

Understanding the Significance of the Priesthood of Jesus

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1. Priesthood of Melchizedek

The first reference to a priest of God is found in the Book of Genesis. This priest is Melchizedek, king of Salem (Gen. 14:18), who is designated 'priest of God Most High.' Melchizedek blesses Abraham (Gen. 14:19-20). In that his dignity is exalted over that of Abraham, the 'father of faith' (Gen. 15:6). The Hebrew word Melchizedek means 'my king is Zedek.' The reference to the name Melchizedek as 'king of righteousness' is unsubstantiated. As a priest of God Most High, Melchizedek brings forth bread and wine. Abraham pays him tithes on all his booty amounting to one tenth.

Josephus, with many others, identifies Salem with Jerusalem, and adds that Melchizedek "supplied Abram's army in a hospitable manner, and gave them provisions in abundance. . .and when Abram gave him the tenth part of his prey, he accepted the gift" (Ant., I, x, 2). The Rabbis identified Melchizedek with Sem, son of Noah, rather for polemic than historic reasons, since they wished to set themselves against what is said of him as a type of Christ "without father, without mother, without genealogy" (He. 7:3). In the Epistle to the Hebrews the typical character of Melchizedek and its Messianic import are fully explained. Christ is "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:6; Ps. 109:4); "a high priest forever" (Heb. 6:20).

The silence of Scripture about the facts of Melchizedek's birth and death was part of the divine plan to make him prefigure more strikingly the mysteries of Christ's generation, the eternity of His priesthood. Abraham, patriarch and father of nations, paid tithes to Melchizedek and received his blessing. This was all the more remarkable since the priest-king was a stranger, to whom he was not bound to pay tithes, as were the children of Israel to the priests of the Aaronic line. Abraham, therefore, and Levi "in the loins of his father" (Heb. vii, 9), acknowledge Abraham's superiority. In this Melchizedek becomes a type of Christ's priesthood.

The second reference to the priesthood involves the Aaronic priesthood. This is associated with the Exodus event and the Levitical Code of holiness. Hence, it would be necessary and useful to examine Aaronic priesthood, too.

2. The Priesthood of Aaron

The Book of Exodus is explicit that God appeared only to Moses (Ex. 3:4). Scriptures do not record a divine manifestation to Aaron. It was Moses' reluctance to take on the role of 'prophet' that made God condescend and appoint Aaron to the task.

Ex. 6:30-7:1 But Moses said to the Lord, "Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me?" And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.

Moses was hesitant to go before the Pharaoh not so much because he was a poor speaker, but because he was afraid of returning to Egypt on account of the murder he had committed (Ex. 2:12). Even in the story of the exodus, the unworthiness of the human instrument chosen by God becomes abundantly clear.

Aaron was not involved in the process of covenant making. It was a privilege God extended to Moses alone. Yet, Aaron was to accompany Moses atop Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:24), although it was only Moses who would be entrusted the 10 commandments (Ex. 24:18; 32:15-20). It is also Moses who pronounces all the words of the Lord (Ex. 24:3) and who performs the ritual of sealing the covenantal bond (Ex. 24:4-8) by building an altar, and sprinkle blood of the sacrificial animal on the altar and on the people.

Yet, after the covenant making in which Aaron the priest has no part at all apart from sharing in the meal in which the 70 elders partake of (Ex. 24:9-11), God instructs Moses regarding the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests. They were to be vested in priestly garments and subjected to a special code of holiness. They alone would approach the altar of God and the Holy of Holies. As for Moses he had already spoken to God (Ex. 19:19). Moses had privileged access to the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 33:8-11), and would continue to speak to God face to face.

Ex. 28:1 specifies that Aaron and his sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar were to serve as priests. They would be endowed with special vestments highlighting their special priestly dignity and consecration to God (Ex. 28:4; 35:19; 39:41; Lev. 2:2). The priestly vestments included the breast piece, ephod, robe, checkered tunic, turban, and sash. The vestments were in gold, blue, purple, and crimson.

