

Exegesis of Hebrews 5.4-10

by

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English Versions

v. 4 — The versions are mostly in agreement on this verse. There is variation on the idiom “take (un)to” [KJV, NKJV, NASB], “take for” [ESV], and “take upon” [NIV]. NET is unique in translating *ἐαυτω ... λαμβάνει τὴν τιμὴν* as “assumes this honor on his own initiative” instead of the more literal rendering of the other four versions.

v. 5 — There is minor variation in the first clause: “glorify” [KJV, NKJV, NASB, NET], “take ... the glory” [NIV], and “exalt” [ESV]. A more significant difference appears in the way the versions treat the ellipsis that occurs in the Greek text following *ἀλλ’*.
ἀλλ’ ὁ λαλήσας πρὸς αὐτόν

KJV: but he who said unto him (NASB: “that ... to”)

NKJV: *but it* was He who said to him

ESV: but was appointed by him who said to him

NET: but the one who glorified him was God, who said to him

NIV: But God said to him

ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε

KJV: to day have I begotten thee (NKJV, NASB, ESV: “you”)

NET: Today I have fathered you

NIV: today I have become your Father

The NIV most clearly reflects the Hebraism (*ἐἶμι + εἰς = הָיִה + לְ = “to become”*) in the Greek text.

v. 6 — Translations are uniform. The only notable distinction is the NET’s supplying “God” as the subject of the verb *λέγει*.

v. 7

ὃς ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ

KJV, NKJV: Who in the days of his flesh (NASB, ESV: omit “who”)

NET: During his earthly life

NIV: During the days of Jesus’ life on earth

δεήσεις τε καὶ ἰκετηρίας ... μετὰ κραυγῆς ἰσχυρᾶς καὶ δακρῶν προσενέγκας

There is minor variation on prayer synonyms: “prayers ... supplications” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV), “requests ... supplications” (NET), and “prayers ... petitions” (NIV).

ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας

KJV: in that he feared

NKJV: because of his godly fear

NASB: because of his piety

ESV: because of his reverence

NET: because of his devotion

NIV: because of his reverent submission

v. 8 — There is only a minor variation in the translations on this verse. The KJV, NKJV, NASB, and NET preserve the plurality of the relative pronoun ὧν. The ESV and NET Bible, however, simply read “what,” possibly obscuring the fact that the writer has a complex or multi-faceted suffering experience in mind.

v. 9

τελειωθεῖς

KJV, ESV: being made perfect

NKJV: having been perfected (NASB: “made perfect”)

NIV: once made perfect

NET: by being perfected in this way

The KJV and ESV seem to reflect a *contemporaneous* or *antecedent time* use; NKJV, NASB, and NIV lean toward *antecedent time*. NET clearly considers the participle to be *means*.

αἴτιος

KJV, NKJV: author

NASB, ESV, NET, NIV: source

“Author” and “source” are both innovative translations for αἴτιος. The more common gloss is “cause” (cf. 1 Sam. 22.22; Lk. 23.4, 14, 22; Acts 19.40).

Unfortunately, neither “author” nor “source” conveys the meaning “one who causes something” in modern English usage.

v. 10 — KJV and NKJV translate προσαγορευθεῖς as “called,” while other versions prefer “designated.” Because it more clearly conveys the idea of being named to a specific position / task, “designated” is the better gloss.

Discourse Context

Hebrews 5.4-10 serves as an important hinge passage between two key sections of the doctrinal portion of this book. Chapters 1-4 treat the subject of Christ as Son, while chapters 6-10 discuss Christ as High Priest. This portion of chapter 5 shows the relationship between the two roles of Christ: *even though Christ is the exalted Son of God, he submitted to becoming a priest through suffering.*

Chapter 1 begins with an awe-inspiring proclamation that Christ is the ultimate revelation of God: *His Son* (1.2). The author of Hebrews further argues that Christ is superior to angels *because he is the Son* (1.5, 8). He asserts Christ’s superiority to Moses by virtue of Christ’s position as *faithful Son*. His goal in these opening chapters is to present a high and exalted view of the majestic Messiah who is God’s *Son*.

