

The Humanity of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews*

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The humanity of Jesus is one of the most serious points of contention between Trinitarians and non-Trinitarians. Our Trinitarian friends will of course insist strenuously that they believe in the humanity of Jesus, but it is clear from what they have to say on the subject that they conceive of it in terms very different from ourselves. Consider the following quotation from a well-known reformed theologian:

Christ has a human nature, but He is not a human person. The Person of the Mediator is the unchangeable Son of God. In the incarnation He did not change into a human person; neither did He adopt a human person. He simply assumed, in addition to His divine nature, a human nature, which did not develop into an independent personality, but became personal in the Person of the Son of God. After this assumption of human nature the Person of the Mediator is not only divine but divine-human; He is the God-man, possessing all the essential qualities of both the human and the divine nature. He has both a divine and a human consciousness, as well as a human and a divine will. This is a mystery which we cannot fathom.¹

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¹ Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1938, 87.

Berkhof's statement is standard Trinitarian doctrine. A.T. Hanson writes:

During my theological formation I was well instructed in the traditional account of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. I distinctly remember being told that the Word of God, when he assumed human nature, assumed impersonal humanity: that Jesus Christ did not possess a human personality; that God became man in Jesus Christ, but that he did not become a man. In other words, I was taught to believe in the hypostatic union, that the Word of God appeared himself in human nature which he joined ontologically, substantially to himself. Naturally, with this went the Chalcedonian doctrine that there are in Jesus Christ two natures, a divine and a human, inseparably united but not confused.²

The letter to the Hebrews has been held to support the position that Jesus is both God and man. He is called God in 1:8 and later in the same chapter he is said to have created the heavens and the earth (vv. 10-12). Proof of his preexistence has been found in verse 3: "Who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (KJV).

Taken in the context of the overall argument of the epistle these texts yield a very different interpretation, one that does not contradict the clear teaching elsewhere of the humanity of Jesus. Hebrews knows nothing of impersonal humanity or of the hypostatic union. The author is completely unaware of any Trinitarian problem and would have been astonished at the suggestion that Jesus was not a human person.

The epistle of course does not set out to prove the humanity of Jesus. It was not in question among its readers. It is generally accepted that what the author was doing was writing to exhort his readers not to abandon their faith in Christ and return to Judaism. He does so by proving that the work of Christ is superior to, or to use one of his favorite expressions, "better than," the old covenant by contrasting the work of Christ with several major figures in the Old Testament. Firstly, the Son is contrasted with angels and his superiority to them proved by a series of quotations. Following this rather lengthy section is a shorter passage contrasting Christ with Moses. Next the author deals with the work of Joshua in

² A. T. Hanson, *Grace and Truth*, London: SPCK, 1975, 1.

bringing the Israelites into the promised land and shows that this was only a foreshadowing of the final rest promised to believers. The final Old Testament figure with whom the author contrasts Jesus is the High Priest and this is by far the most elaborate contrast of all.

The opening few verses of Hebrews provide a summary of the author's whole argument. We must give our attention to a number of points here which he will deal with in more detail in the body of the letter. Our first point is that Hebrews preserves the same clear distinction between God and His Son found throughout the New Testament. "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (1:1, 2). The Son is here clearly subordinate to God, having derived his status as the heir of all things directly from Him. Hebrews follows Paul and the other New Testament writers in seeing the exaltation of Christ as something new. The whole tenor of this and similar passages runs counter to the idea that Christ's exaltation is a receiving back of what he had before as God.

A further important point is that the work of the Son begins in the last days. The Old Testament revelation was fragmentary and incomplete and came through a succession of prophets but God's final word is through a Son. The lack of the definite article with Son here is significant in pointing to the new character of the revelation. This statement is sufficient proof in itself that the Son was not personally involved in Old Testament times, whether as the Angel of the Lord or in any other way.

