

# Jesus' Heavenly Sacrifice in Early Christian Reception of Hebrews: A Survey<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

Modern readings of Hebrews tend to reduce the text's language of Jesus' sacrificial offering to the event of his crucifixion. In a recent book, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, I argue that such a reduction does not adequately account for either the presence or significance of Jesus' resurrection and bodily ascension for Hebrews' Christology and soteriology. The book's claims have rightly raised questions about why Hebrews has not been read this way in the past. This article offers an initial exploration of some early Christian reception of Hebrews. I demonstrate that, while not universal, a variety of texts from the early centuries of Christianity interpret Hebrews' language of Jesus' atoning sacrifice as referring to Jesus' post-resurrection offering of himself to the Father in the heavens. These findings suggest that early Christian reflection on Hebrews, Jesus' sacrifice, and atonement could approach these interrelated concerns more holistically—that is, orientated toward the full, creedal narrative of the incarnation, than to do some accounts of the atonement that reduce Jesus' sacrifice to his death on the cross.

## I. Introduction

When offering a reading of an ancient text that challenges widely held assumptions, one necessarily wonders whether others in the long history of that text's interpretation have unpacked its inner logic in anything like the same way. Moreover, one worries that if no one else has read the text in this way, why have they not done so? Is the proposed reading simply a *novum* cooked up by an overactive scholarly imagination looking for something new to say?

In a recent book, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*,<sup>2</sup> I argue for a reading of Hebrews largely absent from the most influential secondary literature of the last century. I show first that Jesus' bodily resurrection is affirmed in the homily and seek second to demonstrate that this conviction holds significant implications for how the author's apology for Jesus' high-priestly identity and how he conceives of the nature and timing of Jesus'

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the insightful critiques of several friends and colleagues, especially those of Adam Johnson, Tom McGlothlin, Bryan Stewart, Matthew Thiessen, Tom Wright, and the anonymous reviewer.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

atonement sacrifice. Specifically, I suggest that the author identifies the center of the offering of Jesus' atoning sacrifice as Jesus' act of presenting himself to the Father *after* his resurrection. As the great high priest, Jesus offered himself to the Father as a sacrifice when he ascended through the heavens and entered the holy of holies in the heavenly sanctuary. For the author of Hebrews, Jesus' presentation of himself in his resurrected human body—including his now immortal blood and flesh—is the high-priestly sacrifice that he offers to the Father and that effects sacrificial atonement (i.e., effects forgiveness of sins and purification for the people for whom he perpetually intercedes).<sup>3</sup>

This reading of Hebrews, however, naturally raises the question stated above. Have others read this early Christian text in anything like this way? A handful of reviewers of the book have rightly highlighted this very question.<sup>4</sup> I intend here to demonstrate that something like this

---

<sup>3</sup> A note on sacrifice may be in order here. Several recent studies on Levitical sacrifice have pointed out in fresh ways that such sacrifice is best viewed as an irreducible ritual process wherein some elements are more important for effecting the goals of the sacrificial process than others. Roy E. Gane, for example, helpfully points out that the rituals constitutive of the process are hierarchically structured (*Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), esp. pp. 3–24). Thus, while the various ritual elements are necessary, none of them are alone sufficient for the sacrifice—the whole process constitutes a given sacrifice. Moreover, some of the elements are more central/weighty than others for achieving the goals of the sacrifice. All of this means that sacrifice entails a great deal more than killing an animal. The slaughter of a victim is clearly one constitutive element of some, but not all, sacrifices (see esp. Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), pp. 60–101). Yet, the most central elements of atoning sacrifices—that is, the elements most directly connected with obtaining the atoning benefit of these sacrifices—are the acts of blood manipulation and burning. These activities, by way of contrast to the act of slaughter, are exclusively the prerogatives of the priests and occur at and upon the various altars (see, e.g., Eberhart, *Sacrifice of Jesus*, p. 85; Gane, *Cult and Character*, p. 67). In terms of Levitical sacrifices, then, it is a category mistake to reduce or conflate the meaning of the term 'sacrifice' with the act of slaughtering a victim since this act does not occur on any of the altars and, therefore, is not one of the elements directly linked with effecting the goals of the sacrifice. In the context of the Levitical sacrificial system one can speak about a sacrificial death/slaughter as an essential part of some of the sacrifices, but, and this is an important qualification, *to speak of a sacrificial death is not to speak of the death or slaughter itself as the sum total of sacrifice*. The priestly actions around and upon the altars are the primary elements of the process. This further suggests that the use and conveyance of the elements of the sacrifice into the sacred space of God's presence (i.e. the *offering* of these things to God) is the conceptual core of Jewish sacrifice.

<sup>4</sup> See esp. Nicholas J. Moore's careful review and critique of the book (review of *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, by David M. Moffitt, *JTS* 64 (2013), pp. 673–5, here p. 675). Shawn J. Wilhite helpfully suggests that ancient readings of Hebrews should be examined as a way of probing the book's claims (review of *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, by David M. Moffitt, *Fides et Humilitas* 1 (2014), pp. 72–83, here p. 82). Michael Kibbe thinks the book's argument is weakened by not

interpretation of Hebrews is in fact present within the larger exegetical tradition. That is to say, the kind of interpretive engagement with Hebrews that results in conceptions of the nature, timing, and location of Jesus' atoning sacrifice similar to those that I argue are actually detectable in Hebrews itself can also be detected in the earliest centuries of Christianity.

Significantly, Hebrews' influence on these accounts, especially beginning with Origen, is not only plain and pervasive, but also clearly synthesized with the voices of other authoritative, scriptural texts and confessional ideas. These accounts are, in other words, allowing Hebrews to contribute to their understanding of Jesus' identity (Christology) and salvific work (soteriology). Rather than setting Hebrews' peculiar witness to these matters against those of other texts (as if everything to be said about Jesus and salvation were reducible only to the account of one authoritative text or tradition), they tend to attest to holistic and non-reductive accounts of Jesus and his atoning work.

These findings suggest not only that the kind of reading of Hebrews for which I argue has a long history (one that has not been adequately taken into account in most contemporary theological and exegetical reflection on the epistle), but also that such a reading of Hebrews, no matter how strange it may seem to us today, has in the past been assumed by some to stand together with and even inform other accounts in the wider biblical witness to and theological reflection on Jesus' identity and salvific work.

Obviously, the presence of these sorts of readings of Hebrews does not prove that the reading of Hebrews I have independently offered is necessarily correct (nor is it intended to do so).<sup>5</sup> My goals here are instead to demonstrate that the reading of Hebrews I present in that study 1) is not

---

pursuing the history of reception (review of *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, by David M. Moffitt, *Themelios* 37 (2012): 69–70).

<sup>5</sup> I leave such judgment to the relative merits (and demerits) of the exegetical arguments I present in my earlier study.

alone in the wider interpretive tradition, and 2) has the potential to highlight some ways in which Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension have informed past theological reflection on Jesus' soteriological work conceived in terms of high-priestly service and sacrifice. Attention to this past reflection, I conclude, may suggest some openings for contemporary reflection on Jesus' sacrifice and atonement that recover the high-priestly and sacrificial significance of the confession of Jesus' incarnate ascension into heaven.

