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HEBREWS 1–6

UNDERSTANDING THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S SON
(CA AD 50–60)

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Introduction to Hebrews

Authorship and audience

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is never identified in the letter; as a result, the authorship has been debated for centuries. Yet, the letter gives a few clues that point to Paul:

- a reference to Timothy as a brother (Heb 13:23)
- a reference to bonds and greetings from Saints in Rome (Heb 10:34; 13:3, 24)
- Pauline phrasing, theology, and conclusion
- extensive citations from the Greek Old Testament (LXX)
- an expectation that the audience honor the Old Testament as the word of God

- citation of Hab 2:4 in Heb 10:38 is also found in Gal 3:11 and Rom 1:17
- descriptions of Jewish liturgy and priesthood rites

In addition to textual clues, stylometry studies show the non-contextual words and patterns to be consistent with other Pauline Epistles. Historical evidence also speaks of Pauline authorship. In AD 96 a letter known as 1 Clement cited many phrases from Hebrews as authoritative. Also, the oldest Greek New Testament collection (ca. AD 175) placed Hebrews right after Romans with the Pauline letters.¹ By AD 325 the early Christian historian Eusebius claimed:

The Epistle to the Hebrews . . . 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 . . . ; 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.²

In the late fourth- and early fifth-century canonical lists, Hebrews is categorized with the other Pauline letters.³ However, Origen (AD 185–253) left the letter anonymous, even though he acknowledged that historically it had been assumed Pauline. Tertullian attributed it to Barnabas, and others to Luke, Clement, and Apollos. Some purport that Hebrews was a missionary tract because it contains the longest running argument in the New Testament that Jesus is the most superior being ever known. Even though the authorship debate continues, for simplicity, I will refer to the author as Paul.

Overview

Hebrews testifies of Jesus's Atonement and never moves far from that subject. It is the most Christ-centered book among Paul's Epistles. Paul refers to its message as strong meat for mature members (Heb 5:12, 14). The book can be divided by two main ideas: the promise of the temple and the price of that promise.⁴ The Old Testament temple rituals and the JST changes help 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."⁵

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, and Hebrews explains it. In Hebrews, Paul shows how the gospel grew out of the soil of the Levitical order. 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."⁶ The book also connects the Old Testament temple ritual to Jesus's higher law and the restored temple ordinances.

Table 1. Outline of Heb 1–6

1:1–3	The supremacy of the Son
1:4–14	The superiority of Son over angels
2:1–4	Jesus’s role in salvation
2:5–9	Jesus made human
2:10–18	Christ the Great High Priest
3:1–6	Jesus’s superiority over Moses
3:7–19	Warning against unbelief
4:1–13	Enter the rest of the Lord
4:14–5:10	Jesus is the suffering high priest
5:11–6:8	Warning against apostasy
6:9–12	True believers encouraged
6:13–20	The certainty of God’s promise

Hebrews 1

The supremacy of the Son—Heb 1:1–3

Heb 1:1–2 (NIV). *“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* The epistle opens by announcing the importance of revelation. It skips any standard Greek greeting and thanksgiving to begin with a comparison of past prophets and God’s Son. In seven epistles, “last days” is used most often to refer to the New Testament time. The KJV’s “sundry times and divers manners” means “many times and various ways” (NIV).

Heb 1:2. *“by whom also he made the worlds.”* The restored gospel offers a second witness to the reference that God created other worlds (Mose 1:33; 7:30). Jesus is identified as God’s heir and Creator of the “worlds” (KJV), or “universe” (NIV, BSB). In all fourteen letters attributed to Paul, the author begins with a definition of Heavenly Father and His Son in the Godhead.

Heb 1:3 (NIV). *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”* The Father and His Son look alike. The Greek word *charaktér* is found only once in the New Testament and is translated “express image” in the KJV. Literally, it was a tool for engraving and meant “an engraving”; figuratively, it meant “an exact impression (likeness) which also reflects inner character.” It is also translated “stamped” (NEB), “nature” (RSV), and “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. Across his epistles, Paul identifies Jesus on the right hand of God a half dozen times, just as Stephen and Joseph Smith did.⁷

The superiority of God's Son over angels—Heb 1:4–2:18

Heb 1:4 (BSB). “*He became as far superior to the angels.*” 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 events in the Garden of Eden and in giving the law at Sinai.⁸ Paul teaches that Jesus has a greater inheritance than angels. A whole theology of angels developed out of other biblical traditions. In the New Testament and Restoration scripture, the Lord taught much about angels.

