Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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Introduction

Although there are a variety of metaphors used to interpret Christ’s atonement within the New Testament, a unique emphasis is placed on sacrificial imagery in the Epistle to the Hebrews which calls for careful consideration. Why does the author expend such effort detailing the sacrificial tradition found in the Hebrew Scriptures and the differentiation of Christ’s sacrifice when many other epistles do not even mention such a metaphor? Do these descriptions uphold and defend the system of sacrifice, though now redefined; or, do they offer a challenge to an archaic system? Although arguments have been made to both ends, I suggest that the writer of this letter is employing a framework familiar to his audience in order to discuss the unique work of Christ. Such a conclusion, I hope, will help the contemporary reader make interpretive choices regarding his or her understanding and application of sacrificial models of atonement.

An initial glance at the book of Hebrews will show a “comprehensive use of sacrificial metaphors with regard to the death of Jesus,” which leads scholars like Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann to highlight this imagery as an attempt to develop a theology of Christ’s death and saving work.¹ Many theologians and Biblical scholars have noted the extensive detail and care which the author (henceforth referred to as “Hebrews”) puts into explaining the nuances of his sacrificial language. Sacrifice itself is evaluated as both negative and positive throughout, and at least three distinct contrasts emerge within the letter between elements of Christ’s sacrifice and those of Levitical sacrifice. Obviously, great care has been taken here to clarify what Hebrews does and does not mean to say about Jesus’ sacrifice. This particularity, combined with the

nuanced use of traditions in the Hebrew scripture, leads me to suggest that the author sees the sacrificial metaphor as effective for his particular audience while still being able to anticipate its potentiality for misunderstanding or misuse.

**Sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures**

Before diving immediately into the epistle to the Hebrews, we must first examine the idea of sacrifice more broadly so we have something with which to compare it. Although the idea of sacrifice exists in almost all cultures, let us focus on a definition that illustrates the concept of sacrifice as found in the larger canon of Hebrew Scriptures which our epistle references. Sacrifice seems to be defined most essentially as the offering up of a gift—typically a slain animal—to God. Richard Nelson develops this further, suggesting that, “To offer something as sacrifice is to transfer it out of the realm of human use and disposal and into the domain of God.”

Although scholars critical of the cruelty and/or victimization that comes along with sacrifice have emphasized the existence of victimless grain offerings as far back as Genesis, the sacrificial cultus that receives the most development in the Hebrew Scriptures—and is invoked vividly in Hebrews—involves the shedding of an animal’s blood. This blood then serves as an agent in a purifying process which enabled either an individual or people group to come before God. While there is some debate about the actual “climax” of the ritual, it is generally agreed that the slaughter is not the most important part. Though the animal had to be killed to provide the blood, and in some cases the meal offered to God is shared among participants, it seems that either the bringing or burning of the slaughtered gift before God is the point of greatest efficacy.

It is here the transaction is made between the human and the heavenly.

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3 Indeed 9:22 draws our attention to the significance of blood, although the actual extent to which Hebrews endorses the real need for bloodshed is debated.
Although there are various types of sacrifices outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hebrews primarily makes use of imagery from the sin offering and the Day of Atonement, both of which support the goal of coming before God by removing “obstacles that threaten the relationship between God and God’s people.”\(^5\) These “obstacles” are the unintentional sins of individuals and of Israel.\(^6\) Although the Scriptures do not attempt to explain how this removal actually works, let us briefly outline the process of each to better understand the reference being made in by the epistle writer. The “sin offering”, outlined in Leviticus 4, begins when the sin becomes known by the offender and the community. The offender—who will be the beneficiary of the sacrifice—then lays hands upon the animal to be sacrificed, and it is slaughtered. After the animal has been killed, its blood is spilt upon the altar by the priest and burned, giving off an aroma that rises to heaven. The body of the animal, in some cases, is taken outside the camp; in other sacrifices, the remaining flesh of the animal are shared as a communal meal. The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, involves a somewhat more elaborate process, this being Israel’s yearly remembrance of sins for the whole community. Outlined in Leviticus 16, this ritual involves two different sacrifices: one for the high priest and one for the people. The bull sacrificed for the high priest follows the typical pattern of the above-mentioned sin offering, but the offering for the people is somewhat different. This second step is made only after the high priest himself has been purified and thus enabled to enter the Most Holy Place in which one goat is sacrificed and another serves as a scapegoat, bearing the sins of the people into the wilderness.

On the Day of Atonement, all of Israel observes a Sabbath rest “because on this day atonement

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\(^5\) Nelson, “He Offered Himself,” 257. Priestly ordination and covenant-making sacrifices are both referenced as well, but with focus on the sacrifice and more on the effects.

\(^6\) Leviticus 4:2, 13, 22, and 27 specify that the sin offering is made for the unintentional sins of the individual, group, or leader. No mention is made there of “intentional” sins, and specification is not offered about the nature of an unintentional sin.
will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins” (Lev 16:60).

