

CHRIST, SUPERIOR TO AARON HEBREWS 4:14-5:14

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INTRODUCTION¹

Building upon Christ's superiority to the prophets, the angels, Moses, and Joshua, the writer of Hebrews eloquently shows that Jesus is our unexcelled high priest. The background leading to a discussion of Christ's superior priesthood might be summarized as a development of increasing significance. (1) The prophets delivered God's Word to the Israelites. (2) God gave the prophets his message through the agency of angels. (3) Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and (4) Joshua led God's people into the promised land of Canaan. However, none of this would have been possible if the Israelites did not have a high priest to serve as a mediator (Wuest 90-91). Christ is compared to Aaron, who did not take the honor of high priesthood for himself, but who was called to that position by God (Koester 114).

EXEGESIS AND EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS 4:14-5:14

Chapter 4:14-16: Our Superior, Sympathetic, and Sinless High Priest

Verse 14: "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Previously, Jesus is described as "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1). Jesus is not just our high priest; he is our **great** high priest. The word "great" means "splendid, magnificent, extraordinary, wonderful, powerful" (Perschbacher 267). Jesus' greatness as high priest is due to his access to God in passing through the heavens, not through a

physical veil. He has ascended into the actual presence of God (Moffatt 58). Christ's passing through the heavens alludes to the high priest going through the courts of the temple into the Holy of Holies (Conybeare 523). The term "heavens" is used in a broad, general sense. Trying to calculate the number of "heavens" through which Jesus passed (whether three or seven of them) is not the writer's point. The frequent occurrence in the New Testament and the Septuagint of the plural term "heavens" reflects the Hebrew word that is used in the Old Testament, which is always plural. Jesus' transcendence is what is stressed (Bruce 85). He "has become higher than the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). Additionally, Jesus' passing through the heavens is inseparably linked to his ascension. Jesus literally "passed through the heavens" when he ascended. He "ascended far above all the heavens" (Eph. 4:10). David prophesied Christ's ascension:

Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the king of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory (Ps. 24:7-10).

As the Lord "passed through the heavens," the messengers of God said to the entranced disciples², "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

As a result of having such a great high priest, we are to "hold fast our confession." The Greek word translated "hold fast" means "to hold to, adhere to" (Perschbacher 247). After strongly urging Christians to cling tenaciously to Christ (3:6, 14), the writer once again tries to inspire greater dedication to Jesus. The translators

have supplied the word “our” (in “our confession”). In the Greek text, the definite article (“the”) immediately precedes “confession,” so that we are to “hold fast **the confession.**” Similarly, Paul told Timothy that he “confessed the good confession” (1 Tim. 6:12). In this context of Hebrews, with the mention of “Jesus the Son of God,” “the confession” would remind followers of Christ what they had confessed and the life-long commitment they had made. It also would serve as motivation to greater faithfulness at a time when they were losing spiritual loyalty (Lane 104).

Verse 15: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” The word “sympathize” means “‘to suffer with’ another person, thus to sympathize with him to the extent of entering into his experience and feeling his heartache yourself” (Wuest 94).

“Weakness” is “the frailty to which all human flesh is heir” (Bauer 115). Stählin says that “weakness” almost has “the sense of sin” (492). However, “weakness” cannot mean “sin,” otherwise Jesus would not have been “without sin” since “weakness” is something inherent in all human flesh. Paul says, “For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God” (2 Cor. 13:4). Jesus became as vulnerable as we are, and as a result, he experienced “our weaknesses.” The “weaknesses” with which we struggle and with which Christ sympathizes should not be considered as referring to our yielding to sin but rather to our struggling with temptation.

Jesus can identify fully with our weaknesses and struggles because he was tempted just as we are, in every way, “yet without sin.” Jesus lived without sinning, which does not mean “without the ability to sin” but “without having in fact sinned” (Howley 547). The writer of Hebrews previously states, “For in that He Himself has

suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (2:18). Since Jesus was tempted and overcame every temptation, he is willing and able to help us overcome all our temptations.

Verse 16: “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Since Jesus is our sinless high priest and has compassion for us, we should approach God’s gracious throne with confidence. The “throne of grace” is God’s throne, where Jesus, as high priest, sits at God’s right hand. It is an allusion to the mercy seat in the earthly sanctuary. Bruce says,

It was before the earthly mercy-seat that the work of propitiation was completed in token on the day of atonement and the grace of God extended to His people; the presence of the Christians’ high priest on the heavenly throne of grace bespeaks a work of propitiation completed not in token but in fact, and the constant availability of divine aid in all their need (86).

