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A table of contents for *Epworth Review* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_epworth-review-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_epworth-review-01.php)

# Reading through Hebrews 1-7

Listening especially for the theme of Jesus as high priest<sup>1</sup>

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

*If we let Hebrews 1-7 speak to us in its own terms, what it says about Jesus as high priest may prove less distant than we expect from our experience today.*

THERE are at least two ways of looking at the Bible.

The first is to view the Bible as a quarry in which, if you are lucky, you may find rough stones which, after suitable carving, polishing and setting, may serve as dogmas to build up a theology. In this way, for example, Hebrews may be used to provide materials for something called a high-priestly christology, as part of a wider christological system, or as part of a general scheme of doctrine about priesthood and ministry.

There is nothing wrong with systematic theology. But in this paper, we shall follow the other way: to hear Hebrews 1-7 speaking in its own terms, as far as in us lies.

Of course we cannot unthink, or banish from our minds, the traditional distinctions and categories to which we have become accustomed: between the divinity and the humanity of Christ, between his person and his work, or between different doctrines of the atonement. Nor can we completely lay aside presuppositions about priesthood which we may have gathered, for example, from Roman Catholic tradition, or more likely by reaction against it. But it is worth making the effort for a time to hold these matters in suspense, and subordinate them to the text of Hebrews itself.

Two more preliminary comments, and then we can begin.

First, Hebrews is more than a work of art, and before we finish, we shall need to pass through its language to the substance of its distinctive message. But before we reach that point, it is good to recognize that Hebrews is also a work of art, which can be helpfully compared with other works of art: for example, with a Wagner opera, in which a tiny motif may appear in passing early on, and be revealed later as an essential support of the whole structure; or with an impressionistic painting, in which a fleck of contrasting colour in a corner, nothing much in itself, points towards the heart of the composition; or, if your artistic tastes are more plebeian, with a detective novel, in which cunningly de-emphasized details appear later as vital clues. (You might even push this comparison a little further, and find the occasional red herring in Hebrews: why, for example, does the author call Jesus 'the apostle and high priest of the faith we profess', thus using in a single breath two names for Jesus which are found nowhere else in the New Testament, of which one, 'high priest', is explored to the limit, and the other, equally distinctive, is left completely on one side?)

Second, as we read through, we shall find that Hebrews' literary art, and the way of thinking which underlies it, are largely the reverse of modern western practice, as exemplified in our sermons and essays,

articles and theses. We are trained to divide things up clearly and distinctly. Hebrews' transitions are so gradual, marked by such a thorough interweaving of old and new, that they cause practical problems for editors and translators of the text, when they come to discuss where to mark paragraphs and sections. (Moffatt, in his commentary though not in his translation, simply gave up the attempt.) And we find, in a number of places, what one might call nodal points at which several leading ideas are juxtaposed or fused. Look, for example, at 2:17, in which the thoughts of Christ's human nature, his high priesthood, his relation to God, and the atonement, are pressed hard together; or 7:28, where, at the end of the main discussion of Christ's priesthood, and in a clear allusion to Ps. 110:4 which has been exegeted almost to exhaustion in the previous chapters, the author calls Jesus, not 'a high priest', but 'Son for ever', thereby melting down our clear distinctions, and incidentally marking the limits of Michel's otherwise useful maxim: 'Son he was, and high priest he becomes'.<sup>2</sup> So we are forewarned that, to do justice to Hebrews, we must see it as a whole; in particular, not closing our ears to talk of Sonship as we listen for the theme of priesthood, or to priesthood when, after chapter 7, sacrifice becomes the dominant theme.

Our reading, even of the first seven chapters, must naturally be selective. The introduction (1:1-4) spans the whole of God's purpose, placing the Son at the centre of it all. It is reasonable to expect that the ideas with which the author begins are already familiar to his readers or hearers; verse 3, in particular, may be part of a primitive Christian hymn. But already, if we listen carefully, we can hear two notes which may prove significant later.

