

Part 3 of a series on Old Testament Covenant Theology

Covenant, Law and Sacrifice

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We have been tracing the covenant narrative of the Old Testament from the first time that the word occurs in God's dealings with Noah, through Abraham to the normative establishment of the covenant through Moses with Israel at the time of the exodus. And we noted that those who ate the Passover were committed to pilgrimage. They had no option but to go walking with God. The destination of that walk was mount Sinai.

We might have been inclined to think Mount Sinai was purely incidental; was not the land of Canaan their destination? It is worth giving just a moment's consideration to the fact that, though God was going to lead his people into the land of Canaan in fulfilment of his promise, Mount Sinai was the primary destination towards which they were aiming when they left the land of Egypt. In Exodus 3:12 God speaks to the uncertain and hesitant Moses, 'But I will be with thee; and this shall be the token to thee that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.' To Moses the arrival at Mount Sinai and the worship of God there was the crown upon the whole enterprise. When that happened it would be to him a divine token that God had engineered the whole enterprise. In Exodus 13:17 we read, 'And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by way of the land of the Philistines, though the way was near . . . but God led the people about . . .' God managed this march out of his own perfect design for the people and he led them on course to Mount Sinai. (See also Exodus 3:18).

The Place of the Law in the Life of God's People

We are enabled here, by a simple observation of a sequence of events, to give a biblical perspective on the place of the law in the life of the people of God. The folk who had rested underneath the sheltering blood, who were committed thereby to pilgrimage, discovered that the immediate objective of their pilgrimage was the place where they might hear God speak of the word of law and of commandment. In the Old Testament, the law is not a ladder whereby the unsaved seek in vain to climb into the presence of God. The law is a divinely given pattern of life for those who have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb.

Notice the way in which the law was set before the people. Look at one reference chosen almost at random out of many. Leviticus 19 is a chapter in which are gathered many diverse kinds of law, for the law of God spoken through Moses was a comprehensive law, covering every aspect of his people's life. Notice first of all the point at which this chapter begins: 'Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.' (v. 2) The purpose of the law was to make God's people like God himself. Now notice the echo that runs right through this chapter: at the end of verse 3, 'I am the LORD your God'; verse 10, 'I am the LORD your God'; at the end of verse 12, 'I am the LORD'; verse 14, 'I am the LORD', and so on right through the chapter. As God declares his law in summary form here, he reminds his people over and over again that these commandments are not arbitrary: The law is what it is because God is who he is. The law is a reflection of the divine nature and its design is to make God's people into the same image. There are two images of God on earth: there is the image of God in man, and there is the

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image of God in the law of God. If a man is to manifest the image of God in which he has been made and to live a normative and truly human life, then he must deliberately pattern his life upon the law of God, because that law is the verbal statement of what God is like. The law is what it is because God is who he is and in order that man may become what he should be. That is the central place that Mount Sinai has in the covenant and in the total covenant document which is the Holy Scriptures.

Approaching the Unapproachable God through the Blood of the Covenant

Now we return to Exodus 19. Mount Sinai spoke with a yes and a no to the people of God. In Exodus 3, in the incident of the burning bush, we read, 'Moses said, I will turn aside and see this great sight why the bush is not burnt: And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the bush and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I, and he said, Draw not nigh hither' (3:3-4). Now when the people came to Mount Sinai they found the burning bush on a large scale, for it was the whole of mount Sinai that was aflame and smoking. 'And Mount Sinai was altogether shrouded in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire,' (Exodus 19:18). But while God came down to be amongst his people, there was the same ambivalence that there was in Exodus 3. 'Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God' (Exodus 19:17). But 'Moses said unto the LORD, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for thou didst charge us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it' (v. 23) and 'Let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD.' (v. 24) In Exodus 3 God called Moses, and when Moses responded God said, 'Don't come'; in Exodus 19 Moses brings the people by divine invitation to meet God, and God says, 'Don't let them come near.' Mount Sinai speaks with a double voice. It speaks of a people who are brought near, and it speaks of a mountain with a fence round it whereby they cannot come near.

This situation is solved in the covenant ceremony of Exodus 24:4-8: 'And Moses . . . builded an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath spoken will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it upon the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you on the basis of all these words'. First of all we have the symbol of covenant reality: 'Moses . . .

built an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel' (v. 4). In this symbol, the twelve pillars represent the twelve tribes who are gathered round the altar. God has brought his people to himself, and there he is in the midst of his gathered people. The covenant has been fulfilled, and there it is in symbolic reality.

