

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

*...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)*

## **The Character of a High Priest (Part 1)**

*Hebrews 5:1-10*

*1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; 2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. 4 And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.*

*5 So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU"; 6 just as He says also in another passage, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK." 7 In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. 8 Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. 9 And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, 10 being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

I begin this morning with the story of Telemachus. Telemachus was a monk who lived in the 4th century. He felt God saying to him, "Go to Rome." He was in a secluded monastery. He put his possessions in a sack and set out for Rome. When he arrived in the city, people were thronging in the streets. He asked why all the excitement and was told that this was the day that the gladiators would be fighting and killing each other in the coliseum, the day of the games, the circus.

He thought to himself, "Four centuries after Christ and they are still killing each other, for enjoyment?" He ran to the coliseum and heard the gladiators saying, "Hail to Caesar, we die for Caesar" and he thought, "this isn't right." He jumped over the railing and went out into the middle of the field, got between two gladiators, held up his hands and said "In the name of Christ, forbear."

The crowd protested and began to shout, "Run him through, Run him through." A gladiator came over and hit him in the stomach with the back of his sword. It sent him sprawling in the sand. He got up and ran back and again said, "In the name of Christ, forbear." The crowd continued to chant, "Run him through." One gladiator came over and plunged his sword through the little monk's stomach and he fell into the sand, which began to turn crimson with his blood. One last time he gasped out, "In the name of Christ forbear." A hush came over the 80,000 people in the coliseum. Soon a man stood and left, then another

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and more, and within minutes all 80,000 had emptied out of the arena. It was the last known gladiatorial contest in the history of Rome.

Humanity is a real paradox. For all our desire and cries of independence and free will there is yet a realization that we also need others to be at times, “go betweens” or mediators. Such mediators may either help us to see something in ourselves that is not right, as was the case of the Roman mob as they viewed the death of Telemachus, or they help us ease the tension, wrath or distrust of another party altogether. Having typed in the word “mediator” on a web search revealed an interesting thing - people are looking for “go betweens” in so many areas of life. One of the first types of mediators I found was “divorce lawyers” or those who stand between a feuding husband and wife. In fact, lawyers are simply mediators, those who stand between conflicting parties looking for some kind of resolution.

But mediation does not start and end with the law. As people we are also dependent upon the more casual mediator. I believe we often learn it in school. We write notes or make comments to friends and ask them to take those to another party. Being too shy to ask a person directly if he or she “likes me” we would often ask a friend to pose the question – am I right? There are also spiritual mediators, which the Bible tells us to forsake, for spiritual mediators are those who claim to speak with the spirits of the dead and they offer themselves then as go betweens between the world of the demonic and this physical world. And mediation does not end with individuals. Whole countries and their leadership may seek to serve as a mediator between other hostile countries. We have an example of this with how the United States has sought to mediate or broker peace between Israel and Palestine.

My point with all this is to say that people need mediators, the go betweens, those who are willing to broker peace between parties. And while the Protestant Church has moved away from recognizing a specifically called group out of the church to be mediators, or what we would call “priests” in favor of recognizing the New Testament truth of the priesthood of all believers, we have suffered from a sort of ignorance as to the importance and necessity of a mediator. Such a mediator was called a priest in the Old Testament and there was one priest in particular that served as the mediator of mediators; as the prime minister – the high priest. Now we know that 2 Timothy 2:5 tells us of this important truth –

***For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...***

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But the idea that there is now only one mediator between God and man does not lessen the concept and our need to appreciate the position; rather I suggest it bears with more urgency our need to understand the role of the mediator and priest. This was certainly true for the first readers of this letter to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 4:14-16 we just learned of Jesus as being not just a high priest, but a great and sympathetic and gracious high priest. And while we may sit and say, “Oh, how wonderful, how nice!” the first readers may have been a bit more perplexed.

The concept of the Messiah, the Savior, serving as high priest was an unfamiliar one to the Hebrews; for they knew very well that Messiah was not to come via the priestly line of Levi or Aaron. So, the very first question they might have asked after considering the statement of Hebrews 4:14-16 would have been, “How is Jesus Christ qualified to serve as high priest?” Numbers 16:40 has an interesting comment that some of these Hebrews might have been familiar with. After Korah’s rebellion, the censers they used were gathered up and given to Eleazar, the priest who hammered them into plates to cover the altar because God declared these censers, which were offered to Him, as holy. Why? Let us read Numbers 16:39-40 –

***39 So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers which the men who were burned had offered, and they hammered them out as a plating for the altar, 40 as a reminder to the sons of Israel that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the LORD; so that he will not become like Korah and his company — just as the LORD had spoken to him through Moses.***

In other words, no Jew who was not of the line of Levi or his son Aaron, was to ask as a mediator or priest. So again the question, “How is Jesus Christ qualified to serve as high priest?”

