

EVANGELISATION AND SALVATION 5

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5. Hebrews: communion

Welcome

We come to the third of the biblical models. As noted at the start, the Synoptic Gospels largely *tell* the stories of Jesus death but for a proper theology of the paschal mystery we turn to Paul, the Fourth Gospel and the letter to the Hebrews. We will follow these steps:

1. Puzzle and context
2. The Temple: background information
3. Contrasting priesthoods
4. How did this come about?
5. Synthesis
6. Jesus of History?
7. The joy of the Gospel?
8. And so...?

Puzzle and context

In his new Introduction to the New Testament, Eugene Boring comments in lapidary fashion on St Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: it is not by St Paul, it is not a letter and it is not to the Hebrews. It does clear the decks, so to speak. What are we to make of this fascinating, difficult and brilliant New Testament document?

The oldest surviving manuscript of this document, P45, comes from about 200 AD. That gives us a distant *terminus ad quem*. Properly speaking, it is not a letter in the familiar NT genre, but rather a sermon. In content and context, it is very close to the concerns and viewpoints of 1 Peter and 1 Clement. Because Hebrews was used by 1 Clement and because we know the date of 1 Clement—100 AD—we can bring the *terminus ad quem* forward to just before that date. It does deal with Temple imagery and often people think it was one response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. That probably is so. It helps in that regards that the information about the Temple in sermon does not seem to come from the building of Herod the Great but from the Pentateuch. So broadly speaking, a document from the last thirty years of the first Christian century.

When one asks who was the author, then we can immediately exclude St Paul, even though the letter is written to some degree within the Pauline tradition. Other possibilities—none generally accepted—are Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Epaphras and even Mary, the mother of Jesus. We may add that the writer seems unaware of Gospels or stories about Jesus (with exceptions). In summary, no one knows who wrote the sermon. Such a conclusion might seem overly negative; however, we do know a good deal about the writer from the document itself.

The author has penned a document written in the very best Greek of the New Testament. He was highly educated and deeply familiar with the teaching and thought patterns of Middle Platonism. These affect his account of the heavenly sanctuary, mirrored in the earthly one. His Bible is not the Hebrew Bible but the Greek Septuagint.

For whom did he write? We note at the start the given title “To the Hebrews” is secondary and not original. Mostly likely that title is a scribal deduction from the content. He is writing to a community of Christians (not Jews), of both Jewish and Gentile background. They are undergoing some kind of harassment as believers and stand in need of encouragement. There is a dispute about the origin and destination of the letter, because the one reference is ambiguous:

Greetings to all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with you all. (Heb 13:24–25)

On balance, it would see that the letter was written to Roman Christians by a teacher from the community, writing from abroad.

Finally, a few observations. This sermon offers us a priestly understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are used to thinking of Jesus as a priest. At the time, however, and in the context of Jesus’ ministry, this was quite a stretch. Why? For a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact—candidly admitted by the writer—that Jesus himself was a layman, not being from a priestly tribe. Secondly, Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist and he took from his mentor a hostile attitude to the Temple. The so-called Cleansing of the Temple fits in with such a critical attitude (and very likely was the event which sparked the final push against Jesus). Thirdly, Jesus by-passed the Old Testament priestly system and brought people into direct contact with God. In this he resembled the Pharisees, although without their trademark concern for ritual purity. For these reasons, it was a stretch to describe Jesus as a priest. The writer is aware, because he says somewhat disarmingly,

On this topic we have much to say and it is difficult to explain, since you have become sluggish in hearing. (Hebrews 5:11)

To understand the letter, it is necessary to review the significant and symbolism of the Temple in Jesus’ day.

The Temple: background information

The key feature of this Temple—and all others in antiquity and today—is the radical separation of the sacred and the profane. Eventually, such separation was expressed in terms of space, time, persons and actions. Jesus’ death and resurrection is a radical setting aside of the human construction of the sacred and the profane. We can best appreciate this by going from the known to the unknown, so here are a few images.

(a) The Temple Mount as it stands today, very familiar to us all.

(image)

(b) The plan of the Old City—bearing in mind that the walls are Ottoman (on the lines of the Crusader walls), different from the Byzantine walls and even more different from the walls in the Roman period.

