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Entering Holiness: Christology and Eucharist in Hebrews

Arthur A. Just, Jr.

There are some in our circles who believe that there is an over-emphasis on sacramental readings of New Testament documents. They are concerned that some exegetes see baptism in every reference to water, and the Lord's Supper at any reference to food or table fellowship. No doubt there are abuses in reading too much into texts, yet there are legitimate reasons why sacramental readings are occurring at this time.

For one, there is increased recognition of the significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper as foundational in the life of the New Testament church. To borrow a phrase from Richard Hays, the "narrative substructure" of the New Testament witness was handed down to the first-century saints through its liturgical life, that is through preaching, catechesis, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.¹ The absence of sacramental readings occurs on both extremes of the hermeneutical spectrum. One brief example will illustrate this point. For the higher critics, the sacraments reflect an early catholicism that resulted from the delay of the parousia, a development particularly evident to them in Luke and Acts. For conservative Reformed exegetes, their inability to see the intimate relationship between Christology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology likewise obscures their view of a sacramental sub-structure for the post-Pentecost church. Like the higher critics, their interpretation tends to ignore that the recipients of New Testament documents are liturgical Christians who have been thoroughly catechized, baptized into Christ, his death and resurrection, regularly hear the word read and preached, and receive the Lord's body and blood as members of a eucharistic community. This community knows the end of the story: that Christ has gone to the cross, risen, ascended, and is continually present in the church through the Spirit in the gospel and the sacraments. Curiously, for both the higher critics and the conservative Reformed exegetes, the church as a liturgical community that receives the

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

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Scripture as a kerygmatic word is not a significant factor in their interpretation of the Gospels or the Epistles.

Having said this, most scholars today acknowledge that the church was baptizing and celebrating the Lord's Supper from the beginning. Our honored guest speaker at the 2005 exegetical symposium, Larry Hurtado, in his book *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, openly acknowledges that "it is commonly accepted that a sacred meal that signified religious fellowship of participants was a characteristic feature of Christian circles from the earliest years."² What is remarkable, however, in a book devoted to the "religious beliefs and practices" of early Christians,³ is that Hurtado has so few references to the Lord's Supper, and the eucharistic devotional life of early Christians does not seem to influence his reading of texts as much as one would expect. This is even more remarkable in light of his subtitle, "Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity," and his short monograph entitled *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion*.⁴

This myopic reading of the New Testament apart from the sacraments is particularly evident in interpretations of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This essay will show how the Christology of Hebrews suggests a eucharistic reading of this Epistle; that is, to understand the high-priestly Christology of Hebrews is to affirm that the hearers believed that this Christology was enfleshed at the altar. The hermeneutical lens for this study will be sacramental, which is to say it will reflect a lively sense of inaugurated eschatology:

Inaugurated eschatology demonstrates how Christology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology come together. To sum up the theological themes of [Hebrews]: The Lord (*Christology*) is present (*sacramentology*) in his church (*ecclesiology*) both now and not yet (*eschatology*).⁵

² Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 493

³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 493.

⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). See below for one notable exception on Hebrews 12.

⁵ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Concordia Commentary, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 3.

I. The Eucharist in Hebrews

The general consensus among critical scholars and conservative exegetes today is that Hebrews contains few, if any, references or allusions to the Lord's Supper. Craig Koester, in his monumental commentary on Hebrews for the Anchor Bible series, develops in detail the social setting of Hebrews, first looking at the history of the community through three phases: (1) proclamation and conversion, (2) persecution and solidarity, and (3) friction and malaise.⁶ These three phases accurately reflect what a careful reading of Hebrews yields, namely, a community that is formed by its initial hearing of the gospel (phase 1) rallies as a community under persecution as its commitment to that proclamation is strengthened (phase 2), and then, what may be the occasion that prompted the letter, it experiences a period of stagnation when the persecution lessens but still lingers as they realize that living in this persecuted state will be their life (phase 3). Koester continues his investigation of the social setting by profiling the community and its context, focusing first on the Christian community itself, and then placing that community in both its Jewish and Greco-Roman subcultures. Again, his analysis is impressive and resonates with a careful reading of the text.

Koester acknowledges that this letter is written to a house church that understands itself as a family, with God as Father and fellow members as brothers and sisters in Christ. This community is constituted by baptism, through which each believer receives an identity in Christ.⁷ He notes that "the author apparently envisioned his 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13:22; cf. Acts 13:15; 1 Tim 4:13) being read to a small 'gathering' of Christians (Heb 10:25; cf. 1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3) who would later have occasion to greet 'all the saints' in their area (Heb 13:24)."⁸ He envisions that Hebrews could be considered a sermon or homily, even though he acknowledges that "little is known about the contours of Jewish and Christian preaching in the first century."⁹ There is no doubt that Hebrews is a remarkable

⁶ Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 36 (New York: The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2001), 64–79

⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 66–67.

⁸ Koester, *Hebrews*, 74.

