

III. The Supremacy of Christ's Ministration (4:14-10:39)

Consistent with the perspective and overall thrust of his letter, the Hebrews writer set Jesus at the very center of his instruction regarding faithfulness and entrance into God's rest. But it's his *inclusio* that shows how he viewed Him in relation to this rest and people's inheritance of it: Jesus is the substance of the Christian's confession, but precisely because He is God's ordained *High Priest*. This confession, then, underscores two crucial truths:

- First, Jesus is the true *Image-Son* – the truly human King-Priest who's entered God's rest so as to administer His rule over His creation (2:5-9).
- Jesus is true Man, but as Man *unto mankind*. His resurrection and ascension were human phenomena; He sat down at the Father's right hand as the *Son of David* (Acts 2:22-36). But even more, Jesus attained this consummate glory as the *Last Adam* (2:5-18) – the first-fruits of God's new creation (1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 42-45; Colossians 1:15-18), and the first-born among many brethren, such that His inheritance as Image-Son is the inheritance of all of His brothers and sisters (Romans 8:12-17, 29). They all share His glorification, enthronement, and priestly vocation as authentic image-children who enter God's rest in Him and so fulfill their ordained human destiny (Genesis 1:26-31; Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:3-2:7; 2 Timothy 2:11f; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5:1-10).

The writer used the fact and significance of Jesus' high priesthood to frame his argument concerning God's rest and the human obligation to it (ref. again 3:1, 4:14-16), and the above observations show why he did so. Like everything else in the divine purpose and its outworking, man's attainment of God's rest – the rest for which he was created and predestined – is "yes and amen" in Jesus the Messiah. Human beings attain their regal and priestly fortune as image-children by sharing in the authentic humanity of the unique King-Priest.

Thus Jesus' priesthood is fundamental and critical in the Christian's confession; indeed, an implication of the writer's argument is that there is no truly accurate confession of Jesus that doesn't grasp and hold as central the reality of His status as enthroned High Priest. This was the way Israel's prophets – and so the Israelite nation they served – envisioned the coming *Messiah* (cf. Zechariah 6:9-15 with 2 Samuel 5-7; Psalm 110; Isaiah 53:11-12), but the same imagery also depicted the restored *covenant household* that the Messiah was to inaugurate (cf. Exodus 19:1-6 with Psalm 132; Isaiah 61:1-6; Jeremiah 33:14-22).

The writer clearly was familiar with this messianic backdrop and its place in Israel's history and national hope. But even more, he'd come to recognize how these promises had been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth – albeit not in the way he or his Jewish countrymen had expected. Yahweh's word to Israel had come to pass in a most startling manner, but the events surrounding the prophet Jesus of Nazareth had nonetheless demonstrated that He is indeed the promised Messiah and glorious King-Priest. This truth was foundational to his readers' enduring faith and hope, and thus the writer set about unfolding it for them. And in doing so, he followed his characteristic pattern, showing in great detail how Jesus' priesthood both fulfilled and transcended its Israelite counterpart (5:1-7:28). In the same way that He is greater than Israel's prophets and Moses himself, Jesus is greater than Aaron and the priestly ministration grounded in him.

A. Superior to the Aaronic Priesthood (4:14-7:28)

The author viewed Jesus' high priesthood as compelling incentive for his readers to persevere with confident faith – not just that their sovereign King would provide what was lacking in their resource, but that He served their need as their enthroned High priest. The Son seated at the Father's right hand is the priestly Son of Man, who ever lives to intercede for His brethren.

1. This topic of the Son's priesthood and ministration is the focus of chapters 5-7, and the writer addressed it in terms of its counterpart, namely the Aaronic priesthood that served the covenant household of Israel from Sinai until the coming of the Messiah. Furthermore, he constructed his treatment around the principles of *continuity* and *discontinuity* – which is to say, the ways in which Jesus' priesthood and ministration corresponded with Aaron's, and the ways in which the two differed. And this approach wasn't arbitrary, but determined by the *promise-fulfillment* relationship that exists between the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood and the one associated with Jesus. What binds them together on the one hand, and distinguishes them on the other, is determined by the inherent relationship between promise and fulfillment as it exists and plays itself out in God's purposes and work in the world.
 - a. With respect to the *continuity* between the two priesthoods, the writer began by observing that both share the same *origin* and *orientation*. Each originates in and is effectuated by God's calling and ordination, and both serve the same purpose of mediating the Creator/creature relationship that has man at the center. This mediation ultimately extends to the non-human creation, but the concern in this context is the priestly work of mediating the relationship between God and His human creatures – the divinely-ordained *human* work that binds together God and His human image-bearer. And, inasmuch as they pertain to fallen man, both priesthoods operate from the vantage point of human weakness, ignorance and failure, and so involve the offering of "gifts and sacrifices for sins" (5:1-4).
 - b. As to the matter of *discontinuity*, the first clear point of distinction is the human *individual* in whom each priesthood was ordained, established, and ordered. The former (Levitical) priesthood was grounded in *Aaron* (ref. Exodus 28-29; Numbers 3:1-10), while the latter – the priesthood associated with Jesus – has its origin in the enigmatic figure *Melchizedek* (5:5-6, 10; cf. Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110). The writer only introduces the concept of a Melchizedekian priesthood here, but it will become a key component of his argument going forward (ref. 6:19-7:28). Other than this distinction, the author hints at a couple of others, which he also fleshes out as he develops his case. These are the matters of priestly offerings made for personal sins (cf. 5:3, 7:26-27; cf. 4:15), and an effectual mediation that results in true and full remedy (5:7-9, 7:24-25, 9:11-14).
2. The writer demonstrated his claims of correspondence (continuity) and distinction (discontinuity) using two passages of scripture, both drawn from the Psalms (5:5-6). Each of the two serves a distinct purpose and makes a unique contribution to his argument, and each introduces its own interpretive challenges.

