

# Prayer, Sacrifice and Forgiveness<sup>1</sup>

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## SUMMARY

A key factor in the approach to God in the Old Testament is sacrifice. However, there are occasions where the sacrificial system proves inadequate, and appeal is made directly to God, on the basis of his *hesed*. This second approach to God, which does not depend on sacrifices, is sometimes seen to open the way for a development (for which support is also claimed from some pre-exilic prophetic literature) away from sacrifice as the primary factor in forgiveness, towards something more interior and spiritual. In this paper I will suggest that the

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Opfer sind ein Schlüsselement bei den Annäherungen an Gott im Alten Testament. Es gibt allerdings Punkte, an denen sich das Opfersystem als inadäquat erweist und man sich direkt an Gott wendet – auf der Grundlage seines *hesed*. Diese zweite Annäherung an Gott, die nicht auf dem Opfer basiert, wird manchmal als Anstoß zu einer Entwicklung gesehen, für die man auch Unterstützung aus Teilen der vor-exilischen prophetischen Literatur in Anspruch nimmt und die sich vom Opfer als primärem Faktor bei der Vergebung ab- und einer stärker innerlichen und spirituellen Dimension zuwendet. In diesem Artikel schlage ich vor, dass die Bitte um Ver-

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## RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'Ancien Testament, les sacrifices jouent un rôle important pour permettre aux Israélites de s'approcher de Dieu. Dans certains cas, les sacrifices s'avèrent inadéquats et il est fait directement appel à Dieu, sur la base de sa *hesed*. Cette autre manière de s'approcher de Dieu sans offrir de sacrifice est parfois considérée comme ouvrant la voie à une évolution ôtant aux sacrifices leur rôle de moyen principal pour obtenir le pardon en mettant l'accent davantage sur une attitude spirituelle intérieure (et l'on prétend aussi trouver la même tendance dans certains textes de la littérature prophétique préexilique). L'auteur tente de montrer que, lorsqu'on fait appel

pour la forgiveness on the basis of God's *hesed* alone is made necessary because the sinner has overstepped the boundaries of the covenant, and so the sacrificial system is not effective. For those within the covenant, the sacrificial system, which also has a spiritual and interior aspect, is the prescribed way of approaching God for forgiveness and the Old Testament writers do not envisage its replacement. Recognising the ongoing significance of the Old Testament sacrificial system (up to its fulfilment in the sacrifice of Christ) allows us to draw from it theological principles that continue to be relevant to the life of the Church.

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gebung auf der alleinigen Grundlage derselben *hesed*. Gottes notwendig ist, weil der Sünder die Grenzen des Bundes überschritten hat und das Opfersystem daher nicht wirksam ist. Für diejenigen innerhalb des Bundes ist das Opfersystem, das ebenfalls einen spirituellen und innerlichen Aspekt besitzt, der vorgeschriebene Weg der Annäherung an Gott im Blick auf Vergebung, und die Schreiber des Alten Testaments haben nicht die Ersetzung dieses Systems in ihrem Blickfeld. Die Anerkennung der bleibenden Bedeutung des alttestamentlichen Opfersystems (bis zu seiner Erfüllung im Opfer Christi) erlaubt uns, theologische Prinzipien aus diesem System abzuleiten, die von bleibender Bedeutung für das Leben der Kirche sind.

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à la *hesed* divine seule, c'est parce que le pécheur a outrepassé les limites fixées par l'alliance et se situe en dehors des cas pour lesquels il était possible d'offrir des sacrifices. Pour les cas prévus par l'alliance, l'offrande de sacrifices, qui devait aussi être accompagnée d'une certaine attitude spirituelle intérieure, demeure la condition requise pour s'approcher de Dieu et obtenir son pardon et les auteurs de l'Ancien Testament n'envisagent aucunement son remplacement. De la valeur constante du système sacrificiel de l'Ancien Testament (jusqu'à son accomplissement dans le sacrifice de Christ), on peut tirer des principes théologiques qui demeurent pertinents pour la vie de l'Église.



## Sacrifice and Forgiveness

There is debate about whether Genesis 3 may properly be characterised as a 'Fall' through which sin entered the world and infected every member of the human race. However, though the term 'fall' may not be used, and we need to be wary of reading too much into the text, the effect of sin described in Genesis 3:14-19, on human beings and on the order of creation, does indicate a far-reaching and continuing significance. God's good creation was spoilt by human disobedience; and the remainder of the primaeval history catalogues a continuing and deepening decline into sin. From the start, this is a key factor affecting human relationships with God, and needs to be addressed.

In Israel, formal provision for forgiveness was provided within the sacrificial system.<sup>2</sup> A key term here is 'atonement', which may indicate cleansing or purification, or the payment of a ransom.<sup>3</sup> The burnt offering played a major role in making atonement for sin (e.g. Lev. 1:4; Num. 15:28; 2 Sam. 24:25; Job 1:5; 42:8), and turning away God's wrath (Gen. 8:20-21; 2 Chr. 29:7-8).<sup>4</sup> Two further offerings, also specifically linked with 'making atonement', are the *purification offering* (*hatta't*), often referred to as the *sin offering*,<sup>5</sup> and the reparation or guilt offering (*'asam*). Each of these sacrifices is accompanied by a distinctive ritual; though they have several factors in common, indicating key elements in sacrificial atonement. Where the offering was made by an individual, he brought an unblemished animal to the sanctuary; in the case of the burnt offering and the purification offering he laid (or pressed) a hand on it and slaughtered it. The blood was then taken by the priest and, for the burnt and reparation offerings, was sprinkled on all sides of the altar; for the purification offering, it was smeared on the horns of the altar and the rest poured at the base of the altar.