## II. Jesus' Heavenly Sacrifice: Surveying Past Interpretations of Hebrews

In a recent article published in this journal Michael Kibbe argues that my interpretation of Jesus' high-priestly ministry and atoning work in Hebrews has a precursor in the Reformation-era figure Faustus Socinus. According to Kibbe, my view 'adheres closely to the Socinian view,' particularly as regards the sequence of events that I argue constitute Jesus' atoning work in Hebrews.<sup>6</sup>

There are some interesting ways in which Socinus' interpretation of Hebrews parallels my own.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the emphasis I find in Hebrews on Christ as the eternal, preexistent Son who became the incarnate human being Jesus (to say nothing of the fact that my own project never claims to posit a theory or a synthetic, systematic theology of either *the* atonement or Christology as the term 'Socinian' implies), suggests that my interpretation of Hebrews cannot be linked to that of Socinus in the way Kibbe attempts to do.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kibbe, 'Is it Finished? When did it Start? Hebrews, Priesthood, and Atonement in Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Perspective,' *JTS* 65 (2014), pp. 25–61, here p. 25; cf. pp. 60–1. Kibbe claims that my interpretation of Hebrews' depiction of Jesus' atoning work 'adheres closely to the Socinian view' (p. 25). He writes, '[I]t is the *location and timing* of [Jesus'] sacrifice that distinguish [Moffitt's interpretation] from traditional notions of atonement' (p. 46 n. 93 (emphasis original); cf. p. 47). Jeremy R. Treat makes a similarly mistaken connection between my interpretation of Hebrews and Socinus' synthetic theology of the atonement (*The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 216–7).

<sup>7</sup> I point this out in a pair of footnotes in the book. See Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, pp. 199 n. 130, 257 n. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Kibbe's description of my interpretation as 'Socinian' appears to have led him to miss the central importance of Hebrews' incarnational Christology in my study, although I highlight this point repeatedly throughout. For just a

Nevertheless, Socinus' interpretation does prove that others have interpreted aspects of Hebrews' language of Jesus' sacrifice along somewhat similar lines. But, was Socinus unique in this regard? Further, if others read Hebrews in this way, did they do so in tension with or at the expense of Hebrews' affirmation of the Son's heavenly preexistence?<sup>9</sup>

The simple answer to both questions is, no. A sequential interpretation of Jesus' sacrificial work in Hebrews that identifies Jesus' post-crucifixion offering of his resurrected body to the Father in sacrificial terms was not the innovation of Socinus, but has ancient roots in the exegetical traditions of early Christianity. Leaving the evidence of Hebrews itself aside, the idea that Jesus' heavenly presentation of his resurrected flesh and blood to the Father upon his ascension was a sacrifice that effected atonement (that is, an understanding of Jesus' atoning sacrifice as a post-resurrection reality) is positively in evidence as early as the third century CE. Intriguingly, the texts examined below also demonstrate that such a conviction could depend both upon the Epistle to the Hebrews and the conviction that the pre-existent, divine Son became incarnate.

In the discussion that follows I survey a select handful of ancient texts that, via allusions to and citations of Hebrews, comment on the subject of Jesus' heavenly sacrifice and appeal to

---

few of the more obvious examples see the statement of my larger thesis in my introductory chapter that, '[T]he robust narrative substructure of the singular Christology and soteriology developed in [Hebrews] should be identified as encompassing, in a proto-credal sequence, the full sweep of the significance of the Son's incarnation. For the author of this homily, the heavenly Son came into the world, suffered and died, rose again, ascended into heaven, made his offering for eternal atonement, and sat down at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. ... This is the outline of the author's Christology and the context in which he works out his understanding of how Jesus effected atonement' (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, p. 43). Additionally, see my argument regarding the centrality of this aspect of Hebrews' Christology for understanding the author's defense of Jesus' high-priestly status in Heb 7 (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 207–10; *pace* Kibbe, 'Is it Finished,' 47–9).

<sup>9</sup> Kibbe states that he is not aware of anyone 'prior to Socinus [who] suggested that Christ's priesthood and the atoning sacrifice offered by Christ as priest were specifically post-resurrection realities' ('Is it Finished?,' p. 26 n. 1). He further questions whether one could read Hebrews in such a way and affirm Jesus' deity ('Is it Finished?,' pp. 47–8). As I demonstrate below, there is clear evidence in early Christian texts that 1) Christ's high-priestly sacrifice could be conceived of as a post-resurrection reality, and 2) this was not necessarily understood to stand in tension with the confession of the Deity and pre-existence of the Son.

Hebrews to do so. An important caveat, however, is in order. I make no claim here to present a comprehensive survey or systematic account of early Christian conceptions of Jesus' identity, Jesus' sacrifice, the atonement, or even of the history of reception of Hebrews. The point I seek to establish is more modest. I intend only to show that already in the late-second to early-third centuries CE, passages from Hebrews were being interpreted as presenting a post-crucifixion and post-resurrection account of Jesus' sacrificial work. In these texts the eternal Word is confessed to have ascended back to the Father after his resurrection with his immortal, resurrected human body. Further, the fact of Jesus' bodily ascension is assumed by some to imply that now he continually ministers at the heavenly altar as the great high priest by way of perpetually offering the sacrifice of his resurrected humanity to the Father. Hebrews' emphasis on the once-for-allness of the atoning sacrifice that Jesus offers is even understood by some in terms of Jesus' ascension—his singular return to the heavenly realms to perform his perpetual high-priestly service in the Father's presence at the heavenly altar.

## II.1. Hippolytus' *Against Noetus*

Already in a few ante-Nicene texts Jesus' presentation of himself alive before God in heaven after his crucifixion and resurrection is interpreted along sacrificial lines.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the third century, Hippolytus of Rome, alluding to Hebrews, applies sacrificial categories to describe Jesus' heavenly offering to the Father.

In his *Against Noetus*, Hippolytus argues that Noetus' patripassionism cannot account for the fact that the 'fleshless Word' (λόγος ἄσαρκος), who was eternally with the Father in heaven,

---

<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus refers to Jesus' offering his resurrected humanity to God in heaven as a kind of sacrifice. In *Against the Heresies* he affirms that Jesus 'descend[ed] into the lower parts of the earth, searching for the sheep that was lost—which really was his own handiwork—and ascend[ed] into the heights above, offering (*offerentem*) and recommending to his Father that human nature which had been found, making in himself the first-fruits (*primitias*) of the resurrection of humankind' (*Haer.* 3.19.3.67–72; English translation modified from *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies, Book 3* (Dominic J. Unger, trans; ACW 64; New York: The Newman Press, 2012), p. 94).

became flesh.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, after his resurrection, the Word returned to heaven in his flesh. How, Hippolytus reasons, can the eternal Word of the Father be identical with the Father himself given that Jesus, who is the Word, returned to heaven in order to present the Father his very own flesh as an offering? Since the Father has no flesh, there should be no flesh in heaven even when the Word returned to heaven, were it actually the case that Jesus is the Father.

Yet, Hippolytus argues, there *is* now flesh in heaven. In his words, ‘[T]here is the flesh presented (προσενεχθεισα) by the Word of the Father as an offering (δωρον), the flesh that came by the Spirit and the virgin, demonstrated to be the perfect (τελειος) Son of God. It is evident, therefore, that he offered himself (εαυτον προσεφερε) to the Father. But before this (πρὸ δε τουτου) there was no flesh in heaven.’<sup>12</sup> That is to say, since the Word of the Father was fleshless, took on human flesh to be born of the virgin, was shown to be the perfect Son of God, and then ascended back to heaven where he offered that very flesh to the Father, it must be the case that the eternal Word, who continues even now to have his flesh in heaven, is distinguishable from the eternally fleshless Father.<sup>13</sup> For Hippolytus this means the Father did not suffer because the Father is not the Son.

