

Hebrews 4:14-7:28

4:14-10:25, Overview

The largest section of the book (Figure 1, chart) describes our Lord as a merciful high priest, completing the exposition of 2:17,

Heb. 2:17 Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a **merciful** and faithful **high priest** in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

An internal inclusio in 4:14-16 and 10:19-25 (Table 1, chart) marks the section. Two exhortations in each bracket urge us, in light of our heavenly high priest, to draw near to God and hold fast our profession.¹

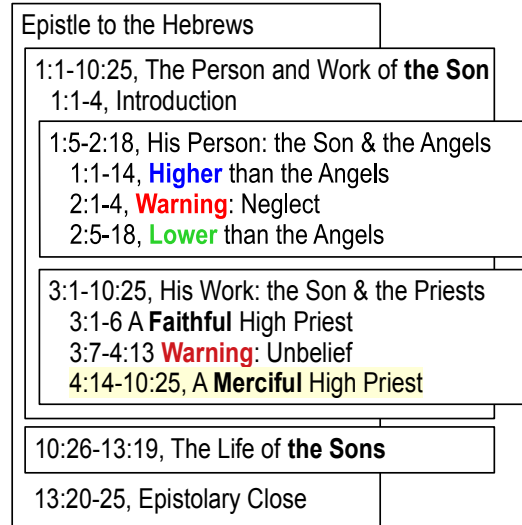


Figure 1: Overall Structure of Hebrews

ch. 4	ch. 10
14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest , that is passed into the heavens , Jesus the Son of God,	19 Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us , through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; 21 And having an high priest over the house of God;
let us hold fast κρατέω our profession ὁμολογία . 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.	22 Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast κατέχω the profession ὁμολογία of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) 24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Table 1: The Inclusio of ch. 4-10

This broader section has two main parts (Figure 2, chart). First, the author points out similarities between our Lord and other priests. Then he shows differences between the Lord and the Levitical priests, a concept that challenges his readers' understanding, about which he warns them.

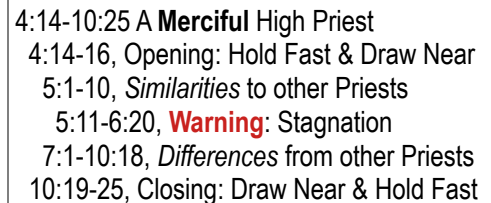


Figure 2: Structure of 4:14-10:25

4:14-16, Opening bracket

14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,—Three descriptions of our Lord recall the opening summary from 1:1-4.

Jesus the Son of God is 1:1-2, “hath ... spoken to us by one who is a Son.”

¹ The third exhortation in the second bracket, our duty to our brethren, transitions to the last section of the book.

Who has passed into the heavens is 1:3, “sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.”
a great high priest is 1:3, “when he had by himself purged our sins”

The third description deserves more attention. The Greek OT often speaks of a “great priest,” meaning Israel’s high priest. Rarely (Lev. 4:3; Josh. 22:13; 24:33) we find “high priest,” using the Greek word here (ἀρχιερεύς G0749). But only two other times in the Greek Bible is “great” joined with “high priest” as here. Both instances are in the book of Maccabees, and describe Simon, one of the five sons of Mattathias the priest of Modin who bravely resisted the command of the Greeks to offer sacrifice to idols (chart):

1Mac. 13:42 Then the people of Israel began to write in their instruments and contracts, In the first year of **Simon the great high priest**, the **governor and leader** of the Jews.

1Mac. 14:27 So then they wrote it in tables of brass, which they set upon pillars in mount Sion: and this is the copy of the writing; The eighteenth day of the month Elul, in the hundred threescore and twelfth year, being the third year of **Simon the great² high priest**, ...
 35 The people therefore, seeing the acts of Simon, and unto what glory he thought to bring his nation, made him their **governor** and chief priest, because he had done all these things, and for the justice and faith which he kept to his nation, and for that he sought by all means to exalt his people.

In both cases, he is described as combining the offices of priest and governor, the spiritual and civil ruler, a characteristic shared by Melchizedek (whom we will meet in ch. 5) and Moses, a non-levitical priest (see notes on 3:6) who also exercised civil judgment over the people.

Now we turn to the two exhortations.

let us hold fast our profession.—The verb here (κρατέω G2902) is different here than in the other “hold fast” passages that we have considered (κατέχω G2722, in 3:6, 14; 10:23, but the object of the verb is the same as in 10:23 in the closing bracket, our “profession” or “confession,” that which we confess about the Lord Jesus (cf. 3:1, “the Apostle and High Priest of our profession,” that is, whom we profess), and the two verbs are very close in meaning (see notes). We must not compromise our confession. Our Lord’s final charge to his disciples is the Great Commission, to bear witness to him among all nations.

15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace,—Earlier, the writer characterizes his throne by its righteous rule, in other words, by the judgment that he performs from it (cf. Pr 20:8; Mt 19:28; 25:31ff; Rev 20:11ff):

Heb. 1:8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. 9 **Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity;** therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

He sits now at the right hand of the throne of God (12:2), looking forward to the day when he returns to judge his enemies. Both references suggest a fearful throne, but because of his work as our High Priest, to us it is a throne of grace.

2 Alexandrinus lacks the adjective in this second case, but has it in 13:42.

that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.—“Mercy” corresponds to חסד, God’s loyal love to us, while “grace” is חן, his condescending favor to those who are unworthy. Recall from Exod 34:6 that God’s graciousness חנוּן and loyal love חסד are the basis on which he forgives iniquity and transgression and sin (34:7). As our high priest, he has purged our sins. Our part now is to claim that gift.

5:1-10, The Similarity of the Messiah to Other Priests

The body of the section compares our Lord with other priests, first by showing their similarities, then (after a warning) by considering how he differs from them.

The Messiah is like other priests in three ways: his *mission* in reconciling sinful people to a holy

God (v. 1), his *identity* with the people whom he represents (vv. 1-3), and his *appointment* to this office (v. 4). Vv. 5-10 apply these three themes in chiasmic order to the Messiah (Table 2, chart).³

	Levitical Priests (1-4)		Messiah (5-9)
Mission	1 For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things <i>pertaining</i> to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:		9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;
Identity	2 Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity . 3 And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.		7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; 8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;
Authority	4 And no man taketh this honour unto himself , but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.		5 So also [the] Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. 6 As he saith also in another <i>place</i> , Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

Table 2: Comparison of the Christ with Levitical Priests

5:1 For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God,—First, we learn of his mission: to bring people to God.

that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:—That is, both unbloody sacrifices (the meal offering) and bloody sacrifices (the latter in this case focused on the sin offering).

2 Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.—The humanity of the Levitical high priest is attested by his moral weakness, confirmed in the ceremony of the day of atonement:

3 And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.—Before he could offer for the people, he had to offer for himself. The very first sacrifice of the day of Atonement was for himself (chart):

Lev 16:6 And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house.

Only then could he proceed with the sacrifices that atoned for the sin of the nation.

4 And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.—The third qualification is that he must be appointed by God.

³ Barmby recognizes the chiasm in the second and third items; O’Brien calls out the third. John 5:26-27 has the same three parts: the mission (judging), divine appointment, and identity with the people (“son of Man”).

Exo 28:1 And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.

5 So also [the] Christ.—Now we turn from the Levitical priests to the Messiah.⁴ He shows the same three features, here considered in inverse order.

glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. 6 As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.—Messiah serves, not on his own initiative, but at his Father's appointment. In support of this, the writer cites two verses that have been in his mind since ch. 1, Ps 2:7 and Psalm 110. Up to this point he has quoted only the first verse of Psalm 110, but now he adds in v. 4, which calls out Messiah's priestly role. Ps 2:7 describes the Messiah as king (2:6), and Ps 110:4 identifies him as priest, the two roles that were forbidden to be combined in Israel's kings, but that were anticipated in Melchizedek, Moses, and Simon.

The second requirement for a priest is his identification with humanity. In the case of the Levitical priests, this identification was established based on their moral weakness and need to sacrifice for their own sin. The Messiah offers a different point of contact with our humanity, his experience of fear in the face of death.⁵

7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death,—The reference is to the agony in the garden (Matt 26:36-46 and parallels), where he prayed three times,

Matt 26:39 O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

The Levitical priest deals with his own sin by an animal sacrifice, and is forgiven. Our Lord, bearing the sin of the world, faces the terror of his own separation from God.

and was heard in that he feared;—He did not pray that the cup would pass *by* him, but that it would pass *from* him. He is not asking to be delivered from the burden of drinking from it. That was the purpose for which he came into the world. But he prays that his death would not persist; that after he has drunk, the cup would pass from him. And this prayer, the Father granted.

8 Though he were a Son,—Better, “though he were Son, though he bore the title of Son.”

yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;—In spite of the Son's exalted future (Psalm 2), he endured the discipline common to human children (as the author will develop in ch. 12).

This verse and the next two recall 2:10, the summarizing central verse of chapter 2. In setting forth the person of the Son of God, chapter 1 emphasized his equality with God, while chapter 2 described his humanity. Compare 2:10 with 5:8-10 (Table 3, chart).

2:10	5:8-10
For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings .	8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered ; 9 And being made perfect , he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him ; 10 Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.

Table 3: 5:8-10 recapitulates 2:10

⁴ The article (see note) focuses on the office rather than the individual person, as shown by the two quotations.

⁵ Recognizing the structure helps avoid the error of thinking that the Messiah had to offer for his own sins.

