



Foreword by N. T. Wright

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# RETHINKING the ATONEMENT

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New Perspectives on Jesus's  
Death, Resurrection, and Ascension

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**DAVID M. MOFFITT**

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**BakerAcademic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Rethinking the Atonement

## *An Introduction*

When the English Reformer William Tyndale translated the Greek New Testament into English in 1525, he used the language of “atonement” to render some of the Greek terms used by Paul to describe the reconciling effects of Jesus’s saving work (see Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18–20). In Tyndale’s New Testament, the gospel proclaimed by Paul was the good news of “the atonement,” or reconciliation between God and humanity brought about by Jesus. Later, when Tyndale turned his attention to translating the Hebrew Bible into English, he drew again on the language of “atonement” and “reconciliation.” This time he employed these terms in the context of certain Levitical sacrifices, even though the underlying Hebrew terms did not have the same meaning as the Greek terms for reconciliation used by Paul.<sup>1</sup>

By applying language that was originally used to express reconciliation in the Greek New Testament to features of sacrifice in the Hebrew Old Testament,

1. Tyndale first used atonement terminology to translate instances of reconciliation language in Paul (καταλλαγή in Rom. 5:11 and 2 Cor. 5:20; καταλλάσσω in 2 Cor. 5:18–19). In Tyndale’s New Testament, Paul speaks of Jesus’s saving work in terms of the atonement—an act that reconciled God and humanity. Tyndale clearly viewed the language of “reconciliation” and “atonement” as synonymous. In 2 Cor. 5:18–20 he uses these terms interchangeably for words from the same Greek root: to reconcile two parties is to bring them together so they are “at one.” Later, however, he again used atonement language when he began translating the Hebrew Bible into English. Here he made a more questionable decision, choosing to translate several instances of the Hebrew verb כָּפַר in the piel stem in sacrificial contexts with the language of “reconciliation” and “atonement.”

Tyndale fostered a degree of conceptual confusion in English theological discourse. Specifically, his translation identified the *mechanism* in the act of applying blood to the Levitical altars—a mechanism that resolved certain problems between God and his covenant people—with the *result* that this mechanism aimed to achieve: atonement/reconciliation. The translators of the King James Version expanded the use of atonement language with respect to the Old Testament sacrifices. This solidified the use of atonement language in the English translation tradition and therefore in theological reflection on Jesus’s death.

Tyndale’s choice to use atonement language in relation to certain sacrificial rituals suggests that he grasped a significant point about Levitical sacrifice: Old Testament sacrifice is deeply relational. Indeed, sacrifice is at the heart of the worship of Israel’s God by his people. Sacrifice *is* a constitutive element of worship. Tyndale rightly perceived that the offering of particular Levitical sacrifices (especially the so-called sin and guilt offerings as well as certain burnt offerings) resulted in a restored relationship between God and his people when particular problems introduced impediments in that relationship (especially the problems of sin and impurity). These sacrifices helped remove the barriers to the relationship and by so doing allowed God and his people to be reconciled to one another.

The problem, however, is that the Hebrew verb Tyndale translated as “to atone” (sometimes as “to reconcile”) does not itself express the relational result of these sacrifices. Rather, the verb refers to a mechanism (a cleaning, purification, or removal of some hinderance) that *contributes* to the resulting restoration in the relationship. If atonement were itself the mechanism in play, there would be a kind of tautology at the core of sacrifice: making atonement by sacrificing on the altar makes atonement. But reconciliation between God and his people (especially in terms of forgiveness of sins) is *not* itself the means or mechanism for achieving that reconciliation. Rather, because these sacrifices do what they do, they allow for the possibility of reconciliation. This is really another way of saying that the sacrifices described in the Old Testament did not work merely by way of performing the proper ritual. Reconciliation rests with God, not with completing the right rituals.<sup>2</sup> The rituals, however, are given by God as a means for creating the conditions within which he will be reconciled to his people.

In Leviticus 17:11 God identifies the application of blood upon the altar as the most significant and effectual element of sacrifice. Blood upon the altar

2. As many Hebrew Bible scholars note, God is never either the subject or the object of the verb כָּפַר in the piel stem. He is, however, the subject of the verb “to forgive” (סָלַח). Sacrifices help remove a barrier in the relationship, but reconciliation is ultimately always God’s prerogative.

is central to the mechanism whereby certain problems are resolved so that God can be reconciled with his people. Because blood on the altar does what it does, reconciliation between God and his people can then follow. God has sanctioned this activity and given his people the right to use blood for this very reason. Tyndale's choice to translate the verb used to describe that mechanism with atonement language led to the eclipse of the mechanism by the desired result. In other words, Tyndale's use of atonement language for Old Testament sacrifice has the effect of obscuring the means by which sacrifices, and in particular the priests' application of blood to the altar, make reconciliation possible, precisely because it substitutes this result for the mechanism itself.

Yet another element of confusion results from Tyndale's decision. The use of this language with respect to the message about Jesus's saving work in the New Testament and the use of it in the context of certain Old Testament sacrifices can leave English Bible readers with the impression that both Jesus's work and Old Testament sacrifice aim to accomplish the very same thing in the very same way.<sup>3</sup> Jesus's death can therefore be self-evidently viewed as the sacrifice that replaces and supersedes all Jewish sacrifice—a notion that has had no small influence on modern interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Since Tyndale's time, confusion has grown as the term "atonement" has greatly expanded in meaning and scope, especially in the context of Christian theological reflection on the death of Jesus. The idea of reconciliation has not been lost, but a number of other meanings have been added. Today, the language of "the atonement" frequently functions as a shorthand for soteriology in general. All the ways that Jesus is thought to save humanity are often lumped together under the rubric of the atonement. Moreover, these factors, together with the association of atonement with Paul's discussion of reconciliation, have contributed to a reductive idea about the crucifixion. All the saving work of Jesus is often thought today to consist self-evidently in the work he did when he died on the cross. The atonement and the death of Jesus tend to be viewed as coextensive. This has further opened the door to conceptual confusion when thinking about Old Testament sacrifice and the death of Jesus.

Christians believe, as Matthew 1:21 states, that Jesus saves his people from their sins. But how does Jesus do this? This question stands at the heart of theological reflection on the atonement. Any historically interested study of Christian theology reveals that Christians in various times and places have held a number of different understandings of how atonement works. In modern

3. Those reading the biblical texts in Greek and Hebrew would not see the connections so directly (it is worth noting that LXX never translates the relevant כפר verbs with forms of καταλλάσσω).

times, there has been a pronounced tendency to assume that how Jesus atones for his people is primarily (often exclusively) bound up with the event of his death. Jesus's death becomes the central (for some the *only*) mechanism of atonement. The atonement, no matter how one imagines this mechanism to work (e.g., penal substitution, *Christus Victor*, ransom theory), is usually seen as a function of the crucifixion. Often, this assumption correlates with at least two others: (1) Jesus's death is the extent or sum total of his atoning sacrifice when, as the great high priest, he offered up his life to God by dying on the altar of the cross; and (2) as concerns atonement, the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus serve primarily to prove that his death was effective, for in raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that he accepted the suffering and death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice.

The title of this volume—*Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension*—signals a different approach to understanding Jesus's atoning/salvific work than that assumed by many today. The book can broadly be understood to engage the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the language of atonement in two ways. On the one hand, if one uses the language of "atonement" as a synonym for all of Jesus's salvific work, then many of the chapters can be seen as arguing that Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension all contribute to the work Jesus does to accomplish salvation. The atonement in this sense can be reframed as encompassing far more than simply Jesus's death. On the other hand, if one narrows the meaning of the term "atonement" to the realm of Levitical sacrifice (in keeping with the long-standing tradition of using this language to describe aspects of priestly ministry and Old Testament sacrifices), there is evidence to suggest that at least some of the books in the New Testament focus far more sustained attention on Jesus's resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession before the Father than on his death. Jesus's high-priestly and sacrificial work—and in this sense his atoning work—are in these texts connected to his heavenly session and ongoing intercession in God's presence. For the balance of this chapter, I unpack how the studies in this volume rethink both these broader and more narrow perspectives on the atonement.

