The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 192–The Christological Impact of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2

"The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus."

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Introduction

In this week's episode, we will look at Hebrews chapter 2 and the way in which it draws upon Psalm 8. Psalm 8 was a popular citation from the OT scriptures, especially since it spoke about God placing all things under the feet of mankind (humanity). Biblical Unitarians traditionally make little use of Psalm 8, even though the NT writers, and even Jesus himself in the Gospels, cited Psalm 8 not infrequently.

What does the use of Psalm 8 in the narrative of the Book of Hebrews tell us about the author's Christology? What can we learn about God and his relationship with Jesus? And what does it mean that God made Jesus lower than the angels?

Let's find out on this week's episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1 - Initial Impressions of Hebrews 2

- *For He did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking. But one has testified somewhere, saying, "WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM? OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM? "YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS; YOU HAVE CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR, AND HAVE APPOINTED HIM OVER THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS; YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET." For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not*

subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. (Heb 2:5-9)

- Continues to contrast Jesus from the heavenly angels, doing so with a quotation from Psalm 8
- Psalm 8 is quoted from the LXX, not the Hebrew
- The Greek translation of Psalm 8, which the author of Hebrews uses, has taken an ambiguous phrase in Hebrew and made an interpretive decision with it (*elohim* to "angels")
- There is some tension between the subjection of all things to Jesus that has taken place and what can be observed by human senses.
- Jesus is repeatedly distinguished from God
- The fact that Jesus has been the beneficiary of God's own attributes, namely God's glory and God's honor, is due to the fact that Jesus suffered and died.

2 - Looking at the Hebrew Text of Psalm 8

- *When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet*, (Psa 8:3-6)
  - Man and Son of Man are generic references to humanity--to human beings
    - Son of Man is not here a technical title as we see in the Gospels
    - The psalm goes on to talk about the ideal purposes of humanity by drawing specifically on Genesis 1:27-28, where humanity was to be in charge of the bird, the animals, and the fish.
  - "You have made him a little lower"
    - This is led to some confusion due to the ambiguity of the English language. Did God:
      - Make humanity, as in, create humanity in a status that is lower than God
      - Make humanity lower, as in, reduce humanity's status
    - The Hebrew verb *chasar* in the piel means to decrease someone, to reduce someone in comparison to another.
  - "A little lower than God"
    - Elohim could refer to God, the one true God
    - Elohim could also be plural, referring to the heavenly beings, namely the angels

- Humanity was either made lower than God himself or lower than the heavenly beings. The Greek translator understood *elohim* as referring to the heavenly angels, but this might not be the way Psalm 8 was originally intended to be understood.

3 - What Psalm 8 says about Jesus, according to the Author of Hebrews

- Jesus is contrasted from God and from the heavenly angels
- Jesus is described in human terms, as a member of the human race.
  - This demonstrates that the "angels" are not human messengers, because Jesus, in fulfillment of the human subject (man/son of man) in Psalm 8, is made lower than the angels. This would be nonsensical if the human Jesus is made lower than human messengers. Angels must mean heavenly angels.
- God made Jesus lower than the angels for a little while
  - Hebrews unpacks this as having occurred at Jesus' death - *But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death* (Heb 2:9*)*
- After Jesus's death, namely, when he was raised and exalted to heaven, God crowned Jesus with glory and honor.
  - These are attributes of God; God's glory and God's honor. God shares these attributes with a human being, with Jesus
    - Jesus bears the glory of God, not innate, but due to God sharing it with Jesus.
    - This portrays Jesus as a highly empowered human being.
- Part of the act of God crowing Jesus with glory and honor involves God putting all things under Jesus' feet, using the term "subjection."
  - God makes this happen to Jesus
  - God exalted Jesus and placed all things under Jesus' feet
    - Certainly, angels are included in the phrase "all things"
  - Jesus is effectively exalted to the #2 position in the universe, as far as rank and status go, and he does so in fulfillment of a psalm that talks about humanity, not someone who is divine.
- "By the grace of God he might taste death for everyone"
  - Some have argued that Jesus only "tasted death" meaning he didn't really die, perhaps because these interpreters think Jesus is an immortal divine being
    - But the verb "taste" regularly means to experience something, to come to know something.
      - *some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power* (Mark 9:1)
      - *If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death* (John 8:52)

4 - The Function of Psalm 8 in the Overarching Argument

- The quotation of Psalm 8 does much to further the argument and narrative agenda belonging to the writer of the Book of Hebrews:

- By emphatically stating that God has placed all things in subjection to the risen Jesus' feet, Jesus is further distinguished from the angels as a human being.
- The subjection of all things under the feet of Jesus argues for the rulership and dominion of Jesus, despite the persecution and negative experiences of the readers of Hebrews.
- The Psalm, by portraying Jesus as dying and then being raised to glory and honor, indicates to the readers that glory and honor come after the time of suffering, not in place of it.
- Psalm 8 also depicts the destiny of humanity, of human beings. The author of Hebrews depicts Jesus as fulfilling the role of humanity, making Jesus the model human being (which would be nonsensical if Jesus was 100% God who took upon himself impersonal human nature at the incarnation).

In conclusion, we have observed that...

1. The author of Hebrews cites Psalm 8, and this psalm has many implications for Christology in the Book of Hebrews.
    a. First, it distinguishes God and Jesus.
    b. Second, it squarely places Jesus on the side of humanity.
    c. Third, it distinguishes Jesus from even the heavenly angels.
    d. Fourth, it portrays Jesus as a mortal, one who suffers and dies.
    e. Fifth, it describes the exaltation of Jesus, after his death, in terms of God sharing his attributes with the human Jesus (God's own glory and honor are "crowned" upon Jesus).
    f. Six, God places all things in subjection to this crucified and risen human being. Jesus is given, by God, authority over all things (including the angels).
2. The most appropriate Christology that takes seriously the fact that Jesus is a human being, who died and was exalted by God to share in God's attributes and authority over all things is a high human Christology, not a Trinitarian or Arian understanding.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of the BUP!

Join us next week as we look at the implications to Biblical Unitarians in the ambiguous reference to the cardinal number one in Hebrews 2:11. If you aren't aware of the grammatical ambiguity in Heb 2:11, then you won't want to miss this episode!

Please look forward to our next episode.

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