



HEBREWS 1–6

UNDERSTANDING THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S SON

CA. AD 50–60

Authorship and Audience

The author never identifies himself in the Epistle to the Romans; as a result, the authorship of the Epistle has been debated for centuries. The letter itself gives us only a few internal clues to help us identify authorship, such as:

Referring to Timothy as a “brother,” (Hebrews 13:23)

- The use of “bonds” (Hebrews 10:34 and 13:3)
- Pauline phrasing, theology, and conclusion
- Extensive citations from the Old Testament (Greek Septuagint or LXX)
- The author expects his audience to honor the Old Testament as the word of God
- Habakkuk 2:4 is cited in Hebrews 10:38, Galatians 3:11 and Romans 1:17

- Jewish liturgy and priesthood rites are described
- Stylometry studies of the non-contextual words and patterns appear consistent with Paul's authentic Epistles.

In addition to textual clues, we find historical clues about the letter's authorship. In AD 96 the letter known as 1 Clement, the oldest Greek New Testament collection from ca. AD 175, placed Hebrews right after Romans.¹ It claimed Hebrews was written by Paul from Rome during his first imprisonment (Hebrews 13:24).² The early historian, Eusebius wrote his opinion two centuries later:

The Epistle to the Hebrews . . . it is indeed Paul's, but that it was written for Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue, and that Luke, having carefully translated it, published it for the Greek. Hence, as a result of this translation, the same complexion of style is found in this epistle and in the Acts . . . Now, as the blessed elder used to say, since the Lord, being the apostle of the Almighty, was sent to the Hebrews; so through modesty Paul, knowing that he had been sent to the Gentiles, does not describe himself as an apostle of the Hebrews, both to give due deference to the Lord, and because he wrote to the Hebrews out of his abundance, being a preacher and apostle of the Gentiles.³

Again, in the late fourth and early fifth century canonical lists, Hebrews is included within the fourteen Pauline letters.⁴ However, Origen (AD 185–253) left the letter anonymous, even though he acknowledged that historically it had been assumed to be Pauline. Tertullian attributed it to Barnabas, others to Luke, Clement, and Apollos. Some purport that Hebrews was a missionary tract as it contains the longest running argument in the New Testament that Jesus is the most superior being ever known. Even though the debate continues about authorship, in this commentary, I will refer to the author as Paul.

Background

The book of Hebrews is “strong meat” (Hebrews 5:12, 14). The book can be divided into two main ideas: The promise of the temple and the price of that promise.⁵ An understanding of Old Testament priesthood ritual and the JST helps us see the temple symbolism. A prominent Catholic scholar wrote, “By all standards this is one of the most impressive works in the New Testament . . . written in quality Greek and passionately appreciative of Christ.”⁶

Outline of Hebrews 1–6

- 1:1–3 The Supremacy of the Son
- 1:4–14 Superiority of Son over Angels
- 2:1–4 The Role of Christ in Salvation
- 2:5–9 Jesus Made Human
- 2:10–18 Christ the High Priest
- 3:1–6 Jesus' Superiority to Moses

- 3:7–19 Warning against Unbelief
- 4:1–13 Enter the Rest of the Lord
- 4:14–5:10 Jesus: Suffering High Priest
- 5:11–6:8 Warning against Apostasy
- 6:9–12 True Believers Encouraged
- 6:13–17 The Certainty of God’s Promise

However, Hebrews is tagged as the most neglected book in the New Testament, because it “is a difficult book. It is to the New Testament what Leviticus is to the Old: Leviticus announces the Mosaic system, while Hebrews explains it. In it, Paul shows how the gospel grew out of the soil of the Levitical order. By the light of the gospel restored in his day, he shows how the Levitical system was intended as a bridge by which those in the wilderness of carnality could cross over to the rest of the Lord.”⁷ Hebrews is certainly the most Christ-centered book among Paul’s Epistles.

HEBREWS 1

The Supremacy of the Son

Hebrews 1:1–3

Hebrews 1:1–2 “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (NIV) The Epistle opens right into the importance of revelation. It skips Paul’s standard Greek greeting and thanksgiving and compares past prophets with God’s Son in their time. As we find in seven Epistles, “last days” is used most often for Paul’s own time. The KJV, “sundry times and divers manners” means, “many times and various ways” (NIV). The restored gospel offers a second witness to this reference of other worlds (Moses 1:33; 7:30). Jesus is identified as God’s heir and the Creator of the “worlds” (KJV) or “universe” (NIV, BSB). Each of Paul’s fourteen letters begins with a definition of a separate Father and Son in the Godhead.

Hebrews 1:3 “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (NIV) We learn more details about the Son of God. The Father and His Son look alike. The “express image” (KJV) is from the Greek word, used only once in the New Testament, which means an image made by engraving tools: “*charaktér*/properly, an engraving; (figuratively) an exact impression (likeness) which also reflects inner *character*.” It is also translated “stamped” (NEB), “nature” (RSV), or “is like him in every way” (CSV).

