

“THE HIGH-PRIESTLY CHRISTOLOGY OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS: A FUSION OF LATE SECOND TEMPLE THEOLOGY AND EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION”

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This thesis is under the direction of Dr. Paul Holloway and Dr. James Dunkly

The high-priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews is unique in the New Testament canon. As an early Christian writing, this letter may help us in our understanding of what ideas, concepts, and traditions of late second temple Judaism influenced the development of early Christian theology and Christology.

The author of Hebrews inherited the apocalyptic world view of second temple Judaism and of the early Christian church. The author’s theology also has antecedents within the second temple priestly tradition. One of these antecedents included the hope of a savior figure as seen in the expectation of a priestly messiah. The author also believed in the efficacy of the temple cult and drew from the cultic tradition as he developed his high-priestly Christology. The author fused elements from the Jewish priestly theology with the early Christian tradition that he had received to argue that the exalted Jesus Christ was Son of God as well as the heavenly high priest of the heavenly sanctuary.

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**The High-Priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews:
A Fusion of Late Second Temple Theology and Early Christian Tradition**

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
School of Theology of the University of the South
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

May, 2012
Sewanee, Tennessee

Approved: _____

Date: _____

Approved: _____

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Introduction

The Letter to the Hebrews is an early Christian document of the late first-century. As such, this letter provides an opportunity to discover what influenced and shaped the theology of the early church.

Hebrews became a popular piece of literature for Christians in the second-century.¹ How would this letter have been interpreted within the context of late-first century and early second-century Christianity? What need did this letter address within the context of the author's Christian community? What impact did this letter have on the development of Christology in the early church?

The author, who inherited a Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic world view, was strongly influenced by the priestly tradition of second temple Judaism. The author was also influenced by the early Christian tradition that the death of Jesus Christ was a self-sacrifice for the atonement of sins. The author fused elements of these two traditions together to develop his high-priestly Christology.

¹ Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 26.

Chapter One

Jewish Messianism in the Second Temple Period

The Letter to the Hebrews contains a high-priestly Christology that is not found in other New Testament Books. How did the author of this letter develop his ideas of envisaging the risen Christ as the celestial high priest? More specifically, what Jewish theological ideas and literary works pertaining to an eschatological high priest would have been available to the author of Hebrews as a first-century Jew, living in either Palestine or the Jewish Diaspora, that enabled the author to develop his high-priestly Christology? Antecedents for the idea of a celestial high priest in the late second temple period of Judaism are found in the concept of heavenly mediator figures and in the expectation of a priestly messiah.

The Hebrew word for “messiah” just means “anointed” and refers to the anointing of kings and priests. The action of anointing set the person who was anointed aside for a particular purpose, and this action also conferred holiness upon the individual that enabled him to be a mediator between God and the people.² This conferring of holiness through anointing gave the king or priest a special status that separated them from the people.³ After the loss of the monarchy, during the post-exilic period, the term “messiah” came to refer to an ideal, eschatological figure who would act sometime in the future to establish a just kingdom in Israel.⁴

² John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement series, 49 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*, Anchor Bible reference library (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 12.

Jewish messianism was for the most part inactive from the fifth through the late second-century BCE.⁵ Messianism became active in the first-century BCE as a result of the dissatisfaction with and the dislike of the Hasmonean rule in the second-century BCE.⁶ The second-century BCE was a period of turmoil for the Jews as they resisted enforced Hellenization and tried to preserve the unique identity of Judaism.⁷ During this period, apocalyptic literature appeared within Judaism. This literature focused on the future end of this world and the coming of a new age ushered in by the intervention of a heavenly, messianic savior.

Jewish messianic expectation was diverse in the late second temple period.⁸ During this period, “There were four basic messianic paradigms: king, priest, prophet and heavenly messiah.”⁹ John J. Collins states that the various messianic paradigms were political statements.¹⁰ The idea of a Davidic messiah became widespread in the first-century BCE as a rejection of the Hasmonean dynasty.¹¹ Dual messianism consisting of a kingly and a priestly messiah was also a reaction against the Hasmonean kings who appropriated the roles of king and priest in one ruling figure.¹² Since the Hasmoneans did not possess a legitimate right to the priesthood, appropriating the role of priest made the Hasmonean rulers was particularly disliked by the people.¹³

⁵ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 40.

⁶ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Biblical resource series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 158.

⁷ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 444.

⁸ Lester L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 80.

⁹ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 14.

The Priesthood in Second Temple Judaism

The temple, run by the priesthood, was an important institution during the late second temple period. For the greater part of this period, the high priest was the sole leader in Judah.¹⁴ The high priest was also the main mediator between God and the people.¹⁵ Therefore the high priest was the main representative of Jewish identity and the office of the high priest was respected, even after the temple was destroyed and the high priesthood ceased to exist.¹⁶

The importance of the priesthood is seen in the records of priestly genealogy that were kept by Jewish communities in Judea and the Diaspora both before and after the destruction of the temple.¹⁷ In the early second century CE Josephus still commented that the priests oversaw Jewish life and in the years after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the rabbis continued to accept the priesthood in principle.¹⁸

A function of the priestly role was to maintain order by making distinctions between what was holy and what was profane and between what was clean and what was unclean. These were important distinctions which affected all areas of Jewish life. These distinctions also were believed to have an impact on the continuing order of the created world.¹⁹

¹⁴ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 31.

¹⁵ Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 22.

¹⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 292.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁹ Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995), 131.

Apocalypticism in Second Temple Judaism

The Heavenly Realm and Heavenly Intermediaries

Judaism has a long history of intermediary figures chosen by God, who relayed God's messages to God's people and who helped to guide the nation of Israel. These intermediaries included Abraham and the other patriarchs; Moses and other prophets; and kings and priests. In the late second temple period there was a shift from earthly to heavenly intermediary figures.²⁰ Angels, as intermediaries between God and the people, became prominent features in Jewish apocalyptic literature. A whole host of heavenly beings were developed, both angelic and demonic, who exerted their influence over the people. These heavenly beings were created by God and therefore were subordinate to God. Although there were a plethora of semi-divine figures in second temple Judaism, it was clear that there was only one God who was the creator of all that existed.²¹ This hidden, supernatural world of intermediary figures directly affected the lives of human beings on earth.²²

In the second temple period, God was visualized as a transcendent deity seated on a lofty heavenly throne and ministered to by angels. Some apocalyptic writings of this time visualized a heavenly temple where angels took on the role of priests in the heavenly worship. These priestly, heavenly intermediaries worshiped God, engaged in intercessory prayer for humankind and acted as God's messengers to God's people. Among the second temple period literary works that focused on the heavenly realm and described visions of the heavenly temple and its worship, the heavenly throne, and numerous heavenly intermediaries are *1 Enoch*, the *Songs of the Sabbath*

²⁰ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 37

²¹ Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period*, 220.

²² John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 8.

Sacrifice and the Apocalypse of Abraham. Angels also play a dominant role in *Jubilees*.²³ The Book of Sirach features the personification of Wisdom or the Logos of God who is also perceived as a heavenly mediator figure.²⁴

1 Enoch

1 Enoch is one of the earliest examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature. The “Book of the Watchers,” which includes chapters 1-36 of *1 Enoch*, was written during the mid or late third-century BCE.²⁵ Originally written in Aramaic, four copies of *1 Enoch* were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.²⁶ *1 Enoch* is important because it represents the beginning of a shift in thought away from a human savior figure to a transcendent and heavenly savior figure.²⁷ The anticipated messiah who would act sometime in the future became a figure more like an angel than a human being.²⁸

The “Book of the Watchers” describes Enoch’s vision of a heavenly temple served by angels who act as heavenly priests. The angels carry out the heavenly worship and function as intercessors. Enoch ascends into heaven and enters the heavenly sanctuary where he is allowed to take on the function of a priest by offering intercessory prayer.²⁹ Enoch ascends into heaven

²³ James C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees*, Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 126.

²⁴ F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church Third Edition Revised* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005), 1288.

²⁵ George W.E. Nickelsburg and James C. Vanderkam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation*, Based on the Hermeneia Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ Benjamin G. Wright III, “Ben Sira and the Book of the Watchers on the Legitimate Priesthood,” in *Intertextual Studies in Ben Sira and Tobit: Essays in Honor of Alexander A. Di Lella, O.F.M. et al., eds.*, Catholic Biblical quarterly Monograph series 38, 241-254 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association, 2005), 249.

and is given instruction by the archangel Michael. Enoch was told that he was to reprimand the angels who had gone astray: “So he created and destined me to reprimand the Watchers, the sons of heaven.”³⁰ As a rebuker of the Watchers, Enoch becomes a human being with an elevated status in the sight of God.

Later, Enoch is shown a vision of the splendor of the heavenly throne with God sitting upon the throne: “I saw a lofty throne its appearance was like ice, and its wheels were like the shining sun. The great glory sat upon it, his apparel was like the appearance of the sun and whiter than snow.”³¹ At the end of *I Enoch*, Enoch is told that he is the son of man, “You are that son of man who was born for righteousness, and righteousness dwells on you, and the righteousness of the Head of Days will not forsake you.”³² Enoch becomes a type of a righteous messianic figure. The story of Enoch shows how a righteous human being ascended into heaven and was shown the heavenly realms including the glory of God. Enoch was given heavenly knowledge through heavenly beings and himself received heavenly status as the son of man.

Jubilees

Jubilees is dated to approximately 170-100 BCE.³³ The author wrote in Hebrew and was probably a Palestinian Jew who may have belonged to a priestly family.³⁴ It is speculated that the

³⁰ Nickelsburg and Vanderkam eds., *I Enoch* 14:3.

³¹ Ibid., *I Enoch* 18:18-20.

³² Ibid., *I Enoch*: 13:14.

³³ John C. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 84.

³⁴ O.S. Wintermute, “Jubilees a New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 2*, 35-142, edited by James C. Charlsworth (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1985), 45.

author may have been associated with the Judaism of the Essenes.³⁵ Many fragments from different parts of *Jubilees* were found at the Qumran site.

Jubilees consists of a retelling of the stories from Genesis and Exodus. An angel of the presence passes on divine revelation to Moses during his forty days on Mt. Sinai. *Jubilees* describes a host of angels with varying levels of authority.³⁶ The second chapter of *Jubilees* describes the first day of creation: “For on the first day he created the heavens ... and all the spirits who minister before him ... the angels of the presence, the angels of sanctification, the angels of the spirits of fire ... and all the spirits of his creatures which are in heaven and on earth.”³⁷ The heavenly host are created on the first day of creation.

The functions of the angels of the presence and the angels of sanctification include relaying messages between God and humankind and protecting humankind against evil powers. The angelic interaction with humankind includes much more than intercessory prayers: the angels are directly involved in human affairs. In *Jubilees* chapter three, angels teach Adam how to till the soil. Throughout *Jubilees* the pronoun “we” is used as the angels direct human history.

In chapter four of *Jubilees* the author refers to Enoch, “And he was therefore with the angels of God six jubilees of years. And they showed him everything which is on earth and in the heavens, the dominion of the sun.”³⁸ (Jub 4:21) Then, “He (Enoch) was taken from among the children of men, and we led him to the garden of Eden for greatness and honor. And behold, he is there writing condemnation and judgment of the world, and all of the evils of the children of

³⁵ Wintermute, “Jubilees a New Translation and Introduction,” 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁸ Wintermute, Jub 4:21.

men.”³⁹ (Jub 4:23) Enoch is removed from his earthly existence and to act as the heavenly judge of the world. Enoch is presented as an ideal semi-divine figure who acts as God’s agent. And Enoch, “offered the incense which is acceptable before the Lord in the evening (at) the holy place on Mount Qater.”⁴⁰ (Jub 4:25) Enoch *functions as a priest by offering incense*.

Angels interact with humans in *Jubilees* by teaching humans the ways of righteousness; teaching humans various practical skills; informing humankind what is God’s will; testing humans; reporting the sins of human beings to God; announcing future events; revealing secret knowledge; binding up evil spirits; guarding human beings; and leading the gentiles astray.⁴¹ There is also a host of demonic heavenly beings who exert their influence over humanity.⁴² Although the world of the heavenly intermediaries is hidden from humanity’s view, in *Jubilees* it exerts great influence over humanity and on the course of human history.

Sirach

The Book of Sirach dates to approximately 185 BCE.⁴³ Ben Sira, the author of *Sirach*, describes Wisdom as a heavenly figure. Wisdom becomes a personification of God’s wisdom. Ben Sira states that Wisdom was created by God and is eternal. “Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages, I shall not cease to be” (Sirach 24:9).⁴⁴ “In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory; I came forth from the mouth of the most high ...” (Sirach 24:2-3). Wisdom is portrayed as

³⁹ Ibid., Jub 4:23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Jub 4:25.

⁴¹ Ibid., 47.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ James L. Crenshaw, “The Book of Sirach,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Bible Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume V (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1997), 611.

⁴⁴ All biblical references in this paper are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

being active in the heavenly council. Wisdom is also directly involved with the people of Israel, God tells Wisdom, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance ... in the holy tent I ministered before him ... and in Jerusalem was my domain” (Sirach 24: 8-11).

Wisdom dwells within the temple and ministers before God, it may be said that Wisdom takes on a priestly function here.

The Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel also dates to the second century BCE (168-64 BCE)⁴⁵ and features the archangels Gabriel and Michael. Gabriel interprets Daniel’s visions and gives to Daniel wisdom and understanding (Dan 9:21-23). The archangel Michael functions as a guardian and protector of Israel. Angels in the Book of Daniel function as bestowers of wisdom and as protectors of human being, specifically as a protector of Israel.

