

Considering Jesus in the Book of Hebrews (1.1-13.25)

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## Introduction

Of the many commentators on the book of Hebrews, the one that states the theme of the book best is the puritan William Gouge (1575-1653): “The main point which is aimed at throughout the whole sacred Scripture, especially in the New Testament, is the principal scope of this epistle, and the mark whereat the apostle aimeth therein, namely this, *that Jesus Christ is the all-sufficient and only Saviour of man*” (*On Hebrews*, I, 7, italics mine).

Therefore, we can begin with this title: “Considering Jesus in the Book of Hebrews.” With a focus on Christ, we will over view the book as a whole.

It seems that every commentary outlines Hebrews in a different way. One reason for this is the “squeezed” unity of the writer’s flow of thought. Sometimes, the ideas appear squeezed together like play dough gushing between your fingers. First things spill over into and beyond later things. Clearly, the paragraphs are not discreet entities that stair step their way from beginning to end. Instead, ideas overlap and the argument oscillates back and forth as the writer unfolds his thoughts. It is as if he never finishes a stage in the argument, at least not cleanly. He seems to move forward before completing a thought. Then, he returns to a previous thought or to many previous thoughts to expand on an idea or to make an exhortation. That may be when he finishes a thought.

The squeezed and oscillating nature of the flow of thought in this epistle makes it challenging to read when you are trying to follow the line of argument. Nonetheless, the book is quite easy to read when you focus on large units without troubling yourself for the moment with transitions and connections. Recall, the writer tells us in a retrospective comment that his exhortation is brief. Near the end he says, **I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly** (13.22). Even this appeal has an oscillating quality to it for he exhorts the reader with regard to his exhortation! He writes “briefly” and what he writes is an exhortation. With regard to that exhortation, he makes an earnest and loving appeal to the Christian family (as family) to bear with his exhortation. This means that he tells them (and us) to exercise self-restraint as they wrestle with his thoughts, to be tolerant and endure his lines of thought, and to be patient with his exhortations. Without question, his exhortation unfolds as many exhortations.

This call for endurance is necessary because the readers lack maturity and self-discipline in the things of God:

**<sup>11</sup> About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. <sup>12</sup> For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, <sup>13</sup> for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (5.11-14).**

The writer thus exhorts his readers to **go on to maturity** (6.1) for they ought to be able to teach others, but as it turns out others need to teach them in their dullness.

Therefore, we can conclude that the solid food of the book comes to us in the following ways: a) it comes by a brief letter that is less than half the size of the Gospel of Matthew (13 chapters to Matthew’s 28). That means that the author squeezes much into little space. b) The solid food involves building on elemental things. The author keeps returning to the elements of the oracles of God in order to build on them and stretch the reader for training in righteousness.

He is fulfilling our Lord's Great Commission and His emphasis on learning for living (Mat. 28.20, **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**). c) The writer calls us to stretch in our understanding of Christ in His person and work in the history of salvation (1.1-4).

If we try to outline the book with this view of solid food in mind, then we come up with a structure that moves from Christ to exhortation. Therefore, it seems appropriate that we consider Jesus in each of the three main divisions of the book:

Jesus as a Son, 1.1-2.4

Jesus as Sabbath king, 2.5-3.13

Jesus as great high priest, 4.14-12.29

We can comment briefly on each of these sections to get our teeth into the structure of the book. It is as if the writer says, "Based on Jesus as a Son, as king, and as high priest, I exhort you to go on to maturity, to grow, and to run the race of the Christian journey."

#### 1A. Jesus as a Son, 1.1-2.4

Without the usual salutation, the writer of this letter immediately makes the point that God has now spoken to us by His Son (1.2).

1) First, he states our Lord's position in the history of revelation, 1.1-2a.

He tells us that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God by whom He has now spoken in contrast to His self-revelation of the OT. Formerly, He spoke by the prophets, now it is by His Son (1.1-3a, **Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**).

