

Lesson Two: Given for You - The Old Testament

Story of Sacrifice

I. Introductory Rites

A. God's Mercy and Glory

In our first lesson, we saw how the Introductory Rites of the Mass draw us into the biblical world of worship.

We saw how the Mass was given to us by Jesus in order to "actualize" - make real in our lives - the salvation and new life promised in the pages of the Bible.

Those introductory rites continue with a confession of sins and a singing of God's praises. Our penitential prayers and the singing of the Gloria are shot through with biblical language and meaning.

The phrase "Lord, have mercy" appears often in Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments (see [Sirach 36:12](#); [Baruch 3:2](#); [Psalm 51:1](#); [Matthew 15:22](#); [17:15](#)). The Scriptures teach again and again that mercy is among God's greatest attributes (see [Exodus 34:6](#); [Jonah 4:2](#)).

The "Gloria" is the prayer of the angels, sung on the first Christmas night (see [Luke 2:14](#)). To that angelic prayer, the Church has added echoes of the angelic songs the Apostle John heard in the heavenly liturgy (see [Revelation 15:3-4](#); [4:11](#); [5:11-14](#)).

Again in the Mass we find ourselves praying and singing with the very words of Scripture. But there is an even deeper biblical dimension to this moment in the Mass.

The confession of sin, accompanied by the offering of sacrifices, was a staple of the Israelites' worship (see [Leviticus 5:5-6](#)). So was the giving of praise and glory to God (see [Psalms 86:12](#); [147:12](#)).

In fact, we could say that at this moment of the Mass we enter into the very heart of biblical worship.

In the next two lessons we will look in-depth at the way God is worshipped in the Bible.

In this lesson, we will look at worship in the Old Testament. In our next lesson we will look at how biblical worship culminates in the worship commanded by Jesus at the Last Supper - which we continue today in the Mass.

B. Our Sacrifice

In a word, biblical worship is the offering of sacrifice. Our worship in the Mass is likewise a form of sacrificial offering.

We hear this repeatedly in the Mass, although we may not notice it or fully understand what it means.

For instance, after the priest prepares the altar, he addresses us with these words: "Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father."

We respond: "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of His Name, for our good and the good of all His Church."

What is sacrifice? Generally speaking, to sacrifice is to make an offering to God of something of value - an animal, vegetable, food, drink or incense. This offering can have many meanings but underlying every sacrificial act is a recognition of the debt we owe to God as the source of life and blessing.

Sacrifice was a universal practice in the religions of the ancient world and it is of the essence of the religious devotion and practice found in the Bible.

II. Origins of Worship

A. The First Priest

The Bible never explains sacrifice or its origins. But we see it in practice from the first pages of Scripture.

Adam and Eve's children offer sacrifices - Cain from the fruits of the earth, Abel from the firstlings of his flock (see [Genesis 4:3-4](#)). Noah, too, seems to have inherited a tradition of worship that includes burnt offerings of animals (see [Genesis 7:2; 8:20](#)).

Abraham, the father of the chosen people, responds to God's call by building an altar and offering sacrifices (see [Genesis 15:8-10; 22:13](#)). Throughout the early part of the Bible, Abraham's sons are frequently seen building altars and offering sacrifices (see [Genesis 26:25; 35:1-7](#)).

Of the sacrifices of Genesis, two are particularly important for our understanding of the Mass: that of the mysterious priest-king Melchizedek (see [Genesis 14:18-20](#)) and Abraham's in Genesis 22.

Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in the Bible. He is a "priest of God Most High." He is also King of Salem, a land that would later be called "Jeru-salem," meaning "City of Peace" (see [Psalm 76:2](#)).

This combination of priest and king is rare in the Old Testament. But later we will see this designation applied to the royal son of David (see [Psalm 110:4](#)) and, in the New Testament, to Jesus (see Hebrews 7).

Melchizedek's sacrifice is also extraordinary in that it involved no animals. He offered bread and wine, as Jesus would at the Last Supper.

B. Offering the Beloved Son

Melchizedek's sacrifice concluded with the priestly blessing of Abraham. And Abraham would later return to Salem to make his own offering.

At the mountain of Moriah, a site that would later be identified with Jerusalem's Temple (see [2 Chronicles 3:1](#)), Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only beloved son, Isaac.

As we will see in our next lesson, in the story of the "binding" of Isaac, the New Testament writers saw a foreshadowing God's offering of his only beloved Son on the Cross (see Genesis 22:12,16; [John 3:16](#)).

