

The Following Is An Excerpt From

Blood, Life, And Atonement:
Reassessing Hebrews' Christological Appropriation Of Yom Kippur
by
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Begin Excerpt:

The offering of blood in the Mosaic cult did not symbolize the entry and presentation of death before the presence of God, but that of life. In the same way, Hebrews' emphasis on Jesus' living presence in heaven—the location where the author consistently claims Jesus made his offering— implies that it is not the death/slaughter of Jesus that atones, but the presentation of his life before God in the heavenly holy of holies. Jesus' resurrection makes this presentation possible not only by informing the Christology of Hebrews— Jesus' resurrection brings him into possession of the indestructible life necessary to become the high priest of Melchizedek's order—but also by providing an explanation for the author's sacrificial soteriology that is intelligible in terms of the biblical account of blood offering.

The case presented above does not, however, suggest that Jesus' death has no importance for the author of Hebrews. While I have focused on the presentation of sacrificial blood as the moment when atonement was effected and on the importance of blood, the agent of atonement, as life, I do not mean to imply that death was not part of blood sacrifice. Nor do I mean to say that Jesus' death is unimportant for the author of Hebrews.

Rather, I have attempted to highlight the fact that blood sacrifice needs to be conceived of as a *process* which involves a whole sequence of events. The

slaughter of the victim and the presentation of the blood are both necessary elements of that sequence, but neither of them alone is sufficient to achieve the goal toward which the entire process aims. The mistake of much modern commentary on Hebrews has been to think of these two elements in the process, at least as they apply to the Christ event, as essentially interchangeable and co-terminus—both occurred when Jesus was crucified. This has contributed to a distorted understanding of the place and importance of Jesus' resurrection in the epistle to the Hebrews. I am not seeking to reduce everything in Hebrews to Jesus' heavenly presentation while trying to show that everything must not be reduced to Jesus' crucifixion. In my opinion, recognizing that sacrifice is a process helps avoid a reductionistic interpretation by allowing the different elements of the sequence to relate to one another as parts of the whole process without having to collapse these elements or their sequential relationship into one another.

One further conclusion may be drawn from this study. If the arguments above are basically sound, then Hebrews' appeal to Yom Kippur attests to a kind of early Christian Judaism concerned with explicating how the purification rites of the Mosaic cult elucidate the confession about and theological implications of Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. That is to say, the Christ event clearly compels substantial rethinking and development vis-a-vis Jewish scripture and belief, but the reading of Hebrews proposed above suggests that some early followers of Jesus sought to work out this development in continuity with and even under the pressure of the biblical witness (e.g., Jesus cannot serve as a priest on earth because the Law forbids it, and the offering of blood emphasizes life, not death). Such a hermeneutic would imply that the discrete voice of scripture plays as big a role in the writer's understanding of Jesus and the atonement as do confessional elements like those of his resurrection and ascension.

End Excerpt.