The translation of verse three in the KJV and NKJV could give the impression of timeless preexistence but is more naturally rendered by more modern translations: "And he is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power" (see NIV, NASB). The present exalted nature of Christ is in view — not his preexistence.

But what of the phrase "through whom also He made the worlds"? There is a difference of opinion among scholars about the translation of the word rendered here "worlds." The word is *aiones* which is normally translated "ages" in the New Testament. The New Testament and Jewish point of view divided the history of the world into two ages. We are now in the "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4), dominated by Satan who is the "god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2). In contrast, the age to come is the period when eternal life will be granted to God's people (Luke 18:30) and the

Kingdom of God established. Is *aiones* to be taken in this sense or does it have reference to the physical earth? Although there is apparently some evidence that it can be used in the latter sense, it seems best to lean towards the view that it does refer here to the two ages. The ages then were made “through” Jesus. The Greek preposition *dia* used here cannot be pressed to mean that Jesus carried out the work of creating personally but rather that God planned the ages of human history with him in view. Such an interpretation corresponds closely with what Hebrews goes on to say about Jesus.

The remainder of chapter one consists of a series of seven quotations proving that the Son is superior to angels. It was a common belief of the Jewish people in the time of Christ that all of the theophanies, or appearances of God in the Old Testament, were angelic — a view well-founded on Scripture and followed by New Testament writers. The most spectacular of these theophanies was undoubtedly the giving of the law at Sinai. Proving the Son superior to angels automatically makes his work more important and serious than the giving of the law, a point drawn out in 2:2: “For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.”

The first point is that God never said to any angel, “You are my Son” (Heb. 1:5). The title Son of God, applied to Jesus throughout the New Testament, is at the heart of the dispute with Trinitarians. There is a widespread assumption that the term is an indication of deity, but nothing could be further from the truth. The quotations in verse 5 are from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. The second of these two quotations is the first in point of time and comes from the promise to David of a son who would establish a dynasty and be responsible for building God’s house, the Temple. There is an initial reference here to Solomon who carried out the commission to build the temple as described in Kings and Chronicles. It is often overlooked that Solomon himself was recognized as the son of God by his own father. When David commissioned Solomon he reminded him of the divine promise recorded in 2 Samuel and applied the promise of divine sonship, “he shall be My son and I will be his Father,” to Solomon (1 Chron. 22:10). Later he repeated the same statement before the assembled leaders of the nation (1 Chron. 28:6). It should not surprise us that a human being is described in this way. The divine testimony to Pharaoh recorded in Exodus 4:22 was that “Israel is My son,

even My firstborn.” Individual Israelites are referred to as God’s sons and daughters (Is. 43:6; 2 Cor. 6:18).

Rooted in the Messianic promises of the Davidic covenant, “Son of God” became an alternative title for the Messiah, the King of Israel, David’s son. Nathaniel used the term Son of God interchangeably with King of Israel when he declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel” (John 1:49). Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). There is a remarkable juxtaposition of three of the Lord’s titles in Matthew 26:63-64: “And the high priest answered and said unto him, ‘I put you under oath by the Living God; tell us if you are the Messiah the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’” Son of God, Messiah, and Son of Man are used interchangeably here. Caiaphas most certainly did not believe in the deity of the Messiah, yet he used Son of God and Messiah interchangeably.

The origin of the quotation in 1:6 has been disputed by scholars. One possibility is that it comes from Psalm 97:7 which describes God coming to establish His reign. The verse reads, “Let all be put to shame who serve carved images, who boast of idols. Worship Him all you gods.” The Septuagint renders this last sentence, “Worship Him all you angels.” A second possibility is that it comes from the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:43 which has the phrase “And let all the angels of God ascribe strength to Him.” Both of these passages are about angels worshipping God. We have here another example of the phenomenon we noted in our discussion about angels.³ These passages have a strongly eschatological flavor, and since Christ will carry out functions ascribed to God in the Kingdom era, these passages can be legitimately applied to Jesus without implying that he is God.

