

The high priest

Introduction

How do the books of Exodus and Leviticus contribute to our understanding of Jesus Christ as a high priest who serves in the heavenly sanctuary?

Psalm 110

The author of Hebrews draws heavily on Psalm 110.¹

God states, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4 NIV)

This appointment of Jesus Christ as a priest in God’s presence takes place after his ascension.

“For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever” (Heb. 7:28 NIV).

“Others became priests without any oath,²¹ but he (Jesus Christ) became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever.”’” (Heb. 7:20-21, quoting Psalm 110:4).

Each Levitical high priest obtains his priesthood “on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry” (Heb. 7:16 NIV).

English translations give the impression that God appoints Jesus to another priestly order, “the order of Melchizedek.”

The Greek term, which is often translated “order” in Hebrew 6:20, is the noun *taxis*, which denotes a particular “kind” or “type.”

The Hebrew expression *‘al-dibrātî malkî-şedeq* in Psalm 110:4 is probably best translated, “according to the manner of Melchizedek.”

A similar expression comes in Hebrews 7:15, which the ESV translates as “in the likeness of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:15 ESV).

Jesus’ unique priesthood resembles that of Melchizedek, but neither of them belongs to a priestly order.

While Jesus’ priesthood resembles in a limited way that of Melchizedek, his high priestly activity parallels most closely that of Aaron and subsequent high priests.

The earthly and heavenly sanctuaries

The earthly sanctuary created at Mount Sinai is a model of the heavenly sanctuary (see Exod. 25:40).

¹ This use of Psalm 110 may go back to the teaching of Jesus, for he referred to it in his questioning of the religious leaders in the temple (see Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44).

The heavenly sanctuary is “the true tabernacle set up by the Lord” (Heb. 8:2); it is “the greater and more perfect tabernacle” (Heb. 9:11), and “the true one” (Heb. 9:24).

The earthly tabernacle by comparison is “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Heb. 8:5).

While the Levitical high priest encounters God by going into an “earthly sanctuary” (Heb. 9:1), Christ enters “heaven itself, to appear... in God’s presence” (Heb. 9:24; cf. 4:14).

- Jesus Christ is a perfect high priest; the Levitical high priest is an imperfect human.
- Jesus Christ enters and is seated in the heavenly sanctuary next to God; the Levitical high priest stands in the Holy Place, shielded from God by a curtain.
- After entering the heavenly sanctuary Jesus Christ remains there permanently; the Levitical high priest goes in and out of the sanctuary daily.
- Jesus Christ is an eternal high priest who never dies; the Levitical high priest dies and is replaced.

The high priest presents offerings to God

In Leviticus 9 Aaron as high priest initiates the sacrificial system associated with the Sinai covenant and the tabernacle.

According to Hebrews 5:1, one of the main roles of the high priest is “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Worshippers are dependent on the high priest to bring their offerings into God’s presence.

The incense altar

Integral to the process by which the Levitical high priest offers sacrifices to God is the burning of incense on the golden altar that stands adjacent to the Most Holy Place.

Firstly, the golden incense altar is first mentioned in Exodus 30:1-10 immediately after the instructions for the sanctification of the high priest.

The golden altar is associated with the tent’s function as a “tent of meeting.”

In Exodus 25:1-27:19 the term used exclusively to denote the tent is *miškān* “dwelling.”²

In Exodus 27:20-31:18 the expression used to denote the tent is *’ōhel mō’ēd* “tent of meeting.”³

The second part of God’s speech to Moses focuses on how the tent functions as a place where God can meet with the Israelites.

Secondly, the golden altar inside the tabernacle resembles the larger bronze altar that sits outside the entrance to the tent.

² Exod. 25:9; 26:1, 6-7, 12-13, 15, 17-18, 20, 22-23, 26-27, 30, 35; 27:9, 19. See R. E. Hendrix, “The Use of *miškān* and *’ōhel-mō’ēd* in Exodus 25-40,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 30 (1992) 6-13; Averbeck, “Tabernacle,” 809-810.

³ Exod. 27:21; 28:43; 29:4, 10-11, 30, 32, 42, 44; 30:16, 18, 20, 26, 36; 31:7.

It (the golden altar) is homologous with respect to ... the bronze altar ... in its morphology, its detail of fabrication, its function, and in its very name. Like the altar of burnt offering, it is square in shape, has horns at its corners, is used for the burning of a substance, and is designated an 'altar' (*mizbēah*).⁴

The noun *mizbēah* is derived from the related verb *zābah* which means “to slaughter/sacrifice.”

Yet, God says, “Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it” (Exodus 30:9 NIV).

Why associate the incense altar with slaughter/sacrifice?

Meyers also notes, “Both altars are at access points, or entrances, which allow movement to the inner-most realm of holiness of the tabernacle complex from the outermost realm.”⁵

Thirdly, and importantly, a close connection exists between the burning of the offering on the bronze altar and the burning of incense on the golden altar.

The Hebrew verb for the burning that takes place on the bronze altar is *hiqtîr*; this verb denotes the transformation of something into smoke.

Various offerings are described as being “an aroma pleasing (Hebrew *rēah nîhōah*) to the Lord” (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17, 2:2, 9; 3:5; 4:31; 6:15, 21).

This type of burning on the bronze altar is distinguished from what happens outside the camp, where the verb *śārap* “to burn” is used.

