

Son and Priest, Then and Now: Christology and Redemptive History in Hebrews in Light of the History of Interpretation

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This article looks at the Christology of Hebrews in light of recent discussion and the history of interpretation. The article addresses both the identity of Christ and the work of Christ in Hebrews, interacting with Reformed discussions of Hebrews and Christology more broadly. Hebrews speaks of Christ as the eternal Son of God, and also as the messianic, human Son of God. Christ's sonship and priesthood, which are key themes in Hebrews, point to realities that were true prior to the incarnation, and are true now in a redemptive-historically fulfilled sense. This affirmation helps us address modern debates about the atonement in Hebrews, including when and where we should locate Christ's sacrifice. Thus, understood rightly, we should affirm that Christ is both Son and priest prior to the incarnation, during the days of his humiliation, and now in his estate of exaltation.

I. Introduction

While one might have said thirty years ago that Hebrews was a comparatively neglected book in scholarship, the same could not be said today. In the past few decades study of Hebrews has blossomed, with significant work having been done on such topics as its structure, its OT background, and its Christology. It is this final category that I will address in the present article, for indeed Hebrews, which was written to encourage believers to persevere on the path of faith, is "unusually important" for Christology.¹ If we were to summarize the Christology of Hebrews, we could say Christ is both Son and High Priest. These concepts will dominate my discussion that follows.²

All agree that one of the keys to the Christology of Hebrews is the priestly identity of Christ, yet the timing and manner of Christ's priesthood has proven to be

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), cxxxviii.

² This article derives from a larger work on Christology: Brandon D. Crowe, *The Lord Jesus Christ: The Biblical Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ, We Believe 3* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming). Due to space constraints in that volume, I present a fuller discussion here on the Christology of Hebrews. I am grateful to Bob Cara, Blake Franze, and Murray Smith for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

elusive and controversial. Traditional understandings of Christ's priestly activity have often been rejected in favor of interpretations that some have found theologically suspect. For example, in Hebrews Christ is clearly a priest in heaven. But was he also a priest on earth? The Reformed answer has historically been "yes," but this viewpoint has been challenged in recent years, resulting in a paradigm shift of sorts. It has become increasingly popular to suggest that traditional statements concerning Christ's sacrifice are actually about his *heavenly* sacrifice rather than the sacrifice on the cross. Similarly, the nature of Christ's sonship is debated. In what way and to what extent does Hebrews present Jesus as the ontological Son of God, or to what degree should the sonship of Christ be understood instead as economic sonship?³ These important exegetical questions require careful consideration, and they can also lead to great confusion. It can seem as though the familiar ground of Hebrews is shifting under one's feet.

In this article I seek to provide an orienting (and perhaps stabilizing) discussion of the Christology of Hebrews in light of the history of interpretation. I will draw from writings of the Reformation and post-Reformation period, along with more recent sources. By so doing I hope not only to provide an overview of Christology as a whole, but also address some of the more contemporary debates about Hebrews. It scarcely needs to be said that given the effluence of all that has been written on Hebrews, what follows will by no means be exhaustive. It is instead selective and strategic. My aims are therefore more focused: to give readers a sense of the christological landscape, and to provide constructive exegetical and theological guidance from an explicitly Reformed perspective. My focus is not so much polemical as it is to provide an integrated, positive assessment of the Christology of Hebrews in conversation with a range of conversation partners. To that end, I will first consider the identity of Christ in Hebrews, including his divinity and his humanity. Second, I will discuss the achievement of Christ in Hebrews. There I will address issues related to the priesthood of Christ, as well as the role of Christ as leader of a new exodus. To be sure, even these divisions are somewhat artificial, given the overlap in categories, but they will suffice for pedagogical purposes.

II. Identity of Christ

1. *The Eternal Son of God*

Hebrews speaks of Christ as the eternal Son of God, who has become incarnate for our salvation and fulfills the role of great high priest. Hebrews 1:1–4 introduces the letter and the Son, and can be arranged in chiasmic fashion, centering on the ontology of the divine Son in Heb 1:3a–b: the Son is the

³ See especially R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021)

radiance of God the Father's glory.⁴ He also created (1:2) and upholds the world (1:3). Further, the eternal Son became incarnate as a true man and has accomplished salvation, thus inheriting a better name than the angels (1:4). He is the royal heir and priest (1:2b, 3d), the one who has obeyed perfectly, defeated death and the devil, and risen as an everlasting high priest. More extensively, Hebrews provides evidence for the *munus triplex* of Christ: he is prophet (e.g., 1:1–2; 2:12–13), priest (e.g., 3:1; 4:14; 5:1–10; 7:26), and king (e.g., 1:3–5; 5:5–6).

This interplay of eternal and redemptive-historical sonship is also apparent in the catena of quotations from the OT in Heb 1:5–13. These quotations are bracketed by Ps 2:7 (“you are my Son, today I have begotten you”) and Ps 110:1 (“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”),⁵ which highlight the accomplishment of salvation by the eternal Son in the economy of redemption. The “today” on which the Son was begotten has quite often been understood as the eternal “today” of eternal generation.⁶ Yet, while it is proper and necessary to affirm eternal generation, it is far from certain that the use of Ps 2 in Heb 1 *directly* supports this important doctrine. Instead, Ps 2:7 is more likely used to support the resurrection of Jesus (see also 5:5), which is indeed the resurrection of the *eternal* Son of God.⁷ This finds corroboration in the quotation of 2 Sam 7:14 which brings into view the promises of the Davidic Covenant.⁸ Similarly, Ps 110:1 is frequently used in the NT to speak of the victorious Christ

⁴ For this structure, see Brandon D. Crowe, *Why Did Jesus Live a Perfect Life? The Necessity of Christ's Obedience for Our Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 107–9. A virtually identical structure is found in Lane G. Tipton, “Christology in Colossians 1:15–20 and Hebrews 1:1–4: An Exercise in Biblico-Systematic Theology,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 179–81. Historically, many Reformed understood ὑποστάσιως as “person” rather than “essence.” See, for example, Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:183, 233; John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 3:95; see also Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 3.28. In the context of Hebrews, however, “essence” or “being” is the better translation, as commentators today typically recognize (see Heb 11:1).

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, English quotations are from the ESV

⁶ For example, Augustine, *En. Ps.* 2.6; Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2018–), 2:543; Madison N. Pierce, “Hebrews 1 and the Son Begotten ‘Today,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 127–31.

⁷ This also accords with Paul's use in Acts 13:33, on which see Brandon D. Crowe, *The Hope of Israel: The Resurrection of Christ in the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 58–61; see also John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:535–36; and Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 42.

⁸ See also D. A. Carson, *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 46–60; William R. G. Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester: Eine traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes*, WMANT 53 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 8–9; Jared Compton, *Psalms 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, LNTS 537 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 19–23, 37–38, 165.

in his glorified state (see Heb 10:12–14), and the same psalm (Ps 110:4) elsewhere in Hebrews speaks of the Melchizedekian high priesthood of Christ (Heb 5:6; 7:17, 20; see also 5:10). These OT passages supporting the sonship and priesthood of Christ are more directly about redemptive history than about ontological sonship per se.

