

'You Are a Priest Forever': An Exegetical and Biblical Theology of High Priestly Christology¹

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Abstract

The letter to the Hebrews is unique among its New Testament counterparts in that it is the only canonical writing to offer an in-depth explanation of the high priestly ministry of Christ within a detailed discussion of Israel's cultic theology. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, the question of timing with respect to *when* Christ was installed as high priest is addressed, noting the various answers that have been proposed. It is argued that similar to the ministry of the high priest on Yom Kippur, Christ's priestly offering is made not at the moment of his crucifixion, but instead his offering of atonement is made upon his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. The second part of this article attempts to briefly situate Hebrews' high priestly Christology within a broader biblical theology of the New Testament, specifically focusing on select passages from the Gospels and the writings of Paul that have been imbued with priestly connotations. It is argued that, while often other writings of the New Testament are appealed to for a proper understanding of the cultic theology of Hebrews, this same practice is not often reciprocated in return. If this were so, it would seem to be rather clear that Hebrews offers no support for an earthly Jesus functioning in priestly manner.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important contributions the letter to the Hebrews offers with respect to Christology is its unique emphasis on the high priesthood of Christ. No other New Testament writing offers such a descriptive picture of Christ's installation as high priest, his process of perfection, or his entry into the heavenly sanctuary and subsequent offering for sin. Overall, Hebrews provides the most vivid picture of Christ's high priesthood ministry in action, one that follows the movement of the Levitical high priest on Yom Kippur rather closely. This article will explore the high priestly Christology of Hebrews, specifically as it relates to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ into the heavenly sanctuary. Each of these aspects plays an important role in shaping Hebrews' discussion of priesthood, while the language of ascension takes precedence in Hebrews.

The central focal point of this article will address the following question: is there a discernible point in time when Jesus was appointed and installed as high priest? In light of the oath made by God to appoint Jesus high priest after the order of Melchizedek (see 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21), does Hebrews give any indication of when this oath was made, and consequently, when Jesus took his place as high priest? While it may appear that such a question is making a distinction without a difference, it will be argued that this is in fact not the case; the timing of Christ's installation as high priest is directly connected to the question of *when* and *where* the atonement occurred. Therefore, formulating a hypothesis as to the timing of Christ's installation serves a crucial part in the overall cultic theology of Hebrews.

As will be exhibited below, there have been a number of proposals put forward that attempt to answer the question of when Jesus became high priest. To address this issue, this article will be structured around two main parts. The first part surveys the proposals that have been offered regarding *when* Christ was installed as high priest. Because Hebrews offers the most extensive description and sustained argument on this topic, the various proposals focus exclusively on what commentators of Hebrews have concluded on this topic. The second part broadens out from Hebrews to examine what other writers of the New Testament have to say about Christ as priest. The focus in this second part is to examine briefly those passages that have been given some type of priestly association with respect to the person of Christ. Simply stated, does the New Testament portray Christ as functioning in a priestly manner?

While it is important to map various themes across the landscape of Scripture, it will be evident from this brief survey that sometimes these themes are informed more by a certain theological tradition than they are by the source of their origin.

2. A Survey of Hebrews' High Priestly Christology

The importance of the priesthood for the author of Hebrews cannot be overstated. In fact, Nairne goes so far as to suggest that the priesthood of Christ is the central theme of the entire letter (1913:136). As evidenced in the author's central section (Hebrews 8–10), where the focus is on the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, the office and function of the priesthood lingers under the surface; just as there is no offering without an officiant, in Hebrews, there is no sacrifice of atonement without a great high priest serving at the *heavenly* altar. Moving outside the testimony of Hebrews, the references to Christ as high priest become fainter, with no more than possible echoes to activities associated with the priesthood attached to the person of Christ. And while there is some debate as to whether Christ is functioning in a priestly capacity outside of Hebrews, the testimony of Hebrews is clear in its affirmation that Christ is unable to serve at the altar (see Heb 7:13–14; 8:4).

This section will address the following question: is there a discernible point in time when Jesus was appointed and installed as high priest? In light of the oath made by God to appoint Jesus high priest after the order of Melchizedek (see 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21), does Hebrews give any indication of *when* this oath was made, and consequently when Jesus took his place as high priest? While it may appear that such a question is making a distinction without a difference, it will be argued that this is in fact not the case; the timing of Christ's installation as high priest is directly connected to the question of *when* and *where* the atonement occurred. Therefore, formulating a hypothesis with respect to the timing of Christ's installation serves a crucial part in the overall cultic theology of Hebrews.