We also learn that the Son upholds “all things by His powerful word” (BSB). And after He cleansed all sin or “provided purification” (NIV) or “purged our sins” (KJV), He “sat down on the right hand of” God the Father. Paul identifies Jesus on the right hand of God a half dozen times, just as Jesus, Stephen and Joseph Smith did (Matthew 26:67; Acts 7:56, D&C 76:20, etc.).

Superiority of God's Son over Angels

Hebrews 1:4-2:18

Hebrews 1:4 “**He became as far superior to the angels . . .**” (BSB) A detailed discussion begins showing that Jesus is more exalted than the angels. The Old Testament speaks of angels as highly exalted beings involved in the Garden of Eden and giving the law at Sinai (see Genesis 3:24; Deuteronomy 33:2; Psalm 68:17). But Paul teaches that Jesus has a greater inheritance than angels. This sounds as if some Jews’ believed that God assigned angels a higher status than the Messiah.

Hebrews 1:5–13 “**For unto which of the angels said he at any time . . .**” Paul supports his thesis with seven Old Testament citations to illustrate the heavenly hierarchy in the next eight verses. Christians combed through the Old Testament to find how Jesus fulfilled prophecies of the Messiah (which means “anointed one” as highlighted in v. 9). It was the Father who anointed His Son Jesus with oil as our promised “Anointed One/Messiah/Christ.”

1. “Thou art my Son today I have become your Father” (Hebrews 1:5; Psalm 2:7).
2. “I will be His Father and He will be My Son” (BSB, Hebrews 1:5; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13)
3. “Let all the angels of God worship him” (Hebrews 1:6; Deuteronomy 32:43)
4. “Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire” (Hebrews 1:7; Psalm 104:4)
5. “Thy God has set thee above thy fellows, by anointing with the oil of exultation” (NEB, Hebrews 1:8–9; Psalm 45:6–7).
6. “In the beginning, O Lord, You laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain . . .” (Hebrews 1:10–12; Psalm 102:25–27)
7. “Sit on my right hand . . .” (Hebrews 1:13; Psalm 110:1)

Hebrews 1:6–7 “. . . Let all the angels of God worship him, who maketh his ministers as a flame of fire. And of the angels he saith, Angels are ministering spirits” (JST) Joseph Smith’s inspired version deviates from the Old Testament quote in order to define an angel as a ministering spirit. The restored scriptures are filled with this definition and other details on ministering angles. For example, “by the ministering of angels . . . men began to exercise faith in Christ” (Moroni 7:25); and “the Aaronic priesthood holds the keys of ministering angels” (D&C 13:1; also, JS-H 1:15; D&C 7:6; etc.).

Hebrews 1:14 “**Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation**” The KJV phrase “heirs of Salvation” received a special meaning in the Restoration. It became a title for those who have been sealed to exaltation but who still dwell in the telestial world (D&C 7:6; 76:88; 77:11; 138:59). Paul and other prophets use several different phrases to state this meaning including:

- “Calling and election sure (2 Pe 1:10; D&C 53:1)
- “Obtained a good report” (Hebrews 11:39)⁸
- “Enter into His rest” (Hebrews 3:18; 4:1–11; Helaman 4:1–10; Alma 13:12, 16; 16:17; 60:13; etc.)⁹
- “Go on unto perfection” (Hebrews 6:1)
- “Enter into the holiest” (Hebrews 10:19)
- “Made a high priest forever” (Hebrews 6:20)
- “More sure word of prophecy” (2 Pe 1:19; D&C 131:5)
- The sure sealing of the “Holy Spirit of Promise” (Ep 1:13; D&C 124:124; 132:7, 19; etc.)
- “Full assurance of hope” (Hebrews 6:11)
- “The heirs of promise” (Hebrews 6:17)

Christians and Jews developed detailed theologies about angels. To clarify the truth, the Prophet Joseph Smith felt inspired to clarify what angels are and what they are not. Some angles, such as Moroni, are resurrected beings. Others such as Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist, who needed to deliver keys, were translated beings (D&C 110). Joseph also defend the difference between angels and ministering spirits.¹⁰

HEBREWS 2

The Role of Christ in Salvation

Hebrews 2:1–9

Hebrews 2:1 “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (NIV) Paul moves into a moral section as he urges his audience to heed Christ’s teachings to stay close to the truth.

Hebrews 2:2–3 “If the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation” (NKJV) The Jews had a tradition of angels acting “as God’s intermediaries at Sinai.”¹¹ Building on that, Paul argues that if the presence of angels made the Law great, then a message from God’s Son must be honored even more. Paul basically asked, if in the Old Testament, you honor angelic-issued directions, punishments, and rewards, then why not give more attention to the teachings of Christ who issued His gospel of salvation. Paul learned of Jesus through visions of the Lord Himself, as well as through other witnesses such as Ananias, Peter, and Barnabas; each taught him much about the Lord.

Hebrews 2:4 “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (NIV) God’s approval of the message is evident through miracles and the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12, D&C 46). The same authenticity can be used to test all who claim to be servants of God. All



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disciples can discern for themselves which teachers or teachings are from God by observing if they transmit or foster the gifts of the Spirit

Jesus Made Human

Hebrews 2:5-9

Hebrews 2:5-9 “He [God] has not put the world to come . . . in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying, ‘What is man . . . or the son of man . . . You have crowned him with glory and honor’” (NKJV) Again Paul quotes the Old Testament to testify that Jesus fulfills the scriptures as the “Son of Man.” Psalm 8:4-6, discusses the relationship between angels and the Son of Man in Hebrews 2:6b-8a. This verse from Psalms describes mortals who have to die, as “lower than that angels.” Yet Jesus had to suffer death like a human, in order to have all things in subjection. In verse nine Paul explains that Christ descended below all in order to lift all, or “might taste death for everyone” (NIV). The Psalm prophecies that because it was required of the Son of Man. Most Greek manuscripts do not have the phrase “And set him over the works of Your hands.

Christ the High Priest

Hebrews 2:10-18

Hebrews 2:10 “In bringing many sons and daughters to glory . . . salvation [was made] perfect through what he [Jesus] suffered” There is a profound message in the Christ being made perfect through sufferings. The “Suffering Servant” or Suffering Savior was prophesied in Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12. Jesus became perfect through His sufferings, thus allowing us to be perfect through His at-one-ment. The Jews were upset at the thought that their God would be killed as a criminal and not reign with glory and honor as king. (It is the old confusion between prophecies of the Lord’s first and second comings.) Though, how could anyone have confidence in divine mercy unless the Lord personally knew the terrible realities of life?

Hebrews 2:11 “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family” (NIV) This is a beautiful description of how we become one through the at-one-ment thus allowing us to be on a level where our Lord, King, and Master, can call us his family, or “brethren” (KJV). To make something or someone holy is also to “consecrate, sanctify/*hagiazó*.” Jesus is the one who has the power to make humans holy or to “sanctifieth” (KJV).

Hebrews 2:12-13 “I will put My trust in Him.” And again: “Here am I and the children whom God has given Me” (NKJV) In this Epistle, nearly every statement is backed up by Old Testament references. In verse 12, Paul confirms Jesus’ sanctifying power by quoting God in Psalm 22:22, “I will declare thy name.” (The *church* in the Old Testament refers to an assembly or congregation.) In verse 13 he cites Isaiah 8:17-18.

Left: *The Consecration of Eleazar as High Priest* by William Hole, 1925.

Hebrews 2:14–15 “By his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (NIV) Because of Jesus’ death, He was able to destroy the devil’s power over our spiritual death. Jesus overcame physical and spiritual death. We can overcome our bondage by releasing our fears, including our fear of death, through trusting in the Savior. When we join as partakers of His flesh and blood, we help His work.

Hebrews 2:16–17 “not angels . . . but he helps the offspring of Abraham. He had to be made like His brothers in every way, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest . . . to make atonement for the sins of the people” (BSB) Paul continues to argue that Jesus is superior to angels, and that he came to do a higher work. God, in His wisdom, sent Jesus as a mortal and as a descendant of Abraham, not as a glorious angel from the heavens. Jesus shares a bond of brotherhood with the people of Abraham, and those adopted as covenant people. Through the priesthood that Abraham held (Melchizedek, not Aaronic), Jesus became the ultimate High Priest. Using a form of the words “priestly sacrifice” in Romans 3:25, Paul pictures Jesus as the High Priest making “propitiation for the sins of the people” (NKJV). He will develop this idea in the next chapters.

Paul testifies of Jesus’ atonement and never moves far from that subject. Jewish converts needed the powerful message of forgiveness through Christ instead of purification rites of animal sacrifice. Jews expected a triumphal Messiah (Luke 24:20–1), so Hebrews probes the need for the suffering mission of the Messiah, too. The “reconciliation” (KJV) or expiation (RSV) is the “atonement” (NIV). The Hebrew word for reconciliation is *kapparah* which comes from “atone/*kippur*/cover” as in the “Day of Atonement” or Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16).

Hebrews 2:18 “Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted” (BSB) Jesus’ suffering became a double gift for us. In addition to mediating our sins, He understands our pain and weaknesses, and can heal us. We can trust our Lord because He has endured that with which we struggle. He can give us perfect counsel. He knows personally the terrible realities of life.

HEBREWS 3

Jesus’ Superiority to Moses

Hebrews 3:1–6

Hebrews 3:1 “Holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest” (NIV) Paul refers to Jesus as not only the High Priest but also Apostle (which in Greek means, “one sent”). The “holy brethren” (KJV) are fellow covenanters (of both genders as the NIV points out above) who are set apart to “heavenly callings.” God calls many, but only those who obey are chosen and will enter into God’s presence (Romans 11:29; 1 Corinthians 1:26; D&C 121: 34–40).

