

# HEBREWS 5

## COMMENTARY

**1 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; 2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer *sacrifices* for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. 4 And no one takes the honor to himself, but *receives it* when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.**

**5:1** The author of Hebrews compares and contrasts the functions of the Earthly high priest (Heb. *ha'kohen ha'gadol*, הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל; Grk. *archiereus*, ἀρχιερέως), with the Heavenly ministry in which Yeshua the Messiah functions as High Priest. Vs. 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. 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. V. 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 Aristeeas* 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).<sup>1</sup>

5:2 The human high priest is appointed by God because he can easily identify with “those who are ignorant and going astray” (NIV). These words parallel those of King David: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments” (Psalm 119:176). The high priest who was appointed by the Lord was to be a man who knew the ills of the people he was to intercede for, so he could properly convey them before God in the Holy of Holies. The problem is that by the time of the First Century, the position of the high priesthood had been largely degraded, hence our author’s usage of *agnoousin kai planōmenois* (ἀγνοοῦσιν καὶ πλανωμένοις), “ignorant and erring” (NEB), as the high priest himself is stated to be “himself also...beset with weakness.” Tim Hegg is keen to note that “Such language no doubt has in mind the manner in which the priesthood was besmerched by appointing men not nearly qualified to function in such a strategic position.”<sup>2</sup> Many Bible readers are too quick to conclude that various Pharisees were some of the principal critics of Yeshua, without balancing it with how it was ultimately the chief priests—those of the party of the Sadducees—who had Him executed and thus bear the brunt of responsibility (John 11:47-53). For the author of Hebrews, Yeshua the Messiah now fills a role that in his time was often occupied by those who were incompetent, inept, and even sinful.

An able high priest is to perform some critical functions according to the Torah. More than anything else, he is to identify with the sins of people and convey them adequately before the Lord. V. 2 includes some likely allusions to these concepts that we see spoken of in the Torah:

“Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them, if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed’” (Leviticus 4:2-3).

“If a person acts unfaithfully and sins unintentionally against the LORD’s holy things, then he shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD: a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation in silver by shekels, in *terms of* the shekel of the sanctuary, for a guilt offering. He shall make restitution for that which he has sinned against the holy thing, and shall add to it a fifth part of it and give it to the priest. The priest shall then make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and it will be forgiven him” (Leviticus 5:15-16).

“The priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. You shall have one law for him who does *anything* unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them” (Numbers 15:28-29).

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<sup>1</sup> R.J.H. Shutt, “Letter of Aristeeas,” trans., in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Hegg, *Hebrews*, pp 88-89.

The key to a good high priest is that he can “deal gently,” “is able to bear patiently” (NEB), or “can be moderate” (*Lattimore*) with the people he serves. The verb *metriopatheō* (μετριοπατέω) often “denotes moderation in passion” (*TDNT*).<sup>3</sup> A priest had to be moderate in his judgment of others, “since he himself is subject to weakness” (NIV). Even Aaron himself participated in the idolatry of the golden calf (Exodus 32:24), but because of his repentance was able to be restored to serve. By the First Century, however, the corrupt priesthood of the Sadducees had largely forgotten all of these important characteristics. F.F. Bruce observes, “from the fall of the house of Zadok to the destruction of the temple 240 years later there were few high priests in Israel who manifested the personal qualities so indispensable for their office.”<sup>4</sup>

5:3 In his service on *Yom Kippur* the high priest is indebted to not only offer a sacrifice for the sin of the people, but also for his own sins because of his mortal limitations. Leviticus 16:11 specifies, “Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself” (cf. 16:6, 15-17). Aaron, as the first high priest, had to offer up a sacrifice for his house, and this obviously passed down to his successors. In Second Temple times, the Mishnah specifies that three specific sets of sacrifices were offered by the high priest on *Yom Kippur*:

**1. A sacrifice was offered on behalf of the high priest for his own sins and those of his house:**

“He came over to his bullock. Now his bullock was set between the Porch and the Altar. Its head was to the south and its face to the west. And the priest stands at the east, with his face to the west. And he puts his two hands on it and states the confession” (m.*Yoma* 3:8; cf. Leviticus 16:30).<sup>5</sup>

