

## Item #44 (Selected Observations on the Christology of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*)

This was Entry #54 on my previous website.

### *Introduction*

The following presentation is designed to be an introduction to the complicated material involved in any discussion of the Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Following on this simplified introduction is a presentation giving detailed thoughts on the Christology. This detailed presentation, in turn, is designed to facilitate a study of the author's book: *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica, 47; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016). 280 p. €24.

### *The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Eucharist*

Hebrews is obviously concerned with Christology. But in my interpretation of Hebrews this Christology is inextricably bound up with the Christian Eucharist. Hence, before making some observations about the Christology some preliminary remarks about the Eucharist in Hebrews are called for.

Many commentators on Hebrews have advanced a case for an important role for the Eucharist in Hebrews, but none, it seems to me, has done this convincingly, even though they have succeeded in making a case for Eucharistic allusions here and there. The reason for this lack of a really convincing case for an important role of the Eucharist in Hebrews is, basically, the failure to link it with the Old Testament *toda*. In this connection Chapter 13 of Hebrews comes to mind, for Hebrews 13 gives evidence that the Eucharistic worship of the addressees (the Mass) was and is based on the Jewish "sacrifice of praise" (the *zebach toda* in Hebrew or, in brief, the *toda*). (In Greek the usual translation for *zebach toda* is *thusia aineseos*.) According to this Old Testament liturgical practice an Israelite male, to thank God in retrospect or in advance for some signal act of benevolence in his regard, commissions a holocaust in the temple (offered by a Levitical priest) and he himself presides elsewhere in a ritual consumption of bread along with hymns and prayers. This he does with invited friends and relatives. In the Christian fulfillment of this Jewish rite Jesus at the Last Supper institutes a ceremony involving a ritual consumption of bread with hymns and prayers and brings it to fulfillment on the cross in His bloody death. He does this in complete faith-trust in God's power to save, a faith-trust justified by God's raising him from the dead. Hence for Jesus God's raising Him from the dead as man is a justification of His faith-trust as man. On justification and the *toda* see Item #43 on this website. (On the *toda* as the background of the Eucharist cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith. Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006], pp. 51-60.)

Chapter 13 of Hebrews is arguably based on the Christian Eucharist as the fulfillment of the *toda*: the central section of Hebrews 13 (vv. 7-17, a section framed by the word “leaders”, i.e., those who presided at the Eucharist) is divided into three sub-sections: 1) a sub-section about the ritual consumption of holy food (vv. 9-10); 2) a sub-section about the bloody death of Jesus (vv. 11-14); and a sub-section about hymns and prayers (vv. 15-17), in which the Greek translation of “sacrifice of praise” is found explicitly. Further, the chapter as a whole, vv. 1-21 (vv. 22-25 being, by common agreement, a postscript), can plausibly be divided into a structure which mirrors the Latin Rite Mass: 1) vv. 1-5a, review of sins; 2) vv. 5b-6, Scripture readings; 3) vv. 7-17, the central, sacramental part or Canon; 4) vv. 18-19, explicit mention of the intention of the Eucharist which the author wishes the addresses to use in his favor; 5) vv. 20-21, final doxology and blessing. Finally, the Latin phrase “*sacrificium laudis*”, a translation of “sacrifice of praise” found in various Old Latin manuscripts of Hebrews 13,15, is found at the Remembrance of the Living in the Canon of the Latin Rite Mass, prefixed by the designation “*hoc*”, “this”: the Latin Rite Mass calls itself “**this** sacrifice of praise”.

The prominence in Hebrews 13, given the Christian Eucharist as the fulfillment of the Old Testament *toda*, argues for a position of importance of the Eucharist in Hebrews as a whole, for Chapter 13 is the climax of the epistle. In particular it will be argued in this paper not only that the Eucharist as an objective sacrifice, but also the faith-trust of Jesus in the face of death as its psychological complement, has a crucial role in the Christology of the epistle. (This statement presupposes that Jesus does not have the Beatific Vision as man. Should He be presumed to have had it, the word ΠΙΣΤΙΣ is best translated “fidelity”, i.e., fidelity to the example of Isaac’s incomplete sacrifice waiting to be fulfilled.)

