

Leviticus 17

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

Blood is very important to the Lord, and this chapter deals almost exclusively with the issue of blood. We are here introduced to the prohibition from eating blood. This instruction was given through Moses to Israel but continued into the New Covenant as one of the four laws given to Gentiles in Acts 15. With apologies for upsetting vegetarians and vegans, the truth is animals had become a biblical food source for human beings following the Flood. Prior to the Flood, animals were used as sacrifices to God (see Abel and his acceptable offering to the Lord). In antiquity in the pagan world, the majority of animal meat was sacrificed to pagan gods, and usually, sacrifices could be performed wherever one pleased, which at its essence is an individualistic way of approaching the divine! God has another way to do this for His people. The command is to sacrifice all animals before the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

This verse inspired a late rabbinic argument in antiquity: were all animals to be killed before the altar or only the ones that were to be used for religious purposes? The debate is recorded between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Akiva (who happened to live in the Galilee and was nowhere near the Temple in Jerusalem) argued that it was permissible to slaughter animals for food away from the altar. Ishmael argued for the stricter interpretation. Rabbinic debates are often left without any final resolution. Rather they highlight the theological discussions occurring at the time and less actual halachic rulings. The Levitical text itself is quite strict in that the penalty for killing animals away from the altar results in ex-communication from the community. Jewish exegesis notes that God gives us permission to kill animals for offerings, food, skins for shelter and clothing. Should we kill animals for any other reason, then it is like killing a human being and that is something you can't do.

The wilderness experience was a time of formation for the Israelites. They had been in Egypt for 430 years and had absorbed Egyptian diet, culture and religious traditions, including the offerings given to animalistic goat demons. Who were these goat demons? Essentially that's unknown. The text implies that Egyptian and Canaanite religion is idolatry. The Apostle Paul likewise suggests to the Corinthians that behind idols are demons and thus the prohibition of Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols. Now in the desert, they had the time to internalize the instructions (the Torah) of God in preparation for entering the Land of Canaan and becoming a light to the nations. Sacrifices come from the root word for 'to come close'. God wanted His people to draw close to Him, thus sacrifices were to be performed in His presence at the Tent of Meeting. Hence the command is actually a positive one, as it reflects the desire for God to be with His people and offers a clear way for the people (rich or poor) to come to God. To honour the Lord, the Israelites, as well as the strangers living amongst them, are not to follow their own hearts, opinions and desires in their relationship with God. Rather they come to the Lord in the way He made for them. This is something we should all internalize in our own relationships with God.

Leviticus continues with an extensive repetition against the consumption of blood. Eating blood was most likely a very real problem for ancient Israel. God takes a strong view of the problem as the consequence is that the Lord will 'set His face against the person who eats blood'. The basic implication here is God will reject the person who consumes blood and engage in hostile action against them. This is obviously very serious. Blood is very important to the Lord. Now, why is that?

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We should always keep in mind that translation is also interpretation. The Hebrew word translated as 'life' is actually the word for soul (*nefesh*). 'The life is in the blood' is literally 'the soul is in the blood.' The soul and the body are somehow connected through the blood of the organism. Adam, the name of the first man, is made up of the Hebrew words for blood (*dam*) and dust (*adamah*). His body, being made of dust, does not become alive until the Lord breathes into the body of Adam, then the Hebrew text says that Adam became a soul. The breath of God mysteriously encouraged the soul to mingle with the blood of Adam and he came to life.

According to Jewish tradition, the souls themselves are products of the creation week. They reside in Heaven in the 'Well of Souls'. This is reflected in such verses as Psalm 139:16: 'Your eyes saw my unformed substance and before I was born you consecrated me'. Similarly, Jeremiah 1:5 says 'I knew you before I formed you in the womb'.

The Lord says the soul is in the blood and it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Blood is reserved for this purpose only, for the atonement of the altar, Holy of Holies, Tabernacle, High Priest and humans. Excess blood is then poured onto the earth and covered. Moses also commands us to respect the blood of animals that die in nature. Such respect for the blood of animals should give us pause to reflect then on the sacredness of the blood of the martyrs and of Jesus Himself.