Article

Hebrews' High Priestly Christology: Models, Method and Aim

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Abstract: This article suggests a systematic analysis of the ways the author of the Letter to the Hebrews links Christ and the sacrificial system, exploring the author's method of using the sacrificial system in his Christology. It points to the issues in which Hebrews embraces traditional Jewish cultic ideas and—building on these basics—those in which Hebrews greatly diverges and modifies high priestly features. The manner in which the author bases his Christology on the sacrificial cult shows that he acknowledges the efficacy of the high priest and sacrifices for contending with sin. Even when modifying the priestly cult to show that Christ's atonement is superior to, and takes the place of, the Temple cult, he bases himself on the fundamentals of the high priest entering the Holy of Holies with blood. He uses the sacrificial cult as a model for Christology, like a map for navigating Christ's doctrine of salvation. It is suggested that Hebrews' aim is to make sense of Jesus' death and atonement, perhaps even to shed light on Pauline Christological and cultic metaphors.

Keywords: Letter to the Hebrews; Christology; high priest; Pauline cultic metaphors; sacrifices

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1. Introduction

The Letter to the Hebrews is both the most detailed and the most radical treatment of the sacrificial system in the NT. Here, Jesus is the high priest in the heavenly Temple, offering the ultimate sacrifice, his own body: "He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17). Hebrews' Christology can be designated as "priestly," "high priestly," "cultic," "Levitical," or "heavenly Temple Christology." Approximately half of this epistle deals with cultic issues.

But why is the author of Hebrews, of all NT authors, so interested in the laws of priesthood, sacrifice, and Temple imagery? And why does he systematically apply the sacrificial cult to Christ if, as he claims, Christ provides an alternative that is superior to the Temple? In other words, what is the author's "method" of using the sacrificial system in his Christology?

The first part of this article shows the many ways in which in the course of introducing Jesus as the new high priest who sacrifices himself in the heavenly Temple, the author actually displays concern for the Temple cult. He bases the new Christology and heavenly Temple on concepts of the priestly law in the Torah and its practice in the Jerusalem Temple. He acknowledges the rationale for sacrifices in the earthly Temple and their importance for the belief in Christ. We shall see the means in which he modifies and appropriates a number of sacrificial rites to make them compatible with Christ and the heavenly Temple.

The second part of the article addresses the question of *why* the author of Hebrews relates the sacrificial system and the high priesthood to Christ. What does he hope to gain from portraying the complex system of Temple-high priest-sacrifice as the background for Jesus' death and ascent to heaven? What problem is he trying to solve through such creative and innovative Christology?

Any discussion of Hebrews needs to address the problem of its date (Koester 2001, pp. 50–54).¹ Some believe it was written before the destruction of the Temple, in 70 CE, especially since the author does not mention this event, despite the fact that it would have

supported his position about the need for a new alternative to the cult (Lindars 1991, pp. 19, 87; Walker 1994).² On the other hand, he does not refer to the Temple at all, only to the Tabernacle of the Priestly Code. In fact, the total omission of the Temple may imply that it is no longer standing (Isaacs 1992, pp. 43–44, 67). Other scholars date Hebrews after 70 (Schenck 2007, pp. 196), also because of the reference to Hebrews 1:3–5 in 1 Clem 3:2–6, dating the latter to ca. 90–120 CE (Lane 1991, pp. lxii–lxiii; Attridge 1989, p. 6).

I suggest that two assertions of the author imply that he is writing after 70. First, he stresses that “by this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the Sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first Tabernacle is still standing” (9:8) (Translations follow the NRSV, unless noted otherwise). If the “first Tabernacle” denotes the Temple, the author is saying that the heavenly sanctuary is available only after the earthly one is no more. Second, after mentioning the believers’ entrance to the heavenly Sanctuary, (10:19), the author warns that further offenses can no longer be expiated with sacrifice: “For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins; but a fearful prospect of judgment” (10:26–27). It seems that sacrifices in the Temple (their efficacy is approved by the author, as we shall see below) can no longer be performed for atonement, probably because the Temple cult has ceased to exist.

My analysis of Hebrews does not rely on a specific dating. It is based on its plain discourse. Nevertheless, it is easier to understand the author’s acknowledgement and adaptation of the priestly concepts if they occurred at a time when the Temple cult was nothing more than a memory, and not vying with Christ’s high priesthood.

2. Part I: Hebrews’ Approach to the Temple Cult

Hebrews is sometimes regarded as attacking the validity of the sacrificial cult. Manson, for example, declared that Hebrews puts an end to the law and the cultus of Israel (Manson 1951, pp. vi, 32, 34, 169; Daly 2009, pp. 60–64). Scholars frequently emphasize that Hebrews points to the limitations of the sacrificial cult and claims that Christ replaces the high priest and his sacrifice, thus cleansing the conscience for eternity and attaining perfection.³ However, they neglect the author’s systematic discussion of the Levitical foundations and do not pay attention to the implications of the author’s very need to introduce the Levitical cultic system.

Here I would like to demonstrate the various ways in which the author displays a favorable attitude towards the high priesthood, the Tabernacle, and sacrifice, as long as they deal with the past or as a theoretical rationale. Despite what the author views as the limitations of the priestly cult, he takes the sacrificial laws very seriously when he first introduces them *plainly*, with no relation to Christ. Furthermore, I intend to show that Hebrews employs the high priesthood, the earthly Tabernacle sacrifices, and purification by blood as *models* for Christ’s heavenly service and atonement. Even when the author *modifies* them substantially, his need to base Christ’s acts and their outcomes on sacrificial precedents, and to compare Christ with the priestly concept of atonement, demonstrates that the author holds them in extremely high regard.

