

Jesus the Superior High Priest of the Superior Covenant

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; HEBREWS 8:1-13

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Congregation of Christ: Let me read a quote from a recent article by a well-known seminary professor:

before [Israel's] monarchy, the historical nature of the biblical accounts is either utterly unclear or in direct tension with the general outline of history that has come to light in the past century or so. Historically speaking, we really don't know where the Israelites came from, and the exodus and conquest stories, which are so central to the biblical account, are particularly problematic.

What do you think is this author's view of the Bible? Do you agree or disagree with him? His view is that the story of Israel, especially the plagues that God sent to Egypt, and the mighty parting of the Red Sea, is full of inconsistencies that it is not God's Word, but merely an invention by Jews. Here's another quote from the same article:

And so when someone asks you what seems to be that most basic of questions about Christianity, "Why did Jesus die?", the answer actually isn't obvious but strikes at the heart of the mystery of faith. And maybe all the atonement theories are right in their own way.

What is this professor saying about the reason why Jesus die? He's saying that the many theories about the atonement by Jesus can all be true. This is because, he says, the Bible is unclear what the sacrifice of Jesus meant and accomplished. So anyone can invent a theory and be right. Is he right or wrong? Obviously, he is totally wrong!

It's a pity that this false teacher has many disciples who are being led astray into doubt and even unbelief. I know personally a few of these followers.

But the Bible is very clear. Israel was redeemed from slavery in Egypt by God's mighty hand in the plagues and in the crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground. The chosen nation was then established on God's covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai. There, God commanded Moses and all the people to build a tabernacle, and ordain priests who would offer regular sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. If, as this professor teaches, these things about Israel was all Jewish inventions, then Christians like us are the most pitiable people in the world.

This is because the whole New Testament is founded on the Old Testament story of Israel. The church established by Christ from Genesis to Revelation is a fulfillment of God's promises to Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and Jeremiah in his covenants with them.

So, in our text today, we will study how these covenants are all fulfilled by Christ in his life, death and resurrection. He is the Superior High Priest of a Superior New Covenant.

The Superiorities of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus' ministry is superior to the earthly high priest, firstly, because he serves his people from heaven. In Daniel 7:13-14, we read one of Daniel's prophecies called "the night visions":

and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

This vision of the prophet Daniel was fulfilled when Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. In heaven, he sat down at the right hand of his Majestic Father. He sat down because his redemptive work for his people was finished. Does this mean that he is not doing anything anymore for us? Of course not, because his work for us continues as our Mediator. He pleads our cause before his Father, and brings our prayers to him.

The right hand of God signifies that Jesus has the place of his Father's highest favor. It also invests him with God's almighty power and authority in heaven and on earth. As he now sits on his throne in heaven, he is actually sitting now on the throne of his father David as the eternal King and the "Son of the Most High," as was promised to his mother Mary (Luk 1:26-33). So it is unbiblical to teach that Jesus is still waiting to sit on an earthly throne in Jerusalem when he returns from heaven. His enemies, including the devil, are already being put under his feet as his gospel is being preached to all the world (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

In sitting at the right hand of God, Jesus sits as a King (2 Sam 7:14; Isa 9:6,7) on the throne of his father David (2 Sam 7:11; Luke 1:26-33). He is the Messiah promised by the prophets: a Prophet (Deu 18:15-19), a Priest (Psa 110:1-7), and a King anointed by God. This is why Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mat 16:16).

Our text also says that Jesus ministers in true sanctuary, not in an earthly temple like the priests in the tabernacle. This true temple is in heaven, *"set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being."* The writer is referring to the tabernacle in the wilderness set up by Moses according to God's specific commands. Remember that when God gave Moses the whole law up on Mount Sinai, he also showed him the pattern of the temple he must build. We read this in Hebrews 8:5 and in many other passages, including Exodus 25:8-9, *"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle..."*

The Old Covenant Gives Way to the New Covenant

Back in 7:22, the writer says, *"This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant."* How is the new covenant under Jesus a better covenant? What are the old and new covenants? Before we can answer that question, we must compare the different covenants.

We must begin with a definition of a covenant in the Bible. A biblical covenant is more than a treaty between two persons; it is between God and man. The best definition of a biblical covenant is “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.” It is a “bond in blood” because all covenants between God and man is ratified with blood. This is why the term “God made a covenant with...” is literally “God cut a covenant with...” And it is “sovereignly administered” because God is the only administrator of the covenant. They are unilateral: God alone imposes the terms of the covenant.

Another important point is that there are two main covenants in the Bible: *the covenant of works* and *the covenant of grace*. What is the covenant of works? After God created Adam, he made a covenant with him placing him under a test by prohibiting him from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When Adam failed this covenant, all his descendants would come under the curse of sin and death (Rom 5:12). So, all human beings from Adam would be born with a sinful nature, so no one is able to obey God out of his own will.