In chapter twelve of Daniel, Michael arises as the protector of the people at the end of the age. “At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of the people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred” (Daniel 12:1-2). Michael will be a prominent figure during the turbulence of the last days. At that time the righteous will be delivered and will receive everlasting life. “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and contempt” (Daniel 12:2). John J. Collins states that the archangel Michael is presented as a savior figure in chapter 12 of Daniel.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice 4Q400-407, 11Q17, Masada 1039-200

The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice were included in the manuscripts found at Qumran belonging to the Dead Sea sect. These manuscripts were found in fragmentary form and are dated to the first- century BCE.⁴⁷ They depict a heavenly temple in which the angels perform worship.

“For he has established supreme holiness among the everlastingly holy, the Holy of Holies, to be for him the priests of [the inner Temple in his royal sanctuary], ministers of the Presence in his glorious innermost Temple chamber.”⁴⁸ The structure of this heavenly temple is described as being similar to the earthly temple. The angels who minister in this heavenly temple are described as wearing ephods and breastplates, the priestly garb of the priests who serve in the earthly temple. These heavenly priests are depicted as offering sacrifices to God.⁴⁹ These angels, dressed like earthly priests, function as priests as they preside over worship in the heavenly temple.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 135.

⁴⁸ 4Q400 fr. I i.

⁴⁹ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple*, 135.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Apocalypse of Abraham

The *Apocalypse of Abraham* was written towards the end of the first-century CE⁵¹ and therefore may be contemporary with the Letter to the Hebrews. Even if this apocalypse was written later than Hebrews, it tells us that the ideas of a heavenly sanctuary and throne served by a host of angels were still ideas circulating in Judaism towards the end of the first and into the second-century. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* was written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. With “the loss of the terrestrial sanctuary, the authors of the Jewish apocalyptic writings tried to embrace other theological alternatives for preserving and perpetuating traditional priestly practices.”⁵² One of these alternatives was the idea of the celestial sanctuary with its heavenly worship. With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple the idea of a celestial temple now took on new meaning.

As in other apocalypses, angels and demons play a large role in this apocalypse. Iaoel is the highest ranking angel in this story and it is he who protects Abraham and shows him the heavenly realm. Iaoel is described with the language of divine majesty, “The appearance of his body was like sapphire, and the aspect of his face was chrysolite, and the hair of his head like snow. And a headdress was on his head, its look like that of a rainbow, and the clothing of his garments was purple, and a golden staff was in his right hand.”⁵³ Iaoel's appearance is described as a mixture of other-worldliness and kingly power.

⁵¹ R. Rubinkiewicz, trans., “Apocalypse of Abraham: A New Translation and Introduction” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Volume 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, edited by James H. Charlesworth, 682-705 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1992), 682.

⁵² Andrei A. Orlov, *Selected Studies in the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigrapha*, v. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 12.

⁵³ Rubinkiewicz, “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” 694.

Even though this apocalypse was written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, priestly worship is emphasized in this story. It is through the ritual of sacrifice, a priestly role, that Abraham is able to ascend into heaven with the angel Iaoel. Worship is taking place in heaven as on earth and Iaoel teaches Abraham the songs for the heavenly worship. “And I saw there a multitude of spiritual angels, incorporeal, carrying out the orders of the fiery angels.”⁵⁴ Abraham sees the divine throne (or chariot) and on the throne God is seen as a transcendent fiery presence. Although there are numerous celestial beings, it is emphasized that there is just one God who is in charge of the entire heavenly realm, while all other beings are less than God. At the end of this era, the apocalypse states that a “chosen one” will gather God’s people and the earthly temple and its sacrifices will be restored.⁵⁵ A messiah type of figure will bring in a new age which will make possible the restoration of the earthly temple. Priestly worship is emphasized not only in the celestial worship but also in the hope of a new earthly temple.

Summary

During the late second temple period there was a shift from the hope of a human David-like savior who would come in the future, to a heavenly or semi-divine mediator figure. Hope was to be found in the existence of the grandeur of the heavenly realm where the throne of God and the heavenly temple resided. In the heavenly realm there was not just one but many intermediary figures who looked after the welfare of humankind. These intermediary figures or angels were semi-divine and were superior to and more powerful than humans. The angels were in direct communication with God and ready to do God’s will. They served humankind by

⁵⁴ Ibid., 698.

⁵⁵ Rubinkiewicz, “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” 685.

teaching wisdom and knowledge and offering intercessory prayer. The earthly temple was seen as a model of the heavenly temple. If there were problems with the earthly temple or even if the earthly temple should be destroyed, a pure form of worship would continuously be practiced in the heavenly temple. The angels functioned as priests in the heavenly temple by leading worship, offering incense and sacrifices to God, and by engaging in intercessory prayer on behalf of the people.

Very righteous and venerable human beings were able to ascend into heaven and witness the grandeur and knowledge of the heavenly realm. Some of these righteous persons, such as Enoch and Abraham, were even allowed to participate in the heavenly worship and themselves to act as priests in the heavenly sanctuary. Enoch was even exalted to semi-divine status as the “son of man.”

Another heavenly mediator figure is seen in the concept of an ideal or messianic high priest.

The Ideal High Priest as a Messianic Figure

The idea of a heavenly, priestly messiah appeared during the second temple period. During this time, the idea of a Davidic messiah was more popular and widespread than the idea of a priestly messiah. One reason for this was that there were more scriptural proof texts to support a Davidic messiah and fewer biblical texts to support an argument for a priestly

messiah.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the idea of a priestly messiah was found in Judaism during the second temple period, especially among Jews with a priestly theology, such as the community at Qumran.⁵⁷

Aaron represented the ideal high priest for many Jews.⁵⁸ Aaron and his sons were appointed by God to serve as priests (Ex 28:1). Aaron was descended from Levi, who was one of Jacob's sons and who was a leader of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Therefore Levi, as an ancestor of Aaron and of the Levitical priesthood, became the ideal priestly figure in many writings of the second temple period.

Literary evidence for an ideal priestly figure, and in some cases a priestly messiah during the second temple period is found in Sirach, *Jubilees*, the writings of Philo of Alexandria, some of the writings identified as the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and in the writings associated with the Melchizedek tradition.

Sirach

Grabbe states that Sirach is important for its insight into the priesthood of Ben Sira's time, approximately 185 BCE.⁵⁹ As noted previously, Sirach was written before the Maccabean revolt at a time when there was little interest in eschatology.⁶⁰ For the author, Ben Sira, the monarchy is an institution of the past and it is the high priest who is the leader of the people. Ben Sira is supportive of the temple cult and its priests. In Sirach, Ben Sira tells the people to fear the

⁵⁶ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 95.

⁵⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 298.

⁵⁹ Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period*, 57.

⁶⁰ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 33.

Lord and revere and honor the priests (Sir 7:29, 31). In chapter 45, Ben Sira praises both Moses and Aaron; but Ben Sira gives Aaron, the priest, seventeen verses of praise, while Moses receives only five verses of praise. Ben Sira states that God exalted Aaron and made an everlasting covenant with him, establishing an eternal priesthood (Sirach 45: 6-7). Aaron received his priestly authority from God and his role as a priest was to be a mediator between God and the people, to teach the Law, and to make atonement for the sins of the people (Sirach 45: 16-17).

Ben Sira sees the high priest in his time as the main mediator of God's blessing.⁶¹ in chapter 50, Ben Sira describes the recently deceased high priest Simon with glowing language. Simon is compared to the morning star, the sun shining on the temple, the gleaming rainbow, like roses and like a vessel of hammered gold studded with all kinds of precious stones. (Sirach 50: 6-9) Simon is described in his priestly robe as being clothed in perfect splendor. (Sirach 50:11) Nickelsburg describes these descriptions of Simon as "hymns of the high priestly glory."⁶² Chapter 50 also describes the magnificence of the temple ritual. (Sirach 50:12-21) Ben Sira sees the high priest as both a religious and a political figure as he ascribes to Simon kingly characteristics.⁶³

⁶¹ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 34.

⁶² George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Early Judaism: Texts and Documents on Faith and Piety* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 63.

⁶³ Wright III, "Ben Sira and the Book of the Watchers on the Legitimate Priesthood," 252.

The Book of Jubilees

Jubilees contains stories about Levi and his role as a priest. In chapters 30-32, there is a story about the calling of Levi's descendants to the priesthood.⁶⁴ Levi and Judah are given special blessings in this story. Jacob gives priority to Levi (priestly descendants) over Judah (royal descendants) by taking Levi in his right hand and Judah in his left and blessing Levi first. Levi's blessing states, "May the Lord give you and your descendants greatness and great glory, and set you apart from all mankind to minister to him and to serve him in his sanctuary like the angels of the presence and the holy ones" (Jub 31:14).⁶⁵ Jacob also states that Levi's descendants "will become judges, rulers and leaders for all the sons of Jacob"⁶⁶ (Jub 31:15). In chapter 32, Levi has a dream in which he has been appointed and ordained a priest of the Most High God. In this dream Levi is also told that his descendants will be priests forever.⁶⁷ (Jub 32:16-20) Jacob, on hearing this dream, gives Levi a tithe of all his possessions. Levi's priesthood is recognized by the patriarch Jacob. (Jub 32:9)

In *Jubilees* the figure of the ideal priest is given precedence over the figure of the ideal king. Although John J. Collins states that the stories in *Jubilees* about Levi and Judah are not seen as messianic or eschatological in character, the stories do emphasize the greater status given to the ideal priest over the ideal king.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Wintermute "Jubilees a New Translation and Introduction," 85.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁷ Wintermute, "Jubikees a New Translation and Introduction," 116-117.

⁶⁸ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 86.

Philo of Alexandria

Philo of Alexandria was a major writer within Hellenistic Judaism and lived from approximately 20 BCE-50 CE.⁶⁹ He belonged to a priestly family and his writing reflects great admiration for the priesthood and the role of the high priest. Philo wove together Greek and Jewish ideas. In his writing the Logos of God was an intermediary figure through whom human beings came to know God. It was the Logos who spoke to Moses in the burning bush and it was the Logos who acted through the high priest.⁷⁰

Philo speaks of the high priest as an exalted figure. Philo states, “But the high priest of whom we are speaking is a perfect man” (*On Dreams* 2.185).⁷¹ Philo then states, “the high priest is inferior to God but superior to man (*On Dreams* 2.188). “Scripture says the high priest goes into the Holy of Holies and he will not be a man. What then will he be? He touches both these extremities (God and man) as though he touched both the feet and the head” (*On Dreams* 2.185). Philo envisaged the high priest as almost a heavenly intermediary figure possessing a status greater than other humans but subordinate to God. It was through the cultic ritual that the high priest achieved this superior mode of being. As the high priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement he was entering into God’s presence and found himself between heaven and earth.

In the *Special Laws* 1.97 Philo states, “For the priests of other deities are accustomed to offer up prayers and sacrifice solely for their own relations, and friends and fellow citizens. But the high priest of the Jews offers them up not only on behalf of the whole race of mankind, but

⁶⁹ Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period*, 90.

⁷⁰ F. L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. revised (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1288.

⁷¹ Philo: in ten volumes (and two supplementay volumes): with an English translation by F.H. Colson, and G.H. Whitaker, Loeb classical library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), *On Dreams* 2.185.

also on behalf of the different parts of nature, of the earth, of water, of air, and of fire, and pours forth his prayers and thanksgivings for them all.” The temple was a symbol of creation in miniature. The ritual performed on the Day of Atonement cleansed not only the temple and the people from sins but also all of creation.⁷²

Summary

The Books of Sirach and *Jubilees* and the writing of Philo all show a high regard for the role of the Jewish high priest. The high priest is seen as superior to other people and at times almost semi-divine, especially while he is performing the cultic ritual. The Levitical priesthood is described as being specifically chosen by God and it is an eternal priesthood. The primary role of the priest is the role of a mediator figure who intercedes between the people of Israel and God.

The Qumran Literature

The documents found at Qumran represent literature from a variety of sources. Among the scrolls were found texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, from apocryphal writings and from texts that were written specifically for the Qumran community. Many copies of the books of *Enoch* and *Jubilees* were found at Qumran, which seems to suggest that the community regarded

⁷² Margaret Barker, “The High Priest and the Worship of Jesus,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrew’s Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus*, Supplements in the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 93-111, ed. by Carey C. Newman et al., 93-111 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 102.

these books as authoritative writings.⁷³ Heavenly intermediaries and ideal priestly figures appear in many of the writings found at Qumran.

The idea that there would be two messiahs, one a priest and one a king, is found in some of the Qumran literature. The idea of two messiahs seems to be a particular idea of the Qumran community.⁷⁴ The priestly messiah also takes precedence in the scrolls found at Qumran and in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.

The founder of the Dead Sea sect may have been a priest known as the Teacher of Righteousness.⁷⁵ The literature found at the Qumran site is unique in the importance it places on the eschatological role of the high priest over the Davidic messiah.⁷⁶ Collins states that the Dead Sea Scrolls “envision a messianic age, when the promises to Israel will be fulfilled in this world. The restoration of the temple cult, under a messiah of Aaron, is an important feature of this age.”⁷⁷

The Aramaic Levi Document

The *Aramaic Levi Document* (ALD) emphasizes the priestly credentials of Levi and the centrality of the Levitical priesthood. Seven fragmented copies of the document were found at Qumran and are dated to the third or early second-century BCE.⁷⁸ In this document, Levi is presented as an ideal priest from the past. In a vision, Levi is told that “the kingdom of

⁷³ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 146.

