

Jesus the interceding High Priest: A fresh look at Hebrews 7:25

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According to the book of Hebrews, the locus of Jesus' intercession is found in his role as a high priest. Yet neither the Levitical high priest nor Melchizedek, the prototype after which Jesus' priestly function is modelled, interceded in a strict sense of the word. In a context where prayer is seen as an activity that pertains to the purview of the weak or needy, how then does one conceive of Jesus' intercession as portrayed in Hebrews 7:25? In addition, does it not seem rather incongruous that Jesus at the height (right hand) of power should still be found to be interceding? It raises some theological questions as to the subordinate role of the exalted Christ. This stands in sharp relief to other passages in the New Testament that have used the same background text, Psalm 110, to advance the motif of a triumphant Jesus. The contention of this article is that in addition to Psalm 110 that is explicitly cited and alluded to in the letter to the Hebrews, the servant's song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 stands behind the high priest motif in Hebrews. The explication of the twin role of Jesus as an intercessor and as an 'atoner' for the sins of the people coheres in the servant's song. The article submits that Jesus' intercession is indeed a continuation of his vicarious interposition whereby he takes the weakness of the people upon himself and stands in their stead.

Introduction

Discussion of the intercession of the resurrected Jesus is tangential to the New Testament; it is explicitly mentioned only in Romans 8:34, I John 2:1¹, and our text, Hebrews 7:25.² For this reason, the discussion has not engaged the attention of many scholars. In a rather dated article, Mauchline (1953) considers Jesus' intercession as a:

Static rather than a dynamic conception, the meaning to be taken being, not that Christ continues actively to intercede for us, but that His presence at God's right hand, inasmuch as He is Redeemer and Saviour, is a continual intercession. (p. 358)

Based on the premise that the stronger intercedes for the weaker because of the intercessor's righteousness, Mauchline (1953:359) surmises that it is incongruous for the redeemed to still require the intercession of a more righteous person, in this case, Jesus. According to him, it would appear as if 'God is reluctant to hear or we cannot plead for ourselves, or that our own pleading is not enough' (Mauchline 1953:359). Mauchline (1953) questions the intercessory office of Jesus:

It is strange indeed that, in view of the atonement wrought in Jesus Christ, it should be said that Jesus Christ now lives to make intercession for us, as one who can sympathize with our weakness. Surely that is a highly dangerous doctrine theologically. It contradicts access to God through Christ and that we are fully reconciled to Him through Christ's sacrifice. Indeed, it is a doctrine which divides the godhead in such a way as to make the unity of the godhead unreal. (p. 359)

In conclusion, Mauchline (1953) asserts:

Christ's reconciling and atoning work was at once an act of intercession and interposition which has continuing validity, eternal validity, so that, *in respect of that work*, He may be said to make continual intercession for us. (p. 360)

In my view, Mauchline seems to have conflated the ideas of atonement and intercession or, rather, has subsumed the concept of intercession under the rubric of the atonement. He is, of course, not treating the intercession of Jesus as portrayed in Hebrews alone, rather he is looking at the concept of Jesus' intercession as discussed in several parts of the New Testament. With reference to Hebrews 7:25, it would be tantamount to tautology if the author of Hebrews who has pervasively discussed the concept of the atonement in chapters 9 and 10 should conflate it

1. There is greater correlation between Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34, for the verb *ἐντυγχάνω* is used unlike 1 John that uses the term *παρακλήτος*.

2. Hay (1973:152) notes: 'Early Christian writings, apart from Hebrews, offer only a handful of references to Jesus as a heavenly witness or priest'.

with intercession as if they were univocal.³ It is, therefore, doubtful that the author of Hebrews considered atonement and intercession as synonyms. In addition, germane to any discussion of a biblical passage or topic is the purpose or significance of the biblical passage in focus. In this case, one needs to ask what purpose the concepts of atonement and intercession of Jesus serve in the book of Hebrews. There is a need to answer this question before one makes conclusions on the theological significance or implications of Jesus' intercession. In addition, we may note that Mauchline's take is theological and is not directly focused on Hebrews 7:25. This article shall employ a literary approach to make sense of Jesus' intercession in Hebrews 7:25.