⁹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 81. Attridge notes that "the text is often identified as a sermon or homily. That judgement has been substantiated by formal parallels with Hellenistic-Jewish and early Christian tests that may be judged to be, or to be based upon, homilies." Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 14.

literary text, fully engaged in the three aspects of Aristotle's rhetorical persuasion: logic, emotion, and character.¹⁰ Throughout his commentary, Koester continually shows how, through the proclamation of a performative word, the hearers are formed, nurtured, and encouraged. His focus on the word of God as constituting and formative reflects a clear understanding of how Scripture preached and embodied in community was central to both Jewish and Jewish Christian communities.

There is much to be commended here, and yet, when it comes to seeing the Hebrews community as a eucharistic one, Koester either ignores or discounts such a possibility:

Hebrews refers to Christian baptism but makes no clear mention of the Lord's Supper. Interpreters have debated whether he might have woven allusions to the meal into his speech, and three viewpoints have emerged. Of these, the most viable is the third, which finds no allusions to the Lord's Supper in Hebrews.¹¹

This is not simply a matter of whether or not references to the Lord's Supper occur in Hebrews, (which Koester, among many others, dismisses), but whether the house churches that receive this homily are regularly celebrating the Lord's Supper. As a homily, Hebrews is a liturgical text that is intended to be preached as a performative word in the context of a worshipping assembly where Christ is present bodily as he comes to the hearers in their ears through the proclaimed word and in their mouths through the Lord's Supper.

Within the academy, however, not all commentators on Hebrews eschew a liturgical setting for this Epistle. Albert Vanhoye, in his remarkable analysis of Hebrews in *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*,

¹⁰ See Koester, *Hebrews*, 87-92.

¹¹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 127. The other two viewpoints are: "1. Some detect favorable allusions to the Eucharist . . . 2. Others propose that Hebrews takes a critical stance toward the Lord's Supper. They read Hebrews' silence about the Lord's Supper more negatively, as a hesitation about the sacrament, either because listeners evinced a misguided trust in ritual or because the meal obscured the once-for-all significance of Christ's death." For an erudite defense of the second position, and his withering critique of Swetnam's position, see Ronald Williamson, "The Eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-75), 300-312. His conclusion in this article, however, is worth noting: "It seems, then, that there is little or no evidence in Hebrews of involvement, on the part of the author or of the community of Christians to which the epistle was addressed, in eucharistic faith and practice."

describes Hebrews as a priestly sermon and presents a persuasive chiasmic structure of the entire Epistle that climaxes at 9:11 when the author describes Christ "as HIGH PRIEST of the good things to come."¹² Vanhoye offers a brief commentary on the entire Epistle, beginning with the observation that the context of Hebrews is liturgical. It is to be heard as a kerygmatic sermon, transforming and forming its hearers:

The Priestly Sermon (Heb 1,1-13,21) has been composed to be read aloud before a Christian assembly, doubtless like the one which St. Luke describes in Acts 20, 7-8 or St. Paul in 1 Cor 14,26. The Christians have come together to hear the Word of God, to sing, to pray, and also, quite likely, to celebrate the Eucharist (cf. Acts 20,7; 1 Cor 11,20). Let us slip into their midst and hear the preaching addressed to them. It is as valid for us as it is for them.¹³

II. Entering Holiness through the Body of the Risen Lord

To observe how Hebrews is as valid to us as it is to them is to encounter the concept of holiness and what it means to enter the presence of God. One of the core values of first century Judaism was God's holiness. The presence of God's holiness in creation and the temple was central to how Israel mapped its world. As Jerome Neyrey expresses it: "Jesus as the cornerstone of the true temple becomes the new center of the map and all holiness is measured by proximity to him."¹⁴

Where Jesus is, there is God's holiness. For the Jews, to enter or approach God's holiness is to enter eschatological space. The language of approaching God's holy presence runs throughout the Hebrews homily, beginning with the paraenetic transition in Hebrews 4:14-16. Harold Attridge notes in his commentary that this section contains "two hortatory subjunctives, 'let us hold fast' and 'let us approach,' that exemplify the two types of exhortation found throughout the text."¹⁵ He expands on the significance of the exhortation to approach God's presence:

At the same time, the addressees are called to a more "dynamic" virtue, to movement in various directions. They are summoned, in

¹² Albert Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Roma: E. Pontificie Instituto Biblico, 1989), 40a-40b.

¹³ Vanhoye, *Structure and Message*, 45.

¹⁴ Jerome Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of the Luke-Acts: 'They Turned the Word Upside Down,'" *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome Neyrey, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 293.

