HEBREWS

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Summary

This article explores the ways in which Jesus' suffering, death and subsequent exaltation are developed by the author of Hebrews. In the introduction attention is briefly paid to the genre, structure, the variety of images and metaphors, as well as the many comparisons employed in Hebrews. Major sections of the article explore how Jesus' suffering as Son of God is treated, and the once and for all nature of his sacrifice and offering of himself as high priest. Hebrew's powerful and evocative reflection on the saving significance of the death of Jesus is one in which his humanity, and his Sonship, are held and honoured in a creative and life-giving tension.

Introduction

Jesus' death and the purpose of Hebrews

As Harrisville notes “Attempts to locate the heart and core of the Epistle to the Hebrews elsewhere than in the death of Jesus fly in the face of all but unanimous scholarly opinion.” Jesus’ suffering, death and exaltation is constantly in view as the author seeks to encourage a community of wavering Christians to hold firm to their faith in the midst of uncertainty and opposition (Heb 3:6). A race is set before them and they are called to faithful and hope-filled endurance (Heb 10:36; 12:2,7). The key to their endurance is the person of Jesus who as God’s own Son and High Priest has radically shared in their joys and sorrows, suffering, persecution and death itself. He is the pioneer who endured the cross, disregarding its shame (Heb 12:2) and, having been exalted, intercedes for them (Heb 7:25) so they can confidently approach God with assurance (Heb 10:22) and hold firm to the end (Heb 3:14).

Genre

The genre of Hebrews is debated since it has the conclusion of a letter (Heb 13:22-25) but speaks of itself as a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22). For many centuries it was considered to be a letter without the traditional opening salutations such as are found in Paul’s letters (Rom 1:1-6; 1 Cor
That Hebrews has the conclusion of a letter has led in more recent times to the characterization of the work as a homily. There is justification for this claim since a good deal of Hebrews is made up of exhortation about the life of faith and following Jesus with enthusiasm and courage (Heb 3:1-4:14; 5:11-6:20; 10:19-39; 12:1-13:19). The difficulty that has been raised with this categorization is that it runs the risk of failing to acknowledge that a considerable amount of the material is taken up by instructions given to the community about the person and mission of Jesus, particularly as Son and high priest (Heb 1:5-2:18; 4:15-5:10; 7:1-10:18; 11:1-40). This is not, in itself, an insurmountable objection since homilies and speeches, both ancient and modern, move between exhortation and instruction. In the light of speeches in antiquity it has been suggested that that it is an example of deliberative rhetoric since it calls the reader to make a decision about the person of Jesus and argues for belief in him. At the same time it has elements of epideictic (ceremonial) rhetoric since it speaks in terms of what is praiseworthy about Jesus and the faith of other key figures in Israel’s saving history.

**Structure**

The alternating sections of exhortation and instruction explore Jesus’ death and the life of faith from a number of perspectives. The modern reader may well find this somewhat confronting and, at times, even confusing. In the attempt to better understand the organisation and development of Hebrews many proposals have been offered. Some approach the structure thematically, others examine the structure using the techniques of literary analysis, classical rhetoric, or discourse analysis. As Attridge notes the difficulty is not the lack of indicators of structure but their overabundance! Albert Vanhoye has proposed a five part concentric structure focussing on the theme of the high priesthood of Christ that has been accepted by many, but it is not without its critics particularly for those who are concerned to pay attention to the development within the text as Hebrews unfolds. While there is no consensus on the structure of the letter there is little debate concerning its focus and the issues it addresses. Harrington astutely observes “It’s language is sophisticated, and its doctrine is sometimes hard to grasp. But its content in the final analysis is simple.” This is due to the fact that Hebrews never lets the reader lose sight of the saving significance of the death of Jesus, and how his sacrifice of himself opened a pathway to approach God with confidence and hope.

**Variety of images**
The sheer density of images, metaphors, and the ways in which they are combined can leave one short of breath in the initial attempt to keep up with the exposition and the arguments the author proposes. An attentive and patient reading will reveal a carefully argued presentation of the significance of the suffering and death of Jesus that has a rare beauty, power and depth.

