

THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

(Leviticus 1-16)

For most Christians, the two books of Leviticus and Numbers are the least well-known of the five books of Torah. They comprise the teaching and events that occurred while the Israelites were still at Mt. Sinai up until the time they camped in the Plains of Moab to the east of the Jordan River.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

The third book of Torah, Leviticus, continues the laws by which the nation was to live. Following the customary pattern of the ancient Near East, the book's Hebrew title is the first word *Wayyiqra* (= And he called). The more familiar title "Leviticus" comes from the Greek Septuagint, where it referred, more or less, to the priests. Since the term "Levites," which is a tribal name, is much broader than simply the priests, the name can be misleading. While it might suggest that the contents were laws for the Levites only or even the priests only, much of the book concerns the laws of holiness for the entire nation, and in fact, the Levites are mentioned only once in the book (cf. Lev. 25:32-34). These statutes regulated both the people's religious and civil life. If the Book of Exodus contains the more static implements of the Israelite religion (the Tabernacle and its related sacred objects), the Book of Leviticus describes religious life itself (people and action). The structure of the book falls broadly into two sections that pivot on the *Yom Kippur* ritual in chapter 16.

Through cult and ritual, the Israelites were called to forsake common life, separating themselves from the world in order to live a life of holiness and dedication to Yahweh. The theology of Israel was expressed in ritual, not merely in words, and this included the structure of the tabernacle as well as the performance of sacrifice and the observance of purity laws. The nature of Yahweh himself was revealed in these ancient forms, and Moses directly quoted the words of God, "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (10:3). Hence, while pagan religions of the ancient Near



Bas-relief of the Assyrian Emperor Ashurbanipal pouring a libation over the heads of dead lions.

OFFERINGS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Ancient Near Eastern religion featured three types of offerings to the pantheon of deities: ritual killing (sacrifice), offerings (vegetable products), and libations (pouring out of liquid). Usually, such offerings were performed in a sacred space, such as a temple set apart for such cultic practice, and usually they were mediated through religious officials or priests.

Human sacrifice was also known, and child sacrifice was performed for various deities as punishment for the sins of parents. While the law of Moses uses some of the same forms as appear in other ancient Near Eastern religions, including blood sacrifice, cereal offerings, and libations, it specifically condemns human sacrifice (Dt. 12:31).

East were based on human needs and desires, the worship of Yahweh was based on his own nature and character. Pagan religions were polytheistic, mirroring the features of the physical world, but Yahweh's actions were always in concert with his basic moral attributes, his power, righteousness, faithfulness, love, wrath, and wisdom. In paganism, one could gain access to the gods by magic, a way of manipulating them to do one's will. Access to Yahweh, by contrast, was only by reconciliation from a condition of estrangement.

LAWS FOR SACRIFICE AND RECONCILIATION (1-7)

The laws for the sacrificial system begin with daily offerings (תָּמִיד = "continual") at sunrise and sunset (Ex. 29:38-41). The daily offering consisted of a year-old lamb offered as a burnt offering. This ritual opened and closed the daily service of the tabernacle and was performed in conjunction with an adjunct cereal offering and an adjunct libation ("drink offering"). The daily offering was performed by the priests, which makes it somewhat different than the offerings brought to the tabernacle by individuals.

The ritual of sacrifice for individual Israelites involved the slaughter and burning of an animal. To understand this, one must look at the relationship of God to living creatures. In the creation account, animal life is valued higher than vegetable life, even though both are "alive" in some sense. However, vegetable life is suitable for food for animal life. Animal life is animate, while vegetable life is inanimate. Animate life has both a created element (body) and an uncreated element (God's breath or spirit, the "breath of life," cf. Ge. 1:30). Blood is the element of animate life signifying life from God (cf. Lv. 17:11; Dt. 12:23). Hence, animal life is a combination of "body" and "blood," and the ritual of sacrifice is the death of an animal to purge impurity and to ransom the life of the sinner—in short, to repair the fractured relationship between the Israelite and God caused by sin.

Animals to be used for blood sacrifice had to meet certain qualifications. Three distinctions governed whether or not an animal was considered fit for sacrifice. The first distinction concerned purity. Animals that the Israelites were allowed to eat were "pure" and could be used for sacrifice, whereas non-kosher animals were "impure" and therefore inappropriate (cf. Lv. 1:10; 11:1ff.). The second distinction concerned domesticity. Only domestic animals, such as, livestock (but also some birds), were fit for sacrifice, so by implication, non-domestic animals or wild animals (game) were inappropriate. Thirdly, only non-defective animals were fit for sacrifice. Animals that were blemished in some way, either by birth defects, disease, or injury, were inappropriate, and in some cases, age or gender could be factors (Lv. 22:21-28; 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6, etc.).

SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

Central to sacrifice was the idea of substitution. This concept first appeared in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, where a ram became the substitute for the offering of his son (Ge. 22:1-2, 13).

All sin has its origin in the life of the sinner. The life of the sinner is forfeit, since he/she now is estranged from the sole source of life, who is God.

The removal of sin is possible only by the same means, the payment of this life-debt, through the substitution of one life for another. The symbolic agent of this substitution is blood (Lv. 17:11-14). The verb כָּפַר (= to atone by offering a substitute) appears some 49 times in the Hebrew text of Leviticus alone! It denotes a vicarious sacrifice, the life of the innocent given for the life of the guilty.

