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**Week 1: Leviticus as Parable**

**Text Reading: Hebrews 9:6-10**

*"If those sacrifices had been able to perfect the worshippers,  
they would have enjoyed the privilege  
of entering the holy of holies and the presence of God."  
(Steve Stanley)*

The history of the Christian Church has not, sadly, been altogether free of antisemitism. The tinge of hatred, or at least profound distrust, of the Jewish people can even be sensed in the background of Paul's letters to the various churches scattered about the Eastern Roman Empire. Certainly the most infamous (and, hence, most famous) manifestation of Christian antisemitism occurs in the Middle Ages, mixed in heavy proportion to the militant Christianity of the Crusades. But 'Christian' Europe of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries was massively antisemitic; Hitler's Germany was by no means the only country in the Western world where Jews were hated and persecuted. Indeed, the pogroms of both Tsarist and Stalinist Russia were violent representatives of a more passive antisemitism in France, Great Britain, and the United States. Hitler's contribution was to provide both government sanction and technological methodology to the eradication, the 'Final Solution,' to what many ostensibly Christian people and nations considered the 'Jew Problem.'

Have we seen the light? Did the horrors of the Holocaust burn irrational antisemitism out of the Western (and allegedly Christian) psyche? Recent events in Israel and Gaza, and their associated responses among Western nations, give rise to some doubts that antisemitism had been eradicated from Western thought. Given the depravity of man, one should not expect that even the Holocaust would be sufficient to remove such a deep-seated prejudice from the Gentile heart. But more significant to this study is the history of antisemitic prejudice within Christian exegesis of both the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible. Of the former there is often mere neglect; of the latter an erroneous

interpretation in which Christianity arrives as the 'true religion' to supplant the 'works salvation' of ancient Judaism. It is commonplace, for instance, for Pauline exegesis within post-Reformation Protestant scholarship to assume, as Martin Luther did, that Saul of Tarsus was a frustrated Jew, trying and failing to attain 'the righteousness of God' through the 'works of the Law.' Christianity, it is thus maintained, 'freed' Paul from a failed religious system and invigorated his soul with the revelation that salvation is through faith, not works.

This subtle antisemitic exegesis touches the New Testament in the way that it does precisely because of its view of the Old Testament. Neglect of the Old Testament due to its apparent 'works' orientation solidifies a New Testament approach in which Christianity is something entirely new; not the fulfillment of the old but a radically new religion, the replacement of the old. This perspective even seems to be supported by the apostle Paul when he discusses the Law and the relative merits of the 'old' and the 'new.' For instance, in II Corinthians 3, Paul speaks of the Mosaic Law as "*this ministry of death,*" contrasting it quite unfavorably with the Gospel that he preached.

*But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. (II Corinthians 3:7-11)*

But to interpret Paul here as condemning the ancient Law as a false and mistaken religion is to completely misrepresent what he is actually saying. True, the *ministry of the Spirit* has great glory, but that glory is not compared by the apostle to an ingloriously false works religion. Rather, Paul exalts the *ministry of condemnation* as *glorious* itself, the baseline, as it were, of glory that is so marvelously exceeded by the New Covenant. To say that the Gospel is glorious

by no means necessitated denigrating the Law, which elsewhere Paul speaks of as “*holy and just and good.*”<sup>1</sup>

Dispensationalism has intensified the rampant neglect and distrust of the Old Testament by New Testament scholars and commentators. Hermetically sealing off the ‘dispensation’ of the Mosaic Era from the ‘Church Age,’ little purpose is left for Christians to study, if even to read, the Old Testament. What good might be found there, so it is taught, pertains solely to Israel as the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not to Gentile Christians. In reality, though, Dispensational commentators do write commentaries on Old Testament books, if only to show how qualitatively different the Mosaic religion was to the Christian. It is true, however, that even Dispensational scholars see in Jesus the fulfillment of the very Levitical rituals and sacrifices that are deemed a ‘works religion’ when considered in their historical context. In this they miss the organic connection between the old and the new, the unbreakable line that is drawn from the altar of the tabernacle to the cross on Golgotha. This line is most powerfully displayed in one particular book of the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews.

There are within the Old Testament a few books that are neglected with greater regularity – *fervor*, even – than others, and Leviticus is one such book. Its neglect came early in Christian history and was noted by the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century theologian Origen, who noted the common response by Christians of his day regarding the rituals and sacrifices of Leviticus, “It’s the Jews business;



**Origen (c. 185 – c. 253)**

let them deal with it!”<sup>2</sup> Origen himself was devoted to such books, understanding as he did that every word of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, contained spiritual nourishment for the Christian. To be sure,

<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:12

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press; 2008); 17.

Origen's own hermeneutic was highly allegorical and has come under severe criticism from his day to ours. Nonetheless, he did not neglect any book of the Bible simply because it was part of 'the old system.' "For my part, and because I believe what my Lord Jesus Christ has said, I think that there is not a 'jot or tittle' in the Law and the Prophets that does not contain a mystery."<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps this sense of mystery that has turned so many Christians away from such books as Leviticus. Making sense of the various rituals and sacrifices, delving into the mechanics of the priesthood, often seems like a waste



**Ephraim Radner** (b. 1956)

of time to those who have been raised on the true understanding of the redemptive power of Christ's blood. Ephraim Radner notes, "Despite Origen's hopes, however, Leviticus is today probably among the least read books of Scripture, by Christians anyway."<sup>4</sup> Radner points out that the Book of Leviticus is rarely quoted directly in the New Testament, the maxim to "*love one's neighbor as oneself*,"

being perhaps the only direct quote (*cp.* Mark 12:31 and Leviticus 19:18). Yet he also notes that Leviticus especially lies behind the ethical teachings both of Jesus and of Paul, with one particular New Testament book almost incomprehensible apart from a foundational knowledge of Leviticus. "Furthermore," Radner writes, "the sacrificial cult described in Leviticus provides the major framework for at least one New Testament writing – the letter to the Hebrews."<sup>5</sup>

In the introduction to his commentary on Leviticus, Radner traces the hermeneutical history of the Old Testament book through Christian history, noting most particularly the positive views of Origen and Blaise Pascal. What Radner concludes regarding the study of the Book of Leviticus is true of the study of the Old Testament in general, though his application to the third book

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*

of the Pentateuch is most significant due to the common neglect of this book. “Jesus is a ‘thinner’ figure in contemporary understanding than is the dense personal reality he represented for Origen, in part because a book like Leviticus in particular no longer traces the outlines of his being.”<sup>6</sup>

As Radner correctly mentions the dependence of the letter to the Hebrews on the Book of Leviticus – albeit an *indirect* dependence as Leviticus is nowhere quoted directly in Hebrews – it is to that New Testament book that we turn to begin our study of its Old Testament inspiration. Of particular note is the attitude of the author of Hebrews to the overall Levitical sacrificial system and priesthood, culminating in the greatest of the sacrifices, the annual *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement. In Hebrews 9, the author refers to the entire sacrificial system of the tabernacle as a *parable*, a very interesting usage of the word in this context.

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was **symbolic** for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. (Hebrews 9:6-10)*

The word translated ‘symbolic’ in the New King James translation is the Greek *parabolei* (παραβολή), typically translated ‘parable’ in the New Testament. Most English translations, however, render the word here in Hebrews 9:9 by some variant of ‘type’ or ‘symbol.’ The King James renders it ‘figure,’ and the NIV translates it as ‘illustration.’ The NIV is actually closer to the way the word is used in the New Testament, though standing alone as a Greek word, none of the other renderings are inaccurate. The word *parabolei* is a combination word

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; 20.

that literally means 'to place alongside.' In literature, therefore, a 'parable' became a literary device whereby an illustration or story was placed alongside the basic teaching (which might not even be written down in the same context) in order to emphasize a truth. Outside the Synoptic Gospels, the word is only used here in Hebrews 9 and again in Hebrews 11, referring in the latter case to Abraham's faith that God would raise his son Isaac from the dead.

*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him **in a figurative sense**.* (Hebrews 11:17-19)

It is entirely possible that the author of the Book of Hebrews utilized the word *parabolei* in a manner unique from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Yet it remains true that there are far more common Greek words used in the New Testament to convey the meaning of 'type' or 'symbol,' the most common being *tupos*, which Paul uses when showing the typological connection between Adam and Jesus Christ, "*Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a **type** of Him who was to come.*"<sup>7</sup> The usage of *parabolei* would naturally cause readers to consider the parables that were such a central feature of the Lord's own teaching. Indeed, if the Greek word in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19 had been rendered 'parable' in our English versions, that is probably where our minds would travel – back to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptics.

*And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.* (Matthew 13:10-13)

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 5:14



Although the Greek word *parabolei* can correctly be translated as 'figure' or 'symbol,' the NIV's 'illustration' is closer to the mark, though not quite there. At least in its New Testament usage – recognized as limited to the Gospels with the two exceptions in Hebrews – the *parable* is more of an illustrative story than a symbol or figure. It is the latter, but the mechanism by which it symbolizes or figures the specific truth is more complex, lively, and expansive. To take the example noted above with regard to the *typology* of the two Adams – the meaning of the first Adam as a 'symbol' of the second Adam is quite limited to their respective roles as the federal heads of two branches of humanity. No one would continue the correspondence between Adam and Jesus Christ to include Adam's seminal act of rebellion against his God and Creator, except as complete and total opposites. But opposition is not Paul's point in Romans 5; similarity is. Thus *typos* – symbol or type – is used in Romans 5:14 in a very limited, pointed way. The author of Hebrews is not using *parabolei* in either 9:9 or 11:19 in such a limited manner. A parable is a type, a figure of speech that has symbolic meaning, but it is more than that, or at least its composition as a literary device is more expansive and complex than merely as a type.

Thus the author of Hebrews is not merely telling us that the Levitical sacrificial system *symbolized* Jesus Christ, though it did indeed do that. The way in which the author of Hebrews connects the Levitical sacrificial service to the ultimate fulfillment of those sacrifices in Jesus Christ is, however, more comprehensive than simply symbolism. He sets forth the 'two tents' of the tabernacle (and by extension, the later Temple) as having a living, parabolic meaning to that which believers have now experienced through Jesus Christ. This correspondence, of course, culminates in the sacrificial ritual of the Day of Atonement, but it includes, as Hebrews 9:6 establishes, the *entire* Levitical sacrificial system as *parabolic*. "It is concluded that Hebrews' author *primarily* intended the Day of Atonement not as a typology of Jesus' death but as a

‘parable’ or illustration of the transition from the ‘current age’ and its old covenant into the ‘age to come’ and its new covenant.”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of this analysis to our current study is the fact that the ‘parable’ alluded to by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 9, is undoubtedly in reference to the regular sacrifices outlined in the first seven chapters of Leviticus as well as the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice described in Leviticus 16. “The closest correspondence in the Pentateuch to the material in 9:6-10 occurs in Leviticus 1-7 and 16, so it is probably that our author relies on these chapters for his description in these verses.”<sup>9</sup> Cortez, in his article quoted above, concludes that the author of the letter to the Hebrews was not primarily trying to show that Christ’s death is the answer and fulfillment of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, though it was most certainly that. Rather, according to Cortez, the author is setting up the entire Levitical sacrificial system which culminates in the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice, as a living parable illustrating the reality of the *transition* from the old to the new, from one age to another. He writes,

In other words, it is suggested that the parable contains *in nuce* the argument for the central section of Hebrews. The period of Hebrews 9:6-10 introduces, then, the Day of Atonement not as a typology for the Jesus’ sacrifice but as an illustration (*parabolei*) of the transition between the ages.<sup>10</sup>

Cortez’ reading of Hebrews 9:6-10 correctly notes that the comparison being made is not between one particular sacrifice and another – between the High Priest’s sacrifice on *Yom Kippur* and Jesus’ sacrifice on Golgotha. This comparison is implicit in the pericope, to be sure, and will become explicit in verse 12, where we read that Christ’s atoning sacrifice was *once for all* as opposed to the *annual* sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. But the *parable* of which we are

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<sup>8</sup> Cortez, Felix H. “From the Holy to the Most Holy Place: The Period of Hebrews 9:6-10 and the Day of Atonement as a Metaphor of Transition” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 125, No. 3 (Fall, 2006); 529.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley, Steve “Hebrews 9:6-10: The ‘Parable’ of the Tabernacle” *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 37, Fasc. 4 (Oct. 1995); 387-88.

<sup>10</sup> Cortez; 537. *In nuce* means, essentially, ‘in a nutshell.’

concerned here deals with the ‘tents’ in which the Levitical priesthood ministered – one, every day; the other, but once a year. Thus Cortez divides the passage into two sections – vv. 6-7 and vv. 8-10. “The first section introduces an antithesis between the first and second apartments of the Israelite sanctuary, while the second interprets it in terms of a second antithesis: flesh and conscience.”<sup>11</sup> The first division is the parable, the second its interpretation:

**Hebrews 9:6-7**

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance*

**Hebrews 9:8-10**

*The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.*

The interpretation of the parable, mentioned only in verse 9, looks back to verses 6-7 (which in turn look back to Leviticus 1-7 and 16) through the interpretive eyes and revelation of the Holy Spirit. “The author of Hebrews introduces the Holy Spirit as the ‘interpreter’ who discloses the inner meaning of the sanctuary’s service...The ‘text’ the Spirit interprets is the two-phased ministry of the two-room Israelite tabernacle. The annual transition in the sanctuary’s service that occurred on the Day of Atonement becomes a parable, the secret of which the Holy Spirit reveals for the believer.”<sup>12</sup>

To unpack this a little further: in the first section of the ‘parable,’ the author quickly and summarily reviews the pattern of Levitical sacrifices that

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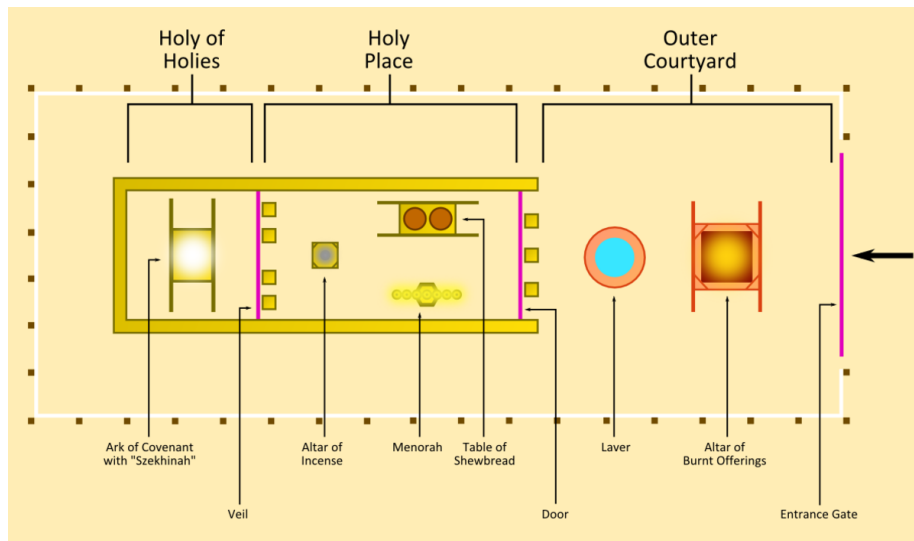
<sup>11</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>12</sup> *Idem.*

occurred on a daily basis within the first 'tent'. This follows a more detailed review of the priestly service in the sanctuary, divided by the veil between the 'first' and 'second' tents,

*Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. (Hebrews 9:1-5)*

Most students of the Bible are familiar with the layout of the tabernacle in the wilderness – the same layout that would be duplicated in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Yet a visual representation certainly could not hurt.



The yellow box represents the sanctuary with two veils – one, at the entrance, prohibited all but Levites of the specific family of Aaron to enter, this was the Holy Place; the other, the inner veil, the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place, could be lawfully passed but once a year, on *Yom Kippur*, and that only by the High Priest. This is, of course, what Leviticus 1-7 and 16 are all about. But this is also what Hebrews 9:6-10 is all about, only in an interpretive manner. Day-

by-day the Aaronic priests of the tribe of Levi ministered before the LORD with burnt offerings, sin offerings, peace offerings, guilt offerings, and the like. Blood from the altar (outside the Holy Place) was taken into the Holy Place and sprinkled according to each sacrifice's pattern and ritual (Lev. 1-7). This ministry represents the 'parable' for most of the year, with the climax coming once a year on the Day of Atonement. On this day an additional battery of sacrifices is specified (Lev. 16) and the blood of atonement was taken beyond the second veil by the High Priest, to make atonement for the entire nation of Israel.

While it is undeniably true that the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross answers to the offering of the High Priest on *Yom Kippur*, this truth is the subject of Hebrews 9:11ff and not of 6-10. And even there the 'once-for-all' death of Jesus as the great High Priest is referenced in support of the overarching theme of this section of Hebrews: that the way into the Holy of Holies is now open for all believers.

*But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.* (Hebrews 9:11-15)

Even in this passage, more explicitly dealing with the correspondence between the sacrifice of Christ and the annual *Yom Kippur* sacrifice, the author is highlighting '*the good things to come.*' Thus the parable, in a way, continues its interpretation as the author elaborates on that second division of verses 6-10, the analogy between flesh and conscience. What is being signified here is the transition to a new era, one in which neither the daily sacrifices nor, more importantly, the annual atonement, are required. Rather all who are in Christ

now have immediate access to the presence of God, the Holy of Holies, by the eternal blood and Spirit of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. "Therefore, the author's 'parable for the present time' refers to the way in which the tabernacle functioned under the old covenant in order to teach his readers something about the nature of the old and new systems...If those sacrifices had been able to perfect the worshippers, they would have enjoyed the privilege of entering into the holy of holies and the presence of God."<sup>13</sup> Cortez adds,

In other words, the Day of Atonement as a parable with its three constituent antitheses provides the arguments for the superiority of a new age and Jesus' high-priestly ministry described in 9:11 - 10:18: the new covenant is superior because it provides the ministry of one high priest (as opposed to the multiple priest of the old covenant), one sacrifice (as opposed to the multiple sacrifices of the old covenant), and access to the presence of God (as opposed to ministry in the outer room). All these arguments are epitomized in a fourth and final antithesis: the new covenant provides cleansing for the conscience (as opposed to the cleansing of the flesh provided by the old covenant).<sup>14</sup>

The significance of this 'parable' is the goal of this study, to not only investigate the Book of Leviticus as a historical part of God's Word, "*given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work,*"<sup>15</sup> but also as the living illustration the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system provides. And this is not only to show how Jesus fulfills all of the Old Covenant tabernacle/Temple complex in Himself and His death, but also to recognize the wonderful transition for believer represented by this fulfillment: *access to the presence of God*. In reference to this passage in Hebrews 9, Steve Stanley writes of the author,

He is spelling out in no uncertain terms that not only is there a historical correspondence between the old and the new in general and between at least

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley; 394.

<sup>14</sup> Cortez; 543.

<sup>15</sup> II Timothy 3:16-17

some of the corresponding details associated with each, but also, and very significantly, he is indicating that there is a conceptual correspondence there as well. In other words, with the use of the term *parabolā* the reader is left in no doubt that, according to Hebrews, there is something to be learned about the new by looking at and understanding the old, and vice versa. It is one thing to find continuity in biblical history by showing a typological correspondence between the details of the old and new age, it is something more to explore the implications of this continuity by attempting to understand each age and its details in the light of these points of correspondence. So, for our author, the old is an illustration of the new, and because of this conceptual relationship, the readers' understanding of both their own age and the age gone by can be enhanced.<sup>16</sup>

The climax of the parable and its interpretation, for the believer at least, is actually only implied in the text, as an understood antithesis. For when the author says "*that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing*" he is implying that the time was coming when the first tent would no longer be in force (the literally meaning of 'still standing'). So long as the Levitical priesthood – both the daily ministry and the annual *Yom Kippur* sacrifice – still held sway, the veils remained and the way into the presence of God was blocked. Nor could it be any otherwise, for the blood of bulls and goats were incapable of cleansing the sinner's conscience, in other words, of making the sinner pure before God (*cp.* Psalm 24:3-4). "The point is that as long as the cultic system connected with the outer portion of the earthly tabernacle 'has standing,' the way to both the earthly and heavenly *hagia* (or Holy place) is blocked."<sup>17</sup> With the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God, the earthly ministry no longer 'has standing,' the ministry of the Levitical priests no longer accounts for anything, it has become 'obsolete' (*cp.* Heb. 8:13). "The obvious implication of the relationship between the two tents as described by this *parabolei* is that Jesus' entry into and sitting down in the heavenly tent shows

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley; 391.

<sup>17</sup> Attridge, Harold W. *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*; quoted by Stanley; 396.

that the first tent, the earthly sanctuary, no longer has any standing."<sup>18</sup> Norman Young adds, "The language of the 'first tent' has a clear eschatological purpose: it means the old covenant order now in process of dissolution by the *Kairos diorthōseōs* (time of reformation); and because it pictures the old order it includes the earthly ritual in its entirety."<sup>19</sup>

The parable works in both directions. Just as the writer of Hebrews shows his readers how the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus brings an end to the entire Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system of the two tents, so also the ancient liturgy of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, the daily sacrifices and the annual *Yom Kippur* atonement, shows us what is required for the people of God to dwell in God's presence. Under the old covenant, Israel did dwell in the presence of their God and He with them. Even with the barriers of the outer and inner veil still in place, their conduct as the people of God in the presence of Jehovah was minutely set forth in the Book of Leviticus. They were to be holy as their God was holy. The impossibility of this righteous requirement necessitated both the daily and the annual sacrifices, all of which were sufficient only to temporarily cleanse the flesh, but had no impact on the conscience. The rituals and statutes of Leviticus still stand as a vivid, parabolic illustration of just what it means to dwell in the presence of a holy God. Believers under the New Covenant may freely enter the Holy of Holies on the merit (alone) of the once-for-all sacrifice of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ. But they nonetheless enter into the presence of a *holy* God. "The 'greater and more perfect tent' symbolizes the eschatologically new cultic means of access; the *hagia* (Holy) is the ultimate goal of that access – the presence of God in heaven."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley; 396.

<sup>19</sup> Young, Norman H. "The Gospel According to Hebrews 9" *New Testament Studies*, 27 (1981); 202.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; 204-5.



**Week 2: The Structure & Place of Leviticus****Text Reading: Exodus 40:1-38; Numbers 1:1**

*“Holiness is rather a way of being,  
a way of being with God in covenant relationship,  
a way of being like God in clean and wholesome living,  
a way of being God’s people in the midst of an unholy and unclean world.”*  
(Christopher J. H. Wright)

The setting of the Book of Leviticus within the Pentateuch – and it is in the same place in both the Hebrew and the ‘Christian’ Old Testaments – interrupts the narrative chronology of the Israelite’s journey from Egypt through the Wilderness. This was intentional. Of course, we may conclude that it was intentional due to the fact that it is inspired literature: God inspired Moses to put the book third of the five he was writing. But *why* was it intentionally inserted between two ‘historical’ narratives? *That* it was so placed intentionally becomes even clearer when we consider the chronology of the book itself – it represents exactly one month in the narrative flow of Exodus/Numbers.

**Exodus 40:17**

*And it came to pass in the **first month of the second year, on the first day of the month**, that the tabernacle was raised up.*

**Numbers 1:1**

*Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on **the first day of the second month, in the second year** after they had come out of the land of Egypt...*

The historical setting of the Book of Leviticus was important enough for Moses to outline the thirty-day interval in which it takes place, so it is worth investigating the situation. The book lies between the *setting up of the tabernacle* and the *census of the people*. These two boundary markers indicate the situation of Israel from two perspectives: first, that of Israel’s God coming to dwell in the midst of His people, and second, the people themselves. The first has priority, of course, as the second becomes oriented entirely to the first. In other words, the Book of Leviticus answers the basic and crucial question, ‘How are the people of

God to dwell in the presence of God?' For this reason, Exodus 40 is the proper prelude to Leviticus, and should be read prior to any reading of Leviticus.

It is not so much the setting up of the tabernacle that marks the beginning of the Leviticus narrative and ordinances, but rather what happened immediately afterward: the coming of the glory of the LORD to the tabernacle and hence within the midst of the people. This is the *Shekinah*, the visible advent of the Spirit/Glory of Yahweh to dwell in the tent in the midst and presence of His people.

*Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.*

(Exodus 40:34-38)

Radner comments,

The narrative placement of Leviticus within the order of the Pentateuch is clear. At the beginning of the second year after their departure from Egypt, and following the initial setup of the tabernacle as the foot of Sinai, built according to the specifications given to Moses by God (Exodus 40:16-38), 'the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.' Exodus ends by explaining how the continuing journey of the Israelites through the wilderness was always directed by the LORD's 'cloud' lifting from the tabernacle and leading them forward. Leviticus itself takes up this situation and provides a long series of instructions, given by God to Moses and the people of Israel from the now-erected tabernacle.<sup>21</sup>

The placement of Leviticus in between Exodus and Numbers is also extremely instructive with regard to the continuing application of the book to believers on this side of the Cross and Resurrection. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ were nothing less than the erection of a new and final

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<sup>21</sup> Radner; 29.

tabernacle on earth. Indeed, the Apostle John coins a new Greek word when he writes of Jesus' advent, "*And the Word became flesh and **dwelt** among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*"<sup>22</sup> The word translated 'dwelt' in most English Bibles is *eskainōsen*, literally 'tabernacled.' Evidently turning nouns into verbs is a very ancient practice. What Leviticus means, in its place between Exodus and Numbers, is that God dwelling with His people is a *reciprocal relationship*. For a holy God to dwell with a people requires holiness on the part of that people; hence the Book of Leviticus.



Christopher J. H. Wright (b. 1947)

Christopher Wright comments quite powerfully, "Holiness is rather a way of *being*, a way of being *with* God in covenant relationship, a way of being *like* God in clean and wholesome living, a way of being God's people in the midst of an unholy and unclean world."<sup>23</sup> Of course, God says the same thing even more powerfully, and in Leviticus itself, "*By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all people I will be honored.*"<sup>24</sup> But how can a sinful people – for Israel was itself a subset of the children of Adam, and thus were sinners, too – be holy? The prospect of *native* holiness is contrary to the teaching of both Genesis and Exodus: the Israelites were not made holy when they were made the people of God. Indeed, their election was in spite of their sin. Therefore, for Israel to dwell in the presence of a holy God there must be *sanctification* – the process of 'making holy' – yet in a manner that (as we learn in Hebrews) did not render the people inwardly cleansed.

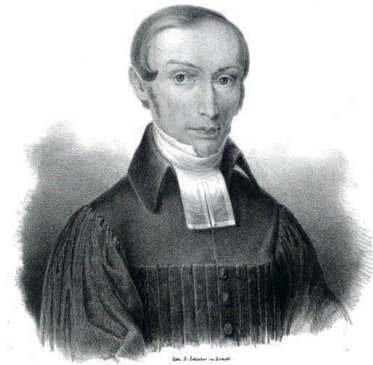
Thus the Book of Leviticus "contains more particularly the laws regulating the relation of Israel to its God, including both the fundamental principles upon

<sup>22</sup> John 1:14

<sup>23</sup> Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2004); 287.

<sup>24</sup> Leviticus 10:3

which its covenant fellowship with the Lord depended, and the directions for the sanctification of the covenant people in that communion.”<sup>25</sup> The people of Israel were not to simply live in the presence of their God according to their own understanding. Rather, as acknowledging the awesome holiness of their God (*cp.* Leviticus 10 again), they were to observe numerous and various rituals and sacrifices vis-à-vis their sin before their God, as well as specific ordinances concerning their relationship to one another. They were to be a holy *people*, not merely holy individuals, in the presence of their God. Keil & Delitzsch, in fairly typical 19<sup>th</sup> Century manner, consider the covenant between God and Israel as a sort of ‘treaty,’ containing reciprocal responsibilities between the parties thus joined. It is debatable whether the treaty paradigm truly describes the covenant relationship between God and His people, but to a large extent the reciprocity does.



C. F. Keil (1807-88)

As every treaty establishes a reciprocal relation between those who are parties to it, so not only did Jehovah as Lord of the whole earth enter into a special relation to His chosen people Israel in the covenant made by Him with the seed of Abraham, which He had chosen as His own possession out of all the nations, but the nation of Israel was also to be brought into a real and living fellowship with Him as its God and Lord. And whereas Jehovah would be Israel’s God, manifesting Himself to it in all the fulness of His divine nature; so was it also His purpose to train Israel as His own nation, to sanctify it for the truest life in fellowship with Him, and to bless it with all the fulness of His salvation.<sup>26</sup>

It is critical both to the understanding of Leviticus in itself, and the understanding of Leviticus as timeless Scripture, to allow the disjuncture of an absolutely holy God dwelling with an unrighteous (and often rebellious) people to have full weight and scope. Gary Edward Schnittjer, in his *Old Testament Use of*

<sup>25</sup> Keil, C. F. and F. Delitzsch *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume II* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1980); 261.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*; 261-62.

*Old Testament*, very appropriately calls this Israel's 'problem.' Schnittjer writes, "Exodus ends by establishing the problem that dominates Leviticus: the holiness of Yahweh's presence...The problem, or at least the reality, of the divine holiness is the game changer that necessitates the teachings of holiness for Israel and the attendant exegetical enhancements of several scriptural traditions. Unlike the legal collections of Exodus and Deuteronomy, Leviticus speaks to Israel – priests and laity – pertaining to coming into the courts of Yahweh. Personal, social, and economic concerns need to be explained in terms of how these could damage and/or help Israel as a tabernacle-going people. Leviticus views all of life relative to its effects on worship."<sup>27</sup>

Are the people of God held to a lesser standard under the New Covenant than under the Old? Or, since the *mode* of sanctification and cleansing differed under the Old Covenant, does the *matter* of holiness no longer apply? These are rhetorical questions that should have obvious negative answers to any believer. Yet modern Christians rarely open the pages of the one book that dealt specifically with the manner in which God's people were to dwell in His presence, and He in their midst. Paul, for one, never lost sight of the imperative demanded by the presence of a holy God.

*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:*

*"I will dwell in them and walk among them.*

*I will be their God, and they shall be My people."*

*Therefore,*

*"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.*

*Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."*

*"I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,*

*Says the LORD Almighty." (II Corinthians 6:14-18)*

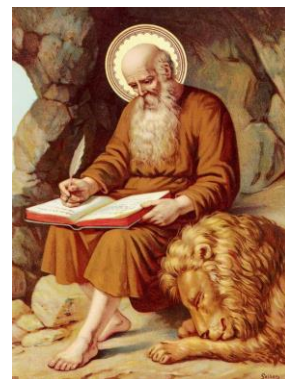
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<sup>27</sup> Schnittjer, Gary Edward *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic; 2021); 39.

This passage from II Corinthians sheds a summary light on the Book of Leviticus; indeed, on the entire Torah. It shows the threefold aspect of the relationship between God and His people (and vice versa). The first, of course, is *the relationship between the people of God and God Himself* – their approach to Him in holiness, elucidated in Leviticus especially through the sacrifices. The second is *the relationship between the people of God and the outside world*, the world in the midst of which the people of God live as witnesses. This is the peculiar province of the dietary laws of Leviticus 11, statutes that most clearly marked off the people of God as unique to Him from among all the peoples. Finally, there is the *relationship of God's people among themselves*, within the community itself. This characterizes much of the Book of Leviticus, not least the Holiness Code of Chapters 17 – 26. This section of the book shows beyond a doubt that holiness toward God and righteousness or justice toward one's fellow Israelite are inseparably connected. The people of God is the family of God, and the relationship between Israelites – as the relationship between believers – is an irreducible part of the relationship between God's people and their God.

### Misjudging a Book by its Title

This outline of the threefold aspect of the *Sitz im Leben* of God's people is a necessary corrective to most English readers' understanding of the Book of Leviticus, an understanding – actually a *misunderstanding* – that derives from the English title of the book: *Leviticus*. This title comes from the Latin Vulgate courtesy of Jerome, a fact that should immediately cause some doubt. In Jerome's defense



**Jerome (345-420)**

he took the title from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures dating from the third century before Christ. These translators are perhaps the source of the error that continues to this day: to associate the Book of

Leviticus with the Levitical priesthood. Actually, when one reads the book, it is quite remarkable how *little* a role the Levitical priests have in it. There are few passages addressed directly to the priests, whereas the vast majority of the book – including the *sacrificial procedures* – is directed to the people themselves. Sadly, the book has come to be considered a manual for the priests rather than a holiness guide for the people, and the name of the book only serves to perpetuate this error.

The book's opening passage gives us both the actual Hebrew title and the intended audience for the work: "*Then the LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them...'*" To whom was Moses to speak? To the priests? No, to the 'sons of Israel.' In other words, to the whole assembly of Israel. Victor Hamilton writes, "Leviticus is addressed to the members of a believing community. The covenant is in the past,



**Victor P. Hamilton (b.1941)**

and the marriage relationship is well under way. Exodus ended by devoting a good bit of attention to *where* God is to be worshiped – in the tabernacle. Leviticus extends the theme to include *how* God is to be worshiped."<sup>28</sup> Radner notes, "While there are obvious reasons for reading Leviticus as a priestly manual – a fact that has dominated and constrained critical studies of the text in the past 150 years – nonetheless much of the book is in fact addressed to

'the people of Israel,' via Moses."<sup>29</sup> It is better, then, to consider the original Hebrew title of the book as the more accurate and representative.

The books of the Pentateuch were 'named' in the Hebrew Bible according to the first word of the text. Thus Genesis is *B'resheet*, the first word of Genesis 1:1, which is Hebrew for "*in the beginning.*" Exodus is called *Shemōt*, meaning

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, Victor P. *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1982); 246.

<sup>29</sup> Radner; 29.

'names.' Leviticus is simply, *V'yakra*, which is translated, '*and He called*' or '*and He spoke*.' It is to be remembered throughout this study, though the common name of Leviticus will be used, this is not a book about the priesthood. It is a book about the people, of which the priesthood was a part, but only a part, of the means by which the people could approach the holy God who had taken up residence in their midst. Radner rightly concludes that "on a theological basis the Hebrew title *Vayikra* is a far more accurate way of naming the purpose of the book."<sup>30</sup> God spoke to Moses, and this book is what He said.

### **The Two Tents**

The author of the Book of Hebrews notes the 'two tents' that served as the operations area for the Levitical priesthood in the tabernacle. Here is the scene for the sacrificial ritual sections of the Book of Leviticus, with the one tent only coming into play once a year, and in one chapter of the book, Chapter 16. As the book does begin with the first aspect of the people's relationship to their God - their approach to Him in His home, as it were - it would be good to establish a solid understanding of how these two tents were configured. Moses had been given very specific instructions as to how everything was to be made and where it was to go within the tabernacle. As the writer of Hebrews, puts it, Moses "*was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, 'See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'*"

It is interesting that the author of Hebrews refers to the operational sphere of the priesthood as 'tents,' a term that hearkens back to the time of the Wilderness journey, and not to the more contemporary references of Holy Place and Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies, associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. The reason is evident in the text of Hebrews, as elsewhere the author speaks of the disobedience and rebellion of the wilderness generation, the first generation led out of Egypt. But the reference to the tabernacle is also significant in that

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<sup>30</sup> *Idem*.



*Moses* was instructed as to the exact pattern of the tabernacle in a manner that *Solomon* was not, or at least not as recorded, in regard to the Temple. Thus the tabernacle more closely approximates the heavenly sanctuary after which it is modeled (*cp.* Hebrews 9:11). In addition, the idea of a tabernacle, a *tent*, is one of mobility: the Israelites were to remain in the wilderness for forty years – the length of the generation that first left Egypt – and their time in the wilderness was to be peripatetic, they would be ‘walking around’ a lot. Rather even than when the tabernacle became a fixed reality at Shiloh, after the conquest of the land, the tabernacle in the wilderness represented the people of God as guided in their daily movements by the cloud and the fire, emblems of the manifestation of God’s Holy Spirit.

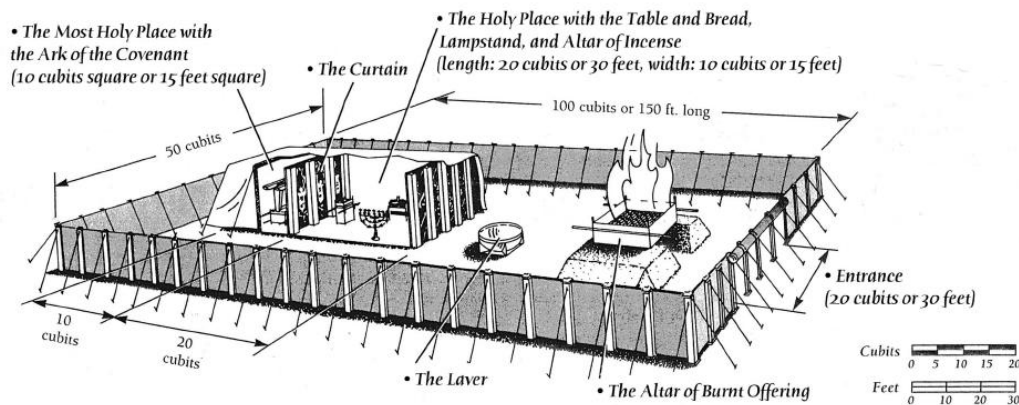
Archaeologists and historians of the Ancient Near East have shown that the idea of a tent-shrine was not uncommon among the nomadic people of the time of the Israelites. Bedouins and nomads were mobile; their gods therefore traveled with them. “The idea of a traveling sacred ark was not peculiar to Israel. Tent shrines are depicted in the third century B. C. and the writer Diodorus tells of Phoenicians taking their tent shrines into battle in the seventh century B. C. These are, of course, later than the Israelite period, but they provide a hint that this sort of thing was not unknown in the ancient world.”<sup>31</sup> Liberal scholars like to point out such similarities as these in order to show that the Israelite religion was essentially no different than those of the diverse peoples around them. Perhaps that is why Israel’s God chose to manifest His presence in such a powerfully visual manner through the *Shekinah*, and why the people of God did not consider that Yahweh was dwelling in their midst if the *Shekinah* had not come.

To return to the ‘pattern’ that *Moses* received on the mount, the features of the tabernacle that most concern us in a study of the Book of Leviticus are the

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<sup>31</sup> Thompson, J. A. *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 1962); 72.

'outer' or first tent and the 'inner' or second tent. These, of course, would come to be known as the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, but they were in the tabernacle simply two concentric tents. Each compartment had a veil over the entrance, and these were specified to limit those who might enter into each. Into the first only the Aaronic priests – the Levitical priest who were descended from the Levite, Aaron, Moses' brother – could enter. This they did on a daily basis, and multiple times during the day. Into the second only the High Priest could go



and that only once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The specifications for these two tents are found in Exodus 25 and following, "And let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it."<sup>32</sup> The furnishings of these two tents are fairly well known among believers: the outer tent contained the Table of Shewbread, the Lampstand, and the Altar of Incense whereas the inner tent contained only the ark of the covenant. But of these furnishings the author of Hebrews could not spare the time to discuss in detail.

*Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer*

<sup>32</sup> Exodus 25:8-9

*and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.* (Hebrews 9:1-5)

In this Hebrews mimics Leviticus, in which the furnishings of the two tents plays a very minor role. More important by far is the altar that lies outside both tents, the place where all Israelite males came to present their sacrifices to Yahweh. This fact shows that the Book of Leviticus is not primarily about the Levitical priesthood, but rather about the entire community of God's people. Yes,



**John Sailhamer (1946-2017)**

the priest were involved and that is important, but what is equally important is that the people *were also involved*, as we will see, in the procedures by which they were to bring their sacrifices to the LORD. Indeed, it may come as a surprise to any reader who has been overly influenced by the common title of the book, to realize that the procedures for the various sacrifices actually involve the one bringing the sacrifice as much or more than they do the priest. Very significantly, as we will see, the killing of the sacrifice was done not by the priest but by the one who brought the sacrifice, regardless, of course, of his tribal heritage within Israel. Of the sacrifice, John Sailhamer writes, "the offerer would slaughter and prepare it and the priest would bring it and its blood to the altar."<sup>33</sup> Despite common misconception, the Israelite who brought his sacrifice before Yahweh did not merely leave it with the priest and go on his merry way. No, he was to be involved in every step up to, but not including, the bringing of the blood of the sacrifice into the first tent; that only the priest was permitted to do.

But why two tents? Why not just the inner tent? The structure of the tabernacle in the wilderness has encouraged a great deal of speculation over the

<sup>33</sup> Sailhamer, John H. *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1992); 325.

millennia, from both Jewish and Christian scholars. Philo of Alexandria allegorizes the tabernacle to represent the universe, with the inner sanctuaries (the two tents) representing the heavens and the highest heaven and the outer court representing the earth. "The earliest interpreters had no doubt that the importance of the tabernacle lay in its hidden symbolism, and the issue at stake was properly to decipher its meaning. ... For Philo the tabernacle was a representation of the universe, the tent signifying the spiritual world, the court the material. Moreover, the four colors signified the four world elements, the lamp with its seven lights the seven planets and the twelve loaves of bread the twelve signs of the Zodiac and the twelve months of the year."<sup>34</sup> Origen, the father of allegorical interpretation within the Church, sees the tabernacle as symbolic of the church and its members, assigning each part of the tabernacle construction and furniture to some aspect of the Christian life. "In Homilies on Exodus 9 and 13, and Homilies on Numbers 5, he unpacks the symbolism of each item that makes up the tabernacle, paying close attention to the details of the biblical text. In Homilies on Exodus 9.3, for example, he identifies the pillars of the tabernacle as teachers and ministers; the interposed bars as the right hand of fellowship; the bases of the pillars as the prophets; and their capitals as Christ."<sup>35</sup>

Another author sees in the whole camp of Israel the progressive sanctification of the believer on his or her journey to heaven,

The Tabernacle was, among other things, an allegory. It showed in symbols the path that was yet to be opened by the reality of the body of Christ (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:20). It led from the Camp of general holiness of God's children, through the Court of justification and friendship with God, to the Holy for service by the called and chosen priesthood, and finally to the Most Holy showing unblemished, divine life in heaven.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> [32. The Tabernacle, the Dwelling Place of God \(Exodus 36:8-39:43\) | Bible.org](#). Accessed 02January2024.

<sup>35</sup> Conway-Jones, Ann *Alexandrian Contexts* <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198715399.003.0004>. Published September 2014; 46.

<sup>36</sup> [The Tabernacle \(heraldmag.org\)](#). Accessed 02January2024.

Exodus makes it clear that the tabernacle was not of human design but was built according to the specifications Moses received from Yahweh while on Mt. Sinai. This indicates beyond doubt that the structure itself had meaning – the orientation of the tabernacle, the courts and compartments, and even the furnishings. To discern the meaning of the two tents, then, one need not allegorize about the seven planets (there are eight...or nine), or the Zodiacal constellations, but rather pay attention to the *purpose* of the two tents, and this is largely given to us in the early chapters of Leviticus. There is both a common purpose and distinct usage for the two tents, both facts are of great significance. In common, both tents were ‘used’ for the presentation of the blood of sacrifice, to be sprinkled by the priests and the High Priest according to the statutes applicable to each particular sacrifice. Except for the table of shewbread, the menorah, and the incense altar – all of which were to be maintained on a regular basis by the priests – the outer tent as well as the inner tent were where the blood was presented before Yahweh. But the difference between the two tents is also very significant, because it pointed to the fact that even rivers of sprinkled blood would be insufficient to cleans Israel from her sin. The outer tent saw blood every day through the day, but the inner tent only once a year. The first signified the reality that the people’s sin blocked their direct access to God whose *“eyes are too pure to look upon iniquity.”*<sup>37</sup> The sacrifices of Leviticus were, to be sure, means of grace for the individual sinner as well as the corporate community. But the sheer volume of sacrifices, the literally sheer volume of blood, should have had an even more profound impact on the worshipper than just his own goat or pigeon. The entirety of the sacrificial system proved that *“without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin”*<sup>38</sup> – for God had given to the people the blood of the sacrifice for atonement (Lev. 17:11). Thus the almost immeasurable outpouring of blood at the altar, and the ceaseless burning of the altar and

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<sup>37</sup> Habakkuk 1:13

<sup>38</sup> Hebrews 9:22

sprinkling of the outer tent, spoke to the massive weight of sin borne by each individual Israelite and by the community as a whole.

But the inner tent spoke something different. It was only entered by one man – the High Priest – and then only one day each year – *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This event promised something different and was thus emphasized by the entrance beyond the second veil into the very presence of Yahweh, as represented by the ark and the cherubim. Contrasted to the multitude of Levitical priest, sprinkling blood throughout the day every day, the Day of Atonement spoke of *one man* entering into the presence of Israel's God to make atonement for the whole nation. Of course, even this was only good for another year and not permanently. Yet it foreshadowed in the most powerful way the promised redemption that would come from *one man* – the Seed of Woman, the Seed of Abraham, the Son of David – who would make atonement for the whole people *once and for all*. This is the interpretation of the entire *parable* of the Levitical sacrificial system, given by inspiration to the author of the Book of Hebrews.

*Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another – He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.*  
(Hebrews 9:23-26)

Thus the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the 'two tents,' spoke of two seemingly opposite principles: the *presence* of Yahweh in the midst of His people, and yet the *separation* from Yahweh caused by the people's iniquity. Patrick Fairbairn notes the dichotomy of a holy God dwelling in the midst of an unholy

people. Commenting on the sacred tent as the *habitation* of the deity in ancient cultures, not least Israel, Fairbairn noted, "Viewing the tabernacle (or the temple), in this general aspect, we may state its immediate object and design to have been the bringing of God near to the Israelites in His true character, and keeping up an intercourse between Him and them."<sup>39</sup>



**Patrick Fairbairn (1805-74)**

This is the aspect of *presence*, and again it is critical to note that in Israel's case the national god made his presence known in a visible, tangible way both in the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem. These structures differed in a number of ways from their pagan counterparts, but perhaps in no more significant manner than the *Shekinah*. Yahweh was undeniably *with* His people at the beginning of both the tabernacle and the temple ministries (though, significantly, never with regard to the Second Temple). But, to the issue here, the *presence* of Israel's God did not mean uninhibited intimacy between the Israelite and Yahweh. With the *presence* there was also *separation*. "At the same time, it manifestly bespoke an imperfect state of things, and was merely an adaptation or expedient to meet the existing deficiencies of their religious condition, till a more perfect dispensation should come."<sup>40</sup> That more perfect dispensation is, of course, the One who tabernacled among us and in whom we beheld (and behold) the *Shekinah*, the glory of God.

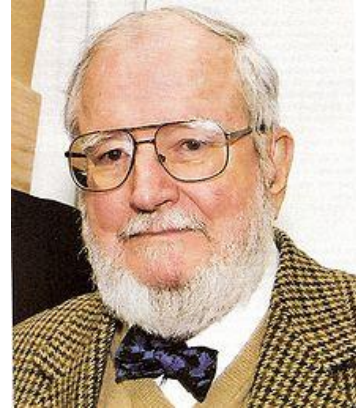
And hence, when the old dispensation vanished away, the only temple that presents itself is the Christian Church; and in the new Jerusalem, where this Church reaches its perfection, no temple shall any longer be seen; for the fleshly weakness, which at one time required this, shall have finally disappeared; everywhere the presence of God will be realized, and direct communion with Him maintained.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick *Typology of Scripture, Volume II* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications; 1989); 203.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*; 204.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem.*

Thus at the outset of any study of the Book of Leviticus, there must be the realization of the continuity between the old and the new covenants with regard to the seemingly insoluble issue of how an unholy people might dwell in the presence of a holy God. Even liberal scholars, fully immersed in the Documentary Hypothesis of Julius Wellhausen, can see the connection between the Old and the New in this re-



**Frank M. Cross (1921-2012)**

gard, as Frank Cross notes in his essay, 'The Priestly Tabernacle.' Cross concludes his essay, "Theologically speaking, [the priestly writers] strove after a solution to the problems of covenant theology; the means through which the breached covenant might be repaired, and the conditions under which a holy and universal God might 'tabernacle' in the midst of Israel. It may be added that the writers of the New Testament were intimately concerned with the same themes, that is, the forgiveness of sin and the self-revelation of God. Christian theology may thus be said to continue, and, from a Christian point of view, to resolve these Priestly problems of the Old Testament, through the Word which 'became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us full of grace and truth.'"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cross, Frank M. "The Priestly Tabernacle" in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* edited by David Noel Freedman & G. Ernest Wright, X3 (Sept. 1944); 228.



**Week 3: The Old Testament Meaning of Atonement****Text Reading: Leviticus 1:1 - 3:17**

*"Sacrifice offered a means for the sinner  
to make his approach to the righteous and holy God."  
(Robert H. Culpepper)*

As noted above, the common English title of the third book in the Pentateuch - *Leviticus* - gives the reader the immediate impression that the content of the book has to do with the Levitical priesthood. That the first seven chapters deal with various sacrifices seems to confirm this impression. But it would not be unreasonable to note that, even in these chapters, the priests have only an ancillary role, though a very important one, in the offering of the sacrifices. The most important functional role - the killing of the sacrificial animal - was almost exclusively done by the worshipper himself and not by the priest. The priest's role was ritualistic: it was the priest who made arrangement for the remains of the sacrifice once killed and, most importantly, manipulated the blood of the sacrifice with respect to the 'two tents.' At the risk of oversimplification, the role of the worshipper moved up to and included the death of the sacrificial animal while that of the priest took over from there. At the very least, the sacrificial event was a mutual affair between the worshipper and the priest, and this fact alone is sufficient to confirm the unfortunate nature of the name of the book in the LXX and English Bible.

The sacrifices themselves have occasioned a great deal of extra-biblical literature, both Jewish and Christian, seeking to expound and explain each particular ritual, in itself and in relation to the others. For Christian theologians, the tendency is to interpret the Old Testament ritual sacrifices from the perspective of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to which they pointed and by which they were fulfilled. There is no *a priori* argument against this hermeneutical approach, but it does have the danger of theological anachronism. Further, it is reasonably argued that the meaning of the Old Testament rituals

should be studied in their own right and context, in order to shed light upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to enable us to glean a fuller meaning of that glorious sacrifice. There is, however, a connection between the two that presents itself as a good place to start, found in the first chapter of Leviticus: *atonement*.

*Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.* (Leviticus 1:4)

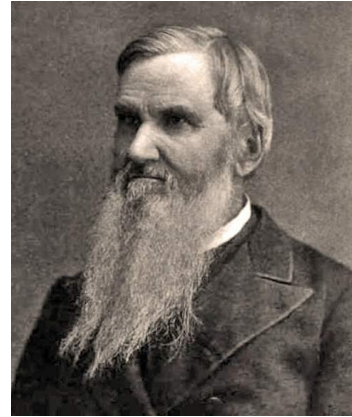
The word translated 'atonement' in verse 4 is the Hebrew *kepher* (כִּפֶּר), a word closely associated with the 'kopher,' the mercy seat that covered the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. In the Septuagint (LXX) the word is translated by the Greek, *hilasasthai* (ἱλασθαι), a verbal derivative of the same term used by the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:25, most often translated as 'propitiation.'

*...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a **propitiation** by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.* (Romans 3:24-26)

This passage in Romans bears a striking resemblance to what may be the seminal verse in the Old Testament with regard to the sacrificial ritual, Leviticus 17:11, "*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to **make atonement** for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.*" The blood of the sacrifice was given by Yahweh to make atonement for the soul of the worshipper. This, we must note early on and continuously, was an act of grace on the part of Israel's God, no less than the blood of Jesus Christ is entirely gracious. This removes at the outset any thought that the Israelite worshipper was performing a works-based act of appeasement to an angry god. Rather, he was responding in obedience to offer to his God that which God had first given him '*to make atonement for the soul.*' Yet while it is necessary to highlight the

graciousness of the entire sacrificial system, this does not immediately help us to understand the meaning of the particular sacrifices and how they themselves brought about atonement. Indeed, even a cursory review of the history of both Jewish and Christian literature show that there has never been much agreement on what exactly *atonement* meant throughout the Old Testament.

Seen through the lens of Reformed theology, atonement is characterized as *vicarious* and *substitutionary*. The essence of this perspective is the *transfer* of guilt from the person offering the sacrifice to the sacrificial animal itself. A classic treatment of the Reformed view is that of Robert Louis Dabney in his *Christ Our Penal Substitute*, in which he writes, 'these bloody sacrifices were intend by God to symbol-



**Robert L. Dabney (1820-98)**

ize the substitution of an innocent victim in place of the guilty offerer; the transfer of his guilt to the substitute; satisfaction for it by the vicarious death, and the consequent forgiveness of the sinner."<sup>43</sup> But as true as the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ is, and as extremely important this doctrine is to both our faith and our hope, when applied backward to the sacrifices of the Levitical system it may be an example of the anachronistic hermeneutic mentioned earlier.

Indeed, in reading of the various sacrifices in the first seven chapters of Leviticus, there are some anomalies in terms of the *substitutionary* theory, and particularly the *penal* view of atonement. Three of the sacrifices, for instance, are completely general in nature and are not specified with reference to any particular sin. These are the *burnt* offering, the *grain* offering, and the *peace* offering, reviewed in Leviticus 1 - 3. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lutheran scholar Johann Kurtz notes in regard to the first of these sacrifices, "No special reasons are assigned for

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<sup>43</sup> Dabney, Robert L. *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications; 1985); 89.

the *burnt offering*. It was offered every day, and without any special occasion."<sup>44</sup> In addition to this aspect of the sacrifices, the more specific and personal offerings – the *sin* offering and the *guilt* offering – were specifically set forth for *unintentional* sins; sins committed with a ‘high hand’ had no remedial sacrifice available to the sinner.

*But the person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.*

(Numbers 15:30-31)

As with so many polemical debates within Christian theology, the definition of atonement is often treated as an ‘either/or’ proposition. Either atonement is vicarious, penal, and substitutionary or it is something else. Is it possible that sacrifice in the Old Testament could have been vicarious and substitutionary (though penal is a difficult one given the nature of the sacrifices vis-à-vis the offerer) and also be something else? Is it possible that the biblical concept of atonement is broader and deeper than the immediate forgiveness of the worshipper’s sin? That forgiveness of sins is part of the sacrificial *modus* cannot be readily denied considering the refrain “*he shall be forgiven*” or “*it shall be forgiven him.*” But there is another refrain in the early chapters of Leviticus that bears serious consideration as to the nature of atonement, “*a soothing aroma to the LORD.*” The sacrifices of the tabernacle were, first and foremost, oriented toward Yahweh, both as a gift from Him (*the blood as atonement*) and as pleasing to Him (*a soothing aroma*). This, rather than the fulfillment of the sacrificial system in Jesus Christ, seems to be the best place to start an analysis of atonement and the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. To work from the Old Testament to

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<sup>44</sup> Kurtz, J. H. *Offerings, Sacrifices and Worship in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1998); 176.

the New Testament is to retrace the same path that the Apostle Paul took in coming to a full and revolutionary understanding of the once-for-all sacrifice of



**Robert H. Culpepper (1924-2012)**

Jesus Christ. Robert Culpepper writes, “an understanding of the meaning of sacrifice in the Old Testament is essential to the interpretation of much of the New Testament material related to the atonement, to an evaluation of many of the historical views of the atonement, and to a constructive interpretation of the meaning of the death of Christ.”<sup>45</sup> This is not an easy task, how-

ever, as the individual sacrifices described in the Old Testament do not differ from one another in any great manner, and the specific purpose or intent of this or that sacrifice is often not divulged in the text. Again Culpepper, “One of the main difficulties in the attempt to interpret the meaning of sacrifice in the Old Testament is the fact that, despite the abundance of the references to sacrifice and the minuteness of the descriptions of the ritual of sacrifice, the Old Testament itself makes no attempt to give a rationale of sacrifice.”<sup>46</sup>

Culpepper points out in his treatise that the traditional (at least since the Reformation) view of penal substitution does not work for the Levitical sacrifices. He points out three troubling characteristics of the Levitical offerings enumerated and described in Leviticus, rendering their meaning problematic in terms of penal substitution. The first aspect of these sacrifices, as noted above, is that they did not have reference to specific, known sins; indeed, three of them did not have reference to sin at all. The two sacrifices that could be regarded as ‘personal’ – the *sin* and the *guilt* offerings – “were designed to cover ritualistic sins, or sins of inadvertence, but they were regarded as having no efficacy for

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<sup>45</sup> Culpepper, Robert H. *Interpreting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1966); 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*; 24.

sins done with a high hand."<sup>47</sup> It remains to be seen, if possible, what exactly an 'inadvertent' sin looked like, and how the offerer could know that he or she had committed this offense, but it is well worth noting that the *willful* sin, the 'sin of the high hand,' which must surely incur *penalty*, had no *penal sacrifice* allotted for it. The willful sinner retained his or her guilt; there was no atonement available (*cp.* again, Num. 15 above).

The second problem with the penal sacrifice perspective in relation to the Old Testament sacrifices is that it assumes a meaning for the ritual 'laying on of hands' that may not be supported by the text. As Dabney noted above, the conventional wisdom among Reformed theologians, at least, is that when the offerer laid his hands upon the animal, he transferred to that innocent animal his own guilt, which then was vicariously borne unto death by the animal. This interpretation of the laying on of hands is common, but it is without explicit support in the text of the Old Testament. In fact, the only explicit description of the transference of guilt to a sacrificial animal is found in the *Yom Kippur* directives in Leviticus 16, where the High Priest placed his hands – and with them, the collective sin of Israel – onto one of the two goats. What is remarkable is that this goat, the *scapegoat*, was *not the one killed*. Rather, it was led out into the wilderness, alive.

*Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.*

(Leviticus 16:21-22)

This is not to say that the laying on of hands upon the animal to be offered in the case of the burnt offering, for instance, did not represent some form of transferal, but only that what that transfer was is not immediately and clearly

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*; 25-26.

apparent. Culpepper adds, "What the worshipper's laying his hands upon the head of the victim in the ritual of sacrifice did mean is not so easy to determine," and surmises, "in this ritual act the worshipper identifies himself with the sacrificial victim so that thereafter what happens to the sacrificial victim, at least symbolically, happens to the worshipper himself."<sup>48</sup>

The final objection that Culpepper offers to the penal substitutionary hypothesis being accurate in terms of the Old Testament sacrifices is that the view assumes a *propitiatory* character to those sacrifices. This \$25.00 word is common in the theologies under the rubric of 'atonement,' and alongside a similar but subtly different term, *expiation*. Propitiation itself is most frequently



A. A. Hodge (1823-86)

used in reference to appeasing an offended god, perhaps the most common purpose in pagan sacrifice, while expiation has reference more to the removal of sin or guilt from the one presenting the offering. A. A. Hodge offers the standard Reformed distinction between the two, "Expiation has respect to the bearing which satisfaction has upon sin or the sinner.

Propitiation has respect to the effect of satisfaction in thus removing the judicial displeasure of God."<sup>49</sup> But, as Culpepper notes, the entire sacrificial system is *gracious*, given by Israel's God to facilitate and perpetuate their abiding in His presence, albeit in the tabernacle and mediated through the priesthood. Culpepper writes, "the Hebrew idea of sacrifice is not analogous to the crude pagan ideas in which the angry deity is bought off and his wrath appeased by the blood of the sacrificial victim."<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that Israel's sin did not make a separation between Israel and God; it is evident from the Garden of Eden onward that human sin separates Man from God, as Isaiah notes, even in the midst of God's power and willingness to save,

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; 26.

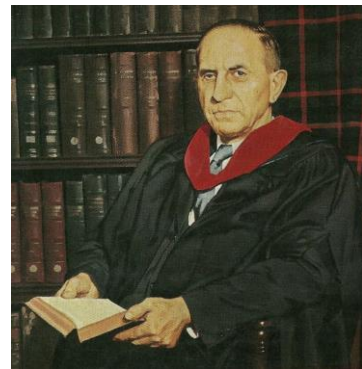
<sup>49</sup> Hodge, A. A. *Outlines of Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1991); 402.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*; 27.

*Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save;  
Nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.  
But **your iniquities have separated you from your God;**  
And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.  
For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity;  
Your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perversity.* (Isaiah 59:1-3)

The main problem with the sacrifices being primarily propitiatory is that they were not all bloody. In the case of the poor man, a meal/grain offering was permitted in spite of the general rule that, as the author of Hebrews puts it, “without the shedding of blood there is no remission.”<sup>51</sup> Culpepper’s arguments are sound because they are biblical. Yet it would be in error to completely remove either the *propitiatory* or the *expiatory* characteristics from the Old Testament sacrifices or, for that matter, the elements of *substitution* and *transference*. What Culpepper’s argument does highlight is the fact that the Old Testament sacrifices must be first read in their own light before the light of their fulfillment through Jesus’ sacrifice is allowed to shine back upon them. In working from the Old to the New, rather than the other way round, we will not lose sight of the promised fulfillment of the sacrifices – shown to be inadequate even in the Old Testament text as they offer no remission or hope for the willful sin – but we will gain an even greater insight into just how comprehensively Jesus did fulfill all of the earlier sacrifices by His once-for-all death on the cross.

We are again reminded by the author of Hebrews that when we are in Leviticus, we are in the shadows. Yet even the shadows bear the lineaments of the reality, for, as John Murray notes, the tabernacle itself and the sacrifices offered therein were patterned after the heavenly reality, which is Christ. “But of more significance is the fact that the



**John Murray (1898-1975)**

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<sup>51</sup> Hebrews 9:22



sacrifice of Christ is the archetype after which they were patterned...Christ's offering is the heavenly exemplar."<sup>52</sup> Due to this fact, we cannot expect to find the fulness of the sacrificial meaning or efficacy in any one of the Old Testament sacrifices, even the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice. Nor will the sum total of the Old Testament rituals add up to the sacrifice of Christ. What we hope, rather, is that a further understanding of the Old Testament sacrifices will illuminate – by the backward shining light of the indwelling Holy Spirit – more and more the comprehensive character of Jesus' sacrifice.

One of the difficult aspects of Old Testament interpretation is often the breadth of meaning that a word can have within such an ancient language as Hebrew. For the English reader, the word 'atonement' constitutes a strictly theological connotation and generally embraces the payment required to a holy God because of one's sin or sins. In a similar way, the Greek word family derived from *soter* – save or salvation – has a very limited, again theological, range of meaning in our English terminology. But in the Greek itself, the word has a wide range of meaning, from deliverance out of a particular situation, to the recovery of physical health, to the eternal salvation of one's soul. Context, therefore, becomes very important in both the Hebrew and the Greek languages. This is certainly the case with that Hebrew word *kepher* (כִּפֶּר) noted above. "The Hebrew verb כִּפֶּר, usually translated 'make atonement,' occurs about a hundred times in the Old Testament, and nouns apparently derived from the same root occur about fifty times."<sup>53</sup> In his article, Smith shows the wide range of usage for this Hebrew word and its roots, not all of which match the conventional understanding of 'atonement,' and indeed not all of them even involving a sacrifice. For instance, Jacob's gift sent ahead to his brother Esau, in hopes of placating the latter's residual anger from Jacob's earlier deception, is called 'a

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<sup>52</sup> Murray, John *The Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.; nd); 14.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, Henry Preserved "The Old Testament Theory of Atonement" *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Jul. 1906); 412.

*kepher* before his face.’ “A case in point is that of Jacob and Esau. The patriarch sends a lavish present, or rather a series of presents, to his brother and says: ‘I will appease him with the present that goes before me; afterward I will see his face.’”<sup>54</sup> Certainly we may consider that what Jacob was attempting was a form of ‘atonement,’ in that he was ‘atoning’ through the presents to Esau for the deceit of their earlier dealings. Yet the idea of appeasement here seems to be a pretty blatant attempt to ‘buy off’ his brother, or at least his brother’s anger, through the lavish gifts sent beforehand. The point is merely that the Hebrew word carries a different meaning in this episode than what we normally consider under the rubric of ‘atonement.’

Perhaps more significant because also from the Book of Leviticus, is the ritual cleansing required of the leper who has been healed from his disease. The same Hebrew word is used with reference to the ritual of cleansing recorded in Leviticus 14.

*And on the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish, three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering, and one log of oil. Then the priest who makes him clean shall present the man **who is to be made clean**, and those things, before the LORD, at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And the priest shall take one male lamb and offer it as a trespass offering, and the log of oil, and wave them as a wave offering before the LORD. Then he shall kill the lamb in the place where he kills the sin offering and the burnt offering, in a holy place; for as the sin offering is the priest’s, so is the trespass offering. It is most holy. The priest shall take some of the blood of the trespass offering, and the priest shall put it on the tip of the right ear of him **who is to be cleansed**, on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot. And the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it into the palm of his own left hand. Then the priest shall dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and shall sprinkle some of the oil with his finger seven times before the LORD. And of the rest of the oil in his hand, the priest shall put some on the tip of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot, on the blood of the trespass offering. The rest of the oil that is in the priest’s hand he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed. So the priest shall **make atonement** for him before the LORD. (Leviticus 14:10-18)*

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; 415.

Leprosy under the Old Covenant was consistently viewed as a judgment of Yahweh upon the victim, though it was not directly linked to personal sin. Therefore the use of the *kepher* root in Leviticus 14:18, again translated 'make atonement' in the New King James version, is connected by the text itself with 'cleansing'; the forgiveness of sins is not mentioned. This observation is confirmed later in the same chapter when the procedure is set forth for 'atoning' for the house of the leprous man.

*And he shall take, to cleanse the house, two birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. Then he shall kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water; and he shall take the cedar wood, the hyssop, the scarlet, and the living bird, and dip them in the blood of the slain bird and in the running water, and sprinkle the house seven times. And he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and the running water and the living bird, with the cedar wood, the hyssop, and the scarlet. Then he shall let the living bird loose outside the city in the open field, and make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean.* (Leviticus 14:49-53)

There should be no doubt that at least in this application, the verb *kepher*, translated again by 'make atonement,' has no reference to sin, at least not to personal, human sin. Another example will reinforce the contention that 'atonement' in the Old Testament does not always have direct, or even indirect, reference to sin. Again, this example is from Leviticus; the cleansing of the woman who has just given birth.

*When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then he shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement for her. And she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who has borne a male or a female.*

(Leviticus 12:6-7)

Smith notes from these passages that the idea of 'cleansing' or 'purification' is also inherent in the Old Testament idea of *kepher*, atonement. The important point here is that in some instances, this cleansing is necessary apart

from actual sin. "This is clear if we compare the case of the woman who has given birth to a child. Here quite certainly there is no question of sin, in our sense of the term. So far from being a sinner, the woman has received special grace from God. Yet by tradition she is regarded as unclean; that is, *she is not fit to approach the sanctuary* without some rite which will remove the disability."<sup>55</sup> Drawing near to God in the sanctuary, that is a very large part of the whole Levitical sacrificial system as it constituted 'atonement' in the Old Testament.

Surely sin is at root here, the general corruption of Creation that must lie behind the entire 'clean & unclean' paradigm, but so often personal transgressions are not even a part of the equation – inadvertent sin, for instance, or leprosy or childbirth which are neither sins – that perhaps it would be better to understand the whole scheme as referring in various forms to the Sin, the power of wickedness that has corrupted both Man and creation (*cp.* the 'atonement' for the house of the leper) rather than the individual sins of the individual worshippers. Indeed, we must always remember that if these individual sins had been willful (and in light of James 4:17 it is hard for us to conceive of a sin as *not* being willful), there was no offering available for atonement, the sinner remained in his guilt.

Again it must be stated that this investigation of the Old Testament usage of the word so commonly translated in the English as 'atonement,' does not preclude the idea of either *vicarious* or *penal* substitution as related to the death of Jesus Christ. It simply serves to indicate that there is much more to 'atonement' than merely *penal substitution*, and that more is also a major component of Jesus' work in that His once-for-all sacrifice has *made a way through the veil*. If we return once more to the immediate setting of Leviticus – the very recent dedication of the tabernacle – and the meaning of that place, we find that the *presence* of Yahweh was a vital component of the overall context and, likely, also a vital component of the *purpose* of the sacrifices themselves. In other words, it may be

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<sup>55</sup> Smith; 420, *italics added*.

that remaining in the presence of God was a more important characteristic of the sacrificial system than even the forgiveness of personal sins – though this latter was always also a part. Again, this dual aspect of the impact of the various sacrifices is highlighted by those two refrains noted earlier: first, that the offering on the altar of fire was to be *a soothing aroma to the LORD* and, second, that the worshipper who brought his sacrifice before Yahweh in the manner prescribed, *his sins would be forgiven him*. Perhaps we have focused too much on the latter and have forgotten the incredible significance of the former.

If we keep in mind that the sacrifices, the ‘atonement,’ that Israel daily and yearly offered up to Yahweh were themselves *given* by Yahweh to Israel, we begin to understand that the impetus for fellowship was *from* Yahweh, as was the maintenance of that fellowship. Remembering that the tabernacle was of divine plan, and was the visible representation of Israel’s God dwelling in her midst, it follows that the primary purpose of the sacrificial ritual was not the forgiveness of individual sins, though that was no doubt encompassed by it, but rather to maintain the community of God’s people in His presence. With reference to the Book of Leviticus itself, Keil & Delitzsch comment, “It contains more particularly the laws regulating the relation of Israel to its God, including both the fundamental principles upon which its covenant fellowship with the Lord depended, and the directions for the sanctification of the covenant people in that communion.”<sup>56</sup>

Israel’s life was from this point forward to be lived *Coram Deo*, in the presence of God. This is fundamentally what the tabernacle, and later the Temple, meant. The thirty-eight years remaining between Israel’s encounter with Yahweh on Sinai and their entering into the Promised Land was, to be sure, a punishment on the generation that failed to believe in His promises and power in spite of what their eyes had seen of His mighty works. Of this generation the writer of Hebrews speaks,

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<sup>56</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 261.

*For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.* (Hebrews 3:16-19)

It might be said that the tabernacle as well as the entire system outlined in the Book of Leviticus, was not really for the Israelites who came out of Egypt, but for those who would enter the Promised Land. With the exception of Caleb and Joshua, it was the next generation that would receive the blessing of the land. But it was also incumbent upon that second generation to *believe* and not to imitate the unbelief of their parents' generation. Thus the tabernacle and the statues and sacrificial rituals became boot camp, as it were, for the generation of Israel that would conquer the Land. The Book of Leviticus may be viewed as a sort of training manual on how the people of God were to live in His presence, both in relation to Himself via the tabernacle and in relation to one another. "Yahweh graciously chose to dwell with the Hebrew community. Once he inhabited it [*i.e.*, the tabernacle], his glory created a whole new reality for them, explained at length in Leviticus."<sup>57</sup> A somewhat lengthy passage from Keil & Delitzsch seems to capture this intent on Yahweh's part quite well.

And whereas Jehovah would be Israel's God, manifesting Himself to it in all the fulness of His divine nature; so was it also His purpose to train Israel as His own nation, to sanctify it for the truest life in fellowship with Him, and to bless it with all the fulness of His salvation. To give effect to the former, or the first condition of the covenant, God had commanded the erection of a sanctuary for the dwelling-place of His name, or the true manifestation of His own essence; and on its erection, *i.e.*, on the setting up of the tabernacle, He filled the most holy place with a visible sign of His divine glory, a proof that He would be ever near and present to His people with His almighty grace. When this was done, it was necessary that the other side of the covenant relation should be realized in a manner suited to the spiritual, religious, and moral condition of Israel, in order that Israel might become His people in truth. But as the nation of Israel was

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<sup>57</sup> Schnittjer, Gary Edward *An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch: Torah Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic; 2023); 228.

separated from God, the Holy One, by the sin and unholiness of its nature, the only way in which God could render access to His gracious presence possible, was by institutions and legal regulations, which served on the one hand to sharpen the consciousness of sin in the hearts of the people, and thereby to awaken the desire for mercy and for reconciliation with the holy God, and on the other hand furnished them with the means of expiating their sins and sanctifying their walk before God according to the standard of His holy commandments.<sup>58</sup>

The statutes and sacrificial rituals of Leviticus were to be met with faith by those who approached Yahweh at the tabernacle, that the author of Hebrews makes quite clear. But these commandments were in their very nature gracious; they were gifts of divine grace to enable an unholy and unclean people to dwell in the presence of a holy God. The architecture of the tabernacle reminds us both of the presence of God in the midst of Israel, and the separation between God and Israel necessitated by the latter's uncleanness. This is what has been removed in Jesus Christ.

*Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Hebrews 4:14-16)

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<sup>58</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 262.

**Week 4: The General Sacrifices****Text Reading: Leviticus 1:1 - 3:17**

*"No special reasons are assigned for the burnt offering.  
It was offered every day, and without any special occasion."  
(J. H. Kurtz)*

Sorting out the various sacrificial rituals of the Levitical/Tabernacle system is no easy task. The statutes concerning the sacrifices are found in two main locations - Exodus and Leviticus - but they are not found identical in each, nor are they in the same order. The opening chapters of Leviticus present us with five different sacrifices, three - the *burnt* offering, the *grain* offering, and the *peace* offering are stipulated without any reference to sin; these we may term the 'General' sacrifices, meaning by that term nothing more than that they were offered in 'general' worship of Yahweh: *"When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD..."*<sup>59</sup> The final two sacrifices - the *sin* offering and the *guilt* offering - are indeed predicated on sin, but 'unintentional' sin: *"If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them..."*<sup>60</sup> *"Wherever sin-offerings are demanded by the law, we always find special faults or special circumstances mentioned, which lay under the curse of sin and needed to be expiated by sacrifice. In the case of the burnt-offerings and peace-offerings these are entirely wanting."*<sup>61</sup> These five sacrifices, then, are presented in the following order in Leviticus:

- |                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Burnt Offering (1:3-17) | 4. Sin Offering (4:1-35)    |
| 2. Grain Offering (2:1-16) | 5. Guilt Offering (5:1-6:7) |
| 3. Peace Offering (3:1-17) |                             |

It appears that these ordinances in Leviticus are an expansion of the initial introduction of the sacrificial statutes found in Exodus 29, where the sin offering

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<sup>59</sup> Leviticus 1:2

<sup>60</sup> Leviticus 4:2

<sup>61</sup> Kurtz; 176.



and the burnt offering are mentioned, but in a different order. On closer examination, though, it becomes apparent that the sacrifices of Leviticus are different than those of Exodus (which are elaborated in Numbers 28) in that the Exodus/Numbers rituals are specifically the work of the priests, the burnt offering being sacrificed morning and evening without fail. The burnt offering of Exodus 29 appears to have occurred just once, at the initial consecration of the priests, a ritual that lasted seven days (*cp.* Exod. 29:35-37).

*And this is what you shall do to them to hallow them for ministering to Me as priests: Take one young bull and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers anointed with oil (you shall make them of wheat flour). You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, with the bull and the two rams... You shall also have the bull brought before the tabernacle of meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall put their hands on the head of the bull. Then you shall kill the bull before the LORD, by the door of the tabernacle of meeting. You shall take some of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and pour all the blood beside the base of the altar. And you shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, the fatty lobe attached to the liver, and the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, and burn them on the altar. But the flesh of the bull, with its skin and its offal, you shall burn with fire outside the camp. It is a sin offering.*

(Exodus 29:1-3, 10-14)

The daily sacrifice of the one-year old lambs – one in the morning and one in the evening – are stipulated both in Exodus 29 and Numbers 28, but are not mentioned in Leviticus.

*Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. With the one lamb shall be one-tenth of an ephah of flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of pressed oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering. And the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; and you shall offer with it the grain offering and the drink offering, as in the morning, for a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the LORD. This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory. So I will consecrate the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. I will also consecrate both Aaron and his sons to minister to Me as priests. I will dwell among*

*the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.* (Exodus 29:38-46)<sup>62</sup>

These consecration sacrifices and the morning/evening sacrifices were to be performed by the Levitical priesthood; they were sanctifying rituals for the tabernacle itself as well as for the priestly ministry. We might say that these daily sacrifices ‘qualified’ the priests to perform all of the other sacrifices that went on through the day in both the tabernacle and later in the Temple. What is unique about the sacrifices enumerated in the Book of Leviticus – again *in spite of* the book’s English (Latin) title – is that the sacrifices are *for the people and by the people*, not the priests. This is not to say, of course, that a priest could not offer a burnt offering or a peace offering, but if he did so in accordance with the procedures of Leviticus, he was doing so on his own behalf as an Israelite and not in his function as a priest.

### **The Burnt Offering**

*Now the LORD called to Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of the livestock – of the herd and of the flock.* (1:1-2)

Although there is no syntactical necessity, it is probably best to take the first two verses of the book as governing the first several chapters: the sacrifices as they are subsequently enumerated and described. This interpretation is reinforced by the more general term used in verse 2, the *corban* familiar to readers of the New Testament from Mark 7,

*For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban” –’ (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making*

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<sup>62</sup> Cp. Numbers 28:3-6

*the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.* (Mark 7:10-13)

The Hebrew word *qorban* is apparently derived from the verb *qarabh* which means 'to bring near.' From this derivation, it thus signifies *something presented*, and its biblical usage indicates something dedicated to Yahweh. "It never signifies a gift from one person to another, but always a gift from man to God."<sup>63</sup> The word is used elsewhere than the beginning of Chapter 1, but always in the most general sense – all offerings brought to the altar were, by definition, *qorban*, whereas each particular offering has its own distinct terminology. The use of the English word 'gift' to describe the *qorban* might be misleading, as the word 'gift' carries a connotation of independence of will on the part of the worshipper, whereas the *qorban* as it is used in the Old Testament is surely a matter of obligation. "*Qarabh qorban* means 'to present a presentation.' It is not giving a gift."<sup>64</sup> Victor Hamilton adds, "A more literal translation of the word than 'offering' would be 'a thing brought near.' The sacrifices are thus concerned with the issue of how one can live in nearness to God."<sup>65</sup>

*If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD. Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. He shall kill the bull before the LORD; and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay the wood in order on the fire. Then the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat in order on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar; but he shall wash its entrails and its legs with water. And the priest shall burn all on the altar as a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD.*  
(1:3-9)

The first of the *qorban* to be mentioned in Leviticus is the *burnt offering*, the '*olah* (עֹלָה), which may derive from the verb 'to ascend,' signifying the smoke

<sup>63</sup> Nordell, P. A. "Old Testament Word Studies: Sacrifice and Worship" *The Old Testament Student*, Vol. 8, No. 7 (Mar. 1889); 258.

<sup>64</sup> Crosby, Howard "The Sacrifices" *The Old Testament Student* Vol. 5, No. 6 (Feb. 1886); 250.

<sup>65</sup> Hamilton; 252.

that would ascend from the altar as the sacrifice was wholly burned. "It is derived from the common verb *'ālāh*, to go up, ascend, and contemplates the sacrifice as ascending from the altar to Jehovah in flame and smoke."<sup>66</sup> As a tabernacle sacrifice, the significant feature of the *'olah* is its complete immolation on the altar, a fact that most interpret to signify consecration. "It is customary to regard the *'olah* (or burnt-offering) as signifying consecration, whereas the sin-offering represents expiation."<sup>67</sup>

One of the most notable features of the Levitical sacrificial rituals is their repetitiveness. As to the burnt offering, there are three possible animals acceptable: *from the herd* (cattle), *from the flock* (sheep or goat), or *of birds* (generally a turtledove or pigeon). The requirement for the mammals is the same, *a male without blemish/defect* whereas there is no stipulation as to whether the bird is male or female. The mammals are to be killed by the one bringing the offering, whereas the turtledove or pigeon was killed by the priest. No reason is given for this distinction; the first point of commonality being the shedding of the blood of each animal, though the blood of the mammals is to be sprinkled around the altar whereas the blood of the bird sacrifice was drained out at the side of the altar. Again, no reason is given for this distinction in method.

Finally as to the procedure of the burnt offering, we note the mention of the laying on of the worshipper's hands on the offering from the herd, though this exact procedure is not mentioned with reference to either the offering from the flock or from the birds. It is generally assumed that the same practice was followed regardless of the sacrificial victim; *i.e.*, the offerer also laid hands on the lamb or goat or pigeon. Keil & Delitzsch note that the laying on of hands is a common feature of all the *bloody* or *bleeding* sacrifices. "The laying on of hands, by which, to judge from the verb *samek* (שָׁמַךְ), to lean upon, we are to understand a forcible pressure of the hand upon the head of the victim, took place in

<sup>66</sup> Nordell; 259. Also Fairbairn; 302.

<sup>67</sup> Crosby; 249. Crosby goes on to note the aspect of *expiation* in all of the bleeding sacrifices, but the concept of *consecration* is not thereby lost to the *'olah*.

connection with all the slain-offerings (the offering of pigeons perhaps excepted), and is expressly enjoined in the laws for the burnt-offerings, the peace-offerings, and the sin-offerings, that is to say, in every case in which the details of the ceremonial are minutely described."<sup>68</sup>

The meaning of this procedure, as discussed above in Week 3, has been assumed to be the transfer of guilt to the victim from the offerer. However, there are several difficulties with that interpretation, not least of which the fact that the poor man was allowed to present a non-bloody sacrifice of grain, for which there is no prescribed laying on of hands. The text is silent in terms of why the offerer was to press his hand upon the victim, except in the instance of the scapegoat, again, noted above (p. 37). Perhaps little more can be said than the worshipper *identified* in some manner with the victim, without conjecture as to the nature of that identification. It does need to be pointed out that, with respect to the first three sacrifices in Leviticus, there is no mention of personal or even corporate sin. The offerings appear to be entirely in keeping with the requirements of an Israelite's approach to Yahweh in worship.

Also absent from the text itself is the reason for the order of the sacrifices, with the burnt offering given first. It is often assumed that we are reading the sacrifices in order of their performance in the tabernacle, but the text seems more strongly to indicate that the burnt offering, the grain offering, and the peace offering were but three possible *qorban* that the Israelite might bring before the LORD at the doorway to the tabernacle. Yet other passages (Exodus and Numbers, in particular) would possibly indicate that the burnt offering was *always* the first sacrifice, at least among the bloody ones, perhaps on account of its more general nature and import along with the complete dedication of the *'olah* to the LORD in the fire of the altar. It also appears from the Pentateuch in general, that the burnt offering was by far the more ancient. The first instance

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<sup>68</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 282.

appears to be the offering Noah presented before God upon disembarking from the ark.

*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done.* (Genesis 8:20-21)

The LORD's reaction to Noah's offering is significant in relation to the first three sacrifices noted in Leviticus: "*and the LORD smelled a soothing aroma.*" Each of the three possible *'olah* in Leviticus 1 is said to be "*a soothing aroma to the LORD*" and this phrase is repeated for the grain offering as well as the peace offering. A total of ten times this phrase is repeated in the first three chapters of Leviticus; surely that is significant. Even more significant is its absence from the two sacrifices that are more personal in nature – the *sin* offering and the *guilt* offering. "In relation to individual sacrifices, the expression רִיחַ-נִיחֹחַ ('a sweet savor') is used only when referring to voluntary sacrifices, not to those brought to atone for sin (with one exception, Lev. 4:31, when an individual brings a goat for a sin offering; but the source of this phrase in context is questionable)."<sup>69</sup> Among the personal, causal sacrifices, however, we find a different phrase, or a variation, repeated nine times: "*and he/they shall be forgiven.*" The contrast and repetition of these two phrases seems clearly to indicate the purpose and orientation of the two sets of sacrifices in the opening chapters of the book. The first three – *burnt*, *grain*, and *peace* offerings – must be oriented toward the One who has come to dwell in the midst of His people through the tabernacle; the last two – *sin* and *guilt* offerings – pertain more directly to the people themselves and to their uncleanness before a holy God.

The phrase "*a soothing (or sweet) aroma*" translates the Hebrew words *rê 'ach nichoah* (רִיחַ-נִיחֹחַ) and is associated throughout the Pentateuch with

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<sup>69</sup> Grossman, Jonathan "The Significance of Frankincense in Grain Offerings" *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 138, No. 2 (2019); 288.

*purifying* sacrifices, though not with those of *reparation*. “Etymologically רִיחֵ-נִיחֹיִם means ‘a rest-giving smell.’”<sup>70</sup> That God smells the aroma of the burnt offering and is pleased is that form of figurative speech known as *anthromorphism* – a man-form. Scripture is clear that God is spirit and does not have physical form, which implies pretty clearly that He does not have physical organs of sense. The rabbis are diligent to point out that the anthropomorphisms of sense attributed to Yahweh consist of only the three ‘non-physical’ senses: *sight*, *hearing*, and *smell*. The famous medieval Spanish rabbi Maimonides declares the senses of *taste* and *touch* to be recognizably deficient and therefore unworthy of God. In *A Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides writes, “You, however, know that, strictly speaking, the condition of all the sensations is the same, that the same argument which is employed against the existence of touch and taste in God, may be used against...There is only this difference, that the former, touch and taste, are at once recognized as deficiencies, while the others are considered as perfections.”<sup>71</sup> Be that as it may, what is clear about the phrase is that the offering is acceptable before a holy God. In contrast, the litany of divine response to disobedience, recorded in Leviticus 26, includes His refusal to “*smell your soothing aromas*.”<sup>72</sup> Israel in her disobedience and rebellion became repugnant to her God, and the sacrifices that were prescribed became a stench in His nostrils.



**Maimonides (1135-1204)**

*I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people,  
Who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts;  
A people who provoke Me to anger continually to My face;  
Who sacrifice in gardens, and burn incense on altars of brick;*

<sup>70</sup> Gray, George Buchanan *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (New York: KTAV Publishing House; 1971); 77.

<sup>71</sup> Maimonides, *A Guide to the Perplexed* Part I 47:3. [Guide for the Perplexed, Part I, Introduction 15 with SidebarSearch \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Guide-for-the-Perplexed-Part-I-Introduction-15-with-SidebarSearch). Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Leviticus 26:31

*Who sit among the graves, and spend the night in the tombs;  
 Who eat swine's flesh, and the broth of abominable things is in their vessels;  
 Who say, 'Keep to yourself, Do not come near me, for I am holier than you!'  
 These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.* (Isaiah 65:2-5)

Thus the arrangement of the first three sacrifices in Leviticus, the ones of general nature and without specific cause, was intended to present something pleasant before Yahweh, a *sweet aroma* to His nostrils, with the implication of disposing Yahweh favorably toward the worshipper. "The entire context shows that the odour if thought of as soothing and placating."<sup>73</sup> The idea of sacrifice as a sweet aroma before the Lord is carried into the New Testament, though the sacrifice is now of the believer's life rather than that of a bull or goat, as Paul makes clear in his letter to the Ephesian church.

*Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.* (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Even the gifts that the Philippian church sends to the apostle to help meet his needs is likened to these sacrifices in the early chapters of Leviticus.

*Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.* (Philippians 4:17-18)

The burnt offering, then, sums up in a sense all of the offerings brought before Yahweh in the tabernacle. James Watts notes that "The `ōlāh 'burnt offering' is the paradigmatic offering in the Hebrew Bible. Of all the many technical terms from Israel's cultic worship, the `ōlāh is most frequently mentioned and, when multiple offerings are listed, it is almost always listed

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<sup>73</sup> Gray; 77.



first.”<sup>74</sup> The importance of this particular offering is seen in the disposition of the sacrificial victim: the entire carcass was to be burnt in the fire; no portion was reserved for either the priests or the one bringing the offering – it was *qorban* in the most complete sense, wholly devoted to the LORD. Jacob Milgrom comments, “when the sacrifices are prescribed they are listed in order of their sanctity (i.e., importance), and therefore the ubiquitous and venerable *’ōlâ*, burnt in its entirety



**James W. Watts (b. 1960)**

as a total gift to God, comes first.”<sup>75</sup> Not offered with respect to personal (inadvertent) sin, the burnt offering is also the most general in the sense that it pertained more to Sin, as Paul might say, than to sins. Fairbairn considers that “the guilt for which atonement here required to be made, was not that properly of special and formal acts of transgression, but rather of those short-comings and imperfections which perpetually cleave to the servant of God, and mingle even with his best services.”<sup>76</sup> Fairbairn might be a bit too generous to the unclean nature of all men, not least the Israelites, but he is correct in associating the *’olah* more with the ‘falling short’ of the congregation than with individual sins. He summarizes,

Hence this offering, combining in itself to a considerable extent what belonged to the other sacrifices, might be regarded as embodying the general idea of sacrifice, and as in a sense representing the whole sacrificial institute...it was the kind of offering which was to be presented morning and evening in behalf of the whole covenant people, and which, especially during the night, when the altar was required for no other use, was to be so slowly consumed that it might last till the morning. So that it was in a sense the perpetual sacrifice – the symbolical expression of what Israel should have been ever receiving from Jehovah as the

<sup>74</sup> Watts, James W. “’ÖLĀH: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 56, Fasc. 1 (Jan. 2006); 125.

<sup>75</sup> Milgrom, Jacob *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday; 1991); 488.

<sup>76</sup> Fairbairn; 302.

God of the covenant, and what they, as children of the covenant, should ever have yielded to him in return.<sup>77</sup>

Yet before moving on to the next sacrifice, an interesting feature of the otherwise 'complete' immolation of the burnt offering, the total sacrifice of the animal to Yahweh, must be noted. Although not mentioned here in Leviticus 1, it is stipulated in Chapter 7 that the hide of the victim was not to be burnt but was rather the property of the priests. "*Also the priest who presents any man's burnt offering, that priest shall have for himself the skin of the burnt offering which he has presented.*"<sup>78</sup> Keil & Delitzsch consider this to be "payment for his services,"<sup>79</sup> but there is no indication in the text that the hide of the sacrificial victim was compensation for services rendered. It seems that a deeper meaning must be found, since otherwise the *`olah* was a complete sacrifice, entirely devoted to the LORD by fire. However, no reason is given in the text, or anywhere else in Scripture for that matter. One might conjecture – and pure conjecture it would be – that this otherwise wholly-devoted offering to Yahweh was done in a similar manner as the first animal sacrifices of Genesis after the Fall. No mention is made of God sacrificing animals, only of providing the hides for clothing for Adam and Eve, a recognizable act of grace. It is implied, and has been generally assumed, that these hides must have come from animals killed by Jehovah. Perhaps the use of the hides of the burnt offerings as hides/clothing for the priesthood is a mysterious continuation of that gracious provision from the LORD.

*When anyone offers a grain offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it. He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD. The rest of the grain offering shall be Aaron's and his sons'. It is most holy of the offerings to the LORD made by fire. (2:1-3)*

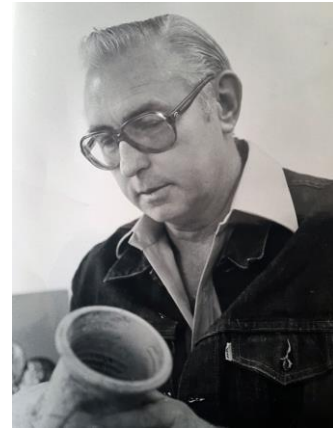
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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; 303.

<sup>78</sup> Leviticus 7:8

<sup>79</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 322.

Two other sacrifices join with the *'olah* as part of the non-particular offerings in Leviticus, those for which there is no specific cause given: the *grain* offering and the *peace* offering. The next in order, the *grain* or *meal* offering, is the *minchah*, the 'present, or offering.' Watts notes that "the *`ōlāh*... was always to be accompanied by the *minchah*."<sup>80</sup> Noted 20<sup>th</sup> Century archaeologist Anson Rainey comments, "The cereal offering appears immediately after the burnt offering because it was always presented along with the latter in actual practice."<sup>81</sup> Although the term is general, "in the Mosaic law it was restricted to bloodless offerings...whether presented independently, or in connection with animal sacrifices."<sup>82</sup> It seems that the *minchah* denoted primarily an offering or gift designed to win the favor of a superior, as Keil & Delitzsch note,



Anson Rainey (1930-2011)

The usual epithet applied to them [*i.e.*, the meal- or grain-offerings] is the *minchah*, *lit.* a present with which any one sought to obtain favor or good will of a superior, then the gift offered to God as a sign of grateful acknowledgement that the offerer owed everything to Him, as well as of a desire to secure His favour and blessing.<sup>83</sup>

One of the classic biblical examples of the *minchah* seeking to curry favor, though not always toward or from God, is Jacob's largesse sent ahead of his own camp, to his estranged brother Esau.

*So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present (מִנְחָה) for Esau his brother: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty*

<sup>80</sup> Watts; 129.

<sup>81</sup> Rainey, A. F. "The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts" *Biblica*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1970); 486.

<sup>82</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 291.

<sup>83</sup> *Idem.*

*female donkeys and ten foals. Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present (הַמִּנְחָה) sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'" So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.' " For he said, "I will appease him with the present (הַמִּנְחָה) that goes before me, **and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.**" So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.*

(Genesis 32:13-21)

This same process, though on a smaller scale, is repeated in Genesis 42 where we read of Joseph's brothers taking a *minchah* down to Egypt on their second journey, with the hope of finding favor before the powerful ruler, whom they did not yet know was their brother.

*And their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: Take some of the best fruits of the land in your vessels and carry down a present (הַמִּנְחָה) for the man – a little balm and a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. Take double money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. Take your brother also, and arise, go back to the man. And may God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved, I am bereaved!"*

(Genesis 43:11-14)

Contrary to the burnt offering, the grain offering was primarily for the priests; only a handful – a *memorial portion* – was offered to Yahweh upon the altar. "He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD." This sacrifice has the unique characteristic of having frankincense added to the portion that was to be burned on the altar, an action that is expressly forbidden to the trespass offering in Leviticus 5,

*But if he is not able to bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he who sinned shall bring for his offering one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it, **nor shall he put frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering.** (5:11)*

This is further evidence of the distinction between the general sacrifices which were offered upon no specific occasion or infraction, and those sacrifices that were linked directly to (inadvertent) sins. The frankincense, then, must have to do with the process of burning the memorial portion on the altar, and most likely the reason is the fragrance of the burned resin, since frankincense is not edible. Maimonides believed this was the purpose of the frankincense, “Frankincense is prescribed (ibid.) because its fumes are good in places filled with the odour of burnt flesh.”<sup>84</sup> The problem with this conclusion is that the frankincense was not added to the offerings of meat, nor to the prepared grain offerings, at least not as explicitly prescribed. Some scholars have concluded that the frankincense must have been added to all of the voluntary offerings, but there is no biblical evidence for that view except the argument from silence where the fragrant resin is not mentioned. Furthermore, there is no evidence either in the Old Testament or other ancient cultic documents, that the deity found the smell of roasting meat offensive; certainly there is no mention of frankincense being added to the burnt offering in Leviticus 1.

The only clue we have as to the purpose of the frankincense in the grain offering is the fact that it is not added to the prepared meals – the grain baked in an oven (2:4), fried on a griddle (2:5), made in a pan (2:7), or roasted grain kernels (2:14). All of these prepared offerings were to have the same *memorial* portion offered to Yahweh by fire, but none of them were to have frankincense added, unless we assume that the first mention of the spice governs the entire procedure, regardless of the preparation of the offering. Mitigating against this ‘one-verse-covers-all’ interpretation is what the text has to say about salt,

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<sup>84</sup> *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 3 46:7. [Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3 46:7 with Sidebar Search \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Guide-for-the-Perplexed-Part-3-46-7-with-Sidebar-Search). Accessed 20 January 2024.

retroactively, as it were, applying the procedure to all grain offerings: “*And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt.*”<sup>85</sup> Such a blanket statement is entirely missing for frankincense.

Israeli scholar Jonathan Grossman accepts the ‘aroma theory’ of the frankincense addition on the basis that this is the evident purpose of frankincense both elsewhere in the Bible and in ancient literature. Grossman, however, explains the non-use of the spice in the prepared grain offerings as due to the fact that cooking grain (bread) already has a pleasant odor that does not need to be augmented. “I propose that frankincense is added to the fine flour offering because the uncooked flour has no scent of its own, whereas prepared grain offerings produce their own sweet savor during the process of baking or frying.”<sup>86</sup> Grossman goes on to quote a cookbook author, “The honest exciting smell of real bread baking...will make you feel, for a time at least, newborn into a better world than this world often seems.”<sup>87</sup>

All of this serves two purposes in relation to the voluntary offerings. The first is to again show that the evidence is not available, or is at least not clear, as to why this or that element was included, or not included, in the various offerings. This is a situational problem faced by anyone who investigates the biblical record with regard to the sacrificial system. The second purpose, and more cogent to the immediate study of the voluntary offerings, is the importance of the *sweet savor*, for whatever reason frankincense was added to the flour, the result would have been a more fragrant smoke from the fire. The purpose of these first three general offerings is at least somewhat confirmed as bringing Yahweh a pleasant odor that would ease (and perhaps mask?) the approach of an

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<sup>85</sup> Leviticus 2:13

<sup>86</sup> Grossman, Jonathan “The Significance of Frankincense in Grain Offerings” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 138, No. 2 (2019); 294.

<sup>87</sup> *Idem*. Quoting Mary F. K. Fisher from *The Art of Eating: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*.

unholy people into the presence of a holy God. “The evidence suggests that the connotations of this expression [*i.e.*, ‘a sweet savor’] are appeasement and closeness, consistent with the concept of voluntary offerings (and collective offerings that are not for atonement, such as the daily offering, the extra sacrifices of the festivals, and the offerings for the tabernacle dedication; all these are said to produce ‘a sweet savor.’”<sup>88</sup>

*When his offering is a sacrifice of a peace offering, if he offers it of the herd, whether male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before the LORD. And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it at the door of the tabernacle of meeting; and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall sprinkle the blood all around on the altar. Then he shall offer from the sacrifice of the peace offering an offering made by fire to the LORD. The fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, the two kidneys and the fat that is on them by the flanks, and the fatty lobe attached to the liver above the kidneys, he shall remove; and Aaron's sons shall burn it on the altar upon the burnt sacrifice, which is on the wood that is on the fire, as an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD. (3:1-5)*

The third of the general, or non-specific, offerings is the *peace* offering, of which there were three types: the *thank* offering, the *votive* offering, and the *free-will* offering, all detailed elsewhere. There are several unique modifications to the peace offering, not least of which is the fact that either a male or female victim may be offered, so long as it is “without defect.” The general category for this sacrifice is the *zebchach shelamim* (זֶבַח־שְׁלָמִים), the first word, *zebchach* being a common term for ‘sacrifice’ deriving from the Hebrew verb ‘to kill, slaughter,’ and the second, *shelamim*, deriving from the common word, *shalom*, or ‘peace.’ There is with this sacrifice a progression in the communal nature of the general sacrifices which becomes clearer as the portion of the priests is outlined in Chapter 7. No portion of the burnt offering remains to be eaten either by the priests or the worshipper; the entire carcass apart from the hide was to be immolated on the altar. The grain offering provided the bread for the priests’ meal; only a handful – the ‘memorial’ portion – was offered by fire to Yahweh,

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*; 288-89.

mixed or unmixed with frankincense depending on the preparation of the grain. Here, with the peace offering, we have what essentially constitutes a fellowship meal: only the fatty portions of the animal were to be offered by fire to the LORD, the remainder to be eaten by the worshipper and his family/guests. "From the earliest times it seems to have been a sacrificial feast or communion meal of which a portion was offered to Jehovah and the rest eaten by the invited guests, as when Jacob parted from Laban, Gen. 31:54, or by the assembled worshipers, as when the people at the high-place of Zuph refrained from eating until Samuel, the man of God had arrived to bless the *zebhach*, I Sam. 9:111-4."<sup>89</sup> Anson Rainey notes, "The most distinctive feature of this class (including its three types, *thank*, *votive*, and *free-will*) was the fact that the offerer received most of the victim's meat for a communal meal of his own."<sup>90</sup>

Two aspects of the peace offering indicate that the communal meal was in the presence of Jehovah, and that Jehovah was Himself a guest at the meal. The first is the portion of the sacrifice that was offered to Yahweh by fire on the altar – the fatty portions which constituted the tastiest parts of the animal. Both the fat



**Jacob Milgrom (1923-2010)**

and the blood were prohibited to the worshipper: "*all fat is the LORD's. It is a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwellings: you shall not eat any fat or any blood.*"<sup>91</sup> Rabbi Jacob Milgrom points out in his commentary on Leviticus, that the proscription regarding fat was not because the fat of the animal was unclean: "The fact is that nowhere is Israel forbidden to

use suet on the grounds that Israel is 'holy,' whereas suet is 'impure' or 'an abomination.' Besides, it is inconceivable that what is impure and abominable to Israel would be acceptable to the Lord on his altar."<sup>92</sup> Milgrom also notes that

<sup>89</sup> Nordell, "Old Testament Word Studies: Sacrifice and Worship"; 259.

<sup>90</sup> Rainey; 488.

<sup>91</sup> Leviticus 3:17

<sup>92</sup> Milgrom; 207.



the prohibition against fat pertained only to the concentrations of fat under the animal's hide and around the organs, the fat that could be easily removed from the carcass. There is no prohibition against eating the fat "that is inextricably entwined in the musculature, called *sûmān* in rabbinic Hebrew."<sup>93</sup> There appears, therefore, to be no intrinsic reason why the fat was denied to the Israelite, regardless of modern claims that it was for their better health. "The reasons for reserving the suet for the deity, it must be admitted, are shrouded in mystery."<sup>94</sup> As is so much of the sacrificial procedures.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*; 205.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*; 207.

**Week 5: The Particular Sacrifices – Sin Offering****Text Reading: Leviticus 4:1 – 35**

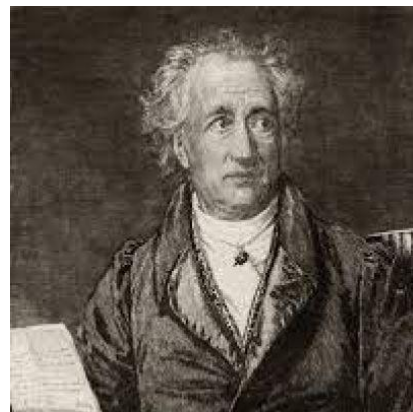
*“The sin-offering, however, was pre-eminently the atonement-offering; the idea of atonement came so prominently out, that no room was left for the others.”*  
(Patrick Fairbairn)

It has been the contention of this study so far that the common title of the Third Book of Moses is misleading, perhaps dangerously so. The Hebrew title, *Vayikra*, ‘and He said,’ is not only accurate as to the opening words of the book, it introduces the form and format of the entire book as a relating of the things, literally *the words*, that Yahweh spoke to Moses. Keeping in mind that the chronology of Leviticus covers only one month in the history of Israel, the markers within the text subdivide the whole book into sections of monologue from God to His servant. The terminology is slightly different; the phrase *vayikra* is not repeated after 1:1. But after the requirements of the general sacrifices in the first three chapters (again remembering that Moses did not write the treatise with chapter divisions), we come to Chapter 4 and the opening phrase, “*Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying.*” The Hebrew here is *vaya ‘diber Yahweh al-Moshe le-amer* (וַיִּדְבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר), literally, “*And spoke Yahweh to Moses, saying.*” The sense is the same as the opening phrase of the book, and the form in Leviticus 4:1 is then repeated, with minor variations, at every partition of thought or statute as we progress through the book (4:1, 5:14, 6:1, 6:8, 6:24, 7:22, 8:1, 11:1, 12:1, 13:1, 14:1, 14:33, 15:1, 16:1, 17:1, 18:1, 19:1, 20:1, 21:1, 22:1, 22:17, 23:1, 23:26, 24:1, 25:1, 27:1). Most of these reference correspond with our modern chapter divisions, but several do not. Of most importance to our current study in this chapter is the division that occurs in the midst of the *sin*-offering and the *guilt*-offering, at 5:14.

The reason this demarcation is important to the exegesis of these two ‘personal’ sacrifices – the *sin*- and the *guilt*-offering – is that otherwise there is very little to differentiate the two. George Buchanan Gray simply notes, “The

precise distinction between the sin-offering and the guilt-offering or trespass-offering is not altogether clear, and has been much discussed.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Leviticus 7:7 indicates that there is *no difference* between the two: “*The guilt offering is like the sin offering, there is one law for them; the priest who makes atonement with it shall have it.*” Now this comment applies particularly to the disposition of the sacrificial carcass, but it does seem to acknowledge what every student of this section of biblical sacrificial procedure has noticed: there is precious little to distinguish between the sin-offering and the guilt-offering. The verbal marker in 5:14 seems to form the literary break between the ‘laws’ of the two sacrifices, and perhaps a demarcation in the subtle difference between them.

What is similar to the two forms of particular sacrifice is not only their methodology, but their apparent purpose. Each has reference to particular transgressions on the part of the person bringing the sacrifice. In addition, with the odd exception of Leviticus 4:31, the phrase “*a sweet or soothing aroma to the LORD*” is absent from the text, replaced by the repetition of the phrase “*he shall be forgiven*” or “*it shall be forgiven him.*” Thus it is the sin- and guilt-offering that represents the more common, ‘Christian’ understanding of the term *atonement*, as Patrick Fairbairn notes, “The sin-offering, however, was pre-eminently the atonement-offering; the idea of atonement came so prominently out, that no room was left for the others.”<sup>96</sup> By ‘others,’ Fairbairn means the characteristics of appeasement, of communion and fellowship, of peace; these are absent in the sin-offerings, of which Fairbairn correctly con-



**Johann Heinrich Kurtz (1809-90)**

siders the guilt-offering to be a subset. Kurtz adds, “The *sin-offering* had to do, not with sin in general, not with such sinfulness and infirmity as not even the

<sup>95</sup> Gray; 57

<sup>96</sup> Fairbairn; 298.

most pious were not free from, but with certain manifestations and effects of sin which are mentioned distinctly by name."<sup>97</sup>

*Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a person sins unintentionally against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them... (4:1-2)*

'Sinning unintentionally.' This is a peculiar phrase and concept, though its interpretation seems at the outset to be over against the 'high handed' sin of Numbers 15, where the topic is similarly on the sacrificial rituals pertaining to 'unintentional' sins.

*But the person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.*

(Numbers 15:30-31)

Though Leviticus does not mention sinning *with a high hand*, it does present two types of sin that actually require some understanding of this unforgivable offense to set them in their proper light. The first, of course, is the



**Baruch J. Schwartz (b. 1954)**

*unintentional* sin in Leviticus 4. But Leviticus 5 presents us with a class of sins that are undeniable intentional, yet are also capable of atonement. These are intentional, yet not 'high-handed' sins. To understand these two classes of sins from Leviticus 4 - 5, we need therefore to spend a little time investigating the 'high-handed' sin of Numbers 15.

In this we must be reminded that the issue was not that there was nothing that the sinner could bring that would appease Yahweh and assuage His anger. Rather, it is the case that Yahweh *had not given* any sacrifice by which the high-handed sinner might receive atonement. That any and all atonement, whether by

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<sup>97</sup> Kurtz; 177.

sacrifice or mediation, is the prerogative of the LORD alone, is noted by Hebrew scholar Baruch Schwartz, “It is not you who are placing the blood on the altar for me, for my benefit, but rather the opposite: it is I who have placed it there for you – for your benefit.”<sup>98</sup>

Numbers 15 presents only two of the three types of sins mentioned above, the *unintentional* and the *high-handed*. The latter is only mentioned in Numbers 15:30, though the Hebrew phrase, or variants on it, is found fairly often in the Old Testament text. The ‘high hand,’ *בְּיַד רָמָה*, is indicative of both positive and negative attitudes. For instance, the children of Israel would depart from Egypt with “*an upraised hand*,” translated ‘boldness’ in the New King James, “*And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel; and the children of Israel went out with boldness.*”<sup>99</sup> Numbers 33 recounts this departure, “*They departed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the children of Israel went out with boldness in the sight of all the Egyptians.*”<sup>100</sup> The sense of each passage, recounting the same event, is one of righteous defiance, and this latter attitude seems to be at the heart of the phrase, ‘with a high hand.’ One author points out that the physical act of raising the hand (fist) into the air remains an immediately recognizable symbol of defiance. “Indeed, a recent study indicates that the upraise arm is a biologically innate nonverbal display of pride in humans.”<sup>101</sup>

Reynolds points out in his article that the biblical usage of the phrase is most often positive, denoting a victorious event rather than an unforgivable sin. Indeed, Numbers 15:30 is the only place where the phrase is contextually negative, as it is contrasted with the *unintentional* sin of 15:28, “*So the priest shall*

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted by Jay Sklar, “Sin and Atonement: Lessons from the Pentateuch” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 22.4 (2012); 471.

<sup>99</sup> Exodus 14:8

<sup>100</sup> Numbers 33:3

<sup>101</sup> Reynolds, Bennie H. “The Expression *בְּיַד רָמָה* in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Legacy of the Holiness School in Essene Legal Texts” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 132, No. 3 (2013); 586. One wonders how much money was spent on the study, as the conclusion seems quite obvious.

*make atonement for the person who sins unintentionally, when he sins unintentionally before the LORD, to make atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him.*" This latter expression, of course, is what we find in Leviticus 4. Given the clear opposition between sinning *unintentionally* and sinning *with a high hand*, the latter "expression communicates intentionality, perhaps premeditation."<sup>102</sup> Jay Sklar, Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Seminary, delves deeper into the meaning of the phrase *בְּיַד רְמוֹה* in Numbers 15, showing the parallels within the text that help in defining the heart attitude of the 'high hand.' The one who sins with a high hand, whether native Israelite or alien in the midst of the people, *blasphemes* against the LORD (15:30), a "blatant rejection of the LORD as God."<sup>103</sup> In this, the high-handed sinner *despises the word of the LORD* (15:31), a biblical phrase that indicates sinning "flagrantly and grossly against the LORD."<sup>104</sup> Sklar helpfully notes two Old Testament examples of those who despised the LORD instead of honoring him: the High Priest Eli and his sons, and the people of Judah through the generations prior to the Exile.

*Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Did I not clearly reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house? Did I not choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to offer upon My altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod before Me? And did I not give to the house of your father all the offerings of the children of Israel made by fire? Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?' Therefore the LORD God of Israel says: 'I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever.' But now the LORD says: 'Far be it from Me; for those who honor Me I will honor, and **those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.** Behold, the days are coming that I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. And you will see an enemy in My dwelling place, despite all the good which God does for Israel. And there shall not be an old man in your house forever. But any of your men whom I do not cut off from My altar shall consume your eyes and grieve your heart. And all the descendants of your house shall die in the flower of their age. Now this shall*

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*; 604.

<sup>103</sup> Sklar; 474.

<sup>104</sup> *Idem.*

*be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them.* (I Samuel 2:27-34)

*And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, **despised His words**, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy.* (II Chronicles 36:15-16)

What is significant in the second passage is the final phrase, *there was no remedy*. Sklar notes, "The severity of the punishment he mentions is obviously due to the severity of the sin that has been committed."<sup>105</sup> Sins 'with a high hand' are, therefore, those that represent on the part of the sinner a complete repudiation of the covenant and Israel's covenant God. "The person who sins with a high hand is doing so defiantly as one who has completely rejected the covenant Lord himself. In short, it is the defiant sin of an apostate that is in view, sin for which no sacrificial atonement is possible."<sup>106</sup> It is likely that the high-handed sin is exactly what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote,

*For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* (Hebrews 10:26-31)

But God shows Himself gracious even in the presence of apostate rebellion, and there are a number of circumstances recorded, from the golden calf to the sin of Peor, in which an otherwise unforgivable sin on the part of the

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*; 475.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*; 476.

whole congregation of Israel was forgiven through the mediation of a Moses, an Aaron, or a Phinehas. Indeed, on a smaller scale and as we shall see in Leviticus 5, there are intentional sins that were capable of atonement, sins with Sklar refers to as ‘intentional but not (necessarily) high-handed.’<sup>107</sup> This classification of sin pertains to Leviticus 5, the *guilt-offering*; Chapter 4 addresses the *unintentional* sin through the repeated use of the opening phrase, *if any soul sins unintentionally*, in verses 2, 13, 22, and 27. Keil & Delitzsch summarize the sin for which the



**Franz Delitzsch (1813-90)**

sin offering is prescribed as, “all such sins as spring from the weakness of flesh and blood, as distinguished from sins committed with a high hand, or in haughty, defiant rebellion against God and His commandments.”<sup>108</sup>

What, then, is an ‘unintentional’ sin? The very nature of sinning, to our conventional understanding, seems to require intentionality; it is an act of *will*. The Hebrew term is *shegaga* (שִׁגְגָה) which appears nineteen times in the Old Testament and always in the context of a person sinning either ignorantly or inadvertently, *i.e.*, not willfully. The *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament* has this to say in its entry on the Hebrew word: “a sin of this type may result from two causes: negligence or ignorance. Either the perpetrator knows the law but unintentionally violates it as in the case of accidental homicide, or he acts without knowing he did wrong.”<sup>109</sup> An example of the first instance is found in Numbers 35, where Moses sets forth the ordinance for the cities of refuge within the Promised Land. The chapter reads as a legal text on the various types of homicide, from what is today called first degree murder to the opposite extreme

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*; 480.

<sup>108</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 303.

<sup>109</sup> Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., & Bruce K. Waltke *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament; Volume II* (Chicago: Moody Press; 1980); 904.



of involuntary manslaughter. Pertinent to the definition of 'inadvertent sin' is verse 22f.

*However, if he pushes him suddenly without enmity, or throws anything at him without lying in wait, or uses a stone, by which a man could die, throwing it at him without seeing him, so that he dies, while he was not his enemy or seeking his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood according to these judgments.* (Numbers 35:22-24)

The prohibition against murder was known by the perpetrator, but murder was never intended or desired; this constituted one example of *הַגָּזֵל* and hence would be susceptible to the sin offering for forgiveness. The inadvertent sin due to ignorance is more difficult to account for, as the ordinances and the statutes of the law were to be so disseminated among the Israelites that none could reasonably claim ignorance. It is probably the case that the perpetrator was not aware that he or she was violating a known law, rather than that the law itself was unknown. Two examples are offered by *TWOT*, though both involve men who were not themselves of the congregation of Israel. The first is Abimelech, in the matter of Sarah, Abraham's wife; the second is Balaam, unaware of the presence of the Angel of the LORD in his path.

*So Abimelech rose early in the morning, called all his servants, and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were very much afraid. And Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done." Then Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?"* (Genesis 20:8-10)

*Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face. And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me. The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live." And Balaam said to the Angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back."*

(Numbers 22:31-34)

There is also the situation in which the person is unaware that his or her actions are in violation of an ordinance or statute of law. An example of this would be unknowingly eating ritually impure meat; the offense would still demand atonement. Upon being made aware of the transgression, the person is no less liable to sacrifice than if he had known the commandment and had violated it unawares. This overall legal stipulation teaches us that sin is sin whether the sinner is aware of it or not, and that sin defiles both the people and the land, impinging directly on the continued presence of the people before Yahweh, and His presence in their midst. This principle has translated into modern tort and criminal law under the rubric of 'strict liability offense' which "is a legal doctrine that says a defendant's intent doesn't matter in determining if they should be held accountable for a crime he committed or if they should be made to compensate injured victims in a personal injury claim."<sup>110</sup> An example in modern jurisprudence would be the possession of illegal drugs, a situation likely to result in criminal charges even if the person was not aware of having the illegal drugs in his or her possession. Strict liability is sometimes called 'absolute' liability, a term that might be even closer to the Old Testament equivalent.

From that Old Testament perspective, and not really present in the modern equivalent, is the sense of defilement of the community rather than strictly the culpability of the sinner. Inadvertent sins seem innocuous to modern readers only because we have lost any sense of holiness and have all but entirely personalized offenses as a matter directly between the sinner and God. It was not so in Israel and was never meant to be so between God and His people under the New Covenant either. It is another manifestation of God's grace that He makes atoning provision for sins committed either unintentionally or ignorantly, for otherwise these sins would prevent His communion with the people.

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<sup>110</sup> [Strict Liability: Legal Definition & Examples – Forbes Advisor](#). Accessed 28 January 2024.

*“...if the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD for his sin which he has sinned a young bull without blemish as a sin offering. He shall bring the bull to the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD, lay his hand on the bull’s head, and kill the bull before the LORD.” (4:3-4)*

What follows in Leviticus 4 is a hierarchy of sacrificial animals that coordinates with the social level of the offending party. The classification is interesting in that it does not follow any other similar social structure found in the Old Testament and does not match anything in ancient Near Eastern literature so far as we know. What is most unique is the inversion of the leaders of the people and the people themselves. The position of the ‘anointed’ priest – “The high priest is here called the ‘anointed priest’ on account of the completeness of the anointing with which he was consecrated to his office”<sup>111</sup> – at the head of the list is to be expected both from the centrality of the tabernacle ritual system and from the socio-religious norms of the ancient world. The priests were in all ancient cultures the most significant persons in terms of society’s moral bearing and standing with the gods. For the High Priest to sin, even inadvertently, would place the entire nation in jeopardy before God or, as the text itself states, “*he brings guilt on the people.*” Thus his offense is noted first, and his offering must be of value commensurate with his standing: a bull, the most valuable of all sacrificial animals in the ancient world. Fairbairn writes of the inadvertent sin of the anointed priest, “because not only in his official capacity did he represent the congregation, but, from his standing in a relation of peculiar nearness to God, sinfulness in him assumed a more offensive and aggravated character.”<sup>112</sup>

We might expect the civil leader to be listed next, but he is subordinated in the sin offering hierarchy to the congregation itself, which must also bring a sacrificial bull on account of unintentional sin.

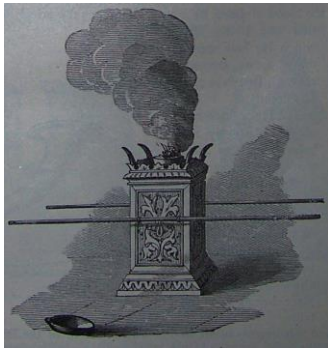
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<sup>111</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 303.

<sup>112</sup> Fairbairn; 292.

*Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which should not be done, and are guilty; when the sin which they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a young bull for the sin, and bring it before the tabernacle of meeting.*

(4:13-14)



**The Altar of Incense**

Indeed, the procedure of sacrifice for the congregation is identical to that of the High Priest, a fact that demands some explanation. Both are to present a young bull, the blood of which was to be sprinkled seven times inside the first tent, in front of the second veil that hides the Holy of Holies. In the case of the High Priest, he was to kill the sacrifice himself; the elders performed that function on behalf of the congregation. Blood from the sacrifice was also put on the horns of the incense altar in the Most Holy Place, the first tent. The fatty parts of the sacrifice were to be washed in water and then immolated on the altar of burnt offering outside the first tent; the remainder of the carcass, including its hide, was disposed of in a clean place outside the camp.<sup>113</sup> None of the sacrificial animal served either for food or for clothing to anyone associated with these two instances of the sin offering; the entire animal was disposed of in some manner. This makes sense with regard to the High Priest, for it was his inadvertent sin that necessitated the sacrifice in the first place; neither he nor his priestly family could partake.

In the cases referred to, the high priest was himself concerned, directly or indirectly, in the atonement, and could not properly partake of the flesh of the victim, as this would have given it the character of a peace-offering. The flesh, as

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<sup>113</sup> Radner notes here an example of the allegorical interpretation of Origen: “Similarly, and on a more specific basis, Origen will take up the differing aspects of a particular sacrifice, as in 4:1-12, and relate each to elements of Christ’s own self and mission: the kidneys that are burnt refer to Christ’s freedom from carnal perturbation; the seven sprinklings of the blood by the priest represent the seven gifts of the Spirit; the four horns of the altar that are touched in blood are tied to the four-gospel renditions of the passion; the lobe of the liver stands for human rage, consumed at the altar; and the blood that is poured at the base of the altar points to the final grace of Israel’s conversions, which will take place after all the nations are brought in by the church.” Reference to Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus*; 3.5.

well as the blood, must therefore be given to the Lord. But it could not be burnt on the altar, for this would have given it the character of a burnt-offering.<sup>114</sup>

The sin of the congregation is listed next, though the common term *בְּשִׁגָּגָה* – *unintentionally* – is not used in the introduction to this class of Israelite society. The description is more detailed and graphic: *the sin was hidden from their eyes* and therefore the congregation was unaware of the transgression. The ultimate meaning is the same, however, and when the knowledge of the sin become manifest, the sin offering is required on behalf of the entire congregation. Commentators overlook the anomaly of having the congregation listed before its leaders. Kurtz, for instance, simply states a principle without further explanation, “the higher the offending individual stood in the scale of theocratical office and rank, the greater was the moral guilt involved in his offense.”<sup>115</sup> Granting this principle, why then is the congregation as a whole listed essentially alongside the High Priest (for the ritual involved in each offense is essentially identical)? Kurtz does not answer this question, nor do Keil & Delitzsch, Gill, Matthews Henry and Poole, Messrs. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, or any other commentary consulted. Everyone seems content with informing us that *the whole congregation* meant either the entire congregation, or a large part of it.

But the real question should be why the congregation not only stands in a higher position of responsibility than a ‘leader’ – which presumably would later apply to the king himself – but also stands on par with the High Priest. Jay Sklar takes the great responsibility of the congregation as self-evident, and marvels rather that the sin of the High Priest is so notorious. He theorizes, “That the sin of the entire congregation would be regarded as serious is obvious, but why that of the high priest? Perhaps because his sin could result in withdrawal of the LORD’s protective presence, or because as the people’s spiritual leader, he risked

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<sup>114</sup> Fairbairn; 296.

<sup>115</sup> Kurtz; 214.

leading them all into sin. When a ship's captain makes a mistake, it endangers all the passengers."<sup>116</sup> The equivalence of the sins of the congregation and the High Priest, however, are not as obvious as Sklar thinks. The issue is further complicated by a parallel passage in Numbers 15, in which the unintentional sin of the congregation is dealt with by the sacrifice of a young bull *as a burnt offering*, followed by a male goat *as a sin offering*.

*If you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments which the LORD has spoken to Moses – all that the LORD has commanded you by the hand of Moses, from the day the LORD gave commandment and onward throughout your generations – then it will be, if it is unintentionally committed, without the knowledge of the congregation, that **the whole congregation shall offer one young bull as a burnt offering**, as a sweet aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and **one kid of the goats as a sin offering**. So the priest shall make atonement for the whole congregation of the children of Israel, and it shall be forgiven them, for it was unintentional; they shall bring their offering, an offering made by fire to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their unintended sin. It shall be forgiven the whole congregation of the children of Israel and the stranger who dwells among them, because all the people did it unintentionally.*

(Numbers 15:24-25)

The phrasing of verse 24, smoothed over in the New King James rendering above, contains the same reference to the *hidden from the eyes* as we find in Leviticus 4:13. Thus it is hard not to consider the two passages as referring to the same ritual, brought about by the same 'unintentional' sin. The typical modern, critical approach is to assume that Numbers 15 is the 'correct'



**Gordon Wenham (b. 1943)**

rendering and that the congregation was only responsible for a male goat as a sin offering, thus dropping the congregation back to the level of the ruler. Gordon Wenham considers the apparent discrepancy between the two passages, "There

<sup>116</sup> Sklar, Jay *Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament: Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic; 2023); 139-140.

is no obvious reason for the difference in the congregational offerings demanded by Leviticus and Numbers. Jewish commentators have held that Numbers is dealing with national idolatry, but it is difficult to see how this could happen *unwittingly without the knowledge of the congregation...* It seems best to suppose that the Leviticus rule is being modified slightly, as occurs with some other Pentateuchal laws."<sup>117</sup>

The problem with these 'solutions' is multifaceted. First, the order of presentation in Leviticus 4 places the congregation before the ruler and, as this is the only passage in which the four classifications are to be found, the priority of place must belong to the congregation, not the ruler. Second, the disposal of the blood is the same in the case of the congregation as it is with the High Priest – the sprinkling of the blood seven times before the veil inside the first or outer tent. Note that for the ruler/leader and for the individual Israelite, the blood was simply to be applied to the horns of the altar of burnt offering; it was not taken inside the sanctuary proper. Third, the passage concerning the congregation in Leviticus 4 *specifically* calls for the exact same disposal of the bull as was the case when the High Priest was the offending party.

*And he shall do with the bull as he did with the bull as a sin offering; thus he shall do with it. So the priest shall make atonement for them, and it shall be forgiven them. Then he shall carry the bull outside the camp, and burn it as he burned the first bull. It is a sin offering for the assembly.* (Leviticus 4:20-21)

The similarity between the first two sin offerings with regard to the disposal of the sacrificial carcass becomes even more significant when one notes that for each of the next two cases – the *ruler* and the *individual Israelite* – no mention is made as to the disposal of the carcass until Leviticus 7, where we read that the priests were to partake of the sin offerings,

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<sup>117</sup> Wenham, Gordon J. *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 1981); 130-31.

*Likewise this is the law of the trespass offering (it is most holy): In the place where they kill the burnt offering they shall kill the trespass offering. And its blood he shall sprinkle all around on the altar. And he shall offer from it all its fat. The fat tail and the fat that covers the entrails, the two kidneys and the fat that is on them by the flanks, and the fatty lobe attached to the liver above the kidneys, he shall remove; and the priest shall burn them on the altar as an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a trespass offering. Every male among the priests may eat it. It shall be eaten in a holy place. It is most holy. **The trespass offering is like the sin offering; there is one law for them both: the priest who makes atonement with it shall have it.** (Leviticus 7:1-7)*

Perhaps the clue to understanding the sin offering as pertaining to the congregation is found later in Leviticus, in the section most commonly known as the Holiness Code. Regarding the congregation as on par with the High Priest as to the sin offering, fits well with the manifestly 'horizontal' statutes in the Holiness Code that pertain to how the people were to live in the presence of one another, as they lived in the presence of their holy God. The Holiness Code is prefaced in Leviticus 19 with the requirement incumbent upon the whole congregation of Israel, "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,*"<sup>118</sup> This perspective on the congregation is a vital and essential feature of the true religion as opposed to all other manmade, mediatorial religions: the holiness of the congregation is no less important than the holiness of highest member of the religious order.

*When a ruler has sinned, and done something unintentionally against any of the commandments of the LORD his God in anything which should not be done, and is guilty, or if his sin which he has committed comes to his knowledge, he shall bring as his offering a kid of the goats, a male without blemish. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the goat, and kill it at the place where they kill the burnt offering before the LORD. It is a sin offering. The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering. And he shall burn all its fat on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of the peace offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him. (4:22-26)*

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<sup>118</sup> Leviticus 19:2. This the evident reference to what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48)



Except for the required animal, the sin offering ritual for the ruler is the same as for the individual Israelite, the 'commoner,' so to speak. One interesting note with regard to the sin offering for the congregation, the ruler, and the commoner is the statement regarding atonement. In verses 20, 26, and 31/35 in regard to each of these three categories of sin offering, we read, "*Thus the priest shall make atonement for them/him...and they/he shall be forgiven.*" This phrase is missing with regard to the sin offering for the High Priest which seems to indicate that he is not making atonement for himself; rather the LORD is making the provision of the blood for atonement available to the High Priest. This is simply to recognize that whereas the High Priest mediated for the congregation, the ruler, and the individual Israelite, there was no one to mediate for the High Priest. Perhaps this, too, points forward to the great High Priest who would indeed be able to mediate for Himself. This is the priest according to the order of Melchizedek, of whom the author of Hebrews writes,

*For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.* (Hebrews 7:26-28)

The lack of this atonement/forgiveness phrase on behalf of the High Priest does not, of course, mean that he was not forgiven after he had offered the appropriate sin offering for his own inadvertent sin. Yet its absence does bear noting, as the High Priest will later be shown to be the supreme mediator, though of necessity temporary and himself a sinner, for the nation on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

Returning to the list of the sin offerings, Jay Sklar offers a helpful summary table for the four categories of sin offering, to bring some perspective on where we have been thus far in this lesson.<sup>119</sup>

	Officiant	Animal	Blood Rites	What Happened to Meat
High Priest (4:3-12) or whole congregation (4:13-21)	High Priest	Bull	Blood brought into the Holy Place, sprinkles seven times before the veil, placed on the horns of the incense altar; remainder brought out and poured at the base of the altar of burnt offering	All of fat burned on altar; rest of meat burned outside the camp
Leader among the people (4:22-26) ordinary citizen (4:27-35)	Priest	Male goat for leader, female goat to sheep for citizen	Blood put on the horns of the altar of burnt offering (outside the Holy Place); remainder poured out at the base of the altar	All of fat burned on altar; priests partook of remaining meat

The Hebrew term found in Leviticus 4:22 is a common term in the Old Testament: *nasi* (נָשִׂיא), which the *TWOT* renders as “prince, captain, leader, chief, ruler.”<sup>120</sup> It is a generic term that would encompass tribal elders, singular judges, princes, and kings; any who exercised authority within and over the congregation. The word could mean someone as seemingly insignificant as the head of a single family.<sup>121</sup> Placed below the High Priest in level of responsibility, as indicated by the less valuable sacrificial animal prescribed, the *nasi* was a civil and not a religious or spiritual authority. Yet this did not abrogate his spiritual responsibility to serve as a good example to the congregation; if he sinned, albeit unintentionally, his sin offering consisted of a more valuable animal than that required of the average Israelite. Any sin, even unintentional sin, defiled both the community and the tabernacle; the approach to Yahweh was thereby blocked and fellowship between Him and the congregation (and the congregation and the LORD) hindered. The leader within the congregation was not in a mediatorial position vis-à-vis the congregation, nor were his misdeeds on the same level as

<sup>119</sup> Sklar; *Commentary*; 139.

<sup>120</sup> *TWOT*; 601.

<sup>121</sup> Sklar; 147.

those of the congregation as a whole. Still, his responsibility as a *nasi* placed him above the commoner. “Thus, while the sin may not have been considered at the same level as the high priest or entire congregation, it was serious nonetheless.”<sup>122</sup> Sklar summarizes the responsibility of the ruler, “Where the head turns, the body follows.”<sup>123</sup>

*If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally by doing something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and is guilty, or if his sin which he has committed comes to his knowledge, then he shall bring as his offering a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill the sin offering at the place of the burnt offering. Then the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour all the remaining blood at the base of the altar. He shall remove all its fat, as fat is removed from the sacrifice of the peace offering; and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a sweet aroma to the LORD. So the priest shall make atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him.* (4:27-31)

The expression translated ‘anyone’ by the New King James version is *nephesh echat* (נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת), literally, ‘one soul.’ Thus, *if one soul among the people sins unintentionally...* is the basis of the fourth category of sin offering. The use of the Hebrew *nephesh*, or ‘soul,’ instead of the earlier *adam*, ‘man,’ may only be a literary choice by Moses, but it is probably significant that the ‘particular,’ sin-related sacrifice of the sin offering refers to the offending party as a ‘soul’ rather than merely a ‘man.’ This will be the consistent designation of the person who sins either unintentionally or knowingly in a lying or deceptive manner – Leviticus 4 & 5, pertaining to the sin offering and the guilt offering.

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<sup>122</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*; 150.

**Week 6: The Particular Sacrifices – Sin Offerings Part 2****Text Reading: Leviticus 5:1 – 13**

*“The precise distinction between the sin-offering  
and the guilt-offering or trespass-offering is not altogether clear,  
and has been much discussed.”  
(George Buchanan Gray)*

The chapter divisions in this particular section of Leviticus are somewhat fluid due to the fact that it is difficult to determine exactly which of the two ‘particular’ sacrifices are in view throughout. In English translations Chapter 5 is uniformly stopped at verse 19 whereas in the Hebrew Bible the first seven verses of Chapter 6 are appended to Chapter 5. In addition, the first thirteen verses of Chapter 5 seem to mix the trespass/guilt offering with the sin offering, making it difficult to know exactly which one is in view. For this reason many commentators consider 5:14 as the start of the discussion of the guilt- or trespass offering, though the *assam* (אָשָׁם), or ‘guilt offering,’ is first mentioned in verse 6. The similarity between the sin offering and the guilt offering is further confirmed by the disposition of the carcass, which belonged to the ministering priest, in accordance with Leviticus 7:7, *“The trespass offering is like the sin offering; there is one law for them both: the priest who makes atonement with it shall have it.”*

There is a certain fluidity of terminology through the transition between the sin offering and the guilt offering. The Hebrew terms associated with each are: *chata’a* (חַטָּאת), derived from the Hebrew word for ‘sin’ and thus consistently translated ‘sin offering,’ and the *asham* (אָשָׁם), translated as ‘guilt’ or ‘trespass’ offering. The former of these is perhaps the most common term found in the Old Testament in regard to sin and sacrifice, as *TWOT* notes, “The most extensively used noun form is the feminine *chatta’t* which occurs almost two hundred and ninety times...In Lev and Num the noun appears many times alternating in meaning between sin, the reality of disobedience to God, and sin-offering, the means of removing the guilt and penalty of sin before the Lord through the

sacrificial system...In this context, the noun is closely associated with *asham*, which is often translated as ‘guilt-offering.’”<sup>124</sup>

The close association of these two terms, and consequently these two forms of sacrifice recounted in Leviticus 4 & 5, stands to reason on at least one account: the fact that sin incurs guilt. But even this is complicated by the fact that



**Pietru Saydon (1895-1971)**

many of the sins for which the sin-offering, at least, and arguably also the guilt-offering are presented as ‘atonement,’ are *inadvertent* or *ignorant* sins – the *shagagah* (שָׁגָגָה) of the previous lesson. It is worth revisiting the concept of ‘inadvertent’ sin, though from the perspective of guilt – the sinner is guilty before the LORD on the basis of the *objective violation* of the commandment and is not exonerated on account of his own *subjective condition*. This point is made in the article “Sin-Offering and Trespass-Offering” by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Roman Catholic scholar, Pietru Pawl Saydon, “the transgression of the Law is always considered in its objectivity independently of the subjective state of the offender.”<sup>125</sup> Saydon introduced the concept of ‘imputability’ to the discussion, noting that all sins were imputable to the offender regardless of both the offense and the nature of the offender’s awareness to the offense. “No distinction is made, as regards imputability, between formal and material offenses, all sins being considered imputable and requiring expiation.”<sup>126</sup> This objectivity with regard to imputability contributes to the difficulties inherent in distinguishing between the sin offering and the guilt offering. Perhaps this was not so much of a concern within the Mosaic ritual environment; the mere reality of an offense being sufficient to call forth a sacrifice. One may, however, wonder how the Israelites themselves knew

<sup>124</sup> TWOT; 638.

<sup>125</sup> Saydon, Pietru Pawl “Sin-Offering and Trespass-Offering” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct. 1946); 395.

<sup>126</sup> *Idem*.

whether they were to bring a *sin* offering or a *guilt* offering when the knowledge of their offense was brought to their attention.

The text of the ‘particular’ sacrifices in Leviticus 4 - 6 seems to divide into three sections. The **first section** was the subject of the previous lesson: the *inadvertent* sins, or *shagalah*-sins, of Leviticus 4. These offenses are not describes as to their nature, but only as to the status, so to speak, of the offending party. Each group or individual who commits an offense deserving of a sin offering is said in the introductory statement to have done it inadvertently. Each section, with the notable exception of the High Priest, ends with the note that atonement has been made and the sin forgiven. Thus Leviticus 4:1-35 forms a discrete pericope.

The **second section**, then, runs in our English Bibles from Leviticus verse 1 through verse 13, and introduces the Hebrew term *asham* (אָשָׁם), ‘guilt,’ in each of the first five verses. In verse 6, in summary of the offenses in the first five verses, the Israelite is to bring his ‘guilt-offering’ before the LORD, or at least that is the rendering of the word *asham* in verse 6 found in the New King James and New American Standard versions. Yet the offering required at the beginning of verse 6 is then termed a *sin*-offering at the end of the verse as well as in verses 7 and 11; in each of these three places the Hebrew term used is the *chata’a* (חַטָּאת) from Chapter 4. This interchangeability of the two key terms is primarily found in this second section, and gives rise to most of the scholarly debate on the topic, one writer concluding, “The precise difference between the *chattath* and the *asham* is obscure and has never been satisfactorily cleared up.”<sup>127</sup>

By way of a side note, these terminological differences and fluidity in these sections of Leviticus, which seem to be dealing with the same class of sins and sacrifices, was one of the primary motives underlying the Documentary Hypothesis of Julius Wellhausen. The apparent change in style or content

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<sup>127</sup> Nordell; 260.

between the evident sections of the particular sacrifices is, under this liberal hypothesis, attributed to different writers: a Priestly contributor, an Elohist, or perhaps the Deuteronomist, among others that have been added since Wellhausen's day. Mosaic authorship is denied on (spurious) historical grounds, and the texts we now have are dated very late in Israel's history, often in the time of Ezra. Thus the text is a quilt of various 'documents' - hence the theory's name - pieced together as best the later editors, or 'redactors,' could manage. One of the strongest arguments against the Documentary Hypothesis is the fact that, on close examination of the text, the apparent disjunction between the various 'writers' disappears entirely, and the text proves to be quite consistent. This we will see as we work through the verses themselves.



Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)

The **third section** in the particular sacrifices begins at Leviticus 5:14 and moves through Leviticus 6:7.<sup>128</sup> What sets this section apart from the others is the common introductory statement, "*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying...*" This terminology, as noted in the previous lesson, delineates the major divisions of the book and, in these early chapters, the various types of sacrifices. In this section, which runs to the seventh verse of the next chapter, the focus is clearly on the *asham*, the guilt offering. Still, there is little in the procedural description of the guilt offering to distinguish it from the *chatta'a*, the sin offering. Nordell writes in regard to the sin offering, *chatta'a* and the guilt offering, *asham*, "They have much in common, but seem to have differed chiefly in that the former was intended to bring about an atonement for guilt, while the latter seems to have been regarded in general as a kind of satisfaction over and above the full restitution made for an injury to another, or for a violation of the law of

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<sup>128</sup> Note again that the first seven verses of Leviticus 6 in our English Bibles are appended to Chapter 5 in the Hebrew Scriptures.

holiness.”<sup>129</sup> Perhaps a summary table will help put these three somewhat distinct segments of the particular sacrifices into better focus.

<u>Text</u>	<u>Type of Sin</u>	<u>Sacrifice</u>	<u>Sacrificial Guidelines</u>	<u>Results</u>
4:1-35	Unintentional sins	Sin Offering	Divided by hierarchy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anointed Priest</li> <li>• Congregation</li> <li>• Leader/Prince</li> <li>• Commoner</li> </ul>	Atonement & forgiveness of sin
5:1-13	Guilt-sins	Sin Offering	Lamb, goat, turtledoves or pigeons, offered according to the sin offering	Atonement & forgiveness of sin
5:14-6:7	Loss-sins	Guilt/Trespass Offering	Sin offering plus restitution of 20%	Atonement & forgiveness of sin

This summary table should be viewed both provisionally and non-exhaustively, as the terminology used in the sacrificial literature is quite fluid. Saydon points out in his article that the sacrifice of the cleansed leper in Leviticus 14:12, and that of the Nazarite who inadvertently violates his vow, Numbers 6:12, are both termed *asham*-offerings, though financial or material restitution is not required in either case.<sup>130</sup> What does seem to be a solid conclusion is that the guilt offering was itself a form of sin offering, the difference being somewhat obscure but apparently related to the offender’s *awareness* of the offense. But this provisional conclusion seems to run against the proscription against any sacrifice for the Israelite who sins ‘with a high hand,’ an attitude contextually opposed in Numbers 15 to the ‘unintentional’ sin we have already encountered in Leviticus 4.

*And if a person sins unintentionally, then he shall bring a female goat in its first year as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for the person who sins unintentionally, when he sins unintentionally before the LORD, to make atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him. You shall have one law for him who sins*

<sup>129</sup> Nordell; 260.

<sup>130</sup> Saydon; 397.



*unintentionally, for him who is native-born among the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwells among them. But the person who does anything presumptuously (lit. 'with a high hand'), whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.* (Numbers 15:27-31)

The presence of enumerated sins in Leviticus 5 introduces an intermediate category of offenses that Jay Sklar calls 'Intentional but Not (Necessarily) High-Handed Sins.'<sup>131</sup> It is apparent that Leviticus 5:1-5 and 6:1-7 each enumerate sins that cannot reasonably be considered 'unintentional,' with the exception of touching the carcass or unclean thing, but "the very nature of these sins requires that the person knew they were sinning when the act was committed."<sup>132</sup> The first of these segments remains in the sin-offering pericope; the second is in the guilt-offering section, further blurring any distinction between the two. However, that there are sacrifices available for these offenses proves that they are not high-handed, no matter how intentional they might have been. "In short, along with unintentional sins and high-handed sins, there is another category that we may label 'intentional but not (necessarily) high-handed sins.'<sup>133</sup> This observation does help further define the 'high-handed' sin as an open act of apostasy and rebellion against Yahweh through wanton disregard for His commandments. Sklar concludes, "Perhaps the most that can be said with certainty, however, is that high-handed sins are definite signs of apostate rebellion, where these sins – for whatever reason – are not."<sup>134</sup>

Yet again it should be noted that the mental state of the offender does not factor into the imputability or responsibility engendered in the offense itself. Whether unintentional, intentional but not (necessarily) high-handed, or high-handed, the person's guilt remained. "Responsibility or imputability and

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<sup>131</sup> Sklar, "Sin and Atonement"; 478.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*; 480.

<sup>133</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*; 480-81.

ignorance or involuntariness are, according to our moral standards, incompatible and contradictory terms, but they were not so incompatible to the Hebrew legislator, who looked upon the transgression of the law from its objective angle, independently of the state of mind of the offender.”<sup>135</sup> All that remains, then, is whether an atoning sacrifice is available and, if so, of what nature and procedure that sacrifice is.

*If a person sins in hearing the utterance of an oath, and is a witness, whether he has seen or known of the matter—if he does not tell it, he bears guilt. Or if a person touches any unclean thing, whether it is the carcass of an unclean beast, or the carcass of unclean livestock, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and he is unaware of it, he also shall be unclean and guilty. Or if he touches human uncleanness—whatever uncleanness with which a man may be defiled, and he is unaware of it—when he realizes it, then he shall be guilty. Or if a person swears, speaking thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, whatever it is that a man may pronounce by an oath, and he is unaware of it—when he realizes it, then he shall be guilty in any of these matters. And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these matters, that he shall confess that he has sinned in that thing; and he shall bring his trespass offering to the LORD for his sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a kid of the goats as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin.* (5:1-6)

Before getting into the nitty-gritty of the particular sins noted in these verses, it is necessary to deal with the statement in verse 6, where it appears the offering brought for the various sins is *both* a trespass offering *and* a sin offering. The difficulty lies in the flexibility of the Hebrew, in which the terms translated *guilt* and *sin* are sometimes uses for the thing itself (guilt or sin) and sometimes for the sacrifice incumbent upon the thing, without any variation in spelling. We have already seen that there is little to differentiate between these two sacrifices, the sin or *chattah* offering and the guilt or *asham* offering. But to mention them interchangeably in one verse does seem to introduce more confusion than clarity. One possible solution – though one cannot be dogmatic here – is to view the word *asham* translated as ‘guilt’ or ‘trespass’ offering in verse 6 simply as the single word, *guilt*. Thus the verse would instruct the offender to *bring his guilt*

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<sup>135</sup> Saydon; 397.

*before the LORD* through the presentation of a sin offering. Structurally, then, we could read the passage thus, in terms of the offender's guilt.

*...then he will bear his guilt (5:1)*

*...then he will be guilty (5:2)*

*...he will be guilty (5:3)*

*...he will be guilty in one of these (5:4)*

*...so it shall be that when he becomes guilty in one of these...in which he has sinned (5:5)*

*...he shall bring his guilt before the LORD for his sin...as a sin offering (5:6)*

Lexically this is permissible, as noted above, the same word is used for both 'guilt' and 'guilt offering' throughout the text, so the rendering of *asham* as 'guilt offering' in verse 6 is a translator's prerogative, but is not necessitated by the term itself. What is significant in this passage, however, is not really what the sacrifice is ultimately called. It is, rather, the *guilt* of the offender and how it is incurred. The actions noted are hardly what one would consider 'inadvertent' and yet there is a sense in which the offender is unaware of his offense. The phrase, "*it is hidden from him,*" occurs in reference to the final three of the four offenses, in verses, 2, 3, and 4. In the latter two, this phrase is joined with "*and then he comes to know it,*" indicating a period of ignorance that seems to render the sin 'inadvertent' or 'ignorant,' though this does not lessen the guilt incurred. Sklar interprets the phrase to signify that the offense was known, but then "slipped their mind," simply forgetting to perform the required purification ritual within the specified twenty-four hour period (*cp.* Lev. 11:28, 31-40).<sup>136</sup> Let us look, then, at the individual offenses that incur guilt and require the sin offering.

#### **Failure to Testify (5:1)**

Sklar notes that each of the four offenses in the opening verses of Chapter 5 are acts of omission, failure to do something that the LORD requires of His people. "With each of the following sins, the sinner has failed to do something: to

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<sup>136</sup> Sklar, *Leviticus*; 161.

give testimony (5:1), to deal properly with ritual impurity (5:2-3), or to fulfill a vow (5:4). They differ in that the first was done intentionally, the others by accident.”<sup>137</sup> The first of these offenses is the failure to bear witness when a *public adjuration* has been given. Literally this phrase signifies that the offender has “heard the voice of an oath,” (שְׁמַעְהָ קוֹל אֲלֵהָ - *v'shemeah qol ala*) – the public calls for witnesses by the adjuration of Yahweh. This was the manner by which witnesses were called to provide information concerning an offense into which the city/village elders were investigating. It is of the same nature as the adjuration Caiphas laid upon Jesus,

*And the high priest arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!”*  
(Matthew 26:62-63)

In the same light, the Qumran community had at least one statute concerning an unknown theft, “And everything that is lost without it being known who stole it from the property of the camp in which it has been stolen, let its owner charge with an imprecatory oath, and any one who hears, if he knows and does not tell, is guilty.”<sup>138</sup>

So the offense in Leviticus 5:1 is not the bearing of false witness, it is the failure to bear true witness when called to do so. The offending party has information pertinent to the trial or investigation and his withholding of that information delays justice, or perhaps even brings about injustice, which is an offense against the whole community as it is against Yahweh. It defiles the camp, and the one who withholds testimony must bear his guilt. Sklar writes, “justice is delayed or denied because the witness fails to provide information (perhaps because they were somehow involved in the crime [Prov. 29:24] or were

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*; 159.

<sup>138</sup> CD 9:10-12, quoted by Milgrom; 295-96.

influenced by friendship or shame or fear or indifference)."<sup>139</sup> Milgrom adds, "The witness's defiance of the imprecation is indisputably a deliberate, if not a brazen, misdemeanor...The reluctant witness of this case, however, is not guilty of perjury; his misdemeanor is that he did not respond to the oath imprecation, in that he did not testify. In this respect his case is similar to the fourth and last one in this series, wherein the misdemeanor is the nonfulfillment of an oath. In both cases, the offenders are not guilty of desecration and, hence, not liable for an *asham*, a reparation offering."<sup>140</sup> Failure to provide testimony when it was called for was a serious offense within the community, but one can imagine mitigating circumstances that might cause a witness to hold back - it is a common phenomenon in law enforcement. This does not remove the guilt of the offense, though it does remove the offense from the category of 'high-handed,' with a suitable sacrifice graciously provided by the LORD to restore the offender.

The phrase "*it was hidden from him*" is not applied to this first offense in the series, which is probably because he was aware of his offense all the time, it was not *hidden from him* nor did it 'slip his mind.' Implied in the bringing of the sin offering, however, is the offender's recognition of his crime and his desire to make amends, or at least to be restored to fellowship with Yahweh. Perhaps it is a matter of conscience, or a particular affliction brought on the offender by Yahweh, we are not told how this person comes to acknowledge his wrongdoing and thus avail himself of the sacrificial atonement. Confession and repentance are not specifically mentioned but seem to be bound up in the process of recognition and coming before the LORD.

### **Ritual Impurity (5:2-3)**

The second and third offenses are related in that they both incur ritual defilement requiring purification before the offender may re-enter the

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*; 160.

<sup>140</sup> Milgrom; 295.

communion of the assembly. Verse 2 relates to impurity caused by the physical encounter of an unclean animal, whether unclean by decree ('beast') or by violent death ('cattle'), or of unclean swarming things. The list is conspicuously missing clean cattle and birds which did not transmit impurity on touch. The law concerning clean and unclean animals, as well as the ritual impurity contracted upon touch, is outlined in greater detail in Leviticus 11, this passage in Leviticus 5 is dealing with a specific case in which the uncleanness has been contracted, but the matter is "*hidden from*" the one who touched and contracted the uncleanness. This could result from contact made unawares, though it is more likely that the offense is not so much in the contact as in the failure to pursue the path of ritual cleanness according to the divine statutes (again, Leviticus 11). The statute of limitations, as it were, was the evening of the day of the offense; if the offender failed to perform the proper act of purification, he was guilty of disregarding, if not actively disobeying, the commandment. "The person forgot to address the impurity, which was a serious matter, not only because they were not following the LORD's commands (11:24-25) but also because they risked defiling the LORD's tabernacle (15:31) or holy items associated with it (7:20-21) – serious signs of disrespect to the LORD."<sup>141</sup>

The third offense in the list is the same as the second, with the distinction that the impurity is contracted from a human rather than an animal or insect. In both of these instances the offense is *hidden* from the offender's eyes, but he *comes to know it* and at that point is responsible to make amends through the sin offering. One must assume that he or she was also required to perform the statutory process for purification; the sin offering was now *in addition* to the regular purification ritual. This is important to note, for the sin did not consist in the contact with the unclean animal or person; it consisted in failure to consequently act in obedience to the purity laws. "Handling these carcasses was not a sin (someone had to remove creatures that died in the camp), but those

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<sup>141</sup> Sklar; 161.

who did so had to undergo proper ritual cleansing (washing their clothes and waiting until evening, 11:24-25)."<sup>142</sup>

#### Uttering a Rash Oath (5:4)

Similar to the first offense (5:1) in that an oath or swearing is involved, only this time it is the offender who utters the oath rather than the town crier. Sklar considers this to be an example of a rash vow involving the name of Yahweh in poorly-considered exuberance or anger. He references two passages from Wisdom literature, one from the Psalms concerning Moses at Meribah, and the other from Proverbs, contrasting true and false speech.

*They angered Him also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses on account of them; because they rebelled against His Spirit, so that he spoke rashly with his lips.*

(Psalm 106:32-33)

*He who speaks truth declares righteousness, but a false witness, deceit.*

*There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword,*

*But the tongue of the wise promotes health.*

(Proverbs 12:17-18)

Milgrom agrees that the matter in Leviticus 5:4 is rash speech involving an oath, the imprecation of the divine name attached to a defense or promise hastily made. "The verb *bittē* and the noun *mibta* connote an impulsive statement. The implication here is that the oath was taken heedlessly."<sup>143</sup> This is also said to be *hidden from him*, possibly immediate forgetfulness when the emotions have passed and the man seems to have escaped the situation that called forth the rash oath in the first place. Or perhaps the 'forgetfulness' is itself culpable: he chooses to forget in order to avoid fulfilling what was so impulsively promised. Again, the manner of forgetfulness is not described, but the matter is nonetheless returned to the offender's attention, *then he comes to know it*. As with the other instances, we are not told just how he comes to know of his offense. We may

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<sup>142</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>143</sup> Milgrom; 299.

assume that the LORD Himself, who knows the secret thoughts of the human heart, in one way or another brings the matter back to the mind. “The punishment emphasizes to the sinner that the LORD knows their sin and that it must be properly addressed.”<sup>144</sup>

*If he is not able to bring a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD, for his trespass which he has committed, two turtledoves or two young pigeons: one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. And he shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer that which is for the sin offering first, and wring off its head from its neck, but shall not divide it completely. Then he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, and the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar. It is a sin offering. And he shall offer the second as a burnt offering according to the prescribed manner. So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin which he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him. (5:7-10)*

Literally the opening phrase of verse 7, and later, verse 11, reads “*and if his hand cannot reach...*” a very vivid way of indicating insufficient funds to afford a lamb, or even the pigeons or turtledoves, due to impoverished circumstances. As important as blood is to the sacrificial ritual, the restoration of the Israelite to fellowship with Yahweh was more important. Blood was still involved with the birds – though not as much as with the animals – but no blood was required for the one whose means only permitted an offering of flour. The decreasing scale of cost for the sin offering was a measure of the compassion of Israel’s God, hardly the harsh and unforgiving tyrant portrayed by Marcion and his perennial followers. Christopher Wright notes, “An Israelite who knew that he could come in poverty of spirit as well as of substance with nothing more than a few handfuls of flour to offer to God, and yet go away with the words of forgiveness from the priest ringing in his ears, was learning something about the grace of God and the ethical power of repentance.”<sup>145</sup>

The procedures by which the sacrifices of the poorer members of the congregation were processed differ slightly, but no doubt significantly, from the standard sin offering. For instance, in the case of the birds, one of the victims was

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<sup>144</sup> Sklar; 160.

<sup>145</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*: 295.



presented as the sin offering, first, and then the other bird was presented as a burnt offering – a ritual without precedent among the sin offerings. Milgrom surmises that the burnt offering was due to the fact that one bird offered very little meat to burn on the altar and so “a burnt offering is added so there will be a respectable sacrifice on the altar.”<sup>146</sup> The problem with such speculation, beyond the fact that it is without support from the text, is that the immediately following section allows the very poor to bring an offering of flour – a tenth of an ephah, or approximately ½ gallon dry measure – surely not much of a fire on the altar.

*But if he is not able to bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he who sinned shall bring for his offering one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it, nor shall he put frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering. (5:11)*

For the very poor Israelite provision is still made: what is essentially a grain offering, only modified to be a sin offering. To avoid any confusion as to the nature of the sacrifice, oil and frankincense are forbidden to the sin offering,



**C. D. Ginsburg (1831-1914)**

whereas they are required of the grain offering (*cp.* 2:1). The recognition of personal offense must be maintained; the grain offering itself would be wholly out of place here. Yet Yahweh has regard to the economic straits that some of His people will encounter, and makes gracious provision for their poverty. C. D. Ginsburg comments in *Ellicott's Commentary*, “because it is a sin offering, and not a *Minchah* or meat offering, therefore it shall have no oil or frankincense, otherwise its distinguishing features as such would be destroyed.”<sup>147</sup>

The common feature of the offenses presented in Leviticus 5:1-13 is an awareness of personal offense, whether active or passive, commission or omission, the responsibility and the guilt still adhere to the offender. This smaller

<sup>146</sup> Milgrom; 304.

<sup>147</sup> Ginsburg, C. D. *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible; Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1954); 355.

passage within the larger sin offering section, beginning in Chapter 4, seems to personalize the actions that are guilt-born, as opposed to the general societal hierarchy found in the previous chapter. Once again, the sin is not necessarily in the act – it was not a sin to contact an unclean animal or contract uncleanness from a neighbor. The offense and guilt arise from either the neglect or refusal to observe the required purification rituals in order to properly rejoin the congregation in the tabernacle. In whatever sense the offense was *hidden* from the eyes of the offender, the text makes it clear that somehow knowledge of the sin was revealed to him, and regardless of his state of mind when the offense occurred, the guilt of the action adheres to his soul. Sacrifice is required. But the sacrifice is not ignorantly presented as a ‘provisional’ offering like Job offered for his children (Job 1:5). Acknowledgement (confession) and repentance are strongly implied in the sin (as well as the guilt) offerings. Jay Sklar observes, “confession and repentance are always a necessary precursor to atonement, sacrificial or otherwise.”<sup>148</sup>

These personal sin offerings – also referred to as ‘purification’ offerings – represent an extension of the four ‘group’ offerings detailed in Chapter 4. The underlying principle in all such sacrifices is the maintenance of covenant relationship with Israel’s God, present through the *shekinah* in the tabernacle. Personal sin was thereby forgiven, and fellowship with Yahweh thereby maintained. Schnittjer summarizes, “The personal responsibility for the purification offering was grounded on the collective identity of God’s people in which individuals participated. The purification offering purged the person, the camp, and especially the dwelling itself of the metaphorical but real contaminants created by the holy presence within the ritually impure encampment.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Sklar, “Sin and Atonement”; 486.

<sup>149</sup> Schnittjer, *Torah Story*; 265.

**Week 7: The Particular Sacrifices – Guilt/Trespass Offering****Text Reading: Leviticus 5:14 – 6:7**

*“Confession and repentance  
are always a necessary precursor to atonement,  
sacrificial or otherwise.”  
(Jay Sklar)*

20<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch Reformed theologian Gerrit Berkouwer bequeathed to the church his excellent *magnum opus*, the fourteen-volume *Studies in Dogmatics*. In this series, Berkouwer displays solid, Reformed erudition on such topics as The Providence of God, Divine Election, and The Work of Christ. Significantly, however, thirteen of the volumes are approximately the same length: plus-or-minus three hundred pages. One volume stands out, at almost six



**G. C. Berkouwer (1903-96)**

hundred pages: the volume on Sin. In this volume, Berkouwer deals with such thorny issues as the origin of sin, the nature (or essence) of sin, and the concept of confession. One chapter alone is devoted to ‘The Sin Against the Holy Spirit.’ Berkouwer treats the reality of sin as self-evident, a position that has lost much ground since his day. In the opening paragraph of his tome, Berkouwer writes, “No real genius is needed to see life’s battered and mangled pieces before us, and no particular wisdom is required to appreciate how profoundly abnormal life can be.”<sup>150</sup>

Perhaps the most significant chapter in Berkouwer’s book with respect to the study of Leviticus, and its application to the *hamartiology* – the doctrine of sin – of the Christian Church, is Chapter Nine, “The Gravity and Gradation of Sin.” In this chapter Berkouwer deals with what another author calls the ‘specie of sin,’

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<sup>150</sup> Berkouwer, G. C. *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1971); 11.

and ‘moral taxonomy,’<sup>151</sup> the various grades of sin as noted in Scripture and as (over)developed by the Church. Berkouwer writes, “It is simply an undeniable fact that Scripture makes various distinctions and speaks of several ‘degrees’ of sin.”<sup>152</sup> Starting from the perspective of the Old Testament, Berkouwer deals with both the ‘unwitting’ sins of Leviticus 4 and the ‘high-handed’ sins of Numbers 15, though he really does not spend much time with reference to the non-sin related sacrifices that begin Leviticus. Degree of culpability is the issue, as it has been for two millennia in church dogmatics. “In such terms as these [*i.e.*, ‘unwitting’ and ‘guilt’] the Old Testament speaks of man’s guilt in the context of every factual violation of God’s commandment and every manifest departure from the rule of his scepter.”<sup>153</sup> This is standard Reformed doctrine regarding the sinfulness of sins, regardless of the specifics. But Berkouwer also sees gradation of guilt on the basis of the sinner’s subjective mental state when the sin is committed. Using the example of the high-handed sin of Numbers 15, Berkouwer comments, “From this single example, and several others, it is clear that the intention and degree of consciousness in committing sin are important qualifications of sin.”<sup>154</sup>

Degrees of sin, or ‘moral taxonomy,’ has been an item of vigorous debate throughout the history of the Church, perhaps nowhere more represented than in the Roman Catholic distinction between ‘venial’ and ‘mortal’ sins. This (in)famous distinction is defended officially in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial, sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience.”<sup>155</sup> The

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<sup>151</sup> Dewan, Lawrence, *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics*, Fordham University Press, 2007; 374.

<sup>152</sup> Berkouwer; 285.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*; 288.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*; 289.

<sup>155</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; (New York: Doubleday; 1995); Section 1854. *Imprimi Potest* by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI).

Scriptural reference noted is but one, and that a very difficult passage that does not establish the distinction between mortal and venial sins.

*If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.* (I John 5:16-17)

Catholic tradition has associated the “*sin leading to death*” as mortal sin, with all others being venial. But John does not mention *sins* leading to death, but *a sin* that leads to death. Nor does John mitigate all other sins not leading to death, stating firmly that *all unrighteousness is sin*. The *sin leading to death* is left undefined (at least explicitly), but this does not justify the elaborate distinction now made by the Roman Catholic Church with regard to mortal and venial sins.



**Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)**

Somehow the Catholic tradition has tied these two categories of sin to *charity*, a contribution made mostly by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas, whose primary contribution to Catholic dogma was to synthesize it with the then-popular Aristotelian philosophy. Following the Thomistic line, the *Catechism* continues, “*Mortal sin* destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. *Venial sin* allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.”<sup>156</sup> The Pelagian orientation of Catholic theology comes through with the ‘remedy’ for mortal sin. Though one might think that excommunication, if not death, was to be the penalty for mortal sin, the *Catechism* offers another conversion for the mortal sinner, “*Mortal sin*, by attacking the vital principle within us – that is, charity – necessitates a new

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*; Section 1855. If the *Harry Potter* series has been around in Aquinas’ day, he might have added ‘makes a horcrux’ to the list of results of the *mortal sin*.

initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the sacrament of reconciliation."<sup>157</sup> This section of the *Catechism* then quotes Aquinas, showing the intricacies of the Catholic doctrine of sin, and its wholesale departure from Scripture.

When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object...whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbor, such as homicide or adultery...But when the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial.<sup>158</sup>

The *Catechism* goes on to a fuller definition of the conditions that constitute a mortal sin, with language that sounds like what we have read in Numbers 15. "For sin to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: 'Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.'"<sup>159</sup> This sounds very much like the 'high-handed' sin of Numbers 15, for which there was no available atonement. This similarity, and the subsequent evasion of the hopelessness of the 'high-handed' sin - mortal sins can be remedied by a 'new initiative of God's mercy' - illustrates a consistent difficulty within Christianity in its moral taxonomy, its classification of sins. Protestantism justifiably rejected the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins, but did not escape the apparent need to 'classify' sins in a sort of hierarchy of harm.

The Reformers, however, did not react nearly so strongly against mortal sins as they did against venial sins. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Catholic teachings on venial sin had gotten to the point that one wondered if it were even correct in calling a venial sin sin at all. This is because the class of sins called 'venial' - by

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*; Section 1856. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is Confession and Penance.

<sup>158</sup> *Idem*. Quoting from Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, 88, 2.

<sup>159</sup> *Idem*. Section 1857.

far the largest speciation of the genus, *sin* – were progressively associated with the fallen human nature as to become essentially ‘natural’ in themselves. Venial sins are borne of the weakness of the fallen nature and are therefore hardly even

culpable, and easily remediated through penance and good works. Indeed, as part of man’s fallen nature, venial sins can be argued as actually beneficial, since they remind the sinner of the true beatitude of orienting his or her life toward God, the greatest good. Lawrence Dewan, a Thomistic



**Lawrence Dewan (1932-2015)**

scholar (and fellow Dominican), shows the extent to which the venial sin can be reduced to almost inevitable human nature, and not really even sin. “Thus, venial sins are conceived of in the light of that perfect condition of the human being, in which there can be no flaw in the functioning of the lower appetites in their order to our higher nature. That is, it is necessary to view the human being as capable of very great moral perfection if one is to take seriously the sort of fault that is venial sin. That is to say that venial sin is part of the doctrine of human nature as a fallen nature...The venial sin is thus a problem typical of the human being in the fallen state. It corresponds to the nobility of the human calling and the wounded character of our nature.”<sup>160</sup> Though this quote is near contemporary, it intentionally reflects the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and thus the medieval taxonomy of sin that the Reformers so vehemently rejected.

Moral taxonomy has been a perpetual problem for the Church simply because sin is so easily referenced to behavior instead of disposition. Believers do sin, and this has created a pastoral conundrum from the start, exacerbated by the fact that *pastors* do sin. The Apostle John makes it clear that sin is an ineradicable

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<sup>160</sup> Dewan, Lawrence *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics: 1<sup>st</sup> Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press; 2007); 382.

feature of every believer in this life, though he then muddies the water in the same epistle.

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

(I John 1:8 - 2:1)

John seems to make a distinction here between 'sin' as a disposition or inherent force (1:8) and sin as an action (2:1). Later in the same letter the apostle makes it seem that it is impossible for a believer to sin, having been born of God.

*Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.*

(I John 3:7-9)

This passage should perhaps be read in light of what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 7, that "it is no longer I who sin, but the sin that dwells in me"; but the sorting out of these passages is beyond the scope of this lesson. Suffice to say at this juncture, that John himself invokes *intercessory* prayer on behalf of brethren who sin, though even this admonition is not without difficulty and controversy.

*If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.*

(I John 5:16-17)

There are few concepts in the Bible that have caused more confusion, and more 'explanation,' than "the sin unto death." In light of the various sacrifices in Leviticus - those without reference to any particular sin, those with reference to



*unintentional* sin, those sins the knowledge of which cannot be denied to the agent, and the 'high-handed' sins for which there was no atoning sacrifice made available – it is worth spending a little time considering the *sin unto death* for which the believer is not to intercede.

As noted, the identity of the *sin unto death* has been hotly debated for two millennia, beginning, as far as the records show, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century North African theologian, Tertullian. His interpretation of the *sin unto death* as “sins for which there is no pardon: specifically murder, idolatry, injustice, apostasy adultery and fornication” contributed to the later Roman Catholic doctrine of the mortal and venial sins.<sup>161</sup> Historians date the earliest taxonomy of sins to 6<sup>th</sup> Century Irish monks who are credited with developing the first ‘penitential handbooks,’ or *libri pœnitentiales*, which were compendiums of sins and their associated penitential actions. “Catholic ethics began to develop in close relation to the sacrament of reconciliation [*aka* Penance] when sixth century Irish monks created handbooks to use in the confessional. The handbooks helped them to guide the penitent in the identification of sins and to prescribe an appropriate penance.”<sup>162</sup> These *libri* were initially intended for the order of the monastery and were not generally applied pastorally among the lay church, though it was perhaps inevitable that the practice of ‘grading’ sins as to their punishment or penance would trickle down to the priest in the confessional. The gradation of sin/penance was called the ‘tariff,’ “chiefly prescribed in schedules, or tariffs, of specific penances for various sins of different kinds and degrees.”<sup>163</sup> The ‘terms’ of the taxonomy of these penitential documents read very much like the sacrificial language of the Old Testament, with fasting on bread and water substituted for animal (blood) sacrifices. For instance, in one document, the

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<sup>161</sup> Ward, Tim “Sin ‘Not Unto Death’ and Sin ‘Unto Death’ in I John 5:16” *Churchman*, 109 no 3 (1995); 234.

<sup>162</sup> Weaver, Darlene Fozard “Taking Sin Seriously” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 2003); 46.

<sup>163</sup> Oakley, Thomas P. “The Origins of Irish Penitential Discipline” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Oct. 1933); 321.

*Canones Hibernenses*, the first canon sets forth twenty-nine offenses and their associated penance. The first of these regards the sin of parricide, the killing of a parent, and the language of the 'unintentional' sin is present in the penitential, as is the notion of restitution found in the Levitical guilt or trespass offering: "The penance for parricide is fourteen years, or half as long if [it was committed] on account of ignorance, on bread and water and with satisfaction."<sup>164</sup> The purpose of the penitential literature was originally to maintain or restore the sanctity and harmony of the monastic house, later applied to the whole community of the church, in a very similar manner to the people of God encamped around the tabernacle in the Wilderness.

In the Old Testament, the interdictions set in place to protect the sacred places, people and objects from ritual defilement constituted the most important mechanism by which the contractual relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel could be maintained. Sin, in essence, implied any transgression against the rules and commandments that Yahweh had given to his people: such offences were disruptive to the social order and were thereby in direct violation of the covenant. The remedy for sin must be sought before the Lord because all sins threatened His holy presence and endangered the solidarity of the whole community. Conversely, the adherence to religious precepts was indicative of an individual's or whole community's acceptance of God, and hence ensured that they would also be accepted by Him.<sup>165</sup>

The following example of an early Irish penitential shows the minutiae of moral taxonomy, and seems to echo the various specifications from the Levitical rituals, though to an amplified degree.

Every penance is determined, both as to its severity and the length of time one is engaged in it, by the magnitude of the sin, the length of time it is persevered in, the motive for which it is committed, and the fervour with which it is eventually abandoned. For there are some sins which are not entitled to any remission of the penitence due for them, however long be the period prescribed for them, unless God Himself shorten it by means of death or a message (?) of sickness or the

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<sup>164</sup> Bergholm, Alexandra "Ritual Lamentations in the Irish Penitentials" *Religions*. [Ritual Lamentation in the Irish Penitentials.pdf](#). Accessed 18February2024.

<sup>165</sup> *Idem*.

amount of [extra?] mortification a person takes on himself. Such are, for example, kin-slayings, homicides, and secret murders; also brigandage, druidism, and satirizing; further, adultery, incest, perjury, heresy, and violation of [the duties of one's ecclesiastical] grade. There are other sins which are atoned for by [performing] half the [prescribed] penance together with half the commutation, others by the [full?] commutation together with one-third of the penance, still others by the commutation alone.<sup>166</sup>

From the Council of Trent in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century to Vatican II in the early 1960s, moral taxonomy was the *modus operandi* of the Roman Catholic system with regard to Christian ethics and the confessional. One could almost pre-determine the penance to be required for a particular sin, weigh one's willingness to pay that penance, and then sin with essential impunity. The sale of indulgences was perhaps the *reductio ad absurdum* of this whole process of the taxonomy of sins, and a major contributing factor to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers rejected the Catholic taxonomy of mortal and venial sins, recognizing rather that all sins, even the seemingly least of sins, are both culpable and deserving of divine judgment and condemnation. With regard to the 'sin unto death' found in I John 5:16, John Calvin fairly represents the Reformers as a whole when he comments, "The apostle is not, however, distinguishing between mortal and venial sins, as afterwards became common. For the distinction which prevails in the Papacy is completely foolish...It is therefore not surprising that they make the worst crimes into venial offenses, for they weigh them in their own balances and not in God's. But among believers it should be an indubitable principle that whatever wars against God's Law is sin and by nature mortal.



**John Calvin (1509-64)**

For where there is transgression of the Law there is sin and death."<sup>167</sup>

<sup>166</sup> Binchy, D. A. "The Old-Irish Table of Penitential Commutations" *Ériu*, Vol. 19 (1962); 59.

<sup>167</sup> Calvin, John *Calvin's Commentaries on the New Testament: Volume 5* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1961); *en loc.*

Yet the Reformers also read their Bibles, and in doing so also recognized a certain gradation of sin, not least in the distinction between “*not unto death*” and “*unto death*” in I John 5:16-17. Refusing to go down the path of trivializing sins by calling them venial, or even the attempt to determine when any particular sin crosses the line into the ‘mortal’ category, they still had to wrestle with the taxonomy of I John 5:16. With Calvin, however, all Protestant exegesis of the text,



**Irvin A. Busenitz (b. 1947)**

and others similar, begins with the principle that *all* sins are by definition mortal: “*the wages of sin is death.*” But from there great divergence occurred as to the meaning of the *sin unto death*. Irv Busenitz summarizes the major interpretive conclusions among Protestant commentators: (1) the sin against the Holy Spirit, (2) any great sin, such as murder or adultery, (3) rejection of Christ as Messiah, (4) deliberate and willful sins, (5) apostasy, and (6) post-baptismal sins.<sup>168</sup> His analysis of the various historical positions regarding the identity of the *sin unto death* is thorough and informative, but his conclusion that it refers to “habitual and continual sinning of a professing brother” is not convincing.<sup>169</sup> From a pastoral perspective, from which John was undoubtedly writing, it is very difficult to determine at what point a believer’s struggle with a particular sin crosses the line into ‘habitual’ and therefore’ *the sin unto death*.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the language John uses in this passage is what the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church concerning the man guilty of sleeping with his father’s wife. Neither the offender, nor the congregation as a whole, seemed disturbed by this sin, an “*immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles.*”<sup>170</sup> Paul is as distressed over the apathy of the community to such a

<sup>168</sup> Busenitz, Irvin A. “The Sin Unto Death” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, Spring 1990; 19.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*; 27.

<sup>170</sup> I Corinthians 5:1

horrible sin as he over the sin itself. If the congregation will not pass judgment, he will.

*And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

(I Corinthians 5:2-5)

The terminology between the Johanine and the Pauline passages are by no means the same, and perhaps not even similar. However, there is a common gravity between *sin unto death* for which a believer is not to pray, and *handing over to Satan* as a judgment for a believer's sin. As a brief side note, the lexical and contextual evidence supports the conclusion that in both cases the offender was a member of the congregation, ostensibly a professing brother. In the Corinthian case, the arrogance of the congregation apparently reflects the arrogance of the sinner, and the judgment of the apostle is certainly a far cry from 'pray for him.' Some have concluded from this that the lack of repentance, or perhaps even acknowledgement of sin, lies at the heart of the *sin unto death*. Guy Woods concludes in his commentary on I John, "The sin unto death is thus a disposition of heart, a perverseness of attitude and an unwillingness of mind to acknowledge one's sin and from it turn away."<sup>171</sup> Though few commentators take note of it, the description of the *sin unto death* for which the community is *not* to intercede does sound much like the high-handed sin of Numbers 15. Common to both is an arrogance in the face of God, an unwillingness to submit to the law of God or to His discipline. Within either the



**Guy N. Woods (1908-93)**

<sup>171</sup> Quoted by Jerry Townsend, "The Sin Unto Death" *Restoration Quarterly*, 1962; 150.

congregation of Israel in the wilderness or the community of faith in Corinth or Ephesus, this willfulness and militant arrogance of sinning can only be cancerous, and eventually fatal, to the integrity and holiness of the community. As the *high-handed sin* was given no means of atonement, the *sin unto death* is given no means of intercession.

One important point remains in this discussion: how does the congregation recognize when the *sin unto death* has been committed? It is clearly implied in John's epistle that the community would know when the sin was *not unto death* and when it was, so that it could order its intercessory prayer accordingly. The association between the 'high-handed' sin and the 'sin unto death' cannot be dogmatic, but as the former represents an irremediable offense to both God and the congregation, the latter seems to as well. Sklar writes, "the person who sins with a high hand is doing so defiantly as one who has completely rejected the covenant Lord himself. In short, it is the defiant sin of an apostate that is in view, sin for which no sacrificial atonement is possible." As a study of I John 5:16 is only ancillary to our study of Leviticus, we may leave the matter provisionally with a wise and pastoral word from Calvin.

But again it may be asked by what indications we know that a man's fall is fatal. For unless we could know this certainly, there would have been no point in the apostle making the exception that they were not to pray for a sin of this sort. Therefore, it is right sometimes to determine whether the fallen is without hope or whether there is still room for remedy. That indeed, I allow to be true, and it is evident beyond controversy from this passage. But as this very rarely happens, and as God commends to us the infinite riches of His grace and bids us follow His example in being merciful, the judgment of eternal death must not be rashly levelled against anyone. On the contrary, love should dispose us to hope well. Yet if the ungodliness of some does not seem otherwise than hopeless to us, as if the Lord had pointed it out with His finger, we should not content against the just judgment of God or seek to be more merciful than He is.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Calvin; *en loc.*

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "If a person commits a trespass, and sins unintentionally in regard to the holy things of the LORD, then he shall bring to the LORD as his trespass offering a ram without blemish from the flocks, with your valuation in shekels of silver according to the shekel of the sanctuary, as a trespass offering. And he shall make restitution for the harm that he has done in regard to the holy thing, and shall add one-fifth to it and give it to the priest. So the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering, and it shall be forgiven him.*  
(5:14-16)

The marker "*the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,*" tells us that we are at a new section in the description of sins and sacrifices here in Leviticus. The transition is subtle, as seemingly the only difference between the guilt or trespass offering (the *asham* – אֲשָׁם), is the addition of a monetary remuneration or compensation not found in any of the other sacrifices. The offense dealt with under this classification of sacrifices is such as causes loss, measurable in financial terms – "*in silver by shekels*" – first against the LORD Himself (5:14-16) and later against a fellow Israelite (6:2-7). The middle passage, 5:17-19, is somewhat more difficult of exegesis and may be merely a reiteration of 5:14-16 for emphasis. The sacrifice differs from the sin-offering only in the specie: a ram is to be slaughtered as the guilt- or trespass-offering, similar to the sin-offering demanded of the *nisi* (cp. 4:23).

The offense in the first section of the guilt offerings is, as were the ones before, unintentional. To this, however, is added the description, "*unfaithfully,*" – the Hebrew word is *ma'al* (מַעַל) which most consistently signifies sacrilege. "Altogether it appears forty-four times in Scripture. That it refers to sacrilege is demonstrated by its antonym 'sanctify,' as in 'you committed sacrilege (*me'altem*) against me...you did not sanctify (*qiddastem*) me' (Deut. 32:51)."<sup>173</sup> In the current passage this is confirmed by the mention of "*the LORD's holy things*" – *m'qadesh* YHWH (מִקְדָּשׁ יְהוָה) – against which the person has offended. Keil & Delitzsch interpret the 'holy things' as "the holy gifts, sacrifices, first-fruits, tithes, etc. which were to be offered to Jehovah, and were assigned by Him to the priests for

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<sup>173</sup> Milgrom; 345.

their revenue.”<sup>174</sup> Thus the Israelite was defrauding both the priest and the LORD in failing to honor YHWH with the required gifts. That this was done unintentionally probably means the offender was unaware that the gift was due, or of the proper valuation of the gift that he did bring, it apparently being too low. His penalty was first, to rectify the situation by presenting the proper gift “according to your valuation in silver by shekels” as the NASB renders it. Second, he is to “add to it a fifth part,” – essentially a 20% interest payment on the neglected gift. Finally, because even if unintentional the offender bears his guilt, he must offer the guilt offering of “a ram without defect.” This does not necessarily indicate the order in which these things were done; it is likely that the offender brought all three elements of the guilt offering to the priest at the same time.

This particular category of guilt offering indicates the importance of the maintenance of the tabernacle, which was assigned to the priests. Jehovah made it quite clear in the distribution of the Promised Land that He had selected the Levites in lieu of the firstborn of each Israelite – one tribe to stand in for the firstborn from every family of all the other tribes.

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel. So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.” Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD.”*

(Numbers 3:5-13)

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<sup>174</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 313.



Indeed, when the enumeration was done in the Wilderness, the difference between the census of firstborn from the other tribes, and the census of Levite males, was balanced by monetary payment from the other tribes.

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the LORD. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites, you shall take five shekels for each one individually; you shall take them in the currency of the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of twenty gerahs. And you shall give the money, with which the excess number of them is redeemed, to Aaron and his sons."*  
(Numbers 3:44-48)

In the days of Nehemiah, after the return of some of Israel from Babylon, the governor found that the sin mentioned here in Leviticus 5:15-16 was quite rampant, and it grieved his heart. He considered remediation of this problem to be an act of worship to the LORD, though no mention is made of the guilt offering.

*I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field. So I contended with the rulers, and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their place. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!*  
(Nehemiah 13:10-14)

It is evident from these background passages that the care of the tabernacle service, and the economic maintenance of the Levites for that purpose, was of primary importance to the LORD. It may be that the 'holy things of the LORD' were neglected out of ignorance, but the passage makes it again clear that ignorance in no way exonerated the offender, *"If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD, though*

*he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.*"<sup>175</sup> The form of the sacrifice, essentially identical to the sin offering, is such that the largest portion of the slaughtered animal was reserved to the priests as food. Perhaps the Apostle Paul has this sacrificial recompense in mind when he writes to Timothy, "*For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages.*"<sup>176</sup>

*If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity. And he shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him regarding his ignorance in which he erred and did not know it, and it shall be forgiven him. It is a trespass offering; he has certainly trespassed against the LORD.*

(5:17-19)

The similarity of these verses with 4:27ff, part of the sin offering paradigm, has presented what is perhaps an insurmountable interpretive difficulty in identifying just what type of offense is described here. Here the sacrificial animal is a ram; there a female goat or lamb (4:28, 32). But both sacrifices are in reference to "*things which the LORD has commanded not to be done,*" though the phrasing is slightly different between the two descriptive verses. No mention is made of remuneration, as opposed to the guilt offering described in 5:15-16 and the one described in 6:2-7. The absence of this facet of the guilt offering is a mystery, not solved by such statements as from Keil & Delitzsch, "but no compensation is mentioned, probably because the violation of right, which consisted in the transgression of one of the commands of God, was of such a kind as not to allow of material compensation."<sup>177</sup> This overlooks the anomaly of 5:17-19 standing, without compensation, in between two guilt offerings in which both compensation and penalty are incurred.

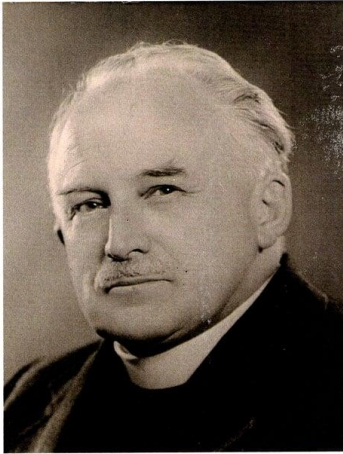
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<sup>175</sup> Leviticus 5:17

<sup>176</sup> I Timothy 5:18

<sup>177</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 314-15.

Ellicott's Commentary surmises that verses 17-19 reiterate the gravity of the offense, even if the offender is not aware that he has done wrong. "To guard



**Norman H. Snaith (1898-1982)**

the Israelites most effectually against making profane use of anything dedicated to the sanctuary and its service, it is here further enacted in verses 17-19, that a trespass offering is to be brought when a man only suspects that he had used things which belonged to the Lord, though he can no longer remember what particular holy property it was, which he used for his own purpose."<sup>178</sup> The sacrifice of 5:17-19 is often termed the 'Suspended Guilt Offering,' as the cause of the offense is unknown. Norman Snaith comments, "The man does not know whether he has broken a negative commandment or not, and thus does not know whether or not he has deprived God (and the priests) of his (their) rights. He may never know; indeed it is more than likely that he never will know. But in case he has committed an offense and made some one incur loss, he brings the proper אֲשָׁם (*asham*) guilt-offering, the ram. He cannot make any monetary reparation, because nobody can say what this ought to be, or indeed if any at all is required."<sup>179</sup> Snaith references as a biblical example, Job's provisional sacrifice for his sons and daughters, though the sacrifice that Job offered was the burnt offering.

*So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did regularly.* (Job 1:5)

<sup>178</sup> Ellicott; 356.

<sup>179</sup> Snaith, N. H. "Sin-Offering and Guilt-Offering" *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 15, Fasc. 1 (Jan., 1965); 78-79.

It has been surmised that such an offering as in Leviticus 5:17-19) would be brought if the person felt an undefined guilt, or was enduring unusual suffering or illness. Perhaps the prayer of Psalm 19 was used before or during this particular offering.

*Who can understand his errors?*

*Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;*

*Let them not have dominion over me.*

*Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of <sup>the</sup> great transgression.*

(Psalm 19:12-13)

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "If a person sins and commits a trespass against the LORD by lying to his neighbor about what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or about a pledge, or about a robbery, or if he has extorted from his neighbor, or if he has found what was lost and lies concerning it, and swears falsely—in any one of these things that a man may do in which he sins: then it shall be, because he has sinned and is guilty, that he shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing which he has extorted, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering. And he shall bring his trespass offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering, to the priest. So the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any one of these things that he may have done in which he trespasses."* (6:1-7)

We note again that these verses are appended to Leviticus 5 in the Hebrew Bible, as they continue the discourse on the guilt or trespass offering. Several things are significant about the offenses noted in these verses as compared to those that have gone before. First, there is no pretense of 'unintentional' sin here; the sins are committed knowingly and, it would appear, quite maliciously. Second, the offenses are specifically those against one's fellow Israelite, though such an offense remains an unfaithful act against the LORD (*cp.* 6:2). This class of offenses highlights the interchangeability between the two 'greatest commandments.' The guilt-offerings associated with the holy things devoted to the LORD, whether unintentionally (5:14-16) or even in complete ignorance (5:17-19) represent fraudulent behavior Godward, and as He is represented by His priests. The guilt-offerings discussed in these verses retain their Godward

character, but are outwardly oriented to and committed against fellow Israelites. Thus “*you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength*” is paralleled by “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

With respect to the sacrifices outlined in Leviticus, the guilt-offering does appear to be a subset of the sin-offering. Certainly the methodology of sacrifice was similar, as was the disposition of the sacrificial remnants. Firm distinctions or definitions are problematic, as the criteria that seems to apply in one location (*i.e.*, Leviticus 5) does not pertain in others. For instance, it is a guilt-offering that is required of the Nazarite who inadvertently violates his vow through contact with a corpse (*cp.* Numbers 6:12), “though the violation of his vow involves no material damage whatever.”<sup>180</sup> The guilt-offering is also required of the leper, yet without any reparation (*cp.* Leviticus 14:12). The terminology is perhaps too interchangeable to permit firm distinctions of classification. Still, within the context of the sin- and guilt-offerings of Leviticus 4-5 (6:7), the most apparent distinction between the two is the incorporation of *reparations* to the guilt-offering. Snaith, then, is reasonable in his summary, “Our view is that the difference between the two terms is that the sin-offering is concerned with unwitting offenses, whilst the guilt offering is concerned with offenses where damage has been done and loss incurred, which in most cases can be assessed.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Saydon; 394.

<sup>181</sup> Snaith; 73.

**Week 8                    The Command of the Offerings: The Fire on the Altar****Text Reading:            Leviticus 6:8 - 13**

*“The ashes on the altar represent the encounter between the person,  
who is transient, temporary, and always changing,  
and the presence of God,  
which is constant and immutable.”  
(Jonathan Grossman)*

Again we encounter the telltale marker of pericope in *Vayikra*: “*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying...*” Only the distinction here in 6:8 is the intended audience of the LORD’s words. Instead of a nondescript directive to Moses, subsequently found to be in regard to the congregation of Israel and its members, here we have the specific, “*Command Aaron and his sons...*” Again in 6:24, “*Speak to Aaron and to his sons...*” with the clear shift away from the Aaronic priesthood coming in 7:22-23, “*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel...’*” Thus we not only know that we have entered a new section in 6:8, we have a completely new perspective on the ongoing theme of the sacrificial ritual of the tabernacle. Up to this point the entire emphasis has been on the manner in which various sacrifices were to be brought before the LORD by the different parts of the assembly, and for different reasons, with the priesthood performing an auxiliary role. Now the priests come front and center, making Leviticus 6:8 through 7:21 the most (and arguably the only) ‘Levitical’ section of the book, and even in that the focus is entirely on one family among the Levites: the family of Aaron.

Thus the section of *Vayikra* before us here is a change of perspective. The sacrificial offerings noted in this pericope are the same as we have investigated in the previous section, beginning in Leviticus 1, but are now entirely viewed from the viewpoint of the officiating priest, the Aaronic priest who serves at the altar. This, then, is the office of the ministry of the tabernacle reserved for the Aaronic family of the tribe of Levi.

*In the tabernacle of meeting, outside the veil which is before the Testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening until morning before the LORD. It shall be a statute forever to their generations on behalf of the children of Israel.* (Exodus 27:21)

Before diving into the exegesis of the passage, we should note that such passages as these are often used to justify the reincarnation of the priesthood within professedly Christian churches and denominations. Though the word 'priest' is never used in the New Testament except in reference to all believers, one abiding impact of the Old Testament, Mosaic dispensation is the legacy of a priesthood – a select group within the Church that stands in a mediatorial role between the 'laity' and God, and vice versa. This presents a unique exegetical and interpretive challenge from Leviticus 6:8 and following, to those Protestants who reject the notion of a unique priesthood (sadly, not all Protestant denominations have abjured the title 'priest'), as to how to not only interpret this section of *Vayikra*, but how also to apply it to the life of the Church today. This passage definitely lives up to the Greek/Latin derived title for the book: *Leviticus*.

Transitioning, then, from a congregationally-oriented treatment of the sacrifices, both General and Particular, to a priestly-oriented reiteration of the same sacrifices (though is a slightly modified order, as we shall see), the first thing that comes to our attention is the word that the LORD uses for what He has to say to Aaron and his sons: *Command*. The beginning of the book emphasizes the free-will aspect of the General sacrifices, "When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD..." But here the word to Moses is "Command Aaron and his sons..." This is a significant shift in emphasis, in keeping with the phrase consistently uses in this section to describe the mechanics, so to speak, of offering: "This is the law..." The word is the familiar *torah* (תּוֹרָה) and at its most basic level means 'to teach.' It is evident, though, that the way it is being used in Leviticus 6:8 through 7:21 goes beyond mere instruction, as the *torah* was

uniquely the property of the priests to begin with.<sup>182</sup> Thus the use of this word from God to the priests must indicate that the law-teaching priesthood had itself a law to follow, the 'law' of the various sacrifices. This paradigm then forms the opposite of what is contained in the first section of *Vayikra*, where the priest was the assistant, so to speak, as well as the mediator on behalf of the Israelite – participating in the sacrificial ritual and seeing to the proper disposition of both the blood and the carcass. Here, however, the role of the priest is viewed from the tabernacle, rather than toward it. For it is Yahweh from the midst of the tabernacle who *commands to Aaron and his sons*.

Two principles can be derived from these observations. The first is the role of ministry in the midst of the congregation. The second is the well-known 'Regulative Principle.' Though Christian theologians have by no means been uniform in their interpretation of these biblical realities, there is little denying the substance of each here in *Vayikra*. The first is, of course, problematic in light of the Protestant rejection of a mediatorial priesthood now that Christ the High Priest has presented His own blood "*once for all*." Just as the animal sacrifices have ceased in light of the perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God, many have considered the concept of 'every member ministry' and the 'priesthood of believers' to positively preclude any ministerial stratum within the congregation. Yet the fallacy of this perspective derives from not realizing that Israel was also (or was supposed to be) "*a kingdom of priests*" to their God.

*And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."* (Exodus 19:3-6)

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<sup>182</sup> Cp. Deuteronomy 17:8-11; 33:10



The explanation of this conundrum – a family of priests within a kingdom of priests – is quite applicable to ministry in the Christian Church. The family of priests, what we typically associate with the word ‘priest’ in the Old Testament, was indeed the unique tribe and family (Levi and Aaron) whose responsibility it was alone to serve Yahweh in His tabernacle.

*Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.* (Numbers 18:20-23)

This was the priesthood *within* Israel, but Israel herself was a priest to the world. The role of witness through obedience is woven throughout the Old Testament as no less a ministry from Israel to the world as that of the priesthood to the tabernacle. Deuteronomy 4 is a classic statement of the ministerial, perhaps even mediatorial, role of Israel.

*Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?’* (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

This paradigm of double ministry continues, though changed, in the Church. There is no mediatorial tribe or family within the Church, and none should adopt the title ‘priest’ if for no other reason than to avoid the error of continued mediation between believers and God. Yet the manner of the

priesthood under the Old Covenant does speak to the manner of ministry in the Church, and there remains a 'right way' and a 'wrong way' to perform the function of God's ministry in His Church. Since the Reformation, and especially along the Reformed wing of Protestantism, that 'right way' has typically been discussed under the rubric of the 'Regulative Principle.'

The basic definition of the Regulative Principle as it has been taught within Reformed ecclesiology is, that only that which has positive warrant from Scripture may be accepted as true worship and true liturgy, and not the 'will-worship' that Paul condemns in Colossians 2:23. Simply put, with regard to the liturgy of the assembly, that which is not *prescribed* in Scripture is thereby *prohibited*. To be sure, this principle has been largely rejected by professing Christianity throughout the ages, with most churches viewing the freedom and guidance of the Holy Spirit as the basis for liturgical decisions. This was Luther's view, over against Calvin's adherence to the Regulative Principle. Luther maintained the opposite: that which is not *expressly prohibited* in the worship of God is thereby *permitted*. The argument will not be settled in this study of the *torah* of sacrifice here in *Vayikra*, but what we encounter here ought to inform our thoughts and decisions regarding 'acceptable' worship. As will be graphically illustrated in the case of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, God takes very seriously the manner in which His worship is performed, "*By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.*"<sup>183</sup>

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Command Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the burnt offering...'* (6:8-9a)

This section of the book is set apart, as noted above, by the unique reference of the word of the LORD specifically toward Aaron and his sons. While the entire tribe of Levi was set apart for the ministry of the tabernacle, only the family of Aaron furnished the priests, those who *ministered before the LORD* in the

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<sup>183</sup> Leviticus 10:3

tabernacle and later the Temple. In the current pericope, the General and Particular sacrifices from the first section of *Vayikra* are reiterated from the perspective of the proper manner in which the Aaronic priesthood was to perform its duties. With the significant exception of 6:19-23, which deals with the anointing of a priest and the sacrifices due on that occasion, the pericope from 6:8 to 7:21 deals with the very same sacrifices as in 1:1 to 6:7, only from the viewpoint of the ministering priest. This section closes in 7:22 with both the classic marker, *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,”* coupled with a different audience, *“Speak to the sons of Israel...”*

The sacrifices that were dealt with from the perspective of the offerer are here rearranged just slightly, with the peace offering coming last instead of third as it was in the earlier section. Otherwise the order remains: burnt offering...grain offering, sin offering, guilt offering...peace offering. The harmony of these two sections is as follows:

<u>Offering</u>	<u>Instructions to Offerer</u>	<u>Command to Aaron</u>
Burnt	1:1 - 17	6:8 - 13 (6:1-6) <sup>184</sup>
Grain	2:1 - 16	6:14 - 18 (6:7-16)
Consecration	N/A	6:19 - 23 (6:12-16)
Peace	3:1 - 17	7:11 - 21
Sin	4:1 - 5:13	6:24 - 30 (6:17-23)
Guilt	5:14 - 6:7 (5:14-26)	7:1 - 10

The consecration command, roughly in the middle of the list, indicates beyond doubt that this particular section pertains to the priesthood. Though the offering of consecration or anointing was not mentioned previously (nor should it have been, since all of the offerings previously treated had reference primarily to members of the congregation and not to the priests), it is brought in here because the *torah* of sacrifice, directed solely to the Aaronic priests, had also to

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<sup>184</sup> References to the Hebrew Bible in parentheses.

include their initiating sacrifice. Its location between two General sacrifices and two Particular sacrifices, will be dealt with in its location.

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Command Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the burnt offering: The burnt offering shall be on the hearth upon the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it. And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen trousers he shall put on his body, and take up the ashes of the burnt offering which the fire has consumed on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar. Then he shall take off his garments, put on other garments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. A fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.* (6:8-13)

This passage actually cuts to the very heart of the sacrificial ritual, showing what was of the essence of acceptable worship in the tabernacle: *fire*. We have already seen that the burnt offering, the *olah* (עֹלָה), was the primary offering of the tabernacle system, as it was even in the pre-Mosaic era and appears to have been also in Ancient Near Eastern religious practice in general. What is significant here is that the mechanics of the offering - the disposition of the carcass on the altar - are not mentioned. What is mentioned is the *fire* that is not to be extinguished on the altar. Coordinate with this emphasis on the fire is the disposition of the ashes.

It has long been a conundrum with regard to the Old Testament sacrifices, that though the blood of the sacrificial victim was an undeniably central feature of the sacrifices themselves, there were notable exceptions of bloodless sacrifices, particularly the grain and wine offerings. One might easily understand bloodless offerings with regard to the *peace* offering, but the grain offering was permitted as a *sin* offering should the one



**Christian A. Eberhart**

bringing the offering have insufficient means to procure one of the acceptable animals. Christian Eberhart, Director of the Religious Studies Program at the

University of Houston, points out that the perennial focus on the blood of the sacrifices has often caused exegetes to miss one procedural aspect of the ritual that was common to each and all: the *burning*. Early in his article entitled, “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar,” Eberhart summarizes his conclusion before presenting his arguments, “Indeed, it is the burning rite that accomplishes the goal of biblical sacrifice – namely, communication with God.”<sup>185</sup> Before investigating Eberhart’s claims, it is important to note the emphasis placed on the fire upon the altar in the opening remarks of the ‘commands’ from the LORD to Aaron and his sons, the officiating priesthood.

“...and the fire on the altar is to be kept burning on it.” (6:9b)

“And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it, not to go out...” (6:12a)

“Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar, it is not to go out.” (6:13)

As with the description of the offerings from the perspective of the offerer, here in the ‘law of the offering’ we find some aspect of the fire ritual to be common to all sacrifices mentioned. Addressing the concern that blood was not an integral part of every sacrifice, Eberhart writes, “To solve this problem, I suggest that we look at a different ritual element shared by all five types of sacrifices above: *the burning of the sacrificial material on the altar.*”<sup>186</sup>

We need not conclude, and Eberhart does not conclude, that the blood of the sacrifices was of no importance, or even little importance, compared to the fire on the altar. But he makes a strong case that the absolute confirmation of the sacrifice, its acceptance by God, was not at the shedding of blood but by the burning on the altar. We have already seen that it was the burning that produced that *sweet savor* or *aroma* (רִיחַ־נִיחֹיִם) pleasing to the LORD and so clearly the successful conclusion of the offering. What is significant about Eberhart’s

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<sup>185</sup> Eberhart, Christian A. “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar” *Harvard Theological Review* Oct. 2004; 485.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*; 489. *Italics* original.

observations is the fact that this fire upon the altar was to be perpetual; it was not to be allowed to go out. The reason for this become apparent later in *Vayikra*, though not until Chapter 9, where we read that the original fire of the tabernacle altar came from Yahweh Himself.

*And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.* (Leviticus 9:23-24)

The original fire on the altar came from the LORD, and it was the same fire



from the altar that leapt forth to consume Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, for failing to honor Yahweh and the 'law of the sacrifice.' Eberhart maintains, with good reason, that the biblical evidence shows that it is the fire that consumes the sacrifice that signals its acceptance by God, in that it signifies the 'consumption' of the sacrificial meal by Yahweh. "Thus, it is the burning that effects the approach to God...According to this interpretation, *the burning rite determines whether any cultic ritual qualifies as an 'offering for God.'* It is, therefore, the constitutive element of a sacrifice."<sup>187</sup> This is because, as leading Hebrew scholar Jonathan Grossman notes, the fire from the LORD signifies the consumption of the sacrificial meal by Yahweh, the One who is both Host and Primary Guest. "However, in the case of the burnt offering, the sacrifice is entirely consumed on the altar. Therefore, the instructions for the burnt offering focus on the 'mouth' that consumes them – the fire of God that consumes them on the altar...As the Sages say in several places:

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*; 491. *Italics original.*

‘The Torah talks about two kinds of eating: the person eating, and the altar ‘eating.’”<sup>188</sup>

Grossman speaks of the disposition of the ashes, which is both a significant feature of the ‘law of the burnt offering’ and a component part to the significance of the burning on the altar to each and every sacrifice. In his article, “Taking Up and Taking Out: Constancy and Change on the Altar,” Grossman notes that the daily cleaning (‘taking up’) of the ashes from the altar is linked to the perpetuity of the fire upon the altar, fueled both the wood laid upon the fire by the priests and the offerings maintained there day and night. This language of burning through the night indicates that the burnt offering referred to in this passage is not the burnt offering of Leviticus 1, the burnt offering brought as a freewill offering by the Israelite. Rather this is the *Tamid*, the daily burnt offering of the morning and evening, and in particular the evening one as it is to remain burning through the night. “However, the formulation: ‘It is the burnt offering, which shall be burning on the hearth on the altar all night until morning’ is more fitting for the burnt offering that is brought regularly and burnt throughout the night – the daily *Tamid* offering.”<sup>189</sup> The *Tamid* offering is not mentioned explicitly in Leviticus; it is found in Exodus 29,

*Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. With the one lamb shall be one-tenth of an ephah of flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of pressed oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering. And the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; and you shall offer with it the grain offering and the drink offering, as in the morning, for a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the LORD. This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you.*  
(Exodus 29:38-42)

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<sup>188</sup> Grossman, Jonathan “Taking Up and Taking Out the Ashes: Constancy and Change on the Altar” *Tradition* 54:2 (Spring 2022); 168.

<sup>189</sup> Grossman, Jonathan “Taking Up and Taking Out: Constancy and Change on the Altar” *Tradition* (Rabbinic Council of America), 54:2 (2022); 151.

The procedure for ‘taking up and taking out’ the ashes is set forth in detail as well as parallelism in verses 10 & 11 (3 & 4 of the Hebrew Bible) of Leviticus 7. The notable feature is the change of garments required of the priest prior to taking out the ashes to a ‘clean place’ outside the camp.

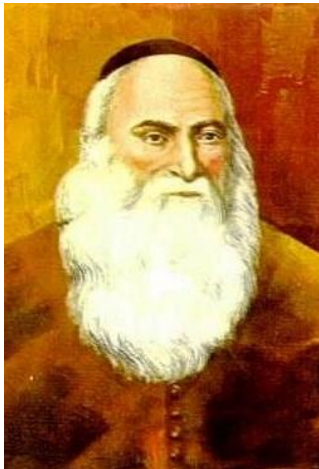
**(10) Taking Up the Ashes**

*And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen trousers he shall put on his body, and take up the ashes of the burnt offering which the fire has consumed on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar.*

**(11) Taking Out the Ashes**

*Then he shall take off his garments, put on other garments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place.*

Grossman points out that there has been perennial disagreement among rabbinic scholars as to whether the ‘taking out’ portion of the commandment was



**Abarbanel (1437-1598)**

required every day, or only when the ash heap grew large. However, there is universal agreement that the ‘taking up’ of the ashes was to be done each and every morning so that the fire of the altar would not be smothered by the accumulated ashes. A simple reading of the text would indicate that the two phases of the disposal of the ashes was done each morning, and that the division of the process into two phases is due to the garment issue: the priest was not to wear his

holy garments outside the tabernacle. “If the priest wanted to take up the ashes and take them immediately outside of the camp, he would make one of two mistakes: Either he would take out the ashes in honorable garments, or he would take up the ashes in inferior garments, and either of these would be far from the Divine intention.”<sup>190</sup> Sklar notes in his commentary on Leviticus that “The need for a continual altar fire is emphasized by a chiasm, with the outer frames

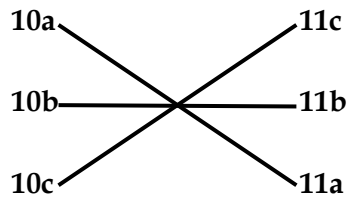
<sup>190</sup> Abarbanel, *Leviticus 6*; quoted by Grossman; 156.



requiring it and the inner frame explaining how it is done.”<sup>191</sup> As with most parallelism in literature, a picture is worth a thousand words. The instructions concerning the removal of the ashes from the altar is in the classic chiasmic (Greek letter Chi,  $\chi$ ). This parallel structure is enclosed by an almost verbatim repetition of the command that the altar fire be kept burning perpetually.

- 9b** *the fire on the altar is to be kept burning on it*  
**10a** *the priest is to put on his linen garments*  
**10b** *the priest is to take up the ashes from the altar*  
**10c** *the ashes are deposited beside the altar*  
**11a** *the priest is to change his garments*  
**11b** *the priest is to take out the ashes*  
**11c** *to a clean place outside the camp*  
**12a** *And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it.*

Thus the center section regarding the disposition of the ashes has the following structure:



The essential meaning of this ritual of the ashes and of the fire is twofold. The first aspect is the sanctity of the altar, before which the priest was required to wear special, sacramental garments. Like the incense burned in the incense altar of the outer tent, which formulation was never to be blended for common household use, so also the garment of the priest was never to be worn outside the tabernacle. This concept has been adopted by many in both Catholicism and Protestantism to signify the need for the preacher to wear special garments when in the pulpit, but as the preacher is not a mediating priest, this practice does not find legitimacy in Leviticus 6. Rather it seems that the proper take-away is not in

<sup>191</sup> Sklar, *Leviticus*; 191.

physical garments but in recognizing the honor and dignity of the pulpit, though not as an altar. Perhaps there is no harm in wearing ecclesiastical robes in the pulpit, but there may be the danger of slipping into a practical priesthood of the preacher, elevating him to a mediatorial position that he does not biblically hold.

The second aspect of meaning in this 'law of the burnt offering' takes us back to the significance of the fire on the altar, and the requirement that it never be allowed to go out. As noted above, this fire was the progeny of the original fire kindled by the LORD himself at the consecration of the tabernacle (*cp.* Lev. 29:23-24). The perpetual burning of the fire on the altar was the continued presence of this initial divine fire (the same fire that would leap out from the altar and consume Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, recorded in Leviticus 10). The fire on the altar was to be maintained, but never lit anew, as it signified the continual presence of Yahweh in the tabernacle, amidst His people. Grossman points out how the connection between the priestly function of maintaining the fire and the divine original of the same fire, indicates both the change and the constancy of the altar ministry.

The first part, which describes gathering the ashes that accumulated the previous day on the altar and clearing them off the altar, reflects the approach that each day begins a new journey on the altar. A sacrifice from yesterday cannot be offered today...In contrast, the second part, which describes the continuous fire, expresses an opposing approach: On the same perpetual fire, all sacrifices are continually offered. Wood should be brought to feed the existing flame, but the fire should never be lit anew. The fire does not cease, and from the moment that it was brought down on the eighth day of the consecration of the Tabernacle, the fire has continued to consume the sacrifices...The Divine revelation that is represented by the fire is unchanging and eternal. God is present in this place all the time, day and night; it does not matter what day we are talking about. In contrast, the person, who brings the sacrifice and brings the flesh for the offering, is a new and different book each day.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Grossman; 163.

There is, however, an exegetical difficulty in regard to the perpetual fire on the altar. When the Israelites moved camp, the tabernacle was disassembled by the Levites, and the fire, it seems, was extinguished.

*Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth, and cover it with a covering of badger skins; and they shall insert its poles. Then they shall take all the utensils of service with which they minister in the sanctuary, put them in a blue cloth, cover them with a covering of badger skins, and put them on a carrying beam. Also they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it.* (Numbers 4:11-13)

Although the text does not say that the fire was extinguished, the placing of a purple cloth over it seems to necessitate that the fire was put out. However, as Grossman notes, "there is a position in rabbinic literature that the fire was not put out, even when traveling."<sup>193</sup> The more conventional interpretation among the rabbis is that the daily fire was initiated by the priests as soon as the tabernacle was set up in a new camp, and its continual maintenance day and night *symbolically* represents the divine fire from the original consecration. But this solution does not fit with the 'perpetual' nature of the fire on the altar, for any interruption of the burning would break the perpetuity of the fire, and this seems to be categorically prohibited by the 'law of the burnt offering' in Leviticus 6. With no further evidence as to the disposition of the fire when the congregation traveled, it seems both more reasonable and safer to conclude that the fire was preserved from camp to camp, if perhaps in a separate vessel, so that the tabernacle fire would indeed remain perpetual.

What is the meaning of this perpetual fire to the Church? Perhaps there is an allusion to the concept of a continual fire burning with the 'lampstand' motif in the letters to the churches in the Revelation. Though the reference is not to the altar, the idea of removing the lampstand from these churches - universally understood as the removal of the Holy Spirit from their midst in a manner similar to the vision of the departing glory in Ezekiel - is comparable to

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*; 164.

permitting the fire to go out on the altar. The difference, however, is that in the case of the tabernacle altar fire, the priests were not to let it be extinguished; in the case of the churches in Revelation, the apostasy was growing so pervasive that the Lord himself threatened to come and remove their lampstand. It would seem that, if there is any New Testament counterpart to the perpetual fire on the altar, its violation was already setting in before the lampstand would be removed.

Combining the command that the fire be kept burning on the altar perpetually with the historical record that the altar fire was first lit by God himself, one's thoughts go to Pentecost, and the 'tongues as if fire' that descended on the believers gathered in the upper room. This was the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God, the third advent of the *Shekinah* coming down upon the new temple of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. The analogy of

fire continues with reference to the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle Paul admonishes the church at Thessalonica, "Do not quench the Spirit."<sup>194</sup> The word translated 'quench' is of the same root family as 'fire' in Leviticus 6, confirming the standard interpretation of Paul's exhortation as putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit. A. T. Robertson, in his classic *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, comments, "Some of them [*i.e.*, the



**A. T. Robertson (1863-1934)**

Thessalonians] were trying to put out the fire of the Holy Spirit, probably the special gifts of the Holy Spirit as verse 20 means...Today, as then, there are two extremes about spiritual gifts (cold indifference or wild excess). It is not hard to put out the fire of spiritual fervor and power."<sup>195</sup> Robertson does not tie this passage in I Thessalonians to the perpetual fire on the altar of Leviticus 6, but the analogy between the two is worth consideration. Perhaps Kurtz best summarizes

<sup>194</sup> I Thessalonians 5:19

<sup>195</sup> Robertson, A. T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV* (Nashville: Broadman Press;1931); *en loc.*

both the reason for the perpetual fire and its on-going significance for the Church as he connects the physical fire on the altar with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

But that fire, by which the sacrificial gift was appropriated to God in a refined and transfigured form, was not ordinary fire. It was *holy* fire: the very same which came out from God in connection with Aaron's first sacrificial service, and consumed the sacrifice, and which was henceforth *never* to be allowed to go out, that its character as fire of divine origin might be sustained. The refining and sanctifying power of which this fire was the symbol, was a power proceeding not from man but from God - the power of the Holy Ghost, which dwelt in the congregation, the fire-spirit of the law, which was proclaimed in fire on Sinai, and burned into the hearts with a fiery glow, whose fundamental idea is the commandment, 'Be ye holy, for I am holy.'<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Kurtz; 155.

**Week 9                    The Command of the Offerings: The Grain Offering****Text Reading:            Leviticus 6:14 - 23**

*“The priesthood of the Aaronites in relation to Israel,  
was similar to that of Israel in relation to the heathen.”*  
(J. H. Kurtz)

The *torah*, (תּוֹרָה) or ‘instruction,’ of the offerings which Moses is directed by the LORD to deliver to Aaron and his sons, reminds us of the central and critical role played by the priesthood in the tabernacle and, later, the Temple in Jerusalem. This series of commands is followed closely, in Leviticus 8-10, with the consecration of the priesthood for the service of the tabernacle. In order to understand the instructions, then, it is worth taking some time to understand the priesthood – its nature and its purpose. Such an inquiry is made even more necessary when one considers the development of a clerical ministry within the history of the Christian Church, leading to another ‘priesthood’ in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Even among Protestants who refuse to use the title ‘priest,’ there has been a strong tendency toward clerical vestments (robes, collars, etc.) that also derive from the distinctive dress of the Aaronic priesthood. There can be little argument with the historical reality that vestiges (and often much more than mere vestiges) of the priesthood have carried over into the Church, and that the symbolic role of the Aaronic priesthood has not been consistently transferred to the life of the New Testament community.

The first issue to deal with has been touched upon already (*cp.* p. 199f), that the entire nation of Israel was to a nation of priests to their God. The transition at Sinai, from the tribal elder to a particular tribe of priests, is clearly recorded in Scripture, but is not explained. Certainly, this was a break from Ancient Near Eastern tradition, including the tradition of the Abrahamic family in which the patriarchs were, in turn, the priests of their clans. Furthermore, to speak of a ‘Levitical’ priesthood is somewhat misleading, for the vast majority of the tribe of Levi *did not* ministry before the LORD either in the tabernacle or later

in Solomon's Temple. This function was specifically for the male line starting with and descending from Aaron, Moses' brother, who was from the Levitical tribe of Kohath. The rest of the Kohathites, as well as their cousins, the descendants of Merari and Gershon, the other sons of Levi, were assigned the menial tasks required for the maintenance and movement of the tabernacle; they were not permitted a mediatorial role at the altar. So the actual priesthood, in the truest sense of the term, was a very limited pedigree within the nation of Israel.

Considering the call upon Israel to be "*a kingdom of priests,*" (*cp.* Exod. 19:6), we have with the Aaronic priestly family a 'priesthood within a priesthood,' and this is perhaps the root of much of the sacerdotalism throughout the history of Christianity - the notion that a priestly class may rightly exist within the 'kingdom of priests' that is the Body of Christ.<sup>197</sup> In order to determine biblically whether such a class within the Christian Church is valid, one must at least attempt to understand the Aaronic priesthood and to ask whether its function persists beyond the fulfilled Great High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. One's conclusion will impact not only whether or not the title 'priest' is valid within the New Covenant context of the Christian Church, but also whether special clothing (vestments) is appropriate, or whether both establish an unbiblical, mediatorial, and sacerdotal class within the community of believers.

The existence of a priestly clan within a priestly tribe within a priestly nation does, *prima facie*, seem to translate into a clerical strata within the Christian community. J. H. Kurtz summarizes the traditional, Protestant view of the position of Israel under the Old Covenant when he writes, "the priesthood of the Aaronites in relation to Israel, was similar to that of Israel in relation to the heathen."<sup>198</sup> The problem with this comment is that at no time did the nation of Israel mediate between Yahweh and the world. Israel did not offer up sacrifices or perform cultic rituals on behalf of the heathen. Apparently, the only role that

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<sup>197</sup> *Cp.* Revelation 1:5-6

<sup>198</sup> Kurtz; 36.

Israel had in the presence of the surrounding nations was that of *witness*, and the failure of this duty led to the name of Yahweh being blasphemed among the Gentiles. So, yes, Israel did have a responsibility vis-à-vis the world, but to call it a priestly function is going beyond what is written. In the same manner, to say that the Christian Church has a priestly, sacrificial, and mediatorial role between God and the world – a common perspective throughout the history of Christianity and very prevalent today – is not supported by the text of either the Old or New Testaments, at least not when one considers the nature and role of the priesthood.

At its root, the priesthood was *mediatorial*; indeed, mediation between a deity and the people who identify themselves with that deity, is the essential definition and role of a priesthood, whether pagan, Jewish, or 'Christian.' Biblically, the definition of the Aaronic priesthood is summarize most concisely in Numbers 16. The context is the rebellion of Korah, himself of the tribe of Kohath, the same as that of Moses and Aaron. Korah demanded equality in the priestly ministry, and that demand was answered by Yahweh himself in a showdown that did not pit the tribe of Levi against the other tribes of Israel, but the family of Aaron against the other families of the tribe of Levi.

*So when Moses heard it, he fell on his face; and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His and who is holy and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him. Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; put fire in them and put incense in them before the LORD tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the LORD chooses is the holy one. You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi!"*

(Numbers 16:4-7)

The sequel, of course, manifested Yahweh's election of Aaron by consuming by fire the other tribal elders, leaving Aaron's censor alone present before the LORD. This rebellion within Levi was answered and quelled by divine intervention, but it is significant that even the censers presented by the non-



Aaronic elders were ‘consecrated,’ and were thus holy and forbidden thenceforth from common use. They were hammered into gilding for the altar.

*So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned up had presented, and they were hammered out as a covering on the altar, to be a memorial to the children of Israel that no outsider, who is not a descendant of Aaron, should come near to offer incense before the LORD, that he might not become like Korah and his companions, just as the LORD had said to him through Moses.* (Numbers 14:39-40)

Kurtz points out from this passage and narrative, four essential aspects of the true priesthood: *election by Jehovah; possession by Jehovah; holiness to Jehovah; and the ability to draw near to Jehovah.*<sup>199</sup> The writer of Hebrews confirms the first of these, *election by Jehovah*, echoing no doubt the narrative of Korah’s rebellion, when he writes, “*And no one takes this honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.*”<sup>200</sup> As to the second criteria, *possession by Jehovah*, it is clear from the Pentateuch that the entire tribe of Levi was separated to Yahweh as standing in the place of the firstborn of the nation, ransom as it were for the firstborn of Egypt whom God slew. The Levites were to have no inheritance in the Promised Land, and the Aaronites were even more restricted to the habitation of the tabernacle and its court. All of this was predicated on the unique relationship that Yahweh had caused to exist between Himself and both the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron from within it. But most pertinent to the function of the Aaronic priesthood are the third and fourth of Kurtz’ essential characteristics: *holiness to Jehovah* and *ability to approach Jehovah*.

‘Holiness’ at its most basic meaning is to be separated from something to something else, to be ‘set apart.’ In the religious sense, of course, it pertains to any object or person dedicated for service to Jehovah in the tabernacle or, later, the Temple. But holiness also has strong connotations of *clean*, as in *undefiled*, and therefore capable of coming into the presence of a holy God. This holiness is

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<sup>199</sup> Kurtz; 35.

<sup>200</sup> Hebrews 5:4

ethical, not merely purposeful. Yes, the family of Aaron was 'set apart' to the ministry of the tabernacle, but they were to be holy in this ministerial function; they were to be clean and undefiled. The problem was, they were not, any more than any Israelite (or any human being, for that matter). Much of the priestly ritual, then, derives from the fact and reality that intercession was being required from men who were themselves in dire need of atonement and intercession. Again, the author of Hebrews drives this point home, in comparing the perfect priesthood of Jesus Christ to the imperfect Levitical/Aaronic priesthood.

*For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.* (Hebrews 7:26-28)

For the family of Aaron to be permitted to come into the presence of Yahweh was an act of divine electing grace; it certainly was not grounded in the righteousness of Aaron, he who produced the golden calf to fuel Israel's apostasy. Ephraim Radner comments, "Yet Aaron is also the quintessential communal sinner, the perpetrator of the golden calf, which becomes the quintessential sin of Israel as a people."<sup>201</sup> There is absolutely no indication in the text of Scripture that Aaron's family was somehow more righteous than the rest of the nation; their selection was purely based on the will of God. Yet that did not absolve them from the demand of holiness, as the graphic narrative of judgment on Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, will make crystal clear in Leviticus 10. Because of their sinfulness, the Aaronic priests really could only perform *half* the mediatorial function, as Kurtz notes,

To represent the people in the presence of Jehovah, and Jehovah in the presence of the people, and to be able to set forth in his own person the mediation

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<sup>201</sup> Radner; 81.

between the two, he ought to stand in essential union on the one hand with the people, and on the other with God; and in order fully to satisfy this demand, he ought to be as much divine as human.<sup>202</sup>

This is, of course, the prophetic description of the Messiah, the God-Man. But applied to the Aaronic priesthood, the reality of a stark disjuncture between Aaron's fallen humanity and the mediatorial role he is to perform helps us better understand the accoutrements and rituals of his office. Aaron was fully united in weakness with his fellow Israelites; there were offerings specifically devoted to the sins of the priests. But he was far from united with the holy God before Whom he was to appear. That 'holiness,' therefore, was entirely symbolic, accepted by Yahweh *graciously* and not as if the priest was truly pure before Him. Two features of the Aaronic priesthood served to illustrate the unreal nature – the façade, as it were – of holiness: the ritual washings and the vestments. Kurtz writes,

The priesthood of that time could only typically prefigure the priesthood of the future, and could only possess in a symbolical and typical manner the two essential prerequisites, sinlessness and a divine nature. The former it acquired through washing and a sacrificial atonement, the latter by investiture an anointing on the occasion of its institution and consecration...and these were renewed previous to the discharge of every priestly function by repeated washings, and by the assumption of the official dress, which had already been anointed.<sup>203</sup>

Thus the narrative of the priestly ministry, with its ablutions and vestments, led historically in the Church to similar rituals and robes within all branches of professing Christianity. But the *meaning* of the washings and the special, anointed clothing argues strongly *against* the continuation of either now that the perfect priest has come. The anabaptist tradition maintains that the entire priesthood, as a distinct caste within the people of God, has been abolished

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<sup>202</sup> Kurtz; 36-37.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*; 37.

with the advent of the perfect Priest, and certainly upon the completion of His perfect self-sacrifice. According to this tradition, and largely opposed to the continued emphasis on clerical ordination and vestments among the magisterial Reformers and their descendants, the anabaptist – and later the Baptist – confessions repudiated any connection between New Testament pastors and Old Testament priests. The former do not occupy a mediatorial, but rather a pastoral, office, and thus should also repudiate any ritual or dress that draws a distinction between themselves as ‘clergy’ and the congregation as ‘laity.’