2.1. Eternal High Priest

One answer proposed for the question of *when* Christ became high priest is to understand his priesthood as eternal. In this manner, the installation took place before the creation of the cosmos. The use of Psalm 110:4 (109:4 LXX) in conjunction with Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 5:5–6 may be taken as support for such a view. As seen earlier in the catena of Hebrews 1:5–13, the author establishes the exalted status of the eternal Son by means of two royal Psalms: 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 (see also Heb 1:3: *ὁς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς*

ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ). Therefore, by connecting God's declaration (ὁμνύω) of an eternal priest (Σὺ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα) with that of a declaration of Jesus's eternal Sonship, it can be deduced that Christ was both Son and priest from all eternity (see Büchsel 1922:15; Moffatt 1924:64; Bates 2015:55).

Also providing support for such a reading is the author of Hebrews' midrash on Genesis 14:17–20 (see Heb 7:1–10) and Psalm 110:4 (Heb 7:11–28) in chapter seven (Caird 1959:47–48; Fitzmyer 1963:305; Cockerill 1976:18; 288–307; Horton 1976:12–53; Thompson 1977:209–23; Ellingworth 1983:258; Parsons 1988:212–13; Attridge 1989:186; Lane 1991:158–59; Rooke 2000:81–94; Mason 2008:25–26; Granerød 2009:194–95). Take for instance the opening verses' historical recounting of the meanings of Melchizedek's royal names and lack of lineage (7:1–3). Of importance to the topic at hand is the author's assertion that Melchizedek has 'neither beginning of days nor end of life' (μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων). Alongside the lack of genealogical record, such vague and ambiguous declarations by the author of Hebrews provide just enough scriptural precedent for the possibility of Christ's preincarnate priesthood. For the author of Hebrews, the lack of parentage and genealogy provides for him the exegetical soil necessary for the comparison between Melchizedek and the Son of God, while also allowing just enough room for speculation with regard to the eternality of Melchizedek and the nature of his priesthood.

2.2. Earthly High Priest

Another way to answer the question regarding the timing of Christ's installation as high priest is to perceive of Christ's installation as high priest as an event occurring prior to his crucifixion. Chrysostom states in no uncertain terms that Christ became high priest at the moment of his incarnation: 'And observe the mystery. First it was royal, and then it is become sacerdotal: so therefore, also in regard to Christ: for King indeed He always was, *but has become Priest from the time that He assumed the Flesh*, that He offered the sacrifice' (*Hom. Heb.* 13:2, emphasis added; see Spicq 1953:2.211; Cody 1960:97; Loader 1981:245–47; O'Collins and Jones 2010:49–50; Richardson 2012:42; 47–48). Kistemaker and Scholer, on the other hand, are a bit more ambiguous, concluding at most that the Son functions as a priest during his earthly ministry (Kistemaker 1984:252–53; Scholer 1991:87–89; see Schreiner 2015:160).

2.3. High Priest at the cross

A third answer to this question of timing suggests that Christ is installed as high priest at the cross. In this manner, the cross functions not only as the place where atonement is accomplished,

but also as the ‘starting point for the high priest’s atoning work’ (Käsemann 2002:223; see Peake 1879:137; Peterson 1982:195; Ellingworth 1993:397; Wallis 1995:146; Fuhrmann 2007:102–17; 2008:94–96). This view of Christ’s installation coheres nicely with the more traditional understanding of the cross functioning as the place of atonement. In order to be consistent with the role of a priest and the presentation of his offering before God, it is necessary to hold to a view of installation that coincides with the cross. For the death of the Son of God to be considered as an offering for sin, Christ must also be high priest in order for such an offering to be acceptable to God.

2.4. Resurrected as High Priest

A final answer offered, and the one affirmed in this article, is the installation of Christ as high priest upon his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary and subsequent exaltation to God’s right hand (Brooks 1970:207; Eskola 2001:259; 264; Moffitt 2011:194–208; Filtvedt 2015:85–87; Kibbe 2016:162–63; Jamieson 2019:25). The Italian theologian Faustus Socinus can be traced back as one of the earliest proponents of this view. Socinus rightly grasps the logical connection between the activity of the Levitical high priest (immolation → entry into the tabernacle → manipulation of blood) with that of Christ in Hebrews (cross → entry into heavenly sanctuary → offering of sacrifice). This leads him to conclude that the cross is not the location of Christ’s self-offering; instead, Christ’s self-offering occurs in heaven. It is not until his glorification and attainment of an indestructible life that Christ is inaugurated as high priest and is thus able to offer his sacrifice as high priest (see Demarest 1976:22 n. 2; Kibbe 2014:25–61; 2017:134–55).