The practice of pressing a hand on the animal before killing it is significant. In the case of the burnt offering, some explanation is given: *he is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him* (Lev. 1:4).<sup>6</sup> This suggests an element of substitution: the animal is offered on behalf of the sinner. By putting his hand on the animal's head, the worshipper identified himself with the sacrifice, which was then killed in his place. One way of understanding this is as an act of surrender: through the sacrifice the worshipper offered his own life up to God.<sup>7</sup> Another, not mutually exclusive, possibil-

ity is that the sacrifice was offered as a ransom: the victim died instead of the worshipper. In this case the sacrifice would have the effect of turning away God's punishment. The idea that it gives up a *soothing aroma* (Lev. 1:9) also suggests turning away wrath and attracting God's favour to the one who offered it.<sup>8</sup> Pressing a hand on the victim has also been traditionally linked with the transference of sin, as in the case of the goat *for Azazel* on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:21-22). However, the goat for *Azazel* was then led out of the camp, not sacrificed on the altar;<sup>9</sup> and it seems unlikely that the practice in relation to the burnt and purification offerings envisages the literal transference of sin – which is often linked with the idea of penal substitution, whereby the animal became guilty and was punished in place of the sinner.<sup>10</sup> It may be possible, though, to think in terms of a more symbolic 'transference', in the sense that the sin of the worshipper necessitates the death of the sacrifice; and as a result of that death, the sinner is freed from guilt. This continues the idea of the sacrifice as a ransom – which seems to be more explicitly associated with the reparation offering (though in that case a hand is not laid on the animal). There may, though, still be a link with the ritual of the Day of Atonement. On that occasion, laying (both) hands on the animal was accompanied by the confession of sin (Lev. 16:21). Confession is also specifically mentioned in relation to the purification offering (Lev. 5:5); and an appropriate point for this would be when the worshipper put his hand on the animal's head prior to killing it. In this, it is important to note that, however mechanistic the ritual of sacrifice became, a significant interior aspect was present, and vital, from the beginning.

A second common factor in sacrifice is the shedding of blood. Sacrifices fulfil different roles, and that accounts for the differences in the particular animals offered and the way the blood was used. However, despite the different emphases, it is clear that the shedding of blood plays an important part in dealing with the separation from God caused by sin. This is best explained by the idea of substitutionary atonement: shedding blood signifies death; and the death of the animal, on behalf of the sinner or sinful community, opens the way for cleansing and forgiveness, and for God's continued presence among his people.

The sacrificial system, then, offered a partial solution to the need for forgiveness and to maintain the relationship with God in the face of human sin. But it was partial: not all sins could be atoned



for in this way. In general, the burnt offerings and the purification offerings covered only unintentional sins. The annual Day of Atonement made provision for the deliberate sins of the nation; but there appears to have been no similar provision for the deliberate sins of individuals. Some wilful sin directed against the property of others may have been covered by the reparation offering, which was accompanied by compensation for the wronged party.<sup>11</sup> But wilful defiance of the laws that touched the nature and character of God himself could not be atoned for through sacrifice. Numbers 15:27-31 sets out the alternatives: for those who sin unintentionally, atonement can be made through sacrifice (vv. 27-29); whereas anyone who sins wilfully *must be cut off from his people* (vv. 30-31). This is probably to be linked with God's direct activity.<sup>12</sup> On some occasions that is explicit: *I will set my face against that person... and will cut him off from his people* (Lev. 17:10; see also Lev. 20:3, 5-6; Ezek. 14:8). It is likely that there would also be some corresponding action within the legal system; so, in Numbers 15:32-36, as an example of what it means to sin wilfully, the Sabbath-breaker is taken outside the camp and stoned to death (cf. Exod. 31:14; Lev. 23:29); and in Leviticus 20:3, sacrificing children to the god Molech, which results in God cutting the offender off from his people, also calls for the death penalty. However, the community action is not described specifically as effecting the 'cutting off'; that seems to remain God's prerogative. And if the community does not carry out its judicial responsibility, God will still take action against the guilty party and any others who condone his conduct (Lev. 20:5). The nature of the threat in a legal context is unclear.<sup>13</sup> It may refer to premature (though not necessarily immediate) death, to judgment beyond the grave by being denied the proper burial that would enable continued fellowship with ancestors, or to being denied descendants. It is more natural, though, to take it, primarily, to refer to severing the sinner's link with the community. Similar expressions refer to offenders being cut off from the community (Num. 19:20) and from Israel (Exod. 12:15, 19; Num. 19:13). This may involve formal expulsion from the nation,<sup>14</sup> but is not limited to it, since excommunication would require judicial action and God's threat may be carried out without the cooperation of the judiciary. Genesis 17:14 suggests a link between being cut off from the people and moving outside the boundaries of the covenant. In that verse, *[he] will be cut off from his people* is in

apposition to *he has broken my covenant*, indicating a level of equivalence between the two expressions. Breaking the covenant might thus be seen, not as one more offence that results in being cut off from the people (the particular offence here is the failure to be circumcised), but the general category into which all of the offences deserving of that particular punishment are incorporated. The expression 'cut off from his people' (*nikrat me'ammayw*) might, therefore, be taken to indicate that, under certain circumstances, God will act to put a guilty party outside the covenant community and so outside the protection of the covenant.<sup>15</sup> The Sinaitic Covenant provided safeguards for the nation as a whole in their relationship with God; this included turning away God's wrath by offering appropriate sacrifices, and providing a worship environment in which sinful human beings could approach and meet with a holy God. Certain offences might lead to those safeguards being withdrawn; putting the sinner beyond the scope of the covenant and so beyond the provision of sacrifices, which are only valid to those who are within the covenant.<sup>16</sup>

In such circumstances, where the sinner is beyond the reach of the sacrificial system, there is still, though, the possibility of forgiveness through direct appeal to the *hesed* of God.

