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## Ancient Priest and Sacrifice in Israel's Scripture: Atonement and Apotheosis

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### Abstract

The Hebrew ritual of killing animals during sacrifice and the manipulation of blood by the levitical priest might seem somewhat distasteful and clumsy to the modern world. The Hebrew Scripture itself complicates the issue by not explaining exactly why this form of worship was used. Like many other things, the scripture merely takes it for granted that everyone would know why blood sacrifice was an appropriate way to worship and this is worrisome. The article sought out the scriptural slant about priest and sacrifices to the original audience and showed that the purpose of atonement achieved by the priest through sacrifice aimed at religious apotheosis in the worshippers' reconciliation with God. Grammatico-historical method was used to work out the meaning of the concerned text and in the circumstances of its writing. As discovered, blood was the strong primitive detergent that rinsed out the contaminated mark of sin. Blood appeased the divine and it was the mechanism by which sin is obliterated from the people and the world. Blood absorbed guilt; remunerated the debt owed for sin and restored the balance in the delicate bond between humanity and divinity. Blood manipulation by the priest was the authentic means through which the ancient Israelite developed to the highest point, to the apex of spiritual wholesomeness through obedience to God's law, only then was apotheosis or union with God achieved. Through the integration of apotheosis into private and public life, individuals and the public can appreciate thoughtful renewal as they are inspired to live according to greater ethics and morals, such as kindheartedness, fear of God, and compassion thereby rebuilding a more pleasant and evenhanded society

**Keywords:** *Sacrifice, Priest, Scripture, Atonement, Apotheosis*

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## 1. Introduction

The place of sacrifice and priesthood in the Old Testament is central to ancient Israelite religion. In accordance with the Law of Moses, offering sacrifice was one of the duties exclusively reserved for the priests. In short, the

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function of a priest in the Old Testament was primarily to offer God sacrifices. With no sacrifice, the priest would not minister to man, for there would be no means of making atonement. And without a sacrifice, the priest could not minister to God, for there would be not anything to offer up to him. A priest without a sacrifice is no priest at all.

People have diverse perceptions about who a priest is, some assume he is someone who does not have a wife, who leads the congregation in prayers, listens to people during confession, speaks in tongue or conducts mass service or wears cassock. The priest of the Hebrew scripture or Old Testament is a lot far removed from the modern priest, though some of the most deeply rooted historical Christian orthodox churches and many other churches have taken elements of the levitical priesthood into their own. However, not minding that there are some touch points between the ancient and the modern priesthood, the notion of priesthood in current time is poles apart from what it was some two or three thousand years ago. Manipulation of the sacrificial blood of animals, which is not among the roles of priests today, was one of the major concerns of ancient priests of Israel.

Modern Christians frequently talk about sacrifices and depict the sacrificial function of a priest without associating them with the bloodletting of animals on the altar. It is remarkable to note, as said before, that bloodletting is not done in any Christian or Jewish traditions today because it was only a ritual tightly linked to the then worship in the temple. Drane in Ugwueye (2004) affirms that modern Christians still sing in their churches about the 'one true, pure immortal sacrifice' of Jesus, and many of them designate a part of their church buildings and homes as altars even though no blood has ever been shed there. Within the world of ancient Israel, being a priest in the ancient Hebrew sense means connecting the people to the divine. The levitical priest played a very crucial role in connecting the people to the divine through sacrifice. According to the book of Leviticus, priests are intercessors between God and Israel. It is the priest's job to make animal sacrifices and make atonement for Israel through blood manipulation.

Sacrifice, with the priest in control as the moderator, is the most typical activity of Old Testament worship and it was a daily ritual in the temple. Modern people do not tend to understand ancient Israelite sacrifice and what the priest did with it, because they were generally practices remote from our experience. The unwarranted termination of the lives of animals in the line of religious worship is a bit repugnant and clumsy to the contemporary society and the Old Testament itself makes the matter worse by not explaining precisely why this form of worship was used. As with many other things, it bothers this paper that, the Old Testament simply takes it for granted that everyone would know why blood sacrifice was an appropriate way to worship. The article intends to seek out the Old Testament point about priest and sacrifice to the original audience and to show that the goal of atonement achieved by the priest through sacrifice aimed at religious apotheosis in the worshippers' reconciliation with God. Grammatico-historical method was used to work out the meaning of the concerned texts and in the circumstances of its writing.