(image)

(c) The Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif (“the noble sanctuary”) follows give us more or less the esplanade as built by the architects of Herod the Great.

(image)

(d) The present Dome of the Rock stands over the site of Herod’s Temple in a significant way. This means the centre of the Dome of the Rock lies on the exact spot the Holy of Holies—an important place for the Letter to the Hebrews.

(image)

(e) When you turn this around to give it true orientation east/west, we can identify more or less not only the Holy of Holies but also the place of the altar of sacrifice.

(image)

It is likely that the altar stood to the east of the present Dome of the Rock and slightly to the south.

(f) The inside of the Dome shelters an enormous rock, the Holy of Holies.

(image)

(g) To recall the general location here again is photo from today:

(image)

(h) How would it have looked in Jesus’ time? Perhaps, something like this:

(image)

The façade of the great temple faced east, towards the Mount of Olives, as is traditional. In the next couple of slides, we see how the Temple was laid out and how the Temple functioned.

(i) The temple had several courts or delimited spaces in increasing holiness and increasingly limited access.

(image)

The widest precinct was the Court of the Gentiles. It was absolutely forbidden for Gentiles of any kind to go beyond this boundary.

- The expansive Court of the Gentiles sported a popular bazaar underneath the protective roof of the Royal Stoa.
- Here moneychangers exchanged local coinage for the pure silver Tyrian shekel so that a proper offering could be made to the temple. (The Tyrian shekel was required because Roman currency was defiling and the Romans forbid the Jews to coin their own money.)
- Here, too, vendors sold animals for use as burnt offerings.

Large notices in Greek forbade any intrusion.

(image)

ΜΗΘΕΝΑ ΑΛΛΟΓΕΝΗ ΕΙΣΠΟΡΕΥΕΣΘΑΙ ΕΝΤΟΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟ ΙΕΡΟΝ ΤΡΥΦΑΚΤΟΥ
ΚΑΙ ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΟΥ ΟΣ Δ ΑΝ ΛΗΦΘΗ ΑΥΤΩΙ ΑΙΤΙΟΣ ΕΣΤΑΙ ΔΙΑ ΤΟ
ΕΞΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΘΑΝΑΤΟΝ

“No foreigner may enter within the railing and enclosure surrounding the temple. Whoever is captured will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.”

There was also the court of the (Jewish) Women. They could not, under any circumstances, go beyond this and enter the area for the men or the priests.

- The Court of the Women, the largest of the courts, was a square courtyard measuring 233 feet (71 m) on each side (a football field is 360 feet long).
- Some scholars estimate that at the time of the feasts it could have held 6,000 worshipers at one time.
- It was not only open to ceremonially purified Jewish women, but also to ritually impure priests, Nazirites, and even lepers.

(j) Beyond that again, there was the place where Jewish men could go and beyond that a place reserved for the priests.

(image)

Israelites

- The Court of the Israelites was limited to ritually pure Jewish men. It was entered by the curved staircase leading up to the Nicanor Gate.
- This court consisted of a narrow hall 233 feet (71 m) wide and 19 feet (5.8 m) deep. Beneath this court were rooms that opened into the lower Court of the Women.
- These were used for storing musical instruments and equipment used by the Levites.

Priests

- All priests are Levites, but not all Levites are priests. While priests (Hebrew *kohanim*) and Levites (Hebrew *leviyim*) both belong to the same tribe of Levi, they come from different descendants within the tribe.
- Priests were male descendants of Aaron, Moses brother, the first high priest. Levites (who served the temple) were any male descendants of the tribe of Levi, including the descendants of Moses and Miriam his sister.
- Priests and Levites shared the responsibility of serving in the tabernacle, and later, the temple.
- However, priests alone were responsible for conducting the sacrifices while the Levites assisted them in various duties such as construction and the maintenance of the temple.

Even beyond that, there was a place reserved for the High Priest. A cross-section gives the best idea.

(k) Cross-section of the Sanctuary (reserved for the priests)

(image)

(l) A cross-section of the inner sanctuary shows us the spaces permitted to the High Priest alone on the day of Yom Kippur.

(image)

(n) To get the relationship between the Holy of Holy and the Dome of the Rock, here is a drawing and cross-section.

