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SACRIFICE
IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT

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SACRIFICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

I. THE CLAIM TO A DIVINE ORIGIN

SACRIFICE is an element in so many religions, whether noble or debased, that it invites the attempt to account for it in purely human terms. If it expresses some of the deepest human emotions (we may argue), may it not have arisen merely as their outlet — gratifying to man, but superfluous to God? If it is found among many peoples, why is its Hebrew form singled out as authoritative? And does the Old Testament describe its sacrifices as they really originated, or only as a later generation pictured them?

The first part of this study will be concerned with showing some reasons for holding that the Hebrew sacrificial system rightly claimed the authority of God, and that the Old Testament gives a convincing account of its history.

It is no new discovery that the Israelites were not alone in offering sacrifices. The Bible itself had much to say about heathen rites before the anthropologists filled out the picture, and it acknowledged the similarities which existed, by applying some of its own terms¹ to their offerings. But this fact no more weakens the Israelite claim to a divine sanction, than the ability of the Nazarenes to name the brothers and sisters of Jesus disproved the Incarnation. It rules out only the assumption that the Word of God must needs be wholly foreign, a bolt from the blue, to be fully divine. Indeed the existence of other cults invites comparisons which soon compel the question whether their cruelties, their licentiousness and their ideas of bribery and of magic, which persistently fascinated the Israelites themselves, were excluded from the Old Testament code by any influence less powerful than the authority of God. And the failure of these cults to lead beyond themselves throws into relief the fruitfulness of the one system which prepared the way for Christ. For if Christ could introduce Himself as destroying nothing in the Law and Prophets, but fulfilling everything;² and if at the end He could best explain

¹ E.g. 1 Sa. vi. 4; 2 Ki. iii. 27, x. 24.

² Mt. v. 17, 18.

His sufferings in the language of the same Law and Prophets,³ then their claim is sufficiently established. It stands or falls with Him.

The Incarnation, besides confirming this system's validity, is also relevant to our inquiry into its history. It is the point at which God's dealings with us are most clearly seen, and it should be the guide of our historical judgment when we are concerned with the intercourse, in any age, of heaven and earth. Now the Incarnation reveals a God who neither leaves us to grope for Him without any clue, nor hands out information without preparing us, but who pitches His tent among us and discloses Himself through familiar things to those who have ears to hear. The Old Testament, as it stands, gives an account of the development of sacrifice which agrees with this. It records progress, but not the suspiciously uniform ascent from the crude to the complex which the nineteenth-century rearrangement of its chronology secured. It is rather the kind of progress the disciples made in their knowledge of Christ, in which the early flashes of insight are succeeded by blindness, and fresh understanding is gained at moments of spiritual crisis, only to be lost again as worldly ambition returns to make the truth of God unwelcome. Yet all along, He is with them, and can be known. A survey of the biblical account of the matter should make this clear.

The sacrifices in the book of Genesis are described in the general terms which are appropriate to a way of worship which has not yet hardened into a system, yet is already being used in the different contexts which will later call for their own distinct rituals. The offerings arise naturally out of the circumstances of the narrative, but many of them show some step of progress towards their fully developed form. The first sacrifice, that of Cain and Abel, illustrates the process. The story avoids technical terms, and refrains from emphasizing the distinction between Abel's animal offering and Cain's gift of produce, for it applies the word *minḥah* (which is reserved for the Meal-Offering in Leviticus) to both alike. It gives the impression that there are no precedents to follow at this stage, and therefore no sure means of knowing what God most desires. At this point God discloses His will with a sign. It is intended to be not a rebuff, as the

³ Lk. xxiv. 27.

subsequent conversation with Cain makes it clear, but a lesson about the offerer and the offering. What is certainly taught is that the heart of the worshipper matters more than his gifts (a lesson to be reiterated through the Old Testament). It may also be implied (by the repetition of the phrase 'and his offering') that Abel's gift, which involved the shedding of blood, was in itself the more acceptable of the two. But this is not explicit: the special sanctity of blood is not disclosed until the days of Noah,⁴ and its value for atonement is stated for the first time in the book of the Law.⁵ A beginning has been made: God has spoken at a time when He will have a hearing, and more can follow as occasion offers.

Such occasions are provided, chiefly, by times of crisis. Noah makes his burnt-offerings of clean beasts when he steps out of the ark as a survivor of a great judgment, and is given in reply the assurance that God is no longer incensed against the earth. That the sacrifice should be found acceptable — a 'sweet savour', or 'savour of quieting' — was never more vital than at this moment. But it is Abraham who explores the innermost meaning of burnt-offering when he faces the call to sacrifice his son. It is a test which is possible only at this early stage, before the will of God has been disclosed; and so the revelation of what God requires and does not require is gained at a moment of intense spiritual conflict, which forges a stronger link between Abraham and God, and burns the lesson almost as deeply into our memory as into his.

