

Exegesis of Hebrews 2:14-18

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Context of the Book of Hebrews

Since we don't know who the author of Hebrews is we need to concentrate even more on other background aspects such as recipients, occasion and line of thought.

As far as we can tell, the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were a group of Jewish Christians living in the city of Rome. In Hebrews 13:24 we read: *Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.* It would seem that these Italians were sending their greetings home. Another argument in favor of this theory is that the book of Hebrews was well known to the church fathers in Rome.

The letter to the Hebrews was written because these Jewish Christians were being tempted to return to Judaism (or to some Jewish sect) to avoid persecution. It's possible that Nero had started to persecute Christians; it's easy to see why Jewish Christians would think about returning to the relative safety of the synagogue. These Christians had already suffered persecution with some ending up in prison (10:32-34) although none had lost their lives (12:4). The threat of this defection was the occasion for this letter. This is the overwhelming thought that must be remembered as we study the book of Hebrews. The author labors to make it perfectly clear that Christ is better than any remnants of Judaism. Christ is the One who brings God's grace; He is superior to the ancient prophets, to the angels, to Moses, and to the high priest. To return to Judaism would be to lose Christ, the Bringer of the perfect covenant.

The book of Hebrews begins with a startling statement to Jewish ears: *God has spoken to us by His Son* (1:2). Jesus is a living, breathing revelation who is more complete than anything in the Old Testament. Jesus was superior to the powerful angels who had been involved in the giving of the law. Christ has been given the name "the Son of God." Angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (Christians!!) (1:14). In the first verses of chapter two the author makes an application of the fact that Christ is superior to the angels; he warns his readers not to ignore such a great salvation (the new covenant). God put His stamp of approval on this new covenant by means of signs, wonders, miracles and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4). Indeed, Christ (and His message) is superior to the angels (and their message).

Wider context (Hebrews 2:5-9)

Verses 5-9 apply Psalm 8:4-6 to Jesus. This is an interesting use of Psalm 8 because it doesn't seem that David meant the Psalm to be prophetic. David praises God in Psalm 8 for His marvelous work of creation and his condescension to bless human beings by giving them a huge responsibility. Even though people are "a little lower than the heavenly beings" God gave people the almost godlike responsibility of having authority over creation. The author to the Hebrews carries this thought one step farther. God the Father sent His Son to be "a little lower than the angels" yet gave Him authority over all creation. God gave human beings authority over creation; Jesus (a true human being) had absolute authority over creation. At the present we do not see Jesus' authority over the world. Instead we see Christ's power and glory in the fact that He suffered death, thus tasting (fully experiencing) death for everyone! The note on verse 9 in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* catches the thought quite well:

Ps 8 is here applied to Christ in particular. As forerunner of man's restored dominion over the earth, he was made lower than the angels for a little while but is now crowned with glory and honor at God's right hand. By his perfect life, his death on the cross and his exaltation, he has

made possible for redeemed man the ultimate fulfillment of Ps 8 in the future kingdom, when man will regain sovereignty over creation. (p. 1877)

Immediate Context: Hebrews 2:10-13

Verses 10-13 are closely tied to verses 14-18 and need to be looked at carefully. Lane states:

As in the previous paragraph, 2:10-18 assumes the form of homiletical midrash. The exposition turns on the citation and development of three biblical quotations. The statement that Jesus calls others his brothers (ἀδελφούς, v. 11) is derived from the first quotation, which contains the crucial expression “my brothers” (τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς, v. 12). The quotation also prepares for the statement in v. 17 that it was essential that Jesus be made like “the brothers” (τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς). The note of trust introduced in the second quotation (Ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθῶς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ, “I will trust him” [v. 13a]) prepares for the description of Jesus as trustworthy (πιστός) in v. 17, where the context establishes that he was trustworthy in response to the call of God (cf. 3:1-6). The key term in the third quotation is “the children” (τὰ παιδιά, v. 13b) which is taken up immediately in the pregnant statement of vv. 14-15 (“Since, therefore, τὰ παιδιά share a common mortal nature”). The pattern of quotation and explanation is characteristic of homiletical midrash and here serves to emphasize Jesus’ solidarity with the human family. (p. 53)

In other words, the three quotations listed in verses 12 and 13 set the stage for verses 14-18. The word “brother” (v. 12) comes back in verse 17. The phrase “I trust him” (v. 13) prepares us for verse 17. The word “children” (v. 13) is explained in verses 14-15.

