

T h e C h r i s t o l o g y o f H e b r e w s

by

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January 1962

Course: Bible 355

The Greek New Testament: Epistle to the Hebrews

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THE CHRISTOLOGY OF HEBREWS

The main theme of the letter to the Hebrews is the finality of the revelation of God manifested in His Son. From the very beginning a marked contrast is established between the old covenant and its provisions and the new covenant introduced by Christ. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (1:1). The Son is the bearer of the final and definitive word of God. Now the old time has come to an end and the end of time has been inaugurated by the Son. The word of the prophet was enough for the old dispensation but in these last days God has chosen a unique medium of revelation, His Son. It is God who speaks in both cases but the medium of revelation is of decisive significance. The Son is the one who reveals the complete truth and the fullness of salvation.

The name Son defines the nature of Christ as in essential relation to the Father. "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (1:3). The brilliancy of the light of God has been revealed in the Son. He brings to us the glory of God. Now the glory of God dwells in a person, not in the Holy of Holies of the earthly tabernacle. Christ also bears the very stamp of the nature of the Father. He is co-equal with Him and reveals Him fully and completely.

The Son is also said to be the mediator of the creation, the preserver of the universe, and to have been appointed the heir of all things (1:2,3). These affirmations obviously spring from faith and give to Christ a cosmic significance that goes beyond his redemptive role.

The term Son is used in these introductory verses, and also in the epistle as a whole, in a metaphysical sense, entailing the essential relationship between the Father and the Son. This usage, however, need not exclude the relationship of intimacy and fellowship between the Father and the Son. The exordium, therefore, postulates the pre-existence of the Son but it does it in personal terms.

The one of whom the author is to speak in detail throughout the letter steps, so to speak, from eternity into time. This stepping into time takes place in the introduction in the clause "when he had made purification for sins" (3b). This is going to be the controlling theme of the epistle, namely, how the Son became man and through obedience and sacrifice became our High Priest forever, opening up the way to God's throne of grace.

After the Son made purification for our sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (1:3). This refers to the exaltation of the Son through the resurrection, and also to His present ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Thus, side by side, both the sacrificial death of Christ and His exaltation are mentioned. These are the two aspects of His life considered in this letter. The former has opened the way for His eternal priesthood. He now sits at the right hand of God and shares in divine majesty, eminence and dignity, and, what is of utmost importance, to us, makes intercession continually before the Father on our behalf.

The main thesis of this letter has been given in the above paragraphs. The writer gives it to us in his first three verses. The rest of the epistle only deals with the above-mentioned themes in detail and for practical purposes. The author has a pastoral burden on his heart.

He wants to present as clearly and cogently as possible the finality of the revelation in Christ in order to warn his readers of the danger of drifting away or spurning such great a salvation, encouraging them continually to hold fast to their confession.

It is our purpose in the rest of this paper to develop more fully the Christological themes touched above, namely, Jesus as Son and High Priest.

The revelation that breaks out in Christ, besides being final and normative, is also superior to all other types of revelation given before by God. The author makes a very serious effort to prove from the Scriptures that the word of God coming to us in His Son is superior to prior words through angels and also Moses.

The name of Son is superior to that of the angels. For one thing, to no angel did God ever say:

"Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." (1:5).

Also Christ is the first-born and therefore has the preeminence above everything else. The Son is changeless; He is the same forever; He has world dominion, being the heir of all things (2:8-12). In brief, Christ is the Son, the Lord, the Ruler of the world. There is no possible comparison between Him and the angels. These are servants and can be changed in form when God desires (1:7). They are even supposed to minister to the needs of those who obtain salvation (1:14). Undoubtedly the author is trying to forestall any identification of Christ as a mediatory angel. He is unique and far above in nature and function to any angelic being. In a word, He is the Son.

The next comparison that the author takes up is between the Son and Moses. He clearly demonstrates that the historical Jesus, the mediator of the redemption of the new covenant, is superior to Moses, the mediator of the old covenant. Moses was faithful to the task appointed to him. Yet he was faithful as a servant and as one with the house of Israel. But Jesus was faithful as Lord of the house and therefore above the house, which is the church. Christ as Son is in charge of the house and has complete authority like God. Moses points beyond himself to the future, when the Son shall appear. In Christ God has fulfilled His promises of final redemption.

For the sake of setting before us the two great contrasts that appear in the first section of the book, we have moved ahead, forgetting the idea of the Son's humiliation which is first touched upon in chapter two in the section devoted to the angels.

