

JESUS AS THE MODEL FOR THE NEW HUMANITY IN HEB 2

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The author of the book of Hebrews argues convincingly for the full deity of Jesus. In chap. 1 he demonstrates that Jesus is the express image of God, the Creator and upholder of the universe, the all-sufficient high priest who sits at the right hand of the throne of God (1:3); the One to whom the Father ascribes ultimate glory and eternal majesty (1:8,9); the One who is accorded worship by all angels of God (1:6). Having established the unchallenged position of the Son in relation to the Father, the author turns his attention in chap. 2 to the discussion of Jesus in relation to humanity.

Reflection on Ps 8

To answer this question the writer of Heb goes back to Ps 8. This psalm may be divided in two parts:

1. Verses 1-3 form a tripartite doxology: God's name and glory are universally majestic (v. 1); His power and greatness, proclaimed even by infants, subdues all adversaries (v. 2); His dominion extends beyond the heavens (v. 3). Thus the first three verses focus on the majesty, glory, power and dominion of God. They may be referred to as the *gloria in excelsis Deo* of the OT, lauding God's undisputed and unmatched glory and splendor.

2. Verses 4-9 focus on humanity. This section opens with a question, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him" (v. 4)?¹ Coming as this question does right after such a vivid description of the greatness of God, our natural answer is to acknowledge and affirm humanity's nothingness. Placed in juxtaposition to such an awesome God, what is a man? But we must note that the question is asked in a double context. First, there is the context of the awesome majesty of God shown over the whole universe. Second is the context of the divine attitude and relation of tender thoughtfulness and care as expressed in the question; it already acknowledges divine care and solicitude as present and active towards humanity.

¹All Bible quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

The question is an expression of wonder at this divine attitude. Were the first context the only one, the answer would be very simple and straightforward. However, the second context complicates the answer. The question is not whether God will take thought of and care for humanity; rather, it is a question of humanity's identity in view of the fact of the evident and on-going solicitous divine thought and care for him. God is already caring for humanity. So in view of the fact that God cares for humanity in this way, what is mankind that God cares for him?

The psalmist then asserts that humanity has been made a little lower than God (v. 5). Such an answer was so astounding and perfectly incomprehensible to the OT community that the Septuagint translators apparently took liberty to translate **lōhîm* (God) with *angeloi* (angels) without clear textual support for the change.² The text must have seemed to exalt humanity too highly for theological comfort. Thus by a simple word substitution the translators sought to preserve the original intent of the statement while removing the obvious theological *scandalon*.

But the psalmist's answer to the question of human identity is more elaborate. Having placed humanity as being created a little lower than God, the psalmist proceeds, "and (you) crowned him with glory and honor" (v. 5b). As F. F. Bruce has observed, "The psalmist is overcome with wonder as he thinks of the glory and honor that God has bestowed on mankind, in making them but little lower than Himself and giving them dominion over all the lesser creation."³

The very same divine attributes of the opening doxology are now here being ascribed to humanity. And it is noteworthy that the act of crowning is not stated in the perfect tense, connoting humanity at the time of creation, but in the imperfect tense, portraying the future condition of mankind. Difficult as this statement might have been even in humanity's pristine glory, it is even more baffling when now made with reference to fallen human beings.

In vv. 6-8 humanity's conferred dominion or reign over God's creation in the terrestrial realm is stated. While God exercises dominion over the celestial realm—the heavens, the moon, and the stars, mankind has been given rulership over the terrestrial realm—the sheep, oxen, beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fishes of the sea. In this passage humanity is portrayed as a dim reflection of God in majesty and dominion.

²Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 85. The same word **lōhîm* is again rendered *angelous* in Pss 82:1,6; 97:7; and 138:1. The LXX translators reasoned that in these verses, to translate **lōhîm* with *Theos* would give a misleading meaning. Therefore, they opted for a theologically safe translation rather than a literal equivalence.

³F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 34. H. Ringgren, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1956), 20, thinks that the statement about giving dominion to mankind was originally addressed to the king who exercised dominion over the world.

Verse 9 closes the psalm with the same exclamation as the opening doxology, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" It reaffirms the glory and majesty of God. In this psalm the identity and glory of God are self-evident. In fact, these are so self-evident that even babies and infants sing of them. It is the glory and identity of mankind, which seems shrouded in mystery, that is here unveiled by special revelation.