2.1. 1A: The Efficacy of the High Priest, the Tabernacle, and Sacrifices

2.1.1. The High Priest

Hebrews does not merely claim that Jesus is the new high priest of non-Aaronite descent, according to the order of Melchizedek (7:1–25; cf. 4:24–15. On the background and importance of this claim, see Mason 2008). The author elucidates the importance and uniqueness of the high priestly office. The high priest is God’s chosen human being, the one charged with purging the sins of others. He does so by offering sacrifices for the people’s sins, including his own:

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he

must offer a sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was (5:1–4).

Later, *Hebrews* discusses the high priest as the one appointed by God to offer gifts and sacrifices: “For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer” (8:3). It is stressed that “there are priests who offer gifts according to the Law” (8:4).

Another merit of the Levitical high priest is that he is “able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness” when he first offers sacrifices for himself (5:2–3; cf. 4:15).

When discussing the role of the high priest, the author’s examples are not only based on Scripture, but reflect contemporary late Second Temple practices. Unlike in the Pentateuch (Num 18:21), collecting tithes is not restricted to the sons of Levi, but is shared by the priests (Heb 7:5). Whereas in Num 19 it is “a priest” who sprinkles the blood of the red heifer before burning it, in *Hebrews* (9:13) it appears that this is done by the high priest himself (Horbury 1983, who also notes the close relationship between the rite of the red heifer and the Day of Atonement, as attested in rabbinic sources).

Throughout the introduction of the high priestly office, the author of *Hebrews* never argues against the sacrificial rites in the Pentateuch, despite the fact that he later introduces an alternative heavenly rite. He accepts the validity of the Levitical system and sacrifices and makes no attempt to undermine them. Instead, he employs what might be termed a “sacramental typology.” (Ribbens 2016, pp. 6–17, 138, 189–192, 200, 228; see also deSilva 2006). Later he points to the shortcomings of the Levitical high priest as compared to the superiority, atonement, and perfection of Christ. Still, neither the disconnection between the Israelite high priest and Christ nor the superiority of the new order causes him to disqualify the high priest and the cult.

Hebrews never criticizes the Levitical priests or the high priest by pointing to their failings (Koester 2001, p. 373). There is no hint of the high priest’s maltreatment of Jesus and his followers. Nor are charges brought against the high priest to justify his replacement by Christ. Unlike many Second Temple texts, such as *Pesher Habakkuk* and the *Psalms of Solomon*, the author never discredits or rebukes the Levitical priests or the high priest for their immoral acts (see the list of polemics with the priests and high priests in Evans 1989; cf. Regev 2003). He does *not* argue that the high priest, the son of Aaron, cannot atone for the people’s sins, only that he endlessly needs to do so (9:25; 10:1, 3, 11).

2.1.2. The Tabernacle

Hebrews enumerates the earthly Tabernacle and its holy vessels: the lampstand, the table and the bread of the Presence, the Holy of Holies, the golden altar of incense, the Ark of the Covenant, and the mercy-seat (9:1–5). Why are these details necessary? They are setting the stage for the heavenly Tabernacle to which Christ has ascended, where he serves as high priest. The earthly sanctuary is merely a sketch and shadow (ὁποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ) of the heavenly sanctuary (8:5 following Ex 25:40; see also 9:23). In a sense, the earthly Tabernacle is the template for the heavenly Tabernacle:⁵ The Tabernacle consists of two spaces or rooms, the first and second Tabernacle, probably alluding to the *heikhal* and the *devir* (9:6–7), whereas the heavenly Temple also consists of rooms, *hagia* and *hagia hagiōn* (9:2–3) and a curtain or veil (6:19; 10:20). In order to envision the heavenly sanctuary, one must first be informed about Moses’ Tabernacle.

2.2. Sacrifices and Blood Rites

After describing the Tabernacle, the author turns to the sacrifices offered there: “the priests go continually into the first Tabernacle to carry out their ritual duties; But only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people” (9:6–7). The author distinguishes between the daily sacrifices (burnt offering, *olah*, with no particular relevance to atonement for sin, cf. Num 38:3–4) offered by the lay priests, and

those offered by the high priest on the Day of Atonement in order to expiate sin by blood (Moffitt 2011, pp. 217–20, 256–85). In this way he marks the uniqueness of the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement and the office of the high priest.

Later, the author describes the use of blood in sacred rituals, claiming that blood is necessary for inaugurating a covenant. He cites verses which describe Moses sprinkling the blood of the covenant on the altar and the people while at Mt. Sinai “in accordance with the Law” (Ex 24:5–8). He then points out that Moses sprinkles blood both in the Tabernacle and on all of the vessels used for worship (Heb 9:18–21).⁶ The lesson for his readers is that “under the Law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (9:22). Thus, the blood of sacrifice sanctifies and purifies: “... the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified ...”⁷

Throughout these passages the author spells out the priestly laws of sacrifice and rites involving blood without criticizing their rationale or practicality, and without hinting that they are superfluous, although he cites them as a background for the belief in Christ.

