

# Leviticus 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]      Leviticus chapter 4. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull, and bring it into the tent of meeting.

And the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the veil of the sanctuary. And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the Lord that is in the tent of meeting.

And all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, 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, just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings.

And the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering. But the skin of the bull in all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung, all the rest of the bull he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood.

On the ash heap it shall be burned up. If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull from the herd for a sin offering, and bring it in front of the tent of meeting.

[ 1 : 5 5 ]      And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the Lord, and the bull shall be killed before the Lord. Then the anointed priest shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the tent of meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle it seven times before the Lord in front of the veil.

And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar that is in the tent of meeting before the Lord. And the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And all its fat he shall take from it, and burn on the altar. Thus shall he do with the bull, as he did with the bull of the sin offering. So shall he do with this. And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven.

And he shall carry the bull outside the camp, and burn it up as he burned the first bull. It is the sin offering for the assembly. When a leader sins, doing unintentionally any one of all the things that by the commandments of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish, and shall lay his hand on the head of the goat and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before the Lord.

It is a sin offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering.

[ 3 : 21 ] And all its fat he shall burn on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of peace offerings. So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven. If any one of the common people sins unintentionally, in doing any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed.

And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar.

And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings. And the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish, and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering.

Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings.

[ 4 : 44 ] And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the Lord's food offerings. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven. The first three chapters of Leviticus are a single speech, containing directions concerning the practice of the ascension offerings, tribute offerings, and in chapter 3 the peace offerings.

In chapter 4 a new speech begins, and the purification offerings, often translated as sin offerings, are discussed. If the ascension offerings are about symbolically ascending into the presence of the Lord, the tribute offerings about your works being received by the Lord, and the peace offerings about communion with God, the purification offerings are about dealing with the impurity of sin, it's important to consider that until this point, many of the ways that contemporary Christians most typically understand sacrifice are marginal to the sacrifices that we encounter in the text.

The sacrifices are not even focused on the death of the animal, let alone death inflicted as a sort of substitutionary atonement. Rather, the focus is upon the animal's ascent as the symbol of the worshipper, upon the gift of tribute, or upon eating and fellowship.

The limited paradigms that many Christians have for considering sacrifice ill equip us to understand what is going on in many of the sacrifices that we encounter in the Old Testament. They also greatly constrain our understanding of the sacrifice of Christ.

If we were to begin with the breadth of the vision of sacrifice that we encounter in the book of Leviticus, we might begin to appreciate how the sacrificial reality of Christ's work extends beyond the cross, including things such as the ascension of Christ, and communion with God with Christ as our peace offering.

[ 6 : 25 ] In the purification offering we have a sacrifice that is more akin to how we typically understand sacrifice. As we have already noted, the three principal sacrifices, the ascension or whole burnt offering, the peace offering, and the purification or sin offering, all have common features.

Each involves the ascension of the animal, or some parts of it in smoke upon the altar. Each involves some sort of blood rite. And both the peace offering and the purification offering typically involve either the priest or the offerer, or both, enjoying a meal.

As Naphtali Meshel argues, some later Jewish sources regard each purification offering as containing within itself its own ascension offering, as some part of it was handled like the ascension offering, and entirely burnt upon the altar.

This chapter also associates it with the peace offering, relating the placing of the fat upon the altar to the placing of the fat of the peace offerings upon the altar. While having such common features, each of the principal sacrifices accents some aspect.

The ascension offering focuses upon the ascension of the flesh on the altar in smoke. The peace offering focuses upon the shared meal. The purification offering focuses upon the manipulation of blood.

[ 7 : 39 ] It is important to consider that there is a sort of logic to the sacrifices. If you are going to approach the Lord, you would need to begin by dealing with guilt and impurity. So the purification offering and the reparation or trespass offerings would need to come first.

Once impurity and guilt have been addressed, you can then be consecrated in the ascension offering, have your gifts accepted by the Lord in the tribute offering, and enjoy communion with him in the peace offering.