The term “firstborn” as applied to Jesus here is also based on the Davidic covenant. We have already noted that it was a term applied by God to Israel. Psalm 89 applies it to the Messiah in verses 26-27: “He shall cry to Me, You are my Father, my God and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” It is probable that we should render 1:6 “And when he again [i.e. for the

³ See *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Volume 6, Number 3, “Christology and the Angel of the Lord,” 3-15.

second time] brings the firstborn into the inhabited earth, he says, And let all the angels of God worship him.” Taken this way the verse refers to the second coming of Christ. This again fits the context in this section of Hebrews, which is strongly eschatological.

Worship does not imply deity in the Bible although Trinitarian writers constantly claim that it does. The word means to “prostrate oneself.” Hence we read in 1 Chronicles 29:20 that “All the congregation blessed the Lord God of their fathers, and bowed down their heads, and worshipped the Lord and the King.” The church in Philadelphia will be worshipped by the synagogue of Satan (Rev. 3:9). Few would claim the deity of the church or David from these texts.

Hebrews 1:8 and 9 are a quotation from Psalm 45 which describes a marriage ceremony of the king. Here is one of the few texts in the New Testament which call Jesus “God,” but there is no need to assume that our author had suddenly become a Trinitarian. Nor is there any need to assume, with some scholars, that this does not represent a true reading of the text. It is perfectly comprehensible as it stands. Angels and men are called *elohim* (God) in the Old Testament. Exodus 7:1 records the words of God to Moses, “See I have made you God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.” The divinely appointed judges of Israel are called *elohim* in Exodus 21:6 and Exodus 22:8-9. Judges are again referred to as God in Psalm 82:6. God Himself says to them, “I have said you are gods,” and these words are quoted by Jesus in defending himself against the Pharisees (John 10:34).

The sixth quotation in this section of Hebrews is from Psalm 102:25-27 which as it stands in our text is a description of the eternity and creative power of God. Yet it is here applied directly to Jesus as God’s word to him. All of the other New Testament passages linking Jesus with creation use the mediatorial preposition *dia*, making it clear that Jesus is the agent through whom God created, but here we have the only statement in Scripture attributing creation directly to him.

We need to establish the context of this statement. We are not left in doubt about the subject matter. The writer to the Hebrews tells us clearly in 2:5 that he is speaking of the world to come: “For He has not put the world to come, *of which we speak*, in subjection to angels.” I emphasize the words “of which we speak.” The whole of the first chapter has a strongly eschatological flavor as we noted before. The word translated “world” here is *oikomene*, meaning the inhabited earth, and the same word appears in 1:6, thus providing a link between these two statements.

Verse 6 refers to the time when the firstborn will be brought again into the inhabited earth, the time when angels are called upon to worship him.

In what way, however, can Hebrews 1:10-12 be considered a statement about the world to come and why did the writer to the Hebrews choose this particular Psalm for his purposes?

The answer to the latter question is dealt with at length by F. F. Bruce in his commentary on Hebrews. Bruce points out that:

in the Septuagint text the person to whom these words are spoken is addressed explicitly as “Lord” . . . and it is God who addresses him thus. Whereas in the Hebrew text the suppliant is the speaker from beginning to end of the Psalm, in the Greek text his prayer comes to an end with verse 22; and the next words read as follows: “He answered him in the way of his strength: ‘Declare to me the shortness of my days: Bring me not up in the midst of my days. Thy years are throughout all generations. Thou, Lord in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth.’” This is God’s answer to the suppliant; He bids him acknowledge the shortness of God’s set time (for the restoration of Jerusalem as in verse 13) and not summon Him to act when that set time has only half expired, while He assures him that he and his servants’ children will be preserved for ever.⁴

