

Leviticus & Sacrifice

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2021

The sacrificial system is not an invention of Leviticus or the Torah. Gentiles engaged in the ritual of sacrifice long before there was a nation of Israelites. Sacrifices of animals and grain appear in the Garden of Eden without any precondition or instruction to do so, even before permission to consume animals was given. One assumes then that Abel was raising flocks for dairy use only. All the Patriarchs, with the exception of Joseph, offer sacrifices and construct altars. Sacrifices are pre-Torah and, with the exception of Job who sacrifices for the sins of his children, are not performed in the explicit context of sin. Examples: Noah does not leave the Ark to sacrifice for sin but simply to offer a sacrifice; Abraham does not offer Isaac as a sacrifice for sin. Prior to the Tabernacle and Temple, sacrifices were performed in multiple locations.

The Israelites had spent over 400 years in Egypt. Much of Egyptian theology revolved around the cult of after-life, the obsession with life beyond death. Many of the surrounding nations practised human sacrifice, presumably out of religious fear and appeasement to angry gods. There is much scholarship linking the influence of pagan sacrifice to Israelite worship, however, I think there is a core difference so often overlooked. The worship of God in the Hebrew Bible is the result and conduit to maintain, first and foremost, a relationship. Sacrifice in Hebrew means 'to draw close to' and Leviticus is a calling into a relationship with a living God who is close, personal and present. Biblical sacrifices are not for appeasement; they are for atonement. The first sacrifice performed by the people of Israel was the Passover sacrifice in Egypt; a blood covering, not for sin and not in the land of Israel.

The prophets railed against an Israelite society that had begun to believe that sacrifices were for appeasing the Almighty, ensuring protection and enticing His favour and blessing. After the destruction of the Temple and the captivity to Babylon, the theological nature of sacrifice was reexamined. Sacrifices were expensive and animals were not always in abundance. Grain more often than not was an adequate substitute for blood. Perhaps the blood of animals was not as important as had become presumed. Psalm 141:2 reminded the worshipper that the prayers of the heart were true incense and raised hands were as sacrifices. Prayers, study and active faithfulness replaced the importance of sacrifice. Heroes like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego all maintained faith and active prayer lives despite the inability to sacrifice. This does not mean that the sacrificial system was without importance or meaning. It had and still has meaning. Theologically, though, the nature of sacrifices became once again part of the relationship, but not the be-all and end-all nor end goal of the relationship. Daniel and Ezekiel prophesied a return to Temple sacrifice, thus giving sacrifices a prophetic aspect. Diaspora theology developed the understanding and knowledge that sacrifices were not what saved you nor the nation from sin or destruction.

Cyrus the Persian decreed Jews could return to Israel and rebuild the Temple, yet the majority of Jewish people remained in Diaspora. If Temple sacrifices and the need for blood atonement was paramount, then why did so few people return? Why did the later prophets not decry this transgression to the Jews outside the Land of Israel? Why does Paul fail to mention the obvious polemic of the need for Temple sacrifices with the Greek Jews in the synagogues of Athens, Corinth or Thessaloniki? Babylonian Jewry maintained a firm grip on faith and tradition ultimately producing a vast body of Jewish literature called the Babylonian Talmud.

It is Hasmonean theology, the Maccabees, that introduces the theology of martyrdom, dying for

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God and the sanctification of the Name of God. Late Second Temple literature shows us that it is the death of the righteous that causes God to act in redemptive ways. Animal blood was much less important than human blood and the true heroes of the faith were those who died for the Lord. Biblical heroes all died of old age or, in the case of Enoch and Elijah, not at all. However, in the late Second Temple Period, it was the blood of the righteous that procured redemption. Jesus understood that the Temple was His Father's house. He also understood it was His righteous blood that would redeem the many.

Sacrifices were part of an active relationship and a foreshadow of things to come. We should not make too little nor too less of the ritual of sacrifice. It is important but it is not magic. It was never the vehicle for salvation, but rather atonement. Just as the Torah was the shield and guardian and not the redeemer itself, sacrifices were part of a heartfelt relationship but they were not what defined the relationship. We also can note that because sacrifices are in the Torah, every generation has to wrestle with their theological nature. Various forms of Christianity have strong positions on the nature and form of Eucharistic worship. Sacrifice can take spiritual forms as we become active 'living sacrifices'. And in modern Judaism, some segments still conduct the blood ritual of chicken slaughter on days leading to Yom Kippur.

Also, discussions about rebuilding the 3rd Temple continue to surface periodically and with passion. In one form or another, sacrifice continues to remain a segment of much of our theology.