**Use of the Sacrificial Cultus in the Epistle**

It is to this ritual—as recorded in the Septuagint—that Hebrews makes reference as he addresses the salvific work of Christ. Harold Attridge points out that “Hebrews is not explicitly interested in the Herodian temple and contemporary high priests, but in the Torah and the cultic system of the desert tabernacle that it portrays.”

The idea that the actual practices, as adapted from the Levitical law, are not the concern of the author is further supported by the way the author blends not only the two sacrificial rituals in question, but also priestly ordination and covenantal sacrifice. Rather than focusing on historical accuracy, Hebrews seems to be making use of a familiar framework to emphasize the uniqueness of Christ’s work. Although further study has been conducted into the implications of the similarities between Christ’s sacrifice and the Levitical sacrificial cultus, it seems that the author intends to use the latter to highlight a contrast, and so we will turn our attention there shortly. However, first we must briefly examine the way Christ is cast in the sacrificial construct of Hebrews.

Of the roles we previously identified within a sacrifice—victim, beneficiary, and priest—Christ takes on the first and the last. The roles of victim and priest are merged so that the one who dies as the source of the blood is also the one entering into the Most Holy Place to bring that offering before God (9:12). Like the offering described for the Day of Atonement, this work is done not just for the cleansing of the priest, but is effective for all those on whose behalf it has been offered. The description of this work follows the same “ritual script” of Israelite sacrifice:

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7 All biblical citations are from the NIV unless otherwise stated.
the death of the victim, passage by the priest into the realm of the holy, and the use of blood to effect purification and to create a covenantal relationship”\textsuperscript{10} Those positive aspects of the sacrifices of the old covenant are retained in Hebrews’ explanation of Christ’s saving work.\textsuperscript{11} However, it is upon this common ground which the author builds the contrast that is a significant part of his high Christology.

**Christ as Contrast**

Using the framework of sacrificial language and laws, Hebrews continues to develop his Christology in alignment with his opening superlatives. Just as Christ is higher than angels and also greater than Moses, so too is his sacrificial act superior to the old system. In particular, Christ’s sacrificial actions are exceptional in regards to the offering, its location, and its efficacy.

Of the offering, Hebrews emphasizes that Christ, acting as High Priest, offers “himself” and “his own blood” before the altar (7:27; 9:12, 14, 25). This gift, compared to the blood of slaughtered animals, is superior for two reasons. First, we see that Christ is pure in spirit and so does not contain the “contagion of sin” which may have been assumed about the temple sacrifices.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, Christ is not a victim, but rather, in the words of Michael Hardin, an “offerer”, which not only undermines the cycle of victimization, but also renders the sacrifice a lasting atonement.\textsuperscript{13} Christ is not made a sacrifice against his will, but enters into the role intentionally.

\textsuperscript{10} Nelson, “He Offered Himself,” 252.

\textsuperscript{11} The actual “positivity” of these elements of sacrifice, particularly the necessity for the spilling of blood, is subject to great debate. Some of this will be addressed later in this paper, but for further discussion of the assumed relationship of blood and purification of sins, see: Fred B. Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” in vol. 12 of The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 106-113.


In addition to the distinction in the gift being offered—that is, the willingly shed blood of the perfect Son of God—the tabernacle in which the sacrifice takes place also renders the sacrifice effective “once and for all.” Hebrews 9:11 claims that Christ, as high priest, “went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.” Although the fact of the difference is obvious, the actual meaning of this alternative is more difficult to discern. Attridge rejects readings of the higher tabernacle as a metaphor for Christ’s body as inconsistent with other usage in Hebrews, suggesting instead that it points to the heavenly locus of Christ’s sacrifice, rather than the earthly locus of the Levitical; that is, it refers to “true” or “heavenly” tent of God established in the prior chapter (8:2). This heavenly locus, then, has already been established as of higher metaphysical value than the “shadow” of the earthly one. Although Fred Craddock does well to warn us that the analogy between earthly and heavenly sanctuaries should not be pressed too far, it is evident at least that what Levitical priests had done on earth was limited by and to their earthly locus, and because Christ, as most high priest, entered the heavenly realm, his own work did not face the same limitation.

Indeed, the efficacy of Christ’s sacrificial work is the most significant contrast to the old sacrifices. We have seen that through distinctions in offering and locus, Hebrews establishes that Christ’s work is effective “once and for all.” That is, it has occurred once and is effective for all time. The end of the offering of sacrifices is indicated vividly by Christ’s “sitting down” at the

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14 Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 246-7.
15 Nelson, “He Offered Himself,” 259. Although the dichotomy here sounds Platonic, it need not necessarily be read as such. For an interesting alternative, see: Edward Adams, “The Cosmology of Hebrews,” in The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology, ed. Richard Bauckham, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 122-139.
16 Craddock writes: “Interpreters are divided as to how far to press the analogy in v. 23. Animal sacrifices purify the earthly sanctuary… Does this mean that the better sacrifice of Christ purifies the heavenly sanctuary? If thus pressed, then there is sin or impurity in the heavenly realm in need of cleansing…. It seems wiser to take the analogy in a broad and general sense, to understand that Christ has entered the heavenly sanctuary with a better sacrifice—that is, himself—but to draw no more detailed comparisons than the writer does in the verses that follow (vv. 24-26).” Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews”, 112.
right hand of God in 10:12, as opposed to the way Levitical priests were instructed to stand before the altar (Deut 10:8; 18:7). Not only is the sacrificial cultus ended, but its efficacy also lasts so that it is not, and need not be, repeated. This lasting power is highlighted as a sharp distinction to the sin offerings which were offered daily or yearly.