As Bruce pointed out the Psalm is concerned about the set time for the restoration of Jerusalem and thus fits in perfectly with Hebrews’ statement about the world to come. Creation language is often used to describe that age. Isaiah speaks of it as “the new heavens and the new earth” (65:17; 66:22). John describes the earth after the final judgment as “a new heavens and new earth” (Rev. 21:1). Peter shows that “heaven and earth” can refer to an age, or period of time, in the world’s history: “For this they willingly forget; that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:5-7). The “heavens and the earth” before the flood is also “the world that then existed.” The present heaven and earth are to be destroyed by fire in preparation for the making of the “new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). The establishment of the heavens and the earth in Hebrews 1:10 can therefore be legitimately applied to the work of Christ in the age to

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 1964, 22.

come. Even the millennial world will perish however. In Revelation 21:1 we see yet another “new heavens and new earth” after the period of the white throne judgement.

Exploring the language used here more fully, we note several texts in Isaiah which are paralleled here. The Messiah prophetically speaks of the destruction of his adversaries: “Indeed they will all grow old like a garment; the moth will eat them up” (Is. 50:9). God’s people are exhorted not to fear the reproach of men, “For the moth will eat them up like a garment and the worm will eat them like wool” (Is. 51:8). The Messiah’s purpose is to “plant the heavens, lay the foundations of the earth and say to Zion, You are my people” (Is. 51:16).

The language of 1:10-12 is thus perfectly consistent with an eschatological interpretation. Indeed, such an interpretation is demanded by the writer’s own emphatic statement that he is speaking of the world to come. The use of the past tense in this passage is not a barrier to this view. Students of the Bible are well acquainted with what has been called the prophetic perfect, in which a prophecy of what God will accomplish in the future is put in the past tense, to emphasize the certainty of the divine decree. An excellent example of this mode of speech is found in verses 6-8 of chapter two.

The last quotation in this section is from Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.” The author of Hebrews makes the same point as in verse 5. God never said this to any angel. Their status is only that of servants, as proved by his quotation of Psalm 104:4, “Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire.” It is important to realize that Psalm 110:1 represents God as speaking to a human being and not another deity. The second word translated “Lord” in this verse is never applied to God anywhere else in the Old Testament. *Adoni*, meaning “my Lord,” is always used to address men of superior rank or angels, but it is never used to address God.

The significance of Genesis 1:26 for New Testament Christology and prophecy is easily overlooked. “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’” The writer to the Hebrews does not believe that this verse has been fulfilled for, after quoting the words of the eighth Psalm, he goes on to say, “For in that He put all in

subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him” (2:8). We are reminded of Paul’s statement in Romans 8:18-23:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

For Paul then the liberation of the creation will occur at the same time that God’s children receive their glorious liberty.

Returning to Hebrews chapter two we find that this author also sees the subjection of the creation to man as described in Genesis 1:26 and Psalm 8 occurring at the same time as “the bringing of many sons to glory” (v. 10). In saying that Jesus was made a little lower than the angels, the author links him directly with the “man” and “son of man” of the eighth Psalm. Jesus then is a member of the human race.

The first part of Genesis 1:26 states that God intended to create man in His own image. The terms “image” and “likeness” do not appear in Hebrews, which uses two words unique in New Testament Greek. Before we consider these let us note what is said elsewhere in the New Testament about the image of God. Although man can presently be said to possess God’s image (James 3:9; 1 Cor. 11:7), it is clear that this is only in anticipation of the eschatological fulfillment. The Lord Jesus is now the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Phil. 2:6) and believers are currently being transformed into the same image. “For whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). “And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Cor. 15:49).

The point about all of this is that the same terms are applied to believers as to Christ, thus pointing to a common humanity. It is impossible to believe that the writers of the New Testament could have written thus had they believed in the deity of Christ.

Returning to Hebrews again let us now look at the expression found in 1:3: “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.” Two words unique in the New Testament are used here. The first word is *apaugasma*, rendered “brightness,” and the second is *charakter*. This whole phrase is often given a Trinitarian slant but this cannot be sustained by the evidence. *Apaugasma* and *charakter* are both used by the Jewish writer, Philo, of humanity in relation to the divine.⁵ Paul can describe man as the “image and glory of God” without implying deity (1 Cor. 11:7).

