

THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB

CRUCIFIXION kills by asphyxiation, exhaustion, organ failure, exposure, heart attack, or pulmonary embolism—but not, generally, by exsanguination. Yet the New Testament language on the death of Jesus flows with blood. It is, in fact, a blood-soaked text. Jesus gives his disciples a cup of wine and proclaims, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28; cf. Mark 14:24); repeating this Last Supper account, Luke changes the phrasing slightly: “And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” (Luke 22:20). The Gospel of John makes the commandment to drink blood even more visceral:

So Jesus said to them, “Very truly [Greek *amen amen*], I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (John 6:53–56)

In Acts 20:28, Paul advises, “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own

Son," and in his own letters, he insists that Jesus is the one "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom 3:25). Indeed, he proclaims, "Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:9).

Paul also reminds the Corinthians: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?"—for "in the same way he [Jesus] took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 10:16; 11:25).

The Epistle to the Ephesians, ascribed to Paul but likely written by one of his followers, makes the blood an agent of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles by telling its gentile audience, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). Its companion volume Colossians, also ascribed to Paul and with better claims for Pauline authorship, offers that through Jesus "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20).

The Epistle to the Hebrews, as we have seen, insists that blood is required for sealing a covenant (Heb 9:18), that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (9:22), and that the only effective blood sacrifice is the one Jesus makes of himself. Jesus's blood, which with his flesh marks him as human (Heb 2:14), is of unique value, for "if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (Heb 9:13–14). Evoking similar sacrificial language, the First Epistle

of Peter speaks of "the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Pet 1:19). The First Epistle of John proclaims that Jesus's blood cleanses from all sin (1 John 1:7; cf. 5:6, 8), and Revelation, also stating "for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God" (Rev 5:9; cf. 12:11), even speaks of the cleansing properties of the "blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

These texts do not explain how blood seals a covenant or atones for sin; they do not need to do so. The world of Jesus and his earliest followers was a world in which sacrifice was religious currency; everyone knew of it and everyone recognized its value. Sacrifice was normative not only for Jews but also for pagans, as we see in Paul's concern that followers be careful about eating meat sacrificed to idols (see 1 Cor 8), lest fellow believers think the diner is participating in idolatrous worship. It would have been very strange had Jesus's followers, in light of the cross, not developed the category of sacrifice. And it is entirely understandable that this development depended substantially on the scriptures of Israel.

The Gospels and Paul draw connections between the death of Jesus and one specific sacrifice, the Passover offering. For the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus's Last Supper is a Passover celebration, a meal that developed in postbiblical tradition into the *seder*, a Hebrew term meaning "order." Several elements of this choreographed meal were already in place while the Jerusalem Temple still stood, including eating certain foods, such as matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs.

At the time of Jesus, the dinner also consisted of a lamb, sacrificed in the Temple on the Day of Preparation, with the holiday beginning that evening at sundown. The lamb is to remind the people of how the Israelites in Egypt sacrificed lambs and then painted the doorposts of their houses with the lambs' blood. God instructs, "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you

when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exod 12:13). The blood served an apotropaic function, that is, it protected the people. Exodus 12:27 describes this offering: "It is the passover [Hebrew *pesach*] sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over [Hebrew *pasach*, better translated as "protected"] the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses."¹ Lambs sacrificed in the Temple and then eaten by Jews in Jerusalem on the first night of Passover recalled the Israelites' freedom from slavery.

In John's Gospel, the Last Supper is not a Passover meal. Rather, Jesus dies the day before, when the priests slaughter the Passover lambs. John 19:14 describes: "Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover ["the" Passover refers to the paschal offering, the lamb, and by extension to the dinner at which it is eaten]; and it was about noon. [Pilate] said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!'" In John's Gospel, Jesus thus becomes the new "Passover," whose blood will protect his followers from (eternal) death. John enhances this connection between Jesus and the Passover lamb by mentioning that the people standing near the cross as Jesus dies "put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth" (John 19:29). According to Exodus 12:22, the Israelites used hyssop branches to paint the blood on their doorposts.

Writing earlier than John's Gospel, Paul had already connected Jesus to the Passover rituals and the paschal offering: In 1 Corinthians 5:7, he exhorts the assembly, "Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." As Exodus 12 describes, because the Israelites, fleeing Egypt, did not have the time needed for the dough to rise, they ate unleavened bread. In Paul's day, and to the present day, Jews traditionally eat matzah for the seven- to eight-day Passover celebration.

Eventually, the understanding of Jesus as a sacrificial "lamb" be-

came common vocabulary. In John 1:29 (cf. 1:36), John the Baptist proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The sacrificial imagery is implicit: the lamb becomes efficacious only in terms of removing sin when its blood is shed in sacrifice. Jesus becomes, as the Epistle to the Hebrews emphatically insists, the perfect sacrifice, whose blood creates a new covenant, saves from death, and washes away sin. First Peter 1:19 speaks of the "precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish," and the book of Revelation consistently refers to the Christ through the symbolism of a slain lamb. This entire program of Jesus as a paschal offering that removes sin is a specific understanding of the Passover offering not found outside of the followers of Jesus.

