

**Assess the function of the various forms of sacrifice in Leviticus. Evaluate their significance for Christians today taking account of Christian interpretations of them.**

Overview of Leviticus

The Book of Leviticus was supposedly given by God as the rulebook for Israel's priesthood – the Levite priesthood but it issues precepts for the laity too. This priesthood existed principally to offer sacrifices to God. God allegedly inspired the book for "explaining the procedures for the various types of sacrifices that were to be offered". 1 Consequentially, "The main subject matter of Leviticus is ritual, and even those parts of the book that are concerned with morality and social order impose a ritual image on moral requirements." 2

What is sacrifice?

Sacrifice expresses the intent to make something holy and to become holy through dedicating it to God. There are different kinds of sacrifices in the book. According to Christian A Eberhart "the goal of biblical sacrifice [was] communication with God". 3. A sacrifice is a sign of wanting to be in a relationship with God thus communication is foundational. You communicate with God by sacrificing to him and by invoking him to respond and bond with you in a relationship.

There is no trace of the superstitious notion that sacrifice was to be used to get the divine favour.

Sacrifice makes atonement to God. Leviticus uses the word kippur which means to make atonement. The word may have been derived from "the Akkadian verb kuppuru, 'to cleanse' or 'wipe'". 4 To me that indicates that sacrifice was a reminder that one must be ritually and morally and spiritually clean to approach God. Clearly nobody should offer sacrifice of any without checking their inner dispositions towards God. The main question they should ask is, "Am I fit to approach God and offer him anything?" To offer God sacrifice while being attached to sin would be saying, "I will serve you when it suits me not you." That is really a repudiation of divine authority. For Christians, this insight was promulgated by Jesus who said that the important thing about sacrifice was to have a contrite spirit. 5

The sacrifice was understood to be a plea for the forgiveness of sin. Some sacrifices were direct pleas and others were pleas by implication. For example, offering a sacrifice of an animal as atonement for sin is a direct plea for mercy. You offer the animal in your place. If you sacrifice things such as the first fruits, you offer them to honour God. This is an indirect plea for mercy because you cannot honour God if your heart is closed to him.

Sacrifice does not entail forcing God to forgive because forgiveness is a free gift from God 6 Jesus stressed how God forgives voluntarily.7

The Five Types of Sacrifice and What they Mean for Christians

Israel has to offer and slaughter sacrifices through the priesthood because it has a covenant or peace agreement with God. The sacrifices picture the perpetuation of the agreement. Israel offered sacrifices to God conscious that they were sinners and needed his mercy. They had to keep offering them. Christians look back on these sacrifices and see that they portrayed the need for a proper and permanently effective sacrifice and Jesus provided that sacrifice according to the Bible.

There are five types of sacrifice explicated in Leviticus.

**Burnt Offering** – The male animal sacrifice was burnt entirely on the altar. As the sacrifices were meant to maintain a relationship with God, the sacrifice had to convey some kind of message to the people. The message is that all belongs to God in its entirety. Jesus allegedly gave his whole self to God. He gave his life and he sacrificed himself unto death. 8 "The Burnt offerings were offered daily as an offering of dedication." 9 Christians think they don't need to do that as the continual presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts reminds them that they are to love God with all their hearts and powers meaning every minute of the day. 10

**The Grain/Meal Offering** – this was an offering to God of frankincense, flour and oil. To me the frankincense symbolises the offering of pleasure and wealth to God. The offering of flour and oil indicates that what is less precious must still be offered to God. For the Christian, it shows that whether Jesus did anything important or seemingly mundane such as throwing a bone to a dog it was something that could be offered as valuable in the sight of God.

**The Peace Offering** - this symbolises peace between God and man for both God and man benefited from this sacrifice. The blood, kidneys and fat of the sacrifice were offered to God while man could feast on what was left. This in the Christian

view "fits Jesus' vivid teaching of a sharing God and he invited us to cooperate with God. The Christian feasts on the body and blood of Jesus by faith when he takes bread and wine in memory of the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus. Faith is opening our hearts to the benefits and graces won by the separation of the body and blood of Jesus on the cross – and they are the sacrifice to God that takes away sin. The peace offering symbolises communion. The communion may happen in a ceremony but we are meant to take the attitude of communion away with us."

The Peace Offering is based on the need to make peace with God after being disrespectful to him. Jesus took the title of Prince of Peace and said that if a sacrifice is offered by one who is not at peace with another the sacrifice will not be accepted. 11

Sin Offering – a bullock is killed and its blood and fat are removed. They are put on the altar for God as a sacrifice for specific sins. These sins have to be confessed to God. This sacrifice tells us the importance of admitting to God what we have done wrong and how guilty we are. The bullock is taken outside the camp and it is burned. This indicates the need to separate ourselves from sin and exclude it from ourselves and our communities.

Trespass Offering – This is not about healing a relationship with God but about making restitution to God for breaking his laws. It reminds one that God is not just a friend but a being who has the right to make laws. One can break these laws without realising it but restitution has still to be made. Jesus stated that the law of God was in full force and condemning us. Christians say he made a trespass offering of his life and death to make amends. A law without a price for lawbreaking is not a law at all. Justice must be done.

