

“THEREFORE, SINCE WE ARE SURROUNDED BY SO GREAT A CLOUD OF WITNESSES, LET US ALSO LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT, AND SIN WHICH CLINGS SO CLOSELY, AND LET US RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE THE RACE THAT IS SET BEFORE US, LOOKING TO JESUS THE PIONEER AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH, WHO FOR THE JOY THAT WAS SET BEFORE HIM ENDURED THE CROSS, DESPISING THE SHAME, AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD.” (HEBREWS

- And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, *and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*” Strategic: Persuading / reinforcing the faith of this influential priestly group would have a “domino effect” on the faith of many others. I appeal (*parakalo*) to you, brethren, bear with my word of exhortation (*ton legou tes paraklesos*). *Parakalo*: An act of emboldening another in belief or course of action, encouragement, exhortation. 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 if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. *Heb. 12:1* “... We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (*martyron*) ...”: In the first major section of *Hebrews*, the sacred author uses Scripture in order to authoritatively assert that Jesus is superior to the angels—displaying his superiority by becoming “a little lower than the angels” in taking on human flesh.

- a. *Hebrews* ch. 1 makes reference to no less than seven OT Scriptures.
 - 1:5 draws upon *Psa. 2:7* [“You are my Son ...”] and *II Sam 7:14* [“I will be to him ...”]
 - 1:6 draws upon *Psa. 97:7* [“Let all the angels ...”]
 - 1:7 draws upon *Psa. 104:4* [“Who makes his angels winds ...”]
 - 1:8 draws upon *Psa. 45:6-8* [“Your throne, O God, is forever ...”]
 - 1:10-12 draws upon *Psa. 102:25-26* [“You, Lord, founded the earth ...”]
 - 1:13 draws upon *Psa. 110:1* [“Sit at my right hand ...”]
- b. Bolstering his argument in ch. 2, the sacred author underscores that these truths of the OT were “declared by the angels” (2:1-2).⁷
- c. *Hebrews 2:6* draws upon *Psa. 8:4-6* [“What is man ...?”]

¹ The best overall volume on *Hebrews* in the modern Catholic biblical tradition is that of a French Dominican, Ceslas Spicq (1901-1992). Unfortunately, it is available only in the original French: C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* [2 vols., Paris: Gabalda, 1952–53. In English, see especially: Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*. Translated by J. B. Orchard. Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1986. See also: Craig Koester, *Hebrews*. AYB 36. New York: Doubleday, 2001; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press; William Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols. (1–8, 9–13), Waco, TX: Word, 1991; Swetnam, J. “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews.” *Biblica* 70 (1989): 74–95; H. W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); S. W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009).

² In contrast, see: *Rom. 1:7*; *I Cor. 1:1-3*, etc.

Heb. 5:6 “Thou art a *priest* forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” See also: *Heb. 7:17*; *10:21*, etc

⁴ *Heb. 2:17* “...so that he might become a merciful and faithful *high priest* in the service of God ...” See also: *Heb. 3:1*; *4:14, 15*; *5:1, 5, 10*; *6:20*; *7:26*, etc.

⁵ *Heb. 7:22* “This makes Jesus the surety of a better *covenant*.” See also: *Heb. 8:6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13*; *9:1, 4*, etc

⁶ *Mark 1:44* “... Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your *cleansing*.” See also: *II Macc. 2:16*

⁷ Ancient Jewish tradition held that Abraham was tutored in the Torah by the angels. See: *Sir. 44:19-20*.

- d. This brings the sacred author's thesis to a head in 2:9—Jesus was “for a little while made a little lower than the angels” (see: *John* 1:14).
- e. Following upon this, 2:10-12 complete the barrage of Scriptures with three more—one from *Psa.* 22:22 [“I will proclaim ...”] and two from the prophet Isaiah (*Isa.* 8:17-18; 41:8-9).
- f. * The overwhelming majority of the many OT references are drawn from the *Psalter*.

In the second major section of *Hebrews*, the sacred author argues that Jesus is a High Priest worthy of our faith and abundant in mercy. In the third major section of *Hebrews*, we reach the heart of the body of the letter. Here, the the sacred author focuses on the high priesthood of Jesus, which is not of the Levitical order, but rather, of the priest king Melchizedek.¹¹

*holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens*¹⁸ rowing old” and about to *aphanismos* (“evaporate / vanish has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by *tes thysias autou*—“the sacrifice of himself”) (9:26). *Hebrews* 10 brings this extended body of the letter to a close. There are 2 parts to the chapter: And all these ... did not receive what

⁸ For background,

⁹ Those fundamentalist Christians who proclaim an “assurance of salvation” have no biblical basis to advocate such “easy-believe-ism.”