Of particular note for this article is Hippolytus’ claim that before Jesus presented the offering of his flesh to the Father (‘before this’, πρὸ δε τουτου), there was no flesh in heaven. This statement implies that Hippolytus here conceives of Jesus’ presentation of himself as a gift (δωρον) to the Father in terms of the presentation of his resurrected body/flesh upon his

---

<sup>11</sup> PG 10, p. 809B–C.

<sup>12</sup> PG 10, p. 809B. English translation lightly modified from *ANF* 5, p. 225.

<sup>13</sup> The creedal narrative that structures the logic of Hippolytus’ reasoning here is noteworthy. One further suspects that his comment about the Word’s being demonstrated to be the perfect Son of God alludes to Jesus’ resurrection.

ascension.<sup>14</sup> Hippolytus does not here mention Hebrews explicitly, but his comment that the Son ‘offered himself’ (ἑαυτὸν προσέφερε) to the Father in heaven appears to allude to the homily.

The allusion is suggested by the fact that, among the texts that became the New Testament, only Hebrews describes Jesus’ sacrifice with the collocation of the verb προσφέρειν + the direct object ἑαυτόν (Heb 9:14, 25). Additionally, only Hebrews refers to Jesus’ sacrifice with the terms προσφέρειν + δῶρον (Heb 8:3–4; cf. 9:9–14). Hippolytus’ comment that Jesus was shown to be the perfect (τέλειος) Son of God is also highly suggestive of Hebrews, a text that speaks repeatedly about God’s Son being perfected (e.g., Heb 2:10; 5:8–10; 7:28).

One might, however, question whether Hippolytus intends a sacrificial meaning when he speaks of Jesus presenting his flesh in heaven as a δῶρον. The collocation of προσφέρειν + δῶρον can be used in the context of offering tribute to an important and powerful figure.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in LXX texts the phrase occurs most frequently in sacrificial contexts that assume or explicitly identify God as the recipient of the δῶρον.<sup>16</sup> In these contexts the collocation functions as a technical term for sacrificing something to God (e.g., wine, grain, blood).<sup>17</sup> The frequency of the collocation in sacrificial contexts in Septuagintal texts does not conclusively prove that Hippolytus uses προσφέρειν + δῶρον here in a technical sense to designate Jesus’ gift as a sacrifice. Given, however, that he read the scriptures in Greek, the frequent use of this language in sacrificial contexts makes this conclusion highly plausible.

---

<sup>14</sup> In a fragment from the text known as *Discourse on Elkanah and Hannah*, Hippolytus again clearly links the offering of Jesus’ humanity to God with his ascension. In reference to Pentecost he claims that when Jesus first ascended into the heavens (αὐτὸς πρῶτος εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀναβάς), he presented (προσενέγκας) humanity (τὸν ἄνθρωπον) as an offering to God (δῶρον τῷ θεῷ) (PG 10, p. 864C).

<sup>15</sup> In non-sacrificial contexts in LXX texts, the collocation tends to mean ‘bring a tribute/gift’ to a ruler/dignitary (e.g., Gen 43:26; Judg 3:17; 3 Kgdms 2:46b; cf. Matt 2:11).

<sup>16</sup> The collocation of προσφέρειν and δῶρον is rare in LXX texts outside the sacrificial contexts of Leviticus and Numbers. The most common meaning of the phrase is to offer a sacrifice to God (see, e.g., Lev 1:2, 3, 14; 2:1, 4, 12, 13; 3:6; 4:23, 32; 6:13; 7:13, 29, 38; 9:15; 17:14; 21:6, 8, 17, 21; 22:18, 25; 23:14; 27:9, 11; cf. Matt 5:23; 8:4).

<sup>17</sup> This, it seems to me, coheres well with the conception of sacrifice discussed in n. 3 above.



More definitive is the evidence presented above that Hippolytus' language echoes that of Hebrews. In Hebrews, the depiction of Jesus as the high priest who offers himself to the Father is clearly intended to be sacrificial. Given that Hippolytus does appear to allude to Hebrews here, there can be little doubt that he envisions Jesus' heavenly offering of his flesh to God in sacrificial terms. Moreover, while he does not explicitly say that this heavenly sacrifice is atoning, and one must be careful not to push the silence of the text here too far, the use of language from Hebrews makes such a conclusion highly plausible.

Be that as it may, Hippolytus' statements in this text provide a clear expression of an incarnational Christology wherein the eternal, divine Word/Son of the Father descended from heaven, became flesh, was born of a virgin, and, after his crucifixion and resurrection, ascended again into heaven with that flesh in order to present it to the Father. Further, with sacrificial language that alludes to Hebrews, Hippolytus says that the Son of God presented that flesh to the Father as a sacrificial offering.<sup>18</sup> Robert J. Daly summarizes Hippolytus' view here well when he writes, 'In heaven Jesus offered Himself—His flesh—to the Father. In terms of [a] physically realistic conception of the self-offering of the Word Incarnate, nothing more could possibly be desired.'<sup>19</sup> While reflecting more broadly on Hippolytus' conception of Jesus' sacrifice, Daly argues further that Hippolytus 'combines his incarnational Christology and soteriology with the

---

<sup>18</sup> A clear link with Hebrews and this kind of thinking about the ascended Christ can also be found later in the writings of Photius of Constantinople. Commenting on Heb 1:13, Photius depicts the Son's exaltation to God's right hand in terms of Jesus presenting the first-fruits offering (τὴν ἀπαρχήν) of humanity to the Father. In language reminiscent of the Mosaic regulations that a sacrificial offering (δῶρον) from the flock must be blameless (ἄμωμον; see, e.g., LXX Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:23, 32), Photius also speaks of Jesus presenting his body to the Father as an offering (δῶρον) that was blameless (ἄμωμον). The Father, he says, marveled at this offering and placed it close to himself by inviting the offering—that is, the ascended Jesus—to sit at his right hand (NTAbh 15, p. 639). One wonders if this kind of idea of Jesus' heavenly sacrifice and high-priestly work might also help explain Gregory of Nazianzus' enigmatic reference to the 'sacrifice of the resurrection' (*Letter* 171), as well as his comment in *Oration* 30.14 that, 'Even at this moment, as man, [Jesus] is making representation for my salvation; for he continues to wear the body that he assumed.' (I am grateful to Peter Martens for drawing my attention to the latter text.) Certainly these sorts of ideas are evident in other early Christian texts (see below).

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Daly, *Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen* (Studies in Christian Antiquity 18; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1978), p. 362.

gift idea of sacrifice in such a way as to produce a new moment in the development of the Christian idea of sacrifice.’<sup>20</sup> This new moment includes, Daly explains, the notion that ‘the eternal Word of God became man in order to be able to rise again to heaven and offer to the eternal Father not only His flesh, His manhood, but also man himself.’<sup>21</sup> Daly may well be correct, though he does not here account for Hippolytus’ allusion to Hebrews in the course of developing this sacrificial theology.<sup>22</sup>

This last point is important for the purposes of this article because, if correct, Hippolytus provides substantive evidence for an early appropriation of Hebrews that affirms the narrational and incarnational sweep of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and correlates this narrative, especially its latter element, with Jesus’ offering of himself—i.e., his resurrected flesh—as a sacrifice to the Father.

An important question remains open, however: Does Jesus’ heavenly offering accomplish anything vis-à-vis atonement? While Hippolytus plainly identify Jesus’ post-crucifixion and post-resurrection presentation of himself to the Father in heaven in sacrificial terms, he does not clearly state here that Jesus’ heavenly sacrifice is an *atonement* sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> The situation is different, however, with Origen.

