

Leviticus 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 9. On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aaron, Take for yourself a bull calf for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, both without blemish, and offer them before the Lord. And say to the people of Israel, Take a male goat for a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both a year old without blemish, for a burnt offering, and an ox and a ram for peace offerings, to sacrifice before the Lord, and a grain offering mixed with oil, for today the Lord will appear to you. And they brought what Moses commanded in front of the tent of meeting, and all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord. And Moses said, This is the thing that the Lord commanded you to do, that the glory of the Lord may appear to you. Then Moses said to Aaron, Draw near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people, and bring the offering of the people, and make atonement for them, as the Lord has commanded. So Aaron drew near to the altar and killed the calf of the sin offering which was for himself. And the sons of Aaron presented the blood to him, and he dipped his finger in the blood, and put it on the horns of the altar, and poured out the blood at the base of the altar. But the fat and the kidneys and the long lobe of the liver from the sin offering he burned on the altar, as the Lord commanded Moses. The flesh and the skin he burned up with fire outside the camp. Then he killed the burnt offering, and Aaron's sons handed him the blood, and he threw it against the sides of the altar. And they handed the burnt offering to him piece by piece, and the head, and he burned them on the altar. And he washed the entrails and the legs, and burned them with the burnt offering on the altar. Then he presented the people's offering, and took the goat of the sin offering that was for the people, and killed it, and offered it as a sin offering, like the first one. And he presented the burnt offering, and offered it according to the rule. And he presented the grain offering, took a handful of it, and burned it on the altar, besides the burnt offering of the morning. Then he killed the ox and the ram, the sacrifice of peace offerings for the people. And Aaron's sons handed him the blood, and he threw it against the sides of the altar. But the fat pieces of the ox and of the ram, the fat tail, and that which covers the entrails and the kidneys, and the long lobe of the liver, they put the fat pieces on the breasts, and he burned the fat pieces on the altar.

But the breasts and the right thigh Aaron waved for a wave offering before the Lord, as Moses commanded. Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them. And he came down from offering the sin offering, and the burnt offering, and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. And when they came out, they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord, and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces. In Leviticus chapter 9, the ritual for the induction and consecration of the priests, the tabernacle, and the garments, which began in chapter 8, is completed. In the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus, we have instructions concerning the sacrifices, and these are presented more in the abstract, in their typical forms. In Leviticus chapters 8 and 9, for instance, we see how some of these sacrifices could function within a larger sequence of sacrifices to perform some ceremonial purpose. In this case, the ordination of the priests and the consecration of the tabernacle. We might perhaps think of the sacrifices as roots of verbs that are conjugated differently within specific sentences. In something such as the ordination ceremony, we have various conjugations of the verbs of the sacrifices being employed within what we might think of as a series of ritual sentences that produce a particular outcome. Reading such passages and recognising why specific sacrifices are joined together in the ways that they are, why they take the particular conjugated forms that they do, and why they have the ceremonial effects that they have, enables us to make a lot more sense of the underlying grammar of the sacrificial system.

The first part of the ceremony for consecration of the priests began with a bull for a sin or purification offering, a ram for a burnt or ascension offering, and a ram for a special form of peace offering, the consecration or ordination sacrifice. The ritual for the ram of consecration had a far more elaborate blood rite than one would typically have for a peace offering, with blood being placed on various extremities of Aaron and his son's bodies. Throughout that part of the ceremony, Moses was the officiant, acting as the priest and receiving the priest's portion. It is illuminating to observe ways in which rituals deviate from their typical patterns, and to consider the reasons why those deviations might occur. For instance, and most obviously, Moses, not the Aaronic priests, officiates at the ceremony. Aaron and his sons have not yet been consecrated, so Moses represents the Lord as his servant, in ways that the priests later would. This helps us to see the prophet Moses as exercising a sort of priestly ministry more generally, behind the Aaronic priesthood. We have elsewhere observed the ways in which Mount Sinai is a sort of archetype of the tabernacle. As Moses ascended the mountain and interceded for the people before the glorious theophanic presence of God, veiled in the dark cloud, he was like the high priest entering the Holy of Holies. The bull for the purification offering for Aaron and his sons was also offered in an unusual way. Aaron and his sons all put their hands upon the bull.

The bull was a sort of collective purification for them. The blood of the bull for the purification offering was not brought into the Holy Place, as it would typically have been. Once again, understanding the unusual character of the situation and the deeper logic of the sacrifices helps us to understand why it was not. Aaron and his sons had not yet ministered in the Holy Place.

[5 : 52] They were still in the courtyard with the laypersons, so they could not yet have defiled it. The unusual ritual of the ram of consecration, where blood was placed on various extremities of Aaron and his sons' bodies, also makes sense as a sort of counterpart to the act of placing blood on the horns of the altar. The ritual followed the instructions given in Exodus chapter 29.

After the initial phase of the ordination ritual, there was a seven-day period during which the process of ordination and the consecration of the altar was ongoing. This seven-day period is described in more detail in Exodus chapter 29 verses 35 to 37.

Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you. Through seven days shall you ordain them, and every day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement. Also you shall purify the altar when you make atonement for it, and shall anoint it to consecrate it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar shall become holy. The connection between the creation of the world in seven days at the beginning of Genesis, and the establishment of the tabernacle and its service through seven days here in Leviticus, should probably not be lost on us. The tabernacle is a new creation, as is clear in Exodus, and the priests are like a new humanity within it. The events of these chapters should probably be identified with the establishment of the tabernacle and its service, described in Exodus chapter 40. Although the book of Leviticus seems to follow directly from the book of Exodus, it seems likely that we are going back a short period of time with the instructions given for the sacrifices and the establishment of the priests, and this period overlaps with that of the final chapters of the book of Exodus. For the completion of the ordination rite on the eighth day, there is another bull offered as a purification offering, although it is possible that this is not a mature bull, but a bull calf. As Aaron is just beginning his high priestly ministry, perhaps a bull calf would make more sense than the bull that he would offer when fully installed in the office.

Likewise, rather than the typical bull for the congregation's purification offering, they are instructed to offer a male goat. Again, perhaps this is because they have not yet fully entered into their status as a priestly people. Now that the seven days of the ordination ritual are complete, Moses no longer officiates. Nevertheless, the priestly sin offering is still offered in the same manner as on the first day of the ceremony, as Aaron and his sons still have to enter into the holy place. Aaron offers a purification offering for himself, the bull, and then he also offers an ascension offering for himself, the ram. His own offerings are offered before the offerings that he offers for the people. This follows the logic described in Hebrews chapter 7 verse 27, where the high priest offered sacrifices daily first for his own sins and then for those of the people.

The sequence of the sacrifices here should also be noted. You deal with impurity and sin first, then you have consecration and ascension into the Lord's presence, then having done that you can share a communion meal with him. The order of the people's sacrifices here are purification offering

first, ascension offering second, tribute offering third, and then peace offerings. While peace offerings were generally not public offerings, the establishment of the tabernacle and its ministry was an important public event, and the sharing of a covenant meal was a natural aspect of its climax. Having gone up to the altar and offered these sacrifices, Aaron then turned to bless the people. The instruction concerning the Aaronic blessing is given in Numbers chapter 6 verses 22 to 27.

[9 : 32] The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. Having finished the sacrifices, Moses and Aaron went together into the tent of meeting. Different terminology is used for the tabernacle in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. The language of tabernacle, which we find more often in the book of Exodus, accents the fact that the tabernacle was the place of the Lord's dwelling.

Tent of meeting terminology presents the tabernacle as the place of interaction between man and God. Prior to the construction of the tabernacle, there was another tent of meeting that preceded it. When Moses and Aaron come out from the tent of meeting, they bless the people once more, and then the glory of the Lord appears to the whole company. Fire descends from the Lord and consumes all the items upon the altar. As we have already seen, the fire burning upon the altar was a sign of the Lord's presence in the midst of his people, a conduit between heaven and earth, an ascending pillar analogous to the pillar of cloud and fire that led the people through the wilderness. The events described here might perhaps be related to those described at the very end of the book of Exodus in chapter 40 verses 32 to 38. When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, as the Lord commanded Moses. And he erected the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and set up the screen of the gate of the court, so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

A question to consider, why might the burnt offering for the people have required a calf and a lamb both of their first year?