

Hebrews 8

Back in **Hebrews 2:17**, the writer made his first mention of Jesus as our high priest: *“Therefore, he had to (literally, ‘was obligated to’) be made like his brethren in all things, so that he might **become** a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”*

Just over five chapters later, he has compared Jesus with Moses in **ch. 3**, highlighted the importance of taking up God’s promise of rest in **ch. 4**, shown Jesus to be the perfect high priest (and compared him to Melchizedek) in **ch. 5**, urged us to press on to maturity in **ch. 6** and explored the different type of priesthood which Jesus exercises ‘according to the order’ of that mysterious ancient King of Salem in **ch. 7** . . .

. . . and now he gets to the main point in what he has been writing: **We have such a high priest**, and for the next few chapters he describes the totally unique function of Jesus as our high priest, with many comparisons to the existing setup of the Jewish priesthood which, at the time of writing, is still functioning in the temple in Jerusalem.¹

8:1 The first fact that he highlights would be completely outrageous to the devout Jew thinking about the high priest in the tabernacle or temple: this high priest has **sat down** in the ‘holy of holies’! He *‘has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens’*. No high priest would ever have sat down when performing his duties; he would always remain standing.² The ‘holy of holies’ was the inner sanctum of the tabernacle, where the high priest himself would only go once a year on the Day of Atonement (‘Yom Kippur’), and then only if he brought the appropriate blood sacrifice.³ It was the place where the presence of God dwelt, both in the tabernacle and in Solomon’s temple.⁴

To sit down in the presence of God would have indicated gross disrespect for the LORD’s majesty, an assumption of equality! Even today, if we were to visit anyone in a position of high responsibility, we would wait to be invited before we sat down – certainly if we were visiting a king!

But this high priest is different! As the eternal Son, he already had a perfect right to sit down at the Father’s right hand, but here he was coming as a human being, one who had been *‘made like his brethren in all things’ (2:17)*, one who had *‘learned obedience from the things which he suffered. And having been made perfect (i.e. complete) he **became** to all those who obey him the source of eternal salvation’ (5:8-9)*. And, as we have seen in **1:13** (quoting **Psalm 110:1**), he has been given a direct invitation to sit there at the right hand of the Father! The writer is making the point very clearly and deliberately: It is Jesus **as a human being** who has entered into the real ‘holy of holies’ – as we shall see more about in **ch. 9**! Have a look back at **Hebrews 1**, especially **v.4**.

. . . and all of that just from **v.1**!

8:2 Jesus is our representative in the real ‘holy of holies’. Not the one constructed by Moses or Solomon, but the one set up by the Lord himself!

8:3-4 Jewish high priests were representatives of the people towards God. They offered gifts and sacrifices (and in fact were still doing so as this letter was written). Sacrifices for forgiveness for sins committed; gifts as thanks to the LORD for his blessings. So, what gifts and sacrifices does **this** high priest have to offer? We shall find out in later chapters.

He wouldn’t even be a priest at all, let alone a high priest, if he were on earth. There already was a system in place and operating, all in line with the Law as given to Moses . . .

¹ This dates this letter as having been written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

² **1 Kings 8:11, 2 Chronicles 5:14, 29:11, Psalm 135:2, Ezekiel 44:15.**

³ Lots of details on the Day of Atonement in **Leviticus 16**.

⁴ **Exodus 40:34-38, 2 Chronicles 7:1-2.**

8:5 . . . but that system was only ‘a copy and a shadow’ of the heavenly realities. And here we get a glimpse into what was revealed to Moses on the mountain in the presence of the LORD God all those centuries earlier! ¹ The details of the tabernacle that were given to Moses were not simply a long list of layouts and designs (as we can read in **Exodus** and **Leviticus**, for example). Moses was not just working through a checklist: he had been **shown** the pattern; he had seen it, he had been given a view into the true heavenly ‘holy of holies’. The tabernacle was a scaled-down, earthbound picture of what he had seen and, amazingly, a functioning version of it, with the awesome Presence very much in evidence! The LORD God really did physically dwell with his people in the tabernacle/temple!²

8:6 BUT our high priest has been given ‘a more excellent ministry’ than those priests serving in the earthly tabernacle. On what basis? Because he is operating as the go-between of a better covenant, enacted on better promises! ³

8:7 If the Lord Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant, it must mean that the old covenant is not so good. Why is it faulty? Some clues in the next verses . . .

8:8-12 Direct quotation from **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. (Jeremiah was prophesying around 600 BC.) There are minor differences between these two passages, mainly due to the fact that the writer is quoting from the Septuagint again – the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was made between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC. Are there any significant differences? Here are a few that I have spotted:–

8:8 In Jeremiah, it says “I will **make** a new covenant . . .” The word is actually ‘cut’, as in cutting a deal. In Hebrews, it says “I will **make** or **establish** a new covenant . . .” Here the word is *sunteleō*, ‘to complete entirely’. In the Septuagint, it says “I will **covenant** a new covenant”.

8:9 In Jeremiah, “My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them”.⁴ In Hebrews, “For they did not continue in my covenant, and I did not care for them”. In the Septuagint, “They did not remain in my covenant and I disregarded them”. ‘Broke’ is more dramatic than ‘did not continue’, but the nett effect is the same!

8:11 In Jeremiah, the two words translated ‘know’ are the same Hebrew word which means ‘to know by seeing’. In both Hebrews and the Septuagint, the two words are different. The first word is ‘know’ in the sense of ‘have the information’, whereas the second is ‘know’ in the sense of ‘know by seeing’. The contrast of ‘head knowledge’ and real experience.

8:12 In Jeremiah, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”. The word ‘remember’ literally means ‘to mark so as to be recognised’. In Hebrews and the Septuagint, “I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more”. Are the singular and plural significant? In all cases, ‘iniquity / ies’ means ‘injustice(s)’ and ‘sin(s)’ means ‘failure(s)’.

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¹ **Exodus 25:9, 40, 26:30, Acts 7:44**

² **Exodus 25:8, 29:45-46, Numbers 35:34, Deuteronomy 12:11, 1 Kings 6:13, 8:12-13, 27** (and all of **2 Chronicles 6**), **Ezra 6:12, Nehemiah 1:9, Psalm 68:16, Isaiah 57:15, Jeremiah 7:12**. And then there is an amazing promise in **Revelation 21:3** !

³ Paul gets excited about this, too! See **2 Corinthians 3:7-11**

⁴ **Isaiah 54:5**, and most of the book of **Hosea**, where the unfaithfulness to the LORD of both Israel and Judah is compared to a wife who is unfaithful to her husband. Same implication here in **Jeremiah**!