

On High

Hebrews 4:14-16

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The reference to Jesus in his office as high priest in v 14 is not an afterthought, but the intended conclusion of the entire argument. The crucial issue for the community is whether they will maintain their Christian stance. The issue was posed conditionally in 3:6*b*, and more pointedly in 3:14. It was raised again forcefully in v 14 in the exhortation to hold fast to the confession that identified Christians as those who had responded to the message they had heard with faith (cf. v 2). The ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary as a faithful high priest in the service of God gives certainty to the promise that God's people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence if they hold fast their initial confidence

Israel at Kadesh, at the point of attaining the goal of the Exodus and pilgrimage through the wilderness, rebelled against God and refused to trust the word of promise. Their subsequent forfeiture of the promise and death in the desert is brought forcefully before the hearers to warn them of the danger of a calloused disposition and apostasy. The generation in the desert provided the writer with a warning paradigm.

In 4:1–13 the note of warning is sustained by specific reference to Israel's unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh (vv 2, 6, 11) and by a pattern of exhortation that exposes the peril of an indifferent community (vv 1, 11–13). But the warning is tempered by the encouragement that the promise of entering God's rest has not been revoked. The failure of the Exodus generation to enter the promised rest did not abrogate the reality and accessibility of that rest. The issue of entering God's rest must be faced by each generation. The continuation of the interpretation of Ps 95:7*b*–11 in 4:1–11 permits the writer to develop a theology of rest.

This verse's inclusion between two prominent hortatory verses, followed by the author's exposition of the high priesthood of Christ, especially Heb 5:7–8, serves the author's purpose of strengthening and comforting his readers amid their trials and temptations. Hebrews indicates that the readers were in danger of disobedience and this may very well have been related to the issue of impending suffering which the community was in danger of recoiling from

That Heb 4:14–16 begins a new major section in the epistle is confirmed by the relative absence of concepts that are also found in 3:7–4:13. There is a back reference to 3:1–6 with the repetition of four words: "high priest," "confession," "Jesus" and "Son." The lexical density of these words throughout Hebrews is striking: "high priest" (11), "confession" (5), "Jesus" (13), and "Son" (15).

I. Higher Hold v.14

a. Great High Priest

i. High Priest

1. It is commonly stated that the purpose of 4:15–5:10 is to demonstrate that the conditions required of any high priest were satisfied by Christ. In 5:1–4 two conditions are set forth: (1) he must be able to empathize with the frailty of those he serves (vv 1–3); and (2) he must be called by God (v 4). In a second paragraph (5:5–10) it is shown on the grounds of Scripture and the gospel tradition that Jesus fulfilled these conditions: (1) he was called by God (vv 5–6); and (2) after he had been exposed to the full range of human emotion and testing, he was installed as high priest (vv 7–10). The direction of the flow of thought is from Aaron to Christ.
2. Given the context of the previous chapters, Jesus is a “great” high priest for a number of reasons. He is highly exalted; superior to Moses, Aaron and the Levitical priests; and designated as Son of God. The translation “gone through” renders a perfect participle functioning attributively and indicating a state resulting from a previous action: Jesus is now permanently in God’s presence having passed through the heavens via the ascension. The phrase “Jesus the Son of God” is in apposition to “a great high priest” and is given emphasis by the author by being placed at the end of the clause. The two titles, “Jesus” and “Son” may reflect Christ’s dual nature: human and divine. It is difficult to decide whether the reference here to “Jesus” harks back to Heb 4:8 where there is an implied contrast with “Joshua.

3.

ii. Passed through Heaven

1. His greatness is expressed in the language of transcendence. He has passed through the heavens (διεληλυθότα τοὺς οὐρανοῦς) to the presence of God (cf. 9:24). The implied reference to the heavenly sanctuary provides yet another dimension to the discussion of the place of rest in 4:1–11. Jesus’ high priestly ministry is the guarantee that God’s people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence.
2. We have only its ἀρχή. In content παρρησία is freedom of access to God, authority to enter the sanctuary, openness for the new and living way which Jesus has restored for us, 10:19. This παρρησία is given with the blood of Jesus (10:19) and is grounded in His high-priestly way (4:14f.). The saving work of Jesus, which penetrates all the heavens, has created *parrhesia* and made its fulfilment possible. *Parrhesia* works itself out in the confidence and openness which need not be ashamed when it stands before the Judge, 4:16. It is preserved by patience in tribulation

3. The greatness of Jesus as ἀρχιερεύς consists in his access to God not through any material veil, but through the upper heavens; he has penetrated to the very throne of God, in virtue of his perfect self-sacrifice. This idea is not elaborated till later (cp. 6:19f.; 9:24 f.),
 - iii. Jesus the Son of God
- b. Let us
 - i. Hold Fast **adhere strongly to, hold commitment** keeping or following a tradition
 - a. hold fast/cling to,” supports the conclusion that ὁμολογία, “confession,” has reference to a specific formulation of faith that had once been accepted and openly acknowledged by the members of the community. In this context the designation of Jesus as τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, “the Son of God,” is almost certainly an echo of that confession
 - b. One keeps it by holding fast, not merely oneself as a believer, but the presupposition of faith in the promise, παρρησία is thus posited objectively with the object of hope, and it is worked out in a life which is commensurate with and has entered into this openness
 - c.
 2. Confession
 - a. The appeal for adherence to the confession has the function of promoting the faithfulness of the community at a time they were displaying a lack of concern for spiritual integrity and steadfastness (cf. 2:1; 3:6b; 10:23). It appropriately concludes the unit introduced in 3:1, in which the faithfulness of Jesus as high priest establishes the context for calling the members of the congregation to faithfulness
 - b. The purpose of introducing Ps 95:7b–11 in 3:7–19 was to exhibit the severe consequences of unbelief and rebellion
 - c. **Confession - statement of allegiance, as content of an action, confession, acknowledgment that one makes:**
Jesus
 - d. One’s grip is to be firm and steadfast, as the verb *krateō* indicates. This exhortation will be repeated at 6:18 and 10:23. “The confession” includes the divine sonship, the unique oneness of Jesus with the Father, as a means of imparting divine revelation (Heb 1:1–2). It also includes a high priestly Christology which is combined with that sonship throughout Hebrews. These two themes are

interwoven here, again in 5:8 where although Jesus is a Son, yet he learned obedience, and again in Heb 7:3 when Christ is compared to Melchizedek

II. Higher Draw v. 15-16

a. High Great Priest

i. Sympathetic

- a. Sympathize - but understanding and sympathetic participation in the destiny of others in all situations
- b. The writer now (v. 15) reiterates the truth of 2:11 f.; the exalted Jesus is well able to sympathize with weak men on earth, since he has shared their experience of temptation. Which is a real ground for encouragement, for the best help is that afforded by those who have stood where we slip and faced the onset of temptation without yielding to it. The special reference is to temptations leading to apostasy or disobedience to the will of God.
- c. *Sympatheō* appears to include sympathy based on common experience, always includes the element of active help, and should not be limited to the psychological notion of “feeling.” The latter (“weakness”) occurs again in 5:2; 7:28; and 11:34. The word is variously taken to mean moral weakness, intellectual and moral weakness, and physical, moral, or spiritual weakness

2. With our Weaknesses

- a. The writer will not recognize any disjunction between the ministry that Christ performs in the state of his exalted glory from that of the state of his humiliation. The experience of sufferings and trials endured during his humiliation equipped him with empathy so that he is able to support the covenant people in their sufferings and temptations.
- b. A possible objection that Jesus’ exalted status as high priest in heaven implied his aloofness from the weariness and discouragement of the Church in a hostile world is anticipated in v 15. The writer resorts to a double negative (οὐ ... μή) to assert forcefully that Jesus identifies himself with those who feel defenseless in their situation. His high priestly ministry of intercession is effective on their behalf.

The special nuance of συμπαθῆσαι extends beyond the sharing of feelings (i.e., compassion). It always includes the element of active help

c.

ii. Tempted

1. In all things

- a. The emphatic statement that he was “tested” κατὰ πάντα καθ’ ὁμοιότητα, “in every respect, in quite the same way as we are,” implies that he was susceptible to all the temptations that are connected with the weaknesses inherent in the frailty of humanity
- b. Tempted without Sin **to endeavor to discover the nature or character of something by testing, try, make trial of, put to the test**
- c. Peccable vs. impeccable
- d. The point here is that Jesus’ likeness to us via the incarnation means he was tempted in the same way that all humanity is tempted, but with this difference: he never sinned

2. Without Sin

b. Draw Near

i. Draw Near

1. Near approach to or entry into a deity’s presence

- a. The only one who was permitted to “draw near” under the provisions of the Mosaic covenant was the high priest, who could approach the altar in the most holy place of the tabernacle once a year, on the Day of Atonement. If his ministry was acceptable, the altar of judgment became the place from which mercy was dispensed to the people (cf. Lev 16:2–34; Heb 9:5). In a bold extension of the language of worship the writer calls the community to recognize that through his high priestly ministry Christ has achieved for them what Israel never enjoyed, namely, immediate access to God and the freedom to draw near to him continually (7:19, 25;
- b. The use of the present tense hortatory subjunctive *proserchomai*, “let us come,” is used several times in the epistle and is always used by the author in a cultic sense of approaching God in worship and priestly service

2. Confidence **boldness and confidence, *courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness***

- a. Abraham is described as coming before God with “courage and well-timed frankness” (παρρησία). This is precisely the attitude that the hearers of Hebrews are encouraged to adopt in speaking with God (91–92). Because they have a high priest who empathizes with them they can go with frankness to the throne of grace and receive timely help in their distress
- b. In secular Greek the term connotes the free open speech of citizens with one another, but it is never used in the context of prayer. But in hellenistic Judaism the range of the term was extended to apply to speech with God
- c. The use of the present tense indicates the readers are exhorted to come as often as needed; when they come it is to be “with confidence” or “with boldness,
- d. Whether the author intended a reference to the Day of Atonement ritual where the priest approached the mercy seat with the sacrificial blood is unclear, but the Day of Atonement was a once-a-year event, whereas here we are told to approach continually.

e.

ii. Throne of Grace

1. Receive Mercy
2. Find Grace

- i. The two phrases “receive mercy” and “find grace” are chiastically arranged in the Greek text, which probably indicates the two phrases overlap in meaning. When there is a difference perceived, it is usually along the lines of mercy in forgiveness of sins and grace to needed assistance in some trial or temptation
- b. Help in time of need
 - i. That love is outgoing in the provision of εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν, i.e., protective help that does not arrive too late, but at the appropriate time because the moment of its arrival is left to the judgment of God

Word Studies

High Priest

Hold Fast **to adhere strongly to, hold commitment** ¹The idea of holding a view, of taking one's stand on it, is found in connection with διδαχή in Rev. 2:14 f., though with παράδοσις at Mk. 7:3, 4, 8 and 2 Th. 2:15 the sense is more that of keeping or following a tradition,⁷ cf. Hb. 4:14²

Confession **statement of allegiance, as content of an action, confession, acknowledgment that one makes:** Jesus as the ἀρχιερεὺς τῆς ὁμ. ἡμῶν *the high priest of (whom) our confession (speaks*³

Sympathize Since εὐσπλαγχνοῖ follows, συμπαθεῖς does not denote active sympathy with those in distress,⁴ but understanding and sympathetic participation in the destiny of others in all situations⁴

Weakness

Temped without Sin **to endeavor to discover the nature or character of someth. by testing, try, make trial of, put to the test**⁵

¹ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 565.

