



Hebrews - Chapter Eight

II Hebrews 3:1-10:18 - Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law (continues)

II.c Hebrews 4:14-10:18 - The high priesthood of Jesus (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eight

Following a summary of the excellence of the high priesthood of Jesus and his duties in the heavenly sanctuary, the writer announces that he too must have something to offer in the way of sacrifice, as did his human predecessors.

The writer then announces that the earthly tabernacle and the temple that replaced it were but copies of the original, which is in heaven; the place where Jesus now ministers, for he was not authorised to undertake such duties within the earthly imitations.

The chapter concludes with the longest quote from Scripture, where the prophet Jeremiah announced God's intention to form a new and better covenant with his people. This he has done through his Son.

II.c.vi Hebrews 8:1-13 - Jesus, high priest of a better covenant

For more than a thousand years the Jews only knew of the earthly tabernacle and then the temple, both of which were only copies of that which was yet to come. Since it was all they had ever known they revered what they had, along with the rites performed therein.

Now there is a new revelation. Jesus is shown to be the eternal high priest, ministering in perfection from heaven in the true tabernacle and enacting the better promises of the new covenant.

¹ 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, ² a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.

Hebrews 8:1-2

The author reminds readers of the main point of the letter: Christians have a high priest who has brought full forgiveness of sins, and this is evident by his being seated at God's right hand: <<*He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*>> (Hebrews 1:3).

The language here now elevates Jesus above his forerunner Melchizedek. He may be of his order but he is clearly much superior given the author's description here; again indicating that Melchizedek was a real person and not a theophany of Jesus. Refer to comments made on Hebrews 7:3.

The Majesty is an indirect Semitic term most frequently used for God himself as noted from Hebrews 1:3.

The Greek translated the sanctuary will refer later to 'the Holy Place' in Hebrews 9:2, and 'the Holy of Holies' in Hebrews 9:3, both of which were in the earthly tabernacle constructed at the time of Moses: <<*You shall hang the curtain under the clasps, and bring the ark of the covenant inside, within the curtain; and the curtain shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy. You shall put the mercy-seat on the ark of the covenant in the most holy place*>> (Exodus 26:33-34); as well as in the Jerusalem temple: <<*Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim*>> (1 Kings 8:6), and: <<*He made the most holy place; its length, corresponding to the width of the house, was twenty cubits, and its width was twenty cubits; he overlaid it with six hundred talents of fine gold*>> (2 Chronicles 3:8).

However, here the author is speaking of something even better, the actual heavenly 'holy places,' that is, the area before the very throne of God himself: <<*At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind*>> (Revelation 4:2-6). This is where Christ is now a minister.

The true tent, Greek *skēnē*, refers to heaven, God's very presence; the earthly tabernacle functions as a picture of entering into God's presence in heaven. Human beings made the earthly tabernacle; the heavenly tabernacle (v.5) was set up by the Lord himself – probably a reference to God the Father, refer vv.8-11, although it could possibly refer to Jesus.

In Jewish thinking, the Holy of Holies was the place on earth where the one entering into it was actually entering into heaven, God's unique space. What the writer is showing here is that when God gave instructions for Moses to make the tabernacle, he actually showed Moses the design of heaven, thus the tabernacle became a copy of it. This design was faithfully followed, although significantly enlarged and extended, when King Solomon built the first Jerusalem temple.

Later in the letter, the reader discovers that this heavenly reality seen by Moses, and represented in the earthly replicas, is actually part of the heavenly Jerusalem, to which all Jesus' followers already belong: *<<But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel>>* (Hebrews 12:22-24).

³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.

Hebrews 8:3

High priests offered gifts of thanksgiving and sacrifices for sin; Jesus as high priest must offer a sacrifice, which he did on the Cross: *<<But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!>>* (Hebrews 9:11-14).

⁴ 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.

