

- e. Jesus' triumph as man – encompassing His incarnation, atonement, resurrection and enthronement – was for the sake of Adam's race. In everything, He is Man unto mankind, and it is precisely as Man – the truly human, regal Image-Son – that Jesus is superior to the angels. The writer has stressed this throughout this context, and he underscored the point with a direct and succinct affirmation: *Jesus “didn't lay hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham”* (2:16).

Scholars have long debated the writer's intent in using this verb. Many of the early church fathers believed that he was speaking of Jesus taking to Himself our human nature and form. This interpretation certainly fits the context, and it seems to have predominated through the Reformation. Others have argued that the writer was referring to Jesus “taking hold” of men in salvation. If this was his meaning, the point is that Jesus is not the savior of angels, but of human beings. More recent scholars have tended to assign to the verb the softer sense of “helping” or “giving aid.” This meaning is reflected in most modern versions of the Bible, including the NKJV, ASV, ESV, NASB, and NIV.

In New Testament usage, this verb occurs nineteen times, and always has the basic idea of *seizing, appropriating, or taking hold of* something or someone.

- Most often, it refers to laying hold of or seizing another *person*, in either a good or bad way (Luke 9:47, 23:26; Acts 16:19, 17:19, 18:17, 21:30, 33).
- It's also used of taking hold of someone's *words*. Here the idea is catching a person in what he says in order to use his words against him (Luke 20:20-26).
- Lastly, Paul used it of laying hold of *eternal life* (1 Timothy 6:12, 18-19).

Whether in the New Testament or the Greek Septuagint, the verb never carries the sense of *helping* or *assisting*. It's also important to note that Hebrews writer used an entirely different verb when he spoke of Jesus coming to the aid of His people in verse 18. And so, scriptural usage and the present context seem to best support the idea of Jesus “taking hold of” the seed of Abraham in the sense of becoming one with them in incarnation and atonement.

Some have questioned why the writer felt the need to make this distinction between angels and human beings; *why would the idea of Jesus taking up the nature and form of angels even be a consideration?* The answer may perhaps be found in the Jewish Qumran doctrine discussed earlier. Recall that the Qumran community (associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls) held the expectation of two messianic figures, one kingly and the other priestly. But both of these individuals would be subject to the archangel Michael. In this sense, the eschatological hope of the Dead Sea sect was ultimately tied to an *angelic* deliverer, and the Hebrews writer may have had this in mind. If so, he was reemphasizing the subordination of angels in the messianic work; indeed, that work doesn't pertain to them, but concerns the human children of the covenant father Abraham (ref. again 1:14).

It may seem surprising that the writer used the expression, “seed of Abraham,” rather than a more universal term. The entire context emphasizes that Jesus took to Himself *human* nature and form; why, then, say that He took hold of the offspring of Abraham? There are at least two clear reasons for this:

- 1) The first is the most obvious, which is that the epistle’s recipients were *Jews*. They understood, from the Scriptures and their traditions, that their God – the God of Israel – was going to send His Messiah to Israel in keeping with His covenant oath to Abraham (Luke 1:26-79, 2:1-32). Israel was the “seed of Abraham,” and the Messiah was going to bring forgiveness and deliverance to Israel by embodying Israel in Himself as a son of Abraham (cf. Isaiah 49:1-13; Matthew 1:1; John 1:44-51). Jesus did indeed “take up” human flesh and blood as a true son of Adam, but specifically as a covenant son of Abraham (Luke 3:23-38).
- 2) The Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would be a son of Abraham, and that He would be Yahweh’s instrument for purging and renewing His covenant people. The Messiah would embody Israel in order to deliver and renew Israel. But this restoration of the Abrahamic household was going to reach beyond Abraham’s biological children to the Gentiles. Yahweh promised Abram that he would be the father of many nations, and He certified His promise by changing Abram’s name (Genesis 17:1-7). The prophets were clear that Messiah was going to restore the house of Israel, but so that they should fulfill their Abrahamic calling to mediate the knowledge of their God to all the earth’s families. Israel’s ingathering would see the Gentiles’ ingathering (Isaiah 11:1-13, 49:1-13, 53:1-55:13).

