

Item #45 (Detailed Thoughts on the Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews)

This was part of Entry #54 in my previous website.

Introduction

The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews is concentrated in the first major section of the epistle, 1,1 – 3,7. (It would be useful to read this item in the context of the previous one.)

I. Hebrews 1,1 – 2,4

Hebrews can arguably be attributed to St. Paul, but whoever wrote it probably wrote to the Hebrew Christians of Rome in the 60s at a time when all Christians there were facing imminent persecution. The underlying purpose of Hebrews would thus seem to be to bolster the courage of these Christians in the face of this persecution. As Christians face increasing persecution in the early part of the third millennium it would not be inappropriate to try to look on the Christology of Hebrews as the first Christians in Rome looked on it, most of them addressed by the epistle having a Jewish background.

A crucial underlying presupposition of Hebrews is the liturgical context in which the addressees worshipped. This becomes clear from an exegesis of Chapter 13,1-21 of the epistle which can plausibly be seen as a Christian version of the Jewish “sacrifice of praise”. The Jewish “sacrifice of praise” or *toda* in Hebrew, was a type of sacrifice offered in thanksgiving/praise to God for some signal act of His Providential Care in saving the one offering the sacrifice, either in retrospect or in anticipation. This saving act could be safe return from a war or survival in time of famine, for example. In the Israelite-Jewish tradition there were three elements in the “sacrifice of praise’: 1) a bloody sacrifice in the temple (which had to be offered by a member of the Levitical priesthood), 2) a public ritual consumption of bread accompanied by 3) hymns and prayers. The bloody sacrifice was offered at the behest of an Israelite male, who presided at the ritual consumption of bread and accompanying hymns and prayers. In the Christian adaptation of this Jewish ritual the one bloody sacrifice of Jesus was represented in each Christian “sacrifice of praise”, thus giving each re-presentation a basic identity with every other Christian “sacrifice of praise”, while the infinitely multipliable consumption of bread and the singing of hymns gave the Christian re-presentation its basic multiplicity. Presiding were the “leaders” of the community. (The term is possibly taken from the image of the New Exodus of Christians

toward eternal life in imitation and fulfillment of the First Exodus of Israelites.) Chapter 13 of Hebrews can be analyzed not only as having the three essential elements of the Jewish “sacrifice of praise” ceremony but as also having the form of a Latin Rite Mass. The appropriateness of this analysis is suggested by the presence of the phrase “sacrifice of praise” in Hebrews 13,15. This detailed presentation of the Christian “sacrifice of praise” in Hebrews 13 indicates that the Mass was the underlying element of worship in the Christian community at the time the epistle was written in the 60s, for it matches the same phrase “sacrifice of praise”—“*this* sacrifice of praise” to be precise, indicating explicitly that the Mass is a “sacrifice of praise”—in the Remembrance of the Living in the Latin Rite Mass. Accompanying the mortal body of the earthly Jesus which served as the material element in His expiatory sacrifice of Himself was the psychological and religious attitude of faith-trust in Divine Providence to free Him from the effects of death. This faith-trust was rewarded with the resurrection given Him by God. (The relevance for the addressees of this faith-trust of Jesus in the face of His own death is not hard to see.) (Or, if one presumes that Jesus Christ in His humanity possessed the Beatific Vision, one could assume that He had not faith-trust in His future Resurrection, but fidelity to the example of Isaac who was spared death as a “parable”—cf. Hebrews, Chapter 11.)

Enlightened by this presupposition which the addressees of the epistle took for granted (for it was the liturgical tradition in which they were living and which was the anchor of their lives,) we are in a position to read Hebrews from the beginning.

The prologue of Hebrews (1,1-4) makes the principal point that God spoke in “a son”. That is to say, the context states that this son is a descendant of the Davidic kings, i.e., a messiah. Because of his eschatological timing this messiah is *the* Messiah—the culmination of centuries of expectation, the long-awaited King of the Jews. But He is more than that: He is also the Son, the exact replica of God Himself. The prologue hints at this by suggesting by the structure that the Messianic son was revealed at the resurrection/exaltation as the divine Son. This is confirmed in 1,5, where the Jewish exegetical device of the *gezera shawa* explicitly argues for the identity between the two. (A *gezera shawa* indicates that where the same word or phrase occurs in two verses of the Scripture the texts are mutually illuminative—what is true of one is true of the other, and vice versa.) Hebrews 1,6-14 goes on to make the attribution of divinity to the Messiah even more unmistakable, by addressing Him as “God” and “Lord”, two titles used only of God in the Septuagint.