Hebrews 8:4

If he were on earth. Jesus could not serve in the earthly tabernacle, since the law requires priests from the Levitical/Aaronic lineage. This is a further reason why Jesus could not remain on earth to be the perfect priest, and to be an imperfect one by not serving in the sanctuary was not an option either. Thus he had to return to his Father's dwelling place: *<<Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"'">>* (John 20:17). Refer to Hebrews 7:11-19 and the comments made there.

Who offer gifts according to the law is a reference to the various sacrifices required under the Law of Moses, a key function of the priesthood.

⁵ 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.’

Hebrews 8:5

They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one. The earthly tabernacle, that is, the tent, in which the Levitical priesthood served, was only a lesser copy of the heavenly pattern shown to Moses: *<<And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain>>* (Exodus 25:40).

The mountain is a reference to Mount Sinai, where Moses met with God and was given the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and all its contents.

⁶ But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.

Hebrews 8:6

Evidence for Jesus’ superior, more excellent ministry is found in the new, better covenant (v.8 & v.13), of which he is the mediator: *<<For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant>>* (Hebrews 9:15), *<<and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel>>* (Hebrews 12:24), which is legally ordained, i.e. enacted through better promises.

The better promises of this new, better covenant are cited in vv.8-12. Basically, the letter states that the old temple was good; the new, real one was better. The old priests were good; the new Priest was better. The old covenant was good; the new one was better, established on better promises.

This passage draws together for the last time the contrast between Jesus as the true high priest and all the human priests that have gone before him. It places this contrast inside two larger contrasts: the contrast of the earthly and temporary tabernacle or temple, and the true heavenly one; and the contrast between the old covenant, the bond established on Mount Sinai between God and Israel, and the new covenant, promised long ago and now brought into being through Jesus.

The Jewish Christians needed to know that the system they had followed and the temple to which so many had made a pilgrimage throughout the centuries was indeed only a copy of the true heavenly temple, and that this Jesus they had chosen to follow was indeed the ultimate high priest, now residing in the original, heavenly temple that was intended to be the focus of their worship system all along, although they had only known the earthly copies.

⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

Hebrews 8:7

For if that first covenant had been faultless. The Mosaic covenant was not wrong; rather, it was weak and ineffective: <<*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*>> (Hebrews 7:18-19), since it could not bring people to perfection due to their sinful nature and indeed their apostasy at times.

God's purposes in the old covenant, among others, were to inform his people of the moral law, to convict them of sin: <<*But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year*>> (Hebrews 10:3), and, as prominently featured throughout the book of Hebrews, to establish the pattern of sacrifice, priesthood, and promise of salvation that is fulfilled only in Christ. Yet the inability of sinful humanity to achieve perfection under the old covenant required the promise of a second one, proving the ineffectiveness, i.e. the shortcomings of the first.

⁸ 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;

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ And they shall not teach one another
or say to each other, “Know the Lord”,
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will be merciful towards their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.'

Hebrews 8:8-12

God finds fault with them. God justifiably blames sinful humanity for the failure of the first covenant, which was made in perfection and broken by the people.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, quoted here, supports several arguments in Hebrews:

1. This second covenant (v.7) comes after the Mosaic covenant - the days are surely coming (v.8), which is said with such certainty.
2. It is established by the Lord himself, i.e. I will establish (v.8), and: <<*he has made the first one obsolete*>> (v.13b).
3. It is a new covenant (v.8 & v.13).
4. It is not like the former covenant of the exodus (v.9 & v.13).
5. The former covenant failed because of the fault of Israel, for they did not continue in my covenant.
6. This new covenant involves a transformation of the inner life of its recipients by writing God's laws into their minds and hearts so that all know him (vv.10-11), as confirmed in: <<*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds', he also adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more'*>> (Hebrews 10:14-17).
7. It brings true, final forgiveness of sins, i.e. I will remember their sins no more (v.12). This is confirmed by David: <<*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit*>> (Psalm 32:1-2 NIV). Refer also to Hebrews 9:15 and 10:12-18.