Ex. 29 specifies the special ordination ceremony of priests. Moses would wash them. Thereafter Moses would vest them in the priestly garments, but only pour the anointing oil upon Aaron's head (Ex. 29:7). Aaron and his sons would place their hands on the head of the sacrificial bull, which would be slaughtered before the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 29:1-10). Its fat would be offered in sacrifice, and the blood placed on the lobe of the right ears, the right thumbs, and right toes of Aaron and his sons, and the rest splattered on the vestments and on the altar (Ex. 29:19-21). Even when God renewed the covenant in Ex. 34:10, it is Moses who intercedes on behalf of the people. Aaron is not

involved in anyway (Ex. 34:27-32). Yet it was the function of the priests to offer sacrifice (Lev. 3:16). The sacrifice was meant to bring a pleasing odor to the Lord. That the Levites were the descendents of Aaron through his son Eleazar and Phineas is testified in Ex. 6:23, 25.

The ordination ceremony lasted 7 days, during which they would be cloistered within the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 8:33-35).

Israel was a chosen people consecrated to God. They were a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). Yet, the Levites were to perform the priestly office. Thus already in the OT there is present in a very rudimentary way the concept of a common priesthood at whose service the ministerial priesthood has been placed. In other words, the OT testifies that the ministerial priesthood is meant to empower, embolden, and vivify the common priesthood of the chosen people. Further, the common priesthood of the chosen people who have been designated as a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation flows from God's promise to make Abram a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). The common priesthood of the chosen people testifies to God's promise to make the descendants of Abram a sacrament mediating divine blessings upon the nations. The ultimate blessing is union with God, and sacramentality facilitates such union.

3. The Code of Holiness of the OT Priesthood

The holiness of the priesthood is founded on the holiness of God (Lev. 19:2; 20:7; 21:8). Holiness is also demanded by their ministry. For, it is they who offered food offerings to the Lord (Lev. 21:8). Their ministry involved teaching Israel how to distinguish between the holy and the unholy (Lev. 10:9). Excommunication was part of the holiness code as evident in the prohibition to give children as human sacrifices to Molech (Lev. 20:3).

The priests were not to consume wine nor strong drink (Lev. 10:8) before entering the Tent of Meeting. They were prohibited from entering a funeral home unless it was their father, mother, son, daughter, brother or unmarried sister living in their house. He was also prohibited from marrying a prostitute (Lev. 21). The rationale for this prohibition of marrying a prostitute becomes clear when one considers the pronouncement in Gen. 2:24, that after marriage 'they (husband and wife) become one.' Priest could not be physically deformed (Lev. 21:18).

4. The Code of Holiness for the High Priest

He is prohibited from shaving his head or trimming his beard. He was obliged to comb his hair since his head was anointed with oil (Ex. 29:7; Lev. 21:10). He was prohibited from tearing his garments. Hence, when the high Priest tore his garments at the trial of

Jesus (Mt. 26:65; Mk. 14:63), he was violating the Levitical Code of Holiness (Lev. 21:10).

The High Priest was prohibited from entering even the funeral home of his father and mother (Lev. 21:12). He was expected to marry a virgin from his own clan.

5. The Code of Holiness for the People of Israel:

- a. **Women had to be purified after childbirth (Lev. 12).**
- b. **Those suffering from skin diseases had to be purified (Lev. 13).**
- c. **Clothes that were stained with mildew were unclean (Lev. 13:47-59).**
- d. **House with mildew had to be purified (Lev. 14).**
- e. **Bodily discharges of men and women render them unclean (Lev. 15).**
- f. **Prohibition of consuming blood (Lev. 17).**
- g. **Forbidden sexual practices (Lev. 18).**
- h. **Prohibition of lying, cheating, and slandering (Lev. 19).**
- i. **THE OBERVANCE OF RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS:**

❖ **The Sabbath Festival (Lev. 23:1-4)**

After six days of work, the seventh would be a Sabbath rest, a holy convocation.