## II.2. Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus*

---

<sup>20</sup> Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*, p. 372.

<sup>21</sup> Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*, p. 372.

<sup>22</sup> If Hippolytus conception of Jesus’ sacrifice in terms of a δῶρον offered to the Father upon his heavenly ascension does indeed draw upon Hebrews, it seems at least possible that the ‘new moment in the development of the Christian idea of sacrifice’ that Daly attributes to Hippolytus should actually be attributed to the author of Hebrews.

<sup>23</sup> Daly rightly argues that Hippolytus’ emphasis on Jesus’ heavenly offering derives from the Old Testament idea of sacrifice as a gift given to God (*Christian Sacrifice*, esp. p. 372). This accords well with the most central aspects of sacrifice as it is depicted in Leviticus (see n. 3 above). What is less clear, however, is how this gift functions for Hippolytus. While Levitical sacrifice generally involves giving something over to God, not all such giving aims to achieve atonement.

In his *Homilies on Leviticus*, Origen provides extensive and clearly sequential accounts of Jesus' sacrificial work. In several of these *Homilies* he identifies Jesus' heavenly presentation of himself to God as a sacrifice that makes atonement. Further, Origen's reflections on Jesus' heavenly offering in these *Homilies* show obvious and pervasive dependence upon Hebrews. Along the lines of the caveat noted above, this survey does not intend to offer either a systematic or comprehensive account of Origen's Christology, cosmology, views on Jesus' sacrifice, understanding of atonement, or even his interpretation of Hebrews. I present instead a narrowly focused discussion of how Origen specifically addresses these issues as they relate to Jesus' atoning work in the *Homilies on Leviticus*, particularly because he repeatedly appeals to Hebrews throughout them.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout these *Homilies* Origen identifies two altars and two sacrifices where and when Jesus offered his blood—one on earth and one in heaven.<sup>25</sup> He writes in *Homily 1*, 'Jesus' blood was poured out *not only in Jerusalem* where that altar and its base and the Tent of Meeting were, *but also that same blood itself was sprinkled on the celestial altar which is in heaven*, where "the church of the firstborn" [Heb 12:23] is.'<sup>26</sup>

This fascinating comment raises questions regarding how this dual-sacrificial work of Jesus should be conceived. Are these sacrifices assumed by Origen to be one and the same event; are they coterminous? That is to say, is the earthly sacrifice also simultaneously a spiritual, heavenly

---

<sup>24</sup> Henri Crouzel, summarising J.A. Alcain's study *Cautiverio y rendición del hombre en Orígenes* (Bilboa: Mensajero, 1973), identifies five distinct but overlapping 'schemes' that Origen employs to explain the various facets of Jesus' salvific work (*Origen* (A.S. Worrall, trans.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp. 194–7). Among these, Crouzel notes that Origen's ritual or sacrificial scheme is heavily dependent upon Hebrews and primarily oriented around Christ's humanity (though never exclusively). This assessment aligns well with Origen's emphases in the *Homilies on Leviticus*.

<sup>25</sup> I speak throughout of Origen, though of course we have Rufinus' translation of these homilies. Whether an idea comes solely from Origen or has been added by Rufinus, however, matters little to the larger conclusions of this study.

<sup>26</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 1.3.19–23. English translation lightly modified from Gary Wayne Barkley, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16* (FC 83; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1990), p. 34 (emphasis added).

one? Or, alternatively, are the two sacrifices related to each other sequentially such that one precedes the other? Is the cross, in other words, an initial offering on earth while the sprinkling of Jesus' blood is another sacrifice in heaven that occurs subsequently, after the crucifixion? Moreover, what is the nature and effect of these sacrifices? As Origen continues to reflect on these sacrifices in the course of his exposition of Leviticus he provides answers to these questions.

At first blush some of Origen's language might lead one to conclude that these two sacrifices are really one, coterminous event. That is to say, one might initially infer that Origen here envisions Jesus' death on the cross as being at the same time his timeless spiritual/heavenly sacrifice of himself to the Father.<sup>27</sup> When, for instance, he explains the heavenly offering of Jesus' blood in *Homily 1* he writes that on earth Jesus 'poured out the very bodily matter of his blood for humanity; but in heavenly places, if there are those who minister as priests there, he offered the vital strength of his body as some kind of spiritual sacrifice.'<sup>28</sup> The idea that Jesus offers a spiritual sacrifice could suggest the he offered one sacrifice on the cross that had both an earthly and a spiritual/heavenly dimension.

Origen's dualism between heaven and earth might appear to provide further support for such an interpretation. Indeed, he speaks later in *Homily 1* about Jesus' flesh hiding his divine nature

---

<sup>27</sup> So, e.g., Peter J. Gorday, 'Becoming Truly Human: Origen's Theology of the Cross', *The Cross in Christian Tradition from Paul to Bonaventure* (ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer; New York: Paulist, 2000), pp. 93–125, esp. pp. 103–4, 110–1. Cf. Crouzel, *Origen*, p. 197. Crouzel's claim that Jerome misunderstood Origen when Jerome says that Origen thought Jesus offered two sacrifices seems to me to be itself confused. Crouzel appears to assume that the language of 'sacrifice' is synonymous with 'death/slaughter.' Thus, Crouzel concludes that for Origen Jesus offered one sacrifice when he died on the cross, though this sacrifice has both earthly and heavenly dimensions. Whatever Jerome's understanding of Origen, in these *Homilies* Origen appears genuinely to posit that Jesus offered two distinct sacrifices, one on earth, which frees humanity from the Devil, and one in heaven, which propitiates God and allows for humanity to be purified. Such a conception of Jesus' sacrificial work seems to draw upon a model of sacrifice that puts more emphasis on the transfer of the elements of the sacrifice into the presence of the recipient of the sacrifice than on the act of slaughter per se (see again n. 3 above).

<sup>28</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 1.3.29–33. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 34.

on earth. Now, however, Jesus has returned to heaven ‘where again his fiery nature is evident.’<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, then, Origen thinks of Jesus leaving his flesh behind when he returned to heaven and assumed again the purely spiritual, fiery nature he has eternally had as the pre-incarnate Word. Were this true, it might follow that Origen applies the category of sacrifice to the historical, earthly event of the crucifixion as a kind of metaphor intended to explain the spiritual, heavenly significance of Jesus’ death.

A wider glance at these *Homilies*, however, points to a different conclusion. Whatever Origen thought of the precise nature of the ascended Jesus’ resurrected body,<sup>30</sup> in these *Homilies* he stresses that Jesus’ resurrection means that this body continues to consist of human flesh and blood, even as the Lord’s fiery nature is now clearly manifest in heaven again. Jesus’ resurrected body is, it seems, a transformed, purified body, but for Origen it is no less a human body for that. Moreover, Origen states plainly that the two altars he has already mentioned—the altars where Jesus offers his two sacrifices—are temporally and spatially distinct.

Temporally, they are separated by the resurrection. The first sacrifice occurred before the event of Jesus’ resurrection, the second one occurred after it. Spatially, they occur in two different locations. The first one on earth took place outside of Jerusalem—that is, on the cross. The second one perpetually occurs now at the altar in God’s heavenly presence. There, at the heavenly altar, Jesus, by virtue of being in God’s presence, is continually present to God as a sacrifice. That is, he perpetually offers the Father the sacrifice of his resurrected humanity. Origen does not, in other words, conflate or collapse the time and place of Jesus’ offerings at these two altars, as one would expect were he envisioning them as different aspects of the

---

<sup>29</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 1.4.49–53. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed and systematic discussion of Origen’s conception of the resurrection of the body see Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen Against Plato* (Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 107–14.

singular event of the cross. Rather, he sets them out in a temporal and spatial sequence—first the cross on earth, then, after the resurrection, the altar in heaven when he returns to the Father as a glorified human being.