### *Hesed* and Forgiveness

*Hesed* is a characteristically Hebrew word with no precise English equivalent.<sup>17</sup> It includes kindness and mercy; and there is a close link between *hesed* and *rahamim* (kindness). However, *hesed* is more than the emotional, benevolent response to the need of another; it also includes loyalty and obligation: a sense of duty and faithful commitment to do what is right.<sup>18</sup> In the Old Testament, the term occurs predominantly in the context of relationships, and especially covenant relationships. The term is frequently translated 'love'; though the use of qualifiers, such as *steadfast* love, *covenant* love, and *unfailing* love, emphasises that the term includes loyal commitment; *hesed* 'expresses, essentially, faithfulness and loyal conduct within the context of a relationship; it is an inward commitment and disposition of goodwill together with its outward expression in dutiful and compassionate action'.<sup>19</sup>

*Hesed* refers to proper conduct within human relationships and within society,<sup>20</sup> and, occasionally, to the proper response of people to God.<sup>21</sup> It is also, more frequently, associated with God's



response to humankind. It figures prominently in the orthodox summary of the attributes of God that appears in its basic form in Exodus 34:6: *the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in hesed and faithfulness*;<sup>22</sup> and in the extended summary, which continues into Exodus 34:7, it is the only divine attribute to be mentioned twice.<sup>23</sup> Because of its close association with covenants in a social setting, it is not surprising that *hesed* is closely linked, too, with divine covenants. God's relationship with his people is referred to as a *covenant of hesed*;<sup>24</sup> and in several passages the terms *hesed* and *berit* (referring to a divine covenant) occur in parallel couplets.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship between *hesed* and the covenant between God and his people is expressed in two complementary ways. First, *hesed* derives from the covenant. By entering into a covenant with his people, God has bound himself to show *hesed* to them. This is emphasised, for example, in Psalm 106:45 – *for their sake [Yahweh] remembered his covenant and out of his great hesed he relented*. Here, *hesed* is the content of *berit* and the existence of the covenant (that God has not forgotten) provides the basis for the *hesed* that he shows to the people. This divine *hesed* that flows from the covenant includes love, loyalty and faithfulness to God's covenant promises. It might include, too, the kindness, mercy and grace that bears with, and remains committed to, his people despite their sin, and provides the basis for forgiveness and restoration; though again, in the context of their previously established relationship.<sup>26</sup> This leads to the second important characteristic of God's *hesed*. As well as deriving from the relationship between God and his people, it also becomes the means by which that relationship continues, even though, because of the people's unfaithfulness, it might properly be terminated. This is evident, in relation to the Davidic covenant, in Psalm 89:28 – *I [Yahweh] will maintain my hesed to [the Davidic king] and my covenant with him will never fail*. Here, rather than flowing from the covenant, *hesed* provides the basis on which God will maintain the covenant and ensure that it will not end. When applied more generally, this provides the basis for the restoration of the nation, and leads, ultimately, to the promise of a new covenant.<sup>27</sup> Corresponding to these two ways of understanding *hesed*, individual and national prayers which appeal to God's *hesed* generally fall into two categories: those based on the uprightness of the one in need; and those based not on human merit, but on God's willingness to

show mercy to the undeserving.<sup>28</sup>

The first of these builds on the idea of obligation. God has committed himself to his people and they can expect him to behave towards them in a particular way. Thus, the Psalmist says: *from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's hesed is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts* (Psa. 103:17-17).<sup>29</sup> In this case, the relationship is perceived to be in good order, and faithful divine action, which corresponds to *hesed*, may be expected. Although the link is not specific in the Old Testament, it is reasonable to think of sacrifice in this category. Where offerings are brought in a right spirit in accordance with the requirements of the covenant, the divine response, also in faithfulness to the covenant, is to forgive. The offering of sacrifices is thus not opposed to *hesed*; the sacrificial system, along with every other aspect of the covenant, is effective precisely because of God's *hesed*: because of his loving, faithful and ongoing commitment to his covenant people.

In the second case, *hesed* comes closer in meaning to *grace*. Here, the relationship is not in good order; the appellant cannot make any claims on God and has no right to expect a favourable response from him. Any appeal is on the basis of God's grace and mercy alone. Such appeals are particularly prominent in the Psalms – especially, as might be expected, in the context of prayers for forgiveness.<sup>30</sup> An important example is in Psalm 51:1[3]. Here, the psalmist, who as the psalm's title suggests,<sup>31</sup> has committed the kind of serious, deliberate sin that would put him outside the provision of the sacrificial system, prays: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your hesed; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions*. In this situation the offender has stepped outside the bounds of the covenant; his sin has put him beyond the normal covenantal provisions for forgiveness and should lead to him, rightly, being cut off from his people.<sup>32</sup> Aware that he might face direct divine action, the psalmist pleads, on the basis of God's *hesed*, here parallel with *rahamim* ('compassion'), that he will not be cast from God's presence (v. 11a [13a]). The strength of the language – *save me from bloodguilt* (v. 14 [16]); *do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me* (v. 11 [13]) – indicates the real possibility of separation from God. That may also be suggested by verses 18-19 [20-21], which, when read as part of a canonical whole, point to a time after the appeal to God's *hesed* has been heard, when the psalmist may again



join in the worship of the believing community, and so bring *righteous sacrifices and whole burnt offerings*. This implies that those sacrifices are not presently being offered; and indicates a breach in fellowship that needs to be restored.<sup>33</sup>

Sacrifice, then, is limited within the boundaries of the covenant; and is unable to help those who overstep those boundaries. By contrast, God's *hesed*, which also operates largely within the mutual relationship established by the covenant, is nevertheless able to reach out to those beyond its limits, and to offer the forgiveness that allows them to be drawn back into a restored relationship with God.

### Is sacrifice necessary?

In Psalm 51, the psalmist not only appeals to God's *hesed*, but also appears to take a negative view of sacrifice: *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise* (vv. 16-17 [18-19]). Some take this to imply a repudiation of animal sacrifices and claim support from the pre-exilic prophets, who also appear to reject sacrifice in favour of a right interior attitude (e.g. Isa. 1:11-17; Jer. 6:20; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8).<sup>34</sup> It is very unlikely, though, that the prophets condemn sacrifices *per se*. What they do condemn is all worship that has been corrupted by a long term exposure to the worship of other gods, and reduced to formal, external ritual without inward consecration. And that might even include *prayer* which was offered inappropriately (Isa. 1:15); though there is no serious suggestion that the prophets rejected the practice of prayer.

