

It Is Not Finished: Jesus' Perpetual Atoning Work as the Heavenly High Priest in Hebrews

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“Even at this moment, as a human being, [Jesus] is making intercession for my salvation, for he continues to wear the body that he assumed...” Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 30.14

I. Introduction

The ongoing high-priestly ministry of Jesus in the heavenly tabernacle stands among the more neglected aspects of New Testament Christology and soteriology in much modern biblical and theological reflection. Jesus' cry in John's Gospel, “It is finished,” has taken on a life of its own, becoming a proof-text in certain circles for the view that the full and final completion of Jesus' sacrificial and salvific work occurred as he expired on the cross. Alan Stibbs makes this case particularly clearly in the introductory paragraph to his book, *The Finished Work of Christ*. Stibbs claims, “The idea that Christ's atoning work is ‘finished’ is Scriptural in origin: it is indeed based on a word uttered by our Lord Himself before His death on the cross.”¹ This word is, of course, Jesus' cry in John 19:30—τετέλεστοι (“It is finished!”). Stibbs continues, “Clearly, therefore, when Jesus at last reached the point of departure from this present earthly life, the work to which this word τετέλεστοι referred was already fully accomplished.”²

¹ Alan M. Stibbs, *The Finished Work of Christ* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1954), 5.

² Stibbs, *Finished Work*, 5. Stibbs states the thesis of his book as follows: “Christ's work of offering Himself for men's salvation is unmistakably represented in Scripture as exclusively earthly and historical, the purpose of the incarnation, wrought out in flesh and blood, in time and space, under Pontius Pilate; that by this once-for-all finished happening the necessary and intended atoning work was completely accomplished ...” (8). It is worth pointing out here that such an account of Jesus' death as the sum total of his atoning sacrifice cannot be made to square with the actual scriptural depictions of atoning sacrifices detailed in Leviticus. Stibbs may be aware of this issue. He tellingly labels approaches that emphasize Jesus' heavenly presentation of his atoning sacrifice to the Father as “more Jewish than fully Christian” (*Finished Work*, 22). One of the problems Stibbs does not engage, however, is the very real historical one of how the first Christians, who were Jews, could have thought about sacrifice in such new and different “fully Christian” categories rather than the “Jewish” ones that they believed God gave them in scripture.

Whether or not this is the proper interpretation of John 19:30,³ the witness of Hebrews differs in kind from such an account of Jesus' priestly and sacrificial work precisely because Hebrews stresses more emphatically and explicitly than any other New Testament text that Jesus is currently the great high priest who now ministers for his people in the heavenly holy of holies (Heb 8:1–4; see also 7:25).

But what comprises Jesus' heavenly ministry? Hebrews suggests that upon his passing through the heavens as the one appointed by God to the position of high priest in Melchizedek's order, Jesus drew near to the Father in order to appear in his presence (see esp. 4:14–16; 5:8–10; 9:24–26). There, as the great high priest, he presented to God nothing less than himself as the ultimate atoning sacrifice on behalf of his brothers and sisters. He thereby made purification for sins and sat down at the Father's right hand where he waits for all his enemies to be made his footstool (esp. Heb 1:3; 10:12–14). His once-for-all offering has been presented and accepted. He has no need to re-present or re-offer himself to the Father.⁴

But is this the sum total of Jesus' heavenly ministry? Moreover, does the once-for-all-ness of his sacrifice mean that his atoning work is fully and finally finished even now? If this were the case, one might wonder why Hebrews emphasizes the need to have a high priest who presently serves as a minister in the heavenly holy of holies (8:1), particularly one who continually intercedes for his people (7:25). If all sin and impurity is fully and finally taken care of by the singular entry of Jesus into the Father's presence, why is his ongoing intercession, presumably a constituent element of his high-priestly ministry, still necessary?⁵

³ For a few examples of commentators who argue the case see, R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 211; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 720 n. 77 (cf. 130–31).

⁴ I detail the case for this interpretation of Hebrews' understanding of Jesus' sacrifice in David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁵ As one might guess from the quotation of Gregory of Nazianzus in the header to this essay, a rich history of reflection on this question can be found in Patristic literature (I survey some of this literature here: David M. Moffitt,

This study reexamines these questions and offers the following three conclusions: 1) Jesus' work of high-priestly intercession implies the need for ongoing forgiveness and purification—some kind of ongoing work of sacrificial atonement⁶—for his followers; 2) if this is correct, Hebrews does not conceive of Jesus' atoning, high-priestly work as completed on the cross or even upon his ascension, though his singular act of presenting himself to the Father is clearly unrepeatable;⁷ 3) the atoning work that Jesus continues now to perform is that of maintaining the new covenant relationship between God and his people, work that is necessary while the covenant people are still in the process of being sanctified and have not yet been perfected.

In short, the author reflects on Jesus' ongoing work of sacrificial atonement in ways that are remarkably analogous to the ministry of the old covenant priesthood, especially the high priests, and the Levitical sacrificial system. As the high priest of the new covenant, Jesus now ministers in the heavenly tabernacle by offering to the Father the ongoing worship that maintains God's new-covenant relationship with his people and mediates the blessings and promises associated with that relationship. This act of ongoing offering consists in the very presence of the interceding Son, Jesus, with the Father. The author of Hebrews, in other words, has neither embraced a logic of sacrifice that stands against that of the Levitical system, which God ordained, nor does he work with a new covenant logic that differs radically from that of the

“Jesus' Heavenly Sacrifice in Early Christian Reception of Hebrews: A Survey,” *JTS* 68 [2017]: 46–71). See also the fascinating late-19th century study of William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord: The Baird Lecture 1891* (London: Macmillan, 1892), esp. 113–65. Though my own account of Hebrews differs in significant ways from Milligan's, our questions and interpretations of Hebrews are similar at many points. (I am grateful to Michael Kibbe for bringing Milligan's volume to my attention.)

⁶ I define this term on p. XX below. See also, David M. Moffitt, “Hebrews,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement* (ed. Adam J. Johnson; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 533–36).

⁷ This does not mean that Jesus' death/work on the cross is not salvific. The tendency to speak of the atonement as if it were equal to a systematic account of Christian soteriology creates confusion when the wide variety of problems that early Christians believed Jesus solved in order to save humanity are lumped together into one concept and event. I discuss this issue more on page XX below.

Mosaic covenant. Instead, as one might expect given that the earliest Christians were Jews, he draws insights about who Jesus is and how Jesus saves his followers from the very scriptures and practices he takes to be the inspired and revealed by God (cf. Heb 1:1–2). The logic of the new covenant and the sacrificial and high-priestly ministry Jesus performs within it relate organically for this author to those of the old covenant.

II. Some Key Assumptions

The arguments advanced here depend in part upon six working assumptions and one caveat concerning Jesus' high priesthood, sacrifice and atonement in Hebrews. I have explored and defended these conclusions in other publications, but some acknowledgement and elaboration of my working conclusions is necessary for the sake of the case being advanced here.