This latter point can be seen clearly in, for example, *Homily 3*. Here Origen again speaks of Jesus’ pre-resurrected flesh hiding the secret of his divinity while he was on earth. Origen nevertheless claims that Jesus placed the bodily matter of his flesh ‘to be sacrificed on the holy altars (*sanctificandam ... altaribus*) and to be illuminated by the divine flames *and to be retained with himself in heaven.*’<sup>31</sup> Here he plainly affirms that Jesus continues to have the bodily matter of his flesh with him in heaven. But what can he mean when he says that the bodily material of Jesus’ flesh was sacrificed on multiple holy ‘altars’ (note the plural *altaribus*)?

The explanation for this idea lies in Origen’s conviction, noted above, that Jesus took his resurrected human flesh with him when he returned to the heavenly realms. In *Homily 7* he again affirms this point when he identifies the cross as one altar, the altar where Jesus offered his flesh on earth,<sup>32</sup> but then goes on to speak of Jesus’ ongoing sacrificial service at another altar, the one located in heaven.<sup>33</sup> In language that alludes to Heb 7:25 and 9:24, Origen claims that Jesus, ‘now stands before the face of God interceding for us. He stands before the altar to offer a propitiation to God for us.’<sup>34</sup> Jesus’ present, perpetual work of intercession is, in other words, occurring *now* and this work is a work of atonement/propitiation.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *Hom. Lev. 3.5.15–9*. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 62 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> *Hom. Lev. 7.1.110–21*.

<sup>33</sup> *Hom. Lev. 7.2.37–57*; cf. 7.2.14–6.

<sup>34</sup> Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 134. Rufinus has translated the last clause as: *adsistit altari, ut repropitiationem pro nobis offerat Deo* (*Hom. Lev. 7.2.38–9*). One suspects that *repropitiationem* renders a ἱλασ- root word, possibly ἱλασμός (cf. the citation of 1 John 2:2 in *Hom. Lev. 9.5.103*).

<sup>35</sup> Origen’s depiction of Jesus standing at the heavenly altar is interesting given his allusion here to Hebrews. Hebrews, by way of contrast with the standing posture of the Levitical high priests, clearly states that Jesus is presently sitting at God’s right hand (see esp. Heb 8:1; 10:12). One suspects that Origen’s conception of Jesus’ high-priestly ministry here is not only informed by Hebrews, but may also be supplemented with, among other things,

Origen further explains this last notion in *Homily 9*. There he claims that the sacrifice that Jesus presently offers to God is none other than the presentation of his resurrected body—the very body he took with him when he ascended into heaven. Reflecting on the high priest’s activities on the Day of Atonement as detailed in Lev 16, Origen ponders the fact that the earthly high priests had to put on consecrated linen garments before their annual entrance into the earthly holy of holies. That tunic, he notes, was made of linen, not animal hide. He finds this detail important because linen, unlike leather, comes from flax that grows out of the earth. In keeping with the model of the earthly high priests in Lev 16, Origen concludes that Jesus also had to put on a consecrated ‘linen’ garment before he ascended into heaven and entered the heavenly holy of holies—the sanctified tunic is his resurrected, earthly body. In Origen’s words: ‘[I]t is “a sanctified linen tunic” that Christ, the true high priest, puts on when he takes up the nature of an earthly body; for it is said about the body that “it is earth and it will go into the earth.” Therefore, my Lord and Savior, *wanting to resurrect that which had “gone into the earth,” took an earthly body that he might carry it raised up from the earth to heaven.*’<sup>36</sup>

For Origen, then, one of the essential reasons that the Son of God became a human being was so that he could raise that earthly, human body from the dead and then ascend with it back into heaven. Moreover, Origen appears to infer, at least partly on the basis Lev 16:4, that Jesus’ resurrection was a necessary prerequisite for his high-priestly ministry at the heavenly altar. Thus, just as the earthly high priest had first to put on a sanctified linen garment before entering the earthly *sancta sanctorum*, so Jesus also had first to be clothed in sanctified human flesh (flesh which, like linen, comes from the stuff of the earth) before he could serve as the true high

---

New Testament texts outside of Hebrews that do depict the risen and ascended Christ standing (e.g., Rev 5:6–7; cf. 1:12–18; Acts 7:55–56).

<sup>36</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 9.2.26–32. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, pp. 178–9 (emphasis added).

priest and enter the heavenly holy of holies. The ascension, Origen here implies, was one of the central purposes of the incarnation. Be that as it may, Origen clearly identifies Jesus' 'sanctified linen tunic' as his resurrected human body. But why would Jesus need to take his resurrected flesh into heaven?

Origen's answer coheres with (even as it moves beyond) the language noted above in Hippolytus—Jesus took his humanity into heaven in order to offer it to the Father as an atoning sacrifice. Commenting on the individual tasked with performing the Day of Atonement's scapegoat ritual—the so-called 'prepared man' (Lev 16:21)—and on the high priest's handling of the goat whose blood is taken into God's presence, Origen explains,

[I]t was necessary for my Lord and Savior not only to be born a man among men but also to descend to Hell that as "a prepared man" he could lead away "the lot of the scapegoat into the wilderness" of Hell. And returning from that place, his work completed, he could ascend to the Father, and there be more fully purified at the heavenly altar *so that he could give a pledge of our flesh, which he had taken with him, in perpetual purity*. This, therefore, is the real Day of Atonement when God is propitiated for men; just as the Apostle also says, 'Since God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'<sup>37</sup>

The preceding passage provides strong evidence that Origen does not conflate the earthly altar of the cross with the heavenly altar in these *Homilies*, nor is the earthly offering of Jesus thought to be coterminous with the heavenly one. On the contrary, Jesus' death performs a particular salvific role: defeating the powers (the 'lot of the scapegoat,' see *Hom. Lev. 9:2:20–33*) by way of his descent into and return from hell. His subsequent resurrection and ascension are prerequisites that then enable him to perform atoning service as the high priest at the heavenly altar where he now offers the sacrifice of his purified human flesh to God.

As he continues to reflect on Jesus' ascension as the true high priest who perpetually serves at the heavenly altar on the real Day of Atonement, he also considers how Jesus, like the high

---

<sup>37</sup> *Hom. Lev. 9.5.47–57*. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 185 (emphasis added).



priests in Leviticus, left his people behind him and entered alone once a year into the holy of holies to make propitiation. Origen likens the period of Jesus' earthly ministry to Jesus' year amongst his people. Jesus' entry *once*, at the end of that 'year,' into the heavenly holy of holies marks the beginning of the 'true Day of Atonement.' Origen does not, however, identify this one-time entry with the crucifixion, but with Jesus' post-resurrection ascension. Instead, he understands Jesus' entrance once for all time into the heavenly holy of holies to be, and here again he invokes Hebrews, that point 'when with his dispensation fulfilled he "penetrates the heavens" [Heb 4:14] and goes to the Father to make atonement for the human race and prays for all those who believe in him [cf. Heb 7:25].'<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, Origen finds corroborating support for the idea that Jesus, after his resurrection and ascension, perpetually offers his atoning sacrifice to the Father in heaven in New Testament texts outside of Hebrews as well. Thus he adds, 'Knowing this atonement by which [Jesus] propitiates the Father for humans, the Apostle John says, "I say this, little children, that we may not sin. But if we should sin, we have an advocate before the Father, Jesus Christ the Just; and he himself is the propitiation for our sins" [1 John 2:1–2].'<sup>39</sup> In this same context Origen even links Paul's statement in Rom 3:25 that God appointed Jesus 'as a propitiator by his blood through faith' with Jesus' sacrificial atoning work in heaven.<sup>40</sup>

Fully consistent with the notion that Jesus' heavenly sacrifice constitutes his high-priestly work on the real Day of Atonement, Origen, in language replete with allusions to Hebrews, goes on to identify the present age—that is, the time between Jesus' ascension and his return—in

---

<sup>38</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 9.5.96–8. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 9.5.99–103. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 187.