The quotation of Ps 45:6–7 [44:7–8 LXX] in Heb 1:8–9, which has in view the messiah who sits on the throne of David (see again the quotation of 2 Sam 7:14 [cf. 1 Chr 17:13] in 1:5), more directly attests the divinity of Christ. Here God addresses the *God* who sits on the throne.⁹ F. F. Bruce captures it well: “In a fuller sense than was possible for David or any of his successors in ancient days, this Messiah can be addressed not merely as God’s Son (verse 5) but actually as God, for He is both the Messiah of David’s line and also the effulgence of God’s glory and the very image of His substance.”¹⁰

The Son is also identified as divine in the quotation of Ps 102:25–27 [101:26–28 LXX] in Heb 1:10–12. The Son is the Lord who laid the foundations of the earth in the beginning, and who will remain forever. Similarly, toward the end of Hebrews, the author speaks of Jesus Christ as the same yesterday and today and forever (13:8). This comes in a context where the author encourages the audience to follow the pattern of their leaders’ faith; despite the opposition that they may face, their Savior does not change. Though this phrase on its own might be ambiguous, in light of all that the author has said about the Son to this point, the sameness (indeed, immutability) of Christ in perpetuity assumes his divinity,¹¹ even as it assumes the perpetuity of his high priesthood.¹² It has further been argued that Heb 13:8 reflects the threefold affirmation of eternity common in the context of the first century, which (along with correlations to Ps 102) does indeed highlight the eternity of the Son.¹³

2. The Son as Truly Human

The work of Christ as messiah and high priest assumes his incarnation, which receives extended attention in Heb 2:5–18. The eternal Son has defeated death

⁹ This is the understanding when we take the second ὁ θεός as a nominative used as a vocative, rather than opting for a less likely translation, such as “Your throne is God.” See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 18–20; Nick Brennan, *Divine Christology in Hebrews: The Son as God*, LNTS 656 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 61–62

¹⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 20

¹¹ Compare Owen, *Hebrews*, 7:426–28; Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 66–70.

¹² Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 705; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 396.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, “The Divinity of Jesus in the Letter of the Hebrews,” in *Jesus and the God of Israel: “God Crucified” and other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 252–53, noting Sean M. McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos: Rev. 1:4 in Its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting*, WUNT 2/107 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999). See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992–97), 3.28.19 (1:287); Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 134.

and accomplished salvation *in the flesh*, thus fulfilling God's design for humanity. To this end in 2:5–8 the author cites Ps 8:4–6 [8:5–7 LXX], which reflects on the role of humanity to rule over God's creation, and also reflects the commission to Adam and Eve in the beginning (Gen 1:26–28). There is, however, a disconnect between this ideal and human experience: if all of creation is to be subject to humanity, why is this not our experience (Heb 2:8)? Though we do not yet see this reality, we do see Jesus, who has been crowned with glory and honor. The Son came as a man, suffered death, and has risen to new, glorious life.

Hebrews 2:5–18 thus extols the logic and wonders of the true humanity of the Son in the incarnation. Psalm 8 helps readers understand why it was fitting for the Son to suffer and die (Heb 2:10). This would not have been obvious in the first century (nor, perhaps, today). How could the divine Son of God suffer and die? How is such a divinity worthy of our worship? One answer is given in Heb 2: for humanity to realize the dominion envisioned in the beginning, and thus to receive an inheritance of salvation, sin and death had to be defeated. This had to be done by a man. Yet no natural person could do this—nor could any angel. It is therefore not embarrassing, but it was fitting for the eternal Son of God to become a man that he might defeat the devil who holds the power of death and slavery (2:14–15). By assuming human nature, suffering, dying, and rising again, Jesus has defeated the devil and delivers us from sin, realizing the vision for humanity of ruling over God's creation. The Son's suffering qualified him to be a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17).

As the defeater of death, Jesus is the ἀρχηγός of salvation (2:10, see also 12:2), which communicates solidarity of Jesus with his people: Jesus leads the way and identifies with us.¹⁴ Moreover, this term is always used in the NT to refer to the resurrection of Jesus,¹⁵ for there is true solidarity between Jesus (the firstfruits of the resurrection) and the resurrection of believers (see 1 Cor 15:20).¹⁶ The author's point is quite similar to Paul's in 1 Cor 15:20–28, 44–47, where he relates the resurrection of Christ as the second and last Adam, and the worldwide dominion that entails, to the future destiny of humanity. The term is also used in the OT to refer to Israel's leaders in the wilderness (Num 10:4; 13:2–3; see also Exod 6:14; Num 14:4).¹⁷ As ἀρχηγός Jesus leads his redeemed people to the promised land by his resurrection from the dead.

Because Jesus accomplishes salvation by rising to new life, it is fitting for the one who is the radiance of God's glory to suffer, and only through him does world history realize its goal through humanity.

¹⁴ Geerhardus Vos, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 133.

¹⁵ So Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 160.

¹⁶ See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, BBMS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 34–36.

¹⁷ See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, BBMS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 34–36.

3. Human High Priest

Jesus is not only the divine Son of God, but he is also one of us and is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (2:11). Hebrews teaches that Jesus is truly human, and this is closely related to his role as high priest. An important caveat, however, is necessary here: it would not be appropriate to say that Jesus is *only* a priest inasmuch as he is a man.¹⁸ That would be to deny the pre-incarnate realities of prophet, priest, and king that are true of the Son as Mediator already during the OT.¹⁹ This is important, for as we will see below, it is common in Hebrews studies today to deny that Christ was a priest in his estate of humiliation. Such an approach, however, fails to recognize the importance of the priestly ministry of the Son prior to the incarnation, and thus too strongly disassociates the *person* of the mediator from his mediatorial work.²⁰

Even so, the incarnation is important for the priestly work of Christ in Hebrews. As one who is not only divine but also truly human, Hebrews teaches that Jesus is uniquely qualified to serve as a high priest. The climactic work of the divine Mediator as priest comes when he assumes a human nature in organic continuity with those he came to save. It is not the angels that Jesus helps, but the offspring of Abraham (2:16).²¹ Jesus made purification for sin (1:3) and sat down at the right hand of God, in the heavenly sanctuary, behind the inner curtain (6:19–20). He has entered the heavenly world (1:6;²² 2:5; 4:14) as a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (5:5–6, 10; 6:20; 7:1–28). Melchizedek was the king of Salem who blessed Abraham and to whom Abraham gave a tenth of his spoil after defeating Chedorlaomer and his allies (Gen 14:17–20; Heb 7:1–2). Thus Melchizedek was not only a king, but also a priest.