When we go to the heavenly Father through Christ, God is approachable.³ God will provide us mercy and grace every time we ask. John says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 Jn. 5:14-15). The writer of Hebrews prescribes prayer as a preventative measure so that we do not sin.⁴ We should go to God in prayer asking for his help during times of temptation. John similarly stresses that the purpose of his writing is so that we will not sin; however, if we do, “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn. 2:1).

Chapter 5:1-4: The Qualifications of the High Priest

Verse 1: “For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.” Every high

priest was taken from among men, not from among angels who would not be able to identify fully with humans (Fausset 539). In order to be high priest, Jesus was “taken from among men,” which required His “coming in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7) and becoming flesh to live among us (Jn. 1:14). “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

The sacrifices offered by the high priest were to make atonement for sin. The goal of every offering and every bloody sacrifice he made was focused on reinstating and securing for the people a condition of acceptance with God (Delitzsch 227-228). Jesus completed the mission that every previous high priest had given himself to the task of accomplishing; “for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:27).

Verses 2-3: “He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins.” The Greek word translated “compassion” (*metriopathein*) is defined as “to be gentle” (Peschbacher 275). However, it is not easy to translate. It is halfway between apathy and anger. God’s faithful high priest was not indifferent to sin, nor was he harsh. He could take the position only because he shared in the same trial of temptation as the sinners for whom he offered sacrifices (Morris 47).

The high priest was fully human and even committed sin himself. “For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness” (Heb. 7:28). Here again, “weakness” is not synonymous with “sin.” It refers to the fact that the high priest was not invincible

but was also susceptible to sin. He offered sacrifices “first for his own sins and then for the people’s” (Heb. 7:27). Even Aaron had to make atonement for himself and for the people (Lev. 9:7). Therefore, the high priest was able to be compassionate toward God’s people.

Verse 4: “And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.” No human was able to appoint himself to offer sacrifices for sins. One of the requirements to be a high priest was that he must be “called by God.” The high priests were appointed by God, “just as Aaron was” (see Ex. 28:1). Rienecker says,

The author may have had in mind the leading sacerdotal families of Jerusalem in his day, who were not descendants of Aaron, but had sought for themselves the high priestly office and been elevated to it by Herod the Great. Such men, though approved by the state, were not approved by God (678).

The Scriptures record God’s punishment that fell on those who took upon themselves the honor of performing the duties of the high priest (or of the priests), such as in the cases of Korah (Numbers 16), Saul (1 Sam. 13:8ff) and Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:16ff) (Morris 48). God will maintain his justice in “dethroning” those who exalt themselves (2 Thess. 2:3-12; 1 Pet. 5:5).

Today, God’s call comes through the gospel (2 Thess. 2:14). God calls every soul who is obedient to the gospel “to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus” (1 Pet. 5:10). Paul says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Those who do not obey the gospel will “be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the

Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:8-9). Therefore, we learn the importance of being called by God, both then and now.

Chapter 5:5-11: The Qualifications of Christ as High Priest

Verse 5: “So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” Jesus says, “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God” (Jn. 8:54). Not even Jesus was able to become a self-appointed high priest. God appointed him. Jesus was called God’s Son by sovereign, divine right. Christ meets all the qualifications necessary to becoming high priest, as previously set forth. He is qualified on the basis of his identification with humanity (vv. 1-3) and his divine appointment (v. 4) (Ellingworth 281). Paul quotes the psalmist, “As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You’” (Ps. 2:7), stating that Jesus was “begotten” through the resurrection (Acts 13:33).

Verse 6: “As He also says in another place: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” The writer of Hebrews quotes God’s reference to Christ’s connection with Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4). Later (7:1-4), our author will refer to Melchizedek’s brief mention in the Scriptures (Gen. 14:18-20). Duerksen says, “Everything the writer says initially leads up to his quotation of Psalm 110:4 as evidence for the priestly position of Christ” (328). Bauer suggests that “according to the order of” may be translated as “according to the nature of,” which is equivalent to “just like Melchizedek” and refers to “the entirely different nature of Melchizedek’s priesthood as compared with that of Aaron” (804). At this point the writer gives no additional explanation, but he will soon return to the reference he made to Melchizedek (v. 10).

Verse 7: “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.” During our Lord’s earthly sojourn, he experienced all the sensations and feelings inherent in becoming human. Jesus became “acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:4), and he knew the full extent of undeserved, inescapable suffering (Duerksen 329).

In connection with Jesus’ prayers and supplications, the writer says he “offered” them. The deliberate use of the technical term for offering sacrifice draws a parallel with the Levitical high priest’s offering of “gifts and sacrifices” (v. 1) (Lane 119). Jesus sacrificially “offered up prayers and supplications.” “Vehement cries and tears” vividly describe his sacrifice. The word translated “vehement” means “strong, mighty, robust” (Perschbacher 211). Jesus’ fervent prayers were accompanied with outcries, wailing, and tears. Moffatt says, “Later Rabbinic piety laid stress on tears,” with the three kinds of prayers being entreaty, crying, and tears. He further states, “Entreaty is offered in a quiet voice, crying with a raised voice, but tears are higher than all” (65).

Jesus engaged intensely in praying and pleading “to Him who was able to save Him from death.” Lane suggests that this phrase is simply a reference to God and does not define the content of Jesus’ prayers but rather the character of God as the Lord of life who accomplishes salvation. He further proposes that the context does not specify Gethsemane or Golgotha, but rather describes Jesus’ passion in its entirety as priestly prayer (120). However, we see Jesus, particularly in Gethsemane, praying fervently and urgently. His request was for deliverance from death (Guthrie 1200). He prayed, begging the God who could have rescued him, tearfully pleading with him to do so.

Graphically, Jesus prayed unembarrassed shouts and outcries along with tears of agony (Duerksen 329). In this context, God, who has accurately preserved the accounts of his Son's harrowing ordeal, undeniably takes our minds to the Garden of Gethsemane where the shadow of the cross loomed ever nearer. We are given a glimpse of Jesus' agony through the words of the Lord himself, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Mt. 26:38). Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Mt. 26:39). Our Lord pleaded with the Father that he would not have to drink the cup of anguish, sorrow, suffering, and death. Jesus yielded his will completely to the Father's will and drank the bitter cup in its entirety. Just as God told Hezekiah, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears" (Is. 38:5), so the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus "was heard because of His godly fear." "Godly fear" does not refer to "fear of death," but rather to our Lord's submission and devotion to God's will (Bruce 102). It indicates cautious and alert reverence in every situation (Rienecker 679).

Being heard by God did not result in the granting of Jesus' request for deliverance. After all, Jesus prayed for the Father's will to be done, and that part of Christ's request was accomplished. God heard his Son's plaintive cries and saw his every tear. Just as in answering our prayers, God showed no partiality to his own Son. The God of Heaven does not always answer exactly as the petitioner wishes. No matter what the cost, the will of Heaven could not be thwarted.

Jesus struggled arduously in committing himself entirely to fulfilling his mission. His struggle was an inevitable part of his humanity and of the "weaknesses" with which He is able to sympathize (Heb. 4:15). In order to pay the ultimate price, the bitter battle

was essential to the resignation of Christ's will to the Father's will. His "godly fear" prevailed and he surrendered all.

Verse 8: "though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered." Jesus "learned obedience" through suffering, and his suffering yielded obedience to God. Therefore, Jesus learned obedience by actually obeying (Morris 50). God established the boundaries of obedience, even for his own Son. From the accounts of the gospel, we see the obedient, perfect life of our Savior. At the tender age of twelve, our Lord clearly stated his mission, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Jesus' sustenance was in doing the Father's will: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:35). Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). Jesus stated, "I always do those things that please Him" (John 8:29). The faithfulness of our Savior was absolute. He was "obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

So that we might sing redemption's sweet song, the Son of God suffered for our sins. He paid the highest price that has ever been paid. Paul says, "You were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). Jesus placed the greatest value on the salvation of souls. Two songs beautifully express our Savior's love: "Out of the Ivory Palaces, into a world of woe; only His great eternal love made my Savior go." "In loving kindness Jesus came, my soul in mercy to reclaim; and from the depths of sin and shame, through grace He lifted me." John the Immerser introduced Jesus as, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29). Peter says, "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition

from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Truly, “Jesus paid it all.” The writer of Hebrews says, “For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer” (8:3). Jesus offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin (Heb. 7:27; 9:26, 28), and then he became our perfect high priest.

Verse 9: “And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” Previously, the writer referred to Jesus as “the captain of their salvation” who was made “perfect through sufferings” (2:10). “Having been perfected” means “to perfect a person, advance a person to final completeness of character” (Perschbacher 404). Jesus’ perfection involved maintaining his integrity throughout every kind of assault on his character, which resulted in firmly establishing his integrity (Rienecker 679). In discussing the perfection of Christ, the writer says, “For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever” (Heb. 7:28).

