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IS THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD NECESSARY FOR FORGIVENESS?

by Daniel Mann

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According to the New Testament, forgiveness *requires* the sacrifice of a substitute: "The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" ([Heb. 9:22, NIV](#)). However, since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, Orthodox Judaism has tended to regard the Old Testament sacrifices as *unnecessary*. In favor of this point of view, Rabbi David Rosen writes, "Judaism does not accept the idea of vicarious atonement. We can only atone for our own sins and are responsible for our own actions."¹

If animal sacrifice *is* necessary, and the temple no longer exists, then the Christian claim that Messiah has fulfilled and replaced them becomes embarrassingly compelling. This represents a threat to Judaism. If, however, animal sacrifice wasn't necessary, why then had God commanded it? For its symbolic value! Rosen writes:

Our ancient sages affirm that... "sincere repentance and works of lovingkindness (charity) are the real intercessors before God's throne" (TB Shabbat 32A) and that "sincere repentance is the equivalent to the rebuilding of the Temple, the restoration of the altar and the offering of all the sacrifices" (TB Sanhedrin 43B). In terms of Jewish understanding of the sacrificial rites in the temple, while the blood of the sacrifice did indeed represent life, it was seen precisely in a representational role symbolizing "the complete yielding up of the worshipper's life to God" (Hertz, Pentateuch and Haftorahs).²

While the New Testament understands the sacrificial system as a foreshadowing of the once-and-for-all substitutionary offering of God's Son, much of Rabbinic Judaism maintains that it represents the yielded life.³ The Orthodox Jewish columnist, David Klinghoffer, also argues in favor of divine forgiveness without blood: "The idea that penitence was not enough would have come as a surprise to the large majority of first-century Jews, who lived in the Diaspora and therefore had no regular access to the Temple rites. In not availing themselves of these rites at all times, they were relying on scripture, which taught that forgiveness could be secured without sacrifice."⁴

Klinghoffer supports this claim by citing Solomon's prayer at the consecration of the temple as proof:

And when they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies who led them away captive, and pray to You toward their land which You gave to their fathers, the city which You have chosen and the temple which I have built for Your name: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause, and forgive Your people who have sinned against You, and all their transgressions which they have transgressed against You; and grant them compassion before those who took them captive, that they may have compassion on them ([1 Kings 8:48–50](#)).⁵

For Klinghoffer, this constitutes proof that a sacrificial offering isn't necessary. This is odd. How could Solomon, on the one hand, bless the inauguration of his costly, God-ordained temple, while, at the same time, preach that the temple wasn't necessary? There are, instead, other ways to explain the fact that God would forgive the Israelites without an immediate temple sacrifice. Simply because blood wasn't required *at that time* doesn't mean it wasn't required! A bank will grant a loan, without a *present* outlay of money, if repayment is guaranteed. The loan doesn't represent a free ride, but a *postponement* of payment. Similarly, God could postpone payment of the debt in view of the Messianic guarantor ([Gen. 15:8–21](#); [Heb. 9:26](#)), even for the sins that had formerly been committed during the first covenant ([Heb. 9:15](#)).⁶

Even though the sacrificial system was symbolic, the shedding of blood was also a *requirement* ([Lev. 16:34](#)) through which God passed over Israel's sins ([Rom. 3:25](#)). Thus, it could-n't simply be set aside or lose its potency, but had to be *fulfilled* by a once-and-for-all bloody atonement ([Heb. 10:14](#)), through which God Himself would make atonement ([Deut. 32:43](#)).

AN UNNECESSARY SYSTEM IS A WASTEFUL SYSTEM

The expenditures underlying the temple system were tremendous. Add to this the cost of maintaining the priesthood and the lives of multitudes of animals. It seems unreasonable that God would require this merely as a symbol that Israel should live in submission to God.

SACRIFICES WERE A REQUIREMENT

The sacrificial system had been so central to God's workings with Israel that Moses and Aaron informed Pharaoh, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go three days' journey into the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword" ([Exod. 5:3](#)).

