

The person and work of Christ according to the book of Hebrews

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(Discussing the contribution of the book of Hebrews to our understanding of the person and work of Christ in the New Testament.)

I am sharing my Collateral Reading Assignment of Global University course BIB2033 – A Study in the Book of Hebrews. It is naturally based on dr. Hangers commentary, which I have [processed below](#).

A. The aspects of the person and work of Christ that the book of Hebrews shares with Paul's Epistles and other New Testament writings. Especially note the definitive and eschatological character of Christ, as well as His universal significance.

My professor of biblical hermeneutics once told us during the class: "There are two kingly epistles in the New Testament, Epistle to the Romans and Epistle to the Hebrews. Understanding these two leads to understanding of whole New Testament theology." That statement influenced me well, so that I put much effort into writing my thesis on Pauline gospel in the Letter to the Romans and then decided to read the commentary on Hebrews by Donald A. Hagner with utmost perceptivity.

These two pearls, which are never read too often or studied too well, are complementary in relation to each other in their teaching about Christ and Salvation. In fact, if I would have to characterize each epistle in five-word summary, I would call Romans "The Soteriological survey with Continual Reference to the Work of Christ" and then I would review Hebrews as "The Christological study with Continual Reference to the God's Plan of Salvation". Both epistles are simply trying to explain, each one from slightly different angle of view, what has Jesus Christ really done on the cross of calvary and what it really means for man, his relationship with God and how it can influence is own life, eventually relationships with others and his position in society.

The book of Hebrews is pretty unique concerning its understanding of the person and work of Christ, which by the way speaks against the possibility of Pauline authorship. That is why it's actually far more appealing to concentrate on distinction rather than on resemblance of apostle Paul and his unknown but not less important brother and colleague.

Such difference would surely be central stress of Hebrews, which is aimed rather to obedience of faith¹, whereas Pauline theology stresses grace exclusively, abolishing any works-righteousness (cf. Rom. 3:28). (This finding is no reason to put author of Hebrews into some category of Legalists or Judaizers.) There we come to another remarkable distinction in treating of term "works", for whereas Paul understands it in very negative context, our author uses this term in context of OT sacrificial liturgy pointing towards final and most decisive work of Christ².

Third difference worth mentioning, which could lead us to the intersection of both Hebrews and Romans, could be found in 10:37–38, in author's treatment of Habakkuk 2:4 compared to Paul's treatment of the same OT passage in Romans 1:17. Here both different ways of thinking can be seen meeting on basis of the pure Gospel while complementing each other: Paul puts stress on momentary justification by faith through once-for-all work of Christ, our author stresses continuous life-long living in security of faith between difficulties and utmost insecurity of present world³.

However, one of the major meeting points of Paul, author of Hebrews and even apostle Peter dwells in eschatological understanding of Christianity. This NT phenomena raised on our authors mind in his call to faithfulness (Heb. 2:1–4). This call is both warning for those, who would like to “neglect such a great salvation” (ESV) and challenging, because God is attesting faith “by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will” (ESV). This is to be compared to Peter's pentecostal sermon in Acts 2:14–18⁴ and with Paul's various allusions and explanations of the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit, which are actual proof of Christ Jesus performing His salvation in life of every single believer.

Matter of the Holy Spirit in New Testament, particularly in second chapter of the book of Hebrews, is not to be reduced to narrow array of “gifts & fruits”, particularly for its close connection to the capstone of faith, Lord Jesus Christ. This can be seen in verse 2:15: Jesus came to set the captives free and the gospel is power of God for salvation, for changing any human life (Rom. 1:16), so that no one has to experience permanent fear. Our author would identify himself with Paul's question: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Jesus destroyed the devils work (1 John 3:8). He is the living one, holding keys of Hades (Rev. 1:18), working daily in lives of his people through His Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 8) and preparing unfathomably glorious future for those, who believe⁵.

B. Hebrews’ unique contributions to our understanding of the person and work of Christ

— His superiority to all created agents and agencies (angelic and human)

It is necessary to comprehend mentality of addressees in order to understand Christ superiority to all creation (or more likely understand the need of argument it in the letter to Hebrews).

The book of Hebrews was aimed into Hellenistic environment⁶, which is a coastline between Jewish and Greek way of thinking. Both of these influences – even though being substantially different – shared an common possibility of endangering view on Jesus as on the Son of God.

Greek thinking led to Gnosticism: Good spiritual God emanates downwardly into His direct opposite: an evil matter. Beings existing between human and God are intermediates, who are from their substance superior to human, particularly to the human incarnation of Jesus. Christian Gnostics found their way out of this embarrassing issue – Jesus had no physical body. This solution, however, could never be acceptable for our author.