9 And being made perfect,—Recall from our discussion of 2:10 that in Leviticus, this verb translates the Hebrew expression “fill the hands,” describing the ordination of the Levitical priests by giving them a sacrifice to offer. Our Lord’s suffering not only shows his identity with his people, but also provides the sacrifice that he presents to the Father to redeem them.

he became the author of eternal salvation—In 2:10, he was “the captain [originator] of our salvation.” Here, more boldly, he is the “cause” of salvation, and that salvation is “eternal.”

unto all them that obey him;—The context of 2:10 emphasized the universal scope of our Lord’s redemption:

Heb 2:9 that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

But it applies only to those “that obey him,” imitating his faithful obedience to God (5:8).⁶

10 Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.—Once more he recalls Ps 110:4, the source for his insight that Messiah is not only God’s anointed king to sit on his holy hill of Zion, but also a priest to redeem his people from their sin.

In 5:1-10, the author uses the quote about Melchizedek to emphasize the similarity between our Lord and other priests: both hold office by divine appointment rather than personal initiative. Now he wants to show how Melchizedek distinguishes the Lord from the Levitical priests, but he hesitates, given his readers’ lack of spiritual understanding. He will eventually press ahead, but not before issuing a sober warning, the third of the warning passages.

5:11-6:20, Warning against Stagnation⁷

This section is like the pilot’s warning at take off: “Please secure your seat belts and be sure your seat backs and tray tables to their full upright and locked position.” He is saying to them, “Some of you may consider what I’m about to say about Melchizedek as exegetical overkill, but you need to hear it, so we’re going to study Melchizedek, whether you like it or not.” Given the challenges they are facing, they must know that their faith is firmly grounded in the OT scriptures, and they must engage those scriptures diligently.

He begins with a paradoxical argument (5:11-6:3), followed by an illustration and encouragement (6:4-20).

5:11-6:3, the Argument

Proper understanding of this warning hinges on grasping the rhetorical connection of the various steps of the argument, which is articulated through repeated words and concepts (chart).

5:12 characterizes their lack of spiritual discernment by asserting that they need to learn again the beginning of the oracles of God, which are made up of “principles” στοιχεῖον G4747 (better, “elements”), rather than the more complex truths involved with OT types such as Melchizedek.

6 Compare Rom. 3:22 “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ **unto all, and upon all them that believe**.”

7 16 June 2020: In preparing my final overview of the book, I have reconsidered section breaks here. Originally I ended the warning at 6:12, and grouped the end of ch. 6 with ch. 7. But this would leave this warning, unlike all the others, without an NT antecedent, and Abraham in his response to the promises is an excellent example of *not* stagnating, culminating in his meeting with Melchizedek, to whose NT fulfillment the writer now wants to introduce his readers.

6:1 mentions this same body of teaching.

- It calls it the beginning of Christ, repeating the word from 5:12, where we read of “the beginning of the oracles of God,”
- and details it with six foundations, analogous to the “elements” in 5:12), the first of which is repentance.
- But surprisingly, the writer insists that in spite of their apparent need for a refresher, he is going to leave this elementary material behind and not repeat the foundations. The “Therefore” *διό* in 6:1 appears to contradict 5:12 directly.

The answer comes with the “for” in 6:4, leading to the conclusion that it is impossible to reintroduce someone to repentance (6:6), the first of the six foundations.

In a nutshell,

1. Your lack of understanding suggests that you need someone to refresh you on the basic principles of the faith.
2. But we’re not going to do that,
3. Because it’s impossible to do that.

We have no choice but to go on, which is just what we’re going to do.

5:11-14, The Readers’ Need

11 Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.—On the verge of explaining the spiritual meaning of Melchizedek, the writer hesitates. The concepts he wishes to present are complex. Will they be able to follow what he says?

12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers,—They have been believers long enough that they ought to be able to nurture others.

His words reflect the consistent emphasis that Scripture places on age and experience in the qualifications of teachers. Those who teach in the assembly are called “elders.” The modern notion that young men, with book learning but not practical experience, can be effective as teachers in God’s church, is ill-informed.

But the writer faces the opposite problem—not young people who think they know everything, but older believers whose understanding does not reflect the years since they came to faith. Instead of growing and learning over the years, they are stunted.

ye have need that one teach you again—In spite of their spiritual birthdays, they appear to need of basic instruction in the fundamental principles of the faith. Just think of the two warnings he has given already—not to neglect the records of the Savior’s life (2:1-4), and to trust in God’s promises (3:7-4:13). Mature believers should have moved well past these challenges.

which be the first ἀρχή G0746 principles στοιχείων G4747 of the oracles of God [the elements of the beginning of the oracles of God];—In fact, they give every appearance of needing a refresher course in the basics of the faith.

and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.—God’s word is commonly referred to as desirable food:⁸

⁸ Not Job 23:12, where the notion of food is foreign to the words used, as well as to the context.

Jer. 15:16 Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.

Psa. 19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Ps 119:103 How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

The writer extends the analogy by distinguishing milk and meat.

13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age,—The NT frequently describes the Christian life as a process of birth and growth, analogous to physical development.

Our Lord introduces the metaphor in his exhortation to Nicodemus and his associates in John 3:7, “Ye [plural, the Pharisees] must be born again.”

Paul distinguishes three spiritual conditions in 1 Cor 2:14-3:4: the natural, or unsaved person; the spiritual person with full understanding and control over his passions; and the babe in Christ. He introduces the distinction between milk and meat:

1Cor. 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto **babes in Christ**. 2 I have fed you with **milk**, and not with **meat**: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.

John distinguishes three stages in 1 John 2:12-13: little children, young men, and fathers.

Like Paul in 1 Cor 3:2, the writer recognizes that the different stages require different kinds of spiritual food.

even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.—

This last clause gives an important insight into how we progress in this process of spiritual growth. Growth happens when we apply the knowledge we already have to make decisions. Likewise, Paul describes the babes in Christ on the basis of their conduct. Maturity is marked, not by depth of doctrinal understanding, but by moral judgment.

We have an illustration of this in the garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve a simple command:⁹

Gen 2:17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it:

God’s path to “the knowledge of good and evil” lay through obedience. But Satan had a different suggestion: they could attain advanced knowledge by a shortcut, simply by eating of the forbidden tree. As we know, that path led to disaster, and throughout the history of the church, straightforward obedience has always surpassed scholasticism in leading to godliness.

6:1-3, The Writer’s Decision

6:1 Therefore leaving the principles ἀρχή G0746 of the doctrine of Christ [the word about the beginning of Christ]¹⁰,—The expression is parallel with 5:12. There, the focus is on the word of God that anticipates the Messiah; here, on the person of Messiah himself.

⁹ It is unlikely that the writer has this example in mind, because he uses different vocabulary than Genesis; see note.

¹⁰Westcott: “Ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ χριστοῦ corresponds with ἡ ἀρχὴ τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ (5:12): the former phrase concentrates attention upon the personal Messiah, the latter on the records in which He was foreshewn.”

let us go on unto perfection;—The word family is used in several senses in Hebrews, including the consecration of a priest (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and the Platonic reality behind the earthly shadow (9:11). Here it has the sense, common in Paul, of maturity, believers who have progressed beyond spiritual infancy.

“Go on” is passive; “let us be carried on,” recognizing the natural course of growth and the need for divine intervention.

He follows by enumerating six of the fundamental principles, the ABCs of the faith. They are grouped into three pairs, dealing with conversion, identification, and expectation.

not laying again the foundation of repentance μετάνοια G3341 from dead works, and of faith toward God,—The first pair describe the transaction by which one comes to the Lord Jesus. It matches the process that our Lord himself preached,

Mark 1:14 Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, 15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: **repent** ye, and **believe** the gospel.

Repentance means a change of mind, and the object of that change is described as “dead works.” The only other combination of either the noun μετάνοια or the verb μετενοέω with this preposition από in the Greek Bible illustrates the meaning:

Jer. 8:6 I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: **no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done?** every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle.

To repent of dead works is to regret having done them and desire to be set free from them. It is a precondition to having faith in the one who came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21).

2 Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands,—The next two things that new converts were taught concern their identification with the Lord and with his church.

Baptisms is plural, probably to include not only the water ritual that pictures our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, but also the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13) that makes us a part of the body of Christ.

Laying on of hands was the means by which the church set people apart for a special ministry, such as oversight in the assembly (Acts 14:23 “ordained” = “laid hands on”), or distributing food to the poor (Acts 6:6), or missionary outreach (Acts 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14). It also emphasized the reception by the church of those who might be thought to be excluded (Acts 8:17; 19:6).

and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.—The last two parts of the basic teaching for new believers concern the future. Our faith in general, and Hebrews in particular, is integrally bound up with the future physical manifestation of the kingdom of God. “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable,” 1 Cor 15:19. The dead will be raised, and face the judgment described in Matthew 25 to determine their eternal destiny.

3 And this will we do, if God permit.—He recognizes the need to go beyond this basic teaching, though he is daunted by their immaturity and recognizes the need for the Lord’s enabling, as already suggested in the passive in v. 1.

So we have a paradox. Their lack of understanding suggests they need someone to take them back to basics (5:12), but the writer resolves not to do this (6:1). The next paragraph explains.

6:4-20, The Explanation of the Paradox

He offers three reasons for not going back to the basics: the impossibility of doing so, an improved estimate of their spiritual condition, and the example of Abraham.

6:1-7, First Reason: Going Back would Dishonour Christ

The first reason that he is not going to go back to basics is that it is impossible to do so. You cannot re-save someone who is already saved, and in fact the very effort to do so is dishonoring to the Lord. The structure of the sentence is complicated. Start with the core and work out.

First: the basic statement of impossibility.