¹⁵ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 22.

terminology probably derived from the cultic sphere, to “approach” (προσερχώμεθα) the throne of God to find mercy and aid; to strive to “enter” (σπουδάσωμεν . . . εἰσελθεῖν) God’s rest (4:11); to “carry on” (φέρωμεθα) to maturity. The final two paraenetic movements, which describe the “approach” that has already taken place (12:18, 22), also contain calls to movement, not to entry or to a cultic approach but first “to run the race” (τρέχωμεν τὸν . . . ἀγῶνα), which is but another way of encouraging endurance (12:1).¹⁶

One cannot underestimate the programmatic nature of the hortatory subjunctive “let us approach” (προσερχώμεθα) in Hebrews 4:16 for a eucharistic reading of Hebrews: “Therefore, let us with boldness approach the throne of grace, in order that we might receive mercy and find grace for help at the right time.”¹⁷ James Swetnam, in his article “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” echoes Attridge’s comments concerning the significance of approach (προσέρχομαι) and enter (εἰσέρχομαι) in “the spatial approach to describe coming to union with God” that in Hebrews “suggests some underlying consistency of liturgical theology.”¹⁸ He goes on to state:

The ultimate goal of the addressees is God’s Rest into which they are to “enter in” (Chapters 3 and 4). But before this definitive entrance into God’s Rest there is the liturgy of “approaching” God, a liturgy couched in the imagery of the entrance of the Old Testament high priest into the Holy of Holies. The Christians are reminded that Jesus as the new high priest has definitively entered into the new Holy of Holies and they are urged to approach God’s presence by doing likewise. Various interpretations can be made as to what Christian reality the author had in mind. But . . . it seems not unnatural to think of him as referring to the eucharist as a means of approaching God’s presence through Jesus on the Christian journey which eventually will end with entrance into eternal life: entering into the Christian Holy of Holies and thus the presence of God available in this life through the means offered by Jesus’ risen body prefigures

¹⁶ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 22.

¹⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 5.

¹⁸ James Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Bib* 70 (1989): 90.

entering into the definitive Rest of God to which entering the Holy of Holies is intrinsically ordered.¹⁹

The significance of "approaching" God (προσέρχομαι) is particularly evident in Hebrews 12 at that climactic moment when the hearers are told that they have not approached Mt. Sinai (12:18—οὐ γὰρ προσεληλύθατε) but they have approached Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22—ἀλλὰ προσεληλύθατε). Here προσέρχομαι is used for entering the presence of God, taking the dative of the place entered.²⁰ Most translations render this as "you have not approached" (or "have approached in 12:22) to indicate that this is a punctiliar durative, indicating that "the action, and the relationship it symbolizes, has begun and is still in effect."²¹ As Attridge pointed out, Hebrews has used this word to suggest the worship of God, the most significant experience a human being might have in his relationship with God (compare 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6) To approach God or to enter into his presence brings with it eschatological consequences.²²

Swetnam and Vanhoye are part of the minority of scholars who interpret Hebrews eucharistically. Swetnam notes what we previously observed in Koester's comments, namely:

The subject of the eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the minor points of disagreement in contemporary New Testament studies. It is minor because relatively few people are in favor of seeing any allusions at all to the eucharist in the letter, *and even these few regard the allusions as quite secondary to the main purpose of the document.*²³

This last comment, that any allusions to the Eucharist are secondary to the main purpose of the document, is at the heart of the issue for those who desire to read New Testament documents sacramentally. Not only will we argue that there are allusions to the Eucharist in Hebrews, but the very homily itself is eucharistic in its purpose and intent. Swetnam's

¹⁹ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 92-93.

²⁰ See Walter A. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition, translated, revised and augmented by William Arndt, Felix Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 720.

²¹ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 372.

²² See the use of ἐγγίζω in the Gospels, which bears a similar eschatological connotation.

²³ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 74 (emphasis mine).

approach is to connect the Christology of Hebrews with the Eucharist, the very thing that is missing in most New Testament exegesis today because interpreters do not recognize that Christ's ongoing bodily presence in his church is at the center of the life of the communities that receive the New Testament. As Swetnam says of his own approach:

There will be no "proofs" offered—the material does not seem to lend itself to a presentation which issues in certitude. All that will be claimed is that the hypothesis of the importance of the eucharist gives a coherence, relevance, and depth to the letter which is otherwise lacking.²⁴

Swetnam's analysis takes us in surprising directions. Instead of approaching the topic by assessing passages that might be eucharistic, he analyzes Hebrew's understanding of completion by observing the theological significance of τελειόω, which he defines as "definitive, God-willed fulfillment or completion."²⁵ His purpose is to show that in Jesus there is completion, particularly in Jesus' body at the resurrection.

Now it was precisely the body which made Jesus liable to death (2,14), so it must be the body which must be changed in some way if death is to be permanently avoided. Hence it is the body which is brought to "completion" if he is to attain the definitive state willed for him by God It is the transformation of the body which is crucial; just as Jesus needed a body of blood and flesh to overcome death by means of death (2,14), so he needs a body which has overcome death to be forever available to those who need his intercession (7,24-25) At the resurrection Jesus was given a body commensurate with his high priestly need of immortality, the words, "You are my Son, today I have given you birth" become stunningly apposite: at the resurrection Jesus finally and fully became the "Son" which his divinely-appointed role in the drama of salvation demanded that he be.²⁶

Completion in the resurrected body of Jesus leads Swetnam to connect this to the Eucharist through Hebrew's high-priestly Christology,

²⁴ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 74.

²⁵ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 76.

²⁶ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 77-79.

particularly Hebrews 9:11-12, the central verse for Vanhoye in his chiasmic structure of the priestly homily:

- 9:11 Χριστὸς δὲ
 παραγενόμενος ἀρχιερεὺς τῶν γενομένων ἀγαθῶν
 διὰ τῆς μείζονος καὶ τελειότερας σκηνῆς
 οὐ χειροποιήτου
 τοῦτ' ἔστιν
 οὐ ταύτης τῆς κτίσεως,
 9:12 οὐδὲ δι' αἵματος τράγων καὶ μόσχων
 διὰ δὲ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος
εἰσῆλθεν ἐφάπαξ εἰς τὰ ἅγια
 αἰώνιαν λύτρωσιν εὐράμενος.

- 9:11 But Christ,
 having-then-come [as] high priest of the good things to come,
through the greater and more perfect *tent*,
 not made-with-hands, that is, not of this creation,
 9:12 and not through [the] blood of goats and calves,
 but *through* his own *blood*,
 entered once-for-all into the sanctuary,
 having found an eternal redemption.²⁷

This passage is significant because Christ's entrance through the "more perfect tent" is through himself, his own blood, that is, his body. Swetnam suggests that because "more perfect" modifies "tent" which signifies "body," the body here is Jesus' resurrected body that has been made complete and is "now cultically empowered to stand before God in the definitive role assigned him in the Holy of Holies (εἰς τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων)."²⁸ Since σκηνή may be understood as either "tent" or "body,"²⁹ and τὰ ἅγια has two possible meanings, "holy things" or "the sanctuary", namely the "Holy of Holies,"³⁰ Swetnam draws the following conclusion that forms the crux of his eucharistic reading as it relates to Hebrews' high priestly Christology:

Based on the parallelism between the two sets of words with twofold meanings, the point would then be that just as Christ's "completed",

²⁷ Translation from Vanhoye, *Structure and Message*, 94.

²⁸ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 81.

²⁹ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 82.

³⁰ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 82.

i.e., risen body was the "means" of entering the sanctuary, thus replacing the outer tent, so the sanctuary/Holy of Holies into which he enters is really a corresponding reality, the "holy things" of Christianity. These "holy things" seem to be referred to at 8,3 with the words "gifts and sacrifices" (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσία). Their old dispensation counterparts are referred to in 8, 4 (δῶρά) and 9,9 (δῶρά τε καὶ θυσία). Given the fact that Jesus offered himself (9,26.28), these "gifts and sacrifices" of the new dispensation are Jesus himself.

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 the Holy of Holies, i.e., God's presence. Even at 9,24, where Christ is portrayed as entering into "heaven itself" (εἰς αὐτὸν τὸν οὐρανόν), heaven is viewed under the formality of God's presence (νῦν ἐμφανισθῆναι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) when it is contrasted with the ἅγια of the old dispensation. Just as the Holy of Holies of the desert tabernacle was considered as the place of meeting between God and his people, so the Christian fulfillment of this "antitype" (9,24) involves the place of meeting between God and his people, but in Christ. No reader of this 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 would have been interpreted.³¹

This oral tradition, of course, is the homiletical, catechetical, and liturgical traditions that articulated for the people of God the biblical faith in their ecclesial life, a faith that reflected a Christology that holds that the person of Jesus is always present according to his divine and human natures. Wherever Jesus is present, he is present in the flesh or bodily. This is why Larry Hurtado, in his book *Lord Jesus Christ*, considers Hebrews as one of the tributaries of second-century Christianity and "the 'two natures' conception that figures prominently in the Christology of orthodox Christianity in the second-century and thereafter."³²

Swetnam's argument sweeps us along, but is he right? In contrast to his reading of τελειώω in Hebrews, C. Koester notes that τελειώω and its derivatives apply to both Jesus and those who are in Christ, and that these two applications frame the epistle, namely:

³¹ Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist," 82-84 (emphasis mine).

³² Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 500.

"Now it is fitting for him, for whom all things and through whom all things exist, in bringing many sons [and daughters] to glory, to make the pioneer of their salvation complete (τελειῶσαι) through sufferings." (2:10)³³

"... and the assembly of the firstborn, who are registered in heaven, and a judge, who is God of all, and the spirits of the righteous, who have been made complete (τετελειωμένων)..." (12:23)³⁴

For this completion to happen to Jesus and to us, "two barriers must be overcome: sin and death."³⁵ Koester clearly sees how this completion happened in Jesus and continues to happen to us, but he does not recognize that this completion happens at the Eucharist:

Hebrews will speak of completion as a present reality for those whose consciences have been cleansed by Christ's self offering (10:14).

If purification removes sin from the conscience and if sanctification puts a person in a proper condition to approach God, then completion is the positive relationship that results from these actions. Although completion finally means everlasting life in God's presence, Hebrews can say that those who are sanctified by Christ have already been made complete in the sense of being brought into right relationship with God (10:14), and this completeness is exercised when they actually approach God in prayer (7:18-19). Such a relationship corresponds to God's new covenant promise to write his laws on human hearts, so that people might be wholly obedient and that God might be their God and they might be his people (8:10-12).³⁶

For Koester, prayer—not the Eucharist—is how we experience this completeness. No one would want to discount the value of prayer in responding to God's gifts of the holy things, but in prayer there is no encounter with Christ in his body, namely with his flesh and blood. That only happens sacramentally, especially in the Eucharist. Swetnam's reading of Hebrews is bloody and Koester's is bloodless. If we follow

³³ Translation by Koester, *Hebrews*, 4.

³⁴ Translation by Koester, *Hebrews*, 13.

³⁵ Koester, *Hebrews*, 123.

³⁶ Koester, *Hebrews*, 123.

Swetnam, our completion comes from our communion with fleshly body and blood, with Christ acting on behalf of us and in us, as we approach the altar as the Holy of Holies. If we follow Koester, our completion comes from our inner urgings to approach Christ and lay before him our thanksgivings and petitions. Both are important, but if Swetnam is correct, the "gifts and sacrifices" are Christ himself and not our response. What is remarkable here, however, (and this is true of many exegetes), Koester takes us there christologically, but he falls short in delivering the goods sacramentally. He does not make the move to the Eucharist because, for him, early Christian communities should be understood more as communities of prayer than as eucharistic fellowships. Even in his final comments about τελειώ he sees the eschatological ramifications of Hebrews that would lead one to the Eucharist:

Completion is the consummation of humankind in an eternal relationship with God, in which people share Christ's glory (2:10), enter God's rest (4:9-10), see the Lord (12:14), and join in the festival gathering in the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22).³⁷

We now turn to this "festival gathering in the heavenly Jerusalem" by looking at two passages in Hebrews that yield a eucharistic reading that augments the previous analysis.

IV. Entering Holiness through the Purification of Sins: Hebrews 1:1-4

- 1:1 Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι
ὁ θεός λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις
- 1:2 ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων **ἐλάλησεν** ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ,
 ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων,
 δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνα":
- 1:3 ὃς
 ὦν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ
 χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ,
 φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ,
 καθαρισμόν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος
ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς,
- 1:4 τοσοῦτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων
 ὅσῳ διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς
 κεκληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα.

³⁷ Koester, *Hebrews*, 123.

- 1:1 On many occasions and in various ways long ago
 God, having spoken to the fathers through the prophets,
 1:2 in these last days **has spoken** to us by a Son
whom he placed an heir of all things,
 through whom also he created the ages;
 1:3 **who**
being the radiance of glory and (pre-existence)
 the impress of his substance,
bearing all things by the word of his power, (pre-existence/incarnation)
 (humiliation) *after having made* a purification of sins (incarnation/atonement)
 (exaltation) **sat down** at the right hand of the Majesty on high
 1:4 having become as superior to the angels
 so much different than them
 as the name he has inherited.

Many call the first four verses of Hebrews the exordium, or introduction, that draws the hearers into the homily.³⁸ It is a periodic sentence written in sublime Greek through which the author is demonstrating his literary talents.³⁹ As a christological homily, Hebrews begins by describing the person and work of the Son in his pre-existence, incarnation, atonement, and exaltation. A full Christology is contained in this periodic sentence.⁴⁰ Although Hebrews' high priestly Christology is not introduced in this prologue, the foundation for that Christology is laid here. The Son now speaks for God (the Father) to the hearers of Hebrews, replacing the speaking of the prophets who spoke long ago to the fathers. God's speaking through his Son is an eschatological act, occurring in "these last days," for when the Son speaks the end is upon us (1:2 – ἡμῖν), the hearers of this homily. With the incarnation of the Son, the end has begun but is not yet. The hearers have all the blessings of the endtimes, even though they may not be experiencing these things in their day-to-day life. In the Son, God's actions on behalf of humanity reach their completion, but the full experience of this completion is still in the future.

³⁸ Vanhoye considers only the first four verses to be the exordium: *Structure and Message*, 23. Koester argues that 1:1 to 2:4 constitutes the exordium which he describes as "an introduction that was designed to make the audience receptive to the rest of what the speaker had to say," *Hebrews*, 174–176.

³⁹ Here Hebrews follows Luke whose prologue alerts his hearers that he is capable of writing in the finest Greek prose.

⁴⁰ See Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, AGJU 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 295–301.