What appears to be the first record of a peace-offering stands, similarly, at a critical point in the story of Jacob.⁶ It is a sacrifice followed by a family meal, at the end of the day in which Jacob and Laban have made their parting covenant. The thought uppermost in all minds is the question of peace within the family; and Jacob himself is more than usually aware of his need of God's help. As if in answer, the angels of God meet him as he travels on, just as God Himself, years later, was to appear to him after another peace-offering as he made the fateful journey into Egypt.⁷ God is seizing some of the rare moments of responsiveness in a lifetime, to make Himself known and to show that He accepts the approach that has been made.

⁴ Gn. ix. 4.

⁶ Gn. xxxi. 54.

⁵ Lv. xvii. 11.

⁷ Gn. xli. 1 ff.

days of Asa: 'For long seasons Israel hath been without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law.'¹⁴

It would have been fruitless in such conditions to attempt to rescue the ritual laws from their imprisonment in the sacred writings. A priesthood that shared in the general ebb of faith would have had no interest in their enforcement. The glimpse we are given of priestly customs at Shiloh during the childhood of Samuel¹⁵ illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a disciplined system, for we see it in two stages of decay. First there has been a modification, at some time past, of the proper ritual of the 'wave-breast' and 'heave-thigh' by which the priests were to receive their portions of the peace-offerings. The accepted method is now the dipping of a flesh-hook into the cooking-pot of the worshippers — a harmless enough procedure, adopted perhaps to save trouble, perhaps to secure a greater variety of meat; but it was a move away from the religious into the secular realm. The gift was no longer offered to and received back from God, but extracted, no doubt with skill, from the worshippers, whose comments may be imagined. But the second stage of deterioration, introduced by Hophni and Phinehas, reached the point of sacrilege, for the priests were now demanding that their portion should be given precedence over God's.

The real need in Israel was not of a ritual reform, but of something deeper. God, as His manner is, did a new thing: He raised up prophets. For some five hundred years after Samuel, the growing-point of Hebrew religion is to be found among the prophets rather than the priests.

Now by their particular calling, prophets show a great concern for loyalty to Jehovah, and for moral righteousness, but comparatively little for matters of ceremonial. Their modern equivalent, in some respects, is the evangelist, who will speak rashly of sacred institutions if he suspects them of screening the soul from contact with the living God. He will certainly not spend his energies on ritual research. It would therefore be a misunderstanding to take a prophet's attacks upon sacrifice, or alternatively his failure to attack irregularities of ritual, as evidence against the existence of a written code in his days. When Jeremiah, for example, suggested that burnt-offerings were a waste of good

¹⁴ 2 Ch. xv. 3.

¹⁵ 1 Sa. ii. 12-18.

food, it was the worshippers he was attacking; for he looked forward to abundant offerings of every kind in ideal times.¹⁶ When Elijah was campaigning against the Tyrian Baal, in a kingdom which (as we shall see) would have no dealings with Jerusalem and its temple, he was right, by every standard, to deplore the broken altars of Jehovah, many though they were. And it is unrealistic (to say the least) to suggest that he should have asked for professional assistance in offering the burnt-sacrifice on Carmel. A prophet was not called to be a legalist.

Yet during this age of the Prophets, a vital struggle was in progress, none the less, in the realm of sacrificial worship; for the advent of the monarchy had brought the settled conditions in which it should have been possible to carry out the full requirements of the Mosaic law. The Chronicler tells of a high degree of organization¹⁷ achieved under David and Solomon, extending even to the provision of music for worship; and 'The place which the LORD your God shall choose' was at last in being.

At this very point a unique opportunity was lost. The triumphant completion of the temple was the moment, more favourable than any other, which Solomon should have seized for abolishing the local sanctuaries, where the corrupted forms of worship were able to continue. Instead, he undermined his own achievement by surrounding the temple with shrines for the foreign gods of his queens. It was left to his son to commit the crowning folly of splitting the kingdom, and thereby putting the temple virtually out of bounds for three-quarters of the nation. It became politically expedient for the Northerners to boycott Jerusalem and to devise a distinctive form of worship and a priesthood of their own.¹⁸ It was the end of any levitical influence in that kingdom. In Judah, on the other hand, the schism made conditions for centralized worship more favourable, geographically, than before. The kingdom was now compact, and the temple within reach of most of the people. But the local holy places kept their popularity, and not every king, even if he were godly, cared to stir up trouble by suppressing them. There were a few energetic reforms, but they were followed by strong reactions towards idolatry.