**2. The high priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of the other priests:**

“And he came to his bullock a second time...and put his two hands on it and made the confession. And thus did he say, ‘O Lord, I have committed iniquity, transgressed and sinned before you, I and my house and the children of Aaron, your holy people’” (m.*Yoma* 4:2).<sup>6</sup>

**3. The high priest would finally offer a sacrifice for the people of Israel:**

“He comes to the goat which is to be sent forth and lays his two hands on it and makes the confession. And thus did he say, ‘O Lord, your people, the house of Israel, has committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before you. Forgive, O Lord, I pray, the iniquities, transgressions, and sins, which your people, the

<sup>3</sup> W. Michaelis, “*metriopatheō*,” in *TDNT*, 803.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp 119-120.

<sup>5</sup> Neusner, 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

house of Israel, have committed, transgressed, and sinned before you” (m.*Yoma* 6:2).<sup>7</sup>

William L. Lane remarks that our author “asserts that the high priest’s oneness with other men and women in human weakness and need was kept alive by his continual obligation to make atonement offerings for himself as well as for others in Israel.”<sup>8</sup> Yeshua the Messiah, however, now serving as High Priest, was “without sin” (4:15) and thus did not need to offer a sacrifice for Himself.

As the Son of God, Yeshua the Messiah is able to fulfill, yet transcend, the original role of a Levitical priest. We see in v. 6 that Yeshua’s priesthood begins with that of Melchizedek, as the priesthood of Melchizedek itself looked forward to the Levitical priesthood of Aaron and beyond. Yeshua’s priesthood is summarized by His Divine appointment from the Father, His perfect humanity, His ability to sympathize with men and women because of His participation in humanity, and finally His sacrificial work for sinners. **Yeshua, in no uncertain terms, is truly portrayed by the author of Hebrews as the Ultimate High Priest.**

5:4 Our author emphasizes that “nobody assumes the office on his own authority: he is called by God, just as Aaron was” (REB). The understanding of Yeshua *needing to be* High Priest should have been very easy for our writer’s First Century Jewish audience to comprehend, because of the problems that the office of high priest often caused for the Jewish people of the era. In the Messiah’s day, the corrupt Sadducees had largely usurped the office of high priest. The role of high priest in the First Century had largely become a political appointment, per the Roman occupation of Judea. The Pharisees, in particular, expressed extreme outrage as the high priest’s power led to corruption and disdain, as detailed in the Talmud:

“It was taught, Abba Saul said: There were sycamore tree trunks in Jericho, and the men of violence seized them by force, [whereupon] the owners arose and consecrated them to Heaven. And it was of these and of such as these that 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; cf. b.*Yoma* 8b-9a).<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the strong animosity that was held for those who functioned as high priest in the First Century, we do see some positive sentiments on behalf of people for the office of high priest (Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 4.164; Philo *The Special Laws* 1.142). However, in spite of this, the office was not as respected as it was during the time of Aaron and his immediate successors. The negative views of the Pharisees were not the only ones extant within Second

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, 47a:117.

<sup>9</sup> *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.*

Temple Judaism, as the Qumran community likewise was looking for the restoration of the office of high priest to its former pristineness, which is one of the reasons that they remained secluded in the desert.

The author of Hebrews primarily writes to a very broad Jewish audience, and as such must address a variety of beliefs and opinions surrounding the high priesthood. His overall point is that his readers must look to Yeshua as High Priest. For an audience which was facing down the destruction of the Second Temple, this would be most important. The Jewish people were about to be cut off from their central locus in Jerusalem, and Jewish Believers needed to know what was going to be done about the priesthood.

Only by a series of specific circumstances could priests serving in Israel not be of Aaronic or Levitical descent. Samuel, who was of the tribe of Ephraim (1 Samuel 1:1, 20), was raised up by God as a judge, prophet, and priest during the time of the Philistine siege (1 Samuel 7:8-17). If Yeshua is now Israel's High Priest, then it must be justified with strong evidence of His Divine call, which our writer proceeds to give. David A. deSilva explains, "The mediator of the New Covenant...is a more effective broker not only on account of his proximity to God in space and familial relationship, but also on account of the absence of any affront to God in his own life."<sup>10</sup> Yeshua said that "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4), and our writer now details some of the critical components of the work given to the Son by the Father.