⁷ Wbg. Th., 162 rightly refers to 1 Tm. 6:20 φύλαξον. At Mk. 7:8 the antithesis to ἀφήμι supports this.

² Wilhelm Michaelis, “[Κράτος \(θεοκρατία\), Κρατέω, Κραταίός, Κραταιόω, Κοσμοκράτωρ, Παντοκράτωρ,](#)” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 911–912.

³ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 709.

⁴ As against Wbg. Pt., 94 f.

⁴ Wilhelm Michaelis, “[Πάσχω, Παθητός, Προπάσχω, Συμπάσχω, Πάθος, Πάθημα, Συμπαθής, Συμπαθέω, Κακοπαθέω, Συγκακοπαθέω, Κακοπάθεια, Μετριοπαθέω, Όμοιοπαθής,](#)” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 935.

someth. someth. = something

⁵ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 792.

Draw near- of approach to or entry into a deity's presence⁶

Confidence- **state of boldness and confidence, courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness**⁷

Hebrews. In Hb. *παρρησία* plays a relatively important part.³⁰ It connotes a distinctive mode of being on the part of the Christian. As has been correctly observed,³¹ *παρρησία* has "a peculiarly objective character." One has it, not as a subjective attitude, but as the appropriation of something already there. One keeps it by holding fast, not merely oneself as a believer, but the presupposition of faith in the promise, *παρρησία* is thus posited objectively with the object of hope, and it is worked out in a life which is commensurate with and has entered into this openness. Hb. 3:6 contains the admonition to hold fast *παρρησία* and τὸ καύχημα τῆς ἐλπίδος. In 3:14 we read: τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως μέχρι τέλους βεβαίαν κατασχεῖν. ὑπόστασις is the formal term for *παρρησία* and the καύχημα which we have in hope. We have only its ἀρχή. In content *παρρησία* is freedom of access to God, authority to enter the sanctuary, openness for the new and living way which Jesus has restored for us, 10:19. This *παρρησία* is given with the blood of Jesus (10:19) and is grounded in His high-priestly way (4:14f.). The saving work of Jesus, which penetrates all the heavens, has created *parrhesia* and made its fulfilment possible. *Parrhesia* works itself out in the confidence and openness which need not be ashamed when it stands before the Judge, 4:16. It is preserved by patience in tribulation, 10:34ff. It demands an ἀληθινὴ καρδιά ἐν πληροθυρίᾳ πίστεως, and presupposes purifying of the conscience and baptism, 10:22. Since it is freedom on the way to God, it contains a reward, the attainment of hope. If it is kept open, there is already achieved, with saving participation in Christ, redeeming membership of His house, 3:14, 6.⁸

Throne of Grace

Mercy

⁶ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 878.

⁷ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 781.

³⁰ Cf. on what follows Mi. Hb.8, *ad loc.*

³¹ E. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (1938), 23.

⁸ Heinrich Schlier, "[Παρρησία, Παρρησιάζομαι](#)," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 884.

Find Grace

Help

Need

priestly ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary. In the description of Jesus as ἀρχιερέα μέγαν, “a great high priest,” the term μέγαν is a qualification of excellence (cf. 1 Macc 13:42, “Simon the great high priest [ἀρχιερέως μεγάλου] and commander and leader of the Jews”; Philo, *On Dreams* 1.219). His greatness is expressed in the language of transcendence. He has passed through the heavens (διεληλυθότα τοὺς οὐρανοῦς) to the presence of God (cf. 9:24). The implied reference to the heavenly sanctuary provides yet another dimension to the discussion of the place of rest in 4:1–11. Jesus’ high priestly ministry is the guarantee that God’s people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence.

The encouragement of Jesus’ high priestly ministry underscores the reasonableness of the exhortation to continue to hold fast to the confession (v 14b). The use of the verb κρατεῖν, “hold fast/cling to,” supports the conclusion that ὁμολογία, “confession,” has reference to a specific formulation of faith that had once been accepted and openly acknowledged by the members of the community. In this context the designation of Jesus as τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, “the Son of God,” is almost certainly an echo of that confession (so Bornkamm, *TBI* 21 [1942] 190, 192–94, 201–2; Neufeld, *Earliest Christian Confessions*, 135–37). The description of Jesus as “high priest” is not itself taken from the confession but serves to interpret it (see on 3:1). [The appeal for adherence to](#)

the confession has the function of promoting the faithfulness of the community at a time they were displaying a lack of concern for spiritual integrity and steadfastness (cf. 2:1; 3:6*b*; 10:23). It appropriately concludes the unit introduced in 3:1, in which the faithfulness of Jesus as high priest establishes the context for calling the members of the congregation to faithfulness (see Comment on 3:1).

Explanation

The purpose of introducing Ps 95:7*b*–11 in 3:7–19 was to exhibit the severe consequences of unbelief and rebellion. Israel at Kadesh, at the point of attaining the goal of the Exodus and pilgrimage through the wilderness, rebelled against God and refused to trust the word of promise. Their subsequent forfeiture of the promise and death in the desert is brought forcefully before the hearers to warn them of the danger of a calloused disposition and apostasy. The generation in the desert provided the writer with a warning paradigm.

In 4:1–13 the note of warning is sustained by specific reference to Israel's unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh (vv 2, 6, 11) and by a pattern of exhortation that exposes the peril of an indifferent community (vv 1, 11–13). But the warning is tempered by the encouragement that the promise of entering God's rest has not been revoked. The failure of the Exodus generation to enter the promised rest did not abrogate the reality and accessibility of that rest. The issue of entering God's rest must be faced by each generation. The continuation of the interpretation of Ps 95:7*b*–11 in 4:1–11 permits the writer to develop a theology of rest.

The notion of rest within the Scriptures is one of expanding horizons. For Israel at Kadesh, and in the Hexateuch generally, the promise of rest connoted entrance into Canaan. But the review of Israel's failure to enter God's rest in Ps 95, long after the conquest and settlement of the land under Joshua, indicated that those events did not exhaust the divine intention. They represented only a type of the rest promised to the people of God.

Already in 3:12–19 a typological interpretation of Ps 95:7*b*–11 had suggested that Israel at Kadesh stood in relation to the Christian community as type to antitype. The argument developed in 4:1–11 is more complex. The expression "my rest" in Ps 95:11 called to mind God's primordial rest announced in Gen 2:2. The state of completion and harmony experienced by God after his creative labor is the archetype and goal of all subsequent experiences of rest. The rest intended for the people of God was prefigured in the Sabbath rest of God. The theology of rest developed in 4:1–11 takes account of the pattern of archetype (God's primal rest, v 4), type (the settlement of the land under Joshua, v 8), and antitype (the Sabbath celebration of the consummation, v 9). The prophetic announcement of another day in which the promise of entering God's rest would be renewed in Ps 95:7*b*–8*a* addressed the community in their situation and supported an eschatological understanding of God's rest. It anticipated the consummation when the completion of work and the experience of rest would provide the setting for a Sabbath celebration marked by festivity and the praise of God (v 9). The task of the community is to enter that rest through faith in God's word of promise and obedient response to the voice of God in Scripture (vv 11–13).

The reference to Jesus in his office as high priest in v 14 is not an afterthought, but the intended conclusion of the entire argument. The crucial issue for the community is whether they will maintain their Christian stance. The issue was posed conditionally in 3:6*b*, and more pointedly in 3:14. It was raised again forcefully in v 14 in the exhortation to hold fast to the confession that identified Christians as those who had responded to the message they had heard with faith (cf. v 2). The ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary as a faithful high priest in the service of God

gives certainty to the promise that God's people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence if they hold fast their initial confidence.⁹

It is commonly stated that the purpose of 4:15–5:10 is to demonstrate that the conditions required of any high priest were satisfied by Christ. In 5:1–4 two conditions are set forth: (1) he must be able to empathize with the frailty of those he serves (vv 1–3); and (2) he must be called by God (v 4). In a second paragraph (5:5–10) it is shown on the grounds of Scripture and the gospel tradition that Jesus fulfilled these conditions: (1) he was called by God (vv 5–6); and (2) after he had been exposed to the full range of human emotion and testing, he was installed as high priest (vv 7–10). The direction of the flow of thought is from Aaron to Christ.

It is questionable whether this scheme represents the writer's intention. It is evident that he made no attempt to develop the two paragraphs in parallel fashion. It is preferable to recognize that the brief review of the Levitical high priesthood in 5:1–4 stands in relationship to the priestly ministry of Jesus contemplated in 4:15–16. It is presented here in order to prepare for the contrast to be developed in detail between the Levitical priesthood and the unique priesthood of Christ at a later point in the sermon (7:1–10:18). The stress on inner disposition in 5:1–3 shows that the description of the Levitical high priest has been conformed to the representation of Christ in 4:15 (cf. 7:3). The direction of the flow of thought is not from Aaron to Christ but from Christ to Aaron and his successors. The entire section of 4:15–5:10 develops the assertion that Jesus is a merciful high priest in the service of God (2:17).

15 οὐ γὰρ ἔχομεν ἀρχιερέα μὴ δυνάμενον συμπαθῆσαι ταῖς ἀσθενείαις ἡμῶν, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel our weaknesses with us.” A possible objection that Jesus' exalted status as high priest in heaven implied his aloofness from the weariness and discouragement of the Church in a hostile world is anticipated in v 15. The writer resorts to a double negative (οὐ ... μὴ) to assert forcefully that Jesus identifies himself with those who feel defenseless in their situation. His high priestly ministry of intercession is effective on their behalf. The special nuance of συμπαθῆσαι (see *Note c*) extends beyond the sharing of feelings (i.e., compassion). It always includes the element of active help (cf. 10:34; 4 Macc 4:25; 13:23; *T. Sim.*

⁹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, vol. 47A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1991), 103–105.

c The complementary inf συμπαθῆσαι means to share the experience of someone. It is not to be understood in a psychological sense (“sympathize with”) but in an existential sense; the exalted high priest suffers together with the weakness of the one who is tested and brings active help (cf. Schenk, *NTS* 26 [1979–80] 247, who calls attention to the synonym βοήθεια, “help,” which stands in the emphatic final position in v 16; W. Burkert, “Zum altgriechischen Mitleidsbegriff” [Dissertation, Erlangen, 1955] 63–66).

3:6; *T. Benj.* 4:4). In this context the stress falls on the capacity of the exalted high priest to help those who are helpless (Schenk, *NTS* 26 [1979–80] 246–47, 251).

