

Jesus as Interceding High Priest and Sacrifice in Hebrews: A Response to Nicholas Moore

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Abstract

Is Jesus' perpetual intercession for his people in Hebrews (Heb. 7.25) understood as a constitutive part of his atoning, high-priestly ministry? Nicholas Moore argues that Jesus' act of sitting at God's right hand is the decisive end of Jesus' atoning sacrifice and so also of Hebrews' Yom Kippur analogy. Among other points, I argue in response that Jesus' ongoing absence from his people, status as high priest and current location in the heavenly holy of holies imply that Hebrews' Yom Kippur analogy extends beyond Jesus' act of sitting to include his present ministry of intercession. Not only were prayer and atoning sacrifice closely correlated for Second Temple Jews, Hebrews presents Jesus as the high priest who, in his resurrected humanity, is always also the sacrifice in the Father's presence. Jesus presented himself to the Father once, but he is perpetually the high priest and sacrifice who ministers in God's presence. For Hebrews, the Yom Kippur analogy (and so also Jesus' atoning ministry) ends when, like the earthly high priests, Jesus leaves the heavenly holy of holies to return to and again be present with his people (Heb. 9.28). Only then will his followers receive the salvation for which they are waiting. Until that approaching day arrives, Jesus' ongoing intercession with his Father ensures that his people will be saved completely.

Keywords

Day of Atonement, eschatology, Hebrews, high priest, intercession, sacrifice

1. Introduction

Nicholas Moore offers his insightful article, 'Sacrifice, Session, and Intercession: The End of Christ's Offering in Hebrews' (2020), in the spirit of critical dialogue with some of my own arguments about how to interpret Jesus' ongoing

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high-priestly ministry in Hebrews. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Moore's excellent essay and hope that our collegial dialogue will contribute to a better understanding of this early Christian text.

Moore bases his article around two important and related questions: (1) How does Jesus' heavenly session in Hebrews correlate with his offering? (2) Should Christ's ongoing intercession be viewed as an expression of his sacrificial work, or should his atoning ministry be seen to be distinct from his intercession? These questions nicely focus the discussion by highlighting the fundamental issue around which Moore and I disagree – the point at which Jesus' atoning ministry in the heavenly holy of holies can be said to be completed. In answering the two questions he poses, Moore argues that Jesus' Yom Kippur ministry is definitively shown to have ended when he sat at God's right hand. Jesus' ongoing intercession in the heavenly holy of holies is not, therefore, part of his atoning ministry on behalf of his people. By way of contrast, I have argued that Jesus' intercession is part of his ongoing Yom Kippur ministry. Jesus, who is himself the sacrifice, continues to do the atoning work necessary to maintain the new covenant he inaugurated when he died. So long as he remains in the heavenly holy of holies, his atoning ministry on behalf of his people is not finished.¹

2. Moore's Central Arguments

One of Moore's central arguments is that Jesus' act of sitting at God's right hand functions as a clear signal that Jesus' sacrificial work has ended. Jesus' work of atonement and that of his royal session are, Moore avers, completely distinct activities. Moore notes that in the case of the earthly Day of Atonement 'the obvious signal' that the sacrificial ministry in the holy of holies had ended would be 'the high priest's emergence from the most holy place'. Hebrews has replaced this sign with a new, unprecedented one – Jesus' taking his seat at the Father's right hand. Since Jesus' sacrificial ministry in Hebrews is shown to be finished by his sitting upon the heavenly throne, it follows that the ongoing intercession of Christ (Heb. 7.25) cannot be part of his Yom Kippur ministry. The sacrificial work of Jesus precedes the commencement of his heavenly session as the now reigning Messiah waiting for his enemies to be subdued. Moore suggests further that Hebrews' reflection on Jesus' high-priestly intercession innovatively draws from the pattern of the *tamid* sacrifice not that of the atoning work of Yom Kippur. Jesus' intercession does not, therefore, have anything to do with atonement (in terms of dealing with sins), but aims instead to provide his people with a means for 'present aid in perseverance'. Jesus' intercession helps his people avoid falling away by offering them help in their time of need.

