

A Biblical Analysis of the High Priesthood of Christ

By
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Abstract

This article examines the nature and function of the priesthood of Christ as our High Priest through His intercession and advocacy for those who are His. The basis for his priesthood, advocacy, and intercession are the oath of the Father and His own body and blood which He offered for the sins of the whole world. His priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek is compared and contrasted with the Aaronic priesthood of the Old Testament. The essentiality of Christ's priesthood for the saints of God [OT and NT] is examined and explained.

Introduction

As a Christian, I have heard thousands of references about Jesus as Savior, and perhaps hundreds pertaining to Jesus as King, and even a few references to Jesus as Prophet. Some correctly call Jesus 'Lord', but few ever mention Him as the High Priest of our Christian faith. **As a matter of fact, Jesus cannot be our Savior and our Lord and King without being our High Priest.** In this article, I will explain and illustrate this truth from the Holy Scriptures, I hope to the reader's satisfaction.

David stated in Psalm 110 the following: *Verse 1: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"* *Verse 4: "The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'"* These prophetic statements from David must now be explained for our clear understanding, and the Bible does this for us. David, undoubtedly, was referring to Genesis 14:18-20, for this is the only prior mention of Melchizedek before Psalm 110 was written. Here in Genesis 14, we see Melchizedek, King of

Salem and Priest of God Most High, blessing Abram [Abraham] and receiving a tithe from Abram. In my opinion, this historical glimpse of Melchizedek is expressly given that we might understand David's prophetic words of Psalm 110:4. Of course, Melchizedek's meeting with Abram also was for Abram's enlightenment regarding God's covenant with him. We need to be aware that the Gen.14 incident occurred 650-700 years prior to the time that God established the Aaronic priesthood under Moses. Also, we must understand that the Melchizedekian priesthood, though similar in form, was very different in effect from the Aaronic priesthood under the law. This we will discuss in detail when our discussion reaches Hebrews. Now, however, we must gain a basic knowledge of the Aaronic [or the Levitical] priesthood.

At Sinai, the children of Israel were essentially a primitive and ungoverned multitude of suddenly freed slave. They had lived without the benefit of law [except the sting of their Egyptian taskmasters' whips]. They needed discipline and organization, and that is one thing that the giving of God's law [Decalogue] did for them. This law was administered through the Aaronic priesthood of the Levitical sacrificial and worship system, and although God's intent was gracious, the Israelites saw the law as a system of legal restraints only, thus placing themselves 'under the law'. This is a subject for a separate discussion, however, and we must confine our present discussion to our topic.

The books of Exodus and Leviticus are our major resources for a basic understanding of the Aaronic priesthood, which we must have for our consideration of what Hebrews will reveal to us. ***The background Scriptures are lengthy for quoting; therefore, the reader should stop at this point and read carefully Exodus, chapters 25-30. This is essential.*** Pay particular attention to the items of furniture, the consecration of Aaron and his sons, and the offerings made to the Lord. Now, turn to **Lev.16** and read about the annual **Day of Atonement**. This will be mentioned later in Hebrews, and there is a need to understand what is said there. The

requirements for service for Aaron and his descendants were very precise and variations from them were rarely allowed (See Lev.10, regarding Nadab and Abihu and their profane fire.).

Our God is methodical in His dealings with humankind. Also, He is consistent in His purposes and practices. Thus, God used the patterns of the heavenly sanctuary for the earthly sanctuary [tabernacle and temple]. *See Exod.25:40 and Heb.8:5*. Aaron's priestly service was patterned after that of Christ, for Christ was, indeed, the true and heavenly High Priest before Aaron was born, since Christ's priesthood is eternal as we shall see.

Now turning to Hebrews, we shall see much of the 'mystery' cleared up for us. The writer of Hebrews seized upon David's prophecy in Psalm 110:1 and 4, and gives us God's interpretation of the Melchizedekian priesthood, relating it to Christ as our High Priest, showing us its eternal nature and uniqueness among all priesthoods [specifically, the Aaronic], and its **absolute essentiality** for those of the faith of Christ Jesus [including the faithful of the OT who believed the promise of God to Abraham (see Heb.9:13-15, Gal.3:22-25)]. We, as NT believers, need the High Priestly services of Christ even more than the OT believers needed those of Aaron [for his were of a temporary nature only]. Christ is the true High Priest *forever* of all the faithful, both OT and NT.

