

# Herald

**ANTIPAS**

*"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)*

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## JESUS CHRIST, HIGH PRIEST OF THE NEW COVENANT

*Part 1 : Some fundamental truths*

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No one can understand the Biblical doctrine of reconciliation and God's plan of redemption if he does not grasp the truth of *Jesus Christ's mediation* properly. This concept lies at the heart of God's revelation and is therefore one of the keys that unlock the gospel, in fact the whole Word of God.

The Bible bears witness to Christ. In the Old Testament it is a prophetic expectation that looks forward. And in the New Testament it is an apostolic testimony that looks back. And central to this is the fact of Christ's mediatorship.

□ A mediator is someone *in the middle*. He is a go-between, a bridge between two (usually hostile) parties. He has contact with both, sympathises with both, and is trusted by both. His task is to represent each party at the other – and thereby bring about reconciliation between them.

Such a Mediator is necessary between God and man, because the fall of man brought about enmity between them (Rom 5:10). Fellowship has been broken off. On the one hand man is hostile towards God (Rom 8:7) and deaf to the words spoken by God (1 Cor 2:6 – 16; 2 Cor 4:4). On the other hand God is filled with wrath over man's sin and His righteousness demands full punishment for the creature's rebellion (Rom 1:8; 3:19; Eph 2:3).

This broken relationship with his Creator is man's greatest problem. This is exactly Paul's point of departure when he starts to expound the glorious truth of justification through faith in Romans (Rom 1:18).

In the Old Testament God's relationship with the people of the Covenant functions mainly through three kinds of mediators. *Prophets* spoke to the people on behalf of Him. *Priests* asked for redemption before Him on behalf of the people. *Kings* had to lead the people in obedience to Him – and thus mediate His government.

Eventually these three offices were bound together in Christ.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS

The origins of all large New Testament truths lie in the Old Testament. Seen in the light of the progressive and integrated development of the revelation of God it is actually obvious. Therefore, whoever wishes to understand Jesus Christ's mediatorship, especially His high priesthood, properly should first of all dig up the Old Testament roots thereof.

The people of the Covenant were mostly illiterate slaves when they moved out of Egypt. God therefore communicates with them in a way that they can understand, that is my means of symbols and ceremonies.

Central to the ceremonies was the *sacrifice system*, with the Day of Atonement as highlight. The basic message of this was: *salvation is by substitution!*

When the believing Israelite made a sacrifice, he effectively confessed: *I am a sinner and deserve death. But I believe I can be pardoned by You, my God. I therefore plead: please accept this sacrificial animal as a substitute. What happens to it should actually happen to me. I know that the sacrifice of an animal can never satisfy You, but this act is an expression of my faith that You Yourself (as for our father Isaac) will provide the final and highest substitute – the Lamb of God!*

God's favourites in the Old dispensation therefore did enjoy the joy of forgiveness and reconciliation with Him. Where is it more evident than in the book of Psalms?

Admittedly they understood little. Only the first drops of the revelation of God had as yet fallen. But whoever believed this and believed it in such a way that he adapted his life according to it, was saved.

As is the case today, justification then also took place through faith alone (Gal 3:6, NIV). Paul strongly uses this when he emphasises in Rom 4 that he is not preaching a new message, but the old-old message of salvation. "*Abraham*

*believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" (Rom 4:3, NIV). He did not acquire this righteousness through *works* (v6), also not through *circumcision* (v10), and also not through *law* (v13).

Also in the Old Testament there was no salvation outside of Christ. Before the advent of Christ the burden of sin of the elect was written off against His account as it were. In time to come He would come and redeem it (Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 10:1 – 4; Heb 9:15).

From what has been said above, it is clear that the Old Testament service of sacrifice was *temporary*. And as such it was also *imperfect*.

The root meaning of the Hebrew word *reconciliation* is *to cover*. The sacrifices therefore covered the people's sins before God. It did not, however, settle the matter; not in the least! The service of sacrifice was merely an interim measure.

How preliminary and incomplete the Old Testament religion really was would only become explicitly clear after the advent of Christ.

The author of Hebrews strongly emphasises it: It achieved very little (7:18). The priests' work was insufficient because they were mortals (7:23 – 24). After all, they had to sacrifice for their own sins (5:3; 7:27). Furthermore, they had to

repeatedly sacrifice (10:1). And these sacrifices did not clear anyone's conscience (9:9). Least of all it addressed the true problem of sin (10:4, 11). And the insufficient nature thereof appeared to be the clearest from the fact that it did not provide access to the Most Holy Place (9:8). Therefore, nobody was completely and finally restored to his relationship with God.