1. See especially Moffitt 2019, with which Moore engages.

Among the points Moore raises in support of these larger conclusions is the fact that positive evidence for one of the assumptions that I find highly plausible, that Second Temple Jews could have thought that the high priest prayed for them when he was in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur, is very thin. Indeed, the only positive evidence comes from Philo's *De Legatione ad Gaium*.² Moore argues, however, that this evidence is inconsequential for the claim that the high priests were thought to pray in the holy of holies. Philo, Moore suggests, is likely concocting this account of the high priest's activity for his own political ends. This evidence does not, therefore, offer any insight into what Jews of the time might have thought the high priest did in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur.

3. Three Responses

Astute readers of our work will recognize that Moore and I agree on a great many points. We agree on far more, I think, than we disagree. Indeed, it would be tedious to enumerate all the areas where we are fundamentally in agreement regarding how to interpret Hebrews. I turn, therefore, to offer three responses to Moore's thoughtful challenges, focusing my response on some particular areas of disagreement between us. These differences concern: (1) the meaning of Heb. 7.26-28, (2) the significance of Heb. 9.28 in the context of the author's Yom Kippur analogy and (3) a point about abductive reasoning and 'gap filling'.

3.1 Hebrews 7.26-28: The Nature of the Heavenly High Priest

I do not agree with Moore's interpretation of Heb. 7.26-27. Moore argues that these verses mark a shift from an emphasis on Jesus' immortality to an emphasis on 'the completed nature of Christ's work'. Moore and I agree that these verses function as a transition. They constitute the conclusion to the entire discussion of Heb. 7. They also serve as the transition into the lengthy discussion of the covenant Jesus inaugurated and mediates (roughly Heb. 8) and the high-priestly ministry that he performs within the context of that covenant (roughly Heb. 9). As such, however, they focus not on the completion of Jesus' atoning work, but on (1) the nature of Christ himself as the immortal and ascended high priest and (2) the ministry that his superior nature and status allow him to perform.³ That

2. I also note this as the instance of positive evidence for high-priestly prayer in the holy of holies (Moffitt 2019: 168 n. 31), though I locate this evidence within the larger apparent pattern in Philo of sacrifice and prayer being tightly bound together as constituent elements of priestly ministry. I return to this point below.

3. It should be noted that *τοιοῦτος ... ἀρχιερεύς* is the subject of the main clause of v. 26, and of the relative clause of v. 27, being the antecedent of *ὅς*. The ministry Jesus performs as the heavenly high priest is the topic of the relative clause of v. 27. The logically subordinate finite clause that follows identifies one element of that ministry, namely, Jesus' act of offering himself to the Father. This is not, however, the sum total of Jesus' high-priestly ministry in Hebrews, a point with which Moore would agree.

is to say, these verses continue to assume and participate in the larger contrast between the mortal nature of the many high priests on earth, the effects of whose ministry is limited by death, and the immortality of Jesus the high priest whose ministry is not hindered by death.

The contrast between death and immortality runs right through Heb. 7 (compare 7.3, 8, 15-19, 23-25). The conclusion to the thought of vv. 26-27 (see γάρ, v. 28), and indeed to the argument of the chapter, reinforces this contrast by depicting the high priests whom the law appoints as weak (i.e., subject to death) and the one appointed by the word of the oath as 'having been made perfect forever' (i.e., no longer subject to death). Within the context of this concern with death and life, then, the point of vv. 26-27 is not to show that Jesus' work is completed, but to show that the superiority of Jesus, the forever perfected high priest, is appropriate for the superior sacrifice and service he offers. All of this stands in contrast with the ministry and sacrifices offered by the many high priests on earth who, because they are subject to death, cannot remain in their offices forever. That the nature of Jesus' high priesthood, not his finished work, is the focus here is confirmed in 8.1. The main point of what the author has been saying, therefore, is not that Jesus' work is fully completed, but that Jesus is the kind of high priest who is able to enter the heavenly sanctuary in order there to minister as the high priest before the Father.