It is said of Jesus in 2:9 that for a while He was made a little lower than the angels. This temporary humiliation is of major significance to the work that the Son came to realize. It refers to the incarnation and consequently to the humanity of our Lord. The Son has come down and taken up human flesh in order to be able to restore humanity back to God.

The author of this epistle gives perhaps the most adequate picture of Jesus' humanity in the New Testament. Side by side with the highest Christology we have the most balanced presentation of the Son as a human being. There is no sign of Docetism throughout the letter.

The Son truly became incarnate: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature" (2:14).

He is said to come out of the tribe of Judah. He had a normal human development, learning obedience by the things which he suffered, even though a Son (5:8). We see him proclaiming salvation (2:3), enduring the cross with joy and faith (12:2), and suffering death (12:2) outside the gate (13:12). What is said about His prayer life is more vivid than anything in the gospels: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (5:7). He shared human temptation and fear and therefore is able to sympathize with us (4:15). Yet He was without sin. This sinlessness is the basis of his work as Saviour and Intercessor.

However, this letter is not interested in the humanity of Jesus just for its own sake. The important idea is the priesthood of Jesus. His humanity is seen in the context of his high priestly function. According to Hebrews the priest is the essential figure in religion. When the priesthood is changed, the whole religious system is altered (7:12). The priest determines the character of religion. Therefore if we want to know what Christianity is we must examine the nature of the priesthood of Christ.

The function of the priest is to represent the fellowship between God and men. Through his ministry man is drawn near to God. This ministry is necessary on account of sin. Sin is the wall that separates man from God; it is the big obstacle that hinders fellowship with God.

It is the testimony of this letter that God has dealt with the problem of sin in a manner commensurate with its magnitude. He has established a priesthood in the person of His Son so that He should make propitiation for our sins (2:7).

The author conceives of this priesthood as an eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek and sets it in contrast to the Levitical priesthood. The latter is but a shadow and figure of the true and perfect priesthood of Christ.

Christ in his person fulfills the requirement for high priest. For one thing, "a high priest is commissioned by God; he does not appoint himself. This Christ fulfilled, for to Him God said: "Thou art my beloved Son, today I have begotten thee"; and also "Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (5:5-6). Furthermore "a high priest comes from among men. This is important, for otherwise he cannot intervene on behalf of men before God. Thus Christ also shared in flesh and blood, and was tempted and experienced fear and suffered, learning obedience thereby.

There is, however, a difference between Christ and the Levitical high priest. "Christ was sinless and did not have to offer a sacrifice for Himself. The sacrifice that He offered was His very life and this was for our own salvation. His obedience and perfection made Him the originator of an eternal salvation for those that obey Him (5:9-10).

When the author conceives the priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek, he is especially interested in the eternal nature of this priesthood. It has no knowable temporal limits; it is, therefore, supernatural in origin, the product of an act of God. Also, it belongs to another order than that of the Levitical priesthood. This order points beyond itself and finds its fulfilment in Christ. Christ is the one who now embodies the eternal priesthood that is superior to the Levitical order.

The Levitical priesthood has a legal ground for existence. That of Christ is based on a free act of the sovereign will of God. The older priest was based on bodily descent. But Christ has become priest "by the power of an indestructible life." God has acted creatively in Jesus. In Christ has been realized what the cultic system of the Old Testament could not do. He has opened the way to God.

Thus the Levitical priesthood is indicted on account of its temporary nature, the mortality and sinfulness of the priests, and the ineffectiveness of the sacrifices. It could not achieve true and permanent atonement. Under this system men received no permanent relief for their consciousness of sin.

But the priesthood of Christ is of another nature. It derives from the power of an indestructible life and therefore is an indestructible priesthood. There is only one High Priest who continues forever and exercises perpetually. Consequently He saves for all time those who draw near and always lives to make intercession. Our High Priest is holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need to offer sacrifices for his sins; He was pure in spirit, mind, and body. He satisfied the requirement of sacrifice for his high priestly office once for all when He offered up Himself. The word of the law appoints men in their weakness who bear the sign of transiency and sin, but the word of the oath appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever and bears the power of an indestructible life.

Jesus as the eternal High Priest through the power of an indestructible life mediates a new covenant and does away with the old. This is the covenant that was prophesied by Jeremiah. Like the old covenant it

had its origin in God and obligates both God and man. It is characterized by the inwardness of the law, the immediate knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins. The promise of Jeremiah has been fulfilled in Christ. His blood is the holy symbol of the new covenant.