Either Israel would sacrifice animals or they would be sacrificed. Christian apologist Michael Brown correctly concludes, "The very reason God gave for calling his people out of Egypt was to offer sacrifices to him."⁷ He adds, "A careful study of the Five Books of Moses indicates that more chapters are devoted to the subject of sacrifices and offerings than to the subjects of Sabbath observance, high holy days, idolatry, adultery,

murder, and theft combined.”⁸ Indeed, Moses explicitly states that the blood offering was necessary to cover or atone for sins ([Lev. 17:11](#)). Sacrifice was never optional. When the Angel of Death destroyed the firstborn from the land of Egypt, he passed over and spared those Israelite homes that had the blood of the offering on them ([Exod. 12:23](#)). Any firstborn without the blood on his doorposts would have been killed. Blood was also required to cover all the sins of Israel ([Lev. 16:21–22](#)) in accordance with the New Testament ([Heb. 9:22](#)).

Anti-Missionary Rabbi Tovia Singer also asserts that animal sacrifice was unnecessary: “The prophets loudly declared to the Jewish people that the contrite prayer of the penitent sinner replaces the sacrificial system.”⁹ He assumes that since Israel no longer had its temple, prayer and repentance would now suffice. He cites [Hosea 14:2–3](#) to prove that the sacrificial system had been replaced by “words”: “Take words with you, and return to the Lord. Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity; Receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices [‘bulls’ in Hebrew] of our lips.’”

Singer is correct in pointing out that Hosea foresees “words” replacing the offering of “bulls.” This change, however, is associated *only* with the culmination of the old system, starting with the Cross, as illustrated by God’s declaration that “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him” ([Hos. 14:4](#)¹⁰). Therefore, it wasn’t a matter of blood sacrifices being unnecessary, but rather being fulfilled!

SACRIFICES COULD NOT BE SET ASIDE UNDER MOSES’ LAW

There is nothing in the Mosaic covenant that suggests that sacrifices were an option or that they would be abrogated apart from the Messianic atonement of Jesus.¹¹ Even so, there are a number of verses that communicate God’s displeasure with the offerings ([Psalm 50:8–15](#); [Prov. 15:8](#); [21:3](#); [Isa. 1:11–17](#); [Jer. 7:23](#); [Amos 5:21–27](#); [Hos. 6:6](#)). Such passages, however, in no way indicate that God was doing away with offerings and leaving no substitutionary blood offering in their place. Instead, these verses can be explained in either of two other ways.

First, God’s displeasure didn’t reflect a problem with the offerings themselves, but the hypocrisy of the offerers. [Psalm 51:16–19](#) illustrates this: “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise....*Then* You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then they shall offer bulls on Your altar” (emphasis added). God was “pleased...with burnt offerings” when they were offered with a broken and repentant heart. When they were offered hypocritically, however, God refused to hear the prayers of Israel ([Isa. 1:15](#)). In this regard, the esteemed Jewish thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Of course, the prophets did not condemn the practice of sacrifice in itself; otherwise we should have to conclude that Isaiah intended

to discourage the practice of prayer....Men may not drown out the cries of the oppressed with the noise of hymns, nor buy off the Lord with increased offerings. The prophets disparaged the cult [of animal sacrifice] when it became a substitute for righteousness.”¹²

Second, the other verses that assert that God didn't desire the blood of animals (even though He commanded it) are explained by understanding that animal blood was merely a symbol of the ultimate Messianic offering. Israel had a dim understanding that something had to take the place of the Mosaic system and that the repeated offering of the same sacrifices gave Israel only a temporary reprieve ([Heb. 10:1-4](#)). They also had been graphically instructed by the temple and offerings that intimacy with God was not yet a reality. They could not enter into God's presence (nor did they dare to!), and yet, they had been promised betrothal to their God ([Hos. 2:18-19](#)). Furthermore, they had been promised a “New Covenant” through which their sins would truly and permanently be forgiven ([Jer. 31:31-34](#)). Consistent with this understanding, [Psalm 40:6-8](#) declares that Israel's God was preparing a sacrifice that would put an end to all other sacrifices: “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a *body* You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, *I have come*—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God’” ([Heb. 10:5-7](#) quoting [Ps. 40:6-8](#), emphasis added).¹³

After the two times where Psalm 40 dismisses animal sacrifice, it then presents a human body, suggesting that the latter sacrifice will take the place of the former. This shouldn't have been foreign to Israelite ears. They often had been promised, starting with Moses ([Deut. 32:43](#)), that God Himself would atone in the end for Israel's sins.