This became a significant issue during the English Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, as the inherently political nature of the event (Henry’s break with Rome) left a legacy of political interference in the church that marred even the pro-Reformation reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I. The ‘Vestment Controversy’ began in the reign of Edward and centered around the person of John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester under Edward and martyr



**John Hooper (1495-1555)**

Under Edward’s older sister and successor, Mary I. The controversy would flare up again under politically pro-Reformation Elizabeth I, but the significance of Hooper’s time is the general attitude of apathy displayed by other leading Reformers both in England and on the continent. When Hooper was selected to become Bishop of Gloucester, he refused to submit to the ‘Aaronic vestments’ required, and was actually imprisoned. He was encouraged by other Reformers – significantly Thomas Cranmer and Martin Bucer – to submit to the vestments, as these were considered inconsequential in light of the need for ‘reformed’ bishops in the Anglican Church. George Park Fisher notes in his *History of the Christian Church*, that opposition to clerical vestments was considered ‘radical’ even among Reformers. “The new leaders among the clergy desired to cast aside the cap and surplice, and with them other peculiarities of the ritual which had been generally dropped by their Protestant brethren on the continent. The

ground of the objection to these things was that they were identified in the popular mind with the notion that the minister is a priest. They were often pronounced to be badges of 'popery.'"<sup>204</sup> Eventually, after a stint in prison, Hooper did submit and conform, and was consecrated Bishop of Gloucester in full priestly regalia. This attitude of apathy – that the vestment issue is of no consequence – has been characteristic of the Protestant tradition descending from the magisterial Reformers. Protestants were united in rejecting the ablutions of the priesthood, but sadly not so in regard to the vestments. These latter, however, are no less a symbol of priesthood than the former, and Hooper was wrong to betray his conscience in favor of ecclesiastical preferment and office.

Returning from this historical excursion, we are reminded that much of what we read in Leviticus regarding the 'law' of the offerings and the rituals and vestments of the Aaronic priesthood, are significant to the imperfect nature of that priesthood, fully and finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ. While there will be correspondence between the intercessory role of the priest and that of the pastor, there must be no insinuation that the pastor *mediates* in any way, shape, or form; he is not a priest.

*This is the law of the grain offering: The sons of Aaron shall offer it on the altar before the LORD. He shall take from it his handful of the fine flour of the grain offering, with its oil, and all the frankincense which is on the grain offering, and shall burn it on the altar for a sweet aroma, as a memorial to the LORD. And the remainder of it Aaron and his sons shall eat; with unleavened bread it shall be eaten in a holy place; in the court of the tabernacle of meeting they shall eat it. It shall not be baked with leaven. I have given it as their portion of My offerings made by fire; it is most holy, like the sin offering and the trespass offering. All the males among the children of Aaron may eat it. It shall be a statute forever in your generations concerning the offerings made by fire to the LORD. Everyone who touches them must be holy.* (6:14-18)

Other than the burnt offering and the offering of consecration, what we are reading in this section pertaining to the priests has much to do with their daily meals. But, as we shall see, the priestly food and the priestly dinner was more than just their daily sustenance, though it was that. The sacred meal, only

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<sup>204</sup> Fisher, George Park *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; 1893); 375.

permitted to the males of Aaron's line and only permissible within the sacred precinct of the altar, was also nothing less than 'table fellowship' with Yahweh, Israel's God. We have seen that the perpetual fire on the altar was more than the continual reminder of the presence of God in the midst of Israel; it was also the 'eating' of the sacrifice by the LORD himself. We are reminded of the rabbinic quote from the previous lesson, "The Torah talks about two kinds of eating: the person eating, and the altar 'eating.'"<sup>205</sup> The priestly meal consisted of the remains of these offerings (again, excepting the burnt and consecration offerings) and was to be eaten within the inner court of the tabernacle, close to and within sight of the altar. It is perhaps not too much to say that the priests were dining in the presence of, and at table with, Yahweh himself.

That this was to be considered a holy meal is clear from the terminology used in the text as well as the limitations placed on the grain offering. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the grain offering of the priest was the *sancta contagion* – the 'contagious nature' of holiness, which is obscured by the mistranslation of the New King James Version above. The more accurate translation of verse 18 is "*Whatever touches them shall become holy.*"<sup>206</sup> Jacob Milgrom shows conclusively, though by no means exclusively among commentators, that holiness was not only a requirement of those who approached this meal, but also the result of those who even so much as touched the sacred food.<sup>207</sup>

Why this is an issue for consideration lies near the heart of the priesthood itself, for it was an abomination for something to 'become holy' that was not first consecrated to the LORD. Therefore, coming into contact with the sacred priestly meal by someone unconsecrated, was not a good thing. Milgrom points out that this is the essential problem in Ezekiel 46 with regard to the necessary isolation of the priestly meal, even to the location where the meal was prepared.

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<sup>205</sup> Grossman; 168

<sup>206</sup> Milgrom; 379.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*; 443-45.

*Now he brought me through the entrance, which was at the side of the gate, into the holy chambers of the priests which face toward the north; and there a place was situated at their extreme western end. And he said to me, "This is the place where the priests shall boil the trespass offering and the sin offering, and where they shall bake the grain offering, so that they do not bring them out into the outer court to sanctify the people."*

(Ezekiel 46:19-20)

The infinitive 'to sanctify' in this passage is the same as we find in Leviticus 6:18, 'make holy.' What is significant about the passage in Ezekiel is that arrangements have been physically made with regard to the priestly meal – mentioning in specific three of the offerings, including the one here in Leviticus 6:14-18 – to *prevent* an inadvertent contact with the people, which would render them 'holy.' The modern believer might read this passage and wonder, 'What is wrong with sanctifying the people? Are we not called to be holy?' The issue is that, under the Old Covenant and before the fulfilled ministry of the Messiah Jesus, the holiness associated with the tabernacle ministry first required consecration; to be 'made holy' apart from consecration was to assume a relationship vis-à-vis Yahweh that amounted to usurpation. For example, a non-Aaronic Levite could by no means be consecrated to the altar ministry. Thus, for such a man, though a Levite, to 'be made holy' by contact with the holy meal or implements, would be to usurp a position and function for which he was not consecrated nor called. This stipulation, then, highlights the separated nature of the Aaronic priesthood, as much a veil between the people of Israel and Yahweh as the two physical canvases that barred entry to the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place within the sacred tent.

Though it is difficult to trace both historically and contemporaneously, this logic most likely lies behind the Roman Catholic treatment of the Eucharist, the Mass. Both of the elements are considered 'consecrated' by the spoken formula of the priest, and thereafter the elements are *sancta contagion* and must not come in contact with unconsecrated things. The *Catechism of the Roman*

*Catholic Church* does not delve into the logic behind the withholding of the cup from the laity, or the procedure of the priest placing the wafer on the communicant's tongue, with a towel below to catch an crumbs, but it is this *sancta contagion* that lies behind the restrictive procedures. For instance, the argument is made that if a crumb of the wafer drops to the floor, a mouse might then eat the crumb which, by consecration, has become the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. The mouse would thus be 'sanctified' in the same sense as a non-Aaronic male touching or partaking of the sacred tabernacle meal. The crumb could be quickly swept up to avoid such blasphemy, but the wine dripping to the floor could not be fully recovered; hence observance in one element only within the Roman communion. The Catechism obfuscates the issue thus, "Communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace. For pastoral reasons this manner of receiving communion has been legitimately established as the most common form in the Latin rite."<sup>208</sup> Remarkably, the post-Vatican II catechism tacitly admits that a fuller rite exists in the Eastern Orthodox communion: "But 'the sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly.' This is the usual form of receiving communion in the Eastern rites."<sup>209</sup>

Though the canons of Vatican II now permit observance in both kinds - admitting the laity once again to drink the cup - both priests and parishioners are strangely reluctant to partake of the wine. Catholic worker Rowina Roppelt noted this phenomenon in her article entitled, "A Fuller Light: Communion Under Both Kinds." She shares an anecdote from an experience in Eichstätt, Germany in which the cup was offered to the laity, and the laity refused to partake.<sup>210</sup> After a millennium of denial, why are Catholics not excited to receive

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<sup>208</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday; 1995), *Imprimi potest* Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger; 1390.

<sup>209</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>210</sup> Roppelt, Rowina "A Fuller Light: Communion Under Both Kinds" *Worship*, 79 no 1 Jan 2005; 2.



the cup once again? Perhaps it is the residual effect of the ancient concern of *sancta contagion* and the resultant caution with regard to the administration of what they believe and proclaim to be the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ.



**Philip Schaff (1819-93)**

This was the essential reason that the withholding of the cup was first officially pronounced at the Council of Constance in 1415, as 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reformed historian Philip Schaff notes, “The practice [*i.e.*, of observing communion under one element only] was no innovation and the action of Constance merely gave official sanction to a custom of long standing, which had its roots in the earliest times. The belief that the bread was the more important of the two el-

ments may appear even in the New Testament, where bread is mentioned more frequently than the cup...To this was added the horror which believers felt if a crumb of the consecrated bread or a drop of the blessed wine fell on the floor...When it became customary for the communicant to receive the host, not in his own hand, but in open mouth from the hand of the priest, he was freed from all responsibility so far as the one element was concerned. It was natural to seek for a like immunity in case of the other. A means to this desired end was found by dipping the host in the wine and using a spoon (intinction). The custom originated in the East, where it is still followed...Another means to the same end was the use of tubes which appear from the ninth century. It was not a very far step for the people to renounce the wine altogether.”<sup>211</sup>

The trail of development whereby the bread and wine became *sancta contagion* in the early Church is a difficult one to follow. The Latin Father, Tertullian (d. c. AD 220) writes ever so briefly in his *de. Corona*, “We feel pained should any wine or bread, even though our own, be cast upon the ground.”<sup>212</sup>

<sup>211</sup> Schaff, Philip, [The Withholding of the Cup \(ccel.org\)](http://ccel.org). Accessed 19March2024.

<sup>212</sup> Tertullian. [CHURCH FATHERS: De Corona \(Tertullian\) \(newadvent.org\)](http://newadvent.org). Accessed 19March2024.

The connection, then, between the developing sacramentalism toward the elements of the Lord's Supper and the *sancta contagion* of the priestly grain offering in Leviticus is made evident by the fact that nowhere in the New Testament are the elements of Communion treated with such religious scrupulosity. The mere development of a priesthood within the Church, and at so early a date, draws an inevitable connection between the developing Christian liturgy and the ancient Levitical one. British anthropologist Mary Douglas considered the connection to be undeniable. In her article titled, "The Eucharist: Its Continuity with the Bread Sacrifice of Leviticus," Douglas writes, "The Christian doctrine of the Eucharist would have grown very naturally from the teachings of Leviticus, without necessarily requiring a violent break with the old religious forms or importing ideas from other religious



Mary Douglas (1921-2007)

traditions."<sup>213</sup> Douglas' argument is not as definitive as her conclusion, but there is certainly a logical path from the *sancta contagion* of the priestly grain offering/meal and the Roman Catholic tradition concerning the bread and the wine.

This degradation of the Lord's Supper to a priestly meal derives once again from an early digression of the Church from the 'priesthood of every believer' back to the shadowy, literal priesthood of the Old Covenant. The veil is removed and believers, each and every, are bidden to "*come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*"<sup>214</sup> We are told that "*there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*"<sup>215</sup> and yet we still establish mediatorial priests to intercede between us and God.

<sup>213</sup> Douglas, Mary "The Eucharist: Its Continuity with the Bread Sacrifice of Leviticus" *Modern Theology*, 15:2 (April 1999); 223.

<sup>214</sup> Hebrews 4:16

<sup>215</sup> I Timothy 2:5

This consistent misunderstanding of the nature of the priesthood has caused untold damage both in the Church and to the consciences of believers. What we are reading here in Leviticus is entirely oriented toward the *weakness* of the Aaronic priesthood; compared to the surpassing greatness of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, why would the Church ever desire a priestly class?

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "This is the offering of Aaron and his sons, which they shall offer to the LORD, beginning on the day when he is anointed: one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a daily grain offering, half of it in the morning and half of it at night. It shall be made in a pan with oil. When it is mixed, you shall bring it in. The baked pieces of the grain offering you shall offer for a sweet aroma to the LORD. The priest from among his sons, who is anointed in his place, shall offer it. It is a statute forever to the LORD. It shall be wholly burned. For every grain offering for the priest shall be wholly burned. It shall not be eaten."* (6:19-23)

As if to confirm the demand upon the Aaronic priesthood to be consecrated before Yahweh, the LORD here interrupts the flow of the offerings to touch upon the ritual of that consecration. The priests were not innately holy; their ministry required both the continual fire of the altar and the twice-daily offering of consecration. This pericope teaches us that the previous verses concerning the grain offering that formed the sacred meal - eaten only within the precincts of the altar and only by the male line of Aaron's family - was indeed 'table fellowship' with Israel's God. This particular grain offering does not correspond to any of the offerings we have encountered thus far in *Vayikra*, but its placement here is both intentional and necessary. This section exhibits the LORD's meal, as it were, alongside the priests' meal.

This was a daily ritual that was divided into the morning and evening to correspond with the twice-daily burnt offering. However, though grain and wine were often associated with burnt offerings, this grain offering should not be considered as a mere auxiliary to the burnt offering, the detail given in these verses forbids such minimizing of the offering as often happens when the grain offering is simply viewed as an adjunct of the burnt offering. No, as Mary Douglas points out, "so far from being subsidiary to the animal sacrifice, it was

recognized as a separate, autonomous and very holy offering, with covenantal implications as strong as those implied in animal sacrifice."<sup>216</sup>

What is particularly interesting about both the text and the placement of this pericope is the manner in which the consecratory grain offering is handled in the same manner as the burnt offering: it is entirely immolated on the altar, no part of it is to be eaten even by the priests. This illustrates two of the points we have touched upon in the last two lessons: first, that *the fire* is indeed the critical element in the sacrificial system. This, again, is not to diminish the importance of the blood, but only to reiterate the only common feature in each offering is not blood, but fire. The second takeaway from this passage is the utter dependency of the Aaronic priesthood upon the grace of God's presence. Lest Aaron and his sons ever be tempted to think themselves somehow worthy of the office to which they were called, they were given a twice-daily reminder that even the most important 'meal' offering of the tabernacle ritual – the *bread* offering – required a specific ritual in which the entire substance of the offering was given over to Yahweh. Sklar writes, "Priests may not eat of their own grain offerings, whether continual or otherwise...Perhaps it was considered improper for them to profit from an offering made on their behalf. Whatever the case, by offering it entirely, the focus was not on what they might eat but on their request for the LORD's favor and help."<sup>217</sup>

Thus we have a class of Israelite that cannot be duplicated in any form under the New Covenant. Outside the tent of meeting, Aaron and his sons were just Israelites – they were not permitted any special distinction, as indicated by the removal of their priestly vestments. Inside the tent, there were a consecrated family representative of what Israel as a whole was to be. For ministers today to set up distinctives in title and dress between themselves and other believers, is to reestablish a mediatorial caste within the people of God.

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<sup>216</sup> Douglas; 210.

<sup>217</sup> Sklar; 204.

**Week 10**                    **The Command of the Offerings: The Sin & Guilt Offerings**  
**Text Reading:**            **Leviticus 6:24 - 7:10**

*“Sanctification is consecration  
for the purpose of transformation.”*  
(Ben Dunson)

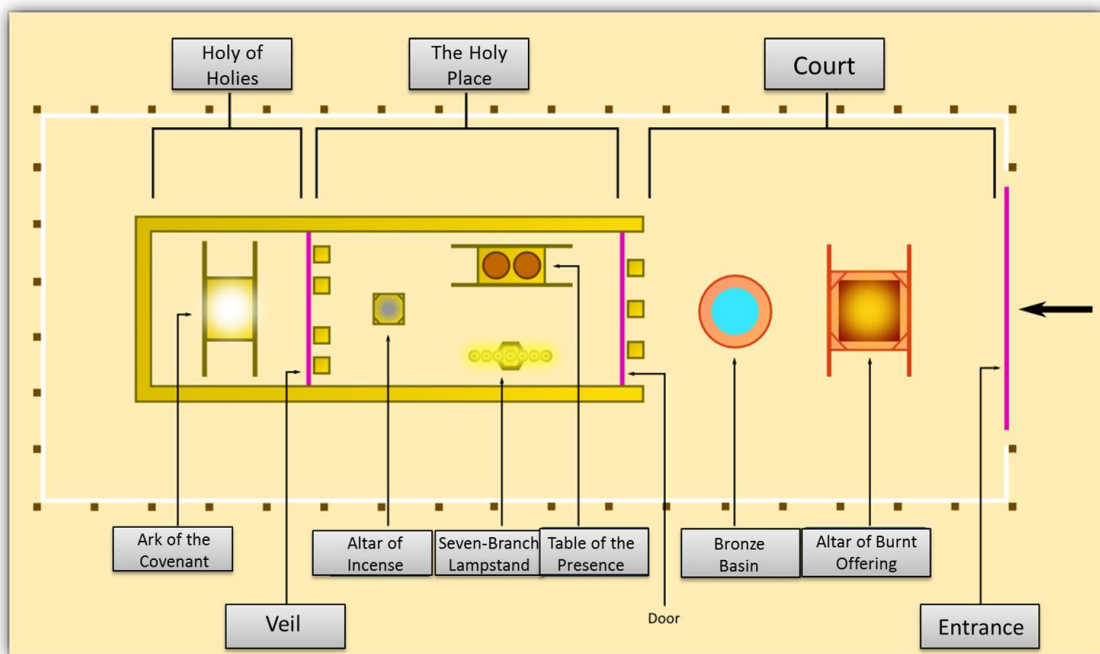
It is common for evangelicals to refer to the place within their church building where the ‘worship’ takes place – the hymns are sung, the sermon preached – as the ‘sanctuary.’ This in spite of the distinctly medieval and Catholic cathedral origins of the term. This in spite of the fact that most of the settlers in British North America – those who settled for religious reasons, that is – refused to use the term, preferring ‘meeting house’ for the entire building, which was usually nothing more than where the congregants gathered to hear the sermon (no fellowship halls, no Sunday School classrooms, no gymnasium for the youth group). Slowly the term ‘sanctuary’ crept back into American Christian vocabulary, especially as church building grew to include the above-mentioned rooms and many others. The etymology of the word brings us to the root of its usage within Christian architecture: “consecrated place, building set apart for holy worship; holy or sacred object, from Anglo-French *sentuarie*, Old French *saintuaire* ‘sacred relic, holy thing; reliquary, sanctuary,’ from Late Latin *sanctuarium* ‘a sacred place, shrine’”<sup>218</sup> The term reflects ‘sacred space,’ deriving ultimately from the same root as ‘sanctification.’ The operative phrase, therefore, for both the etymology and the biblical usage of the term is ‘set apart,’ the consecration of a space for both the dwelling of the deity and the interaction between that deity and the priesthood.

These associated words – *consecration* and *sanctification* – are woven into the fabric of the ‘laws of the offerings’ here in Leviticus 6 & 7. It is no wonder that we encounter the actual consecration of Aaron and his sons in chapter 8. The meaning of this ritual, however, has again been transferred into the Christian

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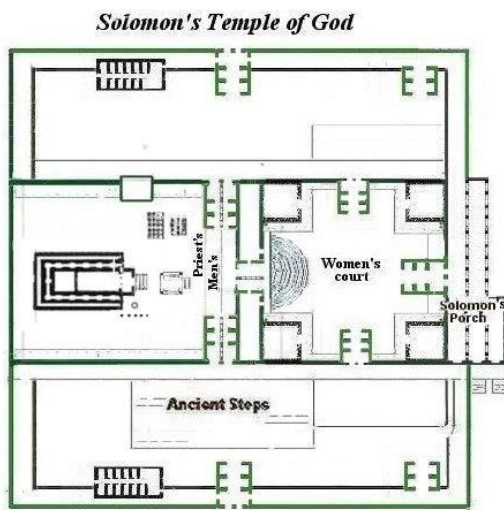
<sup>218</sup> [sanctuary | Etymology of sanctuary by etymonline](#). Accessed 24March2024.

Church in many an illegitimate way, no less than the priesthood itself. For many, the 'sanctuary' of the church – even a Protestant church – is a sacred place, and certain attitudes and dress are considered 'appropriate' (while other forms of dress and other behavior is distinctly 'inappropriate'). The tradition is fading, of course, but for many generations one was to be dressed in one's 'Sunday Best,' and to adopt a quiet and 'reverent' attitude upon entering the sanctuary. The vestments of the clergy were to be mirrored in the dress of the congregation, and the liturgy of the priests or pastoral staff by the solemnity of the assembled. This attitude toward the room in which the 'worship' is conducted remains strong in Reformed churches; the concept of 'sacred space' being retained from the medieval cathedral.



Considering again the layout of the wilderness tabernacle, the line of demarcation for the average Israelite (and for the majority of the tribe of Levi except for when the tabernacle was being disassembled or assembled) was the Altar of Burnt Offering, or the brazen altar. This is as far as an Israelite male could enter into the 'tent of meeting,' to bring his offering to the priest and to

slay it before the altar. At that point the Aaronic priests took over; the area beyond the altar was 'sacred space.' This layout was continued in the Temple in



Jerusalem, with Israelite women limited to the 'Women's Court,' and Israelite men to the 'Men's Court' just outside the altar precincts. Even the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jewish people, did not meet in the inner court, but held meetings along one of the porticos that flanked the Temple so that both the Aaronic priests

and the elders and Pharisees could properly assemble without defiling the sacred space.

As with the issue of clerical vestments, derived from the Aaronic priesthood, so also is the issue of 'Christian' architecture, derived from the tabernacle and Temple. It should be evident to anyone that there existed a 'sacred space' between the nation of Israel encamped in the wilderness and the presence of Israel's God in the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the tabernacle or Temple. The area in which the Aaronic priests both worked and ate their sacred meals constitutes an overlap of the two regions, a consecrated ground between the common and the holy. This cusp of space between the tents of Israel and the tent of Yahweh spoke of the absolute holiness and purity of the LORD, who is *"of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness."*<sup>219</sup> Perhaps the most essential component of the meaning of the term 'holy' and its associated words, is 'separate.' David Peterson writes, "The root meaning of the Hebrew noun



**David Peterson (b. 1944)**

<sup>219</sup> Habakkuk 1:13

‘holiness’ (*qodes*) and the adjective ‘holy’ (*qados*) is separation. The Greek Bible uses *hagios* and some of its derivatives as the equivalent of the Hebrew. This terminology refers to the distinctness or otherness of God’s character, activities and words...As the one who is supreme over all, he is transcendent, exalted and different from everything he has made. He cannot be compared with the gods of human imagination or be judged by human standards.”<sup>220</sup>

The difficulty that Christians and the Christian Church, face when attempting to practically translate these Hebrew and Greek words into the life of



**Louis Berkhof (1873-1957)**

the church, and into the believer’s individual life, is the common rendering of the terms by the English, *sanctify* or *sanctification*. Most evangelicals understand this family of words to signify ‘being made holy,’ and view it as a lifelong process that begins at the point of regeneration. Dutch Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof gives what represents the standard understanding of ‘sanctification’ in his *Systematic Theology*. There we read that sanctification is “fundamentally and primarily...a divine operation in the soul, whereby the holy disposition born in regeneration is strengthened and its holy exercises are increased.”<sup>221</sup> This definition is true in one respect, but incomplete in another, very important one. Berkhof defines what is theologically known as ‘Progressive Sanctification,’ leaving off the perhaps even more biblical ‘Definitive Sanctification.’ The former is, as Berkhof describes, a *process*; the latter a one-time event that occurs at the moment of the sinner’s regeneration. As the terminology derives from the Old Testament, and particularly the relationship of both Israel as a nation and the Aaronic priesthood as a special case within that nation, it stands to reason that

<sup>220</sup> Peterson, David *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 1995); 17.

<sup>221</sup> Berkhof, Louis *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1996); 532.



the sense – Definitive or Progressive – that we find in the Old Testament will likely be at the root of what we find in the New Testament.

The first thing to note from the Old Testament, and in particular the place of the Aaronic priesthood in the midst of the nation, is the connection between the *consecration* of people, places, and things and the concept of *sanctification*. The two terms are intrinsically related: to be *consecrated* is to be set apart, which is the fundamental meaning of *sanctify*. “When one is sanctified one is set apart for God’s special use...the consecration of God’s people is rooted in God’s election and work of redemption. Sinful people cannot be consecrated for service to God unless they are first purified and cleansed of their sinful defilements. God is the one who takes the initiative in sanctifying his people.”<sup>222</sup> God *chooses* or elects Israel to be His people from among all the nations. In this sense Israel is *definitively* sanctified, or consecrated to be the people of Yahweh. Further, the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron are discriminatingly chosen from among Israel, to be first the servants of the tabernacle and then, the mediatorial priests of the LORD. This sets the pattern for both the *definitive* and the *progressive* sanctification that we find in the New Testament, the former being foundational and essential to the latter.

This does not mean that Definitive Sanctification has no necessary relationship to Progressive Sanctification – that one can be set apart without being made progressively holy. God himself commanded that His people be holy, for the very reason that He had set them apart to be His people. “*For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.*”<sup>223</sup> It does mean, however, that in spite of the conventional wisdom among evangelicals with regard to sanctification primarily being a progressive work in the believer’s life, it is only a progressive work *because* it is first a definitive work of God at the moment of regeneration. As illustrated by the nation of Israel, the

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<sup>222</sup> Dunson, Ben C. “Biblical Words and Theological Meanings: Sanctification as Consecration for Transformation” *Themelios* 44.1 (2019); 73.

<sup>223</sup> Leviticus 11:44

tribe of Levi, and especially the family of Aaron, the bedrock of consecration/sanctification is the call or election of God, not the progressive moral development of the people. This fact explains the continual need of the sacrifices within that 'sacred space' of the tabernacle: the Aaronic priests were not a sanctified people in the progressive, moral sense though they most certainly were in terms of the definitive call upon that family. The same was true for Israel as a whole, "Israel is specifically set apart by God as his 'possession,' a 'holy nation.' This consecration, however, is only possible because of the mediation and atonement that is worked by God in and through the priestly system."<sup>224</sup> But the election of God did not absolve the people of God from being holy in the moral sense of the term; indeed, consecration was the divine impetus to holiness, as Ben Dunson puts it, "holiness means being set apart for a relationship with the Holy One, to display his character in every sphere of life."<sup>225</sup>

What is remarkable, considering the root of consecration in the Old Testament sacrificial and priestly system, as well as the common evangelical perspective of sanctification as a progressive work, is the fact that the offerings required by the priests in order to 'set them apart' and fit them to come before Yahweh, did not render them practically any more 'holy' than they were before. This was true, the writer of Hebrews reminds us, of the entire sacrificial system as it applied to both the consecrated priests and the consecrated nation. Speaking of the very rituals that are detailed in Leviticus, the author of Hebrews states,

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still*

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<sup>224</sup> Dunson; 73.

<sup>225</sup> *Idem.*

*standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.* (Hebrews 9:6-10)

This must not be interpreted as meaning the tabernacle sacrifices were of no value with regard to ‘sanctification,’ only that they were powerless to sanctify in the moral sense that is commonly understood by evangelicals to be the primary sense of the term. The writer of Hebrews speaks immediately of the efficacy of these sacrifices for the *purification of the flesh* – the removal of ritual defilement and the preparation of the offerer to approach Yahweh. But this merely proves the author’s point: a ‘better’ sacrifice was needed to go beyond mere ritual purification of the flesh, to the actual cleansing of the conscience.

*For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?* (Hebrews 9:13-14)

Furthermore, if we consider the cleansing that the believer receives from the blood of Christ, we again find that even this is not spoken of in the New Testament as *progressive*, but rather *definitive*. Notice how the Apostle Paul links righteousness, sanctification, and redemption together as the work of God through Jesus Christ.

*For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption – that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”* (I Corinthians 1:26-31)

And again in I Corinthians 6 sanctification is spoken of as a definitive act rather than a progressive process. In this passage he actually puts sanctification before justification, though the three terms used here are probably best taken as different perspectives on the same redemptive work.

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.* (I Corinthians 6:9-11)

The first two of these three terms speak directly of the consecration ritual of the Old Testament system: the *washing* was because of and led to the *sanctifying*. The priest was washed in order to fulfill his consecrated duty as set apart from the people. Physically separated by the curtain of the tent of meeting, he was to be spiritually separated by the ritual washings no less than by the sacred vestments. While this entire system of sanctification/consecration was intended to be exemplary, to lead the priests and the people to holiness of life, that process is predicated much more on obedience to the Law than on the sanctifying rituals of the tabernacle. The people were sanctified – set apart – through the washings and the blood, but they were not transformed by the same means.

Biblical terminology is rarely univocal, however, and we must allow that the word ‘sanctification’ is occasionally spoken of in what seems to be *progressive* terms. For instance, in I Thessalonians we read, “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.*”<sup>226</sup> But this is merely to affirm that, as with the priests and the people of Israel, the intention of consecration was transformation; they were to be holy as the LORD their God was holy. We might say, as is popularly said especially within Reformed theology,

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<sup>226</sup> I Thessalonians 4:3

that we *have been* sanctified that we *might be* sanctified. Yet even this summary risks confusing the biblical language and laying so much emphasis on the *might be* that we lose sight of the *have been*. John Murray, in his article titled "Definitive Sanctification," writes, "We are thus compelled to take account of the fact that the language of sanctification is used with reference to some decisive action that occurs at the inception of the Christian life, and one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace. It would be, therefore, a deflection from biblical patterns of language and conception to think of sanctification exclusively in terms of a progressive work."<sup>227</sup>

This assessment of the consecration rituals of the Aaronic priesthood does result in a more one-to-one connection to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who did not offer up sacrifices for Himself but through His sacrifice cleansed us from all defilement in the sight of God. Under the tabernacle system, it was nonetheless God who initiated and accepted the sacrificial rituals: incomplete and insufficient as they were, they did point forward to the definitive cleansing of His people that Christ accomplished through the cross. By both taking the sacrificial rituals at their face value in Leviticus, and also by reading back through the author of Hebrews, the comprehensive cleansing that results from Jesus' shed blood, we can better understand the 'sacred space' of the tabernacle, or 'tent,' as in Hebrews. This was not progressive sanctification, no matter how often the priest performed the rite, but it did provide at least temporary definitive sanctification in order that the priest might approach Yahweh on behalf of himself and the people.

The question of whether such sacred space still exists remains. Can there still be a spatial overlap between God and His people who are now both 'in Christ' and indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Jesus' own promise seems to answer in

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<sup>227</sup> Murray, John "Definitive Sanctification" *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1997); 278.

the negative, or at least to say that the 'sacred space' of the New Covenant can no longer be viewed in terms of brick and mortar.

*Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him."*

(John 14:23)

Surely this promise must be taken in coordination with Jesus' stunning words concerning the then-Temple in Jerusalem.

*So the Jews answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.*

(John 2:18-22)

The sacred space that now exists for the people of God does not exist in a tabernacle or temple, nor in a particular part of a church building or cathedral. To consider any physical space to be sacred is to move back into the shadows of the Aaronic priesthood and tabernacle, and to rebuild the barriers that Christ tore down. That this sacred space now applies to believers, both individually and corporately, is made clear by Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Speaking of the assembly of believers, the apostle writes,

*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.*

(I Corinthians 3:16-17)

And of the individual believer,

*Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.*

(I Corinthians 6:19-20)

*Also the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the sin offering: In the place where the burnt offering is killed, the sin offering shall be killed before the LORD. It is most holy. The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it. In a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the tabernacle of meeting. Everyone who touches its flesh shall be holy. And when its blood is sprinkled on any garment, you shall wash that on which it was sprinkled, in a holy place. But the earthen vessel in which it is boiled shall be broken. And if it is boiled in a bronze pot, it shall be both scoured and rinsed in water. (6:24-28)*

The *torah* of the offerings continues with the sin offering and the guilt offering. This section is continuous through 7:21, with the next *Vayikra* statement coming at 7:22 in reference to a word from the LORD *to the sons of Israel*. Thus the 'law of the offerings' progresses through the very similar sin and guilt offerings and finally to the peace offering. The emphasis in this section on the sin and guilt offerings is evidently on the *place* where the sacrifice is to be slain as well as where the meal is to be eaten. The text thus linguistically creates that sacred space referred to earlier, with place locators taking the forefront: *in the place where the burnt offering is killed...it shall be eaten in the court of the tabernacle of meeting...it shall be eaten in a holy place; it is most holy*. The operative phrase with regard to the sin and the guilt offerings is that they are both 'most holy.' This designation seems to have triggered a very specific and limited spatial purview for both the offering of the animal and the partaking of the remnant by the priests.

Pursuant to the earlier discussion, it is fair to ask what about the sin and guilt offerings made them 'most holy'; we are, however, not told. Jay Sklar points out that in the Pentateuch, one sacrifice is considered 'holy' whereas six are listed as 'most holy.'<sup>228</sup>

**Holy**  
Fellowship Offering (Lev. 19:8)

**Most Holy**  
Grain Offering (2:3; 6:10)  
Purification (Sin) Offering (6:10)  
Reparation (Guilt) Offering (6:10)  
Bread of the Presence (Lev. 24:9)  
Ordination Offering (Exod. 29:33)  
Perhaps burnt offering (6:18)

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<sup>228</sup> Sklar; 109.

Sklar comments, "The text does not explain the basis of the distinction, but these categories guided the Israelites in treating each offering properly. A 'holy' offering could be eaten in a 'clean place' by the priests' family and by the worshiper, but the 'most holy' offerings could only be eaten in a ritually 'holy place' and only by the ritually holy priests, not their families."<sup>229</sup> The sin offering (and presumably the guilt offering, though it is not stated explicitly) carried the *sancta contagion* in that whatever or whoever touched it *became holy*, meaning consecrated, dedicated solely to the LORD. Thus we have here a procedure for dealing with even the clothing and utensils that may have come in contact with the 'most holy' sacrifice. "Whoever touched it became holy; and if any one sprinkled any of the blood upon his clothes, whatever the blood was sprinkled upon was to be washed in a holy place, in order that the most holy blood might not be carried out of the sanctuary into common life along with the sprinkled clothes, and thereby be profaned."<sup>230</sup>

The disposition of bloodied clothing and soiled vessels is further evidence of the 'sacred space' formed by the perimeter curtain of the tent of meeting, a place that formed the cusp of encounter between Yahweh and His people through the already consecrated Aaronic priests. Here we have the practical details of the reality of a holy God living in the midst of an unholy people, and the 'sanctification' and 'consecration' of the priests did not make them holy in the ethical sense of the word, but did render them holy in the truest sense of the word: separated unto the service of God. But there could be no mixing of the sacred space with the common, for in that case the sacred would be defiled. And such defilement made was all the more heinous by the fact that, through consecration, the clothing, vessel, or priest was rendered *most* holy. Instead of an act of worship, such defilement affected by carrying the holy thing out into the common space would be like the second fall of Man.

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<sup>229</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>230</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 321.



Without such a sacred space under the New Covenant, can there be any application of the *torah* of the sin and guilt offerings to the Church today? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes,' for as the individual believer and the corporate assembly both represent the sacred space of the New Covenant, there remains the command of separatedness, the command to keep oneself undefiled by the world, as both Paul and James make clear in their own ways. In another passage in which Paul speaks of the church as the Temple, dwelling in the presence of God no less (rather, more) than the Israelites at the tabernacle,

*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:*

*"I will dwell in them and walk among them.  
I will be their God, and they shall be My people."*

*Therefore*

*"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.  
Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.  
I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,"  
Says the LORD Almighty."*

(II Corinthians 6:14-18)

James concurs with Paul's doctrine of separation,

*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

(James 1:27)

It would be in error to sacralize physical space and clerical garments, though it is sadly very frequently done. But it would be equally in error to disregard the concept of 'sacred space' in relation to the separatedness of the Church and of believers from this defiling world. We know that this does not mean the abandonment of the world in monasticism, for Paul refutes that conclusion in I Corinthians 5. But we also know that the principle of being

separate is no less valid for the believer and for the Church than it was for Israel and for the Aaronic priest. The ancient consecration rituals and sacrifices may not teach us just how this is to be done, but they do establish the concept beyond doubt. God is no less holy under the New Covenant than under the Old, and His people are no less in need of that purification that comes fully and finally in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Believers are consecrated, sanctified by the blood of Jesus; they are now called to be undefiled by a too-intimate relationship with the world; they are to be transformed into a people who are called apart to the worship and service of God, and therefore live accordingly.

With reference to the concept of holiness and sanctification, as discussed above, the treatment of garments and vessels that come in contact with the 'most holy' sacrifice is instructive. Almost invariably evangelicals of the post-Reformation era associate 'holy' with that which is good, rather than that which is consecrated. The moral 'goodness' is actually not of primary consideration, simply because, as Jesus says, "*This is none good, but God alone.*" In reality, to be holy means to be separated unto God, and for some objects like clothing and cooking vessels, this means either the need for thorough cleansing or the need for destruction. "On the one hand, Scripture states flatly that any object that touches the flesh of the purification [*i.e.*, sin] offering contracts holiness; on the other hand, the object is treated as if it were impure: blood-spattered garments must be washed, copper vessels scoured and rinsed, and earthen vessels broken."<sup>231</sup>

What does this mean to believers and to the Church? Certainly, it requires expanding our understanding of the word 'holy' and its meaning. A purely moralistic definition and interpretation of the word and concept just will not do. In the context of the *torah* of the offerings, holiness has far more to do with consecration than with moral behavior. The emphasis here, again, is on contact, the *sancta contagion*, though the evident reality is that this contact *did not* render

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<sup>231</sup> Milgrom; 405.

the person or object morally pure. Rather holiness as consecration means either the requirement for thorough cleansing or for destruction if the vessel cannot be thus cleansed.

*All the males among the priests may eat it. It is most holy. But no sin offering from which any of the blood is brought into the tabernacle of meeting, to make atonement in the holy place, shall be eaten. It shall be burned in the fire.* (6:29-30)

Considering the nature of the sin offering, it might seem strange that anyone should benefit from it. It would seem more logical, at least to our modern, Christian sensibilities, that any sacrifice offered in atonement for sin be completely immolated upon the altar, that no one should in any way 'benefit' from sin. But we must remember that the entire sacrificial system was entirely the result of divine grace. There is no inherent value of a substitutionary animal sacrifice, nor even the shedding of blood. Indeed, the blood – so central to the meaning of atonement – is *given* on the altar by God. "*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.*"<sup>232</sup> The connection between blood and atonement, and between a substitute animal and forgiveness, are both entirely gracious, not intrinsic. Thus the participation of the priest in the sacrificial meal is also gracious, and indicative of the deeper meaning of the entire tabernacle economy.

As we noted early in the study, the overarching context of the tabernacle and the priesthood is the presence of Yahweh, dwelling in the midst of His people. The thrust of the sacrificial system is not, as many consider, the *appeasement* of an angry God. Divine anger, being pure and just, cannot be appeased – hence the lack of any sacrifice for the 'high-handed' sin. The sacrificial system was given *by God* so that His people would have means by which to remain in His holy presence, not by their own righteousness or moral holiness, but by obedience to that which He has established as atoning and

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<sup>232</sup> Leviticus 17:11

cleansing. The meal as well as the fire serve to confirm the communion between God and His people.

Yet even here there is a limit. The sin offering of the High Priest and that of the congregation as a whole, were distinctive in that the blood was taken inside the first veil and sprinkled before the second veil. These were offenses that, so to speak, 'entered within the veil,' they approached Yahweh more directly than the others. The significance of these sins to the congregation negated any opportunity for anyone, including the Aaronic priests, from benefiting from the altar: *"But no sin offering from which any of the blood is brought into the tabernacle of meeting, to make atonement in the holy place, shall be eaten. It shall be burned in the fire."*

*Likewise this is the law of the trespass offering (it is most holy): In the place where they kill the burnt offering they shall kill the trespass offering. And its blood he shall sprinkle all around on the altar. And he shall offer from it all its fat. The fat tail and the fat that covers the entrails, the two kidneys and the fat that is on them by the flanks, and the fatty lobe attached to the liver above the kidneys, he shall remove; and the priest shall burn them on the altar as an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a trespass offering. Every male among the priests may eat it. It shall be eaten in a holy place. It is most holy. The trespass offering is like the sin offering; there is one law for them both: the priest who makes atonement with it shall have it. And the priest who offers anyone's burnt offering, that priest shall have for himself the skin of the burnt offering which he has offered. Also every grain offering that is baked in the oven and all that is prepared in the covered pan, or in a pan, shall be the priest's who offers it. Every grain offering, whether mixed with oil or dry, shall belong to all the sons of Aaron, to one as much as the other. (7:1-10)*

Each of these 'laws' seems to introduce a distinct concept within the priestly service, a concept that is not necessarily limited or circumscribed that the particular offering to which it textually pertains. The first, for instance, is significant in each and every offering, but is only detailed with regard to the burnt offering. The grain offering and the consecration grain offering emphasize the priestly meal, but the priests were permitted (indeed, required) to eat of the remnant of the sin and peace offerings, as well. Both the sin offering and the guilt or trespass offering are referred to as 'most holy,' but as the summary table

above (p. 158) shows, there were other offerings that were also 'most holy.' It is under the rubric of the grain offering that the *sancta contagion* is discussed, but the stricture applies equally to the sin and guilt offerings. It is not readily apparent why specific offerings are used to highlight specific aspects of the ritual, the connection between the offering and the featured ritual is not made explicit. Scholars of the Wellhausen school, even if otherwise biblically conservative, tend to see in this the impact of later editorial redactors. Keil & Delitzsch, for instance, comment, "Certain analogous instructions respecting the burnt-offering and meat-offering [*i.e.*, the grain offering] are appended in vers. 8-10 by way of supplement, as they ought properly to have been given in chap. vi."<sup>233</sup> Never mind the probable fact that if the text had been redacted by later editors, they most likely would have put the material in the 'proper' place. The net effect of this blending of information is, however, to provide an overall priestly 'manual,' as it were, though it is the cumulative impact of each of the offerings then summarized over the entire tabernacle economy.

With the guilt or trespass offering we encounter an almost identical ritual as with the sin offering. This is to be expected, as we have already seen that the two are barely distinguishable as to their nature and purpose. But the *torah* of the guilt offering introduces another interesting characteristic of the whole tabernacle economy, one which will be taken up again later in Chapter 7. This is the disposition of the fatty parts of the sacrificial animal. As this aspect of the sacrificial ritual is detailed in 7:23-27, we will delay its exegesis to that point in the text.

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<sup>233</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 322.

**Week 11                    The Command of the Offerings: The Peace Offerings****Text Reading:            Leviticus 7:11 - 38**

*“The way of approach is never up to the servant;  
it is always up to the king.”*  
(Jay Sklar)

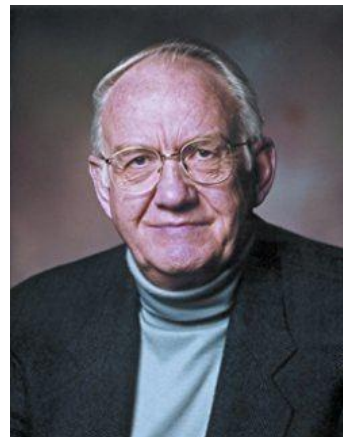
In his first letter to the Corinthian church (the first, at least, that we have), the Apostle Paul deals with a number of issues in which the community in Corinth were failing. Not least of these is the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Modern believers are assured that the context of this enigmatic passage, in I Corinthians 8, is that of an ancient pagan practice no longer observed in the modern, civilized, Western world. The sacralizing of a meal, we are told, is no longer conceivable in a world in which spiritual beings such as angels and demons no longer occupy a place. Never mind what various branches of professing Christendom have done with the Lord’s Supper, can we dismiss the presence and influence of idols and demons so easily? On the one hand, Paul does depreciate the power and influence of the demons that stand behind the idols, though he does not deny their existence. Yet on the other hand, the apostle does not merely dismiss the issue of eating meat sacrificed to such idols; the true response to the circumstance is more nuanced.

*Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.* (I Corinthians 8:1-8)

An extended exegesis of this passage is beyond the scope of a study in Leviticus, except inasmuch as the 'meal' of which Paul speaks is remarkably similar to the *peace offering* of Leviticus chapters 3 and 7. The peace offering, to a greater degree than any of the other offerings, was a community meal with Yahweh; the food sacrificed in this ritual was first devoted to Him, and was then given by Him back to the priests and to the Israelite who offered. Together - Yahweh, priests, and Israelites - there was a communal meal. The Apostle acknowledged that those who are in Christ know that idols are nothing, and that the demons who stand behind those idols are themselves mere creatures, not 'gods' or 'lords.' They have no power, but they do influence the conscience. Paul acknowledges ample room for misunderstanding.

*But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*  
(I Corinthians 8:9-13)

The context in this passage appears to be the partaking by Christians of sacred meals prepared and eaten at the pagan sanctuaries in Corinth. Gordon Fee writes in his commentary on I Corinthians, "That going to the temples is the real issue is supported by the fact that the eating of cultic meals was a regular part of worship in antiquity. This is true not only of the nations that surrounded Israel, but of Israel itself."<sup>234</sup>



**Gordon Fee (1934-2022)**

Like the ancient Israelites with the peace offering, pagan cultures also held sacred feasts at their temples, and the meat and bread sacrifices at these rituals

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<sup>234</sup> Fee, Gordon *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1987); 360.

were considered sacred, or 'holy' as the Levitical text has it. "In the Corinth of Paul's time, such meals were still the regular practice both at state festivals and private celebrations of various kinds. There were three part to these meals: the preparation, the sacrifice proper, and the feast. The meat of the sacrifice apparently divided into three portions: that burned before the god, that apportioned to the worshipers, and that placed on the 'table of the god.'"<sup>235</sup> As we shall see, the *law* of the peace offering also had three components, though significantly the last of these was the communal meal, not the 'placing of the meat upon the table of the god.'

As we have noted many times, the similarity of practice between the pagan cultures and Israel has been taken by liberal biblical scholars as an indication of 'copy' - that the Hebrew Scriptures simply took from pagan culture and pagan religion and sanitized it for use in the cult of Yahweh. There is no historical or anthropological means to refute this allegation, but the mind of faith instinctively rejects it. Not that there is no biblical refutation; it is merely not definitive. For instance, Schnittjer points out that in the entire *torah* of the peace offering - and for each offering, for that matter - there is a complete absence of any vocalization by the Aaronic priests. Schnittjer writes, "the sacrifices of Israel, unlike other ancient religions, were conducted without incantations...Israel's religion did not have magical elements that gave rise to general tendencies toward mythologization."<sup>236</sup> Milgrom, following the Documentary Hypothesis of Wellhausen, considers the 'sanctuary of silence' to "best be explained as the concerted attempt of P to distance the rites of Israel's priests from the magical incantations that necessarily accompanied and, indeed, empowered the ritual acts of his pagan counterpart."<sup>237</sup> From the perspective of believing exegesis, the simple answer is that the divinely appointed sacrificial ritual required no 'Abracadabra' of the priest to 'make it work'; no *Hoc est Corpus Meum* to

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*; 361.

<sup>236</sup> Schnittjer, *The Torah Story*; 263

<sup>237</sup> Milgrom; 60.



consecrate the elements. The sacrifices were ordained by Yahweh, and no priestly verbiage could add to them.

Yet the similarities between the communal meal at the tabernacle and the sacred feasts at the local temple are present in the record and cannot be ignored. The *meaning* of these meals is the issue at hand in Corinth. The apostle was not forbidding believers from taking a meal with an unbeliever, or even in an unbeliever's home. But to partake of a meal in the house of an idol, a meal that has been devoted to the god no less than any of the offerings we have considered in Leviticus, is to participate in *table fellowship* with that false god. Paul is not willing to acknowledge the reality of the god as a true deity, for there is only one God (*vv.* 4-6). But the demonic deception inherent in all pagan religions is real enough, and when the believer stands upon the 'knowledge' that there is but one God, and consequently acts without concern for the conscience of another believer, he or she implicitly equates the idolatrous temple meal with the table fellowship of the Lord, represented in the Lord's Supper.

The correlation between the Lord's Supper and the peace offering of Leviticus 7 becomes more apparent as one considers both the meaning and the motive of the ancient peace offering. We will investigate that, and then return to the New Covenant meal of thanksgiving and peace, the Lord's Supper. Though the peace offering occupies the third position in the record of the offerings in Leviticus 1 - 5, here in the *torah* of the offerings, the peace offering comes last. Probably neither list is intended to be the chronological order of the offerings of the tabernacle, and as we consider in more detail the significance of the *shelamim* - the peace offerings - its position closing out the priestly rituals will make complete sense.

*This is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings which he shall offer to the LORD. (7:11)*

The name of this particular offering, the *shelamim*, is most commonly considered to derive from the familiar *shalom*, meaning 'peace' or 'wellness.' To

be sure, Hebrew is not an exact language and word roots can often lead to false trails. Scholars have proposed other etymologies for the defining term for this category of offerings, but when one considers the nature of the offering as well as its ritual, the concept of 'peace' surely stands above all others. This status of 'peace' also explains the offering's position at the end of the entire sacrificial litany, for this particular offering cannot be made before sin has been atoned. Kurtz well summarizes the context of the *shelamim*, stating that the offering, "...was an expression and attestation of a condition of peace and friendship, of the maintenance and blessedness of fellowship."<sup>238</sup> He goes on to note,

If it had not been right between him and Jehovah, - if there had not been peace and harmony, but division and discord, between him and his God, - it would have been necessary that the cause of the discord should first be expiated by either a sin- or a trespass-offering. A *state* of peace and friendship with God was the basis, and *sine qua non*, to the presentation of a *Shelem*; and the design of that presentation, from which its name was derived, was the *realization, establishment, verification, and enjoyment* of the existing relation of peace, friendship, fellowship, and blessedness.<sup>239</sup>

This may well have been the point on which Yahweh showed approbation toward Abel's offering, but disfavor toward Cain's in that famous incident that led directly to the first homicide.

*And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering.*

(Genesis 4:3-5a)

The means by which the LORD showed His favor upon one man's offering and did not do so upon the other's, is very likely to have been by fire consuming Abel's offering, while Cain's remained on his altar, 'uneaten,' as it were. But the explanation of the differentiation is most likely found in the words of the LORD

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<sup>238</sup> Kurtz; 255.

<sup>239</sup> *Idem*. Italics original.

to Cain, "So the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.'"<sup>240</sup> Abel had offered a sacrifice of blood; Cain a vegetable sacrifice. While we have seen within the tabernacle sacrifices that grain offerings were at times acceptable for atonement, the general thrust of all sacrifices is the shedding of blood for the atonement of the sinner; this Cain did not do. It was as if he was bringing to Yahweh a peace offering, when there was no peace.

There are strong indications in the text itself that the *shelamim* were not directly related to personal sin or sins, though nonetheless blood had to be shed even for the Israelite to approach Yahweh in thanksgiving and praise. The term *kipper*, 'atone,' is not used with reference to the peace offering and though the laying on of hands is present as with other offerings, we have seen that this gesture did not necessarily transfer *sin* to the animal sacrifice, but at all times transferred *identity*. Milgrom refers to the rabbinic attitude toward the peace- or thanksgiving offering, "The uniqueness of the thanksgiving offering is extolled by the rabbis when they claim that it is 'never brought for sin' and that 'in the world to come all sacrifices will be annulled, but that of the thanksgiving will not be annulled, and all prayers will be annulled, but (that of) thanksgiving will not be annulled.'"<sup>241</sup> What sets the peace offerings apart from the others is found in both the variety of such offerings - three in number - and the disposition of the offering itself. The bottom line is *thankfulness* toward a gracious Yahweh. "This core element of the peace offerings, the thankful worship of God with heart and soul, represents the highest and in some sense most essential aspect of all sacrifice...and so it is discussed last of all, as the epitome of offering itself."<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Genesis 4:6-7

<sup>241</sup> Milgrom; 413-14 quoting from *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* 9:1, 7.

<sup>242</sup> Radner, 83.

*If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer, with the sacrifice of thanksgiving, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, or cakes of blended flour mixed with oil. Besides the cakes, as his offering he shall offer leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offering. And from it he shall offer one cake from each offering as a heave offering to the LORD. It shall belong to the priest who sprinkles the blood of the peace offering. The flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offering for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day it is offered. He shall not leave any of it until morning.* (7:12-15)

The peace offering came in three variations: the *thank-offering*, the *votive-offering*, and the *freewill-offering*. The types of animals that could be offered was far more varied than for the other offerings, indicating a great deal more leeway for the offerer than in the case of the General and Particular sacrifices. The flexibility contained within the *shelamim* ritual is indicative that this particular offering centers, far more than the others, on the personal relationship between the one bringing the offering and his God. The first variation, the *thanksgiving* offering, appears to result from a fortuitous providence for which the Israelite is especially thankful; the second, the *votive* offering, pertains to the very personal taking and fulfilling of a *vow* before Yahweh; the third, aptly named the *freewill* offering, was a spontaneous act of worship unconnected to any event in the life of the Israelite before Yahweh.

The *thanksgiving* offering is the *zeba h'todah* (זֶבַח הַתּוֹדָה), often shortened to the *todah*. The word is derived from the verbal root that means 'confessing' as in "acknowledging that which is true, whether in a negative context of 'confessing/acknowledging sin,' or in a positive context of 'confessing/acknowledging that which is true about the LORD, that is, when 'giving praise' to him."<sup>243</sup> In the Old Testament, the text *par excellence* of this Hebrew word and its associated action, is Psalm 107. The psalm begins with the admonition, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His mercy endures forever." It then proceeds to enumerate various situations in life in which the LORD has provided for or delivered from, the many providences experienced by

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<sup>243</sup> Sklar; 228.

the child of Yahweh. “The rabbis derive from Ps 107 that there are four occasions that require a thanksgiving offering: safe return from a sea voyage (vv 23-25), safe return from a desert journey (vv 4-8), recovery from illness (vv 17-22), and release from prison (vv 10-16).”<sup>244</sup> Be this as it may, the entire psalm enjoins a thankful heart, expressed in praise to Jehovah, for all the many blessings and deliverances that He provides throughout life, and ends with the sapiential comment, “*Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.*”<sup>245</sup>

The *thanksgiving* offering, then, was an offering of praise to Jehovah in a more direct manner than any of the other offerings. It was ‘required,’ as the rabbis state, though not in the same sense as either the other General offerings or, of course, the sin- and guilt-offerings. Yet it appears that even this seemingly flexible offering was not brought singularly, without an accompanying burnt-, sin- or guilt-offering. A comprehensive view of the sacrificial day would indi-



Nobuyoshi Kiuchi (b. 1953)

cate that the peace offering came last for two main reasons: first, sin must first be atoned before approach can be made to Yahweh, even to praise Him; and second, the peace offering provided what constituted the daily, communal (and, we shall see, covenantal) meal. Milgrom goes so far as to state quite categorically, “The main function of the well-being [*i.e.*, peace] offering is to provide meat for the table.”<sup>246</sup> Japanese evangelical scholar, Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, reminds us that the act of praise/thanksgiving is not less important than the offering of atoning sacrifices, “The term תּוֹדָה (*todah*) refers to a serious and weighty act on the part of

<sup>244</sup> Milgrom; 219

<sup>245</sup> Psalm 107:43

<sup>246</sup> Milgrom; 221.

the worshipper that comes last in the worship, or if not last, at least after penitence."<sup>247</sup>

Kiuchi addressed the 'mandatory' nature of what appears to be a voluntary offering. While there is not the same requirement upon the peace offerings as on the other General sacrifices (burnt and grain) and the Particular offerings (sin and guilt/trespass), the peace offerings – thanksgiving/praise, votive, and freewill – are really no less obligatory upon the worshipper. Kiuchi writes, "the confessional [*i.e.*, thanksgiving or praise] offering presumes that the worshipper has already experienced a salvific act of the Lord. This means that if the offering is meant to express thanksgiving, for instance, it is not optional but obligatory, since it would be a duty to respond to the gracious dealings of the Lord."<sup>248</sup> Thanksgiving to the Lord is not an option for a member of His covenant community; "*Give thanks to the LORD*" is a command, not a suggestion. Yet, we shall see, it was a command to be met willingly and with great joy. Kurtz summarizes, "The *Todah*-offering, therefore, was a praise- or thank-offering in the literal sense; and in contrast to the vow- and freewill-offerings, would be presented whenever the reception of divine benefits impelled the pious Israelite to offer praise and thanksgiving to the Giver of all good gifts."<sup>249</sup>

*But if the sacrifice of his offering is a vow or a voluntary offering, it shall be eaten the same day that he offers his sacrifice; but on the next day the remainder of it also may be eaten; the remainder of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day must be burned with fire.*  
(7:16-17)

The second and third type of peace offering are handled together, though they are quite different in nature and motivation. The first of these, the *votive* offering, is the *neder* (נדר) and is associated in some sense with a vow made by the Israelite. The question exists as to whether the offering was to be brought at the making of the vow, or upon its fulfillment. While there is no technical data to

<sup>247</sup> Kiuchi, Nobuyoshi "Spirituality in Offering a Peace Offering" *Tyndale Bulletin*, 50 No 1 (1999); 25.