¹⁶ Je. vii. 21-26 with xvii. 26.
¹⁸ 1 Ki. xii. 26 ff.

¹⁷ 1 Ch. xxiii-xxvi.

The biblical picture, then, of worship in the days of the monarchy is of a few short periods, on the one hand, in which the full-scale levitical sacrifices were physically and spiritually practicable; and on the other hand, of longer periods when religion ranged between an unorthodox worship of Jehovah and a thoroughgoing idolatry. It is not a flattering story, but it is self-consistent. If it were the case that human beings showed a greater regard for written regulations than for the habits and fashions of their times, and if Israel, in particular, could be shown to have enjoyed political stability and spiritual health from the Exodus onwards, then it might be necessary to question the existence of an elaborate divine code throughout a period which shows so little trace of it. But by the Old Testament's own account, the full law of the sacrifices was given no fair chance to establish itself, from the days of Moses down to the time of new beginnings after the Exile, when the land had enjoyed its sabbaths and a chastened band of pilgrims had returned to the inheritance of their fathers, to be taught the old paths in due course by Ezra the Scribe.

The absence of any compelling general objection, either theological or historical, to the biblical account of the sacrificial system, makes it possible to examine the ritual, not merely as a study in priestly technique, but as a medium for the word of God to man. We turn now to the details of the five main offerings.

II. THE BASIC LEVITICAL OFFERINGS

THE BURNT-OFFERING¹⁹

THE term 'Burnt-Offering', or Holocaust, has come to us through the Septuagint, and is a suitable title; but it is the Hebrew name, '*olah*', that expresses its guiding thought: 'that which ascends'. It is the upward, or Godward, offering. Whereas the Meal-Offering is generally 'brought' or 'presented', and the Peace-Offering 'sacrificed', the Burnt-Offering is normally described as 'made to ascend'. It was this offering that carried the first message from the newly cleansed earth after the Flood, when instead of the evidence of moral corruption there ascended to God a 'savour of satisfaction'. It was in the skyward flame of the '*olah*' that the angel ascended after speaking with Manoah. And at the House of God the perpetual fire on the altar and the lamb offered up daily at morning and evening were to be the symbols of man's side of an unceasing communion with God.²⁰

But it was more than this. The ritual prescribed in the first chapter of Leviticus dramatizes implications which discerning eyes had no doubt seen in this offering from the days of the patriarchs. In the first place, it was an offering of the best that one could bring. While in any sacrifice the victim must be without blemish, in this it must be also a male, the more costly animal. And not far from the worshipper's thoughts there might well be the knowledge that if Jehovah had been as the gods of the heathen, the victim might have been a firstborn child.²¹ The story of the virtual offering of Isaac, while it ruled out the idea, remained the heart-searching pattern of the devotion the burnt-offering was meant to express: a Godward devotion to the uttermost.

Secondly, the ritual expressed the worshipper's intimate association with the victim. He is more than a donor: he is regarded as himself involved or represented in what happens to the offering. He brings it near, and sacrifices it himself, first

¹⁹ Lv. i and vi. 8 ff.

²¹ 2 Ki. iii. 27, xvi. 3; Mi. vi. 7.

²⁰ Lv. vi. 13; Ex. xxix. 42.

laying his hand upon its head, that it may be 'accepted for him to make atonement for him'. The clue to what this action in all the sacrifices means is to be found in another example of laying-on of hands: in the ceremony by which the Levites were appointed to represent the firstborn of the nation in the service of the tabernacle.²² On that occasion the children of Israel were required to lay their hands upon the Levites, who were then to be offered as a wave-offering to the LORD. They, in their turn, proceeded to lay their hands upon the bullocks that were to be slain as their own sin-offering and burnt-offering; and thenceforth, themselves atoned for, they were admitted to the tabernacle to perform the service which their brethren might not undertake, and 'to make atonement for the children of Israel, when the children of Israel come nigh unto the sanctuary'. The congregation was clearly not transferring its sins to the Levites in this action, as the sins of the nation were transferred to the scapegoat, but was rather appointing them to stand in its place, to do what it was not qualified to do itself. So it is with the offerer of the burnt-sacrifice. He solemnly designates the victim as standing for him; and he knows that if he brings it with sincerity it is accepted for him.

The third stage is atonement. In every sacrifice, whatever its character, there must be the ritual of the blood; for though atonement was not the be-all and end-all of every offering, relations with God could not exist without it. So the priest, treading now where the offerer cannot, takes the shed blood and casts it against the altar. The worshipper is still excluded, as he always will be under this covenant; but peaceful relations have been renewed at God's frontier-post.