Let us now embark on an exploration of Heb. chapters 4-10:

4:14-15 These verses introduce the reader to Christ Jesus, our compassionate High Priest, who, as a man, was tested in every way that we are tested, yet without sin. He has "passed through the heavens". He came from the Father in heaven and has returned from earth to heaven after completing the work the Father gave Him to do (John 16:28, 17:4).

5:1-11 Verses 1-4 depict the earthly [Aaronic] priest who is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, and can have

compassion due to being fallible himself. He does not assume this honor for himself. Likewise, Christ was appointed by His Father, who said, in effect, ‘You are My son ... and I have made you a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’ As Son of God, Jesus was also Son of Man [having a human mother] and, as such, He was made perfect as our sin sacrifice and learned obedience through suffering, becoming the author of eternal salvation *to all who obey Him* (vv.5-9).

6:17-20 God can be believed on the basis of two immutable [uncontestable] proofs: He promised and He sworn an oath on His own name. Those who lay hold of God’s promises have a strong consolation in their faith in Christ. Hope based in Christ is both sure [certain] and steadfast [lasting]. Christ [as our High Priest] has allowed our hope to enter the Presence behind the veil [where, on earth, only the high priest of Aaron’s order could enter once per year to atone for his own sins and for the sins of the people]. Yet Jesus, the Forerunner, has entered the Father’s presence in heaven for us, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. On earth, entrance behind the veil [the heavy, multilayered curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holiest Place wherein sat the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat that covered it and above which was the space where God’s Presence was in a cloud] could be made only by the high priest once a year with sacrificial blood and smoke of incense. But Jesus entered the heavenly Holiest Place with His own precious and priceless blood to obtain our eternal redemption (**Heb.9:12 and 24**). As a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, Christ Jesus offered His own body and blood once for all sin for all time (**Heb.9:27-28, 10:10 and 14**).

Heb.9:11-14 Even as with Aaron’s priestly order the high priest was required to present each offering to God, so the High Priest of Melchizedek’s order [Christ Jesus] was required to present His offering for sins, yielding His body and blood and delivering that sacrifice to the true Mercy Seat in Heaven (**Heb.9:14b** “...who

[Christ Jesus] through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God...” Also, see **John 20:17** “*Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’.*” As our High Priest, Jesus necessarily ascended to heaven immediately after His resurrection to perform His High Priestly service for His sin offering for all believers [applying His sacrificial blood upon heaven’s Mercy Seat] . One can only try to imagine the joy and satisfaction in the Father’s heart when the Son performed that service as High Priest of all the saints of God. How heaven’s cloud of witnesses must have rejoiced with the Father! Then, Christ returned to earth to finish His business with His Church before His final ascension 40 days later.

Heb.10:5-10 “Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: *‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and [animal] sacrifices for sin, You had no pleasure.* This quotation from Psalm 40:6 again indicates God’s sorrow at Israel’s inappropriate response to His offer of grace if they would love and fear Him (See Deut.5:29 and 30:11-20.) and walk before Him in faith. The Spirit, in Heb.10:6-7, interprets *‘My ears You have opened’ (Psa.40:6b)* as *‘a body You have prepared for Me’*. The Holy Spirit, in Heb.10, instructs us as to Christ’s understanding of David’s prophecy, *which spoke of the obedience of the Son to the will of the Father.* To have one’s ears opened is to have a quickening of mind and spirit. Thus, the Son said “Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of Me. I delight to do Your will, O My God, and Your law is written in My heart.” *[As followers of Christ, we need the same submissive attitude of obedience with His law in our hearts].*

So, we see that Jesus, the Christ [regarding our salvation], was both the sin sacrifice and the High Priest who offered it. Not only that, He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, *since He always lives to make intercession for*

them (Heb.7:25). In other words, the efficacy of the blood of Jesus keeps working on and on. (See 1 John 1:7-9, 2:1-2). Our High Priest assures the forgiveness of our confessed sins, restores our fellowship with the Persons of God [Father, Son, and Spirit] and with fellow believers. His intercession for us *keeps* the Father favorable disposed toward the saints [propitiation] (Heb.2:17, 1John 2:2, 4:10). In this body we need His *continuing* intercession for us.

