

## The Exaltation of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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HEBREWS 1:1-3, "Whereas in many parts and in many ways of old, God spake unto the fathers in the prophets, at the end of these days He hath spoken unto us in his Son—whom he hath appointed heir of all things, through whom also he hath made the ages; Who being an eradiated brightness of his glory and an exact representation of his very being, also bearing up all things by the utterance of his power, purification of sins having achieved, sat down on the right hand of the majesty in high places." [*The Emphasized Bible*].

### ~ THE ISSUE ~

In the orthodox Nicene faith Jesus is presented as the unchanging and eternal Divine Son who is of the same "substance" or "essence" as God the Father. Though he assumed a human nature at the "incarnation" and temporarily "emptied himself" of divine prerogatives and authority, he retained his divine nature throughout and reassumed all his prerogatives and authority following his death and resurrection. When exalted by the Father Jesus laid claim to that which was his by nature and which he previously possessed. Since God is immutable so is the eternal and Divine Son.

A theme threaded throughout the Epistle to the Hebrews is that of the *transition of the Son* from one status to another, which takes place at a specific point or points in time when he transitions from a previous state of weakness and humility to one of exaltation and greatness. This theme is integral to the Author's line of argumentation as to why the Son is superior to angels and Moses, and why his priesthood is of a perfect and everlasting order vastly superior to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Covenant. It is part of his strategy to encourage his target audience to hold tight to their original confession (HEBREWS 2:1-4) and press on to the deeper things of God (HEBREWS 6:1-3), rather than fall back into the Old Covenant. In Hebrews the "perfection" and exaltation of Jesus is based not on his "divine nature" but rather on his faithful obedience unto death, which God vindicated when he raised the Son out from among the dead and exalted him to the "right hand of the throne of majesty."

In the opening words of the Epistle the Son is distinguished from God (HEBREWS 1:1-3). Whereas in the past God spoke to his people by means of prophets, in these "last days" he has spoken by means of a Son. This Son has been "appointed" heir of all things and has sat down on the right hand of God because he has "achieved purification of sin." His installation as heir and regal figure is based on his self-sacrificial death. The Greek verb tenses in this passage all point to specific past events.

### ~ THE TRANSITIONING OF THE SON IN THE EPISTLE ~

In HEBREWS 1:4 we read that the Son at one point "became superior to the angels" and went far beyond them, "having inherited a more distinguished name." The metaphor of *inheriting* signifies something received at a particular time or as the result of meeting certain conditions, not to an eternal state of affairs. The Son was "appointed" to his new position by God himself.

HEBREWS 1:5 continues the comparison of the Son to angels, stating "for unto which of the angels said he at any time, 'You are my Son, I *this day have begotten* you,' and again, 'I will become his father, and *he shall become my Son*?' The Author uses quotations from PSALM 2:7 and 2 SAMUEL 7:14, the latter originally applied to David when Yahweh promised him the kingship of Israel. The term "begotten" refers to

a beginning at a specific time, as does God's declaration that Jesus "became" his Son. "This day" translates the Greek adverb *sémeron*, which here is emphatic and points also to a specific point in time when the Son is or was "begotten." There is absolutely no notion here of an "eternal generation" of the Son.

In HEBREWS 1:9 because the Son "loved righteousness and hated lawlessness" his God has "anointed him with the oil of exaltation beyond his partners." This speaks of a past time when the Son demonstrated his love of righteousness and hatred for lawlessness. As a result God exalted the Son far beyond his partners. The Author finishes his opening dialog in verse 13 with another comparison of the Son to angels by quoting PSALM 110:1, "but to which of the angels has he said at any time, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your foes your footstool?'"

In HEBREWS 2:8-9 we read that all things have been subjected beneath the Son's feet and that God "left to him nothing un-subjected." But for now not yet do we see the all things subjected to him, but we see "Jesus made some little less than angels; **by reason of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor**, to the end that by the grace of God in behalf of every one he should taste of death." As previously the relevant verbs are in the past tense and now one is told when this marvelous transition(s) occurred: **when the Son "tasted death."** He was "crowned with glory and honor" because he faithfully endured "the sufferings of death."

