

## CHRIST, THE BELIEVER'S HIGH PRIEST: AN EXPOSITION OF HE- BREWS 7:26–28

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**T**HE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST is discussed often in the Book of Hebrews. In fact it is the author's central theme.<sup>1</sup> Denney suggests that the author of Hebrews could not think of such a thing as a religion without a priesthood.<sup>2</sup> Westcott wrote that the concept of priesthood is universal among the religions of the world.<sup>3</sup>

A priest "is the person through whom and through whose ministry people draw near to God."<sup>4</sup> "Priesthood," Moorehead wrote, "springs from the deepest needs of the human soul," namely, the need for forgiveness and the need for access to God.<sup>5</sup> As Denney put it, "Men are sinful . . . and without some kind of mediation they cannot draw near to God at all."<sup>6</sup>

The author of Hebrews writes on the assumption that all people are sinners, and they can have no access to God except by a priest.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David J. MacLeod, "The Doctrinal Center of the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (July–September, 1989): 291–300.

<sup>2</sup> James Denney, "Priest in NT," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner's, 1911), 4:98.

<sup>3</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 138.

<sup>4</sup> Denney, "Priest in NT," 98.

<sup>5</sup> W. G. Moorehead, "Priesthood," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 2445.

<sup>6</sup> Denney, "Priest in NT," 98.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1855; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 5:546.

It is in this great truth—the fact that Jesus Christ is the High Priest of Christians—that the treasures of forgiveness, access to God, strength, consolation, and care are to be found.

In 7:11–25 the author argued that the priesthood of Christ is superior to that of Aaron in the Old Testament<sup>8</sup>—superior, in fact, to all other priesthoods. He argued that it is superior because it is based on the very oath of God (vv. 20–22). And it is superior because it is permanent (vv. 23–25). Then in verses 26–28 he summarized all that he had been saying by adding one final argument. “The new priesthood is better because the new priest is Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

Verses 26–28 also serve to introduce the next section (8:1–10:18), in which the author described the priestly work and sacrifice of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Lane calls these verses “a majestic statement concerning Jesus’ character, achievement, and status as high priest.”<sup>11</sup> Davidson calls it “a triumphant exclamation, in which epithets are heaped on epithets, describing the lofty moral characteristics and the transcendent sphere of existence of the Melchizedek High Priest, and the consequent perfection of His high-priestly work.”<sup>12</sup> Moffatt called the passage “a rhapsody,”<sup>13</sup> that is, an intense or exalted poem.

Most significant of all, perhaps, is the observation of the Italian commentator Teodorico, who describes verses 26–28 as “a hymn to the High Priest . . . as though an outburst of the joy of humanity which has at last found the high priest qualified to understand its weaknesses and to come to its aid: so far above us and so near to us; himself in need of no cleansing and able to cleanse and expiate all our guilt; so different from the levitical priests and so much more effective in the function of his [priestly] mediation.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 170–75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ellingworth calls verses 26–28 “a great nodal point” in the argument of the epistle (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 392).

<sup>11</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 191.

<sup>12</sup> A. B. Davidson, *Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1882), 143.

<sup>13</sup> James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1924), 101.

<sup>14</sup> P. Teodorico da Castel S. Pietro, *L’ Epistola agli Ebrei* (Rome, 1952), quoted in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 280.

The purpose of this article is to examine what many scholars<sup>15</sup> say is part of an early Christian hymn in praise of Christ.<sup>16</sup> In verses 26–28 the author of Hebrews discussed the purity of Jesus' person (v. 26), the finality of His work (v. 27), and the superiority of His priesthood (v. 28).

### THE PURITY OF JESUS' PERSON (V. 26)

#### HIS PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The initial statement of the author in verse 26 indicates his concern for his readers. He wanted to apply his teachings to their situation.<sup>17</sup> "Such a high priest," that is, the one he described in verses 11–25<sup>18</sup> and the one he would describe in verses 26–28,<sup>19</sup> is exactly what they

<sup>15</sup> Not all are convinced that this passage is a hymn. David Peterson writes, "Even the suggestion that verse 26 is a hymn-fragment seems hard to accept in view of the words 'for it was fitting that we should have such a high priest,' clearly presupposing the argument of the preceding verses (and verse 27 in its turn depending so much on verse 26)" (*Hebrews and Perfection* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 250 n. 76). Also Lane points out that "7:26–28 is a periodic sentence. Such sentences should be recognized as an integral element in the literary signature of this writer" (*Hebrews 1–8*, 179). See also Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 212. The objections of such careful exegetes of Hebrews should make all students of the epistle cautious about being too dogmatic in asserting that this passage is a hymn. If the author of Hebrews himself were the author of the hymn, however, the objections of Peterson, Attridge and Lane would be without merit.