Beginning at 4.14, the epistler introduces Christ's priesthood to this letter and begins discussing his sonship and priesthood together. He starts with a reference to Christ as *heavenly high priest* and *Son of God* (4.14). He makes two references to Christ as *Son* and three to Christ as *priest* in 5.4-10 [discussion below]. In chapter 6, he warns of the danger of rejecting the *Son* (6.6) while pointing to the hope to be found in the *high priest* (6.20).

The discussion focuses almost exclusively on the priesthood of Christ from chapters 7-10. Christ is a *priest* like Melchizedek (7.15, 17), appointed by an oath (7.21), holy and exalted (7.26), sinless (7.27), seated at the Father's throne (8.1), dealing with spiritual realities (9.11), and over God's house (10.21).

There are key similarities between both sections. As both Son and priest, Christ sits at the Father's right hand (1.3, 8.1). As both Son and priest, he identifies with his people (2.10-14; 4.15). As both Son and priest, Christ is over God's house (3.6; 10.21).

Yet this merging of sonship and priesthood would have raised a very challenging question to the audience. How can the exalted Son of chapters 1-3 be the sympathetic priest of 4.14-15? The author presents the answer in short form in 2.17 ("he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God"), but reserves a full explanation of the link between the sonship and priesthood for 5.4-10.

As a rule, priests do not make themselves priests (5.4). In the Old Testament, Aaron was named by God as high priest, and all other priests were born into his family. The same is true of Christ. Though he is incomparably glorious as Son, he did not glorify himself to become high priest (5.5); God designated him high priest with several statements. The first quotation is from Ps. 2.7: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" is coronation ceremony language and points to the Father's will in making Christ his Son and co-regent (Ps. 2.6). The second quotation is from Ps. 110, another coronation psalm: "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. In both these quotations, the writer affirms that the Son is made king and priest because of the Father's will.

The question still remains: how can this Father-appointed Son / priest be sympathetic? The answer lies in the process that the Father used to make his Son a priest. The writer identifies the Messiah whom God has appointed as "he who ... learned obedience" (7-8). For the exalted Son of God to become an understanding high priest, he learned obedience by suffering things. The learning process consisted of two components and an explanation. The components to Christ's learning obedience were "offering prayers and supplications" and "being heard." The concession in verse 8 explains a paradox.

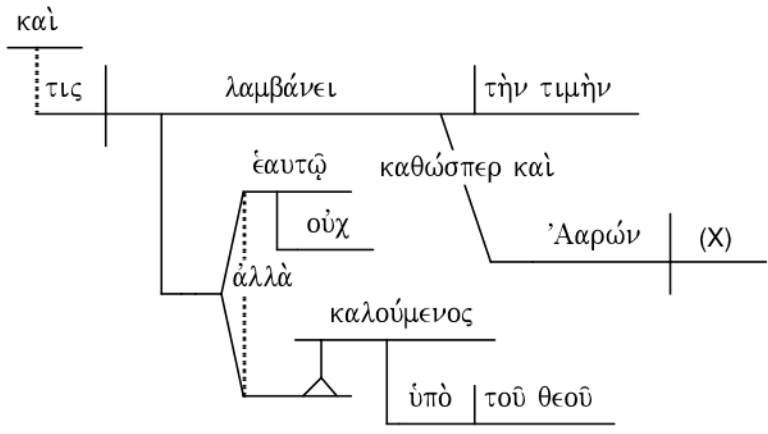
Fathers don't normally like to see their sons suffer in this way, and we don't immediately see why the Son should have to suffer that way. Christ learned obedience the hard way *even though* he was a Son.

As a result of learning obedience, this Son was "made perfect," that is, he was installed as priest (5.9). The word τελειωθεις reflects LXX usage and is parallel to "designated by God as high priest" (5.10).

