

18. Defining a Sacrifice without Blemish (Exodus 35–40; Leviticus 1, 16, 19)

Jesus' saying that "in me is the Law of Moses fulfilled" (3 Nephi 9:17) lies at the back of Paul's teaching when he says, "Be it known unto you, men and brethren, that through this man [Christ] is preached unto you forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38–39). Indeed, the entire catalogue of bloody animal sacrifices performed under the Law of Moses that atoned for men's sins could never typify heavenly bliss for all of God's creatures in a paradisiacal age of peace. Clearly, the sacrifice of animals under the Law of Moses was an interim arrangement of divine justice that waited in time until the appearance of the only true "sacrifice without blemish."

To compensate for Israel's and humanity's transgressions of divine law, restitution needed to be "in kind"; that is, equal to the gravity of the offense. As no flawed human being—let alone an animal or lower species—could atone for men's transgression against God, who is an infinite and divine being, Israel's God himself consented to pay the debt of justice, thereby enabling his mercy to operate for those who repent: "Redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered" (2 Nephi 2:6–7).

Humanity's fall at Adam's and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden necessitated more than remorse for sin or a sincere desire to sin no more: "It is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made. For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:9–10);

"Behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption" (Alma 34:14–16).

Among the righteous Nephites of the New World, anticipation of the coming of the Son of God ran high: "Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ; for, for this end hath the Law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him" (2 Nephi 11:4); "Behold, they believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name. And for this intent we keep the Law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him;

and for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5).

The Nephites thus clearly understood that the sacrifice of animals under the Law of Moses—which served as proxies for transgressors—foreshadowed Jesus’ proxy sacrifice of his life for the sins of the world. While they “took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the Law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3), they realized that “the Law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the atonement of his blood” (Mosiah 3:15).

When Jesus appeared to the Nephites after his resurrection from the dead, he reiterated the interim purpose of animal sacrifice under the Law of Moses, and that with his coming it had an end: “By me redemption cometh, and in me is the Law of Moses fulfilled. I am the light and the life of the world. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings. And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Nephi 9:17–20). He himself constituted the only true sacrifice “without blemish” and he wanted his people to become like him.

Through the sacrifice of his life for humanity’s transgressions Jesus also brought about the resurrection from the dead—first of himself and the righteous up to that point in time, and eventually of all men: “No flesh can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise. Wherefore, he is the firstfruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved” (2 Nephi 2:8–9).