Brief exegesis of Hebrews 2:10-13

Ἔπρεπεν γὰρ αὐτῷ, δι’ ὃν τὰ πάντα καὶ δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα, πολλοὺς υἱοὺς εἰς δόξαν ἀγαγόντα τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι. ὁ τε γὰρ ἀγιάζων καὶ οἱ ἀγιαζόμενοι ἐξ ἑνὸς πάντες· δι’ ἣν αἰτίαν οὐκ ἐπαισχύνεται ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοὺς καλεῖν λέγων,

Ἀπαγγελῶ τὸ ὄνομά σου τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου,
ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας ὑμνήσω σε,
καὶ πάλιν,
Ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθῶς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ,
καὶ πάλιν,
Ἴδου ἐγὼ καὶ τὰ παιδιά ἃ μοι ἔδωκεν ὁ θεός.

10 In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. 11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. 12 He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.”

13 And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.” (NIV)

Verse 10 is a good summary of the plan of salvation. The first part of the verse (in the Greek) tells us that God had a plan to save the world (*it was fitting ...*). The second part of the verse (in the Greek) stresses the

goal of the plan of salvation (*in bringing many sons to glory*). Finally, the third part of the verse tells us the plan (*make the author of salvation perfect through suffering*). It was fitting for Jesus to suffer because someone had to suffer for sins committed (*In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*. Hebrews 9:22). God the Father put this plan into action; that too is fitting because He is the Creator (*for whom and through whom everything exists*). The goal of the plan of salvation was to bring many sons to glory. The word ἀγαγόντα is difficult to translate. It is an accusative, active participle. It modifies the dative αὐτῷ but is accusative because it is the subject of the infinitive τελειῶσαι in an accusative with infinitive (ACI) construction. Yet it does not have an article and seems to have the characteristics of a circumstantial participle with a purpose sense. In other words, God the Father is the One who “makes complete” (τελειῶσαι) the author of Salvation so that “many sons might be brought to glory” (ἀγαγόντα – literally “the One who leads ...”). This is another example of the New Testament writers not observing our neat grammatical categories!

God the Father made Jesus complete (τελειῶσαι) through suffering. In the book of Hebrews παθημάτων is nearly synonymous with death. Jesus not only had to live a perfect life but had to die a sacrificial death in order for salvation to be complete. This suffering and death qualified Him to be the Savior. Jesus is called τὸν ἀρχηγὸν of our salvation. In Greek writing ἀρχηγὸν was used of heroes, people who founded cities, the head of a family or a founder of a philosophic school. The idea is that Jesus is our hero who has opened a “new way” for us, eternal life in heaven!

About the word ἀρχηγὸν William Lane writes, “Hearers familiar with the common stock of ideas in the hellenistic world knew that the legendary hero Hercules was designated ἀρχηγός, “champion,” and σωτήρ, “savior”. They would almost certainly interpret the term ἀρχηγός in v. 10 in the light of the allusion to Jesus as the protagonist who came to the aid of the oppressed people of God in vv. 14-16. Locked in mortal combat with the one who held the power of death, he overthrew him in order to release all those who had been enslaved by this evil tyrant. This representation of the achievement of Jesus was calculated to recall one of the more famous labors of Hercules, his wrestling with Death, “the dark-robed lord of the dead” ... The designation of Jesus as ἀρχηγός in a context depicting him as protagonist suggests that the writer intended to present to his hearers in language that drew freely upon the Hercules tradition in popular Hellenism” (p. 56-57). Certainly we wouldn’t agree with Lane’s major idea ... especially since Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who no doubt were not great fans of Hercules myths! Yet there is something we can learn from Lane. In a world that latches on to heroes we need to remember that Jesus is our hero and needs to be the hero of our young people. Build Jesus up in the eyes of the young people! His life is more interesting than any sports star or musician!