3. IB. The Sacrificial System and Christ: Application and Modification

The author frequently compares the sacrificial system to Christ’s atonement in the heavenly Temple. The Levitical system serves as the model for Hebrews’ Christology in several ways, encompassing many aspects of the cult, especially the atonement by blood. This attests to the acceptance of the Jewish cultic principles and their adoption for understanding the death of Jesus.

Nevertheless, in several places the author departs from the Levitical model and modifies the principles of the cult to illustrate that Christ is superior to the sacrifices of the priests and the high priest because he sacrificed himself once for all. Curiously, although Hebrews departs from the priestly law when these modifications are introduced, a sense of similarity is initially maintained. Christ does not operate in a manner that is totally different from that of the high priest. His service is only partially altered, but this change makes all the difference.

This need to compare Christ with the priestly sacrifices, and to point out how his office and his sacrifice depart from those in the Tabernacle/Temple, is telling; it demonstrates that Christology is still being interpreted through the lens of priestly doctrine. This section opens with several examples of how the sacrificial cult can be applied with minimal amendments to understand Christ, and proceeds to the substantial modifications of the Levitical system in describing Christ’s sacrifice.

3.1. Applying Sacrificial Blood

Jesus’ blood sanctifies and purifies because it is perceived to be sacrificial blood: “For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified; how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (9:13–14).⁸

3.2. Applying the Burning of Sin Offering

Another application of a sacrificial rite is related to Jesus’ death “outside the camp.” Here Jesus’ crucifixion outside Jerusalem is explained by the need to dispose of the remains of animal sacrifices: “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp; Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood” (13:11–12). This ritual act actually applies to the remains of the sin offering (*hattat*) that is burnt there, including on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:28). On the one hand, Jesus is once again being identified with the sin offering; but on the other hand, he merely represents the disposable remains of this sacrifice. Being excluded from the sacred precincts conveys a sense of rejection and shame in the act of crucifixion.⁹

3.3. The Sacrificial System as a Model for Christology

The scope of this article does not allow for a discussion of all the cases in which Hebrews adopts or applies the Levitical system. The main points of similarity between the Levitical system and Christ are summarized in the following table (common traits are marked in bold):

Levitical Model (According to Hebrews).	Christological Adaptation
The high priest deals gently with the ignorant and wayward when he offers gifts and sacrifices for sins 5:1–2	Merciful high priest makes a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people 2:17
Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices 8:3	Offered himself 7:27
The high priest goes into the second Tabernacle once a year 9:7	Jesus enters the inner shrine, behind the curtain 6:19–20; cf. 10:19
Offering the blood of bulls and goats 9:11	Christ offers his own blood 9:12
The blood of goats and bulls, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified 9:13	The blood of Christ, purifies our conscience 9:14
Animal blood offered in the holy of holies 9:25	Christ offers himself 7:27; 9:14
The bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp 13:11	Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood 13:12

In Hebrews, the high priest serves as the model for Christ's office. The list of commonalities between the high priest and Jesus goes beyond the direct parallels in the above table and includes: being called by God; serving in matters pertaining to God; coping with sin; and, as we shall see below, offering sacrifices for forgiveness.¹⁰ The so-called priestly code of the Torah provides comparative categories through which the author validates the continuity of the Christ event with Jewish tradition: covenant, priesthood, and sacrifice. The continuity between the old order of Moses and the new order of Christ is established through the use of three cultic categories: The *high priest* mediates between God and the people, gaining access to God's *sanctuary*, and offering *sacrifices* to bring atonement.

The author regards sacrifices and other Temple rites as the background for the belief in Christ. Hebrews' doctrine and discourse draws on the sacrificial law, building on its assumed rationale of sin and how the Israelites must eliminate it. The model of sacrifice and priestly theology or cosmology is overarching: sin defiles (10:22) and is also contagious (12:15). Christ brings atonement in the same way as the sacrificial cult (2:17). Christ's blood is sacred and must not be profaned (10:29), whereas it sanctifies the believer (10:10; cf. 2:11). Christ's death purifies (1:3; 9:13–14) or sets aside sin (9:26; Dunnill 1992, p. 237). Without the concept of blood sacrifice as the means for purification, forgiveness, and atonement, Hebrews might be unable to explain how and why Jesus is the ultimate high priest, offering himself as a sacrifice for the sins of others.

This kind of discourse aims to make the readers more conscious of sin (9:9, 14; 10:2, 12:1) and the need to strive for atonement (Johnson 2001, pp. 100–4). They are called upon to adapt the Jewish cultic/priestly ideas in order to come to terms with their sense of having sinned against God, and the need for expiation.

Nevertheless, at times the author of Hebrews reduces the Levitical concept of sacrifice to atonement or penance. In the Priestly Code, sacrifices do not merely concern atonement (Klawans 2006, pp. 49–73), and when they do, atonement is achieved not only through specific sacrifices (mainly in the Day of Atonement), but is also accompanied by confession as an act of repentance. In addition, sin offerings are actually purification offerings that purge the altar from the impurity caused by that sin (Milgrom 1991, pp. 253–378).