⁷⁴ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 95.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ David Flusser, *Judaism in the Second Temple Period Volume 1: Qumran and Apocalypticism*, trans. by Azzaras Yadin (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 33.

⁷⁷ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 175.

⁷⁸ Michael E. Stone, *Ancient Judaism New Visions and Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 36.

priesthood is greater than [] to the Most High God” (*ALD* 4:7).⁷⁹ The “kingdom of priesthood” implies rule and is most likely contrasted with the rule of the king. *ALD* 4:8 states that, “you will rule until”; the action of ruling refers more to the function of kings than to that of priests. The *Aramaic Levi Document* states that Levi was more beloved than any of his brothers. (*ALD* 10:11) This seems to indicate that Levi is given precedence over Judah from whom the Davidic dynasty would come. Both royal and priestly characteristics are given to Levi and royal language is used of the priesthood.⁸⁰

In chapter four of the *Aramaic Levi Document*, Levi is shown a vision of heaven with its host of angels.⁸¹ This vision ends with the anointing of Levi as priest. In other words, Levi is chosen by God to be a priest and is anointed in the heavenly realm. Levi goes to his father Jacob who blesses him. Then Jacob makes a tithe of everything he possessed. In *ALD* 5:3 Levi says, “And then I was before him at the head of the priesthood and to me, of all his sons, he gave a gift, a tithe to God, and vested me in the priestly garb.” Levi then performs the priestly function of blessing his father and brothers. Levi goes to his grandfather Isaac, who “when he heard that I was a priest of the Most High God, the Lord of heaven, he began to instruct me and to teach me the law of the priesthood” (*ALD* 5:8).

The *Aramaic Levi Document* stresses the continuity of priestly teaching, extending back into the time of the patriarchs and even extending back to the time of Noah. The continuity of priestly teaching therefore extends back to the very beginning of a new earth after the flood.⁸²

⁷⁹ Jonas C. Greenfield, Michael E. Stone, and Esther Eshel. *The Aramaic Levi Document*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigrapha*, v. 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2004)

⁸⁰ Greenfield, Stone and Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi Document*, 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 21.

This Levitical priesthood will be an eternal one. “And now child Levi, your seed shall be blessed upon the earth for all generations of eternity” (*ALD* 10:14).

One of the characteristics of the priesthood that is stressed in the *Aramaic Levi Document* is the desire for wisdom and the teaching of wisdom. Prior to his vision, Levi prays to the shown the Holy Spirit and asks for counsel and wisdom and for a pure heart. (*ALD* 3:6) Levi also prays for “true judgment.” (*ALD* 3:17) In chapter 13, Levi teaches his children and grandchildren in the ways of wisdom. “Wisdom is a great wealth of honor for those familiar with it and a fine treasure for all who acquire it. (*ALD* 13:10) The passing of judgment was a function of the priest and Levi’s judgment will be greater than all others. “Your judgment is greater than that of all flesh.” (*ALD* 6:1)

The *Aramaic Levi Document* presents Levi as an ideal priest who is called and anointed by God and whose priestly line will continue through his descendants into eternity. Levi received his priestly teaching from an unbroken line of descendants going back to the time of Noah. Levi’s wisdom and judgment are presented as being unsurpassed by any other human being.

The Testament of Qahat

The *Testament of Qahat*,² or 4Q542, is another fragmented text found at Qumran, which dates from 125-110 BCE.⁸³ This document, like the *Aramaic Levi Document*, stresses the transmission of an unbroken line of priestly teaching from Abraham to Qahat, the son of Levi and grandfather of Aaron and Moses.

⁸³ Stone, *Ancient Judaism New Visions and Views*, 38.

The Florilegium and the Testimonia

Two very fragmented writings found at Qumran also refer to a priestly messiah. The *Florilegium*, or 4Q174, mentions two messiah-type figures one who is a Davidic messiah and one who is a priestly messiah.⁸⁴ The *Testimonia*, or 4Q175, refers to three eschatological figures: the prophet like Moses, the royal messiah, and the priestly messiah.⁸⁵

The Community Rule, IQS

The *Community Rule* is a document of the Dead Sea sect that is dated to approximately 100 BCE and states, “The sons of Aaron will command in matters of justice and property, and every rule concerning the men of the community shall be determined according to their word.”⁸⁶ In other words, the priests will govern the community at Qumran. This document also contains the statement about the coming of two messiahs, “They shall depart from none of the counsels of the Law until there shall come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.”⁸⁷

Summary

The Qumran documents noted above give precedence to a priestly messiah over a royal messiah. Levi, as the antecedent of the Levitical priesthood is highly regarded. Levi’s status is even exalted, as seen in the *Aramaic Levi Document*, where Levi ascends into heaven during a vision and is anointed a priest by the angels of God. In the *Aramaic Levi Document*, Levi is given

⁸⁴ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 132.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Geza Vermes, trans, ed., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), 110.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

both royal and priestly characteristics and royal language is used of the priesthood.⁸⁸ *Jubilees* also gives precedence to Levi in chapters 30-32.⁸⁹ In chapter 31, Jacob by his blessing gives precedence to Levi who represents the priesthood, over Judah who represents the monarchy.⁹⁰

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs are difficult to date because most of the manuscripts we have are not originals but are from later Greek translations. It is estimated that the *Testaments* date from the late second or the early third-century.⁹¹ The discovery of the *Aramaic Levi Document*, which is similar to the *Testament of Levi*, shows that earlier forms of the *Testaments* existed. The later Greek translations of the *Testaments* have undergone extensive Christian editing. However, despite this editing the earlier Jewish ideas can still be found. The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* are probably not the work of the Dead Sea sect.⁹²

The *Testaments* are a series of farewell discourses to the sons of Jacob.⁹³ Ethical instruction, predictions of the future, and the consequences of obedient and disobedient behavior towards God are addressed in these stories.⁹⁴

In these *Testaments*, Levi and Judah are given special attention because they are the ancestors of the priests and kings of Israel from whom will come salvation in the eschatological

⁸⁸ Greenfield, Stone and Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi Document*, 20.

⁸⁹ Wintermute, *Jubilees*, 36.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹¹ Nickelsburg, *Early Judaism*, 189.

⁹² Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia, Helmut Koester, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 98.

⁹³ M. De Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 264.

⁹⁴ Marinus De Jonge, *Jewish Eschatology, Early Christian Christology and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Supplements in Novum Testamentum*, v. 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 264.

future.⁹⁵ *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* emphasize the dual leadership of the priest and king.⁹⁶

The high priest is given superior status in relation to the royal messiah in several of these *Testaments*.⁹⁷ In the *Testament of Judah*, the role of the priest is given more importance than the role of the king, even though the monarchy will descend from the tribe of Judah.⁹⁸ The *Testament of Judah* contains a warning that if the priesthood allows itself to be dominated by the king, it will no longer be following the Lord.⁹⁹ This statement may have been a reaction against the Hasmonean dynasty who combined the roles of king and priest in one leader.¹⁰⁰ In the *Testaments* the monarchy is set beneath the authority of the priesthood. According to Collins, however, the *Testaments* do not carry an eschatological meaning.¹⁰¹

In the *Testament of Levi*, Levi is portrayed as having an eschatological priesthood which will be eternal. “From now on become a priest of the Lord, you and your seed, forever” (T. Levi 8: 3).¹⁰² “During his priesthood all sin will fail and the lawless will rest in evil, but the righteous will rest in him. And he will open the gates of paradise ... and Beliar will be bound by him” (T. Levi 18: 9-12). Attridge states that Levi’s role as the eschatological priest will be to cause sin to cease, provide rest for the righteous, defeat the powers of evil, and restore humanity to a state of righteousness.¹⁰³ In this testament, Levi becomes a heavenly being who resembles

⁹⁵ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 99.

⁹⁶ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 90.

⁹⁷ Nickelsburg, *Early Judaism*, 189.

⁹⁸ De Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature*, 126.

⁹⁹ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰² H.W. Hollander and M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary*. *Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 1985)

¹⁰³ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 99.

Melchizedek.¹⁰⁴ It is difficult to identify who this eschatological priest is because of the influence of Christian redaction. The Testament of Levi does however present a heavenly high priest who functions in a messianic role by defeating the powers of evil and who restores humanity to a state of righteousness.

According to Collins, the *Testaments* adopt the earlier Jewish expectation of two messiahs, but he adds that, “In their final form (Christian form) the testaments envisage one messiah, who is associated with both Levi and Judah and who is identified with Christ.”¹⁰⁵ The old Levitical priesthood will disappear and God will send a new priest who will receive divine revelations and who has the attributes of both a priest and a king.¹⁰⁶

The Melchizedek Tradition

The mysterious figure of Melchizedek “exercised a fascination on Jewish imagination at the beginning of the Christian era.”¹⁰⁷ Melchizedek appears in *Jubilees*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, the writings of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and midrashic literature, among other writings.¹⁰⁸ The Melchizedek tradition is based on two short references to Melchizedek in our Old Testament: Genesis 14:18-29 and in Psalm 110:4. Genesis 14:18-20 is the story of Melchizedek meeting Abraham. Abraham has returned from a successful battle; and King Melchizedek greets Abraham and blesses him. This action of blessing associates Melchizedek with the priesthood because blessing was a priestly prerogative. Abraham in turn

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁵ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 141.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰⁷ John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Monograph Series (Society for New Testament Studies), v. 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 164,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 164.

acknowledges the priesthood of Melchizedek by giving him a tithe of his spoils or possessions.¹⁰⁹ “And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him (Abram) and said ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’ And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:18-20). By giving Melchizedek a tithe Abraham also acknowledges that Melchizedek is superior to himself.¹¹⁰ Melchizedek’s superiority is then, by implication, meant to be over Abraham’s descendants as well, who include Levi and the Levitical priesthood.¹¹¹

Melchizedek is priest of God Most High or El Elyon, a Canaanite god.¹¹² Israel Knohl states that since Melchizedek is a non-Israelite king, he is not restrained by the Torah and so he can serve as both king and priest.¹¹³ (The Torah promotes the separation between the priesthood and the kingship.) Therefore, Melchizedek can serve as the ideal biblical model for the union of the roles of priest and king in one figure.¹¹⁴ Horton believes that verses 18-20 of Genesis 14 were inserted into the text at a date later than the rest of the chapter.¹¹⁵ But it is unclear as to why the verses were inserted.

¹⁰⁹ Stone, *Ancient Judaism*, 33.

¹¹⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 344.

¹¹¹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 187.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 188.

¹¹³ Israel Knohl, “Melchizedek: A Model for the Union of Kingship and Priesthood in the Hebrew Bible, 11QMelchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Text, Thought and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, eds. Ruth A. Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz, 255-266 (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 259.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹¹⁵ Fred L. Horton, Jr. *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Monograph series (Society for New Testament Studies) v.65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.), 13.

Psalm 110 and Melchizedek

Psalm 110 is a royal psalm; it may have been used at the coronation of King David; verses 1-4 were a favorite messianic text for the early Christians. “The Lord says to my Lord; sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. rule in the midst of your foes ... The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps110:1-4). The name “Melchizedek” means “my king is righteousness.” In this psalm the king is also a priest, which reflects the fact that both King David and King Solomon served in priestly roles. Combining the two roles of priest and king demonstrates the power and the prestige of the priestly role. This psalm also emphasizes that Melchizedek’s priesthood is forever and that his priesthood is also an “order.”

11QMelchizedek

11QMelchizedek is a fragmented and poorly preserved document found at Qumran.¹¹⁶ This document describes a great jubilee which will take place at the end of ten jubilees and this great jubilee will take place on the Day of Atonement.¹¹⁷ Melchizedek performs the role of high priest in this Day of Atonement ritual.¹¹⁸ The document states that “This is the time of Melchizedek’s year of favor,” a statement that substitutes Melchizedek’s name for the Lord’s.¹¹⁹ Melchizedek is given a very elevated status as he takes his place in the divine council and acts as

¹¹⁶ Anders Aschim, “Melchizedek and Jesus: 11QMelchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, eds. Carey C. Newman et al., 129-147 (Boston: Brill, 1999), 129.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

judge over other heavenly beings; it is Melchizeek who will carry out God's judgment.¹²⁰ On the Day of Atonement, Melchizedek will judge Belial and liberate the captives, "the mourners of Zion." and will forgive their sins.¹²¹ Melchizedek symbolizes the messiah or God on the Day of Atonement and at the last judgment.¹²² Israel Knohl states that *11QMelchizedek* combines the roles of king, priest, and redeemer in one person, which is a new messianic idea.¹²³

11Q Melchizedek portrays Melchizedek as a heavenly being of elevated status who acts as a heavenly judge and high priest. Anders Aschim states that Melchizedek is also presented as a warrior who will conquer the evil powers, and therefore Melchizedek may be identified with the archangel Michael.¹²⁴ Horton states that the description of Melchizedek in this document goes beyond the description of Michael found in other Qumran documents, such as the War Scrolls, and that Melchizedek is here portrayed as an angelic, eschatological figure.¹²⁵

Summary of the Melchizedek Tradition

In the Melchizedek tradition, Melchizedek is portrayed as a non-Levitical priest and as a king. He was chosen by God for his unique purpose of being the priest of God and his priesthood is portrayed as being superior to the Levitical priesthood. Since Melchizedek suddenly appears and disappears in the biblical record, in the late second temple period he is presented as an exalted, semi-divine figure. Psalm 110 links the exalted position of sitting at God's right hand, a

¹²⁰ Aschim, "Melchizedek and Jesus," 133.