One way of interpreting this negative language is that it is relative: not rejecting sacrifice outright, but asserting that it has meaning only when accompanied by, and subordinated to, a right interior attitude.<sup>35</sup> The prophet Samuel, who was certainly not against sacrifice, says something similar when he criticises Saul's disobedience: *Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams* (1 Sam. 15:22). In the discussion of the ongoing significance of the sacrificial system, it is also worth noting that sacrifices still have a place after the return from exile (e.g. Ezra 3:1-6; Neh. 12:43; Mal. 1:6-9), and, perhaps even more significantly, within the prophetic vision of the kingdom of God (Jer. 33:18; Ezek. 40:38-43; 46; Zec. 14:20-21;

Mal. 1:11).<sup>36</sup> The spiritual renewal of Israel will result in the right and sincere offering of sacrifices, rather than in their cessation. Condemnation is not of sacrifice itself, but of the idea that the ritual act alone is a sufficient response to God.<sup>37</sup>

In the case of Psalm 51, the explanation might be more straightforward. The suppliant has placed himself beyond the scope of the sacrificial system; and his words might be taken, not as a general statement about sacrifice, but as a comment *on his own situation before God*. Because his sin puts him outside the provisions of the covenant, there is no animal sacrifice *that he can bring*. This fits with the canonical setting of the psalm, since the sacrificial system contains no provision to atone for adultery and murder.<sup>38</sup> All that is left to the psalmist is true contrition. This, too, fits with the psalm's canonical context: and in the narrative in 2 Samuel 12:1-14, where Nathan confronts David over his sin, David's repentance is immediately followed by Nathan's pronouncement of absolution – *the LORD has taken away your sin* (v. 13) – with no mention of sacrifice.

There may be an element of this, too, in the prophetic indictment of sacrifice. Indeed, it might even be possible to see Psalm 51 as providing a pattern for the repentance of the nation as a whole. As well as condemning religious formalism and syncretism, the prophets also announce the breakdown of the covenant relationship between God and his people.<sup>39</sup> For them, as for the psalmist, standing outside the covenant, there are no longer any sacrifices that can be offered to make atonement for their sin. And comments about God not accepting or being pleased with sacrifice could be related specifically to that context, rather than taken as general statements about the continuing relevance (or otherwise) of the sacrificial system. Given the spiritual condition of the nation, *there are no sacrifices that the people can bring*;<sup>40</sup> all that remains, as in the case of the psalmist, is a sincere and heartfelt repentance and return to God. And also, as in the case of the psalmist, forgiveness and the possibility of restoration is based on divine *hesed*. The covenant has been broken; but God's faithful commitment to his people opens the way for the possibility of a new relationship and a new covenant – based on God's *hesed*;<sup>41</sup> and, as in Psalm 51, for the opportunity to offer righteous sacrifices.<sup>42</sup>

However, if more serious sin can be forgiven by direct appeal to God's *hesed*, surely lesser sins could be dealt with in the same way; so is there any fur-



ther need for sacrifice? Commenting on Psalm 51, Tate says: 'the suppliant is sure that the sacrifices of a "broken spirit" and a "contrite heart" would be acceptable to God... The worshiper who offers this sacrifice, accompanied by burnt offerings or not, can be sure of divine acceptance'.<sup>43</sup> While this does not indicate the rejection of animal sacrifices, it suggests that they may be an optional extra, and that when it comes to forgiveness, the psalmist has turned from them to penitent prayer, which provides a better way. Kiuchi appears to take a similar view: 'when the symbol and what is symbolized become one in reality, there is no need for sacrifices and offerings'.<sup>44</sup> From a Christian perspective, that strikes a chord; but it is not what the psalmist is saying. He appeals to God's *hesed*, not because of a profound theological awakening as to the true nature of sacrifice, but because he has no choice. He would bring burnt offerings if he could (Ps. 51:16 [18]); it is only because he cannot, that he looks for a different basis of appeal. And he looks forward to a restored relationship where he may again offer *righteous sacrifices*, including *burnt offerings* (v. 19 [21]).

More generally, in the life of the nation, the prophets' condemnation of sacrifice is not presented as the result of theological enlightenment; it is a necessity occasioned by the corruption of true worship, and the people's spiritual condition. And there is no reason to suppose that if these factors were not present, and the sacrificial system was sincerely applied, such a negative view of sacrifices would be so evident. And, as we have noted, sacrifice and other elements of cultic worship condemned by the prophets, continue to feature in the vision of God's coming kingdom, and are still acceptable after the spiritual renewal of the nation.

Focusing on the attitude to sacrifice in some of the Psalms, Eichrodt points to the priority of prayer without the need for sacrifices, and speaks about God's 'right to dispense with sacrifices, wherever their essential meaning, spiritual intercourse with God, has been overpoweringly experienced in prayer'.<sup>45</sup> This emphasises the importance of spiritual communion with God; however, it almost certainly overstates the case, since none of the passages quoted in support need imply that sacrifices are actually dispensed with.<sup>46</sup> A right interior approach to God need not, and may not, be separated from the appropriate offering of sacrifices. Rowley rightly emphasises the need to maintain the balance between spirit and ritual: 'where

the ritual act was prescribed, sincerity of penitence could not dispense with it. Neither could the act dispense with the spirit, and the prophets therefore insisted that the act must be infused with the spirit'.<sup>47</sup> The move from dependence on sacrifices to a direct appeal to God's *hesed* is not the result of a development from external ritual to a deeper communion with God. As we have seen, a significant factor in the negative attitude towards sacrifice is that outside of the covenant its provisions do not apply. The problem is not with the system, but with the people, who have failed to maintain the relationship with God that would allow the cultic provisions to remain effective.<sup>48</sup> The prophets also condemn corrupt syncretistic worship and a mechanistic view of sacrifice; but that, too, is not the fault of the sacrificial system, which included interior elements of penitence and contrition from the start.