Heb 1:5. “*For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?*” In the next eight verses (1:5–13) Paul explains Jesus's superiority with seven Old Testament explanations of the heavenly hierarchy.

- “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (Heb 1:5 NIV; Ps 2:7).
- “I will be His Father, and He will be My Son” (Heb 1:5 BSB; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13).
- “Let all the angels of God worship him” (Heb 1:6; Deu 32:43).
- “Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire” (Heb 1:7; Ps 104:4).
- “Thy God has set thee above thy fellows, by anointing with the oil of exultation” (Heb 1:8–9 NEB; Ps 45:6–7).
- “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” (Heb 1:10–11 BSB; Ps 102:25–27).
- “Sit on my right hand” (Heb 1:13; Ps 110:1).

The Prophet Joseph Smith clarified what angels are and what they are not. Some angels, such as Moroni, are resurrected beings. Others, like Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist, who needed to deliver keys, were translated beings (D&C 110). The Lord taught him the difference between angels and ministering spirits.⁹ Also, angels “who minister to this earth . . . belong or have belonged to it” (D&C 130:5).

Heb 1:6–7 (JST). “*let all the angels of God worship him, who maketh his ministers as a flame of fire. And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. Angels are ministering spirits.*” Joseph Smith's inspired version of this passage

Table 2. Angel in the standard works

	Old Testament	New Testament	Book of Mormon	Doctrine & Covenants	Pearl of Great Price
Angel(s)	130	180	187	96	19
Total words	611,508	180,665	267,519	112,178	26,459
Ratio per 10k words	1.9	10.0	5.5	7.4	6.1

defines an angel as a ministering spirit. The restored scriptures are filled with this definition and other details on ministering angels. For example, “By the ministering of angels . . . men began to exercise faith in Christ” and “The Priesthood of Aaron . . . holds the keys of the ministering angels.”¹⁰

Heb 1:9. “*God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.*” Heavenly Father anointed His Son Jesus with oil and made Him our promised Anointed One. The terms *Messiah* and *Christ* mean “anointed.” The author combed through prophecies of the Messiah and shared some that Jesus fulfilled.

Heb 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” became a title in the Restoration for those who have been sealed to exaltation but who still dwell in the world.¹¹ Paul and other prophets use ten different phrases when describing this sure sealing:

1. The sure sealing of the “Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13; D&C 124:124; 132:7, 19).
2. “Heirs of salvation” (Heb 1:14).
3. “Enter into his rest” (Heb 3:18; 4:1–11; Hel 4:1–10; Alm 13:12, 16; 16:17; 60:13).¹²
4. “Go on unto perfection” (Heb 6:1).
5. “Full assurance of hope” (Heb 6:11).
6. “The heirs of promise” (Heb 6:17).
7. “Enter into the holiest” (Heb 10:19; and possibly 6:20).
8. “Obtained a good report” (Heb 11:39).¹³
9. “Calling and election sure” (2 Pe 1:10; D&C 53:1).
10. “More sure word of prophecy” (2 Pe 1:19; D&C 131:5).

As the epistle of Hebrews focuses on Saints seeking to enter the presence of the Lord, it is not surprising to find seven different titles for the sacred sealing of exaltation—more than in any other book of scripture.

Hebrews 2

Jesus’s role in salvation—Heb 2:1–4

Heb 2:1 (NIV). “*We must pay the most careful attention, . . . so that we do not drift away.*” Paul urges his audience to heed Christ’s teachings and stay close to the truth. He also warns them about apostasy.

Heb 2:2–3 (NKJV). “*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.*” A Jewish tradition claimed that angels acted “as God’s intermediaries at Sinai.”¹⁴ Paul argues that if angelic intervention made Moses’s law great, then a message from God’s Son must be greater. He asked, if you honor angelic-issued directions, punishments, and rewards, why not give more attention to the teachings of the Messiah, who revealed His law and gospel of salvation?