Hebrews 3:2–5 “Moses was faithful in serving . . . But Jesus deserves more honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house deserves more honor than the house . . . and God is really the one who built everything” (CEV) In the household of God, Moses was a “faithful servant” who helped establish the House of God. But, Paul points out that the actual builder was Jesus, and it all came from the Great Architect of the whole plan, God. Paul often refers to God as Jesus’ Father, but the Old Testament usually uses God for Jehovah, who became Jesus, so I’m not sure if this refers to the Elohim or not. From the KJV, “This man,” refers to Jesus.

Hebrews 3:6 “We are His house, if we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope” (BSB) If we can uphold our testimonies and confidence in Jesus, then as heirs of God’s house, we join Jesus in His House or kingdom. The word “confidence/*parrésia*” is mentioned often in the New Testament for “freedom of speech, openness.” We see the word used when Jesus “spoke openly” (Mark 8:32; John 7:14), or when they asked him to speak “plainly” (John 10:14; 11:24). Most often Paul used it for “boldness” (2 Corinthians 7:4; Php 1:20; 1 Tim 3:13; etc.). The word speaks of courageously sharing one’s testimony, or sharing our confidence in God and His plan.

Warning against Israelites’ Unbelief

Hebrews 3:7–19

Hebrews 3:7–11 “As the Holy Ghost saith . . .” Paul credits the Spirit as the source of their hymn, Psalm 95:7–11. The quote extends from verses 7 to 11 summarizing the Children of Israel’s apostasy in the wilderness. He uses it as a warning to the early Christians against falling into the same place and forfeiting their chance to have the higher law rather than the lower law. It is the higher law that allows one to enter into the presence of the Lord rather than being content with only the administering of angles. .

Hebrews 3:8–9 “Do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness . . . for forty years” (NIV) Paul quotes this Psalm as a warning the Hebrew-Christians not to follow the bad example of the exiled Israelites. The “provocation” refers to their rebellion (RSV, NIV) near Sinai. They were tempted during their trial or testing period and failed because they hardened their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit.

Hebrews 3:10–11 “I was angry with that generation and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray . . . They shall never enter My rest’” (BSB) The Psalmist alludes to the Exodus accounts when the God through Moses, invited the Israelites to climb Mt. Sinai and enter into His presence. But the smoking mountain and thunder frightened the Israelites. They told Moses to go for them; “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Exodus 20:19, NIV). Moses tried to encourage them to receive this opportunity, “Do not be afraid . . . God has come to test you, so that the fear of Him may be before you, to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20, BSB). Sadly, “the people stood afar off,” and Moses went alone up the mountain to see God (Exodus 20:21).

We learn in restored scripture that Israel rejected the higher priesthood and so the Lord gave them the lower law, including the administration of angels (D&C 84:23). The result was they had to wander for forty years. This was unnecessary. If they had accepted the Lord's invitation and higher law, they could have gone at once to inherit their promised land as well as received the gospel rather than the Law of Moses (JST Exodus 33).

The Lord defines the phrase "My rest" in modern revelation as the "fullness of his glory" (D&C 84:24; see also 84:6–26). Hebrews repeats this specific word eight times, "*katapausis/rest*" (The word is found only one other time in the New Testament, by Stephen in Acts 7:49). Paul first quotes it from Psalms, and then builds on it seven other times in chapters three and four (The other uses of "rest" in KJV come from approximately a dozen different Greek words).

Hebrews 3:12–14 "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart . . . But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today' . . . hold our original conviction firmly" (NIV) Paul finishes quoting Psalm 95, and likens the frightened Israelites' experience to the new Christians. God has again given them an opportunity to live His higher law and enter into His Presence. He warns them that their unbelief will destroy their chances of entering into God's presence. He encourages them to exhort each another to stay free from the deceptions of sin.

The word "Today" has multiple meanings. In this context it sounds similar to Paul's quotation of Isaiah 49:8, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Later Paul uses "Today" to last until the day of judgement (Hebrews 10:25). This is the same definition the Lord taught the elders of the restored church in D&C 64:23, "Behold, now it is called today until the coming of the Son of Man, and verily it is a day of sacrifice, and a day for the tithing of my people; for he that is tithed shall not be burned at his coming."

Hebrews 3:15 "while it is said: Today . . ." Paul again quotes two of the verses he just cited from Psalm 95:7 and 8 for emphasis. He tries to help them see the unique opportunity that God is giving them once again to prepare for the day of salvation.

Hebrews 3:16–19 "Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? . . ." (NIV) Paul reviews the Exodus story with three parallel questions and answers to drive home his message. He concludes with the sad summary: "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." Moses had tried to give them the higher law, but they refused it and were unable to enter into the presence of the Lord as a people.