Hebrews draws on the Wisdom tradition as well as drawing on Jewish apocalyptic hopes and expectations. It reflects on the function of the high priesthood as well as exploring the wider concern of Israel’s covenant relationship with God (Exod 34) and its hopes for its renewal (Jer 31). In the light of Jesus’ sacrifice of himself all the Jewish rituals of sacrifice are examined with a view to their meaning and limitations, in particular the rituals of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). The author of Hebrews uses the Old Testament like an artist’s palette blending colours in surprising and intriguing ways. The palette is further enriched by the fact that concepts and motifs shared with the wider Greco-Roman world are also incorporated e.g. Jesus as pioneer (Heb 2:10), or the combination of divine sonship and priesthood that would be otherwise attributed to emperors (Heb 5:5-9). Koester notes that the challenge the author of Hebrews faced is that of conveying the significance of the crucifixion as “a three-dimensional object on a flat surface: no single vantage point allows the artist to represent all its aspects.”

Hebrews is a work that combines continuity and discontinuity, similarity and extension as themes are introduced, sounded and resounded. The author has freedom to highlight the ways in which Jesus’ death can be seen in the light of contemporary motifs and images and yet go well beyond them. What has happened in Jesus’ death is once and for all (Heb 7:27; 9:12,26,28; 10:2,10), and the death of Jesus reshapes how sacrifices – be they concerned with establishing or celebrating a covenant, regular sacrifices made for sin, or the annual Day of Atonement rituals- are seen and understood. Harrisville resonates with the suggestions of Günter Bader that the idea of sacrifice is now freed from its associations in Jewish, Greek and ancient religion with their emphasis on the need for repetition. It is not as though the sacrificial system is attacked in any way for what it is, since the author of Hebrews freely acknowledges that it was established due to divine command and initiative. It is, however, shown to be now redundant in the light of Jesus’ death and exaltation. He has literally gone where no one has gone before since he enters into heaven itself on our behalf (Heb 9:24).
A work marked by comparisons

One of the striking features of Hebrews is the way in which it is filled with comparisons between Jesus and other figures, as well as offices and rituals that were part of in Israel’s saving history and its life of worship. These comparisons are one of the principal means by which the continuity with the past is stressed while indicating that now everything needs to be reassessed in the light of Jesus’ death. The first verses indicate that while God has indeed has been speaking in manifold ways in the past these previous communications are open to review and evaluation since God has now spoken by a Son (Heb 1:1-2). As Son Jesus is claimed to be more superior to angels with a more excellent name (Heb 1:4) and Hebrews proclaims him to be worthy of more glory than Moses (Heb 3:3) and even the law itself. The law, such an integral element of Israel’s life, is now interpreted as being only a shadow of the good things to come (Heb 10:1). Through Jesus’ death a better hope has been introduced so that we can come to God, and he has become the guarantee of a better covenant (Heb 7:19,22), and a more excellent ministry that has been enacted through better promises (Heb 8:6).

Much of the exposition of Hebrews is concerned to compare Jesus’ high priesthood with the levitical priesthood. In terms of lineage Jesus’ priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek and so eternal (Heb 5:10; 7:17). As high priest Jesus has passed through a greater and more perfect tent than in the Temple in Jerusalem (Heb 9:11), where better sacrifices than those previously offered are required (Heb 9:23). In speaking of Jesus as pioneer (Heb 2:10; 12:2) the reader is invited to appreciate that in these final days new ground is being broken, and that it is Jesus, the one who suffered and died, who can lead where no one has led before. He is the better hope through which we can approach God in ways not previously possible or available (Heb 7:19). As a result this struggling community are encouraged to be confident (Heb 3:6,14; 10:19,35; 13:6) and so run the arduous and demanding race that is set before them (Heb 12:1).