<sup>16</sup> H. Windisch suggested that the source of verses 26–28 was a concise liturgical hymn (*Der Hebraerbrief*, 2nd ed. [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1931], 67–69). Otto Michel suggests that verse 26 is a hymn fragment, and he sees the four stanzas of the hymn as follows:

Such a high priest became us,  
Holy, guileless, undefiled,  
separated from sinners,  
made higher than the heavens.

See also Otto Michel (*Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 12th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 278–80); Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 175 n. 81; and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 383.) Michel noted two criteria in hellenistic hymns (cf. the summary in Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 179): (a) third person predication, that is, the person is not addressed directly (v. 26 fits this criterion); and (b) titles of honor and participles that are attributive, or predicative, are accumulated. Verse 26 also fits this criterion with its three anarthrous adjectives (ο{σιο", α[kako", ajmivanto") and its two attributive participial phrases (kecwrismevno" ajpo; tw'n ajmartw'lw'n and uJyhlovtero" tw'n oujranw'n genovmeno").

<sup>17</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 191.

<sup>18</sup> According to Henry Alford the demonstrative τοιου'το" is "retrospective, not prospective," for it looks back at the argument that precedes and leads up to this point (*The Greek Testament* [1861; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1958], 4:143).

<sup>19</sup> When followed by the relative ο} " (as in 8:1) the demonstrative τοιου'το" refers

needed.<sup>20</sup> They need look no further than Jesus to meet all their priestly needs.

“It was fitting for us to have such a high priest.” The word “fitting” ( $\epsilon[\text{prepen}$ , “became us,”  $\kappa\text{JV}$ )<sup>21</sup> does not speak of the fitting together of some divine jigsaw puzzle. Rather it means “appropriate.” Jesus’ assets correspond exactly to the believer’s needs. He is the very kind of priest believers need.<sup>22</sup> The word “us” ( $\text{h}\text{Jmi}'\text{n}$ ) is not speaking of people in general. Verse 25 makes it clear that the verse refers to Christ’s intercessory work for Christians.

The everyday struggles of believers call for His aid. Actually believers have many and varied needs that only such a priest can meet. The great Puritan pastor and scholar John Owen noted eight such needs. First, people need a priest who can make atonement for their sins (2:17). Second, they need someone who can cleanse their consciences so that they can serve God (9:14). Third, they need someone who can procure acceptance with God for them (10:19). Fourth, believers need someone who can administer the grace of God to them to enable them to live a life of faith, worship, and obedience (13:15, 21). Fifth, believers need someone who can give them assistance and comfort in their trials, temptations, and sufferings (2:17–18; 4:15–16). Sixth, they need someone who can preserve them from sins and dangers that might ruin them (7:25). Seventh, they need someone who is continually ready to hear their calls to Him for help (2:18). Eighth, they need someone who will see them through all of life and insure their final salvation (7:25). Jesus is just such a priest.<sup>23</sup>

The late Carl Armerding (1889–1987), well-known Bible teacher, professor at Dallas Seminary and Wheaton College, and president of the Central American Mission, told that when he was a boy he had a close friend who was a Roman Catholic. One day his friend asked Carl if he would like to go to church with him. Carl asked his parents, and they agreed to let him go if Carl’s friend would go with him the next week to the Armerdings’ local church. Both sets of parents agreed to

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to what follows. In 7:26, then,  $\text{t}\text{o}\text{i}\text{o}\text{u}'\text{t}\text{o}$  looks forward as well as backward (Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 193; and Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 191).

<sup>20</sup> The  $\text{g}\text{a};\text{r}$  in verse 26 is intensive, that is, “Yes, in truth” or “Indeed.” The  $\text{k}\text{a}\text{i};$  further intensifies the statement. The New English Bible reads, “Such a high priest does indeed fit our condition.”