## 2. Sacrifice and Atonement

In the heydays of Israelite religion, sacrifice was a very important part of worship in ancient Israel. It represented both basic aspects of the Old Testament faith (people made for fellowship with God and with one another), and also externalized the faith in such a way that no one would be left in any doubt about what it meant to address Yahweh as a sacred being. Human sin broke the covenant relationship between God and his people. But fellowship could be restored by offering an appropriate sacrifice. The English word sacrifice covers a number of Hebrew terms; some of them indistinguishable from one another and defies strict taxonomy or schematization. But two were designed to remove the barrier of sin that made fellowship between people and God impossible: the sin offering and the guilt offering. The precise difference between these two classes of sacrifice is sometimes not specifically clear

Generally, there are five types of sacrifice: Sin Offerings, Guilt Offerings, Burnt/Holocausts, Cereal Offerings and Peace Offerings. Sin offerings usually involved mere ritual impurity or unintentional sins. Guilt offerings were more likely to involve conscious violations of the law. The distinction between these two kinds of sacrifice and the rest: burnt, grain, and peace offerings, is that the first two were mandatory while the latter three were voluntary. It is crucial to state that the use of blood gave all animal sacrifices atonement nuances.

First, the animal was slaughtered. In this action, the worshipper was reminded of the consequence of uncleanness: death, separation from fellowship with God. The worshipper himself would perform the action, declaring that he was fit only for death himself. Second, the blood of the sacrifice, which represented the sinner's life was given up to God, to the altar. Depending on the identity of the sinner, different altars would be used

For an ordinary person, it was the altar of burnt offerings in the temple courtyard; for a priest, the altar of incense in the temple itself; and for the whole nation (on the Day of Atonement), the lid of the Ark in the holy of holies. This action constituted the moment when the worshipper's uncleanness was removed (Lev, 17: 11). It marks the moment of Atonement or reconciliation, signifying that God and his people had been reunited in fellowship.

Third, the animal's body was placed on the altar in the temple, as a sign that the forgiven sinner was offering his whole life to God. In the case of a gift offering, the whole sacrifice would be burnt there. Finally, depending on the nature of the sacrifice, some of the meat still left was eaten in a meal. This means that not only were things made right between God and the individual worshipper: true fellowship with other people had also been restored.

The Day of Atonement was one special occasion when the whole nation was united in seeking forgiveness. During this event, the blood of the sacrifices would be taken into the holy of holies itself, and applied to the top of the Ark. This was why the lid of the Ark came to be known as 'the mercy seat'. After the exile, it was replaced by a gold plate which served the same purpose. According to Faley (1977), since the Ark itself was never recovered after the Exile, the propitiatory ritual alone remained in the Holy of Holies, where the presence of the Lord was believed to reside. When the main sacrifices had been offered, a second ritual took place. This involved the selection of two goats, one to be sacrificed in the temple and the other to be sent into the desert beyond the inhabited land. The priest laid his hands on the head of the goat which was to be sent out and confessed the sins of the nation.

These two ritual procedures were quite different, but they both emphasized the same facts: that sin is a serious business as it disrupts fellowship between God and his people. The two rituals were also a dramatic declaration that sin could be forgiven, and removed from the lives of God's people as surely as the goat was driven out into the desert, never to be seen.

In Israel's scripture the idea of sin represents a physical weight, a burden, a physical thing that is capable of building up or sticking to the body, to the altar or the temple as a whole. As a result, it is the blood of animal that can cleanse sin and therefore provide atonement. The role of blood is to wipe out sin, get rid of the burden and remove the weight of the sin. Through the manipulation or spinning of blood, sin is washed out. Blood appeases the divine and it is the mechanism by which sin is obliterated from the people and the world. Blood absorbs guilt, satisfies the debt owed for sin and restores equilibrium in the delicate relationship between man and God. For Israel, according to Schaser (2022), blood is the ancient detergent that washed away the stain of sin.

Atonement, forgiveness and repentance are three relational system set out clearly in Israel's scripture. Atonement is achieved through the manipulation of blood while forgiveness is God's activity of pardoning his people. Repentance called *teshuvah* (תְּשׁוּבָה) in Hebrew literally means return, as if turning back to something one had strayed or looked away from. Essentially humans can turn to God and God can turn to human beings.