Thus the writer wasn’t denying that Jesus took hold of all men in the incarnation and atonement; rather, he was underscoring for his Jewish readers that this profound work was precisely God’s fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. In Jesus, the singular Abrahamic seed, Abraham’s offspring become true covenant children. This renewal is “for the Jew first,” to fulfill Yahweh’s word to the fathers and prophets, but with a view to the ingathering of the nations, so that the Father’s house should be filled to overflowing (cf. again Isaiah 11, 49, 53-55 with Luke 13:22-14:24; Acts 1:1-8, 9:1-11:18). His design in the Messiah is that all who share in Him are Abraham’s children and heirs of the promises (Galatians 3).

- f. Jesus “laid hold of” of Abraham’s children by becoming one with them – “being made like His brethren in all things,” sharing their Adamic “flesh and blood.” But He did so for the sake of His *priestly* vocation and ministration (2:17); He did so to fulfill His Father’s design to “bring many sons to glory.” Two things are important to note about this statement:

- 1) The first is the writer’s description of Jesus Himself as God’s great high priest: “*It was necessary that He be like the brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest...*”

Most English versions treat *merciful* and *faithful* as equal, parallel adjectives modifying the term, *high priest*. But the writer's expression set apart and highlighted the adjective "merciful," so that it conveys this sense: *Jesus had to share the likeness of the brethren in every respect, in order to become merciful, and a faithful high priest.*

2) Mercy is an integral dimension of Jesus' high priesthood, but the writer wanted to distinguish this quality because of how it connects His work with the One who appointed Him. A priest who isn't merciful denigrates his calling, and in this sense mercy is inherent to Jesus' faithfulness as God's high priest. But the Hebrews writer wasn't simply identifying mercy and faithfulness as two marks of a true and effective priest. Rather, he was emphasizing a key dynamic in Jesus' priesthood:

- God sent His Son into the world to execute a preordained priestly vocation on behalf of men and the wider creation. Jesus' *faithfulness* consisted in His full embrace of this vocation and His perfect devotion to it. Thus His faithfulness was directed toward His Father and His specific calling in His Father's purpose; He was a faithful high priest "*in things pertaining to God.*"
- But, in order to faithfully execute His priestly vocation, Jesus needed to be characterized by *mercy*. There are two dimensions to this, inherent in the fact that priests are mediators between two parties. First, Jesus needed to have a heart of sincere mercy toward *men*, and this required that He fully share in their human condition. But He was also representing His Father in His priestly ministration, so that His mercy toward men is *His Father's* mercy. This is the focus of the last part of verse 17.

Importantly, this is the first time the writer mentioned Jesus' priestly vocation, and he went on to make it a central theme in the balance of his epistle. This shows that he regarded his statement in verse 17 as foundational, and thus he constructed it as a summary overview of Jesus' high-priesthood. The statement consists of three parts: The middle part is the heart of the statement, as it designates Jesus as God's high priest. That designation, then, looks backward to Jesus' priestly role on behalf of men (v. 17a), and forward to His priestly role on behalf of God (v. 17c).

In order to fulfill His vocation as high priest, Jesus needed to be *man unto God*, and *God unto man*. This dual representation was depicted in Israel's priesthood, which mediated the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His covenant "son." The Law of Moses was the covenant charter, and it depended for its success on a mediating priesthood (ref. 7:11-12). Israel's priesthood, though, was preparatory and prophetic, and looked to another priesthood to mediate the relationship between Father and sons.

Jesus is the sole priest in that new priesthood, and the writer goes on to emphasize that this new priestly system is a radical departure from the Levitical system that anticipated it. Not only does it have but one priest, that priest is of a radically different sort (ref. chaps. 7-10). And the heart of Jesus' uniqueness as high priest is that He truly and fully represents *both* parties in His priestly mediation.

- Like the Levitical priests before Him, Jesus mediates for human beings as sharing their human nature and condition (vv. 14,17). He bears their weakness and infirmity before God, representing them as they are. But He also represents them as they *ought* to be – as God created them to be. Jesus mediates for men as a son of Adam, but with the goal of bringing many sons to glory as the Last Adam (8:1-9:15, 10:1-22).
- But Jesus' greatest distinction from the Levitical priests is that He is God unto man in a way that no other man could be. The former priests *represented* Yahweh to Israel, expressed in their absolute consecration to Him (cf. Exodus 28:36-38, 29:38-46; Leviticus 21:1-24; Numbers 1:45-53, 3:11-13, 8:5-22; etc.), but they didn't *embody* Yahweh as Jesus does. *Jesus' mediation to men on God's behalf is the mediation of God Himself.*

The writer underscored this truth by the way he closed his statement, which highlights the *God-ward* dimension of Jesus' priesthood. Sadly, most English versions tend to obscure his meaning, which is best captured as follows: Jesus became all that men are in order to become merciful toward them, and so a faithful high priest on behalf of God and His intent, which was resolving the human calamity and obtaining image-children.