While on earth, Christ is barred from serving as high priest. This is due in part to two important factors. First, Jesus’s genealogy prohibits him from serving in the earthly sanctuary. As Hebrews makes clear, Jesus is a descendant from the tribe of Judah, a tribe that has no priestly representation (7:13–14). This distinction is important for the development of the author’s cultic theology, particularly in its relationship with the inauguration of a new covenant, and with it, a new priesthood (see Heb 7:11–22; 8:7–13; 9:15–21). The second factor that prohibits Christ from serving as a priest while on earth is the presence of the Levitical priesthood itself. As long as the Mosaic covenant and Levitical priesthood were operative in Jerusalem, the Melchizedekian high priest is unable to offer gifts or sacrifices within the holy sanctuary (Heb 8:4). Moffitt rightly notes that the problem Jesus faces with regard to his role as high priest while on earth is a problem created by the incarnation. Although he is the Son of God

and appointed by God to be high priest, his elevation to that office is prohibited by his tribal genealogy (Moffitt 2019:160). Therefore, for these reasons the priesthood that Christ assumes must be one that has no geographical or genealogical connection to the Mosaic covenant or Levitical cult.

If it is the case that Christ is unable to present his offering for sin while on earth, where then is his offering made? Because a priest is appointed 'to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins' (ἵνα προσφέρῃ δῶρά τε καὶ θυσίας ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτιῶν; 5:1), and Christ is genealogically barred from presenting such an offering while he is on earth, the logical conclusion, and one that is supported by the text of Hebrews, is that Christ presents his offering for sin upon his ascension into the heavenly sanctuary (8:1–4; see Moffitt 2017:162). Such a line of reasoning implies that Christ obtains his role as high priest at some time after his resurrection.

This conclusion is supported by the author of Hebrews' declaration that the priesthood which Christ receives is not because of genealogy, but instead is based on the 'power of an indestructible life' (ἀλλὰ κατὰ δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκατάλυτου; 7:16). The word ἀκατάλυτος occurs only here in the New Testament, carrying the sense of 'endless' or 'perpetual' (BDAG: s.v. ἀκατάλυτος; GE: s.v. ἀκατάλυτος; LSJ s.v. ἀκατάλυτος). The only occurrence of ἀκατάλυτος in related literature is found in 4 Maccabees 10:11, where it refers to eternal torments (ἀκαταλύτους βασάνους). At the resurrection of Christ, God declares the Son a high priest in perpetuity, which enables him to present his offering upon his ascension into the heavenly sanctuary.

The author of Hebrews organizes his homily in such a way as to illustrate the Son of God's qualification to serve as high priest. The various qualifications for appointment to high priest can be grouped together under one rubric in Hebrews: the author's use of τελειῶω and its related cognates. Perfection is the requisite characteristic that is required for the Son to function as the Melchizedekian high priest.

Hebrews 5:7–10 outlines the steps the historical Jesus took on his way to perfection, and ultimately his installation as high priest. In Hebrews 5:7, the author provides a snapshot of the earthly life of Jesus (ὃς ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ), along with his Passion (δεήσεις τε καὶ ἰκετηρίας πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον σώζειν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου μετὰ κραυγῆς ἰσχυρᾶς καὶ δακρύων προσενέγκας), and because of his reverence/fear (ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας) he is heard by God (εἰσακουσθεῖς). There is some debate as to the precise meaning of ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας in the context of 5:7.

Most translations take ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας as a reference to Christ's piety, hence the translation 'because of his reverence/piety/reverent submission'.

Another possible meaning is to understand the noun εὐλαβείας as a reference to fear, which provides the following translation, 'because of his fear'. The fear referenced here points back to the prepositional phrase πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον σφῆξιν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου in 5:7. This fear of death is similar to Hebrews 2:14–15 and the universal fear of death (φόβῳ θανάτου) that has plagued mankind since the Garden. By sharing in our humanity, Jesus likewise agrees to take on the shared experiences of humanity, none more universal than the fear of death. It is this fear of death that the Son experiences during his Passion, deliverance from which he prays for and is heard (Ellingworth 1993:290). The content of Jesus's prayer is important in the context of perfection and installation as high priest; it is the plea of the Son for deliverance from death (ἐκ θανάτου). But what precisely does the prepositional phrase ἐκ θανάτου refer to in 5:7, and how does it relate to perfection and priestly installation?