The essays collected in this book all address the topics of Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension to one degree or another. Most of them have been previously published, but in addition to this introduction, two have not appeared in print before (chaps. 4 and 10). Most deal with the Epistle to the Hebrews (chaps. 2–11). Some deal with one of the topics noted above more than others. Chapters 2–4 focus primarily on Jesus's death. They explore ways that Hebrews identifies the death of Jesus as the means for defeating the Devil and for inaugurating the new covenant. Chapters 5–7 largely focus

on ways in which Hebrews draws upon the confession of Jesus's resurrection to explain his high priesthood and his high-priestly ministry and to identify his life as the sacrifice he offers. Chapters 8–11 emphasize aspects of Jesus's ascension and ongoing heavenly ministry in Hebrews, while chapter 14 argues that the book of Acts works with some of the same ideas. Not all of the chapters explicitly deal with the topic of atonement. In particular, chapters 12, 13, and 15 explore more general aspects of Jesus's death and resurrection that are sometimes overlooked in the arguments about particular parts of the New Testament (specifically in Matthew and 1 Cor. 15).

Since these essays were first presented or published individually in different journals, volumes, and academic conferences over the past twenty years, no one overriding thesis binds them all together. However, most of them aim to offer new perspectives on the saving work of Jesus by examining some of the ways the New Testament reflects on the saving benefits of Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension. Due to this wider focus on Jesus's saving work, these essays generally fall within the purview of contemporary discussion of the atonement. Yet they also challenge the commonly held assumption that the atonement is entirely bound up with the event of the crucifixion. Not only do these essays aim to show that there is a good deal more significant reflection on Jesus's resurrection and ascension in parts of the New Testament (especially in Hebrews) than is sometimes recognized; most of them also aim to show that this reflection attributes saving work to Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension. I argue at points that not all this saving work can or should be described in terms of Levitical sacrifice. Many of these essays, however, seek to demonstrate that there are times when Levitical sacrificial categories and concepts of sacrificial atonement are most closely linked in the New Testament (especially in Hebrews and Acts) not with Jesus's death but with his ascension and exaltation to God's right hand.

Most of these essays therefore suggest that Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension are all essential (in distinct ways) for the salvation of his people. In the broadest sense of the word "atonement," these are all important for salvation because all of them do important, saving work. Jesus's resurrection and ascension are not merely events interpreted in early Christian belief to show that Jesus's atoning death was really accepted by God and thus effective. The resurrection and ascension are not just important addenda to the main event of the crucifixion—or, as in some modern theologies, important expressions of the *meaning* of the main event. Rather, Jesus's resurrection and ascension are themselves fully and robustly salvific. If the atonement is broadly understood in terms of Jesus's salvific work, the goal of many of these essays is to show that Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension are all atoning.

To paraphrase Paul, Jesus saves his people by dying, yes, but *even more* by rising, ascending, and now interceding for them at the right hand of the Father (cf. Rom. 8:34). Because the love of Jesus for his siblings extends beyond the cross to include his ongoing intercession, nothing can separate us from God (cf. 8:35–39). Not only did Jesus die *for us*; he also now intercedes *for us* before the Father. These aspects of his saving work are held together in his person. They are part of who he is. Jesus is the one who died, rose, ascended, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. These creedal affirmations, which help to identify who the Son of God is, are all part of how *he* saves his people from their sins. There is no one event in the life of the incarnate Son of God that does all the work of salvation. As essential as all of these several events are for salvation, they are held together in the person of the incarnate Son—*Jesus* saves his people from their sins, not the death of Jesus or even the so-called Christ event. These essays attempt to explore specific ways in which early Christians thought about Jesus’s death as salvific but also ways in which his resurrection and ascension were thought to be salvific and, so, atoning.

If, however, one wishes to narrow the use of “atonement” to sacrificial contexts and to considerations of sacrifice in relation to Jesus, then within the dynamics of God’s covenant relationship with his people, it seems clear that some of the texts in the New Testament—the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular but also, as I argue in chapter 14, in Acts—think consistently in terms of Jesus’s sacrificially atoning work occurring in the place to which he ascended: the heavenly holy of holies. This is the place where Jesus now serves as the atoning high priest interceding for his people. This is the means whereby his people are assured of salvation, when he will one day finish his atoning work and return to his siblings (Heb. 9:28; 10:35–39), and they will all inherit the promised unshakable kingdom.

I have made a number of minor corrections, modifications, or edits in preparing these essays for inclusion in this volume (for example, while in the past I happily used the language of “the Christ event” to speak about a complex of events involved in salvation, I have removed that term in favor of incarnational language). Original language citations have been retained, but English translations have also been provided. Various stylistic changes have also been made across the essays to harmonize them in this volume. In a few places some further clarification has been offered and noted mistakes have been corrected. I am especially grateful to Melisa Blok for her very careful copy editing and helpful suggestions. I have not, however, attempted major revisions. For the most part, these essays are presented in the form in which they were originally published with very little updating. Thus, for example, I have not revised references to the NA<sup>27</sup> or UBS<sup>4</sup>, even though these updated

versions of the Greek New Testament have subsequently been published. This also means that there is from time to time a degree of repetition in some of these chapters. This is especially true when, in the context of an individual essay, I deemed it essential to the specific argument being advanced to lay out central assumptions about how Levitical sacrifice worked. Readers may wish to skim some of these sections—though I hope that where there is repetition, it will serve to highlight important places where, it seems to me, we must place emphasis to reorient much modern thinking about what Levitical sacrifice and atonement actually were and how they functioned.

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## 2

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# Modeled on Moses

## *Jesus's Death, Passover, and the Defeat of the Devil in the Epistle to the Hebrews*

An evaluation of the figure of Moses in the Epistle to the Hebrews is fraught with difficulties, not least because it raises the thorny question of the relationship between the community this epistle presupposes and other Jewish communities at the time. While many today would rightly eschew simplistic dichotomies between “Jews” and “Christians” in the first century CE, Hebrews’ repeated claims that Jesus is superior to prior Jewish figures and institutions, together with the epistle’s categorical critique of the ultimate efficacy of animal sacrifice, are often interpreted as a nascent Christian supersessionism or replacement theology.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, Moses can appear to be little more than either a foil or a cipher for the author’s preformed Christology.

Some argue that the author has so shaped the idea of Moses in this ancient text in light of his predetermined Christology that he has made Moses into

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I am grateful to my colleague Elizabeth Shively for her critical engagement with an earlier version of this essay. I am also grateful to the Department of New Testament at the University of Pretoria, where I am currently a research associate in the Mission and Ethics project.