Loader (1978) on his part asserts that Psalm 110:1 is foundational in the development of christological expressions in the New Testament. His article aims at tracing this development. According to Loader (1978:201–202), the earliest passage in the New Testament where allusion to Jesus' exaltation at God's right hand was made is Mark 14:62, '... and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'. This passage correlates Jesus' enthronement with the *parousia*:

We would suggest then that the earliest use made of Ps. Cx.1 is reflected in Mark xiv.62. It was used as an affirmation of what God has done at Easter. This act has implications for the immediate future: the *parousia* when the Messiah will reign. There is not yet any suggestion of its significance for his function and activity in the interim, because in the heat of expectation the interim is not significant. (Loader 1978:201–202)

In light of this, the activity of the enthroned Jesus is seen principally in dispensing judgement at the end of time (Loader 1978:205). Furthermore, Psalm 110:1 is also used to explain what happens in the interim, between Jesus' enthronement and his ruling. This is demonstrated in Acts 2:33, for instance: 'exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear'. For Loader (1978) then:

Possibly an earlier idea was that the Spirit was given in response to the intercession of the exalted one. This would represent the stage at which Jesus was conceived of as having been exalted but not yet ruling. The event of the out-pouring of the Spirit by God would have been linked with the activity of Jesus in the interim – perhaps his intercession for the Spirit [...] (p. 202)

John 14:16 seems to corroborate this when Jesus says he would pray to the Father to send the Holy Spirit. Other passages that Loader attributes to the interim period are:

- Acts 5:31: 'God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel'

- Acts 7:55: 'but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God'
- Romans 8:34: 'who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us'
- Hebrews 7:25: 'therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them'.

In these passages, Jesus is presented as sitting at the right hand of God, interceding for believers in the interim. So in summary, through his intercession, Jesus procures the Holy Spirit for them (Ac 2:33), and procures repentance and forgiveness of sins (Ac 5:31) and helps the tempted (Heb 7:25). For Loader (1978:205) then, there is a development of thought from the earlier understanding of his enthronement as the coming Judge to the interim role of acting 'on behalf of his own'. In terms of the origin of the idea of the interim role of Jesus, according to Loader (1978:207), it seems to arise at a time when 'Jesus was thought of as not yet having received power to rule, but as awaiting his kingdom as Messiah at the endtime'. The logic behind this could be 'once he was understood as having received such power to rule, intercession would have become redundant. He would not have needed to ask!' (Loader 1978:207). He, however, discountenances such reasoning because 'the idea of intercession survived long after Jesus was conceived of as having power to rule ...' (Loader 1978:207).

Finally, according to Loader, Jesus is presented in some parts of scripture as ruling presently:

- I Corinthians 15:20ff.: 'then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death'.
- I Peter 3:18ff. v. 22: 'who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him'.
- Ephesians 1:20ff.: 'which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in this present age but also in the one to come'.
- Ephesians 2:5ff.: 'seated with Christ in heavenly realms'.
- Colossians 2:15ff.: 'and having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross'.
- Colossians 3:1: 'since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God'.

In conclusion, Loader (1978:216) notes that the significance of the role of Christ as an intercessor waned as prominence was given to 'the idea of present rulership' for 'Christ himself now has power to act'.

3. Note especially 9:24, 'for Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in the presence of God'; 10:11–14, 'day after day every priest STANDS and performs his religious duties ... but when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he SAT down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy'.

Loader has tried to make sense of the evidence found in the New Testament of what the Early Church made of the role of Jesus as he sat on the right hand of Majesty. However, these categories may not necessarily suggest a neat progression of thought or ideas but that different communities made use of the same scripture in view of the need of that community.

For Hay (1973:149), Hebrews 7:25 is problematic for it 'introduces a source of unresolved tension into the epistle's theology'. He notes that the prevailing thought in Hebrews is the sufficiency of the death of Jesus for atonement. However, the concept of Jesus' intercession as found in Hebrews 7:25 suggests that 'Jesus has an ongoing priestly ministry in heaven on behalf of believers' (Hay 1973:150). Hay (1973) queries the necessity for intercession:

Why should he need to intercede after offering an utterly adequate sacrifice? Moreover, if the intercession is central to the author's soteriology, why does he mention it directly only once and never discuss it systematically – as he does Jesus' death? Also, one may note that this intercession reference is really only a passing remark, made in the context of a discussion not of Jesus' priestly work but of his priestly office. (p. 150)

Hay's (1973:150) solution to this riddle is to consider Hebrews 7:25 as a 'foreign element' or better as a 'seam' that reveals 'the uniting of two fundamentally different ideas of Jesus' priestly work: one that it is consummated in his cross, the other that it is a post-resurrection celestial ministry'. Having enumerated the importance of Psalm 110 for Hebrews especially in stating the genuineness of Jesus' priesthood, Hay (1973:153) notes that the 'single major Christological idea which the author of Hebrews could not find in Ps 110 was that of the messiah's death. One can imagine his regret'.