❖ **Passover (Lev. 23:5-14)**

The Passover celebration was to commence on the 14th Day of the month of Nisan. On the 10th day of the month every household would select a one year old lamb without blemish. The lamb would be slain on the 14th day. The meal was to be eaten in the evening with loins girded, with sandals adorning the feet, and staff in hand. The meal was to be eaten in haste.

❖ **Unleavened Bread.**

On the fifteenth day of Nisan the feast of unleavened bread begins. On this day the first sheaf of the grain harvest is offered. Unleavened bread would be eaten for 7 days.

❖ **Pentecost (Harvest Festival) – Lev. 23:15-22**

Fifty days or seven weeks after the first sheaf is presented as an offering, the Harvest Festival is celebrated. This is the feast of Weeks or Pentecost.

❖ **Rosh Hashanah (Lev. 23:23-25)**

The first day of the seventh month is the New Year Festival. It is Rosh Hashanah.

❖ **Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:26-32)**

On the 10th day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement is celebrated.

❖ **Sukkoth (Lev. 23:33-44).**

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the feast of Tents or Booths or Tabernacles is celebrated. This is the festival of first fruits or vine harvest. The festival lasts seven days, and the eighth day is celebrated as a festival in its own right.

➤ The Sabbath Year (Lev. 25:1-7)

After every six years the land is not cultivated. It is a Sabbath rest. At the end of the sixth year it is believed that Yahweh would fulfill his abiding promise to grant a harvest that would suffice for three years (Lev. 25:21).

➤ The Jubilee Year (Lev. 25:8-22)

The Jubilee Year was celebrated every 50 years. The land was not cultivated. The vine was not pruned. All debts were cancelled, and slaves were set free.

+ Restoration of property (Lev. 25:23-34).

+ Cancelling debts (Lev. 25:35-38).

+ Release of slaves (Lev. 25:39-55).

j. Establishment of the Principle of Retributive Justice (Lev. 26)

➤ The just will be rewarded with divine blessings (vv. 1-13).

➤ The unjust punished for their disobedience (vv. 14-46).

k. The Ransom Price (Lev. 27)

This is based on the divine command that the first born of man and beast belong to the Lord.

“Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.” And Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage, for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place; no leavened bread shall be eaten...’ (Ex. 13:2-3).

6. The Priesthood of Christ

(a). The Baptismal Consecration of Jesus: At His baptism Jesus was consecrated as priest, prophet and Servant. The heavenly voice acclaiming Him as the ‘Beloved Son’ evokes Ps. 2:7, which is a royal psalm in which the king is acknowledged as a son of God. In the OT, from the time of Melchizedek, the king also functioned as

priest (Gen. 14:18; 1 Kgs. 8:9-10, 11, 12-66). King Solomon consecrated the Temple he built (1 Kgs. 8:1- 9:3), although it were the priests who brought the ark of the covenant to the holy of holies (1 Kgs. 8: 6). In this instance Solomon functions as a priest by invoking God's blessings upon the Temple. He becomes an intercessor.

At the same time, the baptismal scene depicts what kind of messiah Jesus would be. He would be a prophetic messiah (Lk. 4:14-30). The Synoptic gospels use the imagery of the tearing open of the heavens and descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove in order to describe what is essentially an interior transformation resulting from an oracle. The oracle is given to the prophet, and the oracle concerns the prophet.

The prophet is a priest because he offers Himself to the Father. Therefore, God is well please in the Son (Is. 42:1). The heavenly identification associates Jesus with the Servant of Yahweh who will shepherd Israel as priest and prophet, in fulfillment of scriptures but in hitherto unknown ways and unconventional ways.

(b). The Priestly Prayer of Jesus (Jn. 17:1-26): In the Last Discourse Jesus prays to His heavenly Father consecrating His disciples to the truth. He prays that the disciples may be one, as He and the Father are one. Jesus exercises his priestly office by mediating before the Father in order to incorporate His disciples into the privileged relationship He enjoys with the Father. Jesus becomes priest by mediating a filial relationship between the disciples and His Father who is the Creator of heaven and earth. Jesus explicitly says that for the sake of His disciples He consecrates Himself to the truth – His consecration is the means by which His disciples are consecrated. He is a priest because thus He has become a mediator who has offered Himself as sacrifice of atonement.