(image)

(o) The building of Herod's Temple was the single greatest architectural project thus far in antiquity (predating Nero and his megalomania). It was a truly awe-inspiring and very beautiful building.

(image)

So much for the building. How was it used?

The cycle of feasts, in relation to our calendar was as follows:

(image)

The Temple was both multi-functional in use and polyvalent in symbolism. Without unnecessary detail, here a list of its roles and meanings:

1. Divine presence
2. Covenant
3. End of the Exile
4. Socio-Political institution
5. National sovereignty
6. National Blessings
7. World-wide blessings
8. Prayer

The chief activity was sacrifice and prayer. For this, there were the priestly "orders":

- All priests are Levites, but not all Levites are priests. While priests (Hebrew *kohanim*) and Levites (Hebrew *leviyim*) both belong to the same tribe of Levi, they come from different descendants within the tribe.
- Priests were male descendants of Aaron, Moses brother, the first high priest. Levites (who served the temple) were any male descendants of the tribe of Levi, including the descendants of Moses and Miriam his sister.
- Priests and Levites shared the responsibility of serving in the tabernacle, and later, the temple.
- However, priests alone were responsible for conducting the sacrifices while the Levites assisted them in various duties such as construction and the maintenance of the temple.

The high priest has a particular functions and he exemplified the system of separations:

(image)

- Sacrifices on the Day of Atonement
- Prayers of intercession before the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant on the
- Day of Atonement
- Management and supervision of the other priests

Holy of Holies

The Holy of Holies was the domain of the High Priest but even he could enter it only one day in the year.

- The Holy of Holies (Hebrew *qodesh haqqodashim*) was technically known as the *Devir*. No part of the sanctuary had greater sanctity than this small square room 34. 4 feet (10. 5 m) in length and breadth and 69 feet (21 m) in height.
- While the priests served within the Holy Place, no one but the high priest, and only on one day- the Day of Atonement- was allowed to enter into the Holy of Holies.
- Following the biblical precedent (Ezra 5: 15), the priestly workmen had built the temple with the Holy of Holies in the exact same location as the previous two structures: over the bedrock platform (an exposed portion of Mount Moriah) known as the Foundation Stone.

Ritual Purity

Finally, ritual purity was highly significant.

- People could become unclean in a number of ways: for example, having a skin disease, eating certain foods, or touching a carcass.
- Some of these things were associated with death (the consequence of sin), but the association of others (such as the dietary laws) are less clear. Nevertheless, they were violations of sanctity because God revealed them as such.
- In the temple complex, the closer a person got to the location of God's presence, the higher the requirements for holiness or ritual cleanliness.
- People who had become unclean could be restored by undergoing various rituals and waiting for a set period of time.

The Sacred and the Profane

Solomon's Temple was basically a Canaanite sanctuary. Herod's Temple resembled all other Greco-Roman sanctuaries except for the absence of graven images. Both were good examples of the human way of projecting the transcendence of the deity by ever more intense separation from the ordinary and the every day. In summary:

1. Holy - qadosh / sanctus - "cut off" - sanction / sanctuary
2. Profane and pro-fanum - outside the sanctuary
3. This division is found in many societies
4. Holy = place, time, persons and actions
5. Key idea: separation from the profane

6. God's transcendence is symbolised by the systematic negation of the ordinary and the everyday

I apologise for spending so much time on this but it is essential to capturing the meaning of the letter to the Hebrews, to which we now turn.

Contrasting priesthoods

The author summarises the OT teaching in priesthood as follows:

1. OT sacrifice: animals, who cannot represent humans
2. Repeated sacrifices, therefore incomplete
3. The priest himself was a sinner
4. The temple was shadow of the heavenly sanctuary
5. God promised a new priesthood (Melchizedek)

Because of 1, 2 3 and 4, God himself promised another, very different kind of priesthood. The contrast is established early in Hebrews:

Heb 5:1 For every high priest is taken from among the people and appointed to represent them before God, to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal compassionately with those who are ignorant and erring, since he also is subject to weakness, 3 and for this reason he is obligated to make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. 4 And no one assumes this honour on his own initiative, but only when called to it by God, as in fact Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming high priest, but the one who glorified him was God, who said to him, **“You are my Son! Today I have fathered you,”** 6 as also in another place God says, **“You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.”** 7 During his earthly life Christ offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his devotion. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered. 9 And by being perfected in this way, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 10 and he was designated by God as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Why the very obscure Melchizedek? In reality, he was not so obscure at in the first century and there was much speculation about him in Jewish writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The writer argues (1) that Melchizedek was superior to the Levitical priests, because they honoured him in the loins of their ancestor Abraham; (2) he resembles Jesus in original and destiny. As chart captures this:

1. Why Melchizedek?
 - a. Genesis 14 and Ps 110
 - b. Abraham brought him offerings, and, “in the loins of their ancestor” the Levites recognised the superior priesthood of Melchizedek
 - c. Melchizedek was of mysterious origin (“without father, without mother”)
 - d. Melchizedek's destiny was mysterious (“without end of life”)
2. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, he has neither beginning of days nor end of life but is like the son of God, and he remains a priest for all time. (Hebrews 7:3)

A few texts capture the heart of the argument:

Melchizedek's priesthood his superior

But Melchizedek who does not share their ancestry collected a tithe from Abraham and blessed the one who possessed the promise. Now without dispute the inferior is blessed by the superior, and in one case tithes are received by mortal men, while in the other by him who is affirmed to be alive. And it could be said that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid a tithe through Abraham. **For he was still in his ancestor Abraham's loins when Melchizedek met him.** (Hebrews 7:6–10)

A change of priesthood was promised and did take place

So if perfection had in fact been possible through the Levitical priesthood—for on that basis the people received the law—what further need would there have been for another priest to arise, said to be in the order of Melchizedek and not in Aaron's order? For when the priesthood changes, a change in the law must come as well. Yet the one these things are spoken about belongs to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever officiated at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord is descended from Judah, yet Moses said nothing about priests in connection with that tribe. (Hebrews 7:11–14)

The OT priesthood: repeated, therefore not effective

So with these things prepared like this, the priests enter continually into the outer tent as they perform their duties. But only the high priest enters once a year into the inner tent, and not without blood that he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit is making clear that the way into the holy place had not yet appeared as long as the old tabernacle was standing. This was a symbol for the time then present, when gifts and sacrifices were offered that could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper. They served only for matters of food and drink and various washings; they are external regulations imposed until the new order came. (Hebrews 9:6–10)

Lastly, even the Temple was only a shadow of the real sanctuary in heaven.

The OT Tabernacle: only a sketch of the true, heavenly reality

The place where they serve is a **sketch and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary**, just as Moses was warned by God as he was about to complete the tabernacle. For he says, "See that you make everything according to the **design shown to you on the mountain.**" But now Jesus has obtained a superior ministry, since the covenant that he mediates is also better and is enacted on better promises. (Hebrews 8:5–6)

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands—the **representation of the true sanctuary**—but into heaven itself, and he appears now in God's presence for us. And he did not enter to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the sanctuary year after year with blood that is not his own, for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the consummation of the ages to put away sin by his sacrifice. (Hebrews 9:24–26)

So, against all the odds, Jesus a layman from a non-priestly tribe both fulfilled and abolished the priesthood of the Temple.

How did that come about?

The writer singles out the ways in which Jesus exercised his radically new and revolutionary priesthood:

(1) Prayer

(a) Heb 5:7 During his earthly life Christ offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his devotion.

(2) Obedience

(b) Heb 5:8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered.

(c) Heb 10:5 So when he came into the world, he said, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me” 6 “Whole burnt offerings and sin-offerings you took no delight in” 7 “Then I said, ‘Here I am: I have come—it is written of me in the scroll of the book—to do your will, O God.’” 8 When he says above, “Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sin-offerings you did not desire nor did you take delight in them” (which are offered according to the law), 9 then he says, “Here I am: I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first to establish the second. 10 By his will we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

(3) Communion

(d) Heb 2:14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in their humanity, so that through death he could destroy the one who holds the power of death (that is, the devil), 15 and set free those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death. 16 For surely his concern is not for angels, but he is concerned for Abraham’s descendants. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 For since he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

(e) Heb 4:14 Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help.

(4) Entry

(f) Heb 8:1 Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We have such a high priest, one who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up.