In the context of 5:7 Jesus is praying for deliverance from his impending crucifixion ('Bitte um Bewahrung vor dem Tod,' Braun 1984:142). But this understanding introduces an inherent contradiction within Hebrews 5:7, namely that Jesus's prayer went unanswered. Montefiore attempts to solve this by proposing that his prayer is in fact answered, just not in the way one would expect. Montefiore suggests instead of the cross, the deliverance that is granted to Jesus is from the fear of death itself (1964:98–99). Given the context of Hebrews 2:14–15 and the reference to fearing death, this is a plausible interpretive option. While not addressing the exact issue as Montefiore, Bruce likewise suggests a possible double entendre for ἐκ θανάτου in 5:7, offering Hosea 13:14 as a possible example of such an occurrence (1990:129 n.51). Attridge attempts to solve this conundrum by delaying God's answer to prayer until the time of Christ's exaltation (1989:150; see Jeremias 1953:109–110). Unfortunately, none of these options adequately solve the contextual problem of Hebrews' affirmation that Christ is in fact heard and his prayer answered.

In the context of Hebrews 5:7–10, it would appear what Jesus prays for, and which God answers, is to be saved *out of* death and not from the actual moment of death (Easter 2014:122–24; see Kurianal 2000:70; Moffitt 2008:69–71; Richardson 2008:60). The answer to Jesus's prayer is granted in the act of his resurrection out of the realm of death (see Sir 48.5: ὁ ἐγείρας νεκρὸν ἐκ θανάτου). The earthly life of Jesus is one learning obedience through suffering (5:8). This

all culminates in 5:9, where ‘after Christ is perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation’. This perfection, indicated by the aorist passive participle *τελειωθείς*, refers to the earthly completion of Christ’s sufferings in 5:8, after which he became the source of eternal salvation (*ἐγένετο ... αἴτιος σωτηρίας αἰωνίου*). The events in 5:7–10 are laid out in a sequential manner: Passion, suffering and death, perfection/resurrection, source of eternal salvation and installation as Melchizedekian high priest. At his resurrection, Christ achieves perfection and is made fit to enter the heavenly sanctuary and offer his sacrifice before the altar of God (Jamieson 2019:25–35; see Moffitt 2011:194–214).

3. A Biblical Theology of the Priesthood of Christ

While the letter to the Hebrews is unique among its New Testament counterparts in its presentation of Christ as the great high priest, some scholars suggest that there are echoes in the Gospels and the letters of Paul of a Messiah functioning in a priestly manner (see Cullmann 1963:83–89; Feuillet 1975; Fletcher-Louis 2006:155–75; 2007:57–79; Pitre 2008:47–83; Wenkel 2014:195–201; Piotrowski and Schrock 2016:3–13; Perrin 2018a:81–99; 2019b). Although these echoes never rise to the level of Hebrews’ overtly high priestly Christology, they nevertheless introduce incidents in the life of Christ that may contain echoes to activities associated with the Levitical priesthood.

3.1 The Synoptic Gospels

Perhaps the definitive role associated with the Levitical priesthood is the officiating of the sacrifice and the duty of the high priest in assuming the burden of Israel’s sin. The duty of bearing the burden of Israel’s sin is first set out to Aaron in a chapter focused on a description of the high priestly garments. Moses is commanded by Yahweh to make a pure plate of gold and engrave on it the words ‘Holy to the Lord’, after which he is to fasten it upon the turban with a blue cord (Exod 28:36–37). By wearing the engraving upon his forehead, Aaron assumed the guilt of the people (*וַיִּשֶׂן אֶת־הַשָּׂדֶה אֶת־עֹרֹתָיִם*; *ἐξαρρεῖ Ααρων τὰ ἁμαρτήματα τῶν ἁγίων*), which transfers from the officiant to the high priest by means of the sacrifice. This transfer of guilt is also seen in Leviticus 10:17, where Moses chastises Eleazar and Ithamar for not eating the flesh of the goat of the sin offering and thus ‘bearing the iniquity of the congregation’ (*וַיִּשֶׂן אֶת־הַשָּׂדֶה אֶת־עֹרֹתָיִם*; *ἵνα ἀφέλητε τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τῆς συναγωγῆς*). What is of significance here is the transference of sin from one person/people group to that of the high priest, who alone is able to bear the transferred sin.