Paul includes a different spin with his retelling of the story. Unlike our Old Testament account, Paul points to what we know as temple promises. They were given the lesser priesthood of the administering of angels. In other words, neither the Israelites—nor their priests—were allowed to enter through the veil of their Tabernacle. Only

the one high priest, on one day of the year communed with God in the Holiest Place (Leviticus 16). The tragic realization is that it was not necessary for them to travel in the wilderness—nor is it for us. If we keep the commandments and make covenants with God, we can move beyond the administration of angels and teachings of the lower law to enter into His Presence. Paul’s audience (including us!) are given the same invitation in chapter four. The prophet Joseph taught:

HEBREWS 4

Enter the Rest of the Lord

Hebrews 4:1-13

Hebrews 4:1 “Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (NIV) Paul invites his audience as children of Israel to likewise enter into the same “rest” of the Lord. The understanding that “the Lord’s rest is fullness of his glory,” fits into other New Testament accounts that speak of striving for their “calling and election” to be made sure (D&C 84:24; 2 Pe 1:10). This same encouragement is given to our dispensation. Although very few couples receive this temple ordinance by ordained prophets, all are encouraged to strive for it (Moroni 7:3; D&C 93:1; 132:18–20; 49; etc.).

Hebrews 4:2–5 “For unto us was the *rest* preached, as well as unto them . . . If they harden not their hearts, they shall enter into my rest” (JST *italicized*) The JST adds this important conditional. Just as the early children of Israel had in their wilderness, the opportunity to receive the fullness of the gospel is being offered to Paul’s audience again. He pleads with them to have the faith to believe and strive to keep their covenants in order to enter into the “rest of the Lord.”

Hebrews 4:6–7 “God again set a certain day, calling it ‘Today’” (NIV) Paul continues to give commentary on Psalm 95:7, 8. Since Moses’ people did not accept the promises offered to them (“they” in v. 6), God set a time in the future for a second chance, calling it “today.” (v. 7).

Hebrews 4:8–10 “if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day” (KJV) “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day” (BSB) This is referring to the prophet *Joshua* (in Greek his name is Jesus) who did not give the children of Israel “spiritual rest” once they entered into the promise land, because they had rejected the higher law. The Israelites only received the law of resting on the Sabbath not the higher form of “God’s rest.”

Hebrews 4:11 “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (NIV) Paul’s comparison of different uses of “sabbath rest” and “Eternal Rest”

identifies the enteral nature of his plea to “labor” in order to return to the presence of God. The Old Testament also occasionally uses a special definition of “rest” as exaltation (Isaiah 11:10; Psalm 95:11; etc.).

Hebrews 4:12–13 “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword . . . Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight” (NIV) Paul uses the image of a double-edged sword to describe God as a powerful judge of our thoughts and desires. In the Old Testament, a two-edged sword was only about 18 inches long (Judges 3:16). In the Roman Empire, soldiers carried these double-edged swords.¹²

Jesus is The Suffering High Priest

Hebrews 4:14–5:10

Hebrews 4:14 “since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (NIV) During His mortal ministry, Jesus of Nazareth never acted as the High Priest at Herod’s Temple to offer sacrifice on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), nor presided over the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:27), although He was the Greatest High Priest that all others were to point toward. Jesus went through the veil and opened it for all “his children” (Hebrews 12:5, 7). Paul understood the higher priesthood promises and symbols. Most of the twenty-four references to the “high priest,” in Hebrews, refer to Christ.

Hebrews 4:15 “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” In the Old Testament the priest (*kohen*) acted as a mediator between man and God. All priests were to typify the Savior as they acted as a mediator between God and man. The Hebrew roots of the word “priest” also go back to the idea of “ministering.” The same word in Latin is, “*sacerdos*” or sacred. Leviticus 21:10–13 outlines the high priests’ duties. They also had the responsibility to watch over and guard the covenant, to teach the law of God, and to make the ritual offerings required by the law.¹³ There was only one high priest to oversee all priesthood functions in the Law of Moses. (The other priesthood offices were chief priest, priests descended from Aaron, and all the other Levites.) In the Book of Mormon, the high priest was not descended from Aaron, but functioned under the “holy order of God,” or the Melchizedek Priesthood (2 Nephi 6:2; Alma 4:4, 4:18; 13:1).

The most sacred duties of the high priest included: entering through the veil of the Temple into the Holy of Holies on the day of Atonement where he would sprinkle the blood of a sin offering on the mercy seat to seek forgiveness for the people’s sins (Leviticus 16:3); mediating with God for his people (Exodus 28:29); bearing the sins of his people (Exodus 28:38); offering incense—symbolically, Israel’s prayers ascending to heaven (Leviticus 16:12–13); making an atonement (Leviticus 16:32); judging uncleanness in deciding who can enter into the presence of the Lord (Leviticus 13:2); blessing the people (Numbers 6:23); receiving the mind and the will of the Lord for the Israelites through the Urim and Thummim (“lights and perfections”). In Jesus Christ, Israel was to see



Christ Before the High Priest by Gerard von Honthorst, ca. 1617. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



Replica of the Ark of the Covenant in the Royal Arch Room of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. Photo by Ben Schumin on December 27, 2006. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

their faithful and spotless Mediator and High Priest. Paul explains that Jesus' mortality taught Him how we feel in order to be the perfect mediator and comforter.

Hebrews 4:16 “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy” It was the initial desire of the Lord that all of Israel would become a “kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6). It was Israel's earlier refusal that led to the higher priesthood being taken from them. Now Paul states the challenge again. “Come boldly” (KJV) or “with confidence” (BSB), up the mount all the way to the throne of God. Their disciples receive the Lord's mercy as they make sacred covenants to obey and serve God.

HEBREWS 5

Hebrews 5:1–3 “Every high priest is selected from among the people . . . to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those . . . going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness” (NIV) Paul defines the high priest, as one who made sacrifices for others, referring to the Temple and beyond. The calling of the high priest included acting as judge and counselor to act with compassion in behalf of his people.

Hebrews 5:4 “no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron” The “*honour*” refers back to the office of high priest in verse one. Paul references Moses ordaining Aaron as the high priest, which suggests he saw it as relevant to the Christian priesthood, too.

The New Testament examples of selecting another apostle through prayerful revelation, the laying on of hands, and receiving common consent, became the pattern for priesthood callings in the early Christian church (Acts 6:5–6). At the organization of the restored church, those with priesthood authority were “called of God” (D&C 20:2–3). Rather than just one high priest though, in this dispensation God's servants have the right to inspira-

tion from Him to call saints to serve, including men to the priesthood, and women to become priestess in the Temple.¹⁴

Hebrews 5:5 “Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father’” (NIV) Again Paul quotes Psalm 2:7 just as he did in Hebrews 1:5.

Hebrews 5:6 “He saith also in another *place*, Thou *art* a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” Paul cites his twenty-fifth Old Testament scripture from Psalm 110:4. The word, “*Melchizedek*” is made up of two words in Hebrew: *Melek* (or as it was written, *MLK* or *MLCH*) is “king,” and “*zedek*” is “righteousness.” (In Hebrews 7:2, the author spells out this definition.)

These root words have two connections with restored scripture. First, some have speculated that “Shem, the Great High Priest,” was also called Melchizedek, as a title (D&C 138:41).¹⁵ Second, the group of people in the Book of Mormon who bring the King’s son from Jerusalem called him, “Mulek,” or as it would have been written at the time, “MLK,” a perfect name for the baby “king.” He was “the son of King Zedekiah who came out of Jerusalem with them . . . and the land north was called Mulek” (Helaman 6:10). We refer to these people as the Mulekites.

Joseph Smith learned that in order to not overuse the name of the Lord, the higher priesthood was also called “order of Enoch” or “Melchizedek.” But it is actually “The Priesthood After the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3–4; also see 76:57).

Hebrews 5:7–8 “Jesus . . . offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears . . . and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (NIV) Being willing to suffer anything necessary in order to come up to the full measure of obedience is part of what is required to be “made perfect” (v. 9). The teachings of Spencer Kimball enlighten this, “to each person is given a pattern—obedience through suffering, and perfection through obedience.”¹⁶ Times of suffering are often the times when we draw closest to God. They are times of refining. In the end, those who become more Christlike through suffering are grateful for the experience to grow. I am one of those.

Hebrews 5:9–10 “. . . having been perfected, He became *the* author of eternal salvation to all those obeying Him . . . designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (BLB) Christ alone become the “author of eternal salvation” for all who obey Him. This is one of the glorious truths of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ: we have an impartial God who welcomes all who will obey to receive eternal salvation.

Warning against Apostasy after a Sure Witness

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

Hebrews 5:11–13 “It is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” (NIV) Paul perceived that his flock were “babes” spiritually and could not digest the full truths about the Melchizedek priesthood power. They were only able to handle the “milk” of the first principles. It is as if Paul observes that his fellow Christians, like the Israelites, have tarried too long in the foot hills of immature spiritual experience, but he wants them to climb the mountain of deeper faith.

Hebrews 5:14 “But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (NASB) However, “strong meat” (KJV) is available and good for those who have matured spiritually by discerning “good and evil.” This comes from attuning one’s heart to the Spirit’s promptings. Learning the language of the Spirit’s inspiration develops the gift of discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10; D&C 46:23).

HEBREWS 6

Hebrews 6:1–2 “*Not leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection . . .*” (JST *italics*) Paul wants those in his audience who are spiritually strong enough to climb the mount and receive the “strong meat” of the gospel. The one-word addition in the JST adds the crucial reminder that moving onto higher principles, does not mean that we leave behind the doctrine of Christ. Instead, rooted disciples build on “repentance . . . faith . . . baptisms . . . laying on of hands . . . resurrection . . . and of eternal judgment.” Paul wants to discuss how to attain spiritual “maturity” (BSB) or “perfection” (KJV) in the Lord’s sense.