Notice the language in the story told in Genesis 22. The words "his son" or "the boy" are used 11 times in 15 verses. The only words that Isaac speaks begin with the word, "Father." As if to drive home the point even further, the narrator of the story says, "Isaac spoke to his father..."

All of this will become even more important when we study our Lord's sacrifice in our next lesson.

C. Passover Sacrifice

It is clear that by the time of their captivity in Egypt, sacrifice was central to the Israelites' worship.

Moses' original request to Pharaoh was permission to travel into the desert "that we may offer sacrifice to the Lord, our God" (see [Exodus 3:18; 5:3,8](#)).

And sacrifice marks the pivotal moment in Israel's history - the Passover which precipitates the people's exodus from Egypt.

The Passover story (see [Exodus 12:1-30](#)) is the defining drama of the Old Testament. It is crucial to understanding both the Crucifixion and the memorial of that event, the Mass.

Notice an echo of the story of Abraham and Isaac. God calls Israel "my son, my first-born" (see [Exodus 4:22](#)). At the Passover, God instructed each family to take an unblemished lamb, kill it, and sprinkle its blood on the door post with a branch of hyssop. Then they were to eat the lamb's roasted flesh along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

God promised that if the Israelites did this their first-borns would be spared - He would "pass over" their houses when He came to strike down the first-borns of Egypt.

The sacrificial lamb died so that the first-born of the people - and God's first-born son, the nation of Israel - might live.

On the night of the first Passover, God fixed its observance as a "memorial feast" and a "perpetual institution" for future generations (see [Exodus 12:14,24](#)).

Moses commanded that the Passover memorial include a narrative recalling the reason for its institution - "When your children ask you, 'What does this rite of yours mean?' you shall reply, 'This is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he spared our houses.'" (see [Exodus 12:26-27](#)).

When the Israelites reach Mount Sinai, they ratify their covenant with God with sacrifice (see [Exodus 24:3-8](#)).

Moses builds an altar with twelve pillars and orders that young bulls be sacrificed and their blood put in large bowls and splashed atop the altar. Then he writes down the words and ordinances of God in a "book of the covenant" that he reads aloud to the people.

When the people vow to live according to the words of the book, Moses sprinkles the sacrificial blood on the people, saying "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his." Following this, Moses and the elders eat a sacrificial meal in the presence of God.

This scene too will be important for our study of the Last Supper and the Mass.

Daily sacrifice was the defining characteristic of the Israelites' worship as they entered the Promised Land.

In fact, much of the Law or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) is devoted to ritual laws and regulations that set out in precise detail the ways in which Israelites are to offer their sacrifices (see for example, Leviticus 7-9; Numbers 28; Deuteronomy 16).

Sacrifices were to be offered at the "tent of meeting" - the portable shrine that housed the Ark of the Covenant, the site of God's glorious presence (see [Exodus 25:8-22](#); [Joshua 3:8-11](#)).

The Ark contained signs of God's covenant (see [Hebrews 9:4](#)) - the tablets of the 10 commandments (see [Exodus 40:20](#)), Aaron's priestly staff (see [Numbers 17:10](#)) and some of the manna upon which the Israelites fed in the desert (see [Exodus 16:32-34](#)).

The ordination of Aaron and his sons as Israel's priests, along with the beginning of the daily sacrifices, is a crucial juncture of the Old Testament.

At the tent of meeting, Aaron and Moses blessed the people and then made a sin offering, a burnt offering, and a peace offering, as prescribed by God. Then fire came forth from the Lord's presence and consumed the offering on the altar (see [Leviticus 9:22-24](#); [Exodus 29:38-42](#)).

In the priestly offering of sacrifices, the goal of God's covenant is realized: "At the altar, I will meet the Israelites...I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites and will be their God" (see [Exodus 29:43,45](#)).

D. Temple of the King

When Israel becomes a kingdom under David and his son, Solomon, the Ark is given a permanent home in the Temple.

The Ark is restored to Jerusalem in joyous religious feast marked by the sacrificial offerings of seven bulls and seven rams and priestly blessings (see [1 Chronicles 15:1-16:3](#); [2 Samuel 6:11-19](#)).

The Temple was built according to a divine blueprint (see [1 Chronicles 28:19](#)). God told Solomon it was to be "My house of sacrifice" (see [2 Chronicles 7:12](#)).

