

The victorious high priest in the African context: Christ and the logic of atonement in Hebrews 2:14–18

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Abstract

Scholars have proposed several atonement theories to describe what Christ has achieved through the incarnation, particularly through his death—Recapitulation, Example, Moral Influence, Ransom, Christus Victor, Penal Substitution, and Government theories. However, the discussion of atonement theories reveals that scholars favour and advocate for one theory. The Christus Victor and Penal Substitutionary atonement theories are often pitted against each other. This article examines Hebrews 2:14–18, using a historical, grammatical, and literary method. The passage depicts Jesus's sacrificial death for the sins of God's people and his victory over the devil and death through his incarnation. Contrary to the common tendency of scholars to pit the Christus Victor model and Christ's atoning substitution against each other, in the present pericope, the author of Hebrews illustrates the integration of Christus Victor and substitutionary atonement theories as complementary aspects of Jesus's incarnation. The article also showcases the integration of victory and sacrifice in African Christian songs that perceive Jesus as a victorious High Priest who died as a substitute and freed his people from the domination of the devil and death. The article proposes that the Christus Victor and Penal Substitutionary atonement models are not mutually exclusive but should be understood synergistically.

Keywords

Christus Victor; penal substitution; death; the devil; The Epistle to the Hebrews; oral theology; African songs

Introduction

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews vigorously and convincingly argues that Jesus is a better high priest and mediator who eclipses other intermediaries. The exordium offers the précis of the entire epistle, by uniquely lumping many Christological statements together. Jesus is depicted in these four verses – which is one sentence in Greek, hence a periodic sentence – as God’s Son who is a better prophet, an “heir of all things,” agent of creation, the radiance (ἀπαύγασμα) of God’s glory, the bearer of God’s nature (χαρακτήρ), sustainer of the universe, a better priest-victim, an enthroned Messiah, and superior to the angels (Heb 1:1–4). The rest of the epistle is an exposition of the exordium to offer a “word of exhortation” (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως) (Heb 13:22) because the audience is faltering in the face of persecution.

The above descriptions of the superior Son of God, a better priest-victim, and an enthroned Messiah, reveal what Jesus achieved through his incarnation, particularly through his death, resurrection, ascension, and session. Hebrews 1:3c–d declares: καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης ἐν ὑψηλοῖς (After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High). This text depicts Jesus as a priest-victim who was both an offerant and an offering for the sins of the people. It also declares Jesus as a victorious King who conquered sin through his death. Indeed, the cross or the death of Jesus is not mentioned explicitly in Hebrews 1:3, but the participial phrase καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος (after making purification for sins) indicates that substitutionary death and offering occurred on the cross, and this death was necessitated by the sins of the people.¹

The temporal participial phrase anticipates a subsequent event: the session of Christ. Jesus sat down at the right hand of God after his effective, final, and superior sacrificial offering on the altar of the cross. The session of

1 Questioning the completion of atonement on the cross, particularly among Hebrews scholars, is in vogue. Their argumentation tends to consider the atoning death of Christ on the cross as introductory or penultimate. This current fad diminishes the finished work of Christ by emphasizing that atonement occurred or is occurring in the heavenly tabernacle. For a recent work that goes against what has become de rigueur, see William Loader, “Revisiting High Priesthood Christology in Hebrews,” *ZNW* 109 (2018): 238–242.

Christ is one of the author's proofs that Jesus is a better sacrifice and high priest who surpasses the Levitical sacrifices and high priesthood. The author substantiates his argument of Christ's exaltation subsequent to his sacrificial death for sins by utilizing the LXX Psalm 109:1: Εἶπεν ὁ κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12–13 and 12:2 echo this Psalmic passage; however, Hebrews 1:13 cites the Psalmic passage verbatim: Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. Contrary to David R. Anderson, the session passages hearken back to the cross as the reason for Christ's exaltation as a King-Priest who conquered death, rose again, and ascended to be seated at the right hand of his Father.²

The session of Christ in Hebrews punctuates two essential theological facts. First, Jesus as a priest-victim has offered an unrepeatabe, superior, and final sacrifice once and for all – as opposed to the Levitical/Aaronic high priests who offer sacrifices repeatedly. Second, the victorious high priest is engaged in a perpetual intercessory ministry – on behalf of God's people who are struggling with sin, Satan, their flesh, and the world – at the right hand of God.

It is vital to note here that Jesus's exalted, royal, and victorious kingship in Hebrews is not detached from his high priesthood office and function. For instance, Hebrews 8:1 states, "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." Similarly, 10:12–13 asserts, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet." Again, at 12:2, the author notes, "[look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." These passages intertwine the priestly sacrifice-death-offering with the victory-exaltation-kingship of Jesus.