Hebrews 6:3 “*And we will go unto perfection if God permits*” (JST in *italics*). Paul wants to move on if God directs him as he hopes. For the next five chapters, he discusses requirements of deepening one’s faith to receive the covenants that provide exaltation. We know these in our dispensation from the temple endowment.

Hebrews 6:4–6 “*He hath made it impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift . . . if they shall fall away, to be renewed again unto repentance; seeing they crucify unto themselves the Son of God afresh*” (JST) Paul’s only concern with moving onto a higher level to discuss perfection is that his audience will be accountable now. Special knowledge requires special obligations. (The same doctrine is taught in 1 John 5:16, “sin unto death.”) If a saint enjoys the Holy Ghost, to the extent of receiving the “other comforter” in a vision, then he or she will be held accountable (D&C 88:3–4). It helps to know what Paul is talking about, though. Joseph Smith defined the “other comforter” in a sermon in Nauvoo:

There are two Comforters spoken of. One is the Holy Ghost . . . When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and his election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter.¹⁷

If one falls away after one has had the calling and election has been made sure, then Paul's warning that they will not be forgiven is applicable.¹⁸

In this dispensation, modern saints who fear that they are beyond forgiveness can be assured by the prophet Joseph's words: "All sins shall be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Ghost: after a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost there is no repentance for him, he has got to say that the sun does not shine, while he sees it, he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens were open to him"¹⁹ Most saints will received this promise of exaltation or their "calling and election made sure," on the other side of the veil.²⁰ Yet the prophet has the keys to administer the sure seal to a few, in this life, through an additional temple ordinance in the Holy of Holies.²¹

Hebrews 6:7–8 "*The day cometh that the earth which drinketh in the rain . . . who now receiveth blessing from God, shall be cleansed with fire. For that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected . . . therefore, they who bring not forth good fruits, shall be cast into the fire, for their end is to burned*" (JST in *italics*) God's gift of rain brings vegetation to bless those who cultivate it. But, if God's gift bears harmful thorns and thistles—symbols for sins—then they will be burned at their divine judgment. In the Old Testament, we find the judgment described as the Law of the Harvest (Hosea 6:11).

True Believers Encouraged

Hebrews 6:9–12

Hebrews 6:9 "**Beloved, we are persuaded better things of you**" Paul is optimistic that his dear friends are capable of a righteousness salvation, not cursing and punishment.

Hebrews 6:10–11 "**God is not unrighteous, therefore he will not forget your work and labor of love, which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints . . . And we desire that every one of you do the same**" (JST in *italics*) The Christian saints had shown good labors of love in their ministering to one another. Love is an action verb. It is work, not just a fleeting emotion. Paul encourages the Hebrew saints to work with the same diligence for a "full assurance of hope" for God to make their exaltation sure.

Hebrews 6:12 "**We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised**" We cannot be spiritually lazy—in our prayers, charity, dress, self-control, sabbath and temple worship. The key for receiving exhalation is in being "valiant" in our testimony of Jesus Christ and keeping our covenants (D&C 76:69). We must develop patience and faith in order to "inherit the promises"

(KJV). In modern scripture we find similar discussions of this same promise (D&C 88:3, 4, 68, 69; 124:124; etc.).

The Certainty of God's Promise

Hebrews 6:13–20

Hebrews 6:13–15 “When God made a promise to Abraham . . . ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise” (ESV) The same blessings Paul refers to were received by Abraham after he “patiently endured.” A few of Abraham’s challenges included: suffering childlessness for decades, multiple foreign moves, marital strife, and the emotional pain of being asked to sacrifice his beloved Isaac. His valiant nature during the suffering allowed him to receive the highest blessings of God, “by whom the promises remain” (D&C 27:10; also see 101:4; 110:12; 132:29–37; 133:55).

Hebrews 6:16–17 “God, desiring to show more abundantly the unchangeableness of His purpose to the heirs of the promise, guaranteed *it* by an oath” (BLB) Oaths were a part of Israelite religious life (Genesis 24; Numbers 30:2; 1 Nephi 4:32; etc.) “The heirs of the promise” are those same saints that he hopes to encourage to join with those that have their exaltation made sure. The oath God promises them is Eternal Life. When Joseph Smith addressed this chapter, he repeated the same encouragement: “Make your calling and election sure go on from grace to grace untill [*sic*] you obtain a promise from God for yourselves that you shall have eternal life. This is eternal life to know God and his son Jesus Christ.”²²

Hebrews 6:18–19 “hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil” (NKJV) Disciples are to “hope” for this great blessing as an anchor of our souls. If we grasp steadfastly, it will allow us saints to enter through “the veil” to meet the Lord. This hope is Christian’s inheritance as children of God’s Promise, as those adopted into Abraham’s seed and members of the Church of the Firstborn. Paul asks his audience to seek for these things. At the time of Jesus only the High Priest entered through the veil once a year. But, Jesus’ death opened the veil to God’s throne and to a whole kingdom of High Priests and Priestesses.