Sacrificial procedure varied to some degree, depending on the types of sacrifice, but several generally common features can be observed, divided between rituals performed by the laity and those performed by the priest. The layperson was to present the animal and impose his hands on its head, thus identifying the animal as one's own (Lv. 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 24, 29, 33, etc.).¹ The Israelite then slaughtered the animal. Once the animal had been killed, it was skinned and dissected. Then followed a ritual of blood, either dashing it against the altar, daubing it upon the horns of the altar, or sprinkling it on the altar (Lv. 1:5, 11; 3:2, 13; 4:6-7, 17-18, 25, 30, 34; 5:9, etc.). The animal then was burned, either in part or entirely, depending on the type of sacrifice (Lv. 1:9, 13, 15, 17; 2:2, 9, 16, etc.).² Finally, there were rites of disposal for blood, body parts, and ashes (4:11-12; 6:11; 8:17; 9:11).

Five primary offerings of different types and for different purposes are described in some detail (Lv. 1-7). These sacrifices were of two types: the first three were relational, that is, they were to provide "a sweet aroma" to Yahweh, and the final two were expiatory, that is, they were to atone for sins.

The Burnt Offering (1; 6:8-13): The Hebrew name *'ola* (= what ascends) implies that the entire offering was turned to smoke. This offering was intended to pay homage, offer thanksgiving, seek appeasement, or gain expiation. The presenter's actions included the imposition of hands and the slaughter, skinning, and dissection of the animal. The priest's actions were to sprinkle the blood on the altar and burn the animal entirely.

The Cereal Offering (2; 6:14-23): Rabbinic tradition regarded the cereal offering, which consisted of raw flour, cakes, wafers or first-fruits with oil, as the poor man's substitute for a burnt offering. The grain could be baked, toasted or fried with salt, but it must not have yeast or honey. It could be offered as an accompaniment to the burnt offering or by itself. The Hebrew word for this offering, *minhah*, generally means "gift" as an expression of reverence, gratitude, homage, or allegiance. In contrast to the burnt offering, the priest only burned a portion and kept the rest for himself and his family to consume.³

The Fellowship Offering (3; 7:11-21, 28-36): The title of this offering is related to the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning well-being, peace or fellowship. Hence, this offering was intended for the healing of relationship and for restoration to fellowship with God. The presenter laid hands upon the animal and slaughtered it. The priest sprinkled blood on the altar and partially burned the offering. However, part of the offering was to be eaten, some by the person bringing the offering and some which was allotted to the priest and his family (7:15).

¹ Some have suggested that in this imposition of hands, the Israelite was symbolically transferring his/her sins to the animal, though this is not specifically stated. Still, at the very least, the gesture seems to link the Israelite individual with the animal to be slaughtered.

² The Hebrew word for burnt offering is *'ola*, and it lies behind the Greek translation *holokautoma* and the English derivation "holocaust."

³ The *minhah* was what Cain presented to Yahweh (Ge.4:3), an offering that God rejected. It sometimes is suggested that this rejection was because it was not a blood offering, but such a conclusion is unnecessary. A *minhah* was an acceptable offering. It is more likely that it was Cain's attitude, not the type of offering, that resulted in rejection.

The Sin Offering (4:1—5:13; 6:24-30): The Hebrew word for this offering, the *hattat*, refers to deviation or falling short of the mark. Hence, this offering was for personal forgiveness or purification of the sanctuary if it had been contaminated by some sinful action. As before, the presenter laid his hands upon the animal and slaughtered it. The priest offered its blood before the inner curtain, on the altar, and on the base of the altar, after which he burned the sacrifice.

The Guilt Offering (5:14—6:7; 7:1-10): The final offering, as its name implies, was intended to repair a breach of faith through sacrilege against holy objects, laws, or oaths. The presenter was obliged to provide restitution. The priest sprinkled blood on the altar and burned the sacrifice.

THE ORDER FOR PRIESTHOOD (8-10)

Next comes the order for priesthood, a solemn ritual for the ordination of Aaron and his sons, which included investiture, anointing with oil, sacrifice, and a sacred meal (8-9). When the rebel sons of Aaron dared to offer unauthorized fire to Yahweh, he executed them (10). It is difficult to determine the exact nature of their offense, but possibly they had taken their fire from a place outside the altar instead of from the altar itself. At the very least, this incident underscores the fact that the rituals were to be carried out precisely.

THE PURITY SYSTEM (11-15)

The third section of laws details the impurity system, including statutes about diet, childbirth, disease, and bodily discharge. At issue is the basic principle that God is holy, so therefore, his people must prepare themselves to enter his presence. Anyone defiled by violating a purity law was restricted from the Tent of Meeting, and such cases included the transgression of *kosher* laws regarding food (11), defilement relating to childbirth (12), infectious diseases, such as, leprosy⁴ or boils, or contamination from clothing or mildew (13-14). Finally, there were purity laws concerning bodily secretion, such as, male genital discharge, menstruation, or venereal disease (15).

YOM KIPPUR (16)

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) was the most solemn day in Israel's calendar. Unlike the five primary offerings, which were for individuals, this sacrifice was for the atonement of the whole nation. The ritual began with the selection of a bull, a ram and two goats. The high priest bathed and vested before beginning the ritual. The bull and one goat were slaughtered, and their blood sprinkled within the Most Holy Place of the Tent of Meeting. The other goat was driven into the desert after the sins of the nation had been confessed over it. Finally, the bull and the ram, one for the priest and the other for the people, was burned on the altar.

YOM KIPPUR AND THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

In the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews draws an extended parallel between the ritual of Yom Kippur and the death of Jesus, showing that Jesus was the perfect atonement for all sin forever (Heb. 9-10).

⁴ The translation "leprosy" in the older English Versions requires some explanation. A better term might be "scale disease," for the word *sara'at*, as used in the Hebrew Bible, is much wider than what we call Hansen's Disease. It included various diseases affecting the skin, all of which resulted in impurity.