In addition to achieving permanently what the Levitical sacrifices could only do temporarily, Christ’s sacrificial act also effects a different level of purification. In addition to the dichotomy of the earthly and heavenly drawn early on in Hebrews, we also see contrast developing between the inward and outward. The old system, we are told, makes the beneficiary outwardly clean; that is, it can only affect the physical because it takes place, and makes use of, only the physical (9:13). Christ’s sacrifice, however, is actually able to access and affect our inner consciences. Whereas the old system demanded a continually guilty conscience—reminded each year that the sins in need of cleansing at the Day of Atonement are not really erased—Christ’s sacrifice is able to perfect the conscience by actually removing the sins. One cannot feel guilty if his or her sins are no longer remembered by God, or so the logic seems to go. It is only by the perfecting of this conscience that one is able to enter fully into God’s presence—the ultimate goal of the sacrificial cultus. Although it is Christ’s work which makes this inner purification ultimately possible, Hebrews does make it clear that this is an ongoing process for the believer which will ultimately be completed at Christ’s return (10:14; 9:28).

**Evaluation of the Sacrificial Metaphor**

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17 Nelson, “He Offered Himself,” 527.
18 Craddock points out that the use of “day after day” sacrifices in 7:26-28 is a collapsing of sin offerings and the annual Day of Atonement to highlight the contrast between the levitical system and Christ. Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” 94.
19 Nelson, “He Offered Himself,” 261.
Although Hebrews provides the reader with detailed explanation regarding the superiority of Christ’s sacrificial act, it remains that sacrifice itself reflects a violent system which does not seem compatible with the Gospel portrayal of Jesus. While Michael Hardin argues that the epistle writer actually undermines and critiques the sacrificial system of the old law, Eberhart suggests that, “the total denial of the validity of the Judean sacrificial cult in Heb 10:4 is inconsistent with Hebrews’ own argument in Heb 9:13. There the effectiveness of this cult is the foundation of the metaphor of Christ’s sacrifice.”

Must we acknowledge some authority, even one which might now be made obsolete, of a system built upon victimization and slaughter? Here I suggest we look back to the earlier details discussed about Hebrews’ invocation of the sacrificial cultus. First, we saw the mixing of historical rituals to create a more effective metaphor. This blurring of historical fact, in addition the use of metaphors based on prescribed rather than practiced sacrificial customs, suggests that the author is not so strictly attached to the sacrificial process in itself. Instead, he seems to be making use of a construct familiar to his readers to communicate the difference between Christ’s work on their behalf and the work formerly done by humans. Indeed, there seems to be a good deal of distance between the old sacrificial system and the actual desires of God, highlighted by Hebrews’ invocation of Psalm 40:6-8 which begins “Sacrifices and offering you did not desire.” To blatantly deconstruct the entire sacrificial metaphor, it seems, would be to lose common language available between the writer and his intended audience. Instead, Hebrews seems to use it as an entry point in which to discuss the purifying work of Christ which is unique in process, duration, and ultimate efficacy.

**Conclusion**

We have seen, then, that the epistle to the Hebrews makes use of the sacrificial cultus described in the Hebrew Scriptures to develop his Christology. Rather than casting Christ as one

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22 Eberhart, “Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors,” 60.
who fulfills the sacrificial rituals in accordance with the Levitical system, he highlights the contrasts by which Christ surpasses the locus and efficacy of the old. Because the sacrificial imagery seems to take on a more metaphorical use, opting for the scriptural rather than the historical practices, it seems that the cultus is being used more as a means for communication than being affirmed as a system. However, many questions still remain. In particular, what is really meant regarding blood being required for forgiveness? Are suffering and death really necessary parts of Christ’s work, or do they just appear so when cast in the framework of sacrifice? Furthermore, if the Levitical sacrifices addressed unintentional sins, what about intentional ones? Does Christ’s atoning work suffice for these in the theology of Hebrews?

Despite these lingering questions which continue to challenge contemporary scholars, it seems that at least we can conclude that the author’s primary intentions in using extended sacrificial metaphors seem to be communicating his Christology with an audience familiar with the traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures. The framework provided by the Levitical descriptions offers touch points of offering, location, and efficacy; these in turn create a coherent and elegant order in which to approach the questions of Christology and atonement. By casting Christ as highest priest and also as the ultimate sacrifice, Hebrews is able to effectively portray the unique nature of the atonement achieved through Christ’s life and work.
Bibliography


