

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

4:14-5:10

Previously the author has demonstrated the superiority of Yeshua the Messiah as divine revelation, and over angels and Moses. Now he turns his attention to another area in which He is better.

The superiority of Yeshua to Aaron the High Priest as a person (4:14-16)

v. 14 – He directly states that Yeshua is a *Cohen Gadol* – High Priest. High priests in Israel had several roles:

- Overseeing the regular priests (2 Chr 19:11).
- Ascertaining the will of God by wearing the *Urim* and *Thummin* (Num 27:21).
- Entering the presence of God in the Holy of Holies on *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).
- Conducting all of the steps that provided atonement (Lev 16).
- Representing all of the people (Heb 5:1).

So if Yeshua is superior to the Aaronic high priests, He will be superior in all of these roles:

- He will oversee an expanded priesthood.
- He will not ascertain the will of God using religious artifacts, but He will know it innately—it will be part of who He is.
- As we will see in chapter 9, he will not enter the copy of the holy of holies on earth, but the genuine one in heaven.
- He will complete a work of atonement that will never have to be repeated.
- And He will not just represent the people of Israel, but believers from every nation.

Those are the things we should expect to see in Scripture, and indeed that is true. But there is even more revealed here in the book of Hebrews. Immediately we are given a superior aspect of Yeshua by bringing out that He passed through the heavens. That is a picture of Him transcending the earth to the presence of God and remaining there, which is something the Aaronic high priests could never do. Note that the word “heavens” is in the plural. That is consistent with the Hebrew word *shamayim* that is always in the plural. This is also a reflection of the understanding in second temple times that there are three kinds or dimensions of heavens—the atmosphere, outer space, and heaven itself where God dwells. Paul refers to the three heavens in 2 Corinthians 12:2 and Ephesians 1:10.

The application of this awareness is to “hold fast to our confession.” This book has been addressing the author’s concern of the audience forsaking their faithfulness to Yeshua, which implies a prior confession of belief in Him. So this is an exhortation to remain faithful. It is likely that their original confession was consistent with Romans 10:9 – “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

v. 15 – This verse describes a key attribute of Yeshua that makes Him better than Aaronic high priests: He can sympathize with the weaknesses of believers. The word translated as

sympathize (KJV “touched with the feeling”) literally means to “experience the same pain or suffering.” In order to do that, He would have to experience the same things that cause us pain and suffering. The writer calls those things weaknesses. Yeshua experience the weakness of having to deal with our frailty and limitations as humans. He understood what it is like to be hungry (Mat 4:2) and tired (Mk 4:38). He knew what it is like to be thirsty in a hot dry environment (Jn 4:6-7).

The author then points out another experience that Yeshua shares in common with believers—He faced temptation to sin. The word translated as “tempted” comes from a root verb, “to test.” It is a picture of being under pressure to succeed. And that is consistent with the situation when Yeshua was tempted by the Adversary:

- Matthew 4 describes how after Yeshua became hungry after fasting for forty days in the wilderness, Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread. We face similar temptation whenever we are vulnerable in some way, he tempts us to compromise our standards in order to satisfy that vulnerability.
- The second temptation was for Yeshua to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple, forcing the Father to use His angels to save Him. We face similar temptations whenever we treat God like a spiritual “force” that can be manipulated and used for human purposes.
- The third temptation was for Yeshua to be made king over all the nations of the world by worshiping Satan. We face similar temptations whenever opportunities are presented to gain power, wealth and pleasure or to compromise our integrity.

So clearly the temptations experienced by Yeshua are similar to those that we face. The only difference is that Yeshua never gave in to the temptations. But the point in Hebrews is that because of our common experiences, including temptation, He can sympathize with us.

Having that awareness motivate us to “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, as it says in the next verse (16). We have greater confidence in trusting in someone if we know they have experienced and overcome something. And since Yeshua passed the test of temptation, drawing near to Him will help us to pass our own tests. we can ask Him for help in such times. But when we fail, we can still draw near to Him because He offers grace and mercy. Grace is not based on what we deserve. And so is mercy. When we know that, we can turn to Him with confidence, not with uncertainty or doubt.

This idea of approaching the throne of grace would have been a radical concept for this audience. Historically, only one person (the high priest) could approach God’s divine presence on one day of the year (Day of Atonement). But now, that was possible for all believers at any time.

Altogether, these three verses show how Yeshua is able to relate to us in ways that an impersonal and unapproachable human high priest could never do.

The superior qualifications of Yeshua as High Priest (5:1-10)

- v. 1 – The first qualification of a high priest was being appointed by God. In Exodus 28:1 God appointed Aaron as high priest and indicated that Aaron’s sons would follow in his footsteps. Numbers 3:1-10 reaffirms this appointment, and describes how Aaron’s two oldest sons had died, so the third son, Eleazer, would serve as Aaron’s successor. That succession continued generation after generation for over one thousand years. But it all started to unravel in 175 B.C.

when the Syrian Seleucids under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes had control of the land of Judah. The high priest at that time was Onias III. One of the brothers of Onias was named Yeshua. But he became Hellenized and adopted the Greek name Jason. Jason bribed Antiochus, who then installed Jason as high priest, and he began implementing the movement toward Hellenism among the Jews.

Four years later, another brother named Menelaus outbid Jason for the office of high priest again by bribery. Menelaus was the high priest who permitted Antiochus to commit the terrible acts of defilement at the temple, and led to the rebellion by the Maccabees. After the victory of the Maccabees and the restoration of temple worship, one of the terms of triumph gave Jonathan, the youngest brother of Judah the Maccabee, the office of high priest, even though he had no legal claim to the office. It was entirely political.

