

Hebrews 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 8. Now the point in what we are saying is this. We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices. Thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.

For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain. But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old, as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says, Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete, and what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. The author of Hebrews has been contrasting the priestly order of Melchizedek with the Levitical priesthood, and continues to do so into chapter 8. In chapter 8, he moves into a contrast between the old covenant order in terms of which the old Levitical priesthood operated, and the new covenant with its Melchizedekian priesthood. He also contrasts the nature and the context of their service. Our high priest, Jesus Christ, is high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He is a priest in the heavenly places, in the true tabernacle of the heavens, high above any earthly priest. Hebrews works with a sort of vertical typology. When we talk about typology, we're generally talking about horizontal typology, where former events anticipate later events, and later events explore or develop the patterns of earlier ones. However, there are other ways in which typology can operate. A vertical typology thinks about the relationship between different levels of reality. A heavenly reality above is impressed upon an earthly reality beneath. So the tabernacle of Moses does not just anticipate things that are to come, it also relates to something that already exists in the heavens above. Heavenly realities are mirrored in the earthly realities of the sanctuary. The Levitical priesthood operates in the realm of the earthly model, the copy and the shadow of the heavenly temple, according to the order of which the pattern for the tabernacle was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The book of Hebrews has both horizontal and vertical elements of typology, which often come together. The copy and the shadow are not empty of meaning. They are, however, like a replica of a great heavenly reality, through which people could relate to the heavenly realities in an indirect manner. Christ would not qualify as a Levitical priest on account of his coming from the tribe of Judah. Consequently, for him to be a priest, some change would need to occur in the terms of the covenant order, or it would have to relate to some other covenant order entirely.

[3 : 54] Christ comes with a new covenant, a new covenant with much better promises. As it is concerned not just with the earthly model and replica, but with the heavenly realities, it is much more effective, much more powerful in bringing people near to God.

The first covenant was hamstrung by the sins of the priests and by the unfaithfulness of the people. In verse 8 we read that he found fault with them. Where was the problem with the old covenant? It was with the people. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. We see in verse 9. A new covenant had to deal with the most fundamental problem, which was with the rebellious and resistant hearts of the people. The Lord had to write his law upon their hearts, so that the core problem, the problem of the people turning astray, could be dealt with.

The tabernacle and the temple were among other things, not just models of the heavens above, but also models of the true person, the person who has the word of God treasured within, the word of the covenant that is stored in the treasure house of the heart.

They bear the light of the Lord's truth like the lampstand of the temple, and then they also feed upon the word of God like bread. Like sacrifices ascending, they offer themselves up to God.

Their prayers ascend like incense to his house, and living water flows out from them as they give life to all around them. However, under the old covenant, this was not realized. There was an architectural replica of the faithful people, but there was no actual people to correspond with it.

[5 : 27] In the new covenant, we have a new temple. The new temple is Jesus Christ himself, and the people formed in him by his spirit. And that new temple has the law of God dwelling in its heart, the work of the spirit by which people are transformed. The core problem of the old covenant was seen all the way back in Deuteronomy. The Lord offered countless blessings to a faithful people and promised them life. However, the people consistently rebelled and failed. Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Facing the reality of exile, the Lord later promised that he would restore his people and deal with the fundamental problem of the covenant, their hearts.

In Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 24 to 28, I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. And from all your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. Christ is the mediator of this new covenant. He is sinless and entirely faithful. He is ever living to intercede for us before God's very throne, so we are preserved in relationship with God. His spirit is writing the law of God upon our hearts, so that we are conformed to him. Now that the old covenant has been surpassed, it is about to be removed altogether. The old covenant will finally be removed in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70, when the sanctuary is destroyed and sacrifice is rendered inoperative. A question to consider. Implicit in this passage is a contrast between the people of the old covenant and the people of the new covenant.

In what does this contrast consist? How might this contrast inform our reading of Hebrews more generally?