to be repeated on a daily basis (v. 27). Third, the former priests had no oath from God (vv. 20-22); a person can be a priest only when called by God (5:4). Fourth, the former priests could not continue in office because of death (v. 23). This adds to the fleeting nature of the old system. Finally, the priests needed to offer sacrifices repeatedly (daily) for their own sins (v. 27; 5:3).

The midrash on Ps. 110:4 shows that a new way of doing things was needed. The key qualifications of Jesus as high priest are permanence and adequacy because of his victory over suffering and death, resulting in what the author calls “the indestructible life” (v. 16). Though the word “resurrection” is not used in this passage, the assumption is that Jesus came out of the other side of his suffering and death with full victory (v. 24). The oath of God about the permanence of Jesus’ priesthood confirms beyond doubt the adequacy of Jesus’ victory (v. 21). Jesus is in a class of his own. Each of the qualities listed in verse 26 (holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens) came through his victory over temptation and suffering.

Verse 25 uses present tense verbs along with a temporal adverb to show that Jesus’ ministry as the resurrected and exalted one continues on, thereby making it possible for the readers to draw near to God *now*. His present status as high priest qualifies him to perfect those who come to God through him. What this perfection entails is suggested in verse 25 in the phrase “to save completely.” This implies that the full salvation in the author’s mind is the ability to draw near to God. Consequently, full salvation involves being made holy by having the problem of sin removed in order to be qualified to come before the holy God. The problem of sin is taken care of by Jesus’ perfect sacrifice “once for all” (v. 27).

Having been perfected, Jesus now is able as the perfect sacrifice to sanctify those who put their faith in him and bring them to the throne of God (2:10-11). Having established the qualification for Jesus to serve as high priest, the author moves on to discuss the affects of Jesus’ victory over the problem at the core of human struggle.

B. Jesus as Mediator (ch. 8). Beginning with 8:1, the author shifts from Jesus as priest to Jesus' ministry as priest. The author begins with the summative declaration of confidence that our high priest now serves at the throne of God. The mission of the high priest, "bringing many sons to glory" (2:10), continues beyond resurrection.

God intended the first covenant to be only temporary. God had something better in mind, a plan that would provide a lasting solution to sin (1:1-4). The author logically argues that since God promised a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), there must have been a problem with the old one (v. 7). What was its fault? One clue comes in verse 6. It was enacted on inferior promises. It is assumed that the promises of the old covenant are the same as with the new covenant—to perfect the conscience of the worshippers (9:9-10) in order that they might enter the holy places (that is, to be in God's presence; 10:19). The specific fault of the first covenant appears in the quotation of Jeremiah 31:32 in verse 9: "they did not continue in my covenant." The author has already shown the problem in 3:7-4:13, disobedience (4:6). They could not succeed because the law was powerless and only external; it never dealt with the deeper heart need of cleansing, or as the author puts it, the perfecting of the conscience (9:9, 14; 10:22). Again, something or someone outside of sin needed to provide a remedy for the malady of sin.

Where the old system failed, Jesus the high priest succeeded. Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant provides the means for this deeper cleansing of the conscience. The new covenant is enacted on better promises (v. 6) bought by a high priest who was able to offer the perfect sacrifice once for all (7:27). Jesus' self-sacrifice, his own blood (9:13; 13:20), ratified the new covenant. The affects of the new covenant are significant and consistent with the author's argument.

First, the terms of the covenant (the laws) are written in the minds and hearts of God's people (v. 10). The problem was not the laws but the inability to keep them because of a sinful conscience. Bruce comments, "What was needed was a new nature, a heart liberated from its bondage to sin, a heart which not only spontaneously knew and loved the will of God but had the power to do it."²⁵ Something had to be done to purify and empower the conscience. Second, intimate relationship with the holy God

²⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 173.

is restored (v. 10). This relationship lies at the heart of the faith of Israel (Ex. 6:7) and the church (2 Cor. 6:16). Relationship with the holy God can only be present when the separation caused by sin is removed. Third, new insight to the person and character of God is given (v. 11). The intimacy of relationship is intensified with knowledge. This knowledge is linked to and a result of the intercession of Jesus as high priest, the exact imprint of the divine nature (1:3) and the object of confession (3:1, 4:14). Considering him confirms and keeps the new covenant in us while we face the challenges of our own sufferings (12:3). Finally, forgiveness is provided (v. 12). Mercy is the only way sin can be removed, and God has provided “a merciful and faithful high priest . . . to make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17). The perfected sacrifice overcomes the penalty of death once and for all (9:16).

