

"He Offered Himself" *Sacrifice in Hebrews*

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As both priest and victim, Christ offered himself through sacrificial actions involving death, entry into the heavenly sanctuary, and cleansing by blood. Hebrews highlights the soteriological, psychological, and social benefits of this sacrifice.

Hebrews drew on the sacrificial system of the Old Testament to develop an effective, Christocentric soteriology to meet the needs of those it addressed. This rhetorical strategy required Hebrews to portray sacrifice in both negative and positive terms. The author criticizes the sacrificial rituals of Israel as ineffective (7:11, 18–19; 10:4), endlessly repetitious (7:23; 10:1), impermanent (8:13; 9:9–10), and tainted by the sin of the priests who offered them (5:3; 7:27; 9:7). Hebrews deprecates sacrifice from the perspective of a spatial, temporal, and evaluative dualism that opposes transitory earthly phenomena over against eternal heavenly realities. This reflects the apocalyptic worldview of early Christianity and echoes Platonic idealism (8:5; Wis 9:8). Such a negative appraisal of sacrifice echoes the critiques of the Hellenistic world. Yet for the sake of its argument, Hebrews asserts the overall validity of the sacrificial process. It does not deny the validity of earthly sacrificial ritual, but rather points beyond it to a transcendent temple and a definitive sacrifice. Hebrews criticizes the previous sacrificial system to highlight, by contrast, the effectiveness of a “better” sacrifice (9:23) that enacts a “better covenant” (7:22) based on “better promises” (8:26) made by Christ as the superior priest (7:11, 15, 26–27).¹

¹Those addressed by Hebrews were perhaps attracted to aspects of Judaism, providing another reason to disparage Old Testament ritual and priesthood. For priestly imagery in Hebrews, see R. D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 141–54.

The author argues as an exegete of the Septuagint. This exegetical perspective is unmistakable in 7:27; 9:1–5, 13, 19. Hebrews bases its perceptions on the Septuagint's portrayal of the wilderness tabernacle rather than on actual practices in the Jerusalem temple. There is no awareness that contemporary (or recently discontinued) temple ritual might differ from what biblical texts describe. Two rituals provide templates for describing the sacrifice of Jesus: the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16 and the ceremony of covenant confirmed by sacrificial blood in Exod 24:3–8. Hebrews selects only those portions of the Day of Atonement ritual that serve the argument, thus eliminating the scapegoat entirely. At the same time, it enriches its understanding of sacrifice with elements from texts that go beyond the Day of Atonement, utilizing the sin offerings and reparation offerings of Lev 4:1–6:7, the red heifer ritual of Numbers 19, the daily *tamid* sacrifices (Heb 7:27; Num 28:1–8), as well as the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and the first Passover (Heb 11:4, 17, 28).

THE DRAMA OF SACRIFICE

In the popular mind, sacrificing an animal is the same thing as killing it. This oversimplification of the sacrificial act and the overemphasis on the death of the victim has caused all sorts of theological mischief in the history of Christian thought. In reality, animal sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible were complex ritual events that involved a series of actions. Among these are the presentation of the animal by the donor, its slaughter by the donor or a priest, the capture of blood, the conveyance of all or part of the animal by the priest to the altar in order to effect its transfer to God, a shared meal, and the manipulation of the victim's blood as a ritual agent.²

Hebrews reflects the complexity of Israelite sacrifice by describing the sacrificial act of Jesus as a ritual script that entailed three episodes: the death of the victim, passage by the priest into the realm of the holy, and the use of blood to effect purification and to create a covenantal relationship. All three of these actions were part of the Day of Atonement ritual (slaughter in Lev 16:11, 15a; entrance in vv. 12–13, 15a; sprinkling blood in vv. 14, 15b, 18–19). The first and last steps appear in the covenant ceremony of Exod 24:5, 6–8. Hebrews presents these three stages in an intertwined and complex way.

The verb “offer” (*prosp̄erō* and *anapherō*), used frequently in Hebrews, does not mean narrowly “kill as a sacrifice” (even in 9:28), but rather describes the whole complex act of sacrifice, of which death is only the first element. To offer something as sacrifice is to transfer it out of the realm of human use and disposal and into the domain of God. To offer means to present a sacrifice to God by bringing it near to the divine presence and employing some action or gesture to express this act of transfer: lifting it up to heaven, setting it

²Nelson, *Faithful Priest*, 55–82; bibliography on pp. 176–77.

down near the altar, pouring it out, or putting it on the altar fire to ascend as smoke.³

DEATH

In Israelite sacrifice, the death of the victim was essential to the ritual script, but it was not the central or most important action. The slaughter of the animal was an initial first step, obviously necessary to what followed. The real center of gravity in sacrifice, however, was the priestly act of bringing the victim and its blood before God at the altar. Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible was not a matter of substitutionary atonement or vicarious suffering.⁴ The animal was killed, not as a substitute for the donor of the sacrifice, but to provide blood for purification, food for the communal meal, and a gift to offer to God on the altar fire. In fact, the slaughter of the animal was sometimes the task of the donor, not the priest.⁵