Following on this unmistakable attribution of divinity to the Messiah, Hebrews 2,1-4 goes on to give words of “encouragement” (in this case negative encouragement in the form of a warning) based on the exposition which preceded in Hebrews 1,1-14: if violations of the “word” “spoken” through angels (i.e., the Mosaic Law) merit severe punishment, how much more will carelessness in violating the “salvation which had its beginning of being spoken through the

Lord” be punished, since the Lord is divine and angels are mere creatures. Couched as it is in a context which speaks of legal safeguards for the transmission of what the Lord “spoke”, and in the context of the underlying importance of the Christian *toda* in the epistle, this “beginning of being spoken” can plausibly be seen to refer to the institution of the Eucharist. As it is presented here, in contrast to the Mosaic Law, the Eucharist would seem to be viewed as God’s presence to His people in the New, Christian Exodus to eternal life. And just as the Book of the Law was God’s symbolic presence in the First Exodus, so the Eucharist is God’s real presence in the Christian Exodus—witness the previous stress on the divinity of the Son who, by implication, is in parallel not only with the angels as an agent of transmission from God, but as that which is being transmitted, for He *is* the New Law. (In terms of Christ’s humanity He is the Eucharistic Victim as well as the Eucharistic High Priest.) The imagery of Hebrews 2,4 to describe the signs and wonders accompanying the Christians on the New Exodus is taken from the vocabulary found in the Septuagint to describe the signs and wonders accompanying the Israelites on the First Exodus.

In the context of the above exegesis of Hebrews 1,1 – 2,4 the “speaking” of God in the Messianic Son in Hebrews 1,2 assumes a profound significance. For with this expression the author of Hebrews is stating that God is nullifying through His Son the cultic provisions of the Mosaic Law so that the *speaking* by which the Eucharist began and is continued replaces the *written* Book of the Law for the worship of the Old Dispensation. With this verse the author of Hebrews is also saying that the Eucharist replaces the Book of the Law, i.e., Christ *is* the New Law. And, in addition, he implies in Hebrews 1,1 – 2,4 the “Real Presence”, but couched in terms proper to the culture in which the author of Hebrews wrote. (And this “speaking” of God in His Son would seem to be the basis for the primacy of Magisterium/Tradition over Scripture in Catholic Christianity.)

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II. *Hebrews 2,5 – 3,6*

It should be noted that in the present interpretation Hebrews 1,1 – 2,4 is about the Son as divine. In Hebrews 2,5 – 3,6 the author moves on to a presentation of the Son as man. Just as Hebrews 1,1-14 culminated at 1,13 in a citation of Ps 110,1 which sums up and concludes all that precedes, so Hebrews 2,5 – 3,6 begins with a citation from Psalm 8 which sums up and introduces all that follows. The two sections are joined by a *gezera shawa* constituted by the phrase “under feet” in both Scripture citations. Thus the author of Hebrews states in a way familiar to him and his addressees, that whatever can be said of the Son as divine can be said of the Son as human, and whatever can be said of the Son as human can be said of the Son as divine. Hebrews 1,1 – 3,7 may thus be viewed as Chalcedon in Semitic terminology.

The passage is dense. 2,5-18 is exposition, 3,1-6 is encouragement. Thus the entire passage parallels 1,5 – 2,4.

In the exposition part (2,5-18) the author of Hebrews makes a number of crucial points:

1) The Son as man became like the spiritual children of Abraham (= “seed of Abraham”, i.e., those who, like Abraham, trusted in God in the face of another’s death.) in order to die for them. In doing this He was an earthly High Priest and an earthly Victim. By shedding blood He was able to free mankind from its sinfulness. Parallel to this earthly Victimhood and earthly High Priesthood are His heavenly Victimhood and heavenly High Priesthood. He entered into the heavenly Victimhood and High Priesthood when He was “perfected” by God, i.e., raised from the dead. This is His present and eternal High Priesthood. In other words, His Priesthood and His Victimhood depend on the state of His body: earthly body, earthly Victimhood and earthly High Priesthood, heavenly Body, heavenly Victimhood and Heavenly High Priesthood.