Jewish thinking, surprisingly, led to similar ending: Since God is the Holy One and remote, need for intermediates is obvious⁷. Counting Jesus as one of them could have become appealing bypass of the stumbling block (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23): Accepting deity of crucified Christ Jesus.

Our author was apparently well-aware of both attitudes, because he brought argument of ascension of the Son to the right hand of God by Christocentric interpretation of Psalm 2⁸. Our author is depicting Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who is eternal, preexistent and practically interchangeable with the Lord Yahweh⁹.

— His high priesthood

Depicting Jesus as a highest priest is something unique for this epistle. In passage beginning with 4:14 and ending in 5:10 author shows his comprehensive knowledge of OT sacrificial order by detailed comparison of priesthood of Jesus with levitical priesthood known from mosaic law.

High priesthood of Jesus is most important in our author's argument, because it is only high priest, who represents humanity before God¹⁰. To support his deductions, our author combines Psalm 2:7, Psalm 110:4 in Hebrews 5:5–6. He who was “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” (ESV) as the beloved Son of God (cf. Isaiah 53:5 with John 3:16) is at the *same time appointed by God to be priest forever in the lineage of Melkizedek*¹¹. Dr. Hagner found this insight one of authors most brilliant and unique in all the NT.

High priesthood of Jesus and His right to represent humanity before God, however, depends on His full humanity¹². Being a human, Jesus wasn't unfamiliar with temptation (Luke 4) though he has not committed any sin. (On the one hand, Jesus as human was born into the fallen world with no abnormality concerning his bodily existence; sin is no essential to original concept of humanness¹³. That means, that although He could have been tempted, he had not inherited sinful nature known from Pauline understanding and therefore was not predetermined to sin and die like the rest of humanity, but to defeat death.)

Nor suffering was something unfamiliar to Jesus of Nazareth¹⁴. But all of the tribulations fit in unchangeable character of God's purpose of fulfilling promises to the fathers of His people¹⁵.

— His work in terms of the new covenant, the once-for-all sacrifice for sin

The crucial moment of authors argument hides itself in 9:5, on the background of the throne of grace, that is identical with mercy-seat. The original term “hilastērion” refers to the lid of the ark, where the blood of the sacrifice had to be sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16).

The word “hilastērion” appears also in Romans 3:25 as an allusion to OT sacrificial order, particularly the mercy-seat, where God used to reveal Himself (Lev. 16:2). In Romans, however, “hilastērion” is interpreted rather as “propitiation”. This confusion becomes clear in context of whole Gospel: Hilastērion as mercy-seat is basically Gods position, on which he accepts a sacrifice and forgives a sin. On the cross of calvary, however, God in Jesus Christ is one with the ultimate sacrifice, which is why either mercy-seat and propitiation are identical in Christ and God is de facto accepting himself¹⁷.

High priest Jesus Christ sprinkled his own blood once on the cross of calvary for all the sins ever done: for human hostility towards God exhibited in the paradise for the first time end exercised over and over again during God's faithful dealing with humanity. Jesus covered humanity with His blood: with endless blanket of God's love that forgives any human transgression and transforms sinner into a new creation.

[1] p. 71:

4:6 / ... Those who wandered in the wilderness did not go in (alluding to the original quotation), because of their disobedience.

[2] p. 72:

4:10 / ...

... it is unlikely that the works should be thought of as works-righteousness in the Pauline sense, so that rest is one of justification by faith.

Possibly by “works” the author may have in mind the activity of sacrificial ritual and the minutiae of ceremonial purity so important in the Judaism to which the readers were attracted.

[3] p. 175:

§26 An Exhortation to Endurance and Faithfulness (Heb. 10:32–39)

10:37–38 / ... Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted here, but not with the same meaning as when Paul cites it in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 (cf. RSV's effective translation of Hab. 2:4 in these verses). In these passages the stress is upon how a person becomes righteous, namely, by faith. Here, however, the stress is upon the faithfulness of the righteous person: my righteous one will live by faith. That is, righteous people will live faithfully, their lives will be lived in accordance with their faith. These two emphases are complementary rather than contradictory. The possibility of our faith (whereby we are accounted righteous) and our faithfulness (whereby we live according to God's will) are both based upon the faithfulness of God on our behalf.

[4] p. 41:

§3 A Call to Faithfulness (Heb. 2:1–4)

2:4 / This message of salvation is no less true than the earlier message spoken by God on Sinai, ...