First, within the traditional language of this verse 3, and half hidden in a subordinate phrase, there come the words 'having made purification of sins', words which show that, from the beginning, the author is concerned, not only with what Christ was, but even more with what he did; and not only with what he is in himself, but even more with what he is for us. Doctrine and exhortation belong together, and the cutting edge is the call for action.

Second, at the end of this monumental opening sentence, we have the thought that Christ's superiority over angels is measured by the superiority of God's gift to him of a higher 'name': he is 'raised as far above the angels, as the title he has inherited is superior to theirs' (*NEB*). All the emphasis falls on the last of these 72 words: *onoma*. What is this 'name'? At first the answer seems obvious: it must be the title of Son, contrasted with prophets in v.2, and with angels for the rest of the chapter and beyond. This is certainly part of the truth, and intended to be recognized as such on a first hearing. Yet the more I think about it, the more I wonder if that isn't a little too obvious to be the whole truth. I wonder whether we do not have here a subtler case of the rhetorical practice of Phil. 2, where the 'name above every name' is not the name 'Jesus' (At the name of Jesus, Every knee shall bow), but the title given to Jesus in his exaltation, the name of Lord. Given the coherence and resilience of the structure of Hebrews, it does not seem too far-fetched to see a second level of meaning, on which the new title given at his exaltation to God's eternal Son, because of what he has done for our 'salvation' (1:4; 2:3), is

already, by anticipation, that of high priest.<sup>3</sup> Only it is much too soon for the author to mention this title with any hope of being understood.

It is tempting to skip the rest of chapter 1 as irrelevant to our purpose; nothing about priesthood here; it's all about Christ's status, not his work; it's just a chain of Old Testament quotations; and we're not very interested in angels anyway. There are two main reasons why this would be wrong.

The first reason is that Hebrews presupposes the widespread Jewish view, stated in 2:2 and confirmed elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 7:38,53; Gal. 3:19), that angels were the intermediaries by whom the Torah was brought from God to Moses (cf. Heb. 3:1-6); and the author's overriding interest in the Torah is in what it says about worship, and thus about priesthood and sacrifice. To illustrate this, jump forward for a moment, if you will, to 7:12, a text which, to our way of thinking, puts the cart before the horse. We might want to say something like: 'If for some reason God decided to establish a new Torah, then it is reasonable to assume that this might involve, among other things, changes in those parts of the old Torah which have to do with ritual.' What Hebrews in fact says is the exact converse: 'God has, by his sovereign act, changed the priesthood; and this necessarily entails a change of law.' Worship is primary, and law is seen in a perspective of worship.

The second reason for taking chapter 1 seriously lies in the last of the seven texts quoted: 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies a stool for your feet' (Ps. 110:1). Since this is the Old Testament text most widely used in the New Testament, it is fair to suppose that one of the author's reasons for placing it here, as the climax of the series, was that his hearers would already share the conviction that it referred to Christ. This verse thus forms a firm base or springboard for the author's further exploration of scripture, following his normal practice of reading passages as a whole, and moving from one related passage to another. From Ps. 110:1, it is a small step to verse 4, the key text for Hebrews' whole discussion of Christ's priesthood: 'You are a priest for ever, like Melchizedek'; and from there another easy step to Gen. 14:17-20, the only other place in the Old Testament where Melchizedek is mentioned. By the end of chapter 1, the reader is thus reassured and held by a familiar text which, before long, will lead into an uncharted path.

At this point, we shall do two things: first, follow the author's example, and look for a moment at the situation of his first readers or hearers; then, second, leap from crag to crag to the end of chapter 7, to compress the stages by which the author develops what he has to say about Jesus as high priest.

In one sense, we simply do not know who the original addressees were, any more than we know the name of the author. There is, I think, much to be said for the idea that this so-called epistle was first written to be preached, and then sent off to another congregation with a covering note, so that the very first addressees were hearers, not readers. But I do not find any of the more specific theories convincing; for example, that the addressees were converted Qumran priests.<sup>4</sup>

What we can tell, from Hebrews itself, is what kind of people they were. They were certainly steeped in the Old Testament: no doubt less

deeply than the author, but still well versed in scripture, unless the author was so uncharacteristically foolish as to speak completely over their heads. They were Christians, and had been for some years, yet in course of time something was happening to weaken the liveliness of their faith; perhaps to relativize the place of Jesus within it. There had been some pressure on them from outside. The author's great fear is that when the big test came, they would not have the resources to withstand it, and would apostatize, like so many members of God's people in Old Testament times. There can be no standing still: unless they move forward with Christ, they will fall back, not as is sometimes said into Judaism, or Old Testament faith, but into a loss of that entire, integral faith which finds its completion in Christ.