One such prominent New Testament account that illustrates this transfer of sin is located in Mark 2 (see Matt 9:1–8) at the healing of the paralytic man. Upon seeing the faith of the associates of the paralytic, Jesus pronounces a pardon of forgiveness for the paralytic man (2:3–6). This verdict causes immediate consternation among the religious leaders, who rightly acknowledge that it is only within the purview of God to declare one forgiven of sin (2:6–7). Jesus, knowing that the religious leaders were debating his pardon, provides the healing that was first sought as a testimony to his ability to not only declare such a pardon, but also the power to actualize the forgiveness pronounced (2:9–11). The man who came to Jesus paralysed and believing that he could be healed left that house not only walking away from the mat that carried him there, but also from burden of his guilt (2:12).

In declaring the paralytic forgiven, Jesus appears to assume the duty of the high priest and his responsibility of bearing the burden of sin. However, the context of Mark 2 does not highlight a priestly connection with forgiveness of sin; instead, it is the ontology of Jesus that is emphasized in his declaration of forgiveness and its juxtaposition with the singular truth that only Yahweh has such authority to pronounce forgiveness of sin. When the religious leaders reason that forgiveness is God's prerogative alone, they are correct in their estimation. The Old Testament is emphatic in its insistence that only God is able to forgive sin (Exod 34:7; Num 14:18; 2 Sam 24:10; Neh 9:17; Job 7:21; Ps 51:2; 130:4; Isa 43:25; 44:22; Jer 31:34; 36:3; Dan 9:9; Micah 7:18; cf. Acts 5:31; Col 2:13). Jesus uses this event not only to provide temporal healing for a man long paralysed, it is also a teaching moment to show the crowd that he is the long-promised Messiah, the very God incarnate. Therefore, while Jesus does in fact remove the burden of this man's sin, there is no indication in the pericope that what the author of Mark's Gospel had in mind was an allusion to the high priest's role in bearing the burden of the sin (France 2002:125–26). Instead, Jesus's declaration of forgiveness and its connection to the healing of the paralytic was affirmation of Christ's ontological claim to deity.

A further instance in the Gospels that differs from the priestly portrait found in Hebrews is Jesus's insistence that the observance of the Old Testament ritual laws be followed. In the account of the man healed of leprosy in Mark 1:44; Matthew 8:4; Luke 5:14 (see Luke 17:14), Jesus commands that this man go and show himself to the priest and offer the appropriate sacrifice Moses commanded in light of his cleansing (*προσένευκε περί τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου ἃ προσέταξεν Μωϋσῆς*; see Lev 13:2–14:32). By pointing the healed man to the

priest for cleansing, Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of the Old Testament cult for ritual purification (Guelich 1989:76). For if Jesus had been high priest at that moment in his ministry, he would have been able to rectify this defilement himself, thus rendering the Levitical cult null and void (see Heb 8:13). However, as a faithful Jew, Jesus was demonstrating to his detractors that he, in fact, kept the commandments of Moses.

In contrast with the Gospels, the letter to the Hebrews is clear that not only are people cleansed of the outward ritual defilement of sin, but more importantly they are also cleansed of the inward defilement caused by sin, a defilement of the conscience now purified through the blood of Christ's sacrifice (9:13–14). By healing the man of his leprosy, Jesus is demonstrating to the people (*αὐτοῖς*) his power over death and disease and his role as God's Messiah (Collins 2007:179); but in the case of requisite ritual cleansing, he leaves this responsibility in the hands of those who are qualified to handle such matters of religious and social importance.

3.2 The Gospel of John

Perhaps the most famous passage of scripture outside of Hebrews given the priestly designation is the so-called high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. Although the textual basis for such a title in John 17 is debatable at best, since the Reformer David Chyträus (see Hoskyns 1947:494; Cullmann 1963:105; Schnackenburg 1990:433; Keener 2003:2.1051) in the sixteenth century onward, many have concluded that the content of the prayer alone is more than enough to warrant such an appellation. This conclusion is no doubt heavily influenced by an overt dependence upon the high priestly Christology outlined in the letter to the Hebrews (see Spicq 1950:258–69; Cullmann 1963:105; Ramsey 2010:873–74; Stevick 2011:310).