Continuing its theme of the unity of Christ with his people, Hebrews goes on to prove from Scripture that believers and Christ all have one Father, and Jesus calls us his brethren: “For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: ‘I will declare your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise unto You.’ And again: ‘I will put my trust in Him.’ And again: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’” It is obvious that the expression “are all of one” has reference to the common Fatherhood of God as Jesus declares that the sanctified ones are his brethren. Psalm 22 from which this statement is taken is another well-known Messianic Psalm which describes in graphic detail the sufferings of the Messiah and his subsequent glorification.

Hebrews 2:14 summarizes by declaring that as the children are flesh and blood so also Jesus shares in the same: “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” Genesis 3:15 pronounces the doom of the Serpent (identified as the devil in Revelation 12:9 and 20:2) through the seed of the woman. That is, his destruction must be accomplished by a descendant of Eve. Paul applies Genesis 3:15 to the church in Romans 16:20: “And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.” So here again there is an unbreakable connection between the Lord and his people. He is a descendant of Eve as they are and the same proof texts can be used for both.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, SCM, 207.

The whole point of the real humanity of Jesus is asserted in verses 14-18 of Hebrews 2. It is not a mere academic issue but concerns the deliverance from death of his brethren: "Therefore, in all things he had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself has suffered, being tempted, he is able to aid those who are tempted" (2:17, 18). Trinitarians have often claimed without a shred of biblical support that in order for Christ's sacrifice to be efficacious he had to have been God since nothing less than that would atone for the sins of the world, but that is the opposite of what is said here. According to Hebrews he had to be a human being as we are in order to be a perfect sacrifice and in order to perform his High Priestly service on behalf of his people.

Hebrews has now introduced the High Priesthood of Jesus, a subject which we will discuss shortly. For now we will simply discuss the sensitive question of the temptations of Christ and the Trinitarian response to them. The problem which the doctrine of the deity of Christ poses for Trinitarians is brought out clearly in Hendriksen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. In the section on the nature of the temptation of Christ Hendriksen writes:

In connection with Christ's temptation certain rather philosophical questions are constantly being asked:

First, "Was it possible for the Saviour to succumb to temptation?"

The answer is "Definitely not." He was without sin, not even able to sin (Is. 53:9, John 8:46, 2 Cor. 5:21). In fact, he was filled to overflowing with positive goodness; such as holiness, pardoning love, a yearning to heal and to impart the true knowledge of God; etc. (Is. 53:5; Matt. 5:43-48; 14:14; 15:22; Luke 23:34; Acts 10:38).

Secondly, "If he was unable to sin, was his temptation real?"

Yes, "he was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15).⁶

Trinitarians are committed to the belief that it was impossible for Jesus to commit sin and it is not difficult to see why they must maintain this.

⁶ W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, 223.

They believe he was God, and since God cannot sin it was impossible for Jesus to sin. But the Bible says not only that God cannot sin, but that He cannot even be tempted to sin (James 1:13). Here is another clear pointer to the humanity of Jesus since nothing is clearer in the Bible than that he was tempted as we are yet without sin. It is interesting that Hendriksen goes on to deny the real significance of Hebrews 4:15: “Heb. 4:15 cannot mean, however, that the psychological process involved in being tempted was exactly the same for Jesus as it is for men in general.”⁷ Yet Hebrews says that it was the same and Hendriksen is simply contradicting the Bible. Jesus was tempted in all points as we are. The only difference was that Jesus did not commit sin. We do.