¹²¹ Knohl, "Melchizedek" 259.

¹²² Knohl, "Melchizedek," 262.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹²⁴ Aschim, "Melchizedek and Jesus," 133.

¹²⁵ Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 81-85.

position associated with the early kings and later with the messiah, with an eternal priesthood. Melchizedek is portrayed as a heavenly messiah type of figure who will cause sin to cease, will conquer the powers of evil, and will liberate the captives. He is also portrayed as the heavenly high priest who officiates over the temple ritual on the eschatological Day of Atonement. Melchizedek is the one who will carry out God's judgment in the eschatological future. Philo equates Melchizedek with the Wisdom of God. As Knohl stated, the Melchizedek tradition portrays Melchizedek as an eschatological priest, king and redeemer.

Summary: Jewish Messianism During the second Temple Period

During the second temple period the Jerusalem temple, run by the priesthood, was an important institution. The high priest was the mediator between God and the people of Israel and in the absence of a king was also Israel's main representative of Jewish identity. Messianic expectations were diverse in the late second temple period. Although the expectation for a Davidic messiah was greater in some sections of Judaism, the idea of a priestly messiah existed among those groups who supported a priestly theology, such as the community at Qumran.

In the late second temple period there was a shift away from earthly mediator figures and towards heavenly mediator figures as seen in the literature of this period. These figures, who acted as mediators between God and the people, were seen as exalted, ideal, and sometimes even semi-divine beings. Levi, as the ideal representative of the eternal and ideal priesthood, became one of these exalted intermediary figures in the literature of the second temple period.

The ideal high priest was seen as the most powerful representative of Israel, enjoying precedence over the king. The ideal priest was chosen by God to establish an eternal priesthood. At times, this ideal priest is presented as a savior and redeemer figure who will destroy the powers of evil and bring forth righteousness on earth. The ideal priest functions as a heavenly priest in a heavenly temple.

Chapter Two

The High-Priestly Christology in the Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews: Its Context

The Letter to the Hebrews puts forth a sustained argument that presents Jesus Christ as the “Son of God”¹²⁶ and as a “merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (Heb 2:17). The date, author, genre, and the audience to whom the letter is addressed all continue to be debated by scholars. *Hebrews* may have been written towards the end of the first-century. A date between 60-90 is often given by scholars.¹²⁷ The date preferred sometimes depends on the scholar’s opinion of whether it was written prior to or after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In addition some scholars believe that Clement of Rome borrowed from *the* Letter to the Hebrews when he wrote *1 Clement*. Since *1 Clement* is often dated to approximately 96 CE, these scholars propose that Hebrews was written prior to 96 CE. However other scholars give a broader range of dates for the writing of *1 Clement* ranging from 70-140 CE.¹²⁸ Therefore these scholars suggest that the two writings may have been written independently, with both authors using a common tradition that was available to them.¹²⁹ The date for *Hebrews* is therefore placed sometime between the end of the first and the early part of the second-century.

By the middle of the second-century, the Letter to the Hebrews was considered to be a letter written by the apostle Paul.¹³⁰ The earliest papyrus that contains Hebrews is dated to approximately 200 CE. In this papyrus Hebrews is listed as part of a collection of Pauline

¹²⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 104.

¹²⁷ Matthew Marohl, *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 30.

¹²⁸ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

letters.¹³¹ Attributing Hebrews to Paul gave the work the credibility of apostolic authorship. Hebrews became a popular Christian literary work in the second century and Tertullian states that, “The Epistle to the Hebrews is more widely received among the churches than the *Shepherd of Hermas*.”¹³² By the end of the second century *Hebrews* was widely known among Christian groups.¹³³

Whether Hebrews is a letter or a sermon and whether it was written to a particular early Christian group or to a group of churches is under debate. The unknown author wrote in Greek, knew the Septuagint well and, knew how to use the art of classical rhetoric.¹³⁴ The author was able to sustain an argument that would have been intelligible to Christians in either Palestine or the Diaspora.¹³⁵

The author is writing to a church or a group of churches that he has a relationship with and he is addressing a particular problem that he knows they are currently experiencing. The problem may have been a form of discrimination or persecution that threatened the stability of the group. The central argument of Hebrews is that Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for sins continues to have efficacy for believers even though Jesus’ death occurred a generation or more in the past.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Bruce M. Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

¹³² Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* (London: Routledge, 1995), 177.

¹³³ Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 26.

¹³⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

¹³⁵ Morohl, *Faithfulness and Purpose of Hebrews*, 44.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

Hebrew's High-Priestly Christology: Influences from Second Temple Judaism

The Cult of the Second Temple and its Meaning

The foundation for the Christology of *Hebrews* was the early church's belief that Christ's death was pre-ordained by God as a sacrificial offering that somehow had the power to overcome sin and death.¹³⁷

The belief that the sacrificial system was efficacious for the cleansing or the atoning of sins was essential for the high-priestly Christology found in *Hebrews*.¹³⁸ The Old Testament provides no rationale for Israel's sacrificial system. Despite this lack of awareness of how the system worked, the sacrificial system lay at the center of Israel's religion.¹³⁹ The temple was believed to have been built according to God's instructions and worship was carried out according to divine directions, therefore most Jews had great respect for the temple and its ritual.¹⁴⁰ Even after the destruction of the temple and the loss of the sacrificial cult, the rabbis continued to accept the priesthood in principle.¹⁴¹

It was believed that the priesthood, which controlled the cultic ritual, was ordained by God for eternity through the descendants of Aaron. "and so they shall have priesthood as their right for all time. You shall then ordain Aaron and his sons" (Ex 29:9). One of the main

¹³⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 104.

¹³⁸ Lindars, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 10.

¹³⁹ Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism*, 43.

¹⁴⁰ Leon Morris, "The Saints and the Synagogue," in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church – Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement series, 87, edited by Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige, 39-52 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 40.

¹⁴¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 359.

functions of the priestly role was to make atonement for the people. “For this shall be to you a law for all time to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year” (Lev16:34).

It was also believed that the sacrificial system was commanded by God as a means of maintaining a state of purity that was essential in order to maintain the divine presence within the temple¹⁴² and within Israel as a people. Second temple Judaism believed that there was a barrier between heaven and earth because God could not be in the presence of sin and death. God cannot dwell in the presence of sin or defilement. The sacrificial system was intended to remove the barriers of sin which hindered the worshiper’s approach to God.¹⁴³ Presenting an offering to be sacrificed in the temple was a way to present oneself to God.¹⁴⁴ This action of presenting a sacrifice was also seen as a form of obedience to God.¹⁴⁵

It was not the killing of the sacrificial animal that was important, it was the procurement of blood that was essential for the sacrifice to be effective. In the ancient world it was observed that when a living thing loses much blood it dies, therefore the source of life, the substance that animates a living creature, was thought to reside within the blood. When blood is shed, the power of life is released. “Life power released from the blood, was seen as that essential and mysterious substance whose loss, causing death, may paradoxically bring life.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore blood was a substance that contained power and that power, which contained life, could fight against the power of death.¹⁴⁷ The atoning nature of blood is found in the book of Leviticus. “For

¹⁴² Marie E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, supplement series,73 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 88.

¹⁴³ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 91.

¹⁴⁴ Christian A. Eberhart, “Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews,” in *Hebrews Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, Biblical Interpretation Series, v.75, edited by Gabriella Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 53.

¹⁴⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 427.

¹⁴⁶ John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 106.

¹⁴⁷ David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, v.141 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 219.

the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” (Lev 17:11).

When a sacrificial offering is presented to a priest, the ritual act that the priest performs results in obtaining atonement for sins and elicits God’s forgiveness to the person who presented the offering. “The priest shall make atonement on your behalf with the ram of the guilt offering, and you shall be forgiven” (Lev 5:16).

Sin was also thought to have a contagious or contaminating power to it and therefore without the temple cult sin would be uncontrollable.¹⁴⁸ The sacrificial system provided a very concrete and material way to deal with the problem of sin.¹⁴⁹

Jesus’ death was an essential prerequisite for his entry into heaven. For the author of *Hebrews*, the effect of Christ’s death is more important than the cause of it.¹⁵⁰ The author assumes that sacrifice is the only way to enter into the presence of God, since it removes the barrier of sin which divides the sacred from the profane.¹⁵¹ This idea of entering into God’s presence through sacrifice is also seen in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In this story Abraham ascends into heaven with the angel Iaoel after he has offered a blood sacrifice. This act of sacrifice was also seen as an act of obedience and faithfulness to God.

The blood used for a sacrifice also needed to be innocent blood obtained from an innocent life.¹⁵² Innocent blood obtained from an innocent life, or a sinless life, was free of guilt and was able to sanctify that which it touched. The action of sprinkling or pouring of blood was

¹⁴⁸ Robert J. Daly, S.J., *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 26.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 107.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁵² Ina Willi-Plein, “Some Remarks on Hebrews from the Viewpoint of Old Testament Exegesis,” in *Hebrews Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, edited by Gabriella Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 33.

an action that sanctified and cleansed all that the blood came into contact with. The Christian doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ had its beginnings in the representation of Christ as a sacrificial victim.¹⁵³ “ ... the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience” (Heb 9:14). Here the author of Hebrews is comparing Jesus’ death with the death of a sacrificial animal, which must be without blemish. The blood, which contains the life force within it, is able to purify everything that it comes into contact with.

It was believed that sin separated humanity from God. Separation from God resulting in a broken relationship could be restored by God through the process of atonement. After the Exile the process of atonement became associated with the sin offering which involved the ritual manipulation of the sacrificial blood.¹⁵⁴ A sin offering involved animal sacrifice. The blood was manipulated by sprinkling or smearing it on whatever needed to be cleansed from sin and impurity. The goals of this manipulation of the blood was to ransom for sin and to cleanse from all impurities. Blood had the power to redeem and to purify.¹⁵⁵ “ ... he entered once for all into the Holy Place ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). Here the author of *Hebrews* believes in the redemptive power of Jesus’ death achieved through the shedding of blood. “And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). As a blood sacrifice, Jesus’ blood, that was shed, redeems and sanctifies.

¹⁵³ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 109.

¹⁵⁴ Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*, 26.

¹⁵⁵ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 263.

It was believed that blood was a substance that could effect cleansing, sanctification and forgiveness and it could provide access to God.¹⁵⁶ “Indeed, under the law, almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22).

Sin is something that defiles and prevents access to God. The result of engaging in sin is unfaithfulness and disobedience,¹⁵⁷ because the sinful person is not in relationship with God. Therefore Christ’s sinless offering of himself shows his faithfulness and his obedience to God.¹⁵⁸ The value of blood sacrifice may have resided in the moral obedience involved in carrying out what the Law required.¹⁵⁹

The author of Hebrews has taken the priestly cultic language and applied it to early Christian theology. Christ’s death in itself is not the actual event that effects salvation rather it is the precondition for the availability of his blood.¹⁶⁰ Pfitzner stated that Jesus’ death was, “Not a necessary death but necessary blood.”¹⁶¹ The author of *Hebrews* saw Jesus’ death as a blood sacrifice offered to God for the purpose of restoring a broken relationship between God and the people of Israel. The two major problems that seem to prevent God’s will from being done is the presence of sin and death. For God’s purposes to be made complete, sin and death need to be overcome. Blood sacrifice was thought to be able to atone for sin and to overcome death through the shedding of blood which released the life force of the sacrificial victim.

¹⁵⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 415.

¹⁵⁷ Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 43.

¹⁵⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 121.

¹⁵⁹ Barnabas Lindars, SSF, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 99.

¹⁶⁰ Eberhart, “Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews,” 59.

¹⁶¹ Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 131.

The sacrificial system ended with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. However sacrifice had been part of the Jewish cult for so long that the theology that supported it remained, even though the cultic ritual had ended. The theology of blood sacrifice was very important to the author's concept of Jesus Christ as the heavenly high priest.

The author of Hebrews understands Christ's death as a sacrifice as stated in the early Christian confession, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures."¹⁶² The humanity of Jesus was an important part of the author's theology. "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 (Heb 1:17-18). Jesus needed to be a human with flesh and blood in order to be able to offer a blood sacrifice to God that would exalt him into the presence of God.

The Letter to the Hebrews: Apocalyptic Motifs

The Letter to the Hebrews incorporates the apocalyptic and eschatological ideas that were current in Judaism and in early Christianity in the first-century. The author of Hebrews, who lived in the late second temple period, inherited an apocalyptic world view and the Letter to the Hebrews is an example of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.¹⁶³ God as creator and controller of history has a pre-determined plan,¹⁶⁴ and for the author of Hebrews, Jesus was the fulfillment of

¹⁶² Daniel J. Harrington, *What are they Saying About the Letter to the Hebrews?* WATSA series (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁶³ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 30.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

God's plan.¹⁶⁵ It was this apocalyptic world view that allowed the author to imagine the exalted Jesus as serving in the heavenly temple as the heavenly high priest.

