

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 194—The Human Jesus in Hebrews Chapter 2

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Introduction

Upcoming debate!  Kelly Powers Vs Dr. Dustin Smith: Does the Old Testament Teach Unit...

In this week's episode, we will explore one of the strongest passages arguing for the full humanity of Jesus, which is the latter half of Hebrews chapter 2. Although Biblical Unitarians typically resort to citing a variety of single-verse quotations in order to argue that the Bible teaches that Jesus is a human being, I am going to suggest that this passage in Hebrews 2 might be worth considering as a much more persuasive passage.

What does it mean to say that Jesus was like his brothers and sisters in all things? Was Jesus really tempted, and if so, is this the same sort of temptation that everyday Christians experience? What does the humanity of Jesus say about his relationship with God? Why is it that some older translations of Hebrews 2 speaks of Jesus taking upon himself human nature while modern translations no longer speak this way? And how does the humanity of Jesus fit into the doctrine of atonement within the Book of Hebrews?

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

1 - Initial Impressions of Hebrews 2:14-18

- *Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of*

death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Heb 2:14-18)

- Jesus partook of the same flesh and blood as the children--as other human beings.
- This “flesh and blood” meant that Jesus was mortal- he died.
- Because Jesus died and is now alive again, he can free those who were subject to slavery of the fear of death.
 - Namely, Jesus helps the seed of Abraham.
- Interestingly, it was the death of Jesus *who himself was flesh and blood* that rendered the devil powerless and offered freedom.
 - In other words, a human being was the center point of atonement. A man can and did die for your sins. No argument here about God dying or an angel dying.
- He had to be made like his brethren *in all things*.
- He was faithful--to God. This distinguishes Jesus from God while enacting a faithful relationship between the two.
- He was a high priest--a human being among the people of Israel who mediated forgiveness and holiness concerns between God and his people.
- He himself was tempted, Jesus was a single self (not two natures)
 - God cannot be tempted (James 1:13)--using the same verb πειράζω.

2 - The History of Interpretation of Hebrews 2:16

- For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. (Heb 2:16)
- For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. (KJV)

2976 ἐπιλαμβάνομαι

• ἐπιλαμβάνομαι (s. λαμβάνω) fut. ἐπιλήψομαι LXX; 2 aor. ἐπείλαβον; pf. ptc. fem. ἐπειλημμένη Gen 25:26 (in our lit., as well as LXX and TestJos 8:2, only in the mid., which is used since Hdt.; also ins, pap; Philo, Somn. 2, 68; Jos., Bell. 6, 232; Just.).

1. to make the motion of **grasping or taking hold of someth., take hold of, grasp, catch**, sometimes w. violence, w. gen. foll. (Hdt. 6, 114 al.; LXX) of pers. (Laud. Therap. 24 ἐπιλαμβάνονται τοῦ ἀνδρός; 2 Km 13:11; Is 3:6) **Mt 14:31; Lk 23:26 v.l.; Ac 17:19; 21:30, 33** (s. 2 below); of thing (LXX) τῆς χειρός τινος (cp. Pla., Prot. 335c; **Zech 14:13**; Jos., Ant. 9, 180) **Mk 8:23; Ac 23:19**; fig. **Hb 8:9** (Jer 38:32). Foll. by gen. of pers. and of thing by which the person is grasped (X., An. 4, 7, 12 ἐ. αὐτοῦ τῆς ἵτιος 'his shield'; Diod. S. 17, 30, 4; Epict. 1, 29, 23; **Bel 36** LXX; TestJos 8:2) μου τῆς χειρός *me by the hand* Hv 3, 2, 4 (Plut., Mor. 207c ἐπιλαβόμενος αὐτοῦ τῆς χειρός). αὐτοῦ τῆς πήρας *him by the knapsack* s 9, 10, 5. W. acc. of pers. (cp. Pla., Leg. 6, 779c) **Lk 9:47; press into service 23:26** (for the loanw. ἀγγαρεύω, q.v.). Freq., where ἐ. seems to govern the acc., that case is actually the object of the finite verb upon which ἐ. depends: **Lk 14:4; Ac 9:27; 16:19; 18:17**.

2. to take into custody, **arrest** (cp. Demosth. 33, 9) **Ac 21:33**.

