

HEBREWS

The Book of Better Things

The recipients of Hebrews were probably Jewish Christians, and the author urged them to hold fast to the new relationship with God established by Christ, as superior in every way to the old covenant God had provided through the Law of Moses. It is sometimes called **“The Book of Better Things”** because of its use of comparisons, usually comparisons of old and new. Its readers were very familiar with the “old,” and would have readily understood the comparisons being made. Today’s Christians, however, may not be as familiar with the references found in Hebrews, and this introduction seeks to smooth over those bumps as we read Hebrews in the next two weeks.

Jesus is Superior to the Angels

Angels are spiritual beings created by God. The word “angel” means messenger, and they are chiefly messengers of God and ministers to mankind. They are stronger than Man, but not all-powerful; they are greater than Man in knowledge, but not all-knowing; they are able to move between heaven and earth, but they are not omnipresent.

Jesus is Superior to Moses, as Mt. Zion is Superior to Mt. Sinai

To tell a Jewish audience that Jesus was superior to Moses was saying something. The writer of Hebrews acknowledges the faithfulness of Moses. God said that Moses was “faithful in all my house,” and that he spoke to Moses clearly, not in riddles, and face-to-face. (Num 12:7-8). Through Moses, God established his covenant (the Law) with Israel.

God was present on Mt. Sinai when he delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses. God’s presence made the mountain holy, and so God commanded that if even a beast approached the mountain, it should be stoned. Hebrews contrasts it with Mt. Zion, used throughout the OT to mean the future Jerusalem, the heavenly City of God where we will dwell someday.

Jesus is Superior to the Priesthood

The priesthood of Aaron was established by God at the time he gave the Law to Moses. God established that the high priest of Israel would be Aaron and his descendants.

Jesus, in contrast, is a priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (mel-KIZ-a-deck). The little we know about him is found in Gen. 14:18–20. The Hebrew name means “king of righteousness.” Melchizedek was the king of the city of Salem, a name from the same root as the Hebrew for “peace” (shalom). Instead of being a priest because he descended from a priestly line, carefully recorded in scripture, he suddenly appeared in Genesis 14 and then disappeared. As far as the OT narrative is concerned, it shows no end to his priesthood, so in that sense he continues a priest forever (Psalm 110:4). Hebrews treats him as a metaphor, or “type,” a foreshadowing of Christ, of his eternal priesthood which brings true peace.

Atonement of Jesus Superior to the Sacrifices Under the Law

The tabernacle was essentially a tent, with an outer court and inner sacred rooms. A veil separated the two sacred rooms in the Tabernacle – the Holy Place and the *Most Holy Place*. The junior priests entered the Holy Place each day to tend to the altar and make sacrifices on behalf of the people. The *Most Holy Place* is where the Ark of the Covenant was located, over which God’s presence rested. Only the high priest could enter through the veil into the Most Holy Place, and he could do so only on the yearly Day of Atonement, to make atonement for the sins of the nation as a whole.

Daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly offerings were made to atone for sin, including animal sacrifices in which the blood was *sprinkled*. *Hyssop* is a plant with cleansing properties used throughout the OT in connection with cleansing from sin; the first instance was in Exodus, when the Israelites used hyssop to spread the blood on the doorposts so the angel of death would pass over their house. Another cleansing ritual was found in the burnt sacrifice of a *red heifer* without defect, slaughtered outside the camp, and burned with *cedarwood*, *scarlet yarn*, and *hyssop*. The ashes of this offering were mixed with water and *sprinkled* on people and things defiled by contact with death. The entire ritual was a foreshadowing of Christ, killed outside the gate, whose sprinkled blood cleanses from death.

Hebrews says that Jesus’ sacrifice was better than all of these, because it is once-for-all. He is the true sacrifice, the true veil through which we must pass, and the true high priest who brings us into the Most Holy Presence of God.

The last, best comparison in Hebrews reminds us of the first recorded sin after the Fall. Cain, son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother Abel. Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground. Jesus’ blood also spilled onto the ground, and if Abel’s blood cried out for justice, the blood of Jesus answers: justice satisfied.