Atonement is built on *kpr* (כַּפַּר) lev 4: 16-18, 20 and forgiveness is built on *slh* (סָלַח). God grants forgiveness from heaven. Atonement and forgiveness are two sides of the levitical coin, but, they are not quite the same, the blood of animal makes for atonement and God forgives Israel. Jesus making intercession and atonement in the New Testament for the people to be forgiven has their basis in Leviticus. The levitical status behind this event is the use of the ideas and images from Leviticus to describe Jesus as the high priest who offers his own blood as a sin offering.

It is based on atonement that God grants forgiveness. The analogy of spilling oil on the floor rug of a living room can put the explanation clearer. It is easy for the culprit to apologize for the mistake of pouring oil on the rug and he would simply be forgiven. But to remove the oil mark on the rug, in order to put the matter to an end,

someone needs to stoop down to clean the mess or stain on the rug with a detergent. Blood was that strong detergent used in suppressing the chaos caused by sin (Schaser, 2024).

The Old Testament never specifically discusses how a sacrifice could deal with sin. But it is discovered that it was a strong belief, taken for granted that those who sinned deserved to die, and that a sacrifice in some way substituted for the condemned sinner. Certainly, the blood of the sacrificial animals (representing the life of the animal) played an important role. It was only as blood was splattered on the altar that the worshipper could be pronounced forgiven. The blood empowered the Israelites individually and collectively to work through the difficult condition imposed by sin. The blood supplied the bridge through which to approach God under undeserved sinful state. Blood reinforced the basic tenets of ancient Israelite religion and at the end of every blood atonement exercise; the Israelites emerged with renewed identity.

Every sacrifice in ancient Israel involved some impression of atonement. The making of the offering necessarily entailed self-denial, and the reestablishment or maintenance of amicable relations with God implied that these relations had been disturbed. The bringing into play of blood bestowed all animal sacrifices with conciliatory tones, in addition to the specific sacrifices of expiation for various faults. Blood is the vital force or essence of the animal sacrificed, making it a powerful symbol of sacrifice. Blood was believed to contain the soul or spirit of the animal sacrificed, making its offering a means of communing with the divine.

Blood of animal is essentially needed for the ritual of atonement. Blood is important to purge the plague of sin. Blood was linked with life or death (Abe, 2004). The Hebrews thought that life was resident in the blood. It is a life for life scenario; for the life of the flesh (שׁוֹפָר) is in the blood (Lev 17: 11), for the blood is the life (Deut 12: 23, Gen 9:4). It is about the severity of sin which causes death if it builds up, hence the need for substitution. The narrative about the murder of Abel by Cain highlights the severity of sin. Cain, the murderer mentions this first biblical iniquity as *avon* (אָוֹן), meaning that his sin was 'too heavy to carry or greater than what he could bear' (Gen 4:13), therefore the need for sacrifice to do away with the load and get rid of its grave heaviness in order to keep life. Animal blood, according to Igbo (2021), is used to substitute for the life of the people because it was the holiest part of the victim.

For Moraldi (1956), no sin or wrong committed in Israel would go unpunished. Consequently, the person offering sacrifice is substituting his life with the victim in order to undertake his deserved punishment for sins committed. With the elaborate levitical spiritual legislation and rituals on sin and sacrifice, the blood sacrifice was obligatory in the decontamination of the polluted smudge of sin.

It was believed that life belongs to God. Therefore, it was forbidden to eat blood. Blood must be returned or given back to God, its owner. For this, the blood of any slaughtered animal for sacrifice was sprinkled or smeared on the horns of the altar that represented God's presence. God showered favor for blood oblations throughout the Hebrew sacrificial rituals. Blood sacrifice was more efficacious than the bloodless one, because there was a wide spread belief that blood is the life of all organism, human and animal. This concept lingered throughout the Old Testament on to the New Testament, and found its culmination in the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ as the supreme lamb of the sacrifice for mankind.

It is true of every religion that the items of sacrifice or ritual come from the product of the environment and occupation of the people. According to Drane (1990), a religion's view of God will always affect its view of sacrifice. The people of Israel in the Old Testament period were much more connected to animals. They were pastoral and agricultural people that reared animals. Apart from using the blood of animals for rituals, the sacrificial meat constituted food for the worshipper and the temple officer.