1. For a few especially clear examples, see A. N. Chester, “Hebrews: The Final Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 57–72; S. Haber, “From Priestly Torah to Christ Cultus: The Re-Vision of Covenant and Cult in Hebrews,” *JSNT* 28 (2005): 105–24; A. J. M. Wedderburn, “Sawing Off the Branches: Theologizing Dangerously *ad Hebraeos*,” *JTS* 56 (2005): 393–414.

a “Christian.”<sup>2</sup> In her important study of Moses in Hebrews, Mary Rose D’Angelo suggests that the author’s retrospective approach to Moses means that he actively conforms Moses to Christ and not the other way around.<sup>3</sup> She states unequivocally, “For Hebrews, it is never the case that Jesus is like Moses.”<sup>4</sup> Thus Hebrews, she continues, “is an ideal subject for an examination of the workings of Christology as a principle of interpretation of the scripture within the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Moses, when seen in this light, becomes “the model of the Christian and the imitator of Christ” in that he chose to suffer with God’s people.<sup>6</sup> His work for and among God’s people does not inform that of Jesus but rather serves as an example of what it means to be faithful to Jesus. For D’Angelo, this conclusion follows from the fact that the author of Hebrews believes that when Moses saw the glory of God on Sinai, he was in fact seeing the glory of Christ, the eternal Son of God.<sup>7</sup>

Pamela Eisenbaum agrees that Hebrews turns Moses into a Christian.<sup>8</sup> She argues in addition, however, that the author intentionally diminishes Moses’s role as a national liberator and leader of God’s people. Eisenbaum thinks that Hebrews appeals to Moses in order to make him a witness to individual virtues (especially his faith). Thus she writes, “The emphasis on Moses’ personality . . . deflates Moses’ role as a savior of the people of Israel. Instead of being depicted as a man who leads the people of Israel out of bondage, he is a man who makes wise choices for himself.”<sup>9</sup> Even in Hebrews 11:28, where Moses is portrayed as doing something on behalf of the people, “the symbolism of the Passover is not employed in the service of prefiguring the

2. Esp. M. R. D’Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 42 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979), e.g., 12; cf. J. Barclay, “Manipulating Moses: Exodus 2.10–15 in Egyptian Judaism and the New Testament,” in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed. R. P. Carroll, JSOTSup 138 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 28–46, here 44–45.

3. D’Angelo does not deny that the earliest Christology was shaped by the influence of Old Testament figures such as Moses. She claims, however, that by the time of the writing of most of the New Testament texts, the more fluid process of creating Christology has shifted into apologetics. With this transition, early Christians—and this is especially clear in Hebrews—begin to work actively to show that Scripture’s authoritative figures and institutions actually conform to Jesus and not the other way around (*Moses*, 2–3). Importantly, D’Angelo is not arguing that the author of Hebrews imagines that this conformity diminishes Moses. Rather, as she states clearly, the author himself assumes a “high Mosesology” (257). It is just that this high view of Moses is itself subordinated to and dependent upon the author’s even higher Christology. Thus, “the principle of [Hebrews’] exegesis is Christ” (260).

4. D’Angelo, *Moses*, 11.

5. D’Angelo, *Moses*, 11.

6. D’Angelo, *Moses*, 254.

7. D’Angelo, *Moses*, esp. 177.

8. P. M. Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context*, SBLDS 156 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 220.

9. Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 170.

death of Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, even here there is no sense that Moses’s actions are being celebrated as a salvific event. Like D’Angelo, Eisenbaum thinks that Moses functions solely as an ethical model for the present community of those who follow Jesus to imitate, not a model whose work and service informs how one should understand Jesus or what Jesus has done to bring salvation to his people.

John Dunnill argues somewhat differently that Hebrews portrays Moses as an intentionally ambivalent figure—one whose merits are seriously diminished by the author’s attention to his failures. Thus, Moses is depicted as a faithful servant and as someone who had the privilege of meeting God and who showed appropriate reverence and trembling in his presence. Nevertheless, the author criticizes the covenant and the law that Moses gave as being provisional and insufficient to bring the people into the land God promised them. For Hebrews, then, Moses ultimately “failed in his task as leader. In his ambivalent status he is perhaps an emblem of Judaism as it appears from the point of view of the author.”<sup>11</sup> Whatever his praiseworthy qualities, “Moses’ reputation is diminished by association, as mediator of such a deficient covenant.”<sup>12</sup> Moses serves primarily, then, as a negative foil for Jesus, not as a positive model.

I suggest that such assessments of Hebrews’ engagement with Moses do not do full justice to the complexities of the epistle’s argument. Moses plainly does serve as a model in Hebrews for the readers to emulate, especially in Hebrews 11. But it is worth noting that Jesus does as well.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, some of the roles that Moses holds in Hebrews indicate that the author respects Moses (and the larger pentateuchal narrative of the exodus) and uses him to inform his understanding of Jesus and his salvific work.<sup>14</sup> While the writer’s conception of Jesus indubitably informs his interpretation of Moses and the exodus (he

10. Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 171.

11. J. Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, SNTSMS 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 168.

12. Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice*, 169.

13. See esp. Heb. 12:1–10, where Jesus, like Moses and the rest of those celebrated in Heb. 11, looked beyond the discipline he endured to the eternal glory of God’s promises. Jesus is the chief model of obedience to the Father in the midst of suffering in Hebrews (see, e.g., 5:7–10). In this way Jesus and Moses are likened to each other, even though the author of Hebrews clearly thinks of Jesus as the superior figure.

14. While discussing Heb. 3:1–6, D’Angelo states that in these verses, “like other treatments of Moses in the letter, [Hebrews’ midrashic interpretation of Scripture] is guided by the author’s Christology rather than by any inherited or contemporary picture of Moses” (*Moses*, 69). D’Angelo does not deny the influence of traditions about Moses on Hebrews. However, she largely limits this influence to determining the shape of the structure of the argument of Hebrews’ initial chapters rather than to contributing substantively to the content of the comparison and contrast of Moses with Jesus. D’Angelo argues that the latter is strictly driven by the author’s Christology insofar as the author thinks that Moses’s heavenly vision on Sinai

clearly reads Jewish Scripture retrospectively in light of Jesus and identifies patterns that can be seen to prefigure Jesus only from the vantage point of the particularities of the incarnation), an equal and opposite interpretive force is also in play—elements from the biblical accounts and later traditions about Moses, especially regarding his role during the exodus, positively inform Hebrews' Christology.<sup>15</sup> The author of Hebrews allows the discrete witness of Scripture to construct and determine aspects of his Christology, particularly as these relate to Jesus's salvific work.<sup>16</sup> Moses is an important figure in this regard. Thus, while Hebrews clearly considers the person and work of Jesus to be superior to those of Moses, the writer does not thereby criticize Moses or force him into a typological straitjacket that sees his value only in terms of how he conforms to Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Rather, for Hebrews, Moses serves as a central model, one that informs the writer's understanding of some of the most significant soteriological roles that Jesus performs on behalf of his brothers and sisters.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than attempt a study of all the ways that Hebrews engages with Moses, in this chapter I explore only one of these roles: Moses as the one whose faithful performance of the first Passover protected God's people from the Destroyer.<sup>19</sup> I argue that the author links Moses and Jesus by way of a

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(see Exod. 33–34), the source of his great insights and revelations, depends on the fact that his encounter with the glory of God was actually an encounter with the eternal Son of God, Jesus.

15. J. Lierman's extensive study on traditions about Moses in the Second Temple period and in early Judaism helpfully traces some key ways that the figure of Moses likely informed the development of early Christian thinking about Jesus (*The New Testament Moses: Christian Perceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of Jewish Religion*, WUNT 2/173 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003]).

16. A. T. Lincoln makes a similar point when he writes, "Interaction between the Jewish Scriptures and Christology does not take place for the first time when the writer brings his christological key to the reading of Scripture. Interaction has already been taking place in formulating the Christology that now provides the key. So there should be no room for thinking that a Christological interpretation merely involves a one-way movement from the new to the old" ("Hebrews and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 313–38, here 320).

17. C. L. Westfall makes a case for a similar conclusion relative to Heb. 3:1–6 ("Moses and Hebrews 3:1–6: Approach or Avoidance?," in *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries*, ed. S. E. Porter and B. W. R. Pearson, JSNTSup 192 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 173–201). My view about the identification of the house in this passage differs (see my comments on the matter in n. 21 below), but I fully agree with Westfall that the force of the argument in Heb. 3:1–6 relies on a positive comparison of Jesus with Moses, not a pejorative one (cf. H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 105).

18. The discussion in this chapter is in no way intended to reduce either the person or the work of Jesus, as these are described in Hebrews, merely to the points made herein.