2 David R. Anderson, *The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews*, StBibLit 21 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 143; see a critique of Anderson in Abeneazer G. Urga, *Intercession of Jesus in Hebrews: The Background and Nature of Jesus' Heavenly Intercession in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, WUNT 2/585 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 162–163.

Hebrews 2:14–18 is the most explicit and pertinent pericope where we find sacrifice and victory, purification (priest-victim) and conquering the devil and death (victorious king) entwined. Before examining Hebrews 2:14–18, it is necessary to briefly assess how scholars have attempted to explain Christ's atonement, particularly the Christus Victor and Penal Substitutionary atonement models.

Christus Victor vs. penal substitution atonement models

In attempting to identify what Christ has achieved through his incarnation, particularly through his death, biblical scholars and theologians have submitted several atonement theories: Recapitulation, Example, Moral Influence, Ransom, Christus Victor, Penal Substitution, and Government theories. These various theories strive to indicate some aspect of the nature and benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. However, a cursory perusal of the discussion of atonement in secondary literature reveals that scholars favour and advocate for one theory over the other. In so doing, some biblical scholars and theologians unhelpfully pit one atonement theory against another by considering that one is lower in the assumed hierarchy or is after the other. The Christus Victor and Penal Substitutionary atonement theories are often pitted against each other in this way.³

Gregory A. Boyd, for example, argues that the Christus Victor theory is the foundation and central model of atonement that can encompass every other atonement theory.⁴ The Christus Victor model points out that Jesus's death has brought about victory over the devil and death. This model underlines, Boyd contends, that “the cosmic significance of Christ's work is

3 Robert D. Falconer attempts to show that the Penal Substitution and Christus Victor atonement models do not contradict each other. Rather, they complement each other. The integration of the two models addresses African realities and provides “liberty and hope” to Africans who embrace the person and works of Jesus. See Robert D. Falconer, “A Theological and Biblical Examination on the Synthesis of Penal Substitution and Christus Victor Motifs: Implications for African Metaphysics” (PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2013).

4 Gregory A. Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in *The Nature of Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23–49.

ontologically more fundamental than its soteriological significance.”⁵ The locus of Christ’s victory is at the cross. In tandem with his resurrection, his life in its entirety is vital for conquering the devil and death. For Boyd, the defeat of the malevolent powers effected the holiness of sinful people before God.⁶

On the other hand, others like Thomas R. Schreiner advocate for the primacy of Penal Substitutionary atonement, insisting that “penal substitution is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of atonement.”⁷ Schreiner ardently asserts that “penal substitution is fundamental and the heart of the atonement.”⁸ For him, the main culprits in the cosmos are not the powers and principalities; they are human beings. He further contends that “Evil powers reign over us because of the evil within us.”⁹ In his estimation, Christus Victor and other atonement models minimize the reality and role of sin and guilt of human beings. These models do not do justice to God’s holiness, glory, law and his judgment against sin and sinners.

The contention that one is central and the other is peripheral is not convincing. Both Christus Victor and Penal Substitution atonement models should be considered complementary to each other as both views have their own weaknesses if taken separately. Proponents of the Christus Victor theory at times lay all the blame on Satan and excuse the individual or groups from their sinful tendencies and practices. Hence, the theory at times devolves into the known mantra, “The devil made me do it.” The

5 Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” 33, emphasis his; Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 446.

6 Gustaf Aulén contends that the Christus Victor model was the primary atonement model in the early church until Anselm introduced the satisfaction atonement theory in the 12th century. See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003). For a critique of Aulén’s one-sided presentation of the historical development of atonement, see Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 181–201, esp. 183–187.

7 Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 67.

8 Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 67.

9 Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 68.

main reason for this stance is the over-emphasis on cosmology rather than on anthropology. Second, as several Asian theologians point out, Christos Victor's atonement theory has propelled Euro-American militarism, triumphalism, and warmongering. Some Japanese theologians, Kazoh Kitamori and Kosuke Koyama particularly, decry the fact that Western Christology has immensely neglected the suffering Christ, the pain of God and the weak Christ. Rather, Euro-Americans emphasize "an unbroken Christ, a powerful, conquering Christ."¹⁰ In other words, they understand Christ not primarily as the Captain of our salvation, but as Captain America. Third, others have understood, albeit wrongly, in the fashion of Rudolf Bultmann, secularized liberation theologians,¹¹ and several empire studies of the New Testament – that the model is and should be directed towards institutions, empires, and systems, not malevolent spiritual beings.

