

HEBREWS 4:14-16

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Yeshua the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

From Hebrews 4:14 onward through Hebrews ch. 9, the author begins a series of off-and-on references to Yeshua the Messiah as High Priest.¹³³ What we see is largely an exposition on Psalm 110:4, “The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” Yeshua functions as High Priest in Heaven in a position and role that is superior to that of Aaron. Lane makes the important observation, “Jesus’ high priestly ministry is the guarantee that God’s people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence.”¹³⁴

Generally, the Jewish people of the First Century looked upon the priests favorably. The historian Josephus attests, “the priests were not at all hindered from their sacred ministrations...but did still twice each day, in the morning and about the ninth hour, offer their sacrifices on the altar; nor did they omit those sacrifices, if any melancholy accident happened, by the stones that were thrown among them” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.65).¹³⁵ In this particular instance, Josephus is recording the history of Pompey’s subjugation of the Land of Israel, and he is able to pridefully say, “anyone may hence learn how very great piety we exercise towards God, and the observance of his laws” (*Ibid.*).¹³⁶ However, even though our author’s contemporaries probably had some level of respect toward the normal *kohanim* (כֹּהֲנִים) or priests, most did not likely have respect for the *ha’kohen ha’gadol* (הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל) or the high priest. This view is reflected in the Talmud:

“Abba Saul b. Bothnith said in the name of Abba Joseph b. Hanin: ‘Woe is me because of the house of Boethus; woe is me because of their staves! Woe is me because of the house of Hanin, woe is me because of their whisperings! Woe is me because of the house of Kathros, woe is me because of their pens! Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael the son of Phabi, woe is me because of their fists! For they are High Priests and their sons are [Temple] treasurers and their sons-in-law are trustees and their servants beat the people with staves’” (*b.Pesachim* 57a).¹³⁷

The reason that the Jews of the First Century did not have a high opinion for the high priest was because the Sadducees were largely in league with the Roman occupiers of Judea. The position of high priest became a political appointment for Rome, as the high priest in turn was responsible for the collection and dispersion of Temple monies. A large portion of these funds would be siphoned off to the Roman government. The office of high priest was greatly abused, and nepotism flourished. And, by the time of the author of Hebrews writing his composition, many Jews may have become fed up with a priesthood that, for a variety of political reasons mostly, and some spiritual reasons, did fail them. It is probable that the author of Hebrews is relying upon these kinds of attitudes to be present among his audience so that they could easily look toward Yeshua functioning as High Priest, and they could focus their attention toward Him rather than a Temple system that was on the verge of falling.

¹³³ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

¹³⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:103.

If necessary, be sure to consult the entry for Hebrews 4:1-10 in the *Messianic Sabbath Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

¹³⁵ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 370.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 369-370.

¹³⁷ *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.*

Yeshua, as the Son of God, functions in an exalted state as High Priest in Heaven, and is far superior to any human priest. The Apostle Paul attests, “He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10). Our author will further state, “For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26, HCSB). Because of these important attributes, our writer admonishes his audience, “let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrews 4:14, NIV). The verb *krateō* (κρατέω) is generally used in the Apostolic Scriptures to mean “to seize.” Its usage in the LXX includes “such senses as ‘to be strong,’ ‘to have power,’ ‘to rule,’ ‘to take control, and ‘to hold’” (TDNT).¹³⁸ Because of Yeshua’s unique abilities as High Priest, all Believers in Him must powerfully latch on to the faith that they have been given. Certainly, when we observe *Shabbat* today (Hebrews 4:9), do we do so with the intention of appealing to our Father in Heaven via His Son, the High Priest?

One of Yeshua’s unique abilities is exemplified in the fact that He “has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NRSV), or He “has been tempted in all the same ways—yet without sin” (TLV). Yeshua, having come down from Heaven and taken on mortality, experienced the same things that other human beings do, so that He could be the perfect sacrifice. This is easily understood from a summary of Apostolic teaching:

“He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“For you have been called for this purpose, since Messiah also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH [Isaiah 53:9]; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Peter 2:21-24).

“You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin” (1 John 3:5).

The unique feature of Yeshua’s life and ministry, of course, is that while He experienced the same things as all mortals do, as God in the flesh He lacked the fallen human nature. Bruce renders Hebrews 4:15 as, “he has endured trial in all respects like ourselves, while remaining free from sin” (NICNT).¹³⁹ Nevertheless, Yeshua did partake of the human experience, and because of this He has the unique capacity to sympathize with mortals in their petitions before the Father. The verb *sumpatheō* (συμπαθέω) specifically means, “**to have/show sympathy with**” (BDAG).¹⁴⁰ deSilva validly remarks that Yeshua “is perfectly suited as a broker between humans, for whom he has complete sympathy (and hence greater willingness and eagerness to help), and God, with whom he remains in an unblemished relationship at all times.”¹⁴¹

While Yeshua the Messiah did legitimately partake of humanity, He did not partake of fallen humanity. Lane candidly states, “The writer nowhere suggests that Jesus had to become identical to fallen humanity in order to redeem it.”¹⁴² Because of this, Yeshua was able to offer Himself up as a sacrifice for mortal sins, but did not have to offer a sacrifice “for His own sins” (Hebrews 7:27; cf. 9:14).

¹³⁸ W. Michaelis, “power, strength,” in TDNT, 467.

¹³⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 114.

¹⁴⁰ BDAG, 958.

¹⁴¹ deSilva, 182.

¹⁴² Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:115.

