

# The Christology of Hebrews 1-2

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## Introduction

In order to understand the role and status of the divine Christ in Heb 1 it is necessary to understand the flesh and blood humanity of Christ in Heb 2. There is a synergy between the two chapters such that the one could be badly misunderstood without the other.

To show how this might be and to provide a focus for the discussion generally it will be useful to consider some of the claims made for the Roman Catholic mass. This is an area in which Catholics have taken a lot of criticism. In what follows my goal is to be incisive without being unkind. I would like for this to be a paper that Catholics can read--despite the fact that I argue against their church's position.

## Some Clarifications Regarding the Mass

By contrast with at least some forms of Protestant communion, Catholic mass is not a reenactment of Christ's last Passover meal with His disciples but of His subsequent death on the cross.<sup>1</sup> These are different events. Paul, when describing the first eucharist and thus establishing a formula for the church to follow in celebrating it, says: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, (24) and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:23-24). Here the emphasis is on what happened "the night he was betrayed"--not the day He was crucified--although the one event certainly betokens the other. This distinction might appear to be subtle but it has vast implications, as we shall see below.

Christ's last meal with His disciples was more than a celebration of Passover. The bread represented His body and the wine His blood. But when the disciples first received these elements there could be no literal interpretation of their deeper meaning.<sup>2</sup> The bread and wine were offered to the disciples separately but the flesh and blood of Christ were still united within His living body. They would not be separated until the next day. Christ's sacrifice was indeed already available to the disciples in the upper room by faith, as it is to us now. But faith is not the basis on which Christ's presence is predicated in the mass. The claim is that He is really there in a plenary sense. He is bodily present. The bread is His actual flesh. At the first eucharist there was no way to maintain such an interpretation, and no one did.

It is true that the mass has a long history. But if faith was necessary for the disciples to grasp the spiritual significance of the food they were sharing with Jesus so long ago, on what basis can we argue that it is inappropriate to grasp the same meaning by the same faith as we share the same meal with our Lord in the communion service now? This latter approach has an even longer history than the mass. It extends farther back in time. Thus, if there is any innovation here it does not lie in Protestants breaking with Catholic usage, but in Catholics

breaking with apostolic usage--with the usage of the apostles "on the night he was betrayed" (1 Cor 11:23).

## The Reality of Christ's Physical Body

A major point of the first two chapters of Hebrews is that Christ is now in heaven. There is a reason for saying the first two chapters rather than the first chapter, which alone speaks of Him being there. Without a full awareness of Christ's humanity it would be possible to argue that His body, once glorified, is no longer "here" or "there" or anywhere--that "glorified" means ethereal or unreal. But this is not the case. The fact that Christ has a human body makes it necessary to emphasize that He is in one place rather than many--i.e., in heaven at the right hand of the Father. The following statement by Anthony Wilhelm, a Roman Catholic, seems ambivalent on this point.

*It is important to remember what we assert, as Christians, when we say that Christ is risen. We are saying that his complete manhood is glorified, that it is perfect, unrestricted, unlimited, endowed with the fullness of divine power. We cannot imagine a risen humanity, and we should be careful of picturing the glorified Christ as being "here" or "there." When he wished his followers to realize that he was truly alive, he "appeared" to them, was "seen" by them, i.e., they realized that he was alive and glorified. We, too, by faith, "meet" the glorified Christ when we realize that he is alive and acting among us.<sup>3</sup>*

The above statement should not be taken out of context. In another place the same author writes that, "Christ's ascension into heaven completed his resurrection. His mission on earth was now totally fulfilled. He has returned to the Father and is glorified at his 'right hand' in heaven."<sup>4</sup> These two statements appear to contradict each other, but Wilhelm's book throughout is a combination of historic Christian doctrine and swirling mysticism. It is true of course that there are mysteries in the New Testament (see 1 Cor 15:51), but mystery--while legitimate in itself--invites abuse and can easily be misused.

