

The Superior Priesthood Of Jesus Christ

Johnny Felker

Introduction:

- I. John Phillips begins his commentary with two scenarios of Jewish men who are contemplating reversing their decision to follow Jesus and choosing instead to go back into Judaism. The first is drawn to the “reality” of the temple, its priests and rituals from which he has been separated. The second is faced with isolation, loneliness, and persecution for the sake of His choice to follow Jesus. If indeed these are the kinds of situations to which the Hebrew writer addresses his remarks, we can see how appropriate was his theme -- the superior priesthood of Jesus.
- II. The whole structure of the book of Hebrews centers on the theme of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.
 - A. Someone once called Hebrews the foremost Christology of the NT outside the gospels. Its principal focus is Jesus and particularly His role as our great high priest.
 1. Heb. 3:1
 2. Heb. 4:14
 3. Heb. 8:1-2
 4. In the summary and application section, all of our response is grounded in two essentially connected truths:
 - a. *Since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus (10:19)*
 - b. *Since we have a great high priest over the house of God (10:21)*
 - B. More specifically the book may be outlined in terms of the characteristics of our great high priest.
 1. What we have in the person of Jesus (The majesty of our high priest) (1:1-7:28).
 2. What we have in the provisions of Jesus (The ministry of our high priest) (8:1-10:18).
 3. What we should do in the pursuit of Jesus (Our ministry as His priests) (10:19-13:25). (However note that all throughout the discourse the Hebrew writer gives a “word of exhortation” 13:22.)
 - C. Our study will focus primarily on what we have in the person of Christ, the essential message of Hebrews 1:1-8:4.
 1. The first part of Hebrews is summarized in 8:1 and serves as a helpful structural marker.
 - a. *“The main point in what we have been saying!”*
 - b. *“We have such a high priest!”*
 2. What kind of high priest do we have?!
 - a. Heb. 7:28 provides the answer -- *“a Son, made perfect, forever!”*
 - b. Implications of this three-fold description:
 - 1) *“A Son”* -- superior in nature (1:1-4:13)
 - 2) *“Made perfect”* -- superior in experience (4:14-6:20)
 - 3) *“Forever”* -- superior in tenure (7:1-28)

- c. Thus, the first eight chapters intend to show clearly that our high priest Jesus Christ is superior in every way!

Body:

I. The OT Background for the Presentation of Jesus Our High Priest

- A. It appears that the Hebrew writer draws his portrait of Jesus with a spiritual eye on the redemptive history that preceded Him, generally upon the events of the whole Torah, but more particularly the history of Israel's salvation from Egypt.
 - 1. Thus, we see in the book allusions to:
 - a. Adam to whom was promised dominion over the world.
 - b. Melchizedek who served the patriarch Abraham as priest.
 - c. The angels who served as heavenly messengers of the covenant.
 - d. Moses the mediator of the old covenant.
 - e. Aaron the high priest of the sanctuary.
 - f. Joshua the captain who led them into the promised land.
 - 2. Yet each of these historical figures only serves as a lesser point of comparison with one the Hebrew writer contemplates and exalts.
- B. But if the Hebrew writer is thinking of the history of redemption, he is also thinking of the OT priests and their role in the aftermath of the nation's redemption. They too serve as lesser points of comparison with the one the Hebrew writer extols. But it might be useful to think about the role of priest (and high priest) in the OT economy. (Note that there were priests before the giving of the Law, but for our purposes the predominant comparisons and contrasts are based on the institution of the Levitical priesthood). The OT priest was a:
 - 1. Messenger of God to the people
 - a. Consider God's description of ideal priesthood through Malachi as he describes the covenant with Levi (Mal. 2:1-9).
 - b. God's true priest is an instructor of the people both by word and example.
 - 2. Minister of God in the tabernacle
 - a. The priest's role was to ensure the proper worship of God in the offering of incense and sacrifices.
 - b. To offer holy sacrifices to God with reverence (Cf. Mal. 1 where Israel's priests offered defiled food with disdain)
 - c. These two roles are clearly outlined in the Law and in the prophetic blessing of Moses for the house of Levi (Deut. 33:8-11).
 - 3. The role of the high priest in particular was to maintain special oversight of the priesthood and its work, and to actively participate in its most solemn moments of revelation and sacrifice.
 - a. This role was exercised both in the revelations of the Urim and Thummim, as well as in the ongoing instruction of the people in the Law of God.
 - b. The high priest alone entered the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the nation on the Day of Atonement.