(c). The Perception of Jesus as High Priest Based on the Letter to the Hebrews:

The letter is an exhortation or homily whereby the community which is in danger of 'falling away' in terms of regular attendance at the communal assembly (Heb. 10:25) although in 'previous days' they persevered in the midst of persecution, are called upon to counter misplaced sacramental piety (by compromising discipleship in favour of piety), and adapt Jewish apocalyptic tradition to a Gentile environment. Therefore, throughout Hebrews, the community is exhorted thus: 'let us hold fast' and 'let us approach.' The community must hold on to their 'boldness' and 'hope.' They must learn to endure. At the same time, they must also 'approach' the throne of God to find mercy and aid.

In the first part of the Exordium (i.e. the Introduction) the author contrasts how God spoke of old with the manner in which He spoke 'in these final days' through a Son. In the second part, the author affirms the exalted status of the Son: He is higher than the angels. The Son, seated at God's right hand, is superior to all other agents, through whom God's word has come, particularly to angels, to Moses, to Joshua, and to Aaron. God

spoke through His Son not only in word, but in the entirety of the Christ event, providing for humanity atonement for sin and an everlasting covenant.

God has made His Son the ‘heir of all things’ (Heb. 1:4). The reference to the inheritance of a name more excellent than angels, together with the quotation from Ps. 2:7-8, introduces the inheritance motif. OT tradition about inheritance promised by God has been developed in various ways in apocalyptic and wisdom literature. In the beginning, the primary content of God’s promised inheritance was land (Dt. 12:9; 19:10). Yet, in the teachings of Christ, the promised inheritance was introduced as ‘the kingdom of God’ (Mt. 25:35); eternal life (Mk. 10:17); immortality (1 Cor. 15:50); Christ’s glory (Rom. 8:17); heavenly salvation (1 Pet. 1:4-5); the heavenly city (Rev. 21:2-7).

The Exordium (introduction) highlights Christ’s exalted status by referring to Him as the *απαυγασμα* (pronounced phonetically as ‘apaugasma’) of God’s glory (cf. Wis. 7:26) – radiance or reflection of God’s glory; the *χαρακτηρ* (pronounced phonetically as ‘charactēr’) which means imprint or stamp of the divine reality; as the ‘one who bears all things’ – *φέρων τε τα παντα* – phonetically pronounced as ‘pherōn te ta panta’ which means ‘bears all things’ and therefore not only creating but also sustaining the universe. The Son who from the beginning was the instrument of God’s creative activity, is also the instrument of His salvific will because it was the Son who made ‘purification’ for sins. It is of this ‘day’ on which the Son made ‘purification’ for sins, that the author of Hebrews attributes the words of Ps. 2:7, “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son, today I have begotten you...’” The Son who was God’s image and agent in creation and redemption, ‘took seat’ at God’s right hand. This is imagery used by the author basing himself on scriptural precedence (i.e. Ps. 109 (110) to refer to the universal divine promulgation of the unrivalled stature of the ‘Son.’ The historical Jesus was the pre-existent Son of God, through whom God created and sustained the universe. It was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that God in His wisdom chose to publicly manifest the unique, unrivalled, and unparalleled status of Jesus as ‘Son.’ This divine revelation was made manifest through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this sense that the author of Hebrews re-interprets Ps. 2:7.