Wilhelm's inability "to imagine a risen humanity" illustrates this problem. He can accept Christ's resurrection in a mystic sense, but has difficulty saying that that event produced a risen humanity. I submit that if the resurrection of Christ did not have this result, He was not resurrected. It is important to be clear on this matter. The disciples (especially Thomas) could not imagine a risen humanity either until Christ stood before them and said, "'Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have'" (Luke 24:37-38). Paul had to meet the same sort of reticent attitude in Corinth. Writing to the Corinthian church he links our own resurrection with that of Christ and writes:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. (17) And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (18) Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. (19) If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Cor 15:16-19)

Christ did truly rise from the dead. Otherwise He did not truly rise from the dead and if He did not, neither will we. Roman Catholics do not deny this. So instead of trying to catch Wilhelm in his words we should clarify the thrust of what he himself is trying to convey, which is that "we should be careful of saying that Christ is 'here' or 'there'." Why should we be careful of

saying that? There is something in a mystic interpretation that makes Wilhelm's caution necessary. It is this that we should be careful of and not the historic reality of Christ's resurrection.

Only in the degree that Christ is not really "there" in heaven is it possible (ironically) to imagine that He is really "here" on a thousand altars as mass is said around the circle of the globe on any given day. But if He is already truly before us on our altars, why should there ever be a second coming? Why should the church hope for Christ's physical presence at some future time if we already have it now? "Who hopes for what he already has?" (Rom 8:24). And yet if Christ does not come in glory at some future time, how will the dead in Christ be raised? Of course they do not need to be raised if they are already in heaven.<sup>5</sup>

The issues raised by failing to interpret Christ's resurrection with the starkest realism have not diminished over the centuries. If we have other priests (on earth), and other means of making Christ present (through the mass), and other mechanisms for going to heaven (automatically at death), then why should Christ do these things for us? Why should He minister, or come again, or raise the dead? The solution to all these multiplied problems lies in accepting the radical implications of the one supremely important fact that Christ became a man--a fact which localizes Him in both time and space.<sup>6</sup>

When the Holy Spirit is present it is true in one sense that Christ is present because wherever the Holy Spirit is, there Deity is present, and Christ is God. But we should not use this fact to set aside the implications of Jesus' human (although glorified) body. He is in us (or among us) only by His Holy Spirit (see Col 1:27). The Holy Spirit is therefore Christ's Paraclete or personal Representative--His Vicar--on earth (see John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7),<sup>7</sup> just as Christ is our Paraclete or personal Representative before the Father (see 1 John 2:1). The same Greek word (*paraklētōs*) is used in both sets of passages.

Conservative Seventh-day Adventists have generally read Heb 2 to show that Christ took human nature at a time later than the fall.<sup>8</sup> But there is more to learn from the chapter than this. The nature of Christ on earth (emphasized in Heb 2) explains the nature of Christ in heaven (emphasized in Heb 1), especially as it relates to His role as our High Priest. Apart from this fundamental truth, it would be unnecessary to say, as the author of Hebrews does say, that Christ "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:3). Consider also Stephen's similar statement: "'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:56). The difference between sitting and standing is not at issue here, but rather the fact that Christ is genuinely in heaven with the Father. How comforting it would have been for Stephen to say, Look, I see the Son of Man right here beside me (along the lines of Dan 3). But there is something reassuring in his inability to make such a statement.<sup>9</sup> How can this be?

The fact which, more than any other, provides an anchor for our souls in Heb 6:19-20 is that Jesus has passed beyond the veil. He is in heaven with the Father, and that fact is the promise that we will eventually follow Him there. That was also Stephen's interpretation in Acts 7:56 (see Heb 1:3; 10:19). Christ is not bodily with us at present. It was his knowledge that Christ is no longer here but with the Father that gave Stephen the courage to face a martyr's death by stoning.

If we take the humanity of Christ literally in Heb 2 and carry this same literalness over into His glorified state in Heb 1 (taking two passages in the place of many), there can be no confusion as to where Christ is while the eucharist is being celebrated. Both during and between

such celebrations He is in heaven at the Father's right hand. We cannot assert that Christ is literally present wherever mass is said--often, it must be, in many places simultaneously--and maintain any useful concept of the bodily nature of His resurrection. Conversely, when we take the reality of His human nature as our starting point it provides a safeguard against any number of doctrinal abuses.

## Uses and Misuses of Mystery

Catholic writings abound with references to the sacrifice of the cross. The mass is a daily celebration of that sacrifice. This is not lip service. Catholic teaching is Christ centered. But it is surrounded by a quality of mystery which makes real things appear unreal (Christ's physical, post-resurrection body) and unreal things appear real (the flesh of Christ in the bread of the eucharist). The net effect of all this is to draw the church's attention from the reality symbolized to the emblem which symbolizes it. To whatever extent the symbol takes on a reality of its own, there are two realities and the relationship between them must be one of mutual competition.

