

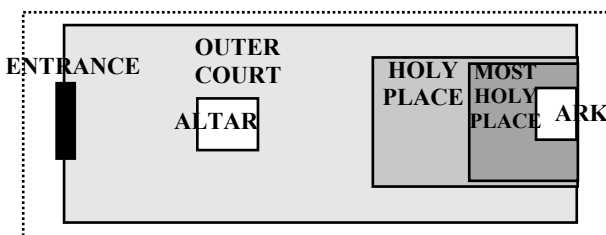
*“We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God”* Heb 4:14

The Letter to the Hebrews stands out as the major New Testament example of the detailed way in which the evangelists and apologists of the early church used the Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus truly was the Messiah. In this they were following the approach which Jesus adopted with his disciples after his resurrection, when he expounded to them *“all the things written in the Law and the Prophets concerning himself”* (Lk 24:27). Paul also adopted this approach, as, for example, in his work at Thessalonica where he *“went into the Synagogue and on three Sabbath days reasoned with them(the Jews) from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead”* (Acts 17:2-3). It was an approach that had immediate and particular relevance, of course, to Jews, and Hebrews is clearly written for Jews. These were Jews who had embraced Jesus as the Messiah, but who for one reason or another were in danger of turning back from their faith, and needed their faith under girding. The author of Hebrews methodically and biblically shows them how superior Jesus was to the leading persons and institutions of the old Jewish faith, that is to say how superior he was to angels, Moses, Abraham, Joshua and the Tabernacle with its High Priesthood, sacrifices and covenant. It is with the exposition of the High Priesthood and the Tabernacle that this pamphlet is concerned.

**The Tabernacle and the Letter to the Hebrews**

All Jews would naturally have been conversant with the structure and arrangement of the Tabernacle and with the duties of its priesthood. God had ordered Moses to construct the Tabernacle as a moveable place of worship which the Israelites were to take with them throughout their wilderness wanderings. It became the basis in all its essential details and arrangement for the permanent Temple built by Solomon and later, in the time of Jesus, rebuilt by Herod. God strictly warned Moses to make it exactly as he was told, for its structure and its priesthood were intended from the very first to enshrine important truth for the Israelites and to point to an ultimate spiritual fulfilment.

The Tabernacle was really a very simple structure (see diagram), and is sketched out in some detail in Hebrews 9:1-10. The Tabernacle area was enclosed by a screen of curtains, and divided into three distinct parts. There was an open outer court in which was situated a great brazen altar where the sacrificial animals were to be offered. There was also a covered section divided into two parts, the first of which was accessible from the outer court and called the *“Holy Place”*, and the second part accessible only from the *“Holy Place”* and called the *“Most Holy Place”*. In the *“Most Holy Place”* was the Ark of the Covenant which contained the ten commandments of God and which was covered with a Mercy Seat guarded by two carved Cherubim. God *“dwelt”* in the Most Holy Place by his *“inner presence”*, and no one was allowed into that Most Holy Place on pain of death. The only exception was the High Priest who was allowed into it once a year on the Day of Atonement. The adjacent Holy Place represented the *“outer*



*presence”* of God and housed the Altar of Incense, representing the prayers of the saints, a candlestick representing the Light of God, and a table of Showbread representing the provision of God. Only selected priests were allowed into the Holy Place to attend to these

three symbols of the *“outer presence”* of God. In the outer court sacrifices of numerous kinds were held daily on the altar—sin offerings, burnt offerings, thank offerings, peace offerings etc, all of which were performed by Levitical priests. These

were the sacrifices through which alone it was possible to gain access to the two Holy Places and to the presence of God.

**The whole scheme was designed to represent the process by which humanity could come into the presence of God, or, better, by which the presence of a holy God would come close to humanity.**

This was the basic picture that forms the background to chapters 4 to 10. The main estimate of the Temple/Tabernacle as the author of Hebrews saw it in his day, however, was that it revealed not *“access”* but, on the contrary, a restriction of access to God: *“The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was standing”* (Heb 9:4). What he meant was that though the Tabernacle was certainly a picture of how access to God could be made, the reality was that the animal sacrifices never prevailed for real forgiveness, and the High Priest was never able to open the Most Holy Place permanently. Direct access to God, therefore, actually remained closed. What the Tabernacle and its priesthood represented was only a shadow of the real thing: *“They (the priests) serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven”* (Heb 8:5). The object of the author of Hebrews was to show that in Jesus, the new and heavenly High Priest, the real thing had arrived – in Jesus full access to God had been obtained once and for all through a new sacrifice that was fully adequate. Reality replaces shadow.

It was this kind of thinking of which Hebrews was such a conspicuous example, that brought to the Christian church the recognition that the Temple and its sacrifices had had their day, and left the church with an indelible image of the High Priesthood of Jesus in heavenly places: *“we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God”* (Heb 4:14).

## The High Priesthood

It is with the High Priest that Hebrews is particularly concerned. It is the High Priest who typifies Jesus. This was not simply in the fact that he is able to “*sympathize with our weakness*” and understand us (Heb 4:15), but more significantly in the fact that it was the High Priest alone who could make atonement for the sin of the whole people and enter the inner sanctuary. He alone could meet with God at the throne of grace and at the mercy seat. It was important to demonstrate to the Jews that they needed to see Jesus as the one who fulfilled perfectly this High Priestly role. He was the one to whom every previous earthly High Priest pointed. It was important also that they saw that the Most Holy Place which Jesus entered was a heavenly sanctuary, the true fulfilment of the Tabernacle, and that as a result of his resurrection and ascension he dwelt there permanently, eternally alive to make intercession.