Let us remember that in the Old Testament economy the role, or burden of the high priest was mediatorial – that is, the high priest literally stood between God and man – representing man before God. Part of the high priest’s role was to shoulder the sin and spiritual needs of the people (not a job for the faint of heart). As the high priest, he made a yearly sacrifice on behalf of the people for their sins. Consider just how important this sacrifice and the giver of it was to the people. For it was only as God accepted the high priest into the holiest place of the tabernacle, before the ark of the covenant, and his sacrifice that the people themselves would be accepted before God. In other words, it was only in the successful execution of the high priest’s office that the people had any assurance of their standing before God; and such assurance was only temporary at best.

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Now we, looking back upon it, are aware that the Old Testament high priest only served as a type or example of the one true High Priest to come, that is Jesus. And I hope you can already see how it is only by the sacrifice of our High Priest, Jesus Himself, that we could ever be accepted before God; and that by the successful execution of the office of High Priest by Jesus, we can have full and eternal assurance of our standing before God. Yet, the question remains, “How is Jesus Christ qualified to serve as high priest, particularly since He was not the descendent of Levi or Aaron?” Hebrews 5:1-10 sets out to answer this question by revealing to us the very character of the high priest. The question for us becomes, “What is the character of the high priest and does Jesus in fact reveal this character?” To answer this question we will walk through three steps. First we will look at the **comparisons** between the Old Testament high priest and Jesus. Second we will look at the **contrasts** between the O.T. high priest and Jesus. Third we will be presented with the **conduct** of Jesus as high priest and finally we will conclude with the **confirmation** of Jesus as high priest. We will consider the first two of these four points this morning.

## I. The Comparisons Between the O.T. High Priest and Jesus (5:1-4)

Having already looked at some of the characteristics of Jesus as being a great, sympathetic and gracious high priest back in Hebrews 4:14-16, our author now would have us note the general qualities or characteristics of the Old Testament high priest. The first thing we see is a most universal aspect of the priesthood, **“for every high priest taken from among men...”** This points us back to what the author of Hebrews has been asserting all along, the very humanity of Jesus. For every high priest had to be “taken” or “obtained” from among men, or humanity. In this then we are to see the comparison between “every high priest” that has come before Jesus and Jesus himself – they are all human, “from among men.”

A second consideration is that every high priest has always been **“appointed”** or ordained. This word means “to appoint or place a person to a particular position.” Please make note of this word **“appointed”** for the author will use two other words to indicate that neither any O.T. high priest nor Jesus Himself choose or appointed themselves to this position. Someone called them to the position and as one reads the Old Testament, it is clear who actually did the choosing, namely God Himself. Turn with me if you would to Exodus 28:1, where we find the priesthood being established and let us note who is doing this appointing.

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***Then bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the sons of Israel, to minister as priest to Me — Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.***

Here then is the inception of the Old Testament priesthood, referred to as the Aaronic Priesthood because the LORD choose Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests to Israel. Numbers 18:6-7 also have a similar feel to Hebrews 5:1.

***6 “Behold, I Myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD, to perform the service for the tent of meeting. 7 But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”***

Here we have reference to the “Levites.” Remember that Levi was the father of Moses and Aaron, both of whom served God as priests along with their descendents. This is why the priesthood is also referred to as the Levitical Priesthood, speaking of the sons of Levi. Both note the words used by the LORD, ***“I myself have taken...”*** It is the LORD that does the taking and choosing when it comes to the priesthood. All of this should serve to remind us of the sovereignty of God – He does as He chooses, ***“and no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Daniel 4:35).***

