

THE BIBLICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRIFICE

Hebrews 10:1-18.

Much is said about sacrifice throughout the Bible, beginning early in Genesis and continuing into Revelation. It is a matter of critical importance for Christian theology. We will begin at the beginning.

1. Genesis 1-3.

1.1. I read these opening passages in the Bible as history; Matthew 19:4-6, Romans 5:12-16, and I Corinthians 15:22. The morality and theology of both Jesus and Paul demand that the first chapters of Genesis be taken historically.

1.2. The primary consequence of the Fall was the violation of *interpersonal relations*: Genesis 2:24- 25, 3:7-11. First, the man and the woman clothed themselves with leaves; second, they hid themselves from God – that is, both their relationship with God and their relationship with each other were vitiated. These two problems have continued and increased during subsequent history. So today we are still having problems relating to the world – truth – and relating to the opposite sex – morality. See Mathew 22:36-40. The commandment to love should correct both relationships – both with God and with our neighbour.

Hence, one of the fundamental words in salvation is ‘*reconciliation*’.

1.3. God’s response to the Fall.

He immediately explains the consequences, Genesis 3:16-19. Difficulty in God’s world – i.e. between God and man – and difficulty between man and woman.

God’s response to the fallen, Genesis 3:21.

Here is God’s first redemptive or saving act of grace – the covering of man’s shame and the first death and sacrifice.

THE WHOLE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL SACRIFICE BEGINS HERE. IT BEGINS WITH GOD’S SACRIFICE OF AN ANIMAL FOR MAN’S SAKE IN EDEN AND IT ENDS WITH GOD’S SACRIFICE OF HIS OWN SON FOR MAN’S SAKE AT CALVARY.

2. Old Testament record.

2.1. Noah’s sacrifice; Genesis 8:20. I assume, in response to God for his own salvation.

2.2. Abraham’s altars: Genesis 12:7, 12:8, 13:4, 8. He pitched his tent and built an altar! Indicative of his priorities?

2.3. Moses. In the recovery from captivity in pagan Egypt, Moses was instructed in divine law and in divine worship. The Ten Commandments and details of the Tabernacle were given to him – that is, they were instructed in divine moral principles AND in a sacrificial system whereby, despite their moral failures, they could maintain their fellowship with God. Every day sacrifices were made.

2.4. The history of Israel from then until the destruction of the second Temple in AD70 was centred upon the temple, its laws and its sacrifice. It was – ideally – a theocentric nation.

3. A New Testament reaction.

3.1. Two young men and John the Baptist. John 1:29-34. “The Lamb of God”.

3.2. The apostle’s final assessment. Hebrews 10:1-4.

This does not mean that the OT sacrifices were useless, a mere waste of time! They were a daily ‘sermon’, a constant reminder of God’s forgiving grace: Hebrews 10:3. Moreover, they provided the opportunity for the least as well as the greatest in the community to find joy and peace in the presence of God, the common factor uniting the people of Israel. They were signs and seals of greater things (cf. Romans 4:11).

3.3. To authenticate this point, the apostle quotes from Psalm 40:6-8 (Hebrews 10:5-7). And see Hosea 6:6, cf. Matthew 9:13.

We should never think that the New Testament in some way corrects the Old Testament, or teaches something that is entirely new. Evidently the knowledgeable in Israel knew that animal sacrifices did not save them. Like us, they were saved by faith in the God who promised them forgiveness.

4. The appropriate response.

4.1. Your body as a living sacrifice. Romans 12:1.

4.2. Secondary and evidential sacrifices:

Spiritual sacrifices: I Peter 2:5.

Attitudinal sacrifices: Hebrews 13:15-16.

Material sacrifices: Philippians 4:13.

