Moral Transformation
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Before we read chapter 12 of Moral Transformation, I would like to remind the reader of sins for which there was no prescribed sacrifice, but rather deserved the Death Penalty for such sins.

**Death Penalty Sins**

- Murder - Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:12-14,20,23; Lev. 24:17,21; Num. 35:16-34; Deut. 19.
- Smiting Parents- Ex. 21:15.
- Kidnapping - Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7.
- Cursing Parents - Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9.
- Negligence with animals that kill - Ex. 21:28-32.
- Witchcraft - Ex. 22:18.
- Bestiality –( sexual intercourse with an animal ) Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18:23-29; 20:15,16. Lev. 20:15,16
- Idolatry - Ex. 22:20.
- Adultery (including sexual intercourse with father's wife, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law) Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-30.
- Working on the Sabbath - Ex. 35:2.
- Incest - Lev. 18:6-29; 20:11-22.
- Consecration of children to idols - Lev. 20:1-5.
- Sodomy/Homosexuality - Lev. 20:13.
- Whoredom - Lev. 21:9; Deut. 22:21,22.

- Sorcery  Lev. 20:27
- Blasphemy - Lev. 24:11-16.
- False prophecy - Deut. 13:1-18; 18:20.
- Leading men away from God - Deut. 13:6-18.
- Stubbornness, rebellious, glutton drunken sons - Deut. 21:18-23.
- Idolatry - Deut. 17:2-7.
- False dreams and visions - Deut. 13:1-18.
- Rape Duet. 22:25

Chapter 12

# Sacrifice

To understand how the New Testament authors used sacrificial language to describe what Jesus had accomplished, we must first find out the way in which their culture understood sacrifices. Let us start with some background. Sacrificial practices predated the formation of ancient Israel. Both biblical narratives and studies of ancient cultures reveal that people made sacrifices long before the Jews received the sacrificial laws of the Torah. The covenant between God and Israel at Sinai did not introduce sacrificial practices, but rather provided formal guidelines and strict limits in order to control an already existing system. Generally, early Christian writers believed that God had never approved of ritual sacrifices and desired to phase them out. In their view, he regulated their practice first at Sinai and then critiqued them over time through the Prophets. Finally, he

abolished them entirely following the life of Jesus and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.[1] As one scholar explains: "Early Christian writers collected together the anti-sacrificial passages in the prophets in order to show that God did not need or want the sacrifices of the Jews, but rather demanded obedience, learning to do good, desisting from evil, seeking justice, correcting oppression, and supporting the widow and orphan."[2]

In the last few centuries, many Christians have believed that Jesus died a substitutionary death on behalf of others to atone for their sin. This idea has become connected with the New Testament sacrificial language used to speak of Jesus' death. Without understanding how ancient Israelite sacrifices actually worked, Christians often assume they worked through substitutionary atonement. One scholar explains it like this: "ideas that form the basis for certain interpretations of Jesus' death are read back into the biblical texts regarding sacrifice so as to argue that the same ideas are behind ancient Jewish beliefs concerning sacrifice… it is argued that in ancient Israel, sacrifices were understood as involving the death of an animal as a substitute for the person who had sinned and thus deserved death: sinners themselves were spared this penalty when the animal victim endured it in their place."[3] We could imagine that people offered sacrifices because they felt guilty of sin and worthy of death. The animals died in their place as substitutes, and took the punishment they deserved. Such an account has appeared widely in recent Christian literature, and it probably sounds familiar to many Christians today.

As plausible as such a view might sound, recent scholarship shows that the Israelites understood their sacrifices very differently. "A deepening scholarly appreciation of ancient animal sacrifice has revealed that later Christian conceptions of sacrificial

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1 E.g. *Barnabas* 2.7-8; Irenaeus *Against Heresy* 4.17.1-4; Origen *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.5, 4.5.

2 Frances M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 55.

3 David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostles's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 19.

atoning death have been systematically projected back onto Judaism."[4] We know this because scholars have studied the ancient texts carefully. They have examined how the people practising those sacrifices described what they did and why they did it. Largely, these scholars have reached agreement. Even anthropologists who study modern cultures that perform sacrifices report the same findings. It does not seem to matter what culture we study – Israelite or Greek, Indian or Hawaiian, ancient or modern – the same basic sacrificial principles and motivations appear around the world and throughout history. Modern scholars have studied ancient Jewish texts carefully (including the scriptures and other texts). They have found that the principles and motivations held by the Israelites have striking parallels in many other cultures – yet modern Westerners would find their ideas completely foreign!

One scholar investigated the way in which the early Christians understood sacrifices as part of her doctoral research. She has also published several books on early Christianity. She noted this problem of misunderstanding the meaning of sacrifice, and explained it in this way:

> [Christians today] live in a culture in which the practice of sacrifice is totally foreign – no doubt largely because of the influence of Christianity down the centuries. But the result is that we no longer seem to be in a position to know instinctively what the sacrifice language of our traditions really means. In fact, we get certain preconceptions about the meaning of sacrifice and so misinterpret the real point of the language we are using. Many books on the subject expound theories of sacrifice which are in fact modern reconstructions with little evidential basis in the ancient texts. The most common misconception when sacrificial language is applied to the death of Christ runs something like this: 'God was angry with sinners. The Jews had tried

[4] Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1994), p. 206.