*By means of incarnation, Jesus became merciful toward men, which mercy is exercised through a faithful (agreeing and conforming) high priesthood in which He manifests and fulfills God's merciful design in forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation.*

Again, this meaning is often missed, particularly because of the translation choice of the word "propitiation." In contemporary usage, propitiation is frequently treated as a technical term that refers to *satisfaction of divine wrath*, which is viewed as one of the core components of atonement. But the Greek term (and its cognates) highlights the idea of forgiveness and cleansing by virtue of mercy (cf. Luke 18:13, Romans 3:23-26; note also the Septuagint version of 2 Kings 5:18; 2 Chronicles 6:28-30; Psalm 25:11, 65:2-3, 79:9). The same is true of the Hebrew counterparts – hence the "*mercy seat*" (the gold cover of the ark of the covenant) was the place of propitiation in the Levitical system (ref. Exodus 25:17-22; Hebrews 9:5; cf. Deuteronomy 21:8; Psalm 79:9; Proverbs 16:6; Isaiah 6:5-7).

The writer's focus in verse 17 – which he intended to encourage and strengthen his readers – is the crucial truth that Jesus' vocation as high priest entails His merciful ministration of God's forgiving and reconciling mercy toward men. This only underscores the error and detriment of viewing Jesus as interposing Himself between a wrathful God and the objects of His wrath. Sadly, many Christians (and non-Christians) hold this view, and notions about propitiation only reinforce it. *But propitiation speaks, not to God's indignation because of human failure to conform to a moral standard, but His unrelenting love that is committed to seeing His image-children fulfill their created nature and vocation.* Yes, God is wrathful toward sin, because it falsifies and corrupts His creation, and it is sin that He condemned in Jesus (Romans 1:18-19, 8:1-4). But God's wrath flows from His love, and it's love that motivated Him to intervene and reconcile all things to Himself. This is the context for God's wrath toward men; it speaks to the ultimate outcome for those who suppress the truth – in their minds and lives – of His all-embracing triumph in His Son (ref. John 3:16-17, 36; Romans 2:1-8, 5:1-10, 8:1-39; Ephesians 1:2-6, 2:1-7; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Colossians 1:19-20; Titus 3:1-7; 1 John 3:1, 4:7-10).

- g. A high priest represents men, and so must share their nature; he must be one of them. But he must also be merciful, and this requires that he understand and empathize with the weakness and infirmity of those under his care. And the only way to truly empathize with another person is to share the same experiences. Hence there are two reasons that Jesus "had to be made like the brethren in all things": The first is His work of *representation* and *substitution*, and the second is His work of *renewal* and *intercession*. The first focuses on Jesus' incarnation and atonement, and the second on His ministration as enthroned King; the first focuses on His identity as a son of Adam, the second on His being the Last Adam.

Fully sharing in the human nature and condition was essential to Jesus' work that culminated with Calvary, but it is equally essential to what Calvary inaugurated. Both dimensions of Jesus' high-priestly work depend on Him being truly human, and His resurrection and exaltation haven't distanced Him from the brethren whose humanness He shares. Though enthroned at the right hand of God with all things in subjection to Him, Jesus knows human weakness and the oppression of temptation (2:18). He's been tempted in all that is common to Adam's offspring, and so understands their ordeal and fully empathizes with them. At the same time, Jesus' suffering in temptation transcends that of all other men, for no other son of Adam has resisted and contradicted his condition and its struggles and temptations the way Jesus did. And so, He's not simply an *empathetic* high priest, but an *effectual* one. It's one thing to commiserate with others in their weakness, failures and suffering; it's quite another to provide them with remedy. Jesus is such a friend and brother; He meets His own with the resource of sovereign love (4:14-16; Romans 8:28-39).