<sup>21</sup> The verb  $\epsilon[\text{prepen}$ , an imperfect indicative active of  $\text{p}\text{r}\text{e}\text{v}\text{p}\text{w}$ , also occurs in 2:10, where the author pointed out that it is fitting for God the Father to perfect the author of salvation through sufferings (Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 271).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid; see also J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 5:556.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 5:548.

the arrangement.

Carl went, and he admitted that he was impressed with the liturgy, the candles, the incense, the altar, the stained glass, and the high vaulted ceilings. "Well," his friend asked, "how did you like it?" Carl was noncommittal. He answered, "It was new to me."

The next week they attended Carl's home church, a little storefront gospel hall that served as the meeting place of a Brethren assembly. As was their custom, the Christians there celebrated the Lord's Supper with the chairs arranged in a circle around a plain table with a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. There was singing, prayer, and some Bible exposition. "Well," Carl asked his friend on the way home, "how did you like it?" His friend answered, "It's all right for them that likes it, but you ain't got no priest!"

Carl reported this conversation to his father who said, "But, Carl, we do have a priest. The Book of Hebrews tells us that the Lord Jesus is our priest." "But what does He do for us?" Carl asked his father. "Well, He offered a once-for-all sacrifice that forever redeems us, and He prays for us all the time." Carl sought out his friend and explained this newly learned truth. "It must be wonderful," the boy said, "to have someone who constantly prays for you."<sup>24</sup>

Verse 26 mentions five characteristics of Christ in His high priestly role.<sup>25</sup> The first three characteristics describe the Lord in relation to God, people, and Himself. First, He is "holy" ( $\omicron\{\sigma\iota\omicron\}$ , "devout," NEB).<sup>26</sup> This describes Jesus in relation to God the Father. It depicts someone who is faithful in all his duties to God.<sup>27</sup> It describes a person not so much as he or she appears before others, but as he or she ap-

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<sup>24</sup> S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "Suffering, Sympathy and Succor (Hebrews 2:17–18)," (cassette tape, Dallas: Believers' Chapel, 1968).

<sup>25</sup> Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 176 n. 84) says  $\omicron\{\sigma\iota\omicron\}$  has the basic sense of "loyal to covenant obligations." Delitzsch renders it as "godly minded, saintly." Moffatt said the term suggests His qualities of reverence (5:7), obedience (5:8; 10:5–7), faith (12:2), loyalty (2:17; 3:2), and humility (5:5) (Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. T. L. Kingsbury [Edinburgh: Clark, 1871], 2:2). See also Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Christ was "wholly oriented in thought and act to God and His service" (G. Schrenk, "ajrciereuv," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 280). In the Septuagint  $\omicron\{\sigma\iota\omicron\}$  is used predominantly for  $\delta\upsilon\sigma\iota\acute{\iota}\nu$ ; never for  $\nu\omega\delta\acute{\alpha}\nu$ ; ( $\alpha\{\gamma\iota\omicron\nu\}$ ) or  $\kappa\upsilon\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron$  ( $\delta\iota\nu\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron$ ). The term  $\delta\upsilon\sigma\iota\acute{\iota}\nu$ ; speaks of a relationship of faithfulness to Yahweh. It is a cognate of  $\delta\varsigma, \acute{\iota}$ , ("loyal or steadfast love"). Elsewhere in the New Testament  $\omicron\{\sigma\iota\omicron\}$  is used of Christ in connection with the resurrection (Acts 2:27; 13:35; cf. Ps. 16:10 [LXX, 15:10]). See F. Hauck, " $\omicron\{\sigma\iota\omicron\}$ ," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5 (1967), 490–92.

pears before God.<sup>28</sup> Though Jesus was tempted, He never yielded to sin. He was holy in the absolute sense, that is, totally without sin. It is fitting that Christians have this kind of high priest, for God accepts believers because He is totally pleased with Him.