NEVER A MATTER OF EITHER BLOOD OR REPENTANCE

Although Job had never been short on animal sacrifices, Elihu counseled him that a special ransom was required *in addition* to repentance ([Job 33:24-28](#)).¹⁴ Tovia Singer claims, however, that there are three types of atonement (sacrificial, repentance, alms), and that any one will suffice! This is contradicted, however, by the fact that any one of them by itself was *incapable* of bringing forgiveness: “Speak to the children of Israel: ‘When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the Lord, and that person is guilty, then he shall [1] *confess* the sin which he has committed. He shall [2] *make restitution* for his trespass in full...in addition to the [3] *ram of the atonement* with which atonement is made for him’” ([Num. 5:6-8](#), emphasis added; see also [Lev. 5:5-6](#)).

Similarly, Gerald Sigal writes, “It is clear from the Scriptures that sin is removed through genuine remorse and sincere repentance.” In support, he cites [Micah 6:8](#),

stating that the Lord requires justice and mercy.¹⁵ However, this also falls short of proving that sacrifice isn't part of the equation.

Blood atonement, *without* confession and repentance, never accomplished anything ([Amos 5:21–24](#)). Nevertheless, it was still *mandatory*. There is no biblical evidence that it was or could be simply set aside apart from the Messiah's coming. After surveying the rabbinic literature, Michael Brown concludes, "It was only after the Temple was destroyed [in AD 70] that the Talmudic rabbis came up with the concept that God had provided other forms of atonement aside from blood."¹⁶

PROPHECY: A RANSOM AND REDEEMER

There Had to Be The Payment of a Ransom. Even in the midst of God's earliest response to humankind's sin, a ransom was cryptically provided when *He* replaced the first couple's inadequate fig leaves with animal skins ([Gen. 3:21](#)), foreshadowing His Messianic endgame ([Isa. 61:10](#)). A ransom is inseparably and necessarily connected to Israel's return to God ([Isa. 35:10](#); [48:20](#); [51:10–11](#)). "'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.' For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he" ([Jer. 31:10–11](#)).

God Himself Would Have to Pay the Ransom. The Israelite couldn't afford it ([Ps. 49:7–9](#))! So God Himself would pay the price (49:15): "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" ([Isa. 44:22](#)).

Without God's ransom, Israel couldn't return to God ([Ps. 65:3–5](#); [78:38](#); [130:7–8](#); [Deut. 32:43](#); [Isa. 54:5–8](#); [Hos. 13:12–14](#)). Although repentance is necessary, it isn't sufficient ([Isa. 59:16–20](#)). Psalm 24 offers a graphic, if perhaps cryptic, demonstration of this principle. It asks the question, "Who may stand in His holy place!" The answer is discouraging—only those who are perfect (Ps. 15)! Because of this dismal response, even the gates are hanging their heads in despair, until the mysterious appearance of the "King of Glory" entering through the temple gate into God's presence to make intercession!

Messiah Would Pay with His Own Blood. Singer asserts, "Nor does Scripture ever tell us that an innocent man can die as an atonement for the sins of the wicked."¹⁷ However, according to the Zohar, the most highly esteemed Jewish mystical book, in its commentary on [Isaiah 53:5](#), "The children of the world are members of one another, and when the Holy One desires to give healing to the world, He smites one just man amongst them, and for his sake heals all the rest."¹⁸ Israel's salvation depended on Messiah's substitutionary atoning death and not on the Israelites sufficiently yielding themselves: "Break forth into joy, sing together...For the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has made bare His holy arm" ([Isa. 52:9–10](#); cf. [59:16](#); [63:5](#)). His "holy arm," the Son (53:1), will pay the price: "But he was pierced

for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the *punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has *laid on him the iniquity of us all* ([Isa. 53:5-7](#), emphases added; see also [Ps. 40:6-8](#); [Dan. 9:24-27](#); [Zech. 12:10-13:1, 7](#); Ps. 22; 69).