Given the central importance of sacrifice in Israelite religion, it is surprising, according to Castelot (1977), to find some harsh condemnations of it in some Old Testament passages. But an unbiased study of these condemnatory passages reveals implicitly that sacrifice was held in high esteem in Israel and that it was not a mere external rite of magic efficacy, but rather an externalization of noble religious sentiments, without which sacrifice was a sham and mockery. What the prophets were condemning was formalistic, merely external worship without the proper spiritual dispositions. Such sacrifice or worship was not veneration at all but an empty rigmarole bordering on superstition. Justice and ethics must accompany sacrifice (Schmidt, 2008). Cult must always be matched with conduct because for any belief to be valid, behavior must be behind it (Ugwueye, 2019).

To appreciate the importance of sacrifice, it is crucial to recognize the worth of 'holiness' in the Old Testament. In ancient Israel, sacrifice is understood as a means of relating the visible, tangible world in which people exist to the invisible, intangible and uncontrollable world in which God exists. It is a means whereby people can encounter the powerful 'holiness' that radiates out from the presence of God, without suffering the horrific consequences that would normally follow such an encounter. This is why animals, particularly domestic animals, were appropriate as sacrificial items, for they are themselves living things, which have a close relationship with people, and could then; serve as a suitable symbol of the worshippers themselves.

### 3. Priests and Atonement

The book of Leviticus served as the liturgical handbook of ancient priesthood and at the same time taught the Israelites the requirements (mainly pentateuchal tales) of an uncontaminated holiness in every aspect of their lives. The history of priesthood in Israel's religion is complex but it is remarkable to note that at a point the levitical priesthood became more outstanding as it preserved the link with the mosaic tradition, and was constantly in favor of the royal house after the division of the monarchy. It was under the influence of the Levites that the royal sanctuary in Jerusalem was standardized and significantly shaped from within.

*Kohen* (כֹּהֵן) is the original Hebrew word for priest (plural *kohanim* כֹּהֲנִים). *Kohen* is particularly used in reference to the Aaronic priesthood, sometimes called Aaronides or Aaronites. They are traditionally believed and *halakhically* required to be of direct patrilineal descent from the biblical Aaron and thus belonging to the tribe of Levi (Leuchter, 2021). In the halcyon days of the Temple and previously in the time of the Tabernacle, *kohanim* performed the Temple sacrificial offerings, which were permitted to be offered by them. Following the destruction of the temple, it seemed that most of them joined the synagogue movement before adopting gradually Rabbinic Judaism.

When the temple was standing, one *kohen* was singled out in every generation to perform the functions of the High priest (כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל). His primary task was the Day of Atonement sacrificial service. Another unique duty of the high priest was the offering of a daily meal sacrifice and he also held the prerogative to supersede any priest and offer any sacrifice as it pleased him. Although the torah retains a procedure to select a High Priest when needed, it is to be noted that in the absence of the temple in Jerusalem, there is no High Priest in Judaism up till today.

According to the Documentary hypothesis, Leviticus is identified as one of the books authored by the priestly source (P). Its tradition, characterized by cultic themes, priesthood and worship, came through a generation of priests connected with the temple (Igbo, 2020). To stabilize monarchical centralism, the Israelite deity had to move into a stable sanctuary to be attended day and night by a professional priesthood controlled by the government. The temple itself and the holy place where it had been constructed, Mount Zion, became the center of the empire (Gerstenberger, 1995), even of the world, according to the book of Psalms (46:48). As the abode of the highest God, both were clothed with myths and legends of absolute invulnerability. Regular sacrifices were offered by royal officials, recruited by the government.

The priest presided over many types of sacrifice, in some ways they defy comprehensive analysis in the Old Testament. In the book of Leviticus, priests are intercessors between God and Israel and it is the priest's job to make animal sacrifices and make atonement for Israel through blood manipulation. It is the priest who makes atonement on behalf of the sinner or family. It is a human activity. Leviticus 17:11 is the ancient biblical passage formalizing the central goal and job of a priest. It says "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life". Below is the Hebrew rendering of the passage.

כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נֹתְתִיו לְכֶם צֶלֶהּ מִדָּמָהּ לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם

כִּי הַדָּם הוּא בְּנֶפֶשׁ יְכַפֵּר

The Hebrew word לְכַפֵּר (*le'khaber*) in the passage is the crucial word for the explanation of the text. It means to purge, to obliterate, to atone or to cover up.



Then the anointed priest (שֹׁמֵר הַדָּבָר) shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the tenth of meeting and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the Lord in front of the veil. And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar which is in the tenth of meeting before the Lord; and the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering...; and the priest shall make atonement (לְכַפֵּר) for them and they shall be forgiven (Lev 4: 16-20).

The Hebrew *le'khaber* is derived from the root *kpr* (כָּפַר). Kippur could mean two things: to repay a debt and to purify. Whether it is levitical sacrifice or Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, atonement is not simply an event that happens when a blameless one dies. The spiritual life of the blameless representative (the innocent sacrificial victim), is activated to save the sinner and energized to atone for his sins, by the priest, the ritual expert who has the special secret knowledge of atonement and the power to act for God. All the priest did was to draw closer the dividing wall between God and the sinner through the manipulation of blood.

Before the priest of Israel was prepared for sacrificial duty, he was anointed with oil and furnished with priestly garments. A turban and oil were placed on the priest's head, and ephod and breastplate were draped over his shoulders, and blood went on his right thumbs and big toes. Pouring oil on the head was a common practice (1 Sam 10: 1; psalm 23: 5; Ecc 19:8) but thumbs and toes may seem like odd additions to the ritual. However, the rationale behind this practice reveals the relationship between the priests and the atoning work that they performed for the people. In the description of clerical consecration in the book of Exodus 29: 7, "you shall take the anointing oil and pour it on the priest's head (שֹׁמֵר) and anoint him. After being dressed in the sacred garment, ram's blood was to be placed on the right ear (אָזְנוֹ) and on the thumb (אֶבְטָלָם) of their right hands, and on the big toe (אֶבְטָלָם) of the feet (Ex 29: 20; Lev 8: 23-24). Modern readers might assume that these actions have to do only with the priest listening to God or walking in the commandments.

On the other hand, the real rationale is related to the place of priestly sacrifice in Israel's ancient religion. The altar of Israel (as with altars in the ancient Near East) was constructed with four horns on each of its four corners. Just as the priest's extremities – ears, toes, thumbs) were anointed with blood, so were the horns of the altar: 'you shall take part of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger and the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar'. It is because of the extremity of the priest—ear, thumb of the toe, hand and head. They align and represent the horns on the altar. The priest symbolizes the altar; he is a breathing altar, a walking four horned altar anointed with blood in the midst of the people. He is a locus of intercession and focal point of atonement for the people of Israel.

On why blood was applied to those extremities, Philo, a Jewish first century writer in Alexandria Egypt, perceived that the fully consecrated priest must be pure in words and action and in life; for words are judged by hearing, the hand is the symbol of action, and the foot remains the pilgrimage of life (Artson, 2024). Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (12<sup>th</sup> century Spain) argues on the other hand that the ear symbolizes that one must attend to what has been commanded and the thumb is the origin of all activity. Unlike Philo, Ibn Ezra sees the two pivotal points as obedience to God's *mitzvot* (commandment) to a life of sacred deeds. While Ezra provides different reasons than Philo, the two of them agree in reading metaphoric connotation into the details of the ritual, which body parts are involved. By placing sacrificial blood on the priest's extremities, the torah indicates that the newly ordained *kohen* (priest) has passed through a transitional moment from being a private citizen to becoming a representative of God and a public leader. Ear, hand, and foot—an abbreviated code for his entire body—emphasize that service to one's people, or to one's God, must be total. In replicating this initiation ritual during blood atonement, the priest invokes the special authority and certification of his divine assignment to serve man on behalf of God.

The priest and the altar receive the same treatment, which conveys the idea that the priest himself was a kind of live altar. Without the priests, no sacrifices could be made on the altar. Likewise, without the altar the priest would have no place to offer sacrifices. By being anointed with blood in the same way, both the priest and the altar were purged of sin and expressly equipped for the job of atonement.

