

**New Testament Session #6**  
**The Letter to the Hebrews:**  
**Christ the High Priest**  
**Offers Himself as a Sacrifice on our Behalf**

The Letter to the Hebrews is a theologically complex document. Emory University's Luke Timothy Johnson points out that the entirety of this book is one sustained argument.<sup>1</sup> In this sense it is very comparable to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. Unlike most of the rest of the New Testament it is not a book of historical narrative, or a brief epistle meant to address a few particular points. This means that to enter into this book as we should, this presentation should follow the same pattern as last week's. It should follow one central theme through this book and show how every portion of the text is intimately linked to every other portion.

Unfortunately I'm not quite up to that task. My level of familiarity with this text is not at the same level as what I've been able to reach in regards to Romans. If I tried to present this evening with the same depth and certainty as I did last week I would be pretty likely to lead you astray in some way. I'm not going to do you a disservice by pretending to know Hebrews as well as I know Romans. So this is going to be more a general introduction to the letter, with some thoughts on it's main themes thrown in. I'm not going to attempt to make a single hour long sustained argument as I present this text.

**Dating, Authorship, and Purpose of the Letter to the Hebrews**

The Letter to the Hebrews is cited in the Letter of St. Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, which was written in approximately 96 AD. This gives us the latest possible date at which the Letter to the Hebrews could have been written. There is a growing consensus among modern scholars that the traditional view on the dating of this letter, that it was written prior to the 70 AD, is correct. This would place it's composition prior to the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> This would most easily make sense of the letter's apparent reference to the current carrying out of Jewish animal sacrifices, which ceased after the destruction of the temple.<sup>3</sup>

The author of this letter is unknown. If the Timothy referred to in 13:23 is the same Timothy to whom Paul addressed his two epistles then the author of Hebrews would be someone who was a part of the group made up of St. Paul and his missionary associates.<sup>4</sup> There were some in the ancient church, such as St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. John of Damascus, and St. John Chrysostom, who thought that either St. Paul wrote this letter himself or that a secretary or disciple of his put his words into the format that we now have. Others, such as Tertullian and St. Cyprian of Carthage, denied this. Most modern scholars do not believe that Paul wrote this letter. It differs stylistically from his

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), RG 541.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, NT 350.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter to the Hebrews* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 13, 36.

other letters, and there is no personal claim of authorship as we see in the other letters of St. Paul.<sup>5</sup> Some of the other possible authors, and all of these possibilities are very speculative, are Barnabas (who among other things accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, see Acts 13:1-14:28), Apollos (who served the church in Ephesus, see Acts 18:24-:28, and Corinth, see 1 Corinthians 1 Cor 1:10-:17 and 3:5-:23), or the married couple Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18:1-28).<sup>6</sup> The issue of who wrote Hebrews seems to be irresolvable.

It does seem certain that the letter was written to a group of Jewish Christians. This can be assumed from the knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures and Jewish sacrificial system that the author assumes the readers possess. Hebrews 13:24 makes a reference to a greeting sent by those who come from Rome, so the letter may have been written in Italy. Or this could be a reference to a group of Jewish Christians from Rome who had traveled to another location.<sup>7</sup>

There are certain elements of the Letter to the Hebrews which make it resemble a sermon or homily more than a formal letter. The Letter to the Hebrews is therefore something of a literary hybrid, some sort of a combination of a letter and a sermon.<sup>8</sup> The possibility exists that this text was preached before it was put down in the written form that we now possess it in.<sup>9</sup>

The Letter to the Hebrews is a mix of doctrinal content alongside of spiritual and moral encouragement. The exhortations of this book are rooted in it's doctrine. Fidelity and loyalty to Christ, perseverance in the faith, is called for because of who Christ is and what he has done. The Letter to the Hebrews does not portray the understanding of doctrine as something separate from the life of the ordinary Christian, but as something essential for anyone who wants to live and worship within the church. As a result, the doctrinal sections of this letter are mixed in throughout the text as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

There are five main doctrinal points made in the Letter to the Hebrews:

1. Christ's pre-existence, divinity, and work as creator (1:1-:4)
2. Christ's superiority over the angels (1:5-2:18)
3. Christ's superiority when compared to Moses (3:1-4:13)
4. The greater reality of Christ's priesthood when compared to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament (4:14-7:28)
5. Christ's sacrifice is greater than all the sacrifices carried out under the Old Law (8:1-10:18)

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>6</sup> Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible*, NT 349.