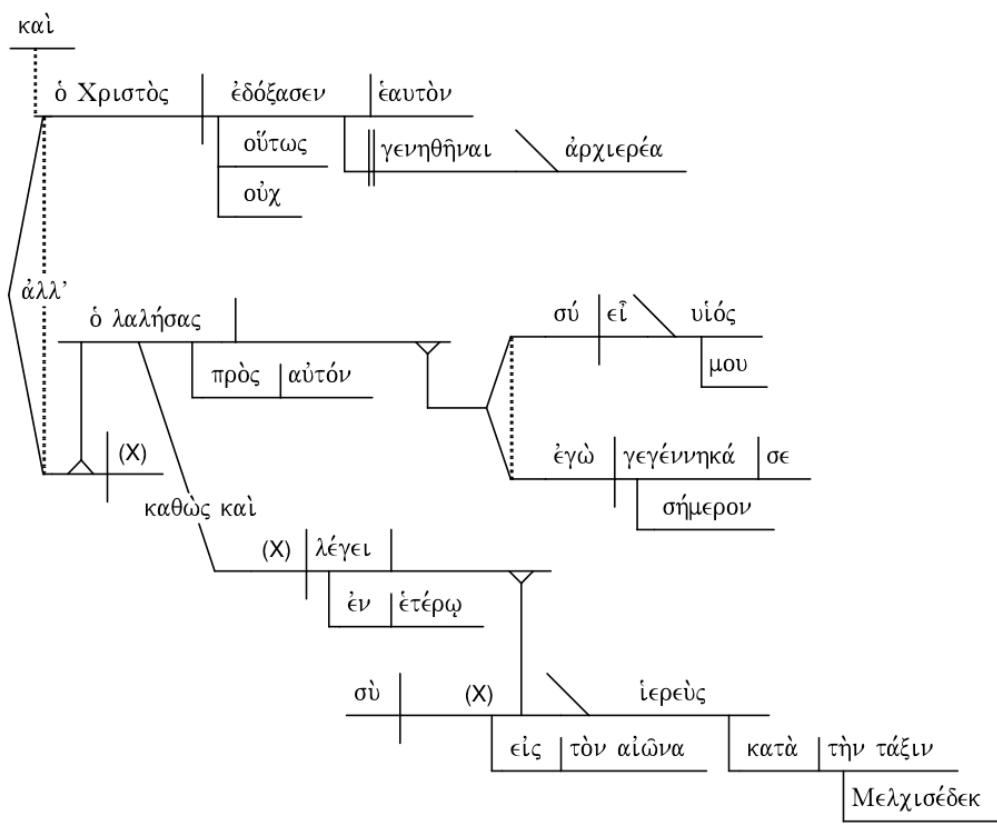
How does the exalted Son become a sympathetic priest? He is made a priest through suffering. This fact, explained in detail in these verses, sets the stage for the next four chapters of Hebrews. The author introduces Melchizedek in this explanation (5.6), then spends chapter 7 explaining that comparison. He claims that Christ was called by God (5.4), then discusses his oath-based appointment (7.20-21). He quotes coronation psalms (5.5-6), then portrays Christ as a priest who is by the throne (8.1). He attributes God's answering Christ's prayers to Christ's reverent obedience (5.7), then calls him "holy, innocent, unstained" (7.26) and describes his submission (10.7-10). He credits Christ with initiating eternal salvation (5.9), then describes him as the mediator of an eternally effective self-sacrifice (10.11-13).

Grammatical Structure (Sentence Diagram)