The Hebrew noun for “incense,” *qēṭōret*, is related to the verb *hiqtîr*.⁶

The burning of incense, with its distinctive smell, mirrors the offerings on the bronze altar, which give off “an aroma pleasing to the Lord.”

Both altars are used at precisely the same time (see Exod. 29:38-41 and 30:7-8).

Fourthly, the five types of sacrifices listed in Leviticus 1-7 are all designated ‘offerings’ *qorbān*.⁷

Strictly speaking, only four are “sacrifices” if one adopts the narrower sense of the word, taking it to refer to the slaughter of an animal or bird.

⁴ C. L. Meyers, "Realms of Sanctity: The Case of the "Misplaced" Incense Altar in the Tabernacle Texts of Exodus," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, eds. M. V. Fox, et al. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 44.

⁵ Meyers, "Realms of Sanctity: The Case of the "Misplaced" Incense Altar in the Tabernacle Texts of Exodus," 45.

⁶ See L. M. Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption* (Essential Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 95.

⁷ See Lev 1:2,3,10,14; 2:1,4,7,12; 3:1,7,12,14; 4:23, 28, 32; 5:11; 7:13, 14, 16, 38b.

The Hebrew root *qrb* “expresses a process of ‘approaching’ God.”⁸

The high priest plays an essential role in presenting the atoning offerings to God.

Others are not permitted to burn incense before God.

Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. ² So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (Leviticus 10:1-2 NIV)

In Numbers 16, a Levite, called Korah, and 250 community leaders, challenge Moses and Aaron. In response, Moses says to Korah and his followers:

“In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. ⁶ You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers ⁷ and tomorrow put burning coals and incense in them before the Lord. The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!” (Numbers 16:5-7 NIV)

“Now listen, you Levites! ⁹ Isn’t it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord’s tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? ¹⁰ He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. ¹¹ It is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? (Numbers 16:8-11 NIV)

Korah and others believe that they are sufficiently holy to undertake the task of presenting atoning sacrifices to God.

Only the high priest is authorised to present offerings to God in the sanctuary.

As Geerhardus Vos writes: “It is not merely necessary that a sacrifice be slain; it is equally necessary that the sacrifice be brought into the immediate presence of God ... The sacrifice is not completed until this is done.”⁹

The burnt offering

The burnt offering (Hebrew *’ōlâ*) takes “pride of place.”¹⁰

The bronze altar is referred to on various occasions as “the altar of the burnt offering” (e.g. Exod. 30:28; 31:9; 35:16; 38:1; 40:6, 10, 29; Lev. 4:7, 10, 18, 25, 30, 34).

⁸ C. A. Eberhart, "A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in The Hebrew Bible: Remarks on The Burning Rite on The Altar," *Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004) 488, fn. 12.

⁹ G. Vos, "The Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. R. B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NY: P&R Publishing, 1980), 142."

¹⁰ On the importance of the burnt offering, see J. W. Watts, "’ōlāh: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings," *Vetus testamentum* 56 (2006) 125-37; Morales, "Atonement in Ancient Israel: The Whole Burnt Offering as Central to Israel's Cult," 27-39.

Because it is “the paradigmatic offering of the Hebrew Bible,”¹¹ all other types of offering replicate in part what happens to the burnt offering when it is transformed into smoke.

The LXX uses the term ὁλοκαύτωμα *holokautōma*, which can be translated “holocaust” or “whole burnt offering,” to render the Hebrew noun *’ōlâ*.

The noun *’ōlâ* conveys the idea of “ascending;” it is related to the verb *’ālâ*, which means “to go up/ascend.”

It makes good sense to translate *’ōlâ* as “ascension offering.”¹²

- *Firstly, there is the image of the offerings ascending as smoke and giving off a fragrant smell that pacifies God.*
- *Secondly, there is the picture of the high priest going into the sanctuary to present the offerings to God.*

Christ’s ascension to the heavenly sanctuary

The apostle Paul writes, “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

The author of Hebrews emphasizes that Christ “appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).

Importantly, Christ’s death on earth can only be an effective offering for sin when the offering comes before God in the heavenly sanctuary.

Christ’s high priestly presentation of the sacrifice

According to Hebrews 9:25, as high priest, Jesus Christ goes into the heavenly sanctuary only once “to offer himself.”

Jesus Christ’s high priestly activity is dependent on his self-sacrifice on earth.

As Richard Gaffin comments, “His sacrificial death is integral to his identity and activity as high priest, a *sine qua non*.”¹³

When he ascends to the heavenly sanctuary, Jesus Christ is simultaneously both perfect sacrifice and perfect high priest.

Conclusion

A wholistic reading of the books of Exodus and Leviticus informs our understanding of Christ’s death of the cross, his ascension to the Father and his high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.¹⁴

¹¹ Watts, “*’ōlâh*: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings,” 125.

¹²Morales, “Atonement in Ancient Israel: The Whole Burnt Offering as Central to Israel’s Cult,” 27-39, adopts the translation “ascension offering” in preference to “burnt offering.” Cf. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 3A; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 173-74.

¹³ Gaffin, “The Priesthood of Christ: A Servant in the Sanctuary,” 52.

¹⁴ See T. D. Alexander, *Face to Face with God: A Biblical Theology of Christ as Priest and Mediator* (Essential Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).