

Leviticus 1vs4-17

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We continue our study on the ordinances and rules surrounding the 'olah', the sacrifice known as the burnt offering. The first recorded 'olah' in the Bible is Noah in Genesis following the flood. The 'olah' is burnt entirely on the altar. We recall that the 'olah' has a freewill component implied by the conditional question 'if'. God does not compel obedience nor worship. Leviticus is a calling and we can choose to answer that call and partake in a relationship with the Lord. The 'olah' is an unblemished sacrifice from livestock. This is different from the poorer bird offering, also called an olah, to which the unblemished requirement is not required. The worshipper engages with the sacrifice by placing his hands upon its head before the animal is killed. Also detailed is the locations of the sacrifice, to the north of the altar for livestock and east of the altar for the discarding of various parts of the bird offering. No reason is given for these actions or locations and theological traditions have arisen over time to answer some of these questions. The priest who officiates receives the skin of the animal as a type of fee for his services, and thus he can provide for his family.

Olah comes from the verb to ascend and it is written that performing this sacrifice creates a pleasing aroma to the Lord and procures atonement, although the actual sin that is being atoned for is not specified. Actually, sin is not mentioned in this chapter at all. The concept of covering is indeed present but how and what is unclear. The standard judicial Christian concept of sin, sacrifice, and punishment is not enough to explain our first chapter. There is something much deeper going on. In this initial chapter, we note that the livestock required to make atonement are very expensive and well beyond to reach of the majority of Israelites. Bird offerings are cheaper, the directive of blemished or unblemished is not required and the result of bird offerings procures a pleasing aroma but not atonement. Interestingly the animal sacrificed is considered as atonement prior to the animal being killed.

Why the north side of the altar? Leviticus 1vs11 gives us the location of sacrifices but not the reason why? Psalm 75vs6 says exaltation does not come from the east or west nor from the south. Psalm 48 declares that the city of the great King lies to the north. The north became synonymous with hope and redemption. As the prophet Isaiah would declare, the northern lands of Zebulun and Naphtali would see a great light. Jesus begins his ministry in the north. It is in the north in Caesarea Philippi that Peter would declare Jesus as Messiah and from there Jesus would set his face towards Jerusalem.

For the poorer bird offering the east direction is mentioned. The east is also special. This is the direction Adam and Eve flee the garden, from the east come many adversaries such as the Babylonians, it is also the place of captivity. However in that captivity you can find hope and victory such as Daniel and the prophetic revelation of the Son of Man, ultimately the people return from the east and rebuild, the Magi come to Jesus from the east and prophetically Isaiah 63 notes a messianic figure coming for the east during the last days.

We often think of the Lord as 'watching over us' thus giving God some semblance of eyesight, this chapter of Leviticus mentions several times that a divine olfactory sense also exists. That God can smell is indicated as early as Genesis with the burnt offering sacrifice of Noah. Paul describes us in 2 Corinthians 2vs14-16 as being the aroma of Christ among those being saved. How God engages the sense of smell is unclear. I suspect we will not know how until the world to come. For now, we see but through a glass darkly. Exodus describes a unique recipe

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of incense that was only to be used for the Lord and for no other purpose. Prayers are also defined as being incense before the Lord. Suffice to note, the freewill offering brought before the Lord by a true worshipper does indeed please the Lord and in the case of livestock procure atonement.

In summary then of the first chapter, we note that Leviticus begins as a calling, God does not forcefully compel obedience. Rich and poor have the opportunity to bring a freewill sacrifice without the reason mentioned for doing so, nor the occasion, nor number of times required to do so. Participation by the worshipper is encouraged and blood does play an important part of the ritual. Geography is theology and the directions of north and east become important in the messianic story.