JESUS, THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

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CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

II. JESUS PROVES THE GREATER MEDIATOR ......................................................... 1
    A. The Humanity of the Mediator ........................................................................... 2
    B. The Morality of the Mediator ......................................................................... 3

III. JESUS OFFERS THE SUPERIOR SACRIFICE .................................................. 5
    A. The Legitimacy of the Sacrifice ..................................................................... 5
    B. The Place of the Sacrifice ............................................................................. 7
    C. The Endurance of the Sacrifice .................................................................... 8
    D. The Significance of the Sacrifice ................................................................... 9

IV. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................... 10

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................... 12
INTRODUCTION

In A.D. 70 the Jerusalem temple was destroyed and the sacrificial ritual was history, leaving the orthodox Jew who dismissed Jesus in a quandary, as it was understood, based on the Tanakh, that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Although it is likely that Hebrews was written before the temple’s razing, this writing preemptively proclaims the inadequacy of animal sacrifices. The parade of high priests and the continual sacrifices communicated that shadowy substitutes were never able to complete the restoration process between fallen man and the most holy God. While it should be understood that the priests carried out their sacrificial duties in obedience to Yahweh and His law, these substitutes pointed to the necessity of a more worthy mediator and sacrifice. To that end, this paper will compare and contrast the persons and practices of the Old Covenant high priests to the unique New Covenant High Priest, and thereby demonstrate that Jesus is the greater mediator and the superior sacrifice, empowering fallen man to be made righteous in the eyes of the Most Holy God.

JESUS PROVES THE GREATER MEDIATOR

Although the great high priest was to be different, he could not be distant. That is, he was to be righteous, but also relational. According to Hebrews 5:1-4, the high priest was to be a sympathetic man who was called by God to mediate between the created and the Creator. If Jesus was to fulfill this role, then the incarnation was essential, whereby he fully represented men before their Maker.1 Thus, the Word put on skin and lived among people (Jn. 1:14). While Jesus was not distant in his humanity, he was very different in his morality. Although he frequently

1 David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, God the Father, God the Son (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1996), 305.
touched those *with* sin, he remained untouched *by* sin; he was constantly clean. Thus Jesus became the unique, sinless, human, high priest.

**The Humanity of the Mediator**

The high priest was not to be distant from those he represented, but compassionate and gentle, as he experienced their same weaknesses (Heb. 5:2). Although the Old Testament stresses the high priest be taken from the house of Aaron (Ex. 29:9, 44; Numb. 18:1-7), “It is the high priest’s identification with those whom he represents that is the focus of attention.”

The author may be preparing the audience for his arguments regarding the priesthood of Melchizedek, but here it is rather the function before God and relationship with man that is in the spotlight. The high priest who deals gently (*metriopathein*) as mediator between God and man takes the middle course between apathy and anger. Hence, he is to be concerned with the seriousness of sin, but compassionate regarding the salvation of sinners. The high priest was to fulfill his ritual responsibilities precisely and carefully while moderating his emotions to deal gently with those he represented.

It was this high priest who had the responsibility of offering the most important of all Israel’s sacrifices on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But before this event took place there was much work to be done. The high priest would have earlier cleansed himself ritually and dawned his royal robes, breastplate, and ephod as he began the daily sacrifices. It is likely that he

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4 O’Brien, 190.
would have slaughtered twenty-two animals by the time he reached the atonement event.⁵ After this busy and bloody work he would then remove his royal robes, bathe completely, and put on the simple white linen garment, with no decoration or ornament.⁶ Thus it was in humility before God that he would enter the Most Holy Place representing humanity.⁷

Interestingly, the removal of the high priest’s splendor in favor of white linen foreshadowed the ultimate act of humility, the Lord Jesus stripping off all His glory to become a humble man.⁸ Indeed, it was the incarnation that was a stumbling block to so many in Jesus’ day. That ‘a mere man’ would claim to be God (Jn. 10:33) was blasphemous. Yet it was not only his self-righteous claims that caused so much consternation; it was the gentleness which Jesus showed the cultural outcasts. The gospels document many moments in which the religious leaders were frustrated that Jesus refused to distance himself from ‘sinners’ (cf. Mark 2:15-17; Luke 15:1-2). He was like the doctor who breathed the same air as his patients, never covering his face, yet was never infected with their sicknesses. Still the author points to the full humanity of Jesus, his ability to understand frailties and temptations (Heb. 4:15), that enables him to sympathize with mankind’s weaknesses. So it is that the writer first introduces the characteristics of a high priest (5:1–4) and then demonstrates how this was perfectly satisfied by Jesus (5:5–10).⁹ While the author first writes of Jesus’ humanity, he next focuses on his morality, further proof that he is the greater mediator.