The royal and priestly also come together in Ps 110, which speaks of the Lord seated at the right hand of the Lord; this Lord is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (110:4). Melchizedek's priesthood is not according to the genea-

¹⁸ See the important contribution of Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 115–46

¹⁹ See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 3:364–65; Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 117–118

²⁰ This latter point is also emphasized by David Schrock, "Resurrection and Priesthood: Christological Soundings from the Book of Hebrews," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18.4 (2014): 89–114. Thanks to David Garner for bringing this essay to my attention.

²¹ The term ἐπιλαμβάνομαι in 2:16 has often been understood as "taking on," referring to Christ's true humanity (e.g., Calvin, *Inst.* 2.14.9; Turretin, *Inst.* 13.5.6–8 [2:307–8]; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015], 1:504–5). While most commentators today opt for a translation akin to "help" (see BDAG, "ἐπιλαμβάνομαι," 374 [#5]), the context of Heb 2 does indeed emphasize the true humanity of Christ. See also Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 177–78; Douglas F. Kelly, *The Beauty of Christ: A Trinitarian Vision*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in the Light of the Church* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2014), 314.

²² On οἰκουμένην as the heavenly world in 1:6, see Koester, *Hebrews*, 193; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 117–18; David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 53–118.

logical descent of the later Levitical priesthood. In this sense, he is without father or mother (7:3). This does not mean that Melchizedek was not a real person, nor that he was the preincarnate Christ himself, but Melchizedek anticipated the divine priest-king whose everlasting kingship is likewise not according to the law of physical descent. Indeed, Hebrews states that Melchizedek resembles the Son of God, not vice versa (7:3); Jesus is preeminent to Melchizedek.²³ Jesus has conquered death and serves as a priest forever by the power of an indestructible life (7:16). “Indestructible life” is an important phrase that seems to refer both to the divine nature of Jesus, and to his resurrection life as the incarnate God-man.²⁴ The one who is resurrected is resurrected *as a man*; he is like us in every way, sin excepted (e.g., 2:14). It is thus as a glorified man that the Son of God in heaven intercedes for his people. He lifts our shared humanity to the innermost sanctum of heaven.²⁵ Jesus fulfills Ps 110 and the vision of a faithful priest whose house will be secured forever (1 Sam 2:35; see also 2 Sam 7:14).²⁶

Before ascending in indestructible glory, the Son was made perfect as a high priest by suffering in human weakness (2:9–10, 18; 5:8–10). He has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he remained without sin (4:15); he can therefore help us when we are tempted (2:18). Our high priest sympathizes with us; he knows what it is like to struggle with human weakness—which renders us susceptible to sin—and he can help us.²⁷ And, since he never gave in to temptation, he has in one sense been tempted even more than we have, for at some point we all cave to the pressure of temptation.²⁸ Running half a marathon may be difficult, but it is more difficult to finish an entire marathon. In an analogous way, Jesus was tempted but never submitted to sin. He always persevered in obedience. Experiential knowledge of sin is not necessary for Jesus to help us in our struggle, nor is his experience of sin necessary for him to sympathize with us (see Heb 4:14–16; 5:7–10; 6:19–20; 7:19, 23–28). As it has often been observed, “Sinlessness heightens, not lessens, temptations.”²⁹

Christ understands our struggles and can help us. Even so, there are limitations to how far we can push the similarities between our temptations and Christ’s temptations. This brings us to the question of whether Christ could or could not sin (that is, whether Christ in his state of humiliation was peccable or

²³ Vos, “Priesthood,” 152; Koester, *Hebrews*, 343 (following J. A. Bengel); Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 106

²⁴ See Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 122, 142–44

²⁵ L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 258.

²⁶ On 1 Sam 2:35 and the Davidic Covenant in 2 Sam 7, see P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 91. See also Schrock, “Resurrection and Priesthood,” 101–4.

²⁷ See Vos, “Priesthood,” 145–46

²⁸ For example, Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 114–15.

²⁹ Jones, *Knowing Christ*, 114

impeccable). The traditional Reformed answer is that Christ was impeccable.³⁰ To demonstrate this answer requires an integrative biblical-theological investigation, but is certainly supported by Hebrews. Hebrews presents Jesus as the perfectly holy Son of God; unlike us, he had no internal pull toward sin.³¹ His temptations toward evil were purely external, not internal. This does not, however, lessen the sympathy of our high priest, as Hebrews expressly makes clear (4:15).

Moreover, in Hebrews Christ's temptation was not to evil in particular, but specifically was temptation *to avoid suffering* (2:18)—the test was whether he would persevere in his calling as messianic priest.³² Vos notes that the author of Hebrews “nowhere, not even in 2:18, speaks of temptation as entailing suffering for Jesus, but always of suffering as involving temptation.”³³ Suffering can lead us to sin; we therefore need a high priest who can keep us from apostasy.³⁴ Though he was a Son, he learned obedience through his suffering, and by this suffering he was made perfect high priest, after the order of Melchizedek, and is the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (5:8–10). The perfection in view in Hebrews is not ontological perfection, for the divine Son of God lacks no perfection. This instead is perfection in a redemptive-historical sense: he is made perfect as the high priest, come in the fullness of time, to bring redemptive history to a climax.³⁵

This focus on the Son's knowledge of our weakness and the way he has shared in the weakness of our humanity helps us see that Christ is not *only* a heavenly high priest now, but he was already a priest during his earthly ministry. The

³⁰ For example, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:314; Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., 5 vols. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012–2016), 3:48, 58; John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 1:215; Turretin, *Inst.* 10.3.5–6 (1:666); Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 520–26.

³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:315; see also 3:252–53; 3:408; Calvin, *Inst.* 2.16.12 (1:518–19).

³² Vos, “Priesthood,” 145, 149. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:315n233: “The temptation to which Jesus was exposed according to the Letter to the Hebrews (2:18; 4:15) did not lie, strictly speaking, in the realm of morality and was not a temptation to sin, but consisted in the fact that the manifold and heavy suffering he had to endure tested him on the point of whether he would persevere to the end in his messiahship, in his calling as Redeemer, in his office of Savior.”

³³ Vos, “Priesthood,” 149. Vos also states, “Wherever the Epistle speaks of temptations of Christ, it always means to refer concretely and specifically to the temptations that arose from His call to suffer. Of temptations in general it never speaks in connection with Jesus. In thus doing it limits the sphere of the Saviour's temptations to that class of experiences wherein a real appeal to His feelings and desires was possible, and yet the mere presence and force of such an appeal could not endanger His sinlessness. For the inclination to escape from suffering, which made the temptation a real one, is in itself a natural, innocent inclination. It could assert itself in the Saviour's heart and require a positive choice of the will to overbear it and keep it down, without depending for its power on the presence of evil” (p. 149).

³⁴ Cf. Vos, “Priesthood,” 146.