4 For *it is impossible* ... 6 ... to renew them again unto repentance *μετάνοια* G3341;—The reference to repentance takes us back to the six fundamental teachings in 6:1-2. In a nutshell: “I’m not going to take you back to repentance and all those other things, because it is impossible to do so.”

This impossibility is clearly not general. Preaching repentance and faith is the core of the church’s mission to the lost (Mark 1:14). The impossibility has to do with the nature of the readers. He defines this in five participles (chart), all parallel to one another, all in the Greek aorist tense, which means he is considering them as complete events, not as processes. The first four are descriptive of a true salvation experience. The fifth is usually understood to describe apostasy from the faith, but I will suggest an alternative understanding.

4 ... those who were once enlightened,—“Once” ἅπαξ G0530 is a favorite word in Hebrews, which contains eight of the 14 instances in the NT; no other book has more than two. It has the sense of “once for all,” a unique occurrence, and here refers to people who have recognized their sin and the provision of the Lord Jesus. The writer uses this verb “enlightened” again:

Heb. 10:32 But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were **illuminated**, ye endured a great fight of afflictions;

They have “seen the light.”

and have tasted of the heavenly gift,—It is common in the NT to speak of salvation as God’s gift to us:

John 4:10 Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest **the gift of God**, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but **the gift of God** is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eph. 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is **the gift of God**:

Some suggest that “taste” means that they have only partial experience of this gift, but that’s not how our writer uses the term:

Heb. 2:9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

Our Lord fully experienced death; the readers have fully experienced the gift of God.

and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,—Possession of the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of participation in the New Covenant. Paul makes clear both the positive and negative:

Rom 8:9 But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

5 And have tasted the good word of God,—The term for “word” ῥῆμα G4487 emphasizes the spoken word of God, not the content, probably referring to the prophecies uttered in the gatherings of the church. The grammar¹¹ suggests the nuance, “have tasted that the word of God is good.” They rejoiced in the preaching of God’s word.

and the powers of the world to come,—The last time we saw the word “powers” δυνάμεις G1411 was in 2:4, where it is translated “miracles.” Like the Corinthians, some of the Hebrews had experienced the signs that confirmed the apostolic preaching in the first century.

6 If they shall fall away,—The “if” is an interpretation on the part of the translators; the writer simply says “and fall away.”

Most commentators understand this verb to speak of apostasy from the Lord, leading to a debate over whether it is possible for a saved person to become unsaved. This view largely results from an insistence that all five warning passages refer to the same shortcoming. But the first two dealt with different problems.

- 2:1-4 warned those who would not receive Messiah’s words in the first place.
- 3:7-4:13 warned those who, having received the word, would not trust in the Lord’s promises.

Here, we have a third stage—those who have received the word, and who do trust in the Lord, but have stalled in their Christian life. What would “fall away” mean in this context?

This is the only instance of the verb in the NT, but it appears eight times in the Greek Old Testament (see note). Ezekiel uses it of Israel’s apostasy from the Lord, but the cognate noun παράπτωμα G3900 definitely describes forgivable offenses:¹²

Matt. 6:14 For if ye forgive men their **trespasses**, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:
15 But if ye forgive not men their **trespasses**, neither will your Father forgive your **trespasses**.

The verb need mean nothing more than “sin, offend, trespass.” Such lack of victory can be discouraging, and some groups tell such people that they have “lost their salvation” and need to start over. Our author disagrees. Whatever the reason is for the stagnation of the Hebrews, he refuses to return to the basics. The rest of this verse explains why.

seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.—The critical question is how these two participles (“crucify afresh” and “put to an open shame”) are connected with the context. One option is that they modify the verb “offend” (AV “fall away”), the other, that they modify the verb “renew” (chart).

¹¹ Use of the accusative rather than the genitive as usual for this verb

¹² So also the verb in Wis. 12:2 Therefore chastenest thou them by little and little that **offend**, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have sinned, that leaving their wickedness they may believe on thee, O Lord.

Some commentators (Lane; deSilva; Ellingworth) understand these words as descriptive of the offense. On this reading, those who fall away are rejected because they have dishonored the Son of God by falling away.

There are two difficulties with this interpretation.

First, the closer verb is “renew,” not “offend.” In general, it makes sense to prefer the nearer connection.

Second, the tenses of these participles are more consistent with the tense of renew (all present) than with the tense of “offend.” “Offend” (like the other four descriptions in vv. 4-5) is aorist, presenting a series of atomic, completed events. The author shows no interest in their inner structure. “Renew” is present, viewing an ongoing process. The participles are also present. It is simpler to understand them as refining what is involved in the renewal than as opening up the closed box of the “offend” event. Thus O’Brien and Westcott, as well as the diagrams of Leedy (in BibleWorks) and Koivisto and Fabbri (both in Accordance).

We take this view. For one who has become a follower of the Lord, even if they sin, going back to repentance (and by extension, the other introductory steps) is not acceptable. To do so would deny the reality of their experience in vv. 4-5. If a sin means that you have to get saved all over again, that’s like saying that the Lord has to be crucified again. It implies that he is not able to keep those whom he has brought to himself, and thus bring him to shame.

The writer will not go down this path. The solution to stagnant believers, frustrated by sin, is not to try to repeat the salvation experience. It is to press on to maturity.

7 For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: 8 But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.—He summarizes the lesson with an agricultural example. A person who has received God’s blessing of salvation is like a field blessed with the rain from heaven. If it brings forth good fruit, all is well. But what if it does not? In that case it is burned.

This verdict sounds dire, until we reflect that the field itself doesn’t burn. What burns is the worthless fruit that it has born. In fact, it was common practice to burn the fields after harvest each year, so that the stubble would be turned into accessible nutrients for the next year’s crops.¹³ The OT often refers to the burning of stubble (the stems left after harvest). For example (chart),

Is. 5:24 Therefore as **the fire devoureth the stubble**, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust:

Is. 47:14 Behold, **they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them;**

These quotations show that burning stubble was a common practice in Israelite agriculture. Isaiah’s metaphor is a bit different than that in Hebrews. Isaiah compares unbelievers, not with the ground on which the stubble grows, but with the stubble itself. In Hebrews, the immature believer is the ground, not the stubble, and that which is burned is weeds that have sprung up that render the land unfruitful. The purpose of the burning is to enable future fruitfulness. God deals with an unfruitful believer, not by saving them over again, but by discipline, as we will learn in much more detail in Hebrews 12. The lesson here is very much like that in 1 Corinthians 3:

1Cor. 3:11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stubble_burning

Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; 13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because **it shall be revealed by fire**; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. 14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. 15 **If any man's work shall be burned**, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

6:9-12, Second Reason: They Do Show Signs of Maturity

The pronouns shift from “those who” to “you.” The writer initially noted the readers’ lack of spiritual understanding. On reflection, he realizes that their lives, like fields blessed with the rain, are in fact bearing practical fruit.

9 But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.—Whatever their understanding may be, their lives do in fact show behavior characteristic of salvation. “Accompany salvation” ἔχομαι + genitive means “next to, besides,” and is used in Numbers to describe how one tribe is “along side” the next. These things do not *cause* salvation, but are associated with it, clues that it is there.

10 For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.—That behavior is loving care for the saints. The writer agrees with 1 John,

1John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.

This verse is one of a series of verses that reflect the writer’s concern for the life of the assembly. Others include 3:13 “exhort one another daily”; 10:24; 13:1, 3; and all of 10:26-13:19.

So the readers lack understanding (5:12), but show evidence of salvation in their behavior (6:10). They lie between Paul’s spiritual man and carnal man. Table 4 (chart) compares them with the steps of spiritual growth in 1 Corinthians.

	Spiritual Man (1 Cor 2:15)	The Hebrews	Carnal Man (babe; 1 Cor 3:2,3)
Understanding	judgeth all things	5:12 need that one teach you again	neither yet now are ye able
Behavior	is judged of no man	6:9 things that accompany salvation ... 10 your work and labor of love	envying and strife and divisions ... walk as men
Appropriate Food	Meat	Melchizedek	Milk

Table 4: The Intermediate Maturity of the Hebrews

The spiritual man has both understanding and behavior in line with the gospel:

1Cor. 2:15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

The carnal believer, or babe in Christ, has neither:

1Cor. 3:2 I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. 3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

Comparison of these two passages gives us valuable guidance as teachers in adjusting our material to the abilities of those whom we teach. Paul continues to feed the carnal believer with

milk. The writer contemplates this approach with his readers, but realizing the positive signs that they do show, resolves to press ahead.

11 And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: 12 That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.—His concern is not merely academic. The objective is not simply that they understand Melchizedek, but that they inherit the promises, that they enter into the promised rest. He earnestly desires their spiritual profit, that they would understand the *promises* that God has given his people, and enjoy the *hope* that rests on them.

These two verses are the second reference to each of these themes. Hope appears first in 3:6,

Heb. 3:6 But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the **hope** firm unto the end.

and God’s promise on which it is based follows in 4:1,

Heb. 4:1 Let us therefore fear, lest, a **promise** being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

These two words are associated throughout the book (Figure 3, chart), with “hope” introducing “promise” three times. Each time they introduce heroes of the faith.

- In Hebrews 3-4, the hero was Moses, who was faithful in all God’s house.
- Here, it is Abraham.
- In 10:23-11:1, it introduces many faithful saints, including not only Moses and Abraham but also others before and after them.

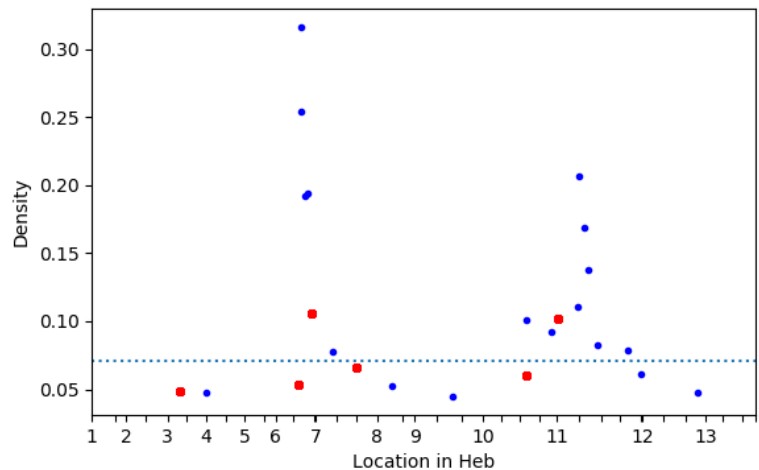


Figure 3: “Hope” and “Promise” in Hebrews

The instances here lead to the peak in the next section. The writer focuses our attention on those before us who have been offered this promise and held this hope, taking us back to the time of Abraham and Melchizedek. This whole event introduces the *distinction* between our Lord’s priesthood and that of Levi, following the *similarities* presented in 5:1-10 (Figure 2, chart).

6:13-20, Third Reason: The Example of Abraham

Another shift in pronouns brings us to a third-person narrative of God’s dealings with Abraham. The third reason for not stagnating is the example of how God kept pointing Abraham to a future that was not yet realized. Abraham did not stagnate, and neither should we.

13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself, 14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.—God’s promise to Abraham unfolds in Genesis 12-22 around four repeated themes: the **land** of Canaan, Abraham’s **seed**, God’s **blessing**, and **worldwide impact**. The first instance is when the Lord calls him to leave his country and family for the land of Canaan:

Gen 12:1 Now the LORD had said unto Abram,
Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a **land**
that I will shew thee:
2 And I will make of thee a **great nation**,
and **I will bless thee**, and make thy name great;
and be thou a blessing:
3 And **I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee**: and in thee shall
all families of the earth be blessed.

Facets of the blessing are repeated:

- in 13:14-17, when Abram graciously gave Lot the choice of the land, but the Lord then reassured him that he had not given away God's promise;
- in 15:1, 5, 18-21, after the war with the Mesopotamian kings, when Abram regrets his lack of an heir and the Lord engages in a formal covenant ceremony with him;
- in 17:3-8, when God institutes the sign of circumcision;
- and in 18:13-14, when the Lord and two angels come to visit Abraham, and emphasize only the promise of the seed.

The final stage comes after Abraham has demonstrated his faith by his works in offering Isaac.

Gen 22:16 And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son*: 17 That
in **blessing I will bless thee**,
and in multiplying I will multiply **thy seed** as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which
is upon the sea shore;
and **thy seed** shall possess the **gate of his enemies**;¹⁴
18 And in **thy seed** shall **all the nations of the earth** be blessed; because thou hast obeyed
my voice.

This last is the version that Hebrews quotes in 6:14, where God swears by himself.

15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.—This is a surprising claim. In Hebrews 11 we will read very nearly the opposite:

Heb. 11:13 These all died in faith, **not having received the promises**, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Heb. 11:39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, **received not the promise**: 40 God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

How then can the writer here say that Abraham obtained the promise?

The commentaries are full of suggestions.

¹⁴ The reference to the land here (“possess the gate of his enemies”) anticipates what happened in the conquest, when the nation took over not only the land, but also the cities and houses (gated structures) of their enemies (Deu 6:10-11). The usual practice in the ancient world is to burn a conquered city, but God enabled them to conquer the cities without destroying them (Jos 11:13), so that they could “possess the gate of [their] enemies.”

- Does he perhaps refer to receiving God’s solemn oath by himself, in Gen 22:16? This seems a very weak form of fulfillment, since he had God’s promise ever since Genesis 12. And he didn’t have to endure patiently to receive the promise in that sense—God just gave it to him.
- Perhaps it refers to the birth of Isaac, the first of the seed, which is the one facet that is found in all six editions of the promise, or receiving Isaac back from the dead after the offering on Mount Moriah. This is promising, except that the context in Hebrews mentions nothing about Isaac.
- We’ll suggest that the fulfillment that the author has in view here is the meeting with Melchizedek, who delivers to Abraham the blessing that God has promised. The author sees Melchizedek as a picture of the coming Messiah, and this encounter is thus a down payment to Abraham on the promise, not only of the seed (from which Messiah would come), but of the blessing as well.

16 For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. 17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:—Now the writer focuses in on one particular word in the last version of God’s promise to Abraham: “I have sworn,” Gen 22:16. The divine oath is a favorite theme in Hebrews. There are only three such references elsewhere in the NT, two to God’s oath to Abraham (Luke 1:73; Acts 7:17) and one to his oath to David (Acts 2:30), but six in Hebrews:¹⁵

- The oath from Ps 95:11 that Israel would not enter into God’s rest (Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:3);
- The oath from Gen 22:16 to Abraham;
- The oath from Ps 110:4 to make the Messianic king an eternal priest.

The writer finds it remarkable that God, whose very word is truth, should choose to swear an oath. He concludes that God wants to reassure his people. He knows our weakness, and wants to give us every encouragement.

18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie,—That is, his underlying counsel (stated five previous times in his promise to Abraham) and the confirming oath (coming in ch. 22). Whatever uncertainties Abraham might face, he could cling to these two.

we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:—Now the writer moves from Abraham to us. God’s promise and the confirming oath are not just a comfort to Abraham, but also to us. In what way?

In a general sense, the promise to Abraham *is* a promise to us. God promises to bless all nations through him. But there is something more, identified in the next two verses.

19 Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;—Our hope is anchored within the veil, in the holy of holies, God’s resting place. This resting place is our destination as well, according to the exposition of Psalm 95 in 3:7-4:13. What grounds do we have for our hope of entering that rest?

20 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus,—The word “forerunner” is used in the LXX for the very first grapes (Num 13:21) and figs (Isa 28:4), which give an indication of the coming harvest.¹⁶ God has given us an indication of our future blessing. Our Lord has already

¹⁵ In addition to these nine divine oaths in the NT, human oaths are mentioned 17 times, 16 elsewhere in the NT and once (6:16) in Hebrews.

¹⁶ Wisd 12:8 uses the term of the first wave of attackers in a military action.

entered the holy place, in response to the invitation of Ps 110:1, “sit thou at my right hand.” Compare

Heb. 4:14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,

But Psalm 110 brings us back to the verse that the writer wants to discuss:

made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.—Here is the promise. He will point out in 7:21 that this promise is confirmed by an oath. In other words, the principle of a promise confirmed by an oath applies not only to Abraham, but to our Lord in his role as our high priest.

6:13-20 prepares us for Melchizedek, who is a picture of God’s promise to Abraham.¹⁷ When did Abraham “obtain the promise” (v. 15)? He died a stranger in the land, but he did meet Melchizedek, who delivered the promised blessing as a type of the promised Messiah.

7:1-10:18, Distinction

The distinction between our Lord’s priesthood and that of the Levitical priests is marked in two ways: he serves in a different order (τάξις G5010) and according to a different covenant (διαθήκη G1214) (Figure 4, chart). The *order* emphasizes the internal structure of the priesthood, considered as a system. The *covenant* looks beyond the system to the authority by which it is established. Our Lord’s *order*, unlike that of the Levites, combines kingship and priesthood in one, and is not vulnerable to death, for it is guaranteed by God’s promise. His *covenant* gives him access to the heavenly sanctuary, unlike the earthly one to which they are restricted.

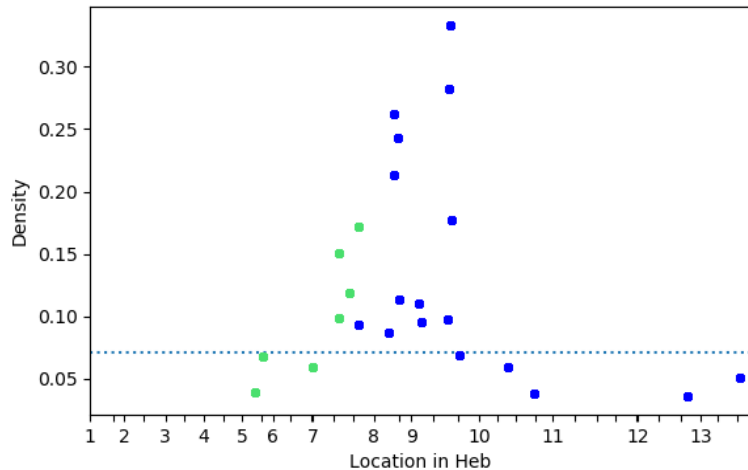


Figure 4: The *Order* and *Covenant* of our Lord's Priesthood

7:1-28, Melchizedek

God swore a blessing to Abraham, an oath that is to increase our confidence that we have an anchor within the veil. That anchor consists of Jesus, in his function as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The time has come to explore this OT character in more detail. The argument unfolds in three steps.

- 1-10: The OT history shows that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham.
- 11-19: Melchizedek’s priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood

¹⁷ See the extensive study of this theme at

<https://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/special/christmas/notes/Christmas11ThePromise.pdf>

- 20-28: Our Lord, as a Melchizedekian priest, is greater than the Levitical priests

Each of these takes the form of a chiasm in three levels.

1-10, The History: Abraham is Greater than Melchizedek

The OT history concerning Melchizedek is surprisingly brief.