The second part of the Exordium (introduction) includes a catena of seven scriptural quotations [Heb. 1:5-13 –cf. Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 45 (44): 7-8; 97 (96):7; 102 (101): 25-28; 104 (103): 4; 110:1;]. The purpose of the catena is to demonstrate Christ’s superiority to angels because of strands of messianic theology which developed along angelological lines. For instance, in the book of Daniel, Michael is portrayed as battling for the children of Israel. In Qumran fragments, Melchizedek appears as an angelic figure with royal and priestly functions (11QMelch). Christ’s exaltation above angels is meant to amplify the inauguration of the Kingdom of God as an unshakeable realm (Hen. 12:28) of God’s presence to which believers have gained access to. The king’s love for justice has led to his anointing by God. The superiority of Christ distinguishes Him from all who participate in God’s sonship. Therefore, the believers are urged to ‘hold fast’ lest they fall away or slip away (Heb. 2:1). The superiority of Christ gives added weight to the reason why believers ought to heed the Son, who is the definitive herald of God’s word.

Heb. 2:6-8 cites Ps. 8 and re-interprets the text to mean that in Christ, God is subjecting ‘the world to come’ to redeemed humanity, the first among whom stands Christ. The Christological re-interpretation of Ps. 8, associates Jesus with the ‘man’ referred to by the psalmist. What the text reveals is that the exalted status of Jesus depends on what happened to him as a human being. Christ’s humiliation was on account of ‘tasting death’ and his glorification was because he ‘tasted death.’ Such a tasting of death is a biblical reference to the bitterness of the experience (Job. 3:20; 13:26; Is. 22:4; Ez. 21:6; Amos 8:10; Ps. 23:4; 55:4, 15; 88:15; 116:3).

Christ the agent of redemption, having been ‘perfected through suffering is the perfected High Priest (Heb. 5:9; 7:28) who offers a sacrifice is the ‘more perfect’ (Heb. 9:11) tabernacle. He thus perfects his followers in a way that the OT institutions could not. Christ was ‘tested’ in his suffering because his brothers were also being ‘tested.’ He shared the human condition of weakness, and by his participation in ‘blood and flesh’ which resulted in death, he was able to free his brothers from dominion of the one who held sway over death. The incarnation and suffering of Christ took place so that he might be a High Priest characterized by mercy and fidelity. As the heavenly intercessor he is reliable and to be trusted. He can come to the aid of his brothers! (Heb. 2:10-18). Therefore, the believers must consider the apostle and High Priest of their confession (i.e. belief), namely Christ. His reliability is based on his fidelity as Son, unlike Moses who was faithful (Num. 12:7) as a ‘servant.’ Christ is the unique intercessor, unrivalled and unparalleled. This Christ is as a son over his house, which house we are (Heb.3:6). Yet, we remain God’s house only if we maintain our boldness and hopeful boast. This boldness consists in ‘freedom of speech’ especially in prayer (1 Jn. 3:21; Eph. 3:12).

Therefore, believers are exhorted to see to it that there is not in any of them ‘a wicked, faithless heart.’ The reference to Ps. 95 in Heb. 3:7-11 alludes to Israel’s faithlessness in its failure in the desert (Num. 14). Faithlessness involves more than passive unbelief. It is active resistance to the divine will. Hence, believers must continually exhort one another lest their heart be hardened.

In Heb. 4:1, the author summons the community to fidelity saying, “let us fear, therefore, lest with a promise to enter his ‘rest’ left open, anyone of you might be deemed to have fallen short.’ In Heb. 4:3 the author says, ‘For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall never enter my rest,’ although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.” The author elaborates further saying ‘now since it remains for some to enter into it, and those who formerly received the good news did not enter because of disobedience, he again designates a certain day, today, speaking through David a long time later as was said before, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ Now, if Joshua had given them rest, he would not be speaking about another day thereafter. Therefore, a Sabbath observance remains for the people of God (Heb. 4:6-9). In Heb. 4:11, the author will say again, ‘Let us therefore strive to enter that rest that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience.’ The key to understanding how it is that the promise remains open is to see that God’s promised ‘rest’ is not the earthly land of Canaan, but a heavenly reality which God entered upon at the completion of creation. That the ‘promise’ {(ἐπαγγελία – Translit. *Epangelias* - from

the noun **ἐπαγγελία** (*Epangelia*), which means promise or what is promised} remained to be fulfilled after the oath of Yahweh at Kadesh Barnea is clear from Num. 14:22-23.

“...none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to my voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers; and none of those who despised me shall see it.”

Related texts from the book of Numbers are given below:

- Num. 13:30 But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it."
- Num. 14:2 And all the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!"
- Num. 14:4 And they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."
- Num. 14:6-7 And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, rent their clothes, and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land."
- Num. 14:10 But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

The author is not saying that ancient Israel was not united to the faithful remnant Caleb and Joshua who heard the message, rather he is saying that they were not united to us who do, as per his aspirations, listen to his message. Amongst all Israelites, Joshua and Caleb were renowned for their obedience of God's command. The promised repose is to be understood in terms of an eschatological rest. Jewish application of the biblical images of Sabbath rest (**καταπαυσις**- Translit. katapausis) also has apocalyptic sources in which the 'rest' is described in terms of a new creation (Dan. 5:12; Ez. 8:52). Such portraits of eschatological rest derived from apocalyptic sources do not refer to a place as much as it does to a condition. Such conditions are described as joyous or festive repose.

καταπαυσις means a state of rest (cf. Ex. 35:2; 1 Macc. 15:1). **καταπαυσις** and **αναπαυσις** (Translit. anapausis) appears synonymous in the command to keep the Sabbath in Ex. 35:2. This goes to show that the rest is not necessarily to be associated with a particular location. Entry into rest is thus viewed as the liberation of the new Israel, and in terms of apocalyptic imagery, as entry into the eschatological temple, as entry into the heavenly spiritual world. The Christians entry into rest parallels Christ's entry into the

divine presence. Hence the image of rest is to be understood as the symbol for the entire process of salvation which the Letter to the Hebrews does not fully articulate, and which involves a personal and corporate dimension. The author redefines the rest spoken of in Ps. 95 as a heavenly reality using the exegetical argument based on the form of *gezerah shawah* in which a term in one verse of scripture is interpreted according to its use in another. *Gezerah shawah* is a form of midrash. This reinterpretation of the rest spoken of in Ps. 95 suggests that the heavenly resting place had been prepared by God as one of the works of creation (cf. Mt. 25:34; 1 Pet. 1:3; Rev. 21:2). Such rest was a sequel to completed ‘works.’ Our author considers the Sabbath as a symbol of eschatological salvation. He has in view the primordial Sabbath of God’s own rest. That divine Sabbath, is not only the symbol of the eschaton, but the reality itself about which the good news is proclaimed. The Jews believed that ultimate rest is ‘in God’ alone.

As seen in Heb. 4:5, the author indicates his judgment that the scripture again is speaking about the original divine Sabbath. It remains for some to enter this rest, because it remains an eternal and heavenly reality. This day, is the ‘today’ which God designates for such individuals to enter into rest. God designates another day, the ‘today’ of Ps. 95 as an appeal to the author’s contemporaries.

In Jewish tradition the Sabbath was not simply a time of quiet inactivity but of festive praise and celebration. Jewish sources portrayed a Sabbath as filled with praise and thanksgiving directed towards God. A Sabbath celebration remains for the people of God, not because the earthly land of Canaan remains to be entered, but because the individual who enters rest does as God did on the first Sabbath and rests from work. Christians can expect rest after the ‘toils’ of life. Such ‘toils’ involve the persecutions that they are now subjected to. Jesus is the leader of the people of God who leads them to true rest in heavenly glory.