### Prayer and Sacrifice

I have argued that the appeal for forgiveness on the basis of God's *hesed* is an alternative to the sacrificial system only in cases where the appellant has placed himself outside the covenant and so in a place where the provisions of the cult in general, and the sacrificial system in particular, do not apply. In other cases, where sacrifices may be offered appropriately, the existence of true penitence and contrition does not dispense with the need for them. In the canonical form of Psalm 51 these approaches to God – one from outside the provision of the covenant, the other from inside it – exist side by side. The argument about which approach is better is academic: they apply to different circumstances, and the worshipper does not have a choice between them. We may, though, ask the question: why are two approaches necessary? If sin can be forgiven without sacrifice, why continue with (or even start with) such a complicated ritual framework? What is the distinctive significance of sacrifice within the context of the covenant that makes it the prescribed way of approach to God in that setting?

Discussions of sacrifice in the Old Testament often emphasise the importance of inward consecration, without which the ritual act has no meaning.<sup>49</sup> And, in the right context, that is an appropriate, even necessary, emphasis. It was necessary for the Old Testament prophets, who had to contend with a growing dependence on the outward rite at the expense of a real relationship



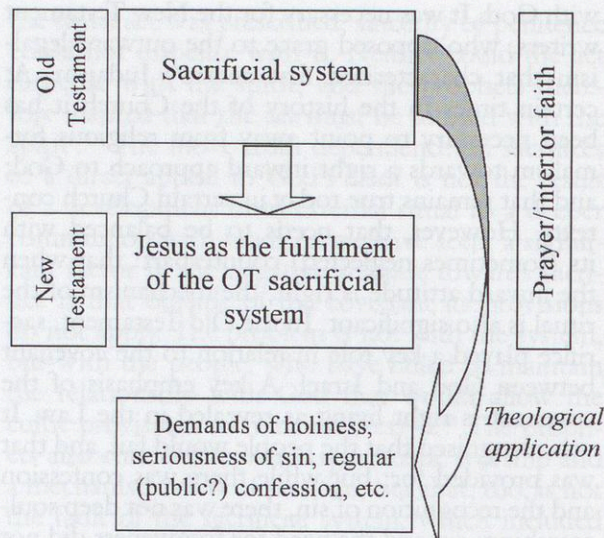
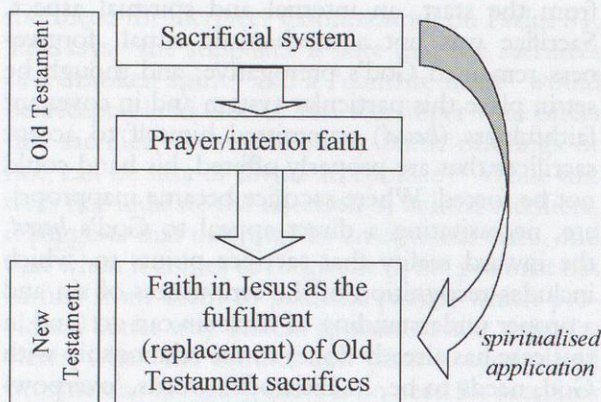
with God. It was necessary for the New Testament writers, who opposed grace to the outward legalism that characterised first century Judaism. At certain times in the history of the Church it has been necessary to point away from religious formalism towards a right inward approach to God; and that remains true today in certain Church contexts. However, that needs to be balanced with its (sometimes neglected) counterpart: that when the inward attitude is right, the mechanism of the ritual is also significant. In the Old Testament, sacrifice played a key role in relation to the covenant between God and Israel. A key emphasis of the covenant is right living as revealed in the Law. It was recognised that the people would fail, and that was provided for; but while there was confession and the recognition of sin, there was not deep soul-searching; sin and the need for forgiveness did not become a pre-occupation. Sacrifices were never a formality, but they were routine; with the emphasis on sorting out the problem and getting back to the real issue of living as the covenant people of God. This requires a delicate balance between being aware of the seriousness of sin on the one hand, and confidence in the readiness of God to forgive on the other; a balance that Christians also seek to maintain – and not always with great success. Within the Old Testament context, sacrifice and the shedding of blood play an important part in holding that balance. The sacrificial system, set in the context of relationship and of the worshippers' sincere desire to maintain that relationship, asserts God's willingness to forgive; and provides the assurance that when a worshipper offers his sacrifice in the right way, he will be forgiven, and accepted by God. Also, though sacrifice may be routine, it demonstrates the nature and serious effect of sin. Bringing an unblemished animal is costly, and shows that sin cannot simply be ignored. The worshipper's full involvement in killing the animal would have been a stark reminder of the effect of the sin he confesses, and a warning not to step outside the provision of the covenant, where substitutionary atonement did not apply – and where, as a result, the sinner might perish instead. Its public nature also recognises that individual sin has an effect on the life of the community – and this may also be linked to the fact that the most serious sin resulted in being cut off from the community. The worshipper's identification with the animal, through the laying on of his hand, might also indicate full and complete dedication to God.

As we have noted, the sacrificial system had,

from the start, an internal and spiritual aspect. Sacrifice was not a mechanistic ritual; forgiveness remained God's prerogative, and though he set in place this particular system and in covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) committed himself to accept sacrifices that are properly offered, his hand could not be forced. Where sacrifice became inappropriate, necessitating a direct appeal to God's *hesed*, the inward reality that sacrifice points to, which includes recognition of the seriousness of sin and a proper understanding of what sin can do (and in this case has already done) to the relationship with God, needs to be, in Eichrodt's words, 'overpoweringly experienced in prayer'.<sup>50</sup> Such exceptional circumstances mean that the sinner is no longer in a place where his sin can be dealt with as a matter of routine, and calls for a different approach involving greater contrition. We see this in Psalm 51, where the level of soul-searching and expressions of contrition and repentance is entirely appropriate, but goes beyond what was formally required within the sacrificial system. The goal, though, is to restore the sinner to the covenant community, where such exceptional provision is no longer necessary.