First, I assume that the author of Hebrews has thought carefully through the problem of Jesus' tribal lineage for the legitimacy of the claim that Jesus is a high priest. The author and the original audience likely shared a confession that identifies Jesus as a high priest. This identification may be a central element of the confession that some have begun to call into question.⁸ The writer presents his apologetic reflection on the validity of Jesus' high priesthood in Heb 5:1–7:28, and especially in Heb 7. His main goal in Heb 7 is to show how Jesus, a

⁸ George H. Guthrie demonstrates conclusively the structural links between Heb 4:14–16 and 10:19–23, arguing that these verses form an *inclusio* (*The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* [NovTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 79–80). This is relevant for reflecting on the confession the author urges the congregation to maintain. While he never gives the content of the shared confession he wants his intended readers to continue to affirm, the fact that the bulk of the material that stands between his two explicit calls to hold fast to this confession (4:14; 10:23) revolves around the topic of Jesus' high priesthood (with the author first defending the legitimacy of Jesus' high priesthood in Heb 5:1–7:28, and, second discussing the covenantal context, location and nature of Jesus' high-priestly ministry in 8:1–10:20) implies that the affirmation of Jesus' high-priestly status is one of the central elements of the common confession that he thinks his readers are in danger of surrendering (see also the explicit reference to Jesus' high priesthood in the author's first reference to a shared confession in Heb 3:1). A similar conclusion, though via a different route, was advanced by Ernst Käsemann, who located the confession of Jesus' high priesthood in early Christian liturgy that predates Hebrews (*Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* [4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961], 108–10).

Judahite by birth, can legitimately be the high priest he is confessed to be. The problem the author faces concerns Jesus' humanity.⁹ This latter point has at times not been properly explored in the commentary literature due to the misguided assumption that Hebrews derives Jesus' high-priestly status from the fact of his divine Sonship.¹⁰ Thus, it bears repeating that the issue of Jesus' priestly status is in Hebrews chiefly a question of his humanity, not one of his status as divine Son per se.

A few observations help to clarify the point. If the author thought that Jesus' high priesthood was a function of Jesus' divine nature rather than one of Jesus' humanity, he has done a particularly poor job laying out his case. One could well imagine him reducing the complex argument of Heb 7 to a simple statement that Jesus is high priest *because* he is the Son. Instead, however, the logic of the author's argument aims to show that, *although* Jesus is the Son, he suffered, died, and, after being made perfect (τελεωθεις), *became* (εγενετο) the source of eternal salvation (Heb 5:8–10). That is to say, although Jesus is the royal and divine Son, he nevertheless became the high priest that he is confessed to be. This logic implies that simply being the Son does not qualify Jesus to be a high priest.

Unpacking this concessive logic requires sustained and careful argumentation on the part of the author precisely because he knows that as the Son Jesus lacks the proper qualification to be a priest at all, at least on earth where the Mosaic law has authority (compare Heb 7:14 and 8:4). To put the point differently, when the divine Son took up the blood and flesh of Abraham's

⁹ For my detailed arguments on this subject see Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, esp. 200–14.

¹⁰ So, e.g., B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (3rd ed.; London: MacMillan and Co., 1903), 124; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), 64. Other accounts that do not look to Jesus' divinity but nevertheless think Jesus' priesthood is a function of his sonship are present in the secondary literature (e.g., Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*, 141). Deborah W. Rooke suggests that Hebrews draws on the ancient Israelite notion of sacral kingship ("Jesus as Royal Priest: Reflections on the Interpretation of the Melchizedek Tradition in Heb 7," *Biblica* 81 [2000]: 81–94). Among other considerations, the fact that Hebrews does so little to develop the royal office of Melchizedek works against Rooke's thesis.

seed, he took up the blood and flesh of the line of Judah. The Son came into the world in the tribe and lineage of Judah. While this coheres well with Son's royal role as the Christ, the reigning messiah, the fact of the incarnation creates a problem for Jesus' elevation to service in the priesthood. According to the Mosaic law no one from the tribe of Judah can legitimately serve as a priest. To be a priest of God who serves in the earthly sanctuary, one must belong to the tribe of Levi (esp. Deut 18:1–5). Thus, even though Jesus is the Son and, like Aaron, God called him to the office of high priest, his elevation to that office faces a problem created by the incarnation itself, precisely because the incarnation placed the Son in the wrong tribe for priestly service. The issue the author therefore has to solve when looking at both the confession of Jesus' high-priestly status and God's revelation through Moses revolves around his status as the incarnate Son in Judah's tribe.¹¹

The author must have seen a number of possible solutions to this issue. He has already ruled out a simple deduction from the Son's divine preexistence, taking seriously the need for high priests to be human beings (Heb 5:1). Still, he could have merely reasserted in Heb 7 God's call of Jesus to the role (Heb 5:5–6), a fact he obviously thinks is fundamental for Jesus' elevation to high-priestly status. Divine fiat would seem to offer sufficient warrant to allow for an exception to the Mosaic law. The writer does not, however, center his argument in Heb 7 on the fact of Jesus' divine appointment. He could have simply appealed to Melchizedek, the priest-king, as offering a model from Ps 110 that justifies the application of both roles to Jesus. Here, too, he is clearly aware of Melchizedek's dual offices (Heb 7:2–3) and his passing comment to Melchizedek's kingship seems designed to highlight the fact that this figure holds both royal and

¹¹ One wonders if this difficulty with confessing Jesus as both royal Son from Judah's tribe and high priest may be one of the points under contention among those who might be tempted to abandon the community and its confession.

priestly offices. Yet after pointing this out, he surprisingly does not develop Melchizedek's royal role as his argument in Heb 7 unfolds.

The author adopts instead a different solution, one that takes Jesus' death, bodily resurrection, and ascension into account. In the process, he highlights his respect for the authority of the Mosaic law. Rather than appealing to the Son's divinity as something that simply trumped the particularity of Jesus' humanity; rather than playing out the mention of God's call of the Son to the high priesthood in terms of divine fiat that simply supersedes the law; rather than developing Melchizedek's royal status and explaining how this is a model for Jesus, the tack he takes both recognizes that the law forbids Jesus to serve as a priest on earth (Heb 7:14; 8:4), and develops the claims that Jesus' high-priestly office is heavenly and that the high-priestly service he performs occurs in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb 8:1–4).

Second, I assume that the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which Hebrews correlates with the Son's perfection and which also pertains to the incarnate Son's humanity, provides the author with the solution to the Mosaic problem of Jesus' tribal descent barring him from priestly ministry. The bodily resurrection of Jesus perfects his Judahite humanity. As a perfected Jew from the tribe of Judah, Jesus' humanity is now immortal, no longer corruptible and no longer subject to death, as it clearly was when he died on the cross. The indestructible life he now has as a human being qualifies him to serve in another legitimate priesthood, the heavenly one to which the ministering spirits belong.¹² As noted above, the author does not resolve the problem of the Mosaic law's stipulations on tribal descent by dismissing the law *tout court*. Indeed, the law's authority regarding priestly legitimation appears to be the presupposition

¹² For additional argumentation see David M. Moffitt, "If Another Priest Arises": Jesus' Resurrection and the High Priestly Christology of Hebrews," in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Contexts* (ed. Richard Bauckham et al; LNTS 387; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 68–79.

that necessitates his defense of the legitimacy of Jesus' high priesthood. The logic of the argument in Heb 7 seizes on the transformation of Jesus' particular Judahite humanity in the resurrection such that, as a human being, Jesus now has life that is like that of Melchizedek. This indestructible life into which he arose qualifies him to serve as the priest of Melchizedek's order spoken of in Ps 110 (see esp. Heb 7:15–16).¹³ Further, this implies that Jesus became the high priest he now is at the resurrection, when his human lineage no longer barred him from priestly service.¹⁴ The author has, then, constructed a careful and precise argument that takes seriously