This is what the angel was trying to convey when he told Daniel that Christ's high priestly ministry in heaven would one day be thrown to the ground. This prediction was fulfilled not by preventing Him from doing what He does in heaven, but by imitating His ministry here on earth. The passage in question reads as follows:

(9) Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. (10) It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. (11) It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice [*tāmîd*] from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. (12) Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground. (Dan 8:9-12)

In Dan 8 it is not Christ's ministry itself that is thrown to the ground, but the truth about His ministry--i.e., the church's understanding and practical awareness of it. The idea of making heavenly realities present on earth is a theme to which Catholic writers return again and again. For them it is a major point of emphasis. But this is backwards. By faith we are commanded to "approach the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16). We should not attempt to make the One seated there approach us on our altars, as if we could do that. He has already come to earth once--in the incarnation. Now by faith we must go to Him. Consider the following representative statements, which I believe miss this point, all of them taken from the *Saint Andrew Daily Missal*:<sup>10</sup>

And thus, all the merits of Calvary are constantly placed within our grasp at Mass. Not that the death with the shedding of His Blood is repeated; Christ, for ever in glory, dies no more. But the Mass is a sacrament which makes present what happened on the Cross; the separation of the Body and Blood of Jesus, represented by the separate bread and wine, is effected anew by means of the transubstantiation--the whole substance of the bread is changed into that of His Body, the whole substance of the wine into that of His Blood. It is therefore indeed the divine Victim Himself that the Mass **makes present** among us, in His immolated state. The worship of infinite adoration, thanksgiving, expiation and intercessions which Christ gave to His Father on the Cross,

He gives to Him afresh on the altar whenever Mass is celebrated. (pp. 775-76)

The day before He suffered, during the Paschal meal of the Last Supper, Jesus, the eternal High Priest, celebrated the first Mass; in advance He offered to His Father His own death and He ceases not to offer it in our Masses at which the priest takes His place. (p. 776)

The Mass, which is the central act of religion, is the realization by the Church of the unique and primordial sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; it is this redemptive act accomplished once for all in the centre of history that the Mass **makes present** in the course of time. (p. 775)

The Mass, it was pointed out above, is the sacrifice of Calvary perpetuated, the sacrifice of the covenant with God and of our own redemption, **made present** on the altar so that we may associate ourselves with it. (p. 778)

Christ is the High Priest, but to perform the rites of this sacrifice, a lower order of priesthood is necessary to supply what our Lord does not Himself perform. These ministers of the priesthood of Christ are the members of the Catholic hierarchy, and thus at one and the same time by Christ invisible, and by Christ visible, it is ordained that we shall pray to God in the person of the Pope, bishops, and priests. These priests are the official intermediaries between heaven and earth. (p. viii)

We must be constantly aware of what Christ did for us on the cross. This much is good. But we must also be aware of the use Christ makes of that experience before the Father. Having once shed His blood, He then ministers it. If we think He does not, the way is open for us to supply the lack. But if He does minister His blood before the Father and we attempt to perform the same function on earth, our work has the potential of competing with His and what we once thought was good becomes transformed into something bad. In the mass Peter once again interdicts a duty that only Christ can perform and once again merits His rebuke (see Matt 16:21-23). There is no basis for saying any of this, however, until we understand that Christ is our great antitypical High Priest in heaven, completing by His own ministry the work that He began on the cross as our great antitypical sacrificial Victim. No one else can minister His blood--in the plenary sense of presenting it to the Father--any more than they could shed it for Him initially.

Thus, human priests are intermediaries between heaven and earth only in a limited sense. To mediate between two parties one must have access to both. No one denies that Christ is uniquely qualified to be our great High Priest (see Heb 8:1-2). But one implications of this fact is that no one can do His work for Him--neither priests nor saints. As regards the saints, they are not in heaven anyway but are sleeping peacefully in their graves, awaiting Christ's return. So they are not in a position to intercede for us. And even if they were in heaven, it would still not be possible for them to intercede with God on our behalf, because for Christ to present His blood He must present Himself. "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). The Holy Spirit makes Christ present in the hearts of His people everywhere and at all times--not merely in the bread and wine as it is made available to us by a priest.