> to placate his anger by symbolically offering the lives of animals to him in place of their guilty selves. But this was inadequate and so Jesus offered a perfect sacrifice. He died as our substitute to appease God's anger.' With certain degrees of sophistication, this is the general picture one gets from listening to sermons or reading the majority of easily available books. Yet it is far from doing justice to the real religious outlook of the Jews, or the early Christians who used sacrificial terminology to sense the depth of meaning in the death of Christ. Clearly, if we are going to be able to appreciate the language of the liturgy and the New Testament, of our hymns and prayers, we need to go back and try to understand what sacrifice meant in the ancient world and what the new use of sacrifice language in Christianity meant to the worshippers of that time."[5]

We will present here the conclusion of numerous scholars after their extensive research into the ancient Israelites' sacrificial system. Remember, the Israelites did not hold a 21st-century Western view of life. They held a world view totally different from our modern one, which has been strongly shaped by science. We cannot understand their ideas about sacrifices through the filter of our modern world view. Their sacrificial ideas corresponded with the way in which *they* understood the world, so we can only understand their sacrifices properly within their cultural context.

## Israel's sacrifices

Cultures that sacrifice tend to perform a number of different rituals at different times for different purposes. Israel's sacrificial system fitted this general rule. It used *three* major concepts that many other cultures also used: gifts, meals, and purification.[6]

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[5] Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, p. 11.

[6] Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p. 31; Young, *Sacrifice and the*

## Gifts

People in the ancient world often sacrificed to give "gifts to the gods," as one ancient Greek writer noted.[7] We noted earlier that ancient cultures valued the giving and receiving of gifts highly. People could have many different motivations for giving gifts: to gain a person's favour; to appease an angry person; to thank someone; or to repay a debt. It was believed widely that the gods abided by the normal rules of social interactions, and so people thought it appropriate to give them gifts for any of these reasons. The notion that gods accepted sacrifices as gifts thus had tremendous flexibility, and seems to have appeared in all sacrificial cultures.[8]

Israelites gave the 'first fruits' offering to the priests of God as thanks for the harvest. In presenting this offering at the Temple, the offerer thanked God publicly for bringing his ancestors to the fertile land of Israel.[9] In a 'burnt offering' sacrifice, a whole animal would be burned as a gift to God. People would sometimes sacrifice a burnt offering in the hope that God would respond favourably to their prayers. We might call it 'bribery', but many ancient societies used this standard practice on a daily basis. They also gave gifts as a common customary way in which to appease those they had offended. So, if people believed they had angered God for some reason, they often attempted to appease him by giving him a gift.

Initially, ancient Israel had no prisons. No crimes resulted in imprisonment and punishments took instead the form of either death or a fine. The ancient Israelites had very little coinage – since the wealth of their agricultural society consisted in livestock

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*Death of Christ*, p. 21, 25; Nigel B. Courtman, 'Sacrifice in the Psalms' in R. T. Beckwith and M. J. Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 51 – 52; Gordon J. Wenham 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, pp. 82 – 83.

7 Plato *Euthyphro* 14C-D.

8 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 – A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), p. 441.

9 Deut 26.

and grain – and therefore had to pay fines in food products. In some cases, the monetary value of the sacrifice was downgraded for poorer people according to what they could afford – birds instead of livestock, or just flour.[10] They paid these fines to God, and burned the offerings whole as compulsory 'gifts.' Hence, the Israelite 'burnt offering' served several purposes: the motivation varied, but in all cases the giver sacrificed an animal or grain to God as a *gift*.

## Meals

Meat was far rarer and more expensive in ancient societies than it is in modern times. The ancient world had no refrigeration and very poor quality salt, so they also needed to eat killed animals quickly. Naturally, many people were required in order to consume an entire animal in a short time, and the killing of an animal for meat was generally reserved for special celebrations involving many people. The group dynamics at such meals mattered greatly. Who sat where, who got which cuts of the meat, and even the preparation of the meal itself had great significance.[11] Many cultures gave a portion of the meal to the gods, who they believed shared the meal in fellowship with the community.

Israel called such group banquets 'well-being', 'thanksgiving', and 'free-will' offerings. They performed sacrifices of this type most commonly. A modern reader may feel that these do not truly count as 'sacrifices' at all, but, as in many ancient cultures, the Hebrew word for 'sacrifice' also meant 'slaughter.'[12] They considered life sacred, and taking the life of an animal, even for eating, required an appropriate ritual. The Israelites held these community meal sacrifices in the presence of

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[10] Lev 5:7-13.

[11] Stanley K. Stowers, 'Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not' in L. M. White & O. L. Yarbrough (eds.), *The Social World of the First Christians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 327 – 328. See also M. Detienne J.-P. Vernant (eds.), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989, trans. Paula Wissing), pp. 132 – 145.