C. Jesus Opens the Way to the Most Holy Place (God’s Presence) (ch. 9). Chapter 9 is significant in the author’s overall argument. Often termed the “atonement chapter,” it compares the sacrificial system under the first covenant to the once and for all sacrifice offered by Jesus that inaugurated the new covenant. The chapter is more or less divided into two parts, the first describing the regulations surrounding the first covenant and their inability to solve finally and completely the sin problem (vv. 1-10), and the second with how Jesus’ sacrifice surpasses the first covenant by being able to purify the conscience (vv. 11-28).

The author further explains the “full salvation” offered through Jesus, the great high priest, by interpreting several key components of the first covenant, especially the Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16. God’s plan of redemption is consistent because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (v. 22; see Lev. 16:16). A life must be offered for breaking the terms of the covenant (v. 15; cf. Rom. 6:23). Under the old system, the priests offered sacrifices to atone for sin, but these sacrifices never solved the problem of the sinful conscience but only dealt with the “flesh” (vv. 9, 13). By not dealing with the inner issue, the first covenant never enabled the people of Israel to obey God’s laws because their disobedience remained (4:6, 11). The earthly tabernacle was a place where people could experience God’s holiness, but only in indirect and protected ways, with the most direct being limited to only one day a year, the Day of Atonement, when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, which housed the ark of the covenant (9:4), the “throne of God.”

The priestly ministry of Jesus solved the problem of sin once and for all. His ministry was similar in purpose to the earthly priests, to open the way to God, but where they could only partially and temporarily succeed by making annual atonement for their sins and the sins of the people, Jesus succeeded completely and eternally. To make the new covenant promises a reality, the root of the problem had to be dealt with. First, the transgressions needed to be atoned for, and then God would forgive them (vv. 15, 22; 2:17). There is no difference in the means and outcome between the old system and Jesus' sacrifice, for when a life was given, God would forgive the sins (v. 22). The difference lies deeper, with the need to deal with sin in a permanent way.²⁶ If the problem of inner sin had not been dealt with, Jesus would have been like any other high priest and would have needed to offer himself continually as sacrifice (v. 25). The author gets to the deeper issue, what sets the new covenant off from the old, the cleansing of the conscience.

The author uses the word "conscience" five times in the epistle. Christian Maurer comments, "It is man aware of himself in perception and acknowledgment, in willing and acting."²⁷ Lane states that "the 'conscience' is directed toward God and embraces the whole person in his relation to God."²⁸ In 9:9, the old covenant could not "perfect in regard to the conscience" because it only affected the worshipper externally. It had no power to bring permanent change because of its need to be repeated; it only sanctified the flesh (v. 13). Bruce writes, "A conscience stained with sin is the one effective barrier to fellowship with God."²⁹ The "awareness of" or "direction of the mind towards" sin remained, effectively cutting off fellowship with the holy God. As long as the stain of sin remains, one is hindered from fellowship with God. Once the conscience is cleansed from sin and perfected by the appropriation of Jesus' perfect sacrifice, one can then draw near to God (10:22). The old covenant failed because it could not purify the conscience. Holiness was only outward—a cleansing of the flesh (v. 13)—and not deep enough to allow one to enter the Most Holy Place.

²⁶The use of the singular in 9:26 is noteworthy. Every reference to the removal of sin in the old system is plural, suggesting the transgressions (5:3; 7:27; 9:7, 22; 10:2, 3, 4, 11). Here, Jesus dealt with the problem of the entity of sin itself, not simply the manifestations of it.

²⁷Christian Maurer, *TDNT*, VIII, 914.

²⁸Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 47B, 225.

²⁹F. F. Bruce, "The Kerygma of Hebrews," *Interpretation* 23 (January, 1969): 14.

Jesus mediates a new covenant because he is able to change the inner person, making it possible for the law to be obeyed (because of a purified conscience) and for relationship with God to be established (because of victory over sin). This is only possible because of Jesus' ministry as high priest, offering up his own blood "without blemish" (v. 14) to establish a new covenant. In the office of high priest, Jesus cleanses that which has been defiled through disobedience. Through his victory over temptation and death, Jesus showed himself worthy to inaugurate the new covenant because only his life was pure enough to cover the sins of the whole world—his life to replace the untold numbers of human lives. His sinlessness also enables others to follow in his footsteps to the presence of God. A purified conscience is the essential qualification for perfection.