In the old covenant sacrifices were continually made by the priests and the high priest. Yet the way of the sanctuary remained closed to the congregation, the offerings and sacrifices could not perfect the conscience of the worshippers and the statutes that regulated the cultic life were carnal in nature.

But Christ has changed all this situation. He offered his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary. This is an eternally valid sacrifice, providing an eternally valid salvation, because it was offered by a perfect High Priest in the true sanctuary, the heavenly one. It is through His sacrifice, or His blood or His death, all are the same, that Christ was able to reestablish the broken bond between man and God and to seal the new covenant. There can be no covenant nor forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood. The blood of Christ, therefore, has power to cleanse us from sins. His death has opened up the way and has initiated a new covenant in which our sins are forgiven.

The sacrifice of Christ, because of the nature of the priest and the offering and also because of the place where it is effected, is valid once for all and does not need to be repeated. It is efficacious forever and for all. It is perfect, and therefore unrepeatable. It closes an epoch and opens another, and even then we look towards the consummation of the age when He shall come in glory "to save those that are eagerly waiting for Him" (9:28).

The main emphasis of the letter is on the finished work and present

reality of redemption with a brief mention of a future realization of the present salvation. Thus the reader is concurrently confronted with the crucified Christ, the eternal High Priest, and the coming Saviour. This triple treatment places the Christology of the letter squarely within the New Testament faith, in spite of the unique theological path in the treatment of the high priestly ministry of Christ.

There are two other ideas that we should like to consider before bringing to a close this essay. One is the relationship of God to the sacrificial death of Christ and the other, the effect of Christ's redemptive work on us. The former we have touched upon on several occasions but should like to present more in detail.

The author of this epistle, like the rest of the New Testament writers, relates the sacrifice of Christ to the grace of God.¹ By the grace of God Jesus tastes death for every man (2:9). In His death Jesus carries out the purpose of God. God is gracious towards sinners through Christ's death. This grace of God is shown in two other ideas. First, there is the idea that no one takes the honour of priesthood upon himself of his own accord. He must be commissioned by God. From Psalm 110:4, these words are applied to Jesus: "Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." Christ was therefore under God's appointment and carrying out his good will for the salvation of men.

Second, the idea of obedience as presented in the letter to interpret Christ's work, especially His death, connects Him also with God.

Jesus learned obedience through the things which He suffered, although He

¹For the following insights concerning the relationship of the death of Christ to the grace of God I am indebted to James Denney, The Death of Christ (London: The Tyndale Press, 1951). pp. 121-123.

was a Son (5:8). But when He revealed Himself in the body which God had prepared, it was with the saying: "Lo, I am to do thy will, O God" (10:7). There is complete obedience here to the will of the Father. When He suffered He was doing God's will; when He died He was in the very center of the Father's will. The gracious hand of God is seen in providing a way of making possible for the sinful to have fellowship with Him.

There is another idea that connects God directly with the course of the life of Christ. In 2:10 we read: "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering." It was fitting with God's nature to make Jesus partaker of suffering and death even as we are. He was thus made perfect in character to carry out the redemption of man. God was there in His suffering and death all along. This is real revelation.

And now let us consider the effect of Christ's priestly and sacrificial work on us. This we gather from several passages throughout the epistle. We read in 2:11: "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin;" in 10:10: "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all;" in 10:14: "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified;" in 13:12: "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood."

The important word in the above passages is hagiazerein. Through what Christ has done men are sanctified. The meaning of this word cannot be equated with moral perfection. Men are sanctified not when they are raised to moral perfection but when through the forgiveness of sins

in the person of their Apostle, Pioneer, and High Priest, they have access to God. The word seems to correspond to the Pauline justification. Through the death of Christ, God declares us righteous and therefore we have peace with God.

Similar in usage is the word telaion. Through Christ's sacrifice men are perfected. This refers to the fact that the worshipper has now been made perfect as touching conscience (9:9), that is, the load of sins has been lifted from his conscience by Christ and he can with boldness and joy draw near to the presence of God.

The same meaning applies to the word katharizein. It is used in 9:13-14: "For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." In the Old Testament the purification was external; it did not touch the conscience. But in the New Testament Christ's sacrifice is inwardly efficacious. It reaches down to our conscience and opens up the way for a joyful religious service to the living God.

To all this we can only say:

Christ our Priest, Alleluia,

Bore our sins, Alleluia.

Now to God we can draw near

And sing for evermore:

Alleluia!