The Christology develops quickly through two verses (1:2-3) as God's speaking in the Son receives its authority by a description of the Son as the heir of all things (1:2), a theme that frames the exordium since the author concludes by describing the name that the Son inherits (1:4). The Son's speaking is performative, first as that which brought creation into being (1:2—"through whom also he created the ages"), next as the one who keeps all things in creation together (1:3—"bearing all things by the word of his power"), and then as that which cleansed a creation whose fall is manifest in sins (1:3—"having made a purification of sins"). The Son is also described as the radiance of the Glory (1:3) and possessor a "more excellent name (1:4); both of these descriptions identify the Son within the mystery of the one God of Israel.^{38b} These Christological titles and acts show the Son's preexistence, incarnation, and atonement. The humiliation of the Son is seen in his making a purification for sins. The Son's speaking and acting leads to his exaltation where he sits "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3).

If this letter is a homily delivered in the context of a liturgical rite that begins with the reading of the Word of God and climaxes with the Eucharist, the author of Hebrews may be suggesting this by the very manner in which he structures his prologue. The Word of God that creates and sustains all things becomes incarnate so that he might act in that creation as the one who in the atonement makes purification for sins. The Word made flesh not only acted in creation at the cross to purify us from our sins, but continues to act in his creation by forgiving sins at every Lord's Supper. The reference to "making purification for sins," then, may refer not only to the atonement, but also to the Eucharist, where the atonement continues in the life of the community. Vanhoye seems to suggest this as he describes how the exordium of this priestly homily is to be heard in the context of the liturgy where the action is in the Lord's Supper:

The Sermon is clearly connected with the liturgy of the Word of God. The preacher is well aware of this: we grasp it immediately, for his first words evoke the theme "God has spoken to us" (1,2). . . . The liturgy of the Word is not all there is to the matter, for God is not content simply to speak: he has acted. He has intervened in an active way in our history. The Word of God is closely linked to this action which gives the Word all its validity. The Christian liturgy has two parts, inseparable the one from the other, one which proclaims the word, the other which makes present God's action. This action of

God is his victory over sin and death, a victory gained through the passion of his Son. The beginning of the Sermon faithfully reflects this reality, for in one matchless sentence it presents in quick succession the Word of God and the mystery of Christ and ties them close together. Reduced to its main parts the sentence affirms that "God has spoken to us in his Son . . . who . . . having brought about the purification from sin is seated at His right." From now on the word of God reaches us in its fullness, because it has found its perfect form thanks to the incarnation of the Son of God, who is "splendor of His glory and imprint of His being" (1,3). From now on the action of God transforms our existence, for it unfolds for us completely and definitively in the glorifying Passion of Christ. It follows that for us the word of God and the action of God are inseparately linked to the mediation of Christ. It is in Christ that God speaks to us, it is in Christ that God saves us.⁴¹

Hebrews is especially interested in the rites of atonement and purification in the tabernacle and how they have been superseded and rendered obsolete by the death of Jesus. If the climax of Hebrews is 9:11-14 where Jesus, the high priest of the good things to come passes through the more perfect tent through his own blood to purify our consciences from dead works, then the question to be asked by a first-century Christian is: How do I now receive this purification of my sins from Jesus' death if the sacrificial rites of the Old Testament are now nullified? We know how God speaks to us today in his Word, but where is his action among us? To echo the language of Hebrews 10 and 12: How do I draw near to the holy places through the blood of Jesus; how do I approach God's presence on Mt. Zion?

Two possible answers from Hebrews would be baptism, described as enlightenment (6:4) that comes from "our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (10:22), or prayer, as Koester suggests in his comments on 4:16 where prayer is the primary way for Christians to "draw near to the throne of grace" (see also 7:18-19 and 10:22 where prayer is also significant for Koester). If however, the readers of Hebrews are an ecclesial community that regularly celebrates the Lord's Supper, where the sacrificed body and blood of Christ on behalf of sins is offered to them in this sacred meal for the forgiveness of their sins, would they not see the Eucharist as central to how they now receive

⁴¹ Vanhoye, *Structure and Message*, 45-46.

the purification of sins that Christ accomplished for them through his death?

The final verse of the exordium may support a eucharistic reading of "purification of sins." The Son is described as "having become superior than the angels." Both the word for superior (κρείττων) and the introduction of angels (τῶν ἀγγέλων) suggest a eucharistic reading in light of the climactic moment in Hebrews 12:22-24 where both words are used for the final time in the Epistle: the hearers approach Mt. Zion with its myriad of angels (μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων, πανηγύρει) in festive gathering, and with Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (καὶ διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ) whose sprinkled blood speaks in a superior way to Abel (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἀβελ).