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- C. It is against this backdrop that Jesus is presented!
1. Messenger of God to the people
 - a. God's final spokesman (1:1ff)
 - b. God's first spokesman of the great salvation (2:3)
 - c. God's awesome present spokesman (12:25)
 - d. Hence we are urged to "*consider him*" as "*the apostle...of our confession*" (3:1).
 - 1) It was He who was sent by God, like Moses, with a message of deliverance.
 - 2) He is the mediator of a new and better covenant (8:6).
 2. Minister of God in the tabernacle
 - a. "*A great high priest who has passed through the heavens*" (4:14)
 - b. "*A minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle*" (8:2)
 - c. Hence we are urged to consider him as "*the high priest of our confession*" (3:1).
- D. The Hebrew writer stresses that Jesus in these important roles is "better" than or superior to His OT correspondents.
1. *He is mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted on better promises* (8:6).
 2. He has obtained "*a more excellent ministry*" as priest (8:6).
 3. This better covenant and better ministry are grounded in his "*more excellent name*"! (1:4). (In Hebrew thought, one's name was associated with his character.)
- E. The superior features of our high priest (that is, in his person) are declared in three principal areas.
1. Superior or "better" in name or nature -- "A Son"
 - a. Note that the usage of "Son" here and in 7:28 calls attention to the quality of "sonship". He is not merely a man or angel; he is "Jesus, the Son of God" (4:14). That is demonstrated in several ways (1:2-4):
 - 1) His right to the world as His inheritance -- "*heir of all things*"
 - 2) His work as creator -- "*through whom also He made the worlds*" (Greek plural for "ages")
 - 3) His nature as the image (icon) of God -- "*the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature*"
 - 4) His role as sustainer -- "*upholds all things by the word of His power*"
 - 5) His completed work as our great high priest -- "*when He had made purification of sins, He has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*". Levitical priests "*stand daily*" (10:11); but He "*sat down*" at the right hand of God (10:12).
 - 6) His excellent name -- "*having become as much better than angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they*". His superiority to angels is clearly seen in the OT Scriptures:
 - a) In His designation "Son" 2:5-6.
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- 1] The quote from the royal psalm (2) is Messianic and appears to refer to the day of “begettal” (The usage of first-born might allude to texts like Ps. 89:27 as a reference to primacy as heir of all or it may be a reference to the resurrection, cf. Paul’s usage in Ac. 13:33.)
 - 2] The second quote comes from 2 Sam. 7:14 and refers to the antitypical “son” of David who would rule on David’s throne.
 - b) In His treatment as God, the served (worshipped) rather than the servant (the worshipper) 1:6-7.
 - 1] In Deut. 33:43 (LXX) the angels of God are urged to adore God. The Hebrew writer urges worship of Jesus by the angels.
 - 2] In contrast, angels themselves are by the poetic structure of Psalm 104:4 (poetic parallelism) said to be “*servants*”. They are later called “*ministering spirits*” (Heb. 1:14).
 - c) In His designation “God” 2:8-9.
 - 1] This royal psalm (45) celebrated the wedding of the king to his bride. Its usage may be an example of the “characteristic hyperbole of oriental court style” (Bruce, p. 19) in calling the king “God”.
 - 2] Typologically it is fulfilled in the union of Christ and His church (cf. Eph. 5:22ff). Stress lies on the name given to the one addressed -- God!
 - d) In the designation “Lord” 2:10-12.
 - 1] Psalm 102 contrasts the eternity of Jehovah with the temporal nature of earth.
 - 2] The Hebrew writer calls Jesus “Lord”. Contextually the antecedent of “Lord” is the divine name (YHWH). This passage devastates “Jehovah’s Witness” teaching that Jesus is a creation of Jehovah; Jesus is Jehovah!
 - e) In the position of ruler at God’s right hand 2:13-14.
 - 1] This quote from Psalm 110 is often cited as the expression of God’s will for the Messiah to rule over God’s kingdom and conquer His enemies.
 - 2] Cf. Ac. 2:34; 1 Cor. 15:25
 - f) Therefore as God’s Son, he is superior to angels, the heavenly mediators of the Law (1:4-14). (This is the basis of the exhortation in 2:1-4.)
 - g) And, as God’s Son, he is superior to Moses, the earthly mediator of the Law 3:1-6
 - 1] Like Moses, He was faithful in His task (3:2).
 - 2] Unlike Moses, who was a *servant in the house of God*, Jesus is a *Son over the house of God*. (This is the basis of the exhortation in 3:7-4:13.)
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- 3] Unlike Joshua, He brings true rest to God's people (4:1-13). (This comparison is not formally presented but is implicit in the exhortation section 4:8).