(g) Heb 9:24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands—the representation of the true sanctuary—but into heaven itself, and he appears now in God’s presence for us.

Synthesis

In summary, the letter to the Hebrews has a distinctive attitude to the Levitical priesthood. What it stood for in an inadequate way—access to God—has been fulfilled in Jesus. In the course of this fulfillment, the Levitical priesthood was abolished in favour of an older priesthood, that of Melchizedek. That priesthood was both older and superior. We may summarise as follows:

1. Abolition of the Levitical priesthood

2. Foreshadowed in Melchizedek, fulfilled in Jesus
3. Not by sacred separation but by communion
4. Thus setting aside radically the human construct / projection of the sacred and the profane
5. Sacrifice, yes: communion
6. But not of blood / atonement in that sense
7. Instead by Jesus' faithful obedience and prayer
8. Thus he became our entry to the very presence of God, independently of sanctuary, priesthood and blood offering

Jesus of history?

Historically and theologically, it was quite a challenge to present Jesus as a priest. As noted earlier, he was not from a priestly family and he was hostile to the Temple. Also, his death was the exact opposite of a "sacred" event: it took place *outside* the holy city, it was technically a *curse* (Deut 21:22-23), death itself brings *ritual* impurity (the opposite of Temple holiness) and among the body fluids cause ritual impurity *blood* is near the top of the list.

Nevertheless, the presentation of Jesus as priest, involving fulfillment, abolition and communion, can be traced to the historical Jesus.

(i) Jesus did have a negative attitude to the Temple

1. Dissident follower of the Baptism, with a prophetic critique of the Temple (Matthew 3)
2. The Temple Action: the end such a system of worship (Mark 11)
3. Foresaw the end of the Temple (Mark 13)

(ii) At the same time, Jesus did fulfill that core Temple function, which is bringing people into contact with God:

4. Proclaimed God and brought God's presence to people in the everyday (in the *pro-fanum*)
5. Brought holiness / wholeness to people while by-passing the Temple system and Sabbath observance
6. Brought holiness / wholeness to people while by-passing / breaking the dietary and purity laws

The Joy of the Gospel?

In a pastoral vein, Pope Francis also reflects on God's presence in the midst of life, not at all confined to sacred times and places.

An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelising community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelisation consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time. Faithful to

the Lord's gift, it also bears fruit. An evangelising community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds. (EG 24)

The new Jerusalem, the holy city (cf. Rev 21:2-4), is the goal towards which all of humanity is moving. It is curious that God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realised in a city. We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner. (EG 71)

And so...?

1. In contact with the Pauline tradition
 - a. Mercy seat / atonement: Rom 3:21-26 and Heb 7:1-10:18
 - b. New covenant: 2 Cor 3:1-11 and Heb 7:22-10:16
 - c. Intercessor Rom 8:34 and Heb 6:19-10:22
2. In continuity with the Jesus tradition
 - a. Jesus is a priest (unexpectedly)
 - b. Not because of spilling of blood / suffering
 - c. But because of prayer, faithfulness and communion
 - d. Thus, breaking down for ever distinction of sacred and profane
3. Jesus, by his death and resurrection, both fulfilled and abolished the OT sanctuary and priesthood
4. The biblical roots of his priesthood lay not in Levi but in Melchizedek
5. Jesus did away with the distinction "sacred" and "profane", by identification not separation
6. Jesus' "sacrifice" was the gift of himself, in faith and obedience to God, entering the true sanctuary
7. Jesus' faith opens for us a way to God
8. Hebrews matches Jesus' ministry and Paul's teaching

So what is the core teaching? The sacrifice of Jesus was not the commercial exchange of blood (redemption) but rather the interior openness to God. Hebrews expresses this using the language of obedience. It corresponds to Paul's language of faithfulness and to Jesus' own journey of trust through Gethsemane and Calvary.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)

When he says above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sin-offerings you did not desire nor did you take delight in them" (which are offered according to the law), then he says, "Here I am: I have come to do your will." He does away with the first to establish the second. (Hebrews 10:8-9)

Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set out for him he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)

The questions appended to the Paul study can simply be repeated here.

1. Do these teachings of Hebrews speak to us today?
2. What kind of disciple should I be?
3. What kind of church should we be?