One *might* deduce that the reference to Jesus' once-for-all offering of himself (v. 27) means his sacrificial work is completed, but then again, one might not. Since, *contra* Moore, the completion of Jesus' work is not the point of these verses, one might just as well view the once-for-all offering of Jesus as being thought to be superior to the many, repeated offerings of the many high priests on earth precisely because, like the high priest who offers it, it is a sacrifice that is timeless (the kind of conclusion that a figure like Cody would endorse). Equally, however, and this is the interpretation I think most likely, the second clause of v. 27 could be understood to highlight Jesus' once-for-all *act of presenting himself* as the sacrifice to God. In terms of the larger thought world of Hebrews, this would be the moment when the ascended Jesus presents himself to the Father in the heavenly holy of holies. Here, then, Moore and I agree. On this reading, however, it seems to me that we still find ourselves faced with the very interpretive choice about which we disagree: is this singular act of presentation also the end of Jesus' atoning, Yom Kippur ministry, or does that atoning ministry continue throughout Jesus' heavenly session precisely in his ongoing work of intercession? There are reasons to think that the latter conclusion better harmonizes with the tensions that Moore and I both recognize are a part of Hebrews' soteriology.

3.2 Hebrews 9.28 and Jesus' Departure from the Heavenly Holy of Holies

In my view, one of the chief reasons to think that Yom Kippur is still in play in Hebrews' understanding of Jesus' session is the emphasis on Jesus' return to his waiting people in Heb. 9.28. Both Moore and I agree that Yom Kippur is not the only cultic influence on our author's theological imagination. We also agree that even when the author draws upon Yom Kippur, he does not work with a rigid one-to-one correspondence between Jesus' atoning work and that of the earthly high priest.

We disagree, however, as to the extent to which Yom Kippur is determinative for the author's understanding of Jesus' high-priestly ministry. I continue to think that Yom Kippur is by far the most dominant and pervasive cultic motif for the author as he reflects on Jesus' role and work in the heavenly holy of holies. One way in which our different understandings of the influence of Yom Kippur impacts the interpretation of Hebrews concerns the question of when Hebrews imagines Jesus' Yom Kippur ministry to have come to an end. For Moore, Jesus' act of sitting is the decisive moment that signals the end of Jesus' Yom Kippur ministry, particularly given that Hebrews does not depict Jesus leaving the heavenly holy of holies. I argue below, however, that Yom Kippur continues to play a key role in Hebrews' conception of Jesus' heavenly session.

I begin by noting that Hebrews *does* envision Jesus' departure from the heavenly holy of holies. The author points to this when he speaks in Heb. 9.28 of Jesus appearing to his people a second time. Hebrews' incarnational Christology assumes the following plotline about the divine Son: the Son, through whom the Father created all things, left the Father's heavenly presence in order to take up the blood and flesh of the seed of Abraham. This in turn allowed him to liberate God's people from slavery and inaugurate the new covenant by his death. In his resurrection, he became the great high priest for his siblings. In his ascension, he returned to the Father, now as the first perfected human being. There, as the glorified human being, he has been elevated to the pinnacle of the created order. He returned to the Father in order to perform his high-priestly ministry in the heavenly tabernacle and take his seat at God's right hand. He is now performing his high-priestly ministry on behalf of his brothers and sisters. While he remains with the Father, he is the reigning king and interceding high priest in the heavenly holy of holies. At some point, however, he will leave that space and appear again to his people. This moment is *in the future* for the author. This second appearance of the Son is the moment when the high priest Jesus leaves the heavenly holy of holies to return to his people, who are waiting for him to come back to them. He will then bring them the salvation that the full sweep of his incarnation has made possible for them.

Locating Heb. 9.28 in the context of this larger, implicit narrative suggests, however, that the author has not in fact dropped the Yom Kippur pattern and replaced it with something else. Rather, while the author may well be drawing on other elements of high-priestly ministry and royal enthronement to fill out his understanding of Jesus' ongoing work in the heavenly holy of holies, these elements are still situated within the controlling Yom Kippur motif precisely because *Jesus has not yet left the space where the high priest ministers on the Day of Atonement* – the holy of holies. This, however, would further suggest that Jesus' atoning ministry is not in fact finished, a point that appears to align well with the logic of Heb. 7.25.

This larger point also aligns well with the relational, covenant dynamics that Hebrews seems to presuppose. Jesus' intercession is, I have argued elsewhere, the means by which the new covenant is being maintained.⁴ Indeed, one might ask the question, what would happen should Jesus stop interceding for his people? What would happen were he not a merciful and *faithful* high priest? Implicitly, the claim in Heb. 7.25 that his ongoing intercession enables his people to be saved completely suggests that were he to stop that intercession before full salvation were accomplished, his people would not receive the inheritance/salvation promised to them. This encourages the conclusion that Jesus' present work as high priest *now* enables his people to approach the throne of grace boldly, precisely because he continues to sanctify them and lead them into perfection. To be sure, all that needed to be forgiven and purified in the past has been decisively dealt with by Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. This is part of what was needed to free the seed of Abraham from slavery and inaugurate the new covenant. But within the dynamics of that covenantal relationship, Jesus' ongoing intercession is the means by which God's people are kept and enabled to persevere while they wait ultimately for him to return to them and bring them their salvation.

It seems to me, then, that the two ideas that (1) Jesus is the high priest who is now interceding for his people in the heavenly holy of holies in such a way as to save them completely (7.25) and that (2) Jesus will one day leave this place to return to his people in order to bring them their salvation (esp. 9.28) continue to participate in a broadly coherent analogy that draws on the general pattern of the earthly high priest's atoning work on Yom Kippur, particularly with respect to the dynamics of the covenant relationship Jesus mediates.

To put the point in different terms, the present, physical absence of Jesus from the earthly congregation to which Hebrews is addressed aligns well with the earthly high priest's absence from the people as he enters the holy of holies in order to perform the very atoning ministry that the people need to continue in

4. I argue for this conclusion in Moffitt 2017.

covenant relationship with God. Only once his ministry there is finished does the high priest leave the temple sancta and return to the people. On this account, Jesus' future return to his waiting people correlates with the conclusion of the high priest's atoning ministry in the holy of holies. This is precisely why the author can say that when Jesus appears to his people a second time, it will not be to bear their sins (this was the purpose of his first coming to earth and subsequent entry into the heavenly tabernacle to serve there as their high priest), but to bring them their salvation (9.28). The Son's departure from the heavenly holy of holies a second time is the signal that the work that he has been doing for his people as their heavenly high priest is completed.

Moore suggests that kind of view just outlined represents an 'insufficiently realized eschatology'. It may be that in comparison to some other NT authors, Hebrews' eschatology is less realized. Yet, if the interpretation of 9.28 just offered is correct, then the problem would be that Moore presses an overly realized eschatology on the text, an eschatology that does not properly recognize the full significance of Jesus' return to his people in Hebrews in terms of the broader analogy the author draws with Yom Kippur and the larger account of their salvation.

This kind of back and forth between us could obviously run and run. Be that as it may, I am happy to agree with Moore that my understanding of Hebrews' eschatology, as this relates to the soteriology and high-priestly Christology espoused by the author, is less realized than Moore's own account is. It seems to me, however, that this 'less-realized' account coheres with the author's consistent view that salvation is not something God's people yet possess (e.g., 1.14; 3.14; 6.11-12; 7.25; 9.28; 10.25, 36; 11.39-40; 13.14). For what it is worth, this less-realized eschatology is one reason why the interpretation given above really has little in common with more Platonizing accounts of Hebrews. Hebrews does not envision Jesus having entered some kind of timeless realm where individuality and activity are nonsensical. Rather, as we see in apocalyptic texts, Hebrews envisions the heavens as full of spiritual beings engaged in cultic/worshipful activity. Jesus, as an embodied human being, has entered that time and space and is actively doing things there now. This is the place that in some sense his people can now access, but also from which he will one day return to them.

3.3 High-Priestly Prayer in the Holy of Holies: Interpretive Gap Filling

In the case of the high priest's activity in the earthly holy of holies, Moore and I disagree on the likelihood that Second Temple Jews could infer that, as part of his ministry, the high priest prayed for the people while in the holy of holies.

The issue here is not so much about positive evidence (and even less about what the high priest actually did). The issue concerns whether or not abductive reasoning is useful to fill the gaps or silences in the evidence concerning what the

high priest might be thought to have done in the holy of holies. The biblical texts say nothing about the high priest praying in the holy of holies. Indeed, apart from one reference in Philo, there is no positive evidence of this practice. Is it, therefore, mistaken to imagine that Second Temple Jews might infer that intercession for the people was in fact part of what the high priest did in the holy of holies?

I want to stress that I do not think the view for which I argue, that Jesus' ongoing sacrificial and intercessory work are bound together as part of his heavenly session, is problematized if in fact this understanding of the high priest's Yom Kippur session in the holy of holies is a *de novo* innovation of the author of Hebrews rather than an assumption based on the supposition that the high priest prayed for the people in the holy of holies. The question of whether or not there is substantial or only little positive, historical evidence for this supposition is not determinative for my interpretation of Hebrews. If, as Moore thinks the thin evidence implies, I am wrong to draw the inference that some Second Temple Jews could imagine the high priest praying for them in the holy of holies, it does not necessarily follow that Hebrews eschews the conclusion that Jesus' ongoing intercession is a constitutive part of his atoning, high-priestly ministry in the heavenly holy of holies.

Still, I would note that little positive evidence is not the same thing as zero positive evidence. Philo *does* offer some explicit positive evidence for the sort of deduction that I have suggested Second Temple Jews could draw – namely, that the high priest prayed in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur. I return to this point below. A word about Moore's claim that Hebrews innovates on the basis of the *tamid* is, however, in order first.

Even if Moore is correct that Hebrews' claim that Jesus intercedes for his people is an innovation based on the *tamid*, this innovation would continue to be heavily marked in Hebrews by the Day of Atonement precisely because of *who* Jesus is and *where* Jesus ministers. Jesus is the high priest (and sacrifice) in the heavenly holy of holies. There he now performs his high-priestly ministry (Heb. 8.1-4). It seems to me almost inconceivable that the collocation of this office (high priest) and ministry in this space (the holy of holies) would not evoke the Day of Atonement for Second Temple Jews. Jesus' sitting at the Father's right hand plainly offers an opportunity to disrupt this evocation, but Hebrews' larger emphasis on Jesus *remaining* who and where he is until he returns to his people seems to me to suggest that the conceptual disruption, whether it invokes the *tamid* or not, still participates in the more determinative Yom Kippur analogy.

One more comment about the *tamid*, however, needs to be made. Even if one agrees with Moore on this point, the association of Jesus' high-priestly intercession with this sacrifice would seem to support the deduction that high-priestly prayer could be closely linked with the act of offering atoning sacrifice, sacrifice that deals with sins. The *tamid* was a whole burnt offering. There is good evidence to suppose that it was thought to be an atoning sacrifice in the Second

Temple period.⁵ If prayer is closely associated with offering this sacrifice, it would seem to support a broader pattern for which I have argued: prayer is closely associated with the offering of atoning sacrifices. From this standpoint, that is, the *tamid* serves as one of those sacrifices that provides a more complete pattern of priestly ministry, a pattern from which a deduction could be drawn to fill in gaps about what the high priest could be thought to do when he offers the atoning sacrifice in the holy of holies. That is to say, if one were to innovate when thinking about the high priest's ministry in the holy of holies, it seems reasonable that one would draw from what one assumes to be the case for the high priest's ministry when he officiated at other atoning sacrifices. Knowing what priests do when offering such atoning sacrifices, in other words, would be useful for 'gap filling' where the biblical text is silent.

Be that as it may, Moore rightly notes that there is vanishingly little positive evidence for the supposition that the high priest prayed in the holy of holies. I would reiterate, however, that little evidence is not the same as no evidence. Moreover, the evidence we do have appears to follow the general point just made – because prayer and sacrifice were so closely associated as constitutive elements of the high priest's ministry, some might well assume that the high priests prayed in the holy of holies as they offered sacrifices there. In fact, this seems to be the deduction Philo has drawn when he speaks about the high priest praying for the world as he offers incense in the holy of holies (*Legat.* 306).

Moore suggests, however, that the evidence of Philo is essentially irrelevant to what the high priest actually did on the Day of Atonement, because Philo probably invented this comment to address the political needs of the situation. In the face of Gaius's threat to erect an image in the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem temple, the idea that this is the space where the high priest prays for the whole world might be an expedient strategy to dissuade Gaius from violating that space. As I noted above, however, my interest is not in what the high priest actually did, but on what people might have assumed or inferred that the high priest did. Regardless of what actually happened in the holy of holies, Philo seems to offer

