

Sacrifices in the Old Testament

from Commentary on the Old Testament, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch

[Grace Notes has a 20-lesson course based on Keil and Delitzsch commentary on the book of Leviticus. Write to: wcloud@gracenotes.info for information.]

When the glory of the Lord had entered the tabernacle in a cloud, God revealed Himself to Moses from this place of His gracious presence, according to His promise in Ex. 25:22, to make known His sacred will through him to the people (Leviticus 1:1).

The first of these revelations related to the sacrifices, in which the Israelites were to draw near to Him, that they might become partakers of His grace.

The patriarchs, when sojourning in Canaan, had already worshipped the God who revealed Himself to them, with both burnt-offerings and slain-offerings.

Whether their descendants, the children of Israel, had offered sacrifices to the God of their fathers during their stay in the foreign land of Egypt, we cannot tell, as there is no allusion whatever to the subject in the short account of these 430 years.

So much, however, is certain, that they had not forgotten to regard the sacrifices as a leading part of the worship of God, and were ready to follow Moses into the desert, to serve the God of their fathers there by a solemn act of sacrificial worship (Ex. 5:1–3, compared with Leviticus 4:31; 8:4, etc.); and also, that after the exodus from Egypt, not only did Jethro offer burnt-offerings and slain-offerings to God in the camp of the Israelites, and prepare a sacrificial meal in which the elders of Israel took part along with Moses and Aaron (Ex. 18:12), but young men offered burnt-offerings and slain-offerings by the command of Moses at the conclusion of the covenant (Ex. 24:5).

Consequently the sacrificial laws of these chapters presuppose the presentation of burnt-offerings, meat-offerings, and slain-offerings as a custom well known to the people, and a necessity demanded by

their religious feelings (Leviticus 1:2, 3, 10, 14; 2:1, 4, 5, 14; 3:1, 6, 11).

They were not introduced among the Israelites for the first time by Moses, as Knobel affirms, who also maintains that the feast of the Passover was the first animal sacrifice, and in fact a very imperfect one.

Even animal sacrifices date from the earliest period of our race.

Not only did Noah offer burnt-offerings of all clean animals and birds (Gen. 8:20), but Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock an offering to the Lord (Gen. 4:4).² The object of the sacrificial laws in this book was neither to enforce sacrificial worship upon the Israelites, nor to apply “a theory concerning the Hebrew sacrifices” (Knobel), but simply to organize and expand the sacrificial worship of the Israelites into an institution in harmony with the covenant between the Lord and His people, and adapted to promote the end for which it was established.

But although sacrifice in general reaches up to the earliest times of man’s history, and is met with in every nation, it was not enjoined upon the human race by any positive command of God, but sprang out of a religious necessity for fellowship with God, the author, protector, and preserver of life, which was as innate in man as the consciousness of God itself, though it assumed very different forms in different tribes and nations, in consequence of their estrangement from God, and their growing loss of all true knowledge of Him, inasmuch as their ideas of the Divine Being so completely regulated the nature, object, and signification of the sacrifices they offered, that they were quite as subservient to the worship of idols as to that of the one true God.

To discover the fundamental idea, which was common to all the sacrifices, we must bear in mind, on the one hand, that the first sacrifices were presented after the fall, and on the other hand, that we never meet with any allusion to expiation in the pre-Mosaic sacrifices of the Old Testament.

Before the fall, man lived in blessed unity with God.

This unity was destroyed by sin, and the fellowship between God and man was disturbed, though not entirely abolished.

In the punishment which God inflicted upon the sinners, He did not withdraw His mercy from men; and before driving them out of paradise, He gave them clothes to cover the nakedness of their shame, by which they had first of all become conscious of their sin.

Even after their expulsion He still manifested Himself to them, so that they were able once more to draw near to Him and enter into fellowship with Him.

This fellowship they sought through the medium of sacrifices, in which they gave a visible expression not only to their gratitude towards God for His blessing and His grace, but also to their supplication for the further continuance of His divine favour.

It was in this sense that both Cain and Abel offered sacrifice, though not with the same motives, or in the same state of heart towards God.

In this sense Noah also offered sacrifice after his deliverance from the flood; the only apparent difference being this, that the sons of Adam offered their sacrifices to God from the fruit of their labour, in the tilling of the ground and the keeping of sheep, whereas Noah presented his burnt-offerings from the clean cattle and birds that had been shut up with him in the ark, i.e., from those animals which at any rate from that time forward were assigned to man as food (Gen. 9:3).

Noah was probably led to make this selection by the command of God to take with him into the ark not one or more pairs, but seven of every kind of clean beasts, as he may have discerned in this an indication of the divine will, that the seventh animal of every description of clean beast and bird should be offered in sacrifice to the Lord, for His gracious protection from destruction by the flood.

Moses also received a still further intimation as to the meaning of the animal sacrifices, in the prohibition which God appended to the permission to make use of animals as well as green herbs for food; viz., "flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat" (Gen. 9:4, 5), that is to say, flesh which still contained the blood as the animal's soul.

In this there was already an intimation, that in the bleeding sacrifice the soul of the animals was given up to God with the blood; and therefore, that by virtue of its blood, as the vehicle of the soul, animal sacrifice was the most fitting means of representing the surrender of the human soul to God.

This truth may possibly have been only dimly surmised by Noah and his sons; but it must have been clearly revealed to the patriarch Abraham, when God demanded the sacrifice of his only son, with whom his whole heart was bound up, as a proof of his obedience of faith, and then, after he had attested his faith in his readiness to offer this sacrifice, supplied him with a ram to offer as a burnt-offering instead of his son (Gen. 22).

In this the truth was practically revealed to him, that the true God did not require human sacrifice from His worshippers, but the surrender of the heart and the denial of the natural life, even though it should amount to a submission to death itself, and also that this act of surrender was to be perfected in the animal sacrifice; and that it was only when presented with these motives that sacrifice could be well-pleasing to God.

Even before this, however, God had given His sanction to the choice of clean or edible beasts and birds for sacrifice, in the command to Abram to offer such animals, as the sacrificial substratum for the covenant to be concluded with him (Gen. 15).

Now, though nothing has been handed down concerning the sacrifices of the patriarchs, with the exception of Gen. 46:1ff., there can be no doubt that they offered burnt-offerings upon the altars which they built to the Lord, who appeared to them in different places in Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:4, 18; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1-7), and embodied in these their solemn invocation of the name of God in prayer; since the close connection between sacrifice and prayer is clearly proved by such passages as Hos. 14:3, Heb. 13:15, and is universally admitted.³ To the burnt-offering there was added, in the course of time, the slain-offering, which is mentioned for the first time in Gen. 31:54, where Jacob seals the covenant, which has been concluded with Laban and sworn to by God, with a covenant meal.

Whilst the burnt-offering, which was given wholly up to God and entirely consumed upon the altar, and which ascended to heaven in the smoke, set forth the self-surrender of man to God, the slain-offering, which culminated in the sacrificial meal, served as a seal of the covenant fellowship, and represented the living fellowship of man with God.

Thus, when Jacob-Israel went down with his house to Egypt, he sacrificed at Beersheba, on the border of the promised land, to the God of his father Isaac, not burnt-offerings, but slain-offerings (Gen. 46:1), through which he presented his prayer to the Lord for preservation in covenant fellowship even in a foreign land, and in consequence of which he received the promise from God in a nocturnal vision, that He, the God of his father, would go with him to Egypt and bring him up again to Canaan, and so maintain the covenant which He had made with his fathers, and assuredly fulfil it in due time.

The expiatory offerings, properly so called, viz., the sin and trespass-offerings, were altogether unknown before the economy of the Sinaitic law; and even if an expiatory element was included in the burnt-offerings, so far as they embodied self-surrender to God, and thus involved the need of union and reconciliation with Him, so little prominence is given to this in the pre-Mosaic sacrifices, that, as we have already stated, no reference is made to expiation in connection with them.⁴ The reason for this striking fact is to be found in the circumstance, that godly men of the primeval age offered their sacrifices to a God who had drawn near to them in revelations of love.

It is true that in former times God had made known His holy justice in the destruction of the wicked and the deliverance of the righteous (Gen. 6:13ff., 18:16ff.), and had commanded Abraham to walk blamelessly before Him (Gen. 17:1); but He had only manifested Himself to the patriarchs in His condescending love and mercy, whereas He had made known His holiness in His very first revelation to Moses in the words, "Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes," etc. (Ex. 3:5), and unfolded it more and more in all subsequent revelations, especially at Sinai.

After Jehovah had there declared to the people of Israel, whom He had redeemed out of Egypt, that they were to be a holy nation to Him (Ex. 19:6), He appeared upon the mountain in the terrible glory of His holy nature, to conclude His covenant of grace with them by the blood of burnt-offerings and slain-offerings, so that the people trembled and were afraid of death if the Lord should speak to them any more (Ex. 20:18ff.).

These facts preceded the laws of sacrifice, and not

only prepared the way for them, but furnished the key to their true interpretation, by showing that it was only by sacrifice that the sinful nation could enter into fellowship with the holy God.

The laws of sacrifice in Leviticus 1–7 are divisible into two groups.

The first (Leviticus 1–5) contains the general instructions, which were applicable both to the community as a whole and also the individual Israelites.

Chapter 1–3 contain an account of the animals and vegetables which could be used for the three kinds of offerings that were already common among them, viz., the burnt-offerings, meat-offerings, and slain-offerings; and precise rules are laid down for the mode in which they were to be offered.

In Leviticus 4 and 5 the occasions are described on which sin-offerings and trespass-offerings were to be presented; and directions are given as to the sacrifices to be offered, and the mode of presentation on each separate occasion.

The second group (Leviticus 6 and 7) contains special rules for the priests, with reference to their duties in connection with the different sacrifices, and the portions they were to receive; together with several supplementary laws, for example, with regard to the meat-offering of the priests, and the various kinds of slain or peace-offering.

All these laws relate exclusively to the sacrifices to be offered spontaneously, either by individuals or by the whole community, the consciousness and confession of sin or debt being presupposed, even in the case of the sin and trespass-offerings, and their presentation being made to depend upon the free-will of those who had sinned.

This is a sufficient explanation of the fact, that they contain no rules respecting either the time for presenting them, or the order in which they were to follow one another, when two or more were offered together.

At the same time, the different rules laid down with regard to the ritual to be observed, applied not only to the private sacrifices, but also to those of the congregation, which were prescribed by special laws for every day, and for the annual festivals, as well as to the sacrifices of purification and consecration, for which no separate ritual is enjoined.