Second, He is “innocent” (a[kako], “harmless,” KJV; “guileless,” NEB; “blameless,” NIV).<sup>29</sup> This describes Jesus in relation to human-kind. People sometimes use the word “innocent” to mean inexperienced or naive.<sup>30</sup> The opposite sort of person is one who deceives the heart of the “unsuspecting” (tw'n ajkavkwn, Rom. 16:18). But in Hebrews 7:26 a[kako] means without guile or malice, or unkindness.<sup>31</sup> It describes a person in his motives toward and his effect on others. It suggests the absence of all that is bad and wrong. Jesus was “innocent” in that His motives were pure, and He was incapable of conceiving harm against anyone.<sup>32</sup>

How different from sinful people, whose lives are soiled by false motives and unworthy deeds. How fitting, then, that God should give His Son to be the Sin-bearer of the world. Because He was “innocent,” He could take the world’s guilt on Himself and endure the judgment deserved by all sinners.<sup>33</sup>

Third, He is “undefiled” (ajmivanto).<sup>34</sup> This describes Jesus in relation to Himself. This term means freedom from blemish and spot.

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<sup>28</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Daily Bible Study Series, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 83.

<sup>29</sup> [Akako] implies “the one who does not do evil.” It has an active moral sense, while ajmivanto is passive. [Akako] is common in Proverbs where it has the sense of “unsullied by evil” or “ignorant or simple in relation to evil” (W. Grundmann, “a[kako],” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 [1965], 482).

<sup>30</sup> Marcus Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 4:317; cf. George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 128.

<sup>31</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:3.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 272; Hugh Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 130.

<sup>33</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 272.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 54. In each of the known uses of ajmivanto the common factor is “the absence of anything which would constitute defilement before God” (H. Wahrisch, “Virtue,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], 3:925). Cf. also F. Hauck, “ajmivanto,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (1967), 647.

Christ was free from evil in Himself, and also He contracted none from anything else. He was not defiled because of the uncleanness of the people among whom He lived, worked, and served.<sup>35</sup> Old Testament animal sacrifices had to be “without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). Had Jesus been defiled in any way, He could not have been acceptable to God; He could not have achieved redemption for the lost. How fitting, then, that He should be without stain or blemish.<sup>36</sup>

#### HIS PRESENT STATE

Jesus' next two characteristics are linked to His present state in heaven. First, He is said to be “separated from sinners” (*kecwrismevno* " *ajpo*; *tw'n aJmartwlv'n*).<sup>37</sup> The perfect tense of the

<sup>35</sup> Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 5:555.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 273.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase “separated from sinners” (*kecwrismevno* " *ajpo*; *tw'n aJmartwlv'n*) has been interpreted in three ways. One view is that Christ's separation is local or spatial, that is, the phrase is taken with the following words “exalted above the heavens.” This is the view of the majority of the commentators, and it is the one followed in this article. See J. A. Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Philadelphia: Perkinpine & Higgins, 1864), 2:629; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:4; Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:144; Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 143; Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 195; Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 101; C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* [Paris: J. Gabalda, 1953], 2:201; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 213; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 192; and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 394. This interpretation seems best for two reasons: First the perfect participle *kecwrismevno* suggests a historical event (His ascension) that introduced an abiding state (His exaltation). Second, a study of the usage of the verb *cwriwz* in the passive followed by *ajpov* indicates that the idiom regularly denotes local separation.

This view has been rejected by some for two reasons. First, they say that since Jesus was sinless, it was unnecessary that He be exalted to avoid defilement (Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960], 126). However, as William Kelly points out, the text says “separated from sinners,” not “separated from sins” (*An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* [London: T. Weston, 1905; reprint, Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, n.d.], 140). Second, the epistle stresses His nearness to sinners and not His remoteness from them (2:10–18; 4:14–16; 10:19–24; cf. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 274). While the epistle does stress Christ's nearness to His people, the epistle also stresses His present session in heaven.

A second view of the meaning “separated from sinners” is that Christ's separation is moral. In this view the phrase is taken with the one that precedes it (“holy, innocent, undefiled”). The perfect participle denotes the Incarnation and the abiding state of Jesus' incarnate sinlessness. Proponents of this view include John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 102; Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 5:556–58; Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 318; Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 126; Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 274–75. But the problem with this view is that it is not supported by use of the words elsewhere.