The apocalyptic world view visualized a powerful, transcendent God whose authority extended over all of creation. God had the power to control and manipulate the creation at will. "At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised yet once more will I shake not only the earth but also the heaven" (Heb 12: 26). The author envisages God as a consuming fire. A fiery image of God was often used in apocalyptic literature. Fire is an image that shows the radical difference between God and humanity. The divine nature is not touched by fire but fire is able to kill human beings. "... for indeed our God is a consuming fire" (Heb12:29). God is also described as fire in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. (ApAb 19:1)¹⁶⁶

The author's world view can be seen in his appropriation of apocalyptic ideas. The author sees the current time in which he is living as the "last days." The last days or end of days refers to a decisive change at a future time when one era ends and another begins.¹⁶⁷ In the last days an eschatological agent will be sent who will be the hope for the future.¹⁶⁸ The author of Hebrews believed that God's plan of salvation has been fulfilled through the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ "... but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things ..." (Heb 1:2). The author also believed in the parousia or the second coming of Christ¹⁶⁹ when all the faithful will be gathered into the eternal presence of God. "... so Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb 9:2). The author believes in the

¹⁶⁵ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Rubinkiewicz, "Apocalypse of Abraham: A New Translation and Introduction," ApAb 19:1)

¹⁶⁷ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 104.

¹⁶⁸ John A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who is to Come* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 2.

¹⁶⁹ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 21.

coming “Day of the Lord,” the time of God’s final judgment of the righteous and the unrighteous. Apocalypticism sees things in a dualistic way and the author of Hebrews does also. People are either good or bad, there is no middle ground. “...but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). The author believed in the world to come, a heavenly and eternal world. The heavenly world is the true reality while the earthly world will pass away.

The author believes in a heavenly realm that contains the throne of God and the heavenly temple. As has been noted, *I Enoch* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* both describe a heavenly throne and temple. The heavenly temple is the true temple¹⁷⁰ and the worship in the heavenly temple is true worship. Koester states that the earthly temple was a visible pointer to a heavenly reality;¹⁷¹ and the heavenly sanctuary was the focus of faith and worship.¹⁷² Hurst states that towards the late second temple period the heavenly temple was perceived as becoming increasingly realistic.¹⁷³ The earthly temple was seen as a model of the heavenly temple, so even if the earthly temple should be destroyed, a pure form of worship would continuously be practiced in the heavenly temple.

Heavenly mediators are part of the heavenly realm. These mediators mediate between God and humanity and interact with human beings. God was thought of as being so “other” and so powerful that it was not safe for humans to approach God, therefore God’s relationship with people needed to be mediated through semi-divine beings such as angels. These angels were described in apocalyptic literature with divine-like majesty and appearance and exercised kingly power; as noted previously, an example is the angel Iaoel in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The

¹⁷⁰ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 99.

¹⁷¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 414.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁷³ Hurst, “The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2,” 32.

angels are less than God, but as semi-divine beings, they are greater than human beings. Part of the author's Christology is the idea that the exalted Jesus Christ becomes God's principal mediator.

The functions that the angels perform in their interaction with human beings included relaying messages from God, protecting against evil powers, and bestowing wisdom upon humanity. Angels also function as priests by performing the ritual duties in the heavenly temple, by offering intercessory prayer and by propitiating God for human sin. The role of the heavenly priest was featured in the literature of the time and is seen in the stories about Melchizedek, Levi, and Enoch.

Even though earth and heaven were two separate and distinct realms, stories of heavenly ascents by a few very righteous and venerable human beings are found in apocalyptic literature. These righteous and venerable human beings were able to ascend into heaven and witness the grandeur and knowledge of the heavenly realm. Some of these righteous persons, like Enoch and Abraham, were able to participate in the heavenly worship and to act as priests. Enoch was even exalted to semi-divine status as the son of man.

In the *Aramaic Levi Document* both royal and priestly characteristics are given to Levi and royal language is used of the priesthood. As noted previously, in the *ALD* Levi ascends into heaven during a vision and is anointed priest by the angels of God. In the *Testament of Levi*, Levi is portrayed as having an eschatological priesthood which will be eternal and Levi will cause sin to cease, provide rest for the righteous and will defeat the powers of evil and restore humanity. The author's high-priestly theology draws on the Jewish messianic expectation expressed in the hope of a priestly messiah. The author of Hebrews has a heavenly rather than an earthly

orientation. He believes in the transcendent power of God over the cosmos and that God has a pre-determined plan for the salvation of humanity who is contaminated by sin. The fulfillment of God's plan will take place in the heavenly realm.

Jewish apocalypticism sometimes envisioned the world to come as a space and a time in which the created realm would be renewed and become incorruptible. This world would be perfect and a glorified humanity would live in God's presence.¹⁷⁴ The idea of glorification, that a human body must be transformed in order to enter into heaven, is an apocalyptic idea. In *1 Enoch*, Enoch must be transformed before he can draw near to God. The righteous are told that they will receive the garment of life from the Lord of Spirits and that the garment will not wear out and that their glory will not fade in the presence of the Lord of Spirits.¹⁷⁵ Enoch after putting on the garment of life finds that he looks like the angelic spirits and he sees no observable difference between himself and the angels. Enoch still has a human body but the properties of it have been altered, he shines like the angels and he is able to stand in God's fiery presence.¹⁷⁶ Enoch remains human but his body has been glorified so that he can dwell in heaven. Enoch's glorification does not erase his humanity.¹⁷⁷ Likewise the author of Hebrews states that Jesus was perfected (glorified) so that he could ascend into God's presence.

The author uses the apocalyptic tradition of his time within the context of the early Christian tradition. That tradition included the conviction that Christ died, rose and was exalted into heaven.¹⁷⁸ Therefore the author's letter differs from other apocalyptic literature in certain ways. For the author, who is a Christian, Christ's death becomes the decisive eschatological

¹⁷⁴ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 170.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷⁷ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 177.

¹⁷⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 104.

event.¹⁷⁹ The eschatological hope for the author is not only in the future but it is also a present reality achieved through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Jewish apocalypticism envisioned the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem to earth at the end of the age whereas the author envisions an upward movement to heaven at the end of the age.¹⁸⁰

Jesus as an Ideal Figure

The ideal high priest was chosen by God to establish an eternal priesthood. At times, this ideal high priest is presented as a savior and redeemer figure who will destroy the powers of evil and liberate the people. As a savior or redeemer figure, the ideal high priest functions as a heavenly priest and judge in a heavenly temple. The ideal priest is a savior figure who shows a combination of priestly, royal and angelic elements.¹⁸¹ The ideal priest is also a teacher figure who will give authentic teaching in the last days.¹⁸² Important roles of the ideal priest are overcoming evil and giving an eternal peace.¹⁸³

The author of Hebrews looked to the Hebrew Scriptures to find supporting evidence for his theology. The author of Hebrews believed Jesus was the Son of God, and the author turned to Psalms 2 and 110 as he developed his Christology. Psalm 2 is a royal psalm in which the king is portrayed as an agent of God. “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: he said to me, you are my son; today have I begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps 2:7). As the ‘son’ the king has a special and unique

¹⁷⁹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 251.

¹⁸⁰ Marie E. Isaacs, “Hebrews” in *Early Christian Thought in its Jewish Context*, eds. John Barclay and John Sweet, 145-159 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 147.

¹⁸¹ John J. Collins and George W.E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 105.

¹⁸² John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 122.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 105.

relationship with God. The king is given his authority as a divine gift from God. The king, as God's agent, is to see that God's laws are followed by the people. In the first chapter of Hebrews the author states, "... but in those days he (God) has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things ..." (Heb 1:2). An agent is given all the authority of the master and therefore in terms of authority, can be considered an heir. Jesus as the Son, is God's heir and has authority over all that God possesses. As the Son, Jesus is also the Davidic messiah. But the author of *Hebrews* gives the role of high priest to Jesus as well, in order to support the idea that "Christ died for our sins." The author combines the ideas of a messianic king and priest into one figure. As was noted earlier, this dual role of eschatological king and priest was found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and in some of the literature from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Melchizedek Tradition and the High-Priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews

Psalm 110 was used by early Christians as a messianic psalm that pointed to Christ as the Davidic messiah. For the Jews, it is a royal psalm, and references to both kingship and priesthood may reflect the reigns of David and Solomon who both exercised royal and priestly functions. In this psalm the king is portrayed as sitting at God's right hand in a position of authority and privilege. In the Jewish Study Bible, verse four is translated, "The Lord has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever, a rightful king by MY decree." The Hebrew for "rightful king" is malki-tzedek similar to the proper name of Melchizedek.¹⁸⁴ In the Jewish tradition, both of these interpretations were used. Verse four at times was interpreted as the

¹⁸⁴ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 1408.

proper name of Melchizedek in order to use it as a precedent to support the dual roles which King David and King Solomon performed.¹⁸⁵

The author of Hebrews used Psalm 110 for his argument that the exalted Jesus is both king and priest. Jesus could be envisioned as the Davidic messiah because he was from the tribe of Judah. However because Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, he could not be a priest. For Jesus to assume both the role of king and priest a different model of priesthood, other than the Levitical model, was needed.

The Melchizedek tradition may have provided that different model of priesthood for the author of Hebrews. The Melchizedek tradition had already been used as a precedent for combining the dual roles of king and priest. It could also provide a precedent for the legitimacy of a non-Levitical priesthood and for an eternal, heavenly high priest.

In chapter five of Hebrews the author, who puts the words of Psalm 110 on God's lips, unites the two roles of Jesus Christ as Son and as high priest. "So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, you are my Son, today I have begotten you and you are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:5-6). As the Son, Christ sits at God's right hand and as a high priest Christ becomes the chief mediator between God and his people.

The legitimacy of the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek is based on the fact that Melchizedek is mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. In Genesis 14, Melchizedek is assumed to be greater than the patriarch Abraham because Melchizedek blesses Abraham and it was assumed that the superior blesses the inferior. "But this

¹⁸⁵ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1408.

man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one whom it is testified that he lives. One might say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him” (Heb 7:7-10). The Levitical priests therefore are inferior because they paid tithes to Melchizedek through their ancestor Abraham and the inferior pays tithes to the superior.

The immortality of Melchizedek is argued from silence, an interpretive technique that was used in early Judaism and Christianity. This technique assumes that what is not mentioned in the scriptures did not happen.¹⁸⁶ Since Melchizedek abruptly appears and disappears in the Genesis account, the author of Hebrews is free to embellish the Melchizedek story by saying that Melchizedek is “Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb 7:3).

The Melchizedek tradition provides not only an alternative to the Levitical priesthood but also a priesthood that claims to be superior to the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests died and were continually being replaced, but Jesus Christ continues as a priest forever. “Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to

¹⁸⁶ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 73.

make intercession for them” (Heb7:23-25). Jesus is qualified for the priesthood not through genealogy but by the possession of eternal life.”¹⁸⁷

In the document from Qumran, *11QMelchizedek*, Melchizedek is not only a priest but he is portrayed as the high priest officiating at the Day of Atonement ritual. (The author of Hebrews likewise presents Jesus as the high priest officiating on the Day of Atonement.) In the *11QMelchizedek* document Melchizedek is given an elevated status in heaven as he takes his place in the divine council and acts as a judge over other heavenly beings. Melchizedek as the heavenly high priest is also able to forgive sins. This document portrays Melchizedek as an angelic, eschatological figure who acts as a king, a high priest and also as a redeemer figure.

The author of Hebrews also sees Melchizedek as a type of redeemer figure, when he speaks of Jesus Christ as both an agent of salvation and as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. “ ... and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 9:10).

The author also argues for the superiority of the order of Melchizedek by again using Psalm 110:4, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever ...” The Levitical priests did not take an oath when they assumed office.¹⁸⁸ The author of Hebrews states, “ ... but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.” In appealing to Psalm 110:4, the author claims that Christ was declared a priest with an oath and therefore a new covenant was established. A new covenant takes precedence over older covenants and therefore Jesus’ priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood.

¹⁸⁷ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 199.

¹⁸⁸ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 208.

The author of Hebrews presents Melchizedek as an angelic being who is an eternal high priest. However the author must also prove that Jesus is greater than Melchizedek. The author makes it clear that the exalted Jesus is not an angel. “ ... having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Heb 1:4). Jesus is the Son, a role that angels are not qualified for. “For to which of the angels did God say, you are my Son today I have begotten you?” (Heb 1:5). Referring to the Son the author states “Let all God’s angels worship him” (Heb 1:6).

The author continues to believe in the efficacy of a blood sacrifice and therefore Jesus has to be human in order to make a blood offering. The world is not subjected to angels but to human beings. (Heb2:1-8) Since Jesus’ exaltation sanctified not only himself but also his brothers and sisters (other human beings), Jesus shared the flesh and blood nature of all humanity. “Since, therefore the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things ... ” (Heb 2:14). Then the author states, “For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham” (Heb 2:16).

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he entered the heavens as a human being, different from the angels. Only as a human being is he qualified to be elevated above the angels and to sit at God’s right hand.¹⁸⁹ Some Jews of the second temple period believed that God’s promise of an inheritance would be fulfilled in the heavenly realm and the descendants of Abraham would be given a place in this realm above all of God’s creation, including the angels.¹⁹⁰ Jesus as the Son is heir of all things because through him God created all things (Heb 1:2). Jesus Christ is

¹⁸⁹ Moffitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 45.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

exalted through his humanity and thus becomes the Son of God. As the Son of God and as the great high priest, Jesus becomes superior to Melchizedek.

The author uses Melchizedek as a type of high priest, but Jesus because of his humanity, becomes the “great high priest.” According to Jewish belief, it was the blood, which contains within it the life force, that effects atonement. Jesus needed to present an offering of blood to God to effect atonement and this blood offering was his own. This offering of atoning blood could only be achieved through Jesus’ humanity and it was the blood itself that was believed to have the power to redeem, to sanctify and to forgive.

