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The Superior High Priesthood of Jesus: An Exegetical Study in the Book of Hebrews

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I believe many Christians have not fully grasped the wonderful truth and great comfort of knowing Jesus as their great High Priest, ever interceding for them at the right hand of God the Father. The superiority of Jesus, the Son of God, to the Old Testament high priests and Levitical priesthood is perhaps the most important contribution of the book of Hebrews to New Testament theology. On the other hand, there is apparently little teaching on and understanding of the role of Jesus as our great High Priest in the Church today.

The purpose of this essay is to examine in detail the high priesthood of Jesus as developed in the book of Hebrews, with a view to understanding the argument for the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood, and the significance of this.

The high priesthood of Jesus in the flow and structure of the book of Hebrews

The idea that the Son is a priest, indeed a high priest, is briefly introduced in chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Hebrews, but the most sustained focus on and

argument for the superiority of Jesus as our high priest is found in **Hebrews 4:14 to 5:10 and again in 6:20 to 7:28**. The superiority of Jesus' high priesthood is then the basis of **chapter 8:1 to 10:18** where the writer shows that this superior high priest has a better ministry with a better covenant, better sanctuary and better sacrifice. Finally, it is as our high priest that Jesus opens up the new and living way of confident access to God and persevering faith, hope and love that the writer urges upon his readers from chapter 10:19 to 13:25. Thus, the high priesthood of Jesus is essential to the whole thrust of Hebrews.

The significance of Jesus' high priesthood in summary

In His person, Jesus is "as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (Heb 1:4) and in His work, "Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better" (Heb 8:6). The ministry of Christ is His ministry as our great High Priest. The overall argument is that the Levitical priesthood (Heb 5:2-3; 7:11, 18-19), the old covenant (Heb 8:7-8, 13), the earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:1-10), and the animal sacrifices (Heb 10:1-4, 11) are all flawed, weak, ineffective, only "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Heb 8:5) and "of the good things that have come" (Heb 9:11) in Christ, and therefore, all are now obsolete. They have been replaced with the far superior high priesthood of Jesus (Heb 5:5-10; 7:1-8:1) as mediator of the new covenant (Heb 8:6-13; 9:15-17) in the true heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:2-5; 9:11, 23-24) where He offered His own body and blood as the final, once for all sacrifice for sin (Heb 9:12-14, 18-22, 25-28; 10:6-18).

The priesthood of Jesus introduced: cleansing from sin complete

The priesthood of the Son is first introduced in Hebrews 1:3c which says, "*After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (ESV, unless otherwise indicated; cf. Titus 2:14). At once, without any detail, the writer reveals that Jesus has accomplished the cleansing from sin that all humanity desperately needs but cannot achieve. As priest on behalf of His people, Jesus has removed the sin that makes us impure and unable to dwell with a holy God (cf. Heb 9:13-14). And He has sat down at the right hand of God because His redemptive work is finished and complete. There is no more to be done.

Looking ahead to Hebrews 10:10-14 we read, "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,¹³ waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet.¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Those who trust in the Son are forever cleansed of their sin and set free to dwell with a holy God for eternity.

The Son of God incarnate: fully able to represent and save humanity

Hebrews chapter 2 is focused on the incarnation of the Son of God who identified fully with us as human beings (Heb 2:1-8), suffered and conquered death on our behalf (Heb 2:9-10), and thus became exactly the Saviour and merciful High Priest that we need (Heb 2:17-18). The writer declares in Hebrews 2:9-11: *“But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”*¹⁰ *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.”*¹¹ *For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.”*

When verse 10 says that God *“should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering,”* this does not mean that the Son of God was not perfect already, but rather it means perfect as our Saviour, in other words, exactly the Saviour we need. Thus, the Son incarnate is perfectly qualified to represent His people (*“brothers”*) as their priest before God and accomplish their sanctification. *“He who sanctifies”* is the role of the priest and *“those who are sanctified”* are the people who need sanctification, in other words, *“purification for sins”* (Heb 1:3c). By implication, the accomplishment of this sanctification is linked to *“because of the suffering of death”* that *“by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone ... perfect through suffering”* (Heb 2:9-10). It is by His death that atonement for sin is accomplished.

Hebrews 2:17-18 summarises, *“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”*¹⁸ *For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”* (cf. Heb 5:7; 4:15).

Notice that the Son’s purpose as high priest in the service of God is *“to make propitiation for the sins of the people”* by means of sacrifices (cf. Heb 5:1, 3; 7:27; 8:3; 10:11). This means that by His sacrificial death, Jesus has satisfied the holy wrath of God against our sins. Atonement for sin is only accomplished when the sinner has been cleansed (purification) and the holy wrath of God has been satisfied (propitiation). And now, Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest who is able to help us when we suffer and are tempted because He Himself has suffered and been tempted.

Jesus as the unique Apostle and High Priest of the Christian confession

In chapter 3:1 the writer of Hebrews calls upon his readers to *“consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.”* There is only one Apostle and High Priest of the Christian confession or faith. As Apostle, Jesus was sent by God into the world as His final messenger and revelation

(Heb 1:1-3) and as High Priest, He is the perfect and final mediator appointed to represent the people before God and ultimately deal with their sins. To depart from this is to depart from “*our confession*,” in other words, the true faith. The implication is, “*let us hold fast our confession*” (Heb 4:14) without wavering, firm until the end (cf. Heb 3:6, 14; 10:23). The doctrine of the unique and supreme high priesthood of Jesus is essential to the Christian faith. To let go of this is to be lost.

We will look again in a moment under Hebrews 4:14 at why we should hold fast our confession but let us summarise what we have seen so far in the first three chapters. We have seen that as the only High Priest of our confession, Jesus has completed the work of redemption, having fully identified with our humanity in order to suffer and conquer death on our behalf, thereby accomplishing as our representative both purification of sin and propitiation for sin. He is a merciful and faithful high priest who is able to help those who are tempted and now is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Confidence in Jesus as our great High Priest is essential to Christian confession and life

This brings us to Hebrews 4:14 to 7:28 where the theme of the superiority of the high priesthood of Jesus is argued most extensively. However, we will not need to examine this whole section because within its centre, Hebrews 5:11 to 6:20a, the writer diverts his attention from the high priesthood of Jesus to rebuke his readers for their dullness of hearing and spiritual immaturity which put them in danger of falling away.

Hebrews 4:14-16 reads as follows: “*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*”¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

These verses are strikingly similar to Hebrews 10:19-23: “*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,*²⁰ *by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,*²¹ *and since we have a great priest over the house of God,*²² *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*²³ *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”*

These two positive exhortations in Hebrews 4:14-16 and 10:19-23 occur at critical points in the whole structure of Hebrews. The former pre-empted the explanation of the supremacy of Jesus as our high priest (Heb 4:14-7:28) and His better ministry (Heb 8:1-10:18) and the latter begins the

full outworking of the application of Jesus' superior high priesthood and ministry (Heb 10:19-13:25). This underlines again how essential the high priesthood of Jesus is to our Christian confession and Christian life.

Jesus as supreme, sympathetic, sinless high priest by whom we find grace

Returning to Hebrews 4:14-16, why should we "*hold fast our confession*"?

Because we have a *great* high priest, Jesus the Son of God (cf. Heb 10:21). Our high priest is superior to any earthly or Levitical priest. He is the very Son of God (cf. Heb 1:2-3).

Because Jesus "*has passed through the heavens,*" not a temporary, earthly tabernacle or temple built by human hands. He has entered God's heavenly sanctuary (cf. Heb 9:11, 24) and is still there interceding for us (Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 9:24; 10:12-13; cf. Rom 8:34).

Because "*we do not have a high priest who is unable sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*" (Heb 4:15; cf. 2:18). Jesus shares completely in the experience of our human weakness and the power of temptation, yet unlike us and every earthly priest, is completely without sin (cf. Heb 7:26; 2 Cor 5:21). Thus, we hold fast our confession because Jesus is both our sympathetic and *sinless* high priest. As we shall soon see in chapter 5, sin is not only the problem of the people. It is also the problem of every earthly priest or high priest. This is the great distinction between Jesus and all the Levitical priests, and the fundamental problem of the old covenant. They could sympathise with weakness and temptation (cf. Heb 5:2), but they needed sin offerings for themselves (Heb 5:3; 7:27; 9:7). Thus, Jesus' sinlessness is the most crucial reason why He is a superior high priest.

Hebrews 4:16 then draws out the implication that because Jesus is such a faithful, merciful, sympathetic, supreme, sinless high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence that we will "*receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" All because of Jesus our superior high priest we can draw near to the holy God expecting mercy instead of the just punishment for sin that we deserve and undeserved grace to help in time of need.

Jesus as High Priest compared with every Levitical high priest: purpose and qualifications

Immediately following this, Hebrews 5:1-10 draws a comparison between every Levitical high priest (Heb 5:1-4) and Jesus Christ (Heb 5:5-10) in order to show even more how Jesus is perfectly qualified to be the high priest by whom we may approach the throne of grace with confidence:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with

weakness. ³ *Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.* ⁴ *And no one takes the honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.*

⁵ *So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you";* ⁶ *as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."*

⁷ *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.* ⁸ *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.* ⁹ *And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,* ¹⁰ *being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

Verse 1 reveals both the purpose and qualifications of a high priest. His purpose is *"to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins"* (cf. Heb 2:17; 5:3; 7:27; 8:3-4; 9:9; 10:11). His qualification is *"chosen from among men ... appointed"* by God or appointed by the Law (Heb 7:28). As Hebrews 5:4 says, *"no one takes the honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was."*

Lessons from the Old Testament on Aaron's role as high priest

The reference to Aaron in Hebrews 5:4 should take us back to Exodus 28:1 to 29:30 which records the LORD's designation, consecration, and ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests to the LORD. No other person was permitted to burn incense before the LORD (Num 16:40) or perform the service bestowed by the LORD upon Aaron and His sons (Num 18:7). There are a few significant lessons here.

Firstly, Aaron is the original high priest even though he is not called that, and the term *"high priest"* occurs first only in Numbers 35:28. Earlier in Leviticus 4:3 the high priest is referred to as *"the anointed priest."* That Aaron is effectively the high priest is made clear by the fact that the *"holy garments"* described in Exodus 28:2-39 are one set of garments to be worn by Aaron only (Ex 28:2-3; 29:5-7). His sons are also set apart as priests (Ex 28:1, 41; 29:1, 9), but they wear *"coats"* (Ex 28:40; 29:8).

Secondly, the holy garments the LORD commands to be made for Aaron according to His instructions are *"for glory and for beauty"* (Ex 28:2, 40). When you read through this passage you will see that these garments really were splendid. The high priest looked magnificent. He was meant to be/look "great" because He was to approach God, but all this was dress,

whereas Jesus is “*great*” because of His superior nature as perfect Son of God.

Thirdly, the design of the garments, especially the shoulder pieces and breast-pieces with the precious stones engraved with the names of the sons of Israel (Ex 28:7-12, 15-21, 29-30), made it very clear that the high priests carried the people of Israel before the LORD upon their shoulders and upon their hearts so that all that they did was as representatives acting on behalf of the people.

Finally, on the “*plate of pure gold*” (Ex 28:36-37) or “*holy crown*” (Ex 29:6) on the front of the turban on the high priest’s head, were engraved the words, “*Holy to the LORD.*” Significantly, Exodus 28:38 also says, “*It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.*” This speaks again to the purpose or role of the high priest.

Every Aaronic high priest is beset with sin and weakness

Returning to Hebrews 5:1, we should notice that with the expression “*every high priest*” (cf. Heb 8:3; 10:11) the contrast is established between the Aaronic high priesthood as a generic whole and Jesus. The whole Aaronic high priesthood is going to be shown to be inferior and ineffective. This also sets up the many priests, many sacrifices, every day, every year contrast to the one high priest who makes one sacrifice once for all (cf. Heb 7:23, 27; 9:12, 25ff.; 10:10-14).

In verse 2, the fact that the high priest “*can deal gently* [i.e., sympathetically; cf. of Christ, 2:18; 4:15] *with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness*” should remind us that in the Levitical regulations the sin and guilt offerings which brought forgiveness of sins were only for unintentional sins or sins committed in ignorance (cf. Heb 9:7; Lev 4:2, 22, 27; 5:15-18). There were no sacrifices for defiant, wilful sin against the commands of God. In fact, a defiant sinner was to be cut off completely and his guilt remained on him (Num 15:27-31; cf. Heb 10:26-27).

Being able to “*deal gently*” with the people is the positive, but the negative lesson is that the Levitical high priests were able to sympathise with the people because they themselves were “*beset with weakness*” (Heb 5:2; cf. Heb 4:15; 7:28). The meaning of “*weakness*” is made clear in verse 3: “*Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifices for his own sins just as he does for those of the people*” (cf. Heb 7:27; 9:7). In other words, weakness means sinfulness, and sinfulness means inferior and ultimately ineffective. This ineffectiveness of the Levitical priesthood (Heb 5:2-3; 7:11, 18-19), the old covenant (Heb 8:7-8, 13), the earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:1-10), and the animal sacrifices (Heb 10:1-4, 11) underlies the whole argument that Jesus is the superior high priest (Heb 5:5-10; 7:1-8:1) of the new covenant (Heb 8:6-13; 9:15-17) in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:2-5; 9:11, 23-24) who offers

His own body and blood as the final sacrifice for sin (Heb 9:12-14, 18-22, 25-28; 10:6-18).

Jesus identified as both promised Saviour-King and High Priest after the order of Melchizedek

Now we are ready to return to Hebrews 5:5-10 where we will begin to learn just how great a high priest Jesus is, who does not need to offer up sacrifices first for His own sins, and then for the people.

Hebrews 5:5-6 shows with quotations from Psalms 2:7 and 110:4 that like the Levitical high priests (cf. Heb 5:1, 4), the eternal Son is qualified to be a high priest by being “*begotten*” as a man and by being God-appointed not self-appointed. Verse 10 reiterates that He has been “*designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*” Notably, in verse 5 the title Christ¹ is used for the first time in Hebrews in relation to His being our High Priest. It has previously been used in Hebrews 3:6 and 14 in connection with being a faithful Son over God’s house and therefore superior to Moses as a faithful servant in God’s house. But the point to make here is that “*Christ*” is not merely another way of referring to the historical Jesus or the eternal Son. The Christ is the promised, anointed Saviour-King; the long-expected Messiah. Thus, the Saviour-King is identified with God’s appointed “*high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*” Understanding this new order of priesthood is the focus of Hebrews chapter 7.

Jesus as our high priest fully understands our suffering and weakness, yet without sin

Hebrews 5:7 then shows that Jesus is also, like the Levitical high priests, able to “*deal gently*” (Heb 5:2) with the people because “*In the days of his flesh*” He has experienced suffering to the point of “*loud cries and tears to him who was able to save Him from death.*” Unlike the Levitical high priests (Heb 5:2-3) this is weakness and temptation without sin, for verse 7 continues, “*and he was heard because of His reverence*” (cf. Heb 2:18; 4:15). This is a high priest who knows the anguish of real human suffering. The primary historical reference here is Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-44; Mk 14:32-39; Lk 22:39-45), but also His prayers on the cross (Matt 27:46, 50; Mk 15:34, 37; Lk 23:46), and even there He interceded as Priest for those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34). Notice the language used by

¹ It is worth noting that there is a movement through the book of Hebrews from primarily referring to Jesus as the “Son” (12 times: Heb 1:1, 2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29), to “Christ” (14 times: Heb 3:6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 8:6; 9:11, 14, 24; 10:5, 10, 12; 11:26; 13:8, 21), and finally, “Jesus” (18 times: Heb 2:9; 3:1, 3; 4:14; 5:7; 6:20; 7:11, 22; 8:1; 10:10, 19; 12:1, 2, 24; 13:8, 12, 20, 21). Three-quarters of the references to the “Son” occur before chapter 7 and only one in the application section after 10:19. Two-thirds of both the references to “Christ” and “Jesus” occur from chapter 7 onwards.

Luke to describe Jesus' anguish: "*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like drops of blood*" (Luke 22:44). Significantly, Jesus "*offered up prayers and supplications ... to him who was able to save him*" (Heb 5:7) which is exactly what we now have confidence to do *because* Jesus is our High Priest at God's right hand (Heb 4:16; 10:19-22).

Notice too that Jesus does not offer up "*gifts and sacrifices for sins*" like the Levitical high priests (Heb 5:1, 3; 8:3) but "*prayers and supplications*" (Heb 5:7). The revelation of the sacrifice that Jesus offered for sins has been hinted at in Hebrews 2:9-10, and is implied here in Hebrews 5:9, but will only be made explicit in Hebrews 7:27 and following (cf. Heb 9:12, 14, 28; 10:5-10, 12, 19).

Hebrews 5:8-9 then says, "*Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*" This emphasises that even though Jesus is the divine Son of God, it was as a man that He learned full obedience to the will of the Father and accomplished this to perfection, even to the point of death on a cross (cf. Heb 2:9-10; Phil 2:5-8). This demonstrates again that even though Jesus can fully sympathise with our weaknesses and temptations, He Himself is without sin and therefore qualified to be a supremely better high priest than any Levitical priest, indeed, the perfect Saviour, which leads to the glorious outcome declared in verse 9: "*he became the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey him.*"

As High Priest and forerunner Jesus provides permanent access to God and the hope set before us

Hebrews 5:11 to 6:20a is a diversion in which the writer addresses the spiritual immaturity of the readers, but in Hebrews 6:20b he comes back to almost exactly the same statement he made in 5:10. Jesus has "*become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*"

In the context of Hebrews 6:20, the fact that Jesus is "*a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*" means that He "*has gone as a forerunner on our behalf*" (Heb 6:20) "*into the inner place behind the curtain*" (Heb 6:19c) which is the place of God's most holy presence, not within an earthly sanctuary, but in heaven (Heb 9:11, 24; cf. 9:3, 7). Notice that Jesus has entered *permanently* behind the curtain *on our behalf* having become a high priest *forever*. By contrast, the Levitical high priests could only ever enter the most holy place temporarily, and only once a year (Heb 9:7; cf. Ex 30:10). As forerunner, Jesus leads us in and provides us with access to God (Heb 10:19-20). Behind the curtain there is a "*hope set before us*" (Heb 6:18c) which is "*a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul*" (Heb 6:19a). It is Jesus as our High Priest and forerunner who connects us to this anchor of the soul, this hope, sure and steadfast.

And what is this hope? It is the “*hope set before us*” by God to which we “*have fled for refuge*” (Heb 6:18c). Refuge from what? From sin and its consequences. This is implied in the context of the danger of falling away (Heb 6:6), facing “*eternal judgment*” (Heb 6:3) and “*being cursed*” (Heb 6:8) as opposed to the “*better things—things that belong to salvation*” (Heb 6:9). In the wider context of the other warning passages (Heb 2:1-3; 3:7-19; 10:26-31; 12:25-29), those who do not *escape* the consequences of sin are those who fail to find *refuge*. This refuge and this hope are the absolute certainty that God does not change or lie and will fulfil His unchangeable purpose of blessing and salvation to the heirs of His promise to Abraham (Heb 6:9, 13-18a).

The only way we can be connected to this “*sure and steadfast anchor of the soul*” is through Jesus who “*as a forerunner on our behalf*” and as “*a high priest forever*” has gone “*into the inner place behind the curtain*” (Heb 6:19-20).

Melchizedek as God-intended type of the superior high priesthood of Jesus

Now Hebrews 7:1-10 is concerned with showing us what is meant by a high priest “*after the order [or “likeness” (Heb 7:15)] of Melchizedek.*” The writer argues that Melchizedek’s existence in history, his name and title, and his actions and function are intended by God as an image or type of Christ, the Son of God.

Regarding his existence, as far as the record in Genesis 14 is concerned, Melchizedek appeared in history and in Abraham’s life from nowhere and then promptly disappeared. Thus, Hebrews 7:3 says that he was “*without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*” There is an ‘eternality’ about him. In a literary sense, he is still living and therefore not prevented by death from continuing as a priest. Furthermore, do not miss that Melchizedek is a priest from the time of Abraham, long before Moses and Aaron and the institution of the Levitical priesthood.

Furthermore, Hebrews 7:2 shows that the name “*Melchizedek*” means “*king of righteousness*” (Hebrew: Mělek – “king”; šēdēq – “righteousness”) and the title “*king of Salem*” means “*king of peace*” (Hebrew: Šālēm related to šālôm – “peace”). Both are appropriate as descriptions of Jesus who is perfect in righteousness and exalted as King having satisfied God’s righteousness to secure our justification before God and reconciliation with God (cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14-18; Col 1:20; 1 Pet 3:18; Acts 3:14; 10:36).

In terms of function and actions, it is significant that Melchizedek is not only a king but also a priest. It is from this basis that Jesus is shown to be both a king and a priest which is the new order of priesthood. Melchizedek functions as “*priest of the Most High God*” (Heb 7:1; cf. Gen 14:18-20) mediating between the LORD God and Abraham by receiving the tithe due

to God from Abraham and by pronouncing the blessing of God upon Abraham (Heb 7:1-2). In Hebrews 7:4-10 the writer argues the essential point that Melchizedek functioned as one greater than Abraham, their greatest ancestor. This is captured in Hebrews 7:4 and 7:7: “*See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! ... It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.*” Not only that, he is superior to Levi and all the Levitical priests because “*he lives*” on (Heb 7:8) continually receiving the tithes of Levi who was “*in the loins of*” Abraham when he paid the tithe to Melchizedek (Heb 7:5-6, 8-10).

The Levitical priesthood could not achieve perfection and had to be replaced by Jesus

Hebrews 7:11-25 then shifts to the argument that the Levitical priesthood, which is the order of Aaron based on the Law of Moses (Heb 7:11, 16, 28), is shown to be defunct by the very fact that there is a need for another priest to arise according to a different order, the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:11) and with that a change of the law (Heb 7:12). In other words, if there was nothing wrong with the Levitical priesthood in the first place, there would be no need to replace it. The goal of the priesthood is “*perfection*” (Heb 7:11; cf. 7:19, 25), but the Levitical priesthood could not achieve this.

In Hebrews 7:13-14 the point is that if Jesus fulfils the prophecy of the Messiah King of the line of David from the tribe of Judah (cf. Matt 22:41-45; Mk 12:35-37; Lk 20:41-44) then, according to Psalm 110:4, He must also fulfil the role of a priest after the order of Melchizedek. This means both the prophecy and its fulfilment in Jesus reveal that the Levitical priesthood has been replaced.

Verses 15 and 16 then develop the argument further because not only is Jesus from another tribe, but also like Melchizedek (Heb 7:3, 8), He is able to be “*a priest forever*” (Heb 7:17, 24) “*not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life*” (Heb 7:16). In other words, by His resurrection, Jesus “*holds His priesthood permanently*” (Heb 7:24) and “*always lives to make intercession*” (Heb 7:25). The very fact that a priest like this has arisen shows even more clearly that the Levitical priesthood must now be defunct or obsolete (Heb 7:15).

According to Psalm 110:4, God promised the Son that He would be “*a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*” (Heb 7:17) and this promise or oath (Heb 7:20-21) came after the Law (Heb 7:28) which had no oath (Heb 7:21), and therefore supersedes it. Furthermore, verses 18 and 19 make it clear that the Law on which the Levitical priesthood is based, is set aside “*because of its weakness and uselessness*” (Heb 7:18; cf. Rom 8:3) and inability to make anything or anyone perfect (Heb 7:19; cf. 7:11). On the other hand, the new priesthood of Jesus based on the oath of God brings in “*a*

better hope ... through which we draw near to God" (Heb 7:19) and Jesus is *"the guarantee of a better covenant"* (Heb 7:22; cf. 8:6).

Jesus, as perfect High Priest, makes perfect forever those who draw near to God through Him

Hebrews 7:23-28 then contrasts the weakness of the Levitical priesthood with the perfection of Jesus' priesthood. Levitical priests *"were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office"* (Heb 7:23). They needed to offer sacrifices daily, first for their own sins, and then for the sins of the people (Heb 7:27; cf. 5:2-3). Their weakness is their mortality and their sinfulness. On the other hand, Jesus *"holds His priesthood permanently, because he continues forever"* (Heb 7:24) and *"always lives to make intercession for ... those who draw near to God through him"* (Heb 7:25). In contrast to the many Levitical priests, there is only one priest of the order of Melchizedek who never dies, ever lives, and never needs to be succeeded or replaced. Furthermore, Jesus is without sin. He is *"holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens"* (Heb 7:26). Thus, Jesus only needed to offer Himself once for all for the sins of the people (Heb 7:27). This is captured in Hebrews 10:12-14: *"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."*

All this means that Jesus is able to bring perfection (Heb 7:11) and make perfect (Heb 7:19) and *"save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him"* (Heb 7:25). Thus, perfection, the purpose of the priesthood, is for the people to be able to draw near to God forever without the hindrance of sin. It is Jesus as High Priest after the order of Melchizedek who makes that possible.

Conclusion

In summary, the order of Melchizedek means a new and far better priesthood established upon an oath of God (Psalm 110:4) and the power of an indestructible life (Jesus' resurrection). It means Jesus can be both King and Priest, Messiah and Mediator, and Perfecter of those who draw near to God through Him.

The order of Aaron, the Levitical priesthood, depended upon many sinful priests who had to offer many sacrifices and were prevented by death from continuing. They could make nothing perfect. But Jesus is our one faithful, merciful, sympathetic, supreme, sinless high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, mediator of the new, better covenant, who by one sacrifice of His own life cleansed us from sin, turned away God's holy wrath, and made us perfect, forever able to draw near to God through Him.

Chapter 8:1-2 concludes, “*Now the point in what we are saying in this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.*”

Jesus remains our High Priest forever, constantly interceding for us at the right hand of God. If we have put our trust in Jesus, we can approach God’s throne of grace at any time with confidence that we will “*receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Heb 4:16).

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“Jesus, My Great High Priest”

1. Jesus, my great High Priest,
Offered his blood and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside.
His pow’rful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the Throne.
2. To this dear Surety’s hand
Will I commit my cause;
He answers and fulfils
His Father’s broken laws.
Behold my soul at freedom set;
My Surety paid the dreadful debt.
3. My Advocate appears
For my defence on high;
The Father bows his ears
And lays his thunder by.
Not all that hell or sin can say
Shall turn his heart, his love, away.
4. Should all the hosts of death
And pow’rs of hell unknown
Put their most dreadful forms
Of rage and mischief on,
I shall be safe, for Christ displays
His conqu’ring pow’r and guardian grace.

Isaac Watts, 1709 (Tune: Darwall 666688)

Link to tune: <https://youtu.be/PsCgF0MQk6A>