Nevertheless, death inevitably and necessarily was the starting point for the sacrifice in which Jesus played the role of both priest and victim. His suffering, human nature, and obedient death launched a complex act of sacrifice that culminated in the heavenly sanctuary and in taking a seat beside God's throne (2:9; 5:7–10; 12:2). The Christology of Hebrews derives from three sources: traditions about Jesus, inherited hymnic statements contained in 1:3–4 and 5:8–10, and a selection of Old Testament texts. All three of these resources compelled the author of Hebrews to incorporate the fact of the cross into the sacrificial work of Jesus. The gospel tradition meant that the sacrificial script began with a lifestory involving "loud cries and tears" (5:7) and a shameful crucifixion by hostile opponents (12:2–3; cf. 6:6) outside the gate of Jerusalem (13:12; Matt 21:39; cf. John 19:17–20). Christ's suffering and death were also part of the traditional hymnic creeds of humiliation and exaltation. Like its counterpart in Phil 2:6–11, the poem underlying Heb 5:7–10 describes the downward and then upward movement of the heavenly redeemer. Suffering and death (vv. 7–8) came at the midpoint between his previous glory as Son (vv. 5b, 8a) and his ultimate exaltation as Son and high priest (vv. 6, 10). The "days of his flesh" were marked by submission, obedience, and suffering. The Old Testament also witnesses to Christ's humiliation: for a little while he "was made lower than the angels" (2:9; Ps 8).

"The suffering of death" led to the "glory and honor" of Christ's exaltation, so that he "might taste death" on behalf of all humanity (2:9). Enduring crucifixion and despising its shame brought about the joy of being seated beside God's throne (12:2). The relationship between suffering and becoming perfected gives value to Christ's death (2:10). Suffering

³That the verb "offer" describes the entire sacrificial act, and not just death, is clear in 9:7, 25. *Prosphero* in the Septuagint usually translates the Hiphil of *bw'* and *qrb* ("bring" and "bring near"). *Anapherō* translates the Hiphil of *qtr* ("make ascend as smoke"). The repeated use of the noun *prophora* ("offering") in ch. 10 derives from the quotation of Ps 40:6 in v. 5.

⁴Nelson, *Faithful Priest*, 79–81.

⁵Lev 1:5; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:24, 29, 33 RSV; obscured in other translations.

taught the Son obedience, which was part of the process of “being made perfect” that was the condition for him to become “the source of eternal salvation” (5:8–9).

The value of his death, however, is not to be identified with the act of atonement itself. Rather the special circumstances of Christ’s death made his total sacrificial act efficacious. His death is first and foremost a matter of solidarity with those sisters and brothers for whom he serves as priest (2:10–11, 17–18; 4:15). In sharing the fate of death with them, he was able to destroy the power of death and free those enslaved to the fear of death (2:14–15). His prayers with “cries and tears” were heard, linking his lifestory to the reverent

supplications of those righteous sufferers who speak in the lament psalms (5:7). Christ thus partakes in the same sequence of “first death and then judgment” common to all humanity. But, for him, this sequence is transformed by Jesus’ “having been offered” (*propherō*, the sacrificial act in its entirety) to bear sins (LXX Isa 53:12) and then returning a second time to save (9:27–28). Use of the passive voice in

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9:28 points beyond Jesus himself to the will and plan of God, who has set the Son into his role (5:10; 10:10; 11:40). Yet Hebrews also insists that Jesus voluntarily participated in his own death. Indeed, it was his obedience to the divine will that made his sacrifice eternally effective and radically different from sacrifices performed by earthly priests. It was precisely his self-offering that caused him to be a sacrificial victim without blemish (9:14) and allowed the effective removal of sin (7:27; 9:26). Moreover, his obedient willingness to endure hostility and abuse sets an example for his followers (12:3; 13:13).

Still, the cross was neither the totality of Jesus’ sacrificial work nor even its central focus. Rather, the cross was the first component in a larger sacrificial script. His death made entrance into the heavenly sanctuary possible and provided the blood needed to cleanse, as on the Day of Atonement (9:21–22), and bring about covenant unity (reflecting Exod 24:18–20). The cross meant there could be “something to offer” so that Christ could function as priest (8:3). His death was an offering of his body (10:5, 10; cf. the “flesh” in 10:20), yet for the efficacy of his overall sacrificial offering his blood was more significant (9:12, 14; 12:24). On the Day of Atonement, the unused parts of the sacrifice were disposed of outside the camp (Lev 16:17), but the effective blood was brought into the sanctuary. Following this pattern, Hebrews significantly divides the suffering of Jesus “outside the city” from the effect of his sanctifying blood (Heb 13:11–12).