JESUS’ SUFFERING IN HEBREWS

Jesus as the suffering Son of God

In Heb 1:1-5 the reader is invited to acknowledge Jesus status and unique role in God’s saving plan. He is both revealer and the means God used in creating the universe. He is the one who in these
final days has made purification for sins and is now at God’s right hand. As revealer he is superior to the prophets, and as one who has taken his place at God’s right hand he is superior to the angels. By means of allusions to the figure of Wisdom (Prov 8:22-27, Wis 9:4) and drawing on Ps 2:7 (LXX) Jesus unique status as Son is highlighted. That Hebrews begins by speaking of Jesus in such exalted terms and language might lull the reader into assuming that these claims about Jesus means that the scandal of the cross has somehow been pushed into the background or going to be avoided as the argument develops. Nothing could be further from the truth! The original audience of Hebrews would be well aware that in the phrase “having made purification for sins” (Heb 1:3) an oblique reference to Jesus’ death is already being made. As Heb 2:9 makes clear Jesus is now crowned with glory and honor precisely because he suffered death, and that death was a representative one in that he tasted death for everyone. As the pioneer of salvation he is perfected through his suffering (Heb 2:10), and this suffering is understood as the means by which is he then able to assist others who suffer and are tested (Heb 2:18). As Son he will learn obedience through what he suffers (Heb 5:8), and that suffering experienced outside the city gate sanctified people by his own blood (Heb 13:12) and so becomes a source of encouragement for a wavering community now treated as outsiders themselves.

What these verse already indicate is that Hebrews manages to hold in a creative tension all of Jesus story as Son of God, from pre-existence, through his suffering and death, to his exaltation and vindication. Jesus’ suffering and death are clearly not avoided but interpreted in a manner that intends to give life and courage to a struggling community. There is a sense of wonder that God would dare to act in this way, and that the Son of God would share so unreservedly in the human condition.

The claims that Jesus was made perfect through suffering (Heb 2:10), and that he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb 5:8) have understandably been the subject of intense reflection and study. If Jesus is made perfect through suffering does that imply that somehow he was imperfect or lacking in some critical way? Why would suffering make him perfect? If he is Son of God now made for a short time lower than the angels why would he need to learn obedience, and particularly through what he suffered?

*Heb 2:10 pioneer of salvation made perfect through suffering*
Ideas of perfection were widespread in the Hellenistic world and the verb *telein* could be used to indicate that something or someone was complete, whole or adequate, or has been made so. Peterson has examined the usage of the terminology of perfection in classical Greek sources, Hellenistic–Jewish sources such as the LXX and Philo, the New Testament and other early Christian literature. The predominant usage in the literature is a formal one, that of bringing something to completion. He contends that the verb carries no material associations of a moral or technical kind and that it will be the specific context that is critical in its determining meaning. The reason for this is that the literature can apply the concept of perfection to anything or anyone that is fit for a task or purpose.

With both Jesus’ earthly struggle in Heb 5:9, and his heavenly exaltation in Heb 7:28 in view, Peterson suggests that Jesus’ being perfected through suffering in Heb 2:10 is best understood as a process that embraces both emphases. O’Brien and Attridge would agree suggesting that “Christ’s perfecting, as developed in the text, may be understood as a vocational process by which he is made complete or fit for his office. This process involves, not a moral dimension, but an existential one.” One of the ways in which this is made clear in Hebrews is the assertion that Jesus was without sin (Heb 4:15). Whatever Hebrews understands by speaking of Jesus being made perfect it is not the movement from being a sinner to moral perfection or sinlessness. It is not as though Jesus is somehow morally incomplete or defective prior to his suffering and subsequent exaltation.

The suffering of Jesus is the means by which Jesus completes the mission entrusted to him and it equips him for the next stage of his ministry as the eternal high priest. Sonship characterized by faithful endurance is the means by which Jesus will come to perfection and open the way for others to follow. Koester notes that the two senses of completion act as a frame for the argument of Hebrews. God makes Jesus complete to bring others to glory (Heb 2:10). By the end of Hebrews those who follow Jesus will also be made complete in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:23).

*Heb 5:7-9 Although he was Son he learned obedience through what he suffered*

These verses make reference to Jesus’ prayers, supplications, cries and tears and his pleading with the one who could save him from death. Not surprisingly the Jesus’ anguish in Gethsemane as
portrayed in Mark 14:33-36, Matthew 26:37-39, or his questioning about whether he should ask to be saved from this hour in John 12:27 have been suggested as possible backgrounds for Heb 5:7-9. Other possibilities that have been explored have been the psalms of the righteous sufferers who cry out to God for help (Ps 22:2; 69:3), or with tears (Ps 39:12; 42:3) and anguish (Ps 42:5-6,11). Many interpreters of the passage have astutely refrained from identifying these verses with a specific moment in the passion narrative and Hebrews gives no firm indication as to when these prayers, tears and supplications were offered be it prior to the passion, in Gethsemane, or on the cross itself. While these traditions are all possible sources for Heb 5:7-9 there is no certainty as to the passion tradition that the author of Hebrews draws upon. While there are parallels, there are also different emphases especially the manner in which Hebrews links this experience to his fitness for the office of high priest. This highly evocative text is introduced by speaking of Jesus’ sonship and high priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 4:15-5:6).

