

The Role of Jesus' Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Once Again: A Brief Response to Jean-René Moret

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I am grateful to *New Testament Studies* for allowing me to reply to Jean-René Moret's critical engagement with certain aspects of my 2011 book, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (henceforth *ALR*).¹

There are numerous points in Moret's article with which I take issue.² I will here limit my response to two general concerns. First, Moret has not grasped how resurrection and atonement are inextricably linked in my argument. My response to this concern is woven throughout the specific issues I address below. Second, Moret often does little to engage with the specific arguments/exegesis I present. The *modus operandi* of his critique tends instead toward citing scholarly opinions that differ from my views, even though I argue in *ALR* against many of those very opinions. It would be useful to know why Moret deems faulty the evidence and argumentation I offer in support of my interpretations, particularly since these arguments establish foundational elements for my understanding of the nature of Jesus' heavenly offering in

¹ I must also express gratitude to my student assistant, Amelia Da Gama, for her indispensable help in crafting this response.

² I here note six additional points: 1) Moret suggests that I set up a strawman concerning the role of death in some accounts of blood and sacrificial atonement. Yet, his own citation of Dunnill's comment about priests bringing 'the symbols of death, including blood into contact with the symbols of deity' (to say nothing of the evidence I give in my introduction and throughout *ALR*) suggests this is not a strawman after all. (As a side note, blood is not a symbol for life in Leviticus nor does it give life. Blood is life/the material that bears life, all of which belongs to God (and this is why all the blood/life is given to God. Just to sprinkle some of the blood without handing over all of the blood would not suffice for sacrifice).) 2) I disagree with Moret's reading of *Sifre* 128–129. The focus of the interpretation rests on the meaning of the verb *h#* (well rendered 'perform' by R. Hammer). The crucial point is that the slaughter of the Passover victim must be done with a view to the larger process, especially manipulating the blood. This is what it means to "perform" the Passover since, *Sifre* argues, both slaughter and sprinkling of blood are indispensable for an atoning sacrifice. Apart from that larger process, the slaughter of the lamb would just be a slaughter, not performing the Passover. 3) I am not aware of any place where I claim that Jesus' death is "only" or "merely" anything, let alone "only" preparation for offering his sacrifice. In fact, I speak at length about Jesus' death as, among other things, the event that inaugurates the new covenant. An inaugurating sacrifice, however, functions differently from the regular sacrifices and from those on Yom Kippur. The latter serve to maintain, not inaugurate, the covenant relationship. Remarkably, the Levitical logic that requires one to first inaugurate the Mosaic covenant and tabernacle before offering the sacrifices that maintain the covenant coheres with the notion that Jesus first died to inaugurate the new covenant and then ascended to offer the Yom Kippur sacrifice and intercession that maintains it. 4) I cannot understand what it means to suggest that the act of the high priest interceding in the holy of holies on behalf of God's people can be neatly separated/distinguished from the act of offering sacrifice to God. The high priest can only intercede on behalf of the people in the holy of holies when he is there sprinkling blood on the mercy seat. The two are bound together on Yom Kippur, the only day the high priest can enter the holy of holies. Moret's view does not square with Jewish practice and, in terms of Christology, seems to necessitate a bifurcation between Jesus' person and Jesus' work. 5) Moret's reading of Heb 13:11–12 does not engage with my observations on this text. Hebrews 13:11 coheres well with my larger argument about the mechanism of atonement—the high priest takes the blood into the holy of holies, then the bodies are burned. Notably, this burning is not done on an altar. In the case of Jesus this is reversed—he suffered outside the camp, then entered the heavenly holy of holies. This is how Jesus sanctifies his people. 6) Moret makes a lot of the role of ransom in Lev 17:11. This is fair point. This text does not, however, identify the slaughter of the animal in place of the human offerer as the principal atoning or ransoming moment (the life is not given in offering when the animal dies/is slaughtered). This conclusion is clear from the fact that atonement is made 'on the altar.' But, no animals are slaughtered on any of the Jewish altars.

Hebrews (and thus also for ‘the mechanism’ of atonement). I discuss only three of what seem to me to be the more important examples of this general concern: 1) Hebrews’ argument regarding Jesus’ resurrection life as this relates to the eternal Son of God and Melchizedek; 2) The question of the nature of the heavenly sanctuary in Hebrews; and, 3) The overlap between the language of perfection and purification in Hebrews.

