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Old Testament Sacrifices

Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

Views concerning what is accomplished by baptism and the Lord's supper fall into four groups: Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist (see *Ordinance, not Sacrament, CBTJ*, Fall 1985).

The intent of this brief survey is to point out that the similar viewpoints are evident concerning the value of sacrifices prior to the final, once-for-all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The label used for such discussions is the "efficacy" of animal sacrifices. Two areas of efficacy (what is actually accomplished) are distinguished: theocratic and spiritual. All seem quite agreed that in civil relationships in the nation Israel under God (the theocracy) the divinely appointed sacrifices were fully efficacious.

As performed by an Israelite, the sacrifices restored an offender to national privileges regardless of attitude, much as paying taxes today may be done with a smile or a grimace; what counts is actual payment.

It is in one's relation to God (not the nation) that the differing views appear. For divine approval, to affect eternal life, what was the value of animal sacrifices? Three of the four views are sacramental in nature, that is, actions by man are considered to accomplish spiritual merit. These three can be distinguished as they promote a full accomplishment, a partial covering or a promissory value.

Full Efficacy. Some propose that the animal sacrifices, in and of themselves, entirely satisfied for the remission of sin. Priestly activity was involved, but efficacy was complete with the shedding and application of animal blood.

God in Hebrews 10:4 opposes such an idea: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."

"Old Testament Sacrifices" is a reprint from Calvary Up-Date (Summer 1987) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Professor of Theology at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary.

Partial Efficacy. A second view in this survey considers that there was spiritual accomplishment, but it was only a partial covering and only until the time of the death of Christ. There was no removal of sin nor forgiveness by God, only a covering from God's sight until the shedding of the blood of Calvary.

According to this view, the Hebrew word *kaphar* (to cover) and the NT assurance that God "passed over" (Rom 3:25) indicate that God provided through OT sacrifice a temporary relief from divine wrath but not full acceptance before His throne. No one was saved or got to heaven before 30 A.D.

Promissory Efficacy. A considerable improvement among sacramental views was set forth by A A Hodge: "The sacrifices of bulls and goats were like token-money, as our paper-promises to pay, accepted at their face-value till the day of settlement. But the sacrifice of Christ was the gold which absolutely extinguished all debt by its intrinsic value."

Thus God, by imputing the value of Christ's death to Abraham, could save Abraham (Rom 4:3), not just cover over his sins for two thousand years. God could directly take Enoch into His presence (Gen 5:24) rather than placing him in an outer waiting room for thousands of years.

A clear objection to this view, as to all sacramental views, is that Abraham was saved by faith, not by animal sacrifice. Repentance and faith were God's exhortations throughout the OT. He had no delight in numerous animal deaths (I Sam 15:22; Isa 1:11-18; Mic 6:6-8).

No Efficacy. One who believes that there is no saving efficacy in either baptism or the Lord's Supper recognizes that there similarly was no spiritual efficacy in the sacrifices of bulls and goats.

No one gets saved by being immersed in water. No one got saved by sacrificing a lamb in approved fashion. Saved people today should be immersed in water. OT saints similarly expressed their faith using animal sacrifices.

Rahab was saved by faith (Jas 2:23-25) manifest in actions that probably did not include animal sacrifice at the time she believed. The thief on the cross (Luke 23:43) was assured of heaven apart from animal sacrifice.

People who see sacramental accomplishment rather than symbolic teaching in ordinances and sacrifices turn to Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul."

Two responses seem obvious. Jesus standing in the flesh before His disciples "Took bread . . . saying, This is My body which is given for you" (Luke 22:19). He surely was clearly understood as saying that this bread represents My body.

David longed for water from the well at Bethlehem (II Sam 23:15). When it was brought, he called it blood (II Sam 23:17; I Chron 11:19). Surely all understood this as a figure of speech.

As a final comment, those who evaluate sacrifices as divinely appointed teaching symbols consider that the predicted sacrifices during the millennial reign of Christ will be memorials of Christ's death on Calvary, not reinstatement of an ineffective OT sacramental system.

In every dispensation, salvation is (1) by the grace of God, (2) based on the death of Christ, and (3) received by faith. No one has ever been saved except by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 10:4).