



Leviticus – Part 1

What is Sacred About Sacrifice?

Many readers consider Leviticus to be among the most bewildering books in the biblical canon. This is due in part to the collection of complex sacrificial laws found in its first half. Why is sacrifice featured so heavily within this sacred scripture?

It's important to understand that sacrifice was the equivalent of prayer for ancient Israelites. The act of sacrifice essentially involves giving up something that is valuable as a demonstration of loyalty and devotion. The emphasis on sacrifice was not unique to Israel during this time. Many ancient Near Eastern cultures also practiced similar sacrificial rites. Like sacrifices made by Israelites to YHWH, their offerings were also intended to maintain and enrich relationships with their own deities.

It may be difficult for modern readers to put ourselves in an ancient mindset and imagine a world in which the center of religious life is not just a structure or temple, but a sacrificial act. Strange as it may sound today, sacrificial rituals (including killing animals and manipulating their blood) were considered the most significant interaction one could have with God.

Thanksgiving, Pleas, and Devotion

There are two main types of sacrifice found in the Hebrew Bible: voluntary offerings and compulsory offerings. "Voluntary offerings" were given freely to God as a way of expressing gratitude (e.g. Gen. 8:20-22), asking for something (e.g. Judg.11:30-31), and/or showing devotion (e.g. Gen. 4:3-4). Voluntary offerings could also be made by the community during religious festivals and holidays (e.g. Lev. 23; Num. 28:26-31, etc.).

Sacrifices are gifts to God; a transfer of something from our world to the spiritual world. Ancient Israelites often voluntarily gifted animals to God in the form of burnt offerings ("*olah*" in Hebrew, meaning literally "to go up"). The aroma from these burnt offerings would then waft upward from the earth to the heavens. There are many instances throughout the Hebrew Bible in which the smell of burnt offerings are described as "pleasing" to God (e.g. Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18; Num. 15:3; Lev. 1:9, 1:17, 3:5, 3:16, etc.).

Animals were of great value in ancient Israel. To give an animal to God was to make an enormous personal and economic sacrifice. Most Israelites were poor farmers who lived on hillsides where it was difficult to raise livestock. Meat was thus extremely expensive and only eaten on special occasions. Sacrificial rites performed as part of religious rituals and festivals provided a special occasion on which meat might be eaten and/or shared.

In some cases, the whole animal was offered up to God. In others, only part of the animal was offered to God while the rest was given to the priest and/or back to the offeror. According to Leviticus, God should get the animal's insides and fat while the priest should get the breast and the thigh. The offeror could then receive the remainder of the animal back for themselves.

Purity & Impurity

Unlike voluntary offerings, "compulsory offerings" refer to sacrifices that are *required*. Compulsory sacrifices described in Leviticus are expected when the offeror has sinned or has become "impure" in some way. Discerning what is "pure" or "impure," however, is not always a straightforward task.

Understanding the concepts of "purity" and "holiness" is crucial for reading Leviticus. The word for "holy" is *kadosh*, which literally means "to be separate." It is thus the *separateness* of things belonging to God that defines their holiness, according to priestly writings in Leviticus. Certain things are holy because they have been uniquely "set aside" for God — e.g., holy space like the tabernacle, holy time like the Sabbath, holy people like the priests, and so on.

Leviticus indicates that holy things "set aside" for God require stricter rules because they are always at risk of being accidentally profaned by making contact with something impure. Impurities exist naturally in the world (e.g., certain foods, childbirth, sex, death, etc.). Although modern readers tend to negatively associate "impurity" with uncleanness, *impurities are not inherently bad*. The text assumes that almost everyone is impure all the time. The only stipulation is that, if you do happen to be impure in some way, you cannot offer sacrifices, attend festivals, etc.

Ancient Israelites believed that impurities could contaminate the sanctuary, so the law required people to ritually clean themselves before entering. Some impurities could be cleaned by simply bathing, while other more major impurities demanded a sacrificial offering in order to remove them. The underlying idea was that the sanctuary was *God's space* and *God's people* were responsible for keeping it clean. Impurities were natural and expected. It's only if and when God's people *don't* clean up their mess that God gets angry, according to this text.