Discussion Question: How can we show our young people how “heroic” Jesus is, how worthy of our admiration, respect and love?

In verse 11 the author makes the implication of verse 10 explicit: Jesus is our brother! It was fitting for Jesus to suffer for us so that we could be brought to glory. As a further explanation (γάρ) verse 11 tells us that Jesus and human beings are from one source. The two participles (ἁγιαζων and ἁγιαζόμενοι) are articularized participles. The vocable meaning that is stressed is “holiness.” Jesus did the work (active participle) so that we could receive the benefits (passive participle); what a great “deal” for us! ἐξ ἑνός simple means “from one” or “from the same source.” The source could be God (who created us and begot Jesus) or humanity. From the

context it seems that humanity is the best answer. Because (δι' ἧν αἰτίαν) Jesus shares a common source with us He is not ashamed to call us brothers. The shorter version of Kittel states: "The main point of *aischyne* is not "feeling of shame" but "disgrace," i.e., the shame brought by divine judgment, though sometimes with a stress on "being ashamed." (p. 30). Jesus was not disgraced to call us his brothers because He shared a common source with us (humanity). Since ἀδελφοῦς does not have an article the vocable meaning is stressed. Jesus is part of our family. Lenski states:

We should not forget that he is the *heir* of all things (1:2), and that to be brought to glory means that we *inherit* salvation, i.e., become *joint heirs* with him (Rom. 8:7). Is it not plain that he and we must thus be brothers? Also that the angels do not belong to this brotherhood? (p. 83)

The three Scriptural quotations in verses 12 and 13 offer proof of Jesus' brotherhood with humanity and also prepare us for the implications of this brotherhood as recorded in verses 14-18. The quotation in verse 12 comes from Psalm 22, the great Messianic Psalm that gives us a glimpse into the heart of the Messiah as He suffers, dies and comes back to life in glory. About this Psalm Prof. August Pieper writes, "Every word of this psalm applies directly to Christ. We can find no situation in the life of David that corresponds to what this psalm describes" (p. 294). Professor Pieper's comments on Psalm 22:22 are worth quoting in full:

The "name" of God is the sum total of his divine majesty, which he demonstrated so magnificently by delivering his suffering Servant. The special emphasis here, as verse 25 [NIV – v. 24] makes clear, is on God's grace, his faithfulness, and his help. The Messiah's "brothers" are not his countrymen, with whom he shared a common bloodline, but his spiritual brothers, designated in the following verse as "those who fear God." We need not restrict the "brothers" here to the disciples, to whom the Lord wanted the news of his resurrection announced (Jn 20:17). The second half of the verse makes that clear: "I will praise you in the congregation." "Brothers" and "congregation" are parallel. The "congregation" is to be thought of not only as the group assembled for worship, but as the entire spiritual descendants of Jacob and of Israel (v. 24). In contrast to them are the Gentiles (v. 28). All Christendom is meant. Messiah is saying, "I will proclaim to all of Christendom the wonder of your grace and faithfulness."

Luther: "In Hebrews 2:11f. the apostle takes up the fact that Christ calls us 'brothers' ... Here is the richness of this mystery, that we are Christ's brothers, his co-heirs, children of God, kings ruling over this world, and owners along with Christ of indescribable wealth. Who can properly appreciate what it means to be a brother of Christ? All this is comprehended in that single word." (p. 307)

The point of the second quotation (v. 13a) is that Jesus trusts in His Heavenly Father...just as we do. This is another connection Jesus shares with us. The quotation is from Isaiah 8:17. In Isaiah 8 God warns Isaiah not to follow the ways of the people but instead to trust in the Lord. Verse 17 is Isaiah's confession that he will indeed trust the Lord. The author of Hebrews puts this confession into Christ's mouth. During His ministry Jesus had perfect trust and confidence in His Heavenly Father, the kind of trust human beings are to have. Jesus fulfilled our responsibility in that part of the law too! Even a casual glance at Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane show us the great trust Jesus had in His Heavenly Father. The book of John stresses the fact that Jesus came from the Father...and equipped Him for His work, even giving Him the words to say (John 17:8).