Gen 14:18 And Melchizedek **king** of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the **priest** of the most high God. 19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: 20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.

The writer follows this description quite closely (chart):

7:1 For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; 2 To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all;¹⁸—This part is a very close paraphrase of the Genesis record, omitting only the reference to the bread and wine and the details of the blessing.

Melchizedek is the first person called a “priest” in the Bible.¹⁹ He is the prototype for this office, the one with whom every later priest must inevitably be compared.

first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace;—Now he expands on the name and title of this mysterious character. “Melchizedek” means King of Righteousness, while “Salem” means peace. The combination of these titles in one person reflects the tension between the roles of king and priest in Israel. The king’s function is to enforce righteousness by enforcing God’s law, while the priest’s function is to reconcile a sinful people to God and thus restore peace between God and man. The One who sits at the Lord’s right hand in Ps 110:1 and who will “strike through kings” when he “judge[s] the heathen” (110:5-6) is characteristically a “king of righteousness. But Ps 110:4, addressed to this king of righteousness, claims that the example of Melchizedek allows him to be “king of peace” as well. The writer’s expansion of the name and title shows the link with Psalm 110, and prepares for his next observation, which is even more interpretive.

3 Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life;—These characteristics set Melchizedek apart from other characters in Genesis. The framework of Genesis is a series of statements, “these are the generations of XXX,” as one generation of the chosen race dies off and the next is born. Melchizedek does not fit into this pattern. As Moses presents him, he is a static, unchanging feature, part of the background in which the Patriarchs live.

These statements can be understood in two different ways.

- Some would claim that Melchizedek is in fact a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God, and so he really is without beginning or end.
- Or the statements may refer to how he is presented in the sacred text, without any record of birth, death, or ancestry.

¹⁸ The colored words are picked up in chiasmic order in the exposition of vv. 4-9 (Vanhoye).

¹⁹ Priestly function appears earlier, as Beale (*The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, p. 66f) points out with regard to Adam’s assignment in Eden. See my notes on Hebrews 4. But this is the first instance of the term “priest.”

but made like unto the Son of God;—This clause favors the second of these two positions. He “resembles” the Son of God, which implies that he is not identical with him. The writer is drawing parallels between the literary picture in Genesis and the historical reality in the Messiah.

abideth a priest continually.²⁰—This expression is close to the expression in Ps 110:4, “a priest forever,” but not identical.²¹ “Forever” implies there is no ending. “Continually” emphasizes the ongoing nature of his priesthood, but without committing to its being eternal. The writer clearly wants to remind us of Ps 110:4, but at the same time to reinforce that Melchizedek, while “resembling the Son of God,” is not identical with him. We might paraphrase the writer:

Melchizedek is the prototypical priest, the first person in the Bible to be called a priest. As Genesis presents him, he has neither birth nor death. His priesthood has no beginning and no ending. It is continual.

Ps 110:4 no doubt suggests to the writer this emphasis on the lack of beginning or end to Melchizedek’s history. But his reasoning may be the same that led David to the idea that Melchizedek’s priesthood is unending.

Now, having presented the historical data, the writer shows that it establishes Melchizedek’s superiority to Abraham. In doing so, he repeats three terms from his initial account of the story, in chiasmic order.

4 Now consider how great this man was,—This is his main theme. The writer cites three details from Genesis to support this claim: the tithe, the blessing, and Melchizedek’s continuing status.

unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils.—His first point, corresponding to the final detail in the citation in v. 2 from Genesis 14, is that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. As Melchizedek is the first priest in the Bible, but this is the first tithe. There are references to a tax of one-tenth paid to ruling authorities in Assyrian documents, and much earlier (13th-14th centuries), contemporary with Moses, in Ugarit.²² It seems to have been an accepted way for a person of lower stature to show reverence and respect for a higher one. The next instance in the Bible is when Jacob has his vision at Bethel, and promises God,

Gen 28:22 And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

By paying a tithe, Abraham recognizes the superiority of Melchizedek to himself. Why did he do this? When Abraham meets Melchizedek in Gen. 14, he has already received two of the six promises of God’s covenant that we recalled in 6:13-20. The prevailing culture was overwhelmingly polytheistic. When Melchizedek blesses Abraham in the name of the most high God, Abraham recognizes him as priest of the God who has called him out of Ur, and who has just given him victory over the Mesopotamian kings

5 And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham: 6 But he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham,—The readers of the epistle would naturally associate tithes

²⁰ εἰς τὸ διηνεκές, similar to Ps 109:4’s εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, though occurring nowhere in canonical LXX. 7:17 etc. use εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

²¹ εἰς τὸ διηνεκές rather than εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα

²² M. Heltzer, *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2/3 (1975), pp. 124-128. [jstor.org/stable/27925507](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27925507)

with the Levites. But the tithe paid by Abraham to Melchizedek differs from those in two ways.²³

First, the *relation* between them is different. The Levites take tithes “of their brethren,” who like them are all descended from Abraham. They are peers. Melchizedek is not related to Abraham.

Second, the *motivation* is different. Levitical tithes are by “commandment ... according to the law,” while that of Abraham is voluntary. The patriarch voluntarily offered tithes to his superior, while the people were compelled by law to give tithes to their brethren.

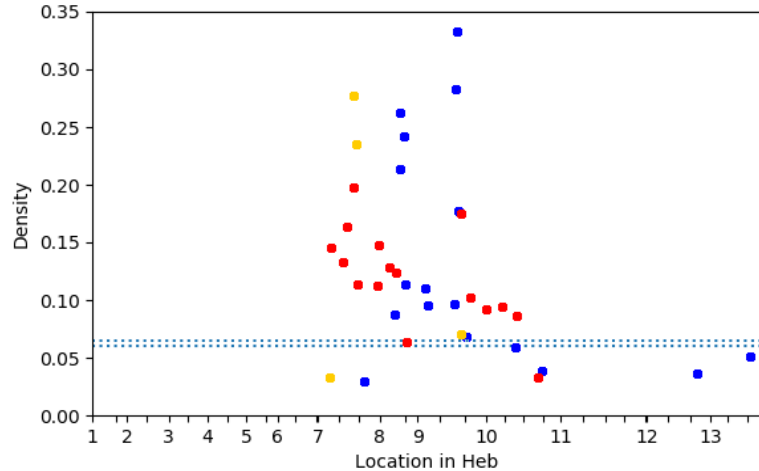


Figure 5: *Covenant, Commandment, and Law/Legislate (νομο-) in Hebrews*

This verse is the book’s first reference to “the law” (and the close synonym “commandment”) which is concentrated in ch. 7-10 (Figure 5, chart). These two words share the complementary distribution with “covenant” that we noticed earlier (Figure 4, chart). “Law” and “commandment,” like “order,” emphasize the way that things are done, the internal structure of the priesthood, while “covenant” emphasizes the relation between the people and God. In general, the writer uses “law” to refer to the precepts of the old covenant, while he reserves “covenant” mostly for the new, referring to the first covenant simply as “the first” (8:7, 13; 9:1, 18).²⁴ The difference is subtle but important, exemplified in the contrast in vv. 5-6. One obeys laws of necessity (Israel’s tithes to the Levites), but yields oneself voluntarily to the obligations of a covenant (Abraham’s offering to Melchizedek, whom he recognizes as priest of the single God who has called him, and whom he serves).

and **blessed** him that had the **promises**. **7 And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.**—The second point in showing that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, corresponding to the second point in vv. 1-2, is that Abraham receives a blessing from Melchizedek. Just as giving a tithe indicates the superiority of the recipient, so receiving a blessing indicates the superiority of the giver.

8 And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth.—The third sign of Melchizedek’s superiority is that he is “a priest continually.”

The verb “it is witnessed” (Figure 6, chart) is an unusually strong description for the argument from silence in 7:3 (anticipated by David in Ps 110:4). But it links Melchizedek with the book’s other heroes of faith. We read of Moses,

Heb. 3:5 And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a **testimony [witness]** of those things which were to be spoken after;

23 A third difference is the verb, λαμβάνω vs. δεκατόω, which might suggest a more forced contribution for the Levites, but there are so few references to the latter verb (Neh. 10:37; Heb. 7:6, 9) that it is difficult to insist on a difference. We can see the point clearly enough in the references to “commandment” and “law.”

24 There are exceptions: he quotes Jeremiah’s promise (31:33) that under the new covenant God’s laws are written in our hearts (8:10; 10:16), and he occasionally follows Jeremiah in using the word of the old covenant (9:15).

Now the term is applied to Melchizedek here and (7:17) in Ps 110:4, and ultimately the heroes of faith in ch. 11. The word refers regularly, not to the witness we bear, but to the witness that God bears to his faithful people. Melchizedek, by being presented as an undying priest, is superior to anyone, such as Abraham, who must one day die.

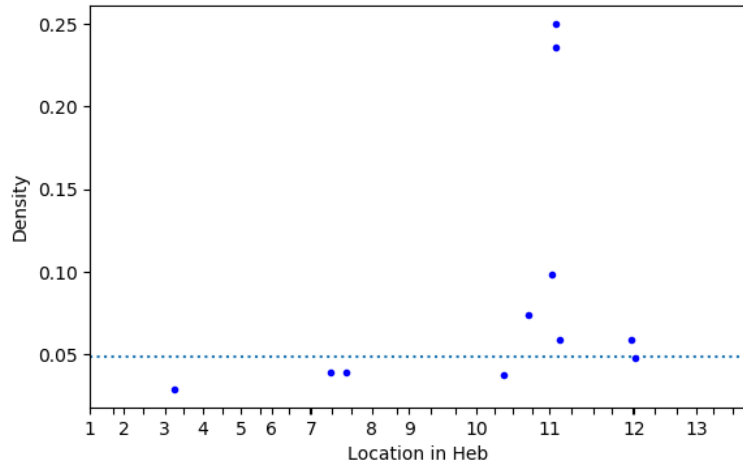


Figure 6: Witness (μαρτυρ*) in Hebrews

9 And as I may so say, Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham. 10 For he was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchisedec met him.

