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## **ANIMAL SACRIFICE AND THE LAMB OF GOD**

Cain and Abel are the first ones mentioned in the Bible as having made offerings to God. Cain offered vegetables from his field and Abel sacrificed animals (Genesis 4:3-4).

Other Bible people offered sacrifices as well. For example, Noah offered animal sacrifices after he and his family came out of the ark (Genesis 8:20). Abraham built altars in various places and presumably offered animal sacrifices on them; and Abraham's grandson, Jacob (also known as "Israel"), offered a sacrifice before he went down to Egypt (Genesis 46:1). Abraham's descendants appear to have offered sacrifices only occasionally before the time of Moses. Not much is found in the Bible about how the people who lived before Moses were supposed to have offered animal sacrifices.

In the Law of Moses, however, specific rules were given. The various the kinds of sacrifices were described, and the times and occasions for offering them were prescribed.

Animal sacrifices taught the people that sin has to be atoned for by the shedding of blood (Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22).

### **ANIMAL SACRIFICES WERE NOT ADEQUATE**

One of the first hints that animal sacrifices may not have been adequate before God is found in the narrative of Saul's conquest of the Amalekites. God told King Saul to put the Amalekites to death along with their animals, but Saul did not fully comply. He spared the Amalekites' king and some of their animals. The excuse that Saul was that He saved some of the animals in order to sacrifice them to God. This evoked from the prophet Samuel the famous question:

“Does the LORD delight  
in burnt offerings and sacrifices  
as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?  
To obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

1 Samuel 15:22 NIV

There has always been a danger that people would look at the sacrifices as a substitute for piety. King David recognized this danger and said to God in one of his psalms,

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,  
but my ears you have pierced;  
burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you did not require.”

Psalms 40:6 NIV

King David was not content to go through the ritual of offering animal sacrifices but wanted to do the whole will of God. He said,

“Here I am, I have come—  
it is written about me in the scroll.  
I desire to do your will, O my God;  
Your law is written in my heart.”

Psalms 40:7-8 NIV

David was not himself able to live up to the words that he had spoken, and it remained for one of his descendants to live up to them. Who is the person who lived up to David's words? We find the answer in the New Testament. See Hebrews 10:5-10.

The prophet Isaiah realized that animal sacrifices were not adequate to cement a good relationship with God. He wrote,

“The multitude of your sacrifices—

what are they to me?’ says the LORD.  
‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings,  
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;  
I have no pleasure in  
the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.’”  
Isaiah 1:11 NIV

The prophet Hosea chimed in with a similar thought. He quoted God, as saying,

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,  
and acknowledgment of God  
rather than burnt offerings.”  
Hosea 6:6 NIV

These statements show that animal sacrifices were not adequate to secure God’s favor. Something else was needed.

### ISAIAH CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Words that describe what else was needed are found in Isaiah chapter fifty-three. The prophet Isaiah spoke in that chapter of a man who would embody within Himself all the elements of acceptable sacrifice.

Although Isaiah spoke of this person in the past tense, no one in the past had ever measured up to Isaiah’s description. Nor was there anyone living in Isaiah’s day who could measure up to it. Therefore, the person of whom Isaiah spoke must have been yet in the future from Isaiah’s point of view. (From our point of view that person lies in the past.)

The man of whom Isaiah spoke would have to be sinless, for Isaiah said of Him,

“...he had done no violence,

nor was any deceit in his mouth.”

Isaiah 53:9b NIV

Isaiah said that the man of whom he spoke would offer Himself as a substitute for the sinners. He said of Him,

“Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows.”

Isaiah 53:4a NIV

Isaiah foretold that this man would suffer for the misdeeds of others. He said,

“But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace  
was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.”

Isaiah 53:5 NIV

Isaiah said, further, that this person would shed his blood as patiently as a sacrificial lamb or sheep. Isaiah’s words:

“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.”

Isaiah 53:7b NIV

Of whom was Isaiah speaking? Was he speaking of himself? (See Acts 8:30-35,) No, Isaiah was not speaking of himself. He too needed redemption (Isaiah 53:4.) Was he was speaking of King Hezekiah? No, although King Hezekiah was a righteous man, he was not willing to die when his time came (Isaiah 38:1-2). Was Isaiah speaking about the children of Israel as a group. No,

for although they have suffered much, they have not suffered to atone for the sins of others.

The Old Testament closes without disclosing who it was of whom Isaiah spoke.

### JOHN THE BAPTIST IDENTIFIED THE MAN

John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the person who would be sacrificed for sins. John was able to recognize Him, because the Spirit of God had come down upon Jesus and remained on Him. (John 1:32-34).

Shortly after John baptized Jesus, he saw Jesus walking toward him and said,

“Look, the Lamb of God,  
who takes away the sin of the world!”

John 1:29b NIV

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus walking by and again said,

“Look, the Lamb of God!”

John 1:36 NIV

Two of John the Baptist’s disciples heard John say this and they started following Jesus (John 1:37).

### JESUS SAID VERY LITTLE ABOUT ANIMAL SACRIFICE

Jesus was well aware that animal sacrifices were being offered in the temple at Jerusalem. In His Sermon on the Mount He said,

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift  
at the altar and there remember  
that your brother has something against you,

leave your gift there in front of the altar.  
First go and be reconciled to your brother;  
then come and offer your gift.”

Matthew 5:23-24 NIV

Jesus also instructed a leper whom He healed to go and offer the appropriate sacrifices for his healing. Jesus said to him,

“See that you don’t tell anyone.  
But go, show yourself to the priest  
and offer the gift Moses commanded,  
as a testimony to them.”

Matthew 8:4 NIV

Notice the reason Jesus gave as to why the man should go and offer a sacrifice. He should do it as “a testimony” to the priest.

In spite of Jesus’ awareness that animals were being sacrificed at the temple, there is no evidence that He ever offered an animal sacrifice.

Jesus made frequent reference to the fact that He would go to Jerusalem, where He would suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the Law. Jesus knew that He would be killed at Jerusalem and that He would be raised on the third day. See Matthew 16:21.

It is perhaps significant that Jesus, who would Himself be the ultimate sacrifice for sin, had very little to say about the need to offer animal sacrifices. It is as though He knew that the day for animal sacrifices was passing away.

## WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANIMAL SACRIFICES?

One of the teachers of the Law overheard Jesus debating with His detractors, and the man asked Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus replied that there is only one God and that the most important thing is to love Him and to love one's fellow man (Mark 12:29-31).

“Well said, teacher,’ the man replied. ‘You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices’” (Mark 12:32-33 NIV).

Did you notice what the man said? He said that loving God and one's fellow man is more important “than all burnt offering and sacrifices.” That was an amazing statement. If Jesus had disagreed with the man, this would have been a good time for Him to say so. Instead, Jesus said to the man,

“You are not far from the kingdom of God”

Mark 12:34 NIV

Jesus' remarks about animal sacrifices add up to something less than a ringing endorsement of them. His mind was increasingly filled with thoughts of the greatest sacrifice of all, which He Himself would shortly offer.

## THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

It remained for the writer of the book of Hebrews to speak at some length about Christ's sacrifice. He said that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). He supported this assertion by saying that sacrifices had to be repeated over and over under the Law of Moses (Hebrews 10:1-3), which would not have been necessary if sacrifices had really taken away sin.

Instead of animal sacrifice, Jesus offered His own blood (Hebrews 9:12,14). He offered Himself once for all time (Hebrews 10:10,12) and His sacrifice does not need to be repeated.

This indicates that no one should try to offer up Jesus again as a sacrifice, for even if it were possible for a human to offer up the Son of God, it would not be necessary. That is because once sins are forgiven, no further sacrifice for them is needed. The book of Hebrews says,

“And where these [sins]  
have been forgiven,  
there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.”

Hebrews 10:18 NIV

After Jesus offered Himself on the cross, He was raised up and seated at the right hand of God in heaven (Hebrews 10:12), where He ever lives to make intercession for His people (Hebrews 7:25).

### THE SACRIFICES THAT JESUS' FOLLOWERS SHOULD OFFER

There is no need for Jesus' followers to offer a Passover lamb, for Christ is their Passover lamb. The apostle Paul said,

“For Christ, our Passover lamb,  
has been sacrificed.”

1 Corinthians 5:7b NIV

Jesus' followers offer sacrifices of a much higher order than animal sacrifices. The apostle Paul encouraged people to offer their own “bodies as living sacrifices.” He said,

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers,  
in view of God's mercy,  
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,  
holy and pleasing to God—



this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Romans 12:1 NIV

The apostle Paul encouraged the Ephesian brethren to live a life of love just as Jesus did. He said,

“and live a life of love,  
just as Christ loved us  
and gave himself up for us  
as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Ephesians 5:2 NIV

The writer of the book of Hebrews suggested that praise offered to God is a form of sacrifice. He said,

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us  
continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—  
the fruit of lips that confess his name.”

Hebrews 13:15 NIV

The writer of the book of Hebrews suggested further that sharing one’s goods is a form of sacrifice. He said,

“And do not forget to do good  
and to share with others,  
for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Hebrews 13:16 NIV

## THE LAMB IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

No one having read the passages that we have presented in this chapter concerning animal sacrifices will have difficulty in recognizing the identity of the one who in the book of Revelation is called “the Lamb.” When the book of Revelation says that the four living creatures in heaven and the twenty-four elders fall down before the Lamb to worship Him (Revelation 5:8), we know

that it speaks of the resurrected Jesus. “The Lamb” is mentioned throughout the book of Revelation.

### SUMMING UP

The story of sacrifice in the Bible begins with animal sacrifices but ends with a vision of the Lamb of God in heaven.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you suppose God introduced animal sacrifices in the first place? What did the people learn who had to kill animals for their sins?
2. Why was God not entirely pleased with animal sacrifices? What do you think?
3. Why do you suppose Jesus did not say much about animal sacrifices?
4. Did Jesus have to offer any animal sacrifices for His sins? If not, why not?
5. When did animal sacrifices finally cease to be offered in the temple in Jerusalem? What are your thoughts as to why they ceased?
6. Would you be in favor of the temple in Jerusalem being rebuilt so that animal sacrifices could be offered there again? Would the teaching of the New Testament be violated if that were to happen? If so, in what way?
7. Why do people partake of the Lord’s Supper? Is it to offer up again the body and blood of Jesus as an offering to God? If that

is not the purpose of the Lord's Supper, then what is its purpose?