¹³ In an excellent essay Georg Gäbel has recently argued against this conclusion (“[...] inmitten der Gemeinde werde ich dir lobsingnen’ Hebr 2,12: Engel und Menschen, himmlischer und irdischer Gottesdienst nach dem Hebräerbrief,” in *Gottesdienst und Engel im antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum* [ed. Jörg Frey and Michael R. Jost; WUNT 2/446; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017], 185–239, here 212–15). I continue, however, to be persuaded that the writer assumes that Melchizedek is an angelic priest, one of the ministering, that is, priestly, spirits (see Heb 1:7, 14), above whom Jesus has been elevated in his resurrected humanity. This means, contra Gäbel, that Hebrews is interested in Melchizedek himself, particularly because of the kind of life this mysterious figure possesses, and how Jesus relates to him (as well as how he relates to the eternal Son). The conclusion that Melchizedek is an angel not only explains why the author can identify him in immortal terms, which is surely the most straightforward reading of the language about him in Heb 7:3 and 7:8, but also coheres well with the writer's identification of Jesus as the great *high* priest even though this fact (that is, his *high* priesthood) cannot be deduced from Ps 110:4, which speaks only of a priest. Gäbel is right to note that the priestly order to which Jesus belongs has only one high priest—Jesus himself. But why is the Son the high priest of an order named after Melchizedek? In my view, the Son has become the sole high priest of Melchizedek's order because the Son, unlike any of the other priests currently serving in the heavenly priesthood, is the first perfected human being elevated to serve in this priestly order. As such, he has been exalted above *all* the angels/ministering spirits and taken his place at God's right hand, just as the argument of Heb 1–2 demonstrates. Melchizedek is *priest* of God most high (the author follows the language of Genesis, which speaks of Melchizedek only as a priest), but the perfected Jesus, who has been elevated above all the angels (including on this hypothesis Melchizedek), is the *high* priest of God most high. For more detailed argumentation, see Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 204–7.

¹⁴ It is common in the secondary literature to read that Hebrews does not identify a moment when Jesus became high priest (e.g., Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 146–47). David Peterson (*Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the “Epistle to the Hebrews”* [SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 191–95), in arguing for this view, provides an excellent discussion of some of the main issues that are at stake. Interestingly, Peterson himself notes, “[Jesus’] death on the cross must be included in our view of his priestly work, *though our writer nowhere explicitly states this*” (*Perfection*, 193, emphasis added). What the literature shows is that the twinned assumptions 1) that the death of Jesus must be the locus of his high-priestly sacrifice, and 2) that Hebrews has little concern for Jesus' resurrection, bodily or otherwise, are among the major drivers of this conclusion. Thus, in spite of the fact that Hebrews predicates Jesus becoming a high priest (ἵνα ... γενήται ... ἄρχιερέως) on his full participation in the human condition, something which must include his suffering and death (Heb 2:17); in spite of the fact that Hebrews locates Jesus becoming the source of eternal salvation after (or upon) his being made perfect (τελειωθεὶς ἐγένετο ... ἀτίως σωτηρίας αἰωνίου, Heb 5:9); in spite of the fact that Hebrews implies that Jesus entered the heavenly holy of holies after having become a high priest (ἀρχιερέως γενόμενος, Heb 6:20); in spite of the fact that Hebrews says Jesus arose in the likeness of Melchizedek and became a priest (ὃς [ἱερέως] γέγονεν) by the power of his indestructible life (Heb 7:15–16); and, in spite of Hebrews' clear statement that Jesus could not even be a priest on earth (εἰ ... ἦν ἐπὶ γῆς, οὐδ' ἂν ἦν ἱερέως), let alone a high priest (Heb 8:4), many continue to assume that the author of Hebrews did not think with precision about when Jesus

both the particularity of the heavenly Son's incarnation and the authority of the divinely given law.

Third, I work with the assumption that this author believes that the resurrected Jesus ascended through the heavens into the highest heaven where he entered the inner sanctum of the heavenly tabernacle. This is the location where he serves as high priest. Moses saw this heavenly structure while he was on Sinai and therefore patterned the earthly tabernacle on the heavenly exemplar he saw. For the author of Hebrews, the priority of the heavenly tabernacle implies that the structure of and worship within the earthly tabernacle brim with analogies to their heavenly counterparts. Analogies of structure, activity and function naturally hold between the earthly and heavenly realities because Moses obeyed God and made everything according to the pattern that was shown to him on the mountain (see Exod 25:40; Heb 8:5). These analogies imply a hermeneutical corollary: one can learn something of the heavenly structure and its cultic service, and so also about where Jesus is and what Jesus is presently doing, by looking at its earthly model.¹⁵

Fourth, this last assumption implies further that Hebrews not only reads Jewish scripture/the Old Testament in the light of Christ, but also learns about Christ by reading him in the light of scripture. The relationship between Christology and scripture in Hebrews is dynamic and dialogical. The author even suggests that given space and time he could have said even more

became a high priest. If, however, the author did think carefully about this and did not, like so many of his interpreters, assume that Jesus had to be a high priest on the cross, but concluded instead that Jesus' became a high priest at his resurrection in order to pass through the heavens and serve in this capacity in the heavenly holy of holies, then the data from Heb 2:17, 5:9, 6:20, 7:15–16 and 8:4 fall neatly and consistently into place. If this interpretation is correct, it is not the author of Hebrews who is confused and imprecise on when Jesus became a high priest. Rather, interpreters create confusion by continuing 1) to assume that that author of Hebrews must identify the cross as the primary if not exclusive place and time of Jesus' atoning, high-priestly sacrifice, and 2) to downplay or deny the importance of Jesus' bodily resurrection for the argument of Hebrews.

¹⁵ I argue this point at length in David M. Moffitt, "Serving in the Tabernacle in Heaven: Sacred Space, Jesus's High-Priestly Sacrifice, and Hebrews' Analogical Theology," in *Hebrews in Contexts* (ed. Gabriella Gelardini and Harold W. Attridge; AJEC 91; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 259–79.

about the significance of the earthly tabernacle for understanding the realities Christ entered and the service he performs (Heb 9:5).

Fifth, a note on my working assumptions about Jewish sacrifice is in order. I assume that a sacrifice consists of an irreducible ritual process. Roy Gane has compellingly argued that the rituals that constitute the process of sacrifice as presented in Leviticus relate to each other hierarchically.¹⁶ This means that some elements of the process hold more importance or weight than do others relative to achieving the goals of a given sacrifice. This also implies that a sequence of ritual elements is necessary, but no one of these elements is alone sufficient for the sacrifice. That is to say, a sacrifice involves several ritual events and cannot, therefore, be reduced simply to one element within the sequence. Contrary to the assumption of many today, therefore, neither the verb nor the noun *sacrifice* are, in biblical terms, self-evidently synonymous with the ritual act of slaughtering a victim.¹⁷ The word *sacrifice* does not mean to *slaughter* or *kill* something. If one only slaughtered a victim, even at the temple, but did not bring the body and blood of the victim to the altars and offer them to God, no sacrifice has occurred.

This last point partly explains why killing the victim is an essential element of some, but not of all, sacrifices.¹⁸ Additionally, slaughter is a constitutive part of some sacrifices, such as Passover and peace offerings, that are not offered for the purpose of sacrificial atonement. There are also examples of ritual acts that can atone but do not entail any act of slaughter (e.g. Num

¹⁶ Roy E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), esp. 3–24.

¹⁷ The point can be shown from another angle. In, e.g., Lev 2:1–15 LXX, flour, loaves and the first-fruits of the grain are all identified with the noun θυσία. Plainly the noun *sacrifice* cannot here denote a slaughtered thing. The term is used because the basic elements of a priest bringing something to an altar on behalf of a supplicant are in play. The logic of *sacrifice*, in other words, revolves around giving a gift to God, not around the act of slaughter, which may or may not be a constitutive part of a particular θυσία.

¹⁸ On this issue see esp. Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 60–101.