<sup>40</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 9.5.103–6. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 187.

terms of Christ's perpetual atoning work of intercession in heaven.<sup>41</sup> 'Therefore,' he writes, 'the Day of Atonement remains for us until the sun sets; that is, until the world comes to an end. For let us stand "before the gates" waiting for our high priest who remains within "the holy of holies," that is, "before the Father;" and who intercedes not for the sins of everyone, but "for the sins" of those "who wait for him" [cf. Heb 7:25; 9:24, 26, 28].'<sup>42</sup>

As noted above, I am not here seeking to reduce all of Origen's thinking on sacrifice and atonement to these passages from his *Homilies on Leviticus*. Remarkably, though, these *Homilies* show Origen reading parts of Hebrews as teaching that Jesus offered himself as an atoning sacrifice to the Father when, after his crucifixion and resurrection, he ascended into heaven. Moreover, Jesus perpetual intercession of his people is, on the basis of the Levitical high priests entrance into the holy of holies to offer sacrifice and intercede on Yom Kippur, partly constituted by his perpetual offering his resurrected self/body to God as a propitiating sacrifice.

Importantly, Origen derives this interpretation, at least in part, by reading Leviticus together with Hebrews under the conviction that Jesus rose and ascended bodily into heaven. The instructions for the Day of Atonement in Lev 16, that is, provide him with models or analogies for understanding the significance of Jesus' ascension and for conceiving of what Jesus is presently doing in the heavenly realm. It even seems to be the case that his comment about Jesus offering 'the vitality of his body' in heaven in *Homily 1* is a way of speaking about Jesus' resurrected body and blood constituting the offering of his resurrected *life* as the atoning sacrifice he presents to the Father in heaven.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> 'Perpetual' should not here be confused with 'eternal.' Origen here seems to say that Jesus' atoning work is continually ongoing and necessary until the point when he returns.

<sup>42</sup> *Hom. Lev.* 9.5.107–12. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies*, p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> This comment coheres remarkably well with the emphasis in Leviticus on the power of the life in blood as the agent that effects sacrificial atonement (see Lev 17:11).

Origen also plainly sees Jesus' resurrection as the moment that prepares him for his heavenly high-priestly service insofar as this is the moment when he imagines Jesus, again like the high priest in Lev 16, putting on the consecrated garment of his now purified earthly human body, the very 'linen' garment he needs to wear before he can enter God's presence in the heavenly holy of holies and serve as there as the great high priest.

The preceding evidence therefore indicates that, at least in his *Homilies on Leviticus*, Origen conceives of Jesus' atoning work in terms of an incarnational sequence wherein, after his resurrection, the ascended Jesus perpetually offers himself as a human being to the Father as an atoning sacrifice. For Origen, this narrative or sequence consists of the following elements: The eternal Word of God became flesh, dwelt among his people, died, descended into hell, rose again bodily, and ascended into heaven with his now transformed human body. Jesus' post-resurrection ascension marks his entry into the heavenly holy of holies where he now ministers on behalf of his people as their great high priest. This latter event constitutes the beginning of the 'real Day of Atonement.' At the heavenly altar Jesus now/perpetually offers his purified, that is, his resurrected, humanity to the Father by virtue of his being in the Father's presence. Moreover, Origen clearly states that the offering of Jesus' humanity in heaven, which is perpetually occurring so long as Jesus remains in the Father's presence, is the means by which God is propitiated/atonement is made. His many allusions and citations of Hebrews show the importance of the influence of this epistle on his thinking in these matters.

Origen, however, is not a lone voice on these matters in the larger tradition. Theodore of Mopsuestia also conceives of Jesus' offering himself to the Father as involving a post-resurrection, heavenly sacrifice at the heavenly altar. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he also relies heavily on Hebrews when expounding the point.

### II.3. Theodore of Mopseustia's *Homily on Eucharist and Liturgy*

In his *Homily on Eucharist and Liturgy* Theodore discusses Eucharist in terms of a sacrifice offered by a duly appointed priest of the new covenant. He makes a direct connection between the sacramental actions of this earthly, new covenant priest and the reality of the heavenly service that this priest and these actions represent. Eucharist, he notes, represents the real sacrifice that Jesus offers. Through Eucharist 'the new covenant appears to be maintained (*qwym*').'<sup>44</sup>

Drawing on Heb 8:4, Theodore claims that 'now' (*hš*', 'at present') Christ 'performs the priestly service in heaven and not on earth, because he died, rose, ascended into heaven in order to raise us all up and cause us to ascend into heaven.'<sup>45</sup> He adds that Jesus 'performs a real high priesthood and offers to God no other sacrifice than himself, as he had delivered also himself to death for all. He was the first to rise from the dead, and he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God in order to destroy our adversaries.'<sup>46</sup> Theodore, citing Heb 10:12, further claims that, '[Jesus] offered one sacrifice for our sins forever, sat on the right hand of God, from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.'<sup>47</sup> He continues, 'The work of a high priest consists in his drawing nigh unto God first, and then in drawing also the others to him through himself.' Theodore then engages in an extended reflection on Heb 8:1–5. As part of this

---

<sup>44</sup> A. Mingana, ed., *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist* (Woodbrooke Studies 6; Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1933), p. 79. For the Syriac text see p. 214. The idea that the new covenant requires a sacrifice to be maintained is remarkable. Theodore appears here to think that Eucharist participates in Jesus' ongoing heavenly sacrifice perpetually offered to the Father and that this sacrifice is the means for keeping the new covenant relationship intact.

<sup>45</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 80. For the Syriac see pp. 215–6.

<sup>46</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 80.

<sup>47</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 80.

exposition he claims, ‘[T]he apostle<sup>48</sup> said that Christ is the minister, as he ascended into heaven and there performs service for all of us, so that he might draw us unto him by all means.’<sup>49</sup>

When Theodore returns again to explain the actual process of performing the Eucharist, he states that as the priest performs the rituals on earth,

[W]e must picture in our mind that we are dimly in heaven, and, through faith, draw in our imagination the image of heavenly things, while thinking that Christ who is in heaven and who died for us, rose, and ascended into heaven is now (*hšʿ*) being sacrificed (*mtnks*). In contemplating with our eyes, through faith, the facts that are now being reenacted: that he is again dying, rising, and ascending into heaven, we shall be led to the vision of the things that had taken place beforehand on our behalf.<sup>50</sup>

When, therefore, the priest draws near to the altar he offers a visual depiction of Christ’s perpetual heavenly service, service that issues from and directly depends upon the full sweep of the Son’s incarnation—especially the past events of his death, resurrection, and ascension. The priest’s approach to the earthly altar is a ‘figure’ that ‘dimly represents the image of the unspeakable heavenly things and of the supernatural and incorporeal hosts.’<sup>51</sup> This appears to explain how Theodore can say that Jesus is ‘now’ being sacrificed in the Eucharist. That is to say, the Eucharist participates in the perpetual reality of Jesus’ heavenly offering, a sacrifice that is always ‘now’ being offered to the Father by virtue of Jesus ‘now’ being in heaven at the Father’s right hand.