Christ's Continuing Work as our High Priest

During the modern /post-modern era of the Church, there has grown up an idea among evangelicals that a one-time profession of faith in Christ purifies a person forever before the Father. This, however, can be a misleading concept, and should be closely examined. Certainly, God is able to save and to keep, but that is not an automatic guarantee of eternal security regardless of ones life after a profession of faith. According to Heb.7:25, a believer is in continual need of Christ's intercessory work as our High Priest. His work of *propitiation* was accomplished by His sacrifice upon the cross and its presentation to the Father and its acceptance by Him, but *the essence of the efficacy* of that act is its continuance to *keep* the Father's sense of justice satisfied forever. Thus, believers [at least while in sinful flesh] *must continue to benefit by that propitiation* as they confess their sins for forgiveness and cleansing from unrighteousness (1 John 1:7-9). **Truly, believers are 'kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Pet.1:5).** See also **Eph.1:13-14**, **Heb.3:14**, and others regarding the believer's security in Christ and his *commensurate* responsibilities toward our God and Savior, who is our High Priest forever.

Comparison of Aaronic and Melchizedekian Priesthood

Aaronic

Melchizedekian

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| 1. | Earthly | Heavenly |
| 2. | Repeated sacrifices | One Sacrifice |
| 3. | Priesthood limited by death. | Eternal by power of endless life. |
| 4. | Sinful high priest. | Sinless High Priest |
| 5. | Appointed by law. | Appointed by oath of God. |
| 6. | Will come to an end. | Is eternal. |
| 7. | Made like Aaron | Made like the Son of God |
| 8. | Descended for Abraham. | Greater than Abraham/no genealogy |
| 9. | Priestly service temporary | Priestly service everlasting |
| 10, | Many priests. | One Priest. |

Scripture References or Notes for the Above

1. Earthly: Subject to all the limitation of the flesh of man.
Heavenly: Heb.7:3, Holy, eternal, immortal, unlimited.
2. Earthly: Heb.9:9, 25, 10:1b, 8:3, 7:27, Exodus, Leviticus, etc.
Heavenly: Heb.7:27b, 9:12b, 24b-25a, 26, 28, 10:10, 14.
3. Earthly: Heb.7:23.
Heavenly: Heb.7:24, 25, 5:6, 6:20, 7:17, 21.
4. Earthly: Heb.7:27b, 28a.
Heavenly: Heb.7:26, 27a & c, 28b.
5. Earthly: Heb.7:21a, 28a, Num.20:25-28, Heb.8:4b.
Heavenly: Heb.7:17, 20, 21b.
6. Earthly: Heb.8:7, 13, 9:9-10.
Heavenly: Heb.7:16, 24, 8b.
7. Earthly: Num.3:1-10.
Heavenly: Heb.7:3, 16-17, 5:5-6.
8. Earthly: Heb.7:8-11, Gen.35:23 (Levi [from whom Aaron and all in his order descended] was a son of Jacob, who was a son of Isaac, the son of Abraham.).
Heavenly: Heb.7:3, 6-7, 7:8b. Son of God.
9. Earthly: Heb.7:23, 11-19.
Heavenly: Heb.7:3c, 24-25.
10. Earthly: Through the centuries, there have been many high priests of the descendants of Abraham/Aaron, all were limited as high priest by years of service or by death.

Heavenly: There is but one High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, which leads me to conclude that Melchizedek of Genesis 14 and Christ Jesus are one and the same [at least in essence]. This appears to be the conclusion of Heb.7:11-17. Regardless of one's idea of Melchizedek's identity, there can be no legitimate doubt as to *the office of His priesthood* belonging to only One and of its eternal nature and function.

The Old Covenant under the Aaronic Priesthood

The Old Covenant [of Law] was given within the Covenant of Grace that God made with Abraham [God clearly had grace in mind when He spoke Gen.12:1-3, especially '*And you shall be a blessing.*' and "*And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*"]. At Sinai, God gave the law [Decalogue with its related statutes and judgments] to define righteousness [and, conversely, sin] and He appealed to the Israelites to follow him in faith (*Take special notice of Jer.7:21-24*) [God's own explanation of the situation at Sinai]. Rather than accepting grace in faith and love and obedience, they chose to view the law as a legal contract, and God sadly accepted their decision (see Deut.5:23-31, especially notice God's lament in verse 29). Now consider Deut.30:11-20, particularly noting verse 14; "*But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you might do it.*" Then turn to Rom.10:8 and get the Apostle Paul's interpretation of Deut.30:14; "*But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith, which we preach): To understand the rebellion of the Israelites, read Deut., chapter 9.*

So, we may conclude that the Old Covenant mentioned in Hebrews was a legal contract by the Israelites' choice. However, God wanted a love relationship with them, but they refused. Jesus lamented that fact in Matt.23:37. God's intent for the Covenant of Law was gracious, whereby it would facilitate the grace promised to Abraham. The Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical sacrificial system were for the administration of the law and for temporary

covering of sins committed in ignorance (see Lev.4:13-35 or Num.15:22-31) until the promised Seed should come (See Gal.3:19 and 4:4-5 and Heb.9:14-15). One can understand from the Scriptures cited that an OT saint who had his unintentional sins atoned for was forgiven and was redeemed by the blood of Christ Jesus when He sacrificed His own body as our High Priest (see especially Gal.4:5 and Heb.9:15b).