16:46–50 MT). These facts suggest that death is not central to the logic of atonement in the Levitical system. Moreover, in those cases where an animal is slaughtered as part of a sacrifice, including but not limited to atoning sacrifices, there is no hint that the animal is made to suffer, nor that the victim is an object of abuse or wrath. Inflicting suffering on the sacrificial victim is not a part of the biblical sacrificial system, and, while sacrifices can serve in part to protect the people from the danger of God’s wrath breaking out against the guilt they have incurred (e.g., Num 18:5; cf. Sirach 34:19), the items offered to God are never themselves depicted as objects of that wrath. The common assumption that suffering and dying for someone else is an act of sacrifice, which clearly is a denotation of the term *sacrifice* in contemporary English, leads to a category mistake when read back into the biblical accounts of Levitical sacrifice. To maltreat a sacrificial animal would be to render it ineligible to be offered to God, since a sacrificial victim that suffered physical damage from abuse would no longer be ἄμωμος (“without blemish”).¹⁹

Rather than being abused or made to suffer, the requirement that sacrificial animals be unblemished implies that they were treated with care prior to their being handed over to God. Further, the supplicant is the one who “pays” for the sacrifice by supplying the actual gift that is offered. It hardly seems a stretch to imagine the cost being borne joyfully when the gift offered is given in thanks, solemnly, even gratefully, when offered to make atonement for an impurity, or sorrowfully and as a penalty when, with repentance, the gift is given to atone for a moral infraction.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the author of Hebrews locates Jesus’ perfection after the completion of his suffering and death. If, as I have argued, the author correlates Jesus’ perfection with his resurrection (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, esp. 198–200), then it makes good sense to interpret him as speaking of Jesus as the one who offered himself without blemish (ἄμωμος, Heb 9:14). Such language should not be reduced simply to moral categories. What is needed for Jesus, who is the high priest and the sacrifice, to approach God and offer himself is for him to be not only morally pure, but also ritually pure—to have a purified body. The resurrection, which on this reading of Heb 9:14 would be the work of the eternal spirit (cf. Rom 8:11), renders Jesus’ humanity perfect so that he can ascend to the Father and offer himself “without blemish.” By virtue of his resurrection the morally pure Jesus, who was without sin (Heb 4:15), now has ritually pure humanity.

Be that as it may, within the series of elements that constitute an atoning sacrifice, the priestly work of applying blood to the various altars and burning portions of the victim on the outer altar (the acts whereby the sacrifice is ultimately offered or given over to God) are weightier than other elements for effecting atonement—they are higher up, as it were, in the hierarchically structured process. This conclusion follows from the fact that these elements of the process, in contrast to that of slaughtering of the victim, 1) occur at and upon the various altars, and 2) can only be performed by priests.²⁰ To reduce Levitical sacrifice to the act of slaughtering a victim, which is not done on any of the altars, is a mistake.²¹

These points imply that one can speak about a sacrificial death/slaughter as an essential, constituent part of much Levitical sacrifice. To speak, however, of a sacrificial death is not to identify the death or slaughter itself as the sum total of a sacrifice.²² Furthermore, the data of Leviticus suggests that the central aspects of the sacrificial process, the weightier elements in the hierarchy, have to do with the priest moving through progressively more sacred space in the tabernacle/temple precinct in order to approach the various altars and thereby bring the material of the sacrifice into God's presence. Bringing the blood and parts or all of the body of the victim, depending on the sacrifice, into the presence of God by doing things with these elements at altars is at the center of the process. Sacrifice, in other words, is about giving the material of an offering, that is, the required elements of a particular offering, over to God. God's willingness to accept the gift stands at the conceptual and effectual core of the process.²³ When the biblical data

²⁰ So, e.g., Eberhart, *Sacrifice of Jesus*, 85; Gane, *Cult and Character*, 67.

²¹ In an attempt to avoid confusion, I try to speak consistently of "slaughter" or "sacrificial death/slaughter" when referring to the act of killing the victim, reserving the term *sacrifice* either for the larger process as a whole, or to identify either the acts of presentation, or the actual materials offered.

²² It seems reasonable to assume that one could speak metonymically about sacrifice, taking one of the various elements of the process to stand in for the whole, but such utterances would not ultimately abstract the named element from or set it against the process as a whole.

²³ The real problems with the sacrificial system occur when God refuses to receive or accept sacrifices that are offered to him (e.g., Lev 26:31; Jer 14:10–12; Hos 8:13–14; Amos 5:20–27). This is a curious datum if the center or

about sacrifice are so understood, Hebrews' emphasis on Jesus' entrance into the heavenly tabernacle where he appears before the Father in the heavenly holy of holies and presents himself as a sacrifice—that is, offers the Father himself, his living blood and flesh—coheres remarkably well with the accounts and logic of sacrifice as depicted in Leviticus. As modern people we may balk at such ideas, but that is hardly a concern of the author of Hebrews.

Sixth, I assume that the author works with a sustained, Pentateuchally-shaped narrative throughout his homily. The narrative singles out the death of Jesus as the event that frees the seed of Abraham from slavery. Like Moses' use of the blood at the first Passover, Jesus' death liberates the people of God from the one who enslaved them.²⁴ This is clearly a salvific act, one of the necessary events that constitute the people's salvation. In Pentateuchal terms, however, the act of liberation/exodus itself is neither the sum total of salvation for God's people, nor is Passover a Levitical offering for sacrificial atonement. The story of salvation, if one can put it that way, moves forward from the exodus to the inheritance. Thus, the basic outline of the Pentateuchal narrative in Hebrews involves a new Passover-like event in which Jesus defeats the devil, liberates his people, and inaugurates the new covenant for them.²⁵ These are the primary salvific functions of Jesus' death in Hebrews.²⁶ In keeping with these past events, the original

effective mechanism of sacrifice has to do with a penalty being borne by a substitute victim by way of its death. To point this out is not necessarily to suggest that some notion of penal substitution should therefore be removed from Christian accounts of Jesus' suffering and death, but rather to highlight that such a notion is not likely, in historical terms, to have developed out of or to have been assumed to function within the sphere of Jewish blood sacrifice. To attempt to read suffering and the centrality of death back into Jewish sacrifice leads to all manner of misunderstanding about sacrifice as Leviticus portrays it.

²⁴ I develop this argument in David M. Moffitt, "Modelled on Moses: Jesus' Death, Passover, and the Defeat of the Devil in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Die Idee des Mose: Eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Betrachtung einer Identitätsstiftenden Idee* (ed. V. Niederhofer, E. Eynikel and M. Sommer; WUNT 1/XX; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), XX–XX.

²⁵ For more detailed argumentation for this claim see David M. Moffitt, "Wilderness Identity and Pentateuchal Narrative: Distinguishing between Jesus' Inauguration and Maintenance of the New Covenant in Hebrews," in *Muted Voices of the New Testament: Readings in the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews* (ed. Katherine M. Hockey, Madison N. Pierce and Francis Watson; LNTS 565; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 153–71.

²⁶ Jared Compton has characterized my accounts of Jesus' elevation to his priestly office and of the function of Jesus' death in Hebrews as "reductive" and "overcooked" ("Review of *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in*

readers have become members of the new covenant who find themselves in a new wilderness-like period, simultaneously gathered around Mount Zion and waiting at the edge of their promised inheritance for their new Joshua to return to them. When Jesus appears again, he will bring salvation to his people (Heb 9:28) and they will receive the fullness of the inheritance and rest God has promised them (cf. Heb 1:14).