The Passover offering was not, as we will see, ever regarded by the Jewish community as a sin offering. Josephus reports:

In the month of Xanthicus, which is by us called Nisan, and is the beginning of our year, on the fourteenth day of the lunar month, when the sun is in Aries for in this month it was that we were delivered from bondage under the Egyptians, and law ordained that we should every year slay that sacrifice which I before told you we slew when we came out of Egypt, and which was called the Passover; and so we do celebrate this Passover in companies, leaving nothing of what we sacrifice till the day following. (*Antiquities* 3.248)

He puts no stress on blood and makes no mention of sin. Philo finds an allegorical meaning rather than an atoning one in the festival celebrations: "The Passover is when the soul is anxious to unlearn its subjection to the irrational passions, and willingly submits itself to a reasonable mastery over them" (*Heir* 192).

In the New Testament, the ancient sacrifices all bleed into one: Jesus is the lamb of God, associated with the paschal offering, which

becomes a sin offering. And once Jesus becomes the prime sacrifice, no other offerings were needed. His followers, especially after the destruction of the Temple, justified this rejection of other sacrifices by appealing to prophetic texts that emphasize repentance over sacrifice. For example, in Matthew 9:13 and again in 12:7, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6a, "For I desire steadfast love [Hebrew *chesed*; Greek *eleos*, "mercy"] and not sacrifice"; the next line repeats the point in poetic parallelism: "the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Isaiah 1:11 similarly asks:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

Such texts, in their historical contexts, do not call for the abolition of sacrifice. This Hebrew poetry establishes not an elimination, but an emphasis, as we see also in 1 Samuel 15:22b, "Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, / and to heed than the fat of rams." In the following chapter, Samuel invites David's father, Jesse, to a sacrifice. These texts, with their polemical bent, show how entrenched the idea of sacrifice was. The frequent modern depiction of "prophetic religion" as being in favor of ethics and absolutely against sacrifice is incorrect.² Ideally, personal ethics and liturgical and cultic activity should be mutually reinforcing. To see how this system works, we turn to the function of sacrifice according to the scriptures of Israel.

SACRIFICES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

SACRIFICE, in its various forms, was fundamental to ancient Near Eastern life—sacrifices represented a return to God (or gods) of the gifts people thought God (or gods) had given them. Sacrifice also reflected the confidence that God/gods would reward the worshiper with additional animals or produce.

Ancient Israel's sacrificial system—its gifts to God—developed over time and involved offerings of both animals and agricultural products. The J author depicts Abel offering "the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions" (Gen 4:4), while his brother Cain "brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground" (4:3). The divine preference for Abel's sacrifice over that of his brother may suggest that this author placed greater value on animal sacrifice, although Genesis 4 never specifies the rationale for God's preference. Likely it reflects the greater cost of an animal sacrifice as well as an imagined divine preference for more "tasty" and good-smelling meat, rather than grain or vegetables. Noah builds an altar after the flood (Gen 8:20), and because of the "pleasing odor" of the offering, God promises never again to destroy every living creature by water (8:21).

Moving from the primeval history to the time of the patriarchs, Genesis recounts how Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all built altars (Gen 12:7; 26:25; 33:20). This altar building shows the centrality of animal offerings: *mizbe'ach*, the Hebrew word for an altar, is de-

rived from the root *z-b-ch*, “to slaughter,” and thus means “a slaughter site.”

According to Deuteronomy 12:6, later than the Yahwist (J) source, God commands the people of Israel to offer “your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks.” Deuteronomy offers some details of how different animals should be sacrificed, but only the later initial chapters of Leviticus, from the Priestly (P) source, prescribe specific rituals concerning sacrifices.

The extensive Priestly sacrificial system, the background for New Testament texts that concern sacrifice, blood, and atonement, differentiates among types of sacrifice. The burnt offering (Hebrew *’olah*; Greek *holokautōma*, the origin of the term “holocaust”) is fully consumed by God (Lev 1), and the well-being offering (*shelamim*, Lev 3)³ is shared between the offerer and God, with God receiving the choice parts. This sharing indicates human-divine communion. In these offerings, blood plays no role, other than that the people do not consume it.

