

The LETTER
to the HEBREWS

**AN EXPLANATION OF THE MECHANISM
OF OUR SALVATION**

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IN THE DAYS OF HIS FLESH,
Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears,
to him who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard for his godly fear.
Although he was a Son,
he learned obedience through what he suffered;
and being made perfect
he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,
being designated by God a high priest
according to the order of Melchizedek.
—*Letter to the Hebrews 5:7–10*



The LETTER to the HEBREWS

AN EXPLANATION OF THE MECHANISM OF OUR SALVATION

HEBREWS 1:1–14

1 ¹In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the ages. ³He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

⁵For to what angel did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”?

⁶And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says,
“Let all God’s angels worship him.”

⁷Of the angels he says, “Who makes his angels winds and his servants flames of fire.”

⁸But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever,
the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness
beyond your comrades.”

¹⁰And, “You, Lord, founded the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

¹¹they will perish, but you remain; they will all grow old like a garment,

¹²like a cloak you will roll them up, and they will be changed.

But you are the same, and your years will never end.”

¹³But to what angel has he ever said,

“Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies a stool for your feet”?

¹⁴Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?



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SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

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There are things to consider when we begin to study any book of the Bible. What can we know about the human author? To whom was he writing? What was his purpose? Shedding light on the author's intention can help us to understand what God's Word is saying to us in the here and now. Things that concerned the early Church remain important to present-day Christians.

It is reasonably safe to assume that all of the books of the Bible were written by men. Although the *Letter to the Hebrews* once was thought to have been written by Paul, most scholars now treat its authorship as anonymous. Even at the time the Bible was compiled, the authorship of this book appears to have been uncertain. The letters that are clearly written by Paul traditionally are arranged from longest to shortest. The *Letter to the Hebrews* is placed outside of that grouping at the end, suggesting that even early Christians were reluctant to attribute this book to Paul.

From the content of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, we know that its author was knowledgeable about Old Testament theology. This suggests that he had close ties to the Jewish priesthood. The work displays familiarity with Greek philosophy as well, which is not entirely surprising since many Jews were Hellenized during the period of the Maccabees prior to the Incarnation of Jesus.

That this work is addressed to Hebrews rather than to Jews suggests a broad audience and at the same time indicates the author's strong interest in the Old Testament.

All Christians are familiar with the reason that Jesus died. Almost none of us can explain how Jesus' death is able to bring about our salvation. This appears to be the task of the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. Why might it be that so few people consider this question? Consider what impact understanding such a concept might be likely to have on a person's life.

1 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:1–2. How has God previously communicated with the ancestors of those to whom this Scripture is addressed? How is God now communicating with humanity? What might have happened to separate the time “of old” and “these last days” that would change the mode of communication used by God? Consider why the author chose to introduce his work with a discussion of the methods that God uses to speak to humanity.

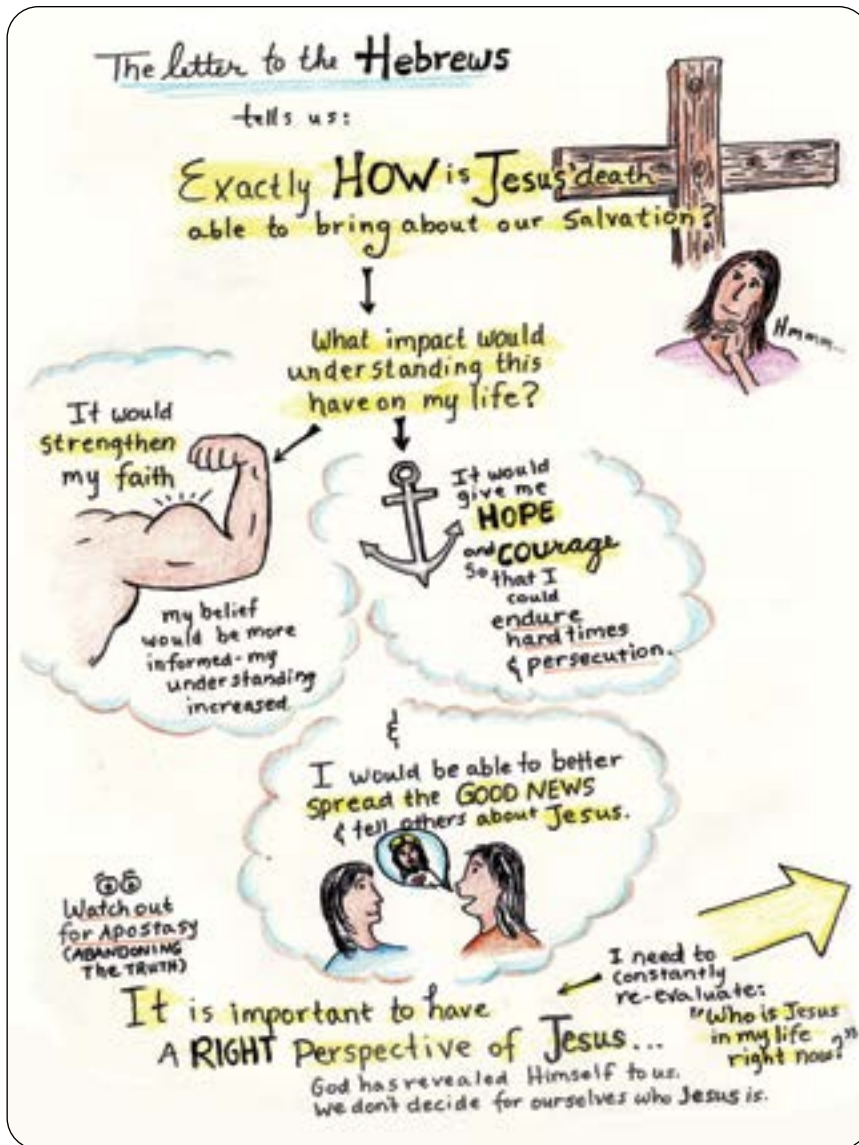
2 The *Letter the Hebrews* 1:2 teaches that through his Son, God created the ages. Refer to the *Gospel According to John* 1:1–2 to explain the role of God's Son in Creation. How is this related to the way in which God now is communicating with humanity?