Singer maintains that God's provision of a ram in the place of Isaac (Gen. 22) proved that He would never accept a human sacrifice: "When Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac, the Almighty admonished him that He did not want the human sacrifice...The Almighty's directive—that He only wanted animal sacrifices rather than human sacrifices—was immediately understood. This teaching has never departed from the mind and soul of the faithful children of Israel."¹⁹ This, however, wasn't the lesson that Israel learned, but rather it was that God would provide: "And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, 'In the Mount of The Lord it shall be provided'" ([Gen. 22:14](#)). Additionally, it was more than just a matter of God's faithfulness. It was also prophetic of Messiah's atonement. The mountain wasn't named "The Lord-*has*-provided," but that He *will* provide! Nor was the promise that God would provide *in general*! Instead, God would provide a greater offering (overshadowing what He had already provided) "in the mount of the Lord," a phrase that "referred to the Temple mount in Jerusalem"²⁰ This became the very place that God did provide for our sins on the Cross at Calvary.

Rather than symbolizing our yielded lives, the animal sacrifices symbolized the very opposite—our *unyielded*, condemnation-worthy lives. That's why every Israelite had to confess his sins on the head of the sacrificial animal, which paid the price for his unyieldedness. In this way, the Israelite was taught that his hope couldn't be in his own righteousness or virtue ([Deut. 27:26](#)), but in a perfect substitution.

Blood has a lot to say about grace. It speaks eloquently about God's ultimate ransom. After I debated Rabbi Yossi Mizrachi at Temple Gabriel, Queens, New York, an Orthodox Jew from his congregation called me. When I mentioned God's grace toward King David, he protested, "You don't understand. The Talmud explains that Bathsheba's husband Uriah was an evil man who deserved to die. Besides, Bathsheba had already been divorced from him. And so David had done righteously by killing Uriah and marrying Bath sheba!" Fortunately, David didn't see things according to the Talmud. He confessed his sins ([2 Sam. 12:13](#)) and acknowledged the blessedness of God's grace ([Ps. 32:1-2](#)) and His willingness to receive blood offerings from the sin-broken repentant heart ([Ps. 51:16-19](#)).

The Talmud likewise rationalizes away the sin of all the patriarchs and therefore fails to recognize our profound need for grace. No wonder blood atonement can also be put away with such ease.

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notes

1 R. T. Kendall and David Rosen, *The Christian and the Pharisee* (New York: Faith Words, 2006), 109–10.

2 *Ibid.*, 109.

3 However, this latter view is hard to maintain in light of Mosaic revelation. Unblemished animals, representing sinlessness, were substituted for Israel's sins. That's why the Israelite had to place his hands on the sacrificial offering ([Lev. 1:4](#); [4:4](#), [15](#), [29](#), [33](#)), confessing and conferring his sins on it ([Lev. 16:21](#)).

4 David Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 111.

5 All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version except where otherwise noted.

6 This same reasoning can also reconcile other verses that seem to suggest that a covering ("kipper") could be obtained by means other than blood. In any event, these verses can't be used to overturn the many explicit verses requiring blood sacrifice.

7 Michael Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 73. This book contains a very extensive rebuttal of rabbinic arguments.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Tovia Singer, "Could Jesus' Death Alone for Any Kind of Sin?" online at www.outreachjudaism.org/jesusdeath.html.

10 This conclusion follows from [Hosea 14:4](#) because God's healing of Israel's backsliding is only accomplished at the end ([Jer. 32:37–41](#); [Ezek. 36:25–27](#)).

11 Although the poor could offer grain as a sin offering, this was only because this offering was laid alongside a blood offering ([Lev. 5:12](#)).

12 Brown, 86.

13 Hebrews quotes the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In this instance, the text differs from its competitor, the Masoretic text. Although the Masoretic doesn't read, "A body you have prepared for me," both texts read, "Behold, I have come to do thy will!" This "coming" seems to suggest a replacement of the sacrificial system.

14 It might be objected that citing Elihu is not persuasive. However, in context Elihu's words are just as authoritative as those that follow. Notice how his words blend thematically, without break or interruption by Job, into God's beginning in 38:1.

15 Gerald Sigal, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 16.

16 Brown, 111.

17 Singer.

18 Brown, 157.

19 Singer.

20 The NIV Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 38.