³⁵ See similarly Moisés Silva, “Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews,” *WTJ* 39 (1976): 60–71.

offering of his body as the final sacrifice (Heb 10:1–10) likewise also assumes that Jesus acted as a priest while on earth (see, e.g., 5:7). There is continuity between the exalted Christ and his work on earth; he is priest in both respects. To be sure, there is a clear emphasis in Hebrews on the *heavenly* high priesthood of Christ (8:1–4), but his priestly ministry also includes his work in the state of humiliation, including his lifelong obedience and his sacrifice on the cross. Yet this is precisely the point that has engendered much debate. I will therefore further defend this point below.

III. Achievement of Christ

1. New Covenant

As high priest Jesus has inaugurated the New Covenant, a better covenant than the covenant with Moses (see Heb 8:6–7). Central to this New Covenant is the blood of the Mediator. It was not ultimately possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins; only through the mediation of the unique God-man (θεάνθρωπος), whose blood is truly effectual, can our sins be taken away. This New Covenant has a better foundation, since its priestly mediator is established not by Levitical law, but by an oath (7:15–22; see also 5:5). The OT itself looked ahead to and spoke of the coming of a New Covenant (see Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:8–12). This means that the first covenant (i.e., the Mosaic Covenant) must not have been the final, perfect covenant.

In light of this New Covenant, which has arrived, the Mosaic covenant is no longer a viable option for governing life today; it is obsolete (8:13). It has served its purpose as a covenant administration of the one Covenant of Grace, preparing us for Christ and the New Covenant.³⁶ In contrast, the New Covenant is the eternal covenant which will never be broken, for it is founded on the sure work of Christ (Heb 13:20). Its Mediator is Christ himself (9:15), and his benefits apply both to Old Covenant and New Covenant believers.³⁷ The New Covenant is better because it is the perfect covenant, that is, it is the final covenant which will not be surpassed by a better covenant, and will not grow obsolete.

2. Leader of a New Exodus

Hebrews also speaks of God's people on a journey through the wilderness of this age as we anticipate entrance into the heavenly rest of the eternal Sabbath (see Heb 3:7–4:13). The exodus is central to the way the author communicates this already/not yet reality. *Already* believers have been delivered and participate in the New Covenant; but believers have *not yet* entered the eschatological promised land of the heavenly Jerusalem (see 4:1, 11; 13:14). But things are better in the New Covenant. For our leader is not Joshua, who provided en-

³⁶ See WCF 7.5–6.

³⁷ See Robert J. Cara, *Hebrews: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, forthcoming).

trance into the provisional promised land (4:8). Our leader is Jesus himself, the forerunner (ἀρχηγός) who has gone through suffering and death, and risen to new life, and is ascended in heaven (2:10; 12:2).

Jesus is thus not only our heavenly high priest, but the forerunner and apostle (ὁ ἀπόστολος) of our confession (3:1). He is the one sent from the Father who leads us on a greater exodus than Moses, who was sent to guide God's people in the first exodus (Exod 3:10–15).³⁸ Likewise, the covenant he inaugurates is greater than the Mosaic covenant, for Christ's blood seals the eternal (i.e., new) covenant (13:20). This resurrected high priest is the great shepherd of the sheep (Heb 13:20) who guides and cares for his people, having laid down his life for the sheep that they may have abundant life (John 10:10–11). He is coming again for the salvation of those who are eagerly awaiting him (9:27–28).

We therefore congregate at a better mountain than Mt. Sinai, around which the Israelites congregated when they left Egypt. By contrast, we come to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:18–24), gathered in the New Covenant by the blood of our Mediator. We worship not in the provisional ceremonies of the Mosaic covenant, but in the permanent substance of the New Covenant—Christ's kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:28); it lasts forever.

3. Final, Perfect Sacrifice

One of the reasons the New Covenant is better is because of the final, perfect sacrifice of Christ. Whereas the Old Covenant required repeated sacrifices to cleanse earthly copies of heavenly realities (9:23), Christ by one sacrifice has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (10:10, 14). His bodily sacrifice is the final, perfect sacrifice (10:10; see also 10:1). It is perfect both in its finality (10:2–3) and efficacy (10:4). It is once-for-all, and by means of this sacrifice he now serves not in an earthly tent, but in heaven itself (9:24). Yet his suffering was on earth, outside Jerusalem, and this suffering is portrayed in priestly terms (13:11–13).³⁹ Christ does not simply enter the sanctuary once a year, but always dwells and intercedes for us at God's right hand (1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), in the heavenly sanctuary, as the one who has secured forgiveness.⁴⁰ Jesus' one sacrifice provides true forgiveness, obviating the need for any future sacrifice (10:18).

The priesthood of Christ also includes his perfect obedience, which is evident in the quotation of Ps 40:6–8 (39:7–9 LXX) in Heb 10:5–7.⁴¹ This point is not always appreciated, but needs to be emphasized.⁴² The priestly, representative work of

³⁸ See Koester, *Hebrews*, 228–29, 236, 243, 249; see also Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 200.

³⁹ See also Vos, "Priesthood," 155.

⁴⁰ See also Owen, *Works*, 1:254.

⁴¹ See also Owen, *Works*, 1:207, 323, 335–36, 339.

⁴² Contrast Georg Gäbel, *Die Kulttheologie des Hebräerbriefes: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Studie*, WUNT 2/212 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 212: "Der irdische

Christ is not limited to his death on the cross, but includes all his active and passive obedience which we must not artificially divide.⁴³ Christ was a priest during his days of humiliation. The active obedience is the lifelong obedience of Jesus, including his death on the cross, and the passive obedience of Jesus is his lifelong obedience, including his suffering prior to the cross.⁴⁴ Though the cross is rightly emphasized as the crown of the obedience of Jesus, it is not the sum total of his obedience. By his passive obedience Jesus bears the curse for sin throughout his life, just as he also actively obeyed on the cross. It is this lifelong obedience that is alluded to in the quotation of Ps 40:6–8 in Heb 10:5–7, but is also brought into view in the suffering obedience of Jesus in Heb 5:8, and in his Adamic obedience and conquering of death in Heb 2:10–18. Herman Bavinck captures this point with characteristic clarity: “Scripture regards the entire work of Christ as a fulfillment of God’s law and a satisfaction of his demand. As prophet, priest, and king, in his birth and in his death, in his words and in his deeds, he always did God’s will. He came into the world to do his will. The law of God is within his heart [Ps 40:8]. His entire life was a life of complete obedience, a perfect sacrifice, a sweet odor to God.”⁴⁵ This obedience and suffering of Jesus is *earthly* obedience and suffering, and therefore provides support for viewing Jesus as a priest while on earth. It is not compelling to understand this offering in 10:10 as the heavenly presentation of Jesus in his resurrected state.⁴⁶ This view threatens to confuse the two states of Jesus. Jesus suffered and obeyed in his state of humiliation, but emerged victorious in his resurrection and now occupies the state of exaltation, no longer subject to suffering. The obedience of Jesus in Heb 10 is therefore the earthly humiliation of Jesus, which is tightly tethered here (and in Heb 2, 5) to his final, climactic (and priestly!) obedience on the cross. Furthermore, it is unnecessary to prioritize the cross over Jesus’ lifelong obedience as the sacrifice that God requires,⁴⁷ because the unity of obedience and sacrifice envisioned in the quotation of Ps 40 points to no dichotomy between the two.⁴⁸ Yes, Jesus was delivered from death (10:12–14),⁴⁹ but the point in Heb 10:1–10 is that the earthly sacrifice of Jesus was the full integration of sacrifice and obedience that truly pleases God.

