Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 7a, Hebrews 7:1-8:13: Better Priesthood, Better Covenant (Part 1)

Hebrews 7:1 to 10:18 presents the long and difficult argument about Jesus' priestly mediation, drilling down on the topics that the author has already raised in chapter 2, verses 17 and 18, and then again in chapter 4, verses 16 through 5, verse 10. In this lengthy central section, the author will deal with several major questions, which we should keep before us as we work through the details of his argument. The first question is, what is the significance of being a high priest in the line of Melchizedek? And what qualifies Jesus to be named to this priestly line? A second question is, what are the consequences for the old covenant and the priesthood that maintained that covenant of the arrival of the priest now in the line of Melchizedek and not in the line of Aaron? A third and major question is, what is the significance of Jesus' death and ascension if we understand these events as the work of the priest in Melchizedek's line? And finally, what are the consequences for those who approach God through the mediation of Jesus rather than the mediation of the Levitical line of priests? Chapters 7 and 8 primarily address the first two of these questions, beginning with, what is the significance of being a high priest in the line of Melchizedek? And what qualifies Jesus to be named to this line? Hebrews 7, verses 1 through 10, goes back to the story of Melchizedek, known from Genesis 14, introducing who he is and drawing out what the story of Melchizedek from Genesis might tell us about this new priest in Melchizedek's line.

The author is particularly interested in demonstrating that this is a more distinguished priestly line than the priestly line of Aaron. He is building on the positive reputation of the priestly line of Aaron, who, at least within Jewish and Jewish-Christian culture, really held the highest, most honorable office in the ancient world. One of the common strategies used in ancient rhetoric to praise a person was to dwell on the dignity of his or her ancestors, and this is something we find at work here, as the author of Hebrews thinks about the dignity of Levi vis-a-vis the dignity of Melchizedek.

This will reflect on the dignity of the two lines and the relative dignity of the two lines that derive from these two priestly predecessors. Another strategy for praising an individual was to compare that person with similar persons of worth. The author also continues to pursue that strategy, as he has already compared the son with angels and the son with Moses.

He continues now to stress the honor of the son and the value of remaining attached to him by stressing his greater honor than the honor that adheres to Levitical high

priests. In chapter 7, verses 11 to 28, the author explores the greater benefits to be enjoyed by those who draw near to God through Jesus over those benefits afforded by the priests of Levi's line. But he also explores the consequences for the Torah, the law itself, of the appointment of Jesus to this non-Levitical priesthood.

At the outset of chapter 8, the author makes a summary statement that also introduces topics that will dominate chapters 9 and 10. These include the better venue in which Jesus executes his priestly work, heaven itself, the heavenly holy place as well as the superior nature of the sacrifice Jesus offers, namely his own life for the life of the world.

In the second half of chapter 8, namely verses 7 through 13, the author recites a landmark oracle of God from the sacred scriptures. He finds in Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, the divine oracle that provides the evidence for his claim that Jesus is now the mediator of a better covenant founded upon better promises. This oracle also supplies the decisive answer to the second question that the author takes up in this long and difficult word.

What are the consequences for the old covenant and the priesthood that maintained that covenant of the arrival of a priest in the line of Melchizedek? Psalm 110 has played a very important role in the author's exposition of the person and work of Jesus, the Son. Psalm 110 verse 1, of course, is the familiar text: sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. Psalm 110 verse 4, however, takes the author further into the mystery of Jesus' person and works with the line, you are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek.

This invites further exploration on the author's part of this figure of Melchizedek. The author turns to Genesis 14, verses 14 to 20, which is the only other place in the Jewish scriptures in which this shadowy figure appears. There, we read.

After his return from the defeat of Kedorlaoma and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet Abraham at the valley of Shaveh. That is the king's valley. And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine.

He was a priest of God Most High. He blessed Abraham and said, And Abraham gave him one-tenth of everything. The background of this story prepares us to examine the author's use of this figure and this episode.

As we read in Hebrews 7, verses 1 through 3. First is translated as King of Righteousness. And then King of Salem, which is King of Peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, being likened to the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.