Now, in addition to being of humanity and chosen specifically by the LORD, the high priest is also to carry out specific functions. He is chosen ***“on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.”*** In other words, the priest is to be a representative of man to God, and because man is inherently sinful, or unholy, something needs to be offered to atone for or reconcile the disparity between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. Because the wages of sin is death, God allowed the death, or blood of bulls and goats to temporarily cover the sinfulness of man so that he might be able to stand before God. It was the priest who made these gifts and sacrifices. The high priest of Israel however had to make a sacrifice not only for the sins of the people, but also for himself because he himself was also sinful. This is purposely stated to remind the readers of this truth in verse 3, ***“and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.”***

So the high priest was to be human, chosen by God and able to offer sacrifices for sins. But another quality of the high priest is found in verse 2 is that

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he is to ***“deal gently with the ignorant and misguided since he himself is beset with weakness.”*** Beloved, this is just a fancy way of saying that the high priest was to be sympathetic. The idea behind ***“deal gently”*** means to be moderate in response. You see, the high priest was to be neither too harsh in condemning sin nor too lenient in forgiving it knowing that he himself is subject to the same tendencies toward sin. Again, the qualities and character of the high priest were demanding to say the least. To be sure it was a position of high standing and honor, but it came with a price for the life of the high priest was in a sense given to serve and to save the people. Because of this, the author once again reminds the readers that this position was not something obtained by mere aspiration on the part of a man. In the church, a man may aspire to the office of Elder as the Word declares and with much prayer, preparation, qualification and dedication, the LORD may choose any man for such a position. But only one man out of thousands would ever serve as high priest.

Therefore, verse 4 reminds us, ***“and no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.”*** So here, in addition to the idea that the high priest is “appointed” as seen in verse one, now we have our second word that emphasizes the sovereign choice and will of God for the high priest much also be ***“called by God.”*** The word called, or *kaleo* in the Greek simply means, “to call; or to call out.” It can refer to naming someone or, as we have here, of calling someone to a position. Sometimes we refer to one’s calling in life. We might say that it appears Tyler has a “calling” on his life to ministry. In the case of the high priest, the calling by God was sure.

And very quickly then, for our author does not specifically point this out but it is to be understood, we are to notice the comparisons or similarities that exists between high priest of Israel and of Jesus. For as we will see more in just a moment, Jesus was appointed or called by God to be our high priest. Also, Jesus offered not sacrifices for sins, but just one sacrifice for sin, that is Himself. And, as was noted from Hebrews 4:15, Jesus is more than able to deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, not because He was beset with weakness, but because He suffered with our weaknesses, yet without sin.

## II. The Contrasts Between the Old Testament High Priests and Jesus (5:5-6)

While there are numerous comparisons between the High Priests of Israel and Jesus there are also a number of important contrasts that are now revealed in verses 5 and 6.

Like the high priest of old, our text tells us that Jesus, ***“did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest...”*** Jesus did not appoint or call Himself to this position, but, like the high priests, was called of God. While this itself is a



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similarity to the old high priests, it is in the calling of Jesus as a high priest that we begin to see the contrasts and these contrasts are revealed by means of quoting some familiar Old Testament passages that spoke of Messiah, or the Christ, that is Jesus.

The first quote is from Psalm 2, ***“You are My Son, today I have begotten You.”*** This passage emphasizes the Incarnation. The truth is that the eternal Son of God, without beginning or end, also became a man, a human, born in time of the Virgin Mary and upon taken on flesh, forever embraced a human nature along with His divine nature. What is the point? Whereas the sons of Aaron could only serve as high priest temporarily, because they were subject to death, the eternal Son of God, who became flesh or human and will always remain 100% human along with being 100% God, will now serve eternally as high priest. This is emphasized again in verse 6 as the author quotes now from Psalm 110:4, ***“You are a priest forever...”*** What a shocking statement this would have been for these first Jewish readers. Never before had they experienced nor had they evidently considered that Messiah would always be a priest. No doubt that the history of Israel’s High Priest’s was sorted at best. There were times under good and righteous High Priests and there were times under bad and corrupt High Priests. Perhaps the changing of the High Priest in Israel was not unlike the changing of Presidents here in the States. What will this new man bring to the office and will it be for the peoples’ good or to their harm?

But as we wrap up our study this morning, I want to focus in on this last statement found in verse 6. We read, ***“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”*** You see, all the way up to this point, many of the first Jewish readers could have been thinking, “Yes, it is amazing all the coincidences between Jesus and the high priests of Israel. But there is just one problem with your theory, we know that Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi. He was not a son of Aaron and therefore, by the testimony of the Word of God itself, Jesus could not serve as high priest under the Aaronic Priesthood. Therefore the question remains; how is Jesus qualified to serve as high priest?”