3. to pounce on someth. compromising, **catch**, fig. ext. of 1, w. double gen. (cp. 1 above) *someone in someth.* αὐτοῦ λόγου *him in someth. he said* **Lk 20:20**; also αὐτοῦ ῥήματος vs. **26**

4. take hold of in order to make one's own, **take hold of**, fig. ext. of 1 (Hdt. 1, 127; 5, 23; Polyb. 6, 50, 6; 15, 8, 12; **Pr 4:13**) τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς **1 Ti 6:12**; cp. vs. **19**.

5. **be concerned with/about**. The context of ἀγγέλων, σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ **Hb 2:16** suggests the rendering **take an interest in**, prob. in the sense **help** (schol. on Aeschyl., Pers. 742 [but s. KDolfe, ZNW 84, '93, on the textual problem]; **Sir 4:11**). This may be the place for the variant reading ἐπιλαβών (but the act. is otherw. never used in LXX or NT) **Mk 14:72**.—M-M. TW.

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- Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* 3:11-- "For He [God] did not indeed put on him [Jesus] the nature of angels, but that of Abraham's seed."
- Thomas Aquinas (*Commentary on Hebrews*, 148) -- "we have never read that he assumed an angel, but only of the seed of Abraham, i.e., a human nature, not in the abstract but in an individual, and from the seed of Abraham. He adds this in order that the Jews, who glory in being of the seed of Abraham, might venerate Christ more... This taking hold of human nature unto the unity of the person of the Son of God exalts our nature beyond measure."
 - Similar arguments were made by Chrysostom, Theodore, and John Calvin.
- All modern translations have abandoned this line of thinking, choosing instead to understand the verb as referring to the offering of help.

3 - Ways in Which Jesus was a Human Being

- Context has Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8 where the passages involving the subject and human family members are cited of Jesus to indicate that he too has human family members.
 - In other words, the author of Hebrews argues that Jesus is a member of the human race and that he has human brothers and sisters based upon scriptural citations from the Old Testament.
- Jesus was like his brothers and sisters in all things (2:17)
 - Mortal, susceptible to death.
 - Human beings are mortal, but God is immortal--never able to die.
 - In need of redemption from death.

- Death brings the end of life, so redemption, life, and resurrection are needed to deal with the problem of death.
- In a relationship with God (faithful).
 - Human beings were made to live in relationship with God. Jesus had that relationship, and he was characterized as faithful.
 - Faithful--suggests that God had obligations for Jesus to adhere to and that Jesus obediently and loyally fulfilled God's requirements on his life.
- Jesus was tempted in that which he suffered, allowing him to aid those who are now being tempted.
 - *One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.* (4:15).
 - God cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13).
- It was the "flesh and blood Jesus" whose death brought freedom. The doctrine of atonement in Hebrews involves a member of the human race dying for your sins.
- Jesus is depicted here as the Jewish high priest, and all high priests were human beings from the descended ancestry of Israel.
 - This is made explicit in Hebrews 5:1, where the author argues that every single high priest is taken from among men, that is, from among humanity.
 - To say that Jesus is the high priest means that he cannot be God nor can he be a heavenly angel. He must be an authentic human being in order to qualify for this position, according to the author of Hebrews.

In conclusion, we have observed that...

1. The author of the Book of Hebrews argues that Jesus as a fully-fledged member of the human race. It accomplishes this by depicting Jesus as likened to his brethren in all things, through multiple scriptural citations claiming that Jesus has brothers and sisters, and by speaking about the benefits of Jesus' mortal death and resurrection.
2. Although some prominent older translations (like the KJV) and some prominent interpreters in the course of church history (Ambrose, Aquinas, and Calvin) strongly argued that Hebrews 2:16 taught that the Son of God assumed human nature at the incarnation, this argument has been completely abandoned by modern scholars and commentators, who suggest instead that the passage speaks about Christ "offering help" to Abraham's seed.
3. The temptation of Jesus, which qualifies Jesus to come to the aid of Christians experiencing temptation, is indicative that Jesus is unlikely to be understood by the author of Hebrews as the Lord God.
4. Lastly, the doctrine of atonement depicted in the Book of Hebrews is built around Jesus being a member of the human race--one who shares the same flesh and blood as you and

me. Jesus had to be a human being in order to redeem humanity in his death, according to Hebrews chapter 2.

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

Join us next week as we look more closely at the depiction of Jesus as the High Priest in the Book of Hebrews.

Please look forward to our next episode.

Debate: Oct 22, 9 pm EST - The Gospel Truth youtube page - "Does the Old Testament Teach Unitarianism?"

 Kelly Powers Vs Dr. Dustin Smith: Does the Old Testament Teach Unitarianism?

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