As the author expands on the meaning of Melchizedek and his stories, he looks particularly for points of resemblance between Melchizedek and Jesus as Messiah. He indicates this himself indirectly in 7, verse 3, where he says Melchizedek was made to resemble the Son of God. What, then, are some of these points of resemblance that the author finds suggesting a close connection between Melchizedek and Messiah? The author offers definitions of Melchizedek's name and Melchizedek's title because these are themselves Messianic pointers.

Melchizedek is interpreted as a name that means King of Righteousness. And his title, King of Salem, is interpreted King of Peace. We find similar translations of Melchizedek and his title in Philo's treatment of this figure.

Righteousness and peace are both characteristics of God's Messiah and the Messianic kingdom. We could turn to Isaiah 9, verses 6-7, for but one well-known example in the Hebrew prophets. For a child has been born to us, a son given to us.

Authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

This prophecy about the restoration of the Davidic monarchy particularly highlights both peace and righteousness or justice, which are synonymous as hallmarks of the Messianic age. Further on in Isaiah, we read again, Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abides in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness, and trust forever.

Examples could be multiplied from texts in the Hebrew prophets and also later Second Temple period Jewish texts. Not only is Melchizedek's name and title a pointer toward the Messiah, but he also resembles the Son of God in some other ways. The author describes Melchizedek as being without a father, without a mother, without genealogy, and having neither the beginning of days nor the end of life.

The principle at work here, as the author is spinning these implications of the Genesis story, is that the silences of Scripture are also eloquent. Nothing is said in Genesis 14 of Melchizedek's lineage. We're not told about his father or his mother or what tribe he comes from.

We're not told about his birth nor about his death. The author takes these silences as significant, as if the author of Genesis wanted to present Melchizedek as a type of the one who was to come, the Son of God who truly is without beginning or without end of life. The word here, without genealogy, without pedigree, is particularly important.

This priesthood after the line of Melchizedek is established on something other than biological descent, which was at the heart of what qualified one for the Levitical priesthood. This is perhaps seen nowhere more clearly than in the careful preservation of genealogy throughout the period of the Babylonian exile and thereafter, as seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If one could not verify one's pedigree within a priestly clan within the tribe of Levi, one was excluded from temple service until such a claim could be verified.

Genealogy was everything. What is this something other that is the basis of the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek? The author infers an answer from the remaining characteristics of Melchizedek that he identifies here, having neither the beginning of days nor the end of life. The defining mark of the priestly line of Melchizedek becomes preexistence and existence into eternity.

This is already something that the author has established for the Son. In Hebrews 1: 1-4, he has spoken of the Son's existence prior to creation as a partner with God in creation. In Hebrews 1:10-12, he has already inferred on the basis of an authoritative scriptural text that the Son will exist long after the dissolution of the material creation and the introduction of the age to come.

The preacher will exploit the argumentative fruit of this later in chapter 7, particularly in 7 verse 16, where he identifies Jesus as holding a priestly office not on the basis of the commandment of a fleshly ordinance but on the basis of an indestructible life. Further, in chapter 7, verses 23-25, the preacher will claim that the endless life of this priest after the order of Melchizedek is a point of advantage for those who approach God through him rather than through the many priests who can't hold on to the office of priesthood because death keeps intervening. But the priest after the line of Melchizedek always lives and thus is always able to make intercession for those who approach God through him.

As I mentioned earlier, one ancient strategy for praising an individual was to compare his or her ancestors with other great figures and show his or her ancestors to be, in fact, greater than those. This is precisely what the author of Hebrews now goes on to do in chapter 7, verses 4-10, as he develops an argument for Melchizedek's elevation above Levi. The implication is that the priest in Melchizedek's line will possess greater honor than any priest in Levi's line.

See how great this one was, the author writes at the opening of verse 4. Here, the author announces his thesis for the paragraph that follows. Melchizedek was one to whom Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils that he had taken in that battle against Kedorlaomer and the other kings who had banded against Abraham, against the king of Sodom, and against their allies. Now the author of Hebrews interprets this act as tithing, that is to say, as giving to one's priestly mediator what is due to that one.