—Here is the third link back to the citation from Genesis, corresponding to “met” in 7:1. These verses transition to vv. 11-19. So far we have been learning that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham. Now we will see that he is also superior to Levi. Levi, before his birth, paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham.

11-19, Melchizedek is Greater than Levi

Now the writer shows Melchizedek’s superiority over the Levitical priesthood. This section is a chiasm (Table 5, chart). Each element contrasts a different facet of priestly order, and we will expound each of the parallels together.

11, 18-19, The Objective: Perfection

The first and last elements speak of “perfect” and “perfection.” The

Objective: Perfection (Maturity, cf. 6:1)	11 If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law ,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?		18 For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. 19 For the law made nothing perfect , but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.
Standard: Law vs. Life	12 For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law .		15 And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, 16 Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment , but after the power of an endless life. 17 For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.
Origin: Tribe	13 For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe , of which no man gave attendance at the altar.		14 For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood.

Table 5: Elements of Priestly Order: Chiasm in 7:11-19

objective of each order is to achieve perfection—not just priestly consecration (as LXX uses the word in Leviticus), but maturity of the people. These elements also repeat “law” from its initial mention in v. 5, preparing for the second pair of elements. “Perfection” and “law” will return at the end of the section in 7:28.

11 If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood,—The writer wants his readers to reach perfection, or maturity: “let us go on unto perfection,” 6:1. The purpose of a priesthood (a priestly order) is to bring the people to that maturity.

(for under it the people received the law,)²⁵—The Levites pursued that objective by ministering the law to the people, in two ways.

First, the priests were responsible for teaching the law to the people. For example (chart):

Lev. 10:8 And the LORD spake unto Aaron, saying, 9 Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, ... 11 ... that ye may **teach** the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses.

Deut. 33:8 And of Levi he [Moses] said, ... 10 **They shall teach** Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law:

Mic. 3:11 The heads thereof judge for reward, and **the priests thereof teach** for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money:

Mal. 2:7 For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

In addition, they were responsible for the offerings that dealt with violations of the law.²⁶ The entire authority and efficacy of the law rested on the Levitical priesthood. If the priesthood were not “perfected,” in fact as well as ceremonially, the whole law came into question.

what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?—If the “perfection” of Levitical consecration really had brought about everything that was necessary, there would be no need for David, four centuries after the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, to speak of a new order. Ps 110:4 shows that the Levitical priesthood did not achieve its objective.²⁷

The conclusion to the chiasm confirms the imperfection of the Levitical priesthood and its law.

18 For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.—As anticipated in the condition in vv. 11-12, the failure of the priesthood to achieve perfection means that the law, resting on the priesthood, also fails.

19 For the law made nothing perfect,—The law claimed to “perfect” (consecrate) the priests, but in fact, it perfected (completed) nothing. The promised of the priestly ritual of consecration was never fully realized.

but the bringing in of a better hope did;—That’s why David speaks of a new priestly order, that of Melchizedek. Recall that in 6:19-20, our “hope” is the Lord Jesus, the new priest after the order of Melchizedek.

by the which we draw nigh unto God.—Throughout the OT, this expression describes the actions of the priests who enter into the sanctuary:

Ex. 19:22 And let **the priests** also, which **come near to the LORD**, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them.

Lev. 10:3 *Upon the death of Nadab and Abihu:* Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in **them that come nigh me**, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.

²⁵ On the syntax, see note

²⁶ M. Dods, Expositor’s Greek Testament

²⁷ France on v. 28: “This argument is interestingly opposite to that of Paul in Gal 3:17-18 that the Law cannot set aside God’s promise, which preceded it!” See note.

Our destination is God's resting place (ch. 3-4), his holy of holies. Our Savior is already there, our sure anchor fixed already in our ultimate destination.

12, 15-17, The Standard: Law vs. Life

The second facet of the order of priesthood is the standard that defines it.

12 For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.—This is a natural consequence of the parenthesis in v. 11. The law rested upon the priesthood, depending on it for its promulgation and expiation. If the priesthood changes, so must the law.

15 And it is yet far more evident:—The comparison here is with v. 14, which we will consider in a moment.

for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest,—As anticipated by David in Psalm 110.

16 Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment,—It would be awkward if he were to call the law itself “carnal,” since Paul in Rom 7:14 says it is spiritual. Better, “a commandment concerning the flesh,” namely, the tribal qualification that he has just discussed in vv. 14-15. “All the requirements ... to be satisfied by a Levitical priest were literally ‘of flesh,’ outward descent, outward perfectness, outward purity. No moral qualification was imposed.”²⁸

but after the power of an endless life.—By contrast, the new priesthood envisioned by David is based not on a carnal commandment but on eternal life, as presented in the Psalm:

17 For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

13-14, The Origin: Tribe

The final aspect of the priestly order, after the objective of perfection that it pursued and the standard by which it is empowered and regulated, is the descent of its members.

13 For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. 14 For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood.—This is an understatement. Not only did Moses not mention any priests from Judah, but the kings, who came from Judah, were forbidden to exercise priestly function, as attested by the leprosy of Uzziah.

20-28, Jesus is Greater than Levi

Like the previous two sections, this one is a three-level chiasm (Table 6, chart).

- It begins and ends with the *oath* of Ps 110:4.
- Next, it contrasts the *unique* person and offering of Messiah with the *many* priests and *daily* offerings of the Levitical system.
- Finally, it describes the *effectiveness* of his ministry for us.

As in the previous section, we consider each matching pair together.

28 Westcott

20-22, 28, A Priest by Oath

At the end of ch. 6, the writer introduces the divine oath, which God graciously adds to his promises for the encouragement of his people. Not only was the Abrahamic covenant confirmed by an oath, but according to a detail of Ps 110:4 that has not been quoted up to this point, so was the promise of the Melchizedekian high priest.


His Consecration: by Oath	20 And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: 21 (For those priests were made without an oath ; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:) 22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament .	 <p>28 For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, <i>maketh</i> the Son, who is consecrated "for evermore."</p>	
His Uniqueness: of Person and Offering	23 And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: 24 But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.		27 Who needeth not daily , as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once , when he offered up himself.
His Ministry	25 Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.		26 For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens;

Table 6: Chiasm in 7:20-28

20 And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: 21 (For those priests were made without an oath;—The OT instructions for ordaining priests (Exodus 29) say nothing about an oath, either by God or by the priests themselves.

but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:)—Again he quotes Ps 110:4, but this time he adds the reference to an oath.

22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.—“By so much” refers to the oath. The example of Abraham in ch. 6 shows that a divine oath is evidence of a covenant between God and his people. So the oath in Ps 110:4 suggests that the Messiah, as priest, participates in a testament, or covenant (the same Greek word). This is the first time we see the word “covenant” in Hebrews. It will become prominent in ch. 8-9, where it refers almost exclusively to the New Covenant promised by God in Jer 31:31-34.

Messiah’s testament is “better.” One naturally asks, “Better than what?” The writer has been contrasting our Lord’s priesthood with that of Levi, which had no oath. So it is natural to look for a covenant that initiated the Levitical priesthood, and we shall see in the next chapter that the contrast is with the covenant at Sinai.

“Surety” ἔγγυος appears only here in the canonical Greek Bible, but its cognates are used throughout Proverbs to refer to a pledge, obligating oneself to be responsible for the payments promised by another. The practice resembles our practice of co-signing on a loan. God has promised (in Jeremiah 31) to replace the covenant of Sinai with a new covenant, and the Messiah’s priestly work will guarantee that this new covenant will be realized.

The chiasm ends with another reference to God’s oath.

28 For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated τετελιωμένον for evermore.—The word “consecrated” is the word “perfected” that we have seen often before, and that can

refer either generally to the completion of God’s purpose, or specifically (as here) to the consecration of a priest. Thus the verse gives four contrasts (chart):

- The law with the oath (and the covenant it seals);
- Men in general with the Son;
- “Maketh high priests” with “consecrated,” truly perfected;²⁹
- The infirmity of Levitical priests (both physical death and their need for personal sacrifice, v. 27) with the eternal priesthood of the Son.

This verse, the last in ch. 7, brings together once more “law” and “perfection,” which marked the outer two elements of the second part of the chapter. The law made nothing perfect (v. 19), but God’s oath leads to the perfect consecration of the Son (v. 28).

Contrast God’s oath with the practice of many Christian communities, which require their leaders to swear oaths—of doctrinal faithfulness, of celibacy, of poverty, of silence. The Scriptures never impose such an obligation. And in fact, our Savior warns us against oaths:

Matt. 5:33 Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: 34 But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: 35 Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. 36 Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. 37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

The only oath that should be involved in priesthood is God’s oath, provided for our comfort and encouragement, to establish his Son as our faithful high priest.

23-24, 27, A Unique Priest

The second pair of elements in the chiasm highlights the uniqueness of our Lord’s priesthood, both in his person and in his work. Each part contrasts him with a distinctive weakness of the Levitical priests, which together make up the “infirmity” we have already seen in v. 28.

23 And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: 24 But this *man*, because he continueth ever *εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα*, hath an unchangeable priesthood.—The Levitical priests died, one after the other. But Messiah is ordained “a priest for ever.” It is never necessary to have a replacement ceremony, such as we see from Aaron to Eleazer in Num 20:28. Thus he is a *unique priest*.

27 Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.—He also offers only one, *unique sacrifice*, in contrast to the many daily sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. The reason they had to offer many sacrifices is the same as the reason they died: they had to deal with their own sins, as well as those of the people. But, as we were told in the opening bracket of this section (4:15), our High Priest was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). He needs to offer only one sacrifice, for the sins of the people.

25-26, An Effective Priest

The center of the chiasm shows that our High Priest is effective in his ministry on our behalf.

²⁹ Though the LXX describes the inauguration of the Levites as “perfecting,” the writer avoids applying that term to them here, in view of his claim in v. 19.

25 Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, —“To the uttermost” is εἰς τὸ παντελές, echoing once again the theme of the “perfection” that the Levitical priesthood could not achieve.

seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.—This assurance is based on his ongoing intercession for us.

The ongoing intercession of Christ for his people is, along with his once-for-all offering, a central part of his priestly work. Our Lord promised such intervention in the Upper Room:

John 14:16 And **I will pray the Father**, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

Under the terms of the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is the one who guides us in righteousness, and ultimately delivers us, not only from the guilt of sin, but from its presence in our lives.

Christ’s intercession for us is the crowning point of Paul’s concise summary of what delivers us from condemnation before God:

Rom. 8:34 Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, **who also maketh intercession for us.**

And John encourages us,

1John 2:1 if any man sin, we have **an advocate with the Father**, Jesus Christ the righteous:

John emphasizes that the effectiveness of such an intercessor depends on his own righteousness, and the writer to the Hebrews goes on to spell out the qualifications of our Lord.

26 For such an high priest became us, who is

Our Lord’s qualifications for his intercessory work are now set forth in three adjectives and two participles. The past tense of the participles shows that the description here applies to our Lord in his present condition, before the Father.

holy,—Two Greek words in the NT are translated “holy.” By far the most common (240x), ἅγιος G0040, is the regular LXX translation for the Hebrew root שָׁקַד, meaning “set apart,” and is a general title for all believers. Moses repeatedly says to the entire congregation (Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21), “thou art an holy people.” Peter repeats this statement to his readers (1 Pet 2:9), and Paul addresses Ephesians and Colossians “to the saints” in those places (Eph 1:1; Col 1:2).

Our Savior certainly is “holy” in this sense, but that is not the point here. This word, ὅσιος GG3741, is much rarer in the NT (7x). In the LXX, it translates the word חֲסִיד H2623, meaning “someone who keeps חָסַד, someone whose conduct is marked by loyal love.” It is one of the marks of someone qualified to be an overseer of God’s people:

Titus 1:8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, **holy**, temperate; 9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught,

“Christians in the New Testament are all called ἅγιοι, but not all ὀσίοι.”³⁰ This is the characteristic mark of our Savior, the expression of God’s loyal love to us.

harmless,—This word (ἄκακος G0172) translates two Hebrew words in the LXX: פְּתִי H6612, the standard word in Proverbs for the simple, naive person, and חָם H8537, meaning one who is

30 Barmby, Pulpit Bible

perfect, used three times in Job (2:3; 8:20; 36:5) to describe an upright person. The only other use of the word in the NT favors the echo of “simple, naive”:

Rom. 16:18 For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the **simple**.

It is at first surprising to hear our Lord described with a word that Proverbs uses to refer to a person who needs instruction. But the other descriptions in this verse guard us against any negative understanding. Perhaps it is best to understand the term in the sense of “guileless.” Israel’s history is full of high priests who plotted and schemed to advance themselves, including

- The sons of Eli, who committed fornication with the worshippers at the tabernacle
- Abiathar, who supported Adonijah against Solomon when David was about to die;
- Caiaphas, who would condemn the Messiah to preserve his political position with Rome.

Our Lord has no ulterior motives as he ministers for us before his Father.

undefiled,—He has no taint of sin about him.

Now we move from the adjectives to the participles.

separate from sinners,—More precisely, we might translate the perfect participle, “having been separated from sinners.” Certainly, during his earthly ministry, our Lord often associated with sinful people, as his adversaries noted in their taunts (Matt 11:19 “a friend of publicans and sinners”). But with his ascent to the Father’s right hand, he has left behind the world of sinners, leaving us to carry on that direct intervention with them.

and made higher than the heavens;—The final participle emphasizes his exalted position, which has preoccupied our writer since the beginning of the book. We have seen it as a mark of the Father’s good pleasure with him. Now it is the place of his continuing ministry for us.

Notes

4:14 Great High Priest ἀρχιερεύς μέγας

The expression ὁ ἱερεὺς ὁ μέγας is common in the LXX (26x) as a translation for הכהן הגדול (which appears 21x). But ἀρχιερεύς appears only three times in the canonical books (Lev. 4:3; Josh. 22:13; 24:33), and the only instances in the Greek Bible where it is modified by μέγας are of Simon the High Priest, last son of Mattathias the priest of Modin, and successor to Judas and later Jonathan in leading the people:

1Mac. 13:42 Then the people of Israel began to write in their instruments and contracts, In the first year of Simon **the great high priest**, the **governor** and leader of the Jews.

1Mac. 14:27 So then they wrote it in tables of brass, which they set upon pillars in mount Sion: and this is the copy of the writing; The eighteenth day of the month Elul, in the hundred threescore and twelfth year, being the third year of Simon **the great high priest**, ...
35 The people therefore, seeing the acts of Simon, and unto what glory he thought to bring his nation, made him their **governor** and chief priest, because he had done all these things, and for the justice and faith which he kept to his nation, and for that he sought by all means to exalt his people.

The addition of μέγας may be to indicate that he combines the functions of priest and civil leader. In this he anticipates the function of Melchizedek, which may be why the author of Hebrews uses this expression to refer to our Lord.

4:16 Mercy and Grace

	τοη	ηη
ἔλεος	208	2
χαρις	2	61

Hebrew reflexes of κρατέω and κατέχω

	קרנ C	רנא
κρατέω	44	10
κατέχω	6	11

The terms are used in parallel in Ex. 4:4; Jer. 49:24; Job 18:9.

Christ vs. The Christ

Articular:

Heb. 3:14 For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end;

Heb. 5:5 So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.

Heb. 6:1 Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,

Heb. 9:14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Heb. 9:24 For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us:

Heb. 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

Heb. 11:26 Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.

Anarthrous:

Heb. 3:1 Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;

Heb. 3:6 But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

Heb. 9:11 But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

Heb. 10:10 By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Heb. 13:8 Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.

Heb. 13:21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

5:14 καλός τε και κακός

Previously, I have aligned this expression with Gen 2:9, 17; 3:5, 22, a passage that illustrates the desire to gain knowledge by a fast track rather than through the process using knowledge already attained in making moral decisions. In Genesis, however, the Greek is καλός και πονηρός. What are the Hebrew precursors of κακός and πονηρός?

	רע	רעה	רעע
κακός	70	138	3
πονηρός	186	63	17

The two words clearly overlap in the LXX. However, given the writer's reliance on the LXX, it is unlikely that he would have abandoned the Greek tradition's consistent use of καλός και πονηρός in Genesis if he were alluding to that passage.

The contrast in 5:14 is a common one elsewhere in the LXX: Gen. 24:50; 1 Kings 22:8, 18; Prov. 15:2, 23; Tob. 12:7; Jer. 18:11. But the contrast in Genesis is even more common (appearing in 22 passages altogether). So it is unlikely that he has mentally assimilated a more common wording to the Genesis context.

How much does he vary from LXX in other quotations? We have already seen his shifting of the 40 years in Psalm 95 from one clause to another. But there would be no motive for the shift in this case.

Conclusion: while we may see Genesis 2-3 as a useful illustration of the principle of Heb 5:14, this parallel was probably not in the mind of the writer.

6:6 παραπίπτω

This is the only instance of the verb in the NT.

It appears 8x in LXX: 5x in Ezekiel, 1x in Esther, and 2x in the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha.

The instances in Ezekiel all refer to serious transgression, and all but the last are paired with παράπτωμα: Ezek. 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4

The instances in Esther and Wisdom are much more moderate, and more related to the scenario in Hebrews 6. In Esther, the verb has an impersonal subject, a "word" that is being neglected.

Esth. 6:10 Then the king said to Aman, Thou hast well said: so do to Mardocheaus the Jew, who waits in the palace, and let not a word of what thou hast spoken be **neglected**.

In Wisdom, it refers to something from which wisdom can protect the hearer:

Wis. 6:9 Unto you therefore, O kings, do I speak, that ye may learn wisdom, and not **fall away**.

Wis 12:2 is particularly appropriate: wisdom is the means for correcting those who have already done what the verb describes.

Wis. 12:2 Therefore chastenest thou them by little and little that **offend**, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have sinned, that leaving their wickedness they may believe on thee, O Lord.

Without claiming inspiration for Wisdom, we may recognize this usage as one that would be familiar to a hellenistic Jew such as our author.

God's Oaths

Heb 6:13-17 emphasizes the final repetition of God's promise to Abraham, which was marked as a divine oath. This is one of at least four such oaths in the OT, each of great relevance to our salvation.

Abraham: The promise of the land, the seed, the blessing, and dominion over the earth: the focus of 6:13-20.

Gen 22:16 And said, **By myself have I sworn**, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son*: 17 That in **blessing I will bless thee**, and in multiplying I will multiply **thy seed** as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and **thy seed** shall possess the **gate of his enemies**; 18 And in **thy seed** shall **all the nations of the earth** be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

Point for us: God's resolve to bless Abraham and all nations. His purposes of salvation and restoration are further confirmed by oath in Num. 14:21; Is. 45:23; 49:18; Ezek. 33:11 (see notes).