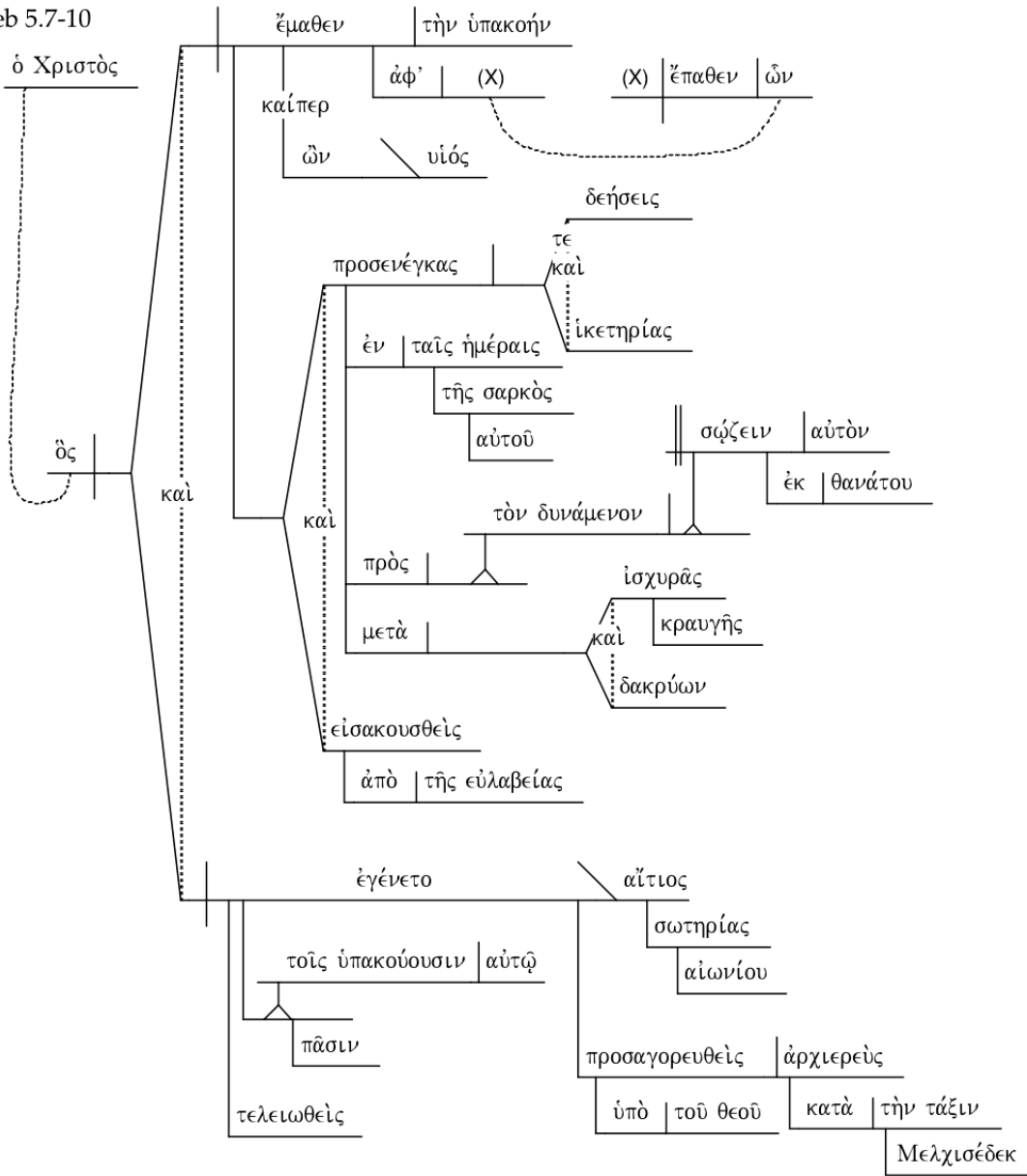
Heb 5.4



Heb 5.5-6



Heb 5.7-10



Clause Display

MAIN: Universal principle	1	καὶ οὐχ ἑαυτῶ τις <u>λαμβάνει</u> τὴν τιμὴν
Explanatory contrast to 1	2	ἀλλὰ <u>καλούμενος</u> ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ
Illustration of 2	3	καθὼς περ καὶ Ἀαρών.
Specific Instance of 1	4	οὕτως καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς οὐχ ἑαυτὸν <u>ἔδόξασεν</u> γεννηθῆναι ἀρχιερέα
Contrast to 4 (like 2 is to 1)	5	ἀλλ' ὁ <u>λαλήσας</u> πρὸς αὐτόν·
Content of 5	6	υἱὸς μου εἶ σύ,
Content of 5	7	ἐγὼ σήμερον <u>γεγέννηκά</u> σε·
Continuation of 5	8	καθὼς καὶ ἐν ἑτέρῳ <u>λέγει</u> ·
Content of 8	9	σὺ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ,
Means of 13	10	ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ δεήσεις τε καὶ ἰκετηρίας πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον σῶζειν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου μετὰ κραυγῆς ἰσχυρᾶς καὶ δακρῶν <u>προσενέγκας</u>
Means of 13	11	καὶ <u>εἰσακουσθεῖς</u> ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας,
Concession to 13	12	καίπερ <u>ὧν</u> υἱός,
Explanation of 4	13	ὅς ... <u>ἔμαθεν</u> ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν,
Means of 15	14	καὶ <u>τελειωθεῖς</u>
Result of 13	15	<u>ἔγένετο</u> πᾶσιν τοῖς ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ αἴτιος σωτηρίας αἰωνίου,
Means of 15, parallel to 14	16	<u>προσαγορευθεῖς</u> ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀρχιερεὺς κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ.