Ben Sira stated that God exalted Aaron and made an everlasting covenant with him which established an eternal priesthood. Aaron received his priestly authority from God and his role as a priest was that of a mediator between God and the people; a teacher who taught the Law and one who made atonement for the sins of the people.

Jesus was not eligible during his lifetime to be a priest because he was not descended from the tribe of Levi. Therefore the author appropriates the “order of Melchizedek” as an alternative and legitimate option to the Levitical priesthood. Melchizedek is an angelic figure, but Jesus cannot be an angelic figure because he is superior to the angels. Jesus remains a human being and as a human being ascends into heaven.

Heavenly Ascensions

As has already been mentioned, some very righteous and venerable human beings were able to ascend into the heavenly realm and some like Enoch and Abraham came into the presence of God. As “Son of God” Jesus’ righteousness is unsurpassed by those who came before him. Jesus ascends into the heavenly realm by entering through the heavenly Holy of Holies. In *1 Enoch*, Enoch ascends into heaven into a house of fire and cold and he saw, “... another open door before me and a house greater than the former one ... all of it so excelled in glory and splendor and majesty ... and I was looking and I saw a lofty throne ... the Great Glory sat upon it” (1_Enoch 14:15-20). Enoch ascends into heaven and enters the tabernacle and then enters into the inner Holy of Holies where the presence of God was believed to dwell. After Enoch entered into the Holy of Holies he was asked by God to offer intercessory prayer on behalf of the Watchers. This action of entering the Holy of Holies and offering intercessory prayer is similar to the high priest’s ritual actions on the Day of Atonement.¹⁹¹

In the Testament of Levi, Levi also enters into the highest heaven called the Holy of Holies, here God is surrounded by the archangels whose main function is to offer atonement on behalf of the righteous.¹⁹²

In the *11QMelchizedek* document from Qumran, the Day of Atonement is the end of the tenth jubilee. At this time atonement will be made for the sons of light and for those of the order

¹⁹¹ Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 82.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 83.

of Melchizedek. (11QMelchizedek ii 7-8) Melchizedek appropriates the role of the high priest on this eschatological Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement: Priestly Theology

In the apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period, the Day of Atonement becomes a model for the eschatological Day of Atonement. A few select humans and semi-divine figures are depicted as entering the heavenly Holy of Holies and as participating in the heavenly Day of Atonement ritual.

The author of Hebrews states that “Christ entered once for all into the Holy Place” (Heb 9:12), Christ enters into the Holy of Holies. The day that Christ enters into the Holy of Holies is the eschatological Day of Atonement. Because of the transcendent nature of God, Judaism believed that access into the presence of God had to be carefully controlled,¹⁹³ approaching God could be dangerous. Those things that were profane or unclean could not come near the presence of God. The sacrificial system was seen as God’s way of dealing with all forms of uncleanness.

The most important characteristic of a high priest was holiness¹⁹⁴ because he was in contact with sacred objects within the temple. This characteristic was especially important on the Day of Atonement, which had an elaborate ritual to ensure the holiness and purity of the priest as he entered into the Holy of Holies. It was believed that God’s presence on earth dwelled within the Holy of Holies and it was here where God’s presence was most intense. God’s presence spread out from the Holy of Holies in concentric circles with diminishing intensity. The Holy of

¹⁹³ Andrew Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 83.

¹⁹⁴ Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 15.

Holies contained the point of intersection between heaven and earth.¹⁹⁵ The high priest washed and changed into a special linen garment just prior to entering the Holy of Holies.¹⁹⁶ Angels are sometimes described as wearing linen.¹⁹⁷ The high priest enters into a liminal space between heaven and earth, and perhaps he momentarily becomes like the angels. When the high priest exits from the Holy of Holies he removes the linen garment.

Only the high priest could enter into the Holy of Holies and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On this day the priest offered sacrifices for the people, the temple, and for the nation; for all the sins that had accumulated over the past year. The atoning ritual on the Day of Atonement removed all these sins. It was essential to remove all accumulated sins in order for God's presence to remain in the temple.

To be able to come into the Holy of Holies, the high priest had to sacrifice a bull for its blood and then take that blood with him into the Holy of Holies. The high priest then sprinkled the blood within the Holy of Holies to purify and cleanse all impurities that may have accumulated over the past year. The blood purified and sanctified the surfaces it came into contact with. The area where God's presence was thought to dwell was called the Mercy Seat. The Hebrew word for "mercy seat" and "atonement" are cognates of the verb "to cover."¹⁹⁸ Israel's uncleanness had to be covered if God was to dwell among the people.¹⁹⁹ It was thought that it was this cultic ritual that made it possible for God's presence to be mediated in the midst of Israel.

¹⁹⁵ Willi-Plein, "Some Remarks on Hebrews", 31.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁷ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 89.

¹⁹⁸ Lincoln, *Hebrews*, 83.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 83.

According to Jewish tradition, the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham occurred on the Day of Atonement.²⁰⁰ Abraham's act of offering his son as a sacrifice to God was seen as the epitome of Abraham's obedience and faithfulness to God. Christian theology identified Abraham who offered his son, whom he loved, in obedience to God's command to sacrifice Isaac, with God who offered his only Son, whom he loved, Jesus Christ. Even though Abraham did not sacrifice his son, Jewish tradition states that Abraham's intent to carry out God's command was equivalent to actually performing the act. The act of offering a sacrifice to God was seen as an act of obedience and faithfulness.

The Day of Atonement and Jesus' Ascension

The author of Hebrews describes Jesus entering the Holy of Holies, "But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with human hands, that is not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls ... sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ ... " (Heb 9:14). Christ as the high priest enters into the heavenly Holy of Holies taking with him the offering of his own blood, the medium through which atonement is made. It is very implicit that Christ entered into the heavenly temple, " ... but the heavenly places themselves need better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:23-24).

²⁰⁰ Eberhart, "Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors, 86.

During the second temple period, the “true” temple was the heavenly temple and the earthly temple was a copy.

The focal point for the Day of Atonement is the manipulation of the blood.²⁰¹ The blood from an innocent victim purifies and sanctifies and effects forgiveness of sins, not only for Israel but for the whole cosmos. This action was very important because it allowed the presence of God to dwell among the people for another year. Also the cleansing of sins and impurities allowed the people to dwell near God in relative safety without the fear of God’s immediate retribution. The ritual of the Day of Atonement allowed God’s relationship with the people to continue. The relationship between God and Israel was maintained through the yearly atoning for the people’s sins.

The author of Hebrews uses the imagery of the Day of Atonement ritual as he describes the ascension of Christ into heaven. To enter into the heavenly realm, Jesus must first be purified. The self-sacrifice of Jesus, which is a blood offering, effects Christ’s purification and allows him to sit at God’s right hand as both Son of God and high priest.

²⁰¹ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection*, 272.

Chapter Three

Christ as the Heavenly High Priest

The Theology of the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

In obedience to God, Jesus performs the priestly act of atoning for the sins of the people through the presentation to God of his own blood. It is this act, according to the author of Hebrews, which directly leads to Jesus' glorification or exaltation. "But when Christ had suffered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb 10:12). By sitting at God's right hand the exalted Christ becomes the Davidic messiah. The seated position points to the finality of Jesus' sacrifice and this work of atonement is now complete.²⁰² Through his sacrificial offering, which opens to him the heavenly Holy of Holies, the place where God abides, Jesus becomes the heavenly high priest. Jesus Christ sits at God's right hand as both the messiah and as the eternal heavenly high priest. Therefore as Jesus completes the work of atonement for the people and sits at God's right hand, the eschatological age has begun. Jesus' faithful obedience and offering ushers in the new age.

The author's eschatological use of the Day of Atonement is not unique. As was noted earlier, the Day of Atonement ritual had been used in Jewish literature as "the day" when the eschatological age begins, the day when God's plan of salvation comes to completion.

It has been thought that Jesus' self-sacrifice was unique to Christianity and not found in Jewish theology of the second temple period. "Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the

²⁰² Koester, *Hebrews*, 187.

high priest enters the Holy place year after year...But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself...for Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many..." (Heb 9:25-28). Christ's sacrifice is seen as a willing rather than as a passive offering. As a willing offering Christ's ultimate obedience and faithfulness to God are demonstrated. As has been noted earlier, the story of the binding of Isaac is associated with the Day of Atonement. In the story of the binding of Isaac, it is not just Abraham who is obedient and faithful, Isaac also cooperates with his father and lets himself be placed upon the altar.

Fragments of manuscripts from *Jubilees* were found at Qunran. Document 4Q225 contains a story about the binding of Isaac.²⁰³ This document is dated to the turn of the first century.²⁰⁴ In this story heavenly angels are present at the site of the sacrifice as well as Mastemah and Belial who are demonic angels. The heavenly angels are weeping and the demonic angels are rejoicing in the prospect that Isaac will be sacrificed. Isaac asks his father Abraham where the animal for the burnt offering is and Abraham says, "God will provide a lamb for himself." Isaac then says, "Tie me well."²⁰⁵ God called out to Abraham and said, "Now I know that [it was a lie that?] he (Abraham) will no longer be loving."²⁰⁶ God then blesses Isaac.

In this story Isaac is portrayed as cooperating with God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac is presenting himself as a self-sacrifice to God and as a result God blesses him, "all the days of his life."²⁰⁷ The powers of good and evil are shown to be involved in the "testing" of Abraham.²⁰⁸ This type of testing is also seen in the story of Job. This story is also

²⁰³ Vermes, *The Complete Dead Scrolls in English*, 540.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 539.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 541.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 541.

²⁰⁸ Vermes, 541.

similar to stories of the binding of Isaac found in the Palestinian Targums.²⁰⁹ Vermes states, “4Q225 provides the earliest (pre-Christian) evidence for the rabbinic story of Isaac’s voluntary self-sacrifice which is thought to have supplied a model for the formulation by New Testament writers of the teaching on the sacrificial death of Jesus.”²¹⁰ Although the actual act of sacrifice was not performed in this story, it does show the belief that Isaac’s willingness to sacrifice himself was pleasing to God who blesses him. We will never know if the author of Hebrews was familiar with this story. However this story does demonstrate that the notion of self-sacrifice was present in first century Jewish literature.

The fragment of *Jubilees* found at Qumran is a modified version of the *Book of Jubilees*. The focus of the account in the *Book of Jubilees* remains on Abraham and Isaac is not portrayed as offering himself as a willing sacrifice. (Jub 17:15-18:19)²¹¹

The Death of Jesus and its Meaning: Early Christian Tradition

How did the idea of Jesus’ death as a vicarious death, as a self-sacrifice or as a command from God, originate in early Christian theology? This is a very difficult question to answer. However the idea that Jesus died a vicarious death was widespread in early Christianity.²¹²

Powerful religious experiences that are interpreted as revelations from God are catapults that result in the reconfiguration of the parent religion.²¹³ The death and resurrection of Jesus were powerful experiences which needed to be explained. The first four or five years after Jesus’

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 540.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Wintermute, 90-91.

²¹² Heikki Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 168.

²¹³ Ibid.,28.

death were a crucial period for the development of beliefs concerning the significance of Jesus' life and death.²¹⁴

The author uses as the foundation of his argument the early Christian tradition that he had inherited. Attridge states that the basic elements of the author's Christology were probably pre-Pauline.²¹⁵ These elements include Christ's pre-existence, affirmation of Christ's humanity, the saving or atoning nature of Christ's death and, resurrection and Christ's exaltation as the Son of God.²¹⁶ Paul's first letter to the Corinthians may contain an early Christian confession of faith: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures"²¹⁷ (1 Cor 15:3).

During the second temple period it was believed that in order for God's purposes to come to fulfillment, the barriers of sin and death needed to be overcome.²¹⁸ In the early stages of Christianity, Christ's death was interpreted as the means by which sin and death were overcome.

Paul's Theology

Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings extant. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he states that he is handing on to other believers the tradition that he had received (1Cor15:3). For Paul, all of Israel was the object of God's salvation. "And so all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26). By the time the Letter to the Hebrews was written, that focus had narrowed to those who believed in Christ.

²¹⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions and Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 37.

²¹⁵ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 9.

²¹⁶ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 29.

²¹⁷ Raymond F. Collins and Daniel J. Harrington, ed. *First Corinthians*, vol. 7 of Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 534.

²¹⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 123.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians he states, "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us ..." (1 Thess 5:9-10). Here Paul expresses the belief in the saving nature of Christ's death. Paul in the Letter to the Romans states. "... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom, God put forward as a sacrifice that produced atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom 3:23-25). Here Paul states that Christ's death was a sacrifice that produced atonement for humanity and that this atonement was achieved by Christ's blood.

For Paul, Christ's death and resurrection made it possible for humans to be set free from the power of sin.²¹⁹ This release from sin reconciled humanity with God.²²⁰ Paul believed that it was God who acted through Christ's death to abolish sin.²²¹ Therefore Christ's death was not perceived to be a self-sacrifice as it is in the *Letter to the Hebrews*. Paul understood Christ's death more in terms of a ransom (a payment to release sins) rather than as an atonement (a vicarious offering for the sins of others).

Atonement is the process whereby human sins are removed and God's wrath is averted, resulting in a renewed relationship between God and humanity.²²² The act of atonement involves both purification and sanctification. The act of purification cleanses that which was unclean and sanctification makes a person or object fit to be brought into the presence of God.²²³ A new relationship between God and humankind is achieved through the process of atonement.

²¹⁹ Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, 171.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 122.

²²³ Ibid., 119.

