

THE BURNT OFFERING IN ITS BIBLICAL CONTEXT¹

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Lists of sacrifices

First a brief word on the context of the legislation on the burnt offering in Leviticus.

A reading of Leviticus 1-7 indicates that each type of sacrifice is discussed twice; the burnt offering (Lev. 1 and 6:1-6 [Eng., 6:8-13]), the cereal offering (Lev. 2 and 6:7-16 [Eng., 6:14-23]), the peace offering (Lev. 3 and 7:11-36), the sin offering (Lev. 4:1-5:13 and 6:17-23 [Eng., 6:24-30]), and the guilt offering (Lev. 5:14-26 [Eng., 6:7] and 7:1-10). A careful analysis of this apparent double listing leads to the following conclusions.

Leviticus 1:1 to 5:26 [Eng., 6:7] was written primarily with a view to what all Israelites were to know. Chapters 5:26 (Eng., 6:7) to 7:38 are supplementary laws with further details and are directed primarily to the priests (in spite of Lev. 7:22-36 which are directed to Israel as a whole). A comparison of the one part (Lev. 1-5:26 [Eng., 6:7]) to the other section (6:1 [Eng., 6:8]-7:38) makes this relationship clear.

Procedure and Frequency

The basic procedure for the whole burnt offering as brought by an Israelite is outlined in Leviticus 1:3-9.

If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. And

¹This is a somewhat abbreviated text of a lecture delivered at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on November 8, 1989. Due to factors largely outside my control, the publishing of this lecture has been a long time coming. To prevent further delay, footnotes have been kept to a minimum.

he shall slay the young bull before the LORD; and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. He shall then skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Then Aaron's sons, the priests, shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the suet over the wood which is on the fire that is on the altar. Its entrails, however, and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer up in smoke all of it on the altar for a burnt offering, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD (NASB).

If a bull was not used, but a sheep or a goat, the same basic procedure was followed (Lev. 1:10-13). It was only with the offering of a bird that modifications of this basic procedure occurred (Lev. 1:14-17). Except for the skin (which God in his mercy granted to the priest, Lev. 7:8), the entire animal went up in smoke to God. This was the only offering to do so. Indeed, the Hebrew for the burnt offering is literally "that which goes up" (עֹלָה); cf. Judg. 6:21; 13:20; 20:40; Amos 4:10).

With respect to the frequency of this sacrifice, one must distinguish between those brought voluntarily and those legislated. Leviticus 1 has in view a voluntary burnt offering. People were free to go to the Tabernacle and bring a sacrifice to God, for example, in thanks for his mercies or for the paying of vows. Think of Psalm 66:13-15.

I will come into Thy house with burnt offerings,
I will pay Thee my vows, that which my lips uttered and my
mouth promised when I was in trouble.
I will offer to Thee burnt offerings of fatlings with the smoke of
the sacrifice of rams;
I will make offering of bulls and goats.

One could imagine that the bringer of the sacrifice would explain why the offering was being brought, and a priest may have responded (cf., e.g., Ps. 20:2-6 [Eng., 1-5]; 1 Sam. 1:17).

It also appears that the Israelites could offer the burnt offering sacrifice without the mediation of the priest (cf., e.g., Manoah in Judg. 13:15-20).

Besides the voluntary burnt offerings, there were also those requested by God in his law. From the Mosaic law it is obvious that this sacrifice was the one most frequently offered. The legislated burnt offerings are as follows.

