

# THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

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## THE THEME

The supremacy of Christ over all others  
as revealer and mediator of God's grace

### *Superior to the prophets*

1:1-3 The author's introduction prepares us for the major thrust of the letter and, at the same time, immediately establishes the strategy he will use as a pattern for much of this writing. That is, to persuade his audience of Christ's superiority to the human agencies they are familiar with and which they hold in highest regard.

No time is wasted pronouncing and demonstrating Christ's supremacy over the OT prophets. Without the detailed elaboration he will provide for most of his subsequent claims, the writer announces this fact with a minimum of discussion. However, what he does provide is concise and profound. He then quickly moves on to his next assignment.

However, let us note here that his mention, under divine inspiration, of the "purification from sins" in vs 3 is deliberate and calculated. The fact that Christ has provided this isn't merely one piece of evidence separating Him from the prophets. And though this evidence is wisely and effectively introduced at the outset (since this truth alone would suffice to establish Christ's superiority over all the remaining human agencies to be examined), there is another critical benefit.

The audience being addressed was familiar with, and for the most part accepted the concepts of God's holiness and man's sinfulness. Their system of sacrifices and offerings addressed these, and they would have conceded the necessity of atonement for their sins. Any discussion of this issue was sure to gain their full attention. The brief mention here, intentionally neglecting further development until much later in the letter, would create an irresistible interest causing them to pay attention to the author's presentation between now and then.

In addition, framing the debate in this manner introduces a seriousness which forces the audience to examine its old belief system in light of its own new experience and knowledge of Christ - an experience and knowledge not yet fully understood or appreciated. Though made difficult because of the natural and predictable human views of change and tradition, the author is assisted because much of his effort to persuade consists in merely facilitating the audience's proper

understanding of what they have already experienced and known. Sadly, this assistance is largely unavailable to us in our efforts today.

### [Superior to the angels](#)

- 1:4-14 Unlike the topical and logical transitions from one assignment to the next employed beyond this point, here the author merely and unapologetically states his next case and begins its defense.
- 2:1-3a Warnings/consequences of missing the truth of Christ's supremacy over the angels. If disobedience to the law of Moses, ministered by angels (Dt 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19), brought punishment, how much greater the consequences for disregarding the gospel, ministered *and* effected by Christ; God himself!
- 2:3b-4 Profound evidence of the gospel's integrity and veracity - to forestall any attempt to deprecate Christ by deprecating the gospel
- 2:5-8, 9 Closing argument - Vs 8 is Ps 8 applied to man, not completed - Vs 9 applies Ps 8 to Christ, the ultimate and perfect man - completed
- 2:10-18 A postlude of details and deeper explanation in light of the confusion caused, or questions elicited by the profound truth just declared; that Jesus is indeed superior to the angels
- 3:1-2 The exhortation in view of Christ's superiority to the angels serves as a segue to the next point - His supremacy over Moses

### [Superior to Moses](#)

- 3:3-6 Note the contrasts presented in vss 5-6, with one going unstated: Moses merely *gave testimony* to what would be said in the future - Jesus was the very *fulfillment* of those things. This is the essential core of the ensuing discussion.
- 3:7-19 Warnings/consequences of missing the truth of Christ's supremacy over Moses. Notice how vs 11 provides a "sneak peak" into "coming attractions" as the writer begins the next transition early.
- 4:1 An exhortation in view of Christ's superiority over Moses. Note how the wisdom of God is evidenced in this most effective and logical progression. The closing note of the previous warning, the very note sustained in this exhortation, will also serve as the opening note of the next presentation. Though Joshua was responsible for leading the people into the rest of the promised land, the author has taken advantage of Moses' role in the events leading to the people's failure to enter that rest to raise this common issue, thereby smoothly blending his presentations of Jesus' superiority to both Moses and Joshua with great effectiveness.
- 4:2-7 Expands and explains the closing point of chapter 3, developing it as preparation for the next point - Christ's supremacy over Joshua. Note that the reference to the gospel having been preached to both the OT

and NT folks has in view merely the promise of rest under discussion - not the whole of the gospel of eternal salvation. Further, the subject is not our *own* rest - it is *God's* rest we are invited to share, now that He has rested from His completed work.

