

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART VI

INTRODUCING JESUS AS THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

I. The Letter now turns to its next theme, that of Jesus the great high priest who brings about the forgiveness of sins that the prayers and sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood could only symbolize.

A. The previous section had been a warning against infidelity during this journey of earthly life. This section gives assurance that God does forgive sins, but also has a warning that one must advance along the paths of salvation, rather than remaining spiritually immature.

B. The background here is that the tribe of Levi was set aside by God after the Chosen People's infidelity in worshiping the golden calf. The Levites rallied to Moses' assistance in putting an end to this idolatry. See Ex. 32:25-29; Duet. 33:8-11.

1. The Levites were in charge of performing the sacrifices, interpreting the Law, giving blessings in the name of God and in general taking care of the Temple and (before it was lost) the Ark of the Covenant. See, e.g., Duet. 18:1-8, 33:10, 1 Chron. 15:11-15, 16:4-37; 2 Chron. 17:7-9, 19:8-11; Ezek. 44. They were also medical advisors and administrators of justice. See Lev. 13; Duet. 17:8-9, 21:5, Num. 5:11-13. Overall, they would connect earth to heaven by the regular sacrifices and teaching, as kings were supposed to do by ruling and prophets by delivering messages and visions.

2. The Levites declined in the era before the exile, taking on some pagan practices, although some (especially of the line of Zadok) remained faithful. As a result, priests of the line of Zadok took on the central roles of worship. See Ezek. 44. After the exile, the priesthood and sacrifices were restored under the leadership of the governor Nehemiah and the priest Ezra.

3. For awhile, there were struggles in restoring the sacrifices and Temple worship. See Neh. 13:10-14. But especially after the Maccabean revolt, leading to Israel's independence by 134 B.C., the sacrifices and worship were fully restored. By the time of Jesus, the priests were again in high favor, performing the sacrifices at the Temple in accordance with many strict, and in fact often overly strict, rules. The Sadducees took their name from the line of Zadok, and were very eager to make sure the Temple and the sacrifices were protected. Even the Gospels reflect a respect for the sacrifices, the Temple, and the office of the high priest, even as they often condemn the individuals involved. See, e.g., Matt. 23:16-22; John 13:13-22, 11:45-53.

C. In addition to the priests in general, there were the line of high priests, starting with Aaron and then his son Eleazar. See Exod. 28:4-39; Lev. 8:7-9, Num. 20:25-28. The high priest was set aside with special robes and a mitre..

- The high priest was the spiritual leader of the Jews and in charge of the sacrifices and worship in general.

- In addition, the most important duty of the high priest was to preside at the Day of Atonement. On that day, he entered the Holy of Holies, the center of the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant resided before it was lost in 586. He alone was allowed there and he alone, and only on this day, pronounced the sacred name Yahweh. He sprinkled the throne of mercy on top of the Tabernacle with the blood of the sin offerings, and then sprinkled the people with this blood before the veil of the sanctuary and on the altar. He would then symbolically confer the sins of the people onto a goat (the basis for our term "scapegoat") by means of confession; the goat would then be led out into the desert, symbolizing the departure of the guilt of the people. See Lev. 16

D. Even before Christ , it was understood that the sacrifices alone did not take away sins, but only symbolized the healing power of God. See, e.g., Is. 1:11-20; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8. The letter is arguing that it is Christ alone who can bring us to that reconciliation the prophets spoke of. See, e.g., Is. 52:13-53:12; Hos. 13:12-14:8; Micah 4:1-7, 5:1-4.

II. This section begins by describing Jesus as the great high priest who at the same time experienced human weakness, but has also "passed through the heavens."

A. The phrase passed through the heavens reflects a view that the sky and space above earth are the lower heavens, and the throne of God is in the highest heaven. See, e.g., Ps. 50:4-6, 148:4. A similar phrase in the letter to the Ephesians refers to the glory of Jesus, who has triumphed and pours out gifts for different ministries on earth. See Eph. 4:10.

B. But the letter also makes clear that Jesus, because He was and is truly human understands human weakness. See also Romans 8:3-4. The idea is to give us confidence and a sense of wonder in the presence of God as well.

C. This introduction then gives what, to the Jews, would have been an astonishing invitation to "draw near to the throne of grace" and find God's grace. The reference would have been to the seat of mercy that was on top of the Ark of the Covenant. Only the high priest could draw near to it; all others were forbidden. It was perilous even to touch the Ark. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 6:1-10. But

now God invites us into the presence that only the high priest could approach, reflecting the glory Christ has won for us.

D. The letter then draws on a common sense analogy. It points out that a priest, because of his own weaknesses, should be able to sympathize with others who are struggling. There is a note of irony here, for the actual Sadducees and priests often had little sympathy with the struggles of others. See, e.g., Matt 23:4; Luke 11:46.

- The priests of old, including the high priest, would make atonement for their own sins, as well as the sins of the people. See, e.g., Lev. 9:7, 16:15-34. The letter points out that the temptation to sin could be seen in a positive light as building up understanding. Cf. 2 Cor. 12:7.
- The Greek word here for patiently, *metriopahein*, is also noteworthy, for the Stoics used it to mean an almost emotionless balance that they considered the ideal, whereas here the perfection of sympathy involves caring very much, as the passage will later describe.