In Heb. 4:12, the author says, ‘For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.’ The word of God was thought of as the effective means of divine creative (cf. Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:9; Is. 55:11; Sir. 42:15; Wis. 9:1; 1 Kgs. 1:51-53; 2:24-25) and judgmental activity (Amos 1:2; Ps. 51:6; Jer. 7:13) and was occasionally personified (cf. Ps. 147:15 where God’s word is referred to as a runner). Here the word of God is compared to a sword. Wis. 18:14-16 speaks of the word of God as a warrior (**πολεμιστη**) who bears the sharp sword (**ξιφὸ ὄξύ**) of God’s decrees of judgment upon the Egyptians at the Exodus. Philo has found a reference to the word in the various biblical swords. In Gen 3:4 the *Logos* is seen to be symbolized by the flaming sword (**την φλογινην ῥομφαιαν**). Early Christians also personified the divine word, and used the image of the sword in various ways. From the mouth of the Son of Man a two edged sword proceeds to slay his enemies (Rev. 1:16; 2:12; 19:15). The Christian girds on the sword of God to also defend himself from the foe (Eph. 6:17). The word therefore is a word of power. The vital power of the word consists in its ability to penetrate the inner most depths of the human being, scrutinizing the inner most thoughts of the human heart. The spiritual penetrating power of the word consists in its ability to scrutinize the inner most thoughts of the human heart. The function of this activity of

discernment is not simply a discovery or unraveling of human thoughts but their judgment as well. The human thoughts are laid bare (**τετραχλισμενα** from the verb **τραχηλιζομαι** to be laid bare, to be exposed) just like the neck of a sacrificial animal is exposed when it is bent back prior to slaughter.

In Heb. 4:14-16 the authors says, ‘Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.’ The author urges the community to hold fast to its faith and to move ahead. Hebrews begins the reinterpretation of Jesus as Son, humiliated and exalted, in terms of his status and function as High Priest. Jesus is a great High Priest in a special sense. He belongs to an entirely different order of priesthood from that of the descendants of Aaron. This difference is bound up with Christ’s heavenly status. Christ has passed through the heavens. He has entered through the veil into the true heavenly sanctuary, and therefore guarantees Christ’s effectiveness as redeemer, and makes possible the addressees entry to the divine presence. The addressees are urged to hold fast to this confession of the Son as High Priest, to hold on to their boldness in this confession. It remains their hopeful boast.

One characteristic of the High Priest is his fellowship in suffering with his followers. The addressees are to hold fast to their confession of the Son of God because their High Priest is able to sympathize (**συμπαθησαι** from **συμπαθεω** to feel sympathy with; perhaps share sufferings with) with them in their general human weakness, because he himself was tried in every respect like them, but did not sin. By holding fast to the boldness of their confession of Jesus as Son and High Priest, the addressees are exhorted to follow the path, through the heavens that Christ blazed, and take advantage of the access to God. To approach God the addressees are urged to enter into a covenantal relationship with God (Sir. 1:28, 30; 2:1). Such boldness is not a public freedom of speech but a confident self expression before God, above all in prayer. It is with this disposition that the addressees are urged to approach the throne of grace, which is the archetype of the ark of the covenant in the sanctuary where God was to be found (cf. Ps. 10:15; Ex. 25:22; Is. 6:1).

The basic function of the High Priest is to make atonement for sin. This was the salvific function of Christ as High Priest (Heb. 4:9-10). Every high priest is established as an intermediary between God and man. The purpose that every High Priest serves relates to God, and yet the high priest remained a part of humanity beset by weakness unlike Christ the true High Priest. Because he was tested in every way like other human beings but did not sin, he is able to sympathize with the rest of humanity. The Levitical high priests must sacrifice for themselves unlike the sinless High Priest Jesus. Whereas the human high priest is called by God, the true High Priest has been divinely installed as Christ. It is God who designated the Son as High Priest. To ask when Christ became high priest would be to miss the point. Ps. 2, give the impression that Christ’s sonship is associated with his exaltation but that is not so. However reference to Christ as High Priest describes his heavenly status and function. It is our view that Hebrews envisages the High Priesthood of Christ in terms of his heavenly and exalted status. At the same time there