For Howard Griffith (2004:155), the book of Hebrews is distinctive in its identification of Jesus as high priest, as a result of this; he argues that Christ's 'heavenly high priestly ministry is the central thrust of the book'. He supports this thesis by proffering both literary and theological arguments. With regard to the former, he notes that the hortatory nature of the book affirms the author's accentuation of the importance of Christ's intercession. Secondly, he notes that Hebrews 8:1–2 (i.e. 'the main point of what we are saying is this') is quite pivotal in underscoring the importance of Christ's intercession at the right hand of God. Griffith takes the phrase 'the main point' to refer not only to what was just discussed, but also for the whole text. Griffith (2004) summarises as follows:

Therefore, as Gaffin argues, 13:22 and 8:1–2 establish a matrix by which Hebrews is to be understood: it is a word of exhortation, whose main point is the heavenly ministry of Christ. (p. 156)

With regard to theological arguments, Griffith (2004:157) asserts that the author of Hebrews subscribes to 'a clear eschatological redemptive historical situation of the church'. The believers live in the present age and experience 'climactic testing' and therefore need to 'hold fast', watch against

'drifting away' and 'persevere' (Griffith 2004:158). Griffith (2004) says:

All told, the writer presents the church as a community under duress, subject to temptation and testing that tends towards its losing its grip on Christ and its confession of faith. (p. 160)

Griffith (2004:162) then surmises, 'it is this situation of testing, temptation and weakness, the real danger of apostasy, that forms the context of Hebrews' presentation of Christ's heavenly intercession'.

Griffith, in discussing the twin concepts of atonement and intercession, posits a mutual relationship between them:

Based on his finished suffering, Christ intercedes for forgiveness and the perseverance of the church. The propitiation and righteousness of Christ as the resurrected/exalted One, qualify him to save the church. In this respect, it is not true to say that the atonement secures the final salvation of the church apart from his heavenly ministry. As exalted priest, Christ mediates righteousness and preserving grace to the church. Ultimately the two sides of this dual mediating function must be distinguished, but may not be divided. There is no intercession without (finished) atonement, nor atonement without intercession. (Griffith 2004:iii–iv)

I shall address some of the issues raised by these scholars in the body of this article.

Atonement as a process

Whilst the Day of Atonement is presented quite vividly in Leviticus chapter 16 as a one-day event, it is obvious that 'atonement' is a process. There are steps to be taken on the Atonement Day to effect atonement. The sacrifices presented are burnt and sin offerings (Lv 16:5). The sin offering comprises a scapegoat and another goat that is later slaughtered (Lv 16:10). Atonement is not complete until all these requirements are met. A very crucial aspect of the atonement is the part played by the scapegoat; this, however, is not explicitly mentioned in Hebrews. However, the actual act of bearing the sins of the people was carried out by the scapegoat. The high priest confessed the sins of the people on the head of the scapegoat and it was sent into the wilderness. The whole passage is worth quoting:

When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert. (Lv 16:20–23)

There is no indication that the high priest actually bore the sins of the people and this is a major point of departure between Jesus and the Levitical high priest, as Ellingworth (1993:452) says: 'the parallel with OT sacrifices breaks down at this point, since Christ is both high priest and victim'. A passage that depicts an activity closest to that undertaken

by the scapegoat is found in the servant's song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Here the Servant is shown to bear the sins of the guilty as the verses below demonstrate:

- Isaiah 53:5: 'but he was pierced for our transgressions and he was crushed for our iniquities'
- Isaiah 53:10: 'though the Lord made his life a guilt offering'
- Isaiah 53:11: 'by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities'
- Isaiah 53:12: 'because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors'.

The vicarious suffering of the Servant is akin to what the scapegoat experienced all in the bid to achieve the atonement of the sins of others. The Levitical high priest functions to facilitate this atonement.

Relationship between atonement and intercession

Whilst it is clear that the high priest leads the people on the Day of Atonement for the atonement of their sins, there is no mention of the high priest interceding for them in a dynamic sense.⁴ What we rather have is an instance where the high priest blesses the people as recorded in Numbers 6:22–26.⁵ In the active sense of the word, Moses is, perhaps, better known as an intercessor (Ex 32:30–31) than the Levitical priests. It is instructive to note that Moses⁶ in verse 31 of Exodus 32 says 'but now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin', yet when Moses went up all he did was to intercede for the Israelites. The range of meaning of the Hebrew verb *kāṣar* in the *piel*, usually translated to 'atone for', is 'to cover over, to pacify, to propitiate, to atone for sin'. Moses intended to turn away God's anger or to cover over the sin of the people by interceding for them. Does this suggest an understanding that atonement can be procured by intercessory prayers?

