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## Traversing the Crossroads of History

Looking at Hebrews 7: 11-19 and 8:1-12 through a Small Basket of Lenses

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I read the Bible, looking through the lenses I am about to describe. This week I am dragging you along with me. I have listened to Hebrews once or twice a week since we began this quarter. As I have listened, it's as if I hear the voice of our unknown speaker. I know they wrote elegant Greek. It sounds to me like they also intimately understood Hebrew history, culture, and rituals. Writing this to you, I am using the NIV and the New English Translation, with its notes on Greek and Hebrew. I have also used the Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance.... And Google.

Somewhere in our discussion this week, I hope Llew reads his Henri Nouwen quote. I believe that quote should be part of every lesson.

So, here we go, taking looks through a few lenses.

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**Context:** I read that the audience of this letter are Hebrews who have chosen to follow The Way. I read that they have been generous, self-sacrificing, and in danger. These people have emigrated from one spiritual location to another, at a cost to themselves and their families. I have worked with immigrants of various kinds. There is research indicating that the process of emigration is so stressful that, usually, at least one family member comes down with some sort of diagnosable mental or physical stress. My sense is that these listeners were exhausted and afraid. I think of Harriet Tubman following the drinking gourd and believe that this writer pulled out every linguistic and cultural encouragement to help the Hebrews see that the journey, its cost, its losses, and its stress were worth everything because the Conductor of this railroad would see them through.

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**Title:** The writer calls their audience, Hebrews. I wonder if this choice was carefully deliberate. *Hebrew* means “to traverse or pass over.” Tradition indicates that Abraham was the first to be called Hebrew...“the one who passed over” (the river). Many scholars think Abraham crossed the Euphrates at a low water time, then the Jabboq, and, finally, the Jordan. Just being called by this name is a reminder of other spiritual travelers, well-known in story, who have been called to leave what they knew, follow God, through loss, trial, wars, and family issues to a place chosen for their growth and strengthening. Their

very name is a reminder of when others have followed God as they traversed their spiritual journey through geography and history. These Hebrews are not alone.

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**Names of the Deity:** I think it was Andrew who pointed out the value of knowing which Names are being used. Different name: unique quality or function.

**Lord:** The Greek *kyrios* indicates that this is the Hellenic translation of *Yahweh*—the covenant-making and convenient-keeping God. The same God who made promises to Abraham is making this promise of a better, attainable land to exhausted, frightened travelers. Their ancestors made it across the Red Sea on the way to Canaan. These Hebrews have the same Covenant Keeper leading them to the Heavenly Canaan. “The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind” (Psalm 110:4).

**God:** *kyrios*, the one true God or the Son of God to denote a relationship to the Father. Jesus is not an imposter (like Barabbas). He is truly part of the covenant-keeping Deity.

**Jesus:** Hellenization of Joshua. Joshua means “to rescue or rescuer.” The One these journeyers are being asked to follow is the ultimate Rescuer. He chose to pay the ultimate self-sacrificing price to keep them safe.

When the Hebrews heard these names, they could also hear the promises and experience the actions that backed up the promises.

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**Object Lessons** - Israel used concrete objects, people, places, and events to describe or teach concepts. They also used them as examples or shadows of spiritual lessons or Heavenly places or people. I believe this thinking is why the Levitical Priesthood and Melchizedek both represent the work of Christ—at different points in history.

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*Levitical Priesthood – Object lesson of us interacting with the grace of Christ*

1. Levi’s entire history was known. Israel kept track of lineage in a way that boggles my mind.
2. Levi’s history is intertwined with violence and blood. Levi first comes into prominence as an instigator of the deceit and blood bath at Shechem (Genesis 34).
3. In Genesis 49:7, Jacob disinherits them from the Canaanite legacy because of that deceit and violence.
4. Oddly, their redemption from that curse is also predicated by violence and blood; the slaughter of unrepentant idolaters at the golden calf debacle (Exodus 32: 25-29). Because of their passionate loyalty, God, through Moses, shifts their curse and

gives the tribe of Levi a role and a blessing heretofore unknown. While they would never have a specific portion of the Promised Land, they would have their own cities and be a part of every portion.