So, Abraham giving Melchizedek a tenth was not just a generous act toward a neighboring king, but it was an act of giving to his priest that which he was owed by virtue of that priest's greater status and functioning as a mediator on Abraham's behalf with God. This leads the author to contrast with the sons of Levi. As he writes, those who are sons of Levi, the priesthood, receive a commandment to tithe the people according to the law, that is, their own brothers, even though they also came from the loins of Abraham.

The author refers here to any one of a number of commands in the Pentateuch, for example, Numbers 18:21. To the Levites, I have given every tithe in Israel for possession in return for the service that they performed, the service in the tent of meeting. It is genealogy that distinguishes the Levites from the other Israelites and which qualifies the Levites to receive tithes from those who come from Abraham's loins like themselves.

But here, the preacher goes on, the one without a pedigree from them tithed Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. In Genesis 14, unlike the arrangements under the Torah, the priest with no explicit genealogical qualifications receives the tithe from Abraham. The point seems to be that the Levites exact the tithe from equals on the basis of possessing a special genealogical qualification, while Melchizedek exacts the tithe from an inferior, not just without genealogical qualifications, but more significantly, without genealogy at all.

Melchizedek is one who represents an eternal being, presented as though without the beginning of days or end of life. And here, he receives a tithe from a mere mortal being. There are two arguments then in favor of Melchizedek's superiority.

The author suggests that, quote, without any contradiction, the inferior party is blessed by the superior party, referring to that part of the story where Melchizedek blesses Abraham. The author is, of course, assuming that the hearers will mentally bracket a host of instances where inferiors do pronounce superiors blessed or invoke blessings on superiors. For example, servants bless or pray for blessings upon their king, or worshippers bless God.

Nevertheless, in human experience, it is often the case that the one with greater privilege is the one who has the power to invoke a blessing on the one with lesser privilege. For example, in the very common situation of parents blessing children. And it is that slice of life that the author invokes, as he says, without contradiction.

Also, he draws a distinction between the immortality of Melchizedek and the mortality of the Levitical priests. Here, mortal people, that is to say, here in the arrangements under the Torah, mortal people received tithes, but there it is testified that he lives. In this instance, the immortal is simply superior to the mortal.

Then the author goes on to say that in this case, mortal human beings receive tithes, but in that case, the witness is given that he lives. And so to speak, Levi, who received tithes, paid a tithe through Abraham, for Levi was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

With the phrase, so to speak, the preacher acknowledges that he is indulging in a bit of metaphorical conceit here. Nevertheless, his claim reflects well the collective notion of identity and personality that would have been a part of the ancient person's mindset. All of Abraham's descendants are still in some regard in Abraham at the time of the events of Genesis 14.

Therefore, Abraham's action toward Melchizedek has implications for Levi and the priests descending from Levi. Their own priesthood is secondary and ultimately dependent upon that of Melchizedek, whose priesthood and mediation Abraham acknowledged when he presented Melchizedek with a tithe. How can the author claim that the Mosaic covenant, together with the Levitical priesthood that had been authorized and regulated thereby for centuries, was now all being set aside in favor of a new high priest, Jesus, and in favor of a new covenant? The author is at pains to give his hearers scriptural evidence for the claims that he is making on behalf of Jesus.

In chapter 7, verses 11 to 19, the topic of perfection emerges again as quite important. The author highlights it by placing it both at the beginning and the end of this section, forming what is called an inclusion. The opening verse is a rhetorical question.

If, therefore, perfection were through the Levitical priesthood, for the people were given the law on the basis of this priesthood, what need would there be to speak of a priest after the order of Melchizedek being appointed and not one after the order of Aaron? And then at the end of section 7:19, we read that the law had perfected nothing. So, we have this inclusio around the idea of perfection. We, therefore, need to ask, what does perfection mean for the author here in this passage and throughout the central discourse of chapters 7 through 10? One thing that we can say is that perfection means the cleansing of the conscience from the defilement of sin so that the human being may approach God face to face rather than remaining at a safe distance from God's holiness.

This cleansing of the conscience is precisely what the Levitical priests were unable to do by, quote, offering gifts and sacrifices that are not able to perfect the conscience of the worshiper, according to Hebrews 9 verses 1 through 10. This is reflected in different words in 7:11. This perfection did not come to the people by means of the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests were not able to cleanse the conscience of

the worshipers and bring them to a state in which they could stand in the very presence of God, cleansed of their sins and their affronts against God.