- b. Thus Jesus, as God's Son, is superior in nature to all who have participated in the history of Israel's redemption.
2. Superior or better in experience or preparation -- "Made perfect"
- a. The Hebrew writer's affirmation that Jesus is superior to angels is ironic. He who is superior to angels as God's Son was made "*lower than the angels*" that He might be perfected through His sufferings as the "*last Adam*" (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:22) or man (2:5-18).
- 1) The psalmist's statement in Psalm 8 concerning man is not fully satisfied or fulfilled by man's limited dominion over the creation. Instead it points to the "*last Adam*" under whose feet God has placed "*all things in subjection*"! (Cf. Eph. 1:22, 1 Cor. 15:20-27; 1 Pet. 3:22) He has "*been crowned with glory and honor*" and "*appointed over the work of God's hands*" (2:7).
 - 2) Yet in order to occupy this place of dominion He must first become "*lower than angels*" for a time that God might "*perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings*" (2:9-10).
- b. Therefore, both Jesus and "*the seed of Abraham*" share a common relationship to God. They are all His sons; and thus are brethren (2:11).
- 1) This commonality with humanity was foreshadowed in the typical relationships of two OT characters, David and Isaiah. Both of these texts involve complex typologies.
 - a) David as the King of Israel (along with his brethren) was a type of the Christ in his sufferings and deliverance (Ps. 22). David's proclamation of victory among His brethren has a greater fulfillment in Jesus and His relationship to the redeemed family. Emphasis in the quote is on "*my brethren*" which established antotypically the relationship of the Christ with what the Hebrew calls "the seed of Abraham".
 - b) Isaiah in His faithful trust in God in the midst of Gentile oppression and Jewish unbelief and his deliverance along with his children (Is. 8) was a type of Christ who would trust God in suffering Gentile oppression and Jewish unbelief and be delivered by Him from death in His resurrection.
 - 2) Jesus shared our humanity that He might through death render Satan powerless and bring deliverance to the seed of Abraham (2:14-16). Through His conquest of death itself, the most fearful weapon in Satan's arsenal, He gives help to those who live in Abraham's trust.
- c. Therefore, it was necessary in God's purpose for Him to be tested by suffering so that He might:
- 1) *Become a merciful and faithful high priest to make propitiation for the sins of the people* (2:17). By facing all temptation without sin, Jesus is qualified to be a sacrifice for our sins.
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- 2) *Come to the aid of the tempted* (2:18). Having endured the full suffering of sin's power, He knows exactly what we need.
 - d. In chapter five the Hebrew renews discussion of this theme: Like the OT priests Jesus was perfected to serve as our high priest by experiencing the struggle of all humanity against temptation and sin and by the appointment of God (5:1-10).
 - 1) The OT priests were qualified by weakness and the appointment of God.
 - a) They were able to deal gently with others because of their own weaknesses (5:1-3).
 - b) They were honored to serve by God's call (5:4).
 - 2) Jesus also was qualified, not by weakness but by perfect "*obedience*" which he "*learned*" through "*sufferings*", and by the decree of God. In this he is superior to the Aaronic priests.
 - a) He was appointed by prophecy from God (5:5-6)
 - b) He was prepared by the experience of suffering (5:7-10)
 - e. Thus, Jesus was "made perfect" to serve as our high priest!
 3. Superior or better in tenure -- "Forever!"
 - a. Jesus was called to serve as a priest after the order of Melchizedek (5:9-10).
 - 1) So far as the Biblical record is concerned, Melchizedek appears as a priest without ancestor or successor. He received his priesthood from no one and he passed it to no one; thus, from the standpoint of what the Scripture says, he becomes a "*perpetual*" priest.
 - 2) Here we see one of the interesting features of OT types. In God's mind the real existed before the shadow. Consequently the real could never be derived from the shadow; instead the shadow derived from the real. Melchizedek was "*made like*" the Son of God (not vice versa). To serve God's purpose he was made a priest in order to serve as a type of Jesus!
 - b. This priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than that of Levi (7:1-10).
 - 1) Levi himself paid tithes to Melchizedek through his ancestor Abraham (7:4-10).
 - 2) God's declaration, after the giving of the Law, of a new priest "*after the order of Melchizedek*" (Ps. 110:4) implied that perfection was not possible through the Levitical priesthood (7:11-28).