19. A number of other important roles of Moses could arguably be considered. These include Moses as priest and possibly apostle (Heb. 3:1–3; see esp. Lierman, *New Testament*

larger, pentateuchally shaped pattern or narrative. His use of this pattern implies that more dialogical and intertextual relationships than are sometimes supposed are in play between biblical texts and Jewish traditions about Moses, on the one hand, and the author's Christology and soteriology, on the other. Specifically, I argue here that the author of Hebrews deduces aspects of the significance of Jesus's death—in particular that this event marks the defeat of the Devil and the liberation of God's people, who are then freed to journey through the wilderness toward their promised inheritance—largely on the basis of the story and actions of Moses at the first Passover. Moses is, therefore, a *sine qua non* for the Christology and soteriology developed in Hebrews, for Moses and his role in the first Passover explain the logic that underlies the author's claim that Jesus's death defeated the Devil and liberated God's people from the fear of death. To put the point differently, one key way that Jesus is like Moses concerns the role his death plays in defeating the malevolent angel bent on destroying God's firstborn people. Jesus's death, I argue, is compared in Hebrews with Moses's performance of the first Passover.

## Allusion to Moses and the First Passover in Hebrews 2

Hebrews first mentions Moses explicitly in 3:2–6.<sup>20</sup> As part of an extended comparison with Jesus, the author describes Moses in positive terms through language drawn from Numbers 12:7.<sup>21</sup> Moses, he states, was faithful as a

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*Moses*, 272–73), Moses as authoritative lawgiver (esp. 7:11–19; 10:28), Moses as covenant and cult inaugurator as well as covenant mediator (chaps. 8–9), Moses as faithful and virtuous leader (11:23–28), and Moses as shepherd of God's people (see the allusion in 13:20 to Isa. 63:11, which speaks of God bringing up Moses as the shepherd of the sheep—a point made in the brief discussion of this verse in P. R. Jones, “The Figure of Moses as a Heuristic Device for Understanding the Pastoral Intent of Hebrews,” *Review and Expositor* 76 [1979]: 95–107, here 101–3).

20. Moses is explicitly mentioned in Heb. 3:2, 3, 5, 16; 7:14; 8:5; 9:19; 10:28; 11:23–24; 12:21.

21. D'Angelo states, “I would assert that the text cited in Heb. 3:2 is not Num. 12:7 (although the allusion is present and held in abeyance) but 1 Chron. 17:14, most probably according to the Septuagint” (*Moses*, 69). She makes a strong case for the influence of the Nathan oracle on this section of Hebrews. Nevertheless, her statement seems to get the identification of the citation and allusion backward. The author's use of Num. 12:7 comes close to citation in Heb. 3:2, and the verse is cited explicitly in 3:5, while his use of 1 Chron. 17:14, if present, is much more allusive (cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 109n53). When the relationship of these texts is seen thus, D'Angelo's conclusion that Jesus is presented as the builder of the house in Heb. 3:4–6 is significantly weakened. For D'Angelo, this conclusion follows from the Nathan oracle, where David's son is the one who will build God's house. Hebrews, however, identifies God as the builder of the house under discussion in 3:2–6, not Jesus. It may well be that, as in Heb. 1, the author plays on the identification of God and the Son in these verses. Of equal importance, however, is the distinction between God and the Son here, especially

servant in God's house. It is worth asking, however, why the author first turns explicit attention to Moses at just this point in his homily.

### *Moses's Ascension and the Logic of Hebrews 2*

I have argued elsewhere that the writer's appeal to Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2:5–9 occurs in the context of a discussion about the ascension of an embodied human being into the heavens and the corresponding elevation of that person above the angels.<sup>22</sup> This use of Psalm 8 resonates well with the logic of some Second Temple and later rabbinic texts that attest to a tradition about Moses's ascension into the heavens and corresponding relationship to the angels when he went up Sinai to receive the law. The author of Hebrews is likely playing on this tradition when, with some rhetorical panache in Hebrews 2:9, he delays mentioning Jesus's name while identifying Jesus as the one who has ultimately fulfilled Psalm 8's implied claim that humanity (ἄνθρωπος) would one day be elevated above the angels in the created order. Therefore, some conception of Moses already informs, albeit allusively, the author's ongoing argument in Hebrews 2 for the elevation of Jesus above the angels.<sup>23</sup>

Once this is recognized, a remarkable aspect of the references in Hebrews 2:14–15 to Jesus's defeat of the Devil and to the release of those who were enslaved to the fear of death emerges. The author's discussion here, particularly when viewed in light of some Jewish traditions about the identity of the Destroyer and the first Passover (see pp. 16–19), continues to suggest that the influence of Moses lies just below the surface of the argument. While many commentators note the potential importance of exodus themes for the author's claims about Jesus's death in Hebrews 2:14–16,<sup>24</sup> fewer argue for a

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as this distinction drives both the logic of the comparison between the Son and Moses and the identification of the audience as "his [i.e., God's] house" (3:6). As most commentators agree, only one house is in question in the passage—God's house. The author is comparing Moses and Jesus, not two different houses. His change from the first-person speech of God in Num. 12:7 (or, *mutatis mutandis*, 1 Chron. 17:14) to the third-person in Heb. 3:2 and 3:5—he alters the genitive pronoun modifying οἶκος from μου to αὐτοῦ—dictates the meaning of all the pronouns in 3:5–6. They all have God as their antecedent. God, who built all things, is the builder of this house (3:4). Jesus and Moses are, therefore, faithful in their respective positions *to the same house*. Moses was a faithful servant within God's house, but Jesus is the Son over God's house (cf. 10:21).

22. See D. M. Moffitt, "Unveiling Jesus' Body: A Fresh Assessment of the Relationship between the Veil and Jesus' Flesh in Hebrews 10:20," *PRS* 37 [2010]: 71–84.

23. Moffitt, "Unveiling Jesus' Body," esp. 80–81.

24. E.g., C. R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 234, 240. While Attridge recognizes the influence of the exodus on the passage (*Hebrews*, 93), he does not think this is the dominant idea here (93n161). L. T. Johnson, based largely on the fact that the verb ἀπαλλάσσω is not used in the exodus

more particular allusion here to the first Passover.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, three points support this conclusion.

First, the Pentateuch's depiction of Moses as the one who, having been instructed by God, directed the Israelites regarding the first Passover is significant.<sup>26</sup> As a result of Moses's command to the Israelites to apply the blood of the Passover lambs to the lintels and doorposts of their houses, the Israelites were protected from experiencing the death of their firstborn. When viewed through the lens of at least some Second Temple reflection on Moses, Moses's role of faithfully performing the first Passover corresponds well to Hebrews' identification of Jesus as the one whose own death has defeated the malevolent angel who wields the power of death—the Devil.

Second, the fact that the first Passover enabled Moses to lead the people out of their bondage in Egypt nicely aligns with the link between Jesus's defeat of the Devil and his freeing his people from bondage. That is, if the author alludes to the Passover in Hebrews 2:14, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that his reference to Jesus's defeat of the Devil is immediately followed in 2:15 by the claim that Jesus has released his siblings from their perpetual enslavement to the fear of death. Hebrews does not just draw broadly on the exodus here but focuses specifically on the event that initiates the exodus—the first Passover.

Third, a further point of correspondence with the larger pattern of the Passover and exodus account is noteworthy. Once the people were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh, Moses led them into the wilderness, where they met and worshiped God at Sinai. It is striking how well this aspect of the story aligns with the author's moves in Hebrews 3–4, in which he not only makes his first explicit comparisons between Jesus and Moses but also goes on to compare his audience with the exodus generation—the very generation

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account, denies that the exodus plays any significant role in Heb. 2 (*Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 100).