The final quotation (v. 13b) in this section is also from Isaiah 8. Isaiah 8:18 states, *Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.* The children Isaiah is talking about are no doubt his own children Shear-Jashub and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. Isaiah says that he and his children are "signs and symbols" from the Lord. His children's

names were symbols from the Lord (“Remnant will return” and “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil” respectively; cf. the NIV notes on Isaiah 7:3 and 8:3). God the Father gave Jesus children as well; in John 10:29 Jesus said, “*My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.*” The Father’s children are given to the Son to be His brothers. [Note: It’s interesting that a third quotation from Isaiah 8 is applied to Christ in the New Testament (cf. Isaiah 14-15, Romans 9:33, 1 Peter 2:6-8)].

Hebrews 2:14-18 for the most part explains and applies the first verses of this chapter.

Exegesis of Hebrews 2:14-18

Verses 14-18 offer us a study in particles. William Lane writes,

The unity between the Son and those who are sons find illustration in the quotations of vv. 12 and 13, while the implications of this solidarity are expounded in vv. 14-18. The exposition is strung together by the particles ἐπεὶ οὖν, “since therefore” (v. 14), γὰρ δήπου, “for of course” (v. 16), the inferential ὅθεν, “for this reason” (v. 17), and the concluding causal ἐν ᾧ γάρ, “because” (v. 18), which sums up the relevance of the development for the hearers.” (p. 53)

Verse 14-15

ἐπεὶ οὖν τὰ παιδιά κεκοινώνηκεν αἵματος καὶ σαρκός, καὶ αὐτὸς παραπλησίως μετέσχευ τῶν αὐτῶν, ἵνα διὰ τοῦ θανάτου καταργήσῃ τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὸν διάβολον, καὶ ἀπαλλάξῃ τούτους, ὅσοι φόβῳ θανάτου διὰ παντὸς τοῦ ζῆν ἔνοχοι ἦσαν δουλείας.

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (NIV)

Lane shows us the symmetry of verses 14 and 15:

Within this setting the periodic sentence in vv. 14-15 provides an example of artistic prose, for in a single sentence the writer makes effective use of both parallel and concentric symmetry.

A	Since the children	
	B shared a common human nature	Parallel symmetry
A	he too likewise	
	B shared the same humanity	
C	in order that by death	
	D he might break the power	Concentric symmetry
	D of the one who held the power	
C	of death	

The regularity of the rhythm is broken momentarily by the parenthetical comment “that is, the devil,” but it is then resumed immediately:

E and that he might liberate those

F who from fear of death
 F throughout their lives
 E were held in a state of bondage

Parallel symmetry

The parallel symmetry emphasizes the resemblance of the Son to those who are “the children”, while the concentric symmetry develops a contrast, first between the Son and the devil, and then between liberation and enslavement.” (p. 53)

Discussion Question: Do you think the author was really thinking about symmetry, artistic prose, and foreshadowing when he wrote Hebrews?

The particles ἐπεὶ οὖν look backward and forward. οὖν looks backward and brings everything stated in verses 10 through 13 into the discussion of this verse. ἐπεὶ looks forward to the rest of the sentence and says that the reason Christ became a human being was that we (all human beings) shared a common human nature. τὰ παῖδιά refers to the whole human race, creatures of flesh and blood. These words are drawn from the quotation in the second half of verse 13. God had given Jesus these “children” (v. 13b); Jesus loved them enough to become one of them. κοινωνέω means “to share one’s possessions, with the implication of some kind of joint participation and mutual interest—‘to share’” (p. 569, Louw and Nida). Robertson (p. 509) reminds us that verbs of sharing take genitives as their objects. The perfect tense stresses that this sharing took place and the results continue; at creation we shared in flesh and blood...and we still do. Human beings share αἵματος καὶ σαρκός. The fact that these words don’t have an article stresses the vocable meanings of the words. “Flesh and blood” was a stock phrase to describe human beings; the phrase stresses our creatureliness and distinction from God.

