

Sacrifices in the Old Testament

Sacrifices were in use during the entire Old Testament period. The first sacrifices are spoken of in connection with the sons of Adam and Eve: Cain and Abel. Cain sacrificed the fruits of the earth and Abel a firstborn lamb (Gen. 4:3). After the flood, Noah sacrificed both cattle and birds as burnt offerings (Gen. 8:20). Already in these cases appear two sacrificial forms: plant offerings and animal offerings. The Old Testament also tells of human sacrifice. At God's command Abraham was ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac. At the moment of sacrifice however God prevented the sacrifice of Isaac and revealed a substitute sacrifice. In his heart Abraham had already sacrificed his son. He had shown obedience to God's will and was ready to fulfill it (Gen. 22:1–19).

Animal sacrifices were more important than plant sacrifices because the blood that flowed from the sacrifices was able to show atonement. This matter came out already in the difference between Cain and Abel's sacrifices. The difference in the sacrificial mind of the two brothers was what was truly decisive. When Cain brought his offering, he did so in the belief that he was a successful worshiper, while Abel felt himself to be a sinner.

In sacrificial offering it was essential that the sacrifice be without blemish. The sacrificial animal had to be the "purest" of the species, a healthy animal. The same quality requirement also touched the offering given from the fruits of the earth. It also had to be pure, a newly gathered harvest. In addition to sacrifices there were also numerous types of offerings in the Old Testament sacrificial worship. In addition to the difference in the offering itself, their differences were based on the manner and purpose of the offering. Thus, categories of offerings included, among others, burnt offerings or whole offerings, thank offerings, sin-offerings, food and drink offerings, and incense offerings (Offerings are dealt with primarily in Leviticus chapters 1–7).

Offerings occurred on a sacrificial altar built of stones upon the ground. Later the tabernacle became the place of sacrifice and after that the Lord's temple, which was built in Jerusalem. In the last-mentioned places of sacrifice the offerings were centered in the courtyard and the tabernacle/temple sanctuary (the Holy place). The part called the Holy of Holies was intended only for the sprinkling of blood that was performed once a year by the high priest.

The Old Testament sacrificial worship and the New Testament sacrifice, which is shown to be Christ, are written of in the Letter to the Hebrews (Ch. 9). In Him, in Christ, is fulfilled the perfect sacrifice, of which the unblemished sacrificial animals of the Old Testament were a type. This matter was shown to Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac, which was mentioned in the beginning of the article. When the patriarch was able to bind an unblemished ram on the altar in place of his son, he was at the same time able to behold by faith the sacrifice of Christ.

METAPHORS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Christ's sacrifice meant the fulfillment of the testament (will) that had been given. When the giver of the testament (will) had died, the testament came into effect. The Old Testament with its continual sacrificial worship ended. The sacrifice of God's Son was a perfect blood sacrifice. He without sin shed his blameless blood on behalf of sinners. The sacrifice was a one-time offering which did not need to be renewed. Christ did not enter into the Holiest of Holies in that sanctuary made by men's hands like the High Priest did. He went to His Father in heaven and at the same time opened the way there to us as well. It is said in the Letter to the Hebrews that He is there before God speaking on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). It is unspeakably comforting to read the related verses that follow as well. In them we are reminded that it is the lot of every man to once die and be judged. But when Christ had given His sacrifice and died on our behalf, He will yet once appear to bring to Him in the glory of heaven us who await His salvation. "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us" (Heb. 10:14, 15).

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