25. Attridge states that “Hebrews does not make explicit any symbolic or typological significance of [the Passover]” (*Hebrews*, 343; cf. Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 171; Koester, *Hebrews*, 504). But see P. E. Hughes, who briefly asserts a link between Heb. 11:28 and 2:14–16 (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 500–501), and Johnson, who allows a connection between the complex of the Passover lamb's death and the people's liberation, on the one hand, and the salvific effect of Jesus's death, on the other (*Hebrews*, 303). By way of contrast, J. Dunnill sees Passover (which he argues joins together the motifs of blood, ritual death, expiation, and the founding of the covenant) as a substantial theme informing various parts of the argument of Hebrews (*Covenant and Sacrifice*, esp. 127–28, 154–55, and 159 [cf. 107]).

26. Given the context of Num. 12:7, where Moses's faithfulness is linked with his direct access to God and God's direct speech and instruction to Moses, the faithfulness of Moses in all of God's house likely includes his performance of the first Passover. This may be why it is precisely Moses's use of the Passover blood that the author highlights in Heb. 11:28 as an aspect of his acting in faith. He was simply doing what God told him to do.

that was liberated from Egypt and then journeyed into the wilderness.<sup>27</sup> It is also striking that, later in the homily, the author links his audience with the “congregation of the firstborn,” who, like Moses and the exodus generation at Sinai, are gathered around Jesus at Zion.

### *Echoes of Passover in the Letter to the Hebrews*

The author of Hebrews explicitly mentions Passover only once in his homily. In Hebrews 11:28 he states that by faith Moses “performed the Passover and the aspersion of blood” (πεποίηκεν τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὴν πρόσχυσιν τοῦ αἵματος) so that “the one who destroys the firstborn” (ὁ ὀλοθρεύων τὰ πρωτότοκα) would not touch the people and livestock of Israel.<sup>28</sup> This reference to “the one who destroys” (ὁ ὀλοθρεύων) recalls the curious statement in Exodus 12:23 LXX that, because of the blood on the doorposts and lintels, the LORD would “not permit the one who destroys” (οὐκ ἀφήσει τὸν ὀλεθρεύοντα) to enter the houses of the Israelites and strike their firstborn. This reference to the Passover in Hebrews 11:28, particularly when understood in light of some Jewish exegetical traditions concerning the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23, suggests that when the author mentions Jesus’s defeat of the Devil and the liberation of his kin from the fear of death in Hebrews 2:14–15, he is alluding to Moses, who held the Destroyer at bay by performing the first Passover.

### *The Destroyer of Exodus 12:23*

While throughout most of the Passover account the text of Exodus typically identifies the LORD himself as the agent who struck down Egypt’s firstborn in the final plague (e.g., Exod. 12:13), the mention of the Destroyer in 12:23 being prevented by the blood from striking the people poses an exegetical curiosity for anyone paying close attention to the details of the text. Why does the text of Exodus refer here to the one who destroys? This odd statement allows the implication that some other figure, someone distinct from the LORD, did the smiting at the first Passover.<sup>29</sup> If this is so, who is this Destroyer? Significantly,

27. In addition to the allusions I argue underlie the larger argument of Heb. 2, it is worth noting that the author’s apparent reference in 2:2 to a tradition about angels mediating the law on Sinai offers a further indication that he has the story of Moses, the exodus, and Sinai in mind in this portion of his homily.

28. In keeping with the account in Exodus, the neuter plural τὰ πρωτότοκα in Heb. 11:28 implies that God even spared the firstborn of Israel’s livestock, not just the firstborn Israelite children.

29. Early Jewish interpretation indicates that just such an exegetical possibility was explored and developed. I focus on Jubilees below. In the Tannaitic period, however, some of the rabbis attest to this tradition by explicitly rejecting the view that an angel or agent other than God

some ancient Jewish interpreters concluded that 12:23 points to an agent other than God who carried out the actual work of smiting in the final plague—the malevolent angel of death.

A host of texts, including some in the New Testament, indicate that many Jews of the Second Temple period believed that demonic forces were at work ravaging the world and attacking God’s people. Moreover, one particular figure, the angel of death—sometimes referred to as the Satan or the accuser and sometimes described with what appear to be proper names such as Belial and Mastemah—was thought to be the chief of all these demonic forces.<sup>30</sup> Evidence from Second Temple and rabbinic-era texts reveals that some Jewish interpreters not only concluded that the reference to the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23 indicated an agent distinct from the LORD but also identified this figure with the great Satan, the chief of the demons and the angel of death.<sup>31</sup>

In Jubilees, for example, the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23 is linked with the figure Mastemah, whom the text also refers to as Belial in a few places (Jub. 1:20; 15:31–33). Throughout Jubilees, Mastemah, the leader of all the destroying spirits, functions as the chief spiritual opponent of God’s people.<sup>32</sup> Mastemah is identified as controlling a demonic horde whom he uses to influence people to fashion idols and to commit other heinous sins (e.g., Jub. 11:4–5; cf. 12:20). Like the malevolent accuser (the Satan) depicted in Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3, Mastemah can stand in the heavenly court and accuse God’s people (Jub. 17:16; cf. 1:20; 10:8; 48:9). In Jubilees 48, Mastemah tries to kill Moses (48:2). He then motivates Pharaoh and the Egyptians to oppose

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did the smiting (e.g., Mek. Pisha 7.28–30; 13.9–11, though see also 11.61–62; Mek. Amalek 1.128–29, where the activity of an angelic agent is simply assumed). Later rabbinic texts tend to distinguish between God and the Destroyer (e.g., Tg. Neof. Exod. 12:23; see also the evidence given in L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003], 1:537–38; M. Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology*, JSJSup 117 [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 210n20).

30. *Mastemah* is not always a name in the Qumran scrolls. Sometimes the term is used to describe Belial, an angel of hostility, or groups of hostile angels. It is likely, however, that in 1QS 3.13–4.26 this figure Belial/Mastemah is to be identified with the Angel of Darkness, who, together with his minions, rules the world and misleads humanity. These hostile figures oppose God, but they are nevertheless created by God and at times do his bidding. See M. Mach, “Demons,” *EDSS* 1:189–92.

31. The name *Mastemah* derives from the Hebrew noun **מִשְׁטָמָה**, meaning “hostility.” The noun’s Hebrew root is **מִשְׁטָמ**, a variation of the root **שָׁטַם**, from which the term “Satan” derives (J. W. van Henten, “Mastemah,” *DDD* 1033–35).

32. E.g., Jub. 17:19. The Ethiopic term *Mäštəm* (a transliteration of the Hebrew term **מִשְׁטָמָה**) most likely functions as a proper name in Jubilees (so van Henten, “Mastemah,” 1033). This particular demon is often equated with the Devil in Ethiopic traditions (see B. Burtea, “Demons,” *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. S. Uhlig et al., 5 vols. [Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003–2014], 2:130–32).

Moses and the Israelites (e.g., 48:9, 12). Pharaoh finally relents and allows the people to go only when some of the good angels bind Mastemah for a time (48:15, 18). Once Mastemah is released, however, the Egyptians change their mind and, again under the evil one's direct influence, pursue the people in order to re-enslave them (48:12, 16–17).

Intriguingly for the purposes of this study, Jubilees 49:2 describes the final plague on Egypt as being carried out by “all the forces of Mastemah,” who “were sent to kill every first-born in the land of Egypt—from the pharaoh's first-born to the first-born of the captive slave-girl at the millstone and to the cattle as well.”<sup>33</sup> The sign of the blood of the Passover sacrifice on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite houses prevented Mastemah's servants from entering and destroying their firstborn.