<sup>7</sup> Jose Maria Casciaro, ed., *The Navarre Bible: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Jose Maria Casciaro, ed. *The Navaree Bible: The New Testament*, Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2001), 567.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Jose Maria Casciaro, ed., *The Navarre Bible: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 40-41.

There are also five main sections of the letter which deal with major elements of the Christian life:

1. The necessity of following Christ in order to obtain salvation (2:1-:4)
2. To receive salvation it is important to follow the example of those who previously accepted God's revelation (3:7-4:13)
3. A discussion of the nature of eternal joy and the standards of the Christian life (5:11-6:20)
4. Reasons to persevere despite difficulties, and a discussion of the example of those who have gone before (10:19-12:29)
5. Final advice (13:1-:19)<sup>11</sup>

### **Use of Old Testament Heroes**

Hebrews 11 shows the continuity of this book with the Old Testament. Throughout the course of this chapter various Old Testament figures are held up as role models of faith. This should (hopefully) remind us how Abraham is used as an example and role model in the books of James and Romans.

As we go through Hebrews 11 we hear of Abel (11:4), Enoch (11:5-:6), Noah (11:7), Abraham and Sarah (11:8-:19), Isaac (11:20), Jacob (11:21), Joseph (11:22), Moses (11:23-:28), all the Israelite people during the time of the Exodus and the entry into Canaan (11:29-:30), Rahab (11:31), Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets (11:32-:38).

In one chapter the author of Hebrews sweeps through the whole of Jewish history and lifts up examples of faith. Hopefully, nearly all of these names are familiar to us. Certainly those who received this letter would have been familiar with everyone who was named, and would have understood the significance of these examples. When Hebrews 12 goes on to use Jesus as an example the message of this portion of this text would have been clear. Those who received this message were to adhere to the covenant of Jesus Christ with the faithfulness shown by those who had accepted God's covenant love in times past.

### **Christ's Superiority to the Levitical Priesthood**

The main theme of the Letter to the Hebrew is Christ's superiority to any other means of access to God. His sacrifice is greater than the sacrifices of the Jerusalem temple. His priesthood is greater than that of the Levitical priesthood.

The previous section of the notes discussed the continuity of the Letter to the Hebrews with God's revelation in the Old Testament. However, the author of this Letter also made it clear that the work of Jesus Christ was a progression beyond what had been offered to God's people during the time of the Old Testament. The bulk of the Letter to the Hebrews is dedicated to communicating this idea.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 41.

This was important because this letter seems to have been written to Jewish Christians who were tempted to renounce their new faith and return to the Old Covenant. This is why it was so important to say that fidelity to the God of Abraham, the God of Sarah, the God of Moses, and the God of David meant fidelity to Jesus Christ. The author (authors?) of this text sought to persuade people that full acceptance of the revelation given to these individuals meant it was also necessary to accept the revelation that God had given to the world in and through Jesus Christ.

