

o8. Hebrews 7:1 – 8:13



Hebrews 5:9-10

and having been made perfect, [Part Three B] (8:1 - 9:28)

he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,
[Part Three C] (10:1-39)

having been designated by God a high priest according to the order
of Melchizedek. [Part Three A] (7:1-28)

Part Three A. High priest of the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)

In this central section of his oration, the author intends to demonstrate the superiority of the mediatory priesthood exercised by the exalted Christ over that which belonged to the Levitical priests of Judaism. He begins by demonstrating that Jesus experiences and mediates to us something that the Levitical priests aimed at but never achieved: indestructible life with God in the eternal sanctuary of heaven.

Part Three A. High priest of the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)

The ancient priesthood cannot bring people to perfection (7:11); it is handed on by a time-bound law, and lacks power (7:16); it is not guaranteed by a divine oath (7:20); it cannot overcome death (7:23); its sacrifices are ineffectual and so the priests keep on offering them, even though perfect communion with God remains beyond their power to achieve (7:27-28).

Our author's focus is on Jesus: on the power he is able to exercise because of his 'indestructible life' (7:16), and so on the 'better hope' he gives us of actually drawing 'near to God' (7:19). He searches the sacred Scriptures and, in the light of what he has come to see in Christ, he finds indications of the superiority of Christ already in the scriptural account of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20 - Hebrews 7:1-10), and in the Psalm traditionally associated with the anointing of the king of Judah (Psalm 110:4 - Hebrews 7:11-28).

The author's way of interpreting the scripture appears strange to anyone trained in the modern craft of scientific exegesis. It must be remembered, however, that he was following a method that was common at the time. Exegetes then were not concerned to find the meaning intended by the original human author and understood by the first recipients of the scriptural texts. They were searching for what God intended in inspiring the text. To discover this they loved to hold the text up to the light to find any possible meaning that might lie hidden in its mysterious depths. They were open to the continuing inspiration of God's Spirit, and knew that their own experiences could throw light back on an ancient text, and so they felt justified in displaying an ancient text as an indication of the further inspired insight which they wished to communicate. As we shall see, this is what our author does now.

Hebrews 7:1-3

This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him”; and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.” His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.”

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

The author highlights the detail that it was Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-20) who blessed Abraham, and that Abraham paid him a tithe. Both of these indicate Melchizedek’s superiority over Abraham (and so over Levi, and the Levitical Priesthood). Nothing is said in Genesis about Melchizedek’s death because God intends him to prefigures God’s Son who ‘remains forever.’

Hebrews 7:4-10

See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Hebrews 7:11-14

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood – for the people received the law under this priesthood – what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord ‘arose (ἀνατέλλω - Anatolia) from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

The purpose of priesthood is to bring about ‘perfection’; that is to say, to bring people into the fullness of communion with God. It is obvious, says our author, that the Levitical priesthood was not able to do this, otherwise why did God (in Psalm 110:4) speak of another priesthood, and one not of the order of Aaron, but of the order of Melchizedek?

God did so because he was promising a priesthood that would effectively bring people into full communion with himself, a priesthood that would be exercised by his king-priest Son, who could not be a Levitical priest since he ‘**arose from Judah.**’ This further demonstrates that his priesthood was not dependent upon lineage, but directly on the word of God.

The word he chooses here for **arose** (7:14) is the verb ἀνατέλλω, used in the following Messianic texts:

‘a star shall **arise** out of Jacob’ (Numbers 24:17).

‘In his days may righteousness **flourish** and peace abound’ (Psalm 72:4).

‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is **Branch** for he shall **branch out** in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord’ (Zechariah 6:12).

‘I am about to do a new thing; now it **springs forth**’ (Isaiah 43:19).

‘Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may **spring up**, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I the Lord have created it’ (Isaiah 43:8).

Hebrews 7:15-19

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

Psalm 110:4 ['You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'] demonstrates that God never meant the Levitical priesthood to be anything other than provisional. From the beginning he promised a priesthood that would belong to his Messiah. This royal Messiah, says our author, is Christ, the Son of God, who 'sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high' (1:3). His life is 'indestructible', and he can do what no Levitical priest was able to do: he can bring us to the perfection of the fullness of divine communion.

Hebrews 7:20-25

This was confirmed with an oath; for others who became priests took their office without an oath, but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him,

“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,

‘You are a priest forever’” –

accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant. Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. [Romans 8:24; 1John 2:1]

That God has, indeed, abrogated the regulations that governed the Levitical priesthood and has introduced ‘a better hope’ which makes it possible now to approach God and to enjoy the fullness of divine communion (see 7:19) is something that God has ‘confirmed with an oath’. Our author has already pointed out the extra security that this provides (see 6:17-20).

Here he takes his argument a step further: ‘Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant’. The comparison is with the former ‘**covenant**’ (διαθήκη), the commitment which God gave through Moses and which found expression in the law. It included the ways in which God’s people were to behave in response to God’s promise, including the regulations concerning the Levitical priesthood.