Heb 2:4 (NIV). “*God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.*” God’s approval of the message is evident through miracles and the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12; D&C 46). The same authenticity can be used to test all who claim to be servants of God. Disciples can discern for themselves whether a teacher or teaching is from God by the presence or absence of God’s Spirit.

Jesus made human—Heb 2:5–9

Heb 2:5–9 (NKJV). “*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.’*” Again, Paul quotes a psalm to testify that Jesus fulfills the scriptures as the Son of Man. Ps 8:4–6 discusses the relationship between angels and the Son of Man. Because mortals must die, they are classified as “lower than the angels.” Yet Jesus had to suffer death like a human to have all things in His subjection. Heb 2:9 describes Christ descending below all to lift all, or “might taste death for everyone” (NIV). (Only a few Greek manuscripts include “and set him over the works of your hands.”)

Christ the Great High Priest—Heb 2:10–18

Heb 2:10 (NIV). “*In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, . . . salvation [was made] perfect through what he [Jesus] suffered.*” Paul repeats the profound message that Christ became perfect through suffering. Isaiah prophesied of the Suffering Servant in Isa 49:1–6; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12. Jesus’s suffering also allows humans to be perfected through His Atonement. Confused between prophecies of the Lord’s first and second comings, the Jews questioned the Christian tenet that their God would have been killed as a criminal and would not have reigned with glory and honor as king.

Heb 2:11 (NIV). “*Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.*” Our Lord, King, and Master calls those who accept His sanctification to be His family, or “brethren” (KJV). To make something or someone holy is to consecrate or sanctify it (*hagiazó*). Jesus has the power to make humans holy.

Heb 2:13 (NKJV). “*I will put My trust in Him.’ And again: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given Me.’*” In this epistle, nearly every statement is based in the Old Testament. Verse 13 cites Isa 8:17–18. Verse 12 confirms Jesus’s sanctifying power by quoting Ps 22:22: “I will declare thy name.”¹⁵

Heb 2:14–15 (NIV). “*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.*” Because of His death, Jesus destroyed the devil’s power over death—both physical and spiritual. We can be free from spiritual bondage by repenting from sin and overcoming fears through trusting in the Savior. When we join as partakers of His flesh and blood, we help His work.

Heb 2:16 (BSB). “*not the angels He helps, but the descendants 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.*” Paul continues to argue that Jesus is superior to angels and that His mortal mission was more important than the missions of angels. God needed a Savior to come to earth as a descendant of Abraham. But Jews expected a triumphal Messiah (Lk 24:20–1), so Paul discusses the suffering Messiah’s mission.

Heb 2:17 (BSB). “*so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest . . . to make atonement for the sins of the people.*” Paul probes the parallels between Jewish temple rites and the Messiah. Using a form of the words “priestly sacrifice” (Rom 3:25), Paul pictures Jesus as the Great High Priest, who made “propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17 NKJV). The ultimate High Priest vicariously took on the sins of the people, not just symbolically through an animal. The word “reconciliation” (KJV), or “expiation” (RSV), is “atonement” (NIV, BSB). In Hebrew the word shares roots with *kapparah* or *kippur*, meaning to “cover, atone,” as in Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). These Jewish converts needed the powerful message of the Atonement and forgiveness that only comes through Jesus the Christ, not their purification rites and animal sacrifice. Paul develops this in the next chapters.

Heb 2:18 (BSB). “*Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.*” Jesus’s 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 endured our struggles. He can give us perfect counsel and comfort. He personally knows the terrible realities of life.

Hebrews 3

Jesus’s superiority over Moses—Heb 3:1–6

Heb 3:1 (NIV). “*holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.*” Paul refers to Jesus not only as the High Priest but also as an Apostle (Greek for “one sent”). The “holy brethren” (KJV) are fellow covenant makers (in Greek it can refer to both genders, as the NIV points out) who are set apart to “heavenly callings.” God calls many, but only those who obey are chosen and will enter His presence.¹⁶

Heb 3:2–4 (CEV). “*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.*” Moses was a faithful servant who helped establish the house of God. But Paul points out that the designer and builder was the Lord, or “this man,” referring to Jesus (Heb 3:3 KJV). The Great Architect of the whole plan was God the Father. When Paul refers to God, he often means Heavenly Father, but in the Old Testament, God and Lord are often interchangeable for Jehovah, who became Jesus. In other places, though, Elohim is used for God (Gen 1:1).

Heb 3:6 (BSB). “*we are His house, if we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope.*” If we trust Jesus, then we join in His kingdom as heirs in God’s house. The word *parrésia*, “confidence,” is used often in the New Testament for “freedom of speech, openness.” We see the word used when Jesus “spoke openly” or when people asked Him to speak “plainly.”¹⁷ Most often Paul used it to connote boldness.¹⁸ The word speaks of courageously sharing one’s testimony or sharing confidence in God and His plan.

Warning against unbelief—Heb 3:7–19

Heb 3:7. “as the Holy Ghost saith.” Paul credits the Spirit as the source of the hymn found in Ps 95:7–11. The quote continues through verse 11, summarizing the Israelites’ apostasy in the wilderness. Paul tells the story as a warning to the early Christians against falling into the same trap and forfeiting their chance to receive the higher law that will allow them to enter into the presence of the Lord.

Heb 3:8–9 (NIV). “*do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness . . . for forty years.*” Paul quotes this psalm as a warning to Hebrew Christians not to follow the bad example of the exiled Israelites. The provocation refers to the Israelites’ rebellion near Sinai. They were tempted during their testing period and failed by hardening their hearts to the Spirit.

Heb 3:10–11 (BSB). “*I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray. . . . They shall never enter My rest.’*” Paul cites Ps 95:11, alluding to the Exodus account when Moses invited the Israelites to climb Mount Sinai and enter God’s presence but the smoking mountain and thunder frightened them. 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” (Ex 20:19 NIV). Moses tried to encourage them to take 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” (Ex 20:20 BSB). Sadly, “the people stood afar off,” and Moses went alone up the mountain to see God (Ex 20:21).

We learn in restored scripture that Israel rejected the higher priesthood, and as a result the Lord gave them the lower law, including the administration of angels (D&C 84:23). Consequently, they had to wander for forty years. This was unnecessary. If they had accepted the Lord’s invitation and higher law, they could have inherited their promised land sooner (JST, Ex 33).

Paul builds on the theme of rest from Ps 95:11 and repeats the word *katapausis* (“rest”) eight times in Heb 3 and 4. The original Greek word is found only once in the New Testament, used by Stephen in Act 7:49 (the other instances of *rest* in the KJV come from different Greek words). In modern revelation the Lord defines His rest as the “fullness of his glory” (D&C 84:24; see 84:6–26).

Heb 3:12–14 (NIV). “*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.*” Paul finishes citing Ps 95 and likens the frightened Israelites to the new Christians. God has again given the people an opportunity to live His higher law and enter

His presence. Paul warns them that their unbelief will destroy their chances to enter God's presence and encourages them to exhort each other and to stay away from the deceptions of sin.

In Heb 3:13 (and 4:7), the Greek word translated "today" has multiple meanings. In 2 Cor 6:2, Paul wrote, "Now is the day of salvation" (referencing Isa 49:8). Later Paul uses the word as the time until the Day of Judgment (Heb 10:25). These are similar to the definition the Lord gave 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."

Heb 3:16–19 (NIV). "*Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?*" 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 the people the higher law, but they refused it and were unable to endure the presence of the Lord as a people.

Paul gives the story a different spin. Unlike the Old Testament account, Hebrews adds temple promises within the story. The Israelites 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 one high priest on one day each year was allowed to enter the throne room of God, called the Holy of Holies (Lev 16). The tragic realization is that it was not necessary for the Israelites 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 the teachings of the lower law, go through the veil, and enter God's presence. Paul's repeats the same invitation in Heb 4.

Hebrews 4

Enter the rest of the Lord—Heb 4:1–13

Heb 4:1 (NIV). "*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.*" Paul invites his audience as children of Israel to likewise receive the rest of the Lord. The restored definition of "the Lord's rest is fullness of his glory" is consistent with Peter's reference to one's calling and election being made sure (D&C 84:24; 2 Pet 1:10).