Would God then be so unloving to cut Adam off right there and then? No, God showed infinite grace and mercy towards his hopeless creation. Adam would die right there and then, but spiritually, not physically, for he lived for 930 years. So in Genesis 3:15, God revealed his original gospel: the devil will bruise the heel of the Seed of the woman, which means that Christ would be put to death by his enemies at the instigation of the devil. But the Seed of the woman will crush the head of the devil, meaning, Christ will destroy the devil when he arose from the dead.

Over many millennia, God progressively unfolded this covenant of grace—his plan of salvation—to his people through various smaller “subcovenants” to Abraham, Moses, David, and Jeremiah. He revealed his plan more and more in these successive covenants.

In his covenant with Abraham, God promised that he would be a father of many nations, and his descendants would inherit a land of their own (Gen 12:1-3). To Moses, God established Israel as his chosen nation, promising them blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Exo 19:5-6). To King David, God promised a Son who would sit on his throne forever, ruling over an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam 7:10-14). To Jeremiah, God revealed a “new covenant” with his chosen people (Jer 31:31-34).

And under this overarching covenant of grace from the day that Adam sinned, until the day that Christ returns from heaven, there is an *old covenant with Israel*, and then *the new covenant under Christ*. So, we see that God's covenants are the framework of the whole Bible.

The Superiorities of the New Covenant

But the writer says that the new covenant is superior to the old. In what ways? He offers four main arguments, all related to the superior ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, while the old covenant was founded on external rites, the new was founded on inner spirituality. Though the promises of the old covenant and the new covenant are essentially

the same, there was a “fault” with the old covenant. This is not saying that the old covenant was bad, because, as Paul says, the law is “*holy and righteous and good*” (Rom 7:12). It was “faulty,” first, because it was incomplete. Christ had not yet been revealed to Israel (Heb 1:1-2). Christ, filled the incompleteness of the old covenant. This is because Christ is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament shadows: the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices.

The second reason that it was “faulty” was its temporary nature. The old covenant served to point Israel—and us—to Christ. The law, for example, served only as “our guardian until Christ came” (Gal 3:24). When he came, perfection and permanency came. His sacrifice was a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice.

So the fault lies, not in God, or in the law, but on man, sinful man. The law is not able to make man sinless. But Christ is able, because the righteousness he gives those who believe is perfect. This is why Israel failed: they were never saved by mere outward covenant rituals and sacrifices. As the prophet Samuel said, “*Obedience is better than sacrifice.*” All people who strive to be right with God through works will never be saved. Faith alone in Christ alone saves, and obedience to God’s law follows.

The second reason why the new covenant is superior over the old is God’s dwelling with his people. In the old, he dwelt with his people in an earthly temple (Exo 25:8). But in the new, God promises to be with his people even while he is in heaven. This is because Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell every believer. This is why he is called Immanuel, “*God with us.*”

The author tells us that the tabernacle of old was only a copy of the heavenly temple. But in Christ, this shadow has given way to the reality of the temple of heaven. What is this temple in heaven? The Apostle John reveals to us what it is in his vision in Revelation 21:22, “*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*” The Triune God is the Temple! Jesus himself revealed this to his disciples, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up,*” referring to his death and resurrection (John 2:19-22). We do not wait for an earthly temple in Jerusalem from where Jesus would reign. But his promise is that in the end, what David prophesies in Psalm 23:6 will be fulfilled: all believers will “ *dwell in the house of the LORD [the heavenly Temple] forever.*”

Thirdly, the new covenant is superior to the old because in the new covenant, God’s people will know God intimately and eternally. In contrast to this, the old covenant people had only head knowledge of God. But we have both: intimate communion with God, and knowledge of God through his revealed. We know and worship God in spirit and truth.

Fourthly and finally, the new covenant is grounded in God’s mercy and in the forgiveness of sin, “I will remember their sins no more.” Israelites were forgiven of their sins when they offered sacrifices for their sins as a token of their faith in the promised Messiah. The whole law then pointed forward to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the great high priest who offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant deals with the problem of human sin for good, in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Dear Friends: Jesus as the Superior High Priest of a Superior New Covenant is a great comfort to us. He mediates for us before his Father in heaven, not from an earthly temple. He is the mediator and guarantor of a new covenant. Our salvation is not based on external rituals and sacrifices, but on faith alone in Christ alone. Praise God that our salvation is through the Spirit giving us new hearts and new minds, because no matter how good we are, we will never be saved by our own works. Only by the perfect works of Christ can anyone be saved.

In Christ, we look forward to our final redemption from sin and death. On that glorious day, we will know God with such intimacy that no one will have to preach to us, "Know the Lord." But while we wait for that glorious day when we will dwell in the heavenly Temple, let us not be impatient that our final restoration is taking so long. We're still surrounded by sin, pain and suffering. The unbelieving world around us hates and persecutes us. But we cling to your promise of the day of Christ. Let us continue to persevere, knowing that you work all things out according to your sovereign plan until that joyous day of redemption comes.