Hebrews anticipates an objection that might be raised by a Jew, namely that Jesus did not come of the high priestly line of Aaron. Lineage was important to the Jews. The author takes hold of a crucial Messianic psalm which indicated that, as priest, the Messiah would come from a different line. Psalm 110 was thoroughly recognized as Messianic by the Jews, and that psalm stated categorically, “*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek’*” (Ps110:5). In its brevity, sheer clarity and authority it is, on any reckoning, an astonishing prophetic word. It refers back to very brief episode in Genesis 14:18-20, and it delineates conclusively, and in majestic manner, a type of priesthood infinitely greater than Aaron’s Levitical priesthood. Hebrews expounds the significance of this lineage from Melchizedek at length in Ch. 7, for its significance is not restricted simply to explaining why Jesus was not of Aaron’s line.

The very name, Melchizedek, is significant for it means “King of Righteousness” (Heb 7:1ff). Melchizedek was also the ruler or king of Salem, and “Salem” means peace, so making him “King of Peace”. King of Righteousness and Peace, therefore, by name and rank, he was, as Hebrews also points out, at the same time “Priest of God Most High” (7:1). He was in fact both King and Priest, and was a true symbolic figure of the great Messianic Priest/King who was to come. It was of this order of priesthood that Jesus came. There are, however, further implications to be seen in the nature of the Melchizedek order of priesthood which Hebrews unfolds. Melchizedek was the priest to whom even Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, paid tithes (Heb 7:4), and indeed from whom even Abraham received a blessing. There was, therefore, a majesty and an authority in this Priest/King to which Abraham (and, in Abraham, the whole Jewish race, including Aaron,) dutifully bowed. He stands towering in his authority over the nation from its very inception, pointing to the spiritual Priest/King to come.

Perhaps the most astonishing implication that Hebrews sees in this priesthood derives from the fact that no genealogy of Melchizedek is presented in Genesis. From this fact Hebrews draws the following conclusion: “*Without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever.*” (Heb 7:3). Thus Jesus, fulfilling the fact that Melchizedek had no mention of forebears, “*became a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry, but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life*” (Heb 7:16). Jesus “*has a permanent priesthood*” (7:24), and “*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them*” (7:25). There is a divinity in his priesthood.

## The High Priest and his Sacrifices

The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, for which the High Priest personally was responsible, were comprehensive. The object of the sacrifices was that “*atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites*” (Lev. 16:34). On that day the High Priest entered twice into the Most Holy Place. On the first occasion he entered with the blood of a bull offered as a sin offering for his own sins, and on the second occasion he entered with the blood of a goat offered as a sin offering for the whole Israelite community. As he did so no other Israelite was allowed in the Holy Places. Even he, however, was not allowed to see the mercy seat, it being expressly covered by the smoke from the incense altar; he simply sprinkled the blood on it and before it. Having sprinkled the blood on the inner sanctuary, the High Priest sprinkled it on the altar of sacrifice. After this he confessed the sins of the people over a second goat and released it into the wilderness to carry away the people’s sins (the “scapegoat”). Finally he offered burnt offerings, indicating total commitment, for himself and for the people. So he “*made atonement*” for himself, the people and the Holy Place.

Hebrews stresses that all these sacrifices were subsumed in one infinitely greater sacrifice, the the body of Jesus himself: “*he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood*” (Heb 9:12), that is to say, “*the blood of the Messiah who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God*” (Heb 9:14). The only sacrifice not subsumed was Aaron’s sacrifice for his own sin, for Jesus was “*unblemished*”, and this fact Hebrews makes plain. It was a once for all sacrifice (9:28), and Jesus, our High Priest remains within the heavenly and true sanctuary pleading our cause with his own blood, thereby securing full, continuous and open access to the throne of God for all who come through him.

## The High Priest and the New Covenant

The author of Hebrews has yet another perspective. He reminds us that the tabernacle expressed regulations appropriate for the first covenant God had made with his people, the Mosaic covenant: “*Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary*” (Heb 9:1). He goes on from there to establish the fact that with the superseding of the earthly sanctuary by the heavenly sanctuary, there came also the superseding of the first covenant by the inauguration of the new covenant. Our new eternal High Priest, Jesus, is, therefore, the mediator of the New Covenant.

Once again the author of Hebrews draws on Old Testament scripture to show that such a new covenant had been prophesied, quoting from Jeremiah 31:33-34. “*This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds*”. This new covenant promise of God was that he would give those who came to him through the Great High Priest a heart on which there was indelibly written a deep desire for and understanding of his laws. Though not specifically mentioned in Hebrews, the agent of this was to be none less than the Holy Spirit himself, a truth that becomes evident in the parallel passage on the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36:24. Thus Jesus becomes the High Priest of the new Covenant of the Spirit.

**Hebrews, therefore, underlines just how crucial Old Testament understanding is for our faith.**

**Bob Dunnett**