[12] Detienne and Vernant (eds.), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, p. 25.

God and followed the relevant customs carefully.

## Purification

Many pre-scientific cultures believed in the existence of magical forces of purity and impurity. As a useful analogy for these ideas, imagine this impurity as invisible dirt or bacteria. If people did not take care to keep things clean, they could become contaminated. If things became too dirty, and stayed dirty for a long time, then disease and suffering could result. People believed that demons thrived in an impure environment. An impure person or house could therefore become inhabited by demonic forces and powers. Purity had special importance around temples, in order to keep demons out of the homes of the gods. Hence, people performed rituals carefully in order to clean up any impurity quickly and keep things clean. Today, if parents saw that their children had failed to take off muddy shoes and trekked mud through the house, they would probably use some cleaning product to remove the dirt. In the same way, cultures that believed in magical purity and impurity used cleansing agents to remove impurity. Such cultures had various sets of cleansing agents, rituals, and incantations that they used to purify people or places, and used various substances and rituals to purify items magically.

The Israelites used purification agents that included blood, ashes, coals, oil, water, cedarwood (a strongly scented red wood), red cows, red wool,[13] and hyssop (an aromatic herb). They believed that these substances acted in the way detergents do today. The detergent analogy even appears in the Bible.[14] As an example, one Israelite purification ritual after contact with dead bodies involved the following:

> Take some ashes of the burnt purification offering, and

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[13] Things that are red in colour are used widely in rituals among different cultures due to the association between the colour and blood (see Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary) – A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), p. 39.

[14] Rev 7:14.

> running water shall be added in a vessel; a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent, on all the furnishings, on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone, the slain, the corpse, or the grave.[15]

Obviously, cultures like that of the West would not perform such a ritual, as typically people do not believe in this kind of magical impurity today. The Israelites, however, believed that such rituals removed the magical contamination that resulted from contact with the dead. The Israelites believed that these magical impurities came from several sources, including corpses, some skin diseases, genital discharges, and moral wrongs.[16] Impurity could also arise if people made mistakes in rituals and did not follow proper procedure.

The Israelites cared especially about maintaining the purity of the Temple, God's dwelling. They believed that impurities elsewhere in Israel could spread into the Temple and contaminate it. The more impurity in Israel, the farther into the Temple the impurity would reach. They feared that God would abandon both the Temple and Israel if impurities contaminated the Holy of Holies.[17] Hence, they purified the Temple regularly. For serious contamination, they purified the inner sanctums of the Temple. Israel's neighbours had similar practices to keep their temples ritually pure because they thought that purity warded off demons. They maintained the purity of their temples to prevent demons from entering, for if they did the gods would leave.[18]

As we have already noted, one of the substances used in these purification rituals was blood. People thought that blood contained the life-force of the animal, and that they could use this pure life-force to wash away impurity. Israelites used blood regularly to purify the contaminated parts of their Temple,

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[15] Num 19:17-18. See also for example: Lev 8:15, 14:4, Psa 51:7.
[16] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 12.
[17] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, pp. 31 – 32.
[18] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, pp. 31 – 32.

pouring or sprinkling the blood of animals on the outer altars to purify them. Once a year, on *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Purgation), the High Priest would use blood to purify the Holy of Holies. Consider this typical passage about a purification ritual being performed in God's dwelling:

> The anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting. The priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the curtain of the sanctuary. The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense that is in the tent of meeting before the Lord; and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.[19]

All the important parts of the altar and Temple needed ritual purification using blood to prevent magical impurities from accumulating within the Temple.[20] Blood served as a magical detergent, not as a means of personal forgiveness. Personal forgiveness in Judaism came through repentance (as we saw in an earlier chapter). One scholar explains the function of blood in this way:

> Failure to keep the temple pure meant to risk God's anger and the loss of his presence. …the blood of the animal was the purging agent that was applied to various parts of the temple and removed the *consequences* of sins and impurities (that is, the pollution of the temple). The person did not receive forgiveness for a sinful act itself but dealt only with the consequences of such acts on the temple.[21]

Another scholar has reached the same conclusion:

> Who or what is being purified? Surprisingly, it is not the

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[19] Lev 4:5-7.
[20] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 15, 30f.
[21] Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans,* p. 208.

> person with the moral or physical impurity. According to Leviticus, if his or her impurity is physical, only bathing is required to purify the body; if the impurity is moral (the unintended breach of a prohibition), a remorseful conscience clears the impurity. In neither case does the offering purify the person bringing the offering. … Blood is the ritual cleanser that purges the altar of the impurities inflicted on it by the offender.[22]

A third scholar agrees that the Israelites viewed the animal's blood "as a kind of spiritual disinfectant purifying the sanctuary of the pollution associated with sin and uncleanness."[23] Traditionally, translators have called the rituals to purify the Temple with blood 'sin-offerings', but these rituals are translated more accurately as 'purification offerings.'[24]

The Israelite Passover also functioned as a purification ritual.[25] In the original Passover, the Israelites had dabbed two purification agents (hyssop and blood) on their doors. The instructions were to "take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin."[26] Other references to the Passover in the Bible confirm that the Israelites considered it a time of ritual purity in which they performed a purification ritual on their doors. The ancient Babylonians performed a similar practice. Their ritual involved "smearing a door with a mixture including bats' blood and crushed spider."[27] The Babylonians did this to create a barrier of purity around the door to protect against evil spirits. People in the ancient Near East performed similar rituals, daubing

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[22] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, pp. 30 – 31.

[23] Gordon J. Wenham, 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p. 83.

[24] J. Milgrom, 'Sin-Offering or Purification-Offering?' in *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 21, Fasc. 2 (Apr., 1971), pp. 237 – 239.

[25] T. D. Alexander, 'The Passover Sacrifice' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice In The Bible*, pp. 1-25; Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 2000, 3rd. ed.), pp. 131 – 132.

[26] Ex 12:22.

[27] Martin J. Selman, 'Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p. 94.

vulnerable parts of structures with blood to purify them and thereby ward off demonic forces.[28] In the original Passover, the Israelites purified the doorways of their dwellings to ward off the Angel of Death.

Ancient Israelites, like people of many other ancient cultures, also believed in the power of curses – magical forces invoked by rituals to bring harm. Curses differed from impurity in that people could not simply wash them away. Instead, people could transfer them ritually. The ancient Greeks performed a ceremony in which they transferred the curses from a city to a slave. They then drove that person out of the city to bear away the curses. The Israelites had a similar annual ritual in which the High Priest placed two hands on a goat and prayed over it all the curses, sins and wrongs of the nation. They then drove that animal off into the wilderness to carry the curses away.[29] Note that they saw the goat simply as a means of transport, and that it did not die as an offering or a sacrifice. It did not die nor suffer on behalf of others but simply carried the curses away, out into the wilderness.[30]

These purification rituals were not, strictly speaking, sacrifices to God. In rituals involving blood, the actual death of the animal had no relevance. In many purification rituals they did not use blood at all and instead used other substances as purification agents. These rituals may strike us as magical, ritualistic and primitive, yet the ancient Israelites took them very seriously. Professionals performed them in a formal and public setting, and people believed these rituals had great power.

## Clarifying modern misunderstandings

The three concepts of *gift*, *meal*, and *purification* correspond to ancient Israel's three types of sacrifice – the three reasons they killed animals. In Israel's sacrificial system, as in most other cultures, the actual death of the animal itself had no relevance. As

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[28] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 85, 137.
[29] Leviticus 16.
[30] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, pp. 168 – 169.

one scholar notes: "In ancient Jewish and ancient Mediterranean animal sacrifices and in the rites of numerous other cultures the death of the animal was an incidental prelude to the ritual. Strange as it may seem to people steeped in the legacy of Christianity; these sacrificing cultures attach no special significance to the death of the animal itself."[31] Rather, they attached importance to what they did with the animal's blood and flesh, which they would eat, burn, or use in rituals. Israel's sacrificial texts discuss these aspects at length, and hardly discuss the death of the animal itself at all. They mention the actual death of the animals only briefly, often to outline simply the most humane way in which to kill the animals.

In Israel, sacrifices could not cleanse deliberate moral sins; repentance and prayer provided the only solution.[32] Israel had a strong tradition of repentance, prayer and forgiveness.[33] In their view, a burnt offering gift might appease God and encourage him to accept a person's repentance and prayers for forgiveness. Their standing before God, though, depended on his kindness and their own prayer and repentance, not on any sacrifices they might perform.

If a transgression deserved the death penalty, no sacrifice could be given. Israel's legal code either fined people in the form of compulsory burnt offerings or applied the death penalty (or in some cases, exile). People could offer sacrificial fines if, and only if, their transgressions did *not* deserve the death penalty. Hence, if we remain consistent with the way their law worked, we see that the animal never died as a substitution for the offerer. This concept would have been totally foreign to the Ancient Israelites.

Many different cultures followed the custom that the person bringing the sacrifice identified the animal publicly as theirs by placing a hand on it.[34] Some Christians have thought mistakenly

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[31] Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, p. 207.
[32] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 42, 60, 171.
[33] Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 30, 60.
[34] Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, pp. 86 – 93; Milgrom, *Leviticus (A Continental Commentary)*, p. 24.

that the Israelites did this to transfer the sins of the sinner to the animal. Many scholars, therefore, take pains to reject this view explicitly and note that the evidence contradicts it.[35] The Israelites followed the hand-laying practice for all their sacrifices – gifts, meals, and purification rituals.[36] In all three of these types of sacrifice, transferring sin to the animal would not have made sense. It would have polluted the gift that the worshipper gave to God, contaminated the meat they ate, or spoiled the blood that they used to purify the Temple. For meal sacrifices, the holy offerer did not even have any sin to transfer. The Israelite practice of hand-laying more closely parallels the customs we see in other cultures, in which it publicly identified the person bringing the sacrifice. It had little to do with atonement. The only time in the Israelite rituals where such a transfer of sin took place was on *Yom Kippur*. On that day, the high priest laid *both* hands on the goat, rather than only one. After praying over it the curses and sins of the nation he did not sacrifice it, but instead sent it away into the wilderness.

## Development of sacrificial ideas

Studies have found that it is common for the sacrificial ideas within different cultures to change over time, moving typically toward moral ideas and away from ritual and magical ones.[37] One scholar has observed: "In cultures from Asia to Europe to Africa there is a progressive and observable development away from

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[35] Finlan, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-93; Milgrom, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Brondos, *Paul on the Cross*, pp. 21-22; Frances M. Young, *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), pp. 51 – 53; Wenham, 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p. 79, 83.

[36] *Gift offerings*: Lev 1:4. *Meals*: Lev 3:2, 8, 13. *Purification Offerings*: Lev 4:4, 24, 29, 33.

[37] See Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), pp. 3-6, 20; Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), p. 8; Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, pp. 31 – 36; Roger T. Beckwith, 'The Death of Christ as a Sacrifice in the Teaching of Paul and Hebrews' in Beckwith and Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p. 133.

violent sacrificial practices toward a concentration on ethics."[38] Sacrificial systems tend to focus initially only on ritual and magic. People see morality as unrelated and irrelevant. Yet, over time, morality becomes as important as ritual. Eventually, people reject ritual and magic and stop making sacrifices. They then start to use sacrificial language metaphorically to talk about morality. A similar progression of ideas occurred among the Israelites and early Christians.

The writings of the Psalms and Prophets in the Old Testament seem to have moved the Israelites some distance toward emphasising morality at the expense of ritual. Some of their comments include:

> I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats… cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.[39]

> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon…But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.[40]

They also used the word 'sacrifice' metaphorically to refer to morality rather than to an animal on an altar. One Psalm reads, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart."[41]

The New Testament authors rejected sacrifices and replaced them completely with morality.[42] Within the Gospels we see some

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[38] Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, p. 14.
[39] Isa 1:11-17.
[40] Amos 5:22-24.
[41] Psa 51:17.
[42] Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, p. 82.

clear statements about the importance of morality compared to that of sacrifices:

> Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."[43]

> "To love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength," and "to love one's neighbor as oneself," – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.[44]

Paul and Peter wrote of 'spiritual' sacrifices, which consisted of moral living:

> Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship… [Act in a way that] is good and acceptable and perfect.[45]

> Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander… be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God[46]

Hebrews says that Jesus abolished the old sacrificial system in order to establish in its place obedience to God's will:

> "You [God] have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and purification offerings" (these are offered according to Torah), then he [Jesus] added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.[47]

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[43] Matt 9:13, 12:7.
[44] Mark 12:33.
[45] Rom 12:1-2.
[46] 1 Pet 2:1, 5.
[47] Heb 10:8-9.

Hebrews also uses sacrificial language as a metaphor for doing good. It teaches: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."[48] This passage uses the term 'sacrifices' non-literally to talk about doing good, rather than the slaughter of animals.[49] We can see from the above passages that terms from the old sacrificial system became metaphors for moral ideas.

The concept of 'purification' also moved away from the original idea of applying purifying substances to cleanse an object magically. The New Testament authors used it to refer solely to moral transformation. Peter wrote, "You have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love."[50] John wrote that followers of Jesus "purify themselves, just as he is pure." He explained that this means they do what is right rather than what is wrong, and are "righteous, just as he is righteous."[51] According to Titus, Jesus came to "purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds."[52] Hebrews explains that Jesus can "purify our ethics from dead works to worship the living God!"[53] James too referred to correct conduct when he instructed: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."[54] The significance of the term 'sanctification' changed in a similar way. The term sanctification had its roots in ritual purity, and yet most Christians know it relates to morality in the New Testament.[55] Likewise, originally yeast had implications of ritual impurity (which is why people made unleavened bread without it), but it became another moral metaphor for the early Christians. They used it as a metaphor for

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[48] Heb 13:6.
[49] For further non-literal 'sacrifices' in the New Testament, see: Phil 4:18; 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 13:15-16; Jas 1:18.
[50] 1 Pet 1:22.
[51] 1 John 3:3.
[52] Titus 2:14.
[53] Heb 9:14.
[54] Jas 4:8.
[55] Ben Witherington III & Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 173.

"malice and evil,"[56] and for the wrong teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees.[57]

As sacrifice and purity became associated more with morality and less with the old rituals, the places where sacrifices took place also changed. Priests had performed literal sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem, yet followers of Jesus could perform moral sacrifices in their own bodies. Hence, they located their 'temple' not physically in Jerusalem, but metaphorically within them. Paul saw Christians as 'God's temple',[58] and Peter saw them as the new 'priesthood' who performed these new kinds of 'spiritual sacrifices'.[59]

In this way, the early Christians moved radically away from ideas of literal sacrifice, spiritualising and moralising the notion instead. They began to use sacrificial language to refer to correct conduct, rather than using literal animal slaughters. Christians became their own temple and their own priests, and gave God acceptable 'sacrifices' and 'offerings' by living morally 'pure' lives in obedience to his will. They rejected the value of performing the cultic and ritual laws, and emphasised the value of good works and faithfulness to the will of God. The cultic goal of purity thus was achieved through morality, and a moral life in obedience to God replaced the old sacrificial system. The New Testament authors used the sacrificial ideas familiar to their first-century readers as metaphors to describe this new state of affairs.

## Jesus and purification

We have seen above that the New Testament authors used the common sacrificial ideas of their day often to explain ideas. Paul described his own suffering and impending death in sacrificial

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[56] 1 Cor 5:7-8.
[57] Matt 16:6-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1.
[58] 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21.
[59] 1 Peter 2:5, 2:9.

terms, for example.[60] The New Testament authors also used sacrificial language to explain what Jesus did. Out of the three types of sacrifices (gift, meal, and purification), they seldom wrote of him as a gift sacrifice.[61] They wrote of him as a meal sacrifice only occasionally in the context of the Eucharist. The vast majority of sacrificial references to Jesus relate to purification.

So in what way did the New Testament writers think Jesus brought purification? We saw in an earlier chapter that they spoke in many ways of the moral transformation brought by Jesus. They drew on ideas from many spheres of life to express vividly how Jesus had changed their lives. As we have just seen, they also referred to moral issues using sacrificial language – especially the idea of purification. We would therefore expect them to have used the language of the ancient sacrificial system to speak of the moral changes Jesus brought. We find exactly this in their writings. They used the ideas of purification sacrifices to speak about the moral changes in their lives, and also about Jesus himself, since obvious parallels existed. The ancient purification rituals took away the ritual impurity from people or places and brought ritual purity. Jesus, on the other hand, brought a way of life that took away immorality and replaced it with right living. Both cases have the concept of purification in common (either ritual or ethical). The two processes worked differently, but had similar effects. The Israelites had believed their rituals worked by magical principles, whereas the Christians believed that by following Jesus' teachings their lives could be transformed. They did not believe this transformation worked by the same magical principles of sacrifice rituals. Nobody among them thought that Jesus' blood literally dripped down onto people from the cross and cleansed magical impurities from them. Rather, the teachings and movement for which Jesus died brought moral transformation to the lives of Christians.

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[60] Phil 2:17, 2 Tim 4:6.

[61] Arguably, Hebrews 9:14 and Eph 5:2 refer to Jesus as a gift-offering.

The writer of Hebrews regularly wrote of Jesus as both performing and embodying a purification sacrifice.[62] He used sacrificial language about Jesus consistently to discuss morality rather than ritual purity. This language referred to a transformed lifestyle and mindset, not a change in ritual state from impure to pure. Hebrews depicts Jesus abolishing the traditional concept of sacrifices. Instead of literal sacrifices, Jesus brought a kind of sacrifice that involved living in accordance with God's will.[63] The author argued that old purification sacrifices never cleansed sinfulness properly. In contrast, the actions of Jesus led to real changes in peoples' lives, which purified them from sinfulness.[64] The writer believed that Jesus' blood brought "a better message than the blood of Abel," and warned that if we ignore this message we will not escape judgment.[65] Note the concept that his blood had a message. It emphasises the message Jesus taught and died for, rather than the magical power of blood to purify what it touches.

John used the idea of Jesus as a purification sacrifice as a metaphor for moral purity in a similar way. He wrote that "the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" only if we "walk in the light."[66] As we saw in the previous chapter, John used the idea of 'walking in the light' to refer to correct conduct. John taught that, in order to receive the purification Jesus offered, we must live according to his example and teachings.

Peter also saw Jesus as a purification sacrifice in moral terms. In the middle of a discourse on moral transformation he wrote:

> Do not be conformed to the desires you formerly had in ignorance. Instead… be holy yourselves in all your conduct… You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors… with the

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62 Hebrews 1:3, 9:11-14, 26, 10:10-14, 13:11-12, etc.
63 Heb 10:8-9.
64 Heb 9:14, 10:24-27, etc.
65 Heb 12:24-25.
66 1 John 1:7.

> precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish... Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.[67]

Here, the concept of ritual purification refers to morality. The passage concerns the 'purification' of people's souls through obedience to Jesus' message, linking that moral purification with Jesus' blood – a reminder of his martyrdom. His blood rescued people metaphorically from 'futile ways' of living and taught them to live with genuine love. Paul, too, referred to Jesus as a purification sacrifice in moral terms. He explained that the Torah could not free us from sinfulness,[68] yet God freed us though sending Jesus and transforming our lives so that we might fulfil his moral requirements.[69] In the middle of this discussion he called Jesus a 'purification sacrifice'.[70] The idea of Jesus cleansing people from moral impurity can also explain a much debated Pauline passage that may refer to Jesus as a purification sacrifice.[71] In that passage, Paul taught that Jesus acted for our sake so that we could gain godly righteousness.