<sup>248</sup> *Idem*; 29.

<sup>249</sup> Kurtz; 259.

answer that question, the usage in the biblical text leans heavily to the fulfillment option. This seems to be the order of events in the following exemplary instances.

*Now this is the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And he shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings.*

(Numbers 6:13-15)

*So Hannah arose after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the tabernacle of the LORD. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. Then she made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head."...Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child was young. Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli.*

(I Samuel 1:8-11, 24-25)

The general attitude regarding the vow, which is a form of prayer as well as of devotion, is captured in Psalm 116.

*I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD.  
I will pay my vows to the LORD now in the presence of all His people,  
In the courts of the LORD's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.*

(Psalm 116:17-19)

Kurtz compares the votive with the thank/praise offering, "The votive offering, therefore, if it was offered after the receipt of the blessing prayed for, was a *thank-offering*, as the praise-offering was; but it differed from this in the fact that it had been previously vowed, whereas the true praise-offering presupposed a blessing that had come from the pure, and nothing but the pure and unmerited grace of God, had been prompted by no promise of any performance in return, and therefore awakened livelier gratitude in proportion

to the greater consciousness of unworthiness.”<sup>250</sup> Perhaps the same can be said of the *freewill* offering.

This last of the peace offering – the *nedavah* (נְדָבָה) is, by the meaning of the word, the *voluntary* offering, the offering brought for no apparent reason at all except love for Jehovah. The freewill offering both funded and *overfunded* the tabernacle in the first place.

*Then everyone came whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and they brought the LORD's offering for the work of the tabernacle of meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments. They came, both men and women, as many as had a willing heart, and brought earrings and nose rings, rings and necklaces, all jewelry of gold, that is, every man who made an offering of gold to the LORD. And every man, with whom was found blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats' hair, red skins of rams, and badger skins, brought them. Everyone who offered an offering of silver or bronze brought the LORD's offering. And everyone with whom was found acacia wood for any work of the service, brought it. All the women who were gifted artisans spun yarn with their hands, and brought what they had spun, of blue, purple, and scarlet, and fine linen. And all the women whose hearts stirred with wisdom spun yarn of goats' hair. The rulers brought onyx stones, and the stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate, and spices and oil for the light, for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense. The children of Israel brought a **freewill offering** to the LORD, all the men and women whose hearts were willing to bring material for all kinds of work which the LORD, by the hand of Moses, had commanded to be done.*

(Exodus 35:21-29)

The key phrase in this text is *whose spirit was willing*, answering to Moses' call for the tabernacle offering earlier in the chapter, “And Moses spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, “This is the thing which the LORD commanded, saying: ‘Take from among you an offering to the LORD. Whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it as an offering to the LORD...”<sup>251</sup> The *freewill* offering, then, appears to be the most spontaneous of the peace offerings, tied not to a particularly favorable providence (though one might argue that deliverance from Egypt was a favorable providence) or the answer

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<sup>250</sup> Kurtz; 261.

<sup>251</sup> Exodus 35:4-5



from Yahweh to a vow or prayer, but only to the offerer's love and devotion to Jehovah. Sklar writes, "Unlike praise or vow offerings, which offerers brought in response to specific acts of deliverance or answers to prayer, voluntary offerings might have been brought as more general acts of praise."<sup>252</sup> In differentiating between the *votive* and the *freewill* offerings, Kiuchi writes, "possibly the term נִדְּוָה (*neder*) refers to a vowed response to the Lord's salvation which has not yet been given, whereas the emphasis of the term נִדְּוָה (*nidavah*) lies in spontaneity and does not involve a vow in responding to the Lord. In other words, while *neder* refers to conditional self-dedication, *nidavah* refers to unconditional self-dedication."<sup>253</sup>

This may be parsing the terms a bit too fine, as each of the peace offerings – the *thank-* or *praise-offering*, the *votive-* or *vow-offering*, and the *voluntary-* or *freewill-offering* – are all presented to a gracious God, whose graciousness in providence, in answer a vow or a prayer, and just in being the Deliverer of Israel, is in all cases the foundation of the peace offering. Truly the manifestations of favorable providences or answer to vows are the confirmation of the people dwelling at peace with their God, and Yahweh dwelling at peace with His people.

*And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offering is eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted, nor shall it be imputed to him; it shall be an abomination to him who offers it, and the person who eats of it shall bear guilt.*

(7:18)

If any differentiation is to be made, it would appear from the text on the basis of the disposition of the remainder of the meal. For some reason, not explained in the text or elsewhere, the *thanksgiving-* or *praise-offering* must be either completely eaten on the day on which it was sacrificed, or burned (though not on the altar). This would, it seems, indicate a priority for the *thanksgiving-*

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<sup>252</sup> Sklar; 230.

<sup>253</sup> Kiuchi; 25.

*offering* over the subsequent two, but any explanation for this distinction would be speculation. For the other two offerings of this class, the *votive-* and the *freewill-offerings*, the leftovers could be eaten on the second day. But on no account may the meat be kept over into the third day. To do this would be to undo all that had transpired, and render the *praise* offering into the need to bring a *sin* offering. "In this case, the offering itself is not credited to the person; it does not count and thus will not result in the LORD's favorable acceptance."<sup>254</sup> One possible explanation for this prohibition on eating the meat on the third day is putrefaction; without preservation – which in the ancient world would have meant immersing the meat in a salt brine – it was considered that corruption would commence on the third day.<sup>255</sup> Kurtz writes, "the putrefaction which would have taken place, and rendered the flesh unclean, - a danger which it was especially necessary to avoid in the case of the highest kind of peace-offering, the praise-offering."<sup>256</sup> However, we must note, the concern of the text is not that the meat would be *unhealthy* but that it would be *ritually unclean* and therefore an abomination if eaten in the presence of Yahweh. Sklar comments at length,

Instead, the offering will be viewed as 'a ritually offensive thing [פִּגּוּל - *piggul*].' The use of this word elsewhere suggests it refers to meat ritually unfit to eat...as opposed to unhealthy meat ('spoiled' or 'rotten')...Lev 19:7-8 uses it to describe sacrificial meat that has been 'profaned,' that is, treated as common instead of as holy – a terrible ritual offense...In short, if the meat is not properly handled, the LORD will not look with favor on the offerer or the offering.<sup>257</sup>

Coming before the LORD is at no time and for no purpose something to be done flippantly or without regard to the prescribed method of approach. Again, we are reminded of the fundamental 'rule' of approach, "By those who come before

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<sup>254</sup> Sklar; 231.

<sup>255</sup> This phenomenon is illustrated in the Gospel account of the death of Lazarus. Having been in the tomb four days, corruption and putrefaction would have set in. This is why Martha responded to Jesus' command to remove the stone with, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been *dead* four days." (John 11:39)

<sup>256</sup> Kurtz; 280.

<sup>257</sup> Sklar; 231.

*Me I must be regarded as holy, and before all people I must be glorified.*"<sup>258</sup> This principle will be drilled into the Aaronic priesthood by the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, for bringing 'strange fire' before Yahweh. The principle is no less true for the rest of Israel, and therefore – because the peace offering was the sole sacrifice of which the offerer (and his family & friends) were to partake – stipulations are now given on how to avoid defiling the sacrifice.

*The flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten. It shall be burned with fire. And as for the clean flesh, all who are clean may eat of it. But the person who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, while he is unclean, that person shall be cut off from his people. Moreover the person who touches any unclean thing, such as human uncleanness, an unclean animal, or any abominable unclean thing, and who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, that person shall be cut off from his people. (7:19-21)*

So long as the meat remains ritually clean, it serves as a meal for anyone who is also ritually clean. This concept of clean and unclean was, of course, a central theme in the tabernacle system, touching the priests, the Levites, and the community of Israel. It is in the light of the Old Covenant distinction that such New Testament passages as "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you"<sup>259</sup> and "Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But rather give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you."<sup>260</sup> The text of Leviticus 7 emphasizes just how critical and important this distinction is as it pertains to the *torah* of the offerings: the person who violates the 'law' was to be *cut off from his people*, essentially exile or execution. "This penalty refers to exile or premature death (with the verb form suggesting that the covenant community carried out the sentence). Death was of courses a serious penalty, but exile was also considered to be horrific, since it was like a living death, with the sinner now separated from the covenant community and the

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<sup>258</sup> Leviticus 10:3

<sup>259</sup> John 15:3

<sup>260</sup> Luke 11:40-41

blessings of the covenant God.”<sup>261</sup> The sacrificial meal of the peace offering was a joyous occasion, a feast at which Yahweh ate with both His representatives, the Aaronic priests, and His children, the sons of Israel. Milgrom writes, “The common denominator of all motivations in bringing a *selamim* is rejoicing, for example, ‘you shall sacrifice the *selamim* and eat them, rejoicing in the Lord your God’ (Deut. 27:7).”<sup>262</sup> In addition to who was eligible to partake of the meal, the restrictions as to the specie of animal and as to the place of consumption, were much more lenient than the other sacrifices. Milgrom notes that “the meat of the well-being offering could be eaten anywhere and by anyone as long as the place and the person were in a state of purity.”<sup>263</sup> This puts one in mind of the Parable of the Wedding Feast, where after dealing with those who rejected his invitation, the king walks among the guests brought from the ‘highways and byways,’ and finds one guest in unsuitable garb,

*But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*  
(Matthew 22:11-13)

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘You shall not eat any fat, of ox or sheep or goat. And the fat of an animal that dies naturally, and the fat of what is torn by wild beasts, may be used in any other way; but you shall by no means eat it. For whoever eats the fat of the animal of which men offer an offering made by fire to the LORD, the person who eats it shall be cut off from his people. Moreover you shall not eat any blood in any of your dwellings, whether of bird or beast. Whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people.’*  
(7:22-27)

This appears to be a new pericope, as it has the maker, “*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying...*” Yet the text will return to the topic of the Aaronic priesthood and its due portion of the sacrifices in verse 28. It is best to consider

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<sup>261</sup> Sklar; 232.

<sup>262</sup> Milgrom; 419.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*; 223.

this section and the next as *addressed* to the common folk of Israel but *pertaining* to the priesthood of the family of Aaron. These sections closing out the chapter are perhaps the most detailed yet concerning the interaction between the Israelite and the Aaronic priest within the sacred space of the tabernacle altar. The propriety of the offering was first and foremost the responsibility of the priest, but this did not absolve the Israelite who brought the offering from responsibility. Thus, "*Speak to the sons of Israel*" is the necessary word from the LORD concerning the peace offering, being the most liberal of any of the sacrifices as far as the commoner was concerned. It is as if the LORD, you are very welcome here, but still, watch your step. The message has already been instilled into the priestly mind; now it is enjoined upon the Israelite in general: The fat and the blood belong exclusively to Yahweh. This constitutes a reiteration of the first presentation of the peace offering in Leviticus 3.

*Then he shall offer from it his offering, as an offering made by fire to the LORD. The fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, the two kidneys and the fat that is on them by the flanks, and the fatty lobe attached to the liver above the kidneys, he shall remove; and the priest shall burn them on the altar as food, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma; all the fat is the LORD's. 'This shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwellings: you shall eat neither fat nor blood.'* (3:14-17)

Why are the fat and the blood of the sacrifice forbidden to both priest and Israelite? Do the prohibitions still apply to believers today? Does the prohibition against blood mean that one must eat one's steak 'well done'? This last question may seem facetious, but many conservative Christians believe that meat must be thoroughly cooked to avoid partaking of forbidden blood. In short, we really do not have a good handle on what to do with these particular prohibitions – as to why they were given and whether they still pertain. The prohibition regarding the blood is clearly stated again in Leviticus 17 where the prohibition against eating the blood is linked to the fact that '*the life is in the blood.*' Even though the

Israelite may eat of the animal itself, the blood, being the very life source of that animal, is forbidden.

*And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.' Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.'* (17:10-12)

While we have solid ground for the prohibition against consuming the blood of the sacrifice, or any blood for that matter, the prohibition against the fat is far more mysterious. Douglas writes, "By comparison there is nothing to explain the second very solemn rule that forbids the people of Israel to eat hard suet fat, even though the two rules are given together."<sup>264</sup> Milgrom devotes a fair amount of text in his commentary to the prohibition and concludes, "The reasons for reserving the suet for the deity, it must be admitted, are shrouded in mystery."<sup>265</sup> Still, an analysis of the term used and the parts of the animal carcass involved may yet be useful in translating the Old Covenant prohibition into New Covenant life. The first thing to note is that the prohibition was very unlikely to apply to *all* fat within the carcass. This is evident from both a practical standpoint – there is fat marbled throughout the body – and from a textual perspective – the relevant texts seems to limit the prohibition to the fatty mass that protects vital organs below the ribcage of most animals. This is the *chelev* (חֵלֵב), often translated by the English 'suet.' Milgrom makes the distinction between the suet and the interstitial fat within the animal, noting that *chelev* is "referring to the layers of fat beneath the surface of the animal's skin and around its organs, which can be peeled off, in contrast to the fat that is inextricably entwined in the musculature, called *sûmān* in rabbinic Hebrew."<sup>266</sup> Thus the

<sup>264</sup> Douglas, Mary *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Academic; 2001); 70.

<sup>265</sup> Milgrom; 207.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*; 205.

prohibition was not against *all* fat in the animal body but only the large aggregates of fat that served to protect vital organs and was easily removed by the priest. In addition to the fat surrounding the lower organs of the body, also included in the prohibition was the ‘fat tail,’ which did not cover any organs but could be a significant amount of fat “as the sheep prevalent in this geographical location have a fatty area around the tail that can weigh up to 33 pounds.”<sup>267</sup>

Analyses on the prohibition against eating the *chelev* have resulted in contradictory conclusions. One scholar will argue that the fat is reserved for the



Derek Tidball (b. 1968)

LORD because it was the best and choicest part of the animal; another will argue that it was forbidden on the basis of it being inedible. As to the latter perspective, Hill points out that the contention is only true in certain cultures, modern American being one, whereas other cultures value the fat very highly and consider it a delicacy. “So although in the United States the

most common use for suet is bird food, this fatty part of an animal is more valued in other cultures and cuisines and is not considered inedible, by any means.”<sup>268</sup> This divergence of views probably means that the dietary angle is not the correct hermeneutic here, and focus on the usage of the term in the Bible. Hill quotes Derek Tidball, an English Baptist minister and theologian, on the subject, “‘we need to disabuse ourselves from thinking about this matter from a dietary viewpoint’ precisely because the ‘portions of the animals that were offered to God as choice cuts are the very portions that most Westerners today despise.’ Rather, Tidball argues, we need to think about suet fat not with regard to its

<sup>267</sup> Hill, Susan E. *Eating to Excess: The Meaning of Gluttony and the Fat Body in the Ancient World* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing; 2011); 25.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*; 27. Hill points out in the same paragraph that people who live in northern climes ‘practically live on blubber,’ and that English cuisine considers suet an essential ingredient for Christmas pudding.

nutritional value, but in regard to its cultic symbolism of prosperity and abundance."<sup>269</sup>

When we consider the Hebrew word *chelev* thus in a symbolic rather than a strictly anatomical or nutritional way, we discover that it is indeed almost synonymous with prosperity, even excessive prosperity. Pharaoh promises Joseph that the family of Jacob will have "*the fat of the land*" when they emigrate to Egypt.<sup>270</sup> Yet once in the land of promise, the Israelites would indulge themselves in the blessings of God's prosperity, would grow 'fat' and rebel against the God who had brought them out of Egypt into this choice land. Note that one of the delicacies upon which Israel indulged was "*the fat of lambs.*"

*He made him ride in the heights of the earth, that he might eat the produce of the fields;*

*He made him draw honey from the rock, and oil from the flinty rock;*

*Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, with fat of lambs;*

*And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the choicest wheat;*

*And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.*

*But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you grew fat, you grew thick,*

*You are obese!*

*Then he forsook God who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation.*

(Deuteronomy 32:13-15)

It appears that we may, provisionally at least, conclude that the *chelev* was indeed a choice part of the animal; it certainly was so to Yahweh. This may be because the fatty parts burned quite well, thus helping to maintain the fire on the altar. In any event, the fatty parts were removed from the animal immediately and were burned on the altar first. Mary Douglas notes, "For the altar in every case the middle zone, the suet or fatty area, is taken out first and burnt on the altar. There are no exceptions to this."<sup>271</sup> Given the textual evidence we may perhaps understand the application made by Philo of Alexandria, "The fat is prohibited because it is the richest part and here again he [Moses] teaches us to

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<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*; 26-27.

<sup>270</sup> Genesis 45:18

<sup>271</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*; 71.



practice self-restraint and foster the aspiration for the life of austerity which relinquishes what is easiest and lies ready to hand, but willingly endures anxiety and toils in order to acquire virtue."<sup>272</sup>

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'He who offers the sacrifice of his peace offering to the LORD shall bring his offering to the LORD from the sacrifice of his peace offering. His own hands shall bring the offerings made by fire to the LORD. The fat with the breast he shall bring, that the breast may be waved as a wave offering before the LORD. And the priest shall burn the fat on the altar, but the breast shall be Aaron's and his sons'. Also the right thigh you shall give to the priest as a heave offering from the sacrifices of your peace offerings. He among the sons of Aaron, who offers the blood of the peace offering and the fat, shall have the right thigh for his part. For the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering I have taken from the children of Israel, from the sacrifices of their peace offerings, and I have given them to Aaron the priest and to his sons from the children of Israel by a statute forever.'* (7:28-34)

With the close of Chapter 7 we also come to the close of the 'offerings' section of *Vayikra*; Chapter 8 reviews the actual consecration of Aaron and his sons. The closing verses of Chapter 7 reiterate and summarize what has gone before in the book, reminding future generations that these *torah* of the offerings were handed down to Moses by Yahweh himself at Mt. Sinai. We may consider verses 35 - 38 as the *Imprimatur* and *Nihil Obstat* of the previous seven chapters; these are authorized by God and there is nothing within the previous statutes, procedures, and instructions that may be treated as optional. This, of course, will be illustrated all too powerfully in Chapter 10 with the fatal error of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu.

In the focus verses above, however, we do have a new element added to the whole: the *wave* and the *heave* offerings. There does not appear to be any unanimity, or even much consistency, among either Jewish or Christian scholars as to exactly what these two actions were, and what they meant. Kurtz writes, "What the waving and heaving signified, however, has been by no means elucidated with perfect clearness and certainty by any previous

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<sup>272</sup> Hill; 31.

investigations.”<sup>273</sup> The wave offering, for instance, occurs numerous times in the Levitical *torah*; Jacob Milgrom provides a useful summary of these instances primarily to show the diversity of sacrifice for which the wave action was enjoined.<sup>274</sup>

- The breast of the sacrifice of well-being (Ex. 29:27-28; Lev. 7:30, 9:21, 10:14-15; Num.6:20, 18:18)
- The right thigh and suet of the consecration ram with its bread offering (Ex. 29:23-24; Lev. 8:26-27)
- The breast of the consecration ram (Ex. 29:26; Lev. 8:29)
- The gold and copper for the building of the Tabernacle (Ex. 35:22, 38:24, 29)
- The reparation lamb and the oil for the purification of the leper (Lev. 14:12, 24)
- The barley sheaf (Lev. 23:14)
- The two wheat loaves together with two lambs of well-being (Lev. 23:17, 20)
- The meal offering of the suspected adulteress (Num. 5:25)
- The boiled shoulder of the Nazirite’s ram of well-being together with the bread offering (Num. 6:20)
- The Levites at their ordination (Num. 8:11, 15, 21)

Milgrom disagrees with the English translation ‘wave’ for the Hebrew term used in these passages, contending that “The prevalent connotation of this verb is not ‘to wave’ but ‘to elevate.’<sup>275</sup> He points out that in numerous biblical examples, and also a fair number of instances and illustrations from the Ancient Near East, the offering is a composite of several items, often quite a handful of items. This would be very difficult to ‘wave,’ though not at all difficult to ‘elevate.’ He provides an illustration from one of the famous reliefs at the temple complex at Karnak in Egypt, in which the offerer



**Temple Relief from Karnak, Egypt**

<sup>273</sup> Kurtz; 267.

<sup>274</sup> Milgrom, Jacob “The Alleged Wave Offering in Israel and in the Ancient Near East” *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1972); 33f.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*; 34.

appears to be lifting a tray of multiple foods, not unlike a waiter, toward the deity. Milgrom contends that this is the visual meaning of the ‘elevation’ offering (תְּנוּפָה - *tenūfā*), as he prefers to call it rather than the ‘wave’ offering, and his argument certainly has weight.

Kurtz then adds in regard to the other ritual action, the *heave* offering, “First of all, then, so far as the word is concerned, there is not the slightest doubt that רֹמַחַ (rōmah) means *to be high*, and nothing else. רֹמַחַ (rōmah) therefore signifies *to make high*, *to elevate*, *to raise on high*.”<sup>276</sup> It appears that the two terms are nearly synonymous, both meaning *to elevate* or *lift up*. “The actual fact, therefore, was as follows: the *heaving* or *lifting* (רָוַחַ) in the ceremony of worship always signified the offering or presentation of the gift to God by lifting it up.”<sup>277</sup> Milgrom adds very practically, “A further consideration: What motion is more expressive of the idea of dedicating an object to the deity – waving it, the symbolism remaining obscure, or elevating it, and thereby dramatizing its transfer to the deity?”<sup>278</sup> This last observation, perhaps, cuts to the core of both physical actions associated with the *elevation/wave* and *heave* offerings.

The mechanics of these two actions may remain somewhat obscure, but the intention of each is evident from the context. Especially with the *shelamim*, the peace offerings, the offering brought by the worshiper comprised a tripartite meal – one part for Yahweh (the suet), one part for the worshiper and his family and friends (the majority of the meat) and one part for the priests – the *wave-breast* and the *heave-thigh*. These were the choicest of the cuts of meat and therefore were due Yahweh’s human representatives, the priests. Yet in a real sense the *entire* sacrifice was both offered up to the LORD, and was therefore *entirely* His, and then the larger portion was *returned* to the priest and to the worshiper for the tripartite communal meal. Lifting or heaving the portions

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<sup>276</sup> Kurtz; 273.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*; 275.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*; 35.

before the LORD and then returning them to their human partakers, was graphically symbolic of this phenomenon: the meal, dedicated to Yahweh and therefore His, is now returned by Him to His children for the feast of peace, of communion.

Communion. Among all of the sacrifices studied thus far, it is the peace offering that is the crown jewel of the entire tabernacle ritual. This is the feast of friendship between Yahweh and His people, a joyous occasion in which alone the worshiper himself is allowed to partake. There is much in this last ritual of the *torah* of the offerings that resembles the Christian sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Communion. To that connection we turn in the next lesson.

**Week 12            The Peace Offering and the Lord's Supper****Text Reading:        I Corinthians 11:17 - 34**

*"We must not forget that Israel was  
first and foremost a community of God,  
a people who derived their identity  
from the covenant between themselves and their God."  
(Cheryl A. Brown)*

*At the Lamb's high feast we sing, praise to our victorious King,  
Who hath washed us in the tide, flowing from his piercèd side;  
Praise we him whose love divine, gives his sacred blood for wine,  
Gives his body for the feast, Christ the Victim, Christ the Priest.*

Where the paschal blood is poured, death's dark angel sheathes his sword;  
Israel's hosts triumphant go through the wave that drowns the foe.  
Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed, Paschal Victim, Paschal Bread;  
With sincerity and love, eat we manna from above.

*Mighty Victim from the sky, pow'rs of hell beneath thee lie;  
Death is conquered in the fight, thou hast brought us life and light;  
Hymns of glory and of praise, Risen Lord to thee we raise;  
Holy Father, praise to thee, with the Spirit, ever be.<sup>279</sup>*

This hymn, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, celebrates the Lord's Supper as reminiscent of the Passover sacrifice in Egypt. From the Middle Ages to the present, the Lord's Supper is most often associated by believers with the Passover meal of ancient Israel. Certainly, it is true that Jesus instituted His Supper at the Passover and two of the components of that meal became the basis for the Lord's Supper: the bread and one of the cups of wine traditionally



Michael Horton (b. 1964)

drunk during the *seder*. For this reason many theologians have concluded that the Lord's Supper *replaced* Passover under the New Covenant, as Michael Horton writes unequivocally, "*The Lord's Supper replaces Passover. At Passover – on the*

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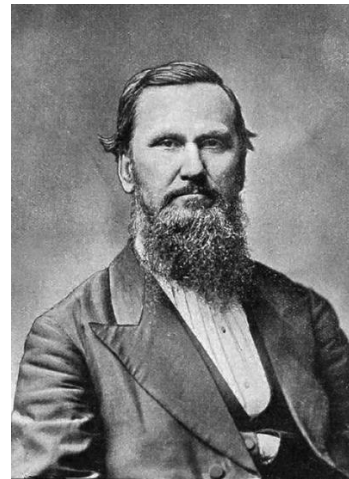
<sup>279</sup> Communion Hymn; Latin 6<sup>th</sup> Century. *Trinity Hymnal* #365.

evening on which he would be handed over rather than passed over in judgment – Jesus instituted the Supper as ‘*my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*’<sup>280</sup> But is the connection between the Passover – when the Lord’s Supper was instituted – and the meal itself as observed by all Christian communions, so clear and direct? On the face of it, there is the problem that the central element of the Passover was *the lamb* and not the bread and wine. It is untenable to take the verse in I Corinthians 5 as evidence of the replacement of Passover by the Lord’s Supper; the context of the passage is immorality within the congregation, not the Supper.

*Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*

(I Corinthians 5:7)

Robert Louis Dabney references this verse in the section of his Systematic Theology dealing with the Lord’s Supper, “I hold that the Saviour undoubtedly held His last Passover on the regular Passover evening, and that this ordinance, intended by Him to supersede and replace the Passover (I Cor. V:7), was very quietly introduced at its close.”<sup>281</sup> While the apostle has much to say about the Supper in his first letter to Corinth, Chapter 5 is not where he says it. Berkhof agrees with this general theory,



**R. L. Dabney (1820-98)**

The New Testament ascribes to the Passover a typical significance, I Cor. 5:7, and thus saw in it not only a reminder of the deliverance from Egypt, but also a sign and seal of the deliverance from the bondage of sin and of communion with God in the promised Messiah. It was in connection with the paschal meal that Jesus

<sup>280</sup> Horton, Michael *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; 2011); 773.

<sup>281</sup> Dabney, R. L. *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1996); 801.

instituted the Lord's Supper. By using the elements present in the former He effected a very natural transition to the latter.<sup>282</sup>

In truth, the connection between Passover and the Lord's Supper may be far more circumstantial than many believe. That Christ was to die at Passover makes sense prophetically; that He instituted His Supper at that last meal makes sense chronologically but is not necessarily theologically. The Passover was to be observed annually, and only annually; the Supper was to be observed "*whenever you do this.*" The Passover was a sacrifice of atonement, performed by the priests but eaten by the families in their homes; the Lord's Supper is a communal meal early recognized as such - there is no evidence of private, household Communion in the early church. The Passover was to be taken with unleavened bread, but there is no evidence in the apostolic record that this was required of the church's observance of the Supper. The argument supporting the Lord's Supper as the New Covenant replacement of Passover is perhaps as tendentious as that of baptism replacing circumcision. The Reformed theologians of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, desiring to show the error of the Catholic sacraments, settled upon two - Baptism and the Lord's Supper - and then set about finding some connection between them and rituals of the Old Covenant. But this may be more special pleading than biblical exegesis. It bears repeating that the only verse used in defense of the connection between the Old Covenant feast and the New Covenant meal, I Corinthians 5:7, is found within a completely different context.

This is by no means to deny the reality of what that verse teaches, Christ *is* our Passover lamb, sacrificed for us as the lamb was slain for the children of Israel in Egypt. The analogies between the Passover event and the salvation to be found in Christ Jesus are solid and plentiful, as are the analogies from the Exodus and the Return from Exile. But analogies are not the foundation of ecclesiastical practice. Nor can they be the sole foundation of our understanding of such things as baptism and the Lord's Supper. In our attempt to see the

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<sup>282</sup> Berkhof; 644.

*continuity* between the Old and New Covenants, we must be careful not to lose the *discontinuity* that comes with the fulfillment of the promises in Christ. Now this is not to say that the Lord's Supper has no connection with the cultic practices under the Old Covenant. It is merely to encourage caution, since there need be no direct connection between a New Covenant sacrament and an Old Covenant ritual. To be frank, the connection made between Passover and the Lord's Supper is at least more plausible than the one made between circumcision and baptism, though it also has a lone New Testament passage on which to hang its hat.<sup>283</sup>

Berkhof begins his discussion of the Lord's Supper with an intriguing association between the Lord's Supper and ritual sacrifices of the Old Covenant, an association that he unfortunately does not pursue. Referring to the analogies referenced above, Berkhof writes, "Just as there were analogies to Christian baptism among Israel, there were also analogies of the Lord's Supper. Not only among the Gentiles, but also among Israel, the sacrifices that were brought were often accompanied with sacrificial meals. This was particularly a characteristic feature of the peace-offerings."<sup>284</sup> Berkhof notes, though not explicitly, that the peace-offerings were the only sacrifices that resulted in a meal – truly a feast – for all involved, including the Israelite who brought the offering, his family and his friends. He provides both a good summary and an excellent interpretation of the peace-offering sacrifice and its results.

Of these sacrifices only the fat adhering to the inwards was consumed on the altar; the wave-breast was given to the priesthood, and the heave-shoulder was given to the officiating priest, while the rest constituted a sacrificial meal for the offerer and his friends, provided they were levitically clean. These meals taught in a symbolic way that 'being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' They were expressive of the fact that, on the basis of the

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<sup>283</sup> Colossians 2:11-12

<sup>284</sup> Berkhof; 644.



offered and accepted sacrifice, God receives His people as guests in His house and unites with them in joyful communion, the communal life of the covenant.<sup>285</sup>

Berkhof also points out that while these peace-offering meals “which testified to the union of Jehovah with His people, were seasons of joy and gladness, and as such were sometimes abused and gave occasion for revelry and drunkenness.”<sup>286</sup> Such behavior, of course, would be no different in its offensiveness than the behavior of the Corinthian congregation, chastised by the apostle in I Corinthians 11. Indeed, the connection between what the peace-offering was supposed to be, in Leviticus 7, and what had happened to the Lord’s Supper in Corinth, may indicate a stronger connection between the two institutions than that between the latter and Passover. Berkhof started with a solid idea but then reverted to the traditional Passover analogy.

There must be some significance in how the early church actually did interpret the Lord’s Supper, which very quickly became the centerpiece of the weekly assembly, and sadly all too quickly took on sacerdotal qualities as well. Perhaps of greatest significance is the name frequently given to the meal: *eucharist*, from the Greek for thanksgiving. Protestants, of course, assiduously avoid this name because of its association with the Catholic Mass, but by the second century the Lord’s Supper was universally known by this term, simply because it was universally considered to be a ‘thanksgiving’ feast. The *Didache*, for instance, speaks of the Lord’s Supper in a manner quite reminiscent of the thank-offering, adding an element of communion that is quite possibly an allusion to the sin and guilt/trespass offerings.

On every Lord’s Day – his special day – come together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone at

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<sup>285</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>286</sup> *Idem.*

variance with his neighbor must not join you, until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled.<sup>287</sup>

It is also evident that the *Didache* is an early example of the Lord's Supper as a *Eucharist* – a thanksgiving meal. In the ninth chapter a form of prayer is given (though the prophet is to be allowed to pray as he wishes) that focuses on general thankfulness with as much of an eschatological as a soteriological slant.

Now about the Eucharist: This is how to give thanks: "We that you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your child, which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever." Then in connection with the piece [broken off the loaf]: "We thank you, our Father, for the life and the knowledge which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory forever. As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever."<sup>288</sup>

With this testimony Justin Martyr agrees, writing in his *First Apology* concerning the practice of a Christian congregation when a baptism occurs. Again, the emphasis of the meal is on praise and thanksgiving.

But we, after we have thus washed him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized [illuminated] person, and for all others in every place, that we may be counted worthy, now that we have learned the truth, by our works also to be found good citizens and keepers of the commandments, so that we may be saved with an everlasting salvation. Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. This word Amen answers in the Hebrew language to  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$  [so be it].

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<sup>287</sup> *Didache* 14:1-2. Translated by Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1996); 178.

<sup>288</sup> *Didache* 9:1-4

And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.<sup>289</sup>

Hippolytus, an early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century bishop in Rome, seems to allude obliquely to Passover in his discussion of the Eucharist, though again the emphasis is on thanksgiving, especially as he comments on the prayer of the bishop: “And the bishop shall give thanks according to the foresaid. It is not altogether necessary for him to recite a prayer according to a brief form, no one shall prevent him. Only let his prayer be thanksgiving to God.”<sup>290</sup> Thankfulness is the recurring theme in the Eucharistic prayer of the *Tradition*,

Therefore, remembering his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the chalice, giving thanks to you, who has made us worthy to stand before you and to serve as your priests. And we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit to the oblation of your Holy Church. In their gathering together, give to all those who partake of your holy mysteries the fullness of the Holy Spirit, toward the strengthening of the faith in truth, that we may praise you and glorify you, through your son Jesus Christ, through whom to you be glory and honor, Father and Son, with the Holy Spirit, in your Holy Church, now and throughout the ages of the ages. Amen.<sup>291</sup>

Finally, Irenæus, an earlier contemporary of Hippolytus, explicitly calls the Eucharist ‘a thank offering.’<sup>292</sup> These examples, however, do not definitively prove that the early Christians considered the Lord’s Supper as the Christian equivalent to the Levitical peace-offering as opposed to the Passover, and Passover themes did find their way into the early literature. Everett Ferguson notes a comparison with the rabbinic traditions regarding the Passover *seder*,

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<sup>289</sup> *First Apology of Justin* 65. Richardson; 285-86.

<sup>290</sup> Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* [The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, translated by Burton Scott Easton—a Project Gutenberg eBook](#). Accessed 20April2024.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Ferguson, Everett *Early Christians Speak* (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company; 1971); 96.



Everett Ferguson (b. 1933)

“The early rabbinic directions for the Passover meal instruct that a benediction be said over a cup of wine before the meal begins, a benediction be pronounced on the unleavened bread, and at the close of the meal a benediction over another cup (the ‘cup of blessing’) which was the thanksgiving for the meal.”<sup>293</sup> This, Ferguson admits, may have strongly influenced early *Jewish* Christian patterns for the Lord’s Supper, though

the striking dissimilarities between the Jewish *seder* and the *Eucharist* still remain, not least of which is the very common use of the word *eucharist* for the Christian meal. Another possible allusion to the peace-offering, in which everybody involved partook of the meal, is the emphasis on the universality of the Christian priesthood, found as early as Justin. Ferguson writes with reference to Justin’s *First Apology*, “All Christians are priests, ‘the true high priestly race of God.’ The sacrifice is that of the whole community. All worship is sacrifice, and the nature of Christian worship finds its climax in the great thanksgiving for God’s gifts of creation and redemption pronounced in connection with the bread and wine.”<sup>294</sup>

The Passover was undeniably a Jewish festival and feast; there was nothing in the history of the Gentile world to correspond. Yet, as we have seen, the temple meal was a common feature of pagan life, a meal that corresponded quite closely to that of the peace-offering. Could it be that the Apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, emphasized the peace-offering more as the template for the Lord’s Supper than the Passover? This is the theory of Cheryl Brown in her article, “The Peace-Offering and Pauline Soteriology,” in which she does not limit herself to just the Eucharist, but to the entirety of the Pauline soteriology. It is certainly not hard to locate the theme of ‘the condition of peace’ with God in Paul’s letters, the *locus classicus* being, of course, Romans 5.

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<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*; 98.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*; 118.

*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

(Romans 5:1-5)

Brown, following Paul, emphasizes the *communal* aspect of the people of God, a feature that is present in the various peace offerings shared between Yahweh, His priests, and His people. “We must not forget that Israel was first and foremost a *community* of God, a people who derived their identity from the covenant between themselves and their God.”<sup>295</sup> In a very significant reference, Brown mentions the question put to the rabbis as to why the peace-offerings were always mentioned last. “One response is recorded in Leviticus Rabbah: ‘Peace is the climax of all things...When the Messianic King is to come, he will commence with peace.’ Similarly, it is taught that this Messianic King ‘will establish peace for them, and they will sit at ease and eat in Paradise.’”<sup>296</sup> Paul’s clear emphasis on peace with God is equally clearly grounding in the crucifixion, wherein Jesus Christ brought the peace for which the faithful Jew longed and the peace-offering foreshadowed.

*For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.*

(Colossians 1:19-20)

In Ephesians 2, Paul again mentions the peace that Christ has both brought to believers and *is* in Himself, laying emphasis on the communion with

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<sup>295</sup> Brown, Cheryl A. “The Peace-Offering (שְׁלָמִים) and Pauline Soteriology” *Immanuel*, Vol. 24-25 (1990); 63.

<sup>296</sup> *Idem*.

God that believers, both Jew and Gentile, now have through Jesus. Note the 'access' that believers now have to God the Father through the 'one Spirit.'

*For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.* (Ephesians 2:14-18)

Brown writes, "While he [*i.e.*, Paul] draws upon other types, such as the Passover Lamb (Eph. 1:7 and 1 Cor. 5:7) and the sin-offering (Rom. 3:25 and 5:9), none of these is so central in Pauline soteriology as the peace-offering. One could almost translate Ephesians 2:11 as 'He is our peace-offering, who has broken down the dividing wall...'"<sup>297</sup> But does Paul's emphasis on the peace we have with God through Jesus Christ influence his teaching on the Lord's Supper? Brown begins her analysis by reiterating the Pauline emphasis on peace and applying that to the apostle's regular exhortation - especially to the church at Corinth - to the preservation of that peace through unity and harmony within the congregation. Disunity is, as Brown notes, the context in which Paul mentions the Lord's Supper, for the only such reference by the apostle is in I Corinthians.

He writes to a Corinthian church divided into many factions and beset by numerous sins, some of them very serious moral failures. There were certainly in need of repentance and reconciliation with God and one another; for their extreme disunity and insensitivity to one another led Paul to declare: 'When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.' Clearly, he thought of the meal as in some way an expression of the group's fellowship together with the Lord, to such a degree that their disunity invalidated the purpose of their sharing the meal.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*; 68.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*; 69.

What does the Lord's Supper signify? Does it point primarily to the Exodus, or does it commemorate the establishment of a 'condition of peace' between God and His people? The answer does not have to be a hard-and-fast either/or proposition; there can certainly be a measure of each contained in the meaning of the Supper instituted by the Lord at His last Passover. On the one hand, we cannot ignore the fact that the Lord's Supper was indeed instituted at Passover, and that elements of that meal were selected as elements of the New Covenant meal. Added to this we have the undeniable reality that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Passover; He is our Passover Lamb *par excellence*. But against these arguments there is the fact that Passover was observed once a year, and not "*as often as you eat the bread...*" Of course, it is true that some denominations derive an annual observance of Communion - 'Communion Season' - from this annual observance of the Jewish Passover. But the practice of the early church strongly indicates a *weekly* observance of the Lord's Supper, not an annual one.

Theologically, at least since the Reformation, the question regarding the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Jewish Passover centers on the associated question as to whether Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper was intended as a 'new' Passover for the New Covenant. The traditional view, again at least from the Reformation, is in the affirmative, as Lutheran scholar Norman Theiss writes, "The four evangelists and Paul interpret Jesus' death in the framework of the Passover...They assume that Jesus went up to Jerusalem to keep the Passover in order to fulfill God's plan of inaugurating a new and final Passover that observes a new exodus in his death."<sup>299</sup> But, as noted earlier in this discussion, this may be confusing the venue for the Lord's Supper with its intent.

Theiss also smooths out the data from the four Gospels. It is a well-known conundrum among biblical scholars (and among alert readers of the

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<sup>299</sup> Theiss, Norman "The Passover Feast of the New Covenant" *Interpretation*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Jan. 1994); 17.

Gospels), that John's account does not harmonize with the Synoptics as to the day on which the Last Supper occurred. "As is well known, however, the question of whether or not the Last Supper was in fact a Passover meal is one of the most complicated questions confronting religious historian, liturgiologist, and biblical scholar alike."<sup>300</sup> The details of this biblical question are beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say that the differences between the Gospel accounts prevents such a firm conclusion as Theiss offers. Instead of instituting a *replacement* Passover for the Church, Jesus can firmly be said to have been *fulfilling* the Passover for Israel. Mark Throntveit writes with reference to John's analysis of the events of Passion Week, "Thus, for John, Jesus 'fulfill' the Old Testament Passover, but not by instituting the Lord's Supper in ritual continuity with the Old Testament seder. By dying on the cross, Jesus 'fulfills' the Old Testament Passover in the sense of bringing it to an end, thereby becoming the last paschal lamb, the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'"<sup>301</sup>

The observance of the Lord's Supper is ordained by Jesus "*on the night He was betrayed,*" but its actual observance – albeit incorrectly – is really only narrated in I Corinthians 11. To be sure, the mechanics of the Supper are only briefly mentions in 11:23-25. But the reason for Paul's having written this chapter at all (of course, it was not a chapter to Paul) is not to explain *how* to observe the Lord's Supper, but to chastise the Corinthian community for the manifest lack of fellowship and concern for one another when they did observe it. Indeed, the apostle denies them the honor of having actually observed the Lord's Supper when they gathered, "*Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.*"<sup>302</sup> Calvin comments at this point,

Paul now turns to condemn the abuse which had crept into the Corinthians' observance of the Lord's Supper, viz. that they were mixing up ordinary

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<sup>300</sup> Throntveit, Mark A. "The Lord's Supper as New Testament, Not New Passover" *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (1997); 275.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*; 283-84.

<sup>302</sup> I Corinthians 11:20



banquets with the feast that is holy and spiritual, and along with that went contempt for the poor. Paul says that when this is done it is not the Lord's Supper that they are eating; not because one particular abuse would completely destroy, and reduce to nothing, the most sacred institution of Christ, but because they were desecrating the sacrament by observing it in the wrong way. In ordinary conversation we are accustomed to say that a thing is not done, unless it is done right.<sup>303</sup>

It is hard to miss in this chapter that the emphasis which the apostle wishes to lay upon the Supper is not the mechanics, but the fellowship. In calling the Supper the Lord's (one of only two places where the possessive form of *kurios* is used, the other being the 'Lord's Day' in Revelation), Paul is saying that Jesus Himself is the host of the meal, giving it a perspective that, it must be



**Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711)**

admitted, rules out entirely the type of selfish and offensive behavior manifested by the Corinthians at their 'feast.' Fee writes, "This meal is uniquely 'his own,' eaten by the gathered people of God in his presence (by the Spirit) and in his honor."<sup>304</sup> This sentence would serve as a perfect description of the peace offering in Leviticus. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch

Reformed theologian, Wilhelmus à Brakel, emphasizes the communal 'table fellowship' of the Lord's Supper in his *Systematics*, "The celebration of the Lord's Supper is referred to as the *breaking of bread* (Acts 2:46), and the cup is referred to as the *cup of thanksgiving* (I Cor. 10:16). These denominations are indicative of the loving and familiar fellowship of believers among each other, and with Christ, for the nourishment of spiritual life. The soul's inner communion with Christ is

<sup>303</sup> Calvin's *Commentaries*, I Corinthians, *en loc.*

<sup>304</sup> Fee, *Commentary on I Corinthians*; *en loc.*

therefore also expressed by the word 'supper.'"<sup>305</sup> Could more than this be said of the peace offering?

Referring to the rabbinic statement that all other sacrifices will pass away in the 'world to come' except for the peace-offering, Cheryl Brown references the article on 'Peace-Offerings' in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "A Jewish commentator has interpreted the peace-offerings as a covenant of friendship, which expresses both community between God and His own and community of God's own among themselves. This same idea of joyful table fellowship is expressed in the midrashim about the peace-offerings, and emphasized particularly by the statement of Rabbi Phineas that all sacrifices will be abolished in the Age to Come except the thank-offering, which is, we have seen, closely related to the peace-offering. As an expression of community it was thought to be of such importance that it will not cease, even when the need for the other sacrifices will have ceased."<sup>306</sup> Could more be said about the Lord's Supper?

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<sup>305</sup> à Brakel, Wilhelmus *A Christian's Reasonable Service; Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books; 1999); 526.

<sup>306</sup> Brown; 70.

**Week 13            The High Priest****Text Reading:        Leviticus 8:1 - 36**

*“Moses was permitted by the Lord to address him directly.  
Joshua and his successors could do this  
only through the mediation of the high priest  
and by means of the Urīm and Tummīm.”  
(William Muss-Arnolt)*

What we read in Leviticus 8 is largely a repetition of the subject matter of Exodus 28, only with less detail. Ephraim Radner wonders on behalf of all readers of Leviticus, whether these early sections of the book are really worth the time and effort, being essentially recapitulations of earlier texts. He refers to Calvin’s opinion especially of Chapters 8 & 9 as “wearisome” and as usual filled with things that “we do not understand.”<sup>307</sup> Of course this is a foil for Radner, who considers the first nine chapters of Leviticus to be vitally important, and not simply under the principle that ‘the essence of instruction is repetition.’ Though he does not mention it specifically, Radner essentially points to these readings of the offerings, the *torah* of the offerings, and now the garments and sacrifices of the priests (Chapters 8 & 9) as fitting perfectly into the *Sitz im Leben* of the Book of Leviticus. We are reminded from our first lesson, that Leviticus is situated chronologically in between Exodus 40 and Numbers 1, a period of only one month, from “*the first month of the second year, on the first day*”<sup>308</sup> to “*the first of the second month, in the second year.*”<sup>309</sup> This dating is one of the most specific chronological markers in the Bible, indicating the *historical* nature of what we are about to read. Or, as Radner puts it,

In a sense these two chapters provide the account of a palpable fulfillment of the previous instructions and constructions of Exodus, as well as the initiation, in practice, of the sacrificial outline given in the opening chapters of the book...To

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<sup>307</sup> Radner, 87.

<sup>308</sup> Exodus 40:17

<sup>309</sup> Numbers 1:1

that degree, they stand as an impression *in* history of the commands of God to Israel: that which God has spoken has taken place. The consecration of the priesthood and their first sacrifices within the erected tabernacle is now a fact of time.<sup>310</sup>

Modern biblical scholars, and sadly many modern Bible readers, neglect the *historical* element of Scripture; these things did happen in time, and their historical reality is an essential component of their truth. As we have seen in an earlier study on the fire upon the altar, that fire is lit – *by God Himself* – here in these historical-event chapters, Leviticus 8 & 9. Again Radner, “Indeed, sacrificial time is now inaugurated by God himself, who sends down his fire and consumes the final burnt offering laid out on the altar (9:24).”<sup>311</sup>

Without these two chapters, recounting the garments and the consecratory sacrifices of Aaron and his sons, the whole ‘Levitical’ system could remain nothing more than theory and abstract religiosity, which is what many modern liberal scholars consider all of this to have been. But in Leviticus 8 we are bid to witness the actual, historical dressing of Aaron in the high priestly garment described in such detail in Exodus 28; and in Leviticus 9 we watch as the tabernacle is, so to speak, opened for business, first for the priests themselves, then for the people.

Though the text of Leviticus 8 deals with the sons of Aaron, the emphasis is on him as the High Priest. In this pericope there is a transfer of mediation as well as of communication with Yahweh. Moses is, remarkably, acting in the role of the High Priest but he is *transferring* that role to Aaron. This is the only time in Israelite history that the ceremonies and rituals recorded in Leviticus 8 will take place; these are non-



**Gordon Wenham (b. 1943)**

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<sup>310</sup> Radner; 87-88.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*; 88.

repeatable by design. Thus Gordon Wenham writes, “Once again the unusual feature is that it is Moses who performs the priestly side of the ritual and the priests-to-be take the part of the ordinary worshipper.”<sup>312</sup> There is a quantum shift taking place in this passage, from one who spoke to Yahweh ‘face to face’ to one who will continue to communicate with Israel’s God, though now through intermediate channels, specifically, the *Urim* and the *Thummim*. This transfer from Moses to Aaron (and Aaron is essentially a stand-in for all subsequent High Priests) is highlighted in the transfer of civil authority from Moses to Joshua, as recorded in Numbers 27.

*And the LORD said to Moses: “Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight. And you shall give some of your authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient. He shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire before the LORD for him by the judgment of the Urim. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, he and all the children of Israel with him – all the congregation.”*<sup>313</sup>

Note that the LORD indicates here that only *some* of Moses’ authority would be transferred to Joshua. Furthermore, Joshua’s ability to know the will of Yahweh concerning Israel’s ‘going out and going in’ would henceforth be mediated through the High Priest, and the revelation that the High Priest would receive from the LORD would itself come through the *Urim*.<sup>314</sup> “The requirement of Numbers 27:21 indicates that Joshua’s standing was not the same as the standing of his predecessor Moses. Yahweh had spoken mouth to mouth with Moses, and Moses had even seen the form of Yahweh (Num. 12:8). This was not the case with Joshua.”<sup>315</sup> Of course, the instructions given to Moses by Yahweh in

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<sup>312</sup> Wenham, Gordon *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1979); 142.

<sup>313</sup> Numbers 27:18-21

<sup>314</sup> The mention of only the *Urim* in Numbers 27:21 is widely considered to be a synecdoche, the mentioning of a part for the whole, and probably should be interpreted as including the *Thummim*.

<sup>315</sup> Van Dam, Cornelis *The Urim and the Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns; 1997); 166.

Numbers 27 are intended to pass down through the generations, outlining the relationship between the civil ruler, the High Priest, and Israel's God. Unlike Israel's neighboring nations, the center of attention will not be the monarch – the pharaoh or emperor or king – but rather the High Priest, for he alone will have access to the counsel of Israel's God. The civil ruler of Israel, again very unlike the pagan nations of the Ancient Near East, was not to be viewed as the manifestation, or even the representation, of the nation's deity; he was just the man who would the Israelites 'out and in,' meaning primarily, in battle. We will find that even David, the man after God's heart and the progenitor of the Messianic line, was only able to ascertain the divine will through the High Priest and the ephod – itself probably a euphemism for the *Urim* and *Thummim* which were kept in or on the ephod.

So the focus of all Israel now turns to the High Priest. Yet even he will not duplicate the ministry of Moses; there will be only One who will both attain and exceed the position of Moses, that is Jesus Christ.

*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.*

(Hebrews 3:1-6)

The High Priest would be the most important man in Israel and would, as Jesus said, "sit in the seat of Moses." But he would not be Moses, with direct access to God, to speak with Him "face to face," as it were. For the foreseeable future – though even this would come to an end – God provided a mysterious means of communicating His will to the High Priest, the *Urim and Thummim*, mentioned here in Leviticus 8 and elsewhere. These objects – if indeed they were

objects, as some have thought them purely spiritual, and if indeed there were two or more of them, as some have thought the collective to be but a singular object – are perhaps the most uncertain of anything revealed in Scripture. What



Cornelis van Dam (b. 1946)

they were and how they were used is nowhere described in the Bible, leaving exegesis across the Jewish and Christian centuries to oscillate between pure speculation and educated guess. Cornelis van Dam, who did his doctoral work and dissertation on the topic of the *Urim and Thummim*, discovered only that there is less consensus about them today than previously. He

writes, “the widespread agreement that once existed about how these words *urim* and *tummim* should be read and understood has disappeared, and there is a growing number of scholars who maintain that the origin and meaning of these terms are either very uncertain or unknown.”<sup>316</sup> Yet it was by this ‘very uncertain or unknown’ procedure that the will of Yahweh would henceforth be made known to Israel.

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments, the anointing oil, a bull as the sin offering, two rams, and a basket of unleavened bread; and gather all the congregation together at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” So Moses did as the LORD commanded him. And the congregation was gathered together at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And Moses said to the congregation, “This is what the LORD commanded to be done.”* (8:1-5)

The writer of Hebrews notes that the office of High Priest was not filled on a voluntary basis, “And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.”<sup>317</sup> That the family of Aaron would fill that role is not first enunciated here in Leviticus, but rather in Exodus. However, it is here in Leviticus 8 that we encounter the historical enactment of the Aaronic priestly

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*; 131.

<sup>317</sup> Hebrews 5:4

dynasty, if we can call it that. “The uniqueness of this moment is marked by certain divergences from the general instructions for, for example, cereal and wave offerings in Lev. 7, the strange transition from Moses as provisional priest to Aaron and his sons as perpetual priests.”<sup>318</sup>

There is also to be no doubt that what was being established on this day did not originate from Moses; this was no mere addition to the compendium of human religions. We are told first that *Moses did what the LORD commanded him* (8:4) and that his first words to the assembled congregation were “*This is the thing with the LORD has commanded to do.*” (8:5) The same phrase occurs eight times in the chapter. It is likely that the gathered Israelites expected the continual leadership and intercession of Moses, to be followed by an equally authoritative and intercessory leader after him, and so on down the generations of time. This would have been, in Egyptian terminology, the First Dynasty of Israel, the ‘Mosaic’ Dynasty. That was not, and never, to be for Israel. Their King was Yahweh, though they would reject Him in that role, and they were not to be a people governed as the pagan nations surrounding them were. The tabernacle, and later the Temple, would be the center of gravity for the nation, not the palace. As the people of Yahweh, the most critical component of their continued prosperous existence in the land was to be their relationship to Yahweh himself, and not the wisdom or martial skill of their king. “At the heart of this scheme was the establishment of a pure system of worship, in which God could be honored and praised in a fitting manner, and through which human sin could be atoned for.”<sup>319</sup>

The mention here of the ‘whole congregation’ may not mean each and every Israel, of which there may have easily been several hundred thousand or more. There is a somewhat indeterminate word in verse 3, *edah* (עֵדָה) which could have referred to only the adult males or even just the tribal elders.

