

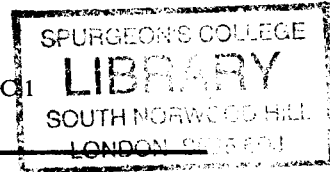
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THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

I BEGIN by stating my presuppositions.

1. The Epistle to the Hebrews is essentially an essay in Christology, and therefore any account of its Christological doctrine must include at least a brief analysis of the structure of the Epistle as a whole.

2. Its theme is the High Priesthood of Christ. All its Christological statements must be interpreted in that light.

3. The writer states his essential Christological position in the opening chapters (i. 1 - v. 10), and in the remainder of the Epistle proceeds to argue on the basis of this position.

4. The qualifications of the great High Priest are two: His oneness with God, and His oneness with man.

Christ's unity with His Father is seen (a) in direct statements concerning His relationship with His Father; (b) in statements about His work in creation; (c) in statements about His superiority to angels; (d) in statements about His heavenly session; (e) in statements about His role as the revealer of God's mind and purpose.

His essential unity with man is demonstrated (a) in a number of striking general statements; (b) in statements to do with the novel and interesting idea of his *teleiōsis* (perfection); (c) in statements concerning His temptations.

My procedure will be, first, to give a brief analysis of the structure of the Epistle; second, to examine some of the statements emphasizing Christ's oneness with God; third, to examine some of the statements emphasizing Christ's oneness with man.

The Structure of the Epistle

After the impressive introduction (i. 1-4), which we shall be analysing more closely later on, the Epistle falls into four main sections.

1. A short section emphasizing the superiority of the Son to the pretensions of angels (i. 5 - ii. 18).

2. Another short section outlining the general character of our Lord Jesus Christ as a faithful and compassionate High Priest (iii. 1 - v. 10).

3. The longest and most significant section of the Epistle (v. 11 - x. 18) which describes in detail the authentic and definitive High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. After a moving rebuke and warning (v. 11 - vi. 20), this main section subdivides into three minor divisions: (a) a division describing the superiority of Christ, the great High Priest, to the representatives of the Levitical priesthood (chapter vii); (b) a division emphasizing the pre-eminence of the great High Priest as mediator between God and man, with special reference to the supersession of the old cultus by the new (chapters viii and ix); (c) a division describing the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice and the relative inefficacy of Old Testament sacrifices (x. 1-18).

4. The main hortatory section of the Epistle (x. 19 to end of the Epistle) which extols the merits of persevering faith.

The first main section (i. 5 - ii. 18) seeks to demonstrate, with a wealth of Old Testament quotations, the vast chasm which yawns between the Son of God, on the one hand, and all angels on the other. For example, the Son is addressed by Almighty God as follows: 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever' It was certainly not to any angel (i. 13) that God said 'Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet'

After an interpolated word of exhortation (ii. 1-4) the writer shows (ii. 5-18) that the redemption of the world could not possibly have been accomplished by an angel: only the Son of God Himself, become man, was sufficient for the task. 'That is why he is not ashamed to call them (human beings) brethren' (ii. 11). 'Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted' (ii. 18).

In the next main section (iii. 1 - v. 10) the writer outlines the general character of our Lord as the faithful and compassionate High Priest. First he shows His character in contrast to that of Moses (iii. 1-6); then he launches into a long warning to the effect that only those Christians who are faithful will finally enter God's rest (iii. 7 - iv. 11); there follows a famous section on the word of God and the true humanity of Christ (iv. 12-16); and the section is rounded off with a recapitulation (v. 1-10).

The third main section (v. 11 - x. 18) begins with a further rebuke and warning (v. 11 - vi. 20). In subdivision (a) (chapter vii) the writer begins with a historical sketch of Melchizedek (vii. 1-3); an argument from the history of Abraham to prove the superiority of Melchizedek to the Levitical priesthood (vii. 4-10); and a final statement (vii. 11-14) that the priesthood 'after the order of Melchizedek' most decidedly supersedes the Levitical priesthood. The priesthood, it need hardly be said, is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ (vii. 15-19); His priesthood is pre-eminent (vii. 20-25); and, of course, the absolute perfection of the great High Priest is a cardinal point of faith (vii. 26-28).

Sub-division (b) (chapters viii and ix) emphasizes Christ's work as mediator, and demonstrates that the cultus of the old covenant cannot begin to compare with that of the new (chapters viii and ix). It is the specific privilege of the great High Priest to mediate the new covenant (viii. 1-13), and the famous quotation from Jeremiah (xxxi. 31-34) is adduced in evidence. The great High Priest enters the Holy of Holies through His own blood (ix. 1-14), contrasted with the high priests of old who were obliged to sacrifice the blood of animals. Each covenant was ratified by blood (ix. 15-22); and, above all, the readers of the Epistle must realize that Christ's sacrifice was final and definitive (ix. 23-28).

Sub-division (c) is no more than a recapitulation, though none the less significant for that. The Old Testament sacrifices were impotent (x. 1-10): 'It is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.' But by contrast, the sacrifice of Christ is completely efficacious (x. 11-18): '... by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are consecrated.' The passage from Jeremiah is then cited once again.