Having said this, however, let me clarify that Christ's followers on earth are indeed called upon to assist Him in His ministry. Paul speaks of himself as "a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, . . ." (Rom 15:16). Paul's ministry was to call attention to Christ's ministry and this is our task as well. Not all are apostles (see 1 Cor 12:29), as Paul was, but the commission to share Christ in some way devolves upon every believer without exception. Thus, lay people occupy a higher role than they might realize, which weakens the distinction between themselves and the professional clergy. If it is true that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," it would be reasonable to add that there is also neither clergy nor laity; "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

## Is the Eucharist a Theme in the Book of Hebrews?

If anyone feels that my criticisms of the mass have been unfair, consider a paper by James Swetnam entitled, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews."<sup>11</sup> Swetnam is a Catholic scholar at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. In the above paper he argues that the main thrust of what the author of Hebrews is saying to discouraged first century Christians is that their Lord is present with them still--in the eucharist.

What all this complicated imagery adds up to seems to be this: that for the addressees the glorified body of Christ which they come into contact with as the eucharistic body is the concrete means given to them by Christ the new high priest of entering into the Holy of Holies, i.e., God's presence.<sup>12</sup>

This is just what the author of Hebrews is not saying. Swetnam's point is contradicted by such statements as: "(19) We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, (20) where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6:19-20). And he is candid enough to admit that his reading of the epistle is not the most obvious one: "No reader of the epistle as it was first written would have been able to grasp this subtle symbolism without the aid of an oral tradition against which the epistle could have been interpreted."<sup>13</sup>

In all other respects Swetnam's paper is a model of scholarly argument. He supports his position as well as anyone could reasonably hope to support it. But the position he advocates is defective and no amount of good writing can alter that fact.

What is the point of the use of the word *laleō* in a thematic way? What Christian reality is parallel to the Law? What is the purpose of the foreshadowing of the tent which Moses erected? In what way is the new *diathēkē* different from the old, and what is the point of the contrast? Finally, how are these four aspects of the letter related to each other?

The present paper maintains that the common element which answers the above questions is the Christian eucharist. Such an interpretation also explains why there are plausible grounds for seeing eucharistic allusions at 9,20 and 13,7.

In fact, the eucharist emerges from the present study as a central point of the epistle. . . . Apparently the addressees are tempted by disbelief in the presence of God among them in the

form of the eucharist, and the author attempts to meet their doubts by showing that the eucharist is really the heir of ancient cultic practices involving God's presence and brought to the divinely-willed fulfillment in Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Christ ministered by us in the bread and wine (as many suppose) becomes the main object of faith rather than Christ ministering for us before the Father. We minister and He is ministered. For His part this is a reversal of roles. By doing for Him a work that only He can perform we appropriate His ministry to ourselves and thus transfer it to the earth. Along with this shift of attention from things in heaven to things on earth there is a corresponding emphasis on the process by which the priest purports to make Christ present before us. Thus, what the prophet specifically warns would happen in Dan 8:11-12 Swetnam seeks to defend with exegetical arguments in his paper. My criticisms have not been unfair. I have not put words in the mouths of Catholic authors making them appear to say things that do not correspond to their own intent.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of Christ's flesh and blood humanity tells us more than what our Lord was like during His life on earth, or what we should be like during our life on earth. It also provides a basis for understanding what He is like now. Any suggestion that Christ only appears to be before the Father (but is really here on our altars) is a natural counterpart of doceticism and should be openly recognized as such. He is not on a thousand earthly altars, but in heaven. And in the same bodily sense He will come again. "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

Christ's promise to come again only makes sense if He is elsewhere prior to His coming. This is one factor to consider. Another is that if He returns in glory to raise the sleeping saints, that fact says something about their current status. I submit that the only way any Christian, dead or alive, has of getting to heaven is for Christ to come and take him there. The saints He comes for are not already where He promises to take them. He does not search for them in the wrong place in 1 Thess 4:13-18 and other similar passages:

(16) For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (17) After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (18) Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thess 4:16-18)

Those who have died in Christ are sleeping peacefully in their graves and will remain there until Jesus comes. Then they will not remain in their graves. They will be resurrected bodily, just as He was, and be caught up to meet their Lord in the clouds--when He comes in the clouds.