Sin is a weight that could accumulate on the priests for they also fell prey to weaknesses. Stone and Greenfield in Brooke *et al.* (1996) said that, Levi the original priest himself, warned his descendants that they would darken and upon them would be the guilt. Levi was saying that some priests are not holy, perfect, not

amazing all the time. Bruce (1958, 1959) described the wicked priest from the Habakkuk Scroll, who betrayed the ordinances for the sake of wealth, as a drunk. There are many other instances throughout history where priests of Israel transgressed the lord's ordinances. The priests were human beings and susceptible to frailties, not minding that they were representatives of the torah.

The Hebrew Scripture's understanding of sacrifice is dominated by its perception of the meaning of holiness, hence the priests, too, were to be holy in spite of their vulnerability to sin. Priests officiating over sacrifices and sacrifice itself are worldwide phenomena, and not restricted either to the Old Testament or the Ancient Near East. In all the places, the priest dived deep into the profound holiness requirement for his duties to perform. It is the concept of holiness that dictated and shaped the role of ancient Israelite priest for the ritual of blood atonement.

#### 4. Apotheosis and Atonement

The word apotheosis, according to Brown (2009), means the transformation of man into God. It is from the ancient Greek: *apo*—'to become', and *theos*—'god.' Apotheosis means to become God. While this definition of apotheosis is usually a permanent transformation from mortality to divinity in mythical texts, in modern religious experience it is described as a union linking deity and human. According to Mills (2014), religion, in this sense, continues to offer a rich contribution to the development of human self understanding and transformation of character. A religious being is expected to develop to the highest point, to the apex of spiritual cleanness through obedience to God's law, only then can apotheosis or union with God be achieved. In religion, apotheosis is the journey to God (Ramesh, 2019) and it is in this sense that we apply it here. Because of human nature, this ritual of bouncing back to God is bound to occur from time to time after slip into sin. For religious beings, this apotheosis or journey to God is not a permanent one, though the heart of the atoned, in the state of atonement desires it to be permanent.

Atonement through the manipulation of blood by ancient Israelite priest in sacrifice permitted divine union with God. Ancient Israelite religion, like every other primeval belief, had quantum entanglement at its base. The interconnectedness of all things is real. Unified interconnected reality suggests that separate entities are interconnected as parts of a unified whole. Metaphysical interpretations of entanglement aim to explain the nature of reality, consciousness and the harmony of all things, resonating with spiritual concepts like oneness (atonement) and unity.

Entanglement is called by various names in history. In Buddhism it is called Dharmakaya, one of the three bodies of Buddha—the absolute; the essence of the universe; the unity of all things. In Chinese ancient religion, it is called Tao (the source and guiding principle of all reality. In Taoism the word for path, way, route, road is Tao). In Hinduism, it is known as Brahman (the divine and absolute power of being that is the source and sustainer of the universe). In fact, in Brown's (2009) opinion, man's oldest spiritual quest was to perceive his own entanglement, to sense his own interconnection with all things. He has always wanted to become 'one' with the creator, to achieve the state of 'at-one-ment'. To this day, Jews and Christians still strive for atonement, although most of the people have forgotten and would not even accept the fact that it is actually atonement they are seeking in their sacrificial rituals.

Rituals exist in every culture and they are unique to each people. Different religions have their dissimilar rituals such as the use of kola nut, rice, fish, hot drinks, pigeon, cow, palm wine etc for sacrifices. It is when we look out to other people's religious rituals in a different timing that we find them odd but when we climb into the skin of ancient Israel's sacrificial rituals, they provide cutting edge information about how the blood of animals provided apotheosis or reunion with God. The sacrifice with the manipulation of blood does not work in consistent iniquity otherwise the desire and willingness to engage in sacrifice would not have been there in the first place. Recognition of the fact of being under the weight of sin and the awareness of its crippling pain provoke the need for sacrifice in obedience to the covenant law. God wants the whole heart, the unity of body and soul, and needs to be loved with everything in man's possession including loving his fellow man.

Just as God's holiness could be defined in a number of ways, so might the priests and the sacrifice he leads the people to offer be described in a number of ways and for different purposes. In relation to the mysterious, numinous holiness that radiated out from the divine presence, sacrifice through the priest was the means by

which a person who was 'unclean' could be made 'clean' and fit to be in state of atonement in order to gain apotheosis or union with God's holy power. In this context, the notion of unclean was not related to morality or behavior alone. Things such as illness, giving birth, touching a dead body, menstruation, even having mildew in the houses or clothes, all rendered a person 'unclean' in a ritual sense (Lev, 11-15). To the modern man, this seems rather an odd collection of things.

But what unites the above human occurrences seems to be the fact that they are all conditions that come about occasionally, and are not a part of everyday life. In this context, those things that are 'clean' are perhaps what could be termed as normal while unusual occurrence renders a person 'unclean'. The precise reasons for this are no doubt lost in the mists of antiquity. But before a person could obtain atonement and gain apotheosis, with the divine presence of God in the sanctuary, such 'uncleanness' had to be dealt with by the manipulation of blood, through offering of the appropriate sacrifices.

There was also a moral side to God's holiness. Wrongdoing also made people 'unclean', and therefore unfit to deal with God. An inadequate understanding of this led to many problems in the history of ancient Israel. The people were naturally inclined to think that worship was concerned only with the ritual aspects of holiness. There was no doubt that the nation as a whole took time, through the unending reprimand of the prophets, to understand that ritual worship and everyday behavior could not be separated.

The worshipper who made a sacrifice in ancient Israel did so out of a consciousness of being alienated from God, for whatever reason. Atonement and apotheosis with God had to be achieved in order for life to proceed as God intended it to be. This sense of alienation is familiar enough to modern people. Modern Christians would tend to place all the emphasis on internal spiritual change as the means of overcoming it. But in the Old Testament, this change of internal disposition was always displayed externally. Here, sacrifice became a visible symbol of transformation in a person's life. A number of stages in the process whereby this transformation was brought about could be traced.

First of all, the sinner would approach the altar of God with the sacrifice. He then laid his hand on the animal's head, to indicate that he wished to be identified with the animal. This was most important, for it meant that from this point onwards the animal was to be a symbol of the worshipper: whatever happened physically and outwardly to the animal was to happen to the worshipper spiritually and inwardly, all to have a transformative good life.

Second, the animal was slaughtered. In this action, the worshipper was reminded of the consequence of uncleanness: death, separation from fellowship with God. The worshipper himself would perform the action, declaring that he was fit only for death himself. Third, the priest then took the blood of the sacrifice, which represented the sinner's life given up to God, to the altar, for the purpose of transformation.

This action constituted the moment when the worshipper's uncleanness was removed (Lev, 17:11). It denotes the instant of Atonement or reconciliation, signifying that God and his people had been reunited (apotheosis) in fellowship.

The priest is not a holy man in the sense of being just, but he is holy because he is set apart. Therefore, to be holy does not always mean to be perfect or sinless like God. Instead, holy means to be separated from others. According to Bosman (2018) holiness is redefined in Leviticus 19 by combining the instruction related to cultic rituals (aimed at the priests) in Leviticus 1-16 with the theological ethical issues (aimed at all Israelites) in Leviticus 17-26; thereby moving from 'ascribed holiness (granted by divine decree to cultic officials) to achieved holiness (available to all Israel through obedience) in the post exilic period.

Rogerson (2014) is of the same view that the purpose of Leviticus 19 is to inform its readers that all areas of life are holy in the sense of being of concern to God: that the church and biblical interpreters become guilty, if by their words or actions, they convey the impression that things such as social justice or respect for the natural world are not of concern to God; that religion has to do only with the 'churchy' things, and that the public sphere has nothing to do with holiness.

Israelite sacrifice served as a gift, expressing the nation's sense of dependence on God, but it far more indicated a desire for cleanness, holiness, reconciliation and apotheosis with God. The Israelite never entertained a crassly physical notion of this union; theirs was a more subtle attitude, in harmony with the



sublime spiritual transcendence. Atonement is a step towards apotheosis. By making amends and finding liberty, the Israelites were able to realize their true opportunity of bringing back together their relationship with God. Apotheosis is the ultimate form of atonement where broken union with God is reconciled. At the point of estrangement through sin, the ancient Israelites temporarily lost their seats in the comity of God's alliance but through atonement, those seats are regained signifying apotheosis, reunion, proper transformation, or true reconciliation of the people with their God.

Sin never led to a permanent failure of relationship with God; rather it caused a temporal breakdown which could only be regained through priestly blood atonement. In every culture, in every era, in every corner of the world, the human dream has focused on the same exact idea of the coming apotheosis of man, the impending transformation of human sinful nature into a union with the holy God.

Christianity, more than any other faith, understood the transformative power of atonement. Even now, to honor the sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross, his followers proffered their own subtle gestures of personal sacrifices of fasting and or Lenten renunciation and tithing observances. All of these sacrifices are impotent, of course, without blood. There is no true sacrifice without blood. Ephesians 1:7 clearly states 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace'. 'Through his blood' highlights the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death, which secured redemption. The power is in the blood

Blood sacrifice and purification to achieve atonement by the priest are efforts towards apotheosis and closeness to the divine. Blood sacrifice represented God's justice and mercy, demonstrating God's willingness to accept a substitute for human sin. This understanding leads to a deeper reverence and apotheosis with the divine in many ways. For instance, the animal's blood that carried away sin and impunity symbolized transformation which is a form of spiritual apotheosis, where the individual or community was elevated to a higher spiritual sphere through their connection to God. Atonement transforms intent of the individual or community and redirects their focus towards the divine. It facilitates spiritual growth, as the individual or community surrenders their ego or desires for higher good

## 5. Conclusion

Priesthood existed in ancient Israel in basic terms for the reason of sacrifice; sacrifice subsisted in essence for the sake of atonement to achieve reunion or apotheosis with God. This ancient system of maintaining relationship with the Israelite God could only be energized by blood: power is in the blood. As early Israelite ritual emphasized blood rituals, the prophetic period was marked by moral and spiritual emphasis, while the New Testament times witnessed atonement through Jesus Christ's blood (Romans 3:25, 5:9).

After Israel lost the three cardinal elements of their faith (the Promised Land, Davidic dynasty and the temple), the priestly source based their vision of new Israel on the fact that it must be a religious community, a priestly community whose focus on Jerusalem and the temple must be geared towards true worship and a careful observance of all the proper rites and ceremonies that give reverence and honour to God who is holy. The new Israel that will come out of exile, according to Boadt (1984) must be a holy community whose life will be regulated by the Torah, the teaching or way of life proposed by Moses and expressed in the laws of both ethical and ritual types (sacrifice, purification, vows, etc.).

In this spirit, the priestly writers reorganized and enlarged the pentateuchal tradition. History is seen as a series of ages that have been bestowed by Yahweh. It stretches from creation until the time of Israel's covenant, and despite failure in each period. God always promises to begin again. The high point of the story is the period in the wilderness when Israel came out from Egypt and when they were trapped in exile in Babylon. It is here that God gives the laws by which one can live, including everything from proper sacrifice to moral obligations towards the poor. The priests will be the true leaders of Israel as a religious community in the future, and they must have a deep sense of God's holiness and their own obligation to careful and reverent service. The fixing of the Pentateuch and its being made the 'Book of the Law' of the Lord must have taken place under Ezra the scribe about 450 BC. From then on the ritual of sacrifice took second place to the study of the law.

As man falls intermittently into sin, he rises through sacrifice of atonement to achieve apotheosis with God: a cost-effective religious system of reconciliation ordained by the priestly authors to the ancients. In

modern times, Sacrifice, priestly blood atonement and religious apotheosis may seem unrelated to national development, but their underlying principles and symbolism can have enormous applications. As far as ancient Hebrew religion is concerned in its modern form, sacrifice, remains the heart of Jewish worship because of its reconciliatory role in bringing man back to God through the priestly blood atonement. Though blood service is no longer in vogue, Jewish thought and practice have shifted from focus on animal blood to emphasis on practices that convey the idea of atonement through prayer and penitence, fasting and self reflection, good deeds, torah study, synagogue worship and the likes. In spiritual context, apotheosis means making efforts to achieve reunion with God and that is exactly the aim of the ancient and modern ritual forms of atonement.

Through the integration of apotheosis into private and public life, individuals and the public can appreciate thoughtful renewal as they are inspired to live according to greater ethics and morals, such as kindheartedness, fear of God, and compassion thereby rebuilding a more pleasant and evenhanded society. Apotheosis as reunion with God encourages spiritual improvement, reflection and deeper understanding of self, leading to individual transformation, ethical consciousness and shared solidarity and progress.

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