

The Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, contributes a further study of an aspect of Biblical language about the death of Jesus.

## THE VOCABULARY OF ATONEMENT IV

# The Blood

*by Leon Morris*

When we read, 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin' (1 Jn. 1: 7) I do not think it would occur to most of us to doubt that the meaning is that the *death* of Jesus Christ is the means of dealing with our sin. But in recent times a number of scholars, some of them evangelicals, are taking a line which denies this. They maintain that in passages like the one we have quoted 'the blood' does not point to death at all. Rather they link it with life.

Justification for this is sought in a new theory of sacrifice. Christ's death is being likened to a sacrifice, but hitherto sacrifice has been misunderstood. It has been thought of as the infliction of death whereas, we are now told, the death is unimportant. What really matters is that life is released from the flesh.

Sacrifice means life, life dedicated, surrendered, transformed. So when we read of 'the blood' of Christ our thoughts should not turn to His death. Rather we should think of His life.

The basis for this view is found in such statements as that in Leviticus, 'the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life' (Lev. 17: 11). Similar statements are found elsewhere and they are held to mean that the essential meaning of 'blood' is not the infliction of death but the release of life.

Thus when an animal was brought to be sacrificed on the altar its blood was collected and manipulated by the priest according to certain fixed rules.

It used to be said that the animal was a substitute for the sinner. The sinner should have died. In his stead the animal was killed. The manipulation of the blood was then the ritual recognition that a death for sin had taken place in accordance with the divine command.

But on the new view this is all wrong. The death no longer appears as the central thing. That place is reserved for the manipulation of the blood, which is seen as something with a significance quite apart from death. Its meaning, we are now told, is essentially life. When the priest took the basin full of the red fluid he had not so much a basin full of blood as a basin full of life. It was life that he was presenting to God. 'It is because the *blood is still alive* after being drawn from the victim's body that it makes atonement upon the altar.'<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate for the animal that its blood cannot be removed without its death following, but that should not blind us, so these scholars assure us, to the fact that the really important thing is the release of life. 'The slaying was merely an indispensable preliminary by which the life was set free to be offered.'<sup>2</sup>

Our understanding of the significance of the death of Christ is affected by all this. Vincent Taylor sees it this way: 'as of old dedicated blood was applied in blessing to the people of Israel, so now His life, surrendered to God and accepted by Him, is offered to, and made available for men.'<sup>3</sup> It is the life, rather than the death, that is central. This tendency becomes quite explicit in G. L. Hendry's work, *The Gospel of the Incarnation*.

Since this view has such far-reaching

consequences it can be accepted only if it is very soundly based. But it is curious to see how slender are the foundations. They will certainly not bear the weight of the edifice that has been erected upon them.

## STATISTICS

If anyone is to maintain that the mention of 'blood' points us to life rather than death it is an elementary requirement that he should demonstrate that this is the way the term is usually used in the Bible. But as a matter of fact none of those known to me among the advocates of this point of view ever surveys the evidence as a whole. They all appear to content themselves with citing a few passages and then holding that their point is proven. This is manifestly unsatisfactory.

The Hebrew term *dam*, 'blood', occurs 362 times in the Old Testament. It is connected with life 7 times only. Against this we can set 203 occurrences where it signifies violent death, 17 where it refers to the eating of meat with the blood yet in it, 103 where it is the blood of sacrifice that is in mind, and there are 32 passages which we may label 'miscellaneous'. Passages where the eating of meat with blood in it or where the blood of the sacrifice is meant might be understood equally well of life or of death. It is plain that the case must rest on whether we are to interpret the 7 passages linking life with blood in terms of the 203 which speak of violent death, or whether the 203 are to be understood in the light of the 7. Where such a numerical preponderance is in question obviously we shall need the strongest of reasons for

holding that the 7 give us the clue to all the rest. And as far as I am aware such strong reasons are not put forward. It is simply held as obvious that the reverence paid to shed blood is proof enough that it is life and not death that is in mind.

But this is not at all obvious. Indeed, the very opposite seems to lie on the surface. It does not appear why people should be especially careful with life, but if blood signifies that a violent death has been inflicted then there is every reason for the person who comes in contact with it to take care. He may well be held responsible. Statistically then, the evidence tells strongly against the new theory. The figures show that the thoughts most likely to be roused in the mind of a Hebrew of ancient times when the term 'blood' was used were thoughts of violent death.

## BLOOD AND LIFE

We have already noted that Leviticus 17:11 is relied upon as a kind of foundation document to support this point of view. The support it lends the theory, however, is not as obvious as some of its exponents maintain. A scholar of the calibre of A. Lods can give the meaning of this verse as, 'There is a ransom, a redemption, a death by proxy.'<sup>4</sup> It can scarcely be denied that this is a possible understanding of the words. A mystic identification of blood and life is not at all required.

There is a similar position with regard to other passages cited. Thus attention is drawn to Genesis 9:4-6, 'But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. And surely your blood, the blood of your lives, will I require; at the hand

of every beast will I require it: and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man's brother, will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed'. It cannot be denied that this passage links blood and life in the closest fashion. But it cannot be denied either that when it says that God will 'require' men's blood it is not any mystic life that is meant. It is murder that is in question. The passage is saying that men will be called upon to give account of themselves whenever they kill anyone. The meaning of 'blood' is death rather than life. The equation with life can be made only in a limited technical sense. It is life yielded up in death and not life itself that is meant.

Not much more can be made of the fact that we find 'soul' and 'blood' in parallelism in Psalm 72:14. This is true, but it does not follow that the terms in parallelism ought to be identified. When the psalmist says 'precious shall their blood be in his sight' he means much the same as 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints' (Ps. 116:15). It is another way of referring to death. Blood here stands for death inflicted, not for life set free.