Hebrews 6:20 “Our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (NIV) Our example is always Jesus. He showed us what was required and how to enter into the “rest” of the Lord (Hebrews 4:1, 3, 4, 5, etc.) We must sacrifice all the Lord asks of us. We must obey the Lord and do the will of the Father at all times. This combination of obedience through sacrifice will lead to sanctification, which is rewarded either in this our second estate, or in our third estate.

Header Image: Moses and Joshua in the Tabernacle by James Tissot, 1904.

ENDNOTES

1. Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 197.
2. *Beatty Papyrus II (P46)*. The only time we know Paul was in Italy, as the verse mentions, was in conjunction with his imprisonments in Rome.
3. Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 201.
4. Welch, Hall, *Charting the New Testament*, 18–5.
5. Donald Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (SLC, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), chapter 17.
6. Raymond Brown, *intro?* 683.
7. Millet, *Studies in Scripture*, 6:192.
8. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 388, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/394>.
9. Joseph Smith, “Times and Seasons, 15 February 1842,” p. 689, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-february-1842/3> “The Lord, the King of Israel, shall be in the midst of them, and that he will rest in the arms of his love, and joy over them with singing. Surely, this will be a *rest* for the people of God in earnest, and this will be the time that the House of Israel will enjoy that *rest*, so often spoken of in the bible
10. Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Joseph Smith Commentary on the Bible*, 201. The prophet Joseph taught: “[There is] a difference between an angel and a ministering spirit. The one [has] a resurrected or translated body with its spirit, ministering to embodied spirits, The other [is] a disembodied spirit, visiting and ministering to disembodied spirits. Jesus Christ became a ministering spirit, while his body lay in the sepulcher. To the spirits in prison, to fulfill an important part of his mission without which he could not have perfected his work or entered in to his rest.” Also see: Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (SLC, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 191, 168.
11. Craig R. Koester, *The Anchor Yale Bible: Hebrews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 205.
12. Koester, *Hebrews*, 274.
13. Numbers 6:22–27; 21:10; 35:25,28; Joshua 20:6; 2 Kings 22:8; Levite duties: Deuteronomy 10:8; 21:5; etc.
14. Russel M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” General Conference October 2019.
15. Alma, E. Gygi, “Is it possible that Shem and Melchizedek are the same person?” *Ensign* November 1973. Gygi offers seven evidences that support this claim: “1. The inheritance given to Shem included the land of Salem. Melchizedek appears in scripture as the king of Salem, who reigns over this area. 2. Shem, according to later revelation, reigned in righteousness and the priesthood came through him. Melchizedek appears on the scene with a title that means ‘king of righteousness.’3. Shem was the great high priest of his day. Abraham honored the high priest Melchizedek by seeking a blessing at his hands and paying him tithes. 4. Abraham stands next to Shem in the patriarchal order of the priesthood and would surely have received the priesthood from Shem; but D&C 84:5–17 says Abraham received the priesthood

from Melchizedek. 5. Jewish tradition identifies Shem as Melchizedek. 6. President Joseph F. Smith's remarkable vision names Shem among the great patriarchs, but no mention is made of Melchizedek. 7. *Times and Seasons* (vol. 6, p. 746) speaks of "Shem, who was Melchizedek. ..."

16. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed., (SLC, UT: Bookcraft, 1982), 168.
17. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 3.380. "The other Comforter spoken of is a subject of great interest, and perhaps understood by few of this generation. After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of his sins and receives the Holy Ghost, (by the laying on of hands), which is the first Comforter, then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and his election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter, which the Lord hath promised the Saints, as is recorded in the testimony of St. John, in the 14th chapter, from the 12th to the 27th verses."
18. Ibid. 6:314–315. The Prophet Joseph Smith spoke on this at the April 7, 1844 General Conference of the Church. The account was recorded in Wilford Woodruff's diary. It is known as the King Follett Funeral Sermon. "All sins shall be forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Ghost; for Jesus will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance." For a comparison of scribal texts of the same sermon, see Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 340–361.
19. Joseph Smith, "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*," 616. *The Joseph Smith Papers* (accessed October 17, 2019) <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/5>.
20. Joseph Smith, "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] [addenda]," p. 9 [addenda], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, (accessed October 17, 2019) <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/544>
21. Daniel H. Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (NYC, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 248.
22. Joseph Smith, "Discourse, 10 March 1844, as Reported by James Burgess," [19], *The Joseph Smith Papers* (accessed October 17, 2019), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-10-march-1844-as-reported-by-james-burgess/5>