First, then, toward the end of his essay Moret raises the following question in relation to part of the chronological aspect of my argument: ‘La résurrection est-elle l’origine de la vie perpétuelle du Christ, ou la manifestation de la vie que le Fils possède déjà?’ The question, however, overlooks key arguments in *ALR*. I state unequivocally that the narrative sequence that underlies Hebrews’ Christology and soteriology draws upon ‘the full sweep of the significance of the Son’s incarnation.’³ This includes the claim that ‘the heavenly Son came into the world.’⁴ *ALR* aims to demonstrate the presence and significance of this incarnational logic and chronology in Hebrews. I here note only two places where my argument falls to pieces if I am wrong about the role of the preincarnate life of the divine Son in this logic—my interpretation of the phrase ‘in the days of his flesh’ (Heb 5:7) and my identification of the syllogistic reasoning that informs the argument for the legitimacy of Jesus’ high-priestly status in Heb 7.

My interpretation of Heb 5:7 depends upon my arguments for Jesus’ bodily resurrection, the nature of Hebrews’ dualism, and the author’s implied cosmology (more on this below). I conclude that the time when the Son did not have flesh (a time implied by the comment that he suffered ‘in the days of his flesh’) refers specifically to the Son’s heavenly life prior to the incarnation, and does not imply, as many argue, that Jesus’ incarnation was a temporary affair that ended when he passed through the veil of his body and entered the spiritual realm of God’s presence.⁵

My arguments for how the eternal Son’s preexistence inform the argument for Jesus’ postmortem elevation to the office of high priest in Heb 7 are no less subtle and no less dependent on the Son’s divine life. I state: ‘Melchizedek is *like* the Son of God (7:3), while Jesus, who *is* the Son of God (4:14), arises in the *likeness of* Melchizedek (7:15). The Son in Heb 1, as was noted, has divine attributes—he is a preexistent, heavenly being. ... The Son of Heb 1, though, is also the human being Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus ... result[s] in Jesus being *like* Melchizedek—that is, possessing a heavenly, enduring life.’⁶ This quote forms part of a larger argument regarding the likelihood that Hebrews assumes that Melchizedek is an angelic figure—one of the ministering/priestly spirits mentioned in Heb 1. Melchizedek’s kind of heavenly life, I suggest, is the middle term in an implicit syllogism whose first premise is the eternal life of the Son of God. The syllogism intends to show that, *in his humanity*, Jesus arose from death to eternal life—life that is like that of Melchizedek. This is important for the author because, according to Hebrews’ exegesis of Gen 14, it is Melchizedek’s *life*, rather than his genealogy/tribal lineage (he has none), that qualifies him for his priesthood and explains why Genesis identifies him as ‘priest of God Most High.’ Thus, while the author knows that Jesus was a mortal human being who really suffered and really died, he also assumes that the divine

³ *ALR* 43.

⁴ *ALR* 43.

⁵ *ALR* 208–10.

⁶ *ALR* 207 (emphasis original).

Son of God is eternal and that the human being Jesus is that Son. He does not move beyond these assumptions into a systematic explanation of how they relate to each other. (Obviously, however, such arguments informed or put ‘pressure’ on later systematic Christological reflection.⁷) The resurrection is the perfection of Jesus’ humanity such that, as a now eternally incarnate figure, the Son’s humanity enjoys incorruptible life.

In sum, my argument depends on the author of Hebrews assuming that the Son of God has divine, eternal life. Apart from this assumption, the argument of Heb 7 explaining how Jesus became qualified to be the high priest he is confessed to be collapses and, by the same token, Jesus would not be qualified to be the high priest who serves in the heavenly sanctuary.

Given my arguments on these points, I am puzzled by Moret’s question (noted above). I am equally puzzled, however, by his comment in n. 52: ‘Il faut cependant noter avec Kibbe ... que la vie imperissable mentionnee en 7.15 n’est pas necessairement une qualite nouvelle acquise a la resurrection, mais que le Fils la possedait avant l’incarnation ; en particulier 7.3 voit Melchisedek rendu semblable au fils de Dieu et non l’inverse!’ The very comparison Moret denies between the Son and Melchizedek is in fact made in Hebrews when (assuming that the human Jesus *is* the Son of God) the author asserts that Jesus *arose* in the *likeness* of Melchizedek.