Having established Jesus’ credentials the reader is then led to reflect on Jesus’ experience of suffering during the days of his flesh. The idea of God perfecting Jesus through suffering is found in Heb 2:10 and it is subsequently developed (Heb 5:7-9). In Heb 4:15 Jesus is described as the high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses and these verses poignantly show how far that sympathy extends describing how Jesus prayed with tears, prayers and supplications to the one who could save him from death. His Sonship does not absolve him or protect him in any way from this experience of vulnerability, fragility or mortality. It is precisely in the midst of this anguish that Jesus will learn obedience and be perfected. It is this experience that is deemed to make him completely fit for his office. Hellenistic readers would have been stunned by this description of a divine figure sharing in the human condition in such a manner, let alone this suffering being the means used to achieve perfection. The noble deaths of philosophers or heroes tended to show the person overcoming and transcending their fate or suffering by force of will or character. This is not the case in Hebrews with its depiction of Jesus being immersed in the experience of suffering where he pleads with the One that could save him out of death. Despite these differences the noble deaths of heroic figures, and Hebrews concern to show Jesus’ anguish, converge in their desire and intention that this manner of facing suffering or death can be emulated. Hebrews’ does so by showing if the Son of God, the pioneer, can take this journey so can believers. His sympathy is a literal one in that he suffers as we do, and this is intended as a source of encouragement and hope for embattled Christians.
It was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world to acknowledge the educative role of suffering Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 177 "by suffering, learning" and Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.630 even goes so far as to say that "Out of my experience of misfortune I learn to help the needy."\(^{17}\) Both Attridge and Koester argue against reading this passage in the sense of the educative value of human experience generally and emphasize the author’s focus is on the extent of the real suffering of Jesus. That Jesus learns obedience is not so much a sign of imperfection being corrected so much as means practicing obedience.\(^{18}\) In other words putting the value of obedience into practice. Attridge rightly stresses that Heb 10:5-10 affirms Jesus' obedience to God from the beginning of his career thus "he can learn obedience only in the sense that he comes to appreciate fully what conformity to God's will means."\(^{19}\)

It is both fascinating and necessary to reflect on the purpose behind these verses highlighting Jesus’ anguish and pleading, especially since this will not save him from suffering and death. Since suffering and death are not avoided Jesus is perfectly equipped to be a sympathetic high priest. That Jesus pleads with the One who can save him out of death could lead to the impression that Jesus goes unwillingly to his death, or by force of circumstances, or simply because it is the inflexible will of God. While Heb 9:8 speaks in terms of Jesus being offered up as something God does this is balanced by both Heb 7:27 and Heb 9:14 that focus on Jesus offering himself. These two dimensions are found elsewhere in the letters of Paul where the death Jesus is seen as both God’s initiative (Rom 8:32) and Jesus’ gift of himself (Gal 2:20).

That Jesus’ prayer is heard in Heb 5:7 would lead to the expectation that a consequence of this would be not having to endure the passion. Of course the author of Hebrews is not in a position to change history or the fact that Jesus suffered and died. This lack of cohesion between what Jesus pleaded for and what was granted has led to wide-ranging suggestions as to the content of his pleas such as that Jesus prayed for others, or that he prayed for the strength to continue, or for victory over Satan, that God's will be done, or for a premature death. Attridge\(^{20}\) sees no support in the text for these suggestions as to the content of his prayer. That he prayed to the one who could save him from death does not mean that he is saved from death or that the prayer was answered immediately.