These six assumptions provide the stepping off point for the current study. Before proceeding, however, one caveat is in order about the word *atonement*. Atonement is a theological term, not a biblical one. As such, the word encapsulates a number of biblical terms and concepts relating to how Jesus brings God and humanity back into full fellowship (e.g., ransom, redemption, reconciliation, forgiveness, purification, propitiation). I work with a narrower notion of sacrificial or Levitical atonement, a qualification I make for the cultic language in Hebrews because the author himself so often highlights the high-priestly and sacrificial person and work of Jesus.²⁷ Sacrificial atonement has to do with offering God a gift in order to effect purification and/or obtain forgiveness for sins.²⁸

the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *TrinJ* 36 [2015]: 133–35). The criticism is more than a little ironic, given that Compton repeatedly intimates that I “reduce” Jesus’ death “simply” to an act of preparation for Jesus’ atoning work. In fact, while I focus on Jesus’ resurrection and entrance into the heavens, I state clearly in the book that “the death of Jesus can be seen as an event that accomplishes more than one thing in the argument [of Hebrews]” (Moffitt, *Atonement*, 285, see also the subsequent discussion of 285–95).

²⁷ I speak explicitly in *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection* about “Levitical atonement” (see esp. 256–57). I intentionally sought to avoid speaking in the book about “the atonement.” I did this in order to focus attention on Hebrews’ engagement with the Levitical logic, pattern of atoning sacrifice and priestly work when explaining when and where Jesus offers his high-priestly sacrifice and why, on Levitical-sacrificial terms, this offering correlates with his entrance into the heavenly holy of holies and appearance in God’s presence. This is not to say that Jesus’ high-priestly sacrifice is the sum total of the author’s soteriology (as if everything he says about salvation revolves solely around Jesus’ high-priestly work), but to point out that the author is not working with a broad, synthetic/systematic-theological account of *the* atonement when he explains Jesus’ high-priestly and sacrificial ministry. I reemphasize the point here because some reviewers appear to think that highlighting Hebrews’ attention on Jesus’ bringing the elements of his sacrifice, that is, himself, into God’s presence is a reductive account of atonement easily disproven by pointing to non-sacrificial occurrences of the language of atonement (e.g., Compton, “Review,” 134).

²⁸ To limit atonement only to what was accomplished when Jesus suffered and died leads to a reduction of the significance of the incarnation to the crucifixion (see, e.g., Stibbs, who identifies Jesus’ death as *the* purpose of the incarnation [*Finished Work*, esp. 28]). This reduction also leads to a confusion of biblical categories. The wide array of problems identified in scripture that prevent fellowship between God and humanity are, on such an account, all imagined as being solved solely by means of Jesus’ suffering and death. Reconciliation, redemption, propitiation,

Purification and forgiveness needed to occur in order for God's people to enter into covenant with him and, importantly, for them to remain in covenant relationship with him.²⁹ Central to the cultic system of the Mosaic covenant were those who crossed the boundaries between God and his people, that is, the priests, and drew near to God's presence to present the gifts and offerings they brought on behalf of the supplicants. The one who came closest to God was the high priest who, on Yom Kippur, entered the most holy place and thereby came more fully into God's earthly presence than any other human being. These elements are central to sacrificial atonement, which primarily aims to effect forgiveness and purification in order to maintain the covenant relationship, not least by enabling impure and guilty humans to approach God's presence, and by fulfilling the terms God himself has given whereby he condescends to be in covenant relationship with and to dwell among his people.

III. Jesus' High-Priestly Maintenance of the New Covenant

As just noted, the Levitical priests and sacrifices were essential to the maintenance of the covenant relationship between God and his people. They are key elements of the mechanism, as it were, that helps to ensure the continued health of the relationship between God and his people

purification, and forgiveness, to name some of the major biblical categories, basically become indistinguishable (if not in terms of the problems they address, then in terms of the solutions given in scripture to those problems). If, instead of trying to load everything onto the cross, we allow that Jesus is in himself the center of atonement (Jesus is the solution to all the problems that separate God and humanity, not the death of Jesus), then the entirety of the incarnation—Jesus' birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, session, and return—can be seen to contribute in particular ways to the atonement. Importantly, such an account would allow for distinct biblical problems to be solved by distinct aspects of the larger sweep of the incarnation. In the case of atoning sacrifice, rather than forcing this to be fundamentally about suffering and death, which Leviticus simply does not support (something that should matter if one wishes to avoid theologies that are essentially Gnostic and/or Marcionite), one could identify ways in which the logics of Jewish sacrifice and high-priestly ministry resolve particular problems that hinder divine-human relations.

²⁹ In keeping with Leviticus, these problems would particularly relate to the ongoing maintenance of the covenant relationship between God and his people. This appears to be Yom Kippur's *raison d'être*.

such that the people can dwell close to God and God condescends to remain in the midst of his people.

Hebrews, I suggest, understands these Levitical concepts and reflects on the new covenant and its high priest and sacrifice in terms that cohere with, are even informed by, the old covenant and its priests and sacrifices. Because Jesus ascended into the heavenly holy of holies and remains there, it follows for the author that Jesus is *the* high priest who can guarantee that the new covenant relationship is perpetually maintained, something no earthly high priest could do because of death and because the law never brought about perfection. The law, in other words, never made it possible for someone to enter the earthly holy of holies and remain there in God's presence, to say nothing of making it possible for a high priest to pass through the heavens and remain in the heavenly holy of holies. Moreover, as Heb 7:25 states, because Jesus is the high priest who always lives and is always at God's right hand, he is always able to intercede for his people and so is able to save them completely (εἰς τὸ παντελές).³⁰

The logic of Heb 7:25 implies that, were it the case that Jesus were not actively interceding for his people, their complete salvation would not be possible. Yet this implication suggests another: Jesus' followers are in need of ongoing atonement. The very work that the high priests on earth could do only once a year is done by Jesus perpetually. In contrast to the old covenant high priests, who were prevented by death from remaining in their office, Jesus' resurrection not only enables him to serve as the heavenly high priest but to do so *without interruption*. Thus, Jesus' high-priestly ministry brings a level of purity and forgiveness that exceeds that of the old covenant. Jesus' ministry ensures that the new covenant relationship is

³⁰ Given that Hebrews views salvation not as something one presently possesses, but as something one receives in the future (e.g., 1:14; 9:28), Jesus' continual intercession appears to be an essential part of his work that ensures that his people will be fully saved—they will successfully enter the promised inheritance. In all probability, this full salvation has to do with all God's people being resurrected when they are all perfected together (Heb 11:39–40).

fully maintained. As the one who is in himself both high priest and sacrificial offering, his very presence in God's presence secures the covenant relationship and ensures the salvation of its members.

This kind of activity is, it should also be noted, exactly what one would expect of a high priest in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur, at least in the late-second temple period.³¹ This is where and when the high priest makes supplication for the people as he offers the sacrificial blood. Indeed, supplication on behalf of the people and the other ritual acts performed in the holy of holies, including the offering of the blood, would be inseparable on Yom Kippur. The author of Hebrews conceives of the ongoing high-priestly work of Jesus along remarkably analogous lines. Jesus' ongoing high-priestly intercession works in ways that follow the pattern and logic of the annual work of the high priest in the earthly holy of holies.³² Insofar as the author reflects on Jesus in light of this Jewish holy day, he does so by highlighting both Jesus' presentation of himself to the Father in the heavens, where there is presumably an altar (cf. Heb 13:10) and where his ongoing work of intercession occurs (compare Heb 7:25 and 8:1–4). This makes also good sense of the metaphor in Heb 12:24 of Jesus sprinkling his blood. Here Jesus' role as

³¹ Philo identifies offering sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people as the main responsibilities of the priest and especially of the high priest (see the evidence and discussion in Jutta Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship in Philo of Alexandria* (TSAJ 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 228–33). Thus, Philo assumes that the high priest offers prayers when he goes into the holy of holies on Yom Kippur (*Legat.* 306; see also Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship*, 128–29). For additional evidence that the ministry of the high priest included offering sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the covenant people see Josephus, *Ant.* 3.189–191.