are other passages which associate his priesthood with his earthly career. His priestly action is consummated in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 9:23), yet is begun with, and of necessity includes his death (Heb. 9:14, 26; 10:10). The exaltation is not the primary locus of Christ's priestly activity. Christ functioned as High Priest throughout his life since he acted as intercessor (cf. Jn. 17:1-26). Yet, Hebrews focuses on his exalted status as Son and High Priest. In developing the notion of Christ as High Priest within the framework of the Day of Atonement, the author shifts the focus of Christ's priestly activity from his exaltation to his sacrificial death. The author shows that God reveals Christ to be both Son and High Priest. The image of the High Priest is the vehicle through which the confession of Christ as Son is reinterpreted and revitalized by the author of Hebrews. Because the death of the Son is the act of the eternal and now exalted High Priest, it has heavenly or spiritual effects. The Son is the effective mediator because he is the High Priest who suffered and now sits enthroned in heavenly glory. Because it is an act of flesh and blood, the act of a Son who leads many other sons to glory, it is something that can be imitated by the followers of Christ.

The High Priest Christ prays earnestly and with deep emotion. As Heb. 5:7 states, 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear.' Jesus fully shared in the doleful conditions of human life, the same conditions which his followers are exposed. But there is no reference here to Gethsamane, because there Jesus prayed that his cup pass away. The verse refers to the prayer experiences of Jesus including his prayer on the cross. In his human condition, in his confrontation with death Christ offered prayers. He prayed to the one who could save him from death, and the content of his prayer is to be understood as a request for deliverance 'out of' the realm or power of death, and not from death itself. In offering his prayer with loud cries and tears Christ offered 'pious' or fervent prayer (cf. Ps. 22:34; 116:8; Is. 65:19; Jdth. 14:19).

Jesus is not an ordinary Son who is expected to learn from suffering. He is the eternal Son. Christ learnt from what he suffered. Jewish sapiential and martyrological concepts viewed suffering as educative, and so Jesus learns obedience in the midst of suffering because that is what the addressees are called upon to do. In learning obedience, he comes to appreciate fully what conformity to the divine will means. Because he has learnt that lesson he can be the sympathetic heavenly intercessor. Christ thus perfected and installed at God's right hand became a source of eternal salvation. So, Christ is designated as High Priest in the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 119:4)

In Heb. 5:12-6:2 the author says, 'For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.' The contrast between babes – adults, and also milk – solid food, is meant to illustrate the dichotomy between the fundamental

traditional doctrines referred to in Heb. 6:1-2, and the advanced teachings which consist of a new reflection of the central and basic doctrine of Christ's salvific death. This advanced doctrine is what is referred to as solid food that adults can intellectually absorb. Its acquisition is the exercise that as adults they must have, if they are to run the race (cf. Heb. 12:1-13). In other words the solid food when acquired is comparable to the exercise adults must have if they are to run the race. This reflection is timely and appropriate also for us priests today, to deepen in our Christian doctrine, because teaching sound doctrine is an important responsibility of elders (Titus 5:1 ff.).

We maintain that Heb. 6:2 is a programmatic summary of the gospel for the gentile world (cf. Seeberg, Michel, Grassler, Theissen agree; Loader argues that the doctrines alluded to here could be appropriate in the context of a mission to Jews). Harold Attridge argues that those who first framed this summary probably viewed Jesus primarily as the agent, rather than the content of the message of eschatological salvation. The addressees are unlikely to have understood Jesus only in these terms. Hebrews does not introduce a high Christology to its audience, but develops and deepens affirmations that they already make in the traditions about his pre-existence and exaltation. The addressees need a renewal of their faith and that can only come through an appropriation of a difficult discourse. Both the exposition and the desired affects require divine assistance. We prefer to view the details of the formulaic summary as inspired by a catalogue of Jewish catechesis. The call to repentance is rooted in the piety of the OT. The dead works are not works of the law or cult, but works that lead to death, namely, sin (cf. Heb. 9:14). Faith in God is part of the Jewish call to repentance (Is. 7:9; Hab. 2:4; Wis. 12:12). The washings are rooted in Jewish rituals of purification. Laying on of hands rooted in healings (), commissioning (Num. 27:18; 27:23; Dt.34:9), and ordinations ().