In contrast, rituals that involve the manipulation of blood play a central role in what the NRSV and most translations call a “sin offering,” Hebrew *chata’t*—the offering most relevant for understanding the role of the cross. The word *chata’t* is used both for “sin,” as in Genesis 4:7 where God tells Cain, “sin [*chata’t*] is lurking at the door,” and for the sacrifices that counter sins. This offering is not typified by the formula “a pleasing odor to the LORD”⁴ because its blood, not its consumption on the altar, was central. For this offering, an animal is almost always used—for animals, not plants, have blood.⁵

Leviticus 4 outlines five different types of *chata’t* offerings: ones brought by the high priest (vv. 3–12), by the entire community (vv. 13–21), by the ruler (vv. 22–26), by an individual who brings a female goat (vv. 27–31), and by an individual who brings a sheep (vv. 32–35).

The offerer eats no part of the sacrifice, although some of the meat is given to the priests (Lev 6:26, 29; 6:19, 22 Heb.). The chapter concludes with a note that clarifies the objective of these offerings (Lev 4:35): “Thus the priest shall make atonement [Hebrew *k-p-r*, as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement] on your behalf for the sin that you have committed, and you shall be forgiven.” As we shall see, it is specifically the blood that atones.

Each of the offerings in Leviticus 4 involves blood manipulation. For example, in the first offering, the text prescribes:

The priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the LORD in front of the curtain of the sanctuary. The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense that is in the tent of meeting before the LORD; and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (Lev 4:6–7)

Leviticus 4:17–18, 25, 30, and 34 also describe blood rituals. In the first two cases, which concern sins by the high priest or the entire community (vv. 3–21) and which therefore are especially grievous, the priest sprinkles the blood against the curtain that protected the holy of holies from view. Thus, the blood comes as close as possible to the ark and the divine presence imagined residing behind the curtain. In these as well as the other cases, the priest “put[s] [the blood] on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and he shall pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar.” These “horns” are quarter-round stone protuberances that have been found in several excavated altars in Israel—they were probably utilitarian, designed to keep the sacrifice on the flat altar. In sum, the *chata’t* involved lots of blood.⁶

The Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) ritual in Leviticus 16 of-

fers the most detailed description of a *chata't*, with its subrituals. The complexity of such practices shows how central the idea of blood as the means of removing sin was to ancient Israel. Leviticus 16:14–20a, describing first the offering that the high priest sacrifices for himself and his family and then the offering for the nation, highlights the centrality of blood; in this long quotation, "blood" (Hebrew *dam*) appears repeatedly:

He shall take some of the blood of the bull [his *chata't*], and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat [the ark cover; Hebrew *kapporet*; Greek *hilastērion*], and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times. He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. . . . Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement on its behalf, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel. (Lev 16:14–15, 18–19)

At the beginning of this chapter, we cited Romans 3:25, where Paul speaks of the Christ as "put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." The Greek term the NRSV translates as "sacrifice of atonement" is *hilastērion*. Paul is referring to Leviticus 16:13–15.

Several subsequent verses in Leviticus clarify the atoning nature of the blood:

Leviticus 16:30: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD."

Leviticus 16:33: "He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly."

As these verses testify, atonement according to Leviticus is not accomplished through prayer, contrition, and fasting but through precisely following rituals of blood manipulation.

Unclear, however, is who (or what) is atoned for (*kiper-ed*)—the people (v. 30) or various physical spaces, such as the sanctuary (v. 33a). This crucial question of the object that receives atonement is intrinsically related to the proper translation of *chata't*, and it therefore has implications for understanding how Jesus served as a *chata't*.

Until 1976, translators typically rendered *chata't* as "sin offering" (so in the NRSV and the original version of the NJPS) and understood the term as indicating a sacrifice for undoing sin and/or removing the consequences of sin, that is, the punishment of the sinner. In 1976, Jacob Milgrom published an article titled "Israel's Sanctuary: The Priestly 'Picture of Dorian Gray.'" In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian Gray's portrait absorbs his misdeeds and becomes hideous, while Dorian himself stays young and healthy. Milgrom states, "On the analogy of Oscar Wilde's novel, the priestly writers would claim: sin may not leave its mark on the face of the sinner, but it is certain to mark the face of the sanctuary [with ritual impurity—NRSV's "uncleanness"], and unless it is quickly expunged, God's presence will depart."⁸ Milgrom observes that particular sins create impurities that are attracted to particular parts of the sanctuary; such attraction is due to the "Priestly notion of impurity as a dynamic force, magnetic and malefic to the sphere of the sacred, attacking it not just by direct contact but from a distance."⁹ This thesis explains the beginning of Leviticus 16:33, cited

above: "He shall make atonement [Hebrew *kiper*] for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar"¹⁰—in other words, the *chata't* cleanses not the sinner but the impurities that various sins created, impurities that now reside at the sanctuary, the tent of meeting, and the altar.

Central to Milgrom's argument is his understanding of the root *k-p-r* as "purge," on the basis of the same root in Akkadian, which connotes "wipe off" or "cleanse."¹¹ Milgrom translates Leviticus 16:33 as "He shall purge [NRSV: "make atonement for"] the holiest part of the sanctuary, and he shall purge [NRSV: "make atonement for"] the Tent of Meeting and the altar." Such cleansing is needed because impurities may cause the divine presence, which likes to live in a low-sin environment, to flee the sanctuary. The initial chapters of Ezekiel display this concern (e.g., Ezek 3:12, "as the glory of the LORD rose from its place"). Milgrom translates "Yom Kippur," usually known as "the Day of Atonement," as "the Day of Purgation" and so keeps the focus on the blood rituals practiced while the sanctuary still stood.

Milgrom also coined a brilliant term, "ritual detergent," to explain the function of the sacrificial blood of the *chata't*.¹² Just as real detergent cleanses dirt from clothes, so blood—properly applied—cleanses (or purges) sin from the sanctuary. This cleaning can be done any time of the year, as noted in Leviticus 4, and Yom Kippur is a special annual cleansing in the early fall—comparable to weekly housecleaning and a giant, daylong spring cleaning. And this cleansing is effective without any personal repentance.

Some scholars have pushed back against Milgrom's understanding of the root *k-p-r* and the function of the *chata't*. Yitzhaq Feder, noting that "blood is used as a means of expiation, purification, and consecration" in Hittite rituals from the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE (in what is now modern-day Turkey),¹³ suggests that the *chata't*

cleanses only the sinner, not the tabernacle. He cites Leviticus 16:30, which notes that Yom Kippur "cleanse[s] you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD"; similarly, Leviticus 16:33 states that the high priest "shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly." Blood did not serve this purpose in ancient Mesopotamia,¹⁴ so verses concerning cleansing people from sin look all the more striking.

According to Feder, the blood purifies the sinners; conversely, Milgrom suggests that the blood purifies the temple/tabernacle areas that were made ritually impure through people's sins. Each position has some support in parts of Leviticus 16. They may both be right. And according to both interpretations, blood plays a crucial role in this *kiper*-ing, this atoning and/or purging.

Blood elsewhere in the Bible is similarly superpowerful.¹⁵ Leviticus 17:11, forbidding Israelites from consuming any type of blood, explains: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement [Hebrew *k-p-r*] for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement [*k-p-r*]." Most likely, this verse indicates that "animal blood is identified with animal life, and the application of animal life to the altar has a positive impact on the life of the offerer: the animal's life, in the animal's blood, functions as a ransom for the life of the offerer."¹⁶ By killing the animal and completing certain blood rituals, sinners may live; their lives are ransomed. We have here the origins of quotations such as Revelation 5:9, "by your blood you ransomed for God." The idea of Jesus's death as a "ransom" appears as well in Matthew 20:28 (cf. Mark 10:45), where Jesus states that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life [as] a ransom for many" (see also 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 1:18).¹⁷

However, the concept of an animal's life replacing a human life appears *only* in Leviticus 17:11,¹⁸ and the precise meaning and trans-

lation of the verse are uncertain.¹⁹ In addition, Leviticus 17 is from a later author (or source) than the *chata't* texts from Leviticus 4, 6, and 16, and it may not reflect those texts' notion of how blood works. The ransom thesis, that the animal's life is given so that the human may live, does not appear to hold for the numerous other descriptions of ancient Israelite sacrifice.

The discussion up to now relates to the original Israelite understanding of the *chata't* and its possible roles. The Septuagint translates *chata't* as *harmartia*, "sin," and its readers may well have understood the purgation to apply to people in addition to, if not rather than, the Temple. For Jews during the Hellenistic period and living far away from the Temple, there was greater concern for the person than for the building surfaces.

In some cases, the Septuagint's translation also influences Christian understandings of sacrifice. For example, the Epistle to the Hebrews uses the Greek of Psalm 40:6a (40:7a Heb.; 39:7 LXX) to support its claim of the Christ's superior sacrifice. The Hebrew reads, "Sacrifice [*zevach*] and offering [*minchah*] you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear [literally "ears you have hollowed out or bored" from the Hebrew verb *k-r-h*, "hollow out"]." Several early Septuagint manuscripts (e.g., Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, and Sinaiticus) translate, "Sacrifices and offerings you do not wish, but a *body* you have prepared [Hebrew *b-r-h*] for me." It is possible that the translators misread one letter in Hebrew, such that *barah* ("choose") became *karah* ("hollow out")—in Hebrew script, the letters "k" (כ) and "b" (ב) visually resemble each other. That would explain the distinction between "choose" or "prepare" and "hollow out." How certain Septuagint manuscripts came to read "body" (Greek *sōma*) for "ear" is less clear. It is possible that the scribes who prepared the Septuagint manuscripts read backward from Hebrews to the psalm; it is also possible that there were different versions of the Hebrew

original. A third possibility is that the Greek transcribers took "ear" to stand, as a metonymy, for the entire body.²⁰

In other cases, the Greek includes new rituals not mentioned in any extant Hebrew sources. Leviticus 24:7, which speaks of the showbread, or "bread of the Presence," reads, "You shall put pure frankincense with each row, to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the LORD."²¹ To this mixture, the Greek translators add "salt." As with many of the variants, the difference is literally a matter of taste.

PASSOVER

THE PASSION narrative, the story of Jesus's last days in Jerusalem, is deeply connected to Passover and the Passover sacrifice. The initial description of the Passover offering appears in Exodus 12:1–28, although how much of the ritual carried into the Second Temple period is, as with many things, debated. Even if the practices were not carried out as described, Exodus 12 remains the source to which early followers of Jesus turned in order to understand his death.

Exodus 12 describes blood rituals twice, in verses 13 and 22–23, each reflecting a separate source: verses 1–20 are from the Priestly (P) source and 21–27 are from the earlier Northern Israel Elohist (E) source. Verse 13 (P) states, "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." Verses 21–23 (E) read:

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop [like a paintbrush], dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees

the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down."

The use of the blood here differs significantly from the blood of the *chata't* because the paschal lamb is not a *chata't* offering. Unlike the *chata't*, this lamb is not primarily for God and the priests but is a family offering, eaten by the laity. In both sources, the sacrificial blood of the Passover lamb is "a sign" (so explicitly in Exod 12:13), a way of saying "Israelites inside," so that they are not killed. The blood is apotropaic—that is, it protects rather than atones. Furthermore, this blood ritual is a one-shot deal; blood does not play a significant role in subsequent Passover offerings because only in Egypt did the Israelites need protection from "the destroyer."

Another factor, however, may have connected blood to subsequent paschal lamb offerings. In general, P's "signs," such as the Sabbath and circumcision, are perpetual,²² and the blood in Exodus 12:13 is also called a "sign." This may have caused some readers to see the blood of the paschal lamb in Egypt as having perpetual significance, even if the ritual was not perpetually practiced. What, however, it "signified," since the Israelites were not annually placing the blood on their lintels, cannot be determined.

For the followers of Jesus, this sign becomes the warding away of death. Jesus, sacrificed as the paschal lamb, protects his followers, through his blood, from eternal death, or damnation.

HUMAN SACRIFICE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

THE IDEA of human sacrifice as depicted in the scriptures of Israel also informs the passion narrative. Genesis 22 is called in Jewish tradition "the Akedah," the "binding" of Isaac. God commands Abraham to offer his son as a "burnt offering," and Abraham proceeds to take Isaac to Mount Moriah, tie him securely, and raise the knife; he stops only when "an angel of the LORD" calls to him. Abraham spots a ram caught by its horns in a nearby bush and offers the ram instead. Many readers view this chapter as a polemic against human sacrifice, and later it was taken to be so. Yet for Israel's scriptures, Genesis 22 is not a polemic against human sacrifice.²³ At the end of the chapter, the angel appears to Abraham and repeats the promise of progeny, land, and blessing (vv. 17–18). This angel does *not* say, "Because you have shown your willingness to sacrifice your son, I will now find human sacrifice abhorrent among your descendants (or all peoples)."

A number of texts may suggest that under certain circumstances human sacrifice is expected, and effective. Exodus 22:29–30 (22:28–29 Heb.), in the oldest legal collection in the Bible, contains the following legislation: "You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with

its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me." The offering from the harvest and presses are given to God, and the oxen and sheep are given, presumably as sacrifices; the command "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me" may be read in the same way. The text may suggest the time when firstborn sons served in priestly capacities, since there is no indication that Exodus expected human sacrifice. Micah 6:7 similarly reads:

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

The quotation suggests that offering the "firstborn," "the fruit of my body," could sometimes happen. This was an offering of something of great value, like "thousands of rams" or "ten thousands of rivers of oil." Alternatively, such verses again may imply that the firstborn was donated to serve at a local temple, as illustrated by Hannah dedicating her son Samuel to the temple at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:24). Eventually these firstborn sons may have been replaced by the Levites.

The scriptures of Israel only rarely depict human sacrifice. According to Judges 11, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in fulfilling a vow: were God to grant him military victory, he would offer the first to come out of his house (the oft-heard proposal that he was thinking of the family dog is unlikely, as well as itself abhorrent). Unambiguously indicating that human sacrifice both occurred and was seen as efficacious, 2 Kings 3:27 explains how the Moabite king "took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall." The continuation of this verse, written by an Israelite author, is remarkable: "And great wrath came upon Israel, so they [the enemy force] withdrew from him and returned to their

own land.” In other words, from the author’s perspective, the human sacrifice worked. Ezekiel 20:25–26 also refers to child sacrifice: “Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.”²⁴

We are not saying that human sacrifice was widely or even typically practiced in ancient Israel. But the textual evidence suggests that some believed it to be effective either in atoning for sins (Mic 6:7) or in diverting a great disaster (2 Kgs 3:27). None of the Hebrew Bible texts that depict human sacrifice, however, suggests that the blood in particular of the human sacrificial victim has any special role in atoning. In the Hebrew Bible, only the blood of the animal *chata’t* offering, not human blood, atones.

NONSACRIFICIAL ATONEMENT

BLOOD IS NOT the only way ancient Israel effected atonement. The *chata’t* texts, emphasizing the tabernacle and so the Temple, all come from the Priestly (P) source. Deuteronomy and related works, emphasizing not sacrifice but “repentance,” use the Hebrew root *sh-u-v*, “to turn, return” (in this case, to God).

The first usage of *sh-u-v* in reference to (re)turning to God is Deuteronomy 4:29–30, which addresses Israel in exile. The setting is key, since it presumes that Israel had no access to Jerusalem and so to the Temple: “From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return [Hebrew *sh-u-v*] to the LORD your God and heed him.” That root reappears several times to frame Deuteronomy 30:1–10, which speaks about the results of turning away from sin and toward standing in a right relationship with God:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you [as described in Deut 28], if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return [*sh-u-v*] to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will

restore [*sh-u-v*] your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. . . . For the LORD will again [*sh-u-v*] take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn [*sh-u-v*] to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut 30:1-3, 9-10)

Sh-u-v, used of both God and Israel in this passage, makes a simple point: if you return (*sh-u-v*) to God, God will return (*sh-u-v*) to you. This emphasis on turning is different from the language of forgiveness (Hebrew *s-l-ch*) effected by sacrifices, which typifies the Priestly source. This returning has nothing to do with animals or blood.

Even in places where we might expect an emphasis on sacrifice, we find the promotion of a change in action. The exilic text 1 Kings 8, affiliated with Deuteronomy, ascribes to Solomon a prayer at the completion of his Temple.²⁵ The text briefly mentions a huge offering (1 Kgs 8:63), but the chapter focuses instead on the efficacy of prayer in various situations:

If they [the Israelites] sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; yet if they come to their senses [literally “return,” *sh-u-v*] in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent [*sh-u-v*], and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, “We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly”; if they repent [*sh-u-v*] with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies, who took them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I

have built for your name; then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you; and grant them compassion in the sight of their captors, so that they may have compassion on them. (1 Kgs 8:46-50)

Shuv-ing, not sacrifices or blood, brings about reconciliation. This prayer not only repeats the root but also offers similar sounding roots such as *veshavum shovehem* (from the root *sh-v-h*), “that they are carried away captive” in verse 46, or *nishbu . . . shovehem*, “have been taken captive . . . captors” in the following verse. These word-plays are difficult to reproduce in English.

Shuv-ing, apart from sacrifice, is a core idea of prophetic texts. Jeremiah 4:1 quotes God as saying,

If you return [*sh-u-v*], O Israel,
says the LORD,
if you return [*sh-u-v*] to me,
if you remove your abominations from my presence,
and do not waver.

Hosea 14:1-2 (14:2-3 Heb.), a passage read on the Sabbath before Yom Kippur, explicitly demands *shuv*-ing with words (namely, prayer) rather than sacrifices:

Return [*sh-u-v*], O Israel, to the LORD your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you
and return [*sh-u-v*] to the LORD;
say to him,

“Forgive all guilt
And accept what is good;
Instead of bulls we will pay
[the offering of] our lips.”²⁶

Again, no animals, blood, or *chata't* offering is required.

SACRIFICE IN POSTBIBLICAL JUDAISM

THE INSISTENCE that repairing a relationship with God is possible without sacrifice continues after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE. Indeed, *not a single text* in the huge corpus of rabbinic Judaism suggests that after the Temple had been destroyed, atonement is impossible or that blood is essential for atonement. When rabbinic texts speak about the power of blood to effect atonement, they refer to past Temple ritual, not the postdestruction reality.

Several rabbinic texts, imagining that sacrifices were carried out, cite Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement,” to make the point that sacrificial blood atones. From the Babylonian Talmud, *Zevahim* 6a begins with Leviticus 1:4, “And he shall place his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to atone for him,” which might suggest that the laying of hands on the sacrificial animal atones for the person offering the sacrifice. The talmudic passage then suggests that only the blood atones: “And does placing hands atone for one's sins? But isn't atonement achieved only by the sprinkling of blood, as it is stated, ‘For it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life (Leviticus 17:11)’?”²⁷ Rabbinic authors recognized that, while the Temple stood, blood is the typical ritual detergent, but even there it is not always necessary.²⁸ And after

the Temple was destroyed, alternatives to blood atonement would continue to develop.