Christians have tended to favour the idea that the attitude to sacrifice developed within the Old Testament faith from exterior ritual to interior reality, and to see the attitude to prayer and forgiveness in the NT as part of that development. Earlier interpretations even suggested that the sacrificial system was an aberration: it was never part of God's plan, and was only adopted because Israel failed to understand God's purposes.<sup>51</sup> Viewing the sacrificial system in this way, as a temporary, less spiritual element of Old Testament faith, limits the way we see its relevance to the Church – emphasising mainly its inadequacy and so focusing, particularly, on its 'spiritualised' fulfilment in Christ, rather than on any ongoing theological significance.<sup>52</sup> This may be illustrated in a diagram.





I have argued that that view is inadequate; the sacrificial system was part of God's intention, and within the faith of the Old Testament was not intended to be replaced.<sup>53</sup> The Old Testament writers point to the need for the renewal of the people; but with a view, not to dispensing with the need for sacrifice, but to offering sacrifices properly. And in this way, sacrifice continues to figure in the prophetic view of God's kingdom. It remains in force until its fulfilment in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. This does replace the offerings for sin in the Old Testament sacrificial system, not in the sense of driving a final nail into the coffin of a spiritually defunct system, but in the sense of fulfilling an important Old Testament theme. This ongoing significance of sacrifice within the faith of the Old Testament suggests that the principles underlying it – such as the seriousness of sin and the demands of God's holiness, the recognition that sin affects the community's as well as the individual's relationship with him, and the importance of seeking forgiveness regularly, even routinely,<sup>54</sup> in order to maintain the relationship and go on with the primary task of living out what it means to be the people of God – remain relevant to the life of the Church. This is now not just a spiritualisation of an Old Testament theme. Old Testament texts relating to sacrifice can be examined in their own right and seen to set out theological principles that may be applied to our relationship with, and approach to, God through Christ. This may be expressed in a different diagram, which emphasises the continuing theological significance and relevance of the Old Testament sacrificial texts to the life of the Church.

## Conclusion

The primary mechanism for dealing with the separation between God and Israel caused by sin was the sacrificial system, which is primarily associated with the Sinaitic covenant. The offering of sacrifices represented, from the start, an interior, spiritual response to God, and, within the Old Testament, was not intended to be replaced – though its continuation into the era of salvation would require the spiritual renewal of the people. Wilful and defiant sin, however, could not be dealt with by the sacrificial system, and resulted in the sinner being 'cut off from his people' – which included being put outside the protection and provision of the covenant, and so in a place where sacrifice is no longer effective in making atonement. In these circumstances there is still the possibility of forgiveness through a direct appeal to divine *hesed*. However, that is an exception and does not represent a general movement away from sacrifice towards a better way of approaching God, through penitential prayer. Its emphasis on the need for inward consecration was a necessary corrective to a mechanistic view of sacrifice, which focused on external ritual; however, its purpose was to restore the sinner to the covenantal community; to a place where sacrifice could again be offered, as an important outward expression of an inward reality.

Recognising the ongoing significance of the sacrificial system, and its intentional role within the covenant relationship between God and his people, allows us to interrogate it for theological principles that are still applicable in the life of the Church



today. Old Testament sacrifice has been completed and perfectly fulfilled in Christ; in the light of his once and for all self-offering, the ritual act has passed away and the approach to God focuses primarily on inward reality – and there is a danger in looking at Old Testament sacrifice only in terms of its inadequacy and its spiritualised realisation in Christ. Whilst recognising the different covenantal situation that Christ has inaugurated, we must not lose sight of those things that Old Testament sacrifice represents – in order to appreciate, more fully, what Christ's sacrifice means; and in order to better understand what it means to live as the covenant people of God. The ritual act may have passed away in the light of its perfect fulfilment; but the theological significance of sacrifice, as with other aspects of the relationship between God and his people in the Old Testament, still stands.

### Notes

- 1 A limited discussion of the issues raised in this article is included in my recent book, Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), see especially pp. 194-204.
- 2 I am using the term 'sacrificial system' primarily in relation to the organised approach to sacrifice and offering associated with the Sinaitic covenant. There are questions of when this 'system' was established in Israel. Some scholars, following Wellhausen's evolutionary view, argue that it reflects a late development in Israel's worship. There is no time or need to enter that debate here, since our focus is on the way sacrifice is viewed in the canonical text. Some passages refer to the offering of sacrifices before the Sinaitic covenant. These are, though, relatively infrequent; do not appear to be prescribed; and are not linked with sin and forgiveness. The first cultic link between sacrifice and sin is in the context of the community established through the Sinaitic covenant.
- 3 The Hebrew term *kipper* ('make atonement') is a Piel form of the verb. It may be linked with the Akkadian, *kuppuru*, and so mean 'purify, cleanse'; the Hebrew, *koper*, from the same root, refers to a ransom paid for a life (e.g. Exod. 21:30; 30:12; Ps. 49:8; Isa. 43:3); and it is possible that both ideas are present in the idea of atonement; see further, Richard E. Averbeck, *NIDOTTE* 2:689-710; Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus* (AOTC; Nottingham: Apollos / Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), pp. 56-57; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (Anchor Bible, vol. 3; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 1079-1084; Gordon J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979), pp. 28, 59-61; cf. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus 1-27* (WBC 4; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992), pp. 64-66 [63];
- 4 See Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, pp. 60-61; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, p. 175; Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 57-63.
- 5 Although associated with atonement for sin, this offering has much more to do with purification – for example after childbirth (Lev. 12:6-7), which results in ceremonial uncleanness, but is not sinful. See Hartley, *Leviticus*, p. 55; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, pp. 253-254; Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 88-89; cf. Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, pp. 90-91.
- 6 There is debate about the translation of Lev. 1:3 – whether the purpose is to make *him* (the worshipper) or *it* (the sacrifice) acceptable. Verse 4 suggests that it is the latter (see, e.g., Hartley, *Leviticus*, p. 13; however cf. Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, p. 56; Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 55-56); though it is offered on behalf of the worshipper, so, presumably, his acceptance is also in view.
- 7 Kiuchi emphasises this in relation to the burnt offering; it symbolised 'wholehearted' commitment, including the death of earthly hopes and desires (*Leviticus*, pp. 63-64). The case, though, is probably overstated, and rests too much on the Christian distinction between the spiritual and the physical, which is far less pronounced in Old Testament theology.
- 8 'Soothing aroma' is probably a better translation than 'pleasing' aroma' (as NIV, NRSV). The expression is usually linked with the burnt offering (Gen. 8:21; Exod. 29:18; Lev. 1:9, 13, 17) maybe because only the aroma remained and, in the form of smoke, was seen going up to God; though it might apply to other sacrifices offered by fire (Num. 15:3).
- 9 Hartley notes that both hands are laid on the scapegoat, which becomes defiled and so is sent away; if the burnt offering was similarly defiled it could not be burnt on the altar (*Leviticus*, pp. 20-21); see also Richard E. Averbeck, *NIDOTTE* 3:412; Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1961-1967), 1:165-166; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, pp. 150-152; cf. Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 62-63.
- 10 There may be a suggestion of this in Isa. 53:5, where the punishment that the people deserve falls on the Servant and Oswalt views this as penal substitution, satisfying divine justice; see John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 388. Another interpretation, more in line with the idea of the Servant as a guilt/reparation offering (Isa. 53:10), is that the people's punishment falls on the Servant in the sense that his death has turned away the punishment they deserve. See also Frank S. Thielman, 'The Atonement' in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*, ed. by Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House (Leicester: Apollos / Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 102-127.