THE NATURE OF YESHUA IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES AND HEBREWS

The result of Yeshua's work as intermediary for human beings is so that they may "boldly approach the throne of our gracious God" (Hebrews 4:16, NEB). The verb *proserchomai* (προσερχομαι) sometimes means "to come forward to speak" (LS).¹⁴³ Those who have been redeemed by the work of Yeshua have the right to go before God and petition Him. As Stibbs summarizes it, "This privilege, formerly restricted to a select few, is now extended to all the people of God. Also, it is not just a symbolic earthly shrine that we can enter, but the very presence of God."¹⁴⁴

The Ark of the Covenant used to stand in the Holy of Holies, unapproachable by the people, except the high priest alone on *Yom Kippur*. The Psalmist records, "The LORD reigns, let the peoples tremble; He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake!" (Psalm 99:1).¹⁴⁵ The presence of God in His Temple was to be an awesome sight to behold, one that you did not simply "go up to" except at certain, designated times. Now in Messiah Yeshua, and Him functioning as High Priest, can those who have placed their trust in Him now "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16, NIV) at any time. The "throne of grace" may also be understood as the "mercy seat" (Hebrews 9:5). It is an awesome concept for anyone to behold, as the prayers of people go right to the throne room in the Heavenly Temple. The Book of Revelation gives a picture of how this presently works:

"Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:3-4).

The author of Hebrews writes about all of this because those thinking about giving up on Yeshua give up on the opportunity to enter into God's very presence. Yeshua functions before the Father on our behalf, relaying human prayers, ever interceding for people. He describes this function of the Messiah after describing Him as mediator (Hebrews ch. 2) and priest (Hebrews chs. 2, 4). The "confidence," "boldness" (NRSV), or "freedom" (YLT) that men and women are to have is available only for those who have been redeemed and know the Father via the Son. *Parrēsia* (παρρησία) means "freespokenness, openness, frankness" (LS),¹⁴⁶ and is used by Philo to describe the one-on-one relationship that Abraham had when approaching God. He said that "the most admirable virtues are boldness and freedom of speech at suitable times towards one's betters" (*Who Is the Heir of Divine Things?* 5).¹⁴⁷

These comments are made regarding Abraham approaching God about his offspring, and the fact that only Eliezeer of Damascus was his heir (Genesis 15:2-3). Because Abraham had a special relationship with God, he was able to speak frankly with Him. Lane summarizes that "This is precisely the attitude that the hearers of Hebrews are encouraged to adopt in speaking with God...Because they have a high priest who empathizes with them they can go with frankness to the throne of grace and receive timely help in their distress."¹⁴⁸ Being able to have such *parrēsia*, though, does not mean that people are to haphazardly approach the Lord in their prayers—for even with a confidence of being able to approach Him, one must still stand respectfully in His awesome and supreme presence. Yet, if anyone ever considers giving up or reneging on Yeshua, such a person is likewise giving up on the ability to go to God with

¹⁴³ LS, 690.

¹⁴⁴ Stibbs, in NBCR, 1200.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. 2 Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 37:16; cf. Psalm 22:3.

¹⁴⁶ LS, 611.

¹⁴⁷ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 276.

¹⁴⁸ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:115-116.

confidence and frankness, forfeiting the opportunity for Divine help and intervention when it is needed.

HEBREWS 5:1-10

“For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer *sacrifices* for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. And no one takes the honor to himself, but *receives it* when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. So also Messiah did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, ‘YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU’ [Psalm 2:7]; just as He says also in another *passage*, ‘YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK’ [Psalm 110:4]. In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

The author of Hebrews compares and contrasts the functions of the Earthly high priest (Heb. *ha'kohen ha'gadol*, הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל; Grk. *archiereus*, ἀρχιερέυς), with the Heavenly ministry in which Yeshua the Messiah functions as High Priest.¹⁴⁹ Hebrews 5:1-4, while legitimately mentioning some of the limitations of the human high priest, especially given First Century C.E. circumstances, are still quite laudatory of the office. Our author introduces some new material in supporting this premise, but also reviews some previously addressed material. The theme of *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement will later be interjected (cf. Hebrews 7:27; 10:4, 12, 26), and over a series of chapters our writer will appropriate ideas and concepts from the high priest and his Earthly service, to Yeshua's ministry and function before the Father in Heaven.

We first see a description of the human high priest who would function before God in the Tabernacle, and consequently also in the Temple. Hebrews 5:1 states that “Every high priest [is] chosen from among mortals” (NRSV). A human priest is chosen on behalf of his other human beings to go before the Lord and deliver specific offerings for the covering of their sins. An important part of our author's argument is that although priests are called forth to serve the people of Israel, the function they serve affects all of humanity. While the Levitical priesthood would definitively serve the community of Israel, it did play a role for all of humankind as well. Israel, after all, was to serve as God's representatives to the nations of the world at large.

The job of the high priest is that he was to offer *dōra te kai thusias* (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας) or “gifts and sacrifices” before God for the covering of sins. The phraseology “gifts and sacrifices” is unique to Alexandrian Judaism, and some use this as evidence that our author was from Alexandria, possibly Apollos. It is used in the *Epistle of Aristeas* in the Pseudepigrapha:

“(The king) praised him generously and asked the tenth guest, ‘What is the highest form of glory?’ The reply was, ‘Honoring God. This is not done with **gifts or sacrifices**, but with purity of heart and of devout disposition, as everything is ordained by God and ordered according to his will” (234).¹⁵⁰

The human high priest is appointed by God because he can easily identify with “those who are ignorant and going astray” (Hebrews 5:2, NIV). These words parallel those of King David:

¹⁴⁹ This entry has been adapted from the author's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁵⁰ R.J.H. Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” trans., in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 28.