3.4. Christ's Modification of the High Priesthood

Hebrews also points to a discontinuity between the high priest and the cult in relation to Christ and the superiority of Christ to the Levitical/Aaronite high priest (Haber 2005, pp. 106, 112). Unlike the high priest, Jesus does not need to repeatedly offer sacrifices. The high priest must atone for his own sins before atoning through sacrifice for the sins of others, but Christ atones for everyone, once and for all, by offering himself (7:27–28). Furthermore, “the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office” (7:23), whereas Christ can never be replaced, since he never dies. He is an eternal priest according to the order of Melchizedek (7:18–22). These failings actually derive both from the basics of the Law and from nature. Christ can escape them only because he is not a conventional human being. Christ is a better high priest because he achieves “perfection.”¹¹

3.5. Modifying Atonement by Blood: A Single Atonement by Christ's Own Blood

Already at the beginning of the epistle it is stated that Jesus “had made purification for sins” (3:1). Later, he purifies the “heavenly things” (9:23). In more detail, “He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption; For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified; How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! . . . because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions” (9:12–15).¹² In this passage, Hebrews points to the superiority of Christ's atonement. But before doing so the author acknowledges the *efficacy* of the traditional Levitical sacrifices! Christ's is an improved version of the traditional sacrifice.

Here (9:11–14), Christ's sacrifice is described in accordance with the sacrifice in the priestly legislation in the Torah. The high priest's entry into the inner sanctum merges with Jesus' entry into the heavenly Temple (Dunnill 1992, p. 140; Brooks 1970, p. 208; Lindars 1991, p. 84). Blood is Christ's price of admission into the holy of holies, as it is for the high priest, but his blood is said to have greater effect than the blood of goats and bulls.¹³ The shedding of Jesus' blood stands for a purgation from defilement, cleansing the conscience.¹⁴ The sense and effect of Christ's blood is therefore based on the blood of the sin offering. In 6:19–20 Jesus is said to enter behind the curtain to the inner sanctuary, just like the high priest at the climax of the Day of Atonement.¹⁵

The way in which Jesus departs from the priestly model relates to his unique sacrifice. Unlike the high priest, Christ has only once offered to bear the sins of many (9:29). He “offered up” (προσενέγκας) not a goat or a calf, but his own loud cries and tears, and his supplications for deliverance (5:7).¹⁶ He offers “himself” (7:27; cf. 10:10) a blameless sacrifice (9:14; cf. 7:26), denoting true worship. But blamelessness is actually a cultic concept pertaining to the physical perfection of the sacrificial animal (Attridge 1989, pp. 250–51). The impact of Christ's sacrifice does not correspond with the Levitical system: it paves the way for the believers to enter into the (heavenly) Sanctuary, and affords lay persons access to the heavenly holy of holies (10:19–25).

The author points to some shortcomings of the priestly sacrifice as compared to Christ's sacrifice. In the Temple cult, “gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the *conscience* of the worshipper; But deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right” (9:9–10).¹⁷ Furthermore, Levitical sacrifices are offered constantly, year after year, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” that is, to absolve them forever (10:1–4).¹⁸ In addition, the priests must offer sacrifices for themselves before atoning for the people, whereas Christ “has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself” (7:27). Yet it is

interesting to note that in order to emphasize the merits of Christ's atonement, the author compares it with the traditional Temple cult.

Although Hebrews notes the limited effectiveness of sacrifices, the author nonetheless believes they *are* somewhat effective.¹⁹ No fault attaches to the earthly sanctuary with its laws and practices. There is simply a far better alternative. Thus, when referring to the heavenly Temple, of which the earthly Tabernacle is a mere sketch, he argues that "it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these" (9:23).²⁰

Some ways in which Hebrews modifies and revises the Levitical system are summarized in the following table. It should be noted that, like any comparison, the differences (marked in italics) are based on preliminary common parameters or components (marked in bold) which makes it possible to draw the distinction between the items under comparison.

Levitical Model (According to Hebrews)	Christological Modification
Former priests were <i>prevented by death</i> from continuing in office 7:23	Holds his priesthood <i>permanently</i> , because he continues <i>for ever</i> 7:24
The high priest needs to offer sacrifices for his <i>own sins</i> 5:3 7:27	<i>Blameless, undefiled</i> , separated from sinners, has <i>no need to offer sacrifices</i> day after day, first for his own sins 7:26–27
Sacrifices that <i>cannot remove sin or purify of the conscience</i> 9:9–10, 10:1–4, 11	A single sacrifice that removes sin and purifies the <i>conscience</i> 9:12 10:10, 12–13, 19–21
The high priest offers <i>again and again</i> , as he enters the Holy Place year after year, <i>not</i> with blood that is his own 9:25, 10:1, 3, 10:11	<i>Once for all</i> at the end of the age, removes sin by the sacrifice of <i>himself</i> , offered <i>once</i> to bear the sins of many 9:25–28, 10:11
Taking the blood that he offers <i>for himself</i> and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people 9:7	Offered up <i>prayers and supplications</i> , with loud cries and tears 5:7

Another striking departure from the sacrificial system should be noted. Hebrews uses an exegetical reading of Melchizedek in Ps 110:4 in order to release Jesus from the Levitical pattern of high priesthood and to justify the fact that his office diverges from the priestly tradition. In fact, the author emphasizes this several times (5:5–10; 7:1–25; 6:19). He uses a prophetic assertion, the word of God ("an oath," 7:20), to justify and explain this marked deviation from the Priestly law and cultic tradition.

