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# THE PROBLEM OF THE EFFICACY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SACRIFICES

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It was at one time rather popular among critical scholars to emphasize a strong distinction between the Levitical and prophetic elements in the Old Testament, and either condemning outright the former, or minimizing its spiritual importance. Historically the Levitical element was as essential to the religious life and development of Israel as the prophetic. It formed the framework, as it were, without which the continuity of the religious life of the Jewish nation would have been impossible.

No valid distinction can be made between the Levitical (or ceremonial) and prophetic (or moral) elements of the Old Testament, since each was divinely instituted to serve its proper purpose. Such a separation is unbiblical and foreign to Old Testament thought. Throughout Israel's history the moral was taught through the ceremonial, the ceremonial being the necessary vehicle for the expression of the moral. The Jewish sacrifices were, by divine intention, to reflect the moral truths of obedience, self-sacrifice, self-dedication, love for and devotion to God, recognition of sin, repentance, and many other spiritual conceptions. Throughout the Old Testament the moral interprets the ritual and the ceremonial gives meaning to the ethical. It is indeed a narrow view of Old Testament sacrifice to fail to see in its institution moral, ethical, and spiritual elements. There was pervading the idea of sacrifice a principle of righteousness. Sacrifice was the divinely appointed means of securing a right standing before God in the Mosaic dispensation, and it is faulty hermeneutics to interpret Old Testament sacrificial concepts in terms of New Testament theology alone. It cannot be overemphasized that the interpreter of Old Testament thought, practices, and theological concepts must constantly remind himself that the Old Testament Hebrew did not have at his disposal the Epistle to the Romans and its revelation of righteousness without the law "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ..." (Rom. 3:31-22), nor did he have the Hebrews' Epistle and its testimony to the nature of Old Testament sacrifice as being typical and a shadow of the good things to come. This of course is not to deny the necessity of faith on the part of the Israelite, but to emphasize the proper importance and place of divinely instituted sacrifice and Mosaic worship in its dispensation.

The interpreter of Old Testament sacrifice should be aware of two things often overlooked. First, to follow to its logical conclusion the idea that the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices were merely typical or efficacious only with respect to ceremonial sins, and had no real importance, results in the denial of the importance of a great portion of the Pentateuch itself, especially Leviticus in its entirety, and a great part of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Such a view can

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give no satisfactory reason for the institution of sacrifice at all. The second factor often overlooked in Old Testament sacrifice is that sacrifice was not to the Hebrew some crude, temporary, and merely typical institution, nor a substitute for that dispensation until better things were provided by revelation, but, as will be shown, sacrifice was then the only sufficient means of remaining in harmonious relation to God. It was adequate for the period in which God intended it should serve. This is not the same as saying Levitical sacrifice was on an equal with the sacrifice of Christ, nor that the blood of bulls and goats could, from God's side, take away sins; but it is recognizing the reality of the divine institution of Mosaic worship, and looking, as too often Old Testament interpreters fail to do, at sacrifice from the viewpoint of the Hebrew in the Old Testament dispensation. Sacrifice, to the pious Hebrew, was not something unimportant, or simply a perfunctory ritual, but it was an important element in his moral obedience to the revealed will of God. Sacrifice was by its very nature intensely personal, ethical, moral, and spiritual, because it was intended to reflect the attitude of the heart and will toward God.

It is just at this point that the prophetic assaults upon the sacrificial system can find explanation. The Israelites had come to believe that punctilious attention to sacrificial ritual and ceremony could atone for their sins however great. But this notion was a misconception of the very principle of the ceremonial system which was based upon moral and ethical conduct within the Covenant. The prophets insisted that the people unite moral conduct with their religious observances. This polemic against mere ceremonialism appears in many Old Testament passages (Cf. Psa. 50:23; 40:6-10; 69:30; Isa. 1:11-15; Micah 6:6-8). The two sides to this problem are clearly seen in the words of the Psalmist. He writes in Psalm 51:16-17:

For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it:  
Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:  
A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

To the superficial observer this would appear as a rejection of sacrifice as a result of the later higher moral concept of religion by the Hebrews. But verse 19 which follows repudiates this view; for after the heart of the worshiper is turned in penitence toward God,

Then wilt thou delight in right sacrifices,  
In burnt-offering and whole burnt-offering:  
Then will they offer bullocks upon thine altar. (Ps. 51:19 RSV)

#### Views as to the Efficacy of Old Testament Sacrifices

To what extent did the Mosaic sacrifices atone? Several views have been proposed by Old Testament expositors. On the one hand, it has been asserted that the Levitical sacrifices had no power to atone for moral transgressions, but simply ceremonial offenses. Keil and Delitzsch moreover, extend this view to include all transgressions, and thereby seemingly render the Old Testament sacrifices meaningless:

...as sin is not wiped out by the death of the sinner, unless it is forgiven by the grace of God, so devoting to death an animal laden with sin rendered neither a real nor symbolical satisfaction or payment for sin, by which the guilt of it could be wiped away; but the death which it endured in the sinner's stead represented merely the fruit and effect of sin.<sup>1</sup>

A second view holds that sin was not removed once for all by an animal sacrifice under the law, but simply for a time, --from the interval of one sin-offering to another, or from one day of atonement to another. A third position is that the Mosaic sacrifices, especially the sin and trespass-offerings, made a real atonement for all sins, moral as well as ceremonial, as long as the sacrifices were presented in humble faith and repentance.

In the first view the atoning sacrifice simply reinstated the Israelite to his position as a legal citizen of the covenant community; the second view holds sacrifice to be a temporary relief from divine wrath with no final and complete purging of the conscience. "Else would they not ceased to be offered? because the worshippers, having been once cleansed, would have had no more consciousness of sins." (Heb. 10:2) The third position contends that the sacrifices were the divinely appointed means of obtaining a real forgiveness of sins, which would be regarded as valid in the counsels of God, and which reinstated the Israelite, not simply to his position as a citizen of the covenant community, but to his position of fellowship with God.

The first view is stated by one writer as follows: "These Old Testament sacrifices availed to 'the flesh,' to ceremonial ends...the sacrifice of Christ avails for the 'conscience,' and removal of guilt in the moral sphere."<sup>2</sup> This artificial distinction between the moral and ceremonial efficacy of Old Testament sacrifice finds support by its advocates in the alleged denunciations of sacrifice in the prophets and psalms. Such a view of the relation of the ceremonial element to the moral element in Levitical sacrifices is not the Old Testament view at all. In the Levitical law there was, to be sure, a great ceremonial system and ritual, but it was ceremony with an inward meaning. The sacrifice had no efficacy apart from its meaning, but because of the very nature of sacrificial ritual the ceremonial aspect could be, and often was, separable from its true inwardness. It is to this that the prophets address their denunciations, the separation of the ritual from its inward meaning, the perfunctory observance of outward forms without a due sense of their meaning and value.

### The Divine Promises

When the Law itself is consulted as to the effects of these sacrifices upon ceremonial, civil, or moral transgression, it is always stated that the effect is the forgiveness of sins, with the Israelite restored to both covenant and spiritual standing.

And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the sin-offering, and kill it for a sin-offering... and the priest shall make atonement for him as touching his sin that he hath sinned, and he shall be forgiven. (Lev. 4:33,35 ASV, Italics mine.)

The conscience of the pious Israelite, oppressed and burdened with sin, accepted with divine assurance the fact that his sins were removed. This is not the same as saying, however, as the

writer of Hebrews observes, that the frequent animal sacrifices effected a permanent peace and satisfaction for the conscience, "Else would they not ceased to be offered?" (Heb. 10:2) Animal sacrifices were never intended to effect such relief, nor could they, since they did not possess that dynamic operation as the once for all efficacious sacrifice of Christ. Animal sacrifices, on the other hand, had to be offered again and again for the atonement of sins.

But the reality of forgiveness is vouchsafed by the divine promises contained within the Law itself. All sins of weakness and rashness were completely atoned for by the sin-offerings whether done knowingly or unwittingly (Lev. 4-5); by the trespass-offering such sins as lying, theft, fraud, perjury, and debauchery were atoned for (Lev. 6:1-7); and on the Day of Atonement forgiveness was obtained for all the transgressions of Israel, whether people or priests.<sup>3</sup>

With respect to the efficacy of the Old Testament sacrifices, Thomas J. Crawford's work, The Doctrine of Atonement, is instructive in resolving this question. He writes,

So far as we can learn from the terms of the Mosaic statutes, the sacrifices seem to have been of unailing benefit in all cases in which they were punctually and exactly offered. Their efficacy, such as it was, belonged to them ex opere operato [by outward acts]. The strict observance of the prescribed form was sufficient to secure for any Israelite the acceptance of his sacrifice, to the effect of "making an atonement for his sin that he had committed, so that it should be forgiven him."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, on the one hand, it seems evident that the Mosaic sacrifices had a certain efficacy ascribed to them in Old Testament Law. It is written again and again in the Book of Leviticus that when the prescribed ritual had been duly performed by the worshipper, the sacrifice offered, and the blood sprinkled, that... "it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Lev. 1:4). On the Day of Atonement complete cleansing and removal of sins is clearly taught in the ritual of the two goats, in which one was slain and his blood sprinkled upon the mercy-seat in the Holy of Holies to propitiate judicial wrath by covering the sins; and the other, after the sins of the people were confessed over it, was sent away into the wilderness bearing the iniquities of the people, thus symbolizing sin's complete removal. It is significant that there is not a word in the ceremony that this great sacrifice made an atonement only with respect to ceremonial sins, but on the contrary, it was an atonement for all the sins of the people. "And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins" (Lev. 16:21). In the individual sin-offering it is promised that "... the priest shall make atonement for him as touching his sin that he hath sinned, and he shall be forgiven" (Lev. 4:35). From all this it is evident that a real atoning efficacy was in some way related to the Mosaic sacrifices by divine appointment. What the nature of this efficacy was will be demonstrated later.

#### The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews

On the other hand, the New Testament teaching, especially the Epistle to the Hebrews, is very emphatic in its declarations that "... the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, can never with the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect them that draw nigh" (Heb. 10:11). For they "... cannot, as touching the

conscience, make the worshipper perfect" (Heb. 9:9), since the blood of goats and bulls availed only to "... sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh" (Heb. 9:13), but "how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works ..." (Heb. 9:14), "for it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4).

Here would appear to be two apparently opposite views of the efficacy of the Levitical sacrifices. But the reconciliation of the difficulty lies, not in a denial of either the Old or New Testament teachings, but in a harmonization of both. This is accomplished through a study of the two different aspects under which sacrifice is regarded in the Mosaic economy and by the Hebrews' Epistle respectively.

### Reconciliation of the Problem

From the worshipper's standpoint the Levitical sacrifices were, in a sense, efficacious in a two-fold way: (1) they healed the breach of covenant relationship which resulted from either ceremonial or moral transgression, and kept secure their civil and ecclesiastical privileges; and (2) they procured also, when offered with unfeigned penitence and humble faith, actual forgiveness for the sinner in that it is clearly stated the sacrifice "...shall make atonement for him as touching his sin that he hath sinned, and he shall be forgiven."

It is dishonoring, it seems, to God's word and promise, which is repeated over and over, to contend that the sins under the first covenant were only symbolically, but never really, forgiven. This is to fail to comprehend the meaning and purpose of Old Testament sacrifice and to reduce it to vague and meaningless ritual. This does not really deal with the problem. It simply raises another one--how can we explain the divine promises of forgiveness in Leviticus?

To be sure, the Levitical sacrifices were but shadows of the true, and most assuredly the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sins, but this is looking at the matter both from the New Testament's and from God's viewpoint. That is to say, it is one thing to view the matter from the Old Testament worshipper's viewpoint, who actually participated in the objective ritual of the animal sacrifice, and to whom there was not a word spoken as to these sacrifices being simply objective symbols of inward spiritual truths, for on the contrary, it is expressly stated "he shall be forgiven." It is another matter, however, to look at the question from this side of the cross, in the light of full revelation, and too, to view it from the standpoint of God's intended purposes with regard to sacrifices. It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that a certain understanding of the meaning of the forms was absent, since the ritual ceremonies were educational in value--a process of working from outward form to inner meaning, which resulted in a consciousness of inward communion with God.

### The Two-Fold Divine Purpose in Sacrifice

How could God promise the truly repentant worshipper actual forgiveness if the prescribed ritual was properly observed? The solution lies in God's eternal purposes in Old Testament sacrifices. Old Testament ritual and worship may be said to have had a two-fold purpose, one purpose to be revealed and realized in the Old Testament dispensation, the other hidden, and to be realized in the New Testament dispensation.

### The Revealed and Realized Purpose

The covenant relationship between God and Israel was expressed in ritual worship. Since the aim of the covenant was the process of sanctification expressed by the words in Leviticus 19:2: "...ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy," the Mosaic ritual was intended as a conscious symbol of this truth. However, the ritual was not simply a system of outward signs of internal truths; but from the standpoint of the worshipper and of the Levitical law, it was the necessary vehicle for the actual realization of forgiveness, and for communion and fellowship between God and Israel within the Covenant. This means that a sacrifice did not symbolize forgiveness of sins and propitiation of God apart from the actual realization of these effects. Sacrifice, in the Old Testament, was not merely a symbol or type, for this is to rob it of all immediate meaning and purpose; but it expressed the transference of legal guilt to the substitute and the imposition of the capital punishment due the sinner, carried out in the act of sacrifice itself. Thus, from the worshipper's standpoint, and on the basis of God's own promises in Leviticus, the Mosaic sacrifices were efficacious in this two-fold sense; (they maintained a covenant relationship between God and Israel, and when offered in humble faith and penitence, they secured for the worshipper a valid atonement and the forgiveness of all sins, moral or ceremonial.) It is, however, quite a different matter to view the Levitical sacrifices in the light of New Testament revelation and from the standpoint of God's ultimate and hidden purposes. It must be carefully observed, therefore, that whatever efficacy was ascribed to the Levitical sacrifices, it was not inherent within the animal itself, and did not, strictly speaking, belong to the sacrifices themselves, which were symbols, from God's viewpoint, of the Lamb of God.

\* Levitical sacrifices were the divinely appointed means of objectively signifying to Israel that man was sinful and that sin was a serious matter which required the forfeiting of one's life and the shedding of blood. Therefore, the Israelites offered animal sacrifices in token of contrition and as a "medium" of pardon. The worshipper might not fully understand how pardon and sacrifice were connected, yet by relying on the divinely-appointed medium and promises, he was actually delivered from the fear which guilt produced, with respect to that particular transgression. The worshipper who confessed his sin over the head of the victim, the blood of which was then applied to the altar, was in a real sense professing the assurance of pardon.

### The Hidden and Future Purpose

The direct and immediate efficacy of the sin-offering, on the basis of God's promises, was the securing of forgiveness of sin for the penitent Israelite, and for the entire covenant community on the great Day of Atonement. Atonement was secured, as has been shown, as a result of, and never apart from, the actual ritual sacrifice and death of the animal. Thus the sacrifice itself was the necessary vehicle for securing forgiveness of sins. But it has also been stated that the efficacy did not lie inherently in the animal itself, nor in the Israelite's understanding that the sacrifice he was making was only a shadow and type of the Messiah's sacrifice. How then could God promise the truly penitent worshipper actual forgiveness if the prescribed ritual was properly observed? The solution lies in God's eternal purposes in the Old Testament sacrifices and religious institutions. While they truly atoned for the sins of the worshipper, yet the Old Testament sacrifices were validated in the mind of God on the basis of the all-sufficient, truly efficacious sacrifice of the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world (I Peter 1:20).

It is categorically true that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin; but then the Old Testament never says that it did. What God promised to Israel was the forgiveness of sins and restoration to covenant standing to be accomplished through the death and shedding of the blood of an innocent substitute victim. It was the forfeiting of a life for a life, which was declared in the sprinkling of the blood, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life."

On the basis of the grace shown to Israel in her divine election and the institution of the Covenant, God provided, by His mercy, a means for the sinner to draw near to Him continually. This was the Levitical system of sacrifices. He did not command Moses to tell the children of Israel that a lamb without blemish could in itself expiate sins, but He did promise to accept the life of an animal, ceremonially pure, in substitution for the life of the actual transgressor, and in view of this act, would forgive his iniquities. It must not be forgotten that it was God Himself who instituted sacrifices, specified the procedure, and promised forgiveness.

Hence, the apparent contradiction between Leviticus and Hebrews 10:4 where we are told that "... it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins," is reconciled in the fact that the Old Testament sacrifices were efficacious only with respect to God's forgiving grace, and not with respect to the final expiation or removal of the sins themselves.

But forgiveness was promised and guaranteed, according to the Apostle, on the basis of God's future purposes in Christ--the Lamb of God,

Whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God. (Rom. 3:25, Italics mine.)

Note also Hebrews 9:15, where the death of Christ, as the Mediator of the new covenant, is said to have been "... for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant ...," the efficacy of His death being regarded by God as retrospective. And again in 9:25 the Apostle states that "...now once at the end of the ages hath he been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

Through the all sufficient sacrifice of Christ for sins, God's righteousness was at last vindicated. The Apostle in Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 10:4 confirms the fact that while the Old Testament sacrifices provided forgiveness for the pious Israelite, yet those sins could never be purged away by the blood of bulls and goats, hence they were "passed over"<sup>5</sup> by the forbearing grace of God until expiated by the sacrifice of Christ.

On account of the eternal purpose of God to punish sin and provide an atonement in His Son, God pardoned the sins of His people under the Old Testament Mosaic dispensation, but they were not actually purged away until covered by the blood of Christ. Owing to the forbearance of His grace He accepted the animal substitutes to make a covering for sin and propitiate His judicial wrath against sin, until in the fulness of time He through His own Lamb would validate all forgiveness granted through atonement by animal types. This means that Christ's atonement was made and

accepted in God's sovereign counsels and foreknowledge before the foundation of the world (I Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8), so that the humble and repentant worshipper with his sacrifices of the Old Testament was accepted on the ground of it.

#### DOCUMENTATION

1. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament. 3 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909, p. 305.
2. W. Sanday (ed.), Different Conceptions of Priesthood and Sacrifice. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900, p. 80.
3. Alfred Cave, The Scriptural Doctrine of Sacrifice and Atonement. Revised ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1890, p. 151.
4. Thomas J. Crawford, The Doctrine of the Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement. 4th ed. revised. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954, p. 249.
5. The Greek word is paresis meaning "passing by" and is used nowhere else in the New Testament. The term aphesis usually translated "remission" occurs seventeen times, but is not used here. Quite obviously the apostle would not have used a different word here, unless he intended to express a different sense. The Authorized Version is incorrect in rendering paresis here as "remission"; the ASV corrects this however.