That began what is called the Hasmonean dynasty in which descendants of Judah the Maccabee served as high priests. That succession continued for over 100 years until Herod the Great became king of Judea under the control of Rome. Herod began appointing high priests again politically, regardless of their ancestry. But typically they were very wealthy and well-connected individuals, often appointed after providing a bribe. This practice continued all the way until the destruction of the temple that would take place a short time after the writing of the book of Hebrews.

So it is important for us to be aware of this background to the office of the high priest, because we can see how, at the time that these words in Hebrews 5 were written, that the office had become greatly corrupted. In many respects these men were not eligible to be appointed, and they assumed the role through manipulation, not through divine appointment. It is also ironic that the corruption of the office began with a man named Yeshua who abandoned and betrayed his Jewish heritage. But this book is esteeming a very different Yeshua who was faithful to his heritage in every way, and, as we will see, He *was* qualified to be appointed by God as high priest.

The second qualification for high priest is that he must represent humanity in a godly way. Notice in verse 1 that he is “appointed on behalf of men.” That means the integrity of the high priest will be extended to humanity. This awesome responsibility is reflected in the necessary personal attributes of the high priest that are described next.

- vv. 2-3 – One of the attributes is dealing “gently with the ignorant and the misguided. The word translated as “misguided” is typically translated as “deceived” in the New Testament. That describes an attitude that is not harsh or indifferent, but expresses an interest in another person’s life. It is also marked by patience for those who do not understand, either because they aren’t aware of the truth or have been deceived by false teachers.

But the high priest was also “obligated to offer sacrifices for sins,” which brings out the necessity of the duties that only he could perform. So what we see here is the mandate of the high priest both to be engaged with people and to provide religious services for them. That is impossible to do if you stay in your palace and never spend time with common people face to face. That serves as a lesson for people in ministry leadership positions needing to have a balance between ministry programs and involvement in the lives of others, not just one or the other.

- v. 4 – He is also not to take on honor for himself, but it comes from God when He makes the appointment.

When we consider the descriptions of the actions of the high priests as recorded in the New Testament, all of these attributes are lacking. During the time at the end of Yeshua's life, the high priest was Caiaphas. His father-in-law, Annas, was the previous high priest, but was still influential. How did they do in terms of showing gentleness toward the ignorant and deceived, being patient, being aware of their own weaknesses, and not taking honor for themselves?

- Instead of being gentle toward someone who may be ignorant or deceived, Caiaphas bullied Yeshua into speaking, when the Law did not require it (Mat 26:63).
- He showed no patience by refusing to follow the Law that required two witnesses for confirming the charge of blasphemy (Mat 26:65).
- Instead of showing awareness of his own weaknesses and accepting honor from men, not God, on the night that Yeshua was captured, a temple officer struck Yeshua for supposedly insulting the high priest, but Annas did not repudiate the blow, thus accepting the honor it represented (Jn 18:22).
- In the same way, both Annas and Caiaphas mocked Yeshua when He was on the cross (Mat 27:41).
- Many years later, when a different man named Ananias was the high priest, he became upset that Paul did not show him honor and he ordered Paul to be hit on the mouth (Acts 23:2-4).

None of these men were appointed in the manner ordained by God, but were given the position of authority politically and by bribery. So that is the state of the high priesthood in the days when the book of Hebrews was written. And that forms the context for the verses that follow in which Yeshua is shown to meet perfectly the qualifications of the office and that He exceeds greatly the character of the human priests that had been leading the nation until that time.

- v. 5 – The words at the beginning of this verse clearly show that Yeshua meets the requirement of God giving the honor to the high priest rather than a man claiming it for himself. Then the author backs that statement up by quoting from Psalm 2:7, just as he had done previously in Hebrews 1:5. Psalm 2 describes the Father sending the Son (v. 6) and declaring that the Son is worthy of homage, which is another term for honor (v. 12).
- v. 6 – The requirement of a high priest receiving a divine appointment is addressed by quoting from Psalm 110:4. The order of Melchizedek is covered in detail in Hebrews 7, so discussing that subject will be covered later. But we can note that in our study of chapter 1, we saw how Psalm 110 can only apply to Yeshua. So this reference in Hebrew 5:6 to the order of Melchizedek can likewise apply only to Yeshua. And it provides the basis for Yeshua being appointed in an equivalent way to the appointment of Aaron. In both cases, the Lord declared that each one was a high priest, and that settled it.
- v. 7 – This is a reference to Yeshua's weeping and intense prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before His arrest and crucifixion (Mat 26:36-46; Mk 13:32-42; Lk 22:39-46).
- v. 8 – The statement that Yeshua “learned obedience from the things which He suffered,” > It doesn't mean that He wasn't obedient was before the Cross. But, He added to His understanding of obedience experientially. We know that from our own lives. When you follow through on what God calls you to do, even though some kind of suffering results, you truly know what obedience is. So Yeshua understands what we go through because He

experienced such things Himself, even more intensely.

Verse 9 shows that all of these things taken together prove that Yeshua is the perfect high priest. He fulfilled all of the qualifications of the office of high priest. And He has all of the loving attributes that we would want to have in the one who represents us in great spiritual matters. That is why the result of His ministry will also be perfect. And that is described here as “eternal salvation.” This is consistent with the declaration later on in the book that the atonement of Yeshua was accomplished “once for all.”

Verse 10 summarizes everything preceding it, with a clear affirmation of Yeshua’s identity as our high priest.