³² Milligan recognized this, too, writing with respect to Jesus' heavenly session: "What is [Jesus] about [i.e., doing]? He is not simply interceding on the strength of a past gift or sacrifice. He is presenting an offering on which his intercession is based, and in which it is involved. The idea of offering ... cannot be separated from the action of our Lord after His Ascension, unless we also separate the thought of offering from what was done by the high-priest of Israel in the innermost sanctuary of his people. Such a separation the ceremonial of the law does not permit. The Jewish high-priest ministered in that sanctuary with more than the recollection or the merit of an offering already made. He had to sprinkle on the mercy-seat and before the veil the blood which he carried in along with him; he had to complete the reconciliation of Israel to God. ... And all of this was part of the offering, not merely something done after the offering was ended. ... As, therefore, the Jewish priest continued his work of offering after he had gone within the veil, so, in similar circumstances, we must connect with [Jesus] in whom the economy of Judaism is fulfilled the idea of offering" (*The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord*, 122–23).

covenant mediator is correlated with the act of offering of his blood by way of sprinkling, an act which the author says “is speaking” (λαλοῦντι) a better word than Abel.³³

The preceding account of Hebrews’ sacrificial and high-priestly reflection on Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly holy of holies has the benefit of offering a historically plausible explanation of the development of early Christian reflection that deduced aspects of Christological and soteriological reflection from the very Jewish scriptures practices it cherished.³⁴ On this sort of reading, in other words, the confession of Jesus’ ascension into the heavens and the identification of Jesus as high priest has real content that would make sense to the earliest Christians in terms of their Jewish background. To assume that new and different conceptions of a high priest and of the way in which sacrifice functioned is at the roots of the earliest reflection on Jesus is not impossible, but such an account is much harder to explain historically.³⁵

³³ The comparison and contrast with Abel in this verse probably does not intend to highlight Abel’s death, as if Abel’s death were somehow compared to the sacrificial act of sprinkling blood in God’s presence. Rather, the parallel intends to recall Abel’s actual act of offering a sacrifice to God. Abel, in contrast to Cain, was the first one to offer a blood sacrifice to God. In Jewish terms, Abel was the first one to sprinkle sacrificial blood as an offering to God. God looked favorably on Abel and the sacrifices he offered (Gen 4:4; compare Heb 11:4). The point of Heb 12:24, in other words, is that God is more pleased by the better offering of Jesus than he was with the blood offering made by Abel (and by implication, with the Levitical sacrifices). Abel’s offering from the first-born of his flocks was good and God looked upon it, but Jesus’ act of presenting himself to God is even better.

³⁴ Stibbs appears not to see the historical problem with an interpretation of Jesus’ sacrifice and high-priestly ministry that bifurcates his high-priestly intercession from his act of presenting his sacrifice. Against those who highlight the need to hold the two together he argues that Jesus’ sacrifice “is unmistakably represented in Scripture as exclusively earthly and historical, the purpose of the incarnation ... by this once-for-all finished happening the necessary and intended atoning work was completely accomplished” (*Finished Work*, 8). He later adds that the idea that Jewish concepts of sacrifice and high-priestly ministry in the holy of holies suggest that offering and intercession belong together fails “to give due consideration to certain new facts in the New Testament fulfilment of the Old Testament figure, which completely alter the situation. Such a view is, indeed more Jewish than fully Christian, because it fails properly to appreciate the true ... perfection, and the consequent surpassing glory, of the priesthood of Christ compared with that of the Levitical system” (*Finished Work*, 22). Hebrews, he later affirms, demands the separation of offering and intercession in the case of Jesus (*Finished Work*, 32). In historical terms (to say nothing of the potential theological problems such a view raises), Stibbs’ account is highly implausible. He places the cart of a certain kind of later soteriological reflection before the horse of the actual appeal on the part of the earliest Christians to biblical and second-temple sacrificial practice as they seek to understand and explain the saving work of Jesus in terms of God’s prior revelation.

³⁵ One needs, too, to take seriously the possibility that the self-evidence of a reduction of all of Jesus’ sacrificial and atoning work to the cross is both anachronistic and potentially leads to a kind of diminution of the importance of the Jewish scriptures and practices for early Christian understandings of Jesus. This is still a long way from Marcion,

Additionally, the work of covenant maintenance by Jesus the heavenly high priest assumes, at least from the perspective of the author of Hebrews, that Jesus has not stepped outside of space and time, even if these are not precisely the same in the heavens as they are on earth. The central points to note here are 1) the reality and ongoing nature of the incarnation; and, 2) the confession in Hebrews that Jesus will return to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Heb 9:28). To take seriously the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus, as I have argued the author of Hebrews does, allows the inference that Jesus continues to be an embodied human being located in a particular place. For the author of Hebrews this place is the heavenly holy of holies at God's right hand. Furthermore, Hebrews looks ahead to a future time and place when Jesus is no longer absent from his brothers and sisters but returns to them, bringing their salvation with him.

This last point is worthy of more reflection. There has been a tendency in Hebrews' scholarship, especially after Ernst Käsemann's influential book, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief*, to assume that Hebrews is about pilgrimage, forward motion that leads one out of the world and into God's presence where Jesus is. God's people wander through this life but are ultimately headed towards their inheritance. The goal is for God's people to endure their earthly suffering and be released into the salvation of the heavenly inheritance. They will one day join Jesus where he sits in the heavenly world to come.

But such a conception struggles to incorporate Heb 9:28, where the author does not say that Jesus will bring his people to himself by leading them out of the wilderness and through the heavens to where he is, but rather that Jesus will appear again to be present with his people

but there are nevertheless real theological concerns that need to be borne in mind if one wants to confess that the God who revealed the tabernacle, priesthood and sacrificial system to Moses is the same God who appointed Jesus to the status of sacrifice and high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, but meant something entirely different by the terms *sacrifice* and *high priest* than what he revealed to his people in the Mosaic law.

where they are waiting for him. Hebrews does not envision the wandering people of God but the waiting people of God.³⁶ This coheres with the writer’s admonition for the readers to exhort each other as they see the day “drawing near” (ἐγγίζουσιν, 10:25), and with his reminder that in just a little while, the one for whom they wait “will come” (ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἥξει, 10:37). In Heb 11:10 the author even describes Abraham as “waiting” (ἐξεδέχετο) for the city without foundations. The English translation tradition mutes the point, tending to render the verb ἐδέχομαι in terms of “looking for/forward to” (KJV, RSV, NIV, ESV). The notion of expectation is plainly present, but as several commentators note, the Jewish apocalyptic idea of waiting for the heavenly Jerusalem is the chief point in play here (see Heb 11:16; 12:22).³⁷ This does not prove that Hebrews envisioned the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem as in, for example, Rev 21:2, 10. The idea is hardly implausible, however, when considered in light of Heb 9:28, particularly given the close collocation in Hebrews of salvation and obtaining the promised inheritance (e.g., 1:14). If the promised inheritance includes receiving the heavenly city, and if receiving this inheritance is at least part of what the writer considers to be constitutive of salvation, then it seems plausible to interpret the idea of Jesus appearing a second time for the salvation of those who wait for him in terms of his bringing the heavenly city to his waiting people. All of this coheres well with the

³⁶ Otfried Hofius made this point forcefully in his volume entitled *Katapausis: Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief* (WUNT 1/11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1970). With respect to this very point he writes, “[D]ie Gemeinde [ist] nicht als das zum Himmel wandernde, wohl aber als das auf die Heilsvollendung wartende Gottesvolk gesehen, und der Verfasser will dieses Volk ... mit aller Dringlichkeit dazu aufrufen, die Erwartung nicht preiszugeben, der allein die Erfüllung verheißen ist” (*Katapausis*, 150, emphasis original).