2) Second, he describes His position in the history of redemption, 1.2b-14

Jesus is heir of all things, co-Creator, the radiance of God's glory, the imprint of God's nature, the upholder of the universe, and superior to the angels. As such, He made purification for sins and became the exalted redeemer sitting at the right hand of the majesty on high (1.3b-4, **After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**).

3) Third, the writer presses home a duty that arises from our Lord's position, 2.1-4

He exhorts us to improve in our attentiveness to the gospel of Christ: **Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it** (2.1). He builds on our Lord's teaching as it is attested to us through those who heard Him (as we have, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew): **It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard** (2.3; accordingly, we have Jesus' words through Matthew's attestation).

#### 2A. Jesus as Sabbath king, 2.5-4.13

Note three things here.

1) The comparison with angels continues in chapter 2 from the argument of chapter 1, but it fades out of view quickly. After 2.7-9, the comparison ceases and the remaining references to angels in the book have a different context (2.16; 12.22; 13.2). Thus, when the writer moves in thought from Christ being lower than angels (2.7, 9) to His exaltation, he no longer develops the idea of our Lord's superiority to angels: **But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor** (2.9). Unstated here is the fact that His glory and honor is far above the glory and honor of the angels. That comparison does not come up again.

The concentration of thought now moves to the exaltation of Christ as Sabbath king, which the writer draws from Psalm 8, **Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking** (2.5) and **You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, <sup>8</sup> putting everything in subjection under his feet"** (2.7-8).

2) He is Sabbath king because He accomplished the work of salvation. It is because of His suffering that God crowned Him with glory: **But we see ...Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death (2.9).**

3) It should not surprise us then that we confront the broad theme of entering into Sabbath rest in 3.7-4.13. We have a promise of entrance into His rest still in front of us, therefore, we are to strive to enter it: **Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (4.1)** and **Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience (4.11).**

### 3A. Jesus as great high priest, 4.14-12.29

The largest section of the book develops the theme of Jesus as our great high priest. The writer introduced this subject earlier: (2.17, **Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people;** and 3.1, **Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession**). In 4.14, he expands on what this means by beginning a long section with an exhortation: **Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**

Clearly, there is development of the priestly work of Christ in chapters 5-12. There is a central comparison of Jesus with the OT priest, Melchizedek. There are a number of comparisons in these chapters that reveal why there is a change from the old to the new and better covenant (especially in 7.1-10.18).

Then, based on the priestly work of Christ, the writer exhorts his readers to faith and faithfulness (10.19-12.11). Notice how he combines the new and living way with the priestly work of Christ in his exhortation:

**<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (10.19-25).**

This exhortation to faith and faithfulness extends right through the famous chapter on faith (11).

It is hard to know where the exhortation ends because of the oscillating character of the argument, but it seems that we can, at least provisionally, mark 13.1 as the beginning of some broad concluding exhortations that rest on all that has gone before. Thus, we might put it like this: because Jesus, the Son, is Sabbath king as saving Lord and great high priest of the Christian family, then obey Him by maintaining brotherly (and sisterly) love, by showing hospitality, by having godly marriages, by being content without the love of money, by submitting to your pastoral leaders, and by bearing with this brief word of exhortation.

### Conclusion

Three considerations get us going in the right direction as we embark on this study of the book of Hebrews to learn about Jesus as the Son, Sabbath king, and great high priest.

#### 1) Consider Jesus

**Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession (3.1).**

Keep Him in focus and you will not only grow in your understanding of the book of Hebrews, but you will also find the strength to overcome obstacles that hinder forward progress in your sanctification.

2) Strive after holiness

Do so with a sense of awe knowing that without holiness no one will see the Lord (12.14). Look to the teachings in this book for guidance to the path of holiness and for the strength to travel on this path.

3) Take up new temple worship with gratitude

There is a reasonable service here that ought to arise from gratitude and lead the way to worship: **Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe (12.28).**

**May we fall down before the majesty of God in gratitude and worship because He has spoken to us through His Son and through whom He will bring us to the city of the living God, the heavenly city, the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is Jesus our Sabbath Lord.**