The fourth stage, the preparing and burning of the victim, expresses the orderly thoroughness which God requires. First the offerer sets apart the hide of the victim for the priest. It is the only portion assigned to human use. Then he divides the carcase, which the priest places in a set order on the wood he has arranged on the altar fire. The legs and entrails are washed by the priest before being added to the rest for burning. The whole of this procedure, elaborate though it is, makes its meaning plain enough, impressing on the thoughtful worshipper the desire of God for 'truth in the inward parts', and for a disciplined devotion.

²² Nu. viii. 10 ff.

It depicts a general self-dedication which is worked out in careful and painstaking detail.

THE MEAL-OFFERING²³

The Meal-Offering is described in Leviticus between the directions for the Burnt-Offering and the Peace Offering, for it had to accompany each of them,²⁴ and it is doubtful whether it was ever offered alone.²⁵ Its name, *minḥah*, makes no mention of its ingredients, meaning simply a gift, and is used quite frequently in a secular sense to describe the formal present one might bring out of courtesy to one's host or superior, or the tribute payable to an overlord. At the royal wedding in Psalm xlv, 'the daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift'; when King Hoshea became the vassal of Assyria, his *minḥah* was the sign of his subjection, and his withholding of it spelt rebellion.²⁶ Jacob used the word with a glance at both worlds, temporal and spiritual, in which it moves, when he sent his offering to 'propitiate' Esau, and told him: 'I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou didst "accept" me.'²⁷ But this is an exceptional use: the idea of propitiation is absent from the religious *minḥah*, except where it is offered in a modified form in the place of a sin-offering, and not in its own character.

If we take together the name of this offering and the ingredients of it, the associations of the two will give us an idea of its place in the sacrificial scheme. The name, as we have seen, is connected with the formal courtesies, and even tribute, which are due to a superior. But the ingredients are those of the kitchen. The second chapter of Leviticus takes into its view the woman's domain of ovens, baking pans and frying pans; of flour, oil and salt. There is no thought of incongruity. These things are made as indispensable in the realm of sacrifice as they are in that of hospitality, for they supply the plain but excellent fare of every day, and of every home alike, which can be acceptably set before the most exalted guest, and must accompany the richest food. We can recall at this point the preparations which Abraham

²³ Lv. ii and vi. 14-18.

²⁴ Nu. xv. 8, 9.

²⁵ Except in a modified form, as a jealousy offering (Nu. v. 15).

²⁶ 2 Ki. xvii. 3, 4.

²⁷ Gn. xxxii. 20, xxxiii. 10.

made when he entertained angels unawares: it was not only the calf, the dish for a festive occasion, which claimed his attention: his first thought was for the best of Sarah's everyday cooking. 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth.'²⁸ So God requires of His worshippers not only the costly decision of total self-dedication (as pictured in the burnt-offering), but with it the offering of the unexciting ingredients of homely, industrious life.

It should not be thought, however, that the meal-offering was something informal. Every detail of its ritual reinforces its description as 'a thing most holy of the fire-offerings of the LORD'. Although it could be brought in various forms, cooked in different ways or uncooked, its ingredients were carefully regulated. The flour must be *soleth*, that is, the finest, as for an honoured guest; there must be oil, the symbol of festivity and of consecration (the oil was to be omitted when the *minhah* was used as a jealousy offering 'bringing iniquity to remembrance'); salt must not be forgotten, for it is 'the salt of the covenant of thy God'; and (for use only in the Godward, memorial portion) there must be frankincense, which was one of the ingredients of the holy incense. The offering was brought to the altar, where a handful was burnt as a fire-offering to God, for a 'sweet savour', and then the rest was for the priests, to be eaten in a holy place. Nothing returned to the offerer.

There was also a final touch to underline the special sanctity of the offering. Two substances, leaven and honey, are named only to be forbidden, as inappropriate to a fire-offering. They were not pronounced unclean; indeed there was provision made in the law of peace-offerings for the unleavened cakes of the *minhah* to be accompanied by the leavened bread of the thank-offering.²⁹ On the reason for so fine a distinction it is unsafe to dogmatize. The offering of leaven or honey, as a thank-offering or as firstfruits, seems to express the truth that 'every creature of God is good . . . if it be received with thanksgiving';³⁰ while their prohibition in offerings made by fire (that is, directly Godward offerings) suggests the value of renunciation: 'Have we not power to eat and to drink? . . . But I have used none of these things'; . . . those that use the world, as not using it to

²⁸ Gn. xviii. 6, 7.

²⁹ Lv. vii. 11-13.

³⁰ I Tim. iv. 4.

the full'.³¹ Whatever the interpretation, the mere existence of this special standard of strictness helped to mark out the most domesticated of all the offerings as one of the most holy.