Heb 4:2–5 (JST). "*For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: . . . If they harden not their hearts they shall enter into my rest.*" The JST adds this important conditional. The early Christians received the same opportunity as the children of Israel to receive the fullness of the gospel in their wilderness. Paul pleads with them to maintain humility to be malleable to the Lord's shaping by hearing and following the Spirit to enter the Lord's rest. The Restoration has provided the same opportunity again.

Heb 4:7 (NIV). "*God again set a certain day, calling it 'Today.'*" See Heb 3:13.

Heb 4:8. "*if Jesus [Joshua] had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.*" This refers to the prophet Joshua (in Greek his name is Jesus) who did not

give the children of Israel spiritual rest in the promised land because they rejected the higher law. The Israelites received the law of resting on the Sabbath but not the higher form of God's rest.

Heb 4:11 (NIV). *“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.”* Paul's comparison of sabbath rest and eternal rest identifies the eternal nature of his plea to return to God's presence. The Old Testament also occasionally uses this special definition of *rest* as “exaltation” (Isa 11:10; Ps 95:11).

Heb 4:12–13 (NIV). *“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.”* Paul uses the image of a double-edged sword to describe God's powerful judgment to cut through our thoughts and desires. In the Roman Empire, a two-edged sword was between fourteen and twenty-four inches long. It was called a *gladius* and was one of their most powerful weapons.¹⁹

Jesus is the suffering high priest—Heb 4:14–5:10

Heb 4:14 (NIV). *“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.”* During His mortal ministry, Jesus of Nazareth never acted as the high priest at Herod's temple to offer sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), nor did He preside over the Sanhedrin (Lev 16; Act 5:27). Nevertheless, He was the Great High Priest that all others were to point toward. Jesus went through the veil and opened it for all “his children” (Heb 12:5, 7). Paul understood the higher priesthood promises and symbols. The book of Hebrews uses the title high priest twenty-four times, most of which refer to Christ.

Heb 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 humans and God. Lev 21:10–13 outlines the high priest's duties.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.) The Hebrew roots of the word for “priest” also go back to the idea of ministering, and in Latin the word is *sacerdos*, or “sacred.”

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 (Lev 16:3); mediating with God for his people (Ex 28:29); bearing the sins of his people (Ex 28:38); offering incense, which symbolically was Israel's prayers ascending to heaven (Lev 16:12–13); making an atonement (Lev 16:32); judging uncleanness in deciding who can enter into the presence of the Lord (Lev 13:2); blessing the people (Num 6:23); and receiving the mind and the will of the Lord for the Israelites through the Urim and Thummim (“lights and perfections”). In Jesus

Christ, Israel received their faithful and spotless Mediator and High Priest. Paul explains that Jesus's mortality taught Him how we feel, which allows Him to be our perfect Mediator and Comforter.

Heb 4:16. *“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy.”* God's plan allowed all Israel to become a “kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”²² It was Israel's earlier refusal that led to the loss of the higher priesthood. Now Paul states the challenge again: “come boldly” (KJV) or “with confidence” (BSB) up the mount, all the way to the throne of God. Again, God's full mercy is available again to all who climb His sacred mount and covenant to obey and serve Him.

Hebrews 5

Heb 5:1–2 (NIV). *“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.”* 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 of his people.

Heb 5:4. *“no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.”* The honor refers to the office of high priest mentioned in 5:1. In this context, Paul's reference to Moses ordaining Aaron as the high priest suggests it was relevant to the Christian priesthood too. The New Testament example of selecting Apostles through prayerful revelation, the laying on of hands, and receiving common consent became the pattern for priesthood callings in the early Christian church (Act 6:5–6). At the organization of the restored Church, those with priesthood authority were called of God (D&C 20:2–3). In this dispensation God's servants seek inspiration from Him to call Saints to serve, including calling men and women to become priests and priestesses in temples.²³

Heb 5:5 (NIV). *“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.’”* Paul quotes Ps 2:7, as he did in Heb 1:5.

Heb 5:6. *“He saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.”* Paul refers to Melchizedek, quoting Ps 110:4 (the twenty-fifth Old Testament citation in Hebrews). The name or title Melchizedek is made up of two words in Hebrew: *Melek* (or, anciently without vowels, *MLK* or *MLCH*) means “king,” and *zedek* means “righteousness” (Paul adds to this definition in Heb 7:2).