In a scene very similar to what we saw with the inauguration of the daily sacrifices, the dedication of the Temple was marked by fire from heaven coming down upon the altar and the people prostrating themselves in adoration (see [2 Chronicles 7:1-4](#)). On that day, the king and the people offered 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep.

From that moment forward, Israel's sacrificial life was centered around the Temple.

Like his father, Solomon offered priestly sacrifices in accordance with Moses' laws (see [2 Chronicles 7:4](#); [8:12](#)). Indeed, Israel's monarch was compared to the priest-king Melchizedek (see Psalm 110).

The Temple, according to tradition, was built in "Salem" where Melchizedek was high priest and king (see [Psalm 76:3](#)). It was also said to be built on same mount, Moriah, where Abraham had offered his son and where God had sworn His oath to save all the nations (see [2 Chronicles 3:1](#); [Genesis 22:2,18](#)).

III. House of Sacrifice

A. Seasons of Sacrifice

The Temple liturgy brought together all the strains of sacrifice that had gone before. Israel's ritual life consisted of a variety of sacrificial offerings:

- The Holocaust - an entire animal burnt on the altar as a "sweet smelling oblation to the Lord" (see [Leviticus 1:3-17](#); [6:8-13](#)).
- The Cereal or Grain Offering - milled wheat mixed with oil and incense and usually offered in conjunction with other sacrifices (see [Leviticus 2:1-16](#); [6:14-23](#); [Numbers 6:14-17](#); [28:3-6](#)).
- The Peace Offering - an animal sacrifice in which the fatty parts and kidneys are burnt on the altar and the meat is consumed by the offerer and the priests (see [Leviticus 3:1-17](#); [7:11-36](#)).
- The Sin Offering - an animal (young bull, goat, lamb, turtledoves, etc.) offered to atone for sin and to purify the sinner (see [Leviticus 4:1-5:13](#); [6:24-30](#)).
- The Guilt Offering - a ram offered in atonement for desecration or some offense against a neighbor (see [Leviticus 5:14-6:7](#); [7:1-10](#)).

Israelites measured their days, their weeks, and their years by sacrifices.

Each day began and ended with sacrifice - one lamb as a holocaust, flour and oil, and a libation of wine (see [Exodus 29:38-42](#); [Numbers 28:3-8](#); [Ezra 3:5](#); [Nehemiah 10:34](#)). Every seventh day, on the Sabbath, these sacrifices were doubled (see [Numbers 28:9-10](#)).

At the beginning of every month, Israel celebrated the New Moon Feast, offering God holocausts, cereal offerings, a sin offering and a libation (see [Numbers 28:11-15](#)). Each new year was celebrated as Rosh Hashanah with ritual sacrifices (see [Numbers 29:1-6](#)).

And Israel's calendar included other annual celebrations, each marked by specifically prescribed ritual sacrifices - the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (see [Numbers 29:12-38](#); [Leviticus 23:33-43](#)); the Feast of Pentecost (see [Numbers 28:26-31](#)); and the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur (see [Numbers 29:7-11](#); [Leviticus 23:26-32](#)).

The liturgical center of Israel's year remained the Feast of Passover (see [Numbers 28:16-25](#); [Leviticus 23:4](#)). In the time of Jesus, more than 2 million pilgrims from around the world would throng Jerusalem.

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, reported that on Passover in the year A.D. 70, roughly 40 years after the Crucifixion, the Temple priests offered 256,500 lambs in sacrifice (Wars of the Jews, Book 6, Chapter 9, no. 3)

Though Israel's Law required that priests make the sacrifices in the Temple on behalf of individual Israelites and the nation, these sacrifices were nonetheless deeply personal affairs.

Imagine having to take an unblemished animal from your own flock, travel to the Temple, kill it, skin and gut it, and present it to the priest to be burnt on the altar. That was the reality of sacrifice in Israel.

B. What Sacrifice Means

Why did God institute sacrifice as the means of worshipping Him?

Certainly, God did not "need" sacrifices, as the prophets and psalmists make clear (see Psalm 50:9-13).

Early on, God seems to have required Israel to make certain kinds of animal sacrifices to teach the people a lesson and to purge them of their worship of false idols.

Moses seemed to recognize this when he told Pharaoh the Egyptians would be gravely offended by the Israelites' sacrifices (see [Exodus 8:25-27](#)). The three animals that God commanded Israel to sacrifice - cattle, sheep and goats - were all considered deities by the Egyptians.

God, in effