

Hebrews - encouragement for weary pilgrims (part 1)

General introduction

Why read Hebrews? Why is it relevant to us today?

Hebrews was written to encourage weary pilgrims.

It is part letter, part sermon.

It addresses folks who have “endured a hard struggle with sufferings.”

The earliest readers

The first known title of the letter is “To the Hebrews”.

By reading between the lines, the earliest readers appear to have been messianic Jews.

Because they have suffered greatly, they are tempted to return to their Jewish roots.

- They possibly missed the reality of past worship involving sacrifices at the temple.
- They may also have had doubts arising from Jesus Christ’s earthly absence. Why was Christ not physically present with them in their struggles?

Author

The unknown author has a deep knowledge of the Old Testament and a profound understanding of Jesus Christ.

A letter-sermon of exhortation

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with **my word of exhortation**, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly. (Hebrews 13:22 NIV)

Hebrews is *profoundly pastoral*.

The contents of the exhortation

Hebrews opens with one of the most significant NT statements about Jesus Christ:

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Hebrews 1:1-4 NIV)

In the rest of chapter 1, the author of Hebrews uses quotations from the Old Testament to show that Jesus, as the Son of God, is superior to the angels.

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, **to what we have heard**, so that we do not drift away. ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Hebrews 2:1-4 NIV)

The author of Hebrews then focuses on how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is also fully human.

⁹But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9 NIV)

Jesus Christ becomes fully human “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil — ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (2:14-15).

Jesus became fully human to serve as a high priest.

¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:14-18 NIV)

The author of Hebrews emphasizes the importance of Jesus Christ being a merciful and faithful high priest.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, **fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.** (Hebrews 3:1 NIV)

The author of Hebrews then strategically explains how Jesus is superior to Moses.

Moses was a servant in God’s house; Jesus is “faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (Hebrews 3:6 NIV).

The exhortation to fix our thoughts on Jesus is then followed by a warning about rejecting Jesus and turning away from God (see Hebrews 3:7-4:13).

The author of Hebrews correlates the experience of the ancient Israelites and that of Jesus’ followers.

The author of Hebrews offers **another exhortation** that focuses on Jesus Christ’s role as a high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. He writes:

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, **let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.** ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are —yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16 NIV)

Jesus’ role as a high priest in the heavenly sanctuary will be the dominant topic from 4:14 to 10:25.

Jesus is compared with two Old Testament priests; Melchizedek, a priest-king mentioned briefly in Genesis 14, and the Levitical high priest, who served in the tabernacle.

- Jesus is like Melchizedek regarding his **appointment** as a priest.
- He is like the Levitical high priest in terms of his **duties** as a priest.

In Hebrews 5, we learn about **Jesus’ appointment as a priest.**

⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.”

⁶ And he says in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 5:5-6 NIV)

This final statement is a quotation from Psalm 110:4, a psalm attributed to King David.

Jesus Christ's priestly appointment involves a divine oath.

Concerning the Levitical high priest, the author of Hebrews writes, "For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness" (Heb. 7:28 NIV).

God's oath distinguishes Jesus' appointment as a high priesthood from that of the Levitical priests.

The author of Hebrews notes that each Levitical high priest obtains his priesthood "on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry" (Heb. 7:16 NIV).

The Levitical high priesthood is a hereditary position legislated for by the Sinai covenant.

Jesus Christ, however, belongs to the tribe of Judah and can never become a high priest in the lineage of Aaron.

English translations give the impression that God appointed Jesus to another priestly order, "the order of Melchizedek."

The Greek term, often translated as "order" in Hebrew 6:20, is the noun *taxis*, which denotes a particular "kind" or "type."

When we turn to Psalm 110:4, which is quoted in Hebrews 6:20, we find the Hebrew expression *'al-dibrātī malkī-šedeq*, best translated as "according to the manner of Melchizedek."

Neither the Hebrew original nor the Greek translation implies that Melchizedek was part of or established an order of priests to which others might belong.

As a priest-king appointed by divine oath after his ascension, Jesus' unique priesthood resembles that of Melchizedek, but neither belongs to a priestly order.

The author of Hebrews discusses how **Jesus' activity is like that of the Levitical high priest.**

The tabernacle on earth resembles God's sanctuary in heaven.

The high priest is the one who presents offerings to God.

Offerings to atone for the sins of the Israelites are presented to God daily, morning and evening, according to Exodus 29:38-43.

Presenting these offerings to God involves burning incense on the golden altar in the Holy Place adjacent to the curtain leading into the Most Holy Place (see Exodus 30:7-8).

Firstly, the golden altar in the Holy Place resembles the larger bronze altar in the tabernacle courtyard.

Secondly, the burning of incense mirrors the burning of the offerings on the bronze altar.

- The verb used to denote the burning of an offering on the bronze altar is *hiqṭr*.
- The noun for incense is *qēṭoret*.

Thirdly, the high priest is instructed to burn incense at precisely the same time as the daily atoning offerings are being consumed by fire on the bronze altar (see Exodus 29:38-41; 30:7-8).

All or part of the different offerings listed in Leviticus 1-7 goes upward as smoke when consumed by fire on the bronze altar.

The Hebrew noun used to denote the most important offering is *‘ōlâ*, usually translated “burnt offering.”

Since the related verb *‘ālâ* means “to go up; to ascend,” a more appropriate translation of *‘ōlâ* would be “ascension offering.”

Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross and his subsequent ascension to heaven resemble the Old Testament’s burnt offerings that ascend as a pleasing aroma to God.

“Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”
(Ephesians 5:2 NIV).

Jesus Christ is both the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrificial offering.

With his ascension, Jesus, as high priest, presented himself as the perfect sacrifice to God the Father to atone for the sins of others.

The high priest as intercessor

With his daily schedule of appearing before God in the Holy Place, the Levitical high priest is uniquely placed to intercede on behalf of his fellow Israelites.

Jesus Christ’s high priestly intercession enables those who are flawed to approach God, where they may obtain mercy and discover grace when it is most needed (Hebrews 4:15-16; see also 10:19-22).

Jesus Christ’s ministry as our perfect high priest is crucial for our eternal salvation.

Unlike the earthly high priest, Jesus Christ remains permanently in the heavenly sanctuary.

Concluding summary

Why does the author of Hebrews write so much about Jesus Christ’s role as our great high priest?

1. He wants to prevent his Jewish readers from returning to the temple and its daily sacrifices, which are inferior to Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.
2. He wants to explain Christ’s earthly absence. Christ continually performs a high priestly role in the heavenly sanctuary, which is vital for our salvation.
3. He wants to remind them that they have a high priest who understands their weaknesses and can intercede for them when they sin.
4. He wants to assure them of access to God’s throne of grace in their times of need.

“Because Jesus is the priest perfected forever, always living and always praying for us, our salvation to the uttermost is secure.” (Dennis Johnston)

Recommended further reading:

D. W. Gooding. *An Unshakeable Kingdom: The Letter to the Hebrews for Today*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 <http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/en/collections/expositions/books/3/an-unshakeable-kingdom>

J. Griffiths. *The Perfect Saviour: Key Themes in Hebrews*. Nottingham: IVP, 2012

T. D. Alexander. *Face to Face with God: A Biblical Theology of Christ as Priest and Mediator*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2022

D. E. Johnson. *Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims*. Grand Rapids: Crossway, 2024