Perfection also means entrance into the ultimate eternal realm. As the Torah and its priesthood could not so work upon the worshiper so as to be able to usher him or her into God's presence in the temple, the earthly model of God's realm, the law and its priesthood are unable to lead human beings into God's real presence, into the heavenly temple, the unshakable heavenly realm where Jesus entered as a forerunner on our behalf. As we come to chapter 7 verse 11, then, we enter into an implicit argument from chronology.

In Psalm 110 verse 4, David the king communicates a divine oracle concerning the appointment of a high priest in the line of Melchizedek, and he does this several hundred years after the establishment of the priestly line of Levi. The author infers from this that the priestly line of Levi wasn't going to achieve God's good ends for God's people. The announcement of a new line of priests in Psalm 110, the more recent text, implies the failure of the old existing line of priests established in the Torah to complete God's assignment for them to perfect the worshipers.

Also at work here is the understood interconnectedness of the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic law or the Sinaitic covenant since the people were given the regulations of the Torah, the law, on the basis of the existence of the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests and their rituals were essential to the functioning, maintaining, and repairing of the Sinaitic covenant. As the people sinned against God, the work of the Levitical priests repaired the relationship.

When the people wished to present offerings of thanksgiving and otherwise communicate gratitude to their divine benefactor, the Levitical priests were the mediators of such messages and sacrifices. Also, the covenant or the law was foundational to the priesthood. As the author will say at the end of chapter 7, the law appoints as its priests men who are subject to weakness.

So, the two, Torah and Levitical priesthood, are inextricably intertwined. The author then draws out the implication of this in verse 12. With the priesthood being changed, there is also, by necessity, a change of law.

The conclusive proof of this will be found in Jeremiah 31, verses 31 to 34, which the author will recite as his evidence at the conclusion of Hebrews chapter 8. For now, he offers other evidence in support of his insistence of a change of law, namely the very appointment of Jesus to this priestly office in the line of Melchizedek. For he of whom these things are spoken belonged to a different tribe, from which no one has been appointed to tend the altar. For it is clear that our Lord was descended from Judah, in regard to which tribe Moses said nothing concerning priests.

The author knows and assumes his hearers would know or readily grant that Jesus was born in the line of Judah, concerning which Moses gave no word concerning priests. The establishment of this new order of priesthood in the line of Melchizedek, and thus the decisive turnover of the priesthood and the law that both regulates the priesthood and is maintained by the Levitical priesthood, is rendered even more clear, as the author puts it, by the fact of Jesus' resurrection. This is the evidence of the power of an indestructible life that Melchizedek himself foreshadowed with his mysterious appearance and disappearing from the stage of history without the beginning of days or end of life.

Faith in the resurrection thus becomes a principal support for the conviction that Jesus was appointed to this priestly order because it bears witness that you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. The phrase, a priest forever here, was not always taken to refer to something so extraordinary. The author of 1 Maccabees, chapter 14, verse 41, refers to the appointment of Simon, the founder of the Hasmonean dynasty, as leader and high priest forever, using the same language.

Tellingly followed by the word until. In Jesus' case, however, a more literal application of this phrase has become possible. As the preacher continues, and it is still more abundantly clear since another priest has risen up in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become such not in accordance with the law, a carnal commandment, but in accordance with the power of an indestructible life.

For he has given this attestation that you are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek. The fact that Jesus now lives beyond the power of death establishes the family resemblance, as it were, between Jesus and Melchizedek. Jesus is said to have become a priest not on the basis of a law, of a fleshly ordinance, but on the basis of an indestructible life.

The author is thus relativizing the value of the Levitical priest's qualifications. It is based merely on a fleshly qualification connected to physical descent and genealogy, but the priesthood of Jesus is based on a qualitatively different and superior kind of being, an eternal kind of being. In the concluding verses of this passage we read, there is a setting aside of the formerly given commandment on account of its weakness and its uselessness, for the law perfected nothing, and the introduction of a better hope, through which we are drawing nearer to God.