Much time and energy can be misguidedly devoted to resolving a question that was not ultimately a critical concern for the author of Hebrews. If the intention of the author is to demonstrate how Jesus has fully shared in human experience in all its powerlessness in the face of death, even to the
extent of pleading that it not occur, then these verses powerfully achieve that. Given that the vindication and exaltation of Jesus is stressed throughout the letter to the Hebrews these verses ensure that Jesus’ humanity is not overlooked or simply pushed into the background. As Heb 2:9 makes clear he is crowned with honour “because of the suffering of death.” This radical sharing in our experience is precisely what enables him to be the sympathetic high priest he is called to be. As high priest now in the heavens Jesus is holy, blameless, undefiled and separated from sinners (Heb 7:26). The author of Hebrews makes sure that the price of that exaltation, or the means by which it has been achieved is not forgotten or devalued (Heb 5:7-9).

**JESUS’ HIGH PRIESTHOOD AND SACRIFICE**

*Jesus as high priest*

One of the most readily identifiable characteristics of Hebrews is its focus on Jesus as high priest. Jesus’ priestly ministry is already hinted at in Heb 1:3 with its mention of Jesus having made purification for sins. This will then come to the fore in Heb 4:14-16 with its call to confidently approach God because we have Jesus as our high priest. In Heb 5:1-7:28 Jesus’ appointment as the unique high priest is addressed, and later in Heb 8:1-10:18 the exposition will continue by comparing Jesus’ offering as high priest to those offered by the levitical priesthood.

a) combination of divine Sonship and high priesthood

In Heb 4:14 Jesus is spoken of as both God’s Son and high priest who has passed through the heavens. While this might seem an unusual combination of titles coins and inscriptions from this period attest to this connection of divine sonship and priestly office in the Imperial cult of Rome where the emperor was identified as high priest and son of the deified Julius, or as son of the divine Augustus. The combination of the sacral and the royal was not isolated to the Imperial cult of Rome and the cultic functions of the king were well established in Israel’s own tradition Kraus notes that Davidic kings blessed the nation when it was assembled (1 Kings 8:14), offered sacrifices (1 Kings 8:62-63), or even had access to the Holy of Holies (Jer 30:21). Ps 110:4 refers to the king as being a priest in the order of Melchizedek which enabled them to exercise priestly functions even though they were not of the levitical line. Hebrews builds on that already existing connection and applies it in a similar fashion to Jesus (Heb 5:5,6,10) thereby overcoming the obstacle to him being considered as a legitimate high
priest. Being in the line of Melchizedek his priesthood is then judged to be both superior and eternal (Heb 7:21-22).

b) when Jesus becomes high priest - combining his earthly and heavenly ministry

In the study of Hebrews there are questions regarding when Jesus becomes high priest and Hebrews displays some ambivalence in this regard. Some passages such as Heb 5:5-6; 6:20 and 7:16 suggest that Jesus’ priestly ministry comes through his exaltation. The use of Ps 2:7 with its use of “today I have begotten you” (Heb 1:5; 5:5) indicates that being begotten as Son and high priest is best associated with his resurrection. A contributing factor for this association is that Hebrews could not speak of Jesus as high priest in any usually accepted sense since he was not of the levitical line, and would have been deemed unable or unworthy to exercise any liturgical office during his earthly ministry. As Heb 7:14 makes perfectly clear Jesus’ lineage is of the tribe of Judah and Moses made no mention of priests coming from that line.

It is intriguing to see how Hebrews 5:5-10 holds two elements of Jesus’ priesthood in a creative tension. Heb 5:5 highlights Jesus’ sonship begotten “today” and Heb 5:6 stresses his eternal priesthood in the line of Melchizedek. This naturally draws the attention of the reader to the exaltation of Jesus. What is fascinating to note is how this is immediately juxtaposed with images of Jesus’ prayers, tears and supplications offered during the days of his flesh (Heb 6:6-9). This would suggest that Hebrews wants to stress the exercise of Jesus’ priesthood both on earth and after his exaltation. In Heb 9:11-14 the combination of the two elements of Jesus’ earthly and heavenly priesthood is encountered once again. Initially mention is made of the fact that he enters into the greater and more perfect tent and secures eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12). This claim does not sever or downplay the connection with Jesus’ earthly ministry since this entry is made precisely by means of his blood (Heb 9:12) and Heb 9:14 continues to elaborate on this by identifying the offering of himself without blemish to God is through his blood. As Heb 10:10 makes clear we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus, an offering that is once and for all by means of a single sacrifice (Heb 10:12) and it is after this offering that he then sits down at God’s right hand. Both Koester and Attridge would argue that either the author of Hebrews is not concerned to give a clear answer to the question of when Jesus became high priest. 23 The question can be best answered by paying due attention to both elements and recognising that Hebrews needs to be understood on its own terms.
c) the nature of Jesus high priesthood – both sympathetic and separated from sinners

