

A Thematic study from the book of Hebrews The sixth lesson

Introduction: The book of Hebrews is a meaningful document, written before 70 AD, to Jews telling them that Christ is supreme and completely sufficient for salvation and christianity is superior and Jesus is the ultimate authority. He is greater than any religion or any angel. He is superior to any Jewish leader such as Abraham, Moses or Joshua and superior to any priest. He is the complete revelation of God. Having established the superiority of Christianity, the writer moves on to the practical implications of following Christ. The readers are exhorted to hold on to their new faith, encourage each other and look forward to Christ's return.

Judaism was a divinely designed religion, expressing true worship and devotion to God. The commandments, the rituals, and prophets described God's promises. But Christ came, fulfilling the law and the prophets, conquering sin, shattering all barriers to God and freely providing eternal life. This message was difficult for Jews to accept. Although they had sought the Messiah for centuries, they were entrenched in thinking and worshipping in rational forms. Following Jesus seemed to repudiate their marvelous heritage and their profound scriptures. But the author explains how to live by faith, giving illustrations of the faithful men and women in Israel's history (11:1-40). The book of Hebrews was written to the Jewish Christians who were probably undergoing fierce persecution, socially and physically both from Jews and Romans.

The book of Hebrews quotes extensively from the Old Testament. Perhaps nowhere in the New Testament does the Old Testament come into focus more than in the Book of Hebrews, which has as its foundation the Levitical priesthood. The writer to the Hebrews constantly compares the inadequacies of the Old Testament sacrificial system to the perfection and completion in Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews gives us encouraging examples of God's "faith heroes" who persevered in spite of great difficulties and adverse circumstances (Hebrews 11). These faith heroes of the OT provide overwhelming evidence as to the absolute reliability of God. We also find in this theological masterpiece a great wealth of doctrine, a refreshing spring of encouragement, and a source of sound, practical warnings against slothfulness in our Christian walk. No other book so eloquently defines Christ as high priest of Christianity, superior to the Aaronic priesthood, and the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. This book presents Christ as the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). However, both the authorship and audience are in question.

Authorship of the book of Hebrews: Who's the author of Hebrews? Until 1800s, the Church tradition taught that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews, contesting St. Paul's theology of justification by faith by alone (Hebrews 4:2., 6:12, 10:19-22, 10:37-39, and 11:1-40). But now, we don't hold that stand for some tempting reasons to think otherwise.

First and foremost is the lack of a salutation. Some sort of personal salutation from Paul appears in all of his letters. So it would seem that writing anonymously is not his usual method; therefore, the reasoning goes, Hebrews cannot be one of his letters.

Second, the overall composition and style is of a person who is a very sophisticated writer. Even though Paul was certainly a sophisticated communicator, Paul stated that he purposely did not speak with a commanding vocabulary. 1 Cor 1:17 reads “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, *and not with the wisdom of human eloquence*, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning 1 Cor 2:1 When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom; 2 Corinthians 11:6).

Thirdly Paul was an apostle who claimed to receive his revelations directly from the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 11:23/ Gal 1:12). The writer of Hebrews specifically says that he was taught by an apostle (Hebrews 2:3). So, If Paul didn’t write the letter, who did? The most plausible suggestion is that this was actually a sermon Paul gave and it was transcribed later by Luke, a person who would have had the command of the Greek language which the writer shows. Barnabas is another likely prospect, since he was a Levite and would have been speaking on a subject that he knew much about. Martin Luther suggested Apollos, since he would have had the education the writer of this letter must have had. Priscilla and Clement of Rome have been suggested by other scholars.

So, who actually wrote Hebrews? The letter fills a needed space in Scripture and both outlines our faith and defines faith itself in the same way that Romans defines the tenets of Christian living. It closes the chapters of faith alone and serves as a prelude to the chapters on good works built on a foundation of faith in God. In short, this book belongs in the Bible. Therefore, its human author is unimportant. What is important is to treat the book as inspired Scripture as defined in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. The Holy Spirit was the divine author of Hebrews, and of all Scripture, even though we don’t know who put the physical pen to the physical paper and traced the words.

How Jesus is the heir of all things: 1:1-2 *“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe”*

As the Son of God, Jesus is the heir of all that God possesses. St. Paul explains that all things not only were created by Christ but also for Him (Read Col. 1:16). Everything that exists will find its true meaning only when it comes under the final control of Christ. The book of Psalms predicted that Christ would one day be the heir to all that God possesses. God also declared, “I also shall make Him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps. 89:27). When Christ comes to earth again, He will completely and eternally inherit all things (Rev. 11:15). And because we have trusted in Him, we are to be “fellow-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16-17). When we enter into His eternal

Kingdom, we will jointly possess all that He possesses. His marvelous inheritance will be ours as well.