**5 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]; 6 just as He says also in another *passage*, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK" [Psalm 110:4].**

**5:5-6** In significant contrast to how the role of high priest had been largely usurped in the First Century, Yeshua the Messiah "did not exalt himself to be made a high priest" (RSV). Because of Yeshua's Divine Sonship, He can serve as *both* Redeemer and High Priest, but the work He performs is notably done via the appointment of His Father. Yeshua's calling as High Priest is justified via the appropriation of two royal Psalms by our author.

The first assertion, repeating what has already been said (1:5), is from Psalm 2:7: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You." Secondly, concurrent with this, Psalm 110:4 affirms, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Yeshua the Messiah, having been incarnated in the world of mortals, as One who is to be worshipped (1:5-6), and One who rules alongside His Father (1:13; Psalm 110:1), is One who has also been appointed to the permanent priestly office, after the order of Melchizedek.

Yeshua is appointed as a priest after the example of Melchizedek (Genesis 14). The Patriarch Abraham encountered this elusive figure, who interestingly enough, brought out bread and wine to him, two symbols which Bible readers often associate with Yeshua and His institution of the New Covenant at the Last Supper:

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<sup>10</sup> deSilva, 188.

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ He gave him a tenth of all” (Genesis 14:18-20).

What is important about this scene is that when King David claimed Jerusalem (Salem) as his capital (2 Samuel 5:6), he and his descendants after him received the priestly duties of Melchizedek as their own. 2 Samuel 8:18 attests that “Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites; and David's sons were chief ministers.” The Hebrew text actually says that David's sons were *kohanim* (כֹּהֲנִים) or “priests” (RSV). As Bruce observes, “he and his heirs became successors to Melchizedek's kingship, and probably also (in a titular capacity at least) to the priesthood of God Most High.”<sup>11</sup> Yeshua, as a descendant of David (Matthew 1:1; Luke 2:4), was an inheritor of both David's kingly and priestly duties. It cannot go unnoticed by readers how the Qumran community believed that both a lay and kingly messiah was going to come and redeem Israel:

“They shall depart none from the counsels of the Law to walk in all the stubbornness of their hearts, but shall be ruled by the primitive precepts in which the men of the Community were first instructed until there shall come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel” (1QS 9.10-11).<sup>12</sup>

The author of Hebrews similarly sees the roles of “Aaron” and “Israel” fulfilled in one Person. Yeshua the Messiah is portrayed as fulfilling both the priestly and kingly roles in his treatise, as evidenced by His ministry on Earth and current ministry in Heaven.

## **7 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.**

5:7 What makes Yeshua the Messiah the able High Priest, is that “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications” (RSV). Our author employs the phrase *en tais hēmerais tēs sarkos* (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς), “in the days of the flesh,” emphasizing the historicity of Yeshua's life, because Yeshua the Messiah lived out a genuine human experience. While Yeshua was on Earth, “he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” (NIV). Yeshua suffered and endured for fallen humanity.

“Prayer and praise,” *deēseis te kai hiketērias* (δεήσεις τε καὶ ἱκετηρίας), are concepts that many among Hebrews' Diaspora audience should have been familiar with. We first see a reference to this in the Apocrypha:

“When Maccabeus and his men got word that Lysias was besieging the strongholds, they and all the people, with **lamentations and tears**, besought the Lord to send a good angel to save Israel” (2 Maccabees 11:6).

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Vermes, 110.

“Then the priests in all their vestments prostrated themselves and entreated the supreme God to aid in the present situation and to avert the violence of this evil design, and they filled the temple with **cries and tears**” (3 Maccabees 1:16).

“But the Jews, at their last gasp, since the time had run out, stretched their hands toward heaven and with most **tearful supplication and mournful dirges** implored the supreme God to help them again at once” (3 Maccabees 5:25).