Exegetically Expanded Translation

And one receives the honor [of being a priest] not of his own initiative, but by being called by God, just like Aaron [was called]. In the same way, even Christ did not glorify himself in order to become high priest, but [God made him high priest,] the One who said to him, “You are my Son, I have begotten you today,” just like He also says elsewhere, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” – [Christ is the one] who, during the days of his life in the flesh, having offered prayers and supplications to the One who is able to save him from death, with loud cries and tears, and having been heard because of his reverence, even though being a Son, learned obedience through the things that he suffered, and having been perfected, he became the cause of eternal salvation to those who obey, having been designated by God as “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Detailed Exegesis

Verse 4

ἑαυτῷ

- 1) What is the use of the word?

Though Blass, Debrunner & Funk (BDF) regard this a dative of advantage (§188.2), Ellingsworth identifies it as *agent* (280). This word is contrasted by καλούμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ: these phrases highlight contrasting means of attaining the priesthood: one’s own initiative v. God’s calling.

λαμβάνει

2. Does this word mean *take* or *receive*?

Since it is contrasted with καλούμενος (a word portraying the passive reception of God’s call), it is most likely that this is describing an active attempt to obtain the priesthood, confirmed by understanding ἑαυτῷ as agency.

καλούμενος

3. What is the antecedent of this participle?

This is unusual. The logic of the passage leads one to believe that τις is the referent, however, the ἀλλά usually indicates a significant enough break in the grammar to require a separate subject. Perhaps the best solution is to understand an elliptical τις λαμβάνει τὴν τιμὴν after the ἀλλά.

4. What is the use of this participle?

Means – as it modifies the elliptical τις, it identifies the means by which one receives the priesthood: being called by God.

Ἀαρών

5. What is the function of this word?

Here we have an ellipsis after an ellipsis. The elliptical τις λαμβάνει τὴν τιμὴν after the ἀλλὰ is illustrated with Aaron's calling. Thus, Ἀαρών is the subject of an elliptical ἐκλήθη.

Verse 5

καὶ

6. What is the function of this word?

Ordinarily καί is a simple coordinating conjunction. However, it may have an intensifying force here. BDF (§442.12) calls this use *ascensive*. Thus καὶ here serves to highlight a series of heightened contrasts: “even Christ did not glorify himself.”

ὁ Χριστός

7. Why is the article used here?

This verse is presenting a series of contrasts to verse 4. Against the indefinite τις, we have the definite ὁ Χριστός (Ellingworth, 279).

ἑαυτὸν ἐδόξασεν

8. What is the significance of this phrase?

It is an intensified contrast to ἑαυτῷ ... λαμβάνει from verse 4 (Ellingworth, 279).

γενηθῆναι ἀρχιερέα

9. What is the significance of this phrase?

It is an intensified contrast to τὴν τιμὴν from verse 4 (Ellingworth, 279).

10. What is the use of this infinitive?

One possibility is purpose, expressing that becoming high priest is the reason for which Christ could have glorified himself. A better possibility is *exegetical*: explaining the verb ἐδόξασεν (Lane, 108). Thus the action of “glorifying himself” is indeed “becoming high priest.”

ὁ λαλήσας

11. What is the use of this participle?

The author of Hebrews is fond of ellipses. This nominative participle is the subject of an elliptical verb, most likely ἐδόξασεν.

υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε

12. Is this verse indicating a beginning of the Son's existence?

No, it is not a statement of creation or birth. Rather this language is from the ANE coronation literature: "the father-son relationship so expressed connotes divine sponsorship, support, or assistance for the king" (Fitzmyer, in Carson, *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 926).

Verse 6

λέγει

13. Who is the subject of this verb?

It could be Scripture (γραφή), but in context, it is much more likely to be God himself, since God is ὁ λαλήσας in verse 5.

τάξις

14. What is the sense of this word?

There are two good possibilities in the Shorter Lexicon: "fixed succession" or "nature, quality." In the first case, this could appear to be a comparison to the Aaronic priesthood which does have a fixed succession. However, there is no lineage from Melchizedek. Thus "according to the nature of Melchizedek" is a better explanation (Lane, 109).

Verse 7

ὅς

15. What is the antecedent of this pronoun?

The closest grammatically acceptable antecedent is Μελχισέδεκ. However, context argues against that: there is no biblical record of Melchizedek offering prayers with tears. Christ did what this verse describes. One must skip past several closer grammatically viable options (including ὁ λαλήσας), but contextually, ὁ Χριστός is the only satisfying option.

16. What is the function of this pronoun?

This question is made difficult by the vast number of words in between this nominative relative pronoun and the verb for which it serves as subject. Moving past three adverbial participles (προσενέγκας, εισακουσθεῖς, and

ὧν) and their modifiers, we find the finite verb that ὅς is subject of: ἔμαθεν (v. 8).

σαρκός

17. What is the sense of this word?

It could denote the weakness of his flesh, referring to his limitations during his incarnation. Lane, however, suggests translating it according the Hebraistic construct pattern: “his flesh days ... [which] simply refers to the human experience of Jesus” (109).

τε

18. What is the function of this particle?

Paired with καὶ, it is the front word of a “both ... and” pair.

ἱκετηρίας

19. What is the sense of this word?

Originally referring to an “olive branch entwined with white wool and fillets and carried by a suppliant” (Friberg), this word refers to a supplication, that is, a plea for help.

ἰσχυρός

20. What is the sense of this word?

Ἰσχυρός normally means “strong, mighty, powerful” (Shorter Lexicon). However, in crying contexts (cf. Rev. 18.2), “loud” is a better gloss.

προσενέγκας

21. What is the use of this participle?

It may be simply antecedent time: Christ learned after he offered up. It is more likely *means* – prayer was part of the process by which he learned obedience.

εἰσακουσθεῖς

22. What is the use of this participle?

Like προσενέγκας above, this is *means*. The answer to offered prayers was part of the learning process as well.

23. Did God actually answer Christ’s prayers?

Harnack assumed that Christ prayed for relief from death, and that the word οὐκ had been omitted (thus, “Christ was not heard ... even though he was a Son”). However, Christ’s Gethemane prayers were accompanied by “not my

will, but yours” (Lk. 22.42). God certainly did answer that prayer, and that submission taught Christ obedience.

εὐλαβείας

24. What is the sense of this word?

In its other uses (Josh. 22.24; Prov. 28.14; Heb. 12.28), it communicates the idea of fear or reverence. In Joshua, it refers to fear of negative consequences; in Proverbs, its object is the Lord; in Hebrews 12, it is used with reference to worship. This reminds the reader very much of the meaningful phrase “the fear of the Lord.”

Verse 8

ᾧν

25. What is the use of this participle?

This is the masculine nominative singular present participle of εἶμι. It’s *concessive* force is heightened by the addition of the conjunction καίπερ.

ἔμαθεν ... τὴν ὑπακοήν

26. How could the omniscient Son of God learn anything?

This phrase refers not the acquisition of new information, but to the learning of a new experience. Christ as God’s ontological equal in heaven did not experience obedience as he did on earth.

ᾧν

27. What is the function of this word?

As a relative pronoun (neuter genitive plural), ᾧν functions as the direct object of the verb ἔπαθεν. Its antecedent is an elliptical object to the preposition ἀφ’.

Verse 9

τελειωθείς

28. What is the use of this word?

It modifies the verb ἐγένετο adverbially, most likely communicating the *means* by which Christ became αἴτιος σωτηρίας αἰωνίου.

αἴτιος

29. What is the sense of this word?

One option is “author,” though some translations prefer “source.” However, neither “author” nor “source” adequately conveys the meaning “one who causes something” in modern English usage.

Verse 10

προσαγορευθεῖς

30. What is the sense of this word?

LXX and Apocryphal usage provides two options: “to call, designate,” or “to seek after.” In this context (looking back at καλούμενος), it would be best to choose the gloss “to call.”

31. What is the use of this word?

Like τελειωθεῖς, this also refers to the means by which ἐγένετο takes place. The two phrases are parallel: both refer to the official installation of Christ as high priest.

Concluding Discussion of Key Point of Interpretation

A major interpretive point in this passage is the understanding of the word τελειωθεῖς. Understanding this word (and its cognates) in the book of Hebrews sheds needed light on the theological development of the writer’s argument.