In the very next verse readers are informed that God determined **to perfect** the Son "through suffering." The notion of the Son needing to reach a point of "perfection" points to a necessary transition in the status and character of the Son, one to be accomplished through "suffering." Elsewhere the letter makes clear the sufferings of Christ occurred above all in his trial and execution on the Cross; in other words, **his death**. Similarly in HEBREWS 2:14-15, the Son was able at a specific point in time "to paralyze him who held the dominion of death, the Devil," through means of his death and thereby released those who "by fear of death were all their lifetime liable to bondage."

In HEBREWS 2:17-18 the Author writes that the Son "was obliged in every way to be made like unto the brethren" in order that he might "**become**" a merciful and faithful high-priest. The Greek verb used has the basic force to "become" (*ginomai*). It signifies transition or change, a **becoming**. As previously the verb tense used refers to a past event, which was when "he suffered, himself being tested" (verse 18).

In HEBREWS 4:14-15 the Son of God is said to have "**passed through** the heavens." The Greek verb *dierchomai* means to "pass or go through, to penetrate, to pierce." Here it is a perfect tense participle. The Greek perfect tense signifies an action completed in the past with its results continuing into the present. It points to an act completed in the past by the Son. Jesus was able to do this because he was one who "**has been tested** in all respects by way of likeness apart from sin." The Greek participle for "has been tested" is also in the perfect tense.

In HEBREWS 5:5-9 the Son who has been "begotten" is described as having at one time, in "the days of his flesh," offered up supplications to the one who was able to save him out of death. In all likelihood this has in view Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Though he was hearkened to by reason of his devoutness, yet still "even though a son, **he learned obedience from what things he suffered**" and was thereby "**made perfect**." Again the Author presents the notion of Jesus "being made perfect" in the past by means of suffering. Because of this the Son also "**became** to all those who obey him Author of everlasting salvation."

In HEBREWS 6:18-20 Christians are reassured they have "a mighty consolation and fore-lying hope as an anchor of the soul" because their forerunner, Jesus, "has entered" into the interior of the veil. This same Jesus thereby became high priest forever "according to the rank of Melchizedek." As the church's

everlasting high priest according to the rank of Melchizedek, Jesus “*has become* surety of a better covenant” than that of the Levitical priesthood, once again using a perfect tense verb (HEBREWS 7:22). This appointment as everlasting high priest occurred when Jesus “sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (8:1) as a consequence of his resurrection and exaltation. As high priest “according to the rank of Melchizedek” Jesus has attained “a more distinguished public ministry” than that of the Levitical priesthood, because he has become “mediator of a better covenant” based upon “better promises” (8:6).

In HEBREWS 9:11-14 Jesus is said to have “approached as high-priest...through the greater and more perfect tabernacle,” one not made by hand, “but through his own blood *he entered once for all* into the Holy place, having discovered everlasting redemption.” The mention of “blood” is not intended to indicate that the Son’s death was particularly bloody but emphasizes the actuality of his death. This new covenant is vastly superior to the old because through the “blood of the Christ, who offered himself unspotted unto God through an everlasting spirit,” it is able to purify our conscience from dead works in order to render divine-service to God. The mention of the “blood of Christ” indicates Jesus was able to enter the greater Tabernacle “one for all” because of his obedience unto death.

In HEBREWS 9:23-28 the Author claims that in comparison to the Old Covenant with its animal sacrifices, it was necessary for the heavenly counterpart to be established “with better sacrifices than these,” namely by means of the death of the Son. A direct result of the faithful and self-sacrificial death of Jesus was his entry “into heaven itself” where he is *now* “manifested before the face of God on our behalf.” Because of the superiority of the Son’s sacrifice Jesus has no need to be “offering himself often times” as the Levitical priests do with animal sacrifices, for he “*once for all*, upon a conjunction of the ages, for a setting aside of sin *through means of his sacrifice*, has been made manifest.” Thus Christ, “having *been offered once for all* for the bearing of the sins of many, a second time apart from sin will appear to them who for him are ardently waiting.”