From this passage in Jeremiah it can be known that God will finally remedy the long-standing problem of his people, namely, that they are circumcised in body but so few are circumcised in their heart, i.e. a reference to one who truly knows the Lord. The benefits that God will provide, knowledge of the Lord and forgiveness, were all offered in the OT but all-too-rarely appropriated.

Two major interpretative issues for the Christian reader are:

1. What does the author of Hebrews mean by connecting this prophecy concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the Messiah?
2. Do the terms in Jeremiah focus the prophecy on ethnic Israel or on a redefined Israel, i.e. the Jewish-Gentile church? The second question is much like the one faced in interpreting 'all Israel' in: <<*And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'*>> (Romans 11:26).

In this passage from Romans Paul quotes from Isaiah 59:20-21, but again modifies the text to suit his purpose. In this way ‘all Israel will be saved’ would be the fulfilment of Paul’s heartfelt prayer for his own nation. Various interpreters have claimed that Paul is speaking of:

1. The salvation of the church of Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, throughout history.
2. The saving of a remnant of Jews throughout history.
3. The salvation of the end-time generation of the Jewish people at some point in the future.

The first view is unlikely since, throughout Romans Chapters 9-11, Israel and Gentiles are distinct ethnic entities. Furthermore, in Romans 11:25, Israel refers to ethnic Israel, and it is difficult to see how the referent could suddenly change in 11:26. Finally, Romans 11:28 indicates that ethnic Israel is still distinguished from Gentiles, for ‘they’ in 11:28 clearly refers to ethnic Israel.

The third view that Paul refers to the salvation of Israel at the end of history seems most likely because:

1. It fits with the promises of God’s future work in Romans 11:12 and 11:15.
2. It is difficult to see how the salvation of a remnant of Jews all through history would qualify as a mystery.
3. The future salvation of ethnic Israel at the end of history accords with the climactic character of the passage in Romans.
4. It demonstrates finally and fully how God is faithful to fulfil his saving promises to his people: **<<It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel>>** (Romans 9:6).

All Israel does not necessarily refer to every single Jewish person but to a very large number, at least the majority of Jews.

Throughout the letter to the Hebrews, the writer has carefully chosen many passages of powerful Scripture to support his argument. This quote from Jeremiah is the longest in the letter and contains a powerful message to the early readers who were brought up on everything that their Jewish heritage provided for them. It shows that what they had known was good, yet what God was doing among them now was so much better, in fact through Jesus, it offered ultimate perfection. What they needed to do was to follow this new way and not return to the old, for that would not lead them to the place where they need to be. In fact, the new covenant promised through Jeremiah had now come into effect, completely replacing the old, which then became obsolete; therefore it was no longer an option.

Just as Psalm 95 continued to be the vital text in Chapters 3 and 4, and Psalm 110 from Chapter 5 to the middle of Chapter 8, so Jeremiah Chapter 31 continues to be in the writer’s mind, and should be in the readers’ minds as well, all the way from this point to the end of Chapter 10.

¹³ In speaking of ‘a new covenant’, he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

Hebrews 8:13

The new covenant makes the first one old, Greek *palaioō*, here translated obsolete, so old that it is becoming like a person of extreme age, Greek *gēraskō*, here translated growing old, and thus is near to disappearing, or ready to vanish away.

This will always be a new covenant, in which all who truly take hold of it shall always be found preserved by the power of God. It is God’s covenant; his mercy, love, and grace encompassed within it; his wisdom that had devised it; his Son who had purchased it; his Spirit who brings souls into it, and builds them up within it.

Tom Wright concludes: ‘This is the most powerful argument yet for the importance of holding on to Jesus instead of going back to the apparent safety of Judaism. If God has established the new thing he had always promised, to go back to the old is foolish as well as disloyal’.