3 What has God's Son been appointed to inherit? What are the circumstances under which a person receives an inheritance, and in what way are inheritances stipulated? What purpose might the author have for mentioning this inheritance?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SUPERIOR?

When the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:4 writes that the Son of God is superior to the angels, he is making the claim that the Son of God has attained a higher position. Although God's Son is human as well as divine, he outranks heavenly beings. The Son of God is emphasized as being more than another prophet or other divine messenger.

an•gel messenger The Greek word ἄγγελος (*angelos*) means “messenger” or “envoy.” In the Bible, **angels** serve as God's messengers. The *Letter to the Hebrews* announces that God now is communicating with humanity through his Son, then lists ways in which the Son differs from the **angels**. The author's point is that humanity should not view God's Son as just another heavenly messenger.



THE SON AS PRIEST, PROPHET & KING

Paragraph 783 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king." In the opening chapter of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the author manages to work in references to all three of these roles.

The very first verse of the *Letter to the Hebrews* establishes God's Son as the replacement for Old Testament prophets who previously spoke God's word (primarily but not exclusively) to the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3 points out the God's Son accomplished purification for sins, the primary duty of priests in the Old and New Covenants.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:8 describes the Son of God as having access to God's throne and to the scepter of God's kingdom.

4 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3–4. Paragraph 705 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses the stamp of God's nature in terms of image and likeness, two theologically different terms. How does the Church explain the difference between God's image and God's likeness? Why is it important to humanity that the Son of God has assumed the image of God and also restored God's likeness? Consider ways in which the Holy Spirit can be seen in the passage in the *Letter to the Hebrews* about the Son reflecting the glory of God? (Note that some translations substitute "refulgence" when indicating that the Son reflects God's glory.) What are some ways in which the Holy Spirit is active in the present day?

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Each lesson in the *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Explanation of the Mechanism of Our Salvation* features a different illustration from a journal of visual meditations created by Tami Palladino. Tami's illustrations demonstrate a type of *lectio divina* that relies on visualization as an aid to a deeper prayer life. Readers who enjoy drawing may want to create a similar prayer journal. Visit our website to learn more about *lectio divina* or to see all of Tami's journal illustrations that accompany this Bible study.

5 According to the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3, what was the mission on earth of God's Son? What reasons has the author been suggesting to explain why the Son was able to accomplish this mission? What did God's Son do after accomplishing his mission? What impact on humanity already is obvious as a result of the Son's mission? What effect is humanity yet to realize?

THE LETTER OF THE LAW

The *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:2 states that God's Son has been appointed heir of all things. The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* mentions this even before noting that the Son reflects the glory of God and bears the imprint of God's nature. The essential fact in the mind of the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is that in order for there to be an inheritance, there must be a legal will and testament naming the heir. The Son of God fulfills the letter of this spiritually binding law.