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<sup>318</sup> Radner; 88.

<sup>319</sup> Wenham; 129.

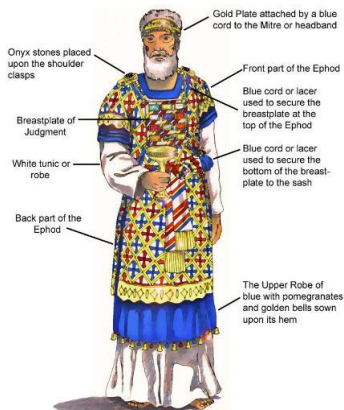


Practically speaking, assembling the entire nation to stand before the Tent of Meeting does seem a bit impossible. Perhaps what occurred here in Leviticus 8 is comparable to the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, recorded in I Kings 8, where the emphasis is on the tribal elders, who are considered the 'whole congregation' by representation.

*Now Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the chief fathers of the children of Israel, to King Solomon in Jerusalem, that they might bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the City of David, which is Zion. Therefore all the men of Israel assembled with King Solomon at the feast in the month of Ethanim, which is the seventh month. So all the elders of Israel came, and the priests took up the ark. Then they brought up the ark of the LORD, the tabernacle of meeting, and all the holy furnishings that were in the tabernacle. The priests and the Levites brought them up. Also King Solomon, and all the congregation of Israel who were assembled with him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing sheep and oxen that could not be counted or numbered for multitude.* (I Kings 8:1-5)

***Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons and washed them with water. And he put the tunic on him, girded him with the sash, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him; and he girded him with the intricately woven band of the ephod, and with it tied the ephod on him.*** (8:6-7)

Technically, at this point Aaron and his sons were still laymen, not yet priests. Thus their consecratory baths – undoubtedly of the entire body, per the context – probably took place just outside the Tent of Meeting. The laver that would be the vessel for their continued ablutions through the years, was not yet



anointed, though Moses would be attending to that very soon. The emphasis in this passage, however, appears to be the clothing for which Aaron's body must be first washed. It is on this day that the garment so carefully described and so carefully woven back in Exodus 28, are finally worn by the High Priest, Aaron. The high priestly ensemble consisted of a tunic over which was a

robe, girded with a sash. Upon this was worn the ephod which was secured, apparently at his shoulders and around his waist, with a band made of the same material. Milgrom theorizes, "It [*i.e.*, the ephod] is shaped like an apron that covers the loins (from waist to thigh?) and is suspended from two shoulder pieces."<sup>320</sup> Over this ephod went the 'breastplate of judgment' adorned with twelve precious stones signifying the tribes of Israel.

*And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister to Me as priest.* (Exodus 28:4)

As discussed before, the garments of the High Priest separated him from the rest of Israel and, in a manner of speaking, from his 'regular' self as well. It was not enough that he be a male descendant of Aaron, without the garments he was totally disqualified from ministering before Yahweh in the tabernacle. Speaking to the general meaning of occupation-oriented garments, Wenham writes, "Essentially a uniform draws attention to the office or function of a person, as opposed to his individual personality."<sup>321</sup> But the office of High Priest was really not comparable to that of a police officer, or even a judge in his robes and wig; this was the man who would stand between Yahweh and His people both as to the atonement of sin and the communication of divine instruction and guidance. Thus, though the priests themselves also had special sacred garments, the High Priest's were far more elaborate, and only he wore the most significant of the items of adornment: the ephod and breastplate, and the turban and gold plate. "In putting on these clothes he took to himself all the honor and glory of the high-priesthood...His glorious clothing symbolized the significance of his office."<sup>322</sup> The uniqueness of these garments is emphasized both by the prohibition against wearing them outside the holy precincts and by the fact that

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<sup>320</sup> Milgrom; 505.

<sup>321</sup> Wenham; 138.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*; 139.

the mixture of linen and wool was prohibited in nonsacred garments because it was considered holy.”<sup>323</sup>

*Then he put the breastplate on him, and he put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastplate.* (8:8)

In terms of the functional part of the garments of the High Priest, none were more significant than the *ephod* and the *Urim and Thummim*, though it appears that in later texts the two stood for the same thing: judgment. Indeed, the breastplate, the *pièce de résistance* of the body of the garment, is called the ‘breastplate of judgment’ in Exodus 28,

*You shall make the **breastplate of judgment**. Artistically woven according to the workmanship of the ephod you shall make it: of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen, you shall make it. It shall be doubled into a square: a span shall be its length, and a span shall be its width. And you shall put settings of stones in it, four rows of stones: The first row shall be a sardius, a topaz, and an emerald; this shall be the first row; the second row shall be a turquoise, a sapphire, and a diamond; the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; and the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper. They shall be set in gold settings. And the stones shall have the names of the sons of Israel, twelve according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, each one with its own name; they shall be according to the twelve tribes.* (Exodus 28:15-21)

The breastplate was made as woven and not of metal, for it was not an article of military armor; it was symbolic of the High Priest carrying the twelve tribes – represented by the twelve gemstones – ‘upon his breast’ before Israel’s God. The breastplate was folded in half, perhaps to strengthen it for the attachment of the gemstones, or perhaps to provide a pouch in which to place those (that?) most mysterious of the accoutrements, the *Urim and Thummim*. Milgrom notes, “Instead of being solid and flat, it was folded in half and formed a pouch about nine inches square.”<sup>324</sup> This breastplate was the only ‘speech’ of the High Priest when he entered into the presence of Yahweh, for there is no biblical evidence that the man himself ever verbalized anything in the divine

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<sup>323</sup> Milgrom; 501.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*; 507.

presence. It was also the receptacle by and through which the LORD 'spoke' to the High Priest, for there is also no biblical evidence of Yahweh verbalizing His revelation to Aaron and his descendants, as He once did with Moses. Milgrom comments,

The *chōzen* (חֹזֵן) served two purposes as part of the high priest's vestments. First, it served as a continual reminder of the twelve tribes before the Lord. The names of the twelve tribes were engraved on a stone. Aaron bore these names upon his heart ('*al lēb* – hence we know that the *chozen* was worn on the upper chest and not at the waist). Because the high priest officiated in silence the engravings on the stones...spoke to the Lord. Second the *chozen* served an oracular purpose; it became the receptacle for the Urim and Thummim.<sup>325</sup>

So that brings us to the mysterious *Urim and Thummim*, typically transliterated from the Hebrew (אֲתֵּרֵת הַתְּמִיּוֹת וְאֲרִיִּים) simply because no one really knows what they are. The two words have the *-im* ending of the plural, though scholars both Jewish and Christian are at a loss as to what that signifies. Milgrom counts seven mentions of either the *Urim* alone or the two together in the Old Testament (there is, of course, no mention in either form in the New Testament).<sup>326</sup> There is considerable debate regarding both the nature and the purpose of the *Urim and Thummim*, beginning with the fact that, contrary to the other items, there are no instructions in Exodus 28 as to what these were or how to 'make' them. As here in Leviticus 8, the *Urim and Thummim* are simply mentioned in Exodus 28 in a manner that indicates both their pre-existence and to Moses' full awareness of what they were.

*So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart, when he goes into the holy place, as a memorial before the LORD continually. And you shall put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be over Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD. So*

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<sup>325</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>326</sup> The Old Testament citations are: Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21 (*Urim* alone); Deut. 33:8 (*Thummim* mentioned before *Urim*); I Sam. 28:6 (again *Urim* alone); Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65

*Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the LORD continually.* (Exodus 28:29-30)

Van Dam, in the publication of his doctoral dissertation titled *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, thoroughly traces the inconclusive historical journey of interpretation regarding this mysterious component of the High Priest's intercessory apparatus. What seems to have achieved somewhat of a consensus is that the *Urim and Thummim* constituted some form of communication media between Yahweh and the High Priest, by which the LORD instructed the nation through the High Priest. Yet even in this there is still disagreement as to whether the *Urim and Thummim* were actual, physical objects. Van Dam writes, "the relatively recent *Encyclopedia Talmudica* defines the UT as 'a divine force operating in the Breastplate...which answered questions affecting the Community of Israel.'"<sup>327</sup>

Even the etymology of the two words is suspect, as there are similar roots to the Hebrew terms from both the ancient Babylonian and ancient Egyptian languages. The most common interpretation of the words' roots, though by no means affirmed by a large majority, is that of 'Lights and Perfections,' though this again does not aid in our understanding of what they were or how they worked. The *Urim*, apparently signifying some form of illumination, has often been thus interpreted as something that glows - or perhaps either the *Urim* or the *Thummim* glowed depending on whether the answer from Yahweh was in the affirmative or the negative. This is apparently the view that Josephus maintained in the Second Temple Period, who also notes that that *Urim and Thummim* had ceased to be a part of the priesthood for at least two hundred years before his time.

I will now treat of what I before omitted, the garment of the high priest: for he [Moses] left no room for the evil practices of [false] prophets; but if some of that sort should attempt to abuse the Divine authority, he left it to God to be present

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<sup>327</sup> Van Dam; 10.

at his sacrifices when he pleased, and when he pleased to be absent. And he was willing this should be known, not to the Hebrews only, but to those foreigners also who were there. For as to those stones, which we told you before, the high priest bare on his shoulders, which were sardonyxes, (and I think it needless to describe their nature, they being known to every body,) the one of them shined out when God was present at their sacrifices; I mean that which was in the nature of a button on his right shoulder, bright rays darting out thence, and being seen even by those that were most remote; which splendor yet was not before natural to the stone. This has appeared a wonderful thing to such as have not so far indulged themselves in philosophy, as to despise Divine revelation. Yet will I mention what is still more wonderful than this: for God declared beforehand, by those twelve stones which the high priest bare on his breast, and which were inserted into his breastplate, when they should be victorious in battle; for so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance. Whence it came to pass that those Greeks, who had a veneration for our laws, because they could not possibly contradict this, called that breastplate the Oracle. Now this breastplate, and this sardonyx, left off shining two hundred years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgressions of his laws. Of which things we shall further discourse on a fitter opportunity; but I will now go on with my proposed narration.<sup>328</sup>

Josephus' view is itself somewhat of an amalgam; many rabbis held that the *Urim and Thummim* were a spiritual force (see above from the *Encyclopedia Talmudica*) and that what indicated Yahweh's instruction or answer was the variegated glow of the gemstones set in the breastplate. The 'spiritual' interpretation, however, is untenable since Moses is told that the *Urim and Thummim* were to go either *in* or *on* the breastplate. Still, the common understanding of both Jewish and Christian interpreters is that these two (or one, as some maintain) stones were a medium of communication between the High Priest and Yahweh. The lack of any specific information regarding the nature of the object(s) or their use would inevitably lead to allegorizing of the *Urim and Thummim*, especially as Christian scholars attempted to translate them into

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<sup>328</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* Book III, Chapter 8, Paragraph 9. [Flavius Josephus: Josephus: The Complete Works - Christian Classics Ethereal Library \(ccel.org\)](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/Flavius_Josephus/Josephus:_The_Complete_Works_-_Christian_Classics_Ethereal_Library.html). Accessed 28April2024.

Christian doctrine and practice. Calvin, for instance, sees both true doctrine and Jesus Christ in the *Urim and Thummim*.

By the *Urim*, therefore, or *splendours*, I doubt not but that the light of doctrine, wherewith the true Priest illuminates all believers, was represented...On the other hand, the *Thummim*, which signifies *perfections*, was a symbol of the perfect and entire purity which is only to be sought in Christ.<sup>329</sup>

Within the biblical record there are numerous instances in which the king would consult Yahweh through the mediation of the High Priest, particularly during the reigns of Saul and his successor, David. In these accounts, however, the actual terms *Urim and Thummim* are not found. Instead, consultation was made via the *ephod*, which became almost synonymous with intercession before Yahweh on behalf of the king. It was by means of the *ephod*, then, that David inquired of the LORD through Abiathar the priest, as to his situation vis-à-vis King Saul, when the latter was seeking to kill him.

*Now it happened, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, that he went down with an ephod in his hand. And Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah. So Saul said, "God has delivered him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars." Then Saul called all the people together for war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men. When David knew that Saul plotted evil against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." Then David said, "O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down." Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will deliver you." So David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah and went wherever they could go. Then it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah; so he halted the expedition.* (I Samuel 23:6-13)

As there is nothing mentioned in the Pentateuch regarding the consultive powers of the *ephod*, most scholars view this as a euphemism for the *Urim and Thummim* and that the *ephod* that was brought to David included the breastplate of judgment. It appears from the narrative in I Samuel 23, that the functionality

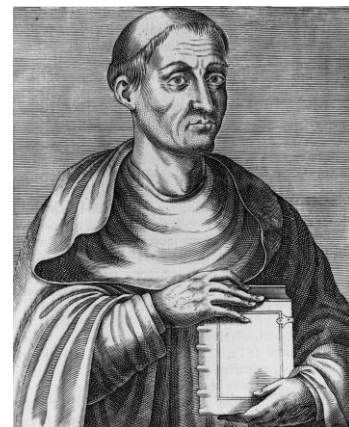
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<sup>329</sup> Calvin's *Harmony of the Pentateuch*; quoted by Van Dam; 13.

of the *Urim and Thummim* - assuming that these were indeed involved - was primarily in the answering of specific questions, and not in proactive revelation from Yahweh (this was from a very early time the province of the LORD's prophets).

Another common means of receiving direction from Yahweh was the casting of lots, as illustrated in I Samuel 14, when Jonathan disobeyed his father's command against anyone taking nourishment during the battle. The Israelite's triumphed over the Philistines on account of Jonathan, but the people were greatly troubled by both Saul's edict and his son's violation of it. Long story short, the priest (presumably the High Priest) was asked to bring the ark (again, presumably the ark of the covenant from the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, which was indeed used as a vanguard for the troops), so that he might inquire of the LORD. Saul did not receive an answer from Yahweh the first day and on the second called to the LORD, "*Give a perfect lot*" and was answered.<sup>330</sup> The overall passage is difficult to decipher, but the essential presence of the priest and of some component of the tabernacle (though this time it was not the ephod or the *Urim and Thummim*) adds to the common understanding that instruction from Yahweh was mediated through the priesthood, associated with the tabernacle, and conveyed by means other than verbal.

Due to the association of the priest with these divine consultations, many scholars have concluded that such terms as *ephod*, and *lot*, and the *Urim and Thummim* are but different ways of referring to the same practice. Thus it is concluded that the *Urim and Thummim* were essentially 'lots' that were carried in the breastplate of the ephod. Van Dam quotes the 12<sup>th</sup> Century scholar, Hugo of



Hugo of St. Victor (c. 1096-1141)

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<sup>330</sup> I Samuel 14:41



St. Victor, "On this account, the lots which were consulted in antiquity for the indication of the truth were called Urim Thummim [sic]. They were signs inscribed with different letters. When they were cast it was shown by a combination of the letters visible from above, by a true indication, what ought to be done or evaded."<sup>331</sup>

This conclusion is certainly not necessary, as the *Urim and Thummim*, the ephod, and the lots may have been completely different articles and methods of determining the LORD's will. What does seem to be certain, however, is that there existed a non-verbal means of divine communication that was interpretable by the priest. The similarities of the practice of the ancient Israelites to that of the pagan nations surrounding them cannot be ignored, as the description of the *Urim and Thummim* and the few examples of the actual practice of determining Yahweh's decision bear a striking similarity to the use of runes among the pagans. Lest this should concern us that this practice undermines the purity of the ancient Mosaic religion, we have the assurance from Proverbs that "*The lot is cast into the lap; but every decision is from the LORD.*"<sup>332</sup>

*And he put the turban on his head. Also on the turban, on its front, he put the golden plate, the holy crown, as the LORD had commanded Moses.* (8:9)

Moses finishes the adornment of Aaron as the High Priest with the headgear - the turban and the gold plate inscribed "*Holiness to the LORD.*" This plate was significant in terms of the High Priest's approach to Yahweh, for as with the breastplate, the plate referenced the sins of the people and was the means by which Aaron's approach into the Holy of Holies would be acceptable to the LORD. The description of both the plate and its purpose is also found in Exodus 28.

*You shall also make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet:*

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<sup>331</sup> Van Dam; 35.

<sup>332</sup> Proverbs 16:33

*HOLINESS TO THE LORD. And you shall put it on a blue cord, that it may be on the turban; it shall be on the front of the turban. So it shall be on Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things which the children of Israel hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.* (Exodus 28:36-38)

The engraving, *Holy to the Lord*, (Hebrew *qodesh l' YHWH* - קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה), on the plate was itself expiatory, taking away the iniquity of the Israelite's 'holy things' brought before the LORD. This part of the High Priest's garments again emphasizes the infinite distance between a holy God and a sinful people, a distance crossed only by divine grace and never by human merit. No matter how assiduously the Israelite, along with the Aaronic priest, observed the *torah* of the offerings, it yet remained constantly true that man's 'holy things' are still an abomination before Yahweh. *"But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags."*<sup>333</sup> There is a direct parallel between the 'holy things' in Exodus 28:38 and the 'righteousnesses' in Isaiah 64:6; the absolute best that a sinner can bring must still be made righteous by the LORD; there is no intrinsic worth in the very best of our 'holy things.' This sentiment remains even for the believer in Jesus Christ, whose free and unfettered approach to the throne of God Almighty must still be sprinkled by the blood of Jesus.

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, **having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*** (Hebrews 10:19-22)

*Also Moses took the anointing oil, and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it, and consecrated them. He sprinkled some of it on the altar seven times, anointed the altar and all its utensils, and the laver and its base, to consecrate them. And he poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him, to consecrate him.* (8:10-12)

As noted above with regard to the washing of Aaron and his sons, the implements of the tabernacle were not yet 'open for business.' Moses, continuing

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<sup>333</sup> Isaiah 64:6a

in his supreme mediatorial and priestly role, must consecrate each article of furniture in the tabernacle before his brother and nephews can begin the sacrificial process that would then last for generations. That Moses uses oil rather



**Menahem Haran (b. 1924)**

than blood is indicative of the typical role of oil in the Ancient Near East as well as in Israel, as the fluid of anointing and (in Israel's case) representative of the divine Spirit. Thus the same anointing oil is poured out on Aaron's head, in a sense uniting him as the High Priest with the functionality of the tabernacle as represented by

its furniture: the High Priest and Tabernacle were one. Menahem Haran, in his extensive study of ancient temples and the tabernacle and temple of Israel, considered the priestly garments to be part of the tabernacle furnishings. "In Haran's work on the structure of the Tabernacle and Temple and the role of cultic service within it, he observes the manner in which the priests, both through their vestments and through their ordination, become, in effect, part of the Tabernacle structure itself."<sup>334</sup>

This, of course, points ahead powerfully to the ministry of Jesus Christ who is both the great High Priest and Himself the tabernacle/Temple. What Aaron and his descendants could not be – *both the just and the justifier* – Jesus became through His obedience suffering, atoning death, and victorious resurrection. Moses' anointing of the tabernacle was not permanent, and these same implements would be anointed again and again with blood. But Jesus' own blood, more precious than the blood of Abel, cleanses for all times the true tabernacle, made without hands.

*For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high*

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<sup>334</sup> Boyd, Samuel L. "Applied Ritual: The Application of Blood and Oil on Bodies in the Pentateuchal Sources" *Biblical Interpretation* Vol. 29 (2021); 129.

*priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.* (Hebrews 7:26-28)

***Then Moses brought Aaron's sons and put tunics on them, girded them with sashes, and put hats on them, as the LORD had commanded Moses. (8:13)***

Aaron's sons were also designated special, sacred vestments, though not so elaborate as their father's. We need not take the placement of this verse as strictly chronological – as though the sons had to wait after their own ceremonial washing until both their father was attired *and* the tabernacle anointed, before they were allowed to be reclothed. The anointing of the tabernacle furniture, as noted above, comes before the priests clothing in terms of *priority*, though it is reasonable to consider that all of the men were clothed at the same time. The emphasis on functional priority rather than time is indicated by the fact that Aaron's head was anointed, though his sons' heads were not. The dressing of Aaron, anointing of the tabernacle furniture, and anointing of Aaron are all of a piece. As the sons of Aaron would serve only as his assistants and not as the mediator and intercessor before Yahweh, their dressing is a lesser priority.

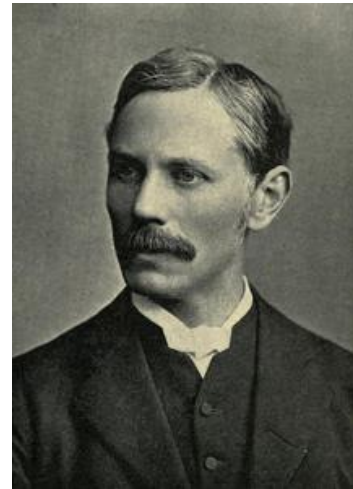
***And he brought the bull for the sin offering. Then Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the bull for the sin offering, and Moses killed it. Then he took the blood, and put some on the horns of the altar all around with his finger, and purified the altar. And he poured the blood at the base of the altar, and consecrated it, to make atonement for it. Then he took all the fat that was on the entrails, the fatty lobe attached to the liver, and the two kidneys with their fat, and Moses burned them on the altar. But the bull, its hide, its flesh, and its offal, he burned with fire outside the camp, as the LORD had commanded Moses. (8:14-17)***

The sacrifices we now read through the end of the chapter only happened once in Israel's history, for this particular day, and the seven-day period to follow, was the inauguration of both the tabernacle sacrificial system and the Aaronic priesthood. The pattern of the offerings, however, follow those of the burnt offering through the peace offering, with a final meal at which Aaron and his sons ate in the presence of Yahweh. The blood of the sacrifice was added to

the anointing oil to purify the altar and was also sprinkled on Aaron and his sons for their purification (8:30). But the most intriguing addition in this particular consecration ceremony was the application of the blood to the priests' right ear, right thumb, and the big toe of their right foot (8:23-24).

One aspect of this odd ritual is fairly clear: the members of the body mentioned are all on the *right* side, which in both biblical instruction and Jewish/rabbinic tradition is the preferred side. Milgrom lists a number of biblical references, for instance, the 'right side of the throne' as being the position of preferment, as well as rabbinic. Among the latter are "in the Temple...every turn must be to the right, priestly manipulations are performed with the right hand, and left-handed disqualifies a priest."<sup>335</sup> Explaining the ear, thumb, and big toe is not so easy.

It appears at first blush that the ritual consists of *partes pro toto* – a part for the whole – and that the entire body of Aaron and of his sons is thereby anointed, just as applying the blood to the horns of the altar was sufficient to consecrate the entire altar. However, this does not explain the actual parts of the body chosen, and biblical scholars have tended toward allegorizing at this point. Noted 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hebrew scholar (and higher critic) S. R. Driver wrote, "that the organs of hearing, handling and walking are touched by the blood, imply that the



**S. R. Driver (1846-1914)**

priest is to have hallowed ears to listen to God's command, hallowed hands to perform his sacred offices, and hallowed feet to tread rightly the sacred places as also to walk generally in holy ways."<sup>336</sup> Cornelis Houtman, emeritus professor of Old Testament at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, considers the order of the anointed body parts to be a "top-to-bottom sanctification" of the

<sup>335</sup> Milgrom; 528.

<sup>336</sup> Quoted by Milgrom; 528. This is essentially the interpretation as well of Keil & Delitzsch; 340.

priests. "Thus, the organs are not selected on the basis of their functional significance but due to their anatomical location. They represent the top, middle, and bottom of the body, and the blood daubing effects a complete sanctification."<sup>337</sup>

Perhaps some light will be shed on the topic by comparing the ritual of consecration of the priests to the ritual of cleansing concerning the leper. In Leviticus 14 we read the process by which a cleansed leper may be re-integrated into the community, and one aspect of the ritual involves the very same body parts, though in the case of the leper the anointing is with blood *and* oil. The blood of the trespass offering required for the atonement of the leper was to be manipulated in the same manner as in the priestly consecration in Leviticus 8:23-24, followed then by the same treatment with the oil.

*The priest shall take some of the blood of the trespass offering, and the priest shall put it on the tip of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot. And the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it into the palm of his own left hand. Then the priest shall dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and shall sprinkle some of the oil with his finger seven times before the LORD. And of the rest of the oil in his hand, the priest shall put some on the tip of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot, on the blood of the trespass offering.*

(Leviticus 14:14-17)

This same treatment of the cleansed leper, who would not thereby be permitted to minister in the tabernacle, and the consecration of the priests would seem to indicate that the focus is on cleansing, and that the bodily parts do not have any symbolic or allegorical meaning. The ritual of daubing is but another mechanism of *kippur*, atonement.<sup>338</sup> Its presence in the text, and its parallel in the ritual of the leper in Leviticus 14, confirm the difficulty any exegete faces with

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<sup>337</sup> Quoted by William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power*. GoogleBooks; 97.

<sup>338</sup> Milgrom; 529.

trying to determine the meaning, much less the prophetic significance, of each and every aspect of the tabernacle system.

*And you shall not go outside the door of the tabernacle of meeting for seven days, until the days of your consecration are ended. For seven days he shall consecrate you. As he has done this day, so the LORD has commanded to do, to make atonement for you. Therefore you shall stay at the door of the tabernacle of meeting day and night for seven days, and keep the charge of the LORD, so that you may not die; for so I have been commanded." So Aaron and his sons did all the things that the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses.* (8:33-36)

The chapter ends with the eighth occurrence of the reference to what *the LORD had commanded*. Aaron and his sons were to stay in the tabernacle for seven days, each day reprising the offerings in accordance with Exodus 29.

*Thus you shall do to Aaron and his sons, according to all that I have commanded you. Seven days you shall consecrate them. And you shall offer a bull every day as a sin offering for atonement. You shall cleanse the altar when you make atonement for it, and you shall anoint it to sanctify it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and sanctify it. And the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar must be holy.* (Exodus 29:35-37)

What is significant about this passage closing out Leviticus 8 is the dire warning that Moses gives to Aaron, that he and his sons are to stay by the tabernacle entrance for seven days and nights, *lest they die*. The reason Moses gives for this warning, "*for I have been commanded,*" is enigmatic since there is no corresponding word in Exodus. It is probably best to interpret this warning in light not of what had gone before in Exodus, but what is about to happen in Leviticus 10. The LORD has commanded the ways and means of proper tabernacle worship; the priests are to strictly obey, *lest they die*.

**Week 14                    The Fire of Yahweh – Part I****Text Reading:            Leviticus 9:1 - 24**

*“All the ritual in the Old Testament  
would have been pointless  
if God had not deigned to reveal himself to the people.”  
(Gordon Wenham)*

Leviticus 9, as a chapter division, is both logical and chronological; a helpful division of the text. The events of Chapter 9 follow immediately upon those of Chapter 8, and are separated logically and chronologically, by the completion of the seven-day consecration period for Aaron and his sons. Logically, we move from the consecration and anointing of both the Aaronic priests and the tabernacle, to the actual taking up of priestly duties by Aaron and his sons. Chapter 9 also completes the transition from Moses to Aaron in terms of the tabernacle erection and service, as Notre Dame professor Gary Anderson notes, “In a word, the period of Mosaic supervision has drawn to a close and from now on the responsibility will rest upon the priests to ‘check the manual,’ so to speak, as to what comes next.”<sup>339</sup> Anderson’s comment reflects the change in perspective between Leviticus 8, where we find Moses giving the commands concerning the vestments and offerings, and Leviticus 9:16, where we read that Aaron “*presented the burnt offering and offered it according to the ordinance.*” From this point on, the *torah* of the offerings would govern their presentation by the priests; Moses will supervise and critique (as we will see in Leviticus 10), but it is now up to Aaron and his sons, and their sons throughout the generations, to do things ‘by the book.’

Leviticus 9 also presents the inauguration of the tabernacle service in the only manner that would be meaningful to both the Aaronic priests and to the people of Israel: by a visible and undeniable manifestation of the divine glory, the divine approbation of all that had happened up to this point. As Wenham

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<sup>339</sup> Anderson, Gary A. “‘Through Those Who Are Near Me, I Will Show Myself Holy’: Nadab and Abihu and Apophatic Theology” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 77, No. 1 (January 2015); 8.



notes, "all the ritual in the Old Testament would have been pointless if God had not deigned to reveal himself to the people."<sup>340</sup> That this self-revelation of Israel's God is an integral theme for Leviticus 9 is seen in both the promise and the fulfillment of the event. In verse 6 Moses tells Aaron and the assembled congregation, "*This is the thing which the LORD has commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you.*" Later, in verse 23, we read of the fulfillment of this promise: "*When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people.*"

The nature of the glory is also a major theme of the chapter, but more in the literary sense of joining this chapter with the one to follow, Leviticus 10. Fire, of course, is the primary element of the divine self-disclosure to Israel. At Sinai, the mountain was enveloped with fire when the LORD descended to meet with Moses,

*Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.*  
(Exodus 19:18)

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Yahweh will manifest His approval and presence concerning the inauguration of the Aaronic priestly duties, via fire. Milgrom writes concerning the evident connection between the tabernacle and the mountain, "The Tabernacle, in effect, becomes a portable Sinai, an assurance of the permanent presence of the deity in Israel's midst."<sup>341</sup> But this very element of self-revelation carries with it foreboding and danger no less than blessing and approbation, as it did at Sinai. After Moses and Aaron return from within the tabernacle and bless the people, "*Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat upon the altar.*"<sup>342</sup> But just a few verses later, when Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offer

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<sup>340</sup> Wenham; 151.

<sup>341</sup> Milgrom; 574.

<sup>342</sup> Leviticus 9:24

'strange fire' in their censers, we read *"And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD."*<sup>343</sup> The similarity of the wording can leave no mistake as to the dual nature of the divine fire: both approbation and disapprobation, blessing and destruction, come from the presence of the same God. The family of Aaron were embarking on a ministry of great influence and blessing, but also one of great and immanent danger. *"It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God,"* for *"our God is a consuming fire."*<sup>344</sup>

*It came to pass on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. And he said to Aaron, "Take for yourself a young bull as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the LORD. And to the children of Israel you shall speak, saying, 'Take a kid of the goats as a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering, also a bull and a ram as peace offerings, to sacrifice before the LORD, and a grain offering mixed with oil; for today the LORD will appear to you.' "* (9:1-4)

The sacrifices to be offered by Aaron on this opening day of the tabernacle service were exactly those prescribed by the LORD through Moses in Exodus 29:10-28. As with the garments, here we have the historical enactment of the ritual ordinances for the true worship of Yahweh. Jewish commentators have long noted the irony that the first sacrifice that Aaron was to offer before the LORD was a 'young bull,' literally, a calf, considering that the fabrication of the idolatrous golden calf was Aaron's trademark sin within the history of Israel.<sup>345</sup> There may actually be no connection, as the ordinance for the consecratory offering was given to Moses on Sinai at the same time that the people were incubating their rebellion back in the camp. Of course, Yahweh knows all things.

The statement of Moses here, *"for today the LORD will appear to you,"* presents a challenge to the chronology of the early wilderness journeys. The narrative of this eighth day of priestly consecration appears to directly parallel

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<sup>343</sup> Leviticus 10:2

<sup>344</sup> Hebrews 10:31; 12:29

<sup>345</sup> Wenham; 148.

the closing verses of Exodus 40, which are, indeed, set within the same time frame as the events of Leviticus. The promise of the LORD appearing to the people implies that He had not yet done so, which ties this chapter in Leviticus to the events in Exodus 40 as being two accounts of the same events. Exodus 40 recounts the washing and clothing of the priests as well as the setting up and anointing of the tabernacle furnishings. Also included in Exodus 40 is the reminder, echoed in Leviticus 8 and 9, that *“Moses did all that the LORD commanded him.”*

*Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tabernacle of meeting and wash them with water. You shall put the holy garments on Aaron, and anoint him and consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. And you shall bring his sons and clothe them with tunics. You shall anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may minister to Me as priests; for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations. Thus Moses did; according to all that the LORD had commanded him, so he did.* (Exodus 40:12-16)

Exodus 40 carefully recounts the placement and anointing of the tabernacle furniture, something Leviticus 8 covers in summary manner without reiterating the details. Yet it is clear that the event summarized here in Leviticus 9, and especially the appearance of the fire of Yahweh from before His presence, is one and the same as the events recorded at the end of Exodus 40. In both passages we read of the *“glory of the LORD”* first appearing at the conclusion of these consecratory rituals.

*Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.* (Exodus 40:34-38)

The two accounts of the same event, however, have two different but complementary interpretations. In the Exodus account, the appearance of the *Shekinah* prevented Moses and the priests from re-entering the tabernacle. In Leviticus 9 the same divine fire announces the divine acceptance of the consecration ritual by consuming the sacrifices that had been slow-burning on the altar. Yahweh was now present in the midst of His people, and had deigned to partake of their offering. Table fellowship between Israel and her God was thus established.

*So they brought what Moses commanded before the tabernacle of meeting. And all the congregation drew near and stood before the LORD. Then Moses said, "This is the thing which the LORD commanded you to do, and the glory of the LORD will appear to you."*  
(9:5-6)

Although this is essentially the inauguration of the Aaronic service in the tabernacle, it is important to note that it is a nation-wide event, as much for the people of Israel as for the priesthood. Indeed, the whole ritual day will end with the peace offering which, of course, involved the subsequent feast. "The whole of the sacrificial ceremony terminated with a national peace-offering, in which the priests took part, uniting in this instance with the rest of the nation in the celebration of a common sacrificial meal, to make known their oneness with them."<sup>346</sup>

The echo of the statement that what was being done here was according to what the LORD had commanded serves two purposes, one theological and one literary. The first, as Gary Anderson notes, is that "Because the cult stands squarely under the authority of God, any freelancing is strictly forbidden."<sup>347</sup> "This is what the LORD commanded you to do" means 'This is what you are to do, and no other.' This leads to the second, literary connection of this oft-repeated phrase concerning the LORD's will, and that is the equally important statement regarding the 'strange fire' of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, that it was fire

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<sup>346</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 345.

<sup>347</sup> Anderson; 7.

*“which He had not commanded them.”*<sup>348</sup> The negation here concerning the act of Nadab and Abihu does not, as we will see, explain what it was that they did wrong, but it does powerfully indicate the jealousy of Yahweh concerning the propriety of His worship.

*And Moses said to Aaron, “Go to the altar, offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people. Offer the offering of the people, and make atonement for them, as the LORD commanded.”* (9:7)

The translation of the New King James version of Moses’ command, “Go to the altar,” is weak. Literally the command is to ‘come forward’ or ‘approach,’ and these phrases/words convey the deeper meaning of what is happening here – Aaron is, for the very first time, coming into the presence of Yahweh as the High Priest. Up to this time it was Moses who stood between Israel and her God; going forward from this day, it will be Aaron and his successors. This command to approach Yahweh – and it is a command, not merely an invitation – also implies what will become explicit elsewhere: the prohibition against anyone else doing so. In Numbers 18 we read a fuller account of the situation,

*Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; **but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die – they and you also.** They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; **but an outsider shall not come near you.** And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there may be no more wrath on the children of Israel. Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; they are a gift to you, given by the LORD, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, **but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.**”* (Numbers 18:1-7)

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<sup>348</sup> Leviticus 10:1

*Aaron therefore went to the altar and killed the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself. Then the sons of Aaron brought the blood to him. And he dipped his finger in the blood, put it on the horns of the altar, and poured the blood at the base of the altar. But the fat, the kidneys, and the fatty lobe from the liver of the sin offering he burned on the altar, as the LORD had commanded Moses. The flesh and the hide he burned with fire outside the camp.* (9:8-11)

Thus begins the tabernacle service. The sacrifices are first for Aaron himself (and for the priesthood of which he was the head) and only then for the people. It is worth noting that the sacrifices that Aaron must offer for the priests come immediately after *seven days* of consecratory sacrifices on their behalf (Lev. 8). Keil & Delitzsch comment, "If, according to this, even after the manifold expiation and consecration, which Aaron had received through Moses during the seven days, he had still to enter upon his service with a sin-offering and burnt-offering, this fact clearly showed that the offerings of the law could not ensure perfection."<sup>349</sup> This is, of course, the very point made by the author of Hebrews, advancing the incomparable High Priest Jesus Christ as the only reasonable hope for perfection,

*For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.* (Hebrews 7:26-27)

The liturgy of offering runs from verse 8 to verse 22, during which process Aaron offers a sin-offering and a burnt-offering for himself, followed by a sin-offering and a burnt-offering for the people. As elaborated in the first seven chapters of Leviticus, this process places the sin-offering first *in order to* make atonement for individual sins *with the result that* the burnt-offering may be made for the sinfulness, as it were, both of the priest and of the people. Only then can the liturgy move on to the grain-offering, which is listed next (9:17), followed by

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<sup>349</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 344.

the climactic peace-offering (9:18), bringing the whole process to its intended goal: the table fellowship of Israel with Yahweh.

It should be noted here that the fire was evidently burning on the altar all through these sacrifices, though the *glory of the LORD* had not yet been revealed by fire. This presents somewhat of a 'chicken-and-egg' conundrum, since without the divine fire the tabernacle sacrifices would not have been effective. Yet it is equally apparent that approach to Yahweh requires sacrifice both for the collective and the individual sins of those who approach. This may foreshadow the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Golgotha, necessary as it was to the consequent outpouring of the *glory of God*, the Holy Spirit, who descended on the assembled disciples that first 'Christian' Pentecost, appearing to them "*as tongues of fire.*"<sup>350</sup> What is certain is that there had to be a fire on the altar for these sacrifices to proceed "*according to the ordinance*" (9:16), though that fire was to be joined and completely overwhelmed by the fire "*from before the LORD*" (9:24).

*Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. (9:22-23a)*

The Aaronic benediction here may very well be the paradigmatic benediction recorded in Numbers 6,

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:*

*"The LORD bless you and keep you;*

*The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*

*The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace."*

*So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them."*

(Numbers 6:22-27)

Upon giving the benediction, Aaron and Moses entered the *tabernacle of meeting*. It is widely considered that the two entered into the sacred tent, though

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<sup>350</sup> Acts 2:3

not necessarily into the Holy of Holies. Up to this point everything has happened at the altar in full view of the congregation. Now Moses and Aaron, it would seem, went 'inside' and out of view. No explanation is given as to what the two men did during their time in the tabernacle, nor how long they were inside before they returned to the people. Keil & Delitzsch offer a simple explanation of Moses 'introducing' Aaron to the sanctuary and to Yahweh himself. "After this Moses went with him [*i.e.*, Aaron] into the tabernacle, to introduce him into the sanctuary, in which he was henceforth to serve the Lord, and to present him to the Lord."<sup>351</sup> If this were the case, then the event would constitute just another, and perhaps the culminating, aspect of the transition of the priestly, intercessory function from Moses to Aaron.

Milgrom, however, superimposes the example of the dedication of Solomon's Temple back on the data of Leviticus 9 to conclude that Moses and Aaron were praying, beseeching Yahweh to permit His glory to come down and dwell among His people. Milgrom notes that the double blessing of Leviticus 9 - one before Moses and Aaron enter the tabernacle of meeting, and one when they come out - was duplicated by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

This Tabernacle pattern [*i.e.*, the double blessing] is duplicated by Solomon, who also blesses the people twice while facing them, and between these two blessings bows down at the foot of the altar...and offers his personal prayer. The Solomonic example, then, allows us to conclude that the entry of Moses and Aaron into the Tent between their blessings was also for the purposes of prayer - that the Lord would establish the work of their hands in the building of the Tabernacle and the investiture of the priesthood by the appearance of his presence in the *kābôd* ('glory').<sup>352</sup>

Wenham seems to combine these two views, and adds to them a sense in which Moses and Aaron go into the tabernacle to (hopefully) bring Yahweh back

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<sup>351</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 347.

<sup>352</sup> Milgrom; 588.



out with them. This is meant, of course, reverently, and as the object of their prayers while in the tabernacle, out of sight from the people. Wenham writes,

Then Moses and Aaron enter the tent of meeting. This was the place where God usually spoke to Moses. So it seems probably that they went in at this time to commune with God, and to pray that he would fulfill his promise to appear in glory. Their conviction that God intended to bless his people was strengthened by their time of communion, and emerging they jointly blessed the people. Their words were then miraculously underwritten by the appearance of the glory of God.<sup>353</sup>

*Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.* (9:23b-24)

Here is the fire that was both the sign of Yahweh's acceptance of the Aaronic priesthood and liturgy, and the source of the altar fire that rabbinic tradition held to be perpetual from the time of the tabernacle to that of Solomon's Temple. "The Rabbins believe that this divine fire was miraculously sustained upon the altar until the building of Solomon's temple, at the dedication of which it fell from heaven afresh, and then continued until the restoration of the temple-worship under Manasseh."<sup>354</sup> The defense of this theory does run into the difficulty that there was already a fire on the altar when this fire proceeded *from before the LORD* as well as the problem - noted previously - that nothing is mentioned in the wilderness narrative concerning maintaining the fire during relocation of the tabernacle. Keil & Delitzsch dismiss the notion of a truly perpetual fire, as the rabbis maintained, as being without any biblical support. "If it had been the intention of God, therefore, to originate the altar-fire by supernatural means, this would no doubt have taken place immediately after the erection of the tabernacle, or at least at the consecration of the altar, which was connected with that of the priests, and immediately after it had been

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<sup>353</sup> Wenham; 150.

<sup>354</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 348.

anointed.”<sup>355</sup> But, as noted above, this is to assume an answer to the chicken-and-egg conundrum; the *glory of the LORD* would not reasonably be expected to proceed before the sins of the priests and the nation had been atoned.

Whatever one concludes regarding the origin and perpetuity of the altar fire, this event at the close of Leviticus 9 is clearly both the answer to the promise in verse 4 and 6, and the mark of divine favor upon Israel. It can be said that this was the point, corresponding again to Exodus 40, at which Yahweh came to dwell in the midst of His people. It was the divine imprimatur of the Aaronic priesthood as well as the construction of the tabernacle and the *torah* of the sacrifices. The whole system was thereby stamped with the divine seal of approval, the *Shekinah*.

The significance of the fire theophany on the inaugural day of the public cult is that it legitimizes the Aaronic priesthood – Aaron and his sons are officiating for the first time – and the following rabbinic observation hits the mark: ‘Rabbi Tanhum son of Rabbi Yudan said...On every one of the seven days of the investiture of the priests Moses served as high priest, but it was not through his agency that the Presence came down to dwell in the world. When Aaron came and ministered, however, the Presence came down through his agency.’<sup>356</sup>

No doubt this was heady stuff for Aaron and his sons, enough so that the temptation to pride would have been quite strong. We know from the incident in Numbers 12 that Moses’ brother was not immune to a grasping spirit. *“Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it.”*<sup>357</sup> Being the sole mediator between Yahweh and His people was indeed a significant role, and potentially a powerful role, within the life of the community – so much so that Aaron did not hold back from opposing Moses.

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<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*; 349.

<sup>356</sup> Milgrom; 590.

<sup>357</sup> Numbers 12:1-2

Perhaps Aaron (and his sons) also needed to be taught that approaching an absolutely holy God was never something that could be either assumed or controlled by the priest; a God who dwells in unapproachable light should never be approached blithely, and certainly that approach should never be regarded as



C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

altogether safe. "Because of the limitations inherent in human knowing, every approach toward God will be dangerous...But the danger involved in approaching God will always exceed any finite list of precautionary measures. *However much law a priest may master, every approach to the altar constitutes a potential danger.*"<sup>358</sup> This lesson is the topic and theme of Leviticus 10, in which the family of Aaron, and the

nation itself, learns that God, as C. S. Lewis puts it in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, "is not a tame lion."

The final clause of Leviticus 9 is capable of several interpretations. The difficulty centers on the word 'shout,' which is, according to Milgrom, an accurate translation of the Hebrew term, *yarenu* (וַיִּרְנְנוּ). One Hebrew online Bible translates the word 'sang praises,' but this is to assume the response of the people to the amazing sight of the *Shekinah*. We are reminded that their response to the fire of the LORD at Sinai was *not* to sing praises. Milgrom, however, believes that "In this instance, the shouting surely stemmed from joy, a meaning for *rnn* that is amply attested."<sup>359</sup> Philo, the 1<sup>st</sup>-Century Alexandrian Jewish scholar, disagrees, as Milgrom admits. "Philo, however, claims they shouted out of 'great agitation and terrible consternation.'"<sup>360</sup> It has become the conventional interpretation to see the community's response as with Milgrom, a response of praise, as Keil & Delitzsch, "The whole nation rejoiced at this glorious manifestation of the satisfaction of God with this the first sacrifice of the

<sup>358</sup> Anderson; 16. Italics original.

<sup>359</sup> Milgrom; 591.

<sup>360</sup> *Idem*.

consecrated priests, and fell down upon their faces to give thanks to the Lord for His mercy.”<sup>361</sup> Note, however, that there is nothing in the text about giving thanks.

It should be noted that falling down on one’s face in the presence of the Lord is the common reaction in both the Old as well as the New Testament. That this was a response of worship may indeed be maintained, but as Wenham notes, it is also a response of fear. “Spontaneous and heartfelt praise is thus a feature of true worship common to both testaments. So is the aspect of fear. In ancient Israel ‘they fell on their faces.’ Similarly on the day of Pentecost we read, ‘fear came upon every soul.’ Hebrews reminds us to ‘offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.’”<sup>362</sup> Certainly the events of the next chapter, involving all four of Aaron’s sons, would go far to instill that ‘reverence and awe’ in the community in the wilderness.

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<sup>361</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 350.

<sup>362</sup> Wenham; 151.

**Week 15                    The Fire of Yahweh – Part II****Text Reading:            Leviticus 10:1 - 20**

*“But the danger involved in approaching God  
will always exceed  
any finite list of precautionary measures.”  
(Gary A. Anderson)*

In his *Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis portrays Mr. & Mrs. Beaver introducing the identity of the ‘Great King,’ Aslan. The Pevensie children have not met Aslan yet, but they are intrigued by his description, thinking initially that Aslan must be a very powerful man. When they hear that he is a lion, they immediately wonder if he is safe. An excerpt from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*,

“Who is Aslan?” asked Susan.

“Aslan?” said Mr. Beaver, “Why don’t you know? He’s the King. . . . It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus. . . .”

“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

“I’m longing to see him,” said Peter, “even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point.”

“Safe?...’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.” It is difficult not to catch the allegory here, as Mr. Beaver (aka C. S. Lewis) is clearly alluding to the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of the ‘Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea.’ Lewis’ theology need not

detain us; nor should it, because it was not all that good most of the time. But he does capture the essence of the mysterious narrative in Leviticus 10, the sudden death of two of Aaron's sons by the same divine fire that had only shortly before consumed the meat upon the altar in a sign of approbation. It has challenged readers and scholars for millennia – both Jewish and Christian – to realize that the text gives no explanation as to what Nadab and Abihu had done wrong, exactly. They offered up 'strange fire,' but we are left with no elaboration as to what made it 'strange,' and why it was so offensive to Yahweh as to cost the two men their lives. Anderson notes that the entire episode has been labeled "a punishment in search of a crime."<sup>363</sup>

Both Jewish and Christian interpreters of the passage have varied widely in their conclusions, with some considering the event an obvious punishment of the two priests, and others viewing it as an act of divine grace and approbation, freeing Nadab and Abihu from the confines of their bodies and uniting them with God. As odd as this may sound to modern Christian readers, it was a view held by the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria as well as both early and medieval Christian interpreters. All alike struggle with the absence of detail as to what it was in the incense offering that brought forth the divine response, as well as what exactly is meant by the LORD's words to Aaron through Moses, "*By those who approach Me I will be holy.*" Scholars consistently allude to the incident of the offerings of Abel and Cain, pointing out that the text fails to provide the reason why Cain's offering was rejected while Abel's received favor from the LORD. Also mentioned frequently is the narrative of Uzzah, who, no doubt in a well-meaning gesture – reached out to steady the cart that was bring the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, and for his pains was struck dead on the spot by Jehovah. Anderson points out that "In the Jewish tradition, in the postbiblical

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<sup>363</sup> Anderson; 1. Anderson is quoting Edward Greenstein from "Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative."

liturgical reading cycle of the synagogue, this tale is paired with the death of Uzzah when he tries to steady the ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6.”<sup>364</sup>

Liberals and skeptics alike point to incidents like these as ‘proof’ that the ‘God of the Old Testament’ is capricious and cruel, unjust and arbitrary in His punishments. Of course, if one holds that kind of view regarding the self-revelation of God in the Bible, there is little need to dig deeper...or even read the Bible at all. This is the perspective of unbelief and rationalism, an arrogant attitude that demands that God explain Himself in terms fully comprehensible to human judgment. One need only skim the Book of Job to conclude that God finds Himself under no obligation to explain His ways to man, even one as righteous as Job.

Still, there is meaning in all parts of Scripture even if there lacks full explanation. In relation to Leviticus 10, the challenge has been to find the meaning of the Nadab & Abihu episode, but as Anderson notes, “After some two millennia of inquiry no consensus has emerged.”<sup>365</sup> James W. Watts, a professor of religion at Syracuse University



**James W. Watts (b. 1960)**

whose research focus is on the rhetoric of Leviticus, concludes that “the endless attempt by interpreters to explain what Nadab and Abihu did wrong is pointless.”<sup>366</sup> This is perhaps harsh, but it is true that any reader of Leviticus 10 contends with the historical conundrum of the passage, a story that has been called “a model of undecidability.”<sup>367</sup>

From a hermeneutical perspective, one must begin by considering the passage in its context, and this from two perspectives. There is the first viewpoint that recognizes the continuity of the ‘fire’ from Chapter 9 to Chapter

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<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*; 2.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*; 10.

<sup>366</sup> Quoted by Anderson; 12.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*; 1.

10; surely it is the same fire, and the proximity of the Nadab & Abihu narrative to the theophany-by-fire at the end of the previous chapter cannot be mere coincidence (see pages 224-25 above). The second hermeneutical point is the oft-missed incident toward the end of the same chapter, involving the apparent malpractice of Aaron's surviving two sons, Eleazar & Ithamar. Again, a section of Scripture that begins with two of Aaron's sons and ends with the other two sons, both dealing with some infraction with respect to the liturgy, shows definite plot as well as context. These two hermeneutical points will perhaps not lead us to the definitive explanation of the opening verses of Leviticus 10, but certainly apart from them the interpretation will be far less likely to be correct.

Perhaps, however, the most pressing question is not so much what it was that Nadab & Abihu *did* as why the text refuses to elaborate the nature of their offense (assuming, with half the exegetes of history, that what they did *was* offensive, and not praiseworthy, to Yahweh). It is a valid exegetical principle that the silence of Scripture, especially in matters pertaining the nature and will of God, are often as important and as instructive as the explanations. It is well worth remembering that Jesus answered very, very few of the questions put to Him during His earthly ministry, and those He did answer were often not answered directly. As two thousand or more years of exegesis has not produced a universally-accepted explanation as to what Nadab & Abihu did that deserved their death by divine fire, perhaps the focus of study should be redirected to why the Scripture is silent on this matter. Anderson concludes, "The point I wish to make is that no single explanation has garnered a consensus and it is highly unlikely that, after centuries of reflection, any of them will ever do so."<sup>368</sup>

*Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.* (10:1-2)

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<sup>368</sup> Anderson; 12.



There are two clues in this passage that indicate, seemingly beyond a doubt, that whatever Nadab & Abihu did, it was *not* pleasing to the LORD. The first is the description of the incense that they offered in their firepans as ‘strange’ or ‘profane’ fire. The Hebrew word here is *zara* (זָרָה) from the root that means ‘stranger’ or ‘strange.’ Milgrom translates it ‘unauthorized,’ but this meaning stems from the modifying statement, “*which He had not commanded them.*” This statement is quite significant, coming as it does after so many repetitions of Moses ‘doing what the LORD commanded’ him in Chapters 8 and 9. Anderson also notes the pattern of ‘taking’ between the previous two chapters and this passage in Chapter 10,<sup>369</sup>

*The LORD spoke to Moses saying, ‘Take Aaron and his sons with him...’* (8:1)

One the eighth day...Moses said to Aaron, ‘**Take** a bull calf...’ (9:1-2)

*Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each **took** his censer...I* (10:1)

*And Moses did as the LORD commanded him.* (8:4)

They brought what Moses commanded. (9:5)

*Nadab and Abihu each took his censer...such as the LORD had not commanded them.* (10:1)

The impact of these word shifts seems quite compelling that, whatever Nadab and Abihu did, it was not in accordance with Yahweh’s commands or Moses’ instructions. This does not necessitate the conclusion that their error was either premeditated or malicious, though the text does not indicate either way on this matter. Anderson, then, is a bit presumptuous when he claims, “But whatever position one takes, it is clear that Nadab and Abihu did not intend to stray from divine teaching.”<sup>370</sup> Fundamentally, then, this is the problem and at least a preliminary answer as to what went wrong, though again without detail. “For some interpreters the fact that Nadab and Abihu did something that was not commanded is all we need to know to explain the punishment. Because the

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<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*; 6.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*; 10.

cult stands under the authority of God, any freelancing is strictly forbidden. Nadab and Abihu were punished for going beyond what was prescribed.”<sup>371</sup> What bothers so many other interpreters is that the *torah* of the offerings does not extend to the incense offering, which is what the two doomed priests brought before Yahweh. Wherein was their fault?

One thing we do know about the incense is that it was to be of a unique blend intended for tabernacle use only; to mix this blend of spices for personal use would get an Israelite ‘cut off’ from the community.

*And the LORD said to Moses: “Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.”*

(Exodus 30:34-38)

The text of Leviticus 10, however, makes no mention of the incense that the two priests offered, only the fire. The earliest instruction regarding the incense is found earlier in the same chapter from Exodus.

*Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it. And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations. You shall not offer strange incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; nor shall you pour a drink offering on it. And Aaron shall make atonement upon its horns once a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonement; once a year he shall make atonement upon it throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.*

(Exodus 30:7-10)

This passage, however, deals with the incense altar within the outer tent, the Most Holy place, and does not seem to directly correspond with what Nadab & Abihu were attempting to do with their firepans. Also, no mention is made in

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<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*; 7.

Exodus 30 as to the proper source of the fire used in the incense firepans. Perhaps a clue may be found later in Leviticus, where this event is mentioned again, in chapter 16.

*Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered profane fire before the LORD, and died; and the LORD said to Moses: "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat.* (Leviticus 16:1-2)

This passage does refer to the day that Nadab & Abihu died as the same day that the LORD instructed Aaron through Moses, that he should not enter the Holy Place, as it were, willy-nilly. It is not immediately clear which veil, and therefore which section of the tent, the passage is referring to, but considering that the chapter focuses on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, we may assume the second, innermost veil is in mind. Yet even though the deaths of Aaron's two sons is mentioned, the prohibition would not have applied to them anyhow – there is no indication in the Chapter 10 narrative that Nadab & Abihu went so far as to enter the Holy of Holies, or even the Holy Place for that matter.

Some guidance may be found in the narrative of the rebellion of Korah and Dathan, recorded in Numbers 16, where the LORD makes a distinction between the family of Aaron and those of the rebels by means of the firepans or censers.