This old covenant is included in the ways in which ‘long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets’ (1:1). Now, ‘in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son’ (1:2), and has committed himself, under oath, to draw us into the fulness of divine communion. Furthermore, Jesus has offered himself as a ‘guarantee’ (ἔγγυος); he has offered himself (his own life) to be our guarantor.

As we read in the Book of Sirach: ‘Do not forget the kindness of your guarantor, for he has given his life for you’ (Sirach 29:15).

He returns also to the point already made that the Levitical priests die (see 7:8). This is why the priesthood has to be continually handed on from father to son. Our high priest, however, continues to exercise the power of God from his seat ‘at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (1:3). He has ‘the power of an indestructible life’ (7:16), and so ‘he holds his priesthood permanently, because **‘he continues forever’** (7:24).

The pastoral implication of this is that ‘those who approach God through him’ will certainly be saved. The fullness of eternal life in communion with God is the ‘salvation’ which is our inheritance (see 1:14). Jesus is our ‘champion’ who has made salvation possible for us by the victory which he achieved in the struggle against sin and death (2:14). He is now ‘source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’ (5:9). As our high priest, he ‘lives to make intercession for us’ (7:25). All our needs are met by God through the mediatory prayer of God’s Son (see 2:18; 4:14-16).

Paul, too, speaks of ‘Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us’ (Romans 8:34), and John offers these comforting words: ‘if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ’ (1 John 2:1).

Hebrews 7:26

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

The author describes our high priest, Jesus, in cultic terms. He is ‘holy’ (ὅσιος, living wholly within the realm of the sacred). The psalmist is confident: ‘you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption’ (Psalm 16:10).

He is ‘blameless’ (ἄκακος), in the sense that he is untouched by anything that is evil.

Like the sacrificial animals, he is ‘undefiled’ (ἀμίαντος), in the sense that there is nothing inhibiting his being united to God.

He is ‘separated from sinners’, not in the sense that he fails to communicate with us sinners to draw us with him into holiness, but in the sense that he himself is innocent of sin (see 4:15), thus perfectly fulfilling another ritual requirement for the exercise of priesthood.

Hebrews 7:27-28

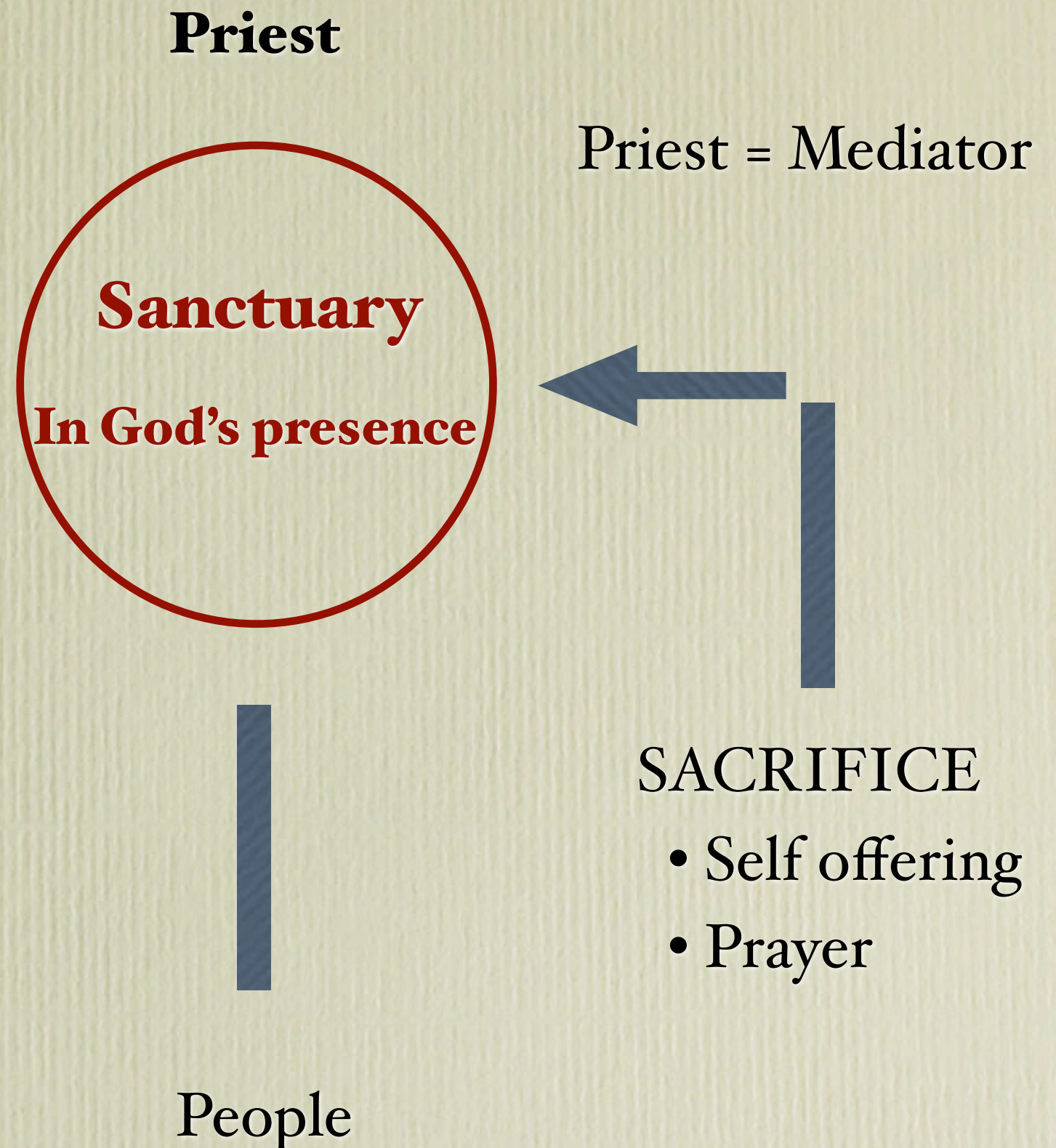
Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect [τελειωω] forever.