According to Revelation, Jesus "freed us from our sinfulness by his blood, and made us to be… priests serving his God and Father."[72] Here, Revelation likens Jesus' martyrdom to a purification sacrifice, which purifies us of our sinfulness. It uses cultic language metaphorically not only of Jesus, but also of Jesus' followers, calling them 'priests of God'. In a similar passage, Revelation speaks later of people who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb [Jesus]."[73] Literally speaking, no one uses blood as a detergent to wash his or her clothes. In the metaphorical language of

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[67] 1 Pet 1:14-22.
[68] Rom 7.
[69] Rom 8:3-4.
[70] Rom 8:3. He speaks of Jesus as a "*peri hamartias*" ("concerning sin") which is the phrase the Septuagint uses for a purification sacrifice.
[71] 2 Cor 5:21.
[72] Rev 1:5-6.
[73] Rev 7:14.

Revelation, white robes represent good works.[74] Thus, the metaphor of washing them in Jesus' blood to whiten them suggests that these good works came through the purifying effect that Jesus had on his followers' lives.

As we saw earlier, the Passover involved a purification ritual. Paul used this metaphor to write about Jesus, once again in the context of our moral transformation: "For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."[75] Here, Paul used an analogy between the Passover lamb that brought ritual purification and Christ's sacrifice that brought moral change away from sinfulness (represented by the yeast). Paul again moved the concept of Christ's sacrifice from the realm of ritual purity to the area of moral transformation.

We must read all these references to Jesus and his purifying blood in the spirit in which the New Testament writers intended them. Magical purification through the smearing of blood interested them no longer; instead, they concerned themselves with spiritual sacrifices rather than literal ones, and moral purity rather than ritual purity. People once thought purification sacrifices performed by smearing blood on the altar brought magical purity. Now, however, Christians believed that Jesus could bring moral purity through his martyr's death and the subsequent spread of his teachings through the church.

People sometimes misinterpret the New Testament sacrificial language in reference to Yom Kippur. On that day, as we have already seen, the High Priest performed a purification ritual in the Holy of Holies to purify it, and then transferred the curses and sins of the nation to a goat which he sent into the wilderness. The New Testament likens Jesus to the High Priest on Yom Kippur

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[74] Rev 3:1-6.

[75] 1 Cor 5:7. John's Gospel also depicts Jesus' crucifixion taking place on the same day as the killing of the Passover lambs, and John 1:29 and 36 are possible references to this.

who performed the purification ritual. Yet, contrary to what some Christians today believe, it never likens Jesus to the goat that carried the curses and sins into the wilderness. It seems the New Testament writers preferred to use the metaphor of a purification offering rather than concepts like the scapegoat.

## Jesus and covenant sacrifice

The New Testament writers also explained what Jesus achieved using another idea. This idea related to sacrificial rituals, but focussed on covenants (agreements or contracts). The Jews divided their history into a series of separate covenants between God and their nation. Jesus aimed to bring the Kingdom of God, a radical social renewal. This heralded a new age, which would require a new covenant. The prophet Jeremiah had promised that a new covenant would supersede the Torah, bringing morality and forgiveness of sins.[76] Jesus introduced this covenant among his followers. At the Last Supper, he made clear to his disciples that he intended to bring such a new covenant.[77] Hebrews echoes this idea. The writer paralleled Jesus and Moses as mediators of the two covenants.[78] Jesus functioned as the new go-between between humanity and God, and had instituted this covenant with God on their behalf just as Moses did for the Sinai covenant. Hebrews emphasises heavily the concept of Jesus as the mediator of this new covenant in which people would live rightly. With regard to this function, Hebrews portrays Jesus regularly in a priestly role.[79] This idea that Jesus brought about a new covenant arose naturally from his mission of social reform. The early Christians saw him as inaugurating a radical new Kingdom of God on earth, since his movement transformed their society and their relationship with God.

Sacrifices often sealed covenants in the ancient world. The

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[76] Jer 31:31-34.
[77] Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26.
[78] Heb 8:6, 9:15, 12:24.
[79] Heb 2:17, 3:1, 4:14, 5:5, 6:20, 7:26, 8:1, 9:11; Rom 8:34.

intended goal of such sacrifices varied widely and no standard meaning existed. In ancient Hittite agreements, cutting animals to seal a contract symbolised a ritual-curse which meant that the party who broke the agreement would be likewise cut into pieces.[80] A covenant between Abraham and God involved this kind of covenant sacrifice.[81] At Sinai, Moses threw blood over the people in a purification ritual and called it a covenant sacrifice.[82] People also saw sacrifices made to seal agreements and treaties as gifts to the gods, inclining the gods to look favorably upon the agreement and perhaps to take action against any who broke it.[83] Most commonly, though, such sacrifices functioned simply as a joint meal held to celebrate new unity and fellowship. For example, the parties in a peace treaty or a new alliance would mark and celebrate the occasion by eating together. At the last supper, Jesus instituted a shared meal in which he was eaten symbolically. The New Testament portrays this as a covenant sacrifice and it seems to fall into this 'joint meal' category.[84] Perhaps this helps to explain why Paul insisted so strongly that Jew and Gentile Christians could eat together.[85] Elsewhere, Paul likened Jesus to a peace sacrifice, since he removed the division between Jews and Gentiles created by the Torah of the old covenant.[86] Of course, since Jesus had died as a martyr because of his work to inaugurate a new covenant, Christians could speak of him as the metaphorical 'sacrifice' that accompanied this new covenant. Jesus had cast himself in this role at the Last Supper, and Hebrews also reinforces this idea.[87]

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[80] Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 16 – 17.