Weg Jesu Christi war ein Weg des Gehorsams, kein priesterlich-opferkultisches Wirken” (“The earthly path of Jesus Christ was a path of obedience, not the priestly work of sacrificial offering”).

⁴³ See, for example, Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8 (2:403–8); 14.12.6, 8 (2:439–40); 14.13 (2:445–55). Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:394; Letham, *Work of Christ*, 113–21. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.16.5 (1:506–10). The unity of the sacrifice of Christ is emphasized in the Reformed tradition.

⁴⁴ For further elaboration on this paragraph, see Crowe, *Why Did Jesus Live a Perfect Life?*

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:394.

⁴⁶ See Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 230–32, 247. To be sure, Moffitt does not deny that Jesus was fully obedient while on earth, but the offering per se was made in heaven.

⁴⁷ For example, Benjamin J. Ribbens, “The Sacrifice God Required: Psalm 40:6–8 in Hebrews 10,” *NTS* 67 (2021): esp. 293–96.

⁴⁸ On the need for the unity of obedience and sacrifice, see 1 Sam 15:22; Ps 51:15–16; Prov 21:3; Eccl 5:1; Isa 1:11–17; 29:13; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; et al

⁴⁹ A point emphasized by Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 239–43.

Hebrews 10:1–10 is about Christ’s humiliation.

To return to Ps 40: Though David sought the Lord and obeyed the Torah (40:8), David experienced trouble for his own sins (Ps 40:12), and David did not rise from the dead (Acts 13:37–38). David anticipated a greater Son who would more fully obey, yielding lasting deliverance. Jesus’ lifelong, bodily obedience enabled him to serve as the final sacrifice, which was manifested by his resurrection and ascension and the true forgiveness effected by his one offering. In contrast to previous priests, Jesus had no sin for which atonement was needed (Heb 7:27), and there was no dichotomy between sacrifice and obedience in Christ himself.⁵⁰ The final sacrifice of Christ required his moral perfection—internally and externally. Jesus rose from the dead in accord with his perfect obedience, enabling him to serve in his body as the final, effectual sacrifice (Heb 10:8–10).

4. When and Where Was Christ’s Sacrifice?

The sacrifice of Christ is thus the culmination of his entire life of obedience.⁵¹ Further, I have argued that Christ was a priest already on earth (and indeed, already in the OT), even though he now serves properly as an exalted high priest in heaven as the God-man. This leads us to some significant debates about the work of Christ in Hebrews, namely, where does Christ serve as a priest, and how should we construe his sacrifice in relation to his death? Further, what is the role of Christ’s heavenly intercession? Is this his heavenly offering?

To begin, let us address in more detail *where* and *when* Christ serves as a priest. On the one hand, Hebrews says that if Jesus were on earth, he would not be a priest at all (8:4). This certainly sounds like Jesus was not a priest while on earth, and many affirm this interpretation today.⁵² But the matter is not so simple, for what the author of Hebrews has in view here is the *type* of priesthood Jesus fulfills. The author speaks in 8:4 of the Levitical priesthood, set forth in the law of Moses, based on bodily descent (see 7:14). Jesus is instead a priest after the order of Melchizedek, which requires a heavenly ministry. Jesus occupies a different realm of priesthood. So while we can affirm the importance of Christ’s heavenly priestly ministry, that is not the same thing as denying altogether the

⁵⁰ See also Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, cxxxiv; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 266.

⁵¹ We must not bifurcate sharply Jesus’ sacrifice (θυσία) and his offering (προσφορά / προσφέρω). See, for example, Heb 5:1; 8:3; 9:9; 10:1, 8, 11–12; 11:4. Further, as noted above, it is not likely that Jesus’ offering is exclusively his *heavenly* offering. For a taxonomy of options on Jesus’ sacrifice, see R. B. Jamieson, “When and Where Did Jesus Offer Himself? A Taxonomy of Recent Scholarship on Hebrews,” *CurBR* 15 (2017): 338–68.

⁵² For example, Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 198–208; David M. Moffitt, “It Is Not Finished: Jesus’ Perpetual Atoning Work as the Heavenly High Priest in Hebrews,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall, LNTS 516 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 161, 162n14; R. B. Jamieson, *Jesus’ Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, SNTSMS 172 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 24, 34–35, 70.

earthly ministry of Jesus.

Yet the location of Christ's priesthood is widely debated—both today and in prior generations. For example, the Socinians of the post-Reformation era taught that Christ's death though necessary, was *preparatory* for the completion and perfection of his sacrifice in heaven.⁵³ This debate has resurfaced in contemporary discussions in light of David Moffitt's influential monograph *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, and in subsequent articles. In brief, Moffitt highlights the centrality of the resurrection and the work of the ascended Christ in making atonement by his presence (i.e., by presenting himself as the offering) in the heavenly sanctuary.⁵⁴ In this sense, Moffitt argues that Christ's work of atonement—by which he means especially *Levitical* atonement—was not finished on earth, but his continued heavenly work of atonement is necessary.⁵⁵ Moffitt's work was preceded by the noteworthy work of Georg Gäbel, who argued for the work of Christ as high priest exclusively in heaven.⁵⁶ Works such as these (which depart from traditional Reformed understandings; see WLC 44) have led to a renewed conversation about the relationship in Hebrews between Christ's ascension and his death, and when and where Christ served as a high priest. In light of such studies, a notable trend in scholarship is to identify Christ's priesthood in Hebrews exclusively in heaven.⁵⁷ Contemporary works have also renewed debate about whether the heavenly offering view of Hebrews is Socinian.⁵⁸ Moffitt distances himself from Socinianism,⁵⁹ and Benjamin Ribbens has shown that emphasizing a sequence of events in the atonement is common both to the Reformed and the Socinians,

⁵³ See, for example, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:476–77; Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8 (2:403–6). The Socinians infamously denied core doctrines, such as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the substitutionary work of Christ. Benjamin J. Ribbens, “Ascension and Atonement: The Significance of Post-Reformation, Reformed Responses to the Socinians for Contemporary Atonement Debates in Hebrews,” *WTJ* 80 (2018): 8–9, points out that the Socinian Racovian Catechism does speak of Christ as a priest on earth, but not *extensively* so.

⁵⁴ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 42, puts the matter starkly: “Jesus’ death is identified by the author [of Hebrews] as the trigger that sets into motion the chain of events that culminates in atonement” (see also p. 299). Further, see Jamieson, *Jesus’ Death*, 14, who wonders why Moffitt apparently denies Jesus’ death is atoning in his 2011 monograph, though (as Jamieson notes) Moffitt does affirm his view more clearly in some subsequent writings.

