

Item #11

The Agony in the Garden

In my book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2016) I maintain that in Heb 5,1-10 Jesus was asking to die. Here is the way I translate the key verses, 5,6-10:

6 Just as in another place he says, “*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*” **7** Who, in the days of his flesh, having offered with a loud cry and tears prayers and petitions to the one able to save him from death, and having been heard because of his reverence **8** even though son, learned from the things he suffered obedience, **9** and once brought to perfection became for all those who obeyed him cause of eternal salvation, **10** having been designated by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (p. 132).

What does it mean to say that Christ “was heard”? I argue that it means that he was permitted to die by his Father (pp. 142-147). (As with all of the positions I adopt in interpreting Scripture, I consider this position not to be “proved” but to be “plausible”.) The passage is difficult and I spent several days in the Bodleian Library in Oxford consulting books and articles before I decided on the position that appears in my Oxford dissertation, which is the position given above. (Cf. *Jesus and Isaac. A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* [Analecta Biblica 94; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981], pp. 178-184.)

My point in choosing this reading of Heb 5,6-10 was that it should be understood in the context of the “Aqedah”, the “binding” of Isaac. That is, the offering by Abraham of his son Isaac as presented in Gen 22,1-18. In this passage Abraham is “tested” by God by being ordered by God to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, an offering in which, in tradition, Isaac willingly concurs. At the last minute a ram is presented for the sacrifice, an angel telling Abraham that he has passed God’s test. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whoever it is, understands this whole story of the testing of Abraham as a “parable” which needs to be fulfilled in the new dispensation that centers on Christ (cf. Heb 11,19). Christ is the new Isaac designated by God to bring to fulfillment the old dispensation sacrifice of Isaac and thus to bring to fulfillment God’s promise to Abraham that his (“seed” would be a source of blessing to all nations—Gen 12,7; 13,15; 17,7; 24,7)(cf. Gal 3,16). Thus in Heb 5,6-10 Christ is just being “faithful” to his calling. (In my treatment it is said that Christ had “faith” in asking to die, but as one having the Beatific Vision it seems impossible that he could have had “faith”. But he

could and did be faithful to his destiny by asking his Father to let him die just as Isaac was willing to die. Otherwise Abraham, father, would have been more generous than God, Father, in working for the salvation of mankind.

Now if Christ in Hebrews was asking his Father to allow him to die in order to fulfill the foreshadowing of the incomplete sacrifice of Isaac, it would seem to follow that he could not have been praying in the Agony in the Garden to be freed from the need to die. But if that is the case, for what was Christ praying in the Garden? With my habitual claim that exegesis of Scripture by one not gifted with some “inside” source of the meaning of a given text can only result in a “plausible” reading of said text, I suggest that Christ in the Garden was praying that his Father not constrain him to die on the cross if the cross is to be considered as a “chalice” of his Eucharistic blood. That is to say, that he be freed from the necessity of violating the Mosaic Law which prohibits the drinking of blood (cf. Lev 7,26). This petition of Christ is to be viewed as an elaborately staged event to emphasize to the apostles, through the testimony of Peter, John and James (cf. Matt 26,37) that the ceremony which they had witnessed at the Last Supper really did result in the presence of Christ’s (Body and) Blood. Until the Mosaic Law was done away with (as it was with Christ’s death on the cross as a sacrificial victim), it was in force, and drinking of the chalice would be a violation of a decree of God. The mention of Christ’s sweat falling to the ground like great drops of blood (Luke 22,43-44) has been taken as a humiliation of Christ and hence as a reason for regarding the verses as a subsequent addition to the text. For me the verses would seem to be part of the original text and designed to give the reader as a clue of the original meaning.

To contemporary Christians for whom the Mosaic Law is only a sacred relic of the past this interpretation may well seem forced. But for the contemporary Christian who regards the real presence of Christ’s blood in the Eucharist chalice as every bit as binding for the Christian of today as obedience to the Mosaic Law was for the believing Jew of Christ’s time, this interpretation makes sense. For after the institution of the Eucharist and before his death on the Cross (i.e., within the period covered by the account of the Agony in the Garden), Christ was both a faithful Christian and a faithful Jew. **(20 May 2019)**