The Penal substitutionary atonement model on steroids is not without weaknesses as well. The model gives an undue emphasis to anthropology while giving lip service to the role powers and principalities play in the cosmos and the day-to-day reality of humanity. At times, this emanates from an over-realized eschatology. Consequently, to some theologians, the powers and principalities either do not exist anymore or they are on sabbatical somewhere in the universe. The hyper-individualistic tendency of penal substitutionary atonement is rightly accused of being too anthropocentric. Logically, this has led many academic theologians

10 Kosuke Koyama, quoted in Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 3.

11 It is worthy to note Simon Chan's critique of liberation theologians that do not consider the Christological questions from the grassroots, nor do not realize the contextual realities of the poor. He writes: "It does not occur to these theologians that the poor may be looking for another kind of liberation: spiritual liberation from fear and fatalism created by centuries of internalizing the law of karma; freedom from the fear of spirits; deliverance from demonic oppression, real or perceived; healing for their sicknesses, and so on. This serious disconnect between the elite and the grassroots explains why the poor are not too attracted to the 'preferential option for the poor' but instead opt for Pentecostalism. Without first addressing the kind of liberation the grassroots seek, there cannot ultimately be any sociopolitical liberation. People need first to experience change within themselves before they can even envisage the possibility of change in the sociopolitical realm. Our Christology will not have much traction with the poor if it does not answer this primal cry for a different kind of freedom." See Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 103.

and missionaries to be susceptible to what Paul Hiebert calls “the flaw of the excluded middle.”¹² The flaw of the excluded middle is a result of the denial, dismissal, or exclusion of the understanding that the powers and principalities have power and influence in this world. I submit, along with Hiebert, that such a notion is influenced by a naturalistic, or, if I may, demythologized and secularized worldview.

Christus Victor’s theory and its African expressions

African Christians have employed various images, metaphors, and expressions to capture the Christus Victor portrait of Christ. Christ is depicted as Liberator, Chief, Ancestor, Healer, Master of Initiation, King, and Elder Brother.¹³ Timothy C. Tennent is on point that these diverse Christological expressions can be categorized under the Christus Victor model because their “underlying theme is an emphasis on the power and victory of Christ.”¹⁴ Apart from a very few highly educated, Enlightenment-stricken African academics, we can safely state that most Africans are aware of the presence of the spiritual realm filled with good and malevolent spirit beings. Africans are typically conscious of the middle level, the supernatural without the taint of secularized, rationalistic, and anti-supernaturalistic inklings. The words of John S. Mbiti ring true of many Africans’ conception of Jesus as victorious:

The Christian message brings Jesus as the one who fought victoriously against the forces of the devil, spirits, sickness, hatred, fear, and death itself. In each of these areas he won a victory and lives now above the assault of these forces. He is the victor, the one hope, the one example, the one conqueror: and this makes sense to African peoples, it draws their attention, and it is pregnant with

12 Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (1982): 35–47.

13 Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 116–132.

14 Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 115; for a similar phenomenon in the Asian context, see Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 108.

meaning. It gives to their myths an absolutely new dimension. The greatest need among African peoples is to see, to know, and to experience Jesus Christ as the victor over the powers and forces from which Africa knows no means of deliverance.¹⁵

This awareness of the malevolent powers and principalities drive Africans to the bosom of Christ, the victorious King, Chief, Liberator and Protector who can offer them safety, deliverance and freedom. Africa's contextual realities necessitate a robust form of the Christus Victor model that gives hope to a continent dealing with various ailments and crises. The perception of Jesus as victorious can also be observed in many vernacular theologies, that is, Christian songs. In Ethiopia, several Christian singers express Christ as a victorious Savior who has defeated Satan and his minions. These oral theologians offer their gratitude and appreciation to Christ who has conquered the devil and death:

Hallelujah

He descended from the highest of heavens

Was born from the Virgin Mary

Let the Lord be praised

He who has freed us from sin

Who threw the dragon into the Abyss

Let the Lord be praised.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Amen, let the Lord be praised.

He who has sliced the dragon

Crushed the snake

Let the Lord be praised!

He who has defeated the enemy

15 John S. Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology," in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, ed. George F. Vicedom (London: SPCK: 1972), 55.

Who opened the seal with his hands.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Amen, let the Lord be praised.

He who has redeemed us by his blood
Who has lifted us out of the pit of destruction
Let the Lord be praised
He saved us by his grace through his Son
He betrothed us for the heavenly kingdom
Let the Lord be praised.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Amen, let the Lord be praised.