- a. The first citation is from Psalm 2, which the author used to support his claim that Jesus, like Aaron, didn't take to himself the priestly vocation and its glory (which was likely a charge Jewish detractors leveled against Him), but entered upon his priesthood as a matter of obedience to God's calling and ordination (5:5-6). Specifically, the writer cited verse 7 of the psalm, which records the king's affirmation of Yahweh's decree of sonship concerning him: "*I will surely tell of the Lord's decree: He said to me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'*"

This citation presents an obvious interpretive challenge, which the writer's silence only increases. The immediate difficulty is that the citation has nothing to do with the priesthood or priestly ministration – Levitical or otherwise (compare the writer's use of it in 1:5). *How does Yahweh's decree of sonship regarding His enthroned king prove the assertion that Jesus didn't take up the priesthood and its glory as an autonomous, self-serving act?* Even acknowledging that Psalm 2 is messianic isn't particularly helpful. For the entire psalm concerns enthronement and dominion, and treating it as messianic simply assigns to Jesus this regal status and rule. Messianic or otherwise, the psalm doesn't so much as mention the concept of priesthood, let alone make the point the Hebrews writer was asserting.

And the writer himself is no help, for he provided no insight into his reasoning or why he believed Psalm 2:7 proved his contention. His silence is significant, and suggests two plausible explanations: Either he unwittingly failed his readers by not connecting the dots for them, or he was consciously confident that they would understand his reasoning, and so felt that no clarification was needed. Given his careful and orderly argumentation, the latter is almost certainly correct. Of course, the writer's confidence in his readers' insight doesn't prove that he was using Psalm 2 correctly, but it does indicate that his understanding of this psalm in relation to Jesus' priesthood was shared in the early Christian community – at least by some among the Jewish believers. And this, in turn, suggests that there were traditions in first-century Jewish scholarship that read Psalm 2 this way, though obviously not in relation to Jesus of Nazareth.

All of this, then, begs the question of how the writer *was* connecting the dots; how did he find within Psalm 2, and especially verse 7, substantiation for his claim concerning Jesus and His priesthood? The critical key to this answer – a key that is often missed (or misunderstood) – is the *organic nature* of scriptural revelation. The Bible isn't a collection of discrete propositions, truisms, and directives, but a multi-dimensional, intricately interwoven storyline. This is especially true of the Old Testament, which tells the epic story of God's design for His creation and its outworking centered in Abraham and his covenant "seed."

The organic nature of the Scriptures means that no portion, aspect, or concern is independent or self-interpreting; rather, the reality, truth, and meaning of any part resides in the whole, but as the whole is rightly ordered and understood. Christians often find this principle strange (if not false), but this isn't the case with Jewish readers, who recognize the Scriptures (*Tanakh*) as Israel's long story.

The same was true of the Jewish apostles and their companions who penned the New Testament documents. This is evident in the way they interacted with Israel's scriptures. Though they typically cited short passages or statements in their writings, they didn't do so as discrete proof-texts for a particular truth or doctrine. Their citations were concise, but their perspective and intention were expansive. *This is precisely the reason they seem so often to be using the Scripture inappropriately and out of context*; they draw on a particular statement or verse, but with reference to other content and ideas intimately related to it, much like pulling a single thread draws in the fabric it's woven into.

- So Matthew cited Hosea 11:1 as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' "exodus" from Egypt after Herod's death (Matthew 2:13-15), though this verse is neither prophetic nor messianic. In context, it is part of God's indictment of Israel's long history of idolatry and rebellion, His declaration of coming judgment, and His promise of future restoration (ref. Hosea 11-14).
- Similarly, Paul cited from the first two chapters of Hosea – a passage that has nothing to do with Gentiles – to prove his contention of God's long-standing intent to call Gentiles to Himself (Romans 9:22-26).