But how is this covenant symbol to become a reality? Look at what verses 5 & 6 say about the blood of the covenant Godward; 'And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it into basins; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.' In the symbol, God is present as the altar; he is symbolised as the one who is present in the midst of his people in terms of sacrifice and blood. And Moses lives out that symbolism now by taking half of the blood and making it exercise its influence Godward, sprinkling it on the altar, reaching back to the Passover blood. The Passover blood, as we saw in our last study, exercised its primary influence towards God in propitiation; the holy God was turned from the wrath which was proper to him, and there was peace between him and the people who were beneath the sheltering blood. And I guess that this is why the sacrifices specified here are burnt offerings and peace offerings, two thirds of the Levitical system. The missing sacrifice was the sin

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offering. I offer you the suggestion that what Moses is doing here is bringing into full expression that which was first expressed in the Passover sacrifice in the land of Egypt. There, peace was established with a holy God; all that is necessary now in order to present the blood of the covenant is to bring that to its fulness by the offering of burnt offerings and peace offerings.

The blood moves first Godward in propitiation, but then, secondly, manward. 'And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people: and they said, All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people.' (vv. 7-8). First comes the commitment to obedience, 'All that the LORD has said we will do, and we will be obedient', then the sprinkling of the blood manward. This means that, just as the blood of the covenant on the one hand establishes the relationship of peace with God by propitiation, so, on the other hand, the blood of the covenant *maintains* the relationship of peace with God for a people who are committed to walk in obedience. God knows that the people are professing beyond their strength: 'They have well said in what they have said. O that there were such a heart in them, that they would . . . keep my commandments always.' (Deuteronomy 5:28ff) But they are professing beyond their ability. 'Very well', says God, 'I will make a provision for them.' The same blood which has made

peace with God will keep peace with God. As they walk in the way of obedience, the blood is available for them. As they stumble and fall, so the covenant blood will be available for them.

See here, *the nature of Old Testament religion*. Old Testament religion is a complex of grace, law and grace. We have seen the grace that brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, the law that was spoken to them because they were redeemed people, and now the grace that was made available for them as they committed themselves to a life of obedience. Notice how this solves thorny problems which have been raised by Old Testament specialists, e.g. the supposition that there was a battle in Israel between those who thought that religion was purely a matter of the cult and the sacrifices and those who thought that religion was purely a matter of ethical observance. It cannot be so because the Sinaitic Mosaic ground work of Old Testament religion is the binding together of the commitment to obedience and the blood of sacrifice. Naturally when the prophets found that sacrifices were getting out of place, they countered that by reasserting the priorities for the people of God. The prior call was to holiness and within that context the blood of sacrifice makes provision for the lapses of the people. It is round this point that the totality of Old Testament religion finds its unity.

Notice also, *the unity of the Old and New Testaments*. I John 2:1-2 reads, 'My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.' People of God under the new covenant have no permission to sin; they are summoned to a life of holiness. 'But if any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins'; God has made a provision whereby those who are committed to obedience may, in spite of their disobedience, still be kept at peace with God and maintained in the covenant relationship. The whole of the Bible speaks with one voice.

The Efficacy of the Blood

We saw above how Mount Sinai posed a great tension between God's welcome of his people and the impossibility of sinners coming into the presence of a holy God. This tension was solved by blood. We move on now to take up the thought of the efficacy of the blood.

Notice first of all the sequence of events which binds the book of Exodus and the book of Leviticus together. The second half of the book of Exodus is concerned with the plans for the

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tabernacle and the setting up of the tabernacle. Look first of all at chapter 29:44, 'I will sanctify the tent of meeting and the altar: Aaron also and his sons will I sanctify, to minister to me in the priest's office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, in order that I might dwell among them.' The tabernacle is the visible focus of the covenant and the climax of redemption; he brought them out of Egypt for this very purpose, that he might dwell among them.

With what anticipation the people must have looked forward to the setting up of the tabernacle! Consider the situation at the end of Exodus: 'Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.' (40:34) God had taken up residence in the midst of the people. But in verse 35 we read, 'And Moses was not able to enter. . . .' So here again is the same tension; God is present but is not available.

How is this situation to be resolved? Look at Leviticus 1:1, 'The LORD called unto Moses, and spoke unto him out of the tent of meeting, saying 'Speak unto the children of Israel and say, When any man offers an oblation unto the LORD' Now literally that is, '*when any man brings near that which is brought near*'. The glory banishes, but the sacrifices unite, the people cannot enter, but they can come near. The sacrifices are designed to maintain a redeemed people in closeknit fellowship with their God.

