



Sacrifice in Ancient Israel

By William K. Gilders

In our world, people commonly understand “sacrifice” to involve some kind of loss, usually for the sake of a greater good. A person may be said to sacrifice time, pleasure, or happiness; the death of a soldier in war is often referred to as a sacrifice. Sacrifice, in this understanding, involves giving *up* something. However, in the case of the ancient Israelite practices we commonly refer to as “sacrifices,” it is better to think of giving *over* rather than giving *up*.

The English word “sacrifice” comes from the Latin, *sacrificare*, “to make sacred,” that is, to permanently transfer something from the human (common) realm to the divine/supernatural (sacred) realm. This basic meaning is quite appropriate for the sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), since they involve the transfer of offerings from the common to the sacred, from human beings to God. In the Hebrew Bible, the primary Hebrew term for a sacrifice is *qorbān* (something brought forward, offering), which indicates the basic ancient Israelite understanding of this activity. In the Hebrew Bible, Israel’s God, Yahweh, is always recipient of legitimate Israelite sacrifice.

One of the most helpful ways to think about sacrifices is as “gifts” given over to God. We can understand this type of gift-giving by thinking about gift-giving in our own lives, especially that of young children to parents. Parents really don’t need the gifts their children give them (a tie given to a father, a bottle of perfume to a mother) and often enough the money a young child uses to purchase a gift comes from the parents themselves. However, the giving and receiving of such gifts is important, because it expresses a relationship of commitment, care, and love. When they performed sacrifices, ancient Israelites gave over to God some of what they believed God had given them, expressing their close relationship with God, and seeking to deepen that bond.

In some passages the sacrificial offerings are called “food” (see, for example, Lev 3:11; 21:6; 22:25). Referring to a sacrificial offering as food makes sense in a culture in which the sharing of meals is an important means and marker of trust, intimacy, and connectedness. Sharing food with God, even though God doesn’t need food, marks and sustains the relationship.

In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifice always involves *transformation*. One of the most common ways to *transform* something as a “sacrifice” is to *destroy* it., Destruction removes the animal from the ordinary realm to a transcendent one. Biblical texts tell us that what God received from a sacrifice was the *smoke* of the burning, as a “pleasing aroma” (see, for example, Lev 1:13). By receiving the smoke, the transformed sacrifice, God enjoyed a fellowship meal with human beings. This meal took place at God’s dwelling—the temple.

The temple where sacrifice was offered was a ‘domestic’ setting, the place of God’s presence with the nation. One of the most common terms for the temple was “house”; another Hebrew term means “palace.” The structure had domestic furnishings, such as a lamp and a table. The altar was essentially a cooking surface, a barbecue, so to speak, where the sacrificial animal was “cooked.” Burning up or “over-cooking” the sacrifices in the altar fire marked out the specialness of the food offerings.

In ancient Israelite sacrifice, death is not the primary focus. The killing of the animals is a means to an end. Killing the animal makes its flesh and blood available for special use. In our own society, those who have hunted or who have raised livestock for meat are probably in the best position to understand this point. Killing an animal is simply how it is made available for food.

References to the practice of sacrifice are scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible, beginning in the book of Genesis. There, the first sacrificial offerings are brought by Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3-5). While readers have long puzzled over why God accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's, the basic thrust of the story is clear: human beings can relate to God through offering over the products of their labor. The theme of God's positive response to sacrifice is strongly present in the brief account of Noah's sacrifices after the great flood (Gen 8:20-21). There, God smells "the pleasing aroma" (New International Version) of burning sacrifices and determines never again to bring destruction on the world.

Instructions for the performance of various types of sacrifices are found in the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus. There are four main types of animal sacrifice, as well as a grain sacrifice. I will briefly describe these sacrifices, in the order they appear in Leviticus, highlighting some key features. A key fact to note (which I will discuss below) is that sacrifices were made with the mediation of priests, who had exclusive access to the sacrificial altar.

1) Burnt Offering (Hebrew, *'olah*; lit., "ascending offering") (Lev 1; 6:8-13). This could be a herd or flock animal (bull, sheep, or goat) or a bird (dove or pigeon). The defining feature of this sacrifice was that the whole animal or bird was burned in the altar fire. It was, therefore, the most extravagant sacrifice.

2) Grain Offering (Hebrew, *minhah*; lit., "gift") (Lev 2; 6:14-23). This was an offering of fine flour or unleavened baked goods, mixed with oil. A handful of the offering was burned (with incense) in the altar fire. The rest went to the priests.

3) Sacrifice of Well-Being/Fellowship Offering (Hebrew, *zevah shelamim*) (Lev 3; 7:11-35). A herd or flock animal could be offered. Innards (fat, kidneys, and part of the liver) were burned in the altar fire. Most of the animal was eaten, divided between the priests and the offerer. This sacrifice was, therefore, associated with feasting. As the name suggests, it had a strongly positive character.

4) Sin Offering/Purification Offering (Hebrew, *hatta't*) (Lev 4:1 – 5:13; 6:24-30). This sacrificial offering dealt with various forms of disruption in the relationship between human beings and God. The specific type of offering depended on the identity and status of the person who required it. The chief priest, for example, had to bring a bull, while ordinary Israelites brought a female goat or lamb; those who were too poor to afford a goat or sheep could offer birds; an offering of grain flour was acceptable from the very poor. In the case of the animals, innards were burned in the altar fire; the rest of the animal was sometimes eaten by priests, sometimes disposed of by burning away from the settlement.

5) Guilt Offering (*'asham*; lit., "responsibility") (Lev 5:14 – 6:7; 7:1-10). This offering dealt with distinct categories of wrong-doing that disrupted the divine-human relationship, for example, unintentional desecration of sacred things. The prescribed sacrifice was a flock animal. As with

the sacrifice of well-being and the sin offering, innards were burned in the altar fire; the animal's flesh was eaten by the priests.

These five sacrificial offerings, in their various forms, have one crucial element in common: the burning of some portion in the altar fire. This burning transformed the offering into smoke, which produced a "pleasing aroma."

Also significant is the fact that every animal sacrifice includes some special treatment of the animal's blood, which various biblical passages identify with the life-force of the animal (see, for example, Gen 9:4; Deut 12:23). Despite the clear importance of this ritual use of blood, only one verse in the entire Hebrew Bible appears to explain its significance. Leviticus 17:11 says, "For the life-force of the flesh is in the blood, and I [God] have myself given it for you upon the altar to effect a ransom for your lives; for the blood itself, by means of the life-force, effects ransom" (my translation). Interpreters have long debated the meaning of this verse, including the question of whether it should be understood to apply to all sacrificial blood. It may, in fact, represent the distinctive viewpoint of just one particular group of Jerusalem priests. Whatever the case, it does seem clear that this verse relates animal life offered on the altar to the preservation of human life. And this is the crucial thing: this verse is about life, rather than death; animal life on the altar preserves and enhances human life.

A final point is the crucial role assigned to priests in the sacrificial instructions in Leviticus. Sacrifice is not a do-it-yourself activity. Rather, specially designated and set-apart mediators are required to bring about the transfer and transformation of the offering. For a special act, special agents are required. These agents are not only expert in the proper procedures; they also bear the risk of moving into God's special presence.

Sacrifice was "mainstream" religion in the ancient world. It may be difficult for modern people to understand the religious significance of killing and cutting up animals and burning them in an altar fire. However, we can bridge this cultural gap if we understand that sacrifice was fundamentally about transforming and sharing of food to express, build, and reinforce the relationship between God and human beings.

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For further reading:

Frank H. Gorman, "Sacrifices and Offerings." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Samuel E. Balentine, and Brian K. Blount, 5:20–32 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

Wesley J. Bergen, *Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 417; New York: T & T Clark, 2005).

William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).