However, the book of Leviticus does not begin with the purification and reparation offerings, but with the burnt offering, tribute offering, and peace offering. Why is this the case? Perhaps the reason for this is because, even though they would be sequentially prior in the order of the offerings, the purification and reparation offerings are theologically subsequent to the ascension, tribute, and peace offerings being added on account of sin.

While some form of ascension, tribute, and peace offerings might have been offered even apart from sin, the same might not be the case for the other two sacrifices. In presenting the sacrifices to us, perhaps Leviticus is concerned that we appreciate that the ascension, tribute, and peace offerings are essential and paradigmatic to a degree that the purification offering is not.

While the other sacrifices are generally voluntary, the sin and reparation offerings are generally mandatory. The need for purification offerings was most pronounced because the Lord dwelt in the midst of his people.

[ 9 : 02 ] Fellowship with the Lord and protection from his holy wrath breaking out against the people required covering of their sin and their impurity. We must consider that the purification offering is not merely about dealing with sins, but also with impurity, which includes non-moral forms of defilement too.

Sin defiles us and makes us unclean, but the flesh is also more generally defiled by death, so exposure to the polluted realities of the flesh also makes people ceremonially unclean, even if there is no moral fault on their part.

This is one reason why purification offering is a more helpful translation than sin offering, even though the term is used for sin elsewhere. Prior to the covenant at Sinai, we have ascension offerings and tribute offerings.

At Sinai, peace offerings and purification offerings gain a new prominence. The most notable and central purification offering was, of course, the Day of Atonement, when the whole system was purified every single year.

Curiously, however, purification offerings barely appear in the Old Testament narrative beyond the Pentateuch. This apparent absence is most striking at times, such as the dedication of Solomon's temple, where we might expect a purification offering to cleanse the people and the structure.

[ 10 : 16 ] How are we to explain this? One interesting verse that might suggest a possibility is Ezra chapter 8, verse 35. At that time, those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and as a sin offering, 12 male goats.

All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. There, just under 200 animals are sacrificed, and the whole assembly of the offerings is considered as a unity. It's described as a burnt or ascension offering to the Lord.

However, as part of that burnt offering to the Lord, there are 12 male goats as a sin offering. A possibility to consider here, perhaps also supported by the way that the purification offering is spoken of in places like Numbers chapter 28, is that the purification offering is generally seen to be subordinate to the burnt offering in larger sacrificial sequences.

We might think of it this way. The purification offering is not an end in itself. It exists, rather, in order to make the other sacrifices possible. In larger complexes of sacrifice, it's generally not the centre of attention, but it's preparatory for the others.

It need not, then, be explicitly mentioned, but its occurrence can be presumed. While no purification offerings are mentioned in the establishment of Solomon's temple, for instance, it seems reasonable to me that the reference to Solomon's offering of the sacrifice of the ascension offering, spoken of in the singular, despite the fact that it involved so many animals that the regular altar was not large enough to contain them, includes, as in Ezra chapter 8, the purification offering within it.

[ 11 : 56 ] While the ascension offerings were always male animals, the peace offerings allowed for female animals on occasion. However, on the occasions where more public or common celebrations of peace offerings are mentioned, in the context generally of calendric feasts, the sacrificial animals invariably seem to be male, save in the case of birds, where the sex seems to be treated as a matter of indifference.

In the case of the purification offering, the sex and type of the animal is much more specified. In the case of some sacrifices, the difference between sacrificial animals is economic.

Allowances made for poorer people to offer a less costly sacrifice, a bird or even a grain offering, rather than an animal of the herd or flock. However, what we have in the case of the sin offering here is not a matter of allowance, so much as of stipulation.

Even the wealthiest layperson should offer a female goat or sheep. Before we consider any more explicit symbolic purpose for the animals, it's worth considering their value. As Meshul and several other scholars argue, female animals would generally be more valuable than male animals, as they would be far more essential to the breeding stock.

However, as Lee Travascus notes, we should consider the possibility that the Israelites would not be sacrificing their breeding stock, in which case the relative value of the animals would be determined more by their size and quantity of meat than by breeding potential.

[ 13 : 16 ] Older animals would also be more costly for the worshipper than young animals, as more time and resources would have been invested in raising them to maturity. Here it might also be worth reflecting upon the psychological effects that raising an animal for the purpose of offering it as a sacrifice for yourself might have had upon the offerer.

The fact that male herd and flock animals are required for the ascension offering and for more public or collective forms of the peace offering suggests that something more is going on in the stipulation of male animals for some persons and female animals for others in the case of the purification offering.

Sex is not merely functioning as an indicator of the economic value of the sacrifice, but seems to carry some further symbolic value. Meshul observes the way that the leaders and the elite of the people are described as rams and billy goats in Ezekiel chapter 34 verse 17 and claims that it seems reasonable to presume that the stipulation of male and female animals relates to the status and office of the offerer.

The priest is like a male bull, the leader of the herd. Leaders of the people are like billy goats, the most powerful creatures in the flock, and relative to them, laypersons are like the less powerful females of the flock and so must offer female goats or sheep to represent themselves.

The offerer's bringing of the animal and laying of his hand upon the animal's head begins the sacrifice. The meaning of the offerer's act of laying his hand upon the animal is discussed by Travascus, who considers a number of different things that it might have signified, things that are by no means mutually exclusive.

[ 14 : 50 ] One of the most basic things it would signify was the offerer's ownership of the sacrificial animal. The animal is theirs, they are the one offering it, and the benefits of the sacrifice should accrue to them.

Others see in the hand laying an act of consecration. The animal is set apart for the sacrifice. While this may be an aspect of what is occurring in the act, it does underplay the relationship between the offerer and their sacrifice.

On the day of atonement, in Leviticus chapter 16 verse 21, Aaron lays his hand upon the scapegoat and confesses over it the sins of the people before sending the creature away into the wilderness.

We might induce from this that there is some sort of transference deemed to have taken place. However, such transference does not seem to be in view in the act in the case of the ascension offering, for instance.

Another possibility is that the animal is seen as standing for or substituting for the offerer in some manner. This possibility could take a number of different forms. First, the animal could more directly symbolise the offerer so that the offerer sees his own acceptance in the acceptance of the sacrificial animal, thinking when he looked at his sacrifice, this is me.

[ 15 : 58 ] Second, the animal could represent the offerer, the fitting offering, not symbolising the offerer themselves, but acting more on their behalf and including them within it, like the high priest represents the people.

In such a case, the offerer might look at their sacrifice and think, I am being accepted in this fitting offering or representative. Third, the animal might substitute for the offerer.

In such a case, the offerer might look at the sacrificial animal and think, this animal is suffering instead of me. We should recognise that each of these ways in which an animal can stand for an offerer might be operative within the sacrificial system.

We should beware of overly depending upon one to the exclusion of others. While the killing of the animal is an integral part of the rite, it is upon the placing of its blood that the accent falls.

Phenomenologically and biologically, blood is intimately associated with life. Lose a large quantity of your blood and you will die. The animal's blood is its life, its life poured out in its death.

[ 17 : 00 ] This blood is then applied to specific objects which represent various realities. Here we need to consider the symbolic importance of various locations in the tabernacle. The high priest alone enters the most holy place only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The rest of the priests can enter the holy place. The people are restricted to the courtyard. The altar of incense within the holy place corresponds to the bronze altar in the tabernacle courtyard.

In many respects, what the bronze altar is to the Israelite layperson, the altar of incense is to the anointed priest. The blood serves to purge impurity, protecting against the breaking out of the Lord's holiness against people.

The blood is applied to the extremities of the two altars, the internal altar of incense in the case of the anointed priest or the entire people and the external bronze altar in the case of laypersons.

In the case of a purification offering for the priest or the entire people, the blood is also sprinkled before the Lord in front of the veil of the most holy place. Although they cannot enter into the most holy place, the blood rite is performed towards the realm of the Lord's special dwelling.

[ 18 : 10 ] The horns of the altar could be seen as symbolizing both the extremities of the land and of the human body. Here it is important to consider instances where the blood of sacrifices is applied to human bodies, as in the cleansing of those with the skin disease later in Leviticus and the ordination of priests.

In Leviticus chapter 14 verse 14, we read of the law of the person to be cleansed from the skin disease. The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.

In Exodus chapter 24 verses 6 to 8, we have a more dramatic blood rite performed at the very foundation of the Mosaic covenant. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he threw against the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient. And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

Perhaps we are to see a symbolic relation here. The altar represents the people and applying blood to the altar is symbolically related to applying blood to people. The extremities of the right ear, right thumb and right big toe correspond to the horns of the altar.

[ 19 : 32 ] Consequently, the altar and the tabernacle symbolize the body and land of Israel and to symbolically cleanse from impurity through such purification offerings. As the fat of the peace offerings is offered on top of the regular ascension offerings, so the fat of the sin offerings is offered.

The remainder of the sacrificial animal was treated in different ways, depending on the party for whom the offering was being made. In the case of the purification offerings for the priests and the whole congregation, none of the animal could be eaten.

The parts that were not offered on the bronze altar were to be burned up in a clean place. Here it is important to remember that different forms of burning carry different significance. The burning on the altar is for the purpose of transformation, not destruction.

The animal burnt there is transformed into smoke and ascends into the Lord's presence. The burning outside of the camp seems to serve a different purpose. It destroyed the rest of the sacrificial animal, preventing it from being used for any other purpose.

It could not be offered as the fat, nor could it be eaten. The regulations for layperson's offerings, however, differed, and they're laid out in Leviticus chapter 6, verses 24 to 30.

[ 20 : 43 ] The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the sin offering. In the place where the burnt offering is killed, shall the sin offering be killed before the Lord.

It is most holy. The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it. In a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the tent of meeting. Whatever touches its flesh shall be holy.

And when any of its blood is splashed on a garment, you shall wash that on which it was splashed in a holy place. And the earthenware vessel in which it is boiled shall be broken. But if it is boiled in a bronze vessel, that shall be scoured and rinsed in water.

Every male among the priests may eat of it. It is most holy. But no sin offering shall be eaten from which any blood is brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the holy place. It shall be burned up with fire.

The flesh of the purification offering was set apart, so it needed to be disposed of in a clean place, either completely destroyed by fire, or in the case of the sin offerings of laypersons, eaten by the priests in the courtyard.

[ 21 : 44 ] The priests' eating of the sin offerings of the people seems to be part of the efficacy of the purification offering, as this is implied in Leviticus chapter 10 verses 17 to 18.

Moses addresses Aaron there. Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy, and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord?

Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary as I commanded. By eating the purification offering, the priests can bear the iniquity of the nation, acting as substitutes for the people themselves, on account of their holy status before the Lord.

Through the sacrifice, a sort of ritual transference seems to occur. The biblical teaching concerning the purification offering finds its fulfillment in Christ, who is given as a purification or sin offering for us, and affects full and perfect atonement once and for all.

In Hebrews chapter 9 verses 13 to 14 we read, For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

[ 23 : 02 ] The blood of bulls and goats could not ultimately take away sin, but Christ's blood can, and so all of the purification offerings anticipate his great offering, and, we can reasonably infer, depend upon that offering for their efficacy.

We can also think about the importance of the purification offering in terms of our patterns of worship. Just as the purification is followed by the ascension, is followed by the tribute, is followed by the peace offering, we can think about the order of worship as one involving confession and dealing with sins, consecration and ascension in worship, offering of our gifts and tribute, all culminating in a communion meal.

A question to consider. Hebrews chapter 13 verses 10 to 13 refer to the purification offering and the ritual disposal of its meat.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat, for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

[ 24 : 16 ] How might our consideration of the meaning of the purification offering help us to interpret this passage?