



The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 1-2: Jesus, The Exalted and Incarnate Son

Hebrews begins with a remarkable rhetorical flourish. Alliteration, the repetition of consonants, and assonance, the repetition of vowels, mark the carefully balanced opening lines. You can hear some of those effects by reading aloud the first verse and half in Greek: *polumerôs kai polutropôs palai ho theos lalêsas tois patrasin en tois profhêtais ep' eschatou tôn hêmerôn toutôn elalêsen hêmin in huiô*). The verbal pyrotechnics signals that a serious piece of oratory is underway. The opening paragraph also announces the subject of the homily, the Son, through whom God has now definitively spoken to “us” at the “end of these days.” The homilist tells us that he is going to be celebrating God’s revelation in Jesus, a revelation that stands in continuity with prophetic literature of old. In fact, that the Christ event fulfills the promise by Jeremiah of a new covenant will be a central claim of the homily.

The opening goes on to sketch a brief summary of who this Son is. V 3 uses language that comes from the Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text written in Greek probably early in the first century CE. The Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26 celebrated the figure of God’s Divine Wisdom, something that Jewish authors had been doing since the book of Proverbs 8:22-31 started the trend. Associating Jesus with the figure of Divine Wisdom was a move that other early Christians made, particularly the author of the Gospel of John who refers to Wisdom using the language of the Logos or “Word” of God. Making that connection enabled followers of Jesus to think about Jesus as part of the reality of God from the moment of creation, and our homilist will do so here in making the claim that the Son was the one through whom the “ages” were made (v 2), and who “bears all things by his powerful word” (v 3). Our homilist will come back on several occasions to that understanding of Jesus as a preexistent being who became incarnate to do God’s will. But the focus of the homily is not primarily on the moment of incarnation. It highlights rather the death and exaltation of Jesus. The opening lines signal that focus in referring to Jesus’ act of “making purification for sins” and “taking a seat at the right hand of the power on high.” That last verse uses biblical language, from Psalm 110:1, a text used by many early Christians to describe what they understood happened to Jesus after his death, events that we usually refer to as resurrection and ascension. The Psalm’s image of heavenly enthronement will reappear at several key points in the homily and one of the boldest moves that the preacher will make, the comparison of Jesus and Melchizedek, is connected with verse 4 of that same psalm.

Another theme that the homilist sounds is “inheritance.” He begins his description of the Son as the one who is the “heir of all things” (v 2) and he will introduce the next section of his homily by picking up that motif. At the heart of the comparison of Christ and the high priest on the Day of Atonement (9:15-22), the preacher will make another bold move using the motif of inheritance in order to suggest how it is that Christ’s death has its salutary effects.

A Scriptural Catena Hebrews 1:5-13

After the introductory paragraph, the preacher continues his celebration of the Son by comparing him to angels. Ancient rhetoric that celebrated people or institutions often made such a comparative move (called in Greek *synkrisis*). Our preacher will use the device repeatedly, comparing Christ explicitly to angels (1:4-14), to Moses (3:1-6), to Joshua (4:8), to ordinary high priests (4:14-5:4), and implicitly to Melchizedek (7:1-28).

In order to make the comparative point, the homilist cites a catena (“chain”) or series of scriptural verses. Such catenas appear elsewhere in the New Testament, e.g., in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (10:25-33; 11:26-36; 15:9-12). Catenas of scriptural texts are also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, where they illustrate an understanding of the character of the Messiah. The texts in this catena make several points, all reading Scriptures as witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah. The first in v 5, from Ps 2:7, is from a “royal Psalm” in which God is portrayed as addressing an Israelite king as his son. The son here is understood to be not just any Israelite king, but Jesus. The homilist will cite other scriptural texts understood to be part of a dialogue between Father and Son. The Son will respond to this address in Heb 2:12-13. Ps 2:7 will reappear in Heb 5:5, followed by Ps 110:4, again addressed to Christ as Son and High Priest. Christ will answer in the words of Ps 40:6-8 at Heb 10:5-7. The scriptural dialogue that begins with God and Jesus concludes with “us,” the addressees of the homily (Heb 13:6), responding to God in the words of a psalm (Ps 118:6), in effect moving into Christ’s place.

2 Samuel 7:14, also cited in v 5, originally a text about the relationship of God and David, reinforces Jesus’ status as Son. The homilist then cites (v 6) a passage from Deuteronomy 32:43 that calls on heavenly beings, in Hebrew “all you gods,” in the Greek translation which our homilist uses, “all angels of God” to worship “him.” The pronoun in the original referred to Yahweh, the Lord. Our homilist understands the referent in fact to be the Son. His introductory comment suggests that he has in mind the moment of Christ’s entry into the world at his incarnation, although some interpreters suggest that “the world” here refers to the heavenly realm where Christ is enthroned. In any case, the scripture’s call to angels to “worship” suggests that they are in an inferior position to the Son. That inferiority is enhanced by the next citation (v 7) from Ps 104:4. The original Psalmist celebrated God’s use of natural elements as his messengers. The Psalm in Greek, however, is best understood to say that God turns his angels into winds and his servants into flames of fire. Angels are thus simply elements of the created order, not enthroned above it. The next passage, cited in vv 8 and 9, from Ps 45:6-7, originally celebrated a royal wedding in ancient Israel. With the characteristic understanding that the scriptures refer to Christ, our homilist takes this text to celebrate Christ’s post-resurrection enthronement, already mentioned in v 3. As an address to Christ, the Psalm also

calls him “God,” something congenial to the homilist whose high estimation of Christ was already made clear. The next passage cited in vv 10-12, Psalm 102:25-27 continues to emphasize the lofty position of Christ, who “remains” (v 11) and is “the same” for years without end (v 12). The homilist will return to this theme in his concluding comments (13:8) celebrating Christ as “the same, yesterday, today and forever.” The catena ends (v 13) with Ps 110:1, which, as already noted, is much cited by other early Christians as a reference to Christ’s ascension and position at God’s right hand.