While the revisions of the Levitical system are critical of the priestly tradition and reject the essential foundations of the cult, these departures are actually based on the sacrificial system. The author needs to elucidate what is common to the Levitical high priest and Christ before he can point out the one-time event of Christ's atoning by his own blood, through offering himself and entering behind the curtain. First he needs to explain that, just as the sacrificial blood atones, so does Christ's sacrifice purify from sin, and only then can he detail the ways in which Christ's sacrifice is superior.²¹ Without the traditional Levitical cultic basics, there is no way to specify who Christ is and how he atones for sins and leads to perfection.²² Although he is building a new structure from the old bricks of the sacrificial/priestly system, the author nevertheless holds them in high esteem.²³

Yet despite his favorable attitude towards the Temple cult, he claims that it is no longer relevant (9:8): Christ's sacrifice does not coexist with the Levitical system, but replaces it.²⁴

4. Part II: Why Is Temple Cult the Key for Understanding Jesus as Christ?

4.1. Three Explanations

The question remains: what is *the purpose of Hebrews' cultic Christology*? Why does the author of Hebrews engage with the Levitical system if, in his own view, it is no longer feasible? Why should a believer in Christ compare Jesus to the high priest and his sacrifice, if it is obvious that only Christ can lead to perfection?

The common view is that the author supersedes the Temple cult in Jerusalem in order to demonstrate that the belief in Christ is more effective. Some so-called Christians want to return to Judaism and need to be deterred from doing so. Hebrews wants its readers to sever their ties with the Jewish Temple cult and the Law, so he demonstrates that they are no longer relevant, since Christ offers a better alternative of “eternal redemption” (9:12).²⁵

If this is so, however, the author would hardly need to review the Levitical system in such detail. His references to the high priesthood and sacrifices offered for sin, as well as their rationale and practice, acknowledge the integrity and power of the Temple cult and show great respect for the priestly system. Had he wished to suppress the Torah he would not have accorded it so much weight! It is also interesting that he never rejects the *logic* of sacrifice, but rather applies it to Jesus. Nor does he use any allegory of sacrifice, like Philo (Lindars 1991, p. 90. On Philo, see Nikiprowetzky 1967). One might even suggest that the author refrains from referring to the Jerusalem Temple and alludes only to the Tabernacle (that is, using strictly scriptural terms, thus distancing the impact of his arguments from the present) because he does not wish to attack it directly (Motyer 2004). In fact, a reading of the epistle leads to an awareness of the similarities between Christological doctrine and the priestly worldview, thus theoretically strengthening the attachment to Judaism.

Another explanation for Hebrews’ decision to allude to the sacrificial system is that the author wishes to convey to Christ-believers who are still devoted to the Jewish traditional Temple and sacrificial cult the sense that their cultic needs are now being fulfilled by Christ. It is the attachment of these readers to the old cultic ways that prompts the author to model the belief in Jesus on the priestly system.²⁶ The competition with the Jerusalem Temple—if it is still standing—or with its memory and impact as a major Jewish symbol after 70 CE may explain why Hebrews focuses on the sacrificial cult as the model for Christology: Those who seek a Temple can find it in heaven.

The problem with this theory is twofold. First, the author invests too much in reminding readers of the sacrificial system and its positive values, in an effort to convince them that they are valid and necessary. He is amplifying the problem of attachment to the Temple while attempting to solve it! Second, if the author’s major concern is to associate the high priesthood and sacrifices with the image of Christ, he could have suggested an alternative Temple in heaven, using a more traditional or simpler presentation, such as that in the book of Revelation.

Revelation provides very little that is descriptive of the heavenly Temple and its cult (the main object is the altar). Incense is offered, but not sacrifices (Rev 5:7–9; 8:3–5) (Stevenson 2001; Briggs 1999). In this Temple, God is worshiped along with the Lamb (Rev 4:11; 5:8–12; 7:9). The author does not explain how the Lamb comes to be there, or how atonement or purification is to be achieved.²⁷ He focuses on the heavenly location and status of the Lamb (5:6; 7:17), utilizing the concept of the heavenly Temple to indicate that Christ should be worshiped (Bauckham 1993, pp. 58–65). In contrast to Revelation, Hebrews has no interest in merely declaring that Christ is the heavenly high priest. It aims to *demonstrate* it, to explain the cultic rationale of Christ’s sacrifice, and to convince the reader that it coheres with the sacrifices in the earthly Temple.

This leads me to conclude that not only does the author wish to address Jewish devotion to the Temple, he is also trying to build on it. I suggest that the author *needs to make sense* of Christological doctrine. He utilizes the sacrificial system and the role of the high priest—which he highly appreciates—to explain Jesus’ expiation for others and his function in relation to God and humans. Jesus’ high priesthood and service in the heavenly Temple aim to make sense of his crucifixion and exaltation in the context of Jewish belief and practice, as if they conform with tradition and maintain the priestly system.

4.2. Hebrews and Pauline Christology

The explanatory value of Hebrews’ high priestly Christology may be demonstrated by comparing it with the Christology of Paul and his understanding of the death of Jesus. Paul introduces the idea that the believers are justified (and saved from God’s wrath) by

Jesus' blood (Rom 5:3). Paul argues that Christ's blood redeems from sin, and he even designates Christ *ἰλαστήριον*, commonly interpreted as the mercy seat (*kapporet*), located upon the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies at the Tabernacle, which was considered "the place of atonement" (Rom 3:23–24; Bell 2002, pp. 18–19 and references; Finlan 2004, pp. 125–26; Hogeterp 2006, pp. 278–79 and references). Hebrews accepts the basic view that Jesus' death atones because of his blood (see also 1 John 1:7), but the author develops it further, explaining the underlying logic and how it coheres with the priestly system (note that the author rarely cites Scripture in these descriptions): Blood is the price of Christ's admission into the Holy of Holies, in the same way that animal blood is the price for the high priest's expiation.