### *Hebrews 1,1-5*

The prologue of Hebrews (1,1-4) and the explanatory verse 1,5, are of key importance for the Christology of the epistle. For in the central section of the prologue, 1,3a, the definitive ontological status in eternity of Christ the Son in relation to God is recognized: He is all but identical with God. In 1,2c and 1,3b His functional role as divine is recognized: He is the one through whom God created all things (1,2c) and the one who sustains all things in existence (1,3b). Vv. 1,1-2b and 1,3-4 this Son is recognized as existing in time as the definitive Messiah, the son of David whom Israel had been expecting for centuries. Verse 1,5 definitively identifies the earthly Messiah as the divine Son.

In presenting the earthly Messiah the author states that God “spoke” in Him. This is the only finite verb in a principal clause in the prologue, and this syntactical prominence argues for its semantic importance. “Speaking” in this context refers to the “speaking” with which the Messiah instituted the Eucharist, as becomes clear from the use of the verb “to speak” in Hebrews 2,3 and other passages. In the context of the prologue as set in the entire epistle, this

emphasis indicates that with the institution of the Eucharist God is definitely abrogating the cultic aspects of the Mosaic Law and putting in their place the cultic aspects of the New Law which is the Son Himself in the Eucharist.

#### *Hebrews 1,6-14*

Hebrews 1,6-14 goes on to reiterate the full divinity of the Son by addressing Him as “God” and “Lord”, designations used only of God in the Old Testament.

#### *Hebrews 2,1-4*

Hebrews 2,1-4 is a sub-section of encouragement based on the presentation of the Son as fully divine in Hebrews 1,1-14. In this “encouragement” the author of Hebrews adopts a strong tone of warning, reminding the addressees that if violations of the Mosaic Law “spoken” through angels merited a severe punishment, how much more would they be punished if they ignored the salvation which had its beginning of being “spoken” through the Lord. Here the “speaking” of God in the Son in the prologue has its explanation: God “spoke” through the Son in His earthly life as Messiah, and it is this “speaking” in the Messiah that is referred to in the “beginning of being spoken through the Lord” in Hebrews 2,3.

#### *Hebrews 2,5 – 3,6*

Hebrews 1,5-14 is paralleled by Hebrews 2,5-18: both are expositions on the Son, both are approximately of the same length when the Scripture citations on which each centers is taken into consideration. Each exposition is followed by an encouragement based on the exposition that precedes them. Hebrews 1,5-13 culminates in the brief citation of Psalm 110,1, while Hebrews 2,5-18 begins with the longer citation of Psalm 8,5-7. Each of the two Psalm citations has a phrase containing the words “under ... feet”. This indicates that the author of Hebrews wishes them to be understood to be linked by the Jewish exegetical device of a “*gezera shawa*” (in Aramaic, “equal category”). This means that what is said of one verse can be said of the other verse, and vice versa. Now inasmuch as 1,5-14 is about the Son as divine, and 2,5-14 is about the Son as human, the use of the *gezera shawa* indicates that what is true of the Son as divine is true of the Son as human, and vice versa. In other words, the two passages as understood in this way are a Semitic way of expressing the truth of Chalcedon that Christ is one Person with two Natures. (This same exegetical device called the *gezera shawa* is used in Hebrews 1,5 to relate the two quotations from Psalm 2,7 and 2 Samuel 7,14 by reason of the common occurrence of the word “son” to show that the messianic son referred to in 2 Samuel 7,14 has inherited the name of divine Son referred to in Psalm 2,7.)

Internally, Hebrews 2,5-18 is put together with extraordinary finesse. The three citations from the Old Testament in the center of the passage indicate three underlying suppositions which

must be kept in consideration. (All citations must be understood as referring to the Christian situation, i.e., the author is viewing the citations backward from the point of view of Christian life to the Old Testament, and not forward from the point of view of the Old Testament to Christian life.) The citation of Psalm 22,22 at Hebrews 2,12 contains the word “brothers” and implies that all that precedes is united under this term. The citation of Isaiah 8,18 at Hebrews 2,13b contains the word “children” and implies that all that follows is united under this term. These two family terms, “brothers” and “children”, are considered from the standpoint of Christ: “brothers” refers to all those who like Christ face personal death with faith-trust in God; “children” refers to all those who are spiritual children of Abraham in the sense that they face another’s death with faith-trust in God just as Abraham faced the death of Isaac when ordered by God to offer him in sacrifice (cf. Hebrews 11,17-19). Thus faith-trust in God in the face of death is a theme underlying the entire section 2,5-18. And this faith-trust is explicitly attributed to Christ in 2,13a, a citation which implies as much. (This “faith-trust” could alternately be understood as “fidelity”, as explained above.)