³⁷ E.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 323–24; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 486. Erich Grässer agrees that Abraham is here depicted as waiting for the heavenly city, but argues that the city’s ultimate transcendence in Hebrews means that even here the idea of wandering rather than waiting is primary (*An die Hebräer* [EKK 17; Zurich: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1997], 3:127; see also Erich Grässer, “Das wandernde Gottesvolk Zum Basismotiv des Hebräerbriefes,” in *Aufbruch und Verheißung: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Hebräerbrief* [ed. Martin Evang and Otto Merk; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992], 231–50).

author's claim that here the audience does not have a permanent city, but seeks instead the one that is coming (τὴν μέλλουσσαν, Heb 13:14).

Furthermore, it is unclear why the idea of a final shaking of the earth and heavens and the removal of created things (Heb 12:27) cannot cohere with the idea of Jesus returning to his people and bringing them their inheritance. The very fact that author says in 12:27 that the removal of the shakable things is done in order to allow the unshakable things to remain (ἵνα μένη) implies that these unshakable things are not Platonic, eternal realities. If the author meant something like the latter idea his statement is nonsensical. How can the removal of the present creation impinge in any way on the ability of the unshakable things to remain?³⁸ A more satisfying account of the verse would seem to be foreshadowed in Heb 1:12, where the citation of Ps 102:26 implies that the present created things will be changed, like a garment. The image is not one of simple removal, but of replacement (cf. Rev 21:1).

Be that as it may, the waiting motif of 9:28 correlates well with the Pentateuchal narrative the author develops in his epistle. It may be tempting to assume that being in the wilderness must imply the forty years of wandering. The author, however, locates his audience in a time and place in the wilderness narrative prior to the failure of the exodus generation at Kadesh Barnea.³⁹ Even as he discusses that generation as a negative example in Heb 3:15–4:7, he focuses not on

³⁸ Most commentators recognize that Hebrews, if it works with a version of a Platonic dualism, does not do so in a thoroughgoing way (e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 383; James W. Thompson, *Hebrews* [Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 268–69). I continue, however, to maintain that Hebrews' confession of Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension suggests that the author does not work with an earthly material/flesh vs. heavenly/spiritual dualism (see Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, esp. 300–3).

³⁹ Albert Vanhoye places more emphasis on Hebrews' call to enter the promised rest than on the motif of waiting for salvation ("Longue marche ou accès tout proche?: Le contexte biblique de Hébreux 3,7–4,11," *Biblica* 49 [1968]: 9–26). Nevertheless, he recognizes that wandering is not the right conceptual category for Hebrews. In his words, "La situation religieuse des chrétiens est comparée à celle des Israélites arrivés aux portes du pays. Il n'est plus question d'un chemin interminable, mais des derniers pas à franchir: le moment est venu de passer du désert au royaume de Dieu" ("Longue marche," 17).

their wandering but on their failure to obtain the promised inheritance,⁴⁰ a failure that resulted in the forty years of wandering and that generation's loss of the inheritance. The equivalent act of unbelief for the contemporary audience would be falling away from the community of the faithful and its confession about Jesus. For this author, to wander in the wilderness is tantamount to having lost already the opportunity of the "today" of Ps 95.⁴¹

None of this is to suggest a neat one-to-one correspondence between the broad narrative of the Pentateuch and the wilderness metaphor the author of Hebrews develops. Hebrews works more freely with the Pentateuchal narrative than that and does not have trouble conflating elements from these texts and from other scriptural passages. But there is a macro-level structure here. As stated above, the broad Pentateuchal narrative of liberation from the enslavement, inauguration of the covenant and the tabernacle, establishment and inauguration of the means and practices of ongoing worship, and waiting in the wilderness to receive the promised inheritance forms the structure the author uses to locate followers of Jesus in relation to their past, present and eschatological hope.

Just here, however, in the waiting in the wilderness, the notion of covenant maintenance and ongoing high-priestly intercession makes so much sense. In the wilderness, even before the forty years of wandering, God's people experienced tests and trials.⁴² The readers of Hebrews

⁴⁰ Hofius notes that the author's use of Ps 94 LXX does not even emphasize the journey from Egypt to the edge of the promised land but rather the actions and judgment of the people at Kadesh Barnea: "Ihn beschäftigt im Hinblick auf die Wüstengeneration einzig und allein das Geschehen bei Kades-Barnea, während die vorausgegangene Wüstenwanderung als solche für ihn gänzlich außerhalb des Interesses liegt. Auch an den beiden Stellen 3,9 und 3,16, wo an die Zeit des Exodus erinnert wird, ist auf die Wanderung selbst kein Bezug genommen" (*Katapausis*, 144).

⁴¹ Again, Hofius saw the point clearly commenting that the wilderness generation "ist ... dem auctor ad Hebraeos ein eindringlichen Beispiel für die *Unmöglichkeit der zweiten Buße*. Für den, der von Gott abgefallen ist, gibt es keine Möglichkeit der Umkehr mehr" (*Katapausis*, 137, emphasis original). Vanhoye similarly observes that the wandering Israelites "loin d'être proposées en exemple aux fidèles, elles constituent le châtement des incrédules, de ceux qui refusent l'invitation divine à entrer. Ceux-là sont renvoyés dans le désert pour y errer indéfiniment jusqu'à y mourir. ... Leur sort ne représente pas la vie chrétienne, mais la damnation" ("Longue marche," 17–18).

⁴² See Exod 15:25; 16:4; 20:20.

continue to face the problems of sin, death and persecution. What is needed above all else in this wilderness moment is ongoing intercession, some way in which they are being made perfect and being sanctified while they wait for their inheritance.⁴³ This is part of the hermeneutical dynamic in play in Hebrews. Hebrews, more than any other NT text, shows how the high-priestly work of Jesus is now keeping God's people safe in the wilderness, ensuring that they can approach their exalted high priest boldly in times of need, and interceding for them such that they will be saved completely and will be able to enjoy the inheritance God has promised his people.

To summarize thus far, the affirmation in Heb 9:28 that Jesus will appear again to bring salvation to those waiting for him implies, as one can deduce from Heb 7:25, that the work of salvation is presently ongoing. Jesus is appealing to God for his brothers and sisters. This intercession ensures their full salvation. Not only can this be inferred from 7:25, but the language in 2:11 that speaks of Jesus as the one who sanctifies those who are being sanctified (οἱ ἁγιαζόμενοι) appears to hint at this dynamic too. I suspect further that this offers the best interpretation of Heb 13:20–21 where, unlike the NIV's incomprehensible translation to the effect that the blood of the covenant brought Jesus back from the dead, the point is more likely to be that the blood of the covenant is the means by which God's people are being equipped to please God by doing his will. Jesus' ongoing high-priestly intercession is making God's people perfect—doing what the sacrifices and ministry of the priests in the old covenant aimed to do, but ultimately could not do in such a way as to bring perfection (see Heb 7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:1).

⁴³ If this is correct, it suggests that Jesus' continuing absence from his people was not primarily a problem to be solved, but an opportunity for creative Christological reflection. If one knows where Jesus has gone—to God's right hand in the highest heaven, that is, into the heavenly holy of holies—then one can deduce things about who he is and what he is doing: he must be a high priest and he must be performing priestly service on behalf of his people. All of this deduction was in dialogue with scripture. Texts like Ps 110 would naturally rise to the foreground, but, at least for the author of Hebrews, so did biblical notions of priestly service and priestly legitimation as one places the confession of Jesus' high-priestly status up against God's past revelation in the Mosaic law.

