

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART VIII

CHRIST AS ESTABLISHING THE NEW COVENANT

I. The letter then sums up the last section and introduces a related point, the new Covenant that Jesus establishes.

A. The letter summarizes the previous section in saying that all the roles of a high priest are accomplished by the High Priest Jesus Christ.

- The high priest of the old covenant was always expected to lead the worship and guide the people.

- However, from Aaron to the sons of Eli and onward, they often faltered either through a desire to be popular or worse. See, e.g., Ex. 32:21-24; 1 Sam. 2:12-17. Although there were some high priests such as Ezra who led the country well, even the best could not really bring the people to the holiness God desired.

- Although it was a not duty assigned by the Bible, in the absence of a king, the high priests often conducted the foreign policy of the Chosen People. The high priests of the time of Jesus thought they were securing the future of the people by keeping a rebellion from taking place. One great irony was that, by opposing Jesus, they were instead bringing judgment upon the city of Jerusalem. See, e.g., Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 29:41-44.

- Nevertheless, the high priests were powerful figures and highly respected, at least until the destruction of the temple. The letter is saying that that great reverence and confidence is to be well placed, but in Jesus Christ, of whom the prior high priests even at their best were but an image.

B. The letter then goes on to introduce the theme that Jesus is not only the high priest, but also the new sacrifice of the true sanctuary in heaven, establishing the New Covenant.

1. The letter points out that Jesus the new high priest is at the right hand of God, here described in His Majesty in heaven. The image again is from Psalm 110, which describes the new and glorious king as at the right hand of God. Here, the letter refers kingly authority of Jesus who protects His people. This authority is combined with His role as the High Priest. See also Acts 3:36.

2. The letter then describes Jesus as the minister of the sanctuary in the "true tent" established by God. This reference would have reminded the people of the Tent of Dwelling that housed the Ark of the Covenant and was the center of Jewish worship until the building of the temple. Here, the letter makes clear that the spiritual and invisible is more real than the visible. See also Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17

- There seems to be an implication that now the new Chosen People of God are journeying again as they journeyed on their way to the Promised Land.

3. The letter argues that, as the earthly Tent and later Temple were images of a heavenly Temple, so also the earthly sacrifices must also be images of a heavenly sacrifice, leading them to ask what that sacrifice may be.

- The letter states that the Book of Exodus itself implied that such was the case. For, after Moses received all of the instruction regarding the building of both the Ark and the Tent, which would later become the model for the Temple, God says to him, "See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." Ex. 25:40; see also Ex. 26:30, 27:9. The implication taken from this was that Moses saw, not only the Tent on earth but a greater Tent and Tabernacle in heaven that he was trying to replicate as much as human effort could. See also Acts 7:44-50. Prophets had spoken of a worship in heaven, see Is. 6:1; Dan. 7:9, but had said little about it. It would appear that Moses also saw the worship in heaven, but could not write of it.

- The letter points out that they already have priests to offer earthly sacrifices; and, as the letter stated earlier, Jesus was not of the human line of priests, at least according to the Law, for by His foster father Joseph, He was of the tribe of Judah and house of David. For this reason as well, one should expect Him to offer a very different sacrifice. The reference to priests who seem to be offering current sacrifices would seem to indicate that the Temple had not yet been destroyed at the time of the letter.

II. The letter then argues that the prophets themselves pointed out that there would be a new and better covenant.

A. Several prophets spoke of a new or renewed covenant. See, e.g., Is. 55:3-56:8; Jer. 31:31-40; Ez.37; Mal. 3. Even those prophets who did not expressly use the term new covenant often spoke of a messianic era in similar terms. See, e.g., Hos. 14; Joel 3; Amos 9:9-15; Micah 4:1-5:8.

B. The letter takes a quotation from the prophet Jeremiah regarding the new covenant. Jer. 31:31-34

1. That passage is particularly appropriate because it comes right after a prophesy of Jeremiah about the impending destruction of Jerusalem due to the foolish confidence of the king Zedekiah.
2. In 597 B.C., the Babylonians took over Jerusalem, deported the new King Jehoiakim and many leading citizens, and appointed his uncle Zedekiah. Jeremiah warned Zedekiah that he must accept Babylonian dominance for the time because it was God's punishment. But Zedekiah listened instead to the false prophet Hananiah who advised him to throw off the Assyrian yoke. At this point, Jeremiah prophesied of the catastrophic consequences of that attempt. See Jer. 29:16-23.
3. But then Jeremiah prophesied of the restoration afterward. See Jer. 30:10-22. Then, the prophet speaks of a new covenant that He would make going to the very heart of the people. See Jer. 31:31-34. Jeremiah went on to relate God promise that the nation of Israel would continue until the earth itself is unmade. See Jer. 31:35-37

C. The prophesy describes a new covenant that would bring the Chosen People to their height.

1. First, the new covenant would be with both halves of the Chosen People. After the reign of Solomon, they were divided in two due to a rebellion after King Rehoboam, Solomon's son refused the people's desire for lower taxes and other burdens. See 1 King 12. The northern Kingdom was conquered and destroyed by Assyria in 721 B.C., never again to be reconstituted. St. Thomas explains that the northern kingdom stands for those who are outside of the Law, i.e. the Gentiles, who will be joined to those who received the Law, i.e. the continuing nation of Judah after the Exile. See Rom. 9:6.
2. The new covenant would be stronger and deeper than the old one, for that one was more external, dealing with symbols and rules that were good in themselves but could not bring about the full holiness that God wanted. As a result, the people could never fully keep the covenant and it only showed the need for something greater. See, e.g., Rom. 7:4-25; Gal. 3:15-29.
3. The new covenant would be written upon the very minds and hearts of the people so that they would know the Lord personally, from the least to the greatest. Joel prophesied in similar terms and St. Peter proclaimed that that prophesy was

fulfilled at Pentecost. See Joel 3:1-5; Acts 2:14-21. The implication of saying people will not teach each other, but rather know God, see also Is. 54:13 is not that there will be no teachers of any sort. Compare Matt. 5:19; Eph. 4:11, Rom. 12:7. Rather the personal experience of God will be greater than any knowledge that can be communicated. The teaching is as shadows and pictures that will give way to vision. See 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 5:6; 1 John 3:2.

4. The statement "They will be My people and I will be their God," see also Ez. 38:23-28, may seem obvious, but it implies the reversal of the statement at the beginning of the Book of Hosea that, because of the infidelity of the people of the northern kingdom, they were no longer the people of God. See Hos. 1:9. That is presumably why the northern kingdom was destroyed and never again restored. The promise of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is that the sinfulness of humanity will never again break them off from God's covenant. See, e.g., Matt. 16:18. God would also forgive the people of their guilt and cease to count past sins against them, both individually and as a people. The author again wants the people to ask how this forgiveness would take place, given that the old sacrifices never accomplished it.

- In addition, the original promise "You will be My people" was in the context of setting the Chosen People apart from all others. See Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 16:1. Now, by contrast, as the prophets promised, people will be gathered from all nations to be the people of God. See, e.g., Is. 66:18; Micah 4:1-7.

5. The letter concludes that the old covenant was rendered obsolete by the new one. The implication is that the old covenant had its time, but that that time is over. The implication is that the Temple, which was the center of the Old Covenant is no longer needed.