Referring to the atoning death of Jesus, Paul uses stereotyped expressions.²²⁴ One is a surrender formula expressing the “giving up” of Jesus for our salvation.²²⁵ For example in Romans 8:32 Paul states. “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us ...” This is at times described as a ransom. The second stereotyped formula that comes directly from Paul is the “dying formula,” as found in 1 Cor:15:3.²²⁶ “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures”

The Synoptic Gospels

The Synoptic Gospels do not emphasize the salvific nature of Christ’s death.²²⁷ The Synoptics place their emphasis on Jesus’ life and his teaching, especially on his proclamation that the kingdom of God is near.²²⁸ Speculation on the salvific nature of Christ’s death was of lesser importance because it did not play a central role in Jesus’ teaching.²²⁹ The salvific nature of Christ’s death was an idea known to the Evangelists as seen in their accounts of the institution of the last supper. For example, Mark states, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24). Matthew elaborates on this tradition and adds, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the “forgiveness of sins,” which emphasizes the atoning nature of Jesus’ death. However, the Synoptic Gospels do not reflect on how Christ’s death was redemptive.

²²⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 35.

²²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²²⁶ Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the doctrine in the New Testament*, 37.

²²⁷ Raisanen, *The Rise of Chriaitan Beliefs*, 160.

²²⁸ Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, 33.

²²⁹ Ibid., 34.

Late First to Second-Century Christian Writings

Writings which were contemporary with the *Letter to the Hebrews* include 1 Peter, 1 John, and *1 Clement*, all of which were written towards the end of the first-century. *1 Peter* 1:18-19 states, “You know you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.” In 1 Peter there is the idea that Christ’s blood was a ransom paid to God for the “futile ways” or sins of the people. Christ is also being compared to a sacrificial lamb, an innocent sacrifice without blemish who is sacrificed for the atonement of sins. The Letter to the Hebrews and 1 Peter share similar ideas about the work of Christ.²³⁰ Both letters portray Christ in cultic terms, both use Psalm 110 as a scriptural proof text, and both describe Christ’s sacrifice as a sprinkling of blood that provides access to God and that also sanctifies.²³¹ Other shared ideas include the once for all death of Christ as the central salvific event and the portrayal of the death of Christ in cultic terms as a sacrifice of a sinless victim.²³² Both of these letters also make use of this imagery as a message of encouragement to a community experiencing persecution.²³³

The sacrificial and atoning nature of Christ’s death is also found in *1 John* 1:7, “... we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

²³⁰ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 30.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

First Clement, whose author is unknown, was written towards the end of the first century or the beginning of the second-century.²³⁴ It is a letter addressed to the church in Corinth. Again, Jesus' death is viewed as an act of atonement. "Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world."²³⁵ (1 Clement 7) In 1 Clement Jesus' death is seen in the context of a sacrificial act.

Jesus' death was "A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles." (1 Cor 1:23) A better word for "stumbling block" is "scandal," since according to *Deuteronomy* 21:23, "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." Many Jews could not accept a crucified messiah. Crucifixion was a means of execution for lower-class criminals. Early Christians needed a reason for Jesus' violent death. It was inconceivable that Jesus died in vain. Therefore Jesus' death needed to be explained. Christ's death had to be a "solution" for a "problem." Raisanen states that the early Christians had the "solution" first and the "problem" "came to be defined in the light of the existing solution."²³⁶ Raisanen also states, "The problem to be solved was not the plight of humans but the fate of Jesus." Since the messiah was considered to be the one who was righteous above all others, his suffering and death must therefore have unique significance.²³⁷

²³⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 320.

²³⁵ Early Christian Writings, "Clement of Rome, First Epistle: Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1_clement-roberts.html (accessed 9/14/11) 1 Clemnt 7.

²³⁶ Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, 172.

²³⁷ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 41.

Interpretations of Jesus' Death in the Early Church

The early church had different ways of interpreting Jesus' death. One response was to subordinate Jesus' death to his resurrection, Jesus was the Son of God despite the fact that he was crucified.²³⁸ Another approach was to explain why Jesus died by crucifixion. Explanations for Jesus' death included these: 1). It was a sacrificial death that borrowed from the imagery of the temple cult. 2). It was salvific in some sense. 3). It happened according to scripture. 4). It was a way to attain glory. 5). It was an example of innocent suffering for the righteous. 6). it was the fate of a prophet. 7). it was a vicarious death "for our sins."²³⁹ The author of Hebrews appeals to all these reasons except for number six as he formulates his high-priestly Christology.

The idea that Christ's death had eschatological significance was common in early Christianity. The idea that the messiah would bring an end to sin was also common in the apocalyptic tradition of the second temple period.²⁴⁰ But how Christ's death was redemptive was and still is interpreted in a variety of ways.

Some in the early church interpreted the death of Jesus as the suffering and death of a righteous person for others. Hengel states that this interpretation is far too general and imprecise to be useful.²⁴¹ Another interpretation of Jesus' death was the idea that his death was an example of the death of a "martyr prophet." Hengel states that this interpretation is also inadequate for the understanding of the death of Jesus, because there is a great difference between Jesus as the "beloved Son" in relation to other prophets.²⁴² Hengel also states that the resurrection and

²³⁸ Ibid., 106.

²³⁹ Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, 167.

²⁴⁰ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 265.

²⁴¹ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 41.

²⁴² Ibid., 41.

exaltation by themselves do not serve as a justification for the messiahship of Jesus.²⁴³ In the Jewish tradition there was a popular formula dated to the time of the second temple period which stated, “I will be atonement for you.”²⁴⁴ This statement reflects the desire of a person to take on the suffering of another, however this does not reflect the idea of self-sacrifice. Raisanen states that the idea of a vicarious death may have appeared first and only later was it linked with the idea of sacrifice.²⁴⁵

Hengel notes that early Christianity was concerned with the utterly unique event of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, who was believed to be the messiah. This was a totally new event which had no parallel in Judaism or in other religions,²⁴⁶ therefore there was no precedent available to explain the significance of Christ’s death. There were no models available to explain the significance of a messiah who dies. To understand the significance of Jesus’ death a new theology had to be created. That theology came out of a variety of early traditions. Hengel also states, “this does not rule out the possibility that the earliest Christian message of the self-giving of the Messiah Jesus on the cross for the salvation of the many was an unprecedentedly new and bold – and at the same time offensive – statement in the context of the tradition of both the Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Judaism, because of its scandalous content, its eschatological radicalism and its universal significance.”²⁴⁷

Unlike Hengel, Raisanen states that the idea for the vicarious death of Jesus may be found in the death of Jewish martyrs, which in turn were influenced by the Greek idea of a noble

²⁴³ Ibid., 41.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁴⁵ Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, 169.

²⁴⁶ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 41.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 65.

death for others.²⁴⁸ In 4 Maccabees 6:27-29 Eleazar dies and his death is for the punishment of the people. He prays, “Be merciful to your people ... satisfied by our punishment for them. Let my blood serve for their purification and accept my life as a ransom for them.”²⁴⁹ Here the death of Eleazar is a vicarious one for the people and cultic language is used. The blood of the martyr will purify the people and the death of the martyr will ransom, or set free, the people.

There were multiple traditions and theologies in the early Christian period that attempted to provide a reason for Jesus’ scandalous death. “However the one common root of all, this multiple tradition is probably to be discovered where there had been a fundamental break with the atoning and saving significance in the worship of the temple in Jerusalem and where the theological significance of this break had to be worked out.”²⁵⁰ “This break was explained in terms of the revolutionary insight that the death of the Messiah Jesus on Golgotha had brought about once for all universal atonement for all guilt.”²⁵¹ The Letter to the Hebrews is an example of an early Christian writing that tries to understand Jesus’ death in terms of the temple cult.

Christ as the Heavenly High Priest

“Having then a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold the confession fast” (Heb 4:14). This verse describes Jesus Christ as being both the heavenly high priest and the Son of God. The author then adds, “let us hold the confession fast”. Some have speculated that the author’s community may have inherited a tradition that believed

²⁴⁸ Raisanen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, 170.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵⁰ Hengel, *The Atonement*, 47.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

that Christ was both a priest and the Son of God. Koester however states that the role of Jesus Christ as a high priest was a new idea for the author's audience.²⁵²

The Superiority of Christ's Priesthood

For the author of *Hebrews* it is the action that happens after the death and ascension of Jesus that is important. God's plan of salvation is fulfilled after the exalted Jesus sits down at the right hand of God. It is the role of Jesus Christ as the heavenly high priest to which the author's argument is pointing and it is the central theme of this letter.

Jesus Christ as the heavenly high priest is exalted into the presence of God, into the heavenly temple. To be in God's presence, and survive, required that Jesus must have achieved perfection or sanctity, a level of holiness that allowed his humanity to dwell beside the otherness of God.²⁵³ Jesus brings his humanity, which has been perfected, into God's presence so that humanity may dwell in the presence of God. As was discussed earlier, this glorification was believed to result in a transformed body that in appearance resembled other heavenly beings but still maintained its essential humanity. This glorification process was important to the author because Jesus as Son of God is superior to the angels. Jesus as Son of God is able to maintain his humanity while he is also glorified. Jesus must be superior to the angels because Jesus as a priest of the order of Melchizedek must be superior to Melchizedek, who is envisioned as an angelic being. Jesus, as superior to Melchizedek, becomes the high priest of the order of Melchizedek.

²⁵² Koester, *Hebrews*, 293.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 402.

Christ has been sanctified, by his offering of blood: he has been made holy without impurity or uncleanness and therefore can continually abide in the presence of God. This continual presence of perfected humanity reconciles the relationship between God and humanity. Therefore there is no further need for the temple cult;²⁵⁴ no other offering needs to be made to maintain God's relationship with his people.²⁵⁵ Christ as the heavenly high priest is now the focal point of worship. The heavenly sanctuary is seen by the author as the "real" sanctuary and there is no longer any need for an earthly sanctuary.

Perhaps the author, in stressing the fact that the temple cult is no longer needed, is addressing the actual loss of the Jerusalem temple. The temple was destroyed and therefore the temple cult could not be practiced. Why was the temple destroyed? Perhaps the author is trying to provide an answer to that troubling question by showing that the temple was destroyed because it was no longer needed. The temple's purpose had been fulfilled through the salvific action of the exalted Christ.²⁵⁶

The author emphasizes that Christ's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. Abraham, who gives tithes to the priest Melchizedek in the Genesis story, is inferior to Melchizedek, and therefore all of Abraham's descendants are also inferior to Melchizedek, including Aaron and Levi. The inferiority of the Levitical priesthood is also seen in the fact that sacrifices for atonement have to be made over and over again, year after year, while Jesus' one offering was a sufficient sacrifice for all time. Also the Levitical priests died, so there was periodically a change in the priesthood. The exalted Jesus, however, is a priest forever. Christ's priesthood is also seen as superior to the Levitical priesthood because the Levitical priests have

²⁵⁴ Isaacs, *Sacred Space*, 223.

²⁵⁵ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 10.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

to offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as for the sins of the people whereas the exalted Christ has been perfected and is without sin.

To be seated at God's right hand is to act as God's agent. A priest stands to offer sacrifice and to perform the ritual of the temple, the seated position of a priest therefore reflects the idea that the priest's work has been completed.²⁵⁷ The seated position of Jesus Christ emphasizes the idea that the sacrifice he offered was a one-time sacrifice, that does not need to be repeated. Christ's work of atonement for the people has been completed for all time.²⁵⁸

The exalted Christ therefore acts as God's principal agent and is also the high priest of the heavenly temple. Christ now takes over the mediatorial role of the angels, since he is superior to the angels. Christ as the heavenly high priest is an eternal priest who has been appointed by God through a new covenant and with an oath. Psalm 110:4 states, "The lord has sworn and will not change his mind ... " The use of an oath validated a covenant agreement.²⁵⁹ "The word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever" (Heb 7:28). A covenant sacrifice starts a permanent arrangement for the future which is expected to remain in force.²⁶⁰ The Levitical priests did not confirm their priesthood with an oath;²⁶¹ therefore the author states that the new priesthood is superior to the old Levitical priesthood.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 440.

²⁵⁸ Lindars, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 10.

²⁵⁹ Scott W. Hahn, "Covenant, Cult and the Curse of Death: Covenant in Hebrews," in *Hebrews Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, ed., Gabriella Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 75.

²⁶⁰ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 95.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 112.

Christ's Humanity

Jesus' humanity is an important aspect of his priesthood, his flesh and blood body was needed in order for Jesus to offer a blood sacrifice. In his humanity, Jesus in his death suffered and that suffering gives Jesus' atonement integrity.²⁶² Also Jesus' own suffering allows him to sympathize with his followers who are currently suffering. Christ knew what it was like to suffer and to be tested; therefore he can be merciful to those who are currently suffering. Christ's suffering as a human also provides an example of enduring faith for the people. Jesus' suffering led to his perfection and to his attainment of the heavenly, eternal kingdom. This attainment of the heavenly kingdom is to be the goal for his suffering believers as well. For the author of *Hebrews* Jesus' humanity and earthly life is seen only in relationship to his exaltation.²⁶³

Characteristics of Christ as the heavenly high priest are faithfulness and obedience. Jesus' death shows his obedience to God's will. "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ..." (Heb 5:8). The act of offering a sacrifice was a form of obedience to God.²⁶⁴ Just as Jesus was obedient to God, so must believers be obedient to Christ. In contrast, sin is seen as a form of defilement that prevents access to God because the results of sin are unfaithfulness and disobedience.

²⁶² Koester, *Hebrews*, 106.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, 106.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 439.