⁶ Ibid., 225.
⁷ The specific sacrifices will be dealt with in the next section.
⁸ MacArthur, 225.
The Morality of the Mediator

The high priest was consecrated to Yahweh as holy (Lev. 21:6, 8, etc.), even bearing on his headdress, “Holiness to the Lord” (Exod. 39:30). This man, chosen by God and set apart for this special moment, was to bathe and dress in white linen (Lev. 16:4) just before the atonement was to commence. This preeminent practice was an annual ritual whereby the priest would pass through the curtain dividing the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place on two occasions, within the same day. Upon the first entrance, he would take the blood of a bull to offer to Yahweh on behalf of his sin and the sin of his family (Heb. 5:3, 6:7). Thus the ritual purity (Lev. 21:11) and bodily integrity (21:17) that was demanded of the high priest could not cover his moral imperfection. So while the humanity of the high priest was necessary, it was also a hindrance, that the imperfect mediator needed the same forgiveness as those he represented.

In contrast, the author of Hebrews highlights the morality of Jesus, the great high priest who is, “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” (Heb. 7:26) According to the Mishna (compiled after the time of Jesus), the high priest was required to leave his home seven days before the great Day of Atonement, being careful to ensure that he avoided ritual defilement. Jesus, on the other hand, was not separated in ritual, but in reality. Despite his contact with sinful people he remained unstained. These three adjectives, holy, innocent, and unstained, together “forcibly describe” the spiritual and moral perfection of the

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11 O'Brien, 280.

12 Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

13 Morris, 72.

14 Westcott, 195.
heavenly high priest. Based on the evidence demonstrating both the humanity and morality of Jesus, it should be no wonder why our author calls him “a great high priest” (Heb.4:14), a title no Old Testament priest could assume. Now, having demonstrated Jesus to be the greater mediator, it is time to discover why the sacrifice Jesus offered was superior to all others.

JESUS OFFERS THE SUPERIOR SACRIFICE

More than any other revelatory writing, Hebrews most fully explains the high priestly work of Jesus, both in heaven and on earth. As previously mentioned, the earthly high priest would enter the Most Holy Place twice within the same day. Upon his second approach, only after offering the bull’s blood for himself, the high priest would then offer the blood of the goat on behalf of the people. In contrast, the author discusses the superior nature of the legitimacy, place, endurance, and significance of the heavenly high priest’s sacrifice (Heb. 9:23-28).

The Legitimacy of the Sacrifice

The sacrificial animal offered by the high priest was to be without any blemish. Yet regardless of the creature’s external beauty, this irrational and unwilling substitute could make no lasting atonement for sin. Indeed, the author of Hebrews clearly communicates that, “In these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:3–4) If the writer is correct, then Jewish recipients who

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15 O’Brien, 280.
18 Westcott, 309.
had been satisfied with the symbolic sacrifices for years were now confronted with a most awful truth: sin has not been erased from their account as this sacrifice is not a legitimate substitute. If to this point the author’s intent has been foggy, it now becomes clear; to demonstrate that these many shadows were pointing to the only legitimate substitute that offered full pardon from the Most Holy’s punishment.

In stark contrast, the blood that Jesus offered was a superior and sufficient substitute for all who would trust him in faith. First, as already demonstrated, the heavenly high priest was thoroughly pure, an unblemished mediator. If this was not yet tough enough for the audience to swallow, the claim of the author, the claim of all New Testament authors, was that “the Sacrificer was the Sacrifice.” As Paul writes, this was “a stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor. 1:23). Wright gives intriguing insight into why this would be so.

This is perhaps the most striking, indeed shocking, idea in the whole letter. At almost no point in the voluminous Jewish literature from the Bible through to the Jewish writings contemporary with the New Testament, and indeed beyond, does anybody suggest that *human* sacrifice might be a good thing—still less that the Messiah himself would become such a sacrifice. Apart from the powerful and deeply mysterious passage in Isaiah 53:10, which speaks of the sacrificial death of God’s servant, the closest that Judaism comes to such an idea is the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac at Mount Moriah (Genesis 22)...The sacrifice didn’t happen. Nor, of course, was there ever a suggestion that a high priest would have to become, simultaneously, both the priest who offered the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. The idea would have been laughable if it hadn’t, almost certainly, appeared blasphemous.

But this ‘laughable’ and ‘blasphemous’ idea is the crux of the Gospel, that the depth of man’s sin demanded the highest payment. It is not that the Old Testament prophets did not foretell of the Messiah’s suffering (cf. Luke 24:26; Acts 3:18, 17:3, 26:23), but it is clear that, among the culture in which Jesus lived, the focus and expectation of the messiah had shifted from a

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19 MacArthur, 229.

suffering servant to a conquering king. The irony is that it was through his suffering that Jesus conquered sin and brought true freedom to the captives. In unique distinction from all other sacrifices, this perfect and legitimate substitute was both human and willing, the bridge (cf. Gen. 28:12, Jn. 1:51) that would allow unbroken access beyond the earthly tent and into the heavenly throne.

**The Place of the Sacrifice**

Without blood, the earthly high priest could not enter the Most Holy Place. Even with the blood of the unblemished, this meeting could only occur one day a year. That there was no access during the other three hundred and sixty-four days was a vivid reminder of the great separation between fallen creature and the Most Holy Creator.²¹ This one-day access “did not indicate its openness, but was the exception that proves the rule.”²² Further, whether the atonement occurred at the mobile tabernacle or the Jerusalem temple, these human structures were to find their usefulness dated, as Jesus communicated to the Samaritan woman (John 4:20-24). The author makes this point unequivocally clear as he states, “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Heb. 9:24) So it is, that Jesus never entered the Most Holy Place inside the temple. Instead, He entered the heavenly reality instead of the earthly replica. Different from all others who served as high priest, Jesus is no mere interim intercessor, he is the greater mediator and the superior sacrifice, enduring for all time.