⁵⁵ Moffitt, “It Is Not Finished,” 157–75; see also 166n27.

⁵⁶ Gäbel, *Kulttheologie des Hebräerbriefes*, e.g., 17: “Alle Sakralität, alle legitime Kultausübung ist nach Hebr seit der Erhöhung Christi im himmlischen Heiligtum konzentriert. Mit dem himmlischen Selbstopfer Christi ist das himmlische Heiligtum geweiht und gereinigt, ist der himmlische Kult inauguriert” (“All sacredness, all legitimate execution of the cult is, according to Hebrews, concentrated in the heavenly sanctuary since the exaltation of Christ. With the heavenly self-offering of Christ, the heavenly sanctuary is consecrated and purified, the heavenly cult is inaugurated”)

⁵⁷ For example, Jamieson, *Jesus’ Death*, 24, 34–35, 70; Benjamin J. Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice and Heavenly Cult in Hebrews*, BZNW 222 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 107–8

⁵⁸ See Michael Kibbe, “Is It Finished? When Did It Start? Hebrews, Priesthood, and Atonement in Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Perspective,” *JTS* 65 (2014): 25–61; Ribbens, “Ascension.”

⁵⁹ David M. Moffitt, “Jesus’ Heavenly Sacrifice in Early Christian Reception of Hebrews: A Survey,” *JTS* 68 (2017): 49–50.

so arguing for an unfolding sequence in the atonement is not necessarily Socinian.⁶⁰

IV. Assessment: Affirming Christ's Priestly Work on Earth

Much of the contemporary debate centers on the degree to which Hebrews mirrors the events of the Day of Atonement. Debate also persists concerning whether death was central to the Levitical sacrificial system, or if instead the Levitical system focused more on the manipulation or handling of the sacrifice, and on the presentation of the blood in various sacred spaces.⁶¹ One question to address is the meaning of αἵματεκνυσία (Heb 9:22). Traditionally this term is translated “shedding of blood” (so ESV and NIV), though many recent studies argue instead that this term communicates more the *application* or *manipulation* of blood.⁶² It is further argued that it is the *life* of the victim in view in the Levitical sacrifices, rather than the *death* (see Lev 17:11). These debates can easily become complicated. A few points can be made by way of assessment.

1. *The death of Christ is indeed central to the atonement theology of Hebrews.*⁶³

On the Day of Atonement, which Hebrews invokes, the bull and the lamb did not simply have some of their blood let, but were actually slaughtered (Lev 16:11, 15).⁶⁴ The death of the sacrificial lamb is further highlighted when we consider the scapegoat, who was in contrast *not* killed, but sent out into the wilderness. Additionally, Jamieson has helpfully argued anew that Lev 17:11 is best understood as a “life-for-life exchange.”⁶⁵ That is, the blood in view in the Levitical system, on which Hebrews builds, is not primarily the “life force,” but the death of the victim.⁶⁶

Further, the term ἰλάσκομαι in Heb 2:17, in a context discussing Jesus' victory over death, points to the wrath-bearing nature of his death.⁶⁷ This required Christ

⁶⁰ Ribbens, “Ascension,” 19–20.

⁶¹ Moffitt, “It Is Not Finished,” 164–65, argues, for example, that “death is not central to the logic of atonement in the Levitical system,” and “the data of Leviticus suggest that the central aspects of the sacrificial process ... 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.”

⁶² See Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 291–92n157; see also Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 155–56.

⁶³ So, rightly, Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 97–179.

⁶⁴ Hebrew: שֶׁחַח; Greek: σφάζω.

⁶⁵ Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 135; see also 135–41.

⁶⁶ Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 185. For Jamieson's response to Moffitt on this point, see pp. 183–87.

⁶⁷ Compare Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 108–24, who argues persuasively that the blood typically refers to the *death* rather than the *life*. He further argues (pp. 125, 174–77) that ἰλάσκομαι in Heb 2:17 is best translated “propitiate.” A recent argument that *expiation* (rather than propitiation) is in view is made by Adriani Milli

to be made a curse on the cross, bearing the wrath of God, and dying (see Gal 3:13; Heb 12:2). The bodily appearance of Jesus in heaven—as one who has been perfected and bears the marks of the crucifixion—does not entirely capture the means by which propitiation was made. Propitiation requires the *death* of the sacrificial victim, even if the point in 2:17 is on the propitiatory aspects of his ongoing, heavenly ministry⁶⁸. Thus the term αἱματεκνυσία in 9:22 most likely does allude to Christ's death.⁶⁹

Christ's death is probably also in view in Heb 1:3, where the aorist participle ποιησάμενος (“having made”) modifying the aorist verb ἐκάθισεν (“he sat”) most likely refers to *antecedent time*. Thus, Christ sat down *after* making purification. To be sure, this does not solve the question of precisely *when* and *where* purification took place, for Christ may have appeared in the sanctuary to present himself as the offering and then sat down.⁷⁰ But the balance of probability tilts toward a reference to Christ's death, which then culminates in his heavenly-priestly activity. The same is true for 9:12, where the aorist participle εὐράμενος (“having obtained”)⁷¹ speaks of redemption accomplished, after which Christ entered (εἰσῆλθεν) the heavenly Holy of Holies.⁷²

This perspective may find support in a related passage (10:12, 14), which speaks of the one offering of Christ. Though this one offering is commonly taken today to refer to Christ's *heavenly* offering,⁷³ given the focus in Hebrews on the earthly obedience of Jesus and the sacrifice of his body in 10:5–10, it is more likely that in 10:10 Jesus' offering is his death on the cross, rather than the presentation of himself in heaven (though the latter is indeed taught in Hebrews).⁷⁴ Additionally, references to Christ's offering and/or sacrifice in 7:27 and 9:26–28 are best taken as references to his *earthly* suffering, especially in light of the parallel in 9:26 with

Rodrigues, *Toward a Priestly Christology: A Hermeneutical Study of Christ's Priesthood* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 152.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Vos, “Priesthood,” 145; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “The Priesthood of Christ: A Servant in the Sanctuary,” in *The Perfect Saviour: Key Themes in Hebrews*, ed. Jonathan Griffiths (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 52–56, who both understand this verse to refer to the heavenly high priestly ministry of Christ—but not to the exclusion of his propitiatory death. Vos further argues: “The principle to be strenuously maintained is that the priestly activity of Christ in heaven rests on the preceding sacrifice and therefore derives from the latter a strictly propitiatory character” (“Priesthood,” 154). Compare the view of Turretin, *Inst.* 14.11.21 (2:434), who emphasizes the death of Christ.

⁶⁹ See especially Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 141–56; see also Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 156, who suggests it may be a synecdoche to refer to the entire sacrificial process.

⁷⁰ Thus, for example, Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 99, says that the ambiguity here is clarified later in the epistle, and it refers to the *heavenly* offering of Christ. See also Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 83–84. Thus, for example, Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 99, says that the ambiguity here is clarified later in the epistle, and it refers to the *heavenly* offering of Christ. See also Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 83–84.