Even though he understood little, the believing Israelite knew his sacrifices were merely *preliminary* (just a covering of sin before the face of God), that every sacrifice prophetically carried a *promise of God*, and that it was therefore an *act of faith*. He believed that God would in time to come deal with his sin and the punishment for it – that God Himself would institute the perfect priesthood and would provide the perfect substitute.<sup>1</sup>

## THE GREAT FULFILMENT

As the years and generations went by, high priest after high priest came and went (Heb 7:23). The people suffered under their ceremonial duties. However, nothing was ever completed; everything was temporary.

One day a triumphant shout brought an end to the long wait: "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29, 36). The Great Substitute had arrived!

Eventually, 'the time had fully come' (Gal 4:4).

Especially in the Gospels it is clear how Jesus' disciples struggled to understand how the Old Testament promises of a Messianic Mediator was fulfilled in Him. For the majority of the Jews, in their spiritual blindness, such a thought was totally unacceptable. The Holy Spirit in His fullness of Pentecost first had to come to guide the Apostles 'into all truth' (John 16:12 – 14). Only when the mysteries of the New Covenant<sup>2</sup> were revealed to them everything fell into place in a wonderful way.

Hebrews was written to Jewish believers for whom the Christian race had become too difficult. They therefore consider to return to the Jewish religion and ceremonies. It fills one with aversion and holy indignation. These foolish people want to turn back to something that no longer exists – things that have been fulfilled in Christ! Do they now really want to trample on God's gift of grace (Heb 6:6; 10:29)?

<sup>1</sup> When one reads the Old Testament, especially the prophets, it is clear how the longing for God's Messianic Mediator, His Great Prophet, Priest and King has increased.

2 Three great covenants are mentioned in the Bible. Firstly, there is the *Covenant of Salvation* between the three persons of the Divine Trinity – to work together to their self-glorification in the salvation of sinners (sometimes also called the *Council of Peace*). Secondly, there is the *Covenant of Work* between God and Adam, as well as, thereafter, between God and the Last Adam – that man had to earn his promised inheritance through obedience. Thirdly, there is the *Covenant of Grace* between God and fallen man – that every sinner who is converted and in complete dependence puts his trust in God in the merit of Christ alone, will be declared righteous by God. This Covenant of Grace has two phases or components: the *Old Covenant* and the *New Covenant*.

The concepts ‘covenant’ and ‘testament’ are in fact alternative translations of a single word on the one hand and a single Greek word on the other hand. One could therefore, in stead of *Old and New Covenant*, also say *Old and New Testament*.

The way the book starts is of significance (1:1). The revelation of God is progressive. In Old Testament times God’s speech was fragmentary (often and varied), but now His revelation has been finally finished off by the incarnation and work of His Son. That which was still *incomplete* in the Old Testament,

has now been *completed*; that which was *temporary* is now *final*.

This extremely important truth is then systematically and with inescapable logic worked out in the rest of the book. The author’s typical modus operandi is to set off the most exalted things in the Jewish mind against Christ. In His light one after the other Old Testament star then grows dim to an indistinct shadow.

However, he also wants to ensure that his readers do not misunderstand him. The contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament, with which he is working so strongly, is not that of *falseness* and *truth*. It is the contrast between *promises* and the *fulfilment* thereof; between *shadows* and their *substance*; between the *incomplete* and the *perfection*.

That is why the word ‘better’ is characteristic of the book. The New Testament believer has in Christ a better hope (7:19); a better covenant (7:22; 8:6); better promises (8:6); and better sacrifices (9:23). Also refer to 11:40 and 12:24.

The fundamental argument of the author of Hebrews is that God now works with His people in a different way – in terms of a *new covenant* (Heb 8:6 – 13). And the actual difference between the Old and the New is that there is now a new

Mediator – Prophet, Priest and King at the same time!

Hebrews certainly deals with Christ as God’s Great Prophet and King, but the main emphasis is on His excellent and perfect *priesthood*. Jesus Christ, High Priest of the New Covenant, stands head and shoulders above Aaron, high priest of the Old Covenant. Almost half of the book is devoted to this (4:14 – 10:18).

The urgent pastoral appeal of the author of Hebrews can be summed up in a nutshell as follows: *‘Look how privileged we are! Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of 1500 Great Days of Atonement. Millions of animals were slaughtered. Century after century the people waited for God’s Lamb. And now He has come! In fact, many of us have seen Him themselves! Come to a standstill, think, do understand! Christ is so much greater than the Levitical priesthood, so much more glorious than Aaron. He is the fulfilment of the Ceremonial Law. And you want to turn around – with such a High Priest!’*

### THE FUNDAMENTAL OFFICE

The Lord Jesus Christ is indeed Prophet, High Priest and King of the New Covenant at the same time. And between these three offices of salvation there is an inextricable and intimate connection. Nevertheless,

His High Priesthood is the most fundamental of the three.

