



# The Heavenly Intercession of Jesus in Hebrews: *Background, Nature, and Significance*

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Urga, Abeneazer G. *Intercession of Jesus in Hebrews: The Background and Nature of Jesus' Heavenly Intercession in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2/585. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. Pp. xx + 290. €99.00 (paperback/e-book).*

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The work is a slightly revised version of the author's PhD thesis, completed at Columbia International University. Abeneazer Urga, an Ethiopian biblical scholar, notes that while scholars have focused on Jesus's mediatorial role before and after his ascension, there has been less emphasis on his intercession as his current mediatorial task in heaven. The author establishes that New Testament scholars have neglected the function of Christ in heaven (i.e., intercession) while focusing on "the death, entry, and offering of Christ" (1). In this monograph, Urga argues that in the book of Hebrews, Jesus's vocal intercession began on earth and constitutes his primary role as high priest in heaven following his sacrifice on the cross.

This study examines the heavenly intercession of Jesus as described in the book of Hebrews. It also explores the idea of intercession and key passages and words related to this theme through the lens of the Old Testament, Second Temple Jewish Literature (STJL), and other New Testament texts apart from Hebrews. This broader perspective helps us understand the background and nature of his role as high priest for believers and allows for a deeper comprehension of how intercession is portrayed and the reasons behind it. Urga employs the concept of semantic domain developed by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida in their *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domain* (2nd edition: United Bible Societies, 1989). In some passages, words directly related to intercession are not used; however, concepts of

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intercession are prevalent in the OT, STJL, and NT texts.

The book is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the research, providing a broader perspective and outlining the methodology along with the literature review. The literature review examines various scholars' work on Jesus's intercession in Hebrews since 1977. However, the selection of 1977 as a cutoff year lacks clear justification. Contrary to some scholars, this study argues that intercession is the primary function of Jesus' heavenly ministry as high priest. Additionally, it shows that this motif is not a "foreign element" but a natural aspect rooted in the mediators' intercession in the Septuagint (LXX) as well as in the STJL (31).

Chapter 2 examines the motif of intercession in the Old Testament, analyzing both the Masoretic Text (MT) and LXX textual traditions. The aim is to investigate whether the author of Hebrews has appropriated the concept of intercession from the OT in composing the Epistle to the Hebrews. The chapter begins by defining the term "intercession," noting that it refers to a form of prayer offered on behalf of someone else. In the Old Testament, intercessors can be either human mediators or angelic beings. It explores intercession in the Old Testament, focusing on figures such as Abraham, Moses, Amos, the Suffering Servant, Jeremiah, Daniel, and angels. The chapter emphasizes that "the motif of intercession is prevalent in the Old Testament. God-appointed mediators engaged in intercession on behalf of others to declare God's judgment against people. All intercessory prayers arose from the sinful actions of both the elect and the Gentiles" (76–77). An important insight from this chapter is that the idea of intercession is communicated through many words, phrases, and expressions, even though the word "intercession" is not used directly in some significant OT texts, such as Isaiah 53:12.

The background research continues in Chapter 3, where the motif of intercession and intercessors is examined in STJL. The aim is to compare the concept of intercession in the OT and STJL. The Greek word ἐντυγχάνειν (*entugkhánein*) is frequently encountered in STJL, so this chapter primarily focuses on this term. The texts of 1–2 Maccabees, the *Testament of Levi*, *1 Enoch*, the Mishnah, *The Genesis Apocryphon*, and Philo are analyzed to understand the concept of intercession. The examination reveals that intercessory prayer was a common practice among mediators during the Second Temple period, involving priests, military chiefs, angels, and martyrs. The roles of intercessory mediators in STJL are largely similar to those in the OT. However, the practice of interceding for the dead, as well as the concept of deceased saints interceding, emerges as unique to STJL.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to Jesus's intercessory work during his earthly ministry and passages that address his heavenly intercession in New Testament

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texts outside of Hebrews. Key passages include Jesus's prayers for his disciples (Luke 22:31–32; John 17:1–2), for himself in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–44; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46; John 18:1), and for others during his passion (Luke 22:39–46; 23:34a, 46). Acts 7:55–58, Romans 8:34, and 1 John 2:1–2 are also covered in detail. This chapter demonstrates Jesus's intercession both on earth and in heaven within the broader New Testament corpus. Urga observes the motif of high priesthood in these texts.

Chapter 5 serves as the centerpiece of the book, specifically addressing Jesus's heavenly intercession as described in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Urga applies all the previous discussions of the book to the text of Hebrews itself. Key passages such as 1:3c–d, 13; 2:17–18; 3:1–6; 4:14–16; 6:19–20; 7:25; 8:1–4; 9:11–12, 24; 10:11–14, 19–25; and 12:1–2 are analyzed to demonstrate how they portray Jesus as a high priest who intercedes. The intended readers of Hebrews are identified as those who were in danger of committing apostasy because they were troubled by sin, temptation, spiritual apathy, and immaturity. Some may have already left Christian fellowship. To such an audience, the author affirms that Jesus is the only one who “can provide efficacious mediatorship because of his sacrificial offering on earth and his perpetual intercession as the high priest of God's people” (235). Jesus's intercession, when compared with OT and STJL, is superior and effective because of his death on the cross as a sacrificial offering, and he intercedes from an exalted position.

Urga's book attempts to answer the question, “What is the background and nature of Jesus' heavenly intercession on behalf of believers in the Epistle to the Hebrews?” (237). It indicates that previous studies on the subject have significantly contributed to delineating the priesthood of Christ and his superior mediatorship. However, the areas of Jesus's present ministry, particularly his perpetual intercession, have yet to receive significant attention. Urga makes a strong case in this book for how the issue of intercession in the Epistle to the Hebrews depends on texts from OT, STJL, and other parts of NT. Urga's work demonstrates real scholarship, sound exegetical skill, and well-rounded interaction with important scholars on the subject.

The intercessory role of Christ is a controversial topic within the Ethiopian Christian context, from which the author hails. While Protestants in Ethiopia emphasize Christ's intercessory role, adherents of the Orthodox church highlight the intercessory roles of other saints. This distinction serves as a significant identity marker between the two groups. I hope the author will produce more materials on this topic in various local Ethiopian languages and translate his work for a broader readership. This would facilitate a more inclusive and accessible discussion of this important theological issue.