

**PART ONE : 1:5 - 2:18**  
**Jesus is superior to the angels**

**For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'?(Psalm 2:7)**

**Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?(2Sam 7:14)**

In verse five we have the first two of seven texts in which God's 'Son'(1:2) is given titles that demonstrate his superiority over the angels, a superiority asserted also by Paul and Peter. Paul declares that the risen Christ is 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come' (Ephesians 1:21). Similarly Peter: 'He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him'(1Peter 3:22).

Though the angels were traditionally called 'sons of God'(see Genesis 6:2, Psalm 29:1, Psalm 82:6—quoted in John 10:35, Psalm 89:7, Job 1:6), both the texts quoted here by our author were traditionally interpreted as referring to the royal Messiah, and both add the intimate word 'my' to the name 'Son'. Our author begins from the intimacy of divine communion that exists between God and the one through whom he has chosen to fulfil his promises, an intimacy never given to the angels. We find Psalm 2:7 applied to Jesus throughout the New Testament. In the gospels this psalm is alluded to in the scene of Jesus' baptism: 'You are my Son' (Mark 1:11), and also in his transfiguration: 'This is my Son' (Mark 9:7). Luke quotes it in relation to the exaltation of Jesus:

We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'

— Acts 13:32-33

The Book of Revelation uses verse nine of Psalm 2 in reference to Christ when it speaks of him ruling all the nations 'with a rod of iron'( Revelation 12:5 and 19:15).

The second text, 2Samuel 7:14, is applied in the New Testament to Jesus' disciples, who share Jesus' life of intimate communion with God: 'I will be your father, and you shall be my sons, says the Lord Almighty'(2Cor 6:18). 'Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my sons'(Revelation 21:7).

In his third text, taken from the Greek version of Deuteronomy 32:43, the author speaks of the Son as ‘the firstborn’. The ‘world’ to which he is referring in verse six is the world of the age to come, the world that lies beyond death, the world into which Jesus was welcomed at his resurrection when God sat him at his right hand in glory (see 2:5). The angels are told to worship him, proof that he is superior to them.

We find the title ‘firstborn’ in another royal Messianic psalm: ‘I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth’(Psalm 89:27). It is a title found elsewhere in the New Testament: ‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation’(Colossians 1:15).‘ Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’(Romans 8:29). The Book of Revelation speaks of Jesus as: ‘the firstborn ... who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood’(Revelation 1:5).

The superiority of the Son over the angels is reinforced by the contrast between Psalm 104:4 and Psalm 45:6-7. Angels are God’s messengers like the wind; they serve in the divine sanctuary as does fire. Their role is to obey. The one who commands is the royal Son, the one whom God brought into heaven and who ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’(1:3). Psalm 45 is a wedding song for the king, addressed in the text as ‘God’ because the power he wields is divine (compare Exodus 4:16; 7:1; Isaiah 9:6; Zechariah 12:8). The point stressed here is not only that God has anointed his Son ‘beyond his companions’(the angels), but also that the reign of the Son is ‘forever and ever’. ‘Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever’(2Samuel 7:16).

**<sup>6</sup>And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’**

(Deuteronomy 32:43)

**<sup>7</sup>Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’**

(Psalm 104:4)

**<sup>8</sup>But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom. <sup>9</sup>You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.’**

(Psalm 45:6-7)

**<sup>10</sup>And, 'In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; <sup>11</sup>they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; <sup>12</sup>like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.'**

(Psalm 102:25-27)

**<sup>13</sup>But to which of the angels has he ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'(Psalm 110:1)?**

**<sup>14</sup>Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?**

Psalm 102:25-27 reinforces the eternal, unchanging condition of the Son in contrast to the transitory nature of the created universe. Another 'name' is applied here to the Son; he is referred to as 'Lord', a title which has a range of meanings. It is a title of respect. Jesus is addressed in this way a number of times in the Gospel (see Luke 5:12; 6:46; 9:54; 10:17; 22:33). It is a title used in the Jewish scriptures of the king, when the focus is on the power of God which the king wields. However, of even greater significance is the fact that the title 'Lord' is used of God as Saviour. When the Hebrew scriptures speak of 'the Lord' they are speaking of God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and who sent Moses to liberate the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:13-15). It is this mysterious and divine aspect that is being highlighted here by our author. To have God's name is to exercise God's power to save (see Exodus 23:20-21). The exalted Jesus is identified with God's redemptive action in history. He is the one who makes possible real and final 'salvation'(1:14; see also 2:3; 7:14; 13:20; 12:14).

The author introduces the seventh and final text in a way that reminds us of his introduction to the first. In this way he indicates that he has come to the end of his chain of texts. Again it is a royal Messianic psalm, and again it highlights the role that God has given his exalted Son in seeing that the divine will is carried out. The carrying out of the divine will is the role especially assigned to the angels. This text, too, is frequently applied to Jesus throughout the New Testament. Mark uses it to invite his readers to see that there is more to Jesus the Messiah than his being the son of David (see Mark 12:35-37). Mark alludes to it again in the context of the coming of the exalted Christ as judge 'seated at the right hand of the Power'(Mark 14:62). The writers of the New Testament frequently draw on this text when they wish to focus on the exaltation of Christ (see Acts 2:34; 1Corinthians 15:25; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; 1Peter 3:22).

Having demonstrated from scripture that it was always God's intention that the royal Messiah, his beloved Son, would be superior to the angels, our author reminds his audience that in God's provident care the angels exist for their sake, to be instruments of God's grace bringing them to enjoy the inheritance won for them by the Son, the inheritance defined here as 'salvation'. This is the key that enables him to turn and directly challenge his audience to take up the implications of what he has just said by renewing their commitment to Christ.

The author now directly addresses his audience. The Jewish tradition that angels were mediators of the Sinai covenant is found also in Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:30,38,53. Since the word spoken by God through his Son is, by the witness of scripture itself, so much more significant than the words spoken through the prophets or even than the Torah itself, surely we must pay the greatest attention to what God has declared to us through his Son.

The verb translated here as ‘pay attention’ (Greek: prosechō) was used of the care taken by sailors to hold a ship on course for the port by skilful use of the anchor. This reinforces the insistence that we not grow careless and ‘drift away’ from ‘what we have heard’. The word translated in both verse two and three as ‘declare’ is once again the Greek *laleō* (see 1:1-2). We are still in the context of the spoken word. If we cling to Jesus and listen for what God is saying to us through him, we are like a ship securely anchored. In spite of contrary tides and unfavourable winds, we will reach the port to which grace is attracting us. If we fail to remain attentive we will find ourselves drifting away from Christ.

The Torah speaks not only of the wonderful ways in which God blesses us, but also of what will happen to us if we reject his covenant and fail to follow the way to the salvation which God promises. If this is true of the Torah, incomplete and imperfect as is its revelation, what must be the effect on us if we fail to attend to the fullness of divine revelation that God gives us through his Son? Through Jesus, God offers us ‘so great a salvation’. Do we really want to let it go and leave ourselves at the mercy of the open sea and the destruction that will certainly follow?

In speaking of ‘salvation’ our author is not claiming to experience it now in its fullness. Later he will declare: ‘Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him’ (9:28). However, it is possible now to taste it (6:5). We can have our sin forgiven now. We are invited now to ‘approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (4:16). We can experience now real communion with God and enjoy a covenant relationship, assured of God’s commitment to us (see 8:7-12; 10:15-18). We can begin now to enjoy the ‘rest’ for which we long (4:3).

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.**

**<sup>2</sup>For if the word [NRSV ‘message’] declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty,**

**<sup>3</sup>how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?**

**<sup>3b</sup>It [salvation] was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him**

**<sup>4</sup>while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.**

As noted in relation to 1:10, there is a close association between ‘salvation’ and ‘Lord’. ‘The Lord’ is God who saves. Referring back to the words spoken by Jesus, ‘the Lord’, in his public ministry (and the deeds that made his words real and gave them context), our author goes on to identify himself and those whom he is addressing as second generation Christians whose contact with the words of Jesus has been through the witness of ‘those who heard him’. We might compare Peter’s words in the house of Cornelius (see Acts 10:36-39). In this context, his exhortation that we attend to God’s words spoken through his Son come close to Paul’s plea: ‘Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus’ (2Timothy 1:13).

The words of Jesus, and the words of Jesus’ disciples were accompanied by ‘signs and wonder and various miracles’. The expression ‘signs and wonders’ is a classical one, associated with the Exodus (see Exodus 7:3). Addressing the crowd at the first Pentecost, Peter speaks of ‘Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you (Acts 2:22). The final words of the Gospel of Mark read; ‘they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it’ (Mark 16:20). Paul, too, speaks of ‘what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God’ (Romans 15:18-19). ‘The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works’ (2Corinthians 12:12).

Salvation is experienced as real by Christians through the many gifts of the Spirit which are part of the life of the believing community. As Paul says: ‘Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction’ (1Thessalonians 1:5).

In Judaism it was commonly understood that God had given over the governance of this present creation to angels:

When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the angels of God (the Hebrew has 'gods').

– Deuteronomy 32:8

God appointed a ruler for every nation, but Israel is the Lord's own portion.

– Sirach 17:17

The author argues that things are different in what he calls here the 'coming world'. He has already referred to this world into which God brought his 'firstborn'(1:6) in triumph, and commanded the angels to worship him. The fact that Jesus is human is no argument against his being superior to the angels, as our author proceeds to demonstrate from Psalm 8. The vagueness of the reference is a rhetorical ploy to highlight the fact that it is not the human author that is important. What is important is that it is God who is speaking. To avoid having to use a singular masculine pronoun the NRSV uses the plural 'them' throughout. This is a legitimate translation as the Greek *anthrōpos* refers to a human being as such. However the move to the plural weakens the rhetorical power of the passage, so I have taken the liberty of restoring the singular '*man*' and '*him*'. Until we invent a singular pronoun that is clearly different from the male form, it seems to me best *in this context* to retain the singular, and to remind ourselves that '*man*' and '*him*' have traditionally also been used in a gender inclusive way, unsatisfactory though we find this usage today. If we use the singular, as does the Greek, it is easier to keep our focus on Jesus - which is the author's intention.

The word of God spoken in this psalm refers clearly to humankind. Our author highlights the fact that it is God's will to subject all things, without exception, to humans. It is not yet true for us, and the angels still have governance over this world, but the truth of the psalm is seen in the human Jesus, named here in an emphatic way, and for the first time. 'Crowned with honour and glory' picks up the motif of exaltation that was central to 1:5-13. It is significant that in the Septuagint we find the expression 'honour and glory' used of the priests (see Exodus 28:2,40; Sirach 45:7-13; 50:5-11). The author is preparing the ground for his central theme which is that Christ is our priest-mediator.

**<sup>5</sup>Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.**

**<sup>6</sup>But someone has testified somewhere, '*What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?*' <sup>7</sup>You have made *him* for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned *him* with glory and honour, <sup>8</sup>subjecting all things under *his* feet'(Psalm 8:5-7).**

**Now in subjecting all things to *him*, God left nothing outside *his* control.**

**As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to *him*, <sup>9</sup>but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour**

<sup>9b</sup>[crowned with glory and honour] **because of the suffering of death,**  
**so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.**

The community for whom this work is intended are in danger of failing to attend to what God has revealed to them through Jesus, of drifting away from their faith in him, and so of missing out on salvation. Our author, desirous of rekindling their faith, has demonstrated that God's revelation through the prophets and in the Torah has been surpassed by the revelation given them in Jesus his Son. This is the key point he has been making by demonstrating the superiority of Jesus even in relation to the angelic world. He has just shown that Jesus being human is no argument against this. In fact, once again, God revealed that it would be so in Psalm 8. The glorified Jesus, though human, is, indeed, 'heir of all things'(1:2). It is he who 'sustains all things by his powerful word'(1:3).

The claims being made here are extraordinary. They seem quite unbelievable, especially in the light of one undeniable fact; namely, the shameful death of Jesus by crucifixion. How can one speak of 'glory and honour' in relation to one whom God seemed to abandon in this way? The crucified Christ is, indeed, as Paul says: 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1Corinthians 1:23).

We are here at the very heart of the gospel and the significance of Jesus' suffering will occupy our author throughout the rest of this work. His opening statement engages the problem head on as he claims that the man Jesus is 'crowned with glory and honour' precisely '*because* of the suffering of death'. We are going to have to understand this carefully – and our author will take great pains to help us do precisely that – but we must know that Jesus' death is no accident. It is 'by the grace of God' and it is that 'he might taste death for everyone'.

As our author will go on to demonstrate, this is partly because, through the way in which he faced death, he gave us an example to follow:

Look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

– Hebrews 12:2-3



The notion of imitation recurs in the New Testament:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

– Mark 8:34

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

– 1Corinthians 11:1

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 2:5

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

– Ephesians 5:1-2

However, imitation ‘from the outside’, as it were, will not work. Jesus therefore gave us his own Spirit to enable us to live the way he lived. He gave us access to the life that comes from God. It is this life of intimate love-communion with our ‘brother’ that enables us to transcend death:

We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.

– Hebrews 10:19

May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

– Hebrews 13:20-21

**<sup>10</sup>It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the champion [NRSV 'pioneer'] of their salvation perfect through sufferings.**

We continue the point introduced in the previous verse. The All-powerful God 'for whom and through whom all things exist'(compare Romans 11:46) is the One who brought Jesus to the fullness of perfection of which we have been speaking, precisely 'through suffering'. Death is the 'last enemy to be destroyed'(1Corinthians 15:26). Like Hercules, the divine hero (see Homer, Iliad 5.394-400), Jesus, our 'champion', the first in the struggle (Greek: archēgon), had to contend with death and be victorious, if he was to be able to lead (Greek: agagōn) the rest of God's 'sons' into glory. The author speaks of Jesus bringing 'many' to glory. He has already said that Jesus tasted death for 'everyone'(2:9). There is no contradiction. Salvation is offered to everyone. The word 'many' accents the fact that we are not dealing with a select few (compare Romans 5:15,18).

We have already noted the priestly connection with the expression 'glory and honour'(2:9). Those listening to this oration, steeped as they were in Jewish traditions, would not have missed the fact that 'made perfect'(Greek: teleioō) was the expression used for the consecration of a priest (see Leviticus 21:10). Jesus is Wisdom leading us in the journey of liberation towards immortality:

A holy people and blameless race wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors. She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord, and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs. She gave to holy people the reward of their labours; she guided them along a marvellous way, and became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night. She brought them over the Red Sea, and led them through deep waters.

– Wisdom 10:15-19

Having struggled with death and been victorious, Jesus was taken right to the heart of God in eternal glory. He is drawing us to the same goal. We are to share in the glory of the risen Jesus. This is Paul's message too: 'He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself'(Philippians 3:21). 'When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory'(Colossians 3:24). Our sharing in his glory depends on our willingness to bear suffering as he bore it: 'We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him'(Romans 8:17).

Peter has the same message: ‘Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed’(1Peter 4:13). ‘After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you’(1Peter 5:10).

Our author, as we will see, is not claiming that God wills the suffering which we undergo. Much of it is the result of human failure to do precisely what our author is encouraging his listeners to do (‘pay attention to what we have heard’). Much human suffering - and the crucifying of Jesus is a clear example – is perpetrated by human sin. However, there is a direct connection between the glory promised us and the way in which we deal with suffering. Our author will have much to say on this subject. For the moment let us preview one text: ‘Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’(5:8-9). That wisdom comes through suffering is a theme found also in classical Greek drama:

Zeus who leads mortals on the way of understanding;  
Zeus, who has established as a fixed ordinance that  
wisdom comes by suffering [*pathei mathos*].

– Aeschylus *Agamemnon*, 177

Justice inclines her scales so that wisdom comes at the price of suffering [*pathousin mathein*].

– Aeschylus *Agamemnon*, 250

I am taught by suffering to endure.

– Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*, 6

**<sup>11</sup>For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.**

**For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,**

**<sup>12</sup>saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you'**(Psalm 22:22).

**<sup>13</sup>And again, 'I will put my trust in him'**(Isaiah 8:17).

**And again, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me'**(Isaiah 8:18).

In 1:5-14, the author selected 'divine' titles from the sacred Scriptures to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus over all created reality, and the unique intimacy which he has with God as 'the Son'. He has just shown that this is true though he is human and though he underwent death. He now returns to the Scriptures to demonstrate the intimacy of his Jesus' with us. He begins in the same place. Jesus is the 'Son' and God is his 'Father'. Except that now the accent falls on the fact that he shares his Father with us. The uniqueness of Jesus remains. He is the one who 'sanctifies'(Greek: *hagiazō*; compare John 17:17,19). This is another word associated with the ministry of priests, see Exodus 28:4; Leviticus 8:12; 1Samuel 16:5). We are the ones who are 'sanctified'. But Jesus is one with us, for we 'all have one Father'.

For his first text he goes to Psalm 22, the psalm that is placed on the lips of the dying Jesus in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. It begins with the cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'(Psalm 22:1), but after a long lament, spoken in trust, it turns into a song of joyful thanks and praise. It is the glorified Christ who has been raised from death who calls us his 'brothers and sisters'. It is 'in the midst of the congregation' that we experience the salvation which our brother Jesus gained for us (see 12:23; also 10:25; 13:15).

When he says that Jesus 'is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters' he is echoing Jesus' words and urging his listeners to fidelity: 'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels'(Luke 9:26).

Isaiah 8:17 expresses the prophet's determination to await the fulfilment of God's word in the face of disbelief and rejection by his contemporaries. The faith of those to whom the oration is addressed is being tried. The author is trying to encourage them to continue to trust. This plea will recur throughout the oration (see 2:17; 3:13,19; 4:2; 11). The following verse (Isaiah 8:18) echoes the fact that Christ's brothers and sisters have been given to him in the community of faith.

Jesus is described as sharing our ‘blood’, for he shares the sufferings of the human condition. He shares our ‘flesh’, for he shares our human vulnerability, weakness and mortality. However, he is our ‘champion’(2:10). He faced death and conquered it for us. Our author’s argument here depends upon the kind of Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of the Genesis story that we find, for example, in the Book of Wisdom:

God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.

– Wisdom 2:23-24

We humans were made to have the whole of creation subject to us, as has already been shown through Psalm 8 (see 2:8), but we have been deceived by ‘the devil’ and instead of commanding creation we have lost our freedom as God’s children and been reduced to slaves. However, Jesus our brother, whose superiority over the angels has already been demonstrated, has conquered the dark forces that perpetrate evil in our world and redeemed us from our slavery. As Paul says; he ‘abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’(2Timothy 1:10). John has the same message: ‘Now the ruler of this world will be driven out’(John 12:31). ‘The ruler of this world has been condemned’(John 16:11; see Revelation 12:7-10). Jesus is the ‘stronger’(Luke 11:22). He has ‘taken the prey from the mighty one’ and has ‘rescued the prey of the tyrant’(Isaiah 49:24).

Just as God took ‘the offspring of Abraham’(Isaiah 41:8) ‘by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt’(Jeremiah 31:32), so, through Jesus our brother, he has taken us. It was essential, therefore, that he ‘become like his brothers and sisters in every respect’. As Paul says: ‘He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness’(Philippians 2:7); and, in a daring phrase: ‘God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh’(Romans 8:3).

**<sup>14</sup>Since, therefore, the children share blood and flesh’ [NRSV ‘flesh and blood’], he himself likewise shared the same things**

**so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,**

**<sup>15</sup>and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.**

**<sup>16</sup>For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.**

**<sup>17</sup>Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect**

<sup>17b</sup>**so that he might be a merciful and trustworthy [NRSV 'faithful'] high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.**

From the outset our author has wanted to focus our attention on the special place of Jesus in our lives. He has demonstrated the unique place of Jesus as the mediator of God's word, superior to the prophets and even to the angels. Since one's 'name' is indicative of the role one has been given in God's providential design, he has concentrated through use of scripture on the names that God has given Jesus. He began with the most intimate name, for Jesus is God's 'Son', and he has progressed through a number of divine and human names, each of which demonstrates Jesus' closeness to God and to us. He now reaches the climax towards which he has been building and comes to the name that is the link between the divine and the human, the name that speaks of Jesus as the perfect mediator between God and humankind. It constitutes the central theme of the oration. The remainder of the work will be spent drawing out the implications of Jesus being our 'high priest'.

It is a cultic term because the author is interested in our prayer, our communion with God, our opening our hearts to receive God's gift and our responding in love to God. As observed earlier, this oration is 'a word of exhortation'(13:22). He wants to remind us of the intimate communion which God offers us through Christ, and, since he is speaking to a community that is steeped in Jewish cult, he chooses to do so in terms that are most sacred to them and that speak of this communion.

He prepared the way when he spoke of Christ making 'purification for sins'(1:3), when he spoke of him being crowned 'with glory and honour'(2:9), and being 'made perfect'(2:10); also when he referred to him as 'the one who sanctifies'(2:11). As just noted, the rest of this oration will be given over to drawing out the implications of Jesus being our high priest. However, since it is likely that we are not as familiar with the significance of this 'name' as were those who are being addressed by our author, we should pause here to gain an initial understanding of what the name 'high priest' would have meant to them. We will see later the importance of noting that he speaks of Jesus as a 'high priest' and not simply as a 'priest'. However, since the high priest is a priest we need to begin by looking at the role played by a priest in the Jewish cult.

The function of the cultic priests of Israel (Levitical priests) can be described under three aspects. First, it was carried out in the sanctuary. Secondly, from the sanctuary they mediated God's word to the assembly, recalling God's action in the people's history and revealing God's will. Thirdly, they received the sacrifices of the people and offered them to God. These three elements can be illustrated from the Scriptures:

The priests officiate in the sanctuary and approach Yahweh to serve him

– Ezekiel 45:4

The Lord set aside the tribe of Levi ... to stand in the presence of Yahweh, to do him service, and in his name to pronounce blessing.

– Deuteronomy 10:8

Moses consecrated Aaron ... to bless his people in the name of the Lord ... to offer sacrifice to the Lord ... to make atonement for the people. He entrusted him with his commandments, committed to him the statutes of the law, to teach Jacob his decrees and enlighten Israel on his law.

– Sirach 45:18-21

The high priest carried out his special function on the feast of Yom Kippur (the ‘day of the cover’). It came as the climax of ten days in which the people, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, sought forgiveness for their sins.

Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on the horns of the altar.

Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering. It is most holy to the Lord.

– Exodus 30:10.

The high priest took the sins of the people into the inner sanctuary of the temple to the ‘mercy-seat’, the golden altar cover of the Ark of the Covenant, which was seen as the throne of God at the heart of God’s holy city. The author of Hebrews is referring to this action when he speaks of the high priest ‘making a sacrifice of atonement’ (Greek: *hilaskomai*). This is translated a number of ways in English: sometimes, as here, ‘to atone’; sometimes ‘to expiate’; sometimes ‘to propitiate’. It is important not to think of it as ‘appeasement’: God does not need to be persuaded to forgive. Rather, sin is understood as a pollution which alienates us from communion with God. The action of the high priest is to bring sinners into contact with divine mercy, and in this way to annihilate sin, for nothing impure can survive in God’s presence. Once he has made ‘purification for sins’ (1:3), we are, once again, at one with God (hence ‘at-one-ment’).

As will become clear later, our author can speak of Jesus as a ‘high priest’ because God, in Psalm 110:4, spoke of a special priesthood that belongs to the king, and so to the royal Messiah who is ‘a priest according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4; see Hebrews 5:6). Melchizedek was the priest-king of Jerusalem (Genesis 14:18). The priestly role of the king transcended that of the Levitical priests, for his sanctuary was not just the temple, but the ‘Holy Land’. He was a sacrament of God and was to bring about God’s reign, firstly in Israel, but then throughout the world. He was to do this by governing the people according to God’s Law and in such a way that they would be faithful to the Covenant and ‘be holy as the Lord God is holy’ (Leviticus 19:2).

Though of the tribe of Judah, and therefore not a Levitical priest (see 7:4), Jesus brings to perfection the functions carried out imperfectly by the cultic priests of the Old Testament. He brings to perfection each of the three aspects of their priesthood. First, they carried out their mission in the sanctuary. Jesus has gone into the sanctuary of heaven (see 1:6) where he sits ‘at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (1:3).

Secondly, the Levitical priests mediated between God and the people when they spoke God's word from the sanctuary and when they declared God's will as inscribed in the Torah. Our author has already demonstrated how superior is the mediating of God's word through Jesus. Thirdly, the Levitical priests mediated between the people and God when they received gifts from the people and offered them to God as sacrifices. Jesus welcomes us in love, 'sanctifies' us (2:11) and, through his victory over sin and death, he achieves for us 'so great a salvation'(2:3). As our author will say later: ' he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him'(7:25).

Jesus' mediatory (priestly) role is expressed in other New Testament writings. Like the author of Hebrews, John speaks of Jesus being 'sanctified'. He is 'the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world'(John 10:36). 'For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth'(John 17:19). John refers to Jesus as God's Word who 'became flesh and pitched his tent among us'(John 1:14). He refers to Jesus' body as a 'temple'(John 2:21). Some suggest that the seamless garment which was stripped from Jesus on Calvary (John 19:23) is an allusion to the tunic of the high priest. He is our mediator: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'(John 14:6). 'If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'(1John 2:1). Christ brings us into communion with God by sharing with us his own communion. 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'(1 John 2:2; also 4:10).

The author of the Book of Revelation portrays the exalted Jesus as a priest present in the sanctuary of the assembled Christian communities::

I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

– Revelation 1:12-16

Paul, too, speaks of Jesus' mediatory role: 'It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Romans 8:34). Jesus opens up access to God for us: 'Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God'(Romans 5:2). 'Through him both of us [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Ephesians 2:18). 'We have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him'(Ephesians 3:12). 'There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human'(1Timothy 2:5). Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice to God for us: 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'(Galatians 2:20). 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'(Ephesians 5:2). 'All are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation-sacrifice by his blood, to be received by faith'(Romans 3:24-25).



The fact that our author can introduce the name ‘high priest’ in this way, prior to offering an explanation, indicates that the idea was not completely foreign to his Hellenistic Jewish audience. The following from the apocryphal Testament of Levi is offered as an example:

Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest ...  
 He shall execute a righteous judgment upon the earth.  
 And he shall open the gates of paradise.  
 And shall remove the threatening sword against Adam.  
 And Beliar shall be bound by him.  
 And he shall give power to his children to tread upon  
 evil spirits.

– Testament of Levi 18:10-12

We also have the following promise:

I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do  
 according to what is in my heart and in my mind.

– 1Samuel 2:35

Our author describes Christ the high priest as being ‘merciful’ and ‘trustworthy’. He is echoing an expression frequently used of God in the Scriptures where God is called *hesed w<sup>e</sup> ’emet*. These key words prepare us for the next steps in the development of the oration. A priest is a mediator, and, as such, must be able to be in communion with both God and us. Our orator will demonstrate firstly that Christ is ‘trustworthy’ in relation to God. He will go on to show that he is ‘merciful’ in relation to us. He is the perfect mediator.

In verse eighteen he once again demonstrates that his aim is a pastoral one. The community is ‘being tested’. His ‘word of exhortation’ (13:22) is aimed at encouraging them by reminding them that Jesus, too, was tested, but that he is now enjoying eternal communion with God, a communion which he is already sharing with us now, but which we will experience perfectly when we, too, are with him in ‘the coming world’ (2:5).

[verse seventeen is repeated from page 126]

**<sup>17b</sup>so that he might be a merciful and trustworthy high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.**

**<sup>18</sup>Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.**

### Sharing in Jesus' priesthood

Though the author of Hebrews to this point is focusing on Jesus, he is doing so in order to show us what we are called to be, for we are called to share in the communion of love which Jesus has as God's Son and it is Jesus' life and Jesus' mission that we are to share. Jesus' disciples are graced to share in Jesus' priesthood. Jesus said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5). His life, the life of the vine, is the Spirit of love that binds him in intimate communion with God, his Father. The branches share this Spirit and so share in Jesus' communion of love. Paul can say: 'It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). Disciples share in Jesus' life according to the special grace each is offered, and according to the way in which each responds to this grace. In the community of the church we are the Body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world with all the creative power of God, through his Spirit poured out into the community.

The Christian community is a priestly community. We are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9). 'Jesus made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Revelation 1:6). The community is priestly because we are living the life of Christ the priest. We are with him in the presence of God sharing his Spirit. We are mediating God's word and God's blessing to the world. We are offering prayer and offering ourselves with Christ to God and drawing the world into communion with God. Our priesthood is royal, because we are sharing the priesthood of the king whose mission it is to bring about the reign of God in the world. God mediates his love to the world through those who share in Jesus' life.

The divinely powerful and effective grace-gift from Christ is realised in different ways in each disciple and together we contribute to living his life and carrying on his mission: 'There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone' (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). Each disciple shares in his or her own way in the priestly mediation of Jesus. We are not mediators independent of Jesus. We are not separate vines. It is Christ who mediates through us, as the vine bears fruit through its branches.

There are as many different ways of carrying out Christ's priestly mediation as there are disciples of Jesus in the Christian community. From her communion in the life of God, a wife and mother lives out the priestly mediation of Jesus by mediating God's love and God's word to her husband and children, and by welcoming their loving response she helps draw them into the communion of love which is Jesus' life. Likewise a husband and father for his wife and family. One can think of teachers, nurses, politicians and public servants. One can think of all the many simple ways in which we are a sacrament to each other of God's love. Jesus is carrying on his priestly mediation through and in us, sanctifying the world through the holy lives which we live, lives which he makes possible by sharing his Spirit with us.