αὐτὸς is a reflexive pronoun that forcefully brings Christ back into the verse (“He Himself.” παραπλησίως is an adverb that ties the two halves of the parallel symmetry together. BAG states, “The word does not show clearly just how far the similarity goes. But it is used in situations where no differentiation is intended, in the sense *in just the same way*” (p. 621). Lenski writes that this adverb enhances the verb and doesn’t limit it (p 89). Jesus *completely* shares our humanity. μετέχω is almost a synonym of κοινωνέω. The vocable meaning is “to share in.” In Hebrews 7:13 this verb is used in the phrase “*belong* to a different tribe.” The inference is that Jesus came to “belong” to the group called human beings. The verb is aorist because Jesus’ incarnation happened; it’s a fact. τῶν αὐτῶν refers to flesh and blood.

ἵνα marks the beginning of the concentric symmetry in this verse. ἵνα introduces a purpose clause. The whole purpose of the incarnation was our salvation, the crushing of the devil’s death grip on humanity. The means (διὰ) by which Jesus accomplished this great feat was His death (τοῦ θανάτου). The article makes death a specific death, Jesus’ death on the cross. Death was the only way that the devil’s grip could be broken. Someone had to die for sins committed (cf. the comments on “It was fitting” in verse 10). καταργήσῃ is subjunctive because it’s in a purpose clause. It’s aorist because it stresses that the action happened; Jesus broke the devil’s power. The vocable meaning of the verb is very interesting. The abridged verses of Kittel states:

1. Religiously Paul uses it for “to make inoperative.”
 - a. When God or Christ is the subject, the effect is beneficial. A transvaluation of values is effected in 1 Cor. 1:28: God “brings to nothing” things that are. In Eph. 2:15 he “destroys” the law of commandments; Christ’s work frees us from the legalistic requirements of the law (while not invalidating its ethical demands; (cf. Rom. 3:31). God also “robs” this age and its rulers “of their power” (1 Cor. 2:6), including death, and, as Hebrews puts it (2:14), the devil. The body of sin, i.e., our form in subjection to sin, is thus “negated,” although our new life has not yet taken on its definitive form. (p. 76)

The word is used in 2 Timothy 1:10: *our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.* About this verb Delitzsch adds:

But καταργεῖν here implies not only passive endurance and suffering, but at the same time an active fight and struggle: the death by which Death was overcome was a mortal combat with him that had the power of death, with life and death for its issues, a decisive termination of the war declared against Satan, at the Lord's first entrance into the world. (p. 135-136)

Whom did Jesus "render inoperative"? τὸν τὸ ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου. The participle ἔχοντα has an article because a specific person is being talked about: the devil. It's true that Jesus came to destroy death and to give us eternal life. It's also true that He came to destroy the devil. The devil is described as one who holds the power of death. The words κράτος and θανάτου both have articles because they are well known (unfortunately the world knows too much about the power of death!). Someone said, "The thing well known as death was destroyed by a well-known death (Jesus' death)." We might ask, "Doesn't God hold the power of life and death?" Of course He does. Yet the Bible also speaks of the devil holding the power of death. The devil holds the power of death in the sense that he tempts people to sin. The wages of sin is death, Paul says. Another way to look at it is that the devil holds the power of death *mediately*; God holds it *immediately*. In John 8:44 Jesus says, *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.* The devil is a killer; he always is destroying things (cf. Mark 3:23ff; Luke 13:11,16; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Timothy 1:20). This verse ends with the short phrase: τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὸν διάβολον. Robertson (p. 705) says that τοῦτ' ἔστιν is used without any regard to the number, gender or case of the word in apposition with it. τὸν διάβολον reminds us that the devil is our enemy. He is the accuser and deceiver who personally wants us in hell.

As we look back at verse 14 we realize that a great battle took place during Jesus' ministry. Jesus was our great Champion who battled the devil for us (both in our place and on our behalf). It has always been that way; God is our Champion against the forces of evil. In Isaiah 49:24-26 we read:

Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives rescued from the fierce? But this is what the LORD says: "Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

We live in an age of stories, TV, and pictures (not in the world of print and words that our grandparents lived in). We dare never forget that the Bible is a picture, a story...the most powerful story ever told. Our Champion has entered our world to fight for us, to lock Himself in mortal combat on our behalf. This is more exciting than any shoot 'em up video game, more grand than any cultural icon and more fulfilling than any materialistic binges. We need to tell the story, the powerful story of our Savior!