¹¹ On Melchizedek, see: *Gen.* 14:17-20. For biblical analysis of this mysterious figure, see: Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 131ff.

¹³ St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 8.

¹⁴ St. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 3–4.

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¹⁶ H. Brown writes: The genealogy of the Levitical priests was very carefully preserved. It was absolutely necessary that a priest should have for his father a lineal descendant of Aaron, and for his mother a person qualified to be a priest's wife; and that his must be certified by a genealogical register.... Melchisedec belonged to an order or priesthood where natural descent was not at all regarded—an order of things free from those artificial restrictions which formed a leading feature of the legal economy.... “Having neither beginning of days nor end of life,” is a phrase to be explained on the same principle. If Melchisedec was a man, there is no doubt that he began and ceased to live; but as a priest he did not belong to that order who had a fixed period for commencing, and a fixed period for concluding, their priestly existence. The Levitical priests were allowed at the age of twenty-five years to minister to their officiating brethren; at thirty they entered on the services peculiar to the priesthood; and at fifty there was an end of their priestly services. This was the beginning of their days and the end of their life as priests. But Melchisedec belonged ... to a less artificial order of things.” Brown, *Hebrews* (London: Banner of Truth, 1976) 327–28. See: Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 301–302.

¹⁷ See A. Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (*Subsidia Biblica* 12; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989) 40a–b; also, *Old Testament Priests*, 150, 173–77.

¹⁸ “The author's pessimism concerning the OT cult is somewhat more comprehensible when we bear in mind that his disparaging remarks are directed against the “law” specifically in its Levitical form, in which the covenant was reconfigured after the disastrous golden calf incident. It is this reconfigured covenant—representing God's condescension to his people but not his original intention—that must finally be replaced.” Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 306.

¹⁹ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*.

²¹ CCC 2572 on Abraham's faith: “As a final stage in the purification of his faith, Abraham, ‘who had received the promises,’ is asked to sacrifice the son God had given him. Abraham's faith does not weaken (“God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.”), for he ‘considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead.’ And so the father of believers is conformed to the likeness of the Father who will not spare his own Son but will deliver him up for us all. Prayer restores man to God's likeness and enables him to share in the power of God's love that saves the multitude.”

²² Pope Benedict, *Spe Salvi*, §5.

was promised, since God had foreseen *something better* for us²⁴ “Contest that is set before us ...” An *agōn* (contest) implies struggle, as in *agonize*. “Pioneer” (*archegon*) because Jesus goes where no other has gone. “Perfecter” () because he *completes* faith by fully trusting God and remaining faithful to God in a way that the believers are to follow. 12:12-13 continues the *race* metaphor, summoning believers on toward the finish line.²⁵ 12:14 “Pursue [*diokete*] peace with all. An athlete would ordinarily “pursue” victory over his competitors, but here peace is the goal. 12:16 “So that no one becomes immoral or profane [*pornos*] like Esau.” *pornos* commonly refers to sexual immorality. In choosing food over his rights as firstborn Esau sought immediate *physical gratification* rather than spiritual benefits.²⁶ Esau’s story is a cautionary tale for the priestly audience of *Hebrews*, who may have been tempted to relinquish their faith in exchange for Temple privileges. Since *Hebrews* has argued that the royal and priestly figure in Ps 110 is Christ, the psalm’s reference to Zion is a suitable climax for the journey of Christian faith.”²⁷ 12:22—12:24 “The blood of Abel” cried out for vengeance after his murder at his own brother’s hand (*Gen.* 4 :1-10).

- “May the God of peace ...” Closely resembles St. Paul’s benedictions elsewhere.³⁰ “Brought up from the dead ...” The only “explicit” reference to Christ’s Resurrection in the letter – is reserved for the closing benediction.

Koester, *Hebrews*, 522.

Athletes would seek to lay aside or eliminate the excess body weight that made them unfit for running. See: Philostratus, *Gymnasticus* 48; Appian, *Roman History* 4.7; Philo, *Special Laws* 2.91.

“Athletes preparing to run leaned forward, with their legs slightly bent and their hands outstretched in readiness. Those who were already running extended their arms and legs as they strove to reach the finish line. For listeners who become weary during the race, straightening hands and knees means greater striving” (Koester, *Hebrews*, 530).

See: Koester, *Hebrews*, 532.

Koester, *Hebrews*, 544.

Koester, *Hebrews*, 546.

²⁹ *Deut.* 9:3 “Know therefore this day that he who goes over before you as a devouring fire is the LORD your God ...”

³⁰ See: *Rom* 15:33; 16:20; *II Cor.* 13:11; *Phil.* 4:9; *I Thess.* 5:23.