The psalm's focus on the glory and dominion of humanity alludes to the creation story: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Gen 1:26).

Humanity is a reflection of divine glory and majesty. It is noteworthy that after the statement of humanity's creation, there follows the statement of human dominion over all the terrestrial works of God's creation. The sequence of God's work in Gen is first the creation of mankind in God's glory and majesty, then the conferring of dominion on them. This same sequence is evident in Ps 8. Clearly the two passages are related and must not be studied in isolation. Thus in studying Heb 2 we must consider this thematic context of Gen 1, and we need to keep Ps 8 as the immediate passage in view.

Heb 2 and Ps 8:4-7

As we turn back to Heb 2 we discover that the author's focus is on Ps 8:4-7, specifically that portion which deals with humanity's position and glory. It seems that the author wishes his readers to view the nature of Christ from the nature of mankind. And so he has made an extended quotation of the passage, which he uses as an introduction to the identity and work of Christ.

Heb 2 begins with an exhortation to pay close and careful attention to the message already proclaimed (v. 1). The author pronounces judgement on those who neglect such a great salvation proclaimed by Jesus Himself and confirmed by those who heard Him (v. 3). Further, God did not subject the world to angels but to humanity (v. 5). And in an intriguing parallel construction, the author also points out that Jesus did not take on Himself the nature of angels but the nature of the seed of Abraham (v. 16). To state this parallel construction more clearly, when God decided to place the world under dominion at creation, He did not place it under the angels, but under humanity (v. 5). And when God sent His Son, Jesus did not take on himself the nature of angels, but the nature of the seed of Abraham (v. 16). It may be presented diagrammatically:

GOD'S ACTION

WITH REFERENCE TO
CREATION (Ps 8)WITH REFERENCE TO
REDEMPTION (Heb 2)

God creates humanity lower than angels (v. 5)	God sends Jesus lower than angels (v. 9)
God crowns humanity with glory and majesty (v. 5)	God crowns Jesus with glory and majesty (v. 9)
God places creation under humanity (vv. 6-8)	God places all things under Jesus (vv. 8-9)

Thus in both divine actions of grace, God bypassed the angels and chose humanity. Clearly, there is established a special relationship between Jesus and humanity.

The writer of Heb recalls that all things were put under the dominion of humanity. He emphasizes that this means that everything is subjected to humanity's dominion. He argues that we do not yet see all things under human dominion. And immediately following this observation he says,

But we do see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. 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 sufferings. Heb 2:9-10

Therefore, while we do not as yet see all things under the dominion of mankind who was made a little lower than angels, we see another, namely Jesus, made a little lower than the angels. The first dominion was given to the first man, Adam, and his posterity. That dominion was lost to Satan in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3). Now we see the second dominion given to the second man, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.⁴

⁴A messianic Son of Man was already anticipated in Ps 80:17, "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself." Pauline Giles points out that even though "Son of Man" was not used as a title for Jesus outside the gospels, except in the passage under consideration (Heb 2:6), in Stephen's vision recorded in Acts 7:55,56, and in the Apocalypse, the title was known and important. Pauline Giles, "The Son of Man in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Expository Times* 86 (1975), 328-32.

The writer of Heb understands Ps 8 to refer to humanity as well as to Christ. He sees in Christ the archetypal human being.⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker suggests that “it is preferable to interpret the psalm citation as referring first to man and second to Christ.”⁶

We must note carefully the points of affinity between Jesus and humanity in Heb 2: like human beings, Jesus is given dominion over creation (v. 8); made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and majesty (v. 9); enters suffering and death (v. 9); comes under the fatherhood of God [although from a unique perspective] (v. 10); and shares in flesh and blood (v. 14). The author summarizes his argument by stating that in all things Jesus was made like His brothers (v. 17). Kistemaker writes, “Jesus became fully human in such a manner that He is related to us. He is our blood relative.”⁷

The bond between Jesus and His people is close and unbreakable. That bond is heaven’s pledge of eternal commitment to mankind. At a number of points in Heb 2:9-18, as summarised in the preceding paragraph, the author reaffirms this link with humanity. He makes use of three OT passages to bolster this linkage: Ps 22:22, a messianic reference that points to the post-resurrection Christ sharing in praise with His brothers and sisters; Isa 8:17, which refers to humanity’s dependence on God; and Isa 8:18, which mentions children as sharing in that dependence on God. Being of the same family (v. 11), Jesus is not ashamed to call humanity His “brothers” (Heb 2:11), or with endearment, “my brothers.” The bond is upheld in His declaration, “Here am I, and the children God has given me” (v. 13b). He fills the role of humanity’s High Priest (v. 17). It is noteworthy that a majority of these linkages are expressed using family models. This portrays Jesus as the head of the redeemed family. Indeed, “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family” (v. 11a).

In helping us to understand the human nature of Jesus the writer of Heb moves from the known to the unknown—from the nature of mankind to that of Jesus. It is as if Jesus was being patterned after humanity. It needs to be stressed, however, that in fact Jesus is the prototype of the new humanity. Notice, for instance, that in this chapter Jesus is not portrayed as being made after the pattern of humanity, though He took upon himself the nature of humanity. His oneness with humanity enables Him to lead us back to God. John F. MacArthur notes that in entering into fellowship with people Jesus took on himself something alien to His nature. The Greek word *metechō* translated as “shared” in v. 14,

has to do with taking hold of something that is not naturally one’s own

⁵Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 14, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 45.

⁶Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 66.

⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

kind. We by nature are flesh and blood; Christ was not. Yet he willingly took hold of something which did not naturally belong to him. He added to Himself our nature in order that he might die in our place, and that we might take hold of the divine nature that did not belong to us.⁸

Though in point of time Jesus took upon himself human nature after humanity had been created, He enters humanity as the prototype of God's new creation. He is portrayed in leadership roles: He tastes death for everyone (2:9); leads children that God has given to Him (v. 10); pioneers humanity's salvation (v. 10); sanctifies (v. 11); destroys the devil that has the power of death (v. 14); frees those who all of their lives have been subject to the fear of death (v. 15); fills the role of High Priest (v. 17); and helps tempted humanity (v. 18).

The portrayal of Jesus in Heb 2:9-18 clearly places Him at the head of redeemed humanity. The word *archēgōs*, translated "captain" in Heb 2:10, has the connotation of source, pioneer, and exemplar. It points to a hero, a founder or patron of a city. It is used with the sense of an originator or a pioneer. The LXX uses it with the idea of a military leader who as captain participates with His people as He leads them on.⁹ Thus in this passage Jesus not only leads the children to glory; He is the source of their salvation. Jesus is the Great Exemplar—the Pattern Man. He is the paradigm of God's new humanity and the touchstone of God's new creation. In Jesus we get a preview of what God's new workmanship will be. He is not a static pattern like a statue, to be studied in passive contemplation; He is a dynamic pioneer to be actively followed as He leads many people to glory.

It is interesting to observe that in all the linkages of Jesus and humanity the implications are not to general humanity but to redeemed humanity. The author connects Jesus to the seed of Abraham. Kistemaker argues, "The name *Abraham* obviously must be understood to mean that all those who put their faith in Jesus are Abraham's descendants."¹⁰ His brothers are those who are led to glory (v. 10) and who are sanctified (v. 11). They constitute the congregation in which Jesus proclaims God's name (v. 12). Jesus refers to them as the children God has given to Him (v. 13). The redeemed are delivered from the fear of death and the devil (v. 15). This suggests that the humanity of whom Jesus is a pattern is not general humanity but the new humanity being re-created in the image of God.

⁸John F. MacArthur, *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 69.

⁹G. Delling, "archēgōs," *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged in one volume, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 83.

¹⁰Kistemaker, 76 (emphasis his).

Conclusion

Heb 2 makes an important contribution to our understanding of the human nature of Jesus Christ. There are indications within the text that point to His role as source, pioneer and exemplar of God's new creation. The writer of Heb, by going back to Ps 8, demonstrates that the dominion that God gave to humanity over the earth, though lost at the Fall, is restored through Jesus as the new leader or head of the redeemed family. Therefore, Jesus portrays both God's new creation and the restoration of dominion. In Heb 2 Jesus is the fullness of the new humanity, with all that God intended in the beginning.