- 11 Offences for which a guilt offering was required include deceiving, lying and cheating (Lev. 6:1-7); these are unlikely to be inadvertent, yet when the sinner offers the sacrifice and pays the fine, atonement is made and the sinner is accounted forgiven (Lev. 6:7).
- 12 The NIV translation 'he *must* be cut off from his people' (Exod. 30:33, 38; 31:14 Lev. 7:20-21, 25-27; 17:4, 9-10; 18:29; 19:8, 20:17-18; 22:3; 23:29; Num. 9:13; 15:30-31) implies that some action is expected from the community against the offender; however the niphal, *nikrat*, is better translated 'he *will* be cut off' (Gen. 17:4; cf. NRSV), which is probably a warning of divine action, rather than instruction to the community.
- 13 It is possible that 'cutting off' was generally effected by death (e.g. Jer. 9:21); and in the legal material it is sometimes set alongside execution (Exod. 31:14; Lev. 20:2-3). However, the link is made specific on relatively few occasions. Where the expression occurs in other passages, it is frequently linked with failed inheritance (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:33; 24:21 cf. 1 Kgs 2:4; 8:25), including the failure to inherit divine blessings (e.g. 1 Kgs 9:7; Ps. 37:9, 22, 28, 34, 38). For further discussion, of the expression, see Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), pp. 83-84; Milgrom, *Leviticus*, pp. 457-460; Kiuchi, *Leviticus, passim*; Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 241-243.
- 14 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1962-1965), 1:264, n. 182; however, cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, pp. 457-458. Davies notes that for the offender, excommunication would be tantamount to a death sentence (*Numbers*, p. 84); see also von Rad, *OT Theology*, 1:268; Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, p. 140.
- 15 Kiuchi sees an antonymous link between 'cutting off' and atonement: 'the sacrificial blood prevents and saves the offerer from being cut off (*nikrat*) from his or her people and enables the person to remain within the covenant community' (*Leviticus*, p. 322). This implies that a person is cut off when there is no possibility of atonement through sacrifice; which reverses the order I am proposing: that there is no possibility of atonement through sacrifice because a person has been cut off. However, it is possible to see this as a more mutual relationship: where sin can be atoned for, the person is enabled to remain within the community – and that is a key role of the sacrificial system. Where sin cannot be atoned for, the individual sinner is cut off from the covenant community, and so deprived of any future benefit of the sacrificial system until his or her place within the community is restored.
- 16 This is not necessarily the same as formal excommunication; it relates, rather, to how offenders stand in God's sight. They might still take part in worship; but sacrifices would not be accepted and so would be ineffective in securing forgiveness. The ineffectuality of inappropriately offered sacrifices is not an uncommon idea in the Old Testament.
- 17 Among the words and expressions used to render the term in English are: mercy, kindness, love, covenant love, steadfast love, everlasting or unfailing love and lovingkindness.
- 18 For further discussion of *hesed*, including an overview of current opinion, see Gordon Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 157; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); Robin Routledge, 'Hesed as Obligation', *TynBul* 46.1 (1995), pp. 179-96; Brian Britt, 'Unexpected Attachments: A Literary Approach to the Term *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible' *JSOT* 27.3 (2003), pp. 289-307.
- 19 Routledge, 'Hesed as Obligation', p. 186.
- 20 E.g. Hos. 12:6[7]; Mic. 6:8; Zec. 7:9
- 21 E.g. Jer. 2:2; Hos. 6:4,6
- 22 See also, e.g., Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), pp. 215-218.
- 23 Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 216.
- 24 Deut. 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23 (=2 Chr. 6:14); Neh. 1:5; 9:32; Dan. 9:4. These verses probably refer to the Sinaitic covenant.
- 25 E.g. Ps. 89:28; 106:45; Isa. 54:10.
- 26 It is the existence of a recognised relationship that distinguishes *hesed* from the Hebrew term *hen* (grace, favour). This is also included in the orthodox summary of God's attributes (Ex. 34:6), where it is linked with divine compassion (*rahamim*). *Hen* and *rahamim* refer to a disposition of good will towards someone in need, and often to God's grace or compassion (e.g. Prov. 3:34; Isa. 26:10) but do not have the close links with faithfulness, obligation and commitment that is present with *hesed*. On *hen* see further, e.g., H-J. Fabry, *TDOT* 5:22-36; Terence E. Fretheim, *NIDOTTE*, 2:203-206; on *rahamim* see further, e.g., George Michael Butterworth, *NIDOTTE*, 3:1093-95; H. Simeon-Yofre and U. Dahmen, *TDOT* 13:437-54.
- 27 E.g. Jer. 31:3; Hos. 2:18-20.
- 28 See also Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Enquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978), p. 148.
- 29 See also Ps. 36:10[11] – *continue your hesed to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart*.
- 30 E.g. Ps. 25:7; 51:3; 130:7.
- 31 The title of the Psalm provides a canonical link with David's adultery with Bathsheba, and indicates that the theological content of Psalm 51 was thought applicable to David's situation at an early stage in the text's transmission, and it seems reasonable to assume that the basis of appeal and the hope of forgiveness are relevant to someone who, like David, is