Hebrews moves beyond this sacrificial model in 9:15–17 to draw a parallel to wills and testaments that require the death of the testator. However, even here the topic of death reverts to the matter of blood used to commit the parties to a covenant and to purify the

things used in worship (9:18–20, 21–22) The author concludes from this that all forgiveness requires blood (9:22). Translators who render *haimatekchysia* in this verse as “shedding of blood” (NRSV) emphasize the death of the sacrificial victim. Translating it as “pouring out” or “sprinkling of blood” stresses the effective application of blood at the altar and to other sacral items. This double-edged word aptly expresses the role of Christ’s death in the sacrificial script as something necessary, and uniquely obedient, as well as voluntary. Yet, at the same time, Christ’s death was only a first step that laid the groundwork for his effective atonement in the heavenly sanctuary.

Hebrews thus binds Christ’s cross and exaltation as elements of a single sacrificial script and as successive stages in a “single sacrifice” (10:12) and a “single offering” (v. 14; cf. v. 10) made “once for all.” His willing death was the first phase of a complex priestly action that continued in his ascension through the heavenly realms and entrance with blood into the heavenly sanctuary. It concluded with a decisive act of purification and being seated beside God’s throne, where Christ can continually intercede for his followers. The cross was no mere prologue to, or presupposition for, Christ’s priestly work in heaven, but an essential first element in his multi-stage act of sacrificial offering. Suffering, entrance, offering, and sacrifice are firmly bracketed together in 9:25–26. The inherited hymnic creed likewise underscores the continuity between Christ’s suffering and his exaltation in the story of salvation (5:7–10).

ASCENSION AND ENTRANCE INTO THE SANCTUARY

An essential element in Old Testament sacrifice was the priest’s approach before God with the offering. Priests enjoyed an exclusive right of access to the holy space of the sanctuary and the holy altar. Entering the sacred realm, they effected the transfer of the sacrificial gift to God or applied the blood to cleanse the holy things from pollution (Lev 15:31; 16:19).⁶ On the Day of Atonement, the high priest approached and entered the holiest place behind the curtain that divided it from the rest of the sanctuary (16:2, 3, 12, 17, 23), bringing with him purifying blood (vv. 14–15). Hebrews uses this ritual movement to conceptualize Christ’s heavenly exaltation, inherited from the hymnic creeds (1:4; 5:6, 10; cf. Phil 2:9–11) and identified in Psalm 8 (Heb 2:9). This corresponds to the historicized ascension of the gospel tradition.⁷ Hebrews thus unites Christ’s resurrection and exaltation/ascension into a single concept (13:20). An indispensable component of Christ’s priestly offering was his transit through the created “heavens” (4:14; 7:26) to reach “heaven itself” (9:24, note the singular). This is the place of God’s throne “in the heavens” and the true heavenly sanctuary (8:1–2; Isa 6:1; Ps 11:4). In this way, Christ is a “pioneer” (better: “originator, founder,” Heb

⁶On priestly access, see Nelson, *Faithful Priest*, 59–62. On the purification of the sanctuary, see J. Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly ‘Picture of Dorian Gray,’” in *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) 75–84.

⁷Luke 9:51; 24:50–51; Acts 1:9–11; cf. John 3:13; 6:62.

2:10; 12:2) and a “forerunner” (6:20) for his followers, who themselves can “approach” God (4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:22; 12:22).

The point of Christ’s passage through the heavens is not the journey itself but its goal, his entrance with blood as high priest into the heavenly sanctuary. This, too, is a liturgical act, a component of his sacrifice.⁸ He entered “the inner shrine behind the curtain” (6:20) to make a ritual appearance on our behalf before God.⁹ He entered with (or by means of) his own blood, obtaining redemption (9:11–12). This entry was by means of (or by way of) the flesh of his incarnation and death (10:20). Although the Day of Atonement ritual required two entrances by the high priest, Jesus needed to make only one (9:12), for he did not have to atone for any sin of his own.¹⁰ His followers, too, enter boldly into the sanctuary (10:19).

PURIFICATION, ENTHRONEMENT, INTERCESSION

Hebrews focuses on Christ’s entry into the inner sanctuary with his blood (9:7–12, 24–25), but avoids describing any actual ritual of purification involving that blood, perhaps to avoid pressing the symbolic language too far. In 12:24, the metaphor shifts to the safer ground of effective language: this is sprinkled blood that speaks a “better word” than that of Abel. Instead of portraying the details of some ritual action, Hebrews stresses that this cleansing was efficacious and that the means of purification was Jesus’ own blood. The old rite was ineffective because it used animal blood and was repeated (10:1–4); Christ’s priestly act took place but only once and involved his own blood as an offering of himself (7:27; 9:25–26). Moreover, it took place in the heavenly realm of true reality (9:24 in contrast to 10:1). Christ’s accomplishment is the ultimate example of the scriptural axiom that purification must be effected by the ritual utilization of blood (9:13–14, 21–23). But his blood is more effective because it was literally his own, the result of an obedient self-offering performed through “eternal spirit” and thus the polar opposite of anything physical or temporary (9:12). The redeeming and purifying effect of his blood is interior and eternal rather than external and impermanent (9:12–14; cf. 10:1–4).