1. Every day a male lamb had to be offered as a burnt offering in the morning and another male lamb in the evening (Ex. 29:38-42; Num. 28:1-8).
2. Each sabbath day two additional lambs were to be sacrificed (Num. 28:9, 10).
3. At the beginning of each month (the New Moon), two young bulls, one ram, and seven male lambs were to be sacrificed (Num. 28:11-14).
4. Each day of the Feast of Passover—Unleavened Bread, the same sacrifices as with the New Moon (Num. 28:16-25).
5. At the Feast of Weeks (Feast of First Fruits) again the same as with the New Moon.
6. At the Feast of Trumpets, one bull, one ram, and seven male lambs (Num. 29:2-4).
7. On the Day of Atonement, one bull, one ram, and seven male lambs (as at the Feast of Trumpets) as well as the special burnt offerings for the atonement which was one ram for the high priest and one for the people (Num. 29:8; Lev. 16:3, 5, 27).
8. On the Feast of Booths a variety of burnt offerings were to be sacrificed. On the first day, thirteen young bulls, two rams, and fourteen male lambs (Num. 29:12-16). With each successive day of the feast, the number of bulls decreased each day by one until on the seventh day there were seven bulls; the number of rams and lambs remained the same (Num. 29:17-35). On the eighth day, there was to be one bull, one ram, seven male lambs (Num. 29:35-38) just as at the Feast of Trumpets and Day of Atonement.
9. Burnt offerings were also required at various purification rituals; after childbirth, a lamb had to be sacrificed (Lev. 12:6-8); after cleansing of male bodily discharges or of abnormal female discharge of blood, a turtledove or a young pigeon (Lev. 15:14-15, 29-30); after defilement during a Nazarite vow, a turtle dove or a young pigeon (Num. 6:10-11); after being cleansed from leprosy, a male lamb or a turtle dove (or young pigeon) (Lev. 14:10, 13, 19-22).

It is quite clear that the burnt offering permeated the life of Israel. Life could not be imagined without it. To miss the burnt offerings was a catastrophe. (Cf. Dan. 8:11-13 where the tribulation coming under Antiochus IV is pictured in terms of the removal of the burnt offering.) For those interested in numbers, the total number of burnt offerings alone for one normal year was one hundred thirteen young bulls, thirty two rams, and one thousand eighty six lambs. That was the minimum

number of burnt offerings that had to be offered to the Lord at the Tabernacle or Temple.

What does all this sacrificing of the burnt offering mean? The idea of atonement is there. The blood is thrown on the altar (Lev. 1:5). However, this is not the central or dominant aspect of the whole burnt offering. The key feature is seen in the name, "it goes up" (עֲלֶה) to God. What does this "going up" signify? Indeed what does the general idea of sacrifice actually mean? Where did sacrifice come from? It is good to ask this question with the whole burnt offering for it was a basic sacrifice. Daily Israel was confronted by it. Furthermore, it is clear that this sacrifice was in use well before the legislation given in the days of Moses.

The significance of sacrifice

Nothing is specifically revealed in the Bible about the origin of sacrifice. However, something can be said about the character and the significance of sacrifice.

In the first place, it is clear from Leviticus 1:2 that the sacrifice is called קָרְבָּן, that is "offering" in the sense of a gift (cf. Mark 7:11). This basic characterization of a sacrifice as a gift is also found elsewhere under the name נְתָתָהּ, "gift." As a matter of fact that is the way sacrifice is referred to for the very first time in Scripture in Genesis 4:3-5 where this term occurs. It is a gift to God. נְתָתָהּ can also be defined as "a present made to secure or retain good will."² Thus, for example, the term is used of Jacob seeking favor with Esau with the many gifts he had sent ahead of him (Gen. 33:10).

The basic idea of sacrifice is, therefore, that it is a gift, a gift to God. The burnt offering is that which goes up (עֲלֶה) to God. Thus the motivation for sacrifice is to give a gift to God. We do not read of a divine command that people had to start sacrificing. So apparently, if we can argue from silence, man came up with it. That statement will be qualified in just a moment.

In order for a sacrifice to be acceptable to God, it clearly had to be rendered in true faith, with the right attitude. After all, it was by faith

²S.R. Driver in *HDB*, III:587b. Because a grain offering is often what an Israelite would give to God, the נְתָתָהּ could also be synonymous with the cereal offering. Cf. G.A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel* (HSM 41; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 31-32.

that Abel offered a sacrifice more acceptable than Cain (Heb. 11:4). This theme is heard throughout the Old Testament (cf., e.g., 1 Sam. 15:22; Is. 1:11-13; Jer. 7:21-23; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-26).