We see further parallels in the Pseudepigrapha, describing humans’ relationship to God:

“In the heaven below them are the messengers who carry the responses to the angels of the Lord’s presence. There with him are thrones and authorities; there **praises** to God are offered eternally” (*Testament of Levi* 3:8).<sup>13</sup>

“If anyone prospers more than you, do not be aggrieved, but **pray** for him that he may prosper completely, for this is what is precisely to your advantage” (*Testament of Gad* 7:2).<sup>14</sup>

Describing himself, the historian Josephus recorded that “just then was he in an ecstasy; and setting before him the tremendous images of the dreams he had lately had, he put up a **secret prayer** to God...And I protest openly, that I do not go over to the Romans as a deserter of the Jews, but as a minister from thee” (*Jewish War* 3.353-354).<sup>15</sup> We also see some important portrayals of prayer by Philo in his work *Who Is the Heir?* 1-29,<sup>16</sup> demonstrating the agonies of Abraham and Moses. Lane observes, “Like Abraham, Jesus prayed with fervent cries (14), and like Moses, with deep emotion (19). Like Abraham, his prayers were accompanied by...a godly fear expressed in the recognition of God’s sovereignty and submission to the divine will (22, 24-29). What distinguishes Hebrews from the hellenistic-Jewish tradition of effective prayer is the emphasis on the significance of the passion of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

These are the varied types of usages that we see exemplified in the ministry experiences of Yeshua while on Earth. Yeshua continually beseeched His Father, praised Him, as well as prayed to Him in dire circumstances. “When He approached *Jerusalem*, He saw the city and wept over it” (Luke 19:41). Yeshua recognized that while on Earth, His Father would surely be able to save Him from death, but instead as an obedient Son He willingly allowed Himself to be humiliated and unjustly executed. Yeshua did not waver in fulfilling the Father’s will for Him while at Gethsemane, in spite of Him being greatly unnerved by the agony, knowing that He was to die:

<sup>13</sup> Kee, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1, 789.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 816.

<sup>15</sup> *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 655.

<sup>16</sup> *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, pp 276-303.

<sup>17</sup> Lane, 47a:120.

“When He arrived at the place, He said to them, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation.’ And He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and *began* to pray, saying, ‘Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.’ Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, and said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation’” (Luke 22:40-46; cf. Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-43).

The most significant of all the instances when Yeshua does not give up is when He was actually on the cross itself, and He cried out to His Father:

“About the ninth hour Yeshua cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?’ that is, ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?’” (Matthew 27:46).

Contrary to some popular views, Yeshua’s quotation from Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?,” is actually a recognition of the Father’s authority and sovereignty over the Son’s situation on the cross. David proclaims in this psalm, “But You, O LORD, be not far off; O You my help, hasten to my assistance. Deliver my soul from the sword, my only *life* from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion’s mouth; from the horns of the wild oxen You answer me” (Psalm 22:19-21). God’s promise to David is that He will deliver him, just as Yeshua was ultimately delivered via His resurrection and triumph over the grave. Yeshua’s ultimate service for humankind as Priest is also an indication of His triumph over sin and over Satan. Yeshua endured hardship, unlike any other priest in Israel’s history.

The reason Yeshua was heard by His Father was “because of his reverent submission” (NIV) or “godly fear” (RSV). The Greek term *eulabeia* (εὐλάβεια) means “**reverent awe in the presence of God, awe, fear of God**” (BDAG).<sup>18</sup> Yeshua was the humblest man who ever lived on Earth, and exemplified the true character of what it means to be High Priest. In contrast to the high priest in the First Century who was largely a Roman political puppet interested in padding his accounts, Yeshua served humanity to the fullest. He did not flaunt His piety, but used it privately to entreat His Heavenly Father in the extremely important matters of accomplishing His will.

**8 Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. 9 And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, 10 being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.**

**5:8** The author of Hebrews makes an interesting transition in his argument, writing that “even though Jesus was God’s Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered” (NLT). The remarks might make one wonder, especially if the Son is a legitimate part of the Godhead along with the Father, why Yeshua would have to “learn” anything at all, if God surely knows all things. The main issue in view is not the omniscience of God, but rather the personal

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<sup>18</sup> BDAG, 407.