In Hebrews, Christ's death redeems the believers from sin and purifies the heavenly Tabernacle (9:14, 23). This may be regarded as a metaphor, since, unlike the shedding of blood on the altar (or the *kapporet*), Christ's blood is not shed on the believers. However, this metaphor actually develops Paul's idea of Christ's atonement for sins. It explains the relationship between Jesus, sin, and forgiveness or atonement, which Paul does not clarify: what does "die for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3; Rom 5:6–11) mean?²⁸ Hebrews' concept of sacrifice that purifies from sin (although Hebrews does not refer directly to the sin offering mentioned in 2 Cor 5:21 and Rom 8:3), explains *exactly how* Christ's death redeems the believer from sin in Rom 6:11, 22; 8:1.²⁹ When Christ himself becomes a sacrifice that redeems from sin, Paul's ransom theology (Rom 3:24; 5:8; Gal 3:13) also becomes clearer, although a ransom and a sin offering may not be the same thing (on Paul's ransom theology, see Williams 2010, pp. 85–118).

Interestingly, Hebrews diverges from Paul in one fundamental aspect. Paul explains Jesus' redemption as being outside or beyond the realm of the Law: "For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as sin offering, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3). Hebrews, in contrast, acknowledges the similarities with the Law and to some extent even regards Christ as a continuation and development of the priestly law. Both argue for the uniqueness of the Christ event and its redemption from sin, but Hebrews elaborates and explains the concept of atonement—which Paul regards as a sin offering (*περὶ ἁμαρτίας*)—and not merely a cultic metaphor, but rather a new type of sacrifice ("himself," "once for all") for sins.

My argument is not necessarily that Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews directly develops Pauline Christology.³⁰ Rather, I believe that the use of detailed cultic discourse clarifies doctrines such as Paul's.³¹ Hebrews explains Jesus' exaltation to heaven and *why* or *how* his sacrifice atones for humanity once and for all. It does so through multiple explanations, building on the themes of high priesthood and sacrifices which atone by purifying from sin.

Viewed from the perspective of Pauline Christology, Hebrews' cultic discourse is not merely a rhetorical exercise. The author is greatly attached to priestly ideas and the sacrificial cult, and his discourse has two complementary aims. First, it makes sense of Jesus becoming Christ. Namely, he is a messiah who atones for people's sins. Second, it revitalizes the sacrificial system, showing that it is still relevant when observed by Christ. In Hebrews, the priestly system continues in a new format when it serves as the key to understanding who Christ is and how he saves the believers. Thus, instead of polemicizing with Jewish tradition and rejecting the Temple cult and sacrificial atonement, Hebrews acknowledges them and utilizes their logic to argue how Christ's dying for others' sins actually works.

To conclude, Hebrews' Christology is indeed "supersessionist," but its author's reasoning has a strong traditional flavor. He enthusiastically embraces the fundamental ideas of the priestly sacrificial system as an interpretive framework, a map for navigating the belief in Jesus. He deploys these ideas "christocentrically" to demonstrate that Christ-belief is superior to the Jewish cult, but by doing so he is actually building a theological bridge from the Torah to the belief in Christ as a savior. I would suggest that his aim in doing

so is to make the belief in Christ more comprehensive and rational from his own Jewish perspective.

Hebrews' attempt to adopt and modify the Levitical system as the key to understanding Jesus' sacrifice and soteriology also attests to the great influence of sacrifices and high priesthood on Christ-believers. They did not regard the sacrificial system as corrupt or degenerate, but rather as logical and essential. In this sense, for Hebrews "the door to Jesus" is indeed in the Temple.³²