The author thus recapitulates his chief points. The appointment of a priest in Melchizedek's line demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the Levitical priesthood and the covenant it mediated to bring people to God's desired goal for them, encapsulated here in that loaded term, perfection. On the other hand, the appointment of this new priest in this alternative and greater order of priesthood introduces a better hope that this goal will indeed now be realized.

In Hebrews 7, verses 20 to 28, the author of Hebrews addresses further the question of what makes the new covenant a better and more reliable bond between God and mortals than the preceding one. The reliability of a contract or covenant depends on the reliability of the guarantor of such a contract. The author brings forward two considerations that establish Jesus as the guarantor of a better covenant, as he puts it in chapter 7, verse 22.

The first piece of evidence is God's oath, as he says, and just as accordingly, it was not without an oath, whereas those without an oath had become priests, the one with an oath became priest through the one speaking to him, the Lord has sworn and will not repent. You are a priest forever. By this decree, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

The author finally here recites that portion of Psalm 110, verse 4, that explicitly reveals this to be the oath that God gave to the heirs of the promise so that, as he put it earlier in 618, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us might have strong encouragement. This is the divine oracle that shows the unchangeableness of God's will and, thus, the ultimate reliability of the new covenant made through the mediation of this new priest. The second guarantee of this better covenant is Jesus entering into his indestructible life.

As the author goes on to say, on the one hand, many have become priests since they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he, by contrast, holds the priesthood without interruption on account of his abiding forever. The hope for a priest whose ministry would be endless and uninterrupted is not unique to Hebrews. A striking expression of the same hope appears in the Testament of Levi in the 18th chapter, which looks forward to a good and just high priest who, as the author puts it, will have no successor under generations and generations forever.

The changeover of high priests created instability in the system of mediation on which the Jewish people relied in their covenant with God. Not all high priests were equally faithful to God and to their office. Memories of the Hellenizing high priests of the mid-2nd century BC, people like Jason and Menelaus and the unreliable Alcimus, had made the succession of high priests a source of some tension or anxiety by the time the author of Testament of Levi wrote.

The importance of this office for the divine-human relationship explains why the author of the Testament of Levi might consider a virtuous, stable, immortal high priest as a good greatly to be desired. The author of Hebrews stresses the advantage now of such an immortal mediator as the addressees have in the Son. Because of this, he is able to rescue those who are drawing near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession on their behalf.

The addressees never need to fear a future in which there is no mediator at work to sustain the people's relationship with their divine patron. They will never need to fear the exchange of a faithful and effective mediator for an unreliable one, as the replacement of Onias with his brother Jason in 175 BC proved to be to the sorrow of the nation. No, rather, the addressees can count on their faithful and merciful high priest to continue for all tomorrows to stand before God on their behalf.

Hebrews 7, verses 26 to 28, provide a recapitulation, drawing together the main points of the preceding discussion of priesthood begun as early as chapter 5. For such a high priest was fitting for us, one who is holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens, who does not have a daily necessity, just as the Levitical high priests, first on behalf of his own sins to make offerings to God and then on behalf of the people. For this, he did once and for all, having offered himself, for the law establishes as high priests men who are liable to weakness.

But the word of the oath, which came after the law, establishes a son who has been perfected forever. Earlier in the sermon, the author had been at some pains to underscore Jesus' solidarity with sinners, emphasizing Jesus' favorable disposition, his sympathy, and his gentleness toward his clients. In this section now, however, the author moves on to emphasize the other side of Jesus' mediation, his proximity to God, and his separation from all that can get in the way of a relationship with God.

Thus, he speaks of Jesus as a fitting high priest who has been exalted above the heavens. He is referring again here to the information about Jesus given in Psalm 110, verse 1, that invitation by God to sit at God's right hand in God's real presence in the unshakable realm. The author is not thereby stressing Jesus' inaccessibility to his followers, for he's already established Jesus' readiness to hear and to help.

Rather, he is establishing Jesus' complete and perfect access to God on their behalf. The author also stresses an important distinction between Jesus and the Levitical priests, namely his unimpeded relationship with God because of his unblemished holiness and his unbroken obedience. Once again, in this sermon, the author returns to the topic that the earthly high priests had to offer sacrifices first for their own sins.