Sprinkled blood is also a feature in the sacrificial ritual by which Moses ratified the covenant in Exod 24:3–8. The blood that Moses sprinkled on people and altar unified God and Israel covenantally. Likewise, Jesus mediated a new covenant through his own death and sprinkled blood (9:15; 12:24). Hebrews 9:18–22 expands on what scripture reports about Moses—Moses sprinkles the law book, the tabernacle, and its vessels—and conflates a variety of ritual acts and items from the red heifer ritual (Num 19:9, 18, 20) to the scarlet wool (Lev 14:2–6). This rhetorical device communicates that the priestly act of Jesus culmi-

⁸ 9:25; 13:11; Lev 16:2, 3, 15, 17, 23.

⁹ 9:24; cf. Exod 23:15b, 17; Deut 16:16.

¹⁰ Contrast 5:3 with 4:15 and 7:26; cf. Lev 16:6, 11.

nated and transcended the entire former sacrificial system, but was still based on its central principle, the effectiveness of sprinkled blood.

The Son's exaltation finds its culmination in his sitting down beside God's throne. This is the climax of the inherited hymnic creed (1:3; cf. Eph 1:20; Col 3:1), buttressed by Ps 110:1 (1:13). This glorious enthronement validates Jesus' degrading death on the cross and his disregard of its public shame (12:2).¹¹ Taking his exalted seat indicates a decisive turn of affairs, for it marks the conclusion of his offering of the "single sacrifice" (10:12). The sequence is purification and then heavenly enthronement (1:3). Thus, Christ's heavenly activities included a past and completed aspect, a unique act of purification performed once for all (9:25–26). However, the work of his permanent priesthood also continues in ongoing intercession (7:24–25).¹² Rather than completing his priestly activities, Christ's enthronement remains connected to his ministry as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary (8:1–2). Because sacrificial service entailed the posture of *standing* before God or at the altar (10:11; Deut 10:8; 18:7), the contrasting act of *sitting down* indicates the termination of Christ's sacrificial act (10:12). Yet, at the same time, his enthronement at God's right side gives him the access and status appropriate for ongoing, effective intercession. Consider the enthronement of Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 2:19–21, which gave her the standing to intercede with Solomon. Hebrews, however, does not conceptualize Christ's ongoing activity as minister in terms of an eternal sacrificial self-offering (*leitourgos*; 8:2, cf. v. 6). That sacrificial offering encompassed a series of acts (self-offering, death, entrance and appearance, removal of sins) done only "once."¹³

ROLES IN SACRIFICE

The drama of animal sacrifice involves three roles: the victim, the beneficiary donor, and the priest. The *victim* is an appropriate animal without physical blemish. The beneficiary *donor*—the one for whose benefit the sacrifice is being performed—might participate in the sacrificial ritual by laying a hand upon the animal to indicate ownership or association with it. Sometimes the donor slaughtered the victim. Many sacrifices resulted in a communion meal eaten by the donor and others (cf. 13:10). The *priest* handled the blood, approached the holy sphere, and performed the act of offering by placing all or part of the animal on the altar. The extraordinary nature of Christ's sacrifice consisted of him taking on the roles of priest and victim at the same time, offering himself in a sacrifice that benefited his followers (7:27; 9:14, 26). French anthropologists label the beneficiary donor as the *sacrifiant*, one who has a sacrifice performed for his or her benefit. This role is distinguished from the *sacrificateur*, the one who actually performs the sacrifice. Using these terms, Christ was the

¹¹For the cultural background of this verse, see N. C. Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–13 in its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 65–68, 175–87.

¹²Cf. 9:24—"now to appear in the presence of God."

¹³7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10.

sacrificateur and victim, but had no need of being the *sacrifiant*.¹⁴

As *priest*, Jesus entered the realm of the holy and made an offering, a sacrifice of atonement (2:17).¹⁵ He is a merciful and faithful priest (2:17; cf. 1 Sam 2:35), holy and pure for his mission (Heb 7:26). As the Son uniquely designated as high priest by God (5:5, 10), he is unlike the Levitical priests whose ministry was undermined by their mortality (7:23). Christ's priestly role is connected only with the time of his exaltation and not with his earthly life (1:3; 5:6, 9–10; 6:20; 7:16, 28; 8:1–2), which helps distinguish his function as priest from his parallel role as victim. Nevertheless, his perfection or completion is a matter of both earthly suffering and heavenly priesthood (2:10; 5:8–9; 7:28).

In his unique sacrifice, Jesus was also the *victim*. Christ offered nothing other than himself,¹⁶ entering the holy place with his own blood,¹⁷ as opposed to “blood that is not his own” (9:25). As victim, Jesus supersedes the inadequate animals of ordinary sacrifice, not

only in his status as God's Son, but in his active, willing obedience to God's will (9:12–13, 19; 10:4).

Hebrews puts Ps 40:6–8 on the lips of Jesus to make this point (Heb 10:5–7). His readiness to die parallels the faith of Jewish martyrs who embraced terrible deaths bearing

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atonement worth (2 Macc 7:37–38; 4 Macc 6:28–29; 17:21–22). When animals are the victims, sacrifice must be repeated (Heb 10:3), but Christ's offering of his body was “once for all” (10:10). The interior character of Christ's sacrifice as a willing, obedient self-offering bestows the power to mend the human conscience (9:14; 10:22).

In addition, Jesus did not need to be the *beneficiary* of his sacrifice. He was an unblemished victim (9:14), not in the outward sense of the old ceremonial law, but as one who is without sin (4:15; 7:26). As such, Jesus differs from all ordinary priests, who as sinners need the benefits of sacrifice themselves (5:3; 7:27; 9:7). This was a sacrifice like no other. The priest and the victim were one and the same, but the one who offered sacrifice was not included among those for whom the benefit of sacrifice was required. In this way, Hebrews simultaneously promotes a “Christology from above,” in terms of the exalted Son and heavenly high priest, and a “Christology from below,” portraying one who willingly and obediently suffered in flesh and body under circumstances of the deepest shame.

Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible is about “atonement,” the removal of obstacles that

¹⁴O. Herrenschmidt, “Sacrifice: Symbolic or Effective?” in *Between Belief and Transgression*, ed. M. Izard and P. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 24–42.

¹⁵6:20; 9:12, 24; 7:27; 9:14; 10:12; cf. 5:1; 8:3.

¹⁶7:27; 9:14, 26.

¹⁷9:12, 14; 10:19; 13:12.

threaten the relationship between God and God's people.¹⁸ Thus, sacrifice was believed to have a positive effect on one's relationship to God. At the same time, sacrifice provided its practitioners psychological and social gains. In its portrayal of Christ's sacrificial act, Hebrews promotes all three of these benefits. The epistle emphasizes the positive effects of Christ's atoning sacrifice, both in the heavenly realm through an eternal atonement involving the cosmic sanctuary and on the earthly plane impacting the lives of his followers. The soteriological effects of sacrifice provides Hebrews with language of atonement, sanctification, cleansing, and the access to God available to Christians. Hebrews uses the psychological aspect to assert that Christ's sacrifice cancels out feelings of guilt. The social aspects of sacrifice are used to build up a community of worship.

SOTERIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

The Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16 and the sin offerings described in Leviticus 4 were primarily intended to remove impurity from the sanctuary and holy things by means of sacrificial blood. The sanctuary and its equipment required purification because of the recurrent impurity of the people (Lev 16:16). The high priest atoned for the sinful nation (vv. 17, 24, 30, 31) and purified the defiled sanctuary (vv. 16, 17, 20, 33) by means of sacrificial blood. Jesus performed a parallel and superior atonement in the true tent (Heb 8:2) beyond "this creation" (9:11). Because this sanctuary in heaven has a higher metaphysical value than the earthly temple of human manufacture (v. 24), the atonement performed there had an immeasurably greater effect (vv. 11–12). However, the sin offerings described in Leviticus also had important effects on the human level as well. The repeated phrase "it shall be forgiven for them/him" (a literal translation of Lev 4:20b, 26b, etc.) indicates that these rituals were also understood as benefiting the offenders themselves. Purgation of the holy place and forgiveness of the individual transgressor were parallel phenomena.

Hebrews employs a wide range of traditional language about the benefits of sacrifice to describe the soteriological effect of Christ's atoning work. First, his sacrifice sanctifies, moving its beneficiaries into a state of holiness (2:11; 10:14; 13:12) by the sacrificial mechanism of his body and blood (10:10, 29). Thus, Hebrews can address readers as the "holy ones" (3:1; 6:10). Holiness is perceived not as a ritual category but as a moral and ethical category that makes life as the people of the holy God possible. This development is already present in texts such as Lev 11:44–45 and the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26.

Second, Christ's sacrifice moves followers from the state of impurity to purity (1:3; 9:14). In the Old Testament, this concept referred to the ritual cleanliness needed to engage in the worship of God (cf. Lev 16:30). Hebrews, however, collapses the originally separate

¹⁸The verb "atone" (root *kpr*) implies the removal of sin by wiping it off or covering it over. The sense of removing an obstacle to relationship is evident in Gen 32:20; Deut 21:8; 2 Sam 21:3.

notions of cleansing and sanctifying (9:13), a coordination of originally separate ideas sometimes present in the Old Testament (see Lev 16:19). Because the state of holiness required purity, the two concepts naturally became intertwined.

Third, his sacrificial act does away with sin (9:26, 28). It took place “for sin”¹⁹ and as a purification from sin.²⁰ As an act that removed the obstacle that blocked the relationship between God and God’s people, it was an act of *atonement*²¹ performed at the cover of the ark, the “mercy seat”²² as on the Day of Atonement.

Other benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are *redemption* (9:12, 15), *salvation* (2:10; 5:9; 7:25), and *forgiveness* (9:22). His was a comprehensive sacrifice, performed for the many and for all time.²³ Hebrews stresses its “once for all” effectiveness and uniqueness.²⁴ In a parallel theological move, the author recalls that the sacrificial ritual of Exodus 24 used the binding power of blood to inaugurate the covenant (Heb 9:19–21). The saving benefits of this new covenant are described in Jer 31:31–34 (Heb 8:8–12; 10:16–17, 29): the law written on human hearts, sins forgiven, and sanctification.

Finally, Christ’s sacrifice provides believers with unhindered access to God’s presence. The former ritual system set up obstacles and limitations to such access (9:2–7). Therefore, access to what is truly holy is denied as long as the ritual arrangements of the present time remain operative (9:8–10). The privilege of approaching God, once reserved to priests, has become democratized and available to all. Christ’s entrance into God’s presence blazed a trail for others to follow. He entered “on our behalf” (9:24), and the opportunity of approach is “through him” (7:25). “Hope” has entered behind the curtain, in a manner parallel to the entry of Jesus, “a forerunner in our behalf” (6:19–20), opening a way to God (7:19; 10:19–20). Such approach to God is a matter of faith (11:6). Moreover, safe communication with the dangerous holiness of God requires holiness and purity.²⁵ One needs holiness to see God (12:14), and Christ’s holiness and purity makes approach in worship possible (9:14; 10:10, 22). Approaching God is not just a theoretical possibility, but something that Hebrews challenges its readers to do in order to receive mercy and grace (4:16; 10:22).

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Anthropologists point out that sacrifice has positive psychological effects on participants. Old Testament sacrifice assured worshipers of a continued relationship with God based on the removal of the sins or impurities that blocked that relationship. Participation

¹⁹ 10:12, 26; *peri hamartias* is used multiple times in LXX Leviticus 16; cf. 10:12.

²⁰ 1:3; cf. LXX Job 7:21.

²¹ 2:17; *hilaskomai*; cf. *exilaskomai* in Lev 16:6, 11, 17, 30, 33, 34.

²² *hilasterion* 9:5; Lev 16:2, 13, 14, 15.

²³ 2:10; 5:9; 7:25; 8:11; cf. Lev 16:17, 33.

²⁴ *ephapax* 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; *hapax*, 9:26, 28.

²⁵ 10:31; 12:29; Lev 16:2, 4; 21:17, 21; 22:3.

in sacrifice promised that God's good gifts and beneficence would continue to flow. This psychological impact is based on human models of reciprocal gift giving, the idea of sharing a common meal with God, and the cathartic power of drama. Gifts sweeten and strengthen human relationships. Eating sacrificial food was seen as practicing table fellowship before God (Exod 18:12; 24:9–11). The potent drama of sacrifice, acting out death, the transferral of a gift to God, and the ritual use of blood influenced the psychological attitudes of participants and observers.²⁶

It is significant that the sin and reparation offerings of Leviticus are often triggered by the worshiper's inner life, namely, feeling guilt or becoming informed of a fault previously unnoticed.²⁷ Unintentional or overlooked transgressions are brought to consciousness and lead to grief and remorse. The person "realizes guilt"²⁸ and seeks to relieve this through a process of restitution, confession, and sacrifice.²⁹

Hebrews speaks of the "perfection" (i.e., completion of a decisive goal) of the Christian as the outcome of Christ's work (10:14; 11:40; 12:2). It is not solely a matter of an objective atonement that removes all obstacles to the divine-human relationship, but also a matter of transformation, one that changes the believer in a decisive way. Christ's sacrifice is the opposite of those sacrifices that did not perfect worshipers or purify their consciences from their inner realization of sin (7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:1–2). In other words, there is a psychological benefit involving the conscience (9:14) and heart (10:22), a perfecting of faith (12:2). Perfection means obliterating not only any memory of sin on God's part (10:14, 17–18), but also the distressing consciousness of sin for believers (9:14; cf. 9:9; 10:2–3).

The previous sacrificial system was ineffective in dealing with such internal feelings of remorse—one's *syneidēsis*, "guilty conscience" (10:22) or "consciousness of sin" (10:2). *Syneidēsis* describes an awareness of information about something, usually negative information. The word can also approximate the English word "conscience," one's internal sense of right and wrong. Apparently the delay in the Parousia meant that the audience had not been prepared for falling into sin after joining the Christian community.³⁰ Hebrews seeks to ease their troubled consciences through a rhetoric of contrasts: the merely external over against the internal and the temporary versus the permanent. The author extends the dualism between the earthly and heavenly cult to the human situation of dualism between flesh and conscience. Because they have to do with physical matters,³¹ earthly sacrifices deal with externalities and can never affect one's inner life or "perfect the conscience" (9:9–10). They are based on a "fleshy" (*sarkinos*) and ineffectual commandment (7:16, 18) and on "shadow" law

²⁶On these interpretive models and their psychological effects, see Nelson, *Faithful Priest*, 62–73.