THE PEACE-OFFERING³²

The Peace-Offering was undoubtedly the best-loved of the sacrifices, and was firmly rooted in the habits of the people, largely through being the appropriate means of celebrating family anniversaries. Samuel's father (to give a well-known example) used to go yearly to Shiloh with his wives and children to offer what is recognizably a peace-offering; and David once plausibly excused himself from attending Saul's new moon feast (which was itself a peace-offering, for the eaters had to be ceremonially clean) on the grounds that he must go to a yearly sacrifice at Bethlehem 'for all the family'.³³

The distinctive feature of this offering, then, was the feast for the worshippers. But first the animal which was to furnish the feast was sacrificed with a ritual identical with the preliminaries of the burnt-offering, in that the worshipper laid his hand on the victim before slaying it, and its blood was cast against the altar, for atonement. This was followed by what may be called a token burnt-offering, for the offerer brought with his own hands certain portions (chiefly the fat) to the altar as a fire-offering, where the priests burnt them on the existing burnt-offering, for 'a sweet savour to the LORD'.

Only when these two steps of atonement and dedication were complete, was the offerer free to proceed towards the feast. Even now, he must first provide the priest with his portions, the breast and the thigh, which had their own ritual of being waved and heaved up before the LORD.

The broad significance of the waving and lifting up is that these portions were presented to God and received back at His hands. This was made clear on the occasion of the human 'wave-offering' of the Levites, when it was said: 'They are wholly given unto me; . . . I have taken the Levites . . . and I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron.'³⁴ But the distinction between the two actions

³¹ I Cor. ix. 4, 15, vii. 31 RVmg.
³³ I Sa. xx. 6, 29.

³² Lv. iii and vii. 11-34.
³⁴ Nu. viii. 16, 18, 19.

is obscure.³⁵ It may be that the movement of the breast portion towards and back from³⁶ the altar envisages God, who receives and returns the gifts, as the One who will 'indeed dwell on the earth', present at His sanctuary, while the raising of the thigh portion on high acknowledges Him as the God whom, at the same time, 'the heaven of heavens cannot contain'.

The worshipper, and those whom he had invited, were required to be ceremonially clean, for they were eating before the LORD, and rejoicing before the LORD. The happiness of the feast was no lessening of its holiness, or of the peril of sacrilege. It was laid down, further, that if the offering was a thanksgiving, the flesh must all be consumed the same day; though for a vow or a free will offering the time could be extended to the next day, but not beyond.³⁷ The reason for setting time-limits may well have been hygienic, but this would not account for the difference between them. It is doubtful whether we should be wise in attempting to find some nicety of doctrine concealed (we can hardly say revealed) here. Yet the reason, surely, is one which we should have discovered soon enough in putting the regulations into practice. We should have found ourselves physically unable to offer our thanks before God in the prescribed time without inviting a considerable number of friends to help us — which is as it should be. Our vows or our devotion, on the other hand, could have been shared, if we wished, with a smaller circle. What certainly was excluded altogether was the notion of a peace-offering, of any kind, in which nobody but the offerer had a share. It was to express peace, not in its minimum sense but in its

³⁵ S. C. Gayford, in *Gore's Commentary*, gives an interpretation based on treating *t'rumah* as meaning merely something lifted off, i.e. extracted or selected, rather than held aloft. It is that the thigh was presented by the worshipper directly to the priest, who thus became his guest, while the breast was a thing given back to the priest by God, making him God's guest. He was thus a mediator between his two hosts. The instructions in Exodus xxix. 27-28, however, tell against this view, in that the verbs from which *t'nuphah* and *t'rumah* are derived are used side by side as if describing equally significant actions; and the *t'rumah* is described (perhaps with a side-glance at its more general sense of 'contribution') as the children of Israel's '*t'rumah unto the Lord*'. Both these portions, in fact, are equally acknowledged by the priest as belonging in the first place to God.

³⁶ Isaiah x. 15 indicates that this is the direction of the 'waving', rather than from side to side, for the verb describes the movement of a saw.

³⁷ Lv vii. 15, 16.

maximum: fellowship with God, fellowship in His service, and fellowship with one another.

THE SIN-OFFERING AND THE GUILT-OFFERING³⁸

The offerings which we have already considered were brought not by command but by invitation, as the worshipper felt moved. This implied that relations between him and God were relatively happy — though indeed far from perfect, as the shed blood and the impassable threshold testified. But the Sin- and Guilt- Offerings were prescribed for breaches of that fellowship, and the element of atonement, which we have noticed in the other sacrifices, here dominates the picture.