Discussion Question: We live in a post-literate society. Instead of simply bemoaning the fact that few people read very much we can take comfort that in a sense we have returned to a culture that is much like the one the early Christian church grew up in. Theirs was an aural culture. They thought in pictures ... much like today's average person. The Bible is full of word pictures, parables and stories. In fact, the Bible IS a (true) story. Two questions:

1. How will this impact our preaching and teaching?
2. Might this cultural shift actually help the church?

Verse 15 continues describing the work Jesus did for us. Jesus freed all people from the slavery they were in, slavery to the fear of death. ἀπαλλάξῃ is a subjunctive because it's still part of the purpose clause in verse 14. It's aorist because the author stresses that the action happened, our freedom is a fact. The abridged version of Kittel states about this verb: "This means 'to alter by removal,' 'to do away,' with such nuances as 'to dismiss,' 'to liberate,' 'to absent oneself,' 'to withdraw.' In the NT it occurs in the transitive active in Heb. 2:15 for 'to liberate.'" (p. 40). Jesus has freed us by "removing" us from the devil's slavery. τούτους is modified by ὅσοι, *as many as those who*. We are ἔνοχοι. "Little Kittel" states:

The classical meaning of *enochos* is "to hold fast to something," and of *enochos* "held fast," "liable," "subject to" (with dative of a law, offense, or penalty), middle "to strive after," "be entangled," LXX "to pursue." In the NT we find "to press" in Lk. 11:53, and "to entangle oneself," "subject oneself" in Gal. 5:1. *Enochos* means "subject" in Heb. 2:15. (p. 289)

We were held fast in slavery (ἔνοχος takes a genitive—hence δουλείας). δουλείας has no article so the vocable meaning is stressed here: the state of condition of subservience, bondage. We are held in slavery by means of the fear of death. φόβῳ is dative of means. The stressed vocable meaning (no article) is fear and terror, a reaction to people's encounter with force. θανάτου has no article so that the vocable meaning of death (the end, destruction) is stressed. This fear of death is διὰ παντός τοῦ ζῆν. ζῆν is an articularized infinitive that is the object of διὰ. The idea is that we have a fear of death "all through the living," all through our life. Death impacts us long before we face it. This verse says much the same thing that Paul states in Romans 8:15: *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."* We were slaves of sin, death and the devil. Jesus came to change all that.

Verse 16

οὐ γὰρ δήπου ἀγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται ἀλλὰ σπέρματος Ἀβραὰμ ἐπιλαμβάνεται.

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. (NIV)

Verse 16 reminds us of the greater line of thought at work: Christ is superior to the angels (and to the law, to Judaism, etc). The author accomplishes this reminder with the first five words of verse 16: οὐ γὰρ δήπου ἀγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται. The words οὐ γὰρ δήπου are meant to shake us up: NOT for certainly....! The word γὰρ technically explains and amplifies verse 15 but is really used to draw a larger conclusion. The word δήπου ("certainly," "surely") makes an appeal to information shared by the hearers (p. 52, Lane). The present tense of the verb ἐπιλαμβάνεται also helps to get our attention after a steady diet of aorist and perfect main verbs. The author is engaging us in the main point of his letter!

ἐπιλαμβάνομαι is a difficult verb to define exactly. This verb can be used in the sense of "to take hold of" and also in the sense of "to help." The question is whether the author is stressing the assumption of the human nature ("to take hold of") or the help Jesus gave us ("to help"). No doubt both meanings are here...but the idea of "help" dominates. *TDNT* defines the word as drawing someone to yourself to help them (p. 9, vol. 4). *BAG* also lists both meanings (take hold of and help) (p. 295). The Greek and Latin church fathers used this verb to talk about Jesus assuming human nature. Yet the primary meaning here seems to be "help." First of all, there is no Biblical usage of ἐπιλαμβάνομαι with the idea of assuming the human nature. When God is said to "take hold of us" by the hand the sense is to help us (Jeremiah 31:32, Hebrews 8:9). The present tense of the verb also argues for a primary meaning of "help"; if the assumption of the human nature was meant an aorist tense would have been used. Verse 15 had just talked about the assumption of the human nature; verse 16 advances the thought by talking about the help Jesus gives us. Therefore the thought is that Jesus didn't help the angels (by assuming their nature) but the seed of Abraham (by assuming their nature). σπέρματος Ἀβραὰμ

stresses our humanity; we are descendants of Abraham. What an honor that God became one of us! Martin Luther made the same point with a story:

The story was told in the papacy that at one time the devil came to Mass in a church. And when in the *Patrem* the words were sung: *Et homo factus est*, “And He was made man,” and the people did not kneel down but stood, he struck one of them on the mouth and rebuked him and said: You gross knave, are you not ashamed to stand here like a stick and not to fall on your knees for joy? If God’s Son has become our Brother as He has become yours, we should not know where to stay for joy. I hold that the story is not true; the devil is too hostile toward us and the Lord Christ. But this is surely true; Whoever invented it had a lofty spirit and well understood the great honor that was bestowed on us by God’s Son becoming man...” (*What Luther Says*, #460)

Discussion Question: Jesus is our Brother. How might we use that truth in a counseling session? Be specific!

Verse 17

ὅθεν ὄφειλεν κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι, ἵνα ἐλεήμων γένηται καὶ πιστὸς ἀρχιερεὺς τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ.

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. (NIV)

Verses 17 and 18 are key transitional verses because they tie together everything said to this point in the letter (*he had to be made like his brothers in every way*) while pointing to the next section of the letter (*a merciful and faithful high priest*). Some have even seen verse 17 as a key verse for the whole letter:

Kistemaker has seen in v. 17 the four perspectives necessary for understanding the whole epistle, each linked with a psalm: (a) the humanity of Jesus; cf. Ps 8:5-7; Heb. 2, especially 6-8; (b) his faithfulness, cf. Ps. 95:7-11; Hebrews 3:1-4:13, especially 3:7-11; (c) Jesus as a merciful high priest, Ps 110:4; Hebrews 4:14-5:10, especially 5:6; and (d) how Jesus deals with sin, Ps. 40:6-8; Hebrews 9:1-10, especially 10:5-7. (p. 179, Ellington)

ὅθεν looks back at everything said in verses 10-16. Jesus needed to suffer in place of the people He wanted to help; *for that reason* He had to be made like His brothers. ὄφειλεν is an imperfect active indicative verb. The root meaning is “to be obligated.” The word often implies a moral necessity. In other words, if Jesus wanted to help us it was necessary that He become one of us. κατὰ πάντα simply means “in every respect” (cf. Acts 17:22, Colossians 3:20). κατὰ πάντα makes it impossible to understand ὁμοιωθῆναι in a weak way. Jesus completely took on our nature as He humbled Himself to live and die for us. τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς is definite because it picks up “brothers” from verse 12 (the quote from Psalm 22:22).

ὁμοιωθῆναι is an aorist passive infinitive used with ὄφειλεν. ὁμοιωθῆναι is aorist because Jesus really came to earth, it happened. The vocable meaning is “to be made like someone.” Especially in this context and with κατὰ πάντα just words away it’s clear that the author is talking about assimilation, not simulation. We recall Paul’s words in Philippians 2:7: *...but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness*. There Paul uses the noun (ὁμοίωμα) derived from the verb we are examining. The point of the Philippians 2:7 passage seems to be more the humiliation of Christ rather than the incarnation of Christ. Of course on the first Christmas the naked eye would not have seen much of a difference between the incarnation and humiliation of Christ. Here in Hebrews both incarnation (cf. the whole context of vv. 10-18)

and the humiliation (dying to make atonement for us) are meant.

