

# Christ Is Superior to the Levitical Priesthood

## “High Priest”

### Hebrews 4:14-16

Before examining the verses in this text more closely, it is important to first look back at the Old Testament to understand who the high priest was and what his role entailed. This overview will not be exhaustive but will provide a brief background to clarify what the book of Hebrews means when it refers to Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest. While we will not be delving into the Tabernacle of the wilderness in this study, it's helpful to recognize the significance of the connection between the Tabernacle and the high priest.

"The Book of Hebrews has much to say about the high priest as a type of Christ and of his relationship to the tabernacle, its furniture, and its rituals. It would be just as impossible to understand the importance of the tabernacle without understanding the office of the high priest as it would be to understand the Gospel without Jesus. It would be a 'Gospel' without Jesus and that would be no Gospel at all. Understanding the office of the high priest is essential in fully realizing the tabernacle as the 'Gospel' preached to the Israelites.

"With the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, the Israelites had a greater revelation of the work of the true high priest, Jesus Christ... (*Teaching from the Tabernacle*, Roy Lee DeWitt, pg. 74)

#### I. THE ROLE AND MINISTRY OF THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

##### A. Appointment and qualifications

###### 1. Lineage and ancestry

- a) The high priest had to be a direct descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Exodus 28:1).
- b) Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi, so the high priest also came from this tribe, which was set apart for religious duties (Numbers 18:1-7).

## 2. Physical and moral purity

- a) No Physical Defects: The high priest had to be physically unblemished, meaning he could not have any physical defects (Leviticus 21:16-23).
- b) Marital Purity: He was required to marry a virgin of his own people and could not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman who was defiled (Leviticus 21:13-14).
- c) Personal Holiness: The high priest had to adhere to strict laws of purity and holiness, including special rules about mourning and defilement (Leviticus 21:10-12).

## 3. Ritual and ceremonial cleanliness

- a) Clothing and Garments: The high priest had to wear specific holy garments that symbolized his office and duties (Exodus 28). These included:
  - (1) The ephod: A richly embroidered garment with shoulder pieces set with onyx stones bearing the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:6-12).
  - (2) The breastplate of judgment: Containing twelve stones, each engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:15-21).
  - (3) The robe of the ephod: Made entirely of blue cloth, with bells and pomegranates on the hem

(Exodus 28:31-35).

(4) Mitre (turban – head dress) and gold plate: The turban had a gold plate inscribed with “HOLINESS TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36-39).

b) Ritual Cleansing: He performed ritual washings and offerings to maintain ceremonial cleanliness (Leviticus 16:4, 23-24).

## B. Duties and functions

1. Mediatory Role: Acted as a mediator between God and the Israelites. He was the key figure in performing the rituals that ensured the community's sins were atoned for and that they remained in right standing with God.

2. Day of Atonement: He had the unique responsibility of entering the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement to atone for the sins of the nation (Leviticus 16:2-34).

a) Overview (Leviticus 16:1-34)

(1) The Day of Atonement was the holiest day of the year for the Israelites.

(2) It was a day of fasting and repentance when the high priest would make atonement for the sins of the people.

b) Preparations (Leviticus 16:2-5)

(1) The high priest had to make specific preparations, including bathing, and putting on sacred garments.

(2) He had to bring a young bull for a sin offering and

two male goats for a sin offering.

c) Ritual for the Sin Offering (Leviticus 16:6-10, 15-19)

- (1) The high priest would sacrifice the bull as a sin offering for himself and his household.
- (2) He would then cast lots to determine which of the two goats would be the "scapegoat" and which would be sacrificed.
- (3) The high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed goat on the atonement cover in the Most Holy Place.

d) The Scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-22)

- (1) The high priest would lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites.
- (2) He would then send the goat away into the wilderness, symbolically taking the sins of the people with it.

3. Daily Sacrifices and Rituals:

- a) The high priest was responsible for overseeing and conducting daily sacrifices and maintaining the rituals of the Tabernacle (later the Temple) (Leviticus 6:8-13).
- b) He burned incense on the altar of incense every morning and evening (Exodus 30:7-8).
- c) He managed the showbread, replaced every Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5-9).

4. Instruction and legal judgments:

- a) Instruction: Taught the people the laws of God and guided them in their observance (Deuteronomy 33:10).
- b) Judgments: Acted in legal matters and difficult cases, providing judgments according to God's law (Deuteronomy 17:8-12).

5. Blessings and intercessory role:

- a) Blessing the People: Pronounced blessings upon the people, such as the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6:22-27.
- b) Intercessory Prayers: Prayed on behalf of the nation, seeking God's favor and forgiveness (Exodus 28:29-30).

Summary

The high priest needed to meet stringent qualifications related to lineage, physical and moral purity, and ceremonial cleanliness. These requirements underscored the sanctity and seriousness of the high priest's role as the mediator between God and the people of Israel, maintaining the holiness of the worship practices and ensuring the nation's atonement and reconciliation with God.

The high priest's ministry was a shadow of things to come, seen as a foreshadowing of the ultimate High Priest, Jesus Christ who offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

**II. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE OLD TESTAMENT HIGH PRIEST AND JESUS CHRIST, OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST**

**A. Their role as a mediator**

- 1. The Old Testament high priest served as a mediator

between God and the Israelites. He was responsible for offering sacrifices and making atonement for the sins of the people. His mediation was limited and repeated annually on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

2. Jesus Christ is the ultimate Mediator between God and mankind (1 Timothy 2:5). Unlike the earthly High Priest, Jesus' mediation is perfect and eternal. His sacrifice on the cross was once and for all, fully reconciling believers to God (Hebrews 9:15; 1 John 2:1-2).

#### 1 Timothy 2:5

<sup>5</sup> For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

#### Hebrews 9:15

<sup>15</sup> And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

#### 1 John 2:1-2

<sup>1</sup> My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:

<sup>2</sup> And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

### **B. Their role in the sacrifice(s) for sin**

1. The high priest offered animal sacrifices for the sins of the people, including his own sins. This was done repeatedly, particularly on the Day of Atonement, when he entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animal on the mercy seat

(Leviticus 16:15-16).

2. Jesus Christ offered Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was not for His own sins (because He was sinless) but for the sins of mankind. By shedding His own blood, He secured eternal redemption for believers (Hebrews 9:11-14, 24-26; 10:10-12).

C. Their role in entering the Holy Place

1. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle or temple once a year on the Day of Atonement. He did this with great caution and with the blood of a sacrificial animal to atone for (cover over) the sins of the people and himself (Hebrews 9:7; Leviticus 16).
2. Jesus Christ entered the heavenly Holy of Holies, the presence of God, after His resurrection and ascension. He did not enter a man-made sanctuary but the true, heavenly sanctuary, offering His own blood. He now sits at the right hand of God, continually interceding for believers (Hebrews 9:11-12, 24; 10:19-22).

D. Their role in the frequency of sacrifices

1. The high priest's sacrifices were repeated regularly, and the Day of Atonement occurred every year. These sacrifices could never fully remove sin but only covered it temporarily (Hebrews 10:1-4).
2. Jesus Christ's sacrifice was a one-time event that never needs to be repeated. It was sufficient to cleanse believers from sin forever. His work was complete and perfect (Hebrews 7:27; 9:28; 10:12-

14).

E. Their role in personal sin and purity

1. The high priest was a sinner like the rest of the people and had to make sacrifices for his own sins before making atonement for the sins of others (Leviticus 16:6, 11; Hebrews 5:1-3).
2. Jesus Christ was sinless and did not need to make atonement for Himself. He was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26-28). His purity qualified Him to be the perfect and blameless sacrifice.

F. Their priestly lineage

1. The high priest had to be a descendant of Aaron from the tribe of Levi. The position was hereditary and limited to a specific family line (Exodus 28:1).
2. Jesus Christ was from the tribe of Judah, not Levi, and was not a descendant of Aaron. His priesthood is described as being in the order of Melchizedek, which is eternal and superior to the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:11-17). This emphasizes that Jesus’ priesthood is based on an indestructible life and God’s oath, not on ancestry.

G. Their garments and symbols

1. The high priest wore elaborate, symbolic garments, including the ephod, breastplate with twelve stones, and a “mitre” (turban) with a gold plate inscribed with "Holy to the Lord" (Exodus 28:4-39). These garments symbolized his holy role and the need to be pure when approaching God.

2. Jesus Christ did not wear priestly garments in the earthly sense but is clothed in divine glory and righteousness. His priesthood is spiritual, and His holiness is inherent and eternal (Revelation 1:13-16; Hebrews 2:17).

#### H. Their role in interceding for the people

1. The high priest interceded for the people, offering prayers and sacrifices on their behalf. His intercession was limited and imperfect (Leviticus 16:17; Numbers 16:46-48).
2. Jesus Christ continually intercedes for believers before God. His intercession is perfect and never ceases. He advocates for believers, ensuring their salvation and access to God (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1).

#### Summary:

- The Old Testament High Priest played a crucial role in the religious life of Israel, but his work was a shadow of the true, complete work of Jesus Christ.
- Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and ultimate High Priest, offering a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that grants eternal redemption. He ministers in a heavenly sanctuary, is sinless, and provides ongoing intercession for believers.
- The Old Testament High Priest's repeated, and imperfect sacrifices point to the need for Jesus' final and all-sufficient sacrifice, demonstrating the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

This comparison highlights the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant, emphasizing that Jesus' work brings believers into a direct and lasting relationship with

God.