He who has rescued us from the bear and the wolf
Who has rescued us from violence and anxiety
Let the Lord be praised
He who has made the spring of life flow
Who has multiplied his mercies to us
Let the Lord be praised.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Amen, let the Lord be praised.¹⁶

16 Sholaye Molito, “ሃሌሊዕል/Hallelujah.” The translation from Amharic to English is mine.

The Christus Victor model is a helpful model that deals with the African realities. It resonates with the people, as it addresses the deeper issues of their day-to-day life. It gives hope to those who struggle with the fear of the powers and principalities, poverty, sickness, demonic attacks, and death. However, as helpful as the African expression of Christus Victor is, an elasticized, untempered form of the Christus Victor theory has taken a theological, emotional, and financial toll on many Christians. For instance, the prosperity gospel has taken advantage of the image of Christ as Healer and Liberator to promulgate health and wealth as the centrepiece of a perfect Christian life. Those who are poor and lack material wealth and good health are considered weak Christians who lack faith. Prosperity gospel and health and wealth theology as such have no place for Christian suffering. It does not consider the notion that probably some are suffering not because they lack faith but because of their faith.

The suffering Christ, the broken Messiah can assuage the Christus Victor model on steroids in Africa. In so doing, a healthy understanding of Christ as victorious over the powers and principalities, demons, sickness, and poverty could flourish. Simon Chan's suggestion that Christians in Asia should incorporate the suffering Christ in their portrayal of Christ should be considered by African Christians:

The theology of the pain of God is particularly relevant in some Asian contexts where Christians who have achieved a measure of economic success and power are often tempted to become triumphalistic. It challenges the megachurch mentality and the self-assured attitude that equates prosperity and health with divine approbation and regards poverty and sickness as signs of a lack of faith.¹⁷

Michael F. Bird points out that quite a few early church witnesses and theologians combined Christus Victor and substitutionary atonement theories. For instance, he mentions Papias who stated, "He [Christ] defeated sin and condemned Satan, and through his death he spread abroad his righteousness."¹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria also wrote:

17 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 100.

18 Papias, *Frag.* 24 quoted in Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 470.

The Word, as I said being Himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as His own in place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it, “might bring to nought Him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and might deliver them who all their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death.”¹⁹

A similar approach is seen among Ethiopian gospel singers. Jesus’s substitutionary death, the blood he shed to redeem sinners is usually integrated with a Christus Victor understanding of Jesus’s death and resurrection. Jesus is a substitute sacrifice and a Victor over the dragon, the snake, and the power of death.²⁰

From the New Testament, Hebrews 2:14–18 illustrates this integration of the Christus Victor and substitutionary atonement models. Now let us turn to Hebrews.

The victorious High Priest: Hebrews 2:14–18

Hebrews 2:5–18 explains Christ’s humiliation, solidarity with humanity, and victorious task. In 2:5–9, the author makes both a Christological and an anthropological argument by underlining that Jesus is the one to whom “God subjected the world to come” (Heb 2:5) and that human beings – because of the Son’s redemptive and victorious work – will be restored to their intended position to subject the “world to come.” The Son, through his vicarious suffering and solidarity with humanity, will bring many sons and daughters to the presence of the Father. These sons and daughters will be the brothers and sisters of Jesus – the suffering Son of God – who “is not ashamed to call them brothers [and sisters]” (Heb 2:11).

This is the wider context where 2:14–18 is located. This pericope can be divided into two major sections. The first section indicates Christ’s victory over the Devil and the power of death (2:14–15). The second section

19 Athanasius (*Incarnation*, 4.20) quoted in Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 470.

20 Falconer, “A Theological and Biblical Examination,” 171–269, rightly contends that the integration of the Penal Substitution and Christus Victor models are best expressed by African Christians.

is concerned with Christ's high priestly office and functions both as an offerant and as a substitute offering for the sins of the people (2:17–18).²¹

Christ's victory over the devil and death (2:14–15)

In Hebrews, the author utilizes a string of quotes from the LXX and places them on the lips of Jesus.²² These Old Testament citations capture Jesus's speech, where we see him responding to his Father, who spoke to him first in the Catena (Heb 1:5–14).²³ These citations reveal that Jesus identifies with God's people as his brothers and sisters. His solidarity with God's people is explicitly mentioned using familial language. The first quote is from the LXX Psalm 21:23: διηγῆσομαι τὸ ὄνομά σου τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου, ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας ὑμνήσω σε (“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you”). The second one comes from the LXX Isaiah 8:17, πεποιθὼς ἔσομαι ἐπ’ αὐτῷ (“I shall trust in him”) (cf. LXX 2 Sam 22:3; Isa 12:2). But note here that Hebrews 2:13 is slightly different since the author supplies an explicit first-person singular pronoun, and the word order varies from its LXX source as well: Ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθὼς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ. The third citation is from Isaiah 8.18, ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ καὶ τὰ παιδιά, ἃ μοι ἔδωκεν ὁ θεός (“Behold, I and the children God gave me”). In addition to identifying God's people as his siblings, here in the third citation, Jesus claims that God's people are also his children.