He humbled Himself so that (ἵνα introduces another purpose clause) He might be a merciful and faithful high priest. ἐλεήμων is the Greek equivalent of ἱερεὺς. Jesus' love for us is undeserved, it's the love of a superior to an inferior. Jesus is also a πιστὸς high priest. πιστὸς tells us that Jesus was faithful in discharging the office He was given by His Father. Jesus is called a high priest for the first time in Hebrews in this verse. The one aspect of Jesus our high priest that needs to be explored here is that Jesus had to take on our weaknesses (the humiliation of Christ); to take on our weaknesses He had to become one of us (the incarnation of Christ). The author explores this topic further in Hebrews 4:14-16:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Here in verse 17 we catch a glimpse of this major theme in Hebrews! τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν was a standard phrase in the LXX (cf. Exodus 4:16, 18:19) that can be translated “with regard to God.” Literally it could be translated “the things in respect (acc. of respect) to God.” The expression points to all men's relations to God.

The phrase εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ tells us the purpose (εἰς το) for which Jesus became our high priest. ἰλάσκομαι has two meanings in BAG: 1) “propitiate, conciliate” and 2) “expiate.” Obviously the two meanings are related. Expiation stresses the payment Jesus made so that our sins are forgiven. Propitiation stresses the right relationship with God that results from Jesus' work. The best meaning in the context is expiate. Jesus gave His life to forgive (expiate) the sins of the people. The only other use of the word is in Luke 18:13 where the meaning is propitiation (“Have mercy on me...”). The NIV translation of Hebrews 2:17 is good (“make atonement for”) as long as the sacrifice of Jesus is kept in mind; the NIV translation stresses the propitiation aspect more. The NIV note (“and that he might turn aside God's wrath, taking away”) is also good; it stresses the expiation aspect more. The verb is present tense because of the continuous application of Christ's work to the sins of the people. ἁμαρτίας has an article because it refers to the sins of the people; the vocable meaning of the word is to miss the mark. λαός has a wide range of meanings: the people of God, a tribe or group or people, or the common people (as opposed to the rich, etc.). In the context the only meaning that works is “people in general.” Jesus has made a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2 says much the same thing: *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Verse 18

ἐν ᾧ γὰρ πέπονθεν αὐτὸς πειρασθείς, δύναται τοῖς πειραζομένοις βοηθῆσαι.

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (NIV)

ἐν ᾧ should be translated “because.” BAG states, “ἐν ᾧ = ἐν τούτῳ ὅτι *for the reason that = because*” (p. 261). γὰρ shows that verse 18 is going to add a bit to what verse 17 stated about Jesus' suffering and dying to forgive our sins. πέπονθεν is perfect because the results of Jesus' suffering continue; this verb should not be stressed in the sentence because a new element is added in the participle. In fact, the participle is even modified by αὐτὸς. The new element in this verse is the word πειράζω. Whenever we work with the word πειράζω we are faced with the two meanings “test” and “tempt.” Most of the time both shades of the word are in place. For example, when the devil confronted Jesus in the desert He was being tempted by the devil; however, these temptations were also “tests” of his Messiahship. Some argue that the author of Hebrews was referring to

Jesus' time in the desert or His ordeal in Gethsemane. To limit the meaning here to those two incidents finds no textual basis. The author seems to be thinking of Jesus' whole ministry as being one of temptations and tests, much like our lives. The thought of this verse is not, "Because He **suffered** when tempted, He is able to help those being tempted." The fact that Jesus suffered isn't the biggest reason that He is able to help those who are tempted. The whole point of the passage is that Jesus **was tested** as He suffered and is therefore able to help others who are being tested. The verb δύναται has as its root meaning "power." The idea behind the word is that someone who is powerful is able to do anything. Ironically, Jesus is able to help us when we are tested because He was tested! Jesus' power is found in His weakness! βοηθησαι means to come to the aid of someone. This word is not used very often in the New Testament because God usually does it all!

Lenski states,

Verse 18 was so effective for the first readers of this epistle because they were compelled to suffer and were thus inclined to return to their old Judaism. Read the introduction. If they were the converted Jews in Rome, we can even visualize their situation. With v. 18 pointing to the suffering Savior and his temptation the way is open for the great admonition which brings his help effectively to the readers in their temptations. (p. 98)

Discussion Question: We face plenty of "tests" as pastors. Name some.
Can you name times in Jesus ministry when He was tested in the same way?
How does the fact that Jesus was tested help us when we are tested?

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