Our author extrapolates from the high priestly sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement and speaks of all the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. They offered animal sacrifices twice daily (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3-8; Sirach 45:14). Jesus offered himself (see also 9:14,28). Having done this, there is no other sacrifice to offer. The purpose of sacrifice has been perfectly achieved. The word that defines this whole section is the word **‘perfect’**. The verb τελειοω is a technical word for the consecration of a priest. It also means to bring something or someone to their goal (τελος). Jesus has attained perfection himself in the eternal communion of love which is the very being of God. As our high priest he is able to draw us into this same communion, thus bringing us with him into the heavenly sanctuary where we, too, can share in this same divine communion.

Part Three B. A priest who has attained perfection (8:1 - 9:28)

The author is speaking of the upward movement of mediation, from mankind to God. As he has just stated, Jesus achieved this movement perfectly and ‘once for all when he offered himself’ (7:27).

This theme of self-offering is central to the section to which we are about to listen (9:14,26). Christ’s self-offering achieves eternal redemption.



- I. The insufficiency of the old ministry, covenant and institutions and their replacement.
 - a. The ministry of our priest is superior, because he is minister 'in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up'. He is the mediator of a superior covenant, based on superior promises. The old cult-ministry is only an imitation of the real, heavenly one (8:1-6).

Hebrews 8:1-2

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister (λειτουργὸς) in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.

The author alerts us to the fact that he is about to deal with ‘the main point’ of his address. He focuses on the exalted Christ, echoing his opening description of Christ as seated ‘at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (1:3). He describes Christ, our high priest, as a ‘minister’, a word commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the cult ministry carried out by the priests (see Isaiah 61:6). The Jewish high priests carried out their ministry in a tent which, as is demonstrated from Exodus 25:40, was only an earthly copy of ‘the sanctuary and the true tent’ which God showed to Moses on the mountain.

Hebrews 8:3-5

For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.

They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain” (Exodus 25:40).

Hebrews 8:6

But he has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator (μεσίτης) of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.

In verse six we find the first explicit use of the term ‘mediator’, though the author has been speaking of Jesus’ mediation from the beginning.

The whole of creation is an expression of the eternal wisdom which has been perfectly expressed in Jesus (1:2). It is the exalted Jesus who sustains everything in being, drawing creation to its goal by his powerful words (1:3). He tasted death for everyone (2:9). He liberates us and atones for us (2:15,17). It is because of him that we draw near to God (7:19).

‘Mediator’ is a term used also by Paul: ‘There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human’ (1 Timothy 2:5).

Being divine and human he is in a perfect position to mediate.

Being a priest who is both trustworthy because he is in perfect communion with God, and merciful because he is in perfect communion with us, he is in a perfect position to mediate.

He has opened up the way to God for us by being the first to go through the veil and reach the goal for which we are all created. There in the sanctuary of heaven he ‘lives to make intercession for us’ (7:25).

b. The old covenant is imperfect and has been made obsolete. God promised a new covenant. the first covenant cannot have been perfect, or God would not have promised a new one. (Hebrews 8:7-13)

Hebrews 8:7-10

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. God finds fault with them when he says: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

At last God's people will live in communion with him. Jeremiah expresses this in terms frequently used of the communion experienced in the sanctuary:

‘I will place my dwelling in your midst ... And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people’ (Leviticus 26:11-12).

‘Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God ... Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments ... and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised’ (Deuteronomy 26:17-19).

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people’ (Ezekiel 37:27).

Hebrews 8:11-13

‘And they will not teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be **merciful** (ἰλεως see ἱλάσκομαι, 2:17; I will graciously draw them into communion; ‘atone’) **toward their iniquities,** and I will remember their sins no more’ (Jeremiah 31:34).

In speaking of “a new covenant,” he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear