



The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 4:14-6:20: Jesus, the High Priest, and a Word of Warning

Jesus, a Merciful High Priest

After the little sermon on Psalm 95, the homilist returns to the theme that he had announced at 2:17, that Jesus is, in some sense yet to be defined, a “high priest.” He advances the theme by exhorting his addressees to take advantage of the fact that they have such a high priest. The exhortation (4:14-16) is filled with the usual rhetorical special effects of alliteration and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), and other figures of speech, such as litotes (double negative) in v15.

Pastoral concerns are evident. The homilist encourages his addressees to “hold fast to our confession.” It is not clear exactly what he has in mind. In the second century Christians developed lengthy creedal statements about essentials of the faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed. Something more simple may be in view here, perhaps a proclamation recognizing the status of Jesus as Christ or Messiah. Formulas of this sort appear in Paul’s letters, for instance, in the “Christ hymn” of Philippians, which ends by referring to the “name above every name,” acclaiming that Jesus is “Lord.” Another confessional formula appears in Romans 10:9. We also hear in the sayings of Jesus the summons to “acknowledge” him publicly (Matthew 10:32; Luke 12:8). Our homilist probably has such professions of loyalty in mind.

He reminds (4:15) his audience that the high priest enthroned on high is able to sympathize with them, a point he had insisted on in his description of Jesus’ suffering humanity in 2:14-18. He urges (4:16) the addressees to “approach the throne,” as if coming to an imperial governor or judge, but to do so with “boldness,” literally, “bold freedom of speech,” knowing that they will find in Christ, a positive welcome, characterized by “grace”, “mercy,” and “help.” The language is consoling and encouraging, which is important to keep in mind as we hear the homilist issue his starker warnings.

Priests in General – Jesus as Priest

The case that Jesus is a High Priest has still to be made. The homilist begins by offering a reflection on what Biblical priests are supposed to do (5:1-4). The job description evokes

Leviticus, where Aaron, mentioned in v 4, is installed as the first High Priest. The “things pertaining to God” are the various sacrifices for atonement that Aaron is instructed to perform (Leviticus 9:7-24). Our homilist adds a touch to the job description not explicit in the Biblical account, but which supports his reason for describing Christ as a priest, namely the requirement that a high priest be able to “deal gently with the ignorant and wayward,” since he is beset with the same weakness as are they. The final point about high priests is that they do not take the honor upon themselves but are “called by God.” This point reflects the fact that in the Biblical account, Aaron and his sons were ordained to the priesthood by divine command (Exodus 28:1). But where was the divine call to Jesus to become a priest?

The homilist answers that question by returning to his favorite tool, Scripture. He recalls (v 5) the verse from Psalm 2:7 cited at the start of the scriptural catena in the first chapter (1:5), then cites another passage from the Psalm that had concluded the catena (1:13), Psalm 110. Unlike the first verse of that Psalm, which is often used in a similar way by early Christian authors, our homilist is the only early Christian author to make use of Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” The meaning of the verse in the original Psalm is debated. One plausible scenario is that Psalm is indeed a very old one, composed at the time when the Davidic monarchy was establishing itself in the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. The Psalm, celebrating the king’s relationship to Yahweh, affirms that he is not only a king, but a priest. The sharp division between priestly and kingly offices did not yet obtain. The mysterious name “Melchizedek” follows the pattern of other ancient Semitic names. Despite the etymology that our author will deploy in 7:1-3, the name means “My king is Zedek,” where Zedek is probably the name of an ancient Canaanite deity. Interpreters of the Psalm and Genesis 14:17-20, the other Biblical text mentioning Melchizedek, puzzled over this mysterious figure, as will be clear in chapter 7. What counts for our homilist is that the verse is addressed to the same person mentioned in v 1 of the Psalm, the one who has taken a seat at God’s right hand, for him, Jesus.

By this point in his homily, our preacher has no doubt intrigued his audience. They know he is going to defend a claim that, on the surface, seems pretty outlandish, that Jesus was a priest, indeed a high priest. They now know that he is going to do so with the use of Psalm 110:4, but how the argument will work remains for the moment an intriguing mystery.

Before developing the theme, the homilist reminds his audience of the human reality on which he is ultimately focused, Jesus in the days of his flesh (5:7-10). The image of Jesus in heartfelt prayer to the God who could save him is reminiscent of the Gethsemane story (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46), although here his prayer is *heard*, “because of his reverent submission.” Our homilist may know other traditions about Jesus’ praying and he definitely wants to set Jesus up as a model. In this case what he models is “sonship,” since he “learned obedience through what he suffered” (v 8). That claim evokes a well-known saying in Greek that connects learning (*mathos*) and suffering (*pathos*). The homilist also reminds his audience that the experience of Jesus affects his followers. Here he phrases that claim in unusual language, that Jesus was “perfected” and thereby became a “cause of eternal salvation” for those who obey him. “Perfection” here connotes not moral development but qualification, i.e.,

to be the kind of high priest just described, one who can sympathize with weak and suffering human beings. How he will be the “cause of salvation” remains to be seen, but that function is associated with his high-priestly status, of which v 10 and its allusion to Psalm 110:4 reminds us.