This capacity derives from Christ's full participation in humanity (cf. 2:17–18). The heavenly exercise of his office is based upon the accomplishments of his earthly ministry. The writer will not recognize any disjunction between the ministry that Christ performs in the state of his exalted glory from that of the state of his humiliation. The experience of sufferings and trials endured during his humiliation equipped him with empathy so that he is able to support the covenant people in their sufferings and temptations. The emphatic statement that he was “tested” *κατὰ πάντα καθ' ὁμοιότητα*, “in every respect, in quite the same way as we are,” implies that he was susceptible to all the temptations that are connected with the weaknesses inherent in the frailty of humanity (cf. Cullmann, *Christology*, 95). This was necessarily the condition for his full equipment with the fellow-feeling required for the discharge of the priestly ministry of helping. Suffering produced sympathy by endurance.

The analogy between the testing of Christ and that to which the hearers are exposed remains unimpaired by the qualifying phrase *χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας*, “only without the result of sin.” It does not restrict the likeness of the testing but relates exclusively to its outcome, i.e., “but without the result of sin in his case” (Vos, *PTR* 5 [1907] 583; cf. Schenk, *NTS* 26 [1979–80] 252). This conclusion has been challenged by Buchanan, who contends that “this does not necessarily mean that [Jesus] never committed a moral offense in his life” nor that he was sinless prior to the crucifixion. Inasmuch as the writer presented Jesus as a high priest, he may have understood the death on the cross as an offering on the Day of Atonement to cleanse his own sins as well as those of the people. This would be consistent with 5:3 (8, 82, 130–31). Buchanan has been supported by Williamson, who asks, “How could Jesus in any sense save sinners if he had not fully shared himself in the human condition ... including actual participation in the experience of sinning?” (*ExpTim* 86 [1974–75] 7). Appealing to 5:8, Williamson emphasizes that Jesus had to learn obedience by overcoming disobedience, a process that was not complete until the moment of his sacrificial death on the cross (4–8).

These arguments, we submit, are untenable. The expression *καθ' ὁμοιότητα*, “in quite the same way,” in v 15 involves both similarity and distinction, excluding identity. The writer nowhere suggests that Jesus had to become identical to fallen humanity in order to redeem it. In fact, in 7:27 he denies that Jesus had to offer sacrifice “first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for *their* sins once for all when he offered himself.” In 9:14 it is affirmed that Jesus “offered himself *unblemished* to God.” It is striking that when the writer speaks of Jesus' qualification for his priestly ministry he adds the proviso that he was without sin (cf. 7:26–28). “Without sin” is a comment concerning Jesus' faithfulness to the one who appointed him (3:2) and describes the issue of Jesus' temptations. It indicates why his provision of compassionate help is

T. Benj. Testament of Benjamin, etc.

NTS *New Testament Studies*

PTR *Princeton Theological Review*

NTS *New Testament Studies*

ExpTim *The Expository Times*

charged with unique virtue and efficacy (cf. Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:933–36; Seesemann, *TDNT* 6:33; Michel, 211–13; Peterson, “Examination,” 326–31).

16 The encouragement offered in v 15 is complemented by an exhortation to persistent prayer. The force of the present tense of προσερχόμεθα is “let us again and again draw near to the throne of grace” (Schenk, *NTS* 26 [1979–80] 252). The source of the terminology is cultic. The “throne of grace” is the place of God’s presence, from which grace emanates to the people of God. The only one who was permitted to “draw near” under the provisions of the Mosaic covenant was the high priest, who could approach the altar in the most holy place of the tabernacle once a year, on the Day of Atonement. If his ministry was acceptable, the altar of judgment became the place from which mercy was dispensed to the people (cf. Lev 16:2–34; Heb 9:5). In a bold extension of the language of worship the writer calls the community to recognize that through his high priestly ministry Christ has achieved for them what Israel never enjoyed, namely, immediate access to God and the freedom to draw near to him continually (7:19, 25; 9:8–12, 14; 10:1, 22; cf. Käsemann, “Hebräer 4:14–16,” 304). They may draw near to God through prayer with the confidence that they will be graciously received.

The instruction to pray with παρρησία, “bold frankness,” takes advantage of a development in the meaning of this word that first occurred in hellenistic Judaism. In secular Greek the term connotes the free open speech of citizens with one another, but it is never used in the context of prayer. But in hellenistic Judaism the range of the term was extended to apply to speech with God (e.g., Jos., *Ant.* 2.52; 5.38). Attridge has called attention to Philo’s tractate, *Who Is the Heir?* 5, where in a comment on Gen 15:2–3 Abraham is described as coming before God with “courage and well-timed frankness” (παρρησία). This is precisely the attitude that the hearers of Hebrews are encouraged to adopt in speaking with God (91–92). Because they have a high priest who empathizes with them they can go with frankness to the throne of grace and receive timely help in their distress. The free right to approach God with bold frankness was given in the sacrifice of Christ (cf. W. C. van Unnik, “The Christian’s Freedom of Speech in the New Testament,” *BJRL* 44 [1961–62] 485). The promise that they will receive ἔλεος, “mercy,” accompanied by sustaining χάρις, “grace,” refers to closely allied and essential aspects of God’s love. That love is outgoing in the provision of εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν, i.e., protective help that does not arrive too late, but at the

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., tr. G. W. Bromiley *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ET (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., tr. G. W. Bromiley *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ET (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

NTS *New Testament Studies*

Jos. Josephus

Ant. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

BJRL *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*

appropriate time because the moment of its arrival is left to the judgment of God (cf. Delling, *TDNT* 3:462; Käsemann, “Hebräer 4:14–16,” 304).¹⁰

Μέγας is a favourite adjective for ἀρχιερέυς in Philo,¹ but when the writer adds, ἔχοντες οὖν ἀρχιερέα μέγαν διεληλυθότα τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, he is developing a thought of his own. The greatness of Jesus as ἀρχιερέυς consists in his access to God not through any material veil, but through the upper heavens; he has penetrated to the very throne of God, in virtue of his perfect self-sacrifice. This idea is not elaborated till later (cp. 6:19f.; 9:24 f.), in the sacerdotal sense. But it has been already mentioned in 2:9, 10, where Jesus the Son of God saves men by his entrance into the full divine glory. **Κρατῶμεν** here as in 6:18 with the genitive (ὁμολογίας, see 3:1); in Paul it takes the accusative. The writer now (v. 15) reiterates the truth of 2:11 f.; the exalted Jesus is well able to sympathize with weak men on earth, since he has shared their experience of temptation. It is put negatively, then positively. **Συμπαθεῖσαι** is used of Jesus¹ as in *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, 17 (ὅς μόνος συνεπάθησεν πλανωμένῳ κόσμῳ); see below, on 10:34. Origen (*in Matt.* xiii. 2) quotes a saying of Jesus: διὰ τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας ἡσθένουν καὶ διὰ τοὺς πεινῶντας ἐπεινῶν καὶ διὰ τοὺς διψῶντας ἐδίψων, the first part of which may go back to Mt 8:17 (αὐτὸς τὰς ἀσθενείας ἔλαβεν); cp. also Mt 25:35f ... Philo uses the term even of the Mosaic law (*de spec. eg. ii.* 13, τῷ δὲ ἀπόρως ἔχοντι συνεπάθησε), but here it is more than “to be considerate.” The aid afforded by Jesus as ἀρχιερέυς is far more than official; it is inspired by fellow-feeling **ταῖς ἀσθενείαις ἡμῶν**. “Verius sentiunt qui simul cum externis aerumnis comprehendunt animi affectus, quales sunt metus, tristitia, horror

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., tr. G. W. Bromiley *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ET (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

¹⁰ William L. Lane, [Hebrews 1–8](#), vol. 47A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1991), 113–116.

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

¹ ὁ μὲν δὴ μέγας ἀρχιερέυς (de Somn. i. 38), even of the Logos.

¹ Of God in 4 Mac 5:25 κατὰ φύσιν ἡμῖν συμπαθεῖ νομοθετῶν ὁ τοῦ κτίστης, but in the weaker sense of consideration. It is curious that 4 Mac., like Hebrews, uses the word twice, once of God and once of men (cp. 4 Mac 13:23 οὕτως δὴ τοίνυν καθεστηκυίας τῆς φιλαδελφίας συμπαθείσης).

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

mortis, et similes” (Calvin). These ἀσθένειαι are the sources of temptation. Ἡ σὰρξ ἀσθενής, as Jesus had said to his disciples, warning them against temptation. Jesus was tempted κατὰ πάντα (2:17, 18) καθ’ ὁμοιότητα (a psychological Stoic term; the phrase occurs in *OP* ix. 1202:24 and *BGU* 1028:15, in second-century inscriptions) χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας, without yielding to sin. Which is a real ground for encouragement, for the best help is that afforded by those who have stood where we slip and faced the onset of temptation without yielding to it. The special reference is to temptations leading to apostasy or disobedience to the will of God. It is true that χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας does exclude some temptations. Strictly speaking, κατὰ πάντα is modified by this restriction, since a number of our worst temptations arise out of sin previously committed. But this is not in the writer’s mind at all. He is too eager, to enter into any psychological analysis.

Philo deduces from Lv 4:3 (μόνον οὐκ ἄντικρυς ἀναδιδάσκων, ὅτι ὁ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ἀρχιερεὺς καὶ μὴ ψευδώνυμος ἀμέτοχος ἁμαρτημάτων ἐστίν) that the ideal highpriest is practically sinless (*de Victimis*, 10); but this is a thought with which he wistfully toys, and the idea of the Logos as unstained by contact with the material universe is very different from this conception of Jesus as actually tempted and scatheless. Nor would the transference of the idea of messiah as sinless account for our writer’s view. To him and his readers Jesus is sinless, not in virtue of a divine prerogative, but as the result of a real human experience which proved successful in the field of temptation.

Hence (v. 16) προσερχόμεθα οὖν μετὰ παρρησίας. Philo (*quis rer. div. haeres*, 2) makes παρρησία the reward of a good conscience, which enables a loyal servant of God to approach him frankly. But here (cp. *ERE* ii. 786) παρρησία is not freedom of utterance so much as resolute confidence (cp. on 3:6). Our writer certainly includes prayer in this conception of approaching God, but it is prayer as the outcome of faith and hope. Seneca bids Lucilius pray boldly to God, if his prayers are for soundness of soul and body, not for any selfish and material end: “audacter deum roga; nihil illum de alieno rogaturus es” (*Ep.* x. 4). But even this is not the meaning of παρρησία here. The Roman argues that a man can only pray aloud and confidently if his desires are such as he is not ashamed to have others hear, whereas the majority of people “whisper basest of prayers to God.” Our author does not mean “palam” by παρρησία.

Our approach (προσερχόμεθα: the verb in the sense of applying to a court or authority, e.g. in *OP* 1119:8 προσήλθομεν τῇ κρατίστη βουλῇ, *BGU* 1022) is τῷ θρονῷ τῆς χάριτος, for grace is now enthroned (see 2:9f.). For the phrase see Is 16:5 διορθωθήσεται μετ’ ἐλέους θρόνος. Our author (cp. *Intro.* p. xlvii), like those who shared the faith of apocalyptic as well as of rabbinic piety, regarded heaven as God’s royal presence and also as the σκηνή where he was worshipped,

OP The Oxyrhynchus Papyri (ed. B. P. Grenfell and A. Hunt).

