



Leviticus - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

The burnt-offering is the most costly offering there is, since it is completely burned up with nothing left except for the skin, which the priest kept. The motive for offering the burnt-offering is assumed, not specified, but other references to the sacrifices show that it is offered on such occasions as thanksgiving, penitence, vows, and self-dedication. Instead of focusing on the motive, this text focuses on more fundamental aspects of the sacrifices, such as the symbolism of the shedding of blood and the burning.

The mention of 'a pleasing odour' implies that the sacrifice results in the Lord's favour toward the one offering the sacrifice. This could happen in sin contexts, such as Noah's offering of burnt-offerings after the flood to appease the wrath of God that was still present after he had destroyed so many of his creatures (Genesis 8:20). This could also happen in praise or thanksgiving contexts, such as the psalmist's presentation of costly and pleasing burnt-offerings as acts of praise for the Lord's deliverance (Psalm 66:13-15). One is also reminded by this sacrifice of Paul's exhortation to Christians to present their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1).

In Leviticus Chapter One, three options are provided regarding the material of the sacrifice, a bull, small livestock such as a sheep or a goat, and a bird, but all were to be from the offerer's own prior possession and were to be from his best stock, without blemish.

I Leviticus 1:1-6:7 - Five Major Offerings

Leviticus describes five major offerings, each with its own characteristics. What is done with the blood and how the remaining flesh is handled varies according to the sinner's standing before the Lord when the offering is a sin offering. While each offering has its own emphasis, the five offerings have common or overlapping elements, especially the use of blood and a pleasing odour.

I.a Leviticus 1:1-17 - The Burnt-Offering

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.

Leviticus 1:1-2

Following on the heels of Exodus 40:34-35, v.1 relates that the Lord spoke to Moses from the tent of meeting, indicating that the tabernacle is now in use. Israel is still camped out at the base of Mount Sinai, and they will remain there throughout the Book of Leviticus.

When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord. Verse 2 mentions that domestic animals are to be offered, which relates to the cases that come next: the bull (vv.3-9), the flock (vv.10-13), and also to the animal offered as a offering of well-being in Chapter Three. Because sacrifice was already known to Israel, these instructions to the priests are not particularly new, they are mostly a clarification of a foundation that was already known to Israel through the traditions of their fathers. God had a wise timing in bringing the law of the sacrifices at this time. Before the tent of meeting was built, there was no one place of sacrifice, and the procedures for sacrifice could not really be codified. However, now with the completion of the Tabernacle, Israel could bring their sacrifice to one place and follow the same procedures for each sacrifice. The first seven chapters of Leviticus deal with personal, voluntary offerings. Chapters One through Five are mostly instructions to the people who bring the offering, and Chapters Six and Seven are mostly instructions to the priests concerning offerings.

In the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, there were three major facets. The covenant included the law Israel had to obey, sacrifice to provide for breaking the law, and the choice of blessing or curse that would become the script for Israel's history. The sacrificial system was an essential element of the Mosaic covenant, because it was impossible to live up to the requirements of the law. Sin was dealt with through sacrifice. This was not the beginning of God's sacrificial system. Adam knew of sacrifice (Genesis 3:21), as did Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3-4), and Noah (Genesis 8:20-21). The idea of sacrifice to the gods was not unique to Israel. Other nations and cultures practiced sacrifice, often ultimately involving human sacrifice. The universality of sacrifice is evidence that the concept was known to man before the flood, and was either carried to different cultures from the survivors of the flood in Noah's day or was developed independently as their own pagan practices were developed. God would use the sacrificial system to demonstrate that an ultimate sacrifice, the offering of his Son, was needed to fully atone for sin once for all.

You shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock. This means that an Israelite worshipper could not offer a wild animal. They could only bring domesticated livestock from their own stock, or purchased from the owner. This shows that an offering to God must cost something.

³ If the offering is a burnt-offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. ⁴ You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt-offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you.

Leviticus 1:3-4

If the offering is a burnt-offering. The burnt-offering, as its name implies, was completely burnt before the Lord. It was a total sacrifice. The burnt-offering was a general offering of propitiation and consecration to God.

You shall offer a male. The animal offered had to be a male, because male animals were thought to be stronger and therefore more valuable.

The bull offered by the worshipper must be without blemish, i.e. without any physical defects (22:22-24) that would lessen its value and make it an unworthy animal to present to the Lord. Israel did not always live up to this standard, and much later the prophet Malachi rebuked Israel for offering God sub-standard sacrifices: *<<When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says the Lord of hosts>>* (Malachi 1:8). Jesus fulfilled this standard perfectly, being a sinless and pure sacrifice without blemish: *<<And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him>>* (John 8:29), *<<Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?>>* (John 8:46), *<<If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love>>* (John 15:10), and: *<<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!>>* (Hebrews 9:13-14).

For acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. This is the first of more than sixty uses of the phrase before the Lord in Leviticus, more than any other book in the Bible. What happens in Leviticus happens before the Lord, and every sacrifice that was made was to be made before the Lord.

You shall lay your hand. This gesture is also found in the offering of well-being, i.e. a peace offering (Chapter 3), and the sin-offering (Chapter 4). While its

symbolism is debated, it probably serves to establish some sort of relationship between the offerer and animal so that the animal is acceptable on his or her behalf. Through this symbol, the guilty one transferred his guilt to the sacrificial victim that would die for the sin of the offerer. It was not enough that the victim merely died. The one receiving atonement had to actively identify himself with the sacrifice. In the same way, it is not enough to know that Jesus died for the sins of the world. The one who would receive his atonement must 'reach out' and identify himself with Jesus.

It shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. This not only introduces v.5 but is the purpose of the whole ritual up to v.9. To make atonement, Hebrew *Kipper*, is of fundamental importance for what the ritual achieves by the shedding of blood, burning of the flesh, etc. While some take this Hebrew term as referring to expiation, i.e. the removal of sin, as opposed to propitiation, the appeasement of wrath, both realities seem to be involved. On the one hand, sin calls forth God's wrath and results in the offerer's need to be ransomed (17:11) so that the Lord's wrath is appeased (propitiation). In this way, the sacrificial animal dies instead of the offerer. On the other hand, sin is also defiling and must be removed (expiation). The offerings that 'make atonement' are the burnt-offering, the sin-offering (4:26), and the guilt-offering (5:16), but not the grain-offering or the offering of well-being.

⁵ The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶ The burnt-offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. ⁷ The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ⁹ but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt-offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord.

Leviticus 1:5-9

After slaughtering the animal, all the ritual acts such as dashing the blood against all sides of the altar (v.5), flaying and cutting the animal into pieces or parts (v.6), preparing fire (v.7), and burning all the parts (vv.8-9), are to be performed by Aaron's sons, who represent the Lord by being holy in their professional capacity; refer to Chapter 8. Thus atonement is achieved through both the sacrifice and the priests who represent the Lord. This underscores that atonement is a divine activity.

Since the life of the animal is in its blood (17:11), it is considered an essential part of the sacrifice.

A burnt-offering. This is not a specific name of an offering but a more general term for what is ‘consumed’ by the Lord in the fire. In other offerings, it is often coupled with a **pleasing odour**, Hebrew *reakh nikhoakh*, as confirmed by: <<*And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done’*>> (Genesis 8:21). The word **pleasing** implies the Lord’s favourable acceptance of the offerer’s sacrifice. Paul uses the Greek for this expression, rendered ‘a fragrant offering,’ as an image for both Christ’s self-sacrifice: <<*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*>> (Ephesians 5:1-2), and the generosity of Christians: <<*I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*>> (Philippians 4:18).

The totality of the burnt-offering reflects the heart behind the burnt-offering. It was a desire to give everything to God, an ‘I surrender all’ attitude. When everything was burnt before the Lord on the altar, there was nothing held back. Taken together, all this shows that there was an order to the sacrifice God wanted to be respected. This was not an attitude that the people would assume once they had arrived in the Promised Land: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6); a person could not offer a burnt-offering, a grain-offering, a offering of well-being, a sin-offering, or a guilt-offering just anyway they wanted to. They had to bring their offering the way God wanted them to.

¹⁰ If your gift for a burnt-offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, your offering shall be a male without blemish. ¹¹ It shall be slaughtered on the north side of the altar before the Lord, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar. ¹² It shall be cut up into its parts, with its head and its suet, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ¹³ but the entrails and the legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall offer the whole and turn it into smoke on the altar; it is a burnt-offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord.

Leviticus 1:10-13

If your gift for a burnt-offering is from the flock. When the offerer desires to offer a **sheep** or a **goat**, his animal ought to be **without blemish**. The priest’s procedure is similar to offering the bull (vv.3-9). The laying on of a hand is assumed but not mentioned. The procedure was essentially the same as that for offering a bull, except that a sheep or a goat was not skinned. Since the entire animal was to be burned, only the impurities of the entrails had to **be washed**

with water before the sacrifice was burnt. A bull presented as a burnt-offering had to be skinned (v.6), but not a sheep or a goat.

The north side of the altar. This specification applies not only to the case of animals from the flock but may also indicate the place of slaughter for the bull.

¹⁴ If your offering to the Lord is a burnt-offering of birds, you shall choose your offering from turtle-doves or pigeons. ¹⁵ The priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head, and turn it into smoke on the altar; and its blood shall be drained out against the side of the altar. ¹⁶ He shall remove its crop with its contents and throw it at the east side of the altar, in the place for ashes. ¹⁷ He shall tear it open by its wings without severing it. Then the priest shall turn it into smoke on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire; it is a burnt-offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord.

Leviticus 1:14-17

If your offering to the Lord is a burnt-offering of birds. This procedure followed the same principles, adapted to the sacrifice of birds instead of bulls, sheep, or goats. The bird was killed and its blood was offered, the carcass was prepared, and then burnt before the Lord.

God would not accept just any kind of bird, but he would accept turtle-doves or pigeons as sacrifices. The fact that God would accept a bull, a goat, a sheep, or a bird shows that God was more interested in the heart than in the actual animal being offered. If the sacrifice was made with the right heart, God accepted the poor man's bird as much as the rich man's bull. At the same time, the sacrifice had to correspond with what one could afford. It was wrong for a rich man to only offer a bird as a burnt-offering. Therefore, when God made his offering for sin, he gave the richest, most costly thing he could - himself.

The practical application of the law would later reveal that Jesus' human family were poor at the time of his dedication: <<*When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'*>> (Luke 2:22-24).

The priest is to wring off the bird's head and tear it open by its wings without severing it completely. These directions can be taken as pointing to the intention to keep the bird's shape as intact as possible before burning it; this, at least, would make up for its smallness. Despite its smallness, the bird burnt-offering achieves the same goal as a pleasing odour to the Lord. Again, casting it at the east side of the altar may also apply to the cases of the herd and flock.