Hebrews 2:14 draws a conclusion based on the preceding texts or citations using an inferential conjunction (οὖν) and a causal subordinate conjunction (ἐπεὶ)²⁴ to punctuate that Jesus not only identified with God's people but also became a human being. Thus, the author declares: Ἐπεὶ οὖν τὰ παιδιά

21 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 376.

22 This approach is identified as *Prosopological Exegesis* whereby the Godhead uses the OT citations in their conversation with each other and with God's people. See Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture*, SNTSMS 178 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Bryan R. Dyer “‘In the Midst of the Assembly I Will Praise You’: Hebrews 2.12 and Its Contribution to the Argument of the Epistle,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 43, no. 4 (2021): 523–538.

23 Pierce, *Divine Discourse*, 98–99; Dyer, “‘In the Midst of the Assembly I Will Praise You,’” 3.

24 Contra Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 91.

κεκοινώνηκεν αἵματος καὶ σαρκός, καὶ αὐτὸς παραπλησίως μετέσχευ τῶν αὐτῶν.²⁵

Jesus's siblings, his children (τὰ παιδιά) are not angels but human beings with “blood and flesh” (αἵματος καὶ σαρκός). “The Children have blood and flesh in common and he [Jesus] likewise partook of the same things.” The usual expression σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα (flesh and blood), which we find in a few places in the New Testament (Matt 16:17; 1 Cor 15:50; Gal 1:16) is inverted here in Hebrews 2:14. Nonetheless, a similar expression is found in Eph 6:12: ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἢ πάλῃ πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα. I concur tentatively with Ceslas Spicq – contra Philip Hughes²⁶ – that the inverted form αἵματος καὶ σαρκός accentuates αἷμα (blood) to give significance to the substitutionary sacrifice Jesus has made on the altar of the cross. However, the term σὰρξ (flesh) is also utilized here to indicate Jesus's sacrificial suffering and death (cf. Heb 5:7; 10:20).²⁷ Curiously, the inverted form is found both in Ephesians and Hebrews in association with the cosmic powers and dark spiritual forces.

The perfect active indicative verb κεκοινώνηκεν denotes that Jesus's siblings have been human beings originally and permanently. There was not a time when Jesus's siblings were not humans. They have been human beings, αἵματος καὶ σαρκός (blood and flesh), all the time. As Brooke F. Westcott rightly says, “κεκοινώνηκεν marks the common nature ever shared among men as long as the race lasts.”²⁸

Having said that about God's people, the author transitions to the next statement with a coordinate conjunction καί (“and”): “and he [Jesus] likewise/ [without any difference] partook of the same things.” Jesus was no different from his siblings and his children in nature as a human being. The author accents – without giving any room to the speculative Docetic theologians – the true humanity of Jesus in a repetitive manner.

25 The only witness for the interpolation of the word παθημάτων after τῶν αὐτῶν is Codex Claromontanus.

26 Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 110 n. 101.

27 Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 171; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 92.

28 Westcott, *Hebrews*, 52.

The expression καὶ αὐτὸς παραπλησίως μετέσχευ τῶν αὐτῶν underlines the fact that Jesus’s siblings and Jesus share the same “blood and flesh.” However, the aorist active indicative form of μετέχω (i.e., μετέσχευ) is a punctiliar aorist that conveys the idea that Jesus became a human being at a particular time in the past. In other words, there was a time when the Son was not a human being. But why did Jesus become a man? What was the purpose of his incarnation? Why did he share in the “blood and flesh” of humanity?

The ἵνα clause details the purpose of Jesus’s incarnation: ἵνα διὰ τοῦ θανάτου καταργήσῃ τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὸν διάβολον (2:14). The first purpose of Jesus’s incarnation is “that he might disable the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” Jesus had to be like his siblings to make the devil who has the power over death ineffective. Quite a few English versions render the aorist subjunctive of καταργέω as “destroy” (CEB, CSV, ESV, GNV, HCSB, ISV, KJV, NASB, NCV, NET). However, this rendering is somewhat misleading. If the devil is destroyed, how could he still operate in the cosmos? After all, John states, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn 3:8). Also, Jesus himself prayed for his disciples – including the future ones – “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (Jn 17:15). The best translation of the verb καταργέω is “disable,” “disempower,” “make impotent,” “make ineffective,” “incapacitate,” or “reduce to impotence.”²⁹ Paul Ellingworth is correct when he comments, “The meaning of καταργέω falls short of ‘annihilate’.”³⁰ Or in the words of Dana Harris, “The [verb] does not indicate Satan’s final defeat but rather the nullification of his power to enslave through fear.”³¹ Satan succeeded in seducing men and women to disobey God. Consequently, he gained control over death, enabling him to weaponize death to subjugate humanity with the fear of death.³²

29 Paul Andriessen, “Teneur judéo-chrétienne de He 1.6 et 2.14b–3.2,” *NovT* 18 (1976): 293–313, here 306, renders it as ‘réduire à l’impuissance.’