The word “author” means “the cause, source” (Bauer 26). As a result of his perfection, Jesus became the only source of eternal salvation. The phrase “eternal/everlasting salvation” occurs in the Old Testament: “But Israel shall be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation” (Is. 45:17). The salvation that Jesus has secured is eternal, like the “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12), the “eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15), and the “everlasting/eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20). The eternal nature of the salvation that Jesus provides is based on his sacrifice, which has been accomplished once for all, is never to be repeated and is permanently valid (Bruce 105).

Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10). Paul says, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15). Jesus says,

For in this way God loved the world that he gave his Son, the unique one, that everyone believing in him might not be lost but might have everlasting life. For God did not send the Son into the world that he might judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him (Jn. 3:16-17, translation mine).

Our Lord states, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Jesus also says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). Faithful followers of Christ are “in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began” (Tit. 1:2).

Jesus accomplished his mission of making salvation possible, and in doing so he became the source of eternal salvation “to all who obey Him.” Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven”” (Mt. 7:21).

Verses 10-11: “called by God as High Priest ‘according to the order of Melchizedek,’ of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Jesus was “called by God as High Priest,” and as a result, he is divinely qualified to be our high priest. The writer now briefly returns to discussing Melchizedek. In making a connection between Jesus as the “author of eternal salvation” and being “according to the order of Melchizedek,” we will learn later that Jesus has arisen “in the likeness of Melchizedek” as our high priest “according to the power of an endless life” (Heb. 7:15-16).

The writer quickly interrupts his discussion due to the challenge of explaining the information as he considers the Hebrews' deficiency in biblical knowledge. He says, "of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain." Keener states, "Many Greek writers used 'much to say' to indicate how important their topic was" (659). Although the information the writer of Hebrews wishes to communicate is vitally important to his discussion, he must first rebuke them since they have "become dull of hearing." The word translated "dull" was used to describe the numbed limbs of a sick lion, and means "slow, sluggish" (Rienecker 679). The Hebrews had become lazy and negligent in "hearing" God's Word.

Chapter 5:12-14: The Failure to Qualify as Teachers

Verse 12: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." Their "hearing" problem resulted in a "teaching" problem. While the high priests had to meet proper qualifications, and Christ had fully qualified to be the perfect high priest, the Hebrews had failed in spiritually maturing to meet the qualifications required to become teachers of God's Word. It was way past time for them to have grown into spiritual adulthood. Now, instead of being able to teach others, they needed to be taught themselves.

The statement that someone needs to teach them again "the first principles" reveals the writer's sharpness. The Greek expression is actually equivalent to our "ABCs" (Morris 51). They need to start all over and go back to the very beginning of the most basic fundamentals of the faith. He then tells them that they are in need of "milk" rather than "solid food." Instead of feasting on the "solid food" or "meat" (a reference to

the teaching concerning Christ's priesthood in connection with Melchizedek), they need "the milk" of elementary biblical principles.

Verses 13-14: "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." The word "unskilled" means "inexperienced, unskillful, ignorant" (Perschbacher 37). The writer first tells them they need "milk." Next, he says they are inexperienced. He then uses the word "infant" to refer to their state of spiritual immaturity. The writer, in essence, portrays the Hebrew Christians as infants whose growth has been stunted for such a long time that by now they should be full-grown adults.

Only those who have spiritually matured can feast upon the solid food or "meat" of the Scriptures. The maturation process involves persistence in sharpening our ability to judge between right and wrong, coupled with the determination to do what is right. Popkes says, "Spiritual growth is not an automatic process working by itself; rather, it means growing in understanding, a renewal of our minds, 'learning to distinguish good from evil' and 'discerning the will of God' (Heb. 5:14; Rom. 12:2)" (329).

CONCLUSION

Jesus is our superior, sympathetic and sinless high priest. He can identify with our weaknesses because he was tempted just as we are; yet he did not sin. Through him we have confidence to approach God's gracious throne with our requests, knowing that he will provide the help we need.

Every earthly high priest had to meet God's qualifications, which included coming from "among men" and being called by God. Jesus, too, was human, and during his days on Earth he went through much suffering. He proved his obedience and was perfected, becoming the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. God called Jesus as high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek." Before telling the Hebrews more, a stern rebuke was in order. They needed to mature past being spiritual infants.

ENDNOTES

¹All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

²The disciples had seen Jesus do many things, but they had never seen him fly.

³For an interesting contrast of the approachability of God versus approaching an earthly king, see Nehemiah 2:1-4.

⁴While the context clearly seems to indicate a preventative measure against sin, the possibility remains that the writer may be making a general statement that would also include the extension of God's forgiveness after sin has been committed (Duerksen 327-328), especially since the high priest functioned to plead with God for the people's forgiveness (Achte-meier 485).

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