...

But the climatic sign of authenticity is the new outpouring of gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus, like Peter at Pentecost (see Acts 2:14–18) our authors regards the Holy Spirit as the ultimate indicator of the fulfillment of God's promises and the dawning of the new era.

...

It can be foolish and dangerous for the readers to let themselves drift away from the truth.

p. 43:

Additional notes §3

The reference to gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will recalls the identical Pauline view expressed in 1 Cor. 12:4, 11: "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines." For both writers the very presence of these gifts of the Holy Spirit conveys the message of eschatological fulfillment, and thus testifies to the truthfulness of the Christian gospel.

[5] p. 53:

2:15 / ...

Our author would agree with Paul's questions: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). Jesus has come "to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8), and presents himself to John in Revelation 1:18 in these words: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold keys of death and Hades."

[6] p. 6:

... strongly Hellenistic character of the book, which does not fit well with, for example, a Jerusalem readership.

[7] p. 30:

On the one hand, God is pure spirit and therefore good; human beings, on the other hand, have physical bodies that involve them in the evil that is intrinsic to matter (salvation consists in the escape of the soul from the body). Mediating between God and humanity are his emanations in the form of a host of spiritual beings, who are God's agents of rule and who thereby elicit worship. These spiritual beings, having no material bodies, are regarded as intrinsically superior to Jesus (unless it be argued, as it was by Christian gnostics, that Jesus never had a real, physical body, but only appeared to have one). Even within the realm of Jewish thought, which affirmed the goodness of matter and shunned the dualism of the gnostics, God was perceived as remote in his transcendence, and the need for angelic intermediates was felt. Thus, in much of the intertestamental and rabbinic literature the role of angels is considered vitally important. We do not know whether the situation addressed in Hebrews stems primarily from gnostic or Jewish circles or from some indeterminate mixture of the two. If, however, we are correct in arguing that the recipients of the epistle are Jews who are in danger of lapsing back into Judaism, it may well be that they found expedient to regard Christ as an angel and thereby to avoid the stumbling-block of Christ as deity.

[8] p. 31:

Our author's argument is that the ascension of the Son to the right hand of God gives him a unique position and name, marking him out as far superior to the angels.

[9] p. 35:

What is in view is the eternity of the Son over against all that is transitory. The opening lines, in the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands, ... The Son is identified as the Lord (Yahweh).

[10] p. 54:

... of what for the author is a most important title of Jesus, and one indeed that in the NT is applied to him only in Hebrews. A priest represents humanity before God (cf. 5:1), ...

[11] p. 80:

5:5–6 / ...

...

This verse [Ps 110:1], although not quoted here, is elsewhere cited as referring to Jesus (1:13; and several allusions) and here may be understood as the bridge between Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4. Jesus is the Son of God by divine decree and therefore the one who has been raised to the right hand of God. He is thus at the same time the one appointed by God to be a priest forever in the lineage of Melkizedek.

[12] p. 53:

2:17 / ...

... The full humanity of Jesus enables him to perform the functions of a high priest. This is the first occurrence ...

[13] p. 83:

4:15 / ...

Tempted (peirazō) ... Although humanness as we know it (i.e., since the Fall) is inherently sinful, it does not follow that sin is intrinsic or essential to humanness.

[14] p. 81:

5:8–9 / As a son o.e., even as God's Son, Jesus was not exempt from suffering. His obedience was not accomplished in ideal circumstances, but was learned in the school of suffering (as NEB appropriately translates).

[15] p. 97:

§12 The Unchangeable Character of God's Purpose (Heb. 6:13–20)

... God has not changed course, nor have his purpose changed. In the definitive high priest, Jesus, God is bringing to pass his promises to the fathers of Israel.

[16] p. 128:

9:3–5 / ...

...

With their wings, these beings overshadowed the atonement cover (see Exod. 25:18–20). This is NIV's appropriate translation of a single technical term (hilastērion) indicating the lid of the ark (as it does regularly in the LXX). This cover to the ark was the place where the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificed bull and then of the goat on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16:14f.). In this way the word came to signify the taking away of sin (as indeed an alternate rendering of consonants of the Hebrew word kpr allows, that is, not only “to cover”, but “to wipe away”) and hence came to be translated “mercy seat” (Exod. 26:34, RSV). In Romans 3:25, the only other occurrence of this noun in the NT, Jesus is described as an “expiation” (RSV) or “propitiation” (KJV, NASB) for our sins, or as NIV puts it, “a sacrifice of atonement”.

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