It will be convenient to study these two offerings together, for the Guilt-Offering (which was for offences which could be assessed for monetary compensation) followed the ritual of the Sin-Offering when the matter of restitution had been dealt with.

The special marks of the Sin-Offering are seen in the treatment of the blood and the disposal of the carcase. The victim was slain in the usual manner, and there was a fire-offering of the fat 'for a sweet savour' as in the peace-offering. But the blood was handled with special ceremony. For the sin of the high priest, or of the whole congregation, the blood was sprinkled with the finger seven times before the veil (and indeed once a year within the veil); then part was put on the horns of the incense-altar in the sanctuary, and the rest poured out at the base of the altar of burnt-offering. It showed that the access to both the innermost and the outermost things of God, hitherto enjoyed by the high priest, or by the congregation through the priesthood, had been barred by the sin in question, and could be restored only by sacrificial blood. In the case of a ruler or a common citizen, coming as a private person, it was the altar of burnt-offering, his usual meeting-place with God, which must be restored to him. So for him the blood was applied to the horns of this altar before being poured out at its base.

It will be as well to pause at this point to examine the view sometimes put forward, that sin had produced not so much the banishment of the sinner as the defilement of the sanctuary. This

³⁸ Lv. iv-vi. 7, vi. 24-vii. 10.

is at first sight the implication of the Day of Atonement, for it was appointed to provide 'atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel', and likewise 'for the tent of meeting, that dwelleth with them in the midst of their uncleannesses'.³⁹ But the New Testament interprets this by taking it a stage further, saying 'It was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be cleansed with these [sacrifices], but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ entered not into a holy place made with hands . . . ; but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us.'⁴⁰ Now if the defilement were regarded as *infecting* the holy things, causing them to lose holiness, the parallel with the heavenlies (which culminates with God Himself) would break down. Therefore the atonement or cleansing of the holy things must mean the removal of uncleanness, not as infectious to them but as an affront. The pollution is taken away, not from them as though they shared it, but from their presence.

After the ritual of the blood, there remained the disposal of the carcase. If the blood had been brought into the sanctuary, the offering was complete, and the carcase was now carried outside the camp, to a clean place where the ashes of other sacrifices were poured out, and there it was destroyed by fire.⁴¹ On the other hand, if the blood had not been brought in, the ceremony was completed by the priest's eating of the victim in a holy place.

At first sight, this may seem the least significant phase of the proceedings. But it has a bearing on the doctrine of atonement which is of some interest. The question it raises is whether or not the sins of the offerer were transferred to the victim. That the whole carcase, including even the hide, should be taken outside the camp and destroyed, may seem to point to its pollution. This impression is reinforced by the fact that when it was the priests' duty, instead, to eat it, God had given it them, they were told, 'to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD'.⁴² But there are at least three objections to this theory. (i) The offering of the fat as a sweet savour⁴³ (that is, as a token burnt-offering⁴⁴) would hardly have been acceptable

³⁹ Lv. xvi. 16.

⁴⁰ Heb. ix. 23, 24.

⁴¹ The verb is *saraph*, the everyday word for 'burn', not the ritual term *hiqtir*.

⁴² Lv. x. 17.

⁴³ Lv. iv. 31.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lv. v. 7.

if the offerer's sin had become attached to the victim. (ii) The flesh was in fact pronounced 'most holy'.⁴⁵ (iii) Other sacrifices besides this one were carried 'without the camp' (after being reduced to ashes), yet the place of their disposal was 'a clean place'.⁴⁶ To have brought unclean carcasses to such a place would have defiled it.

It seems then that we must interpret this 'bearing of iniquity' in the sacrificial meal in some way other than as the eating of the offerer's sin (which is in any case an unparalleled idea). The key is perhaps to be found in the need for a symbol of God's acceptance of the sacrifice. In the burnt-offering, where the ruling idea was homage and dedication, the ascending smoke proclaimed this. In the peace-offering, fellowship was sealed by the feast. In the sin-offering, the blessing desired was access to God's presence. For the congregation as a whole, this was seen to be granted when the priest was admitted into the Holy Place or the Holiest Place, bearing the blood which was the evidence of atonement. For the individual, a similar assurance was given when the same priest⁴⁷ who had offered his sacrifice now represented him at God's table, and was accepted.

Yet when this has been said, it must be added that the symbolism of the sin-offering was not complete without one instance, once a year, in which sins were indeed pictured as transferred to a victim. On the Day of Atonement, one of the two goats which together constituted the Sin-Offering, was burdened with the nation's sins, confessed over it by the high priest, whose hands were laid upon its head. Then this goat was led away to the wilderness, 'to bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited'.⁴⁸

The words have a fine ring of comprehensiveness, and the picture is unforgettable. But as soon as we ask what were the iniquities that a sin-offering could take away, we are answered only by a list of negligences, accidents and 'ignorances'.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁵ Lv. vi. 24-29. Holiness, admittedly, was sometimes popularly confused with ceremonial uncleanness, because both conditions had the effect of putting an object out of bounds, though for opposite reasons. But to import that confusion into the details of laws is to make chaos of them.