In saying that he was tempted in all points as we are Hebrews is not meaning to imply that Jesus was tempted with every sin which it is possible for a human being to commit. Even sinful human beings are not tempted in this way. We all have weaknesses which are peculiar to ourselves. The answer to this is given by comparing the temptation of Eve in Genesis 3 with 1 John 2:16 which reads: “For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world.” The same three categories can be found in Genesis 3: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food [lust of the flesh], that it was pleasant to the eyes [lust of the eyes], and a tree desirable to make one wise [pride of life], she took of its fruit and ate” (v. 6).

Jesus was tempted to use his power to satisfy his hunger by turning a stone into bread (lust of the flesh). He was shown the glory of the kingdoms of the earth (lust of the eyes) and finally was tempted with the pride of life, to prove he was the Messiah by throwing himself off the Temple.

Following this lengthy section which proves that the man Jesus is much greater than angels, Hebrews now presents him as greater than Moses. Surprisingly the author does not spend much time in arguing for this and he makes his point in a simple way. Moses was “in God’s house” (3:5, quoting Num. 12:7) whereas Christ was “over the house” (3:6). One of the functions of the Davidic king as the Son of God was that he would be responsible for building the temple, God’s house (2 Sam. 7:13). Solomon built the first Temple and all the righteous kings of the house of David following him showed that they took the commission seriously.

⁷ *Ibid.*

All were involved in repairing the Temple structure and restoring the worship of God. Jesus is the builder of the greater temple, not made with hands, of which we are members. We are his household (3:6).

The next section of Hebrews deals with the entrance into the promised land under Joshua. The writer demonstrates clearly from Scripture that the rest which Joshua gave was not the final rest envisaged in God's plan. Hundreds of years after Joshua led the people into Canaan, the Holy Spirit speaking through the Psalmist shows us that God's rest is yet future and is open to those who believe: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (4:9). After exhorting his readers not to follow the example of disobedience given by the people of Israel, Hebrews returns to the High Priesthood of Jesus introduced in 2:17.

Just as Aaron was appointed directly to his office by God, so Jesus also was divinely appointed — but not to the Aaronic priesthood. Jesus has been appointed "a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek" (5:6). This is another quote from Psalm 110. As we saw earlier the Psalm testifies to the exaltation of a human being to God's right hand. After quoting the fourth verse of the Psalm, Hebrews continues with one of its strongest affirmations of the humanity of Jesus: "Who, in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear; though he were a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered" (5:7, 8). This does not sound like a being who was incapable of sin. Here is someone who is deeply anguished and who cries out and pleads with God for help.

The writer to the Hebrews is most likely referring to the agony in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prayed three times that the cup might be removed from him if it were God's will. The Gospels do not mention tears on that occasion but Luke does record that his sweat was like great drops of blood falling down to the ground: "And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly. Then his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). This is apparently a phenomenon sometimes experienced by people under great stress.

But who was Melchizedek? This mysterious person has been the subject of much speculation by both Jewish and Christian writers. He appears very briefly in the book of Genesis. Abraham's relative Lot had been taken captive after a battle between an alliance of several Mesopotamian kings and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and their

allies. Abraham set out with a small army and succeeded in rescuing Lot and his household. Having returned with all the people and the goods which were stolen Abraham was then met by Melchizedek king of Salem. "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.' And he gave him a tithe of all."

That is all that is said of the historical Melchizedek, but there is one more reference to him in Psalm 110: "The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Ps. 110:4). From these two statements Hebrews proves that the High Priesthood of Jesus is much greater than that of Aaron and hence that the priesthood and the law under which it was given have been superseded.

Let us now consider the argument in chapter 7. It begins with a summary of what we can learn from the Genesis 14 narrative. The writer to the Hebrews finds significance in the name and title of Melchizedek. His name means "king of righteousness," and as "king of *Salem*" he was also king of *peace*. The application of both of these titles to Jesus is obvious. We may refer here to Isaiah's prophecy of the coming King (Is. 9:6-7) and note the reference there to peace and righteousness. The second point of interest is that Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek. This is one of only two references to the practice of giving a tenth before the Law regularized the giving of the tenth to the Levites.