This evidence from Jubilees suggests the following two inferences: (1) the Destroyer mentioned in Exodus 12:23 is interpreted in Jubilees as the malicious angelic agent Mastemah, whose minions are sent to kill all the firstborn in Egypt;<sup>34</sup> and (2) the first Passover is understood to be both a liberation from enslavement to Pharaoh in Egypt and a release, even if only temporarily, from the dominion of Mastemah, who was at work in Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

These conclusions find some confirmation in other passages where Jubilees reflects on Israel's eschatological future. In Jubilees 50:5 the text envisions a future time when the land of promise will be ultimately purified and the conjoined problems of the people's sins and their ritual impurities will be finally resolved. When this happens, no satan or evil one who destroys will again be able to trouble God's people (cf. 23:29). As the Satan par excellence

33. Translation from J. C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, CSCO 511, *Scriptores Aethiopicici* 88 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 315. According to Jubilees, Mastemah was bound at the time and unable to do the smiting himself. Halpern-Amaru rightly suggests that attributing the smiting to Mastemah's forces and then explaining that these forces were following YHWH's orders is how Jubilees solves the exegetical issue of YHWH doing the smiting in some texts, while in Exod. 12:23 “the Destroyer” does it (see B. Halpern-Amaru, “The Festivals of Pesah and Massot in the Book of Jubilees,” in *Enoch and the Mosaic Torah: The Evidence of Jubilees*, ed. G. Boccaccini and G. Ibba [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 309–22, here 313).

34. Jubilees shares the ambiguity of Exodus here in that both God's forces and the forces of Mastemah are identified as executing the final plague (compare Jub. 48:5–8; 49:2; and 49:4; see also 48:12, 15–17). But Mastemah is not depicted as God's equal, and throughout Jubilees it is clear that God is fully in control of history. Nevertheless, the identification of the Destroyer with the Satan who accuses and threatens God's people is indicative of a significant interpretive move that links this hostile figure with the angelic accuser mentioned in other parts of Scripture and with several key events in which God's people faced various threats. M. Segal may be correct that this tension is one indication that Jub. 48 and 49 reflect different sources that have been redacted (*Book of Jubilees*, esp. 210–28), but this kind of theological tension is well attested in other Second Temple texts (see Mach, “Demons,” 191). For an especially clear expression of such a dynamic, see the depiction of the Angel of Darkness in the “Treatise of the Two Spirits” in 1QS 3–4 (see n. 30 above).

in Jubilees (cf. 10:11), Mastemah is clearly the primary spiritual enemy and destroyer, who one day will never again be able to trouble God's people. There are, in other words, significant links in Jubilees between the first exodus, with the limited liberation from Mastemah and his forces that it achieved, and the future, new creation when God's people will ultimately be freed from sin, impurity, and every accusing satan.

The evidence in Jubilees 48–49 for the identification of the Destroyer in Exodus 12:23 with Mastemah and his forces potentially sheds light on Hebrews' reference to Moses's role in the first Passover vis-à-vis the one who destroys the firstborn mentioned in Hebrews 11:28. Specifically, the sort of exegetical reflection on the exodus narrative (and especially on Exod. 12:23) attested in Jubilees<sup>35</sup> is suggestive for Hebrews. The author of Hebrews could plausibly have assumed that the reference to a destroying figure in Exodus 12:23 identified some agent other than God as the one who killed the firstborn in the last plague—namely, the great Satan, the chief cosmic accuser and opponent of God's people.

I am not claiming that the author of Hebrews must know and be dependent upon Jubilees. Rather, I am arguing that the kind of interpretation of Exodus 12:23 that Jubilees attests provides a way to understand the identity of the Destroyer whom Moses faced in Hebrews 11:28. If the writer and his audience share with Jubilees a common tradition that identifies the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23 as the chief angelic opponent of God's people, then the author would likely identify the figure whom Jesus defeats in Hebrews 2:14—the Devil—with the Destroyer whom Moses faced in 11:28.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Devil in Hebrews as the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23*

Three additional lines of evidence in Hebrews bear out the supposition that the author identifies the Devil with the Destroyer from whom Moses

35. A similar identification between a figure who brought death upon God's people in the wilderness and the Destroyer is found in some other Second Temple and rabbinic-era texts. See Wis. 18:25 and 1 Cor. 10:10, which both identify the figure who struck the wilderness generation with death as "the Destroyer." Notably, Wis. 18:25 does not identify this figure with the one who struck the Egyptians (18:13–19). See also the discussion in n. 29 above.

36. Dunnill argues that Hebrews embraces the ambiguity of Exod. 12 and views God as both the Destroyer and the one who protects his chosen people (Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice*, esp. 107, 159). In my view, Dunnill does not take seriously enough the evidence of texts like Jubilees wherein the Destroyer is independent of God and hostile to God's people, even though he cannot act unilaterally and will one day be stripped of all power. This interpretive tradition takes seriously both (1) God's ultimate control of creation and (2) the presence of a hostile angelic accuser and his minions who are distinct from God but to whom God grants a significant role in creation for set periods of time. See also n. 34 above.

protected God's people at the first Passover. First, the imperfective aspect of the participle ὁ ὀλοθρεύων in Hebrews 11:28 allows the inference that this figure is characterized by destruction. That is to say, this agent is not merely identified as carrying out a particular/one-off task during the first Passover. He is not just "the one who *destroyed*" the firstborn in Egypt. The epithet "the one who *destroys*" suggests instead that destruction is what he continually does. Destroying is part of his identity. Turning again to Jubilees, not only does the Destroyer spur Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites after they leave Egypt, but he is depicted throughout Jubilees as the one who threatens God's special people. In fact, Jubilees portrays the Akedah as the result of Mastemah's agitation. In Jubilees 17:16, Mastemah comes before God in heaven and challenges Abraham's faith. According to Jubilees, it is Mastemah who proposes that Abraham be tested by having him offer up Isaac as a sacrifice.

Intriguingly, too, Jubilees makes a clear connection here between the Akedah and the first Passover when it both identifies the date of the Akedah with that of Passover and explicitly calls Isaac Abraham's "firstborn" (Jub. 18:11, 15).<sup>37</sup> Jubilees appears to take the fact that Scripture identifies Israel as God's firstborn and the notion of the Destroyer of the firstborn in Exodus 12:23 as one indication that Israel is a prime target for this figure. From this perspective, Hebrews 11:28's mention of the "one who destroys" can plausibly be identified as a reference to the cosmic enemy of God's people whose very inclination is to destroy them. This malevolent Destroyer was prevented from harming the firstborn of God's people in Egypt by Moses's application of the Passover blood to doorways of their houses.

Second, if for a moment the preceding observations about the identity of the Destroyer in some Second Temple exegesis of Exodus 12:23 are posited as informing Hebrews 11:28, the further identification in Hebrews 12:23 of the homily's intended audience as part of "the congregation of the firstborn" (ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων) can be seen to suggest that the author wants them to understand themselves as being caught up in the cosmic battle between "the one who destroys the firstborn" and the primary object of his hostility—God's people, "the congregation of the firstborn."<sup>38</sup> In other words, they are those whom, like the firstborn of Israel in the exodus, God has protected and liberated. This analogy allows the further inference that the Destroyer of Exodus 12:23, the figure mentioned in Hebrews 11:28, could plausibly be identified with the malevolent being who has always accused

37. So Segal, *Book of Jubilees*, 191–98.

38. It is worth noting that Exod. 4:22–23 explicitly connects the plague on the firstborn in Egypt with Pharaoh's refusal to release Israel, God's firstborn son.

God's people and who would therefore also be the enemy of those whom Hebrews addresses—the Devil.

The preceding two lines of reasoning give rise to a third point. The imagery the author uses to describe his readers in relation to the congregation of the firstborn gathered around Zion is redolent of the larger pentateuchal narrative of the exodus. The author's comparison and contrast in Hebrews 12:18–23 between Jesus and God's people at Zion, on the one hand, and Moses and the exodus generation who gathered at Sinai, on the other, makes the conceptual connection especially clear. Just as the people were liberated from Egypt and led by Moses in the wilderness to Sinai in order to worship God, so the audience can understand themselves as those who have been liberated from the Devil, have been led into their own wilderness time by Jesus, and have come to Zion, where they worship God.