The superiority of Christ's priesthood is shown in Hebrews 7 as the priesthood of Melchizedek is mentioned. The priesthood of Jesus Christ was different from the priesthood that belonged to the Jewish people during the Old Testament. That priesthood was based on ethnicity, descent, and tribal identity. This is why the mysterious Old Testament figure, the priest Melchizedek (see Genesis 14:18-20) is made use of in this letter. Melchizedek was a priest, despite not being linked to the priestly tribe of Levi, so he is mentioned to show that Jesus could be a true priest despite not being from the tribe of Levi. Christ's priesthood was not dependent on this tribal identity, and his high priestly ministry brought to an end the role of the priests who served Israel during the Old Testament. Melchizedek is used as an apologetic tool, showing that priesthood can exist apart from the Tribe of Levi. Those who wish to accept the truth of the Old Testament must recognize this, and therefore a key argument against Christ's priesthood, that he was not of the Tribe of Levi, fades away.

### **The Holy of Holies (and the Eucharist)**

Hebrews 9:1-14 discusses what was known as the Holy of Holies. In discussing this section I want to directly mention the Eucharist in a way that the Letter to the Hebrews doesn't, but certainly in a way that is consistent with the central themes and ideas of the Letter to the Hebrews. Our first reading today refers to the Old Testament temple.

The Old Testament temple's most sacred area was the Holy of Holies, where God's presence could be most fully encountered during Old Testament times. This could only be entered into once a year, and the only person who could enter in was the high priest of the Jewish people.

Today God's presence is more fully and powerfully available to us in the Eucharist than it was when the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies. And yet this isn't just something that is available to one person, as if the Pope were the only one allowed to receive Holy Communion. Anyone in a state of grace can receive the Eucharist. It is not available to us only once a year, as if Christmas or Easter was the only day on which the Eucharist was offered. Mass is celebrated every day, and Christ's Eucharistic presence can be adored 24/7.

If we're going to follow the Letter to the Hebrews in seeking to be in continuity with the Old Testament, and we need to do that, then we should recognize that that God's people were given through the temple during the time of the Old Testament was a great gift. But if we are going to follow the Letter to the Hebrews in seeing the superiority of what has

been revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and we need to do that as well, then we need to recognize that what we have now been given in the Eucharist is so much greater.

I want to conclude this section on the superiority of Jesus Christ by taking a look at chapter 10 of the Letter to the Hebrews.

*Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of them, it can never make perfect those who come to worship by the same sacrifices that they offer continually each year. Otherwise, would not the sacrifices have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, once cleansed, would no longer have had any consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is only a yearly remembrance of sins, for it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins. For this reason, when he came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, Behold, I come to do your will, O God.'" First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law. Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will." He takes away the first to establish the second. By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But this one offered one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God; now he waits until his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated. The holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying: "This is the covenant I will establish with them after those days, says the Lord: 'I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them upon their minds,'" he also says: "Their sins and their evil-doing I will remember no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer offering for sin. Hebrews 10:1-18*

These verses from the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that the sacrifices of the Old Testament could never bring the fullness of holiness and forgiveness.

They were signs of repentance, signs of trust in God, but they were not of ultimate value. What is of ultimate value is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, giving his priceless body and blood as a sacrifice on our behalf. The offering of his body brings life, the offering of animals could not. His sacrifice can bring us the forgiveness of sins, the sacrifices of the Old Testament could not. The Letter to the Hebrews shows us that our trust is to be in the only true and ultimate sacrifice, Christ's body given and broken for our salvation.

As Catholics, because we refer to the Eucharist as a sacrifice, some people accuse Catholics of believing that multiple sacrifices have to be offered for sin. If we did really believe that we would have a big problem, because we would be contradicting what we just heard in this last passage from Hebrews. (10:12, :14)

The Letter to the Hebrews says there is only one sacrifice needed to take away sins, we would be referring to sacrifices being offered every day, and we would be in some serious theological trouble.

But we don't believe there is more than one sacrifice offered for sin. The mass is not a new sacrifice or a repeated one. Through the mass we share in the one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. This happened once and only once. He died once and only once.

It is made available to us over and over again. But what is made available to us is the once and only sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. All proper Eucharistic theology must be based on this fact.

### **Unforgiveable Sin?**

In the Letter to the Hebrews we hear some frightening words about sin which cannot be forgiven.