Some Words of Warning and Encouragement

Before explaining how Jesus might be a “priest according to the order of Melchizedek,” the homilist engages in exhortation. He begins by challenging his addressees, thereby making sure he gets their attention (5:11-14). “Are they ready for the difficult discourse that follows?” he asks. No, he says, with a hint of irony, they are dullards (v 11), simply children, used to milk, not “solid food” (vv 12-13). Here the homilist uses a common ancient image for levels of teaching, one that appears in Paul (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). By “milk” he refers to basic Christian catechesis, the “elements of the oracles of God” (v 12).

The tone or ironic challenge shifts in 6:1-3 to a more positive exhortation to move ahead and engage the more serious teaching. The homilist notes what he will not cover as he enumerates several items that function as the “foundation” of life as a follower of Jesus. The list sounds familiar, except when it discusses “baptisms,” which may be a reference to the difference between Christian initiation and other types of ritual cleansing. The movement between these two passages is worth noting because it will be repeated in what follows. The rather negative sound of the challenge is balanced by a more positive and hopeful bit of encouragement.

The next sections evenly balance challenge and encouragement. The homilist first (6:1-6) warns sternly that there is no possibility of renewal for one who has fallen away “crucifying again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt” (v 6). The sentiment here resembles the admonition of Jesus about the “sin against the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). Some early Christians doubted the possibility of forgiveness for any serious post-baptismal sin. Many modern interpreters have tried to reconcile this passage with the teaching about abundant forgiveness that characterizes the teaching of Jesus by suggesting that the homilist is describing a tautology: one cannot be forgiven if one rejects the possibility of accepting forgiveness. That solution may be neater than the homilist’s formulation, but he is certainly sketching an extreme case that he hopes does not obtain with his addressees.

An image connects with word of warning with the more positive exhortation that follows (6:7-8). The homilist contrast, in inverse order, the positive image of a land nurtured by rain (v 7) with the negative image of a parched land which produces only thorns and thistles and is fit for nothing but fire (v 8).

Picking up the more positive image, the homilist then expresses confidence in his audience (6:9-12), in the “work and love” that they have shown in “serving the saints” (v 10). He brings his exhortation to a close sounding a note that resembles the start. His initial challenge in 5:11 had been that the audience had become “sluggish.” He now tells them that his hope for them is that they not be so (v 12), but be “imitators of those who ... inherit the promises.” Here he

sounds a theme that will dominate the final exhortation of his homily, the importance of imitating the examples of the faithful of old.

One other feature of this brief positive exhortation is the way in which the homilist builds on the three cardinal virtues so often celebrated by early Christians (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Corinthians 13:13). Here he celebrates the “love” that his audience has shown (v 10), he desires that they show zeal for the consummation of their “hope” and that they imitate examples of “faith.” The triad will reappear in 10:22-24.

As he prepares to return to his argument about the high priesthood of Jesus, our homilist reflects on a Scriptural detail relevant to his use of Psalm 110:4. Though the passage (6:13-20) seems to be an odd digression, its relevance will become clear at 7:21. The detail is the fact that God is sometimes portrayed as swearing, which already appeared in the citation of Psalm 95 at Hebrews 3:11. Why God would do so was a question many ancient interpreters asked and the answer given by such interpreters as Philo, a Jewish philosopher and Biblical interpreter of the early first century CE, was that he did so to give us extra assurance. Our homilist focuses on God’s sworn promise to Abraham to “bless” and “multiply” him (Genesis 12:1-3) and states that in doing so God was confirming his hope by “two unchangeable things” (6:18).

The reference to God’s immutability introduces a framework that our homilist will exploit in the chapters that follow. Although the affirmation that God is unchanging has Biblical roots, it was celebrated by thinkers such as Philo, who interpreted their Biblical heritage in terms of Platonic philosophy. That philosophical tradition grounded all that is and can be known in the changeless realm of eternal ideas or forms. Our homilist knows of that way of thinking about the reality of God and will be appealing to it in the chapters that follow, although he will make a surprising move in identifying the location of the ideal form that is unchangeable and that undergirds all else.

For now he hints at where he is going concluding this bit of reflection with another marvelous image (6:19-20), of Christ as an anchor. Early Christians in fact used the image of an anchor in the decoration of their catacombs and on their tombs, to evoke the cross, and perhaps to express the hope of which this passage speaks. Yet there is something daring about the way in which the author deploys this image. Anchors are supposed hold boats to the sea bottom. They are stable and firm. This anchor “of the soul” is one that moves, as a hope that “enters the inner shrine behind the curtain.” There is a paradoxical quality to this anchor, but it is precisely in such paradox that the homilist’s vision of the importance of Christ resides. At one level, Jesus is being assimilated to the high priest, whose major cultic action is to “enter behind the curtain” into the inner sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. The daring image poses the questions of how Jesus can in fact do such a thing, and how in doing so he does serve as an “anchor.” The following chapters will try to explain precisely those things.

The homilist concludes with a reference to where he needs to go, to explain how it is that Jesus has become a “high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (v 20).



From the Catacomb of St. Sebastian in Rome, images of an anchor and a Chi Rho, from the first two Greek letters of the name Christ, a fish, which was read an acronym for the name Jesus.

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