

Leviticus 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 3. If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offering, if he offers an animal from the herd, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before the Lord. And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And Aaron's sons the priest shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar. And from the sacrifice of the peace offering, as a food offering to the Lord, he shall offer the fat covering the entrails, and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys.

Then Aaron's son shall burn it on the altar on top of the burnt offering, which is on the wood on the fire. It is a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. If his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering to the Lord is an animal from the flock, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish. If he offers a lamb for his offering, then he shall offer it before the Lord, lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it in front of the tent of meeting. And Aaron's son shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. Then from the sacrifice of the peace offering, he shall offer as a food offering to the Lord its fat. He shall remove the whole fat tail, cut off close to the backbone, and the fat that covers the entrails, and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. And the priest shall burn it on the altar as a food offering to the Lord. If his offering is a goat, then he shall offer it before the Lord, and lay his hand on its head, and kill it in front of the tent of meeting. And the sons of Aaron shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. Then he shall offer from it as his offering for a food offering to the Lord, the fat covering the entrails, and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. And the priest shall burn them on the altar as a food offering with a pleasing aroma. All fat is the Lord's. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places, that you eat neither fat nor blood. The book of Leviticus begins with the ascension offering in chapter 1, followed by the tribute offering in chapter 2, and in chapter 3 we come to the peace offering. These three chapters form a single speech introduced by the Lord called Moses and spoke to him in chapter 1 verse 1. In many respects, within the logic of the sacrifices, the peace offering could be seen as the culmination. Once you have dealt with sin, guilt, and impurity through the purification and the reparation offerings, you can symbolically ascend into God's presence in the ascension offering. Following that or accompanying that, you can offer tribute, which could be seen as representing both the acceptance of your works and also your entrance into the broader reality of God's presence. And then finally, in the peace offering, you can celebrate a meal with God. The peace offering then represents the goal of it all, communion with God, fellowship with him, and also in the context of fellowship with God, fellowship with others. Various other interpretations or translations of the peace offering are given. Some see it as a sacrifice of well-being. Baruch Levine speaks about it as a sacred gift of greeting. The animals for the peace offering are either animals of the herd or animals of the flock. The animals of the herd are bovines, and then we have the animals of the flock, which would be either sheep or goats. Neither the age nor the sex of the sacrifices is stipulated here. This raises the question of whether the sex and the age was truly a matter of indifference, or whether these are just more general instructions for a range of sacrifices for which the sex of the animal mattered, but it varied by offerer. As Naphtali Meshul argues, the sacrificial system has a sort of generative grammar. It doesn't necessarily stipulate the form that each and every sacrifice should take in every single particular, but it exposes you to many different examples of laws concerning sacrifices and descriptions of sacrifice from which you can induce the larger grammatical principles that underlie it all.

Then, in situations where certain things are not stipulated, you can appreciate what things would be necessary even if they're not stipulated within the text. On the question of the sex, the age, and the type of animal being offered for the peace offering, it does appear that these things were not without symbolic significance in the case of the peace offering, at least on certain occasions. The Passover is an exceptional example of the peace offering, and for the Passover it was necessary that the animal be an animal from the flock. It could be either a lamb or a kid, but it could not be a calf. Likewise, both the sex and the age of the Passover lamb was stipulated. It had to be a male of its first year.

[4 : 49] The realm of ordination for the priest was another form of peace offering, and again the sex, and in that case also the age of the sacrifice, was stipulated. It needed to be a mature male of the sheep. To make matters more interesting, when the Nazarite completes his vow, he has to bring a male lamb for a burnt offering, a ewe lamb for a sin offering, and a ram for a peace offering. Perhaps the logic of stipulating a ram for the peace offering here should be considered in the light of the realm of ordination for the priests. All burnt or ascension offerings have to be males. Sin or purification offerings are supposed to be female in the case of a layperson, and perhaps the ram of the consecration for the Nazarite should be thought of as a ram of deordination for one who has temporarily enjoyed a sort of priestly status. Again, there is a deeper logic or grammar behind the sacrifices. They're not just arbitrary, and the more exceptional or unusual sacrifices can often serve to disclose aspects of this logic. There are lots of common features between the sacrifices.

For instance, when we look at the sacrifice of the peace offering, we can see that like other sacrifices, it involves the manipulation of blood, placing things upon the altar to be burnt up into the presence of the Lord, and then also eating of a meal. All of those elements are included in some degree or other in other sacrifices. The purification offering, for instance, involves the placing of blood upon certain things. It involves placing items upon the altar to be burnt up, and often involves the priests eating some part of the sacrificial meal. However, each of the sacrifices accents one aspect of the sacrifice rather than others. For the purification offering, it's the use of the blood. For the whole burnt or the ascension offering, it's the conversion and the ascent of the animal into smoke.

And in the case of the peace offering, it's the sharing of a meal. We could even think about dividing the sacrifices down into aspects and thinking about the way that certain sorts of sacrifices contain other modes of sacrifice within them. The purification offering, for instance, has an element of the whole burnt offering, alongside its fundamental element of purification. Meshul discusses this at some length.