The law permeates Scripture. The book of *Genesis* 3:2–3 describes the first commandment (law) God gives to humanity. In the *Gospel According to Matthew* 5:17, Jesus insists that he has not come to abolish the law. In the *Gospel According to John* 13:34, Jesus gives humanity a new commandment. The book of *Revelation* focuses on Final Judgment under the law.

u•ni•verse

the order governing all of existence

The Greek word translated as **universe** in the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3 is κόσμος (*kosmos*), literally “order.” In the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the **universe** is defined not by space but by laws that govern it. The **universe** consists of those laws and by extension the things impacted by them. The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is concerned with how those laws operate. The **universe** itself is described as beyond all limitations. Through his Son, God created space and time—and everything else imaginable

HOW IS IT THAT WE ARE SAVED?

Christians are so accustomed to the gift of salvation underlying our faith that most of us give little thought to the mechanics of how it works—or to the incredible nature of God's love in providing for humanity to enter into eternal life.

How salvation works is the central question that the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* attempts to answer. Other books in the Bible set the stage for the coming of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is filled with passages that the Church interprets as messianic and that foretell the coming of Jesus. The Gospels describe in detail who Jesus is and what Jesus is like. Their authors leave no doubt about Jesus' purpose—Jesus came to bring salvation for humanity. The New Testament *Letters* provide practical information in terms of what men and women need to do in order that to attain this salvation.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* is unique in the Scriptures because it answers the question that no other book in the Bible addresses: “How is it that Jesus is able to bring about salvation?”

How can this core concept of Christianity be explained? How does the mechanism of salvation work? How is it that one person can reconcile fallen humanity to God? How is it possible that the death of one person—even if he is God—can fill in the gap created by the sin of all men and women?

The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* begins developing important aspects of his theme in the very first verse: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets.” The mechanism of salvation is tied to the relationship God established with the ancestors of the Jews, the Hebrews.

In the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:2, we learn that something has happened to change this relationship: “But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created the ages.”

These two introductory verses contain the key to unlocking the mystery of how the mechanism of salvation works, which the remainder of the *Letter to the Hebrews* goes on to explain in rich detail.

re•ful•gence radiance From the Latin *refulgeo*, “to shine back” or “to shine brightly.” In some translations of the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3 the Son is seen as the **refulgence** of God’s glory.

6 According to the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:4, what is the position of the Son of God in relationship to the angels? So far, what name has the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* used when referring to Jesus? Consider what Jesus did to obtain this name. What point might the author be trying to emphasize about Jesus?

7 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:5, in which the author provides evidence from *Psalms* 2:7 and the *Second Book of Samuel* 7:14 to support his claim that God’s Son is superior to the angels. Consider what made it possible for the human authors of the Old Testament to write so definitively about God’s Son.

8 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:6–7. What instructions has God given to the angels in regard to how they are to treat the Son? What task do angels usually perform? If necessary, refer to the book of *Genesis* 19:15 and the *Book of Judges* 13:3–5. Consider why angels are not mentioned as one of the ways God spoke “of old.” What does the fact that angels are like wind and fire suggest about how their nature differs from the nature of the Son?

JUDAISM’S ROOTS

We might expect this book of the New Testament to be called the *Letter to the Jews* instead of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. The word “Jews” would suggest the intended audience was 1st-century practitioners of the law-based religion of Judaism that developed after 538 BC when the Babylonian Exile came to an end. The word “Hebrews” indicates that this early explanation of Christianity is tied to the foundations of Judaism, which is built on much older Hebrew religious tradition.



YOUR YEARS WILL NEVER END

The *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:2 establishes that someone participated with God in Creation—and that person was the Son of God. In the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:3, the mission of the Son of God is identified as making purification for sins. The Son who reflects the glory of God and bears the stamp of God is the very same Son who has been able to accomplish purification from sins. How was the Son able to do this? Why could only the Son do it? Perhaps most mysterious of all—why did the Son wait so long before doing it?

The *Letter to the Hebrews* uses Old Testament law and ideas to build the case for how the Son has been able to accomplish purification from sins. Old Testament rules governing reality are viewed as binding, so the Son’s work of purification must fall within the Old Covenant.

Although much has been written about covenants in both Testaments, there essentially is only

one covenant, expressed in *Exodus* 6:7: “I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.” This represents a contract between humanity and God, in which each side puts up collateral. The people agree to follow God’s law, and in return God promises them life. The covenant is a life-or-death proposition, the mutually exclusive terms of which are set forth in the book of *Deuteronomy* 30:15–20.

