



The Logic of Jesus's Priesthood

*Why Precision is Essential for Scholarship
on Atonement and the Epistle to the Hebrews*

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Is the resurrection essential to Christ's saving work? Is the ascension essential to Christ's saving work?

If you answered "Yes" to either or both of those questions, then you recognize that there's more to the story than just the cross. But how is the death of Christ related to his resurrection and ascension? And how can we talk about that relationship in ways that give proper place to the cross without allowing it to eclipse the resurrection and ascension?

These important theological questions represent some of the concerns of scholars working on the epistle to the Hebrews in the last decade. And this is no coincidence. In 2011, David M. Moffitt, now reader in New Testament at the University of St Andrews, published a truly groundbreaking study—*Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*.¹ In it, Moffitt argued that, while the resurrection is not mentioned explicitly in Hebrews, the focus on the priestly ministry of Jesus in the heavenly tabernacle *assumes* the resurrection. In other words, without the resurrection, the argument of Hebrews cannot work.

Nevertheless, even though Moffitt's work has changed the trajectory of Hebrews studies drastically, outside of work on Hebrews the broader im-

plications of Moffitt's work are underrealized. His most important contributions, as well as the ways his work has been received, can be considered via two major claims that many subsequent works address:²

- Jesus becomes the Great High Priest upon his resurrection and serves in the heavenly tabernacle.
- The self-offering of Jesus must take place after his resurrection and cannot be equated with his death on the cross.

JESUS BECOMES THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST UPON HIS RESURRECTION AND SERVES IN THE HEAVENLY TABERNACLE.

In the 1950s and 60s, many influential scholars proposed that the priestly work of Jesus was the central theme in Hebrews.³ But most of that work focused on the effects of his priesthood, rather than various aspects of the timing. The prevailing standard seems to be the idea that Jesus was a priest at some point on Earth—perhaps from the start of his ministry or perhaps from the beginning of his suffering and death; however, as Moffitt and others have

noted, this creates a tension with Hebrews 8:4.⁴ There the author says: “If [Jesus] were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.” What he is saying is: Earth has a priestly system that has various requirements for what is offered as well as who is offering it,⁵ so Jesus is not a priest who serves on earth. This point now is widely accepted, even by those most critical of Moffitt, but some among those who accept that Jesus’s priestly ministry is “heavenly” and post-resurrection still seek to categorize his death on the cross as his priestly “offering.”⁶ Nevertheless, this leads to the next claim.

THE SELF-OFFERING OF JESUS MUST TAKE PLACE AFTER HIS RESURRECTION AND CANNOT BE EQUATED WITH HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS.

This claim is among the most contentious in Moffitt’s work. Some assume he is saying that the cross is somehow unimportant for Christ’s atoning work.⁷ But (I think) I have summarized the extent of

Moffitt’s claim accurately. He insists that the offering of Jesus be completed in the heavenly tabernacle once Jesus is resurrected and thus qualified to serve as a priest. Nevertheless, arguably, he does appear to think of the death and offering in sequence: “Jesus’ death stands as the event *sine qua non* for initiating the new covenant and in Jesus’ *preparation* for his high-priestly ministry and atoning offering.”⁸ And, as he notes, in the sacrificial system, “making an offering” does not refer exclusively to killing an animal. Instead, making an offering entails presenting the blood of the animal on the altar at the place of worship.⁹

For this point, we must turn to Leviticus 16, a representative text about sacrifice. This is a special offering that requires the High Priest to enter the Most Holy Place, but he does not enter the Most Holy Place until *after* the animal is killed. In fact, generally, the offerer slaughtered the animal.¹⁰ His sacrifice certainly is not complete until he applies the blood to the altar and its surroundings in the Most Holy Place (Lev 16:15–16). As noted, in Hebrews,

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the author presents a vision of heavenly sacrifices. In fact, his presentation of worship in the heavenly tabernacle coheres with several portraits in other contemporary early Jewish literature.¹¹ This is the space where angels make their offerings in service to God, and upon his resurrection, this is where Jesus will make his once-for-all offering of himself, too (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 28; 10:10). Again, the major question that Moffitt raises is: If the offering of Jesus is not completed until the application of blood, when does it start?

Unsatisfied with Moffitt's conclusion on the relationship between the death and the offering of Jesus, in 2019, Bobby Jamieson offered a proposal that: "Jesus' death is not when and where he offers

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himself, but it is *what* he offers."¹² He bases this on an argument about the relationship between blood and death in both Hebrews and its contemporaries/predecessors interested in cultic contexts. Jamieson's project, while relatively new, largely agrees with Moffitt apart from this major point.

CONCLUSION

For those disconnected from scholarship on the epistle to the Hebrews, summarizing the conclusions of an eleven-year-old monograph might seem strange; however, it is hard to identify another scholarly work, especially a published dissertation/thesis, that has been as generative as Moffitt's. It complicates a one-size-fits-all approach to the atoning work of Jesus in the New Testament and encourages interpreters to think about the Jewishness of the text in a more comprehensive and consistent way.

What Moffitt's work does is call interpreters to precision as they describe the sacrifice of Jesus, and this work has not received the attention it deserves in broader scholarship. If theologians and other

New Testament scholars engage with the conclusions and methods of Moffitt, the whole enterprise of theological reflection will benefit. **D**

¹ *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

² The following section will only address published interactions with Moffitt. But it is worth noting that the engagement with Moffitt's work at the annual meetings of ETS and SBL has been consistent over the last decade.

³ See Craig R. Koester, "In Many and Various Ways": Theological Interpretation of Hebrews in the Modern Period" (SBL Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD, 2013).

⁴ For a great summary of these views and a more expansive summary of Moffitt on this point, see R. B. Jamieson, "When and Where Did Jesus Offer Himself? A Taxonomy of Recent Scholarship on Hebrews," *CurBR* 15.3 (2017): 338–68; R. B. Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, SNTSMS 172 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 23–35.

⁵ More precisely, who is qualified to make offerings on earth is addressed in Hebrews 7.

⁶ Michael Kibbe, "Is It Finished? When Did It Start? Hebrews, Priesthood, and Atonement in Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Perspective," *JTS* 65.1 (2014): 52.

⁷ For example, Michael Kibbe says Moffitt refers to Jesus' death as "merely preparatory" ("Is It Finished?," 26); Jared Compton, similarly, responds to his work by saying, "Neither Hebrews nor the OT, however, will allow death to function simply as the preparation for atonement" ("Review of David M. Moffitt *Atonement and the Logic*," *TJ* 36.1 [2015]: 134).

⁸ Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic*, 285.

⁹ See, e.g., Moffitt, 292. He draws upon scholarship on Hebrew Bible. Similar claims are made by Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 60; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 579.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 579.

¹¹ To my knowledge, the most comprehensive comparison of early Jewish literature and Hebrews is found in: Benjamin J. Ribbens, *Levitical Sacrifice and Heavenly Cult in Hebrews*, BZNW 222 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

¹² Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, 128.

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