This, I think, is the reason why, as well as reminding his hearers of what they already know and believe, the author feels he must move forward into this doubly difficult teaching about Jesus as high priest (a new title in superficial contradiction with history), and as being also himself (by a typical piece of fusion thinking) his own sacrifice. And the main area or dimension in which the author and his hearers must move forward together is neither that of moral exhortation (though there is some of that), nor even that of reasoned proof (though reasoned proof is a tool he uses skilfully), but that of a worship of which Christ, their high priest, is the centre and focus.

This sketch of the addressees leaves many questions in suspense, but it may cover enough of the facts to serve as a backcloth against which to see the steps by which the author approaches his central theme. When we say 'steps', don't think of a normal pedestrian walking along a flat pavement; think rather of a climber scaling a sheer cliff, on which each foothold has, with every possible precaution, to be reconnoitred, chosen, prepared, cramponned in, tested, and finally, in an irreplaceable act of faith, made to bear the weight and life of a human being. The teaching is essentially new (though experts differ on just what elements are without precedent); it is hard to explain in itself, and the author is by no means confident of his hearers' willingness to listen, or their ability to understand. Yet he believes this new teaching to be essential if their faith is to be revitalized.

The main steps in his ascent are marked by the places where Jesus is called high priest. They go, singly or in pairs, from 2:17 and 3:1, through 4:14-15, 5:5,10, and 6:20, to the full treatment of the theme in chapter 7.

2:17 is undoubtedly the summation of the argument so far, and more than that, a nodal point, as we said; yet neither here nor in 3:1 is the title of high priest either explained, or significantly developed. Perhaps the closest contemporary parallel is with subliminal advertising. A key word or picture flashes on the screen, and is gone before you consciously see it, yet the impression has been made, and lies in the subconscious to be reactivated later.

The chapter began (vv.1-4) with what one might call an encouraging warning; new information embedded in old (a cardinal principle of communication which the author know well how to apply); bad news packed in good. The bad news is the hearers' danger of total disaster if they neglect or reject (*amelēsantes*) the message of salvation. The reassurance comes from the pastoral use of we-forms, from his reminders

of what the hearers learned as young Christians, and what they knew even before; and from the use of well-worn Septuagintal and primitive Christian expressions about signs and wonders and mighty acts, to describe what Jesus had done, and what had followed from it. Nothing directly about a high priest; but a sharp reminder that we need a saviour, that we have one, and that we must hold on to him.

There follows another reassuring, probably familiar Old Testament quotation (2:6-8 = Ps. 8:5-7). The introduction and immediate follow-up to the quotation are perfectly ambiguous (whether or not *autōl* is read in v.8). They are designed to provoke the question: Who is it about? When Paul quotes v.6 (1 Cor. 15:27, Eph. 1:22), he applies it to Christ, though in both places Christ surrounded by his people, but Hebrews carries the quotation back to v.5, which speaks simply of 'man', and the significance of the parallel 'son of man' is nowhere explored. Out of this tension, fused with what the author knows of the suffering, death and exaltation of Jesus, he draws the following lesson: insofar as this prophecy has been realized, it has been in Christ, but precisely in Christ as man and for humanity, and even more specifically by his suffering, seen as testing, remembered as culminating in death, and recognized as taking away sins. Here already is the germ of all the author will say later, not only about the priesthood of Christ, but also about his sacrifice.

