CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS’ RESURRECTION LIFE AND HEBREWS’
CHRISTOLOGICAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL
APPROPRIATION OF YOM KIPPUR

4.1 Introduction

The arguments of chapters two and three of this study have sought to establish that the confession of Jesus’ bodily resurrection plays a crucial role for the high-priestly Christology presented in the book of Hebrews. In those chapters I argued that the correlated issues of Jesus’ relationship to the angels, elevation to the status of high priest, and divine invitation to sit at God’s right hand as the royal Son make sense on the assumption that Jesus ascended into heaven with his resurrected body. Further, the way the author employs that assumption in his argument accords well with the background of some clearly attested streams of Second Temple speculation about human beings ascending into heaven. These findings bolster the conclusion that the author’s argument depends upon the resurrection of Jesus’ human body. I showed, in addition, that this confession coheres with several allusions and references to Jesus’ resurrection actually present in the homily.

I turn now to address one of the central reasons why the presence and importance of Jesus’ bodily resurrection in Hebrews has tended to be downplayed and even denied by modern interpreters. The survey presented in chapter one of this study indicated the commonplace assumption in the secondary literature that the author maps Yom Kippur’s two great moments—the slaughter of the victim and the presentation of its blood in the holy of holies—on to the two great christological foci of the Son’s humiliation (epitomized by his death) and exaltation (epitomized by his enthronement in heaven). As the great high priest, Jesus is both the sacrificial victim and the high-priestly officiant when he dies on the cross. Moreover, the crucifixion marks the location of Jesus’ sacrifice and thus, the historical, temporal, and physical place of the presentation of that sacrifice before God. In Hebrews, the cross is Jesus’ place of greatest humiliation, the center of
his atoning offering, and the place from which he enters God’s heav-
enly presence.

Put differently, modern interpreters tend to argue that the author’s
appeal to Yom Kippur enables him to explicate the theological mean-
ing of the historical event of Jesus’ crucifixion from both an earthly/
historical and a heavenly/spiritual perspective. On the one hand, Yom
Kippur allows the author to envision the cross in terms of the slaugh-
ter of the sacrificial victim. The cross is the place of Jesus’ self-sacrifice
(where the noun sacrifice is assumed to denote “slaughter/death”). On
the other hand, the imagery/metaphor of the high priest’s entry into
the holy of holies allows him to reflect on the heavenly/spiritual sig-
nificance of that event—Jesus’ death can be likened to the presentation
of the blood before God on Yom Kippur as an atoning sacrifice. In
Hebrews, Yom Kippur functions as a theological prism through which
the manifold significance of the singular event of the crucifixion can
be refracted and seen distinctly. By way of his creative appeal to Yom
Kippur, the author can elucidate the theological/spiritual meaning of
the crucifixion.

Given this general understanding of the centrality of the cross in
Hebrews and the function of the author’s appeal to Yom Kippur, it
is unsurprising that scholars assume that references to Jesus’ blood in
Hebrews are self-evidently references to Jesus’ death. Scot McKnight,
for example, claims that when Hebrews explains the crucifixion, “[T]he
tilt is in the direction of the death of Jesus as a self-sacrifice, often
spoken of as blood.”¹ Likewise, while explaining how blood language
helps the author develop the significance of Jesus’ death, Luke Tim-
othy Johnson states, “When Hebrews speaks of Christ entering the
sanctuary with his own blood, it means that Christ’s entry into God’s
presence was through the violent and bloody death on the cross.”²
Many others could be cited,³ but the point is clear. The language of

¹ Scot McKnight, Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and
Atonement Theory (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 365 (emphasis added).
³ E.g., F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eer-
mans, 1990), 213; Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the
Greek Text (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 456; Craig R. Koester, Hebrews:
A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 36; New York: Doubleday,
240; H.-F. Weiss, Der Brief an die Hebräer: Übersetzt und Erklärt (15th ed.; KEK 13;