E. The letter then points out that this office is given by God, and therefore involves exercising divine power. Thus, contrary to mere earthly offices, this office cannot simply be acquired by human merit or choice, although humans may select them. See, e.g., Ex. 18.

F. The letter then shows how Jesus perfectly fulfilled these qualifications, but without sin. The letter proceeds along these qualifications in reverse order

1. It points out that Jesus was appointed by God. Unlike Adam, who grasped for divinity, Jesus took on humanity and waited upon God's time for His glory to be shown. See, e.g., Phil 2:6-7. Rather than take glory on easy terms, Jesus does God's will, and therefore, receives that glory in His human nature. See, e.g., Matt. 4:1-11; John 8:54-59.

- The letter again applies Psalms 2 and 110, which describe the great conquering king, to Jesus, chosen by God to bring His kingdom to fulfillment. The series of quotations that begins the letter also applies these psalms to Jesus. But the earlier passages quotes verse 1 of Psalm 110, instead of verse 1, which describes the Messiah at God's right hand. Here the letter quotes verse 4, which describes the future Messiah as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the mysterious priest king of Salem. It is thus introducing the theme of a priesthood outside of and prior in time to, the Levitical priesthood, a primordial priesthood that Jesus would also claim

2. This section then goes on to say that Jesus truly suffered and thus offered prayers in this context. The passage reflects all of the prayers Jesus offered in the midst of suffering, His own or others. See, e.g., Mark 7:34; John 11:33-38. It especially calls to mind Psalm 22, the first verse of which at least, Jesus prayed from the Cross: "My God, my God why have You abandoned me?" See, e.g., Matt. 27:46.

- The idea is that, because of His true sufferings, including a human desire to be preserved from suffering and death, Jesus gives us more comfort in times of our own temptation or suffering.

3. The letter then goes on to say that He offered perfect obedience from His sufferings and thus came to perfection.

- It may seem puzzling to say that Jesus came to perfection, for He was without sin or flaw from the beginning. However, as a sapling (even without flaw) comes to perfection by growth into a tree, so too Jesus in His human nature came to perfection throughout His life by growing into full manhood and completing His mission. See, e.g., Luke 1:80, 2:40, 52. In addition, the glorified body of Christ came through His death and resurrection.

- This perfect sacrifice of obedience, even unto death becomes, as the letter will later explain, the source of true forgiveness and salvation that the old sacrifices only pointed towards. The perfect obedience that the prophets called for is at last offered by Jesus.

G. This section then concludes by reintroducing the theme that Jesus is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, both reflecting the promises of a glorious conqueror in Psalm 110, and the mysterious, timeless priesthood of the priest king of Salem, to whom Abraham himself offered tithes and homage. The perfect act of obedience from Jesus forms the basis for this restoration of the connection between heaven and earth that Melchizedek represented. See Phil 2:5-7; Col. 1:20.

III. The letter then goes on to say that this material may be difficult to understand because the readers are not advancing in the faith and understanding as they should.

A. This section begins with a comparison between taking in Christian doctrine and feeding on a feast. The infants in the faith can only take in the milk of basic teachings, unable to think about them or apply them. See 1 Cor. 3:1-3.

- St. Paul several times compares the beginnings of the practice of faith to being children in the faith. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 4:1-2; Eph.4:11-14. There are more positive references to infancy in the faith, in terms of a docile reception of it. See, e.g., 1 Pet. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:7. The call here is to combine receptivity with intellect. Cf. Matt. 10:16.

B. The letter then gives what appears to be a summary of basic Christian doctrines.

- It is noteworthy that, among the basic doctrines is the "laying on of hands," which could be the sacrament of Confirmation and/or Holy Orders. See, e.g., Acts 8:18, 19:6 (confirmation); 1 Tim. 4:14, 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6; Acts 6:6 (Holy Orders.) It may also refer to Anointing of the Sick, see James 5:14, or sacraments in general. In any case, this reference is an indication that sacraments were from an early time an essential part of the faith.

C. Here, as continually throughout the letter, there is a warning against falling away. Adherence to the faith is presented with two images.

1. The first image is tasting the "the heavenly gifts and good word of God" and being enlightened. This image could be a reference to baptism and the Eucharist. The second meaning is sensing the faith so often that one "tastes and sees the goodness of the Lord." See Ps. 34:9, 36:9-10, 119:103; Prov. 24:13-14; Sir. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Peter 3:3. The favor of God is often compared to seasoning that makes life delightful and light that allows us to see with the vision of heaven.

- The warning, however, is that once one has come so close to God that one can taste and see His goodness, falling away is all the worse, for it is a more willful rejection of God.

2. The second image is one Jesus often used, that of a field watered by the grace won by Christ, bringing forth good fruits for the kingdom. See, e.g., Matt. 7:16-20, 13:1-7, 18-30, John 15:1-6. In this case, those good fruits are likely insights into the kingdom of God.

- As with Jesus, the warning is that, if one does not bear fruit, advancing in the kingdom, one will lose that grace.