IV. The Once-For-All-Ness of Jesus' Sacrifice and the Inability to Return to the Covenant

The preceding discussion is likely to raise a number of questions, but two are especially obvious. First, how does this account cohere with the “once-for-all” language in Hebrews and the language of Jesus sitting at God’s right hand *after* having accomplished purification and forgiveness for sins? Texts like Heb 1:3 and 10:10–18 might appear, *prima facie*, to disallow the arguments made above. Second, if Jesus is interceding for his people and thereby maintaining the covenant, how is it that the author can envision the possibility of some falling away from this relationship without any means for restoration?

To take the initial question first, two points can be made. The failure of the old covenant fully to remove sin implies that there are numerous sins of the past that need to be dealt with in order for the new covenant to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The Jer 31 text cited in Hebrews makes this very point—in the new covenant, the sins and lawless deeds of the past are no longer remembered. At the very least, Jesus’ act of sacrificial presentation aimed at dealing fully with certain past sins.⁴⁴

More, however, seems to be implied in the unqualified language of 1:3 and 10:10ff. I suggest that the resolution of the apparent tension between these texts and 7:25 is to be found in the recognition that Jesus is, in his resurrected self, both the high priest and the sacrifice of the new covenant. Given that the covenant people are continuing to be sanctified (2:11; 10:14), continue to wait for their perfection (11:39–40), and will ultimately be saved completely, Hebrews assumes that there continues to be a need for their ongoing forgiveness and purification

⁴⁴ One wonders if this may be one of the aspects of Jesus’ sacrificial work that is implied in the author’s comment in 9:23 that the heavenly things themselves required purification.

even after their initial purification upon entering the covenant.⁴⁵ This is part of the dynamic of their present status as those who wait in the wilderness for Jesus to return to them.

Jesus performs this ongoing ministry by being in himself both the high priest and the sacrifice who sits at the Father's right hand. Because he remains in the Father's presence, his sacrificial, atoning work is perpetual. This is partly why there can be no repetition of Jesus' sacrifice—he never has to leave the presence of the Father and then return again in order to present himself again. The once-for-all-ness of Jesus' presentation of himself is correlated with the once-for-all-ness of his death, resurrection and ascension. There can be no repetition of the process of his sacrifice within the once-for-all-ness of the incarnation, for the risen Jesus cannot leave the Father in order to again take up blood and flesh, die, rise again and return again to the heavenly holy of holies.

Further, the idea in Heb 10:14 that Jesus makes perfect those who are being sanctified appears to restate the claim made in 2:11. Jesus is the one who, by means of his one sacrifice, perfects those who are in the process of being sanctified. If this is right, then the point of 10:14 is not, as in many English translations, that this work of perfection is fully completed for all time, but rather that Jesus is now in the state of making his people perfect. This would correlate perfectly with the idea that he is the high priest who now intercedes for his people. Similarly, in 10:10, his people are said to be in the state of being sanctified by means of his one offering. The idea that his brothers and sisters are being sanctified coheres well with the interpretations of 2:11, 7:25, 12:24 and 13:20–21 offered above. If, as I have argued elsewhere, the author of Hebrews thinks the perfection of humanity lies ultimately in the eschatological resurrection of

⁴⁵ This initial purification may well be what the author has in mind in 10:29 when he speaks of apostates in terms of counting the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified as profane.

the body and reception of the eternal inheritance, as is also the case with Jesus' own perfection,⁴⁶ this again coheres with the resolution of the apparent tensions between these texts. Jesus is the sanctifier who is making his people perfect. His people are being sanctified while they wait for him to perfect them and bring them the inheritance of their salvation. This ongoing work of making his people holy and perfect follows directly from Jesus' ongoing work of interceding for them as their high priest. This high-priestly work is the means by which will be saved completely such that they will receive the fullness of the inheritance promised to them. Jesus' high-priestly ministry, in other words, ensures that the great narrative of salvation in the Pentateuch will come to its intended denouement and God and his people will dwell together in the unshakable inheritance.

As for the impossibility of restoring those who fall away, Hebrews appears to take a different approach than does Paul, for example, on the question of being able to be removed from the covenant relationship. Paul also seems to have a concept of Jesus performing the high-priestly work at God's right hand. He says in Rom 8:34 that Christ Jesus who died, but even more who was raised, is now at the right of God interceding for his people. On the basis of this intercession, those who follow Jesus, presumably those who confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9), cannot be condemned. Paul goes on to affirm in Rom 8:35–39 that nothing is therefore able to separate those whom Christ loves from

⁴⁶ Hebrews is not a unique witness in the New Testament to Jesus' ongoing work of forgiveness and purification for his people in the Father's presence. The idea appears in 1 John 1:7–2:2 as well. The collocation of Jesus' blood, confession of sin, forgiveness of sins and purification in 1 John 1:7–9 suggests the author reflects on Jesus' ongoing work of forgiveness and purification in terms of Jewish sacrificial categories. That the author thinks believers need ongoing forgiveness and purification from sins becomes particularly clear in 2:1. He states there that he is writing to believers ("my little children") in order to encourage them not to sin, the obvious aim or ideal. If, however, they do sin, their sins can be dealt with by means of Jesus' ongoing advocacy for them before the Father. This ongoing advocacy is possible because, the author suggests in 2:2, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice (ἱλασμός) for their sins. The point appears to be that Jesus is the advocate who can intercede for his people when they sin because he is the atoning sacrifice for their sins who is alive and with the Father right now. This looks remarkably like the notions of Jesus' high-priestly ministry and ongoing work of covenant maintenance one finds in Hebrews.

God. Jesus' ongoing intercession means that the saving relationship between God and his people cannot be broken. This looks like a concept covenant maintenance the mechanism of which is nothing less than Jesus' ongoing intercession. Hebrews, however, seems to argue that the people of the new covenant can effectively remove themselves from the covenant relationship. They can repudiate their confession (4:14; 10:23). They can give up meeting together with the rest of the community (Heb 10:25). They can go on sinning willfully (Heb 10:26). Should these things happen, they could find themselves in a position like Israel after their failure at Kadesh Barnea—wandering in the wilderness without hope of receiving the promised inheritance. It appears to be the case in Hebrews that just as Jesus' work of liberating his people, inaugurating the new covenant, and entering into the Father's presence unrepeatable, so also one's entrance into this covenant and community cannot be repeated.

V. Conclusion

If the preceding arguments are correct, Hebrews assumes that the new and living way to God opened by Jesus consists in a life of ongoing cultic relationship within the context of the new covenant. This relationship revolves around worship that involves and is made possible by the perpetual ministry of the great high priest Jesus, the Son of God, in the heavenly tabernacle. This high priest, who is always also the sacrifice offered to God, intercedes on behalf of his brothers and sisters. Because of his resurrection and passing through the heavens, Jesus, who is always the crucified one, is interceding for his brothers and sisters. He, as Gregory of Nazianzus puts it, continues even now to wear that body that died and was resurrected. This is why even now he can intercede for his people's salvation. In this sense, the sacrificial work of Jesus is not finished. The fact of his ongoing presence with the Father and physical absence from his people means

that he is working on their behalf as their high priest mediating and maintaining the new covenant relationship. So long as Jesus remains in the heavenly holy of holies and so long as his people are waiting in their own new-wilderness state for their perfection and are in the process of being sanctified, Jesus' high-priestly intercession continues. For the author of Hebrews, the return of the high priest to his waiting people will mark the point at which they finally obtain the salvation that all of Jesus' incarnate work guarantees them.