The larger analogy between the audience and the exodus generation has already been made in Hebrews 3–4. The imagery of Hebrews 12 develops yet another aspect of it. But the recognition that the exodus narrative informs the argument here further substantiates the suggestion made above that those addressed in Hebrews 12:23 as the “congregation of the firstborn” are to liken themselves to the firstborn mentioned in 11:28. They are, that is, like those firstborn whom Moses protected from the Destroyer, liberated from their bondage in Egypt, led into the wilderness, brought to Sinai, and then guided toward their promised inheritance.

These three points suggest that the author of Hebrews has a keen interest in developing and extending the analogy he has already drawn in Hebrews 3–4 between the congregation to whom he writes and the exodus generation. Indeed, when viewed as a whole, this evidence indicates that the author's analogy between Jesus and his audience, on the one hand, and Moses and the exodus generation, on the other, is pervasive.<sup>39</sup> The contours of this analogy are as follows: On the one hand, Moses performed the Passover and was instrumental (1) in protecting God's people from the hostile Destroyer, (2) in liberating them from their slavery in Egypt, (3) in leading them in the wilderness to worship their God at Sinai (where some traditions even claim he ascended into the heavens), and (4) in bringing them to the edge of the promised

39. Interestingly, the sectarians at Qumran also interpreted their situation by way of a pervasive analogy between their situation and that of Moses and the exodus generation (see, e.g., the discussion in W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 [Leiden: Brill, 1967], 172–73). In fact, the notion of God's people being in the wilderness was widespread in the Second Temple period and could be employed in a variety of ways, often in relation to the exile (see H. Najman, “Toward a Study of the Uses of the Concept of Wilderness in Ancient Judaism,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 13 [2006]: 99–113).

land. On the other hand, Jesus saves God’s people in part by (1) defeating the Devil and (2) liberating them from the fear of death such that (3) they are now in the wilderness gathered around Zion (and their ascended leader) but also (4) standing at the edge of the ultimate promised inheritance.<sup>40</sup>

If these are the basic contours of this analogy, an obvious question naturally arises. Has Jesus done something like Moses’s faithful aspersion of blood that results in the protection and liberation of his people from the Destroyer and issues in their being led into the wilderness? If so, what did Jesus do? The author of Hebrews does in fact think that Jesus has done something like Moses’s performance of the first Passover—specifically, Jesus suffered, died, and was perfected so that he could lead many children to glory (Heb. 2:9–10, 14).<sup>41</sup>

### *Jesus’s Death as a New Passover in Hebrews 2*

In Hebrews 2:14 the author speaks of Jesus defeating “the one having the power of death” (τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου)—the Devil (τὸν διάβολον). Moreover, Hebrews claims in 2:15 that Jesus released (ἀπαλλάξῃ) his people from their fearful bondage (δουλείας) to the power of death that the Devil wields (cf. Heb. 2:10).<sup>42</sup> From the perspective of the analogy laid out above, especially in view of the exegetical tradition about Moses and the Destroyer evident in Jubilees, the language of Hebrews 2:14–15 is highly evocative of the first Passover and subsequent exodus. But recognizing the allusion allows one to pinpoint the conceptual location of Jesus’s death in relation to the role of Moses in the account of the exodus. Jesus’s death functions like Moses’s aspersion of blood at the first Passover. Thus, it is “through his death” (διὰ τοῦ θανάτου) that Jesus defeated the Devil.

40. This analogy is complex and functions at different levels. My point here is neither to identify all the ways the author plays it out nor to reduce it to the level of a consistent chronology. Clearly, for example, the identification of the audience as both gathered around Zion and on the boundary of the inheritance shows how the author can explore multiple aspects of the larger analogy. My goal is only to highlight a few of the interrelated aspects that have tended to be overlooked, not to exhaust, reduce, or overly simplify the rich tapestry of metaphors the author develops or alludes to on the basis of his analogy between the audience and the exodus generation.

41. I have argued elsewhere that Jesus’s perfection in Hebrews is largely, though not exclusively, a way of referring to his bodily resurrection (D. M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 [Leiden: Brill, 2011], esp. 198–200; see also chap. 7 in this volume).

42. While the verb “release” (ἀπαλλάσσω) is not attested in LXX accounts of the exodus, the language of “bondage” (δουλεία) is common with reference to Egypt and the exodus. Indeed, every use of the term in LXX Exodus and Deuteronomy refers to the people’s bondage in Egypt (see Exod. 6:6; 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:6, 11; cf. Lev. 26:45).

In the case of Moses, then, the important pivot in the exodus story—the event that Hebrews identifies in 11:28 as protecting the people from the Destroyer, leading to their release from bondage, and initiating the exodus into the wilderness—is Moses’s obedient application of the Passover blood. In the case of Jesus, the pivotal event that liberates his followers from bondage to the Devil, frees them from their enslavement to the fear of death, and issues in their going into the wilderness is, as Hebrews 2:14 makes clear, his death.

The broad analogy the author constructs between the audience and the exodus generation in Hebrews 2–4 appears, therefore, to form an essential part of the conceptual framework of the homily such that its recurrence in Hebrews 11 and 12 can hardly be either accidental or incidental.<sup>43</sup> Hebrews, in other words, develops a robust analogy between the exodus generation and the epistle’s intended audience, an analogy that recurs in various ways throughout the epistle. Within this analogy, Jesus’s death can be seen to be the essential Passover-like event that, like Moses’s aspersion of blood at the first Passover, brings protection and liberation from the great enemy of God’s people and initiates their time of journeying in the wilderness.

### ***Moses as Model***

When taken together, the preceding arguments suggest the following inference: the author of Hebrews understands the Destroyer of the firstborn who threatened God’s people during the initial Passover to be none other than the Devil, the malevolent angelic figure who holds the power of death. Jesus’s death stands at the beginning of a new exodus narrative in Hebrews. In keeping with this, the audience are to envision themselves as in the wilderness and about to enter the inheritance God has promised for his people. In light of the larger analogy between the community and the exodus generation in Hebrews and the identification of the Devil with the Destroyer of the first Passover, the author’s statement that Jesus’s death defeated the Devil draws a comparison between the singular death of Jesus and the unique performance of the first Passover that initiated the original exodus. The discussion of Moses’s performance of the initial Passover in order to protect God’s people from the Destroyer implies that in Hebrews 2:14–15 Jesus’s death functions as a Passover-like event that liberates humanity from the enslaving power of death and the great destroyer who wields that power—the Devil. Jesus’s death initiates an exodus-like event wherein God’s people are finally

43. I offer a more detailed discussion of the significant role and influence of Exodus and the exodus narrative in Hebrews in D. M. Moffitt, “Exodus in Hebrews,” in *Exodus in the New Testament*, ed. S. M. Ehorn, LNTS 663 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 146–63.

and fully freed from the dominion of the Devil. Hebrews does seem to work with a “new exodus” model but not one that is conceptually driven by the reality of ongoing exile.<sup>44</sup>

If this is more or less on target, then Jesus’s liberating work in Hebrews 2:14–16 is modeled on Moses’s key role in liberating God’s people from slavery (cf. Heb. 3:16). The figure of Moses is, therefore, central to the claim that Jesus defeated the Devil, for it was Moses who defeated the Destroyer when, by faith, he manipulated blood at the first Passover. This conclusion not only sheds fresh light on the meaning and logic of the emancipation Jesus has effected in Hebrews 2:14–16 (his death is a Passover-like act that brings liberation from enslavement to the Devil) but also implies that the author respects the role of Moses in the Passover and the exodus. Moses’s performance of the Passover and his role as liberator of the people are not being critiqued, downplayed, or made to conform to Jesus. Rather, the author draws upon Moses’s act of blood manipulation at the first Passover and his leading the people into the wilderness to explain something about who Jesus is and how his death is salvific.