How Jesus is superior to the Angels? 1:4 He is far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve, for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Before we speak about the superiority of Jesus over the angels, it is important to know who the angels are in the Bible and in the teaching of the church.

Angels are spiritual beings involved in many different tasks, and part of the elect angel's work is to serve, or minister to, believers in different ways. The Greek word for "*diakonia*" refers to being in service to others at the table. Being servants, angels are said to "serve" believers. The author of Hebrews refers to angels as ministers or servants to those who have trusted in Jesus for salvation, and the context of Hebrews 1 specifically contrasts the service of angels with the greater work of Jesus, since He is superior to angels (Hebrews 1:5-14).

As "*ministering spirits*," angels serve believers in several ways. At times, angels are sent by God **to answer prayers**. An example of this is when Peter was imprisoned shortly after the execution of James (Acts 12). As Peter was in his cell chained between two guards, "the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (verse 5). "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. 'Quick, get up!' he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists" (verse 7). The arrival of an angel to rescue Peter was an obvious answer to the church's prayer. God can use angels to answer our prayers just as He did in this instance, even if it is not in a visible manner.

Another way that angels are ministering spirits is that they are sometimes sent **to encourage believers**. In Scripture, angels encouraged and attended the Lord Jesus at least twice: after He was tempted in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 4:11; Luke 22:43). Paul was encouraged by an angel during a storm at sea (Acts 27:23-24).

Providing protection for believers is another service that angels do for the Lord (Psalm 91:11). An army of angels surrounded Elisha in 2 Kings 6, protecting him from the Arameans. Daniel was protected in the lions' den by an angel who "shut the mouths of the lions" (Daniel 6:21). Many people believe in personal "guardian angels"; it could be that every believer has an angel assigned to him for protection.

The Superiority of Jesus over the Angels: Despite the ministries that angels carry out for believers, it is important to remember that the Lord of hosts is our Savior. He is the one who ultimately sends them. He is called the Son of God, a title never given to an angel. Angels are important but are still only servants under God. Christ's kingdom is forever. He is the creator of the world. He is given unique honor by God. Angels do not act on their own accord, nor are they omniscient or omnipresent (Psalm 148:5). The holy

angels do God's bidding. It is God alone who deserves the praise and glory for the answered prayers, encouragement, protection, and service that angels carry out for believers.

We are grateful for the "ministering spirits" that God has ordained, and we give God praise for His care for us. For all their power and glory, the elect angels know their role as servants of the Most High. Like the angel in Revelation emphatically said to John when the apostle tried to worship him, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!" (Revelation 22:9)

The lowliness and the exaltation of Jesus: 2:6-7 Instead, someone has testified somewhere: "What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor

The author quotes Psalm 8:5 and then comments on the totality of creation's subjection to the "**son of man**": "In putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control". The author of Hebrews identifies the "son of man" as Jesus Christ. For a little while, the Son of man (Jesus) was made lower than the angels and then crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (verse 9). This verse stresses the humanity of Christ and his tie to the first Adam and sets Jesus apart as the greatest example of man. Jesus Christ is really the Second Adam, the new Adam, who has come to deal directly with what the first Adam brought upon mankind. The first Adam was never able to defeat death but Jesus, the Second Adam came to deliver mankind from death, through His cross, burial, and empty tomb. Being made a "little lower than the angels" and taking on a body eternally did not in any way diminish the deity of Christ. Jesus never ceased to be God; He simply showed the meekness and condescension of God. After the Incarnation, He was the God-man.

As a result of His atoning work on the cross, Jesus was crowned with glory and honor, and He is now seated at the right hand of His heavenly Father (Colossians 3:1). The author of Hebrews points out that Jesus' humble state was but temporary: "for a little while" He was made lower than the angels (Hebrews 2:7). Jesus is exalted above all angels, and some day every knee will bow at His name and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

How Jesus is greater than Moses according to the book of Hebrews 3:1-6?

Therefore, holy "brothers," sharing in a heavenly calling, reflect on Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was "faithful in [all] his house." But he is worthy of more "glory" than Moses, as the founder of a house has more "honor" than the house itself. Every house is founded by someone, but the founder of all is God. Moses was "faithful in all his house" as a "servant" to testify to what would be spoken, but Christ was faithful as a

son placed over his house. We are his house, if [only] we hold fast to our confidence and pride in our hope

To the Jewish people, Moses was a great hero. He had led their ancestors from Egyptian bondage to the border of the Promised Land. He has also written the first five books of the OT and he was the prophet through whom God gave the Law. Therefore Moses was the greatest prophet in the Scriptures. But Jesus is worthy of great honor as the central figure of faith than Moses. Jesus is greater than Moses in his person (Heb 3: 2-3). Moses was a servant of God but Jesus is the son of God. Jesus is God himself, the second person of the Most Holy Trinity. (2) Moses was a prophet of the Israelites in his time while Jesus is Lord of the universe. (3) Moses prefigured Jesus while Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt but Jesus leads us out of sins' slavery

The power of God's Word 4:12 *Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart*

The Word of God is not simply a collection of words from God, a vehicle for communicating ideas; it is living, life changing and dynamic as it works in us. With the incisiveness of a surgeon's knife, God's word. There is power in God's word to change our lives. We can trust God's word to be the absolute authority in all matters of life because it is the very words of Almighty God written through human vessels inspired by the Holy Spirit. God's eternal, inerrant Word is the basis behind all wisdom for life. If we want to hear what God is saying to us, then we need to be spending time in daily Bible study. Memorizing it, meditating upon it, and keeping scriptures verses in front of our eyes are all important ways that we can soak in the goodness of God's Word.

"I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from The Savior of the world is communicated to us through this Book" – Abraham Lincoln

"The primary purpose of reading the Bible is not to know the Bible but to know God." – James Merritt

THE BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' PRIESTHOOD

Who is Melchizedek? Why Jesus is called the priest in the order of Melchizedek? Melchizedek prefigures Jesus himself (Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 7:1-28)

Melchizedek is both priest and king. The priest is an intercessor between God and human beings. God ordained certain men who were ritually cleansed and called to serve the people of God. They would offer sacrifices to God on behalf of people. When God established His covenant with the Jews at Sinai, he chose one family to act as priests. This family was the family of Aaron and in addition, Aaron's tribe, the Levites. The book of Leviticus is written to instruct the "levitical" priests on how to perform their

service. One example of their service is the day of atonement. Read Leviticus 17: On this day, among other things, the priest in charge would give an animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of the people's sins. He then would take some blood from the sacrifice and enter the small cubicle where God dwelt in a special way. There he would display the blood symbolically to God thus demonstrating that the sacrifice had been given--a life had ended, implying that the wages of sin (death) had been paid. Only the high priest could come into this cubicle in the temple. If anyone else came in, he would be struck dead. This rule was so steadfast that, according to later tradition, a rope was tied around the priest's ankle so that, if he collapsed or died while in the cubicle, he could be pulled out by rope rather than have someone else go in for him.

Hebrews 5 Priests give sacrifice to God and represent the other peoples (5:1). Priests must be cleansed in a special ritual way (5:3). Priests are chosen for the office by God (5:4). As mentioned above, a Jewish priest must be from the tribe of Levi. Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi but from the tribe of Judah. (See Heb. 7:13, 14.) This means that according to Mosaic law, Jesus lacked the first requirement for priesthood.

Melchizedek: A Priest Out of Nowhere (Genesis 14:17-20)

After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine (prefiguration of the Eucharist). He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

This passage introduces us to a rather obscure Old Testament figure named Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a priest coming from nowhere although priesthood was formally established after 500 years. Obviously, this man must have been a priest in some order other than the levitical order. This unusual man meets patriarch Abraham one day as Abraham is returning with the booty he has won from a battle with some enemy troops. Melchizedek blesses Abraham. Abraham gives a tithe of his booty to Melchizedek. This also indicates that Abraham recognized Melchizedek as his priest. Both the blessing and the tithe point to the same thing--the great stature of this man. He stands as a priest at a time there were no priests, and holds a stature greater than the patriarch Abraham.

Why Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek? Psalm 110:4 "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'" Melchizedek as a type of Christ. The comment in Heb. 7 that "without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever," would be referring to Psalms 110 according to this interpretation. There, as we saw, Messiah is a priest forever. The lesson is the same for us--Jesus Christ is the sole authorized priest for all time, completely and permanently replacing the Old Testament priestly cults. The author of Hebrews repeatedly contrasts Old Testament heroes and practices and then profoundly reveals how Jesus is the better and truer fulfillment of the Hebrew's beloved

traditions and patriarchs. In chapters 5 through the beginning of chapter 8 the author focuses on the superior priesthood of Jesus over the Levitical Priesthood as the eternal, perfected priest of the order of Melchizedek.

The book of Hebrews makes it very clear that Jesus is the High Priest ad infinitum. But Jesus belongs to the tribe of Judah, not Levi. Doesn't that eliminate him from being any kind of "priest" or "High Priest" at all? Well, in fact, the Letter to the Hebrews clearly states that Jesus is the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek; first referenced in Genesis. This was the original priesthood of the Old Testament, established long before God had to designate the Levi tribe for that role. In other words, Christ's priesthood is superior to that of the Levitical priesthood. Thus the Church teaches that Melchizedek was a priest of God and prefiguration of the priesthood of Christ.

History of the Catholic Priesthood from the biblical times

To understand more fully all of the nuances regarding the priesthood, we must step into the OT. According to the Catechism, the ministerial priesthood of the Church is actually modeled after the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. People of Israel were in common priesthood, they formed a kingdom of priests. However, God established a special, ministerial, priesthood from one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the Tribe of Levi. From this tribe, God chose Aaron (brother of Moses) and his male descendants to be His priests. Within the ranks of the Levitical priesthood, certain priests would be singled out to be of higher-standing; those men each carried the creative title, "High Priest." The remaining men in the tribe of Levi would be in service to the priests and the High Priests. The priests in the Old Testament (unlike priests in the Catholic tradition) were priests by heredity - as mentioned they were descendants of Aaron, and as such they were priests. Thus for them, priesthood wasn't a call, answered from love, but an obligation handed down by their parents

The duties of the Levitical priesthood included: the teaching of the Law, offering the sacrifices, maintaining the Tabernacle and the Temple, officiating in the Holy Place, inspecting ceremonially unclean persons, they adjudicated disputes, and they functioned as tax collectors. Since the Church understands the Catholic priesthood as modeled on the Levitical priesthood, it is fair to assert that there are connections that can be identified between the Levitical priest of the Old Testament and the Catholic priesthood today. It could be posited, for example, that a prefiguration of the threefold structure of the Sacrament of Holy Order in the Catholic Church can be seen in that Old Testament priesthood:

The High Priest seen as the overseer, may be likened to a Bishop;
The sons and male descendent of Aaron, were the Priests;
The remaining male Levites who assisted the priests, may be likened to Deacons.

In any case the Church herself makes this connection in a prayer used during the ministrations of the Sacrament of Holy Orders: "You established a threefold ministry of

worship and service for the glory of your name. As ministers of your tabernacle you chose the sons of Levi and gave them your blessing as their everlasting inheritance."

Apostolic Tradition: From the book of the acts of the apostles we learn that the Apostles appointed others by imposing their hands, conferring inward grace coming from Jesus himself. We read of the deacons, how the Apostles "praying, imposed hands upon them" (Acts 6:6). In 2 Timothy 1:6 St. Paul reminds Timothy that he was made a bishop by the imposition of St. Paul's hands (cf. 1 Timothy 4:4), and Timothy is exhorted to appoint presbyters by the same rite (1 Timothy 5:22; cf. Acts 13:3; 14:22). When St. Paul ordained Timothy, the presbyters also laid their hands upon him, even as now the presbyters who assist at ordination lay their hands on the candidate. St. Paul here exhorts Timothy to teach and command, to be an example to all. To neglect this would be to neglect the grace which is in him. This grace therefore enables him to teach and command, to discharge his office rightly. The grace then is not a charismatic gift, but a gift of the Holy Spirit for the rightful discharge of official duties.

The Sacrament of Order has ever been recognized in the Church as such. This is attested by the belief in a special priesthood which requires a special ordination. The Council of Trent says, "Whereas, by the testimony of Scripture, by Apostolic tradition, and by the unanimous consent of the Fathers, it is clear that grace is conferred by sacred ordination, which is performed by words and outward signs, no one ought to doubt that Order is truly and properly one of the Seven Sacraments of Holy Church"

The Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563 in **Trent** in Trento, Northern Italy), was the 19th ecumenical **council** of the Catholic Church. This council defined priesthood consisting of the bishop, priest and deacon as a divine origin. We have seen that our Lord instituted a ministry in the persons of His Apostles, who received fullness of authority and power. One of the first exercises of this Apostolic power was the appointment of others to help and succeed them. The Apostles did not confine their labors to any particular Church, but, following the Divine command to make disciples of all men, they were the missionaries of the first generation. Others also are mentioned in Holy Scripture as exercising an itinerant ministry, such as those who are in a wider sense called Apostles (Romans 16:7), or prophets, teachers, and evangelists (Ephesians 4:11). Side by side with this itinerant ministry provision is made for the ordinary ministrations by the appointment of local ministers, to whom the duties of the ministry passed entirely when the itinerant ministers disappeared (see DEACON).

With regard to the episcopate the Council of Trent defines that bishops belong to the divinely instituted hierarchy, that they are superior to priests, and that they have the power of confirming and ordaining which is proper to them. The superiority of bishops is abundantly attested in Tradition, and we have seen above that the distinction between priests and bishops is of Apostolic origin.