

Biblical Theology of Sacrifice

OT Sacrifices Pointing to the Atonement of
Jesus

Introduction

- The practice of sacrifice was a regular part of life in ancient Israel and in ANE culture
- People offered them not only at regular annual festivals (Lev 16; 23), but also throughout the years as a restitution for sin (Lev 4-5) or for answered prayer (Ps 66:13-16)
- There were four types of animal sacrifices:
 - Burnt offerings—for rituals
 - Fellowship offerings—for peace
 - Sin offerings—for purification
 - Guilt offerings—for reparation

Reasons for Sacrifices

- Israelites presented sacrifices for one of three reasons:
- **First**, they brought sacrifices to praise and thank God in response to his goodness:
- “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress” (Ps 107:19)
- “Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy” (Ps 107: 22)
- Paul picks up this idea in Rom 12:1:
- “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1)

Reasons for Sacrifices

- **Second**, Israelites presented sacrifices to emphasize their requests to the Lord. It was like putting an exclamation point on their prayer
- For example, when the Israelites were threatened in battle, Samuel “took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it to the Lord on Israel’s behalf, and the Lord answered him” (1 Sam 7:9)
- **Third**, Israelites presented sacrifices to atone for sin and impurity
- This is the most common reason for sacrifices practiced by the Israelites
- It took place during annual events for the community, such as the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)
- It was also practiced throughout the year as individuals

What is Atonement?

- The basic purpose to make atonement is to repair and restore the relationship with the Lord that sin has broken
- There are two pictures for this: **ransom** and **cleansing** are complementary pictures of atonement
- Atonement as ransom
- Many people think of a “**ransom**” as a payment that delivers an innocent party from a guilty party
- In the OT, it is just the opposite—the guilty party gave a ransom payment to the innocent party in order to be delivered from a just penalty (Ex 21:28-30)

Atonement as Ransom

- “If a bull gores a man or woman to death, the bull is to be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. ²⁹If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull is to be stoned and its owner also is to be put to death. ³⁰However, if payment is demanded, the owner may redeem his life by the payment of whatever is demanded” (Ex 21:28-30)
- The **ransom** payment serves to deliver the guilty party from punishment and appease the innocent party
- This is the basic meaning of atonement (*koper*) or ransom (Lev 17:11)
- “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life”

Atonement as Cleansing

- A **second** picture of atonement is cleansing
- The psalmist says, **“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin”** (Ps 51:2)
- Sin often leaves us feeling dirty, as though our heart and soul is unclean
- Atonement removes the stain of sin from the sinner
- The Day of Atonement ritual affirms this: **“On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins”** (Lev 16:30)
- Thus, the person who is ransomed from a due penalty by sacrifice is at the same time cleansed of sin
- It's just a matter of emphasis of one over the other

Atonement as Cleansing

- “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45)
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9)

Blood Sacrifices

- Lev 17:11 emphasizes the central role that blood plays in sacrificial atonement, where life and blood are closely associated:
- **“For the life of a creature is in the blood”** (Lev 17:11)
- Sacrifices can atone because the animal’s lifeblood is offered:
- **“It is the blood that makes atonement”** by means of the life in the blood (Lev 17:11b)
- In terms of the ransom picture of atonement, the animal’s lifeblood serves as a ransom payment
- It is a gracious application of the **“life for life”** principle of justice (Ex 21:33)
- Thus, people who deserved death were able to be ransomed by the lifeblood of a blameless substitute animal

Blood Sacrifices

- This same understanding is also central to explaining the sacrificial death of Jesus, who died as a blameless substitute in our place so we might be forgiven (Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Pt 1:18-19; cf. Isa 53)
- In terms of the cleansing picture of atonement, lifeblood was the most powerful cleansing agent available in ancient Israel (Lev 16:15-19):
- “He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. ¹⁷No one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. ¹⁸Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and some of the goat’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. ¹⁹He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites”

Blood Sacrifices

- The NT applies this to the far greater sacrifice of Jesus, whose “blood... purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7; cf. Heb 9:14)
- It is only those who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” who are truly clean (Rev 7:14)

The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)

- Aaron took the blood of sin offerings and went into the throne room of the Lord, sprinkled the blood to cleanse the Lord's room (Lev 16:11-19)
- Aaron confessed sins of Israel and placed them on the scapegoat, which was sent away (Lev 16:20-22)
- Aaron presented burnt offerings to underscore the atonement made (Lev 16:23-24)
- The NT describes the day of Jesus' crucifixion as the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:12) and the atoning sacrifice for the sins of others (Heb 9:12)
- "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12)

The Passover

- The Lord passed through Egypt and killed all the firstborn (Exod 11:4-5)
- Children of Israel killed a lamb and placed the blood on their doorframes (Exod 12:1-10)
- The Lord passed over those houses with a sign without executing his justice (Exod 12:12-13)
- The plague was so devastating that Pharaoh finally released the Israelites from slavery (Exod 12:31-34)
- The NT writers use the Passover to explain the death of Jesus:
- Jesus is “our Passover lamb” (1 Cor 5:7)