BGU Aegyptische Urkunden (Griechisch Urkunden), ed. Wilcken (1895).

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

ERE Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (ed. J. Hastings).

OP The Oxyrhynchus Papyri (ed. B. P. Grenfell and A. Hunt).

BGU Aegyptische Urkunden (Griechisch Urkunden), ed. Wilcken (1895).

an idea which dated from Is 6:1f. and Ps 29 (cp. Mechilta on Ex 15:17), though he only alludes incidentally (12:22) to the worship of God by the host of angels in the upper sanctuary. He is far from the pathetic cry of Azariah (Dn 3:38): ὠκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ ... οὐδε τόπος τοῦ καρπῶσαι ἐνώπιόν σου καὶ εὐρεῖν ἔλεος. He rather shares Philo's feeling (*de Exsecrat.* 9) that οἱ ἀνασφωζόμενοι can rely upon the compassionate character of God (ἐνὶ μὲν ἐπιεικείᾳ καὶ χρηστότητι τοῦ παρακαλουμένου συγγνώμην πρὸ τιμωρίας ἀεὶ τιθέντος), though he regards this mercy as conditioned by the sacrifice of Jesus. The twofold object of the approach is (a) λαμβάνειν ἔλεος, which is used for the passive of ἐλεῶ (which is rare), and (b) χάριν εὐρίσκειν κτλ., an echo of the LXX phrase (e.g. Gn 6:8) εὐρίσκειν χάριν ἐναντίον κυρίου (τοῦ θεοῦ). In the writer's text (A) of the LXX, Prov 8:17 ran οἱ δὲ ἐμὲ ζητοῦντες εὐρήσουσι χάριν.¹ Εἰς εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν recalls τοῖς πειραζομένοις βοηθῆσαι in 2:18; it signifies "for assistance in the hour of need." Εὐκαιρος means literally "seasonable," as in Ps 104:27 (δοῦναι τὴν τροφήν αὐτοῖς εὐκαιρον), "fitting" or "opportune" (*Ep. Aristeeas*, 203, 236). The "sympathy" of Jesus is shown by practical aid to the tempted, which is suitable to their situation, suitable above all because it is timely (εὐκαιρον being almost equivalent to ἐν καιρῷ χρείας, Sir 8:9). Philo (*de sacrificantibus*, 10) shows how God, for all his greatness, cherishes compassion (ἔλεον καὶ οἶκτον λαμβάνει τῶν ἐν ἐνδείαις ἀπορωτάτων) for needy folk, especially for poor proselytes, who, in their devotion to him, are rewarded by his help (καρπὸν εὐράμενοι τῆς ἐπὶ τὸν θεὸν καταφυγῆς τὴν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ βοήθειαν). But the best illustration of the phrase is in Aristides, Εἰς τὸν Σάραπιν 50: σὲ γὰρ δὴ πᾶς τις ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ βοηθὸν καλεῖ, Σάραπι.¹¹

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

LXX *The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint Version* (ed. H. B. Swete).

A saec. v. [02: δ 4].

LXX *The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint Version* (ed. H. B. Swete).

¹ Aristotle argues that χάρις or benevolence must be spontaneous and disinterested; also, that its value is enhanced by necessitous circumstances (ἔστω δὲ χάρις, καθ' ἣν ὁ ἔχων λέγεται χάριν ὑπουργεῖν δεομένῳ μὴ ἀντί τινος, μηδ' ἵνα τι αὐτῷ τῷ ὑπουργοῦντι ἀλλ' ἵν' ἐκείνῳ τι· μεγάλη δ' ἂν ἦ σφόδρα δεομένῳ, ἢ μεγάλων καὶ χαλεπῶν, ἢ ἐν καιροῖς τοιοῦτοῖς, ἢ μόνος ἢ πρῶτος ἢ μάλιστα, *Rhet.* ii. 7. 2).

Philo *Philonis Alexandriai Opera Quae Supersunt* (recognoverunt L. Cohn et P. Wendland).

¹¹ James Moffatt, [A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews](#), International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1924), 58–61.

From a discourse perspective, Heb 4:14–10:18 forms the second of three major discourse units in the epistle. The phrase *echontes oun*, “having therefore,” in 4:14 and 10:19 signals the onset of a new discourse section. Following the hortatory paragraph of 4:14–16, one can divide 5:1–10:18 into two sections: 5:1–7:28 and 8:1–10:18. The section covering 5:1–7:28 is marked by the bracketing (an *inclusio*) of 5:1–3 and 7:27–28. Both sections include the following common features: high priest, appoint, to offer, sacrifice from sins, weakness, for the sins of the people.¹ That Heb 4:14–16 begins a new major section in the epistle is confirmed by the relative absence of concepts that are also found in 3:7–4:13.² There is a back reference to 3:1–6 with the repetition of four words: “high priest,” “confession,” “Jesus” and “Son.” The lexical density of these words throughout Hebrews is striking: “high priest” (11), “confession” (5), “Jesus” (13), and “Son” (15). This passage introduces the theological discourse of Heb 5:1–10 on Christ as the high priest. There is a chiasmic structure formed by the lexical and semantic repetition of “confession” in 3:1, “confidence” in 3:6, “confidence” in 3:14, and “the faith we profess” in 4:14. The section begins in 3:1 with the admonition to “fix your thoughts on Jesus ... whom we confess,” and the new

¹ G. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 83; and his *Hebrews*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 186; J. Kurianal, *Jesus Our High Priest: Ps 110, 4 as the Substructure of Heb 5, 1–7, 28*, European University Studies, Series XXIII, Theology, 693 (Frankfurt am Main: Bern, 2000), 235–61.

² Lane wrongly begins a new major discourse unit with 4:15 on the basis that, apart from 4:14, which is hortatory in nature, 4:15–5:10 is expository. He infers a transition indicated by repetition with slight variation of the concept of “having a high priest,” and this “apparent redundancy marks a shift ... from exhortation to exposition,” thus introducing a new unit (*Hebrews 1–8*, WBC [Dallas: Word Books, 1991], 111). H. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper; London: Black, 1964), 90, likewise begins a new section with v. 15. C. Westfall, *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship Between Form and Meaning*, in LNTS 297 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 142, takes Heb 4:11–16 as the point of departure for the second major discourse unit of Hebrews.

section in 4:14 begins with the similar exhortation to “hold firmly to the confession [NIV “the faith we profess”].”³

4:14–16 Hebrews 4:14 should have been a new chapter division in the Bible since it begins a major discourse section of the epistle and since Hebrews 5:1 is introduced by the subordinating conjunction *gar* “for.” Verse 14 begins with *oun*, which introduces an exhortation based on the immediately preceding paragraph, or it resumes the topic of the high priesthood of Jesus in 2:17 or 3:1 after an interruption. Spicq and Ellingworth take the latter position and identify the interruption as 3:7–4:13.⁴ The causal present participle *echontes* conveys the meaning “since we have” and serves as grounds for the two exhortations which follow in 4:14–16. Lünemann connected it with the participial phrase “having a great high priest” (NIV “since we have a great high priest”) as indicating a conclusion to the preceding section.⁵

Given the context of the previous chapters, Jesus is a “great” high priest for a number of reasons. He is highly exalted; superior to Moses, Aaron and the Levitical priests; and designated as Son of God. The translation “gone through” renders a perfect participle functioning attributively and indicating a state resulting from a previous action: Jesus is now permanently in God’s presence having passed through the heavens via the ascension.⁶ The phrase “Jesus the Son of God” is in apposition to “a great high priest” and is given emphasis by the author by being placed at the end of the clause. The two titles, “Jesus” and “Son” may reflect Christ’s dual nature: human and divine. It is difficult to decide whether the reference here to “Jesus” harks back to Heb 4:8 where there is an implied contrast with “Joshua.”⁷

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³ See A. Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1976), 54; W. Schenck, “Hebräerbrief 4.14–16. Textlinguistik als Kommentierungsprinzip,” *NTS* 26 (1979–80): 242–52; G. Guthrie, *Structure*, 78.

⁴ P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 266; Spicq, *l’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1952–53), 2:91. The term “interruption” is too strong given the way the author of Hebrews weaves his units together.

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⁵ G. Lünemann, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. from the 4th German ed., trans. M. Evans, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the New Testament*, ed. H. A. W. Meyer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885), 491–92. The present tense signals a continuing state of priesthood (J. H. Greenlee, *Exegetical Summary of Hebrews* [Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998], 150).

⁶ Greenlee, *Exegetical Summary*, 150.

⁷ Alford thinks there is such a connection (“Prolegomena and Hebrews,” in *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, 5th ed. [Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1878; repr., Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976], 4:88), but Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 267, denies it.

On the grounds of the high priesthood and sonship of Jesus the readers are exhorted to hold fast continually (present tense) the confession. One's grip is to be firm and steadfast, as the verb *krateō* indicates. This exhortation will be repeated at 6:18 and 10:23. "The confession" (*tēs homologias*, NIV "the faith we confess"),⁸ includes the divine sonship, the unique oneness of Jesus with the Father, as a means of imparting divine revelation (Heb 1:1–2). It also includes a high priestly Christology which is combined with that sonship throughout Hebrews. These two themes are interwoven here, again in 5:8 where although Jesus is a Son, yet he learned obedience, and again in Heb 7:3 when Christ is compared to Melchizedek.⁹

The *gar* of v. 15 subordinates it to v. 14, and semantically indicates the grounds for holding fast the confession.¹⁰ Lane noted it counteracts the inference that the exalted state of Jesus would somehow hinder his ability to identify with human weakness.¹¹ This verse is structured in a negative-positive way with two balanced participial phrases separated by *de*, "but." Two concepts deserve attention in the first phrase: the infinitive of *sumpatheō*, "to sympathize with," and the noun *astheneia* "weakness." The former is a compound verb, (lit.) "to suffer with," and connotes sympathy on the part of Jesus derived from the reality of his incarnation. *Sumpatheō* appears to include sympathy based on common experience, always includes the element of active help, and should not be limited to the psychological notion of "feeling."¹² The latter ("weakness") occurs again in 5:2; 7:28; and 11:34. The word is variously taken to mean moral weakness, intellectual and moral weakness, and physical, moral, or spiritual weakness.¹³ The word denotes "objective ineffectiveness rather than merely feelings of inadequacy."¹⁴ The context would indicate that the weaknesses are the sources of the temptation in that they render one susceptible to temptation and sin. The use of the double negative in Greek serves to make the point in a forceful manner.

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⁸ For the meaning of ὁμολογίας, see Heb 3:1.

⁹ See the discussion in O. Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 304–5.

¹⁰ M. Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Expositors Greek Testament*, ed. R. Nicoll (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1903; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 4:283; N. Miller, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Analytical and Exegetical Handbook* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1988), 131.

¹¹ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 107.

lit. literal(ly)

¹² *Ibid.*, 114.

¹³ So Dods, "Hebrews," 284; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 268; and Alford, "Hebrews," 89, respectively.

¹⁴ A. Thiselton, "Hebrews" in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. J. Dunn and J. Roberson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1461.

The second participial clause of 4:15 is introduced by the adversative *de* and provides the positive side to the contrast. The perfect passive participle of *peirazō* (“to be tempted/tested”) confirms that the past temptations of Christ have abiding sympathetic results for us who are tempted. Context determines whether the word means “to tempt” or “to test.” The final phrase, “without sin,” indicates that the meaning of the participle must include temptation and not merely testing. Two prepositional phrases using *kata* (“in accordance with, in conformity to”) with an accusative object are rendered “in every way, just as we are.” The noun in the first phrase is *panta*, “everything,” and in the second phrase it is *homoiotēta*, “likeness.” Lane translated, “in quite the same way as we are.”¹⁵ The point here is that Jesus’ likeness to us via the incarnation means he was tempted in the same way that all humanity is tempted, but with this difference: he never sinned.¹⁶

Oun should be translated “therefore” or “consequently” in v. 16 rather than the weak “then” of the NIV since it functions as the conclusion of vv. 14–15 and gives the grounds for the exhortation “let us come.”¹⁷ The use of the present tense hortatory subjunctive *proserchomai*, “let us come,” is used several times in the epistle and is always used by the author in a cultic sense of approaching God in worship and priestly service.¹⁸ The use of the present tense indicates the readers are exhorted to come as often as needed; when they come it is to be “with confidence” or “with boldness,” or as Lane translated, “with a bold frankness.”¹⁹ The phrase “throne of grace” can be taken as a qualitative genitive, “a throne characterized by grace,” or as a genitive (ablative) of source, “the throne from which grace comes.” In characteristic Hebrew metonymic fashion, the

¹⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 107.

¹⁶ Some take the final phrase “without sin” in the sense of “apart from sin” and conclude that the sinless nature of Jesus precluded any response to the temptation to sin. Such a reading is “linguistically forced” according to Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 269). Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 108. The genitive phrase can be written as an event proposition for clarity: “he did not sin.” The phrase encodes semantically the notion of contra-expectation: “although he was tempted, yet he did not sin” (Miller, *Hebrews*, 131). Other places in the NT that affirm the sinlessness of Jesus include John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22; and 1 John 3:5.

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¹⁷ See L&N 89.50.

¹⁸ J. Schneider, “προσέρχομαι,” *TDNTa*, 262. “Cultic” denotes language having to do with the worship, ritual, and function of the tabernacle/temple.

¹⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 107. Schlier, “παρρησία,” *TDNT* 5.872ff., identified three shades of meaning for παρρησία in Greek political usage: (1) a citizen’s right to full expression in the assembly; (2) openness to truth; and (3) courage to speak openly, candor. The latter meaning fits the context of Heb 4:16. Cf. W. S. Vorster, “The Meaning of *PARRESIA* in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Neot* 5 (1971): 57.

throne substitutes for God who sits on the throne. Miller takes the sense of the passage to be: “(Since Jesus is now our high priest,) let us confidently approach the throne of God, for He is willing to act graciously toward us. In this way we may ask that God will show mercy to us and act graciously to send help to us just when we need it most.”²⁰ Bruce viewed the author’s reference to “throne of grace” as the antitype to the mercy seat in the earthly tabernacle/temple.²¹ Whether the author intended a reference to the Day of Atonement ritual where the priest approached the mercy seat with the sacrificial blood is unclear, but the Day of Atonement was a once-a-year event, whereas here we are told to approach continually.

The purpose for coming to the throne of grace is that we might receive “mercy” and find “grace for timely help” (NIV, “grace to help us in our time of need”). The two phrases “receive mercy” and “find grace” are chiasmatically arranged in the Greek text, which probably indicates the two phrases overlap in meaning.²² When there is a difference perceived, it is usually along the lines of mercy in forgiveness of sins and grace to needed assistance in some trial or temptation.²³ The Greek phrase “for timely help” can be construed with “finding grace,”²⁴ or as is more likely, with

²⁰ Miller, *Hebrews*, 134. B. Demarest and G. Lewis (*Integrative Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 2:360) contrasted the way God is approached in Christianity versus the way he is approached in other religions: “Those who by faith identify with Christ need not approach God through countless intermediaries or dead ‘spiritual masters’ in the next life (as Theosophists and others do). Christians need not wait for countless rebirths in order to evolve morally and spiritually to the level at which they can approach the ultimate Reality directly (as Hindus, Buddhists, and others do). In our approach to God we are not limited to having a high priest enter the Holy of Holies once a year as our representative (as in Judaism). We need not convey our heartfelt concerns to human priests or to Jesus’ mother, Mary [as in Catholicism].”

²¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 116.

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²² So Alford, “Hebrews,” 90; and Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 270.

²³ E.g., B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 110; Dods, “Hebrews,” 284.

²⁴ So P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 174; and Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 107.

both “mercy” and “grace.”²⁵ The Greek noun *boētheia* “help,” preceded by the adjective translated “timely,” is rendered verbally in the NIV as “to help us in our time of need.”²⁶

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS. The most significant theological issue in this paragraph has to do with the meaning of v. 15, particularly the second half of the verse. The debate over whether Jesus could or could not have sinned, the peccability/impeccability debate, has as its *crux interpretum* this verse.²⁷ Several points should be kept in mind. First, the New Testament writers, including the author of Hebrews, affirm Christ’s complete sinlessness in his incarnation. Second, the term “peccability” does not presuppose a sin nature in Christ since virtually all who affirm “peccability” would disavow such. Third, the issue cannot be resolved by appeal to Heb 4:15 alone. Fourth, the Scriptures affirm Christ’s full identification with fallen humanity with the single exception stated here in v. 15: he was without sin. Fifth, the Scriptures also affirm that the temptations and testings which Jesus faced were in fact real.²⁸ The temptation narratives of the Gospels confirm this: Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13.

The issue of the temptation of Jesus involves one in a host of difficult questions. As divine, Jesus possessed the moral attribute of holiness. He has no sin nature. Since according to Jas 1:13, “God cannot be tempted by evil,” the question arises how could Jesus then be tempted at all? Is temptation even possible if sin on the part of Jesus is impossible? “In logical terms, is not

²⁵ So Alford, “Hebrews,” 90; and Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 270.

NIV New International Version

²⁶ “A man is merciful when he takes to heart the need of another. Jesus Christ has once and for all taken our need to heart.... But although he did it once and for all [on the cross], He did not do it once only. Risen from the dead, He lives and takes it to heart with undiminished severity. This is His passion today” (K. Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 396).

²⁷ H. Thielicke (*The Evangelical Faith*, ed. and trans. G. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:376) called this issue “perhaps the ultimate problem of Christology.” Cf. M. Shuster, “The Temptation, Sinlessness and Sympathy of Jesus: Another Look at the Dilemma of Hebrews 4:15,” in *Perspectives on Christology: Essays in Honor of Paul K. Jewett*, ed. M. Shuster and R. Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 211–30; K. Barth, *CD*, IV/1: 257ff., VI/1, 258–60. Barth’s thoughts on this verse are worth pondering by the theologian and the homiletician.

²⁸ See W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 537–38. Cullmann (*Christology*, 95), took the phrase in 4:15 “tempted in every way as we are” to refer both to the form of the temptations as well as to the content, and comments that this verse, which goes beyond what we read in the Synoptics about the temptation of Jesus, “is perhaps the boldest assertion of the completely human character of Jesus in the New Testament.” Furthermore, there is no trace of a docetic Christology in these verses: “Jesus was really a man, not just God disguised as a man” (p. 96).

temptation without sin a contradiction in terms, an antinomy?”²⁹ Hebrews 4:15 asserts the genuineness of Jesus’ temptations. Furthermore, the text does not say either way whether Christ could or could not sin. What of the doctrine of God’s impassibility? Hebrews 4:15 seems to indicate that in some way the Triune Godhead was affected by the incarnation in that Jesus as the God-man “experienced firsthand the full nature of evil,”³⁰ particularly in his death on the cross.

The debate about Heb 4:15 involves those who believe that Jesus Christ was “able not to sin” (the peccability position) and those who believe he was “not able to sin” (the impeccability position). The former believe Christ could have sinned, but of course he did not. The latter believe he was unable to sin. The major arguments for the peccability position generally revolve around three issues: (1) Christ’s humanity, (2) Christ’s temptability, which implies the ability to sin,³¹ and (3) Christ’s free will, which implies peccability. The major arguments for the impeccability position include: (1) Christ’s deity, (2) God’s decreed plan of redemption, which cannot fail, hence Christ could not have sinned; and (3) Christ’s divine attributes, including immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience.³²

Exegetical considerations alone cannot settle this issue from Heb 4:15, or for that matter, from any New Testament passage which speaks directly or indirectly to the issue. One must weigh all of the texts and reason to a theological conclusion. If one is to come to some reasonable conclusion on the subject, a careful definition of terms is mandatory. What do we mean by “able” to sin or not to sin? This question is related to another: what was the nature of Christ’s humanity? Is it identical to Adam’s humanity prior to the Fall, fallen humanity, or glorified humanity in the eschaton? Adam was certainly “able not to sin” and yet he did sin. Glorified humanity will be without the ability to sin. Hence, Adam before the fall was peccable, but after his entrance into heaven and reception of a glorified body, he will be impeccable. If one defines Christ’s human nature as

²⁹ Thielicke, *Evangelical Faith*, 377. Thielicke put the matter well: “Temptation is a problem because it presupposes susceptibility to it. On this side, then, we view Jesus as open to temptation. We construe his humanity so unconditionally and uncompromisingly that only his solidarity with us is seen and not his difference from us. On the other hand, we could choose not to go so far. But then we deprive him of the central core of susceptibility to temptation and consequently of his humanity” (378–79).

³⁰ M. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 607.

³¹ So P. Davids, *More Hard Sayings of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 93: “Could he have sinned? Scripture never enters into such philosophical speculation. But it certainly implies that there was virtue in not sinning and that the test was real, which seems to imply the possibility of failing.”

³² These positions are helpfully summarized by M. Canham, “*Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare: Evangelicals, Hermeneutics, and the Impeccability Debate*,” *TMSJ* 11/1 (2000): 94–96. Canham, along with Shuster, “Temptation, Sinlessness, and Sympathy of Jesus,” 197–209, has one of the best overall analyses of the issue I have seen, though his solution is less than satisfying.

identical to that of Adam before the Fall, then peccability becomes a live option. On the other hand, if one defines Christ's human nature as identical to glorified humanity, then impeccability follows. K. Barth said Christ took "the nature of man as he comes from the fall," yet he does not mean by this that Jesus possessed a sin nature nor that he was not sinless, for he also says: "In His likeness He was also unlike in that He did not yield to temptation."³³ In another place Barth put it this way: "In becoming the same as we are, the Son of God is the same in quite a different way from us; in other words, in our human being what we do is omitted, and what we omit is done."³⁴

Of course, one should ask, what does it mean to sin? If sin is narrowly defined to exclude evil inclinations and include only "willfully entertaining or acting upon those inclinations" by deliberate disobedience, then Jesus could have been tempted "by every sort of fleshly desire, proud ambition, and rebellious impulse ... without ever actually sinning." But as M. Shuster cogently noted: "The desire to sin is sin."³⁵

Another crucial issue is the definition of *peirazō*, whether it should be translated as "test" or "tempt" in Heb 4:15, Jas 1:13, and Matt 4:1. It can mean either, depending on the context. Complicating the question further, the author of Hebrews had available to him a synonym, *dokimazō*, which always means "testing." Those who advocate peccability interpret the word to mean "temptation," while those who argue for impeccability sometimes restrict the meaning to "testing" based on Jas 1:13–15, albeit a testing that includes the meaning of temptation defined as outward solicitation to do evil, not as an inward propensity. The author says Jesus was tempted "in every way" as we are. This exact phrase in Greek was used by the author in 2:17: Christ had to be made like his brothers "in every way." The author takes great pains to stress that Jesus is identified with the humanity of his people.

Likewise, how we define the phrase "without sin" in Heb 4:15 impinges on the issue. Is the meaning "without resulting in sin" or "without having a sin nature?" Both sides affirm both truths, but impeccability advocates choose the latter and conclude since Jesus had no sin nature, he could not have sinned. Exegetically, since "without sin" follows immediately the perfect participle *pepeirasmenon*, it is likely that the meaning of "without sin" is "without resulting in sin" and the meaning of *pepeirasmenon* is "tempted," and includes trials, rather than "tried" that excludes temptation.³⁶ However, it is possible to understand the author as focusing on a distinction in the process of temptation rather than focusing on the result of temptation.

³³ Barth, *CD IV/1*: 258–60. Cf. *CD I/2*:153: "[T]here must be no weakening or obscuring of the saving truth that the nature which God assumed in Christ is identical with our nature as we see it in the light of the Fall." Likewise Westcott (*Hebrews*, 108) noted: "Christ assumed humanity under the conditions of life belonging to man fallen, though not with sinful promptings from within."

³⁴ Barth, *CD I/2*:155.

³⁵ Shuster, "Temptations, Sinlessness, and Sympathy of Jesus," 199.

³⁶ Canham, "*Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare*," 105–7. Ellingworth, (*Hebrews*, 268–69), argued for "tempted" against H. Attridge (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Her [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 140). On "temptation," see W. R. Baker, "Temptation," *DLNT* 1166–70.

D. Bloesch noted how crucial it is to distinguish between internal and external temptation in relation to the impeccability debate.³⁷ Peccabilists argue that Jesus was incapable of internal temptation since he had no sin nature, but like Adam in his pre-fall state, he was capable of succumbing to external temptation. Impeccabilists argue that the deity of Jesus makes it impossible for him to sin, even as the incarnate God-man.³⁸

In arguing the peccability position, M. Erickson, following T. Morris, distinguished between the epistemic possibility of sin and the logical possibility: “On such grounds, it was really possible for Jesus to decide to sin, but the divine nature precluded his actually doing so. As long as his divine nature did not preclude his thinking that he could perform the sin, there was genuine temptation... He chose not to sin, thus never encountering the fact that he could not have sinned.”³⁹ Erickson also suggested another possible approach to the issue: that of distinguishing between the possibility of what *could* occur and the likelihood of what *would* occur. If one takes the position that it is unlikely that Jesus would sin, it could be argued that in this case there are conditions under which Jesus could have sinned, but it was certain those conditions would not all be fulfilled. On this approach, according to Erickson, Jesus could have decided to sin, but it was certain that he would not.⁴⁰

Calvin rightly used Heb 4:15 to refute those, like Abelard, who argued that the suffering of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane was only pretense (“theatrical demonstration” according to Abelard) in light of his deity. “These detractors are, moreover, deceived in this one point: they do not recognize in Christ a weakness pure and free of all vice and stain because he held himself within the bounds of obedience.”⁴¹ With respect to their extent and genuineness, T. Oden noted that the temptations of Jesus were “real appeals to his real freedom. His resistance was a real act

³⁷ D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1:96, 115.

³⁸ H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Eight Lectures Preached Before the University of Oxford in the Year 1866* (London: Rivingtons, 1884), 524–25: “Our Lord’s Manhood, then, by the unique conditions of its existence, was believed to be wholly exempt from any propensity to, or capacity of, sinful self-will.... Thus to any direct temptation to evil He was simply inaccessible.... It is clear that Holy Scripture denies the existence, not merely of any sinful thinking or acting, but of any ultimate roots and sources of sin, of any propensities or inclinations, however latent and rudimentary, towards sin, in the Incarnate Christ.”

³⁹ Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 562; T. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 65.

⁴⁰ Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 562–63.

⁴¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. F. Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1:518. The incarnation subjected Jesus to humanity with its frailty, trials, pressures, and influences of the world of evil, which confirmed the genuineness of his temptations but did not necessitate his sinlessness.

of freedom in saying no on behalf of a larger yes to his vocation.”⁴² Luther said we should not think of Christ as an “unfeeling block.” As man, Christ was subject to every temptation.⁴³ Luther, in a sermon on Psalm 8, created an unnecessary bifurcation in the hypostatic union of Christ when he averred that Christ’s deity, as it were, lifted the drawbridge, withdrew its power, and left the humanity to fight for itself.⁴⁴ Augustine, along with other fathers, compared the temptation of Jesus to the testing of metal. Gold may be tested; if it is gold, it will emerge as genuine gold every time. Analogously, Jesus may be severely tempted and tested, but it is impossible that he should fail the test.⁴⁵

A. B. Edersheim and M. Canham argued that both peccability and impeccability must be affirmed as true and that what we have here is a theological antinomy. Canham resolved the issue by asking the question:

“Is Jesus Christ God or man?” He is of course both, and thus affirming both positions is necessary to capture the whole truth of the situation.... the only truly satisfying answer to the question of whether Christ ontologically could or could not sin is that he was both peccable and impeccable in His incarnation, and that in his *kenosis* the exercise of His human attribute of peccability apparently limited (in some sense) the exercise of His divine attribute of impeccability.⁴⁶

This position is adequately refuted by Lewis and Demarest, though Canham considers their arguments “weak.”⁴⁷

⁴² T. Oden, *The Word of Life in Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 2:244. Demarest and Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, 2:335, surmise based on Heb 4:15 that Jesus must have been tempted sexually.

⁴³ M. Luther, in Psalms, *LW* 5:387.

⁴⁴ Luther, *LW* 45:239.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *NPNF* 8:45. Cf. J. Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter*, CNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 55–56. Jesus experienced temptation to the fullest intensity precisely because he is sinless. Westcott’s oft-quoted statement is on target: “Only one who has not yielded to sin can know the fullest degree of the strength of temptation—for he who sins yields to temptation before it has reached the greatest possible force.... He who falls yields before the last strain” (*Hebrews*, 60).

⁴⁶ Canham, “*Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare*,” 114. Cf. A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1892), 269; and A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 1:298–99.

⁴⁷ Canham, “*Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare*,” 114; Demarest and Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, 2:346. Canham appreciated the strength of the impeccabilist position, but when he remarked: “Therefore, the very fact that Jesus was God demands the

A number of odd and awkward positions have been taken on this issue. H. Berkhof, appealing to the resurrection, seems to take an impeccability position but then stated: “He [Jesus] had no idea of his sinlessness on which he, encouraged by it, could fall back.”⁴⁸ H. Montefiore noted the ambiguity of the phrase “without sin” and posited it could mean something like “except for those sins which result from previous sins.”⁴⁹ F. Schleiermacher affirmed the sinlessness of Jesus but denied the reality of the temptations.⁵⁰ Niebuhr affirmed the reality of the temptations but denied the sinlessness of Jesus.⁵¹ H. Johnson and J. Knox believed Jesus assumed a human nature which had been affected by the fall.⁵² R. Williamson suggested that Jesus participated in the actual experience of sinning.⁵³ Similarly, B. Lindars rightly noted the New Testament does not argue for the sinlessness of Jesus based on his divine nature, but then wrongly asserted that we need not “suppose that he never did anything wrong throughout his human life. The point is that he was without sin in any respects which would have disqualified him for his God-given task of

retention of a belief in His full though not exclusive impeccability” (p. 110), one wonders just what “full though not exclusive” means.

⁴⁸ H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. S. Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 297. This is also the position of P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1910), 302–3.

⁴⁹ Montefiore, *Hebrews*, 91.

⁵⁰ F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 414–15. For him, Jesus’ temptations were conflicts between desire and non-desire. See the refutation of this in Thielicke, *Evangelical Faith*, 2:377–79; and W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1998), 306. Pannenberg noted that Jesus’ sinlessness has been his distinguishing attribute since Irenaeus and Tertullian: “The idea of redemption as a transferring of the Redeemer’s own state to believers was possible, of course, only because Schleiermacher substituted the thesis of a prototypical perfection of God-consciousness for the doctrine of Christ’s deity (93.2). Whereas the Christology of the early church found the uniqueness of Jesus in his deity, Schleiermacher saw it as a purely human uniqueness, i.e., as the constant power of his God-consciousness.” (p. 307). Cf. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (London: SCM, 1968), 354.

⁵¹ R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner, 1941), 2:73.

⁵² H. Johnson, *The Humanity of the Saviour* (London: Epworth, 1962), 116; J. Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 49.

⁵³ R. Williamson, “Hebrews 4:15 and the Sinlessness of Jesus,” *ExpTim* 86 (1974): 4. See the trenchant critique of Williamson in D. Peterson (*Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews,’* SNTSMS [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 188–90).

reconciling humanity with God.”⁵⁴ Others, following the lead of Hegel, see in Heb 4:15 an example of “degree” or “docetic Christology,” according to which Jesus is achieving a quality of perfection and illustrating the inherent divinity of mankind. Such a “Christology from below” actually achieves, according to Gunton, the exact opposite of what it sets out to accomplish. “By putting all their eggs in the basket of an immanentist understanding of Jesus, exponents lift him far outside of our human sphere, and necessarily so, for they must either do this or abandon Christology altogether.” Citing Heb 4:15, Gunton noted that the author of Hebrews did not use a “logical ladder from the human to the divine,” therefore “a Christology from below whose *only* resource is some kind of transcendental anthropology seems logically bound either to do that [take the human Jesus out of our sphere] or to concede the content of traditional Christology.”⁵⁵

In conclusion, it is clear that whether Jesus could or could not have sinned, the fact is he did not sin according to Heb 4:15. The preponderance of evidence seems to tilt the scales in favor of the impeccability position. God is unchanging, thus if Jesus as the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, was impeccable before the incarnation, should he not be so as the incarnate God-man? How could he be peccable unless one comes dangerously close to dividing the hypostatic union of the two natures, which it seems that many peccabilists do? In the incarnation, Jesus’ humanity was an addition to his deity, but it did not ontologically change his divine nature. As Grudem said: “Jesus’ human nature never existed apart from union with his divine nature... Both his human nature and his divine nature existed united in one person.”⁵⁶ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if Jesus had sinned, such would have involved both his human and divine natures. This leads to the logical conclusion that God himself would have sinned, which is impossible due to his nature and attributes revealed in Scripture. Grudem summed it all up: “Therefore, if we are asking if it was *actually* possible for Jesus to have sinned, it seems that we must conclude that it was not possible. The union of his human and divine natures in one person prevented it.”⁵⁷

Jesus was capable of being tested and of being tempted, though he possessed no sin nature. The sinlessness of Jesus becomes a way for the author of Hebrews to manifest the deity of Jesus visibly in his humanity. “In this sinlessness we see Him, as it were, transfigured.”⁵⁸ But does such a position negate the reality of the temptations or his ability genuinely to sympathize with us in our temptations? It does not. Jesus faced the temptation of the possibility of avoiding the suffering of the cross, but to do so would have meant disobedience to his Father, something to which our

⁵⁴ B. Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63.