In determining that blood sacrifice is not necessary, some rabbinic texts follow a precedent in Priestly literature, which in a single case allows for a flour offering to atone. Leviticus 5:11–13 reads:

But if you cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, you shall bring as your offering for the sin that you have committed one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a sin offering; you shall not put oil on it or lay frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering. You shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall scoop up a handful of it as its memorial portion, and turn this into smoke on the altar, with the offerings by fire to the LORD; it is a sin offering. Thus the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for whichever of these sins you have committed, and you shall be forgiven.

From a biblical perspective, too much should not be made of this single exception.

The rabbinic tradition regards repentance, apart from blood sacrifice, as fully effective. While the scriptures of Israel speak of *shuv*, turning, in the sense of an action, rabbinic material stresses the efficacy of *teshuvah* in the sense of internal contrition²⁹ and repentance. As the great scholar of rabbinics Ephraim Urbach summarizes concerning the idea of repentance in the Yerushalmi (the Jerusalem Talmud): "The Holy One, blessed be He, was asked: 'What is the sinner's punishment?' He answered them: 'Let him repent and I shall accept him,' for it is written 'Good and upright is the Lord'" [Ps 25:8]. Obviously, the homilist intended to ascribe to God that the power of repentance was absolute, transcending that of atonement through sacrifices."³⁰ Some early rabbis claim that the daily prayers along with repentance and charity replace the morning and afternoon Temple

offering.³¹ The point continues in Jewish liturgy, for example, in the congregational response to the medieval *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, one of the central prayers recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: "But repentance [Hebrew *teshuvah*], prayer [*tefillah*] and charity (or: "good deeds") [*tzedakah*] cancel the harsh decree."³² In other classical rabbinic texts, fasting or the study of the Torah makes atonement.³³ And in still other texts, "The death of the righteous atones for sin."³⁴ In *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:12, the rabbis backdate this idea to ancient Israel: "Just as the Day of Atonement atones, so does the death of the righteous atone. And where is it shown that . . . the death of the righteous atones? Where it is stated, 'And they buried the bones of Saul.' . . . And God responded to the plea of the land thereafter" (the citation is to 2 Sam 21:14). Here we may see a response to Christian proclamation.

THE BLOOD OF CIRCUMCISION

ALTHOUGH circumcision is mentioned already in Genesis, its significance develops over time. Among its many interpretations is the postbiblical association of the blood of circumcision with atonement. Though sacrificial blood loses its role in Judaism, blood remains closely aligned with atonement in the *brit* or *bris* (Eastern European pronunciation) *milah*, the circumcision ceremony performed upon eight-day-old Jewish males. Immediately following the physical act of circumcising, as part of the boy's naming ceremony, the person performing the circumcision (the child's father, or more typically the professional circumciser [Hebrew *mohel*]) says:

Our God and God of our fathers preserved this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel (*baby's name son of father's name*). May the father rejoice in the issue of his body, and the mother be glad with the fruit of her womb, as is written, "May your father and mother rejoice, and she who bore you be glad." [Prov 23:25] And it is said, "Then I passed by you and saw you downtrodden in your blood, and I said to you: Because of your blood live; and I said to you: Because of your blood live."³⁵

This last verse is from Ezekiel 16, one of scripture's most problematic, even pornographic, chapters. It describes God's adoption of

abandoned (female) Israel, whom he eventually marries and then punishes in lurid terms when she strays. Ezekiel 16:6 describes the newborn baby "befouled and uncared for"³⁶—not even cleaned of the blood from birth. Ezekiel's phrase *bedamayich chayi* means "in your blood(y state), live!"—words of encouragement to the abandoned child. But the circumcision prayer understands the preposition *be-* as "because of" (instead of "in," its more typical meaning), another meaning it has in Biblical Hebrew. And thus the prayer states that the blood of circumcision is life-giving.

The idea that the blood of circumcision is life-giving is found only in the rabbinic interpretation of Ezekiel 16, not in Ezekiel itself. However, according to Exodus 4:24–26, set when Moses is returning from Midian to Egypt, the blood of circumcision does preserve life: "On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses's feet with it, and said, 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' So he let him alone. It was then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.'" The laconic text is "terribly mysterious";³⁷ it is not even clear from the Hebrew whom God seeks to kill: Moses or the child. The account fits folktale patterns of attacking demons and using blood to ward off evil (apotropaic magic), as we saw also with the blood of the Passover lamb put on the doorposts of the Israelite houses. While the story may have something to do with an early concern that Moses, raised in an Egyptian household, was not circumcised, it has nothing to do with sin and repentance.³⁸