Christ's Priestly Role

As the heavenly high priest, Christ performs cultic acts in the heavenly temple. The high priest “sheds blood” and manipulates the blood by smearing and sprinkling it within the temple and on the people. The blood sanctifies and cleanses all that it touches. Christ is also depicted as “shedding” his blood and having his blood “sprinkled.” “Therefore my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary 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 high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19-22).

One of the principal functions of the high priest is to offer intercessions for the people, and the author emphasizes this intercessory role of Christ as high priest. Unlike earthly priests, Christ's high priesthood is eternal, and Christ will continually be available to offer intercession before God. As high priest, Christ mediates the prayers of the people, sanctifies the people, and joins the earthly worship with the heavenly worship. The immediate benefit of Christ's high-priestly role is emphasized by the author, Christ is available to the author's community now to help them through their trials. This immediate availability of Jesus to the community is important to the author.

Christ as the heavenly high priest is also mentioned in the late first-century writing known as *1 Clement*. The Letter to the Hebrews and *1 Clement* share some common ideas. Both refer to Christ as a high priest. “This is the way, beloved, in which we find our savior, even Jesus

Christ, the high priest of all our offerings, the defender and helper of our infirmity”²⁶⁵ (*1 Clement* 36). *1 Clement*, like *Hebrews*, also describes Jesus as being greater than the angels. It is interesting that although *1 Clement* is dated to 96 CE or later the author writes as though the Jerusalem temple is still in operation. “Not in every place, brethren, are the daily sacrifices offered, or the peace-offerings, or the sin-offerings and the trespass-offerings, but in Jerusalem only, and even there they are not offered in any place, but only at the altar before the temple, that which is offered being first carefully examined by the high priest ... ”²⁶⁶ (*1 Clement* 41). This description of the temple worship may show that the symbolism of the temple is still important to some Christians, even at the end of the first century. Since the exact date is not available for either the Letter to the Hebrews or for *1 Clement*, it is not sure whether *1 Clement* borrowed the idea or image of Christ as the high priest from the author of *Hebrews* or whether the two authors used a common tradition.

Christ as the Heavenly High Priest in the Context of the Author’s Community

The community to whom the author is writing is experiencing some sort of crisis.²⁶⁷ The purpose of the letter may have been to encourage steadfastness, faithfulness and obedience to God in the face of some form of persecution or discrimination.

In this letter or sermon the author of *Hebrews* is writing to this particular group not only to address theological concerns but to address pastoral concerns as well. The group he is writing

²⁶⁵ Early Christian Writings, 1 Clement 36.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 1 Clement 41.

²⁶⁷ Marohl, *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews*, 181.

to is having some sort of difficulty as a result of their Christian beliefs. They have already experienced plundering of their property and some form of public abuse.²⁶⁸

This community cannot be identified with a specific group of Christians. They are second-generation Christians and may have been Christian for some time.²⁶⁹ They may have been a group who were expelled from a synagogue and are experiencing some form of hostility from their former place of worship.²⁷⁰ The group is experiencing a difficult time socially but there is no option for them to return to Judaism.²⁷¹ The author needs to promote a feeling of solidarity within the community. The group is united through a confession of faith, “... Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession ...” (Heb 3:1). Early confessions of faith had the dual function of uniting the group while distinguishing the Christian community from other groups.²⁷²

The group may feel a need to continue with some of their former Jewish customs.²⁷³ The group may be trying to come to terms with their sense of sinfulness and feel they are in need of atonement since the author’s main argument is the complete efficacy of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for all, for the atonement of sins. The group may see Jesus’ act of atonement as an event that occurred in the past and which is no longer efficacious for them.²⁷⁴ Therefore in his letter the author emphasizes that no further sacrificial action is necessary.²⁷⁵

The group is discouraged, they lack an interest in worship, and some are thinking of leaving the church. They may think if they leave the community their sufferings will cease.²⁷⁶

²⁶⁸ Marohl, *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews*, 182.

²⁶⁹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 12.

²⁷⁰ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 6.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Koester, *Hebrews*, 67.

²⁷³ Ibid., 10.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁷⁵ Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 14.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 72.

The members of this group are no longer Jewish but they do not yet have a strong Christian identity.

Unlike other groups, these early Christians do not have an earthly temple: they do not have an identifiable sacred space. The author is suggesting to these people that they do have a sacred space in the heavenly temple and they have a heavenly high priest in Jesus Christ whom they already confess to be Son of God. The notion of a heavenly temple provides the people a focus for their worship and Jesus Christ as their high priest is now interceding for them.

The author uses the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish sacrificial system to explain Jesus' exaltation to the role of heavenly high priest. In this way continuity between the group's Jewish roots and their Christian belief is maintained.

The author emphasizes the idea that Christ is an unseen reality who is actively involved with the church's welfare at the present time. Christ as high priest gives his followers the hope that they will also share in the eternal and imperishable kingdom of God.²⁷⁷ The author attempts to make this eschatological hope more important to the group than the present problem that threatens to dissolve the group.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Richard Bauckham et al. eds, *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 109.

²⁷⁸ Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, 22.

The Letter to the Hebrews: Its Impact on Early Christology

“The themes of the Letter to the Hebrews were to become the themes of catholic Christianity because all that is Jewish is held to have been provisional upon the coming of the Son, after which point it is no longer meaningful on its own. Christ is the center in Hebrews.”²⁷⁹

The Letter to the Hebrews is a writing that reflects a “Christian Judaism” because it draws from the Jewish tradition in its attempt to explain the role of Jesus Christ. But, “The Christian Judaism of Hebrews is also self-consciously a system of Christianity, because all that is Judaic is held to have been provisional upon the coming of the Son, after which point it is no longer meaningful on its own.”²⁸⁰ The Letter to the Hebrews is very Christocentric: Christ is the focal point. Scriptures used by the author to support his argument have value only in their ability to interpret the role of the Son. In contrast Paul focused on Israel and its salvation as a whole. In Hebrews the focus shifts from determining what Israel is in relation to Christ to the person or nature of Christ himself.²⁸¹

The presentation of Christ’s high priesthood is one of *Hebrews* most significant contributions to Christology.²⁸² However, the concept of Jesus as high priest may have been part of the community’s tradition because the author describes Jesus as the high priest without any explanation of what that meant.²⁸³ The title of high priest may have been familiar to the group.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ Chilton and Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament Practices and Beliefs*, 184.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁸² Koester, *Hebrews*, 109.

²⁸³ Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity*, 194.

²⁸⁴ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95.

Jesus Christ as high priest may have been part of an earlier creedal formula:²⁸⁵ “ ... consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession ...” (Heb 3:1). There may have been an earlier tradition depicting Jesus Christ as the heavenly high priest, however it was the author of *Hebrews* who developed the high-priestly Christology. In other New Testament writings Christians were referred to collectively as a “priesthood of believers” but only in the Letter to the Hebrews is the exalted Christ referred to as the high priest.

Unique Features of the Letter to the Hebrews

The author of Hebrews was unique in uniting the messianic concepts of the royal and priestly messiah in a Christian context. The author was also unique in his use of Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 as the scriptural references for his concept of Christ being the Davidic messiah (Son of God) and the high-priestly messiah. Also, the author of Hebrews was the first to use the priesthood of Melchizedek in a Christian context, and to use it as a model for the priesthood of Christ. The author of Hebrews also developed the idea of a new non-Levitical priesthood for Christ that was based on an oath that creates a new covenant. According to the author of *Hebrews*, the new priesthood was founded on a promise or an oath rather than on the Law.²⁸⁶ The use of an oath validated a covenant agreement.²⁸⁷ The Levitical priests did not confirm their priesthood with an oath,²⁸⁸ therefore the author states that the new priesthood is superior to the old. The author of *Hebrews* uses the Hebrew concept of covenant “ ... differently and more

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 194.

²⁸⁶ Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 110.

²⁸⁷ Hahn, “Covenant, Cult and the Curse of Death,” 75.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 112.

extensively than any other New Testament book”²⁸⁹ and the author is unique in the emphasis he places on the cultic and liturgical nature of the covenant.²⁹⁰ Jesus Christ as the heavenly high priest is the mediator of this new covenant. A new priesthood founded with a new covenant is found in the New Testament only in the Letter to the Hebrews.²⁹¹

The appropriation of the ritual Day of Atonement to demonstrate the means by which Jesus is exalted is unique to the author,²⁹² nowhere else in the New Testament is Jesus depicted as entering into the heavenly Holy of Holies.²⁹³ The Letter to the Hebrews also emphasizes Christ’s sacrifice and the intercessory nature of Christ’s priesthood more than other New Testament books.²⁹⁴

“At the beginning of the second-century Christ as high priest permanently interceding for his followers in the heavenly Holy of Holies had won quite widespread attention.”²⁹⁵ The Letter to the Hebrews became a popular Christian writing among the churches by the beginning of the second century. The theology of Hebrews would become a part of the Christian tradition and would influence the development of Christian theology. “The Letter to the Hebrews so centrally locates Jesus as the locus of revelation that it became inevitable to ask about his nature (s) and his consciousness in a way that was not current before, because Hebrews develops a religious system which derives completely from Jesus.”²⁹⁶

²⁸⁹ Hahn, “Covenant, Cult and the Curse of Death,” 65.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

²⁹¹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 220.

²⁹² Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 1.

²⁹³ Ibid., 185.

²⁹⁴ Richard Bauckham et al., eds., *A Cloud of Witnesses, The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Contexts* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 2.

²⁹⁵ Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity*, 221.

²⁹⁶ Chilton and Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs*, 182.

Conclusion

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews addresses the theological meaning of Christ's death and how that understanding of Christ's death had relevance for his Christian community. The author is writing towards the end of the first-century. He believes that Jesus' death fulfilled God's plan for the salvation of humanity. These were the 'last days' and the author's community is anticipating the imminent arrival of the parousia. The parousia will open God's eternal kingdom to the righteous. The location of the heavenly kingdom will not be on a new earth but will be in the heavenly realm. Therefore the goal the community is currently working towards is to attain access into the heavenly kingdom.

The author is familiar with the second-temple tradition of heavenly mediators. The community already confesses that Christ is the Son of God, and there may have been an earlier tradition of confessing Christ as high priest as well. Christ becomes the principal mediator for the author's community.

The earlier tradition believed that the exalted Christ is the Davidic messiah who sits at the right hand of God. The author, like his early Christian predecessors, uses Psalm 110 to support the idea that Jesus is the Davidic messiah, however the author uniquely focuses on the fourth verse to support his claim that Jesus Christ is also the heavenly high priest. The author has received the Christian tradition that Christ's death occurred according to the will of God and that through Christ's death atonement and forgiveness of sins were made available to those who believe in him. Atonement and forgiveness of sins are priestly functions. Since Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron or Levi and therefore not eligible for the priesthood. the author sees in the

fourth verse of Psalm 110 the opportunity to link together the concepts of Son of God and high priest in the person of Christ.

The Melchizedek tradition provided the author the precedent for a non-Levitical priesthood, one that was also ordained by God and was eternal. The author combines the two most important Jewish messianic figures the ideal king and the ideal high priest, and sees Jesus Christ's role as the fulfillment of both.

The Day of Atonement was the most important religious festival for second temple Judaism. The ritual performed on this day in the temple could only be performed by the high priest. It was an extremely important ritual because without the yearly atoning for all sins committed by the people and the nation, everything would become contaminated by sin, especially the temple. The temple was the site where God's glory abided, and God cannot dwell in the presence of sin and its contaminating effects. Without the Day of Atonement ritual, God's presence would not be able to continue to abide within the midst of the people in the temple, creating a broken relationship between God and the people.

The Day of Atonement ritual removed sin and its contaminating effects from the temple. Through the ritual smearing and sprinkling of blood, which contained the element of life and therefore was able to create new life by cleansing and sanctifying that which it came into contact with, sins were removed from the temple and the people and nation for another year.

The author believed in the rationale of blood sacrifice and in its ability to cleanse, to sanctify, and to atone. Through blood sacrifice the life force within the blood is released and the people sprinkled with this blood are cleansed, sanctified, and are transformed into "new life".

It was only on the Day of Atonement that the high priest had access to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the temple where God's presence was believed to dwell. The priest could only enter this inner sanctuary by bringing with him the sacrificial blood to sprinkle and therefore cleanse the sanctuary from any form of uncleanness. The sanctuary was believed to be a liminal space between earth and heaven and as the high priest entered into it, he was momentarily caught up into the heavenly realm.

The Day of Atonement ritual provided the author the means to locate the exalted Christ in the heavenly temple and it provided a reason. The author interprets Jesus' death as a self-sacrifice through which he presents his own blood to God. The presentation of blood is a presentation of life which effects atonement for all because Christ's offering is superior in relation to other sacrificial offerings.

As the heavenly high priest, Jesus is able to intercede for his believers in the presence of God at the present time while the community is still in its last days. When the parousia arrives, Jesus will provide the way for the righteous to follow him into heaven. The author perhaps hopes to foster a sense of identity within the community by showing the community that they have a high priest and a temple located in the heavenly realm.

The author's high-priestly Christology is dependent upon ideas found in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, in the belief that the rationale at the heart of the temple cult was valid and in his Christian belief in a divinely ordained meaning for Christ's death. The author also made use of the Melchizedek tradition in developing his high-priestly Christology. The author's aim in this document was to address pastoral concerns of his community. He assures the group that they have a high priest and a temple in heaven, thereby reinforcing the group's sense of

identity. He also reassures the group that if they remain faithful and obedient to God, as Christ was, then they also will share in the heavenly kingdom.

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