D. Jesus' Blood as the Seal of a New Covenant and the Means of Purification (10:1-18). With chapter 10, the author comes to the pinnacle of his argument, linking the earlier discussion with what follows. The author returns to the theme of Jesus' humanness by quoting Psalm 40:6-8. The crucial part of this psalm for the author is stated in verse 10: "we have been sanctified through the offering of the *body* of Jesus Christ once and for all." Our being made holy rests on the ability of Jesus to reach perfection as a *human* by complete victory through suffering and his exaltation after death (v. 12).

Here, the author has come full circle and his argument is complete. Jesus as high priest offered himself as sacrifice, something that came at the high cost of suffering and death. It is noteworthy that the author only cites here two parts of Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant: (1) Jesus' victory provides access to the holy God by removing the barrier of the defilement of sin in the inner person, enabling a new disposition of obedience because of the law being written on the heart (v. 16; 13:12), and (2) his victory also provides access to the holy God by removing the penalty for disobedience through complete and lasting forgiveness (v. 17). The result for those who look to Jesus is perfection, "unimpeded access to God,"³⁰ through a constant sanctifying process. Jesus as high priest helps *now* those who look to him during their moments of suffering and temptation (see 4:16; 12:1-2).³¹ Victor Pfitzner writes:

³⁰Bruce, *Hebrews*, 44.

³¹In terms of holiness theology, we see implied in this verse both the crisis (in the perfect tense) and the process (in the present tense) of sanctification.

The Letter views sin in two ways. It is *defilement* that prevents access to a holy God (1:3; 9:14, 22-23; 10:22; 12:15; 13:4). This is removed by the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ. Second, sin is *unfaithfulness* and disobedience (2:1-4; 3:6-19; 4:11; 6:4-6; 10:21-31, 35-39; 12:1-3, 25). The solution to this problem is to look to Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of . . . faith” (12:2), and so to endure to the end where there is a perfect Sabbath rest for God’s pilgrim people (4:1-9).³²

III. Paraenesis of Perfection (10:19-25)

The author shifts to exhortation in 10:19 where he applies his theology to the present needs of his readers and expresses a pastoral concern for them. Although there is a future aspect to entering heaven (9:28), there is present experience of relationship with the holy God. Entry into this relationship comes through the “curtain,” a reference to Jesus’ “flesh,” again describing Jesus in his humanness. Jesus as *high priest* not only identified with us, died for us as the perfect sacrifice, but also sets the course for our own victory because of the inner change he makes through the new covenant. The result of Jesus’ high priesthood is that we can *come near* to God with consciences that have been purified and bodies washed pure (v. 22).³³

The final barrier between humanity and God is removed through the new covenant hope of Jesus the high priest. This sanctifying of the believer leads to the ability to “*hold firm* to the confession.” With the way opened to God and the inner person cleansed from sin, the new covenant hope of knowing God is possible. This knowledge will keep a person confident in the midst of trials and temptations (10:35, 39; 12:3). Finally, the forgiven and purified believer contributes to community by *spurring* others on to love and good works (vv. 24-25). The new covenant community is vital for running a successful race to the finish line. This community expands to include the “great cloud of witnesses” of chapter 11 (12:1). The new covenant community is characterized by “peace” and “holiness,” which are to be constantly pursued so that no one in the community “fails

³²Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 43.

³³The washing by water is most likely a reference to baptism which consists “in the outward application of water as the visible sign of the inward and spiritual cleansing wrought by God in those who come to him through Christ” (Bruce, *Hebrews*, 251).

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to obtain the grace of God” (12:15). The author’s concluding benediction expresses well the overall purpose of the epistle:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, *by the blood of the eternal covenant*, equip you with everything good *that you may do his will*, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.³⁴

Conclusion

The author of this great epistle was a realist who understood human weaknesses and also had hope in a sure source of help for victory through those weaknesses. Jesus as the great high priest came not simply to die as a substitute for sinners, but as a priest, became one with us, succeeding where we fail. He became the Perfect One by overcoming the same temptations that plague us. His perfection came at a price, for he needed to overcome the greatest struggle we face—death. By becoming the spotless sacrifice, he ended any need for other sacrifices, which never dealt with the real issue of inner sin. Jesus’ death opened a new way of relationship with the holy God by which we can approach God as people made holy inwardly by a change of disposition through the cleansing of our conscience. What the Old Testament longed for, expressed poignantly through the prophet Jeremiah, becomes a reality for those who look to Jesus for their help. Jesus makes it possible for us to reach a perfection that begins with an inner change and works out in faith and obedience and ever increasing victory over sin. Holiness as expressed in Hebrews is not an abstract hope but a livable reality through Jesus, the great high priest.

³⁴13:20-21, English Standard Version, emphasis added.



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