CHAPTER THREE

JESUS’ RESURRECTION, ASCENSION, AND HEAVENLY HIGH PRIESTHOOD IN HEBREWS

3.1 Introduction

I argued in the previous chapter for the importance of the Son’s humanity—in particular his flesh and blood—as one of the central elements in the contrast between the Son and the angels developed by the author in Heb 1–2. I suggested that the Son’s humanity is the crucial factor in his being invited to sit on the heavenly throne at God’s right hand, a throne that no angelic spirit has ever been offered. The author’s interpretation of Ps 8 and implicit appeal to a tradition about Adam’s original glory undergird this claim. Only as an ἄνθρωπος, he argues, can the Son rule at God’s right hand. The Son, therefore, takes his rightful place at God’s right hand and is worshiped by the angelic inhabitants of that domain because, as the first human being to have been brought into the fullness of God’s promised οἰκουμένη, he is the effulgence of God’s glory and the full representation of God’s being.

Such an argument implies that when the Son was brought again into the heavenly οἰκουμένη, he entered that realm as a human being. If the Son returned to the heavenly realms without some of the constitutive elements his humanity—specifically, his flesh and blood—he would have had no more right to be appointed to rule over the οἰκουμένη to come than do the angelic spirits. When viewed against the backdrop of the writer’s plain confession that Jesus suffered and died, such an argument appears to rely heavily upon a belief in the resurrection and ascension into heaven of Jesus’ human body.

If the preceding account of the argument of Heb 1–2 grasps the basic line of reasoning in the opening portion of the homily, then two distinct but interrelated concerns must be addressed. Would some kind of notion of a human body entering heaven and appearing before God’s presence be a plausible idea for a late Second Temple/early Common Era Jew like the author of Hebrews? An ontological dualism between humans and angels pervades the cosmological conceptions attested in ancient sources of the period, whether more generally oriented in
scope toward Jewish biblical sources/Mikra, toward Greco-Roman
religions, or toward Greco-Roman philosophical interests. While there
are varieties of dualisms in these different literary and social spheres,
most texts that address the issue of human ascension find problematic
the idea that a human body can enter, let alone dwell in, heaven.

Secondly, though, what about the much-noted paucity of reference
to, and so also presumed lack of emphasis on, Jesus’ resurrection in
Hebrews? As was discussed in the first chapter of this study, Jesus’
resurrection is often assumed to have been collapsed by the author
into his conception of Jesus’ ascension/exaltation. A few scholars have
even argued that the writer actually denies or suppresses this part of
the early Christian proclamation about Jesus.

The present chapter attends to these two problems. I argue that the
author can envision the Son’s human body entering and dwelling in
heaven because he believes that Jesus rose again from the dead. Put
differently, the author is likely to have assumed that after his death,
Jesus was the first to experience the better resurrection (Heb 11:35)
to a transformed—i.e., a glorified or perfected—human life. The body
the Son has in heaven is a human body (he is not a ministering spirit),
but it is no longer blood and flesh subject to the destructive forces of
corruption and death. Rather, it is a human body imbued with God’s
glory, all the glory that Adam lost, and with indestructible life. For
the author of Hebrews, I suggest, Jesus’ resurrection marks the point at
which he came into possession of this glorified humanity—a human
body fit to enter heaven and dwell in God’s presence. With that glori-
ified blood and flesh he ascended into heaven where he not only reigns,
but also serves as the great high priest.

I lay out this thesis in three steps. First, I examine some relevant
Second Temple and early Jewish traditions concerning human ascents
into heaven. These ascension accounts show that the issue of how a
human being (and especially a human body) could enter and remain
in heaven was a prominent concern when depicting a human ascen-
sion. The tradents of these traditions recognized that human bodies,
in their present, mortal condition, do not belong in the realm of the
holy and fiery spirits. They therefore employ different strategies to deal
with this problem.

Of particular note is the fact that bodily ascension is conceivable,
especially in some early Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic texts.
When this kind of ascension is envisioned, the strategy most often