### [Superior to Joshua](#)

- 4:8 First, the rest Joshua provided was merely a temporal and very imperfect type, not the perfect, eternal rest God promises to His people. Next, Joshua was able to provide this for his generation only; Jesus makes it available to all (as long as Today remains).
- 4:9-11 The promise, exhortation and warning in view of Christ's supremacy over Joshua
- 4:12-13 Additional truths which serve as a clever introduction to the next inferior human agency to be examined: Aaron and the successive high priests. The point of the inclusion of this information isn't readily apparent until we examine vss 14-16, where the author's intent is unveiled.

### [Superior to Aaron and the high priests](#)

- 4:14-16 While vss 12-13 declare the obvious truth that we cannot hide ourselves and our sinfulness from God - that He sees and knows all - vss 14-16 present the solution; that in Christ Jesus we have a High Priest who, having performed His office perfectly and completely, has satisfied God's wrath and justice so that we are covered by and clothed in His righteousness, thereby giving us confidence to approach the throne of God to find mercy and grace.
- 5:1-10 Careful and effective preparation for tackling the next "obstacle" in view. While the audience wouldn't have allowed the author's previous arguments easily, this one strikes at the root of all they hold dear - the very core of centuries of tradition. Prophets, angels, Moses and Joshua were no small matters, but their daily religion - the source of their current hope and pride - was quite another. And the high priest, in the order and tradition of Aaron, was its head administrator.
- 5:11-6:3 An interlude to deliver a calculated "scolding" - a very bold delivery, indicating that the author was confident of his authority and must have held the respect of his audience (a clue as to why he was chosen to author these sensitive teachings, and how he was able to do so effectively and successfully).

Note that 6:1-2 isn't dismissing the *issues* mentioned there as elementary; the author wants his audience to move beyond dwelling on their merely foundational elements to gain a mature understanding which gives purpose and application to the truths they hold - and which allows them to fulfill God's intent that they should be discipling others

toward the same end. Once again, the point of this interlude is not readily apparent until we read on.

6:4-8 Reveals the author's purpose in the previous chastisement: to pre-warn his audience that dwelling in immaturity will result in missing the required greater understanding and application necessary to consummate their salvation. He chooses to tackle this issue at this point because he is about to provide some of the more mature teaching he has referenced ("solid food") which he wants them to recognize, partake of, and digest unto fullness of spiritual health.

(See separate posting on this site regarding ["Eternal Security."](#))

6:9-12 Tender encouragement and purposeful exhortation

6:13-20a Returns to preparing for the upcoming pronouncement, effectively weaving into this preparation new and profound truth regarding God and his dealings with men. Under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, the writer shrewdly chooses to reference the issue of oaths - familiar to this audience, and powerful to intellectually persuade them. And he does so regarding a matter which holds no dispute among his hearers; God's promise to Abraham and its fulfillment. The author will bring this cleverly-laid framework to powerful effectiveness in the next chapter.

6:20b Finally, the announcement of Christ in the role of High Priest (note the extra care and diligence in laying the basis for this tougher assignment - the author will now apply a corresponding extra measure of effort as he argues for Christ's *superiority* in this role)

7:1-10 The author effectively utilizes what God's wisdom has provided to develop Christ's qualification and superior stature as High Priest - the typology of Melchizedek. Deliberately obscure in the scriptures by God's design to allow for greater effectiveness in its application, this audience was nonetheless familiar enough with the role of Melchizedek to be able to understand and apply the typology to the person of Christ.

*Note, as an unrelated benefit here, we see the argument and explanation for God's sovereign application of Adam's sin to all of mankind. As his descendents, all of us were "still in the body of our ancestor" Adam (as with Levi and Abraham in view here)*

7:11-8:5 Having succeeded in establishing Christ in the role of High Priest, the author now employs incontrovertible logic to lay a solid groundwork of support for the next inescapable conclusion.

Notice in 7:20-22 and 28, how the author powerfully and effectively employs the issue of oaths which he purposefully raised earlier. The heads which were then most certainly nodding in understanding and agreement probably found themselves, as a result, more easily doing the same here as the presentation has flowed with flawless logic.