Since we only read of sacrifice after the fall into sin, it has been suggested that sacrifice and the giving of gifts to God was born from a God-given desire to have communion with God again and to share in his favor.³ (This is the necessary qualification for the statement that man came up with the idea of sacrifice. The desire to sacrifice comes from man, but it given to man by God.) With the offering of a gift, man wants to give up his independence from God. The sin of Adam and Eve, was that they sought their independence from God by taking what had been forbidden to them. With the sacrifice the opposite, so to speak, happens. Man then gives God the best of what he has, recognizing God's pre-eminent place. In this way he shows sorrow for sin done in rebellion against God. In the sacrificial gift is the expressed wish to be a child of Father. Have you ever noticed how often children give and they give so freely? That is inherent in being a child. You recognize your dependence and you easily give gifts. And therefore, the one who offers acknowledges God's right to such gifts and to receive the best. Thus, the one offering is actually recognizing God's prerogative to claim him who sacrifices. Indeed, in giving his best, man offers of himself. The sacrifice in a sense represents himself.

From this plausible perspective it is not strange to read of burnt offering going up to God from earliest times. Everything literally went up in smoke to heaven. Everything was given to God. For early instances of the burnt offering, think, for example, of Noah's sacrifice after the flood (Gen. 8:20), Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a whole burnt offering (Gen. 22:2, 13), and Israel's desire to leave Egypt to sacrifice out in the wilderness (Ex. 10:25). The burnt offering was known for a long time.⁴

The LORD took this practice of sacrificing officially into his service and worship. In so doing, he regulated sacrificial giving to the smallest detail. It was basically centralized in the tabernacle or temple, and put into the hands of priests, although sacrifices could apparently still be offered apart from the central sanctuary (cf. Judg. 13:15-20). As we

³Cf. W.H. Gispen in *Bijbelsch Handboek* (Kampen: Kok, 1935) I:279.

⁴For more examples, see W.H. Gispen, *Het Boek Leviticus* (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1950), 13, 46.

have seen at an earlier occasion,⁵ sacrifice as God regulates and legislates it has the underlying element of blood for atonement. This comes more to the foreground in the official Levitical legislation. The blood of course pointed to God's giving his great gift in Jesus Christ. When God appropriated the custom of sacrificing, of giving gifts to God, for his worship, then he used it to picture his great gift that he would give to man. So the basic character of sacrifice, the giving element, was used by the LORD to picture the gospel of his sovereign grace. His gift is much bigger than any gift that man could give. The idea of the sacrifice and the sacrificer giving himself to God was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, who could do so perfectly. This great fulfillment had been foreshadowed already in the events of Genesis 22, when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac as a whole burnt offering, but a substitute was provided.

Having seen that sacrifice is generally speaking, a gift to God, which idea was especially present in the burnt offering, let us now consider some specifics of this sacrifice (and of others with common features).

The role of the people

It is noteworthy that in the burnt offering and other sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus 1-7, the Israelite played a crucial role. He was not a mere bystander. He not only brought the offering, he also laid his hand on the head of the animal, he slaughtered it, skinned it, and he cut it into pieces. Only with the bird, because of its small size, did he do less. How unlike the surrounding nations, where people were kept out of the act of worshiping in this way. There the priest did everything, but not in Israel. The Israelites themselves had to give to the LORD in holy service. For that reason, the sacrificial regulations were addressed to Israel (cf. "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them. . . , " Lev. 1:2).

Three possible sacrifices for burnt offerings

There were three possibilities when it came to bringing a whole burnt offering. The sacrifice could be a bull without defect from the herd, a male sheep or goat without defect from the flock, or a dove or

⁵See the lecture, "The Origin and Character of Sacrifice in Scripture," in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991), 3-16.

a pigeon (Lev. 1:3, 10, 14). There are several important principles that function in these three possibilities, principles from God which still apply today. The first principle is this. Everyone was not expected to bring the same sacrifice. The Lord took the economic well-being and the economic position of the Israelite into consideration.

In the second place, everyone was expected to bear the cost. However poor the person was who was bringing a sacrifice, the offering still had to represent some cost on the part of the donor (cf. 2 Sam. 24:24). Therefore, all the creatures offered were domestic ones. Doves were also raised in Israel and therefore could also be utilized, but no wild animal was allowed. There had to be a cost involved to the Israelite sacrificing.

In the third place, only perfect animals were acceptable. Only the best is good enough for the LORD. Think of the LORD's complaint at the close of the Old Testament period that Israel was despising the LORD.

By offering polluted food upon my altar. And you say, "How have we polluted it?" By thinking that the Lord's table may be despised. . . . "What a weariness this is," you say, and you sniff at me says the LORD of Hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord (Mal. 1:7, 13).

These principles are still very relevant for us today. Philippians 4:18 comes to mind.

I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphrattus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

The apostle considers it a full payment. It was like a burnt offering. They gave of their best in accordance with what God had given them.

The laying on of the hand

Another element is the laying on of the hand. After the Israelite had brought his animal before the Tabernacle, then "he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Lev. 1:4). This action was also done with the peace offering (Lev. 3:2, 8, 13), the sin offering (Lev. 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33) and elsewhere, for example, by the priests with the sacrifice

offered at the ordination of Aaron and the priests (Ex. 29:19; Lev. 8:22).

What does this laying of the hand on the head mean? When the Israelite put his hand on the animal a certain transfer took place. A transfer from the Israelite to the creature, a transference of the responsibility of the Israelite to make atonement for his sins. That responsibility went to the animal which went in his place. Therefore, the matter of the laying on of the hand on the head of the animal is immediately linked in Leviticus 1:4 to the animal's being accepted to make atonement for him. A well-known transference took place on the Day of Atonement when the high priest, Aaron, was to put

both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness (Lev. 16:21-22).

With the burnt offering, more than atonement is involved, however, for in this sacrifice more than atonement is in view. There is a second aspect. By laying his hand on the animal, the Israelite accentuated the fact that he was not just giving this animal to God as a gift, but that he was offering and dedicating himself, his entire being to God as a sacrifice. The primary intent of the burnt offering is to give to God a gift, ultimately of oneself, although the aspect of atonement is certainly there as well (cf. Lev. 16).

There are important principles here for us today. Giving gifts to God as the LORD has prospered us, giving our best is very important. There was a certain spontaneity in the Old Testament voluntary burnt offerings that is valuable to retain. So easily giving can become institutionalized. An Israelite could go to the Tabernacle with a special gift for the Lord because he was happy. A healthy child was born, or a relative was delivered from leprosy—or for any reason he could bring a burnt offering. Giving gifts, also spontaneous gifts, to God is a very important part of one's worship of God.

However, with all the giving, the ultimate offering must be the sacrifice of ourselves. Think of those well-known words in Romans 2.

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

1 Peter 2:5 puts it thus:

Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.

One cannot understand these passages unless one knows something of the whole burnt offering of the Old Testament. Indeed, if one gives oneself completely to God, then one honors also the requirement of the whole burnt offering legislation. The scribe who was not far from the kingdom said to the Lord Jesus,

You are right, teacher; You have truly said that He is one, and there is no other but He; and to love Him with all the heart, and all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:32-33).

Jesus saw that he answered wisely (Mark 12:34) and the scribe's words show that if a person gives himself to the Lord in true love, then he is doing what the whole burnt offering spoke of. He is fulfilling this law. The Lord Jesus Christ did present himself to the Father in perfect love and he is the fulfillment of this sacrifice. In him we too can give ourselves to God in holy service and say with Psalm 40 (which is applied to Christ in Heb. 10:5-9), "I delight to do Thy will, O my God. Thy law is within my heart." The kind of sacrifice God expects is that of an undivided heart. Like the whole burnt offering everything is to go to God. An undivided heart is, therefore, needed.

Unite my heart to fear thy name.

I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
(Ps. 86:11-12).

God expects his children to give themselves entirely and undividedly to him as a burnt offering.

As the whole burnt offering dominated the life of Israel, so our giving ourselves and our heart and our everything to God needs to dominate our existence. We have all the more reason to do this since *the* sacrifice has been made once for all in Christ. As the whole burnt offering was totally directed to heaven and went upwards, so our giving ourselves as a burnt offering to God means that our life must be totally orientated upwards.

It is interesting to note that since the Jews today cannot sacrifice the whole burnt offering, the morning and evening sacrifice, they have

substituted prayer for this sacrifice. In prayer one unites oneself with God, seeks communion with God, and gives oneself to God. Our life of gratitude is also to be a life of prayer. Prayer is the chief part of gratitude (cf. Heid. Cat., L.D. 45).