⁴⁶ Lv. iv. 12.

⁴⁷ Lv. vi. 26.

⁴⁸ Lv. xvi. 5, 20-22.

⁴⁹ Lv. iv. 2, 13, 22, 27, v. 1-5; Nu. xv. 22-31; and cf. Heb. ix. 7, where the word 'ignorances' (*ἀγνοημάτων*) summarizes, significantly, the offences for which the supreme annual sacrifice atoned.

climax of atonement in this elaborate sacrificial system could barely touch the matters which lie most heavily upon the conscience.

Therefore our concluding section must inquire into the relationship between God and man which the system as a whole presupposes. For the Old Testament sacrifices make it clear, by the simultaneous majesty and modesty of their claims, that they are based on something bigger than their own world ceremonial.

III. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYSTEM

THE first thing that needs to be said is that the sacrifices were not intended to be an introduction between strangers, but a means of intercourse within an existing and stable relationship. The Israelite (or the foreigner who joined himself to the congregation) was heir to a bond with God which was rooted in the ancient covenant with Abraham and in the national covenant-sacrifice at Mount Sinai. His own circumcision was a pledge of the relationship which he had entered through no merit of his own. The Law, indeed, was binding on him, because it was his side of the agreement, and the condition of its continuance; but the agreement itself had come into being only through grace. The term 'grace' was, of course, unknown to the Israelite: his immediate dealings were with the Law. But he was well aware that the only reason God had given for 'setting His love upon' His people was, simply, 'because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers'.⁵⁰ The Christian could wish for no clearer statement, *mutatis mutandis*, of his own acceptance.

The initiative of God in making the covenant was extended also to the appointing of the offerings. Whatever ideas may have been held by the heathen or by the ignorant in Israel, the notion that man could feed or enrich his Creator had no basis in the Law, and was held up to scorn by the prophets and psalmists.⁵¹ The giving was first of all on God's side. There is a striking demonstration of this in the arresting of the plague which struck Jerusalem after David's census.⁵² David sees the destroying angel by the threshing-floor of Araunah: whereupon he prays, he sets up an altar and offers burnt-sacrifices and peace-offerings; and the plague is stayed. But this is only half the story, for we are shown that it is God who invited all these actions. God halted the destruction before allowing David the glimpse of the destroyer which impelled him to prayer, and it was God's prophet who directed him to build the altar. David's part was wholly responsive.

⁵⁰ Dt. vii. 7, 8.

⁵¹ E.g. Is. i. 11; Ps. l. 8-15.

⁵² 2 Sa. xxiv. 15 ff.

So it was with the sacrifices in general. The very means of making atonement was His gift to man: 'the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls'.⁵³ The theology of this is essentially that of grace: its crowning statement is that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son'.

It remains now to consider what the sacrifices taught concerning Sin and Atonement, both by their procedure and by what we may call their terms of reference.

We have already seen that the animal-offerings had each its special emphasis, but that all alike began with atonement, which was made by blood.⁵⁴ It is clear, then, for a start, that the cost of atonement was the cost of a life. But was the life regarded as destroyed or as released? Westcott argues that 'the blood poured out is the energy . . . made available for others', and that the high priest 'came before God through and in the power of the life of victims offered up'.⁵⁵ Against this theory three points may be made. (i) The criminal law dealing with blood that was shed by violence, while it may support at first sight the view that the shed blood was still active, prescribes a penalty that is inconsistent with it.⁵⁶ It would seem a curious remedy for the defilement of the land by blood, 'regarded', according to Westcott, 'as still living', to add to it the blood of the murderer, which would itself be as active as the victim's; whereas it is a simple conception to make the murderer's life forfeit, as the full price of his crime. The accusation, 'the voice of thy brother's blood crieth', is vivid enough without being taken literally; and nobody supposes 'the hire of the labourers' in James' Epistle to be alive because it also 'crieth'.⁵⁷ (ii) The prohibition of the use of blood for food is consistent with the idea of its preciousness, but hardly with that of its potency. Indeed, on the theory that the function of the blood in sacrifice was to be a source of energy, it would have been appropriate to have at least one offering in which 'eating with the blood' was prescribed. But such a procedure was unthinkable. (iii) Atonement has reference to an existing breach

⁵³ Lv. xvii. 11.