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²¹ O'Brien, 347.
²² Ibid., 313.
The Endurance of the Sacrifice

What makes the sacrifice of Jesus superior to all others is its endurance, never to be completed again, “able to reach back to the time of creation and forward to the time of consummation of the ages, fully cleansing the people of God.”\textsuperscript{23} The author drives this point home in Heb. 9:25-26.

Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

As the author has argued thus far, sacrifices that are continual are not complete. The sacrifice of Jesus is entirely different, occurring at the crucifixion and never to be offered again. There is no longer an annual sacrifice to anticipate. Instead, there is a sufficient sacrifice to appreciate. In contrast with the earthly priests who stood at the daily duties (Heb. 10:11), our author accentuates the position of our heavenly priest who has “sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12), as the action is complete.\textsuperscript{24} Hence, the author “sees the sacrifice of Christ as having redemptive significance even before its time, and that the redemption of people in all ages depends in some way on [that] sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{25} This means that all sin, for all time, has been paid for all people, who would trust Jesus. Finally, this leads to the audience to consider the immeasurable significance of the sacrifice.

\textsuperscript{23} George H. Guthrie, \textit{Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 316.

\textsuperscript{24} Wright, 110.

The Significance of the Sacrifice

Not only can the person who trusts Christ’s sacrifice be assured of pardon from sin, but he is offered the privilege of continually approaching his Creator in confidence. This unbroken relationship was something unforeseen by those under the Old Covenant. Indeed, “the exclusion of ordinary priests and laity from this sacred realm was normal,” and the curtain in the tabernacle/temple was a continual reminder that the way into the Most Holy Place was blocked. Yet it is to this separation that Matthew writes regarding what occurred upon the death of Jesus: “The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” (Matthew 27:51) This syncs with our author who wrote:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith... (Heb. 10:19-22a, italics added)

Whether rhetorical (i.e. only Christ’s body) or historical (i.e. including the physical curtain), the reality Matthew writes of is clear: Jesus has made continual access available for humans to approach heaven, and it is to the very throne of God that the followers of Jesus can draw near. Yet the Christian’s current privilege of approaching God in spirit is yet only a precursor to the future promise of meeting his Savior face to face (cf. 1 John 3:2; 1 Thes. 4:17).

Comparatively, during Yom Kippur, while the high priest was making atonement for the people, the crowd anticipated and awaited his reemergence, to declare that the sign of forgiveness had

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26 O'Brien, 313.

been performed.\textsuperscript{28} Wright notes that the high priest would reclothe, “in his splendid vestments of blue and red and purple, trimmed with pomegranates and golden bells,” and appear outside “to bless the waiting multitudes.”\textsuperscript{29} As shadow mirrors substance throughout Hebrews, so we await the return of our High Priest, “wearing the robes is his immortal glory,”\textsuperscript{30} appearing a second time, “not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (Heb. 9:28)

CONCLUSION

The Old Covenant, including the high priestly responsibilities, was like the moon in relationship to the sun.\textsuperscript{31} The brightness of the moon is but a reflection of the rising sun. So too, although seeming to give light, the Old Covenant priests and sacrifices were only reflections of the glory of the New Covenant Son, soon to break the horizon. Calvin writes of the unfathomable work of the Great High Priest.

The work to be performed by the Mediator was of no common description: being to restore us to the divine favour, so as to make us, instead of sons of men, sons of God; instead of heirs of hell, heirs of a heavenly kingdom. Who could do this unless the Son of God should also become the Son of man, and so receive what is ours as to transfer to us what is his, making that which is his by nature to become ours by grace? Relying on this earnest, we trust that we are the sons of God, because the natural Son of God assumed to himself a body of our body, flesh of our flesh, bones of our bones, that he might be one with us; he declined not to take what was peculiar to us, that he might in his turn extend to us what was peculiarly his own, and thus might be in common with us both Son of God and Son of man.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Wright, 104.
\textsuperscript{29} Spence-Jones, 241.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Guthrie, 284.
By this eternal transaction, the death of Jesus has transformed the meaning of death for His followers; no longer does death mean judgment, but blessing; not slavery, but freedom. No more is death an enemy, but a friend who ushers the believer into the presence of the Creator.

In conclusion, this paper has compared and contrasted the persons and practices of the Old Covenant high priests to the unique New Covenant High Priest. It has been demonstrated that Jesus is the greater mediator, offering evidence from both his humanity (having the ability to sympathize with weaknesses) and his morality (having the ability to pardon weaknesses). Further, the sacrifice of Jesus has been determined superior to all others because of its legitimacy, place, endurance, and significance. As such, Jesus has empowered fallen man to be made righteous in the eyes of the Most Holy God, and his thankful servants eagerly await their gracious Redeemer, the Great High Priest.

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33 Bruce, 86.