The nature of Christ on earth explains the nature of Christ in heaven, His work there as our High Priest, His promise to come again when He has finished His priestly work, and the condition of those who have died in faith knowing that He would not minister on and on forever but would return for them as He promised (see John 14:1-3). Having made a full end of sin He will then make a full end of sinners--first the one task, then the other. In this way the doctrines of

the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, Christian perfection, the second coming, and the state of the dead all meet and have their confluence.

To explain Heb 1 (Christ is in heaven) without Heb 2 (Christ became a man) is to settle for half an explanation, which turns out to be no explanation at all. Heb 1 and 2, taken together and at face value, protect the church from a mystic interpretation of Christ's person and work and preserve the purity of a long litany of other doctrines.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>"The Mass, which is the central act of religion, is the realization by the Church of the unique and primordial sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; it is this redemptive act accomplished once for all in the centre of history that the Mass makes present in the course of time" (Dom Gaspar Lefebvre and the Monks of St. Andrew's Abbey, *Saint Andrew Daily Missal with Vespers for Sundays and Feasts* (Bruges, Belgium: Biblica, 1962), p. 775. "The Mass, it was pointed out above, is the sacrifice of Calvary perpetuated, the sacrifice of the covenant with God and of our own redemption, made present on the altar so that we may associate ourselves with it" (ibid., p. 778).

<sup>2</sup>As Christ said the words that Paul quotes in 1 Cor 11 He took bread in His hands. It should not be necessary to remind ourselves that when He said, "This is my body" (1 Cor 11:24), He was referring to the bread, not the hand. What gives the eucharist its immense significance is the manner of its enactment, not the manner of its reenactment. And yet, as stated above (see n. 1), what the mass reenacts is something different--not the meal but the crucifixion itself.

<sup>3</sup>Wilhelm, *Christ Among Us: A Modern Presentation of the Catholic Faith*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). This book is an introduction to Catholic doctrine for persons seeking membership in that communion.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>5</sup>There is nothing inherently Christian about believing in life after death. When a Viking chief died his friends would haul his boat up on the beach and cremate him in it. "We burn him in a moment, so that he enters Paradise at once" (Howard La Fay and Ted Spiegel, "The Vikings," *National Geographic*, caption, p. 517). Indeed, the first lie ever told on planet earth was the assertion, "You will not surely die" (Gen 3:4), i.e., it was a defense of natural immortality apart from Christ. The thing that makes the Christian version of life after death Christian is the fact that we obtain it through Christ. He inherits eternal life on our behalf and then returns for the sleeping saints, calling them to life and escorting them to heaven. At that time, but not before, they become and remain immortal. Eternal life is a gift from God bestowed by Christ at His second coming (see Heb 9:28). We have eternal life now in Christ (see 1 John 5:11-12), but become immortal at His second coming (see Rev 22:12). The popular Christian understanding of eternal life bears more similarity to the first worldview mentioned above than the second. The difference between going to heaven immediately after death and waiting to be cremated first is not a difference. In both cases there is no mention of a resurrection performed personally by Christ and a second coming to bring Him here so He can do that.

<sup>6</sup>Christ's words, "And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20), must be understood in the context of another similar statement: "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you;



but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). It is through the Holy Spirit that Christ remains with us "always, to the very end of the age."

<sup>7</sup>In the gospel of John (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) *paraklētos* refers to the third person of the godhead, while in 1 John (2:1) it refers to the second person. This is not a mistake. The Holy Spirit represents God to man on earth, whereas the Son represents man to God in heaven. It is significant and appropriate that the same word is used both ways.

<sup>8</sup>See Hardy, "The Human Nature of Christ in View of Rom 8:3 and 1 Cor 15:45," *Historicism* No. 21/Jan 90, pp. 2-24.

<sup>9</sup>See also Heb 6:19-20, which is closely parallel to Acts 7:56. Both passages merely assert that Christ is in heaven. Armed with this assurance Stephen was able to face a violent death with Christian grace as well as manly courage.

<sup>10</sup>See n. 1 above. Emphasis supplied.

<sup>11</sup>*Biblica* 70 (1989): 74-95.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.