A Brief Warning: Hebrews 2:1–4

Our homilist pauses to issue a word of warning (2:1-4), which he will do at key points later in his homily (6:1-12; 10:26-31). The rhetorical devices of alliteration and assonance are again prominent. The language of the “signs and wonders” (v 4) that accompanied the proclamation of the gospel evokes the account of Acts about the Christian community in Jerusalem and the miracles that accompanied the preaching of the apostles.

Another Psalm Reread: Hebrews 2:5–9

Our homilist is not through with interpreting Psalms and he now turns to Ps 8:4-6 to recall another part of the story of Jesus. The original Psalm celebrated the status in God’s creation of mankind, “human beings” and “mortals” as the NRSV translates the Greek. Human beings were “just a little lower” than angels, characterized by “glory and honor,” because God had given them dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-27). Our homilist read the text differently. Perhaps he took a cue from the Greek words for “human beings” and “mortals.” The word in Greek is actually in the singular, “man” (*anthropos*) and “son of man” (*huios anthropou*). The latter term is indeed in Hebrew a simple idiom for “human being,” but it came to have a special set of connotations after it was used in Daniel 7:13, the prophet’s vision of the Son of Man who came to the divine figure of the Ancient of Days to be invested with royal power. The gospels report that Jesus used “Son of Man” about himself and that usage may have prompted our homilist to read this psalm as a story not of the high position of humankind in the created order, but of Christ’s humiliation and death, as a result of which he was “crowned with glory and honor.” This is the reading of the psalm that he gives in vv 8-9.

A Reflection on Christ’s Salvific Mission: Hebrews 2:10–18

The homilist’s reading of Psalm 8 sketched out a brief story about Christ’s life, death, and exaltation to heavenly glory. He probably assumes that everyone in his audience knows that story. His goal is to try to show how important and relevant for their lives that story is. He begins that process in the next passage (2:10-18). He begins with a general principle that outlines another dimension of who Jesus is, the “pioneer” of their path to salvation. The word that the homilist uses here, in Greek *archegos*, will also appear later in the homily (12:2), with slightly different connotations. The fundamental point that the homilist scores in both passages is that Jesus is somehow the model for anyone who would follow in his footsteps and that following that model leads to heavenly “glory.” The homilist also introduces a motif that he

will develop throughout the homily, in saying that God took care to “make perfect” Christ through suffering (v 10). Perfection functions for our homilist in a way similar to the notion of “justification” in Paul, a condition made possible by God’s grace that makes possible relationship to God and leads to a final consummation of salvific unity with God. In both cases the source of all of this is “the one” whom our homilist celebrates in v 11.

The homilist then develops the notion that Jesus and his followers are all from the same source by deploying scriptural passages that continue the dialogue between Son and Father. The first text is Ps 22:22, a sufferer’s lament, the first verses of which appear in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew on the lips of the crucified Jesus (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46). The verse that appeals to our homilist (Ps 22:22) points not to that moment of suffering, but to the speaker’s mission, to “proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters.” The second half of the verse, “in the midst of the congregation I will praise you,” would have special resonance for people who thought of themselves as members of a “congregation” of believers: The word for “congregation” in Greek is *ekklesia*, often translated “church” and often used, especially in Pauline texts, to refer to groups of followers of Christ. The psalm thus suggests that Christ came to reveal God’s “name” to humankind and to begin a hymn of praise in a special “congregation.”

The exemplary character of Christ’s action is further in evidence in the next two scriptural passages, cited in vv 12 and 13. The verses come from Isaiah 8:17 and 18, where the speaker, now understood to be Jesus, professes his faith or “trust” in God, an act that he does “with the children God has given me.” These verses neatly encapsulate what Hebrews as a whole tries to say about the significance of Christ: that the example of his life and death provides a model for people to follow that puts them in touch with the reality of God.

Before concluding his reflection on Jesus’ exemplary life and death, the homilist strikes one more note (vv 14-15), that Jesus’ acceptance of death as a fully human being defeats the Satanic force that oversees death and liberates those subject to that force. The imagery in this compact verse is evocative and powerful, calling to mind ancient myths of Satan as well as contemporary philosophical notions of overcoming the fear of death by virtue of one’s resolute commitment to truth and virtue. Jesus is sketched here as something like the philosophical interpretation of figures like Heracles, who confronted and overcame the powers of Hades. The most important theological point that the homilist stresses appears in v 16. The point of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and exaltation had something to do not with angels, but with human beings. The heart of the homily will try to show how that is true.

The concluding verses (2:17-18) summarize the point of this reflection by emphasizing Christ’s solidarity with his “brothers and sisters.” At the same time, they introduce a new idea, which will become a major motif, that Christ is a “faithful” and “merciful” *high priest*. The verses, in effect, say, “stay tuned, you who have not thought about Christ in priestly terms, I have something new and interesting to say about how Christ is really relevant to your lives.”



One version of Christ enthroned in heavenly glory is the widespread icon of Byzantine Christianity of Christ “Pantocrator” or “All Powerful.” This version was created in the 14th century in Cefalu, Sicily.

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