[81] Genesis 15.

[82] Ex 24:6-8; Heb 9:19-20.

[83] For example, before finalising the Sinai covenant, Moses sacrifices burnt offerings – Ex 24:5.

[84] Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26.

[85] Gal 2.

[86] Eph 2:14.

[87] Heb 9:16-22, 10:29, 13:20.

## Conclusion

Morality had replaced sacrifice for the New Testament Christians, and they rejected the value of the ritual sacrifice system. They used the language of ritual purity not because Jesus' accomplishments worked through the same magical mechanism, but to express the moral transformation Jesus had brought to their lives. They saw themselves as a temple that Jesus had purified morally with his 'blood' in a way analogous to the way in which blood had purified temples ritually in the past. Christ's martyrdom lent itself naturally to the parallel of a purification sacrifice. His noble self-sacrifice brought purity to his followers through his movement that had transformed their lives. His followers used this language of a new covenant to describe these profound changes to their lives. Hence, they also cast Jesus in the role of Priest because he had catalysed this reconciliation between humanity and God. The early Christians found moral purity through Jesus in a way that the old sacrificial system could never have wrought.

Webmaster

I highly recommend this book. We have come so very far removed from the simplicity of the Gospel and the way of thinking of Christians in the time of Christ.

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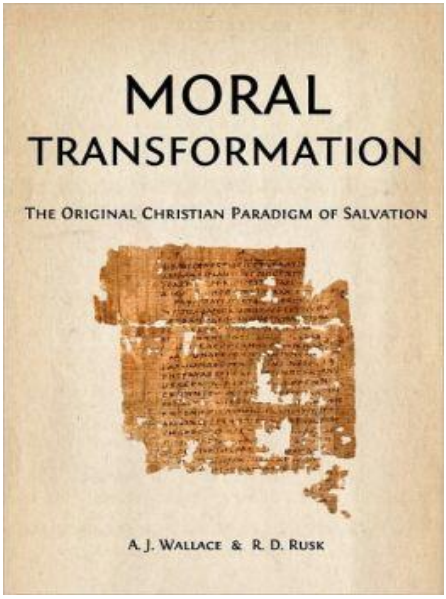


Recent scholarship has challenged post-Reformation ideas about the early Christian doctrines of salvation. This ground-breaking book draws together the conclusions of recent scholarship into a compelling and clear view of the early Christian paradigm of salvation. It presents the case that the early Christians focused not on Christ's death on the cross or 'saving faith', but on moral transformation. They saw Jesus as God's appointed teacher, prophet, and leader, who died as a martyr in order to teach them a new way of life. Their paradigm of salvation centered upon this way of life taught by Jesus, and on following faithfully his example and teachings.

**Part 1:** How the Gospels present Jesus explores the way in which the early Christians understood the teaching of Jesus. It highlights five themes of Jesus' message: economics and wealth, moral purity, social equality, the temple system, and physical and spiritual affliction. It shows why people viewed Jesus as a divinely appointed teacher, prophet, and leader, and saw his death as a martyrdom for his cause and movement.

**Part 2:** Doctrines of the early Christians presents the key early

Christian doctrines of salvation and shows why several post-Reformation doctrines conflict with their views. It shows that the early Christians believed God's final judgment is made on the basis of character and conduct. They believed that by following Jesus and transforming their lives morally, they would obtain positive judgment and resurrection. This part shows how the early Christians' ideas of faith, justification, forgiveness and grace all fit into this paradigm.

**Part 3:** The importance of Jesus looks at why the early Christians considered Jesus so significant; they focused on the moral transformation he brought to their lives. This part highlights what they believed Jesus achieved for them, and how they used sacrificial language to explain these beliefs. It explores the evidence for viewing Jesus' death as a martyrdom, and for seeing his resurrection as equally important.

**Part 4:** Ideas throughout history shows that Christians held this paradigm of salvation for several centuries. It outlines the key changes that occurred from the 4th century through to the Reformation, which moved tradition away from the early Christian ideas. Finally, it offers a critique of modern post-Reformation doctrines of salvation.

As stated in the Foxe's Book Of Martyrs, beginning in chapter one.

> *The dreadful martyrdoms we shall now describe arose from the persecutions of the Christians by pagan fury in the primitive ages of the church, during three hundred years, until the time of Constantine the Great.*
>
> *The first martyr to our holy religion was its blessed founder Himself, who was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, condemned under Pontius Pilate, and crucified on Calvary.*