Postbiblical Jewish authors likely knew that gentile Christians did not circumcise their sons. In fact, Paul so strongly argues against such a practice in his Epistle to the Galatians that he says of those who preach circumcision to the gentiles, "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" (Gal 5:12). For Paul, gentiles should remain gentiles, but they should give up their pagan religious practices,

such as sacrificing to the state gods. Jews remain Jews, but they are to welcome gentile Christ-followers as equal members of their messianic community. Thus, for Paul and even more so for Jews who did not follow Jesus, circumcision functioned as an important boundary marker. The act of circumcision came to represent the broader set of Torah laws and rituals; it could thus exemplify, from a Jewish perspective, being put in a right relationship with God through deeds rather than faith.³⁹

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 29, a chapter devoted to circumcision, notes: "Know then that on the Day of Atonement Abraham our father was circumcised. Every year the Holy One, blessed be He, sees the blood of our father Abraham's circumcision, and He forgives all the sins of Israel, as it is said, 'For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you' (Lev 16:30)." Not only is atonement, the theme of Yom Kippur, accomplished through the blood of circumcision, the same chapter notes, "everyone who brings his son for circumcision is as though (he were) a high priest bringing his meal offering and his drink offering upon the top of the altar." The verse is a possible polemic against claims that Jesus, in the line of Melchizedek (see Chapter 5), is the only effective high priest. The anti-Christian implication is secured by the next line: "Rabbi [Judah the Prince] said: Isaac circumcised Jacob, and Esau; and Esau despised the covenant of circumcision just as he despised the birth-right." This is likely one of many cases in rabbinic literature where "Esau" is code for "Christianity"; Christianity's abandonment of this ritual is projected here, critically, into hoary antiquity.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 29 also connects the blood of circumcision to the blood used in the Passover ritual.

The Israelites took the blood of the covenant of circumcision, and they put (it) upon the lintel of their houses, and when the Holy One,

blessed be He, passed over to plague the Egyptians, He saw the blood of the covenant of circumcision upon the lintel of their houses and the blood of the Paschal lamb, He was filled with compassion on Israel, as it is said, "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee weltering [lying in blood] in thy (twofold) blood, I said unto thee, In thy (twofold) blood, live; yea, I said unto thee, In thy (twofold) blood, live" (Ezek 16:6).

Here may be a polemic against seeing Jesus as a paschal offering. The basis of its exposition is Ezekiel 16:6, "in your blood(y state), live!"—or "in/because of your blood live."

After clarifying that the double mention of blood refers to the blood of circumcision and the blood of the paschal lamb, the midrash continues:

Rabbi Eliezer said: Why did the text say twice, "I said unto thee, In thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee, In thy blood, live"? But the Holy One, blessed be He, said: By the merit of the blood of the covenant of circumcision and the blood of the Paschal lamb ye shall be redeemed from Egypt, and by the merit of the covenant of circumcision and by the merit of the covenant of the Passover in the future ye shall be redeemed at the end of the fourth kingdom; therefore it is said, "I said unto thee, In thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee, In thy blood, live."

This rabbinic connection among circumcision, blood, and Passover again looks like an anti-Christian polemic: it is the blood of Passover and circumcision, not of the Christ, that atones.

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT

THE NEW TESTAMENT connects blood, atonement, and covenant. The scriptures of Israel connect blood and covenant explicitly only in two texts.

Exodus 24, a composite chapter put together from several sources, describes the events that occurred after the revelation at Mount Sinai/Horeb. It begins with the Elohist (E) source's description of an unusual ritual that may have some basis in Northern Israelite religion. Speaking of Moses, verses 4b–8 read:

He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Most likely the shared blood "establishes a bond between the two parties"⁴⁰ of God and Israel. Alternatively, or in addition, the animal's

blood may reflect the "mutilation that will befall whichever party proves faithless."⁴¹

The only other Hebrew Bible text to associate blood and covenant is the postexilic Zechariah 9:11, which likely refers back to Exodus 24.⁴² Thus, blood and covenant are not strongly connected in Israel's scriptures; that connection develops only in postbiblical Jewish thinking concerning the *brit milah*, the covenant of circumcision. This is another case where something peripheral in the ancient texts becomes central in the New Testament and then reappears in Jewish thinking.

Blood remains a powerful image in both biblical testaments. In Christian thought, the Christ's blood atones for sin, and the wine of the Eucharist is, whether literally or metaphorically, his blood. For Jews, male circumcision—and the blood of circumcision—remains a ritual central to Jewish identity.

It is not unusual for Jews to be told by some Christians that they are damned to hell because they do not accept the atoning blood of Jesus to save them from their sins or ransom them from hell. Such comments reflect a lack of knowledge of Jewish views of atonement, including the rabbinic emphasis of repenting and turning (*shuv-ing*) from sin and toward God. At the same time, Jews would do well to understand the *Jewish* background of Christian claims regarding the blood of Jesus. The development of Jewish and Christian rituals, especially absent the animal sacrifice conducted in the Temple, shows how deeply interwoven the two traditions are.