A third view is that Christ's separation is both moral and spatial, that is, the phrase is

participle looks at the event of Jesus' ascension when His life among sinners ceased. He no longer lives on this earth, which is characterized by testing, hostility, and suffering. The thought is well expressed by Isaac Watts in a communion hymn:

With joy we tell the scoffing age,  
He that was dead has left His tomb;  
He lives above their utmost rage,  
And we are waiting till He come.<sup>38</sup>

Having entered heaven, He carries out His ministry of intercession for His people. Jesus is not in heaven today planning the Second Coming or the layout of the millennial temple. That is the Father's business (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:6–7). Today God's Son is in heaven interceding for believers. The saintly, young Scottish preacher, Robert Murray McCheyne, once said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference. He is praying for me!"<sup>39</sup>

Second, He is "exalted above the heavens" (uJyhlovtero" tw'n oujranw'n genovmeno"). This phrase embraces the triumph of Christ's resurrection, ascension, and glorification.<sup>40</sup> It expresses the "super-celestial exaltation" of His priesthood.<sup>41</sup>

This truth has great practical significance for believers. The Lord Jesus has been exalted above all the limitations of time and space. He is not some historical figure locked in the past. For His people He is always in the present and available. "Were He merely a figure of past history, overtaken and held by death, He could be no mediating high priest for us today."<sup>42</sup>

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to be taken with both the one that precedes it and the one that follows it. Proponents include Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 176 n. 88; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 367; and M. J. Harris, "Separate," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:534. At first glance this seems to be the best solution. But it is to be rejected for two reasons. First, linguistic usage supports the first view. Second, the perfect participle *kecwrismevno*" suggests that the author had a specific event in mind, either the Incarnation or Jesus' ascension, but not both.

<sup>38</sup> Isaac Watts, quoted by Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:4.

<sup>39</sup> H. G. Bosch, *Our Daily Bread*, March 4, 1981.

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 275.

<sup>41</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:5; and Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 192.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 275.

## THE FINALITY OF JESUS' WORK (v. 27)

## THE WEAKNESS OF HIS PREDECESSORS

The high priests of the Old Testament were characterized by “weakness” (*ajsqevneia*, Heb. 7:28). Actually the Levitical priesthood had a number of weaknesses, and three of them are cited in chapter 7.<sup>43</sup> First, the Old Testament priests were mortal (v. 23). Second, they were sinful. In verse 27 the author gives a general survey of the high priest's work, which proves this point. He alluded, of course, to the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). As the special events of that annual festival began, a young bull was brought to the high priest, who laid his hands on it and symbolically transferred his sins to it. He said, in essence, “O Lord! I have done wrong. I have transgressed. I have sinned before thee, I and my house, O Lord! Forgive the wrongdoings, the transgressions, the sins which I have committed before Thee, I and my house. As it is written in the Torah of Moses Thy servant: for on this day shall atonement be made.”<sup>44</sup> The greatest of the Levitical rituals began with the high priest confessing his own sins! Having done this the high priest would then sacrifice the bullock (v. 11).

After sacrificing the bull the priest would take two goats, sacrificing one and confessing the sins of the nation over the other (vv. 15, 21).<sup>45</sup> The main point, however, is that the Old Testament priests (i.e., the divinely appointed priests)—like the priests of every other religion—were sinners. In Hebrews 7:27 the word “daily” (*kaq j hJmevran*)<sup>46</sup> reinforces this. It refers to the other guilt offerings the

<sup>43</sup> W. Gutbrod, “*novmo*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (1967), 1079.

<sup>44</sup> *Yoma* 3. 35b–36a, and 4.41b, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed*, ed. I. Epstein, trans. Leo Jung (London: Soncino, 1938), 3:165, 196–97.

<sup>45</sup> *Yoma* 4.41b; 5.53b and 6.66a–66b, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed*, 3:196–97, 251–52, 308–9.