One of the earliest to ascribe priesthood to Jesus in their interpretation of John 17 is Cyril of Alexandria. In his exposition on John 17:9–11, Cyril refers to Jesus as 'our truly and all-holy High Priest'. Jesus is 'the Sacrifice, and is Himself our Priest, Himself our Mediator, Himself a blameless victim, the true Lamb which takes away the sin of the world.' As our high priest and mediator, Christ 'prays for us as a Man', and 'being a holy High Priest, blameless and undefiled, offered Himself not for His own weakness, as was the custom of those to whom was allotted the duty of sacrificing according to the Law, but rather for the salvation of our souls, and that once for all...' (*In Joh.* 11:8; PG 74:505).

While Cyril's exposition is on John 17:9–11, one cannot help but see the influence of Hebrews upon his reading of John 17. The most

obvious example of this influence is the use of the title High Priest with reference to Christ. Outside of Hebrews, this title is nowhere to be found in connection to Christ, and any reading of this title in John 17 is without doubt directly tied to one's familiarity with the high priestly Christology of Hebrews. Further evidence of the influence of Hebrews upon Cyril's exposition is found in the expression 'not for His own weakness'. According to Hebrews 7, Jesus's sacrifice was once-for-all, and unlike the high priests of the Levitical cult, he was excluded from making any such sacrifice for himself. Also, because of the weakness of man—that is, because of their inevitable death—the sacrifices of the Levitical priests were in essence only operative so long as a high priest was serving in the sanctuary (7:27–28). Therefore, when Cyril refers to the lack of human weakness with respect to Jesus, he does so informed by Hebrews' high priestly Christology and its theology of atonement.

With regard to the structure and content of John 17, a number of points can be highlighted that have been used to support a priestly reading. The structure of Jesus's prayer in John 17 is organized around three sets of prayers: Jesus prays for himself (17:1–8); Jesus prays for his disciples (17:9–19); and Jesus prays for the world (17:20–26). Some commentators suggest a connection between the trifold structure in John 17 and that of the liturgy of the high priest on Yom Kippur (Attridge 2013:9–10; see Dodd 1953:417–23). On Yom Kippur, the high priest first offers a sacrifice for himself and his kin (Lev 16:6). This is followed by an offering for the people (16:15). Finally, there is the universal prohibition against entering the tent of meeting (16:17). While these similarities are curious, as Attridge notes, they are not 'enough in itself to confirm that the evangelist is playing with priestly imagery' (2013:10).

Much has also been made of the intercessory nature of Christ's prayer in John 17. As noted above, Jesus engages in intercessory prayer for himself, his disciples, and future believers. However, such intercessory prayer could easily be understood in light of ancient farewell discourses often found in relevant Jewish literature (Carson 1991:550–51; Ridderbos 1997:546; Keener 2003:2.1051; Lincoln 2005:432). Both Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 32–33 offer similar examples to that of John 17. Similar to Jacob in Genesis 49 and Moses in Deuteronomy 32–33, Jesus is likewise engaged in preparing for his departure from this world and return to his Father in heaven (17:5, 11, 13, 24; see 7:33; 13:1, 3; 14:12, 28; 16:5, 28).

Such intercessory prayer is also common among the prophets. Moses on many occasions stood between God's wrath and the people, interceding on their behalf that God would spare them from

destruction (Exod 32:11–14; Deut 9:18, 26–29; see Ps 106:23). Such is similar with the prophet Samuel as well. One such example is found in 1 Samuel 7, where the people urge Samuel to cry out to the Lord on their behalf for deliverance from the hand of the Philistines (1 Sam 7:8–9; see 12:23). Likewise, another such instance of intercessory prayer on behalf of others is found in God’s rebuke of his people in Jeremiah 7, ‘Do not pray for this people (הֲיִזָּה מְעַהֲדֵעַב לְלַפְתֵּת־לָאֵל), or lift up a cry or prayer for them (הֲלִפְתוּ הַגֵּר מִדְּעַב אֲשֶׁר־לָאֵל), and do not intercede with me (יִבְעִיגְפֹת־לִאֲנִי), for I will not listen’ (7:16; see 11:14; 14:11; 2 Macc 15:14). Clearly, such intercession was not only a common occurrence among the prophets, it was also a duty of one’s calling as a prophet.