Note, in passing, how this second chapter crosses, as if ignoring their existence, several of the partitions we put up between various theological categories. It speaks of Christ's death as a sacrifice 'for all' (v.9), and gives us one of the strongest proof-texts (if you like proof-texts) for the Christus Victor theory of the atonement (vv.14f.).<sup>5</sup> The author speaks in a single breath, like other New Testament writers, and indeed the primitive kerygma, of what we should label 'the historical Jesus' and of his exaltation. Emphatic statements about his humanity are fused with others about his glory — and ours, and his divine appointment as high priest. The words usually translated 'a faithful high priest' (2:17) mean, not that Jesus trusted his Father; not even that, in a general way, he proved trustworthy, but specifically that he worthily filled the office to which God had appointed him, namely that of high priest.<sup>6</sup>

As for the vexed question of how this title came to be used of Christ, when all has been said that can be said about the possible influence of Philo or Qumran, and about speculation about Melchizedek in the air at that time, one is driven back to saying that it must be fundamentally the child of two parents — the product of a creative surge of reflection on scripture (in this case Ps. 110 and Gen. 14), set in motion in response to the Christ-event; and conversely, deeper understanding, in the added dimension of scripture, of who Christ had been on earth, and was now in heaven. Occasionally one factor predominates over another: for example, the idea that a high priest should be merciful (2:17) has little basis in Old Testament or rabbinic tradition, and seems to arise mainly from the community's recollection of what Jesus had been like on earth.

The passage which follows, 3:7-4:13, may originally have been a separate sermon, though if so it is well resited in its present setting. On a larger scale, it is the same skilful mixture of warning and encouragement which we noticed in 2:1-4, and will find again. The passage says nothing directly about Jesus as

high priest, for the simple but astonishing reason that it says nothing about Jesus at all! Its indirect interest for our theme is twofold: first, it generally reinforces the urgency of the readers' situation; and second, it encourages the readers to enter into God's rest, hypostatized as a place of rest,<sup>7</sup> still open and available, because of others' faithlessness, to those who keep faith to the end. The rest theme then falls away, but the twin themes of our approach to God, and of Christ's access to God through his exaltation, are firmly stated at the first opportunity afterwards: 'Having therefore a high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God' (note the fusion of the two great titles) 'let us hold fast our confession'. Next comes a restatement of his humanity, his sympathy, and his testing; and then again the note of worship: 'let us therefore approach with confidence the throne of grace', to receive (paraphrasing) the resources we shall need when the great test comes.

After this, again but more fully and clearly than before, comes a statement of the two inseparable conditions needed for any high priest, and thus supremely for Jesus: divine appointment, and oneness with God's people. The hinge turns on the two texts, united in that both are addressed by God to Christ: 'You are my Son' (Ps. 2:7 = Heb. 1:5a; old information, both in Hebrews and probably in the hearers' experience), and 'You are a priest . . .' (Ps. 110:4), which the author now at last feels the time is ripe to quote explicitly, and apply to Christ.

This is the new, difficult bit; and even now, he is not ready to expound the text or explain the title. His immediate preoccupation is to weld together the old title and the new, as being both equally of divine appointment and scriptural attestation: 'being a son he suffered' (5:8) . . . 'having been declared by God a high priest like Melchizedek' (5:10).

This is perhaps as good a place as any to say that I see no significant difference in Hebrews between the titles 'priest' and 'high priest' as applied to Christ, and probably not as applied to the levitical priesthood either. The author calls Jesus 'priest' when he is commenting on Old Testament texts, and 'high priest' when left to himself.

There follows (6:4-6) perhaps the severest warning addressed to Christians in the whole of the New Testament; so severe that one possible way of understanding it is tantamount to placing limits on the gospel itself. The explanation runs like this: the Old Testament cultus could deal with sins of inadvertence; but deliberate sins, those committed 'with a high hand' (*hekousiōs* 10:20) cannot be taken away, but only punished, usually by death. The New Testament cultus, founded on the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, can indeed take away deliberate sins, but only once. About this explanation of a very hard passage, I would say only three things: (1) it goes further than what Hebrews explicitly says; (2) it makes good sense of what Hebrews does say, and is thus difficult to disprove, and (3) the section ends with strongly positive statements, both about God and about the hearers.