These root words have two connections with restored scripture. First, in D&C 138:41, Shem is referred to as the great high priest. The only great high priest in scripture is Melchizedek or Jesus. Does this mean that Shem received the title king of righteousness and became known as Melchizedek?²⁴ Second, the group of people in the Book of Mormon who brought King Zedekiah's youngest son from Jerusalem to the promised land called him Mulek, or as it would have been written at the time, *MLK*, the exact Hebrew word meaning “king.” We refer to these people as the Mulekites (Hel 6:10). Joseph Smith also learned

that the higher priesthood is called The Priesthood After the Order of the Son of God, but to avoid over-using the name of the Lord, we call it the order or Enoch or of Melchizedek.²⁵

Heb 5:7–8 (NIV). *“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.”* Perfection requires being willing to suffer anything necessary to come up to the full measure of obedience (Heb 5:9). The prophet Spencer W. Kimball expanded on this: “To each person is given a pattern—obedience through suffering, and perfection through obedience.”²⁶ Times of suffering can become times of refining as one draws strength from God. In the end, those who become more Christlike through suffering are grateful for the experience to grow closer to God (see D&C 122:7).

Heb 5:9–10 (BLB). *“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.”* Christ alone became 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—Heb 5:11–6:3

Heb 5:11–12 (NIV). *“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!”* Paul perceives that his flock are “babes” spiritually, only able to absorb the milk of first principles. Like the Israelites, they have not digested the full truths of God’s higher priesthood power. He warns readers that they have tarried too long in the foothills of immature spiritual experience and calls them to climb the mountain of deeper faith.

Heb 5:14 (NASB). *“But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.”* Spiritual “strong meat” (KJV) is available and good for those who have developed faith and discerned good and evil. This comes from following the Spirit’s promptings and developing the gifts of the Spirit, including discernment (1 Cor 12:10; D&C 46:23).

Hebrews 6

Heb 6:1 (JST). *“Therefore **not** leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection.”* The one-word addition in the JST adds the crucial reminder that moving on to 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), becoming whole or complete, in “perfection” (KJV). Paul wants those in his audience who are spiritually strong enough to figuratively climb the mount to internalize the higher ordinances of the gospel.

Heb 6:3 (JST). “And ~~this will we do~~, we will go on unto perfection if God permit.” Paul wishes to move on to the requirements for exaltation that the JST refers to as the principles of perfection. For the next five chapters, Paul discusses requirements to receive the covenants like our temple endowment.

Heb 6:4–6 (JST). “~~he hath made it impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, . . . If they shall fall away, to renew them be renewed again unto repentance; seeing they crucify unto themselves the Son of God afresh.~~” Paul’s only concern with moving on to the higher level of discussing perfection is that his audience will be held accountable. Special knowledge requires special obligations (see also 1 Jn 5:16; D&C 88:3–4). Paul warns that those who fall after receiving their highest ordinances and deny the Second Comforter will not be forgiven.²⁷ Yet this does not apply to most. In this dispensation, the Prophet Joseph assured the Saints, “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.”²⁸ The Prophet Joseph explained that this refers to those who have received their calling and election made sure and then deny the Savior.²⁹

Heb 6:7–8 (JST). “~~For the day cometh that the earth which drinketh in the rain . . . who now receiveth blessings from God, shall be cleansed with fire. But 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 be burned.~~” Paul references rain to illustrate that God’s spiritual blessings are offered to all willing to receive them and use them to grow. Those who give way to sin—symbolized by harmful thorns and thistles—will be metaphorically burned for a cleansing at their divine Judgment. In the Old Testament, we find the Judgment described as the law of the harvest (Hos 6:11).

True believers encouraged—Heb 6:9–12

Heb 6:9. “*beloved, we are persuaded better things of you.*” Paul is optimistic that the Saints will choose a righteousness salvation, not a cursing and punishment.

Heb 6:10–11 (JST). “*For God is not unrighteous to, therefore he will not forget your work and labour labor of love, which ye have shewed showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, . . . And we desire that every one of you do shew the same.*” Paul encourages the Hebrew Saints to trust God’s righteousness and diligently seek exaltation with Him by ministering in love.

Heb 6:12 (NIV). “*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, temple worship, and the like. Exaltation requires being valiant in our testimony of Jesus Christ and keeping our covenants (D&C 76:69). Disciples must develop patience and faith to “inherit the promises” (KJV). Modern scripture repeats these same promises.³⁰

The certainty of God's promise—Heb 6:13–20

Heb 6:13–15 (ESV). “*when God made a promise to Abraham . . . ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.*”

The same blessings Paul refers to were received by Abraham after he patiently endured. A few of Abraham's challenges included decades of childlessness, multiple foreign moves, hunger, war, death, family strife, and the emotional and spiritual pain of God asking him 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.”³¹

Heb 6:17 (BLB). “*God, desiring to show more abundantly the unchangeableness of His purpose to the heirs of the promise, guaranteed it by an oath.*” Oaths are a part of Israel's religious life.³² The oath God promises is eternal life. Paul encourages the Saints to become heirs of God's promise by striving for exaltation. Joseph Smith cited this chapter and repeated the charge: “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.”³³

Heb 6:19 (NKJV). “*hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil.*” Disciples are to hope for this great blessing as an anchor of our souls. If we grasp steadfastly, it will allow us to enter through the veil to meet the Lord. This hope is Christians' inheritance as children of God's promise, as those adopted into Abraham's seed, and as members of the Church of the Firstborn. Paul asks his audience to seek for these things. Jesus's death parted the veil to God's throne for a whole kingdom of high priests and priestesses.

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

Notes

1 Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2007), 197; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 693.

2 Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 201.

3 John W. Welch and John F. Hall, *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 18–5.

4 M. Catherine Thomas, “Hebrews: To Ascend the Holy Mount,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 479–491.

5 Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 683.

6 Robert L. Millet, *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 6, *Acts to Revelation* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1987), 192.

7 See Mt 26:67; Act 7:56, D&C 76:20.

8 See Gen 3:24; Deu 33:2; Ps 68:17.

9 Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 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.” See also *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 168, 191.

10 Moro 7:25; D&C 13:1. See also D&C 7:6; JS—H 1:15.

11 D&C 7:6; 76:88; 77:11; 138:59.

12 “Times and Seasons, 15 February 1842,” p. 689, The Joseph Smith Papers, <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.”

13 “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 388, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/394>.

14 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 205.

15 The word *church* in the Old Testament refers to an assembly or congregation. See, for example, Ps 22:22.

16 Rom 11:29; 1 Cor 1:26; D&C 121:34–40.

17 Mk 8:32; Jn 7:14; 10:14; 11:24.

18 2 Cor 7:4; Php 1:20; 1 Tim 3:13.

19 Koester, *Hebrews*, 274.

20 In the Book of Mormon, we find high priests who were not descended from Aaron but functioned under the “holy order of God,” or the higher priesthood. See 2 Ne 6:2; Alm 4:4, 18; 13:1.

21 Num 6:22–27; 21:10; 35:25, 28; Jos 20:6; 2 Kng 22:8. For the Levite duties, see Deu 10:8; 21:5.

22 Ex 19:6. We find this expanded to a priest and priestesses in the Restoration. See, for example, George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, UK: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886), 24:271; Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, Oct 1951, 109–118.

23 Russell M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” October 2019 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

24 D&C 138:41; 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.’”

25 D&C 107:3–4; 76:57; Alm 13:1–2.

26 *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1982), 168.

27 “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff,” p. 138, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/6>. The Prophet Joseph Smith spoke on this at the April 7, 1844, general conference of the Church. The account was recorded at the time and is known as the King Follett Discourse. “All sins and blasphemy, were to be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Ghost. . . . Jesus Christ will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin they must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto them, and know God, and then sin against him.” For a comparison of scribal texts of the same sermon, see Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 340–361.

28 “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” p. 616, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/5>.

29 “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] [addenda],” p. 9 [addenda], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/544>.

30 See D&C 88:3–4, 68–69; 124:124.

31 D&C 27:10; see also 101:4; 110:12; 132:29–37; 133:55.

32 See Gen 24; Num 30:2; 1 Ne 4:32.

33 “Discourse, 10 March 1844, as Reported by James Burgess,” [19], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-10-march-1844-as-reported-by-james-burgess/5>; D&C 132:7; Roy W. Doxey, “Calling and Election,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 1:248.