*And Moses said to Korah, "Tomorrow, you and all your company be present before the LORD – you and they, as well as Aaron. Let each take his censer and put incense in it, and each of you bring his censer before the LORD, two hundred and fifty censers; both you and Aaron, each with his censer." So every man took his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and stood at the door of the tabernacle of meeting with Moses and Aaron. And Korah gathered all the congregation against them at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.* (Numbers 16:16-19)

No indication is given in this passage as to the 'brand' of incense used – was it the incense of the tabernacle? – nor of the source of the fire that each man

put into his censer. But the end result of this trial by censer was the same as the narrative of Nadab & Abihu: consumed by fire. *“And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense.”*<sup>372</sup> Moses, aware of the LORD’s intent to punish the children of Israel for aiding and abetting the rebellion and continuing it even after the deaths of its leaders, seeks to intercede on the people’s behalf, again through the censer and incense. What is significant about this passage is that it finally gives the proper source for the fire used with the censer and incense: from the altar, the same fire that the LORD augmented and the Aaronic priesthood perpetually sustained.

*So Moses said to Aaron, “Take a censer and **put fire in it from the altar**, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the LORD. The plague has begun.” Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped.*

(Numbers 16:46-48)

So we might provisionally conclude that the Nadab and Abihu ‘lit their own fire,’ as it were, and attempted to bring it before the LORD. The only indication of this, of course, is the word translated ‘strange’ or ‘profane’ describing the fire offered in their censers. Bringing their own fire, contrary to the regulations – though it is hard to tell just where those regulations are stipulated in this case – would be sufficient grounds for the judgment meted out by Yahweh, fighting false fire with true fire, so to speak. This explanation of the error is probably the strongest based on the text, but has often been viewed as only provisional, as Menahem Haran concludes,

Nadab and Abihu intended to make an offering of incense in their censers. They were punished because they offered it to Yahweh in ‘strange fire,’ that is, fire other than that which was kept burning on the altar for daily sacrifice. Nadab

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<sup>372</sup> Numbers 16:35. Of course, Korah and Dathan, their families, and all their possessions were swallowed up by the earth immediately before this.

and Abihu *apparently* took their fire from somewhere outside the altar-area and placed it in their censers, as it is stated, 'each took his censer and put fire in it.'<sup>373</sup>

But a broader consideration of the chapter has led many scholars to arrive at different conclusions, and a differing assessment of the culpability of the two brothers. Some of these views can be dismissed due to the obvious influence of Greek Platonism, with its duality between body/matter and soul/spirit. Philo's interpretation, for instance, that the LORD was *rewarding* the two priests for their single-hearted zeal in aggressively offering their incense (so aggressively, it appears, that they did not stop to make sure they were doing it according to the ordinance). Philo's platonic dualism led him to view the immolation of the two priests as a 'release' of their souls from their bodies, itself a reward and blessing from God. Robert Kirschner writes,

Philo's interpretation of the Nadab and Abihu incident is consonant with a basic premise of his philosophy. Man, according to Philo, is a mixture of the material and immaterial. The former drags man down into earthly desires, the latter elevates him toward the Deity. His task in life is to forsake his lower existence and ascend to the realm of the divine...Thus the incineration of the bodies of Nadab and Abihu is construed by Philo as an act of divine exaltation.<sup>374</sup>

In Philo's own words, from *de Somniis* (On Dreams), the Alexandrian philosopher/theologian likens the immolation of Nadab and Abihu to the burnt offering, which he considers the chief of all sacrifices.

But Moses will not allow the sacred reasonings about Nadab to be bewailed; for they have not been carried off by a savage beast, but have been taken up by unextinguishable violence and imperishable light; because, having discarded all fear and hesitation, they had duly consecrated the fervent and fiery zeal, consuming the flesh, and very easily and vehemently excited towards piety, which is unconnected with creation, but is akin to God, not going up to the altar by the regular steps, for that was forbidden by law, but proceeding rapidly

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<sup>373</sup> Menahem Haran, quoted by Anderson; 10.

<sup>374</sup> Kirschner, Robert "The Rabbinic and Philonic Exegesis of the Nadab and Abihu Incident (Lev. 10:1-6)" *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Apr. 1983); 387.

onwards with a favourable gale, and being conducted up even to the threshold of heaven, becoming dissolved into ethereal beams like a whole burnt-offering.<sup>375</sup>

...and certainly Nadab and Abihu, who came near to God, and left this mortal life and received a share of immortal life, are seen to be naked, that is, free from all new and mortal opinion; for they would not have carried it in their garments and borne it about, if they had not been naked, having broken to pieces every bond of passion and of corporeal necessity, in order that their nakedness and absence of corporeality might not be adulterated by the accession of atheistical reasonings; for it may not be permitted to all men to behold the secret mysteries of God, but only to those who are able to cover them up and guard them; on which account Mishael and his partisans concealed them not in their own garments, but in those of Nadab and Abihu, who had been burnt with fire and taken upwards; for having stripped off all the garments that covered them, they brought their nakedness before God, and left their tunics about Mishael.<sup>376</sup>

Thus, the priests, Nadab and Abihu, die in order that they may live; taking an immortal existence in exchange for this mortal life, and departing from the creature to the uncreated God. And it is with reference to this fact that the symbols of incorruptibility are thus celebrated: "Then they died before the Lord;" that is to say, they lived; for it is not lawful for any dead person to come into the sight of the Lord.<sup>377</sup>

Philo's perspective has never been the majority report on the Nadab & Abihu event, his allegorizing tendencies and platonic framework being too obvious for most Christian scholars to accept. Most would agree with Kirschner, "The venerable Greek tool of allegorical exegesis enables Philo to depart from the Biblical text virtually at will."<sup>378</sup> Sadly, this more egregious example of wild exegesis did not the rabbis from developing their own wild interpretations of the narrative, all in an attempt to 'get at' what it was Nadab & Abihu did wrong. One rabbinic tradition held that the LORD was punishing the two men for being

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<sup>375</sup> Philo *de Somniis* 2:67. [Philo: On Dreams, That They are God-Sent \(earlyjewishwritings.com\)](#). Accessed 7May2024.

<sup>376</sup> Philo, *Legum Allegoriarum* 2:57-58. [Philo: Allegorical Interpretation, II \(earlyjewishwritings.com\)](#). Accessed 7May2024.

<sup>377</sup> Philo, *De Fuga et Inventione* 59. [Philo: On Flight and Finding \(earlychristianwritings.com\)](#). Accessed 7May2024.

<sup>378</sup> Kirschner; 380.

reluctant to marry and have offspring. We know from I Chronicles 24 that the men had no children, though it is less certain that they were unmarried. The phrase used in this reference, that Nadab and Abihu “*died before their father,*” is generally a statement of judgment – that the men died before their father did and that they died in the presence of their father.

*Now these are the divisions of the sons of Aaron. The sons of Aaron were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. And Nadab and Abihu died before their father, and had no children; therefore Eleazar and Ithamar ministered as priests.*

(I Chronicles 24:1-2)

The rabbis thus viewed Nadab & Abihu’s childlessness (and apparent singleness) as an affront to Yahweh, on the basis of Psalm 78:63, “*The fire consumed their young men, and their maidens were not given in marriage.*” One of the reasons that the rabbis struggled so intensely with this narrative stems from the events of the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70. In general, the post-70 leaders of Judaism, when they continued to read the opening verses of Leviticus, could not understand why Yahweh would treat two sons of Aaron in such a violent manner, and yet leave the pagan Roman general Titus unscathed. The Leviticus Rabbah laments, “*Even Titus, wicked as he was, could venture into the Holy of Holies, slash both veils, and go forth in peace. But Aaron’s sons, who came into the Tabernacle to present an offering, were taken out burnt.*”<sup>379</sup>

Into this milieu of interpretive schemes comes one more, *conspiracy*. The broader context of Leviticus 10 involves *two pairs* of Aaron’s sons: the chapter begins with Nadab & Abihu, and ends with Eleazar & Ithamar. Both sets of brother-priests are ministering in the tabernacle. The first is consumed by fire from the LORD, the second accused of priestly malpractice by Moses, though defended by their father and ultimately exonerated. This dynamic involving all four of Aaron’s sons is often overlooked in the analysis of the Nadab & Abihu incident, but has also led to interpretive views that put forward the ‘dynastic

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<sup>379</sup> Quoted by Kirschner; 381.

struggle' angle. Anderson writes, "Perhaps it is worth noting...that several commentators have suggested that the real grounds for the incineration of Nadab and Abihu has to do with an internal dispute between two rival priestly parties."<sup>380</sup>

All of this may seem a bit 'in the weeds' with regard to the passage at hand, but it is meant to show that when the Scriptures are short on detail and explanation, there is no associated shortness of interpretation by scholars. Biblical scholarship, like nature, loathes a vacuum. Generally speaking, readers and scholars alike find it difficult to accept the nature of the punishment meted out to Nadab & Abihu without a fuller explanation of their crime (this is, of course, assuming that what happened to the two priests was indeed *punishment* and not reward, as Philo maintained). Thus, "The claim that the text is really about tensions between different priestly parties is also a form of testimony to the difficulty of resolving the nature of the crime."<sup>381</sup> But perhaps resolution of the crime is not the intend of this passage of Scripture at all, and attempts at doing so only move the exegete further from the meaning of the passage. Surely there must be interpretive guidance within the LORD's own statement regarding the event.

*And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying:  
'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy;  
And before all the people I must be glorified.'"*

*So Aaron held his peace. (9:3)*

The wording of this passage is somewhat difficult, but the meaning has been almost universally understood by both Jewish and Christian scholars as well as readers. Those who approach Yahweh must do so as before a *holy* God, in the fullest and incomprehensible meaning of that word. The phrasing of the verse indicates that this is something Yahweh had said previously, and the deaths of Nadab and Abihu were graphic illustrations of the meaning of the

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<sup>380</sup> Anderson; 11-12.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*; 12.



statement. However, as is not infrequently the case in Scripture, we do not have an exact reference verse in which Yahweh spoke these words to Moses. We may safely assume, though, that having consistently presented Himself as a holy God, this particular statement was part of a verbal self-revelation of Yahweh to which, it would seem, Aaron was also privy.

Unfortunately, the manner in which the phrase is written does not definitively show that Aaron's sons failed in approaching Yahweh in proper deference to the divine holiness, though we would have to accept the platonism of Philo to conclude that what they did was *pleasing* in Yahweh's sight. The tone of the passage certainly leads to the opposite conclusion – that the two priests somehow violated this principle – and that seems to be confirmed by the prohibition against Aaron mourning the loss of his two sons. Keil & Delitzsch come to this conclusion, as do most Protestant exegetes.

The fire of the holy God, which had just sanctified the service of Aaron as well-pleasing to God, brought destruction upon his two eldest sons, because they had not sanctified Jehovah in their hearts, but had taken upon themselves a self-willed service; just as the same gospel is to one a savour of life unto life, and to another a savour of death unto death (2 Cor. ii.16).<sup>382</sup>

This reference to Paul's statement in II Corinthians 2 is very illuminating to the Nadab & Abihu incident, as it shows the dual nature of the same relationship with the holy God: both immeasurable blessing and incalculable danger, depending on how one approaches. There are not two different fires; just one, the holy fire that proceeds from a holy God. This reality in the world of living mankind gives credence to the view that hell, where the fire is never quenched, is but the presence of God without mercy and grace. Again, "*our God is a consuming fire*" is true at all times, before all the universe, and true of no other being.

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<sup>382</sup> Keil & Delitzsch; 351.

This brings us to the thrust of Anderson's article already quoted, "Through Those Who Are Near to Me, I Will Show Myself Holy." The author's primary point with regard to the variety of interpretations of the Nadab & Abihu event, is that even the pursuit of an explanation merely betrays a lack of understanding of the text and its purpose. His conclusion is that the incident is unexplained simply because it is inexplicable, resting as it does on the sovereign and inscrutable judgment of God. God has condescended to dwell with Israel via the tabernacle and to maintain that close fellowship through the tabernacle sacrifices and the Aaronic priesthood. But this must not be perceived, as was so often the case in pagan religions, that Israel's God could be manipulated by that priesthood. Of course, the classic example of the attempt to manipulate God is when Eli's sons, Hophni & Phinehas, carried the ark of the covenant before the army of Israel against the Philistines. It did not go well for them or for the army.

*And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook. Now when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the sound of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp. So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp!" And they said, "Woe to us! For such a thing has never happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Conduct yourselves like men, and fight!" So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.*  
(I Samuel 4:5-11)

The point Anderson makes in his article is that the Aaronic family has been given a tremendous privilege and a position of great influence and potential power within the community, as was always the case for the pagan priesthood in every ancient civilization. But in Israel there would be a difference, for Israel worshipped and serve the one true God, who alone is holy. Anderson quotes the German scholar Thomas Hieke, "Leviticus 1-9 gives us the impression that the

priests have a marvelous world at their disposal with their own office at the center in which they can flourish. Leviticus 10, however, makes it clear that the priests have been given the dangerous task of drawing near to God again and again as the representatives of the people.”<sup>383</sup> Anderson adds his own comment, “There remains an infinite gap between creature and Creator, and no matter how much cultic law one might master, God will not be reduced to an object subject to human control. Lest the priesthood become inebriated by the power God has conferred on it, the radical otherness of God’s majestic glory breaks out and reestablishes God’s utter transcendence.”<sup>384</sup>



**Thomas Hieke (b. 1968)**

Did God therefore kill Nadab and Abihu just to prove a point? To quote Paul, *May it never be!* Moses relating of Yahweh’s previous statement, here in verse 3, leaves almost no doubt in the reader’s mind that Aaron’s two sons did something wrong. The mystery, as often the case, is that the error is not explained in the text. God’s service must be according to God’s ordinance, but even in that law, God will not be reduced to methodism. “The biblical author does not want us so much to ‘learn’ from their example (that is, they did X wrong and I will never do that again) as to develop a sense of wariness about the altar of God (I will never master all that is required for this job).”<sup>385</sup> As with Cain & Abel, the death of Uzzah, the defeat of Israel by the Philistines even in the presence of the ark, and finally the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, all point to the inscrutable judgment of a holy God. As for the *torah* of the sacrifices, “Not only do the commands require human discernment in order to be obeyed, but the cost of the slightest error is frightfully high.”<sup>386</sup> Surely this is what it

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<sup>383</sup> Anderson; 16.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*; 16-17.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*; 17.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*; 19.

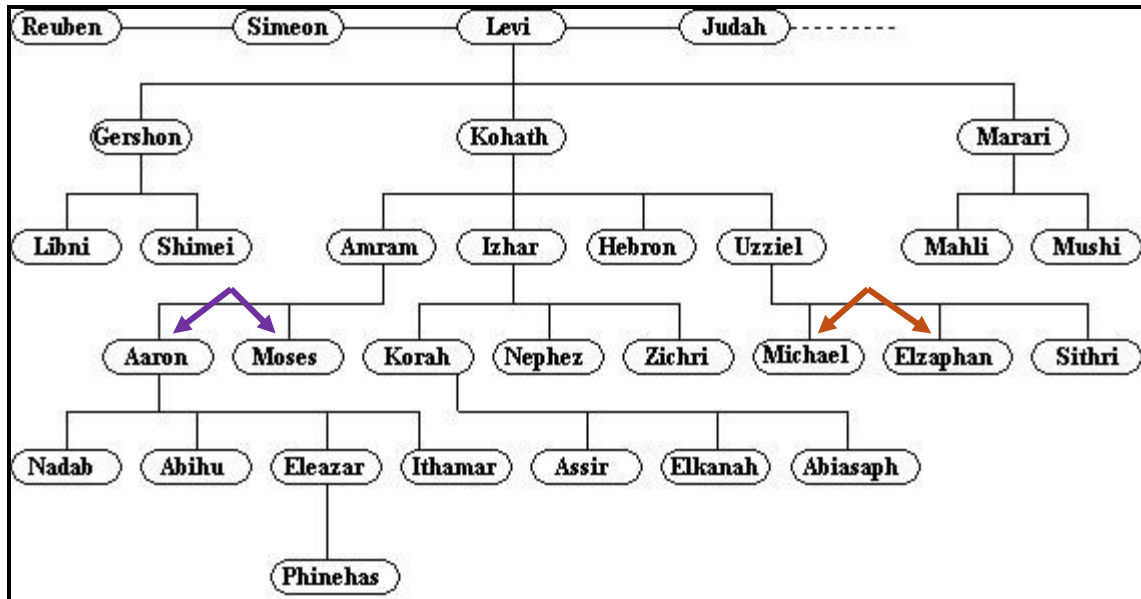
means that *“by those who approach Me I shall be holy.”* Wenham quotes Calvin, “if we reflect how holy a thing God’s worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctioned at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole law.”<sup>387</sup>.

*Then Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp.” So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, “Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you.” And they did according to the word of Moses.* (10:4-7)

Reading on in the narrative, it is quite hard to conclude that what happened to Nadab & Abihu was *not* divine punishment. Though the people are permitted to mourn their deaths, the priests were not. Perhaps we may paraphrase Jesus, *“If you love father, mother, sister, brother, or sons, more than Me, you are not worthy to be my priests.”* Any indication of grief, or any diversion from duty, on the part of Aaron and his two surviving sons would be construed as a priestly charge against the judgment of Yahweh, which would be an act of rebellion. This extends even to the removal of the bodies from the tabernacle precincts; this duty fell to the dead priests’ cousins, Mishael and Elzaphan. For the record, these two Levites were the first cousins of Moses and Aaron, per Exodus 6:16-22. They were the sons of Uzziel, who was the brother of Moses & Aaron’s father, Amram. Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar were disqualified from tending to the bodies of Nadab & Abihu as such an activity would render them ritually unclean and prevent their continuation before the altar until they were purified again.

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<sup>387</sup> Wenham; 156-57.



But at this inaugural event in the history of the tabernacle, things go even further than merely the defilement of the corpse. As with Ananias and Sapphira so many years later, the deaths of Nadab & Abihu were both a judgment and a test. How would Aaron and his surviving sons react? Would they adhere to their duty before Yahweh, or choose to prefer family to the LORD. Disobeying the LORD in this matter would not merely render Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar ritually unclean; it would render them dead: *“Do not uncover your heads or tear your clothes, lest you die...”* Furthermore, even though the rest of the congregation was permitted to mourn the deaths, Yahweh’s wrath would be unleashed upon them if Aaron and his surviving sons were disobedient to His word. This further illustrates and emphasizes the mediatorial union that has now been formed between the priesthood – and especially the High Priest – and the people of Israel. The significance of this particular event is shown in the fact that the prohibition against mourning the brothers’ deaths was extended to Eleazar & Ithamar, though Leviticus 21 only applies it to the High Priest. This later passage includes the same phrase regarding the anointing being upon the High Priest as is reference in Leviticus 10 concerning both Aaron and the two surviving sons.

*He who is the high priest among his brethren, on whose head the anointing oil was poured and who is consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes; nor shall he go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother; nor shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD.*

(Leviticus 21:10-12)

Imaginative scholars have seen in Eleazar & Ithamar's compliance the 'evidence' of an inter-family rivalry between the two sets of brothers, and Aaron's defense of the surviving two sons later in the chapter as proof that the father favored them over Nadab & Abihu. Others introduce Mishael & Elzaphan as rival priests in the same vein as Korah, who was himself a first cousin to Moses and Aaron. Milgrom notes correctly that this theory is 'sheer speculation.'<sup>388</sup>

Such imaginative exegesis makes the primary hermeneutical mistake of thinking that this whole event is not about the men involved but rather about the presence of the holy God in the midst of His people. Liberal scholars always try to find the 'human angle,' and thereby miss entirely the 'God angle,' which in this case is the only angle involved. Thus, rather than trying to turn the narrative into a 'human interest story,' readers should focus on the events and the responses to those events, through the lens of God's own explanation in verse 3. This exegesis, however, is inevitable when the hermeneutical framework holds the Bible to be of human construction, pertaining to the religious history of an ancient people, Israel.

*Then the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: "Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses."* (9:8-11)

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<sup>388</sup> Milgrom; 604.

Verse 8 is remarkable in that it records only one of three times that the LORD speaks directly to Aaron, at least as recorded in Scripture. The first was when he told Aaron to go out and meet his brother who was coming back to Egypt to deliver Israel.<sup>389</sup> At the time, of course, Aaron was not the High Priest. Thus the only other time Yahweh speaks directly to Aaron in his High Priestly office, is in Numbers 18, where we read of the LORD speaking to Aaron twice.

*Then the LORD said to Aaron: "You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die – they and you also.*

(Numbers 18:1-3)

*Then the LORD said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel."*

(Numbers 18:20)

The commandment that the LORD gives here, directly to Aaron and not mediated through Moses, seems out of place in the overall context of the death of Aaron's sons. Unless, of course, the reason for the prohibition against 'drinking and priesting,' as it were, is placed here because Nadab & Abihu were intoxicated when they committed their liturgical malpractice. Many commentators within Judaism and Christianity have come to that conclusion, including Jay Sklar, "Finally, the fact that this prohibition comes immediately after the tragedy of 10:1-7 implies that Nadab and Abihu's sin may have been caused in part by drunkenness. Indeed, 10:9 seems to set up a deliberate contrast with those verses: Nadab and Abihu entered into the tent and died; here, the priests are told not to drink alcohol before entering the tent so that they will not

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<sup>389</sup> Exodus 4:27

die. 'So that you will not die,' like Nadab and Abihu, who in their drunkenness completely disregarded the LORD's holiness."<sup>390</sup>

This is a plausible explanation for the behavior of Aaron's sons, but it is without explicit support in the text. For one thing, no mention is made of Nadab & Abihu having been drunk when they brought 'strange fire' into the tent. Furthermore, along with their father and brothers, they had just spent seven days isolated in the tabernacle, where we probably should not imagine there was a hidden wine cellar from which they might have imbibed. There is no indication that there was wine or strong drink on the eighth day, though there may have been wine served at the peace-offering feast. As with so many explanations of the action that cost these two men their lives, drunkenness must also be chalked up to conjecture, though admittedly a bit stronger than most.

This passage is instructive in telling us the main duties of the priesthood beyond the obvious one of coordinating the sacrificial system of the tabernacle. The priests were to be the arbiters "*between the holy and the profane,*" and "*between the clean and the unclean.*" From a literary viewpoint, these two couplets each point in a different direction in the text. Distinguishing between "*holy and profane*" points back to the fate of Nadab & Abihu, who offered up 'strange' fire, often referred to in English translations as 'profane' fire. The simplest definition of the term 'profane,' then, is the one the text provides us in that narrative: *that which the LORD has not commanded.* The second couplet, "*clean and unclean,*" points forward to Leviticus 11, which begins the discussion of clean and unclean animals. The responsibility to discern these two pairs pertained not just to the tabernacle and the 'official' worship of Yahweh, but also to the life of the congregation in the presence of Yahweh. Hence, the priests (and, we find out elsewhere, the Levites with them) were to be the instructors of Israel "*so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through*

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<sup>390</sup> Sklar; 298.



Moses." Fondness for wine and strong drink does not make for success in this calling.

*And Moses spoke to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons who were left: "Take the grain offering that remains of the offerings made by fire to the LORD, and eat it without leaven beside the altar; for it is most holy. You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, of the sacrifices made by fire to the LORD; for so I have been commanded. The breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering you shall eat in a clean place, you, your sons, and your daughters with you; for they are your due and your sons' due, which are given from the sacrifices of peace offerings of the children of Israel. The thigh of the heave offering and the breast of the wave offering they shall bring with the offerings of fat made by fire, to offer as a wave offering before the LORD. And it shall be yours and your sons' with you, by a statute forever, as the LORD has commanded."* (9:12-15)

This section is a reiteration of previous *torah* of the grain and sin offerings. The sin offering of the priest themselves was to be wholly immolated on the altar, but that of the people provided food for the priests, once the fat portions were burnt. The pericope does not introduce any new information, but rather sets the stage for the incident which follows, in which Aaron's two surviving sons are indicted by Moses for malpractice.

*Then Moses made careful inquiry about the goat of the sin offering, and there it was – burned up. And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron who were left, saying, "Why have you not eaten the sin offering in a holy place, since it is most holy, and God has given it to you to bear the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD? See! Its blood was not brought inside the holy place; indeed you should have eaten it in a holy place, as I commanded."* (9:16-18)

Moses discovers that the sin offering of the people had been completely burnt on the altar, contrary to the prescribed method of sacrifice, and he was – it would seem justifiably – angry with Aaron's sons. We can imagine what might have been going through Moses' mind at the time: two sons of Aaron are dead and only two are left; is now a good time *not* to be doing things 'by the book'? The differentiation between types of sin offerings hinged on what was done with the blood. "In the case of purification offerings priests did not have an automatic right to the meat. It depended on what was done with the blood of the sacrifice.

If the blood was smeared inside the tent of meeting, the animal's carcass was burned outside the camp. If, however, the blood was smeared on the altar of burnt offering outside the tent of meeting, the priests were entitled to eat the meat."<sup>391</sup>

Apparently, Moses interprets 'entitled' to mean 'commanded.' It seems that he saw the priestly meal as an integral part of the *torah* of the sin offering. "Moses' anger is roused because they have not followed the rules with the second offering. They have burned the meat instead of eating it themselves as they were entitled to do. Since the blood was not brought into the *holy place*, i.e., the outer part of the tent of meeting, *you ought to have eaten it.*"<sup>392</sup> On the face of it, and in the immediate context of the deaths of Nadab & Abihu, Moses' anger was justified, stemming as it probably did from his concern that the wrath of God not break out both against Aaron's other sons, and against the nation itself. "The priests seem clearly to have failed to follow proper sacrificial procedure, and this was disastrous. It would mean that this sacrifice - meant to atone for all the people - was now null and void."<sup>393</sup> But was Moses correct? Was the meal of the sin offering as much a commandment as the offering itself? Apparently Aaron did not think so, at least not in this circumstance.

*And Aaron said to Moses, "Look, this day they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and such things have befallen me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been accepted in the sight of the LORD?" So when Moses heard that, he was content.* (9:19-20)

It cannot be denied that more information would have been helpful in understanding just what happened here. On the one hand, Moses was surely correct in saying that the meal of the people's sin offering was not an optional component of the sacrifice. On the other hand, Moses accepts Aaron's explanation categorically, as verse 20 indicates. One Jewish translation from the

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<sup>391</sup> Wenham; 159-60.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*; 160.

<sup>393</sup> Sklar; 301.

Hebrews renders verse 20, “*And it pleased him.*” It was literally, *pleasing in his eyes* and, by implication, in the eyes of Yahweh as well. So, as Milgrom notes, “The overall problem of this pericope is twofold: why was Moses angered by the priests, and why was he assuaged by their answer?”<sup>394</sup>

As to Moses’ anger, that is easily comprehended. Surely the priests were in error, and surely the whole congregation did not need another display of divine wrath against errant priests on this, the very first day of the tabernacle’s mediatorial life. What was to be done about the issue is not readily apparent, for the carcass of the people’s sin offering had been burned and there was no recovering the meat. We know from this incident of the water from the rock, that Moses was capable of temper – justified, perhaps, but not always under control. This is perhaps an accurate description of his response when he failed to find the people’s sin offering on the priests’ plates, but discovered that the carcass had already been burned. Thus the conundrum. Referring to the sin offering, Milgrom writes, “There is something inherent in its function that made it *mandatory* for the priests to eat it and, correspondingly, that made Aaron absolutely certain that he and his sons were unqualified to eat it.”<sup>395</sup>

One rabbinic explanation of the problem can be dismissed with relative ease. It is reasoned from Deuteronomy 26:14, that since Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar were in mourning, they were indeed disqualified from eating of the sacrifice.

*I have not eaten any of it when in mourning, nor have I removed any of it for an unclean use, nor given any of it for the dead. I have obeyed the voice of the LORD my God, and have done according to all that You have commanded me.*

(Deuteronomy 26:14)

This explanation will simply not cut it; Aaron and his surviving sons were forbidden to mourn the loss of Nadab and Abihu and therefore, this ‘loophole,’

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<sup>394</sup> Milgrom; 635.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*; 636. *Italics* original.

as it were, did not apply to them. Furthermore, there is no mention that the priests failed to consume the grain offering that was their due, as well as the wave and heave offerings mentioned in 9:12-15. It appears that only the goat, the sin offering for the people, was burnt outside the camp and not consumed as it was supposed to be.

The key to the mystery is in Aaron's defense and in the order of the events as he recounts them: "*See! This day they have offered their burnt offerings and their sin offerings before the LORD, and this has befallen me!*" We can build a chronology of events here: the priests had already offered up the burnt offering and the sin offering for themselves, of which they were forbidden to partake by the *torah* of the offerings. It seems that in between these sacrifices for the priest and the ensuing sacrifices for the people, Nadab & Abihu brought forward their 'strange fire,' and were consumed by the fire of Yahweh. Surely, "*this has befallen me*" can only be referring to that event. And that event, in Aaron's judgment, altered the whole picture in terms of the people's sin offering, because the death of the two men contaminated the tabernacle and reoriented the nature of the subsequent sacrifices.

Aaron and his sons could eat the sacrificial prebends of the cereal and well-being offerings because they were forbidden to mourn. Yet they refrained from eating the *hatta't* because they apparently felt that the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in the very midst of the sacred precincts had polluted the entire sanctuary and, though the *hatta't* blood had been applied only to the outer altar, its carcass was too laden with impurity to be safely ingested.<sup>396</sup>

Aaron thus reasoned that the people's sin offering, yet to be sacrificed when Nadab & Abihu committed their dereliction of duty, consequently became also a second sin offering for the priests, and thereby ineligible as a priestly meal. Aaron discerned between the holy and the impure. Moses heard, considered, and agreed. Aaron had risen to the occasion and was truly Israel's High Priest.

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<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*; 639.

**Week 16**                    **Leviticus as Parable – A Review****Text Reading:**        **Hebrews 9:1 – 10:31**

*“The New Testament is not just an extension of the Old,  
nor a last chapter in an epic tale.”*  
(Brevard Childs)

The relationship between the two biblical ‘Testaments’ as been, to say the least, problematic throughout the history of Christian hermeneutics as well as the



**Brevard Childs (1923-2007)**

millennia of ordinary believer’s reading of their own Scriptures (if they even had a copy). The two major evangelical divides within hermeneutics – Dispensationalism and Covenantalism – break on this point as to whether the emphasis is *discontinuity* (the Dispensational position) or *continuity* (the Covenantal position) between the Old Testament and the New. Yet even within covenantal evangelicalism, the tendency both among readers and scholars is to pick and choose, to ‘cherry-pick,’ proof texts to establish this or that doctrine or practice. Brevard Childs, in his monumental *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, writes early on, “The New Testament is not just an extension of the Old, nor a last chapter in an epic tale. Something totally new has entered in the gospel.”<sup>397</sup>

Somewhere in the history of ‘Christian’ exegesis, however, scholars began to treat the Old Testament as a ‘verse mine,’ to be picked through for gems to add to sermons or to spice up commentaries, but not as an important part of the overall revelation of God in Scripture. Not that the Church ever tolerated the dismissal of the Old Testament, as Marcion attempted to do; just that being a part of the ‘canon,’ it nonetheless had little to add to the ‘New Testament’ Church. By

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<sup>397</sup> Childs, Brevard S. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1992); 78.

the time of the Reformation, and with the impetus given by Martin Luther, Judaism had morphed into an illegitimate 'works religion' devoutly to be avoided and condemned. The Pharisees came to represent the teachings of Moses in their entirety, and little good was found in the pages of the Old Testament. What was found, however, was diligently turned to good use by allegory and typology, making everything point to and be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This mechanistic handling of the Old Testament text was itself illegitimate, as the Old Testament tells its own story independently, though relatedly, of the New.

It is convenient to lay the Old Testament somewhat, or entirely, to the side and to focus on the New. Is it not in the New Testament that we find the revelation of grace through Jesus Christ? Why, then, would we spend time in the archaic ritualism of the Old Testament? Furthermore, for most Christian readers, the Old Testament is frankly confusing and hard to follow. It is small comfort to hear that the Jews often felt the same way. Origen relates a tradition that was told to him by his Hebrew teacher,

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.<sup>398</sup>

There is a great deal of truth in this statement, but also in the implication that the search for keys eventually yields great rewards: the treasures that lie behind the locked doors. Sadly, the Old Testament itself has lain like a Pharaoh's tomb for the Church for centuries, if not millennia, only occasionally plundered for proof texts either to the veracity of the Messianic claim for Jesus, or for 'prophetic' interpretations of current events. In truth, however, the locked doors

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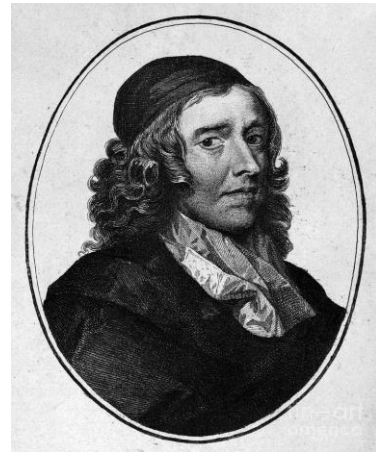
<sup>398</sup> Quoted by Radner; 9.

of much of the New Testament are only to be opened by keys that have been placed, not outside, but *in* the Old Testament books. This is most certainly true of the Book of Leviticus, *Vayikra*.

The writer of Hebrews refers to the tabernacle system outlined both in Exodus and in Leviticus, as *parable*, a parable to be interpreted by the Holy Spirit.

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was **symbolic** for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.* (Hebrews 9:6-10)

As we saw early in this study, the word translated 'symbolic' by the New King James version, and 'a symbol' by the New American Standard, is the Greek *parabolei* (παραβολή). None of the major English translations renders the word 'parable,' though that is the uniform translation of the same word everywhere else in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews might have used *tupos* (τύπος) – 'type' – or *seimeōn* (σημειον) – 'sign' – rather than *parabolei*. Nowhere else is *parabolei* used in the sense of 'symbol' in the New Testament; there must be a par-



**John Owen (1616-83)**

ticular reason the author used it here. 17<sup>th</sup> Century Puritan theologian John Owen certainly felt that *parabolei* ought to be retained, "So should the word here be rendered, 'a figurative instruction,' or the word 'parable' be here retained, as it is in other places. This was God's way of teaching the mysteries of his wisdom

and grace.”<sup>399</sup> It seems reasonable to interpret the word here in Hebrews 9:9 in the same sense it has elsewhere, used to describe short vignettes that have a didactic purpose, homely anecdotes to teach timeless truths. If we accept this meaning for *parabolei* in Hebrews, then the entire tabernacle system – real and meaningful in its own context – also stands as a living story illustrating a deep truth, the truth of the great High Priest and ultimate Sacrifice, Jesus Christ.

But to understand this, and thus to understand the New Testament, takes what often constitutes a paradigm shift in the believer’s hermeneutic: to see the Old Testament as the fount from which sprang the writings of the New, rather than the New Testament as a completely new revelation that ‘borrowed’ useful passages from the Old. The tradition has been to interpret the Old Testament through the filter of the gospel: anything that did not seem to comport with the gospel as the Church understood it, was jettisoned as ‘Old’ Covenant and having no value to the New Covenant. Childs writes, “Although it is obviously true that the Old Testament was interpreted in the light of the gospel, it is equally important to recognize that the New Testament.”<sup>400</sup> This there was not complete *discontinuity*, but rather *selective continuity*. Childs disagrees with this treatment of the Old Testament, and denies that it represents the hermeneutic of the early Church.

In my judgment, this description of the role of the Old Testament within the early church is highly misleading and one-sided in the extreme. Although it is obviously true that the Old Testament was interpreted in the light of the gospel, it is equally important to recognize that the New Testament tradition was fundamentally shaped from the side of the Old. The Old Testament was not simply a collage of texts to be manipulated, but the Jewish scriptures were held as the authoritative voice of God, exerting a major coercion on the early church’s understanding of Jesus’ mission...the problem of the early church was not what to do with the Old Testament in the light of the gospel, which was Luther’s concern, but rather the reverse. In the light of the Jewish scriptures which were

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<sup>399</sup> Owen, John *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews; Vol. VI* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1991); 246.

<sup>400</sup> Childs; 186.



acknowledged to be the true oracles of God, how were Christians to understand the good news of Jesus Christ.<sup>401</sup>

Yet on the other side of the continuity/discontinuity spectrum, there is also the danger of finding too much of the Old Testament in the New. Covenantalism has at times so emphasized the continuity between the testaments that one wonders why Jesus came, what 'difference' did He make? But Childs is certainly right to note, "Something totally new began with the resurrection, and this sharp discontinuity in Israel's tradition is rightly reflected in the formation of two separate and distinct testaments. The old came to an end; the new began."<sup>402</sup> Surely this is what Paul means, and by no means allegorically as it is often interpreted, in II Corinthians 5,

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.*

(II Corinthians 5:17-19)

The centrality of 'Leviticus' thinking to the New Testament is found in its core theme of Yahweh dwelling with His people or, as John puts it in the opening prologue of his Gospel, *tabernacling*. In the first ten chapters of Leviticus we read the historical actualization of the ritual commandments in the latter chapters of Exodus, culminating in the *glory of the LORD* coming visibly to reside in the tabernacle, in the full view of Israel – *Emmanuel, God with us*. John is not picking verses here and there in his prologue, but rather his prologue flows out of the Old Testament Scriptures and the expectation of Israel that her God would again dwell with His people. In expressing this hope, and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, John uses the language of Leviticus, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of*

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<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*; 225-26.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*; 78.

*grace and truth.*"<sup>403</sup> One verse contains both the tabernacle and the glory; there can be little doubt that John's made up word, *tabernacled* – translated 'dwelt' by the New King James version – is tied both to the tabernacle in the wilderness of Exodus-Leviticus and to the *glory of the LORD* that was manifest there, proving that God had indeed taken up residence with His people. Raymond Brown writes in his commentary on the Gospel of John, "When the Prologue proclaims that the Word made his dwelling among men, we are being told that the flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God's presence on earth, and that Jesus is the replacement of the ancient Tabernacle...Thus, it is quite appropriate that, after the description of how the Word set up a Tabernacle among men in the flesh of Jesus, the Prologue should mention that his *glory* became visible."<sup>404</sup>

Furthermore, all of this is nothing less than the progressive reversal of the curse and a return to the Garden. Creation is no less a theme in John's Gospel – beginning as it does with the same phrase found in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:1, *in the beginning* (εἰν ἀρχῆν - εἰν ἀρχῆει) – than tabernacle and glory, but again this is not some makeshift hermeneutic created by the Church by piecing together proof texts from the Old Testament. The tabernacle, and later the Temple in Jerusalem, were themselves microcosms of the original Creation, where and when God walked with innocent Man in unhindered fellowship. Both the tent and the building looked back to Creation, but also pointed forward to the complete removal of the curse and the reestablishment of unhindered fellowship between God and Man, a time when the veil would be torn away. For John, and the other apostles, and the entirety of true, biblical Christianity since their day, that reversal was accomplished in Jesus. The New Creation has begun and the true dwelling-with-man God has come in the person of Jesus Christ, who is now building the true temple with living stones of the regenerate. As the Holy Spirit hovered over the deep at Creation, He now indwells the true tabernacle,

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<sup>403</sup> John 1:14

<sup>404</sup> Brown, Raymond *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday; 1966); 32, 34.

the *Shekinah* is present in each and every child of God and in the true Church corporately.

*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

(I Peter 2:4-5)

We are reminded of the basic definition of ‘temple’ or, as a mobile temple, ‘tabernacle,’ as the place where the divine intersected the human, where the deity came into contact with humanity. Without this foundational understanding of the tabernacle in the wilderness, the ‘tabernacling’ of Jesus among men becomes just an odd neologism by John, a new word that sounds meaningful but lacks any coherence. Nor does John give any further explanation of the term, which is itself an indication of his expectation that the meaning would be self-evident to his readers. “[W]e could say that the author of the Gospel of John doesn’t elaborate this point of how Jesus and the temple are similar because he presumes that his readers will bring to this text a knowledge of how God had indwelt the temple within Israel herself.”<sup>405</sup> But this single word in John’s Prologue speaks volumes about the Old Testament roots of the incarnation; “we are being told that the flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God’s presence on earth, and that Jesus is the replacement of the ancient tabernacle.”<sup>406</sup>

This Old Testament imagery and foreshadowing was lost not long after the apostles departed from the seen, and contemporaneously with the growing influence of Greek philosophy and Greek philosophical terminology with Christian theological debate. Not least among these philosophical terms is the *Logos*, used by John in the Prologue and translated, of course, as *Word*. But the *Logos* is also a frequent participant in Greek cosmology as a ‘demiurge’ responsible for Reason, though not as the ultimate deity. *Logos*-philosophy

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<sup>405</sup> Anderson, Gary A. *That I May Dwell Among Them* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2023); 192.

<sup>406</sup> Brown, Raymond; 33.

diminished the impact of biblical Christology, rooted as it was in the Old Testament narrative of Creation and the imagery and life of the tabernacle. This was abetted, perhaps unwittingly, by Athanasius in his important defense of the deity of Jesus Christ through the use of terms that were also key markers from Greek philosophy, words like *prosopon* ('person'), *hypostasis* ('substance'), and *ousia* ('being'). This is not to say that Athanasius' formulation of what would become orthodox trinitarianism was itself mistaken; it is only to place historically the period when biblical exegesis became more influenced by human philosophy than from Old Testament Scripture. Gary Anderson writes,

But once John hands the baton to the early church, the significance of the Tabernacle Narrative as a source of 'hard data' about the incarnation begins to wane. For these theologians, one might reason, the exegesis of the Old Testament gives way to a different task: that of relating the concept of the *Logos* (Word) to Greek philosophical categories such as *ousia* (being), *prosopon* (person), and *hypostasis* (substance). In this strictly developmental account, the Old Testament no longer played a formative role in guiding Christian theology.<sup>407</sup>

What is needed today, and appears to be taking place within much New Testament scholarship, is a paradigm shift. Only this would be a *return* paradigm shift, as if the latest technology in telescopes and satellite imagery somehow 'proved' that the Sun actually *does* revolve around the Earth - a 'reverse' Copernican Revolution that would take astronomy back to Ptolemy. That is certainly unlikely to happen, but the analogy serves to illustrate facetiously the reality that paradigm shifts can go in either direction, or in a totally new one. In the case of Christian exegesis of the New Testament, the time is past due to *reverse* the paradigm of either neglect or misuse of the Old Testament. That this is an entirely valid paradigm shift can be readily seen in the manner in which the New Testament authors themselves use the Old Testament; again, not as a mine of proof texts but as the very soil in which Christian truth

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*; 6.

grows, the air that Christian theology breathes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Letter to the Hebrews, where we first hear of the tabernacle economy as a 'parable.'

Taking the author of Hebrews as his word – literally, *his word* 'parable' – and not diminishing its meaning as merely 'type' or 'symbol,' it then follows that the entire tabernacle sacrificial system stood as a living illustration of some principle or principles. Hermeneutically, then, we are thus encouraged to not only interpret the tabernacle narratives as history – though this they most certainly are – but also as we would approach and exegete a parable. But if one reviews the history of parabolic exegesis, this approach might not seem to offer much assistance. That is primarily because the tendency among Christian exegetes over the millennia has been either to allegorize every element of a parable into some obscure meaning and significance, or to hold that the parable can have but one meaning, and that alone, though scholars then consistently disagree with what that meaning is. A classic example of the hermeneutics of parables is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The story line is familiar even to those who profess no faith and do not read the Bible. As for the first approach, the authors of *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* note,

Until this century, most interpreters treated the parables as detailed allegories, assuming that most or all of the individual characters or objects in the parable stood for something other than themselves, namely, spiritual counterparts that enabled the story to be read at two levels. So, for example, in the story of the Prodigal Son, the ring that the father gave the prodigal might represent Christian baptism; and the banquet, the Lord's Supper. The robe could reflect immortality; and the shoes, God's preparation for journeying to heaven.<sup>408</sup>

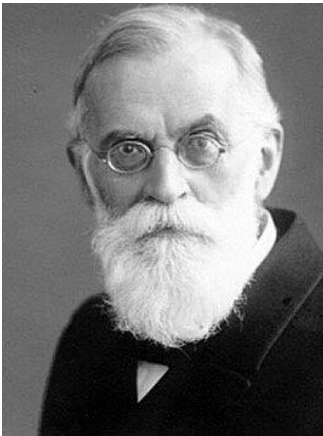
This hermeneutical method, when applied to the parable of the tabernacle sacrifice system, seeks to find underlying spiritual meaning for each particular sacrifice, as well as the components such as the fatty parts. The tabernacle

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<sup>408</sup> Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, & Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing; 1993); 336.

environs and furniture also join in the interpretive party, with such allegorical conclusions that the blood smeared on the four sides of the altar representing the gospel being preached to the four corners of the compass. As with all allegorizing, however, the interpretation of a passages is opened up to sheer imagination, and rarely will two allegorical treatments of the same passage agree.

The opposite end of the exegetical spectrum, as it pertains to parables, is that of the German liberal scholar Adolf Jülicher, who concluded upon an in-depth survey of the massive differences in allegorical interpretations of the parables of Jesus, that there must be one and only one meaning derived from a parable, to avoid the subjective speculation of so much parabolic interpretation.



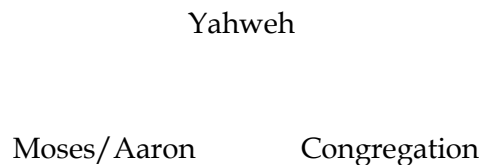
**Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938)**

Jülicher concluded that, since Jesus' aim was to teach His disciples, He would not have used a 'code' understandable only to those who could navigate the labyrinth of allegorical symbolism. "He argued that parables are in no way allegories, and no detail may be said to 'stand for' anything else."<sup>409</sup> But when Jülicher's maxim is applied to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, several seemingly obvious allusions are thus passed over. Readers have uniformly recognized the leading figure in the parable, the Prodigal, as one who has wandered away from God and his covenant – whether Israelite or Gentile – and 'come to their sense' in recognizing the blessing of fellowship with God. The father, then, represents God Himself. The older brother, on the other hand, is a bit more difficult to interpret, until one considers the context of the parable as being one of the many conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel – the brother comes to represent the rebellious and unbelieving Jew, and especially their leaders.

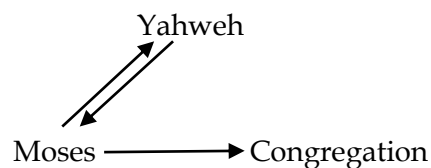
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<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*; 337.

This parable then also illustrates another hermeneutical feature of many of the parables of Jesus, that they are typically *triadic* in structure. “When we analyze the parables in terms of main characters, we discover that approximately two-thirds of Jesus’ stories are *triadic* in structure. That is, they present three main characters (or groups of characters). More often than not one is a master figure (king, master, father, shepherd) and two are contrasting subordinates (servants, son, sheep).”<sup>410</sup> This hermeneutical guide can be overlaid with the tabernacle narrative in Leviticus where there are also three groups of characters. Yahweh stands clearly in the position of highest significance, as the God of Israel who has graciously deigned to dwell with His people via the tabernacle in the wilderness. Moses and Aaron stand in a transferring position of mediation, occupying one point of the *triad*, though the narrative moves us from Moses to Aaron as it progresses. Finally, the third position is occupied by the people of Israel, who, though they have little in the way of a ‘speaking role’ in the parable, are really the most important subordinate group. This structure might be initially diagrammed thus,



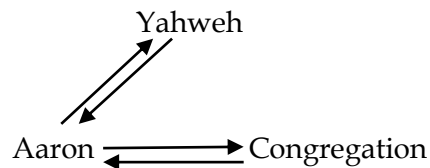
It is not initially clear where the arrows of relationship are to be drawn – between which points and in which direction. Incorporating the experience at Sinai, however, we can posit the following:




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<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*; 338.

The narrative of the tabernacle sacrificial ministry does not change this triadic dynamic, it merely replaces Moses for Aaron as the High Priest, the one who intercedes on behalf of the congregation before Yahweh. We have added, however, also the element of communication between the congregation and the LORD through the mysterious operation of the *Urim and Thummim*, though these are still administered by the High Priest.



It must be said by way of clarification that the narrative of the tabernacle – from Exodus through Numbers – is *historical* and not *figurative*. The point of this exercise is not to diminish the historicity of the characters and places involved in with the tabernacle ministry, as it is the very historicity of the personages and events that gives reality to the fulfilment of the whole ‘parable’ through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is also recognized that the tabernacle narrative spans many chapters of the Pentateuch, involves many different offices and rituals, each of which might be subjected to allegorical interpretation and myriads of possible ‘meanings.’ The purpose here is simply to understand better in what sense the author of the letter to the Hebrews utilizes the word ‘parable’ in his basic description of the tabernacle service that we have studied in greater detail through the first ten chapters of Leviticus.

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic [parabolic] for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard*



*to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.* (Hebrews 9:6-10)

Many conservative commentators and perhaps most evangelical preachers, focus on the ministry of the High Priest, who enters the *Holiest of All* just once per year, and *not without blood*. This is, of course, quite reasonable at first glance, since the author immediately refers to Jesus Christ as “*the High Priest of the good things to come.*” But the variety of ordinances, sacrifices, and rituals to which the author alludes in Chapters 9 & 10 seems conclusively to show that the emphasis is on the priestly ministry *en toto* and not just *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Furthermore, an over-emphasis on the High Priest’s annual venture into the Holy of Holies will overlook the other components of the tabernacle mentioned in this passage, each an integral part of the ‘parable.’ Thus while it is gloriously true that Jesus Christ, as the Great High Priest, has made a way beyond the veil through His own blood, and that should by no means be diminished in significance, there is even more that the *Holy Spirit is indicating* by these ancient things. Thus F. F. Bruce is correct to broaden our focus, “In the record of the tabernacle arrangements and the Levitical offerings the Holy Spirit has a lesson to teach, as in the other parts of the Hebrew scripture.”<sup>411</sup> Thus the author of Hebrews is not drilling down on this or that tabernacle sacrifice or ritual, but rather showing that the whole system itself serves parabolically as a lesson that only the Holy Spirit can infallibly interpret, “This, that throughout the age of the old covenant there was no direct access to God.”<sup>412</sup>



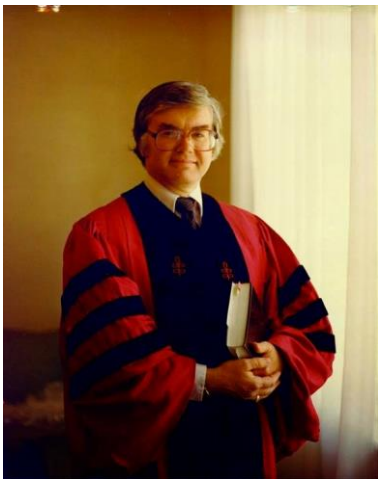
**F. F. Bruce (1910-90)**

Thus, uninhibited fellowship with God – to *walk with Him* as Adam did in the Garden before the Fall – is both the desire of God Himself and of every child

<sup>411</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 1964); 194.

<sup>412</sup> *Idem.*

of God. But sin has made a separation between man and God, including even those whom God has chosen to be His people. That fellowship – limited and bound as it was – was what the tabernacle was all about: Yahweh dwelling in the midst of His people and His people dwelling in His presence. This is what the Prologue of John’s Gospel means when it tells us that “*And the Word tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*”<sup>413</sup> Even the reference to ‘glory’ in this verse harkens back to the promise of Leviticus 9:6, “*This is the thing which the LORD commanded you to do, and the glory of the LORD will appear to you.*” What the writer of Hebrews is claiming regarding the tabernacle paradigm, is that it was wholly insufficient – intentionally insufficient – to attain the goal of uninhibited fellowship between



**William L. Lane (1931-99)**

God and His people. As William Lane writes in his commentary on Hebrews, “It is within a religious perspective that an earnest concern with access to the presence of God and with the decisive purgation of the defilement of sin is thrown into sharp relief.”<sup>414</sup> The tabernacle was the perfect ‘parable,’ then, for the author of Hebrews to elucidate the Spirit’s lesson concerning the inadequacies of the Old Covenant as well as the perfection of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. “The matter of the sanctuary is to be considered in relation to the old and new covenants, and the contrast between the two. It is only natural, therefore, that the tabernacle be used rather than the temple because of the association of the desert sanctuary with the establishment of the old covenant at Sinai.”<sup>415</sup>

The ‘parable’ of the tabernacle liturgy then becomes one of contrast: *limited and inhibited access versus bold and free access* between God’s people and

<sup>413</sup> John 1:14

<sup>414</sup> Lane, William L. *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Word Books; 1991); 218.

<sup>415</sup> *Idem.*

God Himself. This is the instruction of the Holy Spirit, who now brings internally the meaning of the triadic parable that was the tabernacle, and later the Temple, liturgy. "The Holy Spirit disclosed to the writer that, so long as the front compartment of the tabernacle enjoyed cultic status, access to the presence of God was not yet available to the congregation."<sup>416</sup> There were two barriers to unlimited fellowship with Yahweh: first, the spatial barrier of the compartmentalized tent – the veil before the Holy Place limited access to none but the Aaronic priests; the second veil before the Holy of Holies further limited access to the High Priest alone, and that only one day of the year. As we have seen, the average Israelite – even the majority of the tribe of Levi – were prevented access to God except through the Aaronic priests. God did dwell in the midst of His people, but in such a manner as to give a daily reminder regarding the sin that separated them from His holy presence.

The second barrier, also addressed by the author of Hebrews, is the temporal one, as the priestly caste was generationally limited in their ministrations; their tenures were cut short by death and another generation had to take up the tasks after them.

*Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.* (Hebrews 7:23-25)

So long as these barriers existed, there could not be the uninhibited fellowship between God and His people that both parties desired. There was, of course, nothing God's people could do but to accept the gracious sacrificial paradigm offered at Sinai and in the tabernacle, and to continue to look forward in faith to the eventual fulfillment of all things in the Promised One. The writer of Hebrews takes pains to point out that the issue at hand was not the proper sacrifice of this or that animal, or the proper libations, or washings, etc.; the issue

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<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*; 223.

was the *conscience* of the sinner, which could never be washed clean through the blood of animals, no matter how many were slain. "The really effective barrier to a man's free access to God is an inward and not a material one; it exists in his conscience. It is only when the conscience is purified that a man is set free to approach God without reservation and offer Him acceptable service and worship."<sup>417</sup> This is, of course, why Paul's exhortation in Romans 12 comes *after* his thorough explanation of why "*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.*"<sup>418</sup> In the light, and only in the light, of the finished work of Jesus Christ is the believer now free to pursue, by the empowering grace of the indwelling Holy Spirit, acceptable service and worship before a holy God.

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

(Romans 12:1-2)

Thus the child of God can finally and freely approach to the throne of grace without fear of the divine fire leaping forth from the presence of God and consuming him. The multiple barriers of both space and time have been removed for all time by the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is both the Great High Priest and the ultimate Sacrifice. The ultimate meaning of the 'parable,' then, is the glorious admonition and invitation of Hebrews 10, to which the entire tabernacle system pointed for so long.

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

(Hebrews 10:19-22)

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<sup>417</sup> Bruce; 196.

<sup>418</sup> Romans 8:1