5. The whole burnt offering could achieve atonement for individuals (Lev. 1.4). This idea seems to be picked up and applied to the *tamid*. Certainly, Jubilees views the *tamid* as an atoning sacrifice that deals with sins. In Jub. 6.14 the *tamid* is identified as being offered for the forgiveness of sins ('They shall keep it [i.e., the daily sacrifices] for their generations so that they might make supplication on your behalf with the blood before the altar on every day. And as the hour of daybreak and evening they will seek atonement on their own behalf continually before the LORD so that guard it and not be rooted out' (*OTP*). The link between supplication and blood manipulation here is worth noting. Similarly, in Jub. 50.11 the *tamid* is identified as an atoning sacrifice that is to be offered even on the Sabbath, though other work should not be done. Much later, some of the rabbis continue to think of the *tamid* as providing atonement (e.g., *Pesiq. Rab.* 16.7).

here positive evidence that it would be natural and appropriate to assume that the high priest offered prayer in the holy of holies.

If one queries the possible rationale for why Philo might have drawn this conclusion, it seems important to notice that, as with the pattern suggested above, prayer and sacrifice are tightly bound together in Philo (and in other Second Temple texts).⁶ When thinking about priestly ministry at the temple, the activities of prayer and offering sacrifice commonly hung together. Moore suggests that the context of a Roman violation of the temple sufficiently accounts for Philo's emphasis on the high priest's prayer for the world. This seems unlikely, however, given that Philo highlights this very ministry of the high priest in other passages as well (see esp. *Somn.* 1.215, but also later works such as *Spec.* 1.97).⁷ Irrespective of the political situation he faced when he went to Rome, Philo appears to assume (1) that sacrifice and prayer belong together and (2) that the high priest's ministry was for the entire cosmos. Given these two assumptions, it stands to reason that he would further assume that when the high priest offered sacrifice in the holy of holies (in this case the incense sacrifice), he prayed for the world. It seems, therefore, more plausible to suggest that Philo attests a deduction about the high priest's activity in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement that was drawn from the expectation that the high priest's sacrificial ministry there, as elsewhere, involved prayer.

4. Conclusion: Jesus as the Perpetually Present Sacrifice

I conclude with a comment on Hebrews' Christology in relation to the question of Jesus' sacrifice and intercession. It seems to me that Hebrews encourages a focus that rests as much, if not more, on the person of Jesus as it does on the atoning work of Jesus or on the events often thought to constitute that work. The ascension of the risen Jesus means that the elements of the sacrifice he takes into the heavenly holy of holies and offers there consist of his own living blood and flesh. His offering of himself means that what he presented to the Father when he first returned to the Father's heavenly presence was nothing less than the elements that make up his resurrected, human self. Thus, Jesus' sacrifice does not

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6. With respect to Philo, see the evidence amassed in Leonhardt 2001: esp. 128-32. Jeremy Penner, who looks more broadly at the Second Temple evidence, suggests that 'a general cultic "*imaginaire*" existed in the Second Temple period (and earlier), in which prayer and sacrifice were mutually inclusive and reciprocally beneficial' (Penner 2012: 69-70). This seems a helpful way to speak about what appears to be a pervasive collocation in the cultural encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism. When thinking about priestly ministry at the temple, prayer and sacrifice were bound together.
 7. It is possible that later works attest a shift in Philo's thinking about the high priest's ministry that occurred in the face of the events that led him to go to Rome. Earlier works would, however, require another explanation.

consist simply in the events or work that he performs. He is the sacrifice that he offers. That the resurrected Jesus is himself the offering he presents to the Father helps explain why his atoning work can be understood to be ongoing. By his very presence in the heavenly holy of holies, the sacrifice, Jesus himself, is perpetually in the Father's presence. If this rightly grasps Hebrews' understanding of Jesus as high priest and sacrifice, it implies further that Jesus' sacrifice cannot be reduced to the events of his death, or resurrection, or ascension, or heavenly presentation, or heavenly session. All of these events are part of his sacrificial work because he is, in his incarnate person, the sacrifice now present with the Father. This suggests that while Jesus is absent from his people, ordinary time, to use Moore's language, is atoning time. Now, while Jesus remains in the heavenly holy of holies, is the time when the great high priest is actively maintaining the covenant he inaugurated between his Father and his siblings. His ongoing ministry ensures that now his siblings can boldly approach his heavenly throne while they patiently await his return. Only then will they finally inherit their promised salvation.

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