As Hebrews unfolds it states themes, and then develops them exploring them from different perspectives. As has been already indicated the depiction of Jesus’ high priesthood in Hebrews is one that manages to hold a number of dimensions and values that might appear to be mutually exclusive. Jesus’ priesthood is intimately linked to his passion and death, and yet his priestly ministry is seen as a heavenly one. In a similar fashion Heb 7:26 identifies the necessary qualifications of a high priest to be that they are holy, blameless, undefiled, separated and exalted above the heavens. In contrast with other priests whose death prevents them from continuing to exercise their priesthood Jesus has become an eternal priest by virtue of his death and exaltation (Heb 7:23). This priesthood that is exercised by the Risen One who is now at the right hand of the throne of majesty (Heb 8:3).

It would appear that a wedge has been driven between the earthly ministry and his eternal one. Once again nothing could be further from the heart of the argument of Hebrews since it is highlighted that he shared the same things in his flesh and blood (Heb 2:14). It is precisely Jesus’ suffering and human experience that equips him for his eternal ministry as high priest. He is a high priest who had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be merciful (Heb 2:17), and having been tested, as we are, is therefore perfectly qualified to be able to sympathize with our weakness (Heb 4:14), deal gently with the ignorant and wayward (Heb 5:2), and consequently be able to make intercession for all time (Heb 7:25) and is able to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb 9:24).

d) Day of Atonement

Jesus’ sacrificial death is interpreted in Heb 2:17 in terms of the ritual of the Day of Atonement outlined in Lev 16:1-22. The high priest would sacrifice a bull as a sin offering for himself Lev 16:6,11, and a goat would be sacrificed for the sins of the people (Lev 16:15). Another goat designated for Azazel (scapegoat) would be set free in the wilderness bearing with it the sins of the people of Israel (Lev 16:21). The high priest would pass behind the veil of the holies of holies bringing the blood of the bull he had first sacrificed for his own sins, and then later the blood of the goat sacrificed for the sins of the people. Outside of Heb 2:17 reference is made to the Day of Atonement when speaking of the hope that is able to enter the inner shine behind the curtain, a hope that has come through the death of Jesus (Heb 6:19). The Holy of Holies is specifically mentioned in Heb 9:3. Now
the blood of Jesus gives the believer confidence to enter into the sanctuary (Heb 10:19), and it is Jesus’ own flesh that becomes the curtain that opens a new and living way for believers (Heb 10:20). Hebrews makes it clear that the sanctuary Jesus has entered by means of his death is not made by human hands (Heb 9:24) and that he is the minister in the sanctuary that has been established by the Lord (Heb 8:2). These verses indicate how Hebrews uses an existing ritual in Israel’s life of worship but extends it in radically new ways. Now it is not only that Jesus ministers in the heavenly tent but he has opened access to believers to enter where previously only the high priest himself could go.

e) Jesus offers himself

The normal role of the priest was that of offering sacrifices for the people and himself. Where Hebrews radically departs from any normal sacrificial categories and practice is in its stress on Jesus offering of himself as the sacrifice (Heb 7:27). As the sacrifice he is perfectly suited to the purpose because he is without blemish (Heb 9:14), and so removes sin once and for all, bearing the sins of many (Heb 9:26-28). The provisional and partial effectiveness of Israel’s sacrificial system is highlighted on a number of occasions as Hebrews unfolds. The blood of bulls and goats is expressly mentioned as having no power to take away sins (Heb 10:4). Whatever efficacy there may be within the sacrificial rituals of Israel with its recourse to the blood of bulls and goats, or the sprinkled ashes of heifers, are contrasted with the blood of Christ who has purified our conscience so as to turn to the living God (Heb 9:13-14). One of the principal aims of sacrifice was to make purification for sins. By this reference to the purification of conscience Hebrews highlights the superiority of Jesus’ sacrifice stressing the internal over the external.  