These three Old Testament citations, when understood as outlined above, give the key for understanding the relevance of the citation of Psalm 8,5-7 in Hebrews 2,6-8: the citation is to be understood midrashically, i.e., not in its original Old Testament meaning but in its applied Christian meaning as illustrating the situation contemporary with the addressees. The phrase “son of man” is to be understood of Christ as one who is characterized by faith-trust in God in the face of death, and “man” is to be understood of Abraham of whose faith-trust in God in the face of death the Son participates. The clause “You (sc., God) have placed Him a bit lower than the angels” refers to the Son’s earthly life when, because of His mortal body, he was, so to speak, inferior to the immortal angels. “With honor and glory you have crowned Him” refers to God’s having raised the Son from the dead. “All things you have placed under His feet” refers to the dominance over all created reality, even death, given by God to the Son by reason of the resurrection.

Once the midrashic nature of the citation of Psalm 8,5-7 at the beginning of the passage has been ascertained, the rest follows logically.

Hebrews 2,8b-d states that in placing all things under the feet of the Son of man God left not even death outside the Son’s dominion, but the dominion over death has not as yet been realized.

2,9 states that “we”, i.e., contemporary Christians, “gaze” on Jesus who was for a time less than the angels. This gazing on Jesus makes explicit the identification between Jesus and the Son of man of Psalm 8. Further, it makes possible the specific act which is being referred to. For the verb “gaze” in the Greek implies some concrete physical eye-contact with a specific physical object. Here again Hebrews 2,12 provides the underlying supposition, for Hebrews 2,12, as

noted above, is a quotation from Psalm 22,22, which is a *toda* prayer, i.e., a prayer recited as part of a *toda* ceremony. Just as the word “brothers” mentioned in v. 12 is to be understood as referring to all that precedes, so the Christian *toda* ceremony is to be understood as referring to all that precede. That is to say, all that precedes is to be understood not simply as referring to the risen Jesus as the phrase “crowned with honor and glory” indicates, but that all that precedes is to be understood with reference to Jesus as present in the Eucharist. When in 2,9 the statement is made that “we” “gaze” on Jesus, the reference is to the Christians gazing on the Eucharistic host. This interpretation makes possible another, that the enigmatic phrase “so that by the grace of God He might taste death for all” refers to the Christians gazing on the Eucharistic host as the risen victim of Jesus’ self-offering on the cross so that the Christians can experience vicariously the realization of vindication of Jesus’ faith-trust in God in the face of death.

Hebrews 2,10 then explains that the basis for this gazing on the Eucharistic victim is God’s “perfecting” the Son. The word is allusion to the act of priestly consecration of the Levitical priest of the Old Testament and at the same time explains that the Resurrection is to be considered a “perfecting” of a previous state of priesthood: with the Resurrection the earthly priesthood of Jesus is fulfilled in the heavenly priesthood of Christ. And with the priesthood is to be understood the heavenly victimhood of the risen high priest, for the risen high priest is at God’s right hand whereas the heavenly victim is very much in time. In other words, there are two stages on the victimhood/priesthood of Jesus Christ, the earthly and the heavenly, depending ontologically on His body. The heavenly body of Christ makes possible His role as heavenly priest and heavenly victim, for by it He can be present in heaven and the ultimate agent of each Christian sacrifice of praise as high priest, while at the same time be present in innumerable places on earth as the heavenly victim.

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Hebrews 2,11 states the ground for the use of “brothers”: it is the fact that the risen Christ and all who believe in His Resurrection, i.e., all Christians, are “from one”, that is, the union into one of faith-trust in the face of another’s death as was Abraham, and faith-trust in the face of one’s death as was Jesus. Except that in the case of Jesus this faith trust has been vindicated by the Resurrection. In His risen state Jesus is able to act as God and thus “sanctifies” all who believe in Him. This He does in each Christian sacrifice of praise.