⁵⁵ C. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 17. Thielicke (*Evangelical Faith*, 2:368) offered the same critique of Schleiermacher and others who “see in Christ the ideal or prototype of humanity, as though there were fulfilled in him that which is only broken and corrupted by sin in us,” but from a different angle. Cf. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:307.

⁵⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 538–39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁵⁸ A. Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 123.

Lord never succumbed, not only during his Gethsemane and Calvary agony, but during all “the days of his flesh” as well. “[S]uffering temptation and temptation produced by suffering is not in itself sin, nor does it require that sin have a prior foothold.”⁵⁹ It would seem that the incarnation, as a permanent uniting of the two natures into one person, guaranteed his solidarity with us for all time (Heb 2:10–14), and made it impossible for Jesus to avoid the cross without disobeying the Father and hence committing sin. Thus, it is the point of our author to affirm Christ’s sympathy with us in our trials and temptations not only by virtue of his solidarity with us as our high priest, but also by his difference from us, namely, his sinlessness.⁶⁰

This issue plunges one into the depths of theological and philosophical thought which no one can plumb adequately. We see through a glass darkly. The words of H. Thieliicke seem appropriate: “When the theological supply outruns the demand of faith, theology becomes speculation. This principle applies in exemplary fashion to the temptation of Jesus.”⁶¹ This verse’s inclusion between two prominent hortatory verses, followed by the author’s exposition of the high priesthood of Christ, especially Heb 5:7–8, serves the author’s purpose of strengthening and comforting his readers amid their trials and temptations. Hebrews indicates that the readers were in danger of disobedience and this may very well have been related to the issue of impending suffering which the community was in danger of recoiling from.¹²

⁵⁹ Shuster, “Temptation, Sinlessness, and Sympathy of Jesus,” 206.

⁶⁰ Shuster noted: “Thus, exactly because Jesus truly suffered and was tempted ... he is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses and temptations ... he neither condemns nor excuses us. His sympathy, which gives both comfort and strength, depends precisely upon his both being, and not being, a human being like us” (ibid., 208). Heb 4:15 illuminates the point of the statement in Heb 5:2 that the high priest must be able “to deal gently” with sinners.

⁶¹ Thieliicke, *Evangelical Faith*, 2:382. With regard to the relationship of Jesus’ susceptibility to temptation and his sinlessness, Thieliicke wisely concluded we cannot know the “how.” It cannot be investigated. Jesus is not trapped in solidarity with us. “Love and power are at work for us here, the love which meets us in solidarity and the power which brings us to our goal.” If we go behind the result “yet without sin” to the “how,” “we slip into hopeless speculation about the natures” (382).

¹² David L. Allen, [Hebrews](#), The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 302–313.

4:14. Let us hold fast to Jesus, our high priest!

Οὖν does not draw an inference from what immediately precedes. Οὖν is sometimes adversative (Bauer *s.v.* 4), but there is no other suggestion in vv. 12–16 of a contrast between God’s judgment and his mercy; the thought flows smoothly, as usual in Hebrews, from one to the other. It is therefore best to understand οὖν as indicating the resumption of a subject after an interruption (Bauer *s.v.* 2a; cf. Lk. 3:7; 1 Cor. 8:4). In this case, the interruption probably extends from 3:7 to 4:13.

The participle ἔχοντες is causal, “since we have ...” (MHT 3.157); it is present in meaning as well as in form (BD §339). The “we” is inclusive: “we Christians,” though Schenk’s “only we” is too strong. The use of a subordinate clause to reintroduce the theme of Christ’s high priesthood serves a double purpose: in the nearer context, the subordinate clause serves as a stylistic variant for the main clause with ἔχομεν in v. 15, and in the broader context it serves (together with οὖν) to remind the readers that the subject has been mentioned before. The whole construction, together with the earlier anticipatory references to Christ as high priest, may indicate the author’s sensitivity in approaching a theme which, as he says explicitly in → 5:11, he finds difficult to explain (δυσσερμήνευτος, perhaps a tactful periphrasis for “difficult for you to understand”). Hebrews often uses ἔχω with Jesus (v. 15; 8:1; 10:21) or other aspects of salvation (6:19; 10:19, 34f.; 12:1; 13:10, 14) as objects; also of Christian behaviour (5:14; 6:18; 10:19; 13:18); in the present verse, ἔχομεν is the indicative basis for the exhortations κρατῶμεν (v. 14) and προσερχώμεθα (v. 16).

Ἀρχιερεὺς → 2:17. Ἀρχιερέα μέγαν is emphatic and tautologous, but is applied in 1 Macc. 13:42 to Simon Maccabaeus, and by Philo (*Abr.* 30) to Melchizedek and (*Somn.* 1.214, 219; 2.183) to the Logos; cf. ἱερεὺς μέγας, Heb. 10:21; μέγας ἱερεὺς, Justin, *Dial.* 115; τὸν ποιμένα ... τὸν μέγαν, Heb. 13:20, both referring to Jesus. Μέγας may anticipate the comparison between Jesus and other (high) priests which begins in 5:1; or it may reflect the author’s conviction that Jesus is a high priest of an entirely different order (Attridge). See Hillmann 1960; Williamson 1970.130–132.

s.v. sub voce, sub vocibus (under the word[s])

s.v. sub voce, sub vocibus (under the word[s])

MHT Moulton-Howard-Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*

BD Blass-Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*

→ See

→ See

Dial. Justin, *Dialogue*

Διηλυθότα τοὺς οὐρανοὺς: the exaltation of Jesus, like his temptations (πεπειρασμένον, v. 5), are now viewed as permanent aspects of the Christ-event, seen as a whole; cf. 2:9, ἡλαττωμένον ... ἐστεφανωμένον; 12:2, κεκάθικεν; contrast ἐκάθισεν, 1:3; 8:1; 10:12. There is nothing in Hebrews corresponding to the detailed accounts of passage through the heavens found in 2 *Enoch* 1–20; *Asc. Is.* 7–9; 3 *Baruch* (*passim*); (2nd) *Apoc. Jas.* 46.12f. “he who passed [through] the [worlds ...].” For the plural οὐρανοί, → 1:10; οἱ αἰῶνες in 1:2; see also McRay. Διέρχομαι + acc. is regularly used with expressions of place, and the present verse is to be understood similarly, though there is no exact parallel (Sir. 35[32]:17, προσευχὴ ταπεινοῦ νεφέλας διήλθεν) in the Greek Bible. Διέρχομαι + acc. may, depending on the context, refer to movement within an area (Acts 13:6; 18:23), but more usually it denotes movement through an area and beyond it (Acts 14:24; 15:3, 41; 16:6; 19:1, 21; 20:2; 1 Cor. 16:5). The latter option is confirmed by Heb. 7:26 (“above the heavens”). The thought is generally traditional, but the author shows no interest in speculating on the number of heavens, nor in precise consistency between this expression on the one hand, and such expressions as 9:24 (εἰσῆλθεν ... Χριστὸς ... εἰς αὐτὸν τὸν οὐρανόν) and ἐν (τοῖς) οὐρανοῖς (8:1; 9:23; 12:23) on the other. For a different cosmological picture again, cf. 7:26, ὑψηλότερος τῶν οὐρανῶν, which is close to Eph. 4:10, ὑπεράνω πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν. The language is poetic or rhetorical, even if (as in the case of κατάπαυσις in 3:7–4:11) the images are to be taken seriously. See Du Bose 72f.; Galling; Dey; Johnsson 1978.173–175; Ellingworth 1986.

Ἰησοῦν is as usual emphatic (→ 2:9)—all the more so since it is the first occurrence of the name since 3:1, and the first explicit reference to Christ since 3:14. The present verse does not relate this name directly to Jesus’ human existence, but v. 15 will do so indirectly.

It is most unlikely that τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ is added to distinguish Jesus from Joshua, mentioned in 3:8. As 5:5f. make clear, the author’s purpose is rather to relate his distinctive teaching about Christ as high priest to the traditional teaching, developed in chaps. 1–2, about Christ as Son of God. The full expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, as distinct from the simple (ὁ) υἱός, more common in Hebrews as in John, is emphatic; elsewhere (6:6; 10:29) it is associated with warnings, here with references to Christ’s unique status (7:3). For the relation between the titles of Son and high priest, see the comment on 5:5f; 7:3, 28; cf. Schröger 126f. For Jesus as Son of God, → 1:2.

Apoc. Jas. Apocalypse of James

→ See

acc. accusative

acc. accusative

Eph. Ignatius, *Ephesians*

→ See

chaps. chapters

→ See

Κρατέω (Rev. 3:11) and its synonym κατέχω denote holding on to hope (6:18; 10:23), confidence (3:6, 14; 4:16), and the Christian confession (here and in 10:23). Westcott takes κρατέω to mean taking possession, and κατέχω holding on to what is already possessed, but stylistic variation is probably intended rather than contrast. The objects of these verbs are related to one another (W. Michaelis in *TDNT* 3.910–12; MHT 3.232).

This suggests that ἡ ὁμολογία, though distinctively Christian, and in Hebrews probably “a firmly outlined, liturgically set tradition” (O. Michel in *TDNT* 5.215f.), is not limited to a formula confessing Jesus as Son of God (as in Acts 8:37 *v.l.*; Rom. 1:4; 2 Cor. 1:19; so here according to Käsemann 1939.105–110). In → 3:1, τῆς ὁμολογίας may well be verbal in meaning: “... whom we confess as apostle and high priest.” Here the absolute ἡ ὁμολογία suggests refusing to abandon a confession which is in the process of becoming fixed. The variation between the two verses may, however, be stylistic, with ἡμῶν omitted because it occurs in v. 15a. See Galling 263f.; G. Bornkamm 1963; K. T. Schäfer 1971; Schenk 1980.

4:15. Christ and temptation

As in v. 13, a double negative in the first part of the verse corresponds to a positive statement in the second; in both verses, δέ indicates a contrast of form rather than of meaning. However, unlike v. 13b, v. 15b goes further than the first part of the verse; the underlying meaning is: “Our high priest can feel with us in our weaknesses, because he has been tempted in all respects as we are....” At this stage of the argument, there is probably no implied polemic (as for example at Qumran) against unworthy high priests. It is the author’s usual practice to compare antitype and type positively, before contrasting them (→ 3:1–6); Christ is not contrasted with the levitical priests until at least 7:7–10. The present verse is better understood positively in the light of 5:2, with the rhetorically negative μὴ δυνάμενον συμπαθεῖσαι having a positive meaning. See Laub 1980.109–12.