*Jesus’ death establishes a new covenant*

Koester has highlighted that Hebrews has a complex understanding of the death of Jesus in which elements of atonement, covenant and sacrifice are combined. That these elements are part of this densely woven fabric is not noteworthy in itself, since they were already at least partly interconnected within Judaism. What is stunning about Hebrews is the way in which Exod 24:3-8; Jer 31:31-34 and Lev 16:1-22 have been brought together in the exposition so that these key passages and moments in Israel’s ritual life are now all interpreted in the light of Jesus death and the outpouring of his blood.
Heb 9:18 makes the point that not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. Here an allusion is made to Moses pouring the blood of the oxen upon the altar and on the people crying “the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you” (Exod 23:6-8). Heb 12:24 develops this when it refers to Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant whose sprinkled blood speaks in a manner that is superior to Abel.

The limitation of the Law that outlined the demands of the covenant is made clear when it is described as containing only a shadow of the good things to come (Heb 10:1). The weakness in the sacrificial system that maintained and healed the covenant relationship is identified from a clearly Christian perspective. The repetition of sacrifices points to their ineffectiveness (Heb 10:2-4) and this is contrasted with the once and for all nature of the sacrifice of Christ (Heb 10:10). In addition to this Hebrews draws on Ps 40:6-8 with its critique of sacrifices offered when they are disconnected from the appropriate inner motivation of desiring to do God’s will (Heb 10: 5-10).

Within Israel’s history the passionate desire for renewal can be seen in Jer 31:31-34 where God takes the initiative in establishing a new covenant that would be written in the hearts of the people. Hebrews applies this to Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:15; 12:24) and its guarantee (Heb 7:22). The reader is left with no illusion that the old dispensation and covenant is still in force for believers after the death of Jesus arguing that if it was without fault there would have been no need for another (Heb 8:7). As a consequence it is now deemed to be obsolete from a Christian perspective (Heb 8:13).

CONCLUSIONS

The passion and death of Jesus is almost constantly in view in this word of exhortation (Heb 13:22) to a group of struggling Christians. They are encouraged to run with perseverance in the race that is set before them (Heb 12:1-4). It is the suffering and death of Jesus that enables them to approach the throne of grace with boldness (Heb 4:16), a boldness that comes from knowing that he is eternally able to save those who approach God through him, and that he always making intercession for them (Heb 7:25). As with other first century Christian communities they needed to find ways of dealing with the enduring scandal of the cross. In the first instance they needed some hermeneutical framework that
would be powerful enough to enable them to deal with their own rejection, opposition and persecution – all consequences of their belief in Jesus. A second and pressing need was that of articulating in some coherent and life-giving manner what had come about by means of the suffering, death and exaltation of Jesus, not only for themselves but for the whole of creation. Hebrews with its alternating sections of exhortation and instruction addresses these two needs.

Part of Hebrew’s unique contribution to Christian reflection on the death of Jesus is the sustained and creative reflection on the sacrifice of Jesus that has now, once and for all, achieved all that the ritual life of Israel hoped to establish and maintain. Hebrews manages to hold the humanity and struggles of Jesus, and his subsequent exaltation, in a creative tension that honours both. As pioneer he is made perfect through suffering (Heb 2:10), and as high priest he is sympathetic since he understands our weakness and struggles (Heb 4:15). As Son he learns obedience through what he suffers (Heb 5:8), and while he has passed through the heavens (Heb 4:4) the means by which Jesus has become an eternal high priest is never far from sight. Jesus is now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death (Heb 2:9) and endured the cross (Heb 12:2).

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2 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* AB36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 82 notes handbooks of classical rhetoric admitted that both forms could be found in the same speech. Alan A. Mitchell, *Hebrews Sacra Pagina* 13 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 13 may well be accurate in noting that it is easier to describe it than classify it.
4 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 16-17.
7 Koester, *Hebrews*, 234.
8 Harrisville, *Fracture*, 238.
10 Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 47.
12 O’Brien, 107
13 Attridge, 86-87
14 Koester, *Hebrews*, 133
15 Ibid., 108.
16 Ibid., 107
20 Ibid., 150
21 Koester, *Hebrews*, 293.

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