The fourth main section, in some respects the most famous in the Epistle, deals with the subject of persevering faith. Those who have appreciated in their hearts the great truths so far outlined in the Epistle are exhorted to draw near to the throne of God (x. 19-25). Nevertheless, the dangers of apostasy are ever present (x. 26-31). However, the readers must not be discouraged (x. 32-39); their past record is in their favour; further, the faith of the writer assures him that they are 'not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls'. There then follows the famous chapter xi in which is extolled the faith of the Old Testament saints — Abel (xi. 4), Abraham and others (xi. 8-12), Moses (xi. 23-28), and all those concerned in the final journey through the wilderness and the entrance into the promised land (xi. 29-31).

'Time would fail' the writer to continue his detailed narrative indefinitely: but a most moving picture is given of the unnumbered multitude of humble saints who suffered persecution or death for their faith (xi. 32-40).

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . ' all kinds of obligations are laid upon us (xii. 1-4). We must not misunderstand the misfortunes which God permits as a healthful discipline for us (xii. 5-11); and equal doses of encouragement and warning are to be extracted from the message of the Epistle as a whole (xii. 12-29).

An appendix follows (xiii. 1-19) with various practical charges. Finally, there is a famous epilogue (xiii. 20-25) in which 'the God of peace' is invoked to 'equip you with everything good that you may do his will . . . '

Christ's Oneness with God

I now proceed to deal with the first major theme in the Christology of the Epistle, our Lord's essential unity with God. I deal with three key statements in which Christ's relationship with God is described directly and objectively.

The first of these statements is in i. 3: 'He reflects the glory of God . . . ' The Greek *apaugasma tēs doxēs* is worthy of careful analysis. Kittel gives two slightly different meanings for *apaugasma*: (a) 'Radiation', in which sense it is used by the LXX of the relationship of Wisdom to the Eternal Light, and in Philo of the relationship of the human spirit to the Divine Logos; (b) 'Reflection', in which sense it is used by Philo of the relationship of the world to God.

Patristic exegesis is generally on the side of the first meaning: to these early commentators Christ was the 'radiation' of the divine glory, just as the rays of the sun or of any other light may be said to be its 'radiation'. But some modern commentators, notably Spicq in his well-known commentary, prefer the second meaning on the ground that it fits better with the following phrase (examined below) — Christ as the *charaktēr* of God's nature; and also on the ground that it fits in better with the writer's general thought — a 'reflection' suggesting something more independent and more individual than a 'radiation'. I do not think that it is necessary positively to choose between these two meanings: on whichever foot the weight is placed, some weight will still be on the other foot.

The statement that Christ is the *apaugasma* of God's *doxa* contains in germ the whole of the later Nicene theology. If we accept *doxa* in its usual New Testament sense of the divine Nature as manifested to men (cf. Jn. i. 14) the later idea of *homoousios* is clearly latent in the writer's mind. Further, the spirituality of God is emphasized, and any possible tincture of anthropomorphism is excluded (a special reason why Philo likes this metaphor). Finally, there is a clear suggestion of the eternal generation of the Son (cf. the Nicene phrase *phōs ek phōtos*).

The second key phrase follows immediately in i. 3 — Christ the *charaktēr* of God's *hupostasis*. *Charaktēr* comes from *charassō*, 'to engrave', and originally means either the engraver (or his tool), or that which is engraved. Hence it came to mean the essential character of something, its distinctive essence. The *facsimile* of an original, the *impression* made by a seal, or a *statue* of a person are all illustrations of the kind of meaning required by the word here. It will be seen that the word carries a very strong and definite meaning — stronger, for example, than the *eikōn* of Colossians i. 15.

It is only in later theological controversy that *hupostasis* is used to mean 'person' — the *treis hupostaseis* of God being contrasted with His essential *mia ousia*. In New Testament usage *hupostasis* means 'essential nature' — that which underlies outward appearances. If we bear in mind the useful pictures of the facsimile of an original, of the impression made by a seal and of the statue of a person, we arrive at a clear doctrine of Christ possessing the essential nature of His Father. While *apaugasma tēs doxēs* might possibly be interpreted in a sense consistent with Modalism, this second phrase corrects any possible misinterpretation along those lines. The two phrases, taken together, assure us of the writer's conviction (a) that Christ is the exact image of God, (b) that He is personally distinct from God — just as the mark of a seal is distinct from the seal.

The third key phrase is in i. 5: ' . . . today I have begotten thee . . . ' These words are exactly quoted from the LXX of Psalm ii. 7. The Messianic character of Psalm ii was firmly held in Jewish tradition, and Christian exegesis followed this from the beginning — see for example its use in the hymn of praise uttered by the Church on the return of Peter and John from their ordeal before the Sanhedrin (Acts iv. 25, 26). At first sight the phrase seems to carry the awkward implication that the Messiah was begotten at a particular point in time; but further reflection convinces us that 'today' refers, not to the time of Messiah's begetting, but to the announcement by God of His divine office. Luke iii. 22, taken by itself, would suggest that this announcement was at Christ's baptism: the fact that D and some other manuscripts read 'Today I have begotten thee' for 'With thee I am well pleased' shows clearly that the echo of Psalm ii was at once picked up by the early Church: but this too specific impression needs correction from Paul's use of the Psalm in his sermon at Pisidian Antioch, in which there appears to be a close link with the resurrection (Acts xiii. 32-34). Thus the 'announcement'

of Messiah's office can best be referred to all the circumstances in which that office was visibly demonstrated before the eyes of men — certainly at the baptism and in the resurrection, but also, *inter alia*, in the incarnation itself — perhaps the leading thought in our writer's mind here. The phrase, thus interpreted, bears clear testimony to the writer's conviction that Christ was the very Son of God and the appointed Messiah.

(To be continued)

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