The sacrifices are not available to the unconverted. If a man joined the people of God under the old covenant, he signalled that by circumcision and Passover. The Passover is the model of the one sacrifice for sin for ever because it is an Egypt sacrifice. The Passover can only be sacrificed in Egypt because it is designed to get the people out of Egypt. Once they are out it can only be remembered; it cannot be repeated. Therefore the Passover is the model of Calvary, and if a man joins himself to the people of God he must come in at that point; then the other sacrifices become available to him. They are to maintain the redeemed in fellowship with God, just as the blood of Jesus Christ his Son keeps on cleansing us from all sin. Just as that one sacrifice at Calvary is endlessly efficacious to maintain us in fellowship with God, so under the Old covenant the blood of the covenant which was offered normatively in Egypt is endlessly available in terms of the Levitical sacrifices to maintain the redeemed people in fellowship with God.

We must now concentrate in brief on two features of the sacrifices. The sacrificial system was a complex one with three categories of sacrifice; but running through its complexity and common to all its categories, there were two features: the offerer had to lay his hand upon the head of his offering, and there had to be a certain ceremonial to deal with the blood that was shed when the animal was killed.

The laying on of hands is mentioned, for example, in Leviticus 1:4, 'He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering', and you will find a similar reference for each of the other types of offering in Leviticus 3:2 and 4:4. Now in Numbers 8:11 we read, 'And Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD for a wave offering, separating them from among the children of Israel that they may be to do the service of the LORD.' Verse 16 reads, 'For they are wholly given unto me from among the children of Israel, instead of all that openeth the womb, even the firstborn of all the children of Israel. . . .' Notice the phrase, 'instead of'. The Levites were taken in substitution for the people to do in their place the service of the Lord. This relationship was symbolised by the laying on of hands. By this ceremony the Levites were appointed to stand in a certain relationship to the people who performed the laying on of hands; they were appointed to stand in their place and to fulfil certain functions on their behalf. Look now at Leviticus 16:21-22: 'Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat.' What does the laying on of hands now signify? It signifies the transference of sin and guilt. These two illustrations help us to understand the symbolism of the laying on of hands in the Levitical sacrifices. The offerer was appointing one to stand in his place, and where necessary he was off-loading onto the animal all his iniquities, transgressions

and sins, as in the case of the sin offering. The symbolism of the laying on of hands is the symbolism of the appointment of a substitute.

The key verse for understanding the meaning of the blood is Leviticus 17:11: '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: for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life.'

Notice firstly that the function of the blood is stated here: 'I have given it to you . . . to make atonement.' The blood must have a meaning that enables it to fulfil the function of making

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atonement. Now the noun 'atonement' has the consistent meaning of 'a ransom price', 'a payment that is appropriate to discharge a certain indebtedness'. The verb 'to make atonement' means the making of such a payment. So the blood makes a payment; it envisages a situation of indebtedness and it discharges that debt. The basic literal meaning of the verb is to hide. But it is not consistent with the divine nature to sweep sin under the carpet and hide it merely out of sight. That is not dealing with sin; that is conniving with sin. And so, when God hides the sin of his people, he hides it by means of a payment that is satisfactory to discharge their indebtedness. On Passover night the wages of sin was death, and so the payment which will discharge their indebtedness is the death of the Passover lamb. The efficacy of that death is prolonged by means of the threefold system of sacrifices. If the blood is to perform the paying of a debt, then it can only be significant of a life terminated; it can only mean that a death has taken place.

Notice secondly that the life of the flesh is laid down as an equivalent payment for the debt incurred by sin. This life of the flesh is in the blood. When that blood is shed, that life is terminated and laid down as a payment for sin. The last phrase of Leviticus 17:11 fits ideally into that interpretation; literally translated the phrase is: 'For the blood makes atonement by the life.' 'By the life' is exactly the same expression as that found in Deuteronomy 19:21, where Moses announces the fundamental legal precept for all time: 'Thine eyes shall not pity, life shall go for life.' It is a preposition (in Hebrew) of exact equivalence and one that is used in commercial transactions as well as legal. Thus the sacrifices are a divine provision to maintain a redeemed people in fellowship with their God; but they do so by prolonging amongst the people of God the virtue and meaning of the initial sacrifice, where life went for life and on the basis of substitution God was propitiated and God's people were made secure.