- guilty of a serious, deliberate sin.
- 32 The expression is not used specifically in connection with adultery and murder; though it is applied to those guilty of shedding blood (Lev. 17:4), and this may be linked with the reference to *bloodguilt* in Psalm 51:14 [16]; see also Num. 35:30-34.
- 33 Cf. Artur Weiser, *Psalms* (OTL; London: SCM, 1962; repr. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000). Weiser sees vv. 18-19 as a post-exilic appendix, which re-emphasises the importance of sacrifice, and re-interprets the earlier part of the psalm, which for Weiser questions the value of sacrifice, 'in the light of the absence of cultic observances during the exile' (p. 410). It is possible that these verses were added later, though to interpret, not contradict, the earlier verses; maybe to adapt the psalm for community use; see, e.g., Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*. (TOTC; Leicester: Inter-varsity, 1976), p. 194; and maybe to provide a balance to what some might take as anti-cultic sentiments; see, e.g., Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), pp. 29-30. The argument set out below offers an interpretation of the psalm as a unified canonical whole.
- 34 See, e.g., Weiser, *Psalms*, pp. 409-410.
- 35 E.g. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 193-194.
- 36 Goldingay speaks about God's commitment to and renewal of the priesthood which includes bringing appropriate sacrifices; see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity / Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003-2006), 2:491-504 [492-493].
- 37 See the discussion by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / Livonia, MI: Dove, 1997), pp. 454-456.
- 38 See, e.g., A. A. Anderson, *Psalms*, 2 vols. (NCB; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 1:400-401; H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 246.
- 39 Isa. 24:5; Jer. 11:10; 31:32; Hos. 6:7; 8:1; Mal. 2:14; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8.
- 40 See Mic. 6:6-8 and maybe also Jer. 6:20; Hos. 6:6. See Eichrodt's discussion, *Theology*, 1:168.
- 41 A further factor in the attitude towards sacrifice of the pre-exilic prophets may be the imminence of exile. The interior approach to God might be seen as preparing the way for an approach to God in a situation where sacrifices would not be possible. However, the exile is also viewed as a separation from God, reflecting the breakdown of the covenant relationship; and the inability to offer sacrifices (which are in any case corrupt) may be part of that (Jer. 3:6-10; Ezek. 16; Hos. 2:11-13; 3:3-4).
- 42 This might also provide the basis on which the non-Israelite nations, who are from the start outside the sacrificial system, may be accepted by God and participate in the worship of the covenant community – which includes offering acceptable sacrifices (e.g. Isa. 56:3-8).
- 43 Tate, *Psalms* 51-100, p.28.
- 44 Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, p. 32.
- 45 Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:168.
- 46 Eichrodt claims support from Ps. 40:6 [7]; 51:18-19 [20-21]; 69:30-31 [31-32]. We have already noted problems with this interpretation of Ps. 51:18-19[20-21]. Ps. 40:6[7] may envisage a similar situation to Ps. 51 – where the cult is not applicable, and appeal is made to God's mercy (*rahamim*) and *hesed* (v. 11[12]); or it might be as Craigie suggests, that the king will have carried out all the cultic requirements, but knows that more is required of him; see, e.g., Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 315. It is not obedience and listening to God *instead* of sacrifice, but *in addition* to it, as part of its true meaning. Again, this does not reflect a rejection of the sacrificial system. Ps. 69:31[32] does imply that sincere praise and thanksgiving is more acceptable to God than sacrifice. This is set in the context of thanksgiving for deliverance rather than an appeal for forgiveness; but here, too, it does not imply a repudiation of the cult. The passage is relative: the right attitude of the worshipper is vital to sacrifice, and more pleasing to God than mechanistic sacrifice alone. This may also be seen in the wisdom literature; so, for example, the statement in Prov. 15:8 – *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him* – does not oppose sacrifice to prayer, but emphasises the importance of a right inner response over against a rite that is wholly external, lacking inward reality; see de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, p. 455.
- 47 Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel*, p. 246.
- 48 We see the same kind of problem with the old covenant. The covenant itself is not at fault; but the people have broken it, and so have put their relationship with God in jeopardy. It is on the basis of God's *hesed* that he promises to restore the relationship and to establish a New Covenant, which includes within it the necessary spiritual renewal that will enable the people to live by its terms.
- 49 See, for example, Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, pp. 30-32.
- 50 Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:168.
- 51 The Epistle of Barnabas (2) translates Jer. 7:22-23 – *'When your fathers came out of the land of Egypt, did I ever tell them to offer me burnt offerings and sacrifices? Never...'* and implies that physical sacrifice was never part of God's plan.
- 52 Kiuchi has the tendency to spiritualise the significance of sacrifice in what is otherwise a fine commentary on Leviticus. So, for example, the burnt offering symbolises death to self and the world; the burning of the fat of the sin offering symbolises the 'annihilation of the egocentric nature by which a person forfeits his relationship with God' (*Leviti-*



*cus*, p. 106). These are valid New Testament ideas, which may be developed from the Old Testament, but it is unlikely that they would have been understood in those terms by the Old Testament writers.

- 53 This view of sacrifice does seem to be presented in the Letter to the Hebrews (7:26-10:18). However, this seems to be concerned to emphasise the superiority of Christ's sacrifice and to challenge those who might be tempted to go on trusting the sacrificial

system. The emphasis is on the fulfilment of Old Testament sacrifices through Christ rather than their replacement with a more internal faith at an earlier stage. Even passages that some take to imply such a transition (e.g. 10:5-10) are directly linked with Christ.

- 54 This is not to suggest that confession and forgiveness should become a mere formality; what I am suggesting here is the idea that we keep short accounts with God.

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