Before the curtain rises in chapter 7 on the main exploration of the theme of priesthood, there is in 6:13-20 an overture in which we hear three notes from the theme which will soon, at last, be fully developed. First, the somewhat obscure argument about God's oath forms a counterpart to the final quotation of Ps. 110:4 in Heb. 7:21, extended

to focus on its opening words: 'the Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind.'

Second, vv.16-20 consist of one typically long but by no means wandering sentence, leading us smoothly from the illustration of human oaths, through the significance of God's oath, to the anchor-like sureness of our own hope, grounded on Christ's own passage through the veil as Melchizedekian high priest. The order of words in the quotation is changed to stress *kata tén taxin Melchisedek*, and thus ring up the curtain for chapter 7.

But thirdly, under the surface but no less important, these verses are another reminder of what it is all about: the salvation of God's people. There are two things to be said about this. First, words like 'promise' (6:14) and 'hope' (6:18) have to be tested each time they occur, but here, and more often than not in Hebrews, they refer, not (at least primarily) to the act of promising or hoping, but to the content of the promise and the object of the hope, and are often best translated 'what God promised' or 'promises', or 'what we hoped' or 'hope for'. Second, following directly from this first point, what God promised Abraham was blessing and prosperity for him and thus for all God's people. In one sense, as the author says (v.15), Abraham received what God promised when Isaac's life was preserved. But in another sense the promise is not *fulfilled* either then, or in the occupation of the promised land, but only when Christ as high priest enters for us, as a forerunner, into God's immediate presence; and even then, for us, the fulfilment remains promise and hope.

'Now this Melchizedek.' Chapter 7 is not the climax of Hebrews. Structurally, the centre of its concentric circles comes in 9:11 with the word 'Christ',<sup>8</sup> in a text which speaks simultaneously of his priesthood and his sacrifice. Rhetorically, the climax of the book comes in the final great nodal passage 12:18-24, into which flow Old Testament quotation and allusion, old and new covenants, and a vision of worship in which, as a result of what Christ did, the boundaries between heaven and earth are by anticipation lifted; not only for the first hearers and readers, but whenever this word is heard and understood in the community of faith: 'You have not come to something which can be touched . . . but you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God . . . and the new covenant of which the mediator is Jesus, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks something better than Abel's sacrifice.'

But neither is chapter 7 an arbitrary cut-off point. For Vanhoye,<sup>9</sup> it forms the first of three sections in the main theological division, before the central section (chapters 8-9) which focus on Christ's sacrifice. It is as closely joined to those chapters as what Jesus was is joined to what he did; though for all the gradualness of his transitions, the author keeps the two phases generally distinct. And chapter 7 marks the last long exegetical discussion. It is keen, reasoned and impassioned at the same time. When, a few years ago, the congregation at Hinde Street burst out in spontaneous laughter as the reader got to verse 15 in *NEB*: 'the argument becomes still clearer . . .', they were showing how far their presuppositions contrasted with those of the broadly rabbinic tradition in which the author of Hebrews, whoever he was, and his first hearers, whoever they were, must have been most at home. The author is treating



his hearers with the respect due to fellow students of the scriptures. They are not adversaries or heretics, but fellow-Christians in danger. To encourage and stimulate them, he has made the astonishing proposal: 'Think of Jesus as our high priest.' It's a new and dangerous suggestion. Not dangerous just because it's new: whatever date Hebrews was written, it was in any case early enough to share in that christological reminding of scripture which is one of the most exciting things about the New Testament — as if a goldfield, mined to the limit and exhausted, were found to be full of something else called uranium, which people seemed to want even more. But dangerous, perhaps, in two other ways. First, because the hearers might simply refuse to accept it: 'Jesus was of Judah, not of Levi, so to talk of him as a priest is to play with words.' And secondly, because they might have misunderstood, as if Jesus were being put forward as yet another rival to the priesthood in Jerusalem or at Qumran, or to the Samaritan cultus on Mount Gerizim. In order to avoid both these dangers, and bring his hearers to a right understanding of who Jesus was, it was necessary to lead them step by step along the hard road of Bible-based reasoning which the author had first followed himself. Christ is the priest of whom the well-known Ps. 100 spoke; a priest like the mysterious Melchizedek, the first priest mentioned in scripture:<sup>10</sup> eternal like him, so still alive (7:8), as Christians already believed of Jesus: a different kind of priest (*heteros*, 7:11, 15), alive 'for ever' with a life that nothing could destroy (v.16). What kind of a priest could Jesus be, if not of this more ancient and permanent kind? Of whom could this psalm speak, if not of Jesus?