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Notes

- ¹ As for its geographical provenance, the only hint is the reference to "those from Italy" (Heb 13:24).
- ² However, the fact that the sacrificial cult is referred to in the present tense does not necessarily mean that it still functions. This is merely a literary style, one which is also used by other authors who write about the Temple cult when it is no longer in existence. Cf. *Ant.* 4 224–257; Against Apion 2.77, 193–198; 1 Clem 41.2; (Lane 1991, pp. lxiii, 218).
- ³ (Johnson 2001, p. 111) argues that "the cultus was, ultimately, an inadequate remedy for sin." See also (Gäbel 2006, pp. 472–83; McKelvey 2013, p. 205; Salevao 2002, pp. esp. 208–10), who also claim (and attempt to explain) Hebrews' separation from Judaism (e.g., *ibid.*, 171, 197). See also the studies listed in (Ribbens 2016, p. 136, n. 240).
- ⁴ See the list of polemics with the priests and high priests in (Evans 1989). Cf. E. (Regev 2003).
- ⁵ On the meaning and origin of ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ, see (Church 2017, pp. 404–11). Cockerill (2012, pp. 359–60) points out that "pattern and shadow" actually affirm the positive function of the old as an outline or blueprint of the "heavenly" (although there is a certain reservation in 9:23b), anticipating Christ's ministry. In fact, in ancient Judaism the entire concept of a heavenly Temple aims to legitimize its earthly counterpart (Ribbens 2016, pp. 52–81, 81, 137).
- ⁶ The latter act is an inaccurate simplification of Scripture, since Moses sprinkles the blood only on the altar and the priestly garments (Lev 8:15, 19, 24, 30; 9:9, 12).
- ⁷ In these two passages the author combines the inauguration of a covenant by shedding blood, the consecration of people to office, the ritual purification from corpse's impurity (by the ashes of the red heifer, cf. Num 19), and the ritual purification from sin on the Day of Atonement (Attridge 1989, p. 257; Koester 2001, p. 415). Heb 9:13 does not conform to the Jewish rite, since there is no sprinkling of the blood of goats and bulls on defiled persons, and the sprinkling of the red heifer's ashes, used for cleansing in cases of corpse impurity, has nothing to do with cleansing from sin. Daly (1978, pp. 272–73) argues that the author is not concerned with presenting the OT accurately, but freely uses the cultic institutions to serve his own argument.
- ⁸ On the acceptance of the priestly idea of the atoning force of blood, in which blood redeems (like a ransom) and purifies, see (Moffitt 2011, pp. 257–69; Ribbens 2016, pp. 154–59). See also the priestly rites described in 9: 18–22.
- ⁹ (Lane 1991, p. 542; Cf. Moffitt 2011, p. 277; Koester 1962, pp. 299–315) argues that the author intends to show that the sacrifice of Jesus, which cleanses people, is performed outside of the camp. That is, his act of cleansing is performed in a profane place, abolishing all cultic performances. (Lane 1991, p. 445) criticizes this approach, since the text has no cultic sense of a profane space, but is merely a hostile environment. Note that the author extends this metaphor when he portrays his readers' life as also taking place "outside the camp," where they are abused, looking for "the city that is to come" (13:13–14).
- ¹⁰ (Koester 2001, pp. 296, 298). On how the high priest and Christ contend with sin, see Heb 5:1–3; 9:14–15, and the discussion below.
- ¹¹ Heb 7:11 (see the comment of Attridge 1989, p. 200); 7:28; 9:14; 9:28 (on which see Lane 1991, pp. 194–95); cf. 10:13–14. On Christ's perfection, see (Ribbens 2016, pp. 169–77). In 7:11 the Levitical priesthood had failed to attain perfection. Nonetheless, Peterson (1982, pp. 66–73) rejects the possibility of a cultic meaning for this term.
- ¹² Scholars debate whether this purification applies to the heavenly Temple or its inauguration, or is merely a metaphor for cleansing the conscience. See (Ribbens 2016, pp. 120–24).
- ¹³ (Brooks 1970, pp. 209–10). On Christ's blood and its effect following the Priestly Law, see 2011, pp. 257–71. Ribbens (2016, pp. 154–59) points out that the blood (of the sacrificed animal) achieves forgiveness for sins (cf. 5:1, 3; 7:27; 9:7) in the new covenant, despite the denial of sacrifice and blood to accomplish forgiveness in 10:4, 11.
- ¹⁴ (Lane 1991, p. 472; Attridge 1989, p. 250). However, in 12:24 Jesus' blood is *sprinkled* to signify the new covenant. See (Attridge 1989, p. 376). On sprinkling for the inauguration of a new covenant or consecration of the priest, see Heb 9:18–21, discussed

above. Some regard the shedding of Jesus' blood as real (Attridge 1989, p. 248; Cockerill 2012, p. 394; cf. Ribbens 2016, p. 118). Others conclude that Jesus atones/purifies "by means of" (*dia*) his blood, metaphorically, without actually performing the priestly rite: (Brooks 1970, pp. 209–10; Gäbel 2006, pp. 284–85, 288; Moffitt 2011, pp. 224, 273).

(Gäbel 2006, pp. 212–374; Moffitt 2011, pp. 217–20, 256–85). Church (2017, pp. 383–84, 390–91) argues that the curtain does not symbolize a real curtain but represents the access to God now available through Christ.

Jesus' earthly death on the cross is barely dealt with in Hebrews and is debated by scholars. On the relationship between Jesus' earthly death and ascension to heaven, cf. (Moffitt 2011, pp. 42, 216–20, 228–30, 276), followed by (Ribbens 2016, pp. 108, 135). Jamieson (2017, pp. 338–68) reviews the debate. For his most recent attempt to explain this question, see (Jamieson 2019).

Note that the biblical command to fast on the Day of Atonement, "you shall deny yourselves" (Lev 16:29, 31), may actually relate to cleansing one's conscience.

This problem also relates to the very consciousness of sin in a manner that recalls Paul's equation of the Law with sin (Rom 7:7–25). See (Koester 2001, p. 399; Ribbens 2016, p. 178). The ineffectiveness of sacrifice is enhanced by citing Ps 40:6–8 (Heb 10:5–9).

(Ribbens 2016, pp. 149–63, esp. 160, 162): "That Christ's sacrifice is greater does not diminish the assumption that the old covenant sacrifices achieved forgiveness of sins . . . Christ's sacrifice must follow the pattern of the Levitical sacrifice for it to be accepted as an atoning sacrifice." Eberhart (2005, p. 60) maintains that Heb 10:14 denies the validity of the sacrificial cult. However, 9:13 uses the effectiveness of the cult as the foundation of the metaphor engaging Christ's sacrifice.