Clearly Theodore does not abstract Jesus’ death from Jesus’ sacrifice. Jesus’ death is sacrificial and Eucharist is a remembrance of that sacrificial death.<sup>52</sup> Yet, equally clearly he does not reduce Jesus’ high-priestly service and atoning sacrifice to the crucifixion. The resurrection and ascension are also constitutive elements of Jesus’ sacrifice. Theodore appears, therefore, to

---

<sup>48</sup> That is, Paul, whom Theodore assumes to be the author of Hebrews.

<sup>49</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 83. For the Syriac see p. 219.

<sup>51</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, p. 83.

<sup>52</sup> Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore*, esp. pp. 74, 78, 79.

take seriously the notion that Jesus' sacrifice consists in a process whose climatic moment is not Jesus' death, but instead his ascension into heaven where he 'now' (*hš'*) ministers as the great high priest. That ministry involves Jesus presenting himself to the Father as the ultimate and fully sufficient atoning sacrifice. Eucharist, then, partly functions for Theodore as a visualization of the entire process that culminated in the heavenly offering of that atoning sacrifice. As such, the ritual helps one to remember, even to visualize, not just Jesus' death, but also, his resurrection, ascension, and approach to the heavenly altar where, Theodore seems to aver, he perpetually presents the sacrifice of himself to the Father.

Theodore appears, then, to conceive of the full sweep of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and session at God's right hand as constituting Jesus' sacrifice. When, therefore, he speaks of the 'now' of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the point seems to be that the actions the earthly priest performs temporally represent and participate in the singular past events that climaxed in Jesus' present, perpetual, high-priestly presentation of himself to the Father in heaven. This sacrifice—that is, both Jesus' actual and primary sacrifice, as well as the Eucharistic sacrifice that represents and participates in that one real sacrifice—are the means by which the new covenant relationship is maintained.

In a way similar to Origen's expositions of Leviticus, Theodore also seems to think in terms of Jesus entering heaven as the event of his once for all/perpetual presentation or offering of his sacrifice to the Father. Because of Jesus' ongoing presence in heaven at the Father's right hand, Eucharist helps maintain the restored relationship between God and his people that Jesus, as the mediator of the new covenant, accomplishes.<sup>53</sup> Jesus' heavenly, high-priestly ministry, in other

---

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Apos. Con.* 8.13.7–10 for the similar idea that Christ is the priestly mediator who now presents the Eucharistic offering to the Father at the heavenly altar.

words, provides the ongoing covenantal maintenance that ensures that the relationship between God and his new covenant people will never be sundered.

#### II.4. Theodoret of Cyrus' *Questions on Leviticus*

While less developed than Origen and Theodore, Theodoret of Cyrus also at points attests a similar conception of Jesus' sacrifice. In the course of discussing Lev 16 in question twenty-two of his *Questions on Leviticus*, Theodoret argues that the entire Yom Kippur ritual 'prefigures the incarnation of our Savior; as the high priest entered the holy of holies and performed this rite once a year, so Christ the Lord endured the saving passion and ascended to heaven once, "thus effecting eternal redemption" [Heb 9:12] as the holy apostle says.'<sup>54</sup>

Commenting on Heb 8:1–3, he suggests, somewhat like Origen, that the reason that Christ assumed humanity was in order to offer that nature to God on behalf of humanity when he ascended into the tabernacle (i.e., heaven). There, the very one who created heaven now ministers as a human being.<sup>55</sup> He further explains that the annual entry of the earthly high priest into the holy of holies served 'as a type of Christ, who was the first to ascend into heaven and disclose access to us.'<sup>56</sup>

When reflecting on Heb 9:24–26, Theodoret affirms that Jesus, as the great high priest, entered heaven to appear before God. The verb 'to appear' in Heb 9:24 means, Theodoret explains, that Jesus appeared before the Father as a fleshly human being so that 'now for the first time human nature went up to heaven.'<sup>57</sup> He also links Jesus' once-for-all offering with the ascension when he notes that just as the earthly high priests entered the holy of holies once every

---

<sup>54</sup> Robert C. Hill, trans., *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch, Volume 2* (LEC 2; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> Robert C. Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentaries on the Letters of St. Paul, Volume 2* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), p. 169.

<sup>56</sup> Hill, *Commentaries on the Letters*, pp. 172–3.

<sup>57</sup> Hill, *Commentaries on the Letters*, p. 175.

year with the blood of animals, so Christ entered heaven with his own blood in order to offer himself once for all, thereby dealing decisively with sin and promising immortality to his followers.<sup>58</sup>

## II.5. The Homilies of Narsai and Jacob of Sarug on Jesus' Ascension

Yet more evidence for this kind of interpretation of Hebrews can be found in the writings of the Syriac theologians Narsai and Jacob of Sarug. In his *Homily on the Feast Day of the Ascension*, Narsai reflects at on the significance of Jesus' ascension. Narsai speaks repeatedly about Jesus' ascension as the moment when the molded and corrupted 'clay of our bodily structure' and the 'humble dust of Adam' put on glory and were exalted into heaven.<sup>59</sup> Further, via a host of allusions to themes and language found in Hebrews, he speaks of the 'Self-Existent' and 'hidden One' who put on a human body and, by taking our dust into heaven, 'opened the way to the kingdom on high and entered to serve in the holy of holies as the high priest. Into the sanctuary on high he arrived to serve spiritually in (that) resplendent place, undefiled by things earthly.'<sup>60</sup> His 'visible body mounted the wind and arrived on high.'<sup>61</sup>

Narsai is keen to stress that Jesus did not lose his human body of flesh and bone as he ascended. He even interprets the angelic admonition to the disciples in Acts 1:11 as intended to allay any doubts that Jesus might have left his body behind when he ascended. Since the angel says that Jesus will return in the same way as he ascended, Narsai reasons that Jesus must 'remain unaltered in body and soul. Under that (very) appearance, he will remain in ineffable glory' until his return.<sup>62</sup> In this way Jesus can actually return just as he ascended—as a blood-

---

<sup>58</sup> Hill, *Commentaries on the Letters*, p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick G. McLeod, trans., *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension: Critical Edition of Syriac Text* (PO 40; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), e.g. pp. 163, 167, 179.

<sup>60</sup> McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, p. 167. Cf. Heb 8:1–2; 9:24; 10:19–21.

<sup>61</sup> McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, p. 169.

<sup>62</sup> McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, p. 171.



and-flesh human being. In Jesus, then, ‘a member of our race’ has ‘entered to minister in the holy of holies on behalf of [our] life.’<sup>63</sup>

Narsai, not unlike Origen and Theodoret, also appears here to interpret Hebrews’ ‘once for all’ language in terms of the singularity of Jesus’ ascension. He states that Jesus ‘entered heaven to atone (*dnhs*’) for all by the sacrifice of himself (*bdbh’ dnpšh*). *He made one entrance* and was received in the sanctuary above. ... He entered and appeared before the All-seeing One to whom everything was visible.’<sup>64</sup> Narsai adds, again with language redolent of Hebrews, that when Christ entered the heavenly holy of holies, God ‘welcomed him and conferred on him the crown belonging to the name of the Divine Essence.’<sup>65</sup> Jesus, he states later, ‘secured the peace and renewal of the universe through his ascent.’<sup>66</sup> Through the victory of his ascension Jesus ‘made restitution for the bond of our guilt.’<sup>67</sup> By this sacrifice he ‘reconciled the height and the depth’ with God.<sup>68</sup>

In a similar vein, and equally reminiscent of Hebrews (especially of the author’s argument in Heb 1–2 regarding the Son being elevated above the angels in his humanity), Jacob of Sarug says in his *Homily on the Ascension of Our Lord* that, after rising from the dead and spending forty days with his disciples, Jesus ascended to a place above all the ranks of the angels. Indeed, he left the angels below him as he entered the heavenly holy of holies. Jacob avers, ‘To the holy of holies, the high priest bore himself magnificently. Towards that awesome interior tabernacle where the Father is, for the Son alone can enter towards the Father. Outside the door the angels

---

<sup>63</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 175.