That is, they had to deal first with the obstacles between themselves and God due to their own transgressions before they could effectively mediate on behalf of the sins of the people in general. Jesus, however, whose sympathy with his clients is rooted in the shared experience of being tested but not the shared experience of sin, has no such need. Indeed, he makes one offering once and for all on behalf of the people, reconciling them completely with the Father.

The author thus introduces a contrast between the repeated sacrifices that the Levitical high priests make and the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus has made. This

contrast will be developed extensively in chapters 9 and 10, where the repetitive nature of the Levitical sacrifices demonstrates to the author of Hebrews their lack of efficacy. Hebrews 7.28 concludes this segment of argumentation with another well-constructed antithesis, contrasting the Levitical priests and Jesus on three points.

He writes again: The author emphasizes the superiority of Jesus' mediation and, hence, the great advantage of remaining attached to him at each point within this antithesis. First, the word of the oath, a reference again, of course, to Psalm 110, verse 4, supplants the Torah but also shows a more direct commitment on God's part, a personal vow that God has taken concerning this new priesthood. This new priesthood is established on an infallible foundation, unlike the first priesthood, which was built on a contract that could be, and was, according to the author, broken by the unreliability of the human parties.

The incumbent of this priesthood, moreover, is not merely an ordinary human being but one who enjoys an especially close relationship with the divine patron whose favor is sought. It was widely known in the ancient world that one's chances of success in mediation are proportionally greater as one stands closer in relationship with the patron. So, having the son of the household as the one seeking God's favor on your behalf practically guaranteed success.

Finally, and climactically, the weakness of these human beings in regard to their liability to sin and their liability to death is contrasted with the eternal perfection of the Son. The author devotes much time and space to building up the value here of what the addressees have in this Jesus so that they will be less tempted to throw it away in favor of the temporary benefits they lack as long as they are seen to identify with the minority Christian group. If the author has succeeded in reorienting their sights on eschatological deliverance and judgment, then this discussion of one who is able to deliver completely and function as an unfailing broker between them and God will be quite effective.

Before we continue in our journey further into chapters 8 through 10 of Hebrews, it's worth pausing to consider briefly together the background of thinking about a voluntary death on behalf of others as an atoning sacrifice in early Judaism. The idea of the death of a human being functioning as a sacrifice of atonement, restoring the relationship between God and human beings, is not one that springs from the Torah. Quite to the contrary, the Torah prohibits human sacrifice as an abomination before God.

The idea of the life offered on behalf of others, even offered to restore the favor of the gods toward the nation, is well attested in the literature and the mythology of the Greco-Roman world. That idea undergoes a parallel development within early Judaism during the Second Temple period, no doubt influenced in part by the Greco-

Roman counterparts in its culture. But it proceeded by developing this idea on the basis of a truly indigenous Jewish logic.

The idea that a person could die on behalf of others in the sight of God is built on two very important traditions, the first of which is Leviticus chapter 17, verse 11. This verse establishes the foundational connection of blood and the exchange of life with the covering of sins. The life of the flesh is in the blood.

I have given you this blood to perform the rite of atonement for your lives at the altar. For as life, it is blood that atones for a life. We observe throughout the Psalms and the prophets, and the ongoing developments of Judaism attested in the intertestamental literature development of a tendency toward rationalizing animal sacrifices that are beginning to think God prefers human praise or human acts of obedience or contrition for sins to bloody offerings.

Think, for example, of Psalm 51, verses 16 and 17. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would have brought it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. There's also the tendency throughout this period toward the metaphorical extension of sacrificial language to other acts. For example, acts of piety can be counted as cultic acts in Psalm 141, verse 2. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

A second strain that contributes to the development of, in effect, martyr theology in early Judaism is the covenant theology of Deuteronomy itself, especially chapters 27 through 32. These chapters lay out the basic Deuteronomistic theology of history, whereby obedience to God's covenant is expected to lead to the experience of God's blessing, while disobedience to the covenant is expected to lead to national disaster. But then, the return to obedience on the part of the people would effect the reversal of the curses and the restoration of God's favor.

