

The author of *Hebrews* moves on from discussing the priesthood of Melchizedek to the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ. Once again his argument is not easy to grasp.

In brief, it seems to be based on his understanding of the impermanence and ultimate ineffectiveness of the Levitical priesthood in contrast to that which Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection.

The distinction begins with a further statement that Jesus belonged to the tribe of Judah, not that of Levi (7:11-14). The tribe of Judah, of course, had never had a priest among its members, which necessitated a change in the law (vs. 12).

Lacking physical descent for his priesthood, Jesus provided a better priesthood “through the power of an indestructible life” (vs. 16). Whereas the Levitical priesthood was “weak and ineffectual for the law made nothing perfect,” Jesus gives us greater hope in approaching God. (vss. 18-19)

Such words would be shocking to every Jew who faithfully tried to observe the Law of Moses. This would be especially true if attending the holiest festival in the temple, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day all sins were held to have been absolved, by the sacrifice and sprinkling of the blood of the purest lamb and sending of the scapegoat into the wilderness.

This interpretation of the superiority of Jesus as the new high priest is problematic. The argument borders on supersessionism, as noted by Frances Taylor Gench in her introduction. This thesis holds that “Christians have replaced and superseded Israel in the purposes and affections of God.” Gench states, however, that this attitude pertains to the theology rather than the exhortations of *Hebrews*.

Once again quoting from a text in Psalm 110:4, *Hebrews* claims that the superior priesthood of Jesus rests on God's guarantee or oath. Such an oath was lacking in the Levitical priesthood, apparently a point of some force for the author. (7:20-22)

What is more, due to Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God, Jesus' priesthood is not hindered by death. So he is available to approach God for us whenever we need him. (7:23-24; see also Acts 1:9-11.) His intercession for us takes place in a heavenly rather than in the earthly sanctuary of the temple.

Dramatic changes in our concept of the nature of God and life beyond death makes this statement no longer tenable in the same literalist way as *Hebrews*. On the other hand, we have not yet found a fully satisfactory way of describing the spiritual experience underlying our practices of prayer in modern terms. This makes it still possible for us to make use of what must be regarded as metaphorical and poetical terms.

Finally, *Hebrews* sees Jesus' eternal priesthood in terms of his superior moral character. (7:26-27) His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross has effectively replaced the daily and annual sacrifices of the temple no longer available after the temple had been destroyed. As God's Son, perfect in every way, his high priesthood is vastly superior to that of those who had been appointed in Israel.

Gench makes it clear that it is the permanence of Jesus' priesthood that is of greatest importance to us now when we live in a similar age of continuing instability and change. She also says – with a touch of humour – that Jesus' untraditional priesthood should be a comfort to women, LGBTs and any others who have been refused ordination in certain churches. “Neither did Christ have the appropriate credentials.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When is it inappropriate or uncomfortable for any of us to approach God in prayer through the intercession of Jesus Christ?
2. What is your response to the argument *Hebrews* makes for the superiority of Jesus?
3. Our federal government is preparing to establish an “Office of Religious Freedom” in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Consultations for this proposal gave precedence to representatives of the Judeo-Christian tradition and excluded several eastern religious traditions. What is your criticism of this process and of the whole concept?
4. How well does the liturgy we practice in our congregation allow for intercessory prayer so that those participating may have the sense of God’s presence, love, forgiveness and blessing? How would you improve it?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious Lord, teach me to make choices about our time each day, to remember what is important this Advent and Christmas season. Fill me with patience, love and a sense of humor. Remind me of your deep love for us and all people, and let the fire of that love be something we can share with everyone around us.

10 – CHRIST’S ETERNAL PRIESTHOOD

Hebrews 7:11-18



OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, it seems like the lists of to-do's get longer each day as we approach Christmas; the frenzy in our homes each day gets wilder. The holidays have not yet started and already we are behind. Help us to step aside for a brief time this morning so that we may feel your presence and learn to love you more through studying your scriptures. AMEN.