The continual fire

Another aspect that needs to be dealt with is the matter of the continual fire, found in Leviticus 6:1-5 (Eng., 8-13), a passage of special concern for the priests. The LORD said to Moses,

Command Aaron and his sons, saying, "This is the law of the burnt offering. The burnt offering shall be on the hearth upon the altar all night until the morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it. And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and put his linen breeches upon his body, and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has consumed the burnt offering on the altar, and put them beside the altar. Then he shall put off his garments, and put on other garments, and carry forth the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it, it shall not go out; the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall lay the burnt offering in order upon it, and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out."

This legislation does not deal with the voluntary burnt offerings, but concerns the daily burnt offerings that were the responsibility of the priests. One can think in this context also of Exodus 29:38-39, 42.

This is what you shall offer upon the altar; two lambs a year old, day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer in the evening; . . . It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak there to you.

The continual burnt offering meant that fire had to be kept burning constantly on the altar. This point is mentioned five times in Leviticus 6:8-13 (Eng., 8-13). The voluntary burnt offerings would have helped keep that fire going, but if not, wood was to be used.

Why was this continual burning of such importance? Perhaps it symbolized and stressed that the dedication of Israel to the LORD must

be constant and uninterrupted. (Remember that the burnt offering signified a gift to God.) The burnt offering as a continual offering stands in contrast to the sin offering. It could not be a continual sacrifice. Specific sins were atoned for and done away with. So Christ died once for all in fulfilling the sin offering (Heb. 7:27). However, in fulfilling the burnt offering, Christ constantly gives himself to the Father in intercession on behalf of "those who draw near to God through him" (Heb. 7:25).

For Christians today, the burnt offering with the continual fire can show that constant and continual consecration to God is necessary. It cannot be done now and then. The fire must be kept burning continually for God.⁶

One additional remark on the need for the continual fire. In Scripture fire is frequently a symbol for God's presence. Think of how God showed his approval at the first burnt offering prepared by Aaron as high priest. Fire came down from heaven (Lev. 9:24). When this happened, the sacrifices on the altar were already burning (Lev. 9:10, 4, 7, 20). But it would have taken time to burn all the animals that are mentioned and the process was incomplete, when God dramatically demonstrated his acceptance of these sacrifices by burning them up completely with fire from heaven. Similarly, fire came from heaven with the sacrifice of Manoah and his wife when the birth of Samson was announced (Judg. 13); when Solomon dedicated the Temple (2 Chr. 7:1); and when Elijah challenged the Baal priests (1 Kin. 18:38). So fire is often a symbol of and related to the presence of God in the Old Testament (also cf. Deut. 4:24; Ps. 18:9-15 [Eng., 8:14]; Ezek. 1:4). On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit is pictured as "tongues as of fire" (Acts 2:3). It is, therefore, not impossible that the "eternal flame" of the whole Burnt Offering could therefore have symbolized to God's people, God's presence among them (cf. Ex. 13:21-22).⁷ If one goes along with this, an application for today could be that we are to keep the divine fire of the Spirit burning within us. In the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:19, "Do not quench the Spirit." Does that not remind you of putting out a fire?

A final point that can be mentioned concerns the person and the attire of the one who removes the ashes (Lev. 6:3-4 [Eng., 10-11]; cf.

⁶See for the above, S.H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), 61-62.

⁷R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (TCOT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 75.

Lev. 1:16; 4:12). It was the officiating priest and not a Levitical helper who had to do this apparently menial task. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the dress of the priest who removes the ashes is prescribed. This was apparently his normal, official dress (Ex. 28:42-43).⁸ This prescription shows that even the most menial and apparently trivial task has dignity and importance from God. It also shows that God cared about how priests appeared in his presence.

The way in which one appears physically before God frequently betrays one's attitude of mind [cf. Matt. 22:11-14]. Indifferent and casual behavior are unacceptable when we are commanded to have our loins girded for service, however lowly that particular service might seem.⁹

The sacrifices of the burnt offering are pictures of the dedication that God expected from his people and which he received in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ we may do the same. As it dominated the life of Israel, so the sacrifice of ourselves should dominate our life.

⁸If the ashes were taken outside the camp, the priest had to change into other garments (Lev. 6:4 [Eng., 11]).

⁹Harrison, *Leviticus*, 75-76.