Hebrews 2,14-16 parallel Hebrews 2,8bcd-9 in describing the earthly victimhood of Jesus. (The purpose of freeing those who fear death is realized in their gazing on Him as vindicated victim in the Eucharist.) And Hebrews 2,17-18 parallel Hebrews 2,10-11: the earthly high priest parallels the heavenly high priest. The latter, of course, is the “perfection” of the former, for it subsumes it into Christ’s present, definitive state.

### *Hebrews 3,1-6*

The “encouragement” which follows on the exposition at Hebrews 2,5-18 is based on it and makes a number of points:

1) The designation of Jesus as “apostle” in 3,1 refers to His being “sent” as Moses was in Exodus 3,11-15. And just as Moses was “sent” to announce God’s name to the Israelites of the first Exodus, so Jesus is one permanently “sent” to announce God’s name to the Christians of the new Exodus. This He does in the Christian *toda* or Eucharist as explained in Hebrews 2,12. The Christian name for God is, of course, as mentioned explicitly in Hebrews 1,5, “Father”, this being the correlative of the name “Son” in a way unknown to the Old Testament use of “Father” and “son of God”.

2) Jesus founds a “house” in 3,3. That is, He establishes His Church. This is done, of course, with the understanding that God is the one ultimately responsible (3,4). Which, in turn, is reminiscent of God’s “speaking” as regards the Eucharist in 1,2 and 2,3. This is entirely appropriate, for the Eucharist, brought to completion on the Cross (and subsequent Resurrection), is the source of the Church (understood as Christ’s Mystical Body).

3) Jesus is parallel but superior to Moses in 3,1-6, and this subordination of Moses as regards Jesus is reflected in the statement in 3,5 that Moses was a witness to the things “to be spoken”. Again the allusion involved in “speaking” is to the Eucharist, for the occasion referred to is Moses’ use of the blood of animals as a purifying force in the inauguration of the Sinai Covenant, an inauguration which foreshadows the inauguration of the New Covenant by Christ. (This allusion to the Eucharist explains the slight modification in Hebrews 9,20 of the Septuagint’s wording used by Moses on the occasion of the inauguration of the Sinai Covenant to effect an allusion to the words used by Jesus in inaugurating the New Covenant.

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### *Conclusions*

Much more could be said about the Christology of Hebrews, but enough has been said to show that this Christology is intertwined with belief in the Eucharist and both have as an accompanying psychological state the faith-trust/fidelity of Christ and those who believe in His Resurrection. (And this faith-trust /fidelity is appealed to, of course, in the efforts of the author of Hebrews to encourage his addressees in the face of the possible death which he foresees for them.)

But many humans have never had the opportunity of knowing about Christ, much less of believing in His Resurrection. Hence one example of how the heavenly high priesthood and heavenly victimhood of Christ effects the eternal destiny of these men and women needs to be

given. The author presents the theology involved in such persons in Hebrews 7, which is based on a comparison between Christ and Melchizedek. As usual, the author of Hebrews looks on Melchizedek from the standpoint of the risen Christ. And he is interested in Melchizedek as an illumination of the mystery of Christ only insofar as Melchizedek is mentioned in a few verses in Genesis (and, of course, in Psalm 110,4). (There was much speculation about Melchizedek at the time Hebrews was written, but the author of Hebrews makes no use of it in his epistle.) The author of Hebrews is interested in Melchizedek primarily as one who provides an Old Testament antecedent to Jesus Christ the heavenly high priest insofar as Jesus Christ as heavenly high priest exists as divine (“without father or mother, without genealogy”) and therefore “without beginning or end”. That is to say, Christ the heavenly high priest exists “outside of time”, and as such can make the effects of His death in time available to all men and women who have ever lived or will ever live, even though they do not know him. It is sufficient for the faith-trust which Christ makes available to them along with His expiation of sin that they believe that God exists and that He rewards, i.e., that there is such a thing as a moral order founded in God who rewards for good behavior. Cf. Hebrews 11,6 for the way in which the author of Hebrews expresses this idea. **(11 March 2013; modified 27 December 2019)**