⁷¹ See BDAG, “εὐρίσκω,” 412 (#3).

⁷² See Cara, *Hebrews* (forthcoming).

⁷³ For example, Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 127–29; Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 74–78.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 300–301n485; see also 238n375, 244n382, 271–72n443.

Christ's *suffering* and his *self-sacrifice*, for Christ does not suffer in his glorified state. Further, 9:28 echoes the work of the Suffering Servant from Isa 53, which also points to Christ's earthly state of humiliation.⁷⁵

To be clear, this is not to deny that Christ's heavenly priesthood is emphasized in Hebrews. Instead, it is to affirm that Christ is a priest both on earth and in heaven, and we cannot sharply divide between these aspects of his priesthood.⁷⁶ It is also artificial to bracket off the resurrection or ascension from the death of Christ (or, for that matter, from his lifelong obedience). The work of Christ is a unified whole.⁷⁷

Christ's role as heavenly priest is clearly an emphasis of Hebrews, but we must be careful not to de-emphasize the role of Christ's death in Hebrews and transfer the efficacy entirely to the heavenly priesthood of Christ.⁷⁸

2. Hebrews does indeed teach that Christ was priest on earth. Christ's priesthood includes both his sacrifice for sins, and his present intercession.⁷⁹

Hebrews 8:4 should thus not be taken in an *ultimate* sense, but in a *comparative* or *specific* sense.⁸⁰ That is, Christ could not serve in the earthly sanctuary according to the Levitical law, for he was from the tribe of Judah. In this specific sense—in the sense that he serves not in the earthly sanctuary but in the heavenly sanctuary—Jesus is properly a priest only in heaven.⁸¹ Geerhardus Vos drew attention to this many years ago, when he argued that an integral part of the sacrifice itself is the presentation of the sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle.⁸² Even so, this does *not* mean that Christ did not occupy the office of a priest, more broadly speaking, while on earth. For, as Vos himself argues, the death of

⁷⁵ The influence of Isa 53 is emphasized by Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 191–93.

⁷⁶ See Vos, "Priesthood," 157; see also WLC 42; WSC 23.

⁷⁷ For example, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:394–95; see also Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 155, who notes that Jesus' death is "necessary" but not "sufficient" for the atonement in Hebrews (since he must also be raised to serve in the heavenly sanctuary). See similarly Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 132–34.

⁷⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:477, argues that Hebrews does not say that Christ entered the heavenly sanctuary *with* (μετά) his blood, but only *through* (διά) his blood (9:12). In this way, he argues Christ's earthly sacrifice was more effectual than the Levitical sacrifices—for the sprinkling of blood in the sanctuary, as done on the Day of Atonement, was not necessary for Jesus' superior high priesthood. See alternatively Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 118.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Hanover: Wechel, 1615), 6.29 (p. 442); Turretin, *Inst.* 14.10.1 (2:417); WLC 44. Further, the present intercession does not add anything fundamentally new to Jesus' earthly sacrifice. See Hugh Martin, *The Atonement: In Its Relations to the Covenant, the Priesthood, the Intercession of Our Lord* (1870; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2013), 83.

⁸⁰ See also Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8.8 (2:405–6); Vos, "Priesthood," 154–59. Contrast Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*, 108; Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 24, 34–35.

⁸¹ See Vos, "Priesthood," 133: "The only place where [the Savior and true high priest] can properly dwell and effectually minister is the heavenly sanctuary."

⁸² Vos, "Priesthood," 142.

Christ himself was a priestly act (10:10; 13:12).⁸³ The sacrificial, substitutionary death corresponds to Christ's *priestly* office.⁸⁴

We are thus not faced with an either-or scenario for the timing of and location of Christ's priesthood. Yes, Christ serves as a priest in heaven in a consummate sense, but he also served as a priest on earth, during his days of humiliation. This is also highlighted in Heb 5:7, where Jesus' prayers, which were accepted, are portrayed as priestly service.⁸⁵ As Wilhelmus à Brakel notes, this intercession is an element of his high priestly, heavenly work as priest in which he *also* engaged on earth.⁸⁶ This is also consistent with Christ's representative, priestly suffering while on earth that is emphasized in the same passage.⁸⁷ Christ's earthly work was not merely preparatory. As Turretin argues: "The suffering and death of Christ ought indeed to have been preparatory and antecedent to his intercession, which was the other part of his priesthood, to be performed in heaven. But they could not be called a preparation for the priesthood to be administered only in heaven, since in that death was properly contained a sacerdotal offering and delivering up of Christ for us."⁸⁸ Simply put, the death of Christ was a priestly act, and this occurred on earth.⁸⁹

3. It is also helpful to appreciate that Christ's priesthood is not Levitical priesthood, but Melchizedekian priesthood.

Therefore, it is no problem to say that Christ served as a priest even though he was not from the tribe of Levi, for the Melchizedekian priesthood preceded and has priority over the Levitical priesthood. The Aaronic-Levitical priesthood was instituted with the law of Moses and "expired" when the law of Moses was fulfilled. That is, it had served its role in the history of redemption as part of the one Covenant of Grace that anticipated the final work of Christ.⁹⁰ In contrast, the Melchizedekian priesthood was in effect prior to the law of Moses and persists beyond the fulfillment of the law of Moses.⁹¹ Again Christ serves most fully as Melchizedekian high priest in heaven (Ps 110:4), but this need not deny that Christ, descended from Judah, also served as a priest while on earth (as did Melchizedek himself!). The author of Hebrews wants us to see that the Levitical

⁸³ Vos, "Priesthood," 155–57.

⁸⁴ See also Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8.8 (2:406): "He would not have entered into heaven if he had not already been a priest."

⁸⁵ See, for example, Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 119–20; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 146. See also Martin, *Atonement*, 61–62; Ps 141:2; Rev 5:8; 8:3–4.

⁸⁶ à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:542.

⁸⁷ This seems to answer the objection of Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 29–30n20 that Jesus' prayers precede his priestly ministry.

⁸⁸ Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8.10 (2:406).

⁸⁹ So, for example, Turretin, *Inst.* 14.8.6 (2:404–5).

⁹⁰ WCF 7.5; see also Ribbens, "Sacrifice God Desired," 300–304.

⁹¹ See Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 109; compare Turretin, *Inst.* 14.9.2 (2:406).

rules and circumscriptions of priesthood do not apply to Jesus.