Israel in the desert: the focus of Heb 3:7-4:13.

Num. 14:23 **Surely** they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it: ... 28 Say unto them, **As truly as I live**, saith the LORD, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you: "*surely*" is **נא**, indicating an oath. Note also the reference to the oath to Abraham, "*which I swear unto their fathers.*"

Psa 95:10 Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: 11 Unto whom **I swear** in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.

Point for us: need to be accountable to this God. Threats of judgment like this are by far the most common oaths of God (see notes). But note how the judgment oaths of 14:23, 28 follow the promise of salvation in 14:21. Judgment is his strange work (Isa 28:21).

The big question now is how to reconcile these two purposes.

David:

Act 2:30 Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that **God had sworn with an oath** to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;

Psa 89:3 I have made a covenant with my chosen, **I have sworn** unto David my servant, 4 Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah.

Psa 132:11 **The LORD hath sworn** in truth unto David; he will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne.

Point for us: "the kingdom of God is at hand." God has an appointed king whom he will establish over all the earth. But this, with the second point, is threatening. The function of the divine king is to rule with a rod of iron (Ps 2) in judgment.

God's oath promising **Messiah's priesthood** (the focus of Heb 7):

Heb 7:20 And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: 21 (For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, **The Lord swore** and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:) 22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.

Psa 110:4 **The LORD hath sworn**, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

Point for us: Our King and judge is also our Priest, to reconcile us to God by his death and resurrection.

Offer of salvation:

Eze 33:11 Say unto them, **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

Other Instances

כי אני is very common, especially in Ezekiel; בני נשבתי (as in Gen 22:16) appears three more times.

God's Salvation

Num. 14:21 But as truly **as I live**, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD.

Is. 45:23 **I have sworn by myself**, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

Is. 49:18 Lift up thine eyes round about, and behold: all these gather themselves together, and come to thee. **As I live**, saith the LORD, thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all, as with an ornament, and bind them on thee, as a bride doeth.

Ezek. 33:11 Say unto them, **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

Truth of a revelation

Ezek. 18:3 **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.

Ezek. 34:8 **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock;

Judgment

Jer. 22:24 **As I live**, saith the LORD, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were the signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence;

Jer. 46:18 **As I live**, saith the King, whose name is the LORD of hosts, Surely as Tabor is among the mountains, and as Carmel by the sea, so shall he come. *Nebuchadnezzar to bring God's judgment on Egypt*

Ezek. 5:11 Wherefore, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD; Surely, because thou hast defiled my sanctuary with all thy detestable things, and with all thine abominations, therefore will I also diminish thee; neither shall mine eye spare, neither will I have any pity. ... 16 Though these three men were in it, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters; they only shall be delivered, but the land shall be desolate. ... 18 Though these three men were in it, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they only shall be delivered themselves. 20 Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness.

Ezek. 16:48 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, Sodom thy sister hath not done, she nor her daughters, as thou hast done, thou and thy daughters. *Description of Judah's sin, for which she will be punished*

Ezek. 17:16 **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, surely in the place where the king dwelleth that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he brake, even with him in the midst of Babylon he shall die. ... 19 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; **As I live**, surely mine oath that he hath despised, and my covenant that he hath broken, even it will I recompense upon his own head.

Ezek. 20:3 Son of man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye come to enquire of me? **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be enquired of by you. ... 31 For when ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons to pass through the fire, ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day: and shall I be enquired of by you, O house of Israel? **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be enquired of by you.

Ezek. 20:33 **As I live**, saith the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you:

Ezek. 33:27 Say thou thus unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; **As I live**, surely they that are in the wastes shall fall by the sword, and him that is in the open field will I give to the beasts to be devoured, and they that be in the forts and in the caves shall die of the pestilence.

Ezek. 35:6 Therefore, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I will prepare thee unto blood, and blood shall pursue thee: sith thou hast not hated blood, even blood shall pursue thee.

Ezek. 35:11 Therefore, **as I live**, saith the Lord GOD, I will even do according to thine anger, and according to thine envy which thou hast used out of thy hatred against them; and I will make myself known among them, when I have judged thee.

Zeph. 2:9 Therefore **as I live**, saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Surely Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, even the breeding of nettles, and saltpits, and a perpetual desolation: the residue of my people shall spoil them, and the remnant of my people shall possess them.

Jer. 22:5 But if ye will not hear these words, **I swear by myself**, saith the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.

Jer. 49:13 For **I have sworn by myself**, saith the LORD, that Bozrah shall become a desolation, a reproach, a waste, and a curse; and all the cities thereof shall be perpetual wastes.

7:11 ὁ λαὸς γὰρ ἐπ’ αὐτῆ νενομοθέτητο

The MT reads ἐπί + dative, which clearly has the meaning indicated, but the earliest reference to it is in the 9th century. Older MSS have ἐπί + genitive. Recent commentators (Laansma, Koester, Lane, revised NIV, following Schlichting, Grotius, Bleek) take ἐπί + genitive to mean “concerning,” as often in Philo with passive of νομοθετέω (see Lane for references), making the law foundational, and aligning with v. 16. But Delitzsch, Alford, and Ellingworth, though reading the genitive, recognize that the parenthesis in this case is an irrelevant aside, and does not support v. 12.

7:11, Arguing from Successive Promises

R.T. France contrasts the argument in Heb 7:11 (concerning the Levitical priesthood) with Paul’s argument in Gal 3:16-17. Hebrews argues that the introduction of a new version of the priesthood or the covenant replaces the old:

Heb 7:11 If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?

A similar argument is used in ch. 8,

Heb 8:7 For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.

But Paul argues that the covenant on Sinai (which Hebrews calls “the first”) cannot invalidate the even earlier covenant with Abraham:

Gal 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. 17 And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.

When is each logic appropriate?

Consider the three cases separately. They illustrate distinct principles.

Gal 3:16

Paul’s contrast is very focused. He is not claiming that one covenant replaces another, but rather, that the *law* associated with the covenant at Sinai does not replace the *promise* to Abraham. This precision should warn us against overly general conclusions. Our Lord insists that the law itself will endure throughout this present creation:

Mat 5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Paul himself praises the law:

Rom 7:12 Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. ... 14 For we know that the law is spiritual:

As a declaration of God’s will for how we should live, it continues. But it never was a means to salvation, which would invalidate the *promise* to Abraham.

So the principle behind Gal 3:16 is that we should interpret later revelation in the light of what has gone before (and not the other way around, as is often urged). Like the Bereans, we should validate new claims by what we already know. If salvation is by God’s promise, we should not interpret later statements to impose conditions that would violate that promise.

Heb 8:7

The new covenant declaration in Jeremiah 31 motivates the new covenant by the conditional nature of the old, and the failure of the people to keep it. Sinai never claimed to replace Abraham. In fact, the covenant at Sinai insisted on the patriarchal promises (Compare Deut 4:1, insisting on the law, with 4:31, basing it on the covenant with the Fathers.) But the new covenant *does* replace the old.

The principle behind Heb 8:7 is that our sin is not greater than God’s purposes. If he offers us a breakable blessing and we break it, he is able to replace it with something better.

Heb 7:11

The relation between Levi and Melchizedek is more complicated. The OT states that God’s covenant with Levi is everlasting, both at its founding, and after the new covenant (Jeremiah 31).

Num 25:10 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 11 Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy. 12 Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: 13 And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even **the covenant of an everlasting priesthood**; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel.

Jer 33:17 For thus saith the LORD; David shall never want a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel; 18 **Neither shall the priests the Levites want a man before me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually.** 19 And the word of the LORD came unto Jeremiah, saying, 20 Thus saith the LORD; If ye can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season; 21 Then may also my covenant be broken with David my servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne; and with the Levites the priests, my ministers. 22 As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured: so will I multiply the seed of David my servant, and the Levites that minister unto me.

The key here is to recognize the emphasis in Hebrews on a priestly *order τάξις*, a word that the OT uses with reference to priesthood only in Ps 110:4. ἱεροσύνη (7:11, 12, 14, 24), only once in the canonical LXX (1 Chr 29:22, MT “priest”), probably has the same sense.³¹ What is replaced is the priestly order, the internal structure of how the priesthood functioned, but this does not deny to the descendants of Phinehas an enduring role in ministering before the Lord.

The principle in this case is that God’s institutions are not monolithic. They have various parts, and God can terminate one part (here, the priestly order) while leaving another (the privileged position of the descendants of Levi) intact.

7:22 ἔγγυος

The word appears only here in the canonical Greek Bible, but other cognates of ἔγγυος are used in the LXX, largely to translate ערב and derivatives. Here are the hits that Accordance finds for cognates via Tov:

Prov. 6:1	ערבת	ἔγγυσάω: ἔγγυήσῃ
Prov. 17:18	ערב	ἔγγυσάω: ὡς καὶ ὁ ἔγγυσώμενος
Prov. 17:18	ערבה	ἔγγύη: ἔγγύη
Prov. 22:26	ב/ערבים	ἔγγύη: εἰς ἔγγύην
Neh. 5:3	ערבים	διεγγυσάω: διεγγυσῶμεν

31 LXX for the abstract noun כְּהֵנָּה is ἱερατεία, which appears in the NT in Lk 1:9 and Heb 7:5 for the office of priest. TDNT: “ἱεροσύνη is more abstract than the later Greek ἱερατεία. It can mean “priesthood,” “priestly office,” “priestly dignity,” or, more rarely, “priestly ministry.”