Over the years I have learned a lot about fixing cars from my father-in-law who was a mechanic for many years. Now, if in the early days (and even now) I were to come along while he was replacing the transmission on my car and I were to say to him, “You are not doing that right,” what kind of response might I get? Well, I know my father-in-law to be quite gracious and magnanimous, so he might let me off easy, but some of us might at least think, “What qualifies you, one who has no mechanicing in the blood, to tell the mechanic how to do his job?” This is at issue in our text, “how can Jesus, who has no right to the priesthood, now be a high priest?” And in the beauty, wisdom and providence of God, God made a provision for there to be another priesthood, one by which the

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Messiah, a non-Levi, to assume the role of high priest. Remember that no one takes this honor himself but is called or appointed by God and in Psalm 110:4, in reference to Messiah, Jesus is called a priest, but a priest according to a different priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek.

Now we will come to know this Old Testament character of Melchizedek much more intimately a bit later in our study of Hebrews. So for now, let me remind you that Melchizedek was a mysterious figure in the book of Genesis to whom the great and mighty Abraham paid a tenth of all he had as an act of worship after Abraham, by God's help, defeated the kings and rescued his nephew Lot. Let us turn to Genesis 14 and look at this character, Melchizedek, pointing out then how the priesthood of Melchizedek differs or is in contrast to that of Aaron.

## **Genesis 14:18-20**

**18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. 19 He blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” He gave him a tenth of all.**

Please note with me the differences now between the priesthood of Aaron and his sons versus that of Melchizedek. One of the most immediate and striking differences is found in the description of Melchizedek as **“king of Salem”** and as **“a priest of God Most High.”** You see, the sons of Aaron and their priesthood could only served as priests, but Melchizedek and his priesthood made it possible for the priest to also be a king. There is no doubt that the descendants of Aaron had an earthly right, by their parentage, to be priests. Jesus could not say this for He was from what tribe? The tribe of Judah, a tribe that had prophecies concerning its kingly qualities. But who appoints or calls the high priest? God. And while Jesus could not be called a priest according to the Law of Moses, He could be called as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. This, in itself, is meant to reveal the superiority of Jesus as high priest over any priest from the descendants of Aaron.

But there is one more area of this Melchizedek priesthood that I would like to present you with because it is so wonderful. You see, the Aaronic priesthood had a fairly narrow focus. The High Priest, as he went in to make his yearly sacrifice, did not do it for all the peoples or nations on the earth. His ministry was focused upon the people of Israel and he offered his sacrifice for them. But who is this Melchizedek and his priesthood. Remember that Melchizedek existed long before there ever was a nation of Israel and long before Amram, a son from



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the house of Levi and Jochobed, a daughter from the house of Levi, conceived and gave birth to the eldest boy, Aaron and their youngest, Moses. My point is that Melchizedek was not Jewish at all, but rather was a Gentile. So the priesthood of Melchizedek represents a non-Jewish and therefore universal priesthood. This means that the priestly work of Jesus Christ would not be limited in focus to the borders of Israel. This means that when Jesus went into the holy of holies with the blood of His sacrifice, He was not simply making a sin offering for Israel, but for all who would by faith trust in the merits and sufficiency of His sacrifice.

All this should move us to a response. For all the Old Testament High Priests were only shadows of Jesus, who would be appointed by God as the one true and forever Mediator for man. This is how Jesus is qualified to be High Priest – He was chosen by God not to be a temporary high priest according to the priesthood of Aaron, but an eternal high priest according to the priesthood of Melchizedek. Without an eternal mediator we have no way to God. We have seen repeatedly from the Scriptures and our study of our sinful condition, a condition that requires a go-between, a priest, or mediator. Only one eternal mediator has been appointed and only one has been accepted by God, the Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus must not simply be recognized as a great high priest – we must come to know Him as our very own High Priest – this is salvation. It is not enough for a Christian that Christ as instituted as high priest to act on behalf of men, unless he also believes that he himself is one of these men for whom Christ was appointed high priest. Do you so believe that you are one for whom Christ was appointed to be your High Priest? Do you believe Jesus to be qualified to represent you before God and to offer to God both gifts and sacrifices for your sins? Then rejoice in knowing so great a high priest.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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January 22, 2006*



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