The author of Hebrews quotes Ps 110:4 four times: *“The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”* (Heb 5:6; 6:20; 7:17; 7:21). And three times the author comments on the fact that God has confirmed His Son’s High Priesthood with an oath (Heb 6:17; 7:20 – 22; 7:28).

We can certainly draw the conclusion that the High Priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ is of the utmost importance. And it is indeed the deepest anchorage, the heart of our salvation. The origins of the Gospel lie in God’s eternal advice. The proclamation and gradual elaboration thereof is done through Christ’s prophetic and royal offices. But it is His High Priesthood that has *established* the Gospel.

Nothing lets Christ’s office blossom like His Priesthood, because there is almost nothing that He as Prophet has to reveal to us that is not demonstrated and underlined in His High Priesthood in a wonderful way. The Lamb of God’s high-priestly work to a great extent forms the content of His prophetic preaching.

How much of God and His character is not revealed therein! His sovereignty, His holiness, His righteousness, His Law and perfect

standards! His great council plan to exalt Himself, His wisdom and omnipotence! His loving grace, His patience, His reconcilability!

How many shocking revelations about man do not come to the fore therein! His sin and guilt, his damnability, his complete inability to change his own fate!

How much light is not shed on the riches of our salvation! The objective legality and irreversible conclusion thereof! The accessibility of God's throne of grace, the certainty of our perseverance, the inalienable security of our eternal inheritance!

Without Christ's priesthood His *Kingship* would have been inconceivable. He indeed earned His sceptre of government as priest. Those who He overwhelms in a kingly fashion and carries off in His triumphal progress are exactly the same people who He first had to redeem as priest. The back of the enemy who He now crushes under His foot was broken over the cross.

Truly, the Lord's priesthood is fundamental and central. Golgotha is the centre of everything. That is why Paul wanted to talk about nothing else than Jesus Christ – and specifically about Him as the *crucified* (1 Cor 2:2).

#### **A FEW IMPLICATIONS**

#### **There is no basic difference between Old and New Testament salvation.**

The principle of salvation still remains *justification through faith alone*.

Believers in the old dispensation looked *ahead* – through the spectacles of the Ceremonial Law. What did they see? *The Lamb of God!* Even though they did not see clearly, if they believed in God's promises they were considered righteous.

Since the coming of Christ believers look *back* – through the spectacles of the New Testament revelation. What do they see? *The Lamb of God!* Even though they see much clearer, it still applies: if they believe God, they are considered righteous.

#### **The revelation of God in the Old and New Testament is wonderfully integrated.**

Of course there is *discontinuity* between the Old and New Covenant. The author of Hebrews makes it so clear! But, of equal importance, there is also an unbreakable *continuity*.

It has tremendous theological implications which we cannot work out now. But throughout the centuries many misconceptions are due to a false notion about the

relationship between the two Testaments.

#### **Forgiveness through the sacrifice of a substitute bearing punishment lies at the heart of God's plan of salvation.**

The blood trail of a million sacrifices runs from the gates of paradise to Golgotha. But it stops there. How privileged we are! We are free from the heavy yoke of the sacrificial service. The final Sacrifice has been sacrificed once and for all. We can drink from the fountain of Christ's perfect and completed work as High Priest day after day.

This is exactly where the difference lies between the Christian faith and all religions – also the *churchianity* of a formalistic, dead church. All religions, cults and heresies preach: '*Do! Do! Do!*'. The Gospel shouts for joy: '*Done! Done! Done!*'

#### **This substitution is not, however, realised automatically.**

The Old Testament prophets again and again call Israel to humiliation, heartbreak and conversion. And to this day it is no different. It is the 'poor in spirit' (Matt 5:3, NIV), the spiritual beggars, who enter the Kingdom. It is those who embrace Christ from their spiritual bankruptcy and hold on for life and death – who are acquitted and are clothed with His righteousness.

So essentially important is the theme of this working paper (and the following two) that a gospel which has something else as the central focal point is not the true Gospel, but a 'different gospel' (2 Cor 11:2 – 4; Gal 1:6 – 10). Ministry which does not again and again jubilantly exult in the once and for all completed work of Christ, does not save – it damns (Rom 1:16 – 17; 1 Cor 1:17 – 2:5). See how strongly the author of Hebrews emphasises it in his six pastoral warnings! (2:1 – 4; 3:7 – 4:13; 5:11 – 6:12; 10:26 – 39; 12:14 – 17; 12:25 – 29).

The reader can never answer a more important question: *Do you really put all your trust, for life and for death, for time and for eternity, in Jesus Christ and His once and for all completed work – both as Priest and as sacrifice – and in that alone?*

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