 - c. Therefore, the priesthood of Jesus brings in a "*better hope*" based on His permanent role as our high priest. That better hope can be clearly seen by contrasting the Levitical priests with our high priest.
 - 1) They were appointed on the basis of fulfilling a physical requirement (fleshly descent from Aaron) but He is appointed on the basis of an indestructible life (His resurrection from the dead) 7:15-17!
 - 2) They were not appointed by oath, but Jesus was appointment by oath (Psa. 110:4) and that oath becomes a guarantee of a better covenant (7:18-22).
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- 3) They must exist in vast numbers to serve because of the reality of death, but He, because of His endless life, can serve all mankind for all time, saving forever those who drawn near to God through Him (7:23-25).
 - 4) They must offer sacrifices for themselves as well as those they represent because of their sin, but He, because He was sinless, could offer Himself once for all, in behalf of all (7:26-27).
 - 5) They were weak; but He is “*a Son made perfect forever!*” (7:28). The entire development of Jesus’ superior person is intended to urge the reader to “consider Him” (3:1) and “hold fast the confession of hope without wavering” (4:14; 10:23).
- d. Thus, Jesus serves as our high priest “forever”.
- II. Consider Him! Jesus as the apostle and high priest of our confession is the ground of all our service to God!
- A. Clearly the message of Hebrews was intended to have a contemporary impact upon the readers, who appear to be believing Jews who are contemplating leaving the faith of Christ.
1. If the temple service and all its trappings seemed more “real” to the Jewish disciple, the Hebrew writer wants him to understand that it is the high priesthood of Jesus in the heavens that is the “real”. The OT system was but a “shadow” of the real. But the heavenly realities must be seen with the eye of faith; and like the faithful before him the disciple of Jesus must embrace the things “hoped for” and “not seen” (Cf. Heb. 11:1) as the real inheritance and reward of God’s people.
 2. If the difficulties of persecution are the impetus to apostasy, the Hebrew writer would have his reader know that no suffering he experiences is beyond the pale of Jesus’ pain and suffering. He knows the full power of Satan’s temptations having been obedient to the point of death itself. And like the faithful before him, the disciples of Jesus must “*through faith and patience inherit the promises*” of God (Heb. 6:12).
 3. So then, the whole book of Hebrews finds the solution to the problem of apostasy and sets forth the power to constant faithfulness in a fixed gaze upon Jesus. How appropriately this conference was given the theme “Looking to Jesus”!
 - a. *Consider Him!* (3:1; 12:3)
 - b. *Fixing our eyes upon Him!* (12:2)
- B. But the message of Hebrews has lasting power to those of us who believe today. Though not tempted to return to Judaism as they, we too must confront the challenges of a world of doubt and persecution.
1. How easy it is for us to become so focused on this world that we lose touch with the true reality. How easy it is for earthly achievement to become more “real” than God’s approval! How easy it is for financial success to become more “real” than the reward of heaven!
 2. And who among us cannot recount days when mistreatment has not caused us to want to give up? Who among us has not gone home from a business meeting disgusted, maybe even heart-broken wondering if we would ever preach again? And who among us hasn’t just gotten weary of the journey?
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3. We too need to “consider Him” when reality fades and persecution grows. If Hebrews teaches us anything it is that our sense of the greatness of Jesus is what motivates our life of discipleship.
- C. And let us not forget why it is that we came to Jesus.
1. Sometimes I need a high priest because of other’s failures to do God’s will; but more often I need a great high priest because of my failure to do God’s will.
 2. He ever lives to make intercession for us!

Conclusion:

- I. So no matter how heavily temptation may press upon you! No matter how luring the world may at times be! No matter how often you fail and despair of your transgressions! No matter how tiring the road may become! Don’t ever lose sight of Him -- of who He is and what He did for us!!!! For when Jesus means to us what he meant to the Hebrew writer there can be no turning back no matter what the cost! Such is the power of the message of our great high priest!

Johnny Felker
 1139 Woodridge Place
 Mt. Juliet, TN 37122
 (615) 758-2827 or 883-3118
jdfelker@att.net

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