C. Koester, along with many other commentators, has asked the question "why angels play such a prominent role in the first chapter of Hebrews?"⁴² He answers his own question by describing three ways in which the superiority of Christ to angels relates to the rest of Hebrews. His third observation relates this to Hebrews 12:22-24:

The body of the speech concludes with the announcement that the listeners have "approached Mt. Zion and the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, and myriads of angels in festival gathering" (12:22). The gathering of angels is not only for Jesus, who is God's firstborn in a singular sense (1:6), but for all the "firstborn" children of God (12:23). The festive opening section of the speech anticipates its depiction of the final celebration in the city of God, which is the destiny of the faithful.⁴³

Why could this reference to angels here in Hebrews 12 refer not only to the final eschatological feast, but the ongoing anticipation and foretaste of that feast at the church's eucharistic repast? The superiority of Christ to the angels is resolved at the Lord's Supper where angels join the saints in Christ whose bodily presence in bread and wine offers purification of sins through blood that speaks better than the blood of Abel. As will be argued later, Hebrews 12:18-24 is climactic for Hebrews' eucharistic theology.

⁴² Koester, *Hebrews*, 200.

Entering Holiness on Mt. Zion: Hebrews 12:18-24

- 12:18 Οὐ γὰρ **προσεληλύθατε**
 ψηλαφωμένῳ
 καὶ κεκαυμένῳ πυρὶ
 καὶ γνόφῳ καὶ ζόφῳ καὶ θυέλλῃ
- 12:19 καὶ σάλπιγγος ἤχῳ
 καὶ φωνῇ ῥημάτων,
 ἧς οἱ ἀκούσαντες παρητήσαντο
 μὴ προστεθῆναι αὐτοῖς λόγον,
- 12:20 οὐκ **ἔφερον** γὰρ τὸ διαστελλόμενον,
Κὰν θηρίον θίγη τοῦ ὄρους,
λιθβοληθήσεται·
- 12:21 καί,
 οὕτω φοβερὸν ἦν τὸ φανταζόμενον,
 Μωϋσῆς **εἶπεν,**
Ἐκφοβός εἰμι καὶ ἔντρομος.
- 12:22 ἀλλὰ **προσεληλύθατε**
 Σιών ὄρει
 καὶ πόλει θεοῦ ζώντος, Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἐπουρανίῳ/,
 καὶ μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων, πανηγύρει
- 12:23 καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς
 καὶ κριτῇ θεῷ πάντων
 καὶ πνεύμασι δικαίων τετελειωμένων
- 12:24 καὶ διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη
 Ἰησοῦ
 καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ.

Translation

- 12:18 For you have not approached
 a thing palpable
 and a burning fire
 and darkness and gloom and tempest
- 12:19 and a sound of trumpets
 and a voice of utterances,
 which those having heard begged
 that a word no longer be given to them,
- 12:20 for they could not bear the command,
 "Even if a beast touch the mountain,

⁴³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 200–201.

it will be stoned;"

12:21 and
so fearful that which was made visible
Moses said,
"I am afraid and trembling."

12:22 But you have approached
Mount Zion
and the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem,
and myriads of angels in festive gathering
12:23 and an assembly of firstborn registered in the heavens
and God, a judge of all,
and spirits of the righteous who have been made complete,
12:24 and a mediator of a new covenant
JESUS
and blood of sprinkling speaking in a superior way to Abel.

This is a discrete section from 12:18–24 that is composed of two periodic sentences (12:18–21 and 12:22–24). They are parallel in that both begin with *προσελήλυθατε*, a perfect tense verb that indicates an action has begun (or has not begun) and has a continuing result. In the first section, the Hebrews' hearers are told that they have not approached a place that is described like Mt. Sinai; in the second section, they are told that they have approached Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. In the first sentence, fear is the theme that carries through the rest of sentence, showing that the Israelites first are afraid of the command that even a beast would be stoned on the mountain. This fear is then confirmed by Moses who says "I am afraid and trembling" (12:21).

In contrast, the second sentence has a series of words and phrases that describe the place the hearers have entered, Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the circumstances surrounding that place, the myriads of angels in festive gathering and the spirits of the righteous who have been made complete. The sentence concludes with Jesus, whose presence defines the place as well as the community of saints and angels who dwell with him in this place of festal assembly. Both sections end with speaking. Moses speaks of fear and trembling in the first sentence; Jesus' blood speaks better than the blood of Abel in the second.

Mt. Sinai, then, creates fear; Mt. Zion is the place of Christ's presence whose blood speaks of purification and cleansing.⁴⁴

The author of Hebrews, therefore, comes to another climactic moment in his homily by describing the approach of his hearers to the presence of God on Mt. Zion.⁴⁵ To highlight this approach, he compares it to the Israelites who could not approach Mt. Sinai because of their fear of God's presence that could bring instant death. By using the perfect tense for his hearers' approach to Mt. Zion, it is clear that this movement into God's presence has already begun here on earth. Clearly Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is not a specific place in Israel but is wherever Christ is present according to both his divine and human natures. When Hebrews' first-century hearers ask themselves, "where is this place?" their immediate response must be where Christ *speaks* for his Father and *acts* for his Father. That place is the liturgy where Christ's performative word brings purification of sins through preaching and the Eucharist. The inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament encourages us to consider that our approach to God's presence in Jesus begins already now in the church's eucharistic life even as it will reach its consummation when we fully experience Christ's presence at the heavenly feast.