Moret’s question about whether Jesus’ resurrection in Hebrews should be viewed as imparting eternal life to Christ or as a manifestation of Christ’s already eternal life fails, in my view, to take seriously the death and resurrection of the humanity of the incarnate Son (that is, it fails to take seriously the chronology of Hebrews’ implicit Christological narrative). Instead of citing Michael Kibbe, who curiously claims that my reading of Hebrews is ‘Socinian,’⁸ it would be more useful to know what Moret finds problematic about my actual argumentation for Jesus’ resurrection and his elevation to the role of high priest. I emphasize this because the question of when, as a human being, Jesus was qualified to become a high priest (in spite of his human Judahite lineage (on this see esp. Heb 7:14 and 8:4)) is more important and determinative for my interpretation of the mechanism of atonement in Heb 9–10 than is my engagement with the views of J. Milgrom about blood and purity (with which, in any case, I argue that the author of Hebrews only partially agrees).

A second point of disagreement between Moret and me worthy of greater discussion concerns the nature of the heavenly sanctuary. Moret asserts, ‘A notre sens, la réalité ultime est la présence divine, et le sanctuaire en est une métaphore.’ This is fair enough. Moret stands with a well-represented position in the commentary literature. Slightly frustrating, however, is the fact that I offer arguments against just such a view,⁹ none of which are addressed by Moret. As with the question of the Son’s life and Jesus’ elevation to the office of high priest in Heb 7, however,

⁷ See *ALR* 47–48 n. 2.

⁸ Michael Kibbe, ‘Is it Finished? When did it Start? Hebrews, Priesthood, and Atonement in Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Perspective’, *JTS* 65 (2014) 25–61. Kibbe’s attempt to label my interpretation ‘Socinian’ is surprisingly unfair to Socinus and his followers.

⁹ *ALR* 220–29. I further develop my critique of the standard metaphorical reading of Hebrews’ heavenly sanctuary and Jesus’ high-priestly ministry in my essay, ‘Serving in the Tabernacle in Heaven: Sacred Space, Jesus’s High-Priestly Sacrifice, and Hebrews’ Analogical Theology’, in *Hebrews in Context* (ed. G. Gelardini and H. W. Attridge; AJEC; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

my assessment of the nature of the heavenly sanctuary is foundational for my interpretation of the depiction of Jesus' sacrifice in Heb 9–10, and thus also for the mechanism of atonement in Hebrews. In my view, how one assesses the nature of the heavenly sanctuary embroils one in the issue of the cosmology assumed by the author of Hebrews. Many seek to show that Hebrews' cosmology is more Platonic or even Philonic in nature. I argue 1) that this is incorrect, and 2) for a different assessment of the heavenly sanctuary language in Hebrews. I demonstrate, particularly in chapters 2–3 of *ALR*, that Hebrews shares a great deal with the kinds of cosmological assumptions implicit in Jewish apocalyptic texts. (This also helps one recognize that the author of Hebrews conceives of Jesus' resurrection as a discrete, bodily event—the kind of event many other apocalyptic Jews hoped for when they spoke of resurrection.) The bodily ascension of a human being through the heavens and into the tabernacle/temple structure where God sits enthroned in the highest heaven (the structure that Moses saw when he ascended the mountain) does not easily cohere with common Middle Platonic cosmological speculation (e.g., Philo). Yet, if Hebrews is more properly apocalyptic in this sense, then the language of Jesus passing through the heavens, entering into and moving through the heavenly sanctuary, appearing before the face of God, removing sin by the sacrifice of himself (9:24–26), and then sitting at the Father's right hand (cf. 1:3) cannot simply be read as metaphor for Jesus' transition into 'la présence divine.'

Significantly for this discussion, a cosmology and corresponding conception of Jesus' resurrection and ascension into the heavenly sanctuary (rather than his transition into an abstract spiritual realm) make it difficult to conclude that Hebrews collapses or merges Jesus' death on the cross into his entrance into heaven where he offers himself to God. I simply do not agree, as Moret does, with Harry Attridge's conclusion that, 'Christ's sacrificial death is not an act distinct from his entry into God's presence.'¹⁰ Jesus is not, as Moret's view seems to presuppose, simultaneously appearing before the Father's heavenly presence/in the heavenly tabernacle and dying on the cross. It is precisely the recognition of the presence of Jesus' bodily resurrection in Hebrews that calls this reduction or conflation into question. To state the obvious, much of the argumentation of my book aims to show why I think permutations on such readings of Hebrews are incorrect.¹¹