2) In linking the Son’s Victimhood and High Priesthood the author uses a *toda* prayer from Psalm 22, thus indicating that this Victimhood and High Priesthood is to be understood in terms of the Christian *toda* or Eucharist: as High Priest the Son is seated at God’s right hand; as Victim the Son is present in the Eucharistic species on the altars wherever the “being spoken” which had its beginning through the Lord is maintained with attention to the legal proprieties of legitimacy (cf. the legal language of Hebrews 2,3). That is to say, as long as the proper legal safeguards are operative in maintaining the norms for its valid transmission, the “speaking” of God in the Son continues to have its intrinsic efficacy: the “leaders” have to be chosen legitimately and have to act legitimately for what they “speak” to be valid.

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3) Both the Son as human and all those entrusted to Him by God were members of the “seed” of Abraham, i.e., those who, like Abraham, trusted in God in the face of another’s death. In addition to this type of trust, the Son initiated His own type of trust, trust in the face of His own death. This He did in the face of His own death even though in this He was also “put to the test” as Abraham was when offering Isaac, i.e., in the face of another’s death. This faith-trust was the psychological accompaniment of the physical body and blood of the Son’s earthly life needed for the full expiation of man’s sins. Together these two faith-trusts—faith-trust in the face of another’s death and faith-trust in the face of one’s own death—constitute the grounds for Christ calling those who have them “brothers”. Being raised from the dead by God was God’s extrinsic sign of approval of this faith-trust of His Son as man, a sign of approval which is shared by all those who believe in the Resurrection of the Son, i.e., all those who are Christians. But the Resurrection was also God’s intrinsic sign of approval, for it made possible the heavenly High Priesthood and heavenly Victimhood of Christ. (To be read in the light of the remarks on “fidelity” above.)

Also in the “encouragement” which follows at Hebrews 3,1-6 the author makes a number of crucial points:

1) In the parallelism “apostle and high priest” in Hebrews 3,1 “apostle” has not only legal overtones—Christ was “sent” by God—but also cultic. For just as Moses was “sent” by God to announce God’s name in the context of the First Exodus, so Christ is “one sent” by God to announce God’s name in the context of the New Exodus. The term “high priest” would seem to refer to Hebrews 2,17 and Christ’s earthly sacrifice of expiation on the cross, while “one sent” would seem to refer to Hebrews 2,12 and the *toda* prayer of Psalm 22: Christ, like Moses, was sent by God to announce His name. But the name of the New Testament God is different from the name of the Old Testament God because the New Testament God is looked on from the point of view of the Son. Thus the name of God appropriate for the New Exodus is “Father”, as suggested by the citation of Psalm 2,7 in Hebrews 1,5.

2) In Hebrews 3,3 Jesus is “builder” of a house, that is, He is the founder of the Church. This is in contrast to Moses who was not the founder of God’s Exodus people. Jesus is the immediate founder of the Church, but the ultimate founder of the Church is God, as stated in Hebrews 3,4. (This parallels the “speaking” of God in Hebrews 1,2—God is the ultimate source of legitimacy and as such is responsible for everything.) (Cf. above, Item #26 [The Institution of the Church in Hebrews 3,3-4].)

3) In Hebrews 3,5 Moses is said to have been a faithful servant in God’s house because he “bore witness” to “the things to be spoken”. The allusion is to Hebrews 9,20, where the words of Moses in instituting the Mosaic Covenant have been slightly modified to conform to the words of Christ in instituting the Eucharist. Moses’s words are viewed as a prefiguring of Christ’s words. Thus in Hebrews 3,1-6 there is an allusion to the Eucharist in relation to the Mosaic Law just as there is in 2,1-4. But in 2,1-4 the allusion is a part of the encouragement following on the presentation of the Son as divine in Hebrews 1,1-14, whereas in 3,1-6 the allusion is a part of the encouragement following on the presentation of the Son as human in Hebrews 2,5-18. The Eucharist as God present is the point of Hebrews 2,1-4; the Eucharist as God expiating and sanctifying is the point of Hebrews 3,1-6.