The High Priest was required to perform the sin offering and the burnt offering on the Day of Atonement. 12 He had to sacrifice alone while wearing plain vestments instead of the usual splendid ones. He offered a sacrifice to atone for his sins and those of his own family. He went into the holy of holies, a holy place representing the direct presence of God. This was the only day anybody was allowed to enter. A goat was killed for the expiation of the sins of the people. He then laid his hands on another goat to picture putting the sins of the people on it. It was led off into the wilderness never to be found again.

The message in all this is that even the High Priest needed to atone for sin before being allowed to go near God. We feel dissatisfied for it would be better if the High Priest had no sins and could minister for us before God. Christians say we have such a High Priest in Jesus Christ who did not need to make atonement for his own sins so he could focus on helping take away ours. 13

### Spotlight on Animal Sacrifices

Animal sacrifices had to be chosen out of the following, "a bullock, a sheep, a goat, a turtle-dove, or a pigeon, it is always one of these five." 14

Why these animals? The answer is that God required them simply because he wished to test our obedience. If God commands what seems arbitrary or petty we must still obey. And in case we get the idea that sacrifice of the more advanced animals such as bullocks, sheep and goats really can atone our sin he adds in the turtle-dove and the pigeon. Nobody would seriously think they can make up for our sins. This is to test our understanding.

The animals had to be without blemish – a reminder that perfection is necessary to approach a holy God. "The blood represents the life of the victim." 15 This shows that all of us, not part of us, belongs to God. We offer blood as the symbol of our own lives.

### Leviticus claims to be Infallible Scripture

"No book contains more of the very words of God. He is almost throughout the whole of it the direct speaker." 16 Jesus would have been thinking of Leviticus far more than any other Bible book when he stated that the Bible was the very words of God. Jesus declared without qualification that the words of the Bible are God's words "Have you not read that which was spoken to you by God?" 17 Leviticus is one of the most evil books in the Old Testament. It is hated by homosexuals for its God says that if a man lies with man as with a woman he must be stoned to death. Clearly, Jesus would have frowned upon criticism of the book of Leviticus more than any other book.

Leviticus being the word of God shows us that we need grace - God's free gift of supernatural help. Leviticus itself is a grace - it is a revelation that God has given us as a gift. Man cannot decide how to approach God. God must tell man how to approach him. There is an undercurrent of the doctrine of grace in the book.

Finally:

The sacrifices required by Leviticus seem strange. The reason is that they are intended to jolt the people to see the truths that are vital in their relationship with God. They stressed in particular that it is up to God to decide how we must approach him and not vice versa and that obedience to God even if we think he is being silly is obligatory.

The sacrifices show how religion justifies dangerous bizarre behaviour. Animals have to suffer for God.

Jesus was to be the sacrifice without blemish. The Bible required that flawless animals were to be sacrificed. We are told that these sacrifices pictured Jesus'. But in the light of the fact that Luke indicates that Jesus didn't heal himself and it is felt that his problem was a permanent limp Jesus failed the prophecy. If he is on the Turin Shroud his body was abnormally elongated which may be Marfan's Syndrome.

1 Stouffer L Leviticus Primer (2004) p. 1 [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted\\_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/CourseMaterials/Primer/LeviticusPrimer.pdf](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/CourseMaterials/Primer/LeviticusPrimer.pdf)

2 Houston W J, Dunn J D G, Rogerson J W, "Leviticus" - Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible. (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2003) p. 101

3 Eberhar, C A A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar, Harvard Theological Review, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 97

or

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract;jsessionid=F4403D402D1A4654E34C2B0F970BA7D3.journals?fromPage=online&aid=291373>

4 Wenham, G J, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979) p. 28

5 Mark 12:34

6 Lev. 19:18

7 Luke 15

8 Mark 10:45

9 <http://www.abideinchrist.com/messages/levtypes.html>

10 Eph. 2:8-10, 22

11 Matt. 5:23,24

12 Lev. 16; 23:26-32

13 Heb. 7:26-28

14 <http://www.abideinchrist.com/messages/levtypes.html>

15 Houston W J, Dunn J D G, Rogerson J W, "Leviticus" - Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible. (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2003) p. 106

16 <http://bibleencyclopedia.net/index.php/Leviticus>.

17 Matt 22:31

## Bibliography

Eberhar, C A A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar, Harvard Theological Review, (Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Edwards, D. and Stott, J., Essentials (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990)

Demster, S G Dominion and Dynasty (Intervarsity Press, 2003)

Houston W J, Dunn J D G, Rogerson J W, "Leviticus" - Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible. (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003)

Wenham, G J, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1979) p. 28

## The World Wide Web

<http://www.abideinchrist.com/messages/levtypes.html>

Stouffer L Leviticus Primer (2004)

[http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted\\_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/CourseMaterials/Primer/LeviticusPrimer.pdf](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/CourseMaterials/Primer/LeviticusPrimer.pdf)

<http://bibleencyclopedia.net/index.php/Leviticus>

<http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/introductory/q-how-did-jesus-view-the-old-testament.htm>