All of this, however, further suggests that the mechanism of atonement in Hebrews works differently than Moret (and so many others in modern times) claim. If Hebrews affirms the bodily resurrection as a discrete event, then Jesus' heavenly offering of himself as a sacrifice to the Father is not easily (or, at least, not coherently¹²) reducible to the crucifixion. Many of those with whom I engage in *ALR*'s introduction recognize these problems to one degree or another and offer accounts of how to solve them, accounts that downplay or dismiss Jesus' resurrection. Just here, however, my view diverges. I understand that Moret might disagree with these conclusions, especially about the nature of the heavenly sanctuary, but some engagement with my arguments rather than merely asserting an opposing view would be useful, especially because, once again, my arguments concerning the sanctuary in the heavens and the corresponding cosmology matter much more for my exegesis of Heb 9–10 and my conclusions

¹⁰ See Moret n. 43.

¹¹ See especially the concluding chapter of *ALR*.

¹² So A.J.M. Wedderburn, 'Sawing Off the Branches: Theologizing Dangerously *Ad Hebraeos*', *JTS* 56 (2005) 393–414.

about the mechanism of atonement in Hebrews than does my critical use of Milgrom's interpretation of purification in Leviticus.

As a third example I note that Moret and I agree that the language of purity verges with the language of perfection in Hebrews. Where we disagree is how this applies to Jesus. Here Moret's account of purification is, in my view, mistakenly reductive. Moret implies that my account of purity and atonement is more concerned with resolving the interconnected problems of death and physical impurity than with the problem of the moral aspect of sin. But this is not accurate. I argue for both. Moreover, a peculiar attribute of the Day of Atonement sacrifices is that they deal with both moral impurity (sin) and ritual impurity (issues of mortal physicality). Both the problems of sin and the problems of ritual impurities are 'purified'/resolved on the Day of Atonement. In contrast, Moret reduces purification in Hebrews to nothing more than a moral category. But this presents a problem, particularly given that perfection and purity language overlap in Hebrews. What does it mean that Jesus had to be perfected?

Moret has an answer. He appeals to those who argue that Jesus' perfection is primarily a matter of his being prepared for his office.¹³ As with the second issue I discussed above, this is fair enough. Moret has again endorsed an interpretation well-represented in the commentary literature. But, again, I differ significantly with this interpretation, and again Moret does not engage with my interpretation and arguments. This is a pity since here the logic of Jewish sacrificial concern with ritual purity as scholars such as J. Milgrom, J. Klawans, and J. Sklar describe it (in spite of their differences) makes very good sense. The perfection of Jesus is the purification of his body, the removal of the corruption of mortality. This is precisely why Jesus, *as a human being*, can, after the resurrection—that is, after the purification/perfection of his body—draw near to God and serve him in the heavenly sanctuary.

At the risk of being pedantic: Much of the argumentation of *ALR* intends to challenge the two most central and interrelated reductions Moret reaffirms: 1) The reduction of purity in Hebrews only to a moral category (this correlates closely to Moret's corresponding reduction of the sacrificial offering of blood only to effecting ransom); and, 2) The reduction of Jesus' offering (i.e., his 'sacrifice') only to the event of his death. In my view, the arguments Moret offers against my interpretation of Jesus' sacrifice and of purification in Hebrews (the mechanics of atonement) rebound and ultimately disallow my account of Jesus' resurrection in Hebrews. If I may be a bit cheeky, Moret's consistent reference in his footnotes to my book by the short title *Atonement*, rather than, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, offers a kind of synecdoche for what I take to be the primary way in which he has misunderstood *ALR*'s overarching argument. When, therefore, Moret concludes by stating, 'En dépit des mérites de [Moffitt's] étude quant au rôle de la résurrection, sa compréhension du mécanisme de la purification et sa vision de l'offrande du Christ ne peuvent être maintenues face aux données de l'Épître,' I cannot agree. If I am wrong about the mechanism of atonement in Hebrews (that is, if I am wrong that the author of Hebrews thinks that, after his death and resurrection, Jesus effects atonement by ascending through the heavens as the great high priest and presenting himself to the Father in the heavenly sanctuary as the ultimate Yom Kippur sacrifice), then the merits of my arguments about Jesus' resurrection and the role it plays in Hebrews are dubious at best. If I am fundamentally wrong about where Hebrews locates Jesus' offering of his sacrifice to the Father,

¹³ Moret n. 28.

this is most likely because I am wrong about the logical foundation upon which my account of atonement in Hebrews stands—Jesus' resurrection.