5. As the sanctuary was set up, the Levites camped closest to its curtains as the last line of fierce defense of God's *shekinah*.
6. All items in the sanctuary and the priests were anointed (Messiah in Hebrew); an object lesson of the plan of salvation that would be completed by the Heavenly Messiah.
7. In the ancient sanctuary, people **journeyed to** the sanctuary where "God dwelt as the Shekinah glory."
8. No priests officially took part in the rulership of Israel.
9. At the death of Christ, the Levitical services were symbolically ended as the curtain between the Holy and Most Holy place was split open.

Note: It occurred to me as I was writing this: It's ironic; Levi freely shed blood in violent retribution. Redeemed from a curse, the Levites had constant interaction with blood that was shed as an object lesson of redemption.

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*Melchizedek - Object lesson of the grace of Christ in relationship to us.*

1. No one knows the origins of this priest. There is no proper Hebrew line of lineage. People like us often ask, "Where on earth did this guy come from?" We humans are rarely good with "not knowing." People of Christ's time were also not good with confusion about His origins.
2. Names in ancient Hebrew culture indicate character or action. Melchizedek's name means *my king is righteousness* (or right doing)—as opposed to deceit and blood baths.
3. The city he rules is Peace (Salem). Quite a dichotomy from Shechem.
4. Melchizedek **journeyed to** Abraham and gave a war-weary soldier bread and wine as well as a blessing from El Elyon {The God Most High}. This title for God is used only one other time in the Bible (Psalm 78:35 – *They remembered that the God Most High was their Protector/Redeemer*) Again, he is an object lesson of the One who makes a journey to us, in the power of His Spirit, and offers a people, weary from their own battles protection and redemption.
5. Abraham either recognizes the meaning of Melchizedek's blessing or already had known him as a priest of the Protector/Redeemer. From either or both understandings, Abraham offers tithes. As with an exhausted and terrified Elijah, blessing, food and comfort was offered before a response. Jesus, by promise and by action, offered the blessing of God's care before He asks them and us to respond.

6. Melchizedek is fair enough to be king; righteous and kind enough to be a representative of God. Jesus is the fair judge and the one who mediates for us in Heaven.
7. The Levitical priesthood ended with, “It is finished.” The Melchizedek priesthood began there. This priesthood lives not in Canaan but in Heaven. This priesthood does not ask a pilgrimage to visit God, but a door of the heart that is opened to welcome Christ’s knock. It is based in the blood of only One. Its focus is a reminder that relationship with God has always been the priority. Its community is not one lineage but the world. This priesthood’s home is not a sanctuary in Jerusalem but the original City of Peace.

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### **The Plea, Encouragement and Perspective**

As I wrote at the beginning of these thoughts, I believe the writer of Hebrews used every skill, metaphor, lesson, cultural understanding, shared history, and evidence of caring to encourage their readers that a choice to follow the Rescuer had not been in vain. The same God who kept all promises to Abraham as he was at a crossroads of spiritual and cultural history would lead these traversing people through their emigration and into “a heavenly country” based in peace.

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#### Questions:

1. What are the gifts and challenges of having “a mystery” as part of our faith journey?
2. What do you think is the significant difference between the ancient pilgrimage and Jesus knocking on the door of our heart and community?
3. What was there about ancient Israel’s mandate that could have made them ambassadors to the world? What are the similarities and differences between the two times?
4. Do you think that if ancient Israel had followed their mandate that there would have been as much difference between pre- and post-Calvary?
5. Melchizedek was priest and king; Jesus is priest and king. How do you think these connect with us being called priests and kings?
6. Why do you think this concept may have been a comfort to the Hebrews?
7. What qualities are necessary to be both priest and king?
8. How do you think the roles of intercession were similar and different between the two priesthoods?
9. Why would this comparison be a way of giving encouragement and comfort to tired and frazzled people.

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**Notes:**

1. I ran the placement of these verses through my chiasmic lens. They are not exactly in the center of the letter but were close enough to have me wonder.
2. Tom de Bruin's article on positionalism has me thinking about my position as I consider these concepts. As I type this, I think my position is that I am always looking for pictures of the character of God and the ways Heaven woos us. My journey challenges are ones of theodicy.
3. You may or may not have noticed that I used "they/them" pronouns for the writer of this letter. It occurred to me, while on a walk, that I have always assumed the writer was male. That's embarrassing for someone who had "Anonymous was a woman" on my refrigerator at some point in my life. So, in honor of ambiguity, "They/Them" wrote Hebrews.