²⁷Lev 4:13–14, 22–23, 27–28.

²⁸Lev 4:13, 22, 27; 5:2–5, 17, 19, 23 NJPS.

²⁹5:5, 16; 6:5. On the psychological aspects of these offerings, see J. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The ASHAM and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (Leiden: Brill, 1976). For the consciousness of sin, see B. Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 4–15, 79–94.

³⁰Note the rigorist position on apostasy in 6:4–8; 10:26–31.

³¹7:16; 9:13; 10:4.

(10:1). Nevertheless, in the same way that animal blood purifies things of flesh, so Christ's blood purifies the conscience (9:13–14). This assurance is founded on the syllogism: as blood on earth cleanses the copies ("sketches" NRSV), so blood in heaven cleanses the heavenly things (9:23). Because they had to be repeated, Israel's sacrifices were not just ineffective (9:25–26; 10:11); they were psychologically unsatisfying (10:1–2). Repeated offerings do not remove the "consciousness of sin," the feeling of being guilty. In contrast, Christ's sacrifice is psychologically successful because it is effective for all time (10:12, 14), performed "once for all."³² Instead of having a "bad conscience" (10:22), those addressed have undergone the transcendent ritual of being "sprinkled clean" to achieve a "good conscience," something the author and community leaders can themselves claim with assurance (13:18; cf. 2 *Clem* 16:4). It is the "blood of Christ" that purifies conscience from "dead works" (9:14), that is, "deeds that lead to death" (cf. 6:1).

The psychological benefits of Christ's sacrifice are also expressed in terms of the new covenant, according to which laws are written internally on hearts and minds and offenses are remembered no more (10:16–18). The previous sacrifices accomplished only a yearly "reminder of sin" (10:3; generalizing LXX Num 5:15), but the new covenant means that God forgets sins (Heb 8:12; 10:17). The Christian's "heart" is "sprinkled clean" and becomes "true" (10:22), a reference to one's inner life and interior awareness. The sacrifice that accomplishes this was appropriately achieved by Christ's interior decision to do God's will (10:7–10). Christians now have hearts that are the opposite of the stubborn hearts described in Ps 95:8.³³ Theirs is the obedient heart given in the new covenant of Jer 31:33 (Heb 8:10; 10:16), a heart strengthened by grace to resist false teachings (13:9).

Other dramatic psychological language in Hebrews deals with fear. Readers no doubt shared the author's vivid awareness of the "fearful prospect of judgment" (10:27) in "the hands of the living God" (v. 31). To counter this, Hebrews contrasts a description of the terrifying Sinai revelation with the festal gathering of the righteous on Mount Zion in association with the "living God" (12:18–24). This God is indeed "judge of all," but that need not terrify, for Jesus the mediator is also there. His eschatological second appearance will mean salvation for those who believe (9:28; 10:39). Christ's death not only destroyed the source of death but also negated humanity's lifelong psychological slavery to the fear of death (2:14–15). In ch. 11, faith repeatedly overcomes death (vv. 4, 5, 7, 12, 19, 28, 35). The dramatic, albeit confused, language of 6:18–19 encourages those who "have taken refuge" to "seize the hope set before us." This echoes the practice of fleeing to the sanctuary for asylum and seizing the altar there (1 Kgs 2:28). Similarly, the verb *katpheugō*, "take refuge," reflects the cities of refuge (*katphygē*) in LXX Num 35:27–28 and Deut 19:3.

³² 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10.

³³ Heb 3:8, 15; 4:7; cf. 3:12.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Sacrifice had practical social consequences. It helped restore lepers to full participation in the community (Lev 14), appointed priests into their vocations, and reintegrated those who had become unclean back into society (Lev 12 and 15; Num 19). Many sacrifices climaxed with a communal meal that bonded family and acquaintances into a worshipping community. Sacrificial meals created social solidarity by sharing out expensive animal protein to the larger community. They could be an exercise in household bonding, as is clear from the family dynamics indicated in 1 Sam 1:1–8. The sprinkling of sacrificial blood linked parties together into a covenant relationship (Exod 24:5–8). Hebrews takes up the social benefits inherent in sacrifice with its call to gather as a worshipping community, its reference to a communal sacrificial meal from the altar, and its renegotiation of the social categories of honor and shame.

Hebrews advocates full participation in the Christian worship assembly, demonstrating a pastoral interest in communal worship (4:16; 10:23–25). The conscience is purified from the mortal danger of sinful deeds expressly in order to give rise to communal worship (9:14). The beneficiaries of Christ's sacrifice are to give thanks in worship (12:28), offering up metaphorical sacrifices of praise and confession (13:15) as well as of good deeds and generosity (v. 16).