<sup>64</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 175. Cf. Heb 9:24–26.

<sup>65</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 175. Cf. Heb 1:3–4; 2:9.

<sup>66</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 181.

<sup>67</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 185.

<sup>68</sup> McLeod, *Narsai’s Metrical Homilies*, p. 187.

stayed like the Levites, and Christ, the high priest, alone entered.’<sup>69</sup> He later adds, ‘To the place where the Son was exalted with his Father neither Cherubs nor Seraphs with their hallowings were raised. There are [many] priests but the high priest is only one; and into the holy of holies, only one enters, not many.’<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, drawing from Heb 8:1–2 Jacob adds that the Son advanced beyond the angels ‘to the hidden place which is not at all part of creation .... The tabernacle which is not made, nor has it any like it among created things. ... He alone entered into that inner holy of holies.’<sup>71</sup> ‘The high priest,’ he continues, ‘has entered the holy of holies, with his own blood (*bdm*’) he will reconcile his Father with humanity. He is the offering (*dbh*’), the high priest, and the libation (*nwqy*’) too and he himself entered so that the whole creation might be pardoned through him.’<sup>72</sup> Jesus ‘descended, visited us and ascended redeeming us.’<sup>73</sup>

### III. Conclusions

The preceding survey, though limited, has demonstrated conclusively that the idea that Jesus offered himself—specifically his resurrected human body—to God as an atoning sacrifice in heaven upon his post-resurrection ascension is well attested in some of the earliest reception of Hebrews. Most of the texts explored above explicitly affirm the view that the Son of God, as the eternal Word, took upon himself human flesh and blood, died, rose, and ascended bodily into heaven in order to present his humanity to the Father and perform his sacrificial, atoning ministry there at God’s right hand. This, it should be noted, is a model of Jesus’ high-priestly sacrifice

---

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Kollamparampil, trans., *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Ascension of Our Lord* (TCLA 24; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>70</sup> Kollamparampil, *Homily on the Ascension*, p. 52.

<sup>71</sup> Kollamparampil, *Homily on the Ascension*, p. 54.

<sup>72</sup> *Hom. Ascen. Our Lord*, 481–4. Kollamparampil, *Homily on the Ascension*, pp. 56, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Kollamparampil, *Homily on the Ascension*, p. 58.

that coheres well with, is even directly informed by, key elements in the depictions of sacrifice and high-priestly service found in Leviticus.

Moreover, it is also worth highlighting that although this understanding of Jesus' heavenly atoning work is often directly linked in the texts discussed to passages from Hebrews, the figures surveyed above also reflect synthetically on a wide range of texts and traditions. Hebrews makes a distinctive contribution to their thinking because Hebrews, more than any of their other authoritative texts, explicitly focuses on the high-priestly sacrifice of the ascended Christ in the heavenly holy of holies.

These findings suggest two concluding comments. First, some may object that the kind of interpretation of Hebrews detailed above implies that the crucifixion of Jesus becomes merely preparatory for atonement and is thus no longer central to Jesus' sacrifice and atoning work. Such a critique, however, begs the question of the meaning of and relationship between sacrifice and atonement just to the extent that it has itself already limited Jesus' sacrificial and atoning work by reducing this to his suffering and death. None of the figures discussed above, however, would dispute the unique and indispensable importance of the suffering and death of Jesus for the salvation he obtains. Were one to query them on these points, one would find that they have a great deal to say about the ways that Jesus' death contributes to salvation.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, by thinking sequentially through the whole sweep of Jesus' incarnational narrative, they are able to work with a broad perspective on Jesus' atoning work. The cross is essential for them, particularly for the defeat of death and the devil, but it is ultimately the full, incarnational story of Jesus, not the cross *per se*, that is truly central to their understanding of atonement. The author of Hebrews is understood by these voices in the tradition to be making a

---

<sup>74</sup> For examples from Origen, see Crouzel, *Origen*, pp. 194–7.

particular contribution to these larger accounts precisely because of the attention he places on Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and session as he reflects on Jesus' salvific work. Hebrews informs their accounts of atonement by explaining more clearly and explicitly than any other New Testament text how the ascension of Jesus is part of his atoning sacrifice and high-priestly ministry.

Second, Gustav Aulén clearly perceived the centrality of the full sweep of the incarnation for atonement when he posited his *Christus Victor*/'Classic Idea' of the atonement. Thus he stated, 'The organic connection of the idea of the Incarnation with that of the Atonement is the leading characteristic of the doctrine of redemption in the early church.'<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, this study suggests that even with the 'double-sidedness' of Aulén's theory, his view that the atonement is fully the work of God (as opposed to his account of the 'Latin theory' wherein Jesus' death is a sacrifice offered by humanity to God) is hobbled by his own reductive understanding of sacrifice. His assumption that Jesus' death *is* Jesus' sacrifice led him, I suggest, to downplay the full contribution Jesus' humanity makes for atonement along the lines affirmed by the texts discussed above.<sup>76</sup> The texts studied above clearly allow that, as a human being, the Divine Son offers his sacrifice to the Father.

Since Aulén's important work, a number of studies have helpfully expanded the discussion by emphasizing the varieties of sacrifice and of sacrificial ideas and images at play within early Christianity.<sup>77</sup> Frances Young, in particular, has rightly stressed from this fact the dangers of over-systematizing early Christian reflection on atonement.<sup>78</sup> Even Young, however, continues

---

<sup>75</sup> Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (trans. A.G. Hebert; London: SPCK, 1931), p. 58.

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., Aulén, *Christus Victor*, pp. 73–4.

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*; Frances M. Young, *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom* (Patristic Monograph Series 5; Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979).

<sup>78</sup> See esp. Frances M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London: SPCK, 1975), pp. 88–95.

to work with a reductive conception of Jesus' sacrifice wherein Jesus' death is the real subject that the different early Christian sacrificial metaphors seek to explain. This, it seems to me, leads her to miss the possibility that some of the tension/dualism she identifies between Jesus' defeat of evil and his offering of his humanity to God might actually be resolved by paying more careful reflection to how sacrifice works when conceived of as a process whose center rests on bringing the material of the sacrifice into God's presence. Specifically, it may be the case that such attention could unpick ways in which different figures understand Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to make distinct contributions to the atonement (broadly conceived) that they believe he achieves.

Be that as it may, it is hoped the preceding survey will contribute to a renewed recognition of the importance of sacrifice and sacrificial categories for reflection on the full scope of the atoning work of Jesus not only for contemporary interpretation of biblical texts, but also for the interpretation of the texts and communities that came later in the development of the Christian tradition. It may be that such study will lead to a recovery of insights that might themselves prove useful for contemporary theological reflection on sacrifice and atonement.