These two strands of thinking, the idea that blood is given to make atonement, life for life, and the idea that it is obedience that turns away the nation's experience of the curse, are brought together in early Jewish interpretations of the deaths of its own martyrs from the period of the Hellenizing crisis, which dates to about 168 to 166 BC. One of the books of the Apocrypha, 2 Maccabees, interprets the events of this period in Deuteronomistic terms. During this period, for the sake of the material prosperity and international advancements of the city of Jerusalem and its elite class, the priestly elites of Jerusalem sought to remake Jerusalem into a Greek city.

To advance this program, a good portion of the Jewish elite supported Jason, who was born with the name Yeshua but took the name Jason as a sign of his love for all things Greek, in a coup against his more conservative high priestly brother, Onias.

Jason, once in power and approved by the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, set aside the Torah as the political constitution and law of the land in favor of adopting a Greek-style constitution, building all the necessary instruments to make the Greek government work in Jerusalem. The author of 2 Maccabees interprets this as an act of national apostasy at the highest level.

He believes that Jason's act and that of the elite that supported him was a repudiation of the covenant and was the direct cause of the disasters that befell the nation in the years that followed. Indeed, their closer partnership with Antiochus IV led to disasters for the city of Jerusalem. Multiple times, Antiochus raided the temple treasury and slaughtered many of its citizens.

This climaxed in what was remembered as a very direct religious persecution of the righteous Jews who would not then abandon the Torah for the sake of becoming like the nations. A number of Jerusalem's residents were faced with a choice between eating a mouthful of pork as a symbol of their willingness to put their native law behind them in favor of the universal law of the Seleucid kingdom and being tortured until death. These righteous people refused to eat that mouthful of pork even under the direst of pain.

The author of 2 Maccabees then looks upon these martyrdoms as an offering of obedience that the martyrs themselves offered up to God and that God then accepted on behalf of the nation. Because of their obedient deaths, the author writes, the wrath of the Lord had turned again to favor. Revisiting the same story, the author of 4 Maccabees, perhaps a century or more later, uses sacrificial and cultic language even more explicitly to interpret the deaths of these martyrs and their effects.

For example, he had the first martyr, an elderly priest named Eleazar, who prayed thus to God. Be merciful to your people and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification and take my life in exchange for theirs.

In commenting on the martyrdoms and the aftermath in which the nation began to get the upper hand on Antiochus IV and began to reassert its independence, the author of 4 Maccabees writes that the tyrant was punished and the homeland purified. They have become, as it were, a ransom for the sins of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.

It's appropriate at this point to bring in a third scriptural tradition, namely the servant song of Isaiah 52 verse 13 through 53 verse 12, which is a striking precursor. The experience of humiliation and marginalization, even death, is recast in the servant song in terms of death suffered so as to free others from punishment, thus a vicarious atonement. Whatever the song's meaning in its original context, Isaiah 53

certainly opens itself up to readings that cast the death of a righteous person who suffers ignominiously because he or she refuses to break faith with God as a sacrifice that restores God's favor and averts divine wrath.

The suffering servant is subjected to pain and mutilation. The passage affirms the efficacy of this death as an unconventional offering and also finally celebrates the greatness and the victory of the suffering servant. All these elements of the servant song also have counterparts in the presentation of the martyrs in 4 Maccabees and, to a slightly lesser extent, in 2 Maccabees chapter 7. In 2 and 4 Maccabees, it is not, of course, the human blood itself that atones, but the obedience unto death, which God accepts as a perfect sacrifice.

In the context of Deuteronomistic theology, this faithfulness unto death is the display of obedience that affects the reversal of the curses as promised in Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1 through 5. Drawing on the sacrificial terminology of Leviticus concerning the sin offering, the death of the righteous person becomes the offering that restores the relationship between the sinner and God. It is a representative obedience and obedience maintained to the end on behalf of others and, therefore, an act of mediation. All of these traditions together provide the rich background upon which early Christians could draw as they sought to articulate the significance of Jesus' death embraced as the consequence of obedience to God's will for the relationship between God and the larger people.