Nor do any of the other passages adduced alter the position very greatly. I do not quite understand why David's refusal to 'drink the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives' (2 Sa. 23:17) is put forward. David is speaking metaphorically. He is not suggesting that blood should literally be drunk. His symbol points to the risk that his friends ran for his sake, the risk that they should be killed.

This point has a wider significance. The equation of the life and the blood depends on taking certain scriptural statements with great literalness. When we read 'the life of the flesh is in the blood' we are told that this statement must not be watered down or understood symbolically. But we may legitimately ask, Why not? The fact is that the Old Testament abounds in statements about blood which must be taken metaphorically, and which do not seem to differ materially in this respect from the little group which links life and blood.

Take for example, the frequently occurring reference to 'innocent blood' and statements like 'his blood be on his own head'. If we try to give such expressions a literal meaning we find ourselves in the realm of nonsense. They *must* be understood metaphorically.

There are also many passages which use 'blood' in a vivid way, and which it is clear were never meant to be taken literally. Take for example the description of Joab as one who 'shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war upon his girdle . . . and in his shoes' (1 Ki. 2:5). Similarly the psalmist could think of a time when the righteous 'shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked' (Ps. 58:10).

This kind of thing happens so often in the Old Testament that we cannot follow those who demand a literal understanding of those passages which link life and blood. The thrust of Old Testament usage is against it.

Atonement is connected with blood quite a number of times, as when we read of the bullock and goat 'whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place' (Lev. 16:27). But this kind of passage lends no support to either of the views we are considering. It could fit in with either, but in itself it points to neither.

More important are passages in which atonement is expressly linked with death. Sometimes this is expressed in terms of blood as when we are told that 'blood, it polluteth the land: and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it' (Nu. 35:33). Here atonement is clearly in mind, and equally clearly it is secured by killing a murderer.

With this we should set other passages which see death as the means of securing atonement. Thus David made atonement by delivering up seven descendants of Saul to be hanged by the Gibeonites (2 Sa. 21:3ff.). There is no mention of blood here. But that is just the point. It is atonement that is secured and this is seen in terms of death and not of anything that can be interpreted as life. So is it when Phinehas made atonement by executing Zimri and Cozbi (Nu. 25:13). In this case blood flowed, but there is no emphasis on this, and, indeed, no mention of it. It is the death that is important, not any particular means of bringing it about. Again, Moses sought to make atonement for the sin of the people by asking God to blot him out of the book that He has written (Ex. 32:30-32). Quite in-

teresting is the passage which tells how the red heifer is to be slain to avert punishment when some unknown person has committed murder (Dt. 21:1-9). In this passage within the space of 3 verses (7-9) blood is mentioned four times and the verb *kipper*, 'to make atonement' twice, but atonement and blood are not connected. Clearly it is the death that is the significant thing.

Some passages dealing with the cultus strengthen this impression. There is for example the occasion when Aaron and his sons are bidden 'eat those things wherewith atonement was made' (Ex. 29:33). The reference is to the carcase of a beast from which the blood has been drained, so that there is no possible reference to blood or life. Clearly it shows that the death of the animal was thought to be the means of securing atonement.

More could be adduced. But there seems no need. The case for seeing life as actually resident in the blood will not stand up to critical examination. The evidence seems clear that the use of the term was a way of referring to violent death. And when we turn from the use of the term to the means of securing atonement again we find that not life, but death is in mind.

### THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

There is thus no reason for thinking that when we read in the New Testament of the blood of Christ the meaning will be anything other than the death of Christ. The death will remain central, and we will not be forced to enunciate some new theory about the way life can be released

from the body and set free for new and higher purposes. But in any case we are not left to conjecture. There are some New Testament passages which seem to put the matter beyond doubt.

Thus the writer to the Hebrews asks, 'how much more shall the blood of Christ . . . cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?' and proceeds, 'And for this cause he is the mediator of a new covenant, that a death having taken place . . .' (Heb. 9:14f.). I find it impossible to see why 'the blood' in the former sentence should be understood in any other way than 'a death having taken place' in the following one. Clearly 'blood' and 'death' are being linked in the closest of fashions. Again, it is plain that 'the blood of his cross' (Col. 1:20) means the death of Christ. A cross does not find a place in the sacrificial system, so there is no way of making the passage a reference to the sacrifices. A cross simply indicates a very painful and ignominious death.

Romans 5:9 is very instructive. Here we read: 'Much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him.' In each of the three preceding verses and in the following verse there are references to death. It seems impossible to hold anything other than that these words mean that the death of Christ is the means of our justification.

There can be no doubt as to the meaning of 'blood' in the words of the high priest to the apostles, 'ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us' (Acts 5:28). Christ's death is meant and there is

added to this the thought of responsibility for that death. There can be no idea here of release of life or the like.

It would be possible to go on and make an exhaustive examination of all the passages where the term 'blood' occurs. But the result would, I hold, be the same. A close examination of the various occurrences of this term leaves no doubt but that the view which sees 'life released' in the term 'blood' is not soundly based. It can be supported by a few passages, but even these are better understood of death. And the great majority of passages will not stand the meaning at all. Specifically in the case of the Lord Jesus, the term 'blood' points us to His atoning death.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> S. C. Gayford, *Sacrifice and Priesthood*, London, 1953, p. 68 (Gayford's italics).

<sup>2</sup> E. L. Mascall, *Corpus Christi*, London, 1955, p. 89.

It is only fair to add that not all reduce the death of the animal to insignificance. Gayford, for example, regards it as important. But all these men agree that the release of life is much the more important idea.

<sup>3</sup> *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, London, 1939, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> *The Prophets and the Rise of Judaism*, London, 1937, p. 294.