There can be no argument that this passage refers to the final feast on the Last Day in heaven, especially by the phrase "heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22—*Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἐπουρανίω*). Yet in Christ's bodily presence among us now, heaven is on earth, so that Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where the exalted Christ now sits at God's right hand

⁴⁴ Vanhoye relates the presence of angels in the first two chapters with Hebrews high-priestly christology: "We add that the insistence on the angels, which at first sight can seem rather odd, is intelligible in the light of this orientation. For it was their capability as mediators which attracted the attention of the believers of this period. Were not the angels the beings best situated to serve as intermediaries between men and God? Jewish tradition gave them this role. Certain texts even assign to the most elevated among them the dignity of a heavenly high priest. By implicitly opposing such claims our author shows without stating it that Christ is much better qualified than any angel to fill the role of high priest. Son of God, he enjoys with his Father a relation much more intimate than any angel (1,5-14). Brother of men, he is much more capable of understanding us and of helping us (2,5-16). The angels assuredly have their place in the realization of the design of God, but it is a subordinate place (1,14). The glorified Christ is of incomparably more worth than they. He is for us more than a simple intermediary, for it is at the deepest level of his being that he is become for us, through his Passion, the true mediator between God and man;" *Structure and Message*, 49.

⁴⁵ Koester notes that "Arrival in the celestial city marks a climax in Hebrews;" *Hebrews*, 548

(1:3) exists at the altar where the myriad of angels in festive gathering join the assembly of the firstborn and the Spirits of the righteous who have been made complete. Here God is judge as to who is worthy to enter this presence now at the eucharistic feast even as, at the parousia, he will judge who will be invited to the eternal banquet of the Lamb in his kingdom that has no end. Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, pours out the blood of the covenant into the eucharistic cup that speaks better than Abel's blood. Here in this cup a purification of sins takes place through forgiveness.

Hebrews 12:22-24 shows that the superiority of Christ to the angels helps the hearers understand that angels now take their proper place as beings who prostrate before him (1:6), serving as his cult ministers before his throne (1:7) and as ministering spirits for his saints who are about to inherit salvation (1:14). In Christ's suffering and death; however, he momentarily makes himself subordinate to the angels in order that, by tasting death for all, his blood as a sacrifice for all might speak better than the blood of Abel's sacrifice. This blood of the new covenant that gives access to the eternal feast first gives access to the eucharistic table where "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying: 'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of Sabbaoth. *Heav'n and earth* are full of your glory.'"

Hebrews 12:22-24 is the origin of this language from the Proper Preface that leads to the singing of the Sanctus from Isaiah 6 and Psalm 118. What is most curious about the phrase in the Sanctus—"heaven and earth are full of your glory"—is that Isaiah does not include "heaven" in his record of the words of the seraphim, but has only "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3, *ESV*). It is the church that added "heaven" to the Sanctus. The reality of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper demanded that the church acknowledge that heaven and earth are joined together in the breaking of the bread and the eucharistic cup. Larry Hurtado not only supports this reading, but shows how clearly Hebrews 12, which he describes as speaking "of participation in the community of Christian believers in awesome terms,"⁴⁶ is both eucharistic and eschatological. For Hurtado, Hebrews 12 is describing the worship of Christians in the first century and the worship of Christians now:

⁴⁶ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 50.

As the "holy ones" (saints) of God, believers saw their worship gatherings as attended by heavenly "holy ones", angels, whose presence signified the heavenly significance of their humble house-church assemblies. It is this sense that Christian collective worship participates in the heavenly cultus that finds later expressions in the traditional words of the liturgy: "Wherefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we do laud and magnify your glorious name." . . . The point is that in their sense of their worship gatherings as an extension of and participation in the idealized worship of the heavenly hosts, and in their view of their gatherings as graced with God's holy angels, they express a vivid transcendent significance pertaining to these occasions.

Collective worship was also experienced as having a strong eschatological significance. In fact, for religious groups with a strong sense of heavenly realities and eschatological hopes, worship is logically seen as the occasion when heavenly realities come to expression on earth and when foretastes of eschatological hopes are experienced in the present. . . . Consequently, just as worship can be the occasion in which heaven and earth are specially joined, the earthly worship setting thus acquiring a transcendent dimension, so worship can be seen by devotees as a present, albeit provisional, realization of conditions hoped for permanently in the age to come.⁴⁷

V. Entering Holiness: A Preliminary Word

There is still much to be done in determining the full extent of Hebrews' eucharistic theology. More may be gained in this effort by taking a less defensive approach—that is, trying to prove through proof-texts that Hebrews is referring to the Eucharist—and instead demonstrate how a eucharistic interpretation provides answers to many of the questions Hebrews raises.⁴⁸ Such study must grapple with the relationship between Christology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology in this homily. As such, it will demand that we take seriously the liturgical context of Hebrews as an Epistle written for Christians who regularly celebrated the Lord's Supper.

⁴⁷ Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 52–53

⁴⁸ See Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist," 93