What does 'intercession' entail?

Intercession can be viewed as a concept that entails placing oneself in a position to mediate between two warring or opposing parties. So in this broad way, any action that involves serving as a bridge to bring about the reconciliation of two erstwhile enemies or parties could be regarded as intercessory.

In another sense, intercession is an act of prayer whereby someone stands in the gap to pray or entreat the favour of a superior on behalf of a weak or inferior person. The person acting in this position is considered to have a status higher than that of the weak, needy fellow.

4.Griffith's (2004:188) quote of Spicq is, perhaps, quite pertinent: 'the intercession of a priest who himself was a sinner would have no efficacy'.

5.Melchizedek is also recorded to have blessed Abraham (Gn 14:19); there is no mention of intercession.

6.The occasion was the Israelites' worship of the golden calf whilst Moses was away on the mountain to receive the tablets of the commandments.

According to Motyer (1993:431, 443), the Hebrew verb *pāḡa'* translated 'to make intercession' literally means 'to meet, reach, to arrive at', with the hyphal form meaning 'to intercede for', that is, 'to cause to reach' and hence 'to cause someone's plea to reach someone's ears' (to intercede) or to 'introduce someone into someone's presence' (to mediate). For Motyer (1993:443), this verb, as used in Isaiah 53:12, is best translated as 'to make entreaty or to interpose'. Isaiah 53:12 also, perhaps, best demonstrates the relationship between atonement and intercession; 'for he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors'.⁷ The twin concepts of atonement and intercession appear to cohere in the servant's song. It is therefore plausible that the author of the book of Hebrews has given prominence to these two concepts in his exhortation with the Servant's song as his background text. As mentioned earlier, Hay (1973:153) has observed that the 'single major Christological idea which the author of Hebrews could not find in Ps 110 was that of the messiah's death. One can imagine his regret'. I submit that this is the gap that Isaiah 52:13–53:12 fills in the theology of the author of Hebrews. For whilst Psalm 110 has a ring of triumphalism to it, this has been muted in Hebrews by the presentation of Jesus as a fellow-sufferer-high priest.

Setting the context of the book of Hebrews

A notable feature of the book of Hebrews is its blend of high Christology with the humanity of Jesus. Jesus is shown to surpass the angels (chapter 1), faithful in a greater category than Moses (ch. 3:5–6), and is in every way superior to the Levitical high priest. It is notable that right from the first chapter of the book, issues that directly affect our text, Hebrews 7:25, are mentioned. In verse 3 of the first chapter, Jesus, who is described as the son, is said to have sat down at the 'right hand of Majesty in heaven after providing purification for sins'. The author of Hebrews was seeking to provide strength and courage to an audience that was undergoing a time of suffering and trials that threatened to make them abandon their faith or 'drift away' (Heb 2:1).⁸ The author of Hebrews paints a picture of Jesus that would resonate with the situation of the audience. It is a picture of the suffering Jesus, (who at the time of his earthly sojourn offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears; Heb 5:7), a Jesus who was acquainted with grief and suffering. He surmised that this Jesus is sympathetic for he had lived through suffering and is in a position to help them in the present.⁹ Griffith (2004:162) sums it up as follows: 'It is this situation of testing, temptation and weakness, the

7.The difference in the MT and LXX of this verse is rather glaring: '... he bore the sins of many and on account of their sins he was delivered' (LXX); cf. MT '... for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors'.

8.For David DeSilva (2000:18), the problem faced by the recipients was loss of honour in their community: 'the danger of falling away stems from the lingering effects of the believers' loss of status and esteem in their neighbors' eyes, and their inability to regain a place in society'. One problem with this view is how the author hopes to address the problem by presenting Jesus as high priest that continually intercedes for them.

9.Griffith (2004:173) notes that though Jesus in heaven is done with suffering, yet, 'he carries with him the memory of his completed (earthly) temptations, just as he carries with him the memory of his completed sufferings'.



real danger of apostasy that forms the context of Hebrews' presentation of Christ's heavenly intercession'.