III. *Some Reflections*

In order fully to appreciate the import of the above close reading it must be situated in the context of the entire epistle. As the present writer understands it, Hebrews is composed of three major parts:

- 1) 1.1 – 3,6;
- 2) 3,6 – 10,39;
- 3) 11,1 – 13,21.

The parts are distinguishable on the basis of a close reading. That is to say, the macro-structure is based on a micro-structure. In addition, the three parts are signaled by the use of the word *hypostasis* at the beginning of each part, i.e., at 1,3; 3,14; 11,1. At 1,3 the word *hypostasis* is used in the sense of “that which stands under”. It refers to that which “stands under” the external glory of God and as such is reproduced like a stamp to constitute that which “stands under” the external glory of the Son. Thus the word is resolutely ontological in its immediate meaning and in its implications. These implications are taken up in the other major uses of the word, at 3,14 and 11,1 with analogical uses of the word.

At 1,3 the word *hypostasis* implies that everything in 1,1 – 3,6 is related univocally to the ontological status of the Son as divine. In 3,14 the word *hypostasis* implies that everything in 3,7 – 10,39 is related analogically to the ontological status of the Son as divine in that it is His heavenly bodily status that underlies all the objective cultic aspects of Christian existence, in particular, baptism and the Eucharist. In 11,1 the word *hypostasis* implies that everything in 11,1 – 13,21 is related analogically to the ontological status of the Son as divine in that it is His heavenly psychological status that is the decisive element underlying all the subjective aspects of human existence leading to eternal life, i.e., faith/fidelity. (In the case of the risen Christ it is, of course, faith/fidelity validated.) Thus the three major parts of Hebrews are constituted by the ontological status of the Son as divine, the effects of the heavenly bodily status of the Son with reference to His divinity, and the effects of the heavenly psychological status of the Son with reference to His divinity.

The heavenly bodily status of the Son with reference to His divinity means that with the earthly body which the Son took on at the moment of His entering the world of time He is able, once the body is subsumed into the eternity proper to His divinity, to exercise the expiatory effect of His death to all mankind along with His sanctifying action. The heavenly psychological status of the Son with reference to His divinity means that with the earthly psychological virtue of faith-trust which the Son took on as a child of Abraham and which He added on to as the originator of salvation He is able, once this faith-trust/fidelity is subsumed into the eternity proper to His divinity, it can serve to make available for all of mankind the faith-trust in each person needed for his or her definitive salvation.

Beneath the verbiage of the above lies two points taken for granted by informed Catholics instructed in the teaching of their Church:

1) Jesus Christ is true God and true man, one Person with two natures.

2) The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s external “sign” giving approval of all that Jesus Christ said and did in His earthly life.

But there are also several points which have not been explicitly taught by the Church:

1) The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's action making ontologically possible the sacramental life of the Church, for without a risen body Christ could not act in all the Masses of the world as High Priest nor could He be present on all the altars of the world as Victim. Inasmuch as He acts in all the sacraments the resurrection makes them ontological possible as well.

2) As regards Christians, the "faith of the Church" mentioned in the Mass is ontologically the faith/fidelity of Jesus Christ with which He had faith-trust/fidelity in God's ability to save Him from death before He died—which God did in the Resurrection from the dead. (At baptism we were all given this "faith of the Church" as part of our inclusion in the Mystical Body which is the Church.)

3) As regards non-Christians, the ontological ability of Christ to be the agent of definitive salvation of all men and women who ever lived or will live, even if they are not members of the Church, is dependent on the risen body of Christ inasmuch as that body is in eternity, i.e., independent of time and thus applicable in time but from outside of time, through the causality through which God created all things in His Son.

4) In the act by which God validates all that Jesus Christ said and did He also justifies all those who, like Christ, believe in God's ability to raise from the dead.

5) A principal purpose in attending Mass should be the deepening of one's faith-trust in God's ability to raise one from the dead.

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