In HEBREWS 10:10-14 we read that believers “have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Unlike every other priest who must “stand daily publicly ministering and continually offering the same sacrifices,” Jesus our high priest “*has offered one sacrifice for sins evermore*,” following which he “sat down on the right hand of God” where he waits “until his foes be made his footstool.” By means of the “one offering” of his death in the past the Son “has perfected for evermore those who are being made holy.”

HEBREWS 12:1-2 exhorts readers of the Epistle to “be stripping off every encumbrance and easily entangling sin” so as to run with endurance “the race lying before us,” all the while looking away unto Jesus, our “Princely-leader and Perfecter who “endured a cross, despising the shame.” As a consequence “he has taken his seat on the right hand of the throne of God.”

The past death of Jesus is again presented in HEBREWS 13:12 where it states of Jesus, “that he might consecrate the people through means of his own blood,” he suffered outside the gate. Towards the close of the Epistle the Author summarizes what God has accomplished on our behalf when “He led up from among the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, with the blood of an everlasting covenant” (verse 20), having in view the death of the Son as well as his resurrection and consequent exaltation.

### ~ WHAT ABOUT HEBREWS 13:8? ~

HEBREWS 13:8 is cited as evidence of the Son’s eternal and unchanging divine nature (“Jesus Christ, yesterday and today, is the same even unto the ages”). But this interpretation ignores the central message of the entire letter and disconnects from the immediate context. The Epistle speaks not of the Son’s eternal reign or status without beginning or end, but rather of his exaltation as a consequence of his obedience unto

death.

In verse 7 the Author instructs his readers to “be mindful of those who are guiding you, who indeed have spoken to you the word of God.” The point is the *constancy and reliability* of Jesus Christ. The letter’s readers can have confidence and hold fast to the confession because it is the same one manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus and proclaimed by the original apostles. It is a testament to the character of Jesus that the exalted Christ is the same person as the one who endured suffering and thereby learned obedience, the same one who “received a fellowship of blood and flesh...in order that through death he might paralyze him that held the dominion of death...Whence he was obliged, in every way to be made like unto the brethren” (2:14-17).

Jesus thus became the Author and Finisher of the common faith. The exalted Jesus, our high priest, is the one whose “character and word do not change through the ages but who remains constant. Because of this constancy, the hearers may trust Jesus today and tomorrow, even as ‘yesterday’ their leaders trusted Jesus and were not disappointed.”<sup>[1]</sup>

### ~ SUMMARY ~

The Epistle to the Hebrews presents a consistent picture of the Son of God who was resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God because of his faithful self-sacrifice. God has spoken fully to his people in “these last of the days” by means of a Son. This Son “achieved purification of sins” and thus has sat down on the right hand of the majesty in heaven (1:3). He accomplished this “in the days of his flesh” when God “perfected” him through suffering and taught him obedience even as he endured death. As a consequence of the obedience of the Son God delivered him “out of death” by resurrecting him. Thereafter the Son “passed through the heavens” and was appointed a perfect high priest for the sake of his people.

In this Epistle the “perfection” and exaltation of Jesus is accomplished not due to his “divine nature” but rather to his faithful obedience unto death. This God vindicated when he raised the Son from the dead and exalted him to the “right hand of the throne of majesty.” The Author of Hebrews bases the present exalted status of the Son not on metaphysical speculations about the Divine nature of the Eternal Son or how the “persons” of the Trinity relate to one another, **but rather on the historical events of the obedience, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus**, the Son “made like unto his brothers and sisters in all ways apart from sin.” This occurred at “a conjunction of the ages,” for the pivotal point of all history is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### ENDNOTES:

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<sup>[1]</sup> David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), p. 495.