<sup>46</sup> The phrase *kaq j hJmevran* has occasioned much debate. It is obvious that the author was referring in verse 27 to the annual Day of Atonement. As he wrote in 9:25, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies “yearly” (*kat j ejniauto;n*) and not daily. Several solutions have been advanced. (1) “Daily” means each Day of Atonement (Ebrard, quoted by Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:144). However, “daily” means “day by day,” and the author did say “yearly” (*kat j ejniauto;n*) when that is what he meant (Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 276). (2) The reference is to the daily meal offerings in Leviticus 6:12–18 (Schrenk, “*ajrciereuv*,” 280; and Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 214). These were not sin offerings, and they were offered by the priests and not the high priest. (3) “Daily” applies to the work of Christ in heaven, that is, daily intercession (Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 196; and Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 318–19). However, the author's point seems to be that Jesus does not need to do daily what the Levitical priests had to do, namely, offer sacrifices for Himself and for the people. (4) “Daily” means whenever the high priest

priests had to make as they regularly sinned (cf. 4:3–12; Exod. 29:38–41; Num. 28:3–8).

Third, Old Testament priests were ineffective, that is, their sacrifices did not remove sin and guilt (Heb. 7:27; cf. 9:9–10; 10:4).

#### THE SUFFICIENCY OF HIS OFFERING

*Its uniqueness.* Unlike the unending repetition of sacrifices by the Levitical priests, Jesus offered one sacrifice, and that one sacrifice is “once for all” (NASB). The expression “once for all” (εἰς πάντας) is one of the most important words in the epistle.<sup>47</sup> It suggests the definiteness, uniqueness, or singularity of the death of Christ.<sup>48</sup> Jesus offered one sacrifice to God (10:12, 14), and it needs never to be repeated.<sup>49</sup>

*Its nature.* The reason Jesus’ sacrifice need never be repeated is that He offered “Himself” (ἐξ αὐτοῦ). Jesus was both priest and victim, both Sacrificer and Sacrifice. That one sacrifice needs no repetition, and nothing needs to be added to it. The prophet Isaiah pictured this sacrifice when he portrayed the Suffering Servant, who “would render Himself as a guilt offering” (μὴ ἑαυτὸν ὡς ἑὸν ἁμάρτημα, Isa. 53:10; cf. Lev. 5:6–10; 7:1–10).<sup>50</sup> Romans 8:3 refers to Him as “an offering for sin.” The same

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sinned (Lev. 4:3–12; Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 5:564–66). However, Hebrews 7:27 does seem to refer to the annual Day of Atonement. (5) Verse 27 speaks both generally of daily sin offerings and specifically of the Day of Atonement. But the author did speak of the annual Day of Atonement. However, what was done on that one day was sacrificial ritual “raised to a higher power” (Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 144; see also Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, 103; Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 102; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 177; Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 277; Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 395; and K. Weiss, “ἀγιασθῆναι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 9 [1974], 61).

<sup>47</sup> Schrenk, “ἀγιασθῆναι,” 281.

<sup>48</sup> G. Stählin, “εἰς πάντας,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (1964), 383.

<sup>49</sup> Protestant writers have sometimes misrepresented Roman Catholic theology by asserting that Catholics teach that Golgotha is repeated in the Mass. Catholic theologians reject this interpretation and argue that the Mass is not a “repetition” but a “realization” of the sacrifice of Christ in the present. However, even this understanding is not biblical.

In the Lord’s Supper the congregation is pointed back to the historical moment when Christ died and pointed forward to His return. At the present time, however, Christ is seated at the right hand of God. He *has been* crucified and *will* return. In true Christian worship there must be no attempt to reproduce that once-for-all event. There is a danger of falling back to the level of the Old Testament priesthood when it is insisted that a priest must present the sacrifice anew (Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 169; and idem, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963], 99).

<sup>50</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 178.

point is made in 2 Corinthians 5:21 where the apostle said God made Christ “to be sin for [uJpevr] us.” The Lord Jesus said He gave His life “a ransom for [ajntiv] many” (Matt. 20:28).

The language in all these passages is substitutionary,<sup>51</sup> that is, just as the bullock and the goat on the Day of Atonement died in place of the high priest and the people, so Jesus Christ died as a substitute for sinners, that is, in their place. Just as the Levitical high priest confessed his sins over the bullock, so sinners may confess their sins to Jesus, who died in their place.

### THE SUPERIORITY OF JESUS' PRIESTHOOD (v. 28)

#### ITS BASIS: AN OATH

In verse 28 the author detailed the profound difference between the two priesthoods.<sup>52</sup> First, Jesus' priesthood is based on an oath by God. The oath of Psalm 110:4 was given long after the Law of Moses. If the Levitical priesthood had been effective, what possible need would there have been for an oath to establish a new priesthood? The time sequence points to the ineffectiveness of the Old Testament priesthood.<sup>53</sup> God's oath also tells the reader that the priesthood of Jesus is guaranteed. God the Father has sworn that the work of Christ is effective.