*It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Hebrews 6:4-:8*

*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think those deserve to be punished who have trampled the Son of God underfoot, who have treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who have insulted the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10:26-:29*

It is also worth noting that these verses should be read in light of Matthew 12:30-:32, Mark 3:28-:29, and Luke 12:8-:10 where Jesus speaks about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as something which cannot be forgiven.

This can sound as if serious sin after baptism, or after a profession of Christian faith, cannot be forgiven.

Fortunately I believe there is another way in which we can legitimately understand these difficult verses. First let's look at verse 10:26. It says that those who "deliberately keep on sinning" have no hope left. This seems to be talking about continuous sinful action that is freely chosen. Those who willfully and consistently reject Christ will not benefit from his sacrifice, because they are refusing to receive these benefits. It is not saying any Christian who sins seriously is doomed and has no chance to repent. The text is saying that those who reject the chance to repent are in trouble. Most people read Christ's words about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in this way. Jesus has typically been

understood as meaning that those who reject God's grace cannot be forgiven. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the rejection of grace and the refusal to receive forgiveness, which is the one thing that cannot be forgiven.

Hebrews 6 seems to be the more difficult of the two passages. But, the reference to recrucifying Christ seems to imply a very deliberate and severe rejection of Christ. The impossibility of the repentance of the individuals who act in this way seems to be the result of the ferocity of their rejection of God. I don't think the author of Hebrews is saying that there are sins that God won't forgive. I think he (or she if Priscilla did in fact write or contribute to this text) is saying that some people are so determined in their rejection of God that they won't come back. I think the following verses from chapter six support this:

*But we are sure in your regard, beloved, of better things related to salvation, even though we speak in this way. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love you have demonstrated for his name by having served and continuing to serve the holy ones. We earnestly desire each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises. Hebrews 6:9-:12*

The author seems to be gently warning and challenging the readers of this text, speaking of the desire that they "not become sluggish" and expressing the hope that they do inherit the promise. The worst examples of apostasy are held up to, let's say motivate, those who aren't anywhere near this level of spiritual danger but who there is some concern might drift away. I don't think Hebrews 6 is a rejection of the rest of what the bible has to say about repentance and forgiveness, I think it's a dramatic depiction of the results of the worst forms of apostasy meant to serve as a warning to those Christians who are in danger of drifting away from the faith.

### **Sacraments as Part of the Basics of the Faith**

Hebrews 6:1-:2 reads as follows:

*Therefore, let us leave behind the basic teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, without laying the foundation all over again: repentance from dead works and faith in God, instruction about baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.*

This shows us that for the early church baptism and the laying on of hands were part of the basics of Christian faith. This passing reference to baptism being something experience by and explained to converts to the faith is consistent with what we've seen in other biblical texts which speak of the importance of baptism. Hebrews 10:22, which refers to "our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water", is probably another reference to baptism.

The laying of hands could refer to this being done in the context of every believer's reception of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:17 and 19:6), and/or to this being practiced when someone was set aside for a specific leadership position in the early church (see 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6).<sup>12</sup> We see in these actions the grounds for the modern forms of the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. It is extremely likely that Hebrews 6:2 is referring to the early form of either or both of these sacraments.

### **Church Authority**

There are brief, but important, references to church order and discipline in the Letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 10:25 refers to the practice of "neglecting to meet together", which "is the habit of some." This immediately precedes the verses we read a little bit earlier about those who deliberately sin after receiving the truth. Not being present for the regular worship of the church is seen as an indication of a rejection of God.

The church is also shown to be not just a gathering of like minded individuals, but an organization with a structure and with people serving in distinct positions. We see this in 13:7 when we read:

*Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.*

Hebrews doesn't give us a particularly detailed ecclesiastical roadmap, but it does show us that within the church there are those set aside for leadership positions.

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<sup>12</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 22.