This sort of non-contextual use of Israel's scriptures is common in the Hebrews epistle (ref. 1:10-12, 2:5-9, 10:5-7, 36-38, 12:25-27), and the present citation is another instance of it. Just as Paul's understanding of the connection between Israel's restoration and the ingathering of the Gentiles allowed him to cite Hosea 1-2 in Romans 9, so the Hebrews writer's recognition of the intimate, inseparable relationship between Messiah's kingship and priesthood allowed him to use Psalm 2 to make his point here.

Most Christians recognize regal and priestly dimensions in the Old Testament vision of the Messiah, but few hold them together as inseparable and mutually-dependent. So Dispensationalists commonly deny Jesus' present reign, while upholding His high-priestly ministry. They argue that Jesus exercises His priestly ministration from *heaven*, whereas His kingly reign will take place in a future *earthly* "millennial kingdom." But the New Testament allows no such distinction or separation; rather, it treats Jesus' high-priestly ministry as a primary function of His reign: *He rules as Yahweh's enthroned High Priest, and carries out His priestly ministry as the sovereign King of kings* (Hebrews 4:14, 7:26, 8:1; cf. Romans 8:33-34). And this King-Priest dynamic is precisely what the Old Testament predicted of the Messiah. The convergence of the regal and priestly messianic dimensions was first hinted at with Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18; cf. Hebrews 7:1) and Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3, 14:1-20, 17:1-6, 20:1-7), but became a matter of overt prophetic promise in connection with David (2 Samuel 6:12ff; Zechariah 6:9-15). Moreover, it was implicit in the concept of Messiah as the true embodiment of Israel (Isaiah 49:1-6), for Israel was itself a *royal priesthood* as God's elect image-son (Exodus 19:1-6), even as Israel's priests ministered in the place of Yahweh's enthronement (Psalm 99:1-5; cf. Hebrews 8:1-2, 9:11-24).

The Hebrews writer was obviously aware of the inseparable union of priesthood and kingship now realized in Jesus the Messiah, and thus he could use an enthronement/dominion context such as Psalm 2 to demonstrate truths about Jesus' priesthood. (The opposite is also true; truths regarding the nature and operation of Jesus' rule can be deduced from his ministration as High Priest.) Here, the issue was showing that Jesus obtained His priestly vocation as a divine endowment, so that the writer needed only to demonstrate the same dynamic respecting His kingship; if Jesus' installation as sovereign King was a matter of divine grant, the same was true of His priesthood. And the author demonstrated that by citing Yahweh's declaration of *sonship* (5:5). The reason this accomplished his end is that sonship implies *lordship*: Once again, man was created and ordained image-*son* in order to carry out God's rule over His creation. And this human role was realized in the Last Adam, so that the "begetting" of the Son in Psalm 2 speaks to His ordination and installation as Yahweh's sovereign King: "*As for Me (Yahweh), I have installed My king upon Zion, My holy mountain.' 'So I (the installed king) will surely tell of Yahweh's decree. He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask Me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance and the ends of the earth as your possession.*''" Israel's God ordained and granted Messiah's kingship, and so also His priesthood.

- b. This interpretation not only suits the larger scriptural message, it perfectly dovetails with the epistle's surrounding context, both the preceding topic of God's rest (4:9-14) and the subsequent citation from Psalm 110 (5:6). That citation, especially, shows that the writer was thinking in terms of the convergence of the regal and priestly functions in the person of the Messiah. For Melchizedek was the archetypal priest-king, described in the Genesis account as "the *king* of Salem and *priest* of God Most High." Outside of Genesis, the only other mention of Melchizedek (whose name means *righteous king* or *king of righteousness*) in the Old Testament is in Psalm 110, to which the Hebrews author here referred. This psalm makes three important contributions to the Scripture's messianic revelation: First, it associates Melchizedek with God's ideal (messianic) king. In so doing, it secondly connects the priest-king concept with this king. And lastly, the psalm indirectly hints at the Davidic Covenant, since David penned it as song of praise to Yahweh's great king – David's *lord* – through whom He would conquer all His enemies and establish and extend His kingdom throughout the earth. Thus Psalm 110 makes a significant contribution to the Old Testament's developing portrait of the coming Messiah, a fact recognized by the Jews of the second temple period as well as the early Christians. (This psalm is quoted or referenced in the New Testament more than any other, even by Jesus Himself.)

The statement cited by the Hebrews writer (Psalm 110:4) served his argument in both of its facets. On the one hand, it further reinforced his assertion that Jesus, like Aaron, obtained His priesthood as a divine ordination: "*Yahweh has sworn, 'You are a priest forever...'*" But it also highlights a foundational and critical distinction between Aaron's priesthood and the one granted to Jesus: He, too, is God's ordained High Priest, but "*according to the order of Melchizedek.*"