#### ITS APPOINTEE: A SON

The second difference is seen in the quality or nature of the priests. The old priests were merely men (ajnqrwvpou"). The new priest is the Son of God, that is, He shares the very nature of God.<sup>54</sup> In contrast with weak men—the plural suggests the mortality of the old priests—the new priest is the eternal Son of God.

The perfect participle teteleiwmevnon (“made perfect”) looks at Jesus' human nature. It does not mean that He was morally corrected or improved. In Hebrews there are three aspects to the perfecting of Christ. First, there is the ceremonial aspect. “To perfect” means “to consecrate” or “to install in office.”<sup>55</sup> Second, there is the personal as-

<sup>51</sup> Schrenk, “ajrciereuv,” 280.

<sup>52</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 194.

<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 279; cf. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 194.

<sup>54</sup> The anarthrous uiJo;n focuses on the quality or nature of the priest. He is a Son-kind-of-priest. Verse 28, like verse 3, speaks of ontological Sonship, not messianic Sonship (Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:15).

<sup>55</sup> G. Delling, “teleioww,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8

pect. Jesus was “made complete,”<sup>56</sup> that is, He went through the sufferings of life in order that He might experience on a human level what it was like to carry out the task of the Servant of the Lord to the end (2:10; 5:8).<sup>57</sup> Third, there is the official or vocational aspect. These experiences “qualified” Him to be a sympathetic High Priest (2:17–18; 4:15–16), and the Cross qualified Him to be the Savior (2:9–11).<sup>58</sup>

#### ITS DURATION: FOREVER

The Old Testament priests were mortal. Each one died and was replaced by another. Jesus will never die, for He is glorified in heaven. His priesthood will last forever because of who He is. Furthermore it will last forever in light of what He has done. His sacrifice was “once for all,” and so it is eternal in value. Also it will last forever because He is in the very presence of God. Unhindered access to God is the goal of all priesthood, and Jesus has achieved it.

#### CONCLUSION

As the Old Testament states repeatedly, sinful people had to approach God through the mediation of a high priest. But Psalm 110:4 suggests that a priest different from Aaron’s kind was necessary. The message of Hebrews 7:26–28 is that Jesus Christ is precisely the kind of priest people need. Unlike all other priests, He is sinless in His person, and His sacrifice (“Himself”) is efficacious.

Because He is the believers’ High Priest their ultimate destination in heaven is secure. Day by day He is rescuing them from sin, fear, disobedience, and apathy. Therefore they can trust Him, knowing that He never fails.

A high priest is necessary to mediate cleansing from sin and access to God, but the only adequate high priest is the Son of God. The author of Hebrews seems to say, “To gain access to God you need a high priest, and Jesus Christ is just the priest you need.” He has offered a once-for-all sacrifice that will wash away all one’s sins forever.

The seriousness of the word “once for all” is seen in 9:27, where the author wrote that each person must “die once” (αἵματι ἑαυτοῦ). Jesus took to Himself this one destiny of all human beings.

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(1972), 81, 83.

<sup>56</sup> Koester, *Hebrews*, 368.

<sup>57</sup> P. J. Du Plessis, *TELEIOS: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959), 216–17.

<sup>58</sup> Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 125; cf. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 195.

In other words He died as a sacrifice in the place of sinners, and that once-for-all act is all that is needed to provide forgiveness forever (cf. 10:16–18).<sup>59</sup>

In the twelfth century a Christian writer named Herveus wrote that four questions must be asked when evaluating any sacrifice:<sup>60</sup> First, what is offered? Jesus offered "Himself," whose life is holy and blameless (7:26). Second, to whom is it offered? Jesus offered His sacrifice to the one true God, the only one who can truly forgive sin. Third, by whom is it offered? This sacrifice was offered by the only eternal, effective priest, namely, Jesus Christ Himself. Fourth, for whom is it offered? It was offered, the author wrote, for "us" (v. 26).

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Schrenk, "ajrciereuv," 281.

<sup>60</sup> Herveus, quoted in Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 278.