If that is so, then the consequences reach very far. From the author's viewpoint, the entire system of rules for worship, which were the heart of the law and of Israel's life (v.11), was relativized; indeed, come to think of it, it was revealed as having always been of only relative value. Whether, at the date Hebrews was written, sacrifices were still being offered in the Jerusalem temple, or in its ruins, is entirely secondary, both for the author and for us. What matters is that the old order, which never had been able to achieve its purpose of giving sinful mortals access to God, had been superseded by a new and permanent order which could do so. By verse 22, the author is calling this a better 'covenant', a term which will dominate the next two chapters.

Everyone has heard the story of the old-time, uneducated labourer whom his minister found, a week after his sudden conversion, reading through Romans. 'Don't you find that rather difficult?' the minister asked. 'Aye', the labourer replied; 'but I keep on until I find a "therefore", and then I gets my blessing.' At the climax of this pretty complex Melchizedek chapter, there comes a 'therefore' (*horthen*, actually, not *oun*, but let's not quibble); and then, in a flash of light, we see what it has all been about: 'And so he is able, now and always, to save those who come to God through him, because he lives for ever to plead with God for them' (v.25. *TEV*). The last three verses of the chapter are a joyous coda which balance the praise of Melchizedek in the opening verses, and at the same time introduce the most important thing the author has still to say: 'this he did once for all by the offering of himself' (v.27).

What does this mean for us, who believe, and reflect on our belief, in a

very different climate? Each of us could draw his own morals, but I have only one at the moment, and it is this. A healthy faith, like a healthy heart, lives by a rhythm of contraction and expansion. At times, we move, like the author of Hebrews, outwards to the far reaches of God's purpose. After Christ, nothing can be the same again: there is a new order, a new covenant, a new, effective way of access to God and of removing the obstacles to that access. At other times, we move inwards towards the centre, to consider 'Jesus, whom God sent to be the High Priest of the faith we confess' (3:1 *TEV*). Everything is changed, true, but this would not have happened unless Jesus had been man, the man he was, and unless he had once done and suffered what he did. If we lose hold of either phase of the rhythm, our faith becomes in one way or another pathological. Either our world-view becomes the kind of formal dispensationalism which gives theology a bad name; or our attachment to Jesus becomes the type of piety of which Gandhi's is one of the noblest examples in our century, but which has in the end no answer to the question, 'Why this man, among so many?' And it is perilously easy to pass from one extreme to another, so that we have the worst of both worlds. Only as we hold the one Christ-event, as Hebrews does, within a creative reinterpretation of scripture, will our theology be a worthy declaration of the faith in which we hold and are held by Christ.

#### Notes

- 1 A revised version of a paper given to the Theological Students' Fellowship of New College, Edinburgh.
- 2 Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, Göttingen, 7th edition 1975, p.164; cf. William R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hohepriester*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1981.
- 3 Albert Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ*, Paris 1969, pp.93f., 378.
- 4 C. Spicq, 'L'Épître aux Hébreux. Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les hellénistes et Qumran', *Revue de Qumran* 1 (1959), pp.365-91.
- 5 Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor*, London 1931, pp.73, 90.
- 6 Albert Vanhoye, 'Jesus fidelis ei qui fecit eum (Heb 3,2)', *Verbum Domini* 45 (1967), pp.291-305.
- 7 Otto Hofius, *Katapausis*, Tübingen 1970, pp.22-101.
- 8 Albert Vanhoye, *La Structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Bruges and Paris, 2nd edition 1974, p.237.
- 9 *Op. cit.*, p.137.
- 10 Fred L. Horton, jr. *The Melchizedek Tradition*, Cambridge 1976, p.157.