"Sacrifice of praise" (*thysia aineseōs*) reflects the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament thanksgiving sacrifices, during which one gave personal testimony to God's benefits in the worshipping community (Pss

50:14, 23; 107:22; 116:17). Hebrews gathers a varied constellation of communal worship motifs: the Day of Atonement and covenant sacrifice, as well as reflections of enthronement in chs. 1–2, Sabbath in chs. 3–4, and the Sinai and Zion assemblies described in 12:18–29. The overall impression is of a worshipping community that is eschatological yet has positive social consequences in the here and now. Sabbath rest had promised radical social transformation in Israel's culture, permitting male and female slaves and sojourners a share in the leisure enjoyed by landowners and masters (Deut 5:14–15). Hebrews uses the motif of rest in both communal and eschatological ways (Heb 4:1–11; cf. Lev 16:31). The future destiny of believers is described in terms of a coming kingdom and city (Heb 11:16; 12:28; 13:14), yet readers are also called to participate in a present-day community of loving action in imitation of their leaders (13:1–7).

The image of the Mount Zion worship assembly in 12:22–24 also reflects both eschatological and current reality. This assembly is gathered for a religious festival (12:22,

Approaching God is not just a theoretical possibility, but something that Hebrews challenges its readers to do in order to receive mercy and grace.

panēgyris).³⁴ It is a community that transcends the earthly, for it gathers at heavenly Jerusalem. Together in the same sentence appear angels, humans, the living and judging God, the spirits of the righteous and the perfected, along with Christ. Christ's mediation of a new covenantal relationship and his persistently importunate, sprinkled, sacrificial blood make participation possible for those addressed. Yet the implication of their association with this transcendent festal gathering has everything to do with the present moment: do not refuse the One who speaks through this blood but give thanks in worship (12:25, 28). This assembly echoes Deuteronomy's vision of the joyous, socially inclusive worshipping community concretely gathered in Jerusalem, feasting on sacrifices before God (Deut 12:12).³⁵

The enigmatic statement that "we have an altar" (Heb 13:10) is most likely a reference to the ongoing positive effects of Christ's total sacrificial act, beginning with his death and culminating in his appearance within the heavenly sanctuary. The import of this altar is left vague and ambiguous, but it clearly builds on the idea of a worshipping community gathered around a sacrificial banquet.³⁶ At the same time, this verse contrasts the Christian community with the priesthood of the former sanctuary. Priests alone had the right to eat specially assigned portions of the sacrifice (Lev 7:5–6; Num 18:8–20), but those addressed by Hebrews have an even more advantageous cultic privilege.

These references to the social advantages of sacrifice for the shaping of Christian identity must be understood against the backdrop of the Mediterranean culture of shame and honor.³⁷ Hebrews addresses the reality of diminished social status that its readers have suffered as a result of joining the despised Christian community. They are urged to put aside society's judgment of dishonor and accept God's evaluation of them as an honored people. They are part of the assembly of the high-status "firstborn" (12:23; cf. 1:6). They are God's firstborn people who have escaped destruction (11:28; Exod 4:22–23) and who possess the right of inheritance (contrast Esau in 12:16). The cross of Jesus is a paradigm for the author's insistence that dishonorable evaluations made by the outside world count as nothing. The shame of the cross is fully appreciated (6:6), but shockingly this shameful cross is to be the pattern for the Christian community's own efforts (12:1–3). God dignified the crucified one and vindicated him by an enthronement to the place of supreme honor (5:7–10; 12:2).

In an unexpected twist on sacrificial imagery, Hebrews recontextualizes LXX Lev 16:27

³⁴Cf. LXX Ezek 46:11; Hos 2:11; 9:5; Amos 5:21.

³⁵The Sinai experience is described on the basis of Exodus (19:12–13, 16, 19; 20:18) and Deuteronomy (4:11–12; 5:22–25; 9:19). The gathering at Zion also reflects language from Deuteronomy. At this "assembly" (*ekklēsia*; LXX Deut 4:10; 18:16), the "one speaking" is the "living God" (cf. Heb 12:22, 25 with LXX Deut 5:26), associated with "innumerable angels" (LXX Deut 33:2). The role of Jesus as covenant mediator (Heb 12:24) transcends that of Moses (Deut 5:27, 30–31).

³⁶The heavenly sanctuary has only an incense altar (9:4). There may be a reference to the Eucharist in 9:20, where "this is the blood of the covenant" may echo the Last Supper formula; cf. Matt 26:28.

³⁷D. A. DeSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

into a challenge to the community of faith (Heb 13:11–13). In contrast to the blood brought into the sanctuary, the remnants of the Day of Atonement victim were taken outside to be burned. Hebrews applies this pattern to the crucifixion of Jesus “outside the city gate.” Paradoxically, this most shameful event took place to transform those addressed into a holy people by means of Christ’s sanctifying and cleansing blood. Hebrews challenges Christians to follow Jesus “outside the camp,” to the place where disgrace and shameful abuse, suffering and loss, are experienced, where obedience, service, and faithfulness must be practiced.³⁸

³⁸ 10:32–34; 11:26, 36–38; 12:4–7; 13:3.