(Koester 2001, p. 414), referring to Heb 10:1, asserts that the earthly Tabernacle signifies a heavenly reality. Hebrews is most probably influenced by the concept of the heavenly Temple (e.g., in the Qumranic Songs of Sabbath Sacrifices), as well as notions of priestly angelic figures that worship God in heaven (see, e.g., Schiffman 2009).

Ribbens (2016, pp. 163–84) concludes that the advantages of Christ in relation to the Jewish sacrificial cult include the access to God, perfection, and redemption.

Joslin (2008, pp. 253–54) maintains that the Law serves as the fundamental mode of expression for understanding Christ's work, since it foreshadows his ministry: "without the cultus, Hebrews would not have the canvas on which to paint the portrait of Christ."

Some seem to deny this appreciation when they interpret the entire sacrificial system in the heavenly Tabernacle as metaphoric, a figurative language symbolizing the *eschatological* dwelling of God with His people. See Church (2017, pp. 400–1, 404–21), building on Heb 9:11, in which Jesus passed *through* (*dia*) the heavenly Temple, and "pattern and shadow" (8:5) as symbolic foreshadowing, and on "these last days" (1:2). Schenck (2007, pp. 144–81) regards the heavenly Tabernacle as a metaphor for heaven itself. In my view, however, the cultic system is far too detailed and complex to be considered a metaphor.

Heb 13:10 argues that "we have an altar from which those who officiate in the Tabernacle have no right to eat," but it is unclear to which contemporary practice the author is referring. Suggestions include the Eucharist and the heavenly Temple (Lane 1991, pp. 537–38).

Isaacs (1992, p. 25 n. 2) lists several scholars who argue that the author addresses early Christians who desire to return to Judaism. Cf. also (Moule 1950, p. 37; Motyer 2004, p. 189).

(Koester 2001, pp. 382, 428; Gäbel 2006, pp. 484–88). Brown and Meier (1983, pp. 151–58) see here a threat of reversion to the Jewish sacrificial system by early Christians in Rome after 70, reviving the cult based on the Tabernacle. Moule (1950, pp. 35, 37–39) suggests that Hebrews aims to explain why only early Christianity has no sacrificial system. In quite a different vein, (Koester 2001, pp. 78–79) suggests that Hebrews is competing with Greco-Roman cults, since it gives the readers "a focus for their worship that allows their community to maintain an identity distinct from groups associated with other sanctuaries." However, the author's examples and explanations are restricted to the Torah and contemporary Jewish practice.

Rev 7:9–10, 14. Note that the author regards the Lamb as a sacrificial symbol (Rev 5:12; 13:8) and relates to Jesus' death and blood as a ransom for the believers' sins (Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11). However, these themes are not developed in relation to the Lamb's dwelling in the heavenly Temple.

For a search for the origins of the idea of Christ's atonement, see (Hengel 1981, pp. 49–75). In his discussion of the sin-offering metaphor, Hengel (*ibid.*, 52) suggests that "Christ developed his saving power directly in the heavenly sanctuary and not just on the altar . . . access to the direct presence of God himself had been opened up to the believer" (note the similarity to Heb 10:19). Williams (2015) suggests the death of the Maccabean martyrs as Paul's model for this aspect of his Christology. On Jesus' death "for sins," see also Rom 4:25; Gal 1:4. Dunn (1998, pp. 207–33) discusses the centrality of Jesus' death and its soteriology for Paul. Dunn (*ibid.*, 176) explains the brevity of Paul's language (e.g., Rom 3:21–26) as resulting from a quote of a summary statement which was noncontroversial for early Christian readership.

On Paul's cultic metaphor of sin offering, see R.P. Martin (1986, pp. 140, 156–57 and references); Dunn (1998, pp. 181, 217, 219, 222, 440–41). Hebrews may also expand the notion of justification (e.g., Rom 3:21–26; 5:1–2, 6–10; 8:10). On the cultic aspect of justification, see (Dunn 1998, pp. 386–87).

Hebrews contains some general themes parallel to Pauline Christology: Christ as the image of God (Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4), his agency over creation (Heb 1:2; Col 1:16), and his obedience (Heb 5:8; Phil 2:8). Both discuss the new covenant (Heb 9:15; 2 Cor

3:6). See (Cockerill 2012, p. 39). O'Brien (2010, p. 19) compares Hebrews with 1 Cor 1:15–20; 8:6 and Phil 2:6–11. Rothschild (2009) argues for Hebrews' literary reliance on Paul, based on similar scriptural citations, and the use of ostensibly similar terms and concepts. In her view (*ibid.*, 209), the idea that Christ is "better" may be a development of Paul's old-new rhetoric (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14–17). See also Georgi (2005). Nevertheless, Hurst (1990, pp. 107–24) concludes that the similarities do not attest to a direct connection between Hebrews and Paul. Rather, Hebrews develops some central Pauline themes, especially in relation to faith, and both interact with the same traditions.

31 Pauline Christology may have been confusing, requiring clarification and interpretation, as Dunn (1998, p. 231) notes: "the significance of Christ's death could be adequately expressed only in imagery and metaphor . . . Paul uses a rich and varied range of metaphors in his attempt to spell out the significance of Christ's death . . . no one metaphor is adequate to unfold the full significance of Christ's death . . . they do not always fit well together."

32 Cf. Hegesisppus, apud. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.8, a scene situated in the Jerusalem Temple.

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