The analogy implies that Jesus’s death is the Passover-like event that ultimately leads to the liberation of God’s people from the power of the angel of death and allows them to enter into a wilderness-like period as they head toward the eternal inheritance God promises them. The author is not, then, forcing the liberating act of Jesus back into the exodus story as a hermeneutical key to show the true significance of that earlier event. Instead, he appeals to the pentateuchal account of Moses to draw an extended analogy that enables him to identify points of continuity between Jesus and Moses, points that help to inform the true nature of Jesus’s salvific work.

44. M. Thiessen makes the intriguing argument that the author thinks Israel’s exodus from Egypt has never come to an end (“Hebrews and the End of Exodus,” *NovT* 49 [2007]: 353–69). The author does not think in terms of an ongoing exile. Rather, he relegates all of Israel’s history after the exodus to an extended time of wandering in the wilderness. Thiessen therefore suggests that “new exodus” language is inappropriate for Hebrews (355n7). A full discussion of this interpretation lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, I suspect that Thiessen’s thesis does not recognize just how far back the author locates God’s people in redemptive history. The author of Hebrews seems to think that God’s people had never really been liberated from slavery prior to Christ. Like Jubilees, Hebrews suggests that God’s people were never fully freed from the real source of their true slavery—the Devil. In a sense, then, Jesus effects *the* exodus when he defeats this perennial foe. By the same token, the audience are now in *the* wilderness waiting to enter *the* inheritance. This does not mean, however, that the writer denies the reality of the exodus that Moses led or of Joshua’s and the people’s entrance into the promised inheritance. The scriptural narrative of these events provides essential categories for the author as he reflects on who Jesus is, what he has done, and how the homily’s audience ought to think of themselves. When viewed this way, it seems completely appropriate to speak of Jesus leading a new exodus in Hebrews.

Yet another important point follows from the preceding argument. Both Jesus and Moses were faithful *when they faced the same opponent*—the malicious angelic agent who has always been intent on the destruction of God’s people. Both were, in their own ways, victorious over that figure because they were faithful to God’s instructions/will. Their victories differ in kind and degree. In Hebrews, Jesus’s death is clearly depicted as the superior Passover-like event. While Moses earned a partial liberation from the enemy and brought God’s people out of bondage in Egypt by performing the Passover, the problem of death and enslavement to death continued, and, as the author emphasizes by way of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3–4, the wilderness generation did not ultimately enter the true promised rest toward which they were being led. Jesus, however, has finally defeated the Devil and ultimately liberated God’s people from the fear of death. Because of his resurrection and ascension, Jesus has gone ahead of his people and opened a new and living way into the inheritance God has promised them.

If this interpretation is largely correct, there does not here appear to be any attempt to tarnish the importance of Moses at the first Passover or to force him to conform to Jesus. Indeed, the opposite impulse seems to be at work. The author finds in the first Passover a basis from which to draw out aspects of the significance of Jesus’s own death. By analogy to the redemption of God’s people from Egypt, Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection liberate God’s people from the accusing angel and from his power to enslave them. Moses, Passover, and the exodus, far from being mere ciphers for the author’s christological and soteriological views forced back into holy writ, offer the writer authoritative paradigms for thinking about Jesus as a liberating figure and about how his death brought God’s people liberation from their enslavement to death and the Devil—Jesus’s death is a Passover-like event that initiates an exodus-like liberation from the great Destroyer.

## Conclusion

Within the claims and logic of Hebrews 2:14–16 concerning Jesus’s defeat of the Devil and subsequent liberation of God’s people, the allusive presence of Moses and his salvific work at the first Passover suggests that the witness of Scripture and other traditions regarding Moses’s central role in the exodus narrative inform the author’s understanding of what Jesus’s death accomplished. Moses is not a wax nose for the author of Hebrews, nor is his role as liberator of God’s people diminished by being made to conform to the enduring, atemporal work of Christ. True, as a faithful servant in God’s

house, Moses testifies to the good things that are to come (Heb. 3:5). This likely implies, in part, that the author envisions Moses's faithful performance of the Passover as foreshadowing or providing the pattern for the ultimate liberation that Jesus effected. But it follows from this that Moses's leadership of God's people in performing the Passover, helping to protect them from the Destroyer, and leading them out of Egypt and into the wilderness is not diminished or displaced by Jesus's "better" work. Rather, these elements of Moses's work provide a model for the author to use when reflecting on the salvific work of Christ.

Doubtless the larger connections between Jesus and Passover are not original to this author but are, as the Gospels attest, common stock in early Christianity. Hebrews nevertheless offers us insight into the dialogical reasoning of some of the earliest Christians as they thought through the complex relationships they assumed must be present between Jesus and the biblical texts, figures, and traditions they assumed to be divinely revealed and therefore authoritative. For the author of Hebrews, at least, the preceding arguments indicate that it was important to locate Jesus within the larger biblical pattern of God's liberating work through his faithful servant Moses. In particular, Moses's faithful service through his obedient aspersion of blood at the first Passover illuminates who Jesus is and what he accomplished in his death by providing a scriptural frame within which to think about these matters. Hebrews draws on Moses's role in the first Passover and the way this inaugurated the exodus to add depth and texture both to Jesus's identity and to how one understands what he has done to bring salvation to his brothers and sisters. Jesus is a Moses-like figure whose death is a new Passover that has defeated the Devil and freed God's people from enslavement. Hebrews, in other words, presents Jesus as the one who performed *the* Passover par excellence. The audience can now identify themselves as in a new wilderness period gathered around Zion, where they worship God as they wait for their covenant mediator to return from his ascended position in God's presence and lead them finally into the fullness of their inheritance.

All of this implies that Moses is for the author tightly linked with the special event of the first Passover and with the subsequent exodus. Specifically, Moses is viewed as an active agent who listened to God's instructions and faithfully performed them. As noted above, Moses, like Jesus, serves as a model for the audience to imitate. The views of D'Angelo and Eisenbaum are correct on this point. But Moses is not simply a role model for the audience because he, like Jesus, performed an essential saving act on behalf of God's people. Moses's use of blood at the Passover protected God's people and led to their liberation from Egypt. The temporal sequence of the history of God's

people as narrated in the Pentateuch puts Moses in a unique position relative to the rest of God's people.

Jesus's death, as the event that initiates the new exodus of God's people, is also a unique and unrepeatable event. The first Passover, which Moses performed in order to protect God's people from the Destroyer, to liberate them from Egypt, and to initiate their journey toward their promised inheritance, is repeatedly remembered in the annual Passover feast but is never itself repeated. In a similar way, Jesus's Passover-like submission to death has defeated the Devil, liberated God's people from the tyranny of death's power, and initiated their journey into the wilderness of the last days, where they wait to enter fully into their promised inheritance. This event is remembered in the Eucharist, but it is never again to be repeated. Hebrews' comparison of Jesus's death with Moses's faithful performance of the first Passover therefore spotlights the cross as the event that set in motion the new and ultimate exodus of God's people from their enslavement to death and the Devil.

In sum, the preceding arguments demonstrate that the hermeneutical dynamic at the center of Hebrews' dialogical engagement with Scripture is not unidirectional. Rather than forcing Moses or the first Passover or the exodus to mean what they mean only in light of Jesus, the logic and sequence as well as the perceived meaning of these aspects of Scripture helps explain who Jesus is, what he has done, and how he has done it.<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, Moses provides a model for the author to explore some of the essential elements of the salvific work that he confesses Jesus to have accomplished.

45. The author's interpretation of Scripture clearly can take temporal sequence seriously. This is evident in his engagement with Ps. 95 in Heb. 3–4 (see esp. Heb. 4:1–11). For a useful discussion of the significance of temporal sequence in Hebrews' exegetical engagement with Ps. 95 see N. J. Moore, *Repetition in Hebrews: Plurality and Singularity in the Letter to the Hebrews, Its Ancient Context, and the Early Church*, WUNT 2/388 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 111–15.