Peace offerings, with a few exceptions, were almost invariably private and voluntary sacrifices. In Leviticus chapter 7, we see that there are a number of occasions for their offering. They could be offered in thanksgiving for deliverance, as votive offerings in connection with vows, or as free will offerings. In Leviticus chapter 23, verses 18 to 20, two male lambs of the first year are required as a sacrifice of peace offerings at the time of the Feast of Weeks. Interestingly, however, such a requirement is not present in Numbers chapter 28 in the laws concerning the sacrifices there. The laws there differ from the laws in Leviticus chapter 23, as there are two bulls and one ram, instead of one bull and two rams. It seems that these sacrifices evolved over time in the life of the people. Did the peace offerings of the Feast of Weeks cease, or should we rather think that the peace offerings were considered as private sacrifices, and that Numbers is only concerned with the public sacrifices? We could notice, for instance, that there's no mention of the Passover lamb in the context of the Passover sacrifices. Presumably that was seen as belonging to the worship of various families, rather than of the central cult. Another example of the celebration of peace offerings can be seen in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 19 to 22.

All the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock, you shall dedicate to the Lord your God. You shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock.

[8 : 25] You shall eat it, you and your household, before the Lord your God, year by year, at the place that the Lord will choose. But if it has any blemish, if it is lame or blind, or has any serious blemish whatever, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God. You shall eat it within your towns.

The unclean and the clean alike may eat it, as though it were a gazelle or a deer. A further notable example of a peace offering is found in 1 Samuel chapter 9, in the context of Saul's first encounter with Samuel, when Samuel is going to lead a sacrificial meal in the city.

We also have peace offerings offered by the tribes in Numbers chapter 7. In that case, again, all of the peace offerings offered are male. The one occasion where we do seem to have an example of a female peace offering is the offering of the heifer by Samuel in the context of the anointing of David. In 1 Samuel chapter 16, the Lord gives Samuel this cover story. He celebrates the sacrifice and invites Jesse's family to celebrate with him. Can we then discover some sort of logic to the sex of the sacrifice of the peace offering? For the most part, the peace offering is a private, voluntary sacrifice for individual families and worshippers to make. In such a context, the sex will not be stipulated. However, in the case of firstborn males of the herd and flock, the sacrifice is required and will necessarily be a male. When the household is participating in a larger national celebration, the sacrifice of the peace offering, though private in some respects, is participating within a more public event, and as a result, the animal will typically be expected to be a male.

One of the most important points about the peace offering is observed by John Kleinick, when he recognises the connection that it draws between the holiness of the tabernacle and the status of the people. The people bring a clean animal to the temple. The most holy portion of the fat is taken up into the Lord's presence in the smoke. The blood is thrown against the sides of the altar, and then the people receive back holy meat that they can participate in. In participating in that holy meat, they are, as it were, made guests at the Lord's table. Many modern ideas of sacrifice focus upon the killing of the animal. Yet perhaps in the peace offering we see something about the central aspect of sacrifice involving eating a meal. The altar is not primarily a place for killing the animals. Indeed, the animals were killed before they were brought to the altar.

The altar is the table of the Lord, the place from which sacrifices are consumed into his presence. Elsewhere in Leviticus, we see restrictions placed upon the time during which the sacrificial meal could be eaten. Offerings for Thanksgiving had to be eaten on the same day, but free will or votive offerings could be eaten the next day as well. In the laws concerning the peace offering, as in the laws concerning the whole burnt or the ascension offering, a lot of attention is given to the different parts of the animal and the separation of certain elements from the rest. In addition to the taboo upon eating blood, there's also an emphasis upon not eating the fat of the animal.

[11 : 21] The fat covering the entrails, the fat that is on the entrails, the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver all need to be removed along with the kidneys.

The particular parts of the animal that are singled out are intriguing. Mary Douglas has an extensive theory to explain this. She writes, The orderly pattern made on the altar from a dismembered animal present the innermost soft parts of the body under an inclusive series of outer casings. The suet-covered area divides the top of the carcass from the bottom, making it into three parts, the thick layer of suet around the diaphragm which contains liver and kidneys, making a middle zone, while in the last zone are the other entrails. The procedures for sacrifice have broken up the order of the living body, separating each segment and drawing attention to the middle part, which would not otherwise have been distinguished from the rest. Douglas argues that the surrounding fat or suet of these various organs is analogous to the cloud surrounding God's presence upon the holy mountain. It also corresponds to the covered internal area of the sanctuary, and should remind us of the way the tabernacle itself might be compared to an animal covered with skins. Some have argued that the removal of the kidneys and the long lobe of the liver has to do with the use of these items within acts of divination. However, it seems more likely to me that the kidneys represent something of the sacred interiority of the animal, and so need to be set apart for that symbolic reason. We should also note that there are no peace offerings given here for turtle doves and pigeons, or for cereal offerings. In verse 5 we are told that the fat portions of the peace offering need to be placed on the altar on top of the burnt offering, presumably the burnt offering of the morning sacrifice. Kleinig writes,

This sacrifice was therefore associated with the public burnt offering, and incorporated into it, since the daily burnt offering was the foundational sacrifice that provided the ritual framework for all the other sacrifices. The peace offering, though more typically a private act of worship, was incorporated into the more public act of worship of the daily sacrifices. It integrated the worshipper and their family into the holiness characteristic of the tabernacle and its sacrifices.

A question to consider, how can the church's celebration of the Eucharist be considered in terms of the peace offering?