4. The word/concept distinction is also important when considering whether Christ was a priest on earth.

Quite often a theological term describes a concept in a text, even where that specific theological term is not used in the text. Christ's priesthood (as part of his threefold office) is amply attested throughout Scripture, even though the term *priest* is rarely used explicitly for Jesus. Indeed, the church historically has not been limited to texts where the term "priest" is used to find priestly actions of Jesus. Among the many examples of Jesus serving as a priest apart from the term include Jesus blessing the children and his disciples (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:15; 24:50–53) and giving his life as a ransom (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Acts 8:32–33). The theme of Christ as new Temple (and related imagery) in the Gospels and throughout the NT is also evidence of his priestly role (e.g., Matt 12:6; Mark 14:58; John 1:14, 51; 2:19–23; 7:37–38; Rom 3:25; Eph 2:20–22; 1 Pet 2:7; Rev 21:22).⁹²

Further corroborating this approach that finds Christ to be a priest even where the term is not used, the church fathers frequently speak of Christ as a priest during his days of humiliation. To illustrate from four early Christians: Justin Martyr speaks of Christ's priestly death on the cross (e.g., *Dial.* 96, 116), and more broadly of all the things accomplished by our high priest (*Dial.* 115); Irenaeus speaks of Christ's healing ministry as a priestly activity (*Haer.* 4.8.2); and Tertullian clearly speaks of Christ as high priest even during his days of humiliation (*Carn.* 5; *Marc.* 4.35). Additionally, Athanasius speaks of Christ becoming a merciful and faithful high priest when he became incarnate, and in sacrificing himself for us (*C. Ar.* 2.9).

Thus it is not a problem that in Hebrews Christ is portrayed as a priest even where the term is not used. Indeed, though the terminology "priest" (ἱερεὺς, ἱερεύς) is reserved for Christ's heavenly ministry, his earthly ministry is described in priestly ways, as I have argued above. In such cases the concept is present even where the specific language of priest may not be used.

5. The distinctive testimony of Hebrews about the priesthood of Christ does not conflict with other NT witnesses.

The emphasis of Hebrews on the heavenly work of Christ is important and necessary. Even so, the NT is a diverse, yet unified set of writings, and the NT authors' voices are stereophonic rather than cacophonous. Elsewhere in the NT the death of Christ is central,⁹³ and if we end up with an interpretation of Hebrews that is one-sided *against* the view that Christ's death is central to atone- ment,

⁹² Martin, *Atonement*, 71, argues that if Christ is not acting as a priest in his death, then neither is he acting as a prophet or king.

⁹³ A point also made by Ribbens, "Ascension," 22–23; Jamieson, *Jesus' Death*, 99, 116

then we need to reassess our interpretation. The teaching of Hebrews, while distinctive, accords with Paul's emphasis on the death of Christ as accomplishing redemption, and the author's familiarity with Paul's close associate Timothy (13:23; compare 1 Tim 2:5) strengthens this likelihood.⁹⁴ Further, it may be that the distinctive teaching of Jesus in his heavenly state in Hebrews is not so different from the Pauline teaching on the glorified and ascended Christ who pours out his Spirit on his church (see Eph 4),⁹⁵ or the Lukan discussion of the ongoing work of Christ in his state of exaltation. Indeed, in Paul's letters *both* the death of Christ *and* his exaltation are important (e.g., Rom 4:25; 5:6–8; 10; Phil 2:6–11; 1 Tim 3:16).

V. *The Work of the Son in Redemptive History*

Hebrews speaks of the priestly work of Christ as that which provides perfection. This teaching can be understood in two major ways. First, Christ brings objectively the perfection of the final, eschatological age. This is *historia salutis*, or the history of salvation. Christ inaugurates the New Covenant age of fulfillment.⁹⁶ He accomplishes a more lasting redemption even than the exodus (see Heb 9:15). His blood is truly effectual (10:4), and speaks a better word than Abel's (12:24). The Mosaic covenant was provisional and has now yielded to the perfect, New Covenant (13:20), including the final sacrifice which fulfills the Levitical sacrificial system.⁹⁷ Christ's death has provided the true ransom for sin (9:15).

Second, the perfection that Christ brings in the history of redemption also affects the experience of salvation, or what is often called *ordo salutis* ("order of salvation"). Hebrews does *not* teach that those who lived under the Levitical sacrificial system did not have forgiveness of sins. But if so, why does the author say that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin (10:4)? In brief, this requires us to understand that the Levitical sacrifices were not ultimate, but anticipated the coming of the perfect sacrifice in Christ. His sacrifice is the truly effectual sacrifice, and is applied not only prospectively to those who come after him, but retrospectively to those who came prior to him in redemptive history.⁹⁸ This is entailed in 9:15.⁹⁹ OT believers had true forgiveness of sins, though there

⁹⁴ Thanks to Bob Cara for this observation.

⁹⁵ See also Vos, "Priesthood," 158, who argues that the teaching of Hebrews mirrors that of Paul's focus on the application of salvation by the glorified Christ.

⁹⁶ See Silva, "Perfection and Eschatology," 64–68.

⁹⁷ L. Michael Morales, "Atonement in Ancient Israel: The Whole Burnt Offering as Central to Israel's Cult," in *So Great a Salvation*, 37. See also Heb 2:10; 5:9; 7:11; 8:5; 10:1; 12:2.

⁹⁸ A helpful contemporary discussion is Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice*; see also Benjamin J. Ribbens, "The Positive Function of Levitical Sacrifice in Hebrews," in *Son, Sacrifice, and Great Shepherd: Studies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. David M. Moffitt and Eric F. Mason, WUNT 2/510 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 95–113. For a classic discussion, see Turretin, *Inst.* 12.12.15 (2:266).

⁹⁹ Cara, *Hebrews* (forthcoming).

are some differences in the “perfect” age: especially greater cleansing of conscience (Heb 9:9, 14), greater confidence (4:14–16), and greater intimacy with God (6:19–20; 7:19, 25).¹⁰⁰

VI. Conclusion

Hebrews is clear that Christ is both Son and Priest, though parsing out how can be difficult. It is therefore imperative to embrace the complexity of the theology of Hebrews and avoid simplistic, “either/or” options. Christ is both Son like David— heir to the Davidic covenant—and also the divine Son of God ontologically.¹⁰¹ Christ is indeed heavenly high priest, but this does not negate the reality of his priestly actions on earth. He thus was both Son and priest prior to the incarnation, and is messianic priest-Son now in an exalted sense. Somewhat similarly, he was already priest on earth during the days of his representative obedience and sacrifice on the cross, but is now a perpetual, heavenly priest in an exalted sense.

Hebrews therefore requires us to interpret christological statements sensitively in light of redemptive history. This magnificent letter does not proclaim static theology, but speaks of the unfolding of God’s redemptive purposes with particular focus on the Son of God. Just as the OT is organically related to the NT in Hebrews—for God continues to speak in the words of the OT—so is there an organic connection between Christ’s work in his state of humiliation and in his state of exaltation. These traditional categories are well-suited to deal with the complexities of Hebrews. Further, we must appreciate the unity of Christ’s accomplishment of redemption in the state of humiliation, and the ongoing application of that work as exalted, heavenly high priest. Christ is both Son and high priest, both then and now.

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¹⁰⁰ See also Turretin, *Inst.* 12.8.19–25 (2:238–40).

¹⁰¹ Showing this is the major concern of Jamieson, *Paradox of Sonship*, following especially Silva, “Perfection and Eschatology.”