Some interpretative options are:

1. Τελειωθεῖς refers to Christ’s sacrificial death (as the goal of his sufferings).
2. Τελειωθεῖς refers to God’s validation of Christ’s learned obedience.
3. Τελειωθεῖς refers to Christ’s consecration as high priest.

Option 1 finds support in the participle’s placement immediately after a two-verse discussion of Christ’s passion experience. Against this, however, one could argue that the καὶ that begins verse 9 functions to set it apart from verses 7-8. That καὶ indicates that τελειωθεῖς fits more naturally with ἐγένετο than with ἔμαθεν.

Option 2 also correlates τελειωθεῖς to the previous finite verb (ἔμαθεν), but in a different way. As an expression of God’s response to Christ’s obedience, it does not

share Option 1's weakness. This interpretation builds on LXX usage of the verb *τελειόω*, asserting that it refers to God's favorable response to qualified worshipers.

Option 3 also builds on LXX usage, but interprets the Pentateuchal occurrences as references to the ordination ceremony or completed ordination process.

The word *τελειόω* and its cognates are often used with the idea of "completion" or "goal" near the heart of their meaning. The base for this word group is the noun *τέλος*, which means "goal, end" (1 Tim 1.5). The adjective *τέλειος* refers to people or things that have the quality or characteristic of "end-ness" (1 Cor. 13.10). This adjective usually has the meaning "perfect" (Mt. 5.48). From the adjective, we have the verb *τελειόω*, which is causative – "to complete, to make perfect" (Jn. 17.4). The adverb *τελείως* is used to describe actions done "perfectly" (1 Pet. 1.13). There are three nouns built from the verb. *Τελειότης* refers to the state of perfection or completion (Col. 3.14); *τελειώτης* refers to a person who makes something complete (Heb. 12.2); *τελείωσις* refers to the process of completing or perfecting something (Lk. 1.45).

If these New Testament references and senses were all we had, we'd struggle to wonder how Christ was "completed" or "made perfect," since incompleteness and imperfection have never been part of his character. However, if we turn to the LXX (to the Pentateuch in particular), another sense of *τελειόω* emerges.

Exodus 29 discusses the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. Because Aaron is mentioned specifically in Hebrews 5.4, this passage has a special relevance to this interpretation. In all four occurrences in this chapter (9, 29, 33, 35), the verb *τελειόω* refers to the actual ordination ceremony that Aaron and his sons went through. In Leviticus, the occurrences are more spread out (4.5; 8.33; 16.32; 21.10), but they still always refer to a priest who has gone through the ordination process. Numbers 3.3 contains another reference to priests who have been ordained. In these verses, no indication of "validation" or "approval" occurs; they are simply stating that fact that a priest has been officially consecrated.

Occurrences of *τελειόω* in Hebrews fall into two categories: Jesus as the object and people as the objects. When Jesus is the object, the word follows the Pentateuchal cultic sense and means "to consecrate as priest" (2.10; 5.9; 7.28). When people are the object, there are two subdivisions based on the actor of the verb: the law or God. When the law attempts to "make perfect" a person, the gloss "consecrate" does not always work (7.19; 9.9; 10.1). In contrast, by Christ's offering, God does indeed perfect those who come to him (10.14; 11.40; 12.23). Perhaps in these passages, the idea of completing or perfecting

is more prominent. It is also probable that these passages communicate a degree of “derivative priesthood” since Christ’s solidarity with his people is a key theme (2.14; 4.15; 13.12).

What bearing does this have on the occurrence of τελειόω in Heb. 5.9? In light of the specialized Pentateuchal cultic sense of this word, the best interpretive option is Option 3: τελειωθεὶς refers to Christ’s consecration as high priest. This fits perfectly with the context of Hebrew 5.4-10. The author begins with a principle about men becoming priests (4), comments of God’s “calling” of Aaron and Christ as high priests (5-6), explains the suffering necessary to become a priest (7-8), and presents the results of Christ’s successful ordination (9-10). As a statement of Christ’s official consecration as high priest, this participle presents the means whereby he became the cause of eternal salvation. This view is confirmed when we recognize that the second participle attached to ἐγένετο is parallel to “being consecrated” – προσαγορευθεὶς, that is, “being designated by God as a high priest.”