(Note that the "if" of 7:15 is resolved with the "we do" of 8:1)

*Note also that the office of high priest so involves, and is so interwoven with the purpose and function of the law, that the author cannot avoid previewing his next assignment - the new covenant versus the old. We see these glimpses in 7:11-12, 18-19 and 22.*

*The new covenant, and its foundational promises, mediated by Jesus, is superior to the old covenant and promises, mediated by mere men*

8:6 Now that his toughest assignment has been so successfully and thoroughly accomplished, the author changes strategy with his next obstacle - one which isn't much easier. Rather than laying a solid foundation upon which to carefully and methodically construct an argument building to a conclusion (as just completed) he uses the momentum of his fresh success to seize the moment, boldly announcing and also characterizing the conclusion of the next debate before actually making its case. In one swift motion, he immediately attaches the establishment of Christ's superiority over Aaron and the high priests to the superiority of the new covenant over the old - quickly, concisely and appropriately linking the two in mid-stride, barely allowing a noticeable change of direction.

8:7-13 Immediately, the author points out the obvious (though his audience may not have seen it that way until further development); that the old covenant was unavailing. And the fault lay with the people, not the covenant's Author nor its terms. Very simply, the covenant failed because the people failed to keep their side of the agreement. So the writer proceeds to combine logic with his confidence in the people's knowledge of both the OT and their own history to lead them to another undeniable conclusion.

9:1-10 The manner and details of the old covenant administration are reviewed (familiar, of course, to this audience). Then, the inferiority and unavailing nature of the original covenant economy is explained. But, as everywhere in Scripture and in God's dealings with his chosen people throughout history, we see that God had great purpose in His progressive revelation and directives to His people. Those people of the OT who were commended by God were so designated for their faith and obedience to Him. Although God did indeed install the OT rituals Himself, one aspect of their unavailing nature was to allow the perfectly availing replacement to be more easily recognized, understood and accepted, as the writer illustrates here.

The first part of vs 9 conveys the point also found in 1Pe 1:10-12 - that the OT faithful didn't and couldn't understand the ultimate purpose of the obedience God called them to. They were actually ministering to those of us future to themselves; who have been blessed with seeing

the fulfillment of the OT and the institution of the NT through the now-historical and perfectly completed work of Christ on the cross.

9:11-14 The purpose of the author's review of the details of the old ministration is to contrast it here with the new.

First, Christ's ministry was effected through a superior tabernacle - the *ultimate* Holy of Holies; heaven itself.

Next, His entrance was gained by a greater sacrifice and offering - His own blood; that is, the blood of a perfectly blameless sacrifice (Himself) which was pleasing and acceptable to God for the propitiation of sin - not the unavailing blood of goats or calves.

Finally, the redemption Christ has obtained for us is eternal - not the temporary outward cleanliness of the old economy.

9:15 A related truth is announced - one with great significance and which adds support to the argument for Christ's supremacy over the high priests. Christ not only administers the new covenant (as High Priest), He actually mediates it as well (7:25; 1Jn 2:1-2). Now that He has fulfilled His duty on the cross, He mediates the promise of God on our behalf - providing assurance for those called unto salvation. And He has standing with the Father to do so, as the Father Himself signified by accepting His sacrifice in full satisfaction of our sin debt. The earthly high priests served merely as passive mediators or go-betweens in fulfillment of unavailing religious duties. Christ, however, is an eternal and active mediator who, as God Himself, is able to personally effect and guarantee the greater covenant He mediates.

9:16-22 The writer introduces another familiar concept in order to present another set of effective contrasts of old versus new; that a testament (covenant) takes effect only upon the death of the testator. The main point here is a theological truth modern religion seeks to avoid or deny; that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. Man seeks atonement for his sin and reconciliation to God through self-invented religion and philosophy, refusing to humble himself and acknowledge the obvious: that we need a Savior, and that Savior is Christ Himself (and Christ alone).

9:23-28 And so, another set of contrasts now comes to view:

First, even the earthly copy (shadow) of the true tabernacle required purification by blood, but the heavenly things themselves required the superior blood purification of Christ's sacrifice.

Second, the earthly high priest entered a man-made sanctuary containing the symbolic presence of God; Christ entered heaven itself, into the very presence of God.

Third, Christ didn't offer himself over and over, year after year, according to the manner in which the high priests were required to perform their atonement sacrifices; Christ's sacrifice was once for all.