Hebrews 7:3 continues with the account of Melchizedek and claims that he was "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually." Here at last we might seem to have someone who is not human and it is not surprising that this text has been used to teach that Melchizedek was really Christ appearing to Abraham in human form.

F. F. Bruce points out the importance of arguments from silence in rabbinical interpretations of Scripture.⁸ The rabbis taught that nothing must be regarded as having existed before the time of its first mention in the Bible. Philo uses this kind of argument extensively and at one point says that Sarah is "without mother," using the same word which Hebrews here uses of Melchizedek. When Hebrews describes Melchizedek as

⁸ *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 136ff.

being “without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days nor end of life,” he is referring to the fact that his parentage is not recorded, nor is his birth or death. Because Melchizedek had no recorded beginning, end, or parentage, he was clearly of a different order of priesthood than the Levites. Levitical priests gained their position simply through their birth ties to Aaron. In this respect Melchizedek’s priesthood was a fitting type of Jesus’s priesthood, whose ancestry was traced not to Levi but to Judah. Verse 3 says that Melchizedek was “like the Son of God,” not that he was the Son of God. Verse 6 implies that Melchizedek did indeed have a genealogy, but it was not Levitical.

Melchizedek was an ancient priest-king of Jerusalem who preserved the pure worship of God. We know nothing about him other than the account in Genesis; from these few verses the writer to the Hebrews further develops his argument to prove that Christ’s priesthood is greater than that of Aaron.

His first point is that the Levitical priesthood is subservient to that of Melchizedek. Abraham paid tithes to him and was blessed by him, thus proving that he was greater even than Abraham. Verse 7 makes this explicit: “Beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.” The Levitical priesthood had a commandment to receive tithes from the people, but Levi in a manner of speaking paid tithes to Melchizedek while he was in the loins of his father Abraham. The Melchizedek priesthood was therefore greater than the Levitical priesthood.

The Levitical priesthood could not have been perfect for Psalm 110 speaks of another priest who would arise who would be of the order of Melchizedek. This clearly points to a change in the law (Heb. 7:12). The Lord Jesus arose out of the tribe of Judah which had no priestly role at all under the law, but his authority as a priest does not arise from the law but from the power of immortal life as proved from Psalm 110:4: “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

A further contrast with the Levitical priesthood is that Christ’s appointment was accompanied by a divine oath: “The Lord has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” The Aaronic high priests were not appointed with an oath. They were also subject to death and therefore could not continue to serve. The office had to be continually renewed. But Christ continues forever and therefore his priesthood is permanent and unchangeable.

In conclusion, there is nothing in this epistle which demands that we place Christ in a special category of humanity as one who has impersonal human nature but who is not a human person as Trinitarianism demands. We have seen that Hebrews uses some very elaborate and detailed arguments to prove the superiority of Jesus. We wonder why such arguments would have been necessary had the New Testament church been instructed in the doctrine of the deity of Christ. If Christ is God surely it is only necessary to state that fact to prove his superiority.

Far from placing Christ in a category of his own, Hebrews applies proof-texts to Jesus which are also applied to other humans in Scripture. He is the Son of God as was Solomon, and we noted how the same text is used of both. Their common sonship is of the same order, based on the promises to David. Likewise Hebrews links Jesus and humanity inextricably together when we realize the significance of Genesis 1:26.

There is no title of Christ anywhere in the Bible which is not also applied to other human beings. He is called "God" but so are men and angels. He is the "Lord" who sits at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1), but the term used here is applied only to humans and angels, never to God.

The most important point we can make is that the humanity of Jesus is essential for a proper understanding of the atonement. It is not just an interesting academic exercise. The destruction of the devil could only be accomplished by a descendant of Eve whose death would release those in bondage to the fear of death. Christ had to suffer temptation as we do in order to discharge his office of High Priest. Let us then, as Hebrews tells us, "consider him" who endured such sufferings on our behalf for our salvation.