The single characteristic that is most emphasized about the Son of God in the first chapter in the *Letter to the Hebrews* is that the Son is by definition eternal. He is life itself. Present at the Creation of all ages, the Son of God exists outside of the constraints of time and space.

The Son upholds the universe, which is beyond limitation and encompasses time and space—and anything else humanity can imagine. Since the universe was created through the Son, the Son himself is beyond limitation. The Son of God is eternal.



9 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:8–12. Read *Psalms* 45:7–9* and *Psalms* 102:26–28*. What evidence supports the claim of the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* that these Old Testament passages are referring to the Son of God? In what ways do these passages from the *Psalms* point to the eternal nature of God’s Son?

10 Read the *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:13–14. What point might the author be trying to make by mentioning a second time that the Son of God is seated at God’s right hand? Who is it that the angels are sent to serve, and for what purpose? Reflect on whether ministering spirits can be seen at work in the present-day world for the purpose of helping men and women to obtain salvation.

HOW GOD COMMUNICATES

It is unknown whether the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* was familiar with the *Gospel According to John* 1:1—which refers to the Son of God as the Word of God—but the *Letter to the Hebrews* begins by contrasting the old way God spoke to his people with the new way God now speaks. In the times “of old” God communicated remotely through the intermediary voice of the prophets, but the Son of God is more than another prophet.

Because angels are messengers for God, they also serve as intermediaries, but the Son of God is more than another messenger. Something significant has happened to change the history of humanity, and the Son of God now is a meeting point between God and man.

Supernatural communication skills are not the only way in which the Son of God is superior to the angels, however. The angels are ethereal—like wind and fire. As part of the contingent of all created things “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” described in Paul’s *Letter to the Colossians* 1:16, the angels have been created through the Son of the God and for the Son of God. The angels did not always exist. The Son of God is superior to the angels because the Son of God is eternal. God’s Son was present and participated in Creation.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

“The *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:1–2 teaches: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” This act of redemption marked the high point of the history of man within God’s loving plan. God entered the history of humanity and, as a man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time unique. Through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning; he has granted that dimension definitively—in the way that is peculiar to him alone, in keeping with his eternal love and mercy, with the full freedom of God—and he has granted it also with the bounty that enables us, in considering the original sin and the whole history of the sins of humanity, to repeat with amazement the words of the Sacred Liturgy: “O happy fault, which gained us so great a Redeemer!””

—Pope St. John Paul II
Redemptor Hominis

A LOOK AT SOME MESSIANIC PSALMS

The *Letter to the Hebrews* relies on Old Testament messianic prophecies to prove that the Son of God is superior to the angels and to explain the mechanism of salvation. *Psalms* 2:7 prophesies that the Messiah will be God’s own Son. *Psalms* 45:7–9* reveals that the Son of God is anointed by God, that is, he is granted a share in God’s power and authority. *Psalms* 97:7 prophesies that the angels will bow before the Son of God. In *Psalms* 102:26–28*, the Son—like God himself—is described as eternal. *Psalms* 104:4 teaches that powerful forces of nature—wind, fire, and flame—serve the Son of God. Finally, *Psalms* 110:1 foretells that the Son of God is ordained to sit at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus Christ has not yet been mentioned by name, but it is apparent that he is the one being described.

*See the **Index of Scripture Citations** beginning on page 83 for different verse numbering in some translations of the *Psalms*.

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*Psalms reflect the numbering system followed in *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*. Numbering in other translations may vary.

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**Psalms* reflect the numbering system followed in *The Abbey Psalms and Canticles*. Numbering in other translations may vary.

***Psalm* 102:26–28 (*The Abbey Psalms* & NABRE) = *Psalm* 102:25–27 (RSV2CE) 10

****Isaiah* 9:6 (RSV2CE) = *Isaiah* 9:5 (NABRE) 33

*****Daniel* 3:1–25 (RSV2CE) = *Daniel* 3:1–23, 91–92 (NABRE) 72

*****Daniel* 3:28 (RSV2CE) = *Daniel* 3:95 (NABRE) 72

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all Scripture is inspired by God

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

—the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy 3:16–17

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CCC 143 (pages 25 & 26): A discussion of obedience of faith as it applies to Christians.

CCC 144 (page 73): An explanation of the link between listening and the obedience of faith

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CCC 147 (pages 72 & 74): The difference between Old and New Testament witnesses of the faith.

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CCC 148 (page 61): The Blessed Virgin Mary as a perfect embodiment of obedience of faith.

CCC 222 (page 71): Enormous consequences associated with believing in and loving God.