⁵⁴ There is one exception: the offering of flour for a sin-offering, in cases of extreme poverty: Lv. v. 11.

⁵⁵ Westcott: *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, additional note on ix. 12.

⁵⁶ Nu. xxxv. 31, 33.

⁵⁷ Jas. v. 4.

of relations, brought about by sin already committed. The Guilt-Offering, in which there was not only repayment required, but even a valuation of the sacrificial victim,⁵⁸ shows that the Old Testament did not regard the reformation of the offender as closing the incident alone. To offer blood as a symbol of paying the extreme penalty is an intelligible act of atonement; but to offer it as representing energy for future service is to leave the past to bury itself as best it may. This is not atonement even in its loosest sense.

The blood, then, if the point has been made, signified not life but the violent death, or execution, of the victim. When we take this fact in conjunction with two others, first that the victim, by the imposition of the offerer's hand (as already shown⁵⁹), stood for the offerer, and secondly that the effect of this part of the sacrifice by itself⁶⁰ was the securing of atonement, the simplest interpretation is that the victim bore the judgment of God on the offerer's sin. It was his substitute. In the remaining phases of some of the sacrifices, other relationships are to the fore (as when the victim is the offerer's food, or conveys his devotion), but in the blood ritual this alone appears sufficient.

Now the more clear-cut the provision and assurance of atonement, the more is the danger that its very completeness will defeat its object. We have only to read the prophets to sense the complacency of the crowds in the temple courts in the days when sacrifices were most in favour. It was to guard against this that the elaborate sacrificial system of the tabernacle led up to the anticlimax of a sin-offering which was virtually not available for sins — that is, for the sins which seem to cry out most for atonement — but only for the offences which could be reasonably called excusable.

For the thoughtful, this deliberate limitation opened up very important truths about God and man and sin, first by the nature of the offences which were covered, and secondly by the existence of the many for which there was no word of an atonement.

The obligation to seek atonement for sins which had been unconsciously or accidentally committed showed that a sin could have an existence apart from the mind of the sinner or any of his fellow men, and that its existence was an affront to God which

⁵⁸ Lv. v. 15.

⁵⁹ Pp. 13, 14.

⁶⁰ Lv. xvii, 11c; Heb. ix. 22.

was removable only at the full cost of a life laid down. The inference to be drawn from this is that God's standard is perfection, and that human sinfulness is beyond full human control. There is, so to speak, a surgical standard of spotlessness. 'Who can discern thy servant's errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults!'—for it was not enough to be kept back 'from presumptuous sins,'⁶¹ for which indeed there was no remedy.⁶² So the broad classification of men as 'righteous' and 'wicked', while it was useful and legitimate, had obviously only a relative truth; and the justice for which the man of God so often prayed was in the last analysis something he dared not face. He might cry: 'In thy faithfulness answer me, and in thy righteousness'; but when he considered it, he had to continue: 'And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.'⁶³

But if the offences for which there existed a sacrifice invited such reflections on Sin, the misdeeds on which the sacrificial system was silent provoked heart-searchings concerning Atonement. The Law was admitting that the root of the matter lay too deep for it. Sin was far more than a stain on the surface, which would yield to the proper formula, as to a solvent; for sin was not separable from the sinner. To have fixed the sinner's attention on an animal and a ritual would have been to distract it from God and from a violated relationship.⁶⁴ He must be left with nowhere to turn, that he might be cast back upon God. 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight. . . . Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.'⁶⁵

So, because the Law pointed beyond itself, the prophets and psalmists searched the horizon until it yielded the dim shape of

⁶¹ Ps. xix. 12, 13. ⁶² Nu. xv. 30, 31. ⁶³ Ps. cxliiii. 1, 2.

⁶⁴ For the Christian there is no such distraction. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Cor. v. 19).

⁶⁵ Prof. H. H. Rowley has well pointed out (*The Meaning of Sacrifice in the Old Testament* [1950], p. 100) that David's sins of adultery and murder, the subject of this fifty-first Psalm, were not eligible for sacrificial atonement; and that it would be 'gratuitous to assume that the psalmist meant to imply that sacrifice was equally useless under quite other circumstances'.

a country not yet explored, where was a new covenant,⁶⁶ and a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness,⁶⁷ above all, a Figure which they could not identify, though they had always known Him, and had seen Him in a thousand offerings 'brought as a lamb to the slaughter'.⁶⁸ There, if they had known it, their search was over. Had they been able to catch the sound, they might have heard the voice of every generation joining theirs in the same possessive: 'Surely, he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: . . . and with his stripes we are healed.'

⁶⁶ Je. xxxi. 31 ff.

⁶⁷ Zc. xiii. 1.

⁶⁸ Is. liii. 7.