Fourth, the high priests offered blood which was not their own; the unavailing blood of imperfect, unavailing animals. Christ offered His own perfect and eternally-availing blood.

Finally, the superiority of Christ in these contrasts brings another related truth, reinforced with another familiar concept; just as man dies once and faces judgment, so Christ was offered once, bringing the judgment of salvation to those who wait for Him.

- 10:1-18 The author restates some of his previous points, providing additional logical support.
  - 10:19-25 Exhortations in view of the supremacy of Christ and the new covenant over the high priests and the old covenant
  - 10:26-31 Warnings/consequences of missing the truths the author has just completed explaining so thoroughly and effectively
  - 10:32-39 Encouragement in light of past perseverance and success
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11:1-40 Having completed his various arguments for the supremacy of Christ in all things, and having just exhorted his audience to exercise their faith, the author now defines/describes faith and provides numerous familiar examples of how it looks in practice. (The ultimate and supreme example awaits us in chapter 12). His intent is to illustrate the superiority of faith over law as a means of reconciliation to God.

Vs 6 contains another key truth lost on modern religion and the spiritual elites of our day - that without faith it is impossible to please God. Many folks continue to trust their own inventions to appease God's wrath - and new inventions continue to be designed and manufactured.

In vss 13 and 39 the author prods his audience by pointing out that they have greater reason and ease to hold fast their faith than the examples listed. 2Pe 1:19 makes this point very effectively, also.

- 12:1 The author repeats his exhortation to faith, including the call to persevere in light of the examples just given.
- 12:2-3 The supreme and ultimate model to follow - Christ
- 12:4-11 To those who may have been wilting under the load of persecution and sacrifice, the author imparts excellent insight and perspective: simply consider all hardship as loving discipline from a perfect Father whose intent is that His children may share in His holiness.
- 12:12-17 Some practical instructions, reminders and warnings
- 12:18-24 The writer contrasts the fear and trembling which characterized the law and old covenant with the joy and righteousness of the new.

- 12:25 As in 2:1-3a and 10:26-31, the author pleads for a third and final time that his audience should carefully and soberly consider and accept these truths; that there are dire consequences for ignoring the warnings of God Himself.
- 12:26-29 The author encourages the people to a logical response in light of what they know and expect will occur. Though God will destroy all of the old creation, He will spare those who are of the new creation that they may inherit His unshakable kingdom (see 2Pe 3:11-14).
- 13:1-17 With his presentation now complete and in view, the author prepares to close his letter with assorted practical instructions, reminders, encouragements, commands and warnings.
- 13:18-19 The author requests prayer for himself and those who labor with him in the ministry - a specific request with noble purpose.
- 13:20-21 The author prays for the people - in keeping with many other NT examples of purposeful and profound prayer which flow from the sound doctrine being delivered.
- 13:22-25 Closing comments

### Conclusion:

Those who would remain in or turn back to the OT system, or who would endeavor to maintain both the old and new are warned against that. Very effective and logically flowing reasoning is presented. The consequences of failing to heed the gospel message announced by the Lord, confirmed by those who heard Him, testified to by God himself (through various workings) and by the Holy Spirit (through various gifts) (2:3-4) are clearly described. Today, though there remains elsewhere a Jewish culture directly, if not completely addressed by this letter, our own culture isn't faced with the error of entertaining OT Judaism. But the author's efforts here are just as relevant to the constant search for and invention and maintaining of alternatives to Christ which we continue to see promulgated all around us.

We must understand and respond properly to the truth of Christ's supremacy over all. We must look to Him alone for provision, protection and, ultimately, purification. We must recognize and appreciate the shadows of heavenly realities which God has provided as secure guideposts for us. We must commit ourselves to the spiritual struggles we should expect. Rejecting the truth - whether in open rebellion or by merely turning away from it - results in God's judgment as seen in His dealings with the Israelites in the desert. The opening of this letter makes it clear: We have heard directly from God's Son. In Christ, we have witnessed the very fulfillment of the OT prophecies of God. As a result, we are warned to pay more careful attention to what we have heard. We have seen Peter's echo of this warning (2Pe 1:19). Paul's, in Col 2:8, could have easily found its way into this writing - serving as an appropriate summary.