Turning now to the content of Jesus’s prayer, much has been made of Jesus’s use of *ἀγιάζω* in 17:17 and 17:19. Ramsey posits that it is at this point in Jesus’s prayer that one gets one’s first taste of priestly language (Ramsey 2010:872). In John 17:17, Jesus asks that his Father would ‘sanctify/consecrate [his disciples] in [his] word’ (*ἀγιάσον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ*). In 17:19, Jesus sanctifies/consecrates himself (*ἐγὼ ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν*) so that his disciples would be sanctified/consecrated in truth (*ἵνα ὧσιν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἡγιασμένοι ἐν ἀληθείᾳ*). While this language of sanctification and consecration is associated with the priests in the Old Testament (see Exod 19:22: *ἀγιασθήτωσαν*; 28:41: *ἀγιάσεις αὐτούς, ἵνα ἱερατεύωσίν μοι*), it is also used for consecrating prophets for their prophetic mission (Barrett 1978:510; Baigent 1981:38). A clear example of this is Jeremiah 1:5: ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you came out of the womb I have consecrated you (*ἡγιακά*); I have appointed (*τέθεικά*) you a prophet for the nations’. Here in Jeremiah 1:5, the prophet’s consecration and appointment are parallel to one another and occur while Jeremiah was still in his mother’s womb (see Gal 1:15a).

In John 10, similar language to that of 17:17 and 17:19 is used by Jesus in his confrontation with the Jewish leadership. In responding to the charge of blasphemy, Jesus comments that it is the Father who consecrated him and sent him into the world (*ὁ πατήρ ἡγίασεν καὶ ἀπέστειλεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον*; 10:36). The language of consecration in 10:36 is connected to that of sending, so that what Christ is sanctified/consecrated for is his mission to the world. Further, the prayer of Jesus for his disciples in 17:17, and again in 17:19b is that they would be sanctified ‘in truth’ (*ἐν [τῇ] ἀληθείᾳ*). In Jesus’s self-consecration in 17:19a, this same purpose of consecration *in truth* is implied, so that what is explicit in his prayer for the disciples is understood in his

3 Some have suggested a different nuance for Jesus's self-consecration (ἐγὼ ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν) in 17:19. Rather than reading all three instances of ἀγιάζω in 17:17, 19 as parallel the meaning of Jesus's self-consecration has been turned into a reference to his impending death on the cross. Ridderbos follows this train of thought commenting that Jesus's self-consecration is a 'sacrifice for his own' (1997:556, emphasis in original; see Beasley-Murray 1999:301; Ramsey 2010:873-74; Bruner 2012:995. Bultmann appears to suggest both the act of sending and sacrifice are in view in 17:19, 1971:510-11, n.5). Furthermore it is through this self-sacrifice that Jesus's disciples are 'truly consecrated to the sacred ministry for which Jesus has appointed them to speak his name' (Ridderbos 1997:556; see Haenchen 1984:155). However such a break from the parallel uses in 17:17 and 17:19 does not fit the context of what Jesus is praying for. As noted in the commentary on these verses above what Jesus is praying for is the consecration of both his and his disciples' mission to the world (see 10.36; 17:18). Lincoln correctly surmises 'When now Jesus speaks of sanctifying himself this is in line with the way this Gospel portrays him as sharing what would normally be considered divine prerogatives and also as being in control of his own life and mission' (2005:438). Barrett likewise concludes along similar lines noting that whatever one makes of the meaning of ἀγιάζω in 17:17 (and, it may be added, 10:36) the meaning of Jesus's self-consecration in 17:19 cannot mean something altogether different (1978:510).

prayer for himself (Brown 1970:766). Therefore, it is this sense of consecration for mission that Jesus certainly had in mind in both 17:17 and 17:19 (Barrett 1978:510; Ridderbos 1997:556; Keener 2003:2.1060–61).³

3.3. The Pauline letters

Outside of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John (with the possible exception of Revelation), potential references to the priesthood of Christ become harder to identify with any precision. This is certainly the case with the writings of Paul, who speaks more about the sacrifice of Christ than he does about his priesthood. In fact, Montefiore emphatically insists that Paul does not even regard Christ as a priest anywhere in his writings (1964:5). Although lacking in explicit occurrences, as well as scant implicit references, there are a few verses that have been proposed as references to Christ's high priesthood.