Δυνάμενον recalls δύναται in → 2:18, and anticipates δυνάμενος in 5:2. Δύναμαι is later used to denote God’s power to save Jesus from death (5:7); and more commonly Jesus’ own power to save believers (7:25) and to perfect their consciences (cf. 10:1, 11).

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MHT Moulton-Howard-Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*

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v.l. varia lectio (= variant reading)

→ See

→ See

→ See

Συμποθέω and cognates in the LXX, especially in 4 Maccabees, are used most often of family affection (e.g., 4 Macc. 14:13–20); hence by extension to the Christian family in Heb. 10:34**, and in the present verse to the relation between Christ, as exalted high priest, and believers. Although the two occurrences in Hebrews refer to the stress of temptation (here) and imprisonment (in 10:34), the strong sense of sharing suffering, expressed by συμπάσχω in Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 12:26***, is not required by the context. The meaning here, as in 2:16–18 and 5:2, is more probably that Christ's earthly life gives him inner understanding of human experience, and thus makes him ready and able to give active help. Μετριοπαθέω is similarly used in 5:2. See W. Michaelis in *TDNT* 5.935f.; Spicq 1978.842f.

Ασθενεία is used in 5:2; 7:28 of the ineffectiveness of the OT priests, and in 11:34*, as perhaps by implication here, in contrast with the δύναμις which comes from God or Christ. 5:2 suggests that the author is thinking, not of physical weakness, but of the intellectual and moral weakness which leads to failure to do God's will. Here the plural may refer more specifically to unintentional transgressions of the Mosaic Law (Michel 105n.5; cf. ἄγνοια in 5:2). See G. Stählin in *TDNT* 1.491–493.

Πεπειρασμένον (C K L P minn. πεπειραμένον from the Attic πειράω, with no difference of meaning; BD §101): χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας suggests that the meaning here is specifically “tempted,” rather than more generally “tested.” However, this verse recalls 2:18, the only other place in which Hebrews uses πειράζω of Christ, and there πειρασθεῖς is related to his suffering (πέπονθεν), and by implication to his death. The same connection recurs in 5:7, though without the use of πειράζω, so an implicit allusion to the final test of the cross is possible, as perhaps in 12:4 (cf. 12:2). For the force of the perfect, → v. 14, on διεληλυθότα. There is no suggestion that the exalted Jesus is still being tempted; what continue are the effects of what he underwent on earth (cf. BD §342[2]).

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (= for example)

** all references in NT listed

*** all references in Greek Bible listed

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* all references in Hebrews listed

n. note

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minn. minuscules

BD Blass-Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*

→ See

BD Blass-Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*

Κατὰ πάντα καθ' ὁμοιότητα (cf. 7:15**, of Melchizedek) is equivalent to κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι in → 2:17. Ἡμῶν is understood from the previous clause; καθ' ὁμοιότητα is used absolutely in Gn. 1:11f.; cf. Philo, *Fuga* 51; J. Schneider in *TDNT* 5.189f. The phrase itself, here as in 7:15, probably means no more than “like,” or more emphatically “just like”; the following words introduce a qualification not inherent in ὁμοιότης itself.

Χωρίς is one of the author's favourite words (7:7, 20; 9:7, 18, 22, 28; 10:28; 11:6, 40; 12:8, 14*). It is “the proper Hellenistic word” (Bauer *s.v.*) for “without,” synonymous with ἄνευ, ἐκτός (all still in modern Greek), and also ἄτερ. The originally spatial reference of χωρίς is probably a dead metaphor by NT times (cf. the English “apart from”), but χωρίς, more strongly than its synonyms, suggests separation; ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἐποίησεν in 1 Pet. 2:22 is weaker. Χωρίς ἀμαρτίας**: Christ's sinlessness is presupposed in the tradition, not emphasized; for the thought, cf. Jn. 8:46; 1 Jn. 3:5; contrast Mt. 19:17 with parallels Mk. 10:18; Lk. 18:19 (Braun). The closest LXX parallel is 4 Macc. 5:9, τὸ μὴ ἀπολαύειν τῶν χωρὶς ὀνειδῶν ἢ δέων, of which Heb. 11:25 may be a reminiscence. Χωρὶς ἀμαρτίας has a different meaning in → 9:28. In the present verse, the meaning “apart from the temptations which arise from sin” seems linguistically forced and foreign to the thought of Hebrews. The plain meaning is that Jesus, though tempted, remained untouched by sin. Sinlessness is attributed to the incorporeal Logos in Philo, *Fuga* 109f.; *Spec. Leg.* 1.293, and to the Messiah in *Ps. Sol.* 17:41; cf. Bergh van Eysinga; Vanhoye 1980.132–136.

4:16. The Christian's approach to a gracious God

This verse forms the climax and conclusion (οὖν) of the author's encouragement to approach God through Jesus as his high priest.

Προσερχώμεθα is the first of a rhetorically effective though not obtrusive series of words prefixed by προσ- which continues to προσαγορευθεῖς in 5:10. Προσέρχομαι in Hebrews is always used in a cultic sense, of worshippers approaching God, either generally (11:6), in the OT

** all references in NT listed

→ See

Fuga De Fuga et Inventione

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* all references in Hebrews listed

s.v. sub voce, sub vocibus (under the word[s])

** all references in NT listed

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→ See

Fuga De Fuga et Inventione

ritual (10:1; 12:18), or through Christ, as here and in 7:25; 10:22 (cf. v. 19); 12:22. These passages overlap in meaning with the present verse, thus illustrating the author's practice of underscoring important themes. This sense of προσέρχομαι is frequent in the LXX, for example, in Lv. 9:5 of Israel, vv. 7f. of Aaron; Dt. 4:11 (cf. Heb. 12:18) of Israel; without reference to sacrifice in Ps. 34:5(LXX 33:6); Sir. 1:27; 24:29; but rare elsewhere in the NT (1 Pet. 2:4), and not Pauline (1 Tim. 6:3 in a different sense). The language of liturgical procession complements that of the journeyings of God's people (2:10; 4:1, 9; 12:2; 13:14), the first being predominantly present and the latter mainly future (Brady). Cultic associations extend to ἐγγίζω in Heb. 7:19 (cf. Jas. 4:8); otherwise in Heb. 10:25, as in Rom. 13:12; Jas. 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7, ἐγγίζω denotes the approach of the last days. See also the comment on εισέρχομαι in 3:18, and see J. Schneider in *TDNT* 2.683; Laub 1980.265–272.

In other contexts, παρρησία suggests open speaking, sometimes more specifically a confident confession of faith (→ 3:6 with καύχημα; 10:19, cf. v. 23), but the main factor here is that of trusting confidence in God.

Τῷ θρόνῳ τῆς χάριτος, as 8:1 (cf. 12:2) clearly shows, is God's throne, not Christ's (notwithstanding 1:8* = Ps. 45:7, where the emphasis is on θεός, not θρόνος). The phrase recalls but also contrasts with (ὁ) θρόνος (τῆς) δόξης 1 Sa. (LXX 1 Kgdms.) 2:8; Is. 22:23; Je. 14:21; 17:12; Sir. 47:11; Mt. 19:28; 25:31; cf. also θρόνος μεγαλωσύνης (Heb. 8:1); θρόνος ἀνομίας (Ps. 94[LXX 93]:20); θρόνος αἰσθήσεως (Pr. 12:23); all genitives of quality, here "the throne on which God sits to extend his mercy" (Héring; cf. MHT 4.110). Young 1973.165f., following many older commentators, sees a reference to the ἱλαστήριον or mercy seat (cf. 9:5), but Bleek, Michel, and others disagree; the context allows at most an indirect allusion to a heavenly counterpart of the earthly temple's mercy seat. God's name is respectfully avoided, as for example in 1:3; 8:1, but elsewhere grace is explicitly associated with God (2:9 text; 12:15), and with the Spirit (10:29). For χάρις → 2:9. The mention of a throne recalls the idea of judgment which predominated in vv. 12f.; but here the author's purpose is to encourage rather than warn (O. Schmitz in *TDNT* 3.165).

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MHT Moulton-Howard-Turner, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*

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The chiasmus ἵνα λάβωμεν ἔλεος καὶ χάριν εὐρώμεν (obscured in B, which omits εὐρώμεν) suggests that λάβωμεν is close in meaning to εὐρώμεν, and ἔλεος to χάριν. Montefiore unconvincingly relates ἔλεος to the present, and χάρις to the future. Montefiore also stresses the element of penitence, but this is not emphasized either here or elsewhere in Hebrews (6:1). Both λάμβανω and εὐρίσκω (especially passive) sometimes imply an activity of God, from which human beings benefit: for λάμβανω, → 2:2; for εὐρίσκω, cf. 9:12; 11:5 = Gn. 5:24; 12:17*; εὐρίσκω χάριν, Lk. 1:30; Acts 7:46, both with reference to God. There is an implicit link with ἔχοντες in v. 14: “one ‘has’ what one has ‘received’ ” (Michel).

Ἐλεος (here neuter, not masculine as in Attic, and here in C^c D^c E L Chrysostom etc.; there is similar variation in Is. 63:7; 1 Macc. 3:44) is associated with χάρις in Wis. 3:9; 4:15, and in salutations in 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4 *v.l.*; 2 Jn. 3. Further references in R. Bultmann in *TDNT* 2.482–485; Spicq 1982.250–258; see also ἐλεήμων → 2:17.

Εἰς εὐκαιρον (Mk. 6:21**) βοηθειάν (Acts 27:17**) probably goes with the entire previous chiasmus, not only with χάρις εὐρώμεν. Εὐκαιρος (Spicq 1978.318–320; cf. K. L. Schmidt in *TDNT* 3.462) retains its temporal sense in Mk. 6:21 as well as in Ps. 104(LXX 103):27; 2 Macc. 14:29; cf. εὐκαίρως Sir. 18:22, though elsewhere (2 Macc. 15:20f.; 3 Macc. 4:11; 5:44) it denotes convenience of place. In the present context, a temporal element is probably present but not emphasized. There is probably no direct reference to the σήμερον theme of 3:7ff., but rather a more general reference to the readers’ need for God’s support in times of trial. Βοήθεια is spoken of as God’s response to his people’s troubles in Ps. 60:11 (LXX 59:13); 108:12 (LXX

→ See

* all references in Hebrews listed

* all references in Hebrews listed

v.l. varia lectio (= variant reading)

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107:13); Sir. 40:24; → καιρός, 9:9. For βοήθεια, → βοηθέω, 2:18; cf. βοηθός, 13:6 = Ps. 118:7 (LXX 117:6). For the thought, cf. Sir. 8:9. The meaning is “to help when help is needed”; cf. TEV, “to help us just when we need it.”¹³

→ See

→ See

LXX Septuagint (normally A. Rahlfs’s ed., Stuttgart 1932)

TEV Today’s English Version (= Good News Bible)

¹³ Paul Ellingworth, [*The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993), 266–271.