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CCC 760: The startling teaching that the world was created for the sake of the Church.

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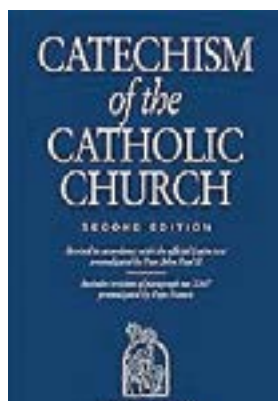
CCC 811: The four characteristic marks that distinguish the Church.

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CCC 1008: Teaching that the covenant stipulates death as a consequence of sin.

CCC 1019 (page 14): That Jesus conquers death in order to make salvation possible for humanity.

CCC 1064 (page 72): That saying "amen" is the equivalent of saying "I believe."



CCC 1065 (page 72): That Jesus represents God's love for humanity as the definitive Amen.

CCC 1213: Teaching that Baptism is the door to all of the other sacraments.

CCC 1219 (pages 60 & 68): The Church's view of Noah's ark as an Old Testament type of Baptism.

CCC 1219–1220 (page 60): Teaching that water in the Scriptures can represent either life or death.

CCC 1221 (page 68): Teaching that crossing the Red Sea as a symbol of freedom from slavery.

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CCC 1225 (pages 54, 55 & 69): That Blood and water are symbols of Eucharist and Baptism.

CCC 1385 (page 52): The importance of receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist worthily.

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CCC 1813 (page 31): That the theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity.

CCC 1860 (page 55): How Christians should approach the sacrament of the Eucharist.

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CCC 2089 (page 30): Definitions of incredulity, heresy, and apostasy.

CCC 2190 (page 22): That the day of Jesus' Resurrection replaces the Jewish sabbath.

CCC 2570–2572 (page 64): That Abraham and Moses are called to prayer in the Old Testament.

CCC 2573 (page 65): A discussion of prayer as a symbol of the ongoing battle of faith.

CCC 2618 (page 64): That the Gospels offer examples of ways in which Mary prays.

CCC 2626 (page 62): That a prayer of blessing is humanity's proper response to God's gifts.

CCC 2728: Suggestions for overcoming common obstacles to prayer.

CCC 2777 (page 14): A discussion of the boldness involved in praying to God the Father.

CCC 2825 (page 25): Relationship of Jesus' suffering to his obedience.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



Melchizedek, priest of God Most High

Psalm 110:1–4 identifies the key aspect of Melchizedek's priesthood as eternal, so membership in the order of Melchizedek is limited to those who already possess eternal life. Melchizedek's priestly function described in the book of *Genesis 14:17–20* is to bless. Because Melchizedek is eternal, the blessing he imparts is eternal as well. At this time in salvation history, God's people are called Hebrews after an ancestor of Abraham named Eber.

Aaron & the sons of Levi The *book of Numbers 18:1–32* describes how the gift of the Levitical priesthood is given as a blessing to Aaron and the Levites. The priesthood becomes hereditary, and only those Levites who are direct descendants of Aaron can perform the priestly function of offering sacrifice. The rest of the Levites perform practical duties involving the tent. This distinction between priests Levites persists in the Gospels. The people of God begin being referred to as Israelites because they are descended from Jacob, also known as Israel.

David & the priesthood The *Second Book of Samuel 6:1–19* describes King David assuming the priestly functions of blessing and sacrifice, combining hereditary and eternal aspects of priesthood. In the *First Book of the Chronicles 24:1–3*, David assimilates the Levitical priesthood under his authority as king. When God establishes an eternal kingdom for David's heirs in the *Second Book of Samuel 7:12–15*, this prepares the way for Jesus as a descendant of David to inherit David's eternal kingdom. David rules as priest-king over Jerusalem, the same realm once known as Salem and ruled by Melchizedek, who also held the dual office of priest and king.

Ezra: priest & scribe The law-based religion of Judaism develops when the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. The *Book of Ezra 7:1–6* records how Ezra, a priest and scribe well versed in the law, is granted secular and religious authority. Scribes emerge as a new class with religious power to rival that of the priesthood. Those who practice Judaism are called Jews.

Sadducees & Pharisees Examples in the *Second Book of the Maccabees 4:1–22* cite the failure of the priesthood to resist foreign threats to traditional worship, which leads to a split in Judaism that is well entrenched by the time of Jesus. The Sadducees represent the educated classes who tend to favor some change, while the Pharisees are ultra-conservative about following religious law.

Jesus Christ, merciful & great high priest in the service of God

the *Letter to the Hebrews 2:17–18*

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people.