Romans 8:34 is found within the crescendo of a prolonged discussion regarding justification by faith (Dunn 1988:497). This final pericope (8:31–39) is a celebration of that work of justification, and subsequent glorification, in the lives of those who have placed their faith in the work of Christ (Wright 2002:609). In 8:34, Paul concisely describes the work of Christ in the following manner: it is Christ who died (ὁ ἀποθανών), who was raised (ἐγερθείς), and who intercedes for his own (ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν). This rather formulaic statement (Dunn 1988:503; see Barrett 1991:162) rightly describes the procession of Christ, from death to intercession. Furthermore, the intercession of Christ echoes that of the Holy Spirit in 8:27 (ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἁγίων / ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν). Rather than a priestly function, there is a legal element of advocacy (παράκλητος) involved in Christ's intercessory ministry on behalf of his followers (see 1 John 2:1; Jewett 2007:542; *pace* Cranfield 1975:439).

Therefore, Paul's confessional formula of Christ's death, resurrection, and intercessory activity in 8:34 supports the argument of this thesis, namely that Christ became high priest upon his entry into the heavenly sanctuary. In order for Christ to engage in a ministry of intercession, he first had to die and then rise from dead. Although the sequence of these events does not prove definitively the argument that Christ became high priest *after* his entry into the heavenly sanctuary, it does argue against the idea that Christ engaged in a priestly function of intercession *before* his death and subsequent resurrection.

One final passage that may have priestly overtones is found in the creedal statement of 1 Timothy 2:5–6 (see Kelly 1963:63; Mounce

2000:87; Belleville 2009:42). Similar in some respects to the formulaic statement in Romans 8:34, 1 Timothy 2:5 portrays Christ as both a sacrifice and one who stands between God and man. Whereas Christ's activity of intercession is highlighted in Romans 8:34, in 1 Timothy 2:5 Christ is specifically referred to as the 'one mediator between God and humanity' (εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων). While on the surface Christ's role as a mediator may conjure up images of priestly intercession, such an interpretation is most likely reading into 1 Timothy 2:5 an idea that is not present in the context of the passage. Elsewhere, Paul uses the same word (μεσίτης) in reference to Moses's mediatorial work with respect to the giving of the law (Gal 3:19–20). A similar usage of the μεσίτης is to be found in Hebrews, but instead of Moses, it is Christ who is the mediator of a new covenant, one that is established by him and mediated through him (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Therefore, rather than a priestly intercessor, Christ is the negotiator between God and humanity of the new covenant inaugurated through his sacrificial offering (Johnson 2001:191–92).

4. Conclusion

The focus of this article has been twofold. Beginning with the letter to the Hebrews, the question of timing with respect to the installation of Christ as high priest was examined. This examination consisted of four proposals for answering this question: Christ was high priest from all eternity; Christ became high priest at his incarnation or at a point in time before the cross; Christ became high priest at the cross; and lastly, Christ became high priest upon his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. It was argued that the evidence in Hebrews best supports this latter proposal, noting that it follows closely the movement of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Christ's lineage also prevented him from serving as high priest while on earth. Because he was a descendant of Judah, he was excluded from serving in the earthly temple, and was thus unable to make any type of offering for sin. This prohibition against making an offering presented a problem for Christ, since it is the duty of the high priest to offer sacrifices for sin. However, for the author of Hebrews this does not pose any serious problem; that is because the offering which Christ offers occurs upon Christ's entry into the heavenly sanctuary. The priesthood that Jesus assumes is one that is built not on any sort of legal requirement; rather, it is received upon the power of an indestructible life.

In the second part of this article, a biblical theology of priesthood was undertaken, built on the premise that Christ was unable to serve as high priest while on earth. This biblical theology was

constructed upon select passages from the Synoptic Gospels, John 17, Romans 8:34, and 1 Timothy 2:5–6. Each of these passages has in some part been associated with priestly activities. However, as was shown above, these activities are not exclusively priestly as they are also associated with other functions related to ontology, office, or consecration for ministry. In this manner, the activities of Christ portrayed in the Gospels and the writings of Paul are not exclusively connected to the role of high priest.

For the high priest, the main responsibility that set him apart from the rest of his kin was the sacrificial offering that he made for the atonement of sin, and no other offering was more important than the one he presented annually on the Day of Atonement. Because Christ was prohibited from making his offering of atonement while on earth, this by extension negates the argument that it was at the cross that Jesus became both the offering and officiant of the atoning sacrifice for sin. Instead, just as the high priest first sacrificed the victim outside the tent, and then entered into the Holy of Holies and by the manipulation of blood upon the mercy seat obtained atonement, so also Christ, after he was sacrificed outside the gates, entered into the heavenly sanctuary whereby he offered himself to God as the once-for-all-time sacrifice of atonement.

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