In chapter 2, the author of Hebrews is at pains to show Jesus' identification with humans in and through his suffering and death 'since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death' (Heb 2:14). The purpose of this identification to the point of death was '... that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people' (Heb 2:17). The author of Hebrews moved from presenting Jesus as the son in chapter one to Jesus as the high priest in chapter two. The idea of Jesus as a sympathetic high priest is repeated in 4:14–15. It is notable that from chapters 2 through 12 the author of Hebrews makes mention of Jesus as a high priest or as one that is seated at the right hand of God. However, and as mentioned above, the idea of a suffering high priest does not seem to arise from Leviticus, though the idea of a weak high priest does. The idea of Jesus as a sympathetic high priest arises from the suffering he experienced in his earthly sojourn. As Hay (1973) has pointed out, the idea of suffering could not be derived from Psalm 110, the text the author of Hebrews uses to ground the high priest motif. It is to this end that I suggest that the servant's song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 stands behind the high priest motif in Hebrews. The explication of the role(s) of Jesus as an intercessor and as an 'atoner' for the sins of the people coheres in the servant's song. The high priest motif in Psalm 110 has provided the author of Hebrews a succinct way of expressing the thoughts of the servant's song with a designated title – the high priest. With this title, the author of Hebrews is able to bring together the ideas of sacrifice, suffering and continuing identification with human sufferers: concepts that are relevant for the Hebrew audience.

The context of Hebrews 7:25

The first ten verses of chapter 7 of Hebrews discuss the priesthood of Melchizedek and how it is superior to the Levitical priesthood, for it preceded it. The rest of the chapter informs how Jesus' high priesthood follows the pattern of Melchizedek's priesthood and not the Levitical priesthood. Jesus' priesthood surpasses the Levitical priesthood on many accounts. One is the failure of the law, on which Levitical priesthood stands for it could not bring about perfection in the worshippers (v.18). In addition, Jesus' priesthood was founded on an oath, a surer basis than the Levitical priesthood. Jesus' priesthood surpasses the Levitical priesthood because it is permanent. Death does not terminate his priesthood since he lives on forever (v.24). On the permanence of his priesthood lies his ability to save completely (save to the end). The result of his permanent priesthood is that he can continue to pray for his own in order to ensure their full salvation at the end of time. Here salvation is seen as a process that commences in this present world, but which reaches its consummation in the world to come.

From a literary point of view, therefore, the completion of salvation is explained in terms of his intercession. Of special

importance is the participial phrase at the end of verse 25, in which the never-ending intercession of Jesus is emphasised by the present continuous participle ζῶν, qualified almost tautologically by the temporal adverb πάντοτε (πάντοτε ζῶν εἰς τὸ ἐντυγχάνειν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν). It is certain, then, that he lives for the purpose of making intercession for them.

How does the concept of the atonement relate to the intercession of Jesus?

The atonement effected by Jesus was a 'one-time affair' unlike that obtained under the Levitical priesthood, '... so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people ...' (Heb 9:28). Both functions of atonement and intercession take place in heaven:

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear in God's presence for us. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again ... then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. (Heb 9:24–26)

However, one duty was apparently performed whilst standing and the other whilst sitting down:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; ... but when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. (Heb 10:11–13)

The sequence is clear; Jesus enters heaven with his blood and following the acceptance of his sacrifice, he sits on the right hand of Majesty waiting for the end-time, when his enemies would be made his footstool. Whilst waiting, he intercedes for the very ones for whose sake he had procured atonement, an example of which are the Hebrews, that they may endure to the end.

Conclusion

Using a literary approach, this article contends that the high priest motif of Hebrews is greatly informed by the author's reading of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the servant's song. The author of Hebrews mutes the triumphalism note of Psalm 110, his basic text for propounding Jesus as a priest, by weaving in the servant's song in order to promote the idea of a suffering, sympathetic and interceding Jesus relevant for his audience. The high priest motif in Psalm 110 has provided the author of Hebrews with a succinct way of expressing the thoughts of the servant's song with a designated title – the high priest. With this title, the author of Hebrews is able to bring together the ideas of sacrifice, suffering and continuing identification with human sufferers: concepts that are acutely germane for his audience.

Prayer, as we have observed, pertains to the purview of the weak or needy – Jesus' intercession is a continuation of his high priestly function whereby he takes the weakness of the people upon himself and stands in their stead to



make plea(s) for the people. His intercession is therefore a function of his identity with the 'sons he is bringing to glory' (Heb 2:10) '... for they are of the same family and Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers' (Heb 2:11). He therefore remains perpetually a merciful high priest whose sphere of ministry is heaven.

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