The New Covenant under the Priesthood of Christ

Hebrews, chapters 8-10, gives us the essentials of the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant. The principle advantages, briefly stated are: 1) a better sacrifice and 2) a better mediator. As pointed out above, under the OC [Old Covenant] sins were temporarily covered, with the prospect of full atonement under the NC [New Covenant]. The mediation of the OC was administered under a mere man [Moses/Aaron] for the Israelites and those with them under the law of God, whereas the Mediator of the NC is Christ Jesus and it is concerned with the fulfilled promises made *before* the law was given [Gen.3:15—the promised Seed and Gen.12:2c & 3b—the promise of grace for all the world]. This is not to imply that grace was not available under the law, for it certainly was [though by-and-large it was rejected by Israel]. Nevertheless, God is gracious and merciful and forgiving to all who will love Him and walk by faith (See Exod. 34:5-7). These words in Exod.34 are among the most important ever given by the Lord God, and we should take notice accordingly. In my opinion, these words are **equivalent to John 3:16 and other statements of grace**, for here God reveals His heart to His servant Moses in response to Moses' request. These words from the Almighty reveal the very motivation for His grace and the many statements that pertain to it in both the OT and NT Scriptures.

To summarize the advantages of the NC over the OC which are given in tabular form above, we will comment briefly: The complete sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ Jesus and its distinct

superiority over the old animal sacrifices first spring to mind. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Heb.10:4), but Christ Jesus sanctified forever those who have placed their hope in Him (Heb.6:18-20, 10:10 & 14). The sacrifices under the OC had to be repeated over and over, but the sacrifice of our High Priest had only to be offered once for all for all time (Heb.7:26-28 and other). The work of our High Priest continues forever based on the efficacy of His one sacrifice (Heb.7:25 and 1 John 1:7)—thus His work when I first came to Him in repentance and faith not only sanctified and justified me then but continues to sanctify me and to justify me before the Father [propitiation]. *It is very important to realize that sanctification and justification are inseparable and dynamic—they continue as a process together under the direction of the Holy Spirit in one who has been born again [regeneration].* To view salvation as an isolated incident in the lifespan of a person can be dangerous and misleading. The ‘sheep’ of Jesus hear His voice *and they follow Him*. They do not sit on a shelf marked ‘Reserved for Heaven’. *Following* is not merely an option, but rather a command and a duty (See Luke 9:23-24, Heb.3:14). This view is biblical and not legalistic as some claim, because works under grace (Eph.2:10 & other) are not ‘works of the law’ (Rom.9:32) but works of faith.

Another attribute of Christ our High Priest is His purity and holiness. He is undefiled, separate from sinners, guiltless, and He is exalted higher than the heavens (Heb.7:26). Thus, He is immanently qualified as our High Priest to serve in the true tabernacle in Heaven not made by man, but by God (Heb.8:2). Moreover, Christ is King of Righteousness (Heb.7:2, Jer.23:6b). We, as among the redeemed of the Lord, may rightfully glory in the knowledge that we know and understand the Lord—that He is the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, and delights in so doing (Jer.9:24-25). Our High Priest has no need for symbolic washings and sprinkling for purification as used under the OC, because He is the source of the purity which those rituals depicted. His water is the water of

life of which all who desire may drink freely (John 4:14, 7:37-38, Rev.22:17). The washing that our High Priest does purifies not only the flesh but [more importantly] the spirit (Titus 3:5).

Our High Priest does not [as Aaron and those after him did] circumcise the flesh (Gen.17:10, Luke 2:25-33, 39), but He circumcises the 'heart' and mind (See Deut.30:6, Rom.2:28-29).

We see, then, Christ Jesus our High Priest who is also King of Righteousness, Prince of Peace, Savior [who offered his own body as the sacrifice that paid for all sin], Mediator and Surety of the New Covenant, Fulfiller and Completer of the Old Covenant, Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, King of kings, Lord of lords, and so much more. He is indivisible and indissoluble. We must not try to disintegrate Him or His offices.

It was God's plan and suited His purposes to pattern the earthly priestly service after the heavenly. The earthly was a mere shadow of the true and heavenly. We may not be able to comprehend all concerning these things, but we can and should believe and honor what has been revealed to us.