30 Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 173.

31 Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2019), 59; see also Falconer, “A Theological and Biblical Examination,” 157.

32 See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 61.

Jesus, “through his death” (διὰ τοῦ θανάτου), was able to disable the devil and conquer death. Westcott rightly denotes, “Death that is truly death ... which was the utmost effect of Satan’s power, became the instrument of his defeat.”³³ This victory of Jesus over the devil is encouraging, especially to the audience which is struggling in the face of suffering and death because 1) Jesus “tasted death” on behalf of everyone (2:9); 2) unlike the Aaronic priests who “were prevented by death from continuing in office,” Jesus “holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever” (7:23–24). In other words, his priesthood is perpetual because he conquered death through his death.³⁴

The second purpose of Jesus’s incarnation is: καὶ [ἵνα] ἀπαλλάξῃ τούτους, ὅσοι φόβῳ θανάτου διὰ παντὸς τοῦ ζῆν ἔνοχοι ἦσαν δουλείας (“and that he might release those who through fear of death were enslaved throughout their life”). Jesus partook in the “blood and flesh” of humanity not only to disable the devil but also to release his siblings who were enslaved by the fear of death throughout their life. As Westcott nicely puts it, “The overthrow of the devil involved the deliverance of men from his power.”³⁵ Satan has no longer an authority over the siblings of Jesus and the children God has given to Jesus. Jesus has defeated Satan and that has made Satan lose his grip on God’s people.³⁶ Jesus’s assumption of “blood and flesh” enabled him to “confront our common enemy, the devil” and through his death, Jesus was able to “[rob] the devil of his bargaining power over sinful human beings, and [to set] free from our bondage to the fear of death.”³⁷

Hebrews 2:14–15 echoes the Exodus tradition whereby God – through Moses – delivers his people from slavery, death and exile.³⁸ Contra Luke

33 Westcott, *Hebrews*, 53; see also Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 405.

34 Cf. Kenneth L. Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Setting of the Sacrifice*, SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 136–137.

35 Westcott, *Hebrews*, 53.

36 Tesfaye Kassa, “Hebrews,” in *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1515–1134, here 1519.

37 Kwame Bediako, “Christian Faith and African Culture: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *JACT* 13, no. 1 (June 2010): 50.

38 The echo of the Exodus tradition is replete in Hebrews. The most explicit references are found in Hebrews 2:2–3; 3:1–6; 8:5; 9:19; 11:23–28; 12:21; 13:20.

Timothy Johnson, I submit that Hebrews 2:14–15 has the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt as its background.³⁹ Craig R. Koester rightly asserts that the author of Hebrews is interpreting the death and resurrection of the incarnate God in light of the preceding revelation.⁴⁰ It is plausible that the inverted expression αἵματος καὶ σαρκός is utilized in Hebrews 2:14 to recall the blood of the Passover Lamb that was put on the doorposts and lintel. God commanded Moses and Aaron: καὶ λήμψονται ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος, καὶ θήσουσιν ἐπὶ τῶν δύο σταθμῶν καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν φλιὰν ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις ἐν οἷς ἐὰν φάγωσιν αὐτὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς. (“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it”) (Exod 12:7). It was the blood of the lamb that would enable them to escape the plague of the Destroyer of the firstborn.⁴¹

Further down, we see how they were spared from the Destroyer and his deadly violence: καὶ παρελεύσεται Κύριος πατάξει τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, καὶ ὄψεται τὸ αἷμα ἐπὶ τῆς φλιᾶς καὶ ἐπ’ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν σταθμῶν· καὶ παρελεύσεται Κύριος τὴν θύραν, καὶ οὐκ ἀφήσει τὸν ὀλεθρεύοντα εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὰς οἰκίας ὑμῶν πατάξει. (“For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you”) (Exod 12:23). The author of Hebrews mentions the Passover and the utilization of the blood of the Lamb for the deliverance of God’s people in slavery: Πίστει πεποίηκεν τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὴν πρόσχυσιν τοῦ αἵματος, ἵνα μὴ ὁ ὀλοθρεύων τὰ πρωτότοκα θίγη αὐτῶν. (“By faith [Moses] kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them”) (Heb 11:28).

39 Pace Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 100.

40 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 240. Similarly, Andriessen, “Teneur judéo-chrétienne de He 1.6 et 2.14b–3.2,” 304, observes that “Le passage qui nous occupera maintenant compare l’œuvre salvifique du Christ à la libération d’Égypte sous la conduite de Moïse.”

41 On the actual identity of the Destroyer, see David M. Moffitt, *Rethinking Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus’s Death, Resurrection, and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 16–22.

One Ethiopian singer, Meheret Etefa, sees a similar connection between the death of Jesus and Christians' deliverance from the angel of death and the Exodus tradition, particularly the Passover tradition. She sings:

Because the blood was smeared on my doorposts
 Because the blood was smeared on my lintel
 Death passed over, it went away from me
 Seeing the blood of my Lord
 Seeing the blood of my Jesus
 Death passed over,
 It went away from me.

The Angel of death doesn't scare me
 I am covered, he won't find me
 I am surrounded by the blood
 How can he pass the hedge and enter?

It is a day of sadness for my enemy and a day of gladness for me
 Death is entering my enemy's village
 Although he prowls around me like a roaring lion
 He won't succeed, he can't because of the blood.⁴²

Jesus disabled the Devil, the Destroyer and defeated death through his death by his "blood and flesh" as the Passover Lamb that delivered God's people in the land of exile and slavery. Christ's incarnation not only brought about victory over the devil and death, it also afforded him to offer a sacrifice and be offered as a sacrifice.⁴³ The next section explains Jesus's priesthood and substitute sacrifice for the sins of humanity.

42 Meheret Etefa, "ደርቱ/His Blood." Translation from Amharic to English is mine.

43 Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 274.

Christ's priesthood and substitute offering for sins (2:17–18)

In Hebrews 1:3 and 2:9–11, particularly in the former passage, the author mentions Jesus's high priesthood implicitly. In Hebrews 1:3, the author states, "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High." The term καθαρισμός has a cultic connotation. As Urga has argued, the term signifies three essential facts:

... the need for ritual cleansing from impurity, the need for a mediating high priest to execute the act of purification and the need to offer a victim to purify and purge the defilement caused by sin. The lexeme καθαρισμός, with its equivalent טהר and כפר in the piel form ... brings the high priestly task of Jesus in the subsequent chapters of the Epistle to the fore.⁴⁴

Here in Hebrews 2:17, Jesus's high priesthood is made explicit. The victorious Christ is named here as a "high priest" of God's people. The author declares, "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 atonement for the sins of the people."

The verse opens with an inferential coordinate conjunction ὅθεν⁴⁵ and provides a summary of the author's argument in the preceding texts about Jesus's humanity (2:10–16). Jesus is not concerned with the angelic beings, but human beings, "the seed of Abraham" (σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ) who need help (2:16).

The author continues his discussion of Jesus's incarnation: "he had to be made like his brothers in every respect." Why? Because he intends to help the seed of Abraham. Jesus does not appear like a man, but he has become "like his brothers" through and through. The prepositional phrase κατὰ πάντα denotes that Jesus is a real person, God in the "blood and flesh" of humanity.⁴⁶

The author makes clear the purpose of Jesus's assumption of the "blood and flesh" of humanity, every aspect of human life: ἵνα ἐλεήμων γένηται

44 Urga, *Intercession of Jesus in Hebrews*, 160.

45 It means "for which reason." See BDAG, 693.

46 Urga, *Intercession of Jesus in Hebrews*, 165; Westcott, *Hebrews*, 56.

καὶ πιστὸς ἀρχιερεὺς τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. He has become a man so that he could be “a merciful and faithful high priest.” Jesus’s high priesthood is couched in his humanity.⁴⁷ The aorist middle subjunctive verb γένηται conveys the idea that Jesus’s incarnation serves as a critical foundation for his priesthood, and it also implies that Jesus was already a high priest on earth before his resurrection, ascension, and entrance into the heavenly tabernacle. Philip Hughes is correct when he states that “the Son assumed human nature *so that he might become* what otherwise he could not be *a high priest*. By the incarnation he becomes man, but his becoming man is also the prerequisite for his becoming a high priest.”⁴⁸

Here the victorious Christ (2:14–15) is named as a “high priest,” but this title is qualified with two significant adjectives: ἐλεήμων ... καὶ πιστὸς. These descriptions echo the Hebraic expressions חַסְדִּי וְאֱמֻנָה (Deut 7:9; cf. Exod 3:4; Ps [MT] 25:10). Jesus’s merciful priestly ministry allows God’s people to receive mercy and forgiveness for sins committed.⁴⁹ But he is also a faithful high priest who brings the issues of his siblings before God as their devoted representative.⁵⁰ Jesus’s merciful and faithful high priesthood is “in the service of God” (τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν). This expression highlights Jesus’s mediatorial task on behalf of God’s People. As Westcott rightly defines it, the expression indicates “all man’s relations towards God.”⁵¹

The subsequent infinitival clause specifies the purpose of Jesus’s mediatorial role: εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἀμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ. God the Son became “blood and flesh” so that he could make atonement for sinners. Here is where the Christus Victor model meets the substitutionary atonement of Jesus. The

47 Christian Rose, *Der Hebräerbrief*, BNT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 49.

48 Hughes, *Hebrews*, 120, emphasis his.

49 Simon J. Kistemaker, “Atonement in Hebrews: ‘A Merciful and Faithful High Priest,’” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 163–175, here 164. Kistemaker unfortunately does not deal with Hebrews 2:14–15. He passes over these verses, which depict Christ as a Victor over the devil and death and goes right to Hebrews 2:17 merely to highlight Jesus’s substitutionary atonement. In doing so, he misses the opportunity to faithfully showcase that Christus Victor and Penal Substitutionary models are complementary.

50 John W. Kleing, *Hebrews*, CC (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 138.

51 Westcott, *Hebrews*, 80.

term ἰλάσκομαι has attracted a heated debate among scholars. Some argue that the term expresses propitiation,⁵² whereas others contend that it means expiation.⁵³ However, I submit to you that the term ἰλάσκομαι expresses *both* propitiation (God as the object of Christ's sacrifice) and expiation (God as the subject of Christ's sacrifice).⁵⁴

Jesus's atoning sacrifice on the altar of the cross deals with the sins of God's people. Note here that the author intentionally employed the term λαός – which is a technical designation for the Israelites in the OT – to describe God's people to situate Christ's atoning sacrifice in the context of the cultic ritual. Jesus's high priestly function is comprised of making atonement “for the sins of the people.” In so doing, he bridges the chasm between God and his people.⁵⁵ He provides help to those who need forgiveness of sin through Christ's sacrificial death. God's people not only need deliverance from the devil and the fear of death but also forgiveness through the death and resurrection of the victorious high priest.

Hebrews 2:18 culminates the forgoing arguments by underlining Jesus's identification and solidarity with humanity and the grounds for his merciful and sympathetic posture towards the fumbling people of God. Jesus himself underwent the reality of temptation. He knows firsthand the seductive nature of sin. As such, he is able “to help those who are being tempted.” The term βοηθέω – I contend – implies Jesus's help through his faithful and perpetual intercession. As a victorious high priest, as a King-Priest, seated at the right hand of God, Jesus prays to the Father when the people of God need grace and mercy (cf. Heb 4:15–16).

Conclusion

Hebrews 2:14–18 depicts Jesus as a victorious high priest who conquered the devil and the power of death and who offered himself as a substitute

52 Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:66; Koester, *Hebrews*, 241.

53 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 96 n. 192.

54 Contra Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 278–283, esp. 280, who claims that we should consider God only as the subject, not as an object of atonement.

55 T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1992), 114–115.

sacrifice “for the sins of the people.” As such, Jesus is a seated, enthroned high priest who intercedes for God’s people at the right hand of his Father. His disabling power made the devil impotent and enabled God’s people to be free from his enslaving power. Hebrews has shown us that our portrait of Christ as a victor should be complemented by the suffering God in Christ. By painting Christ in such a manner, the author of Hebrews aims to encourage the in-between people of God who are faced with suffering, persecution, and death. The author exhorts and warns his audience to persevere by reminding them that the Victorious Christ who is also the Suffering Christ has made the devil ineffective through his death. Consequently, they should not fear death. The Victorious High Priest – who has become a real man, tasted death and knows the power of temptation – helps “the seed of Abraham” to stand firm in the ups and downs of their faith journey.

Here it is important to recall Sholaye Molito’s song, which states that the King-Priest

... has sliced the dragon

Crushed the snake ...

... has redeemed us by his blood

... has lifted us out of the pit of destruction.

But it is also vital to remember that at the eschaton, the ineffective, impotent, and defeated devil will be destroyed completely. The dragon and his minions will no longer trouble God’s people with sin and temptation. The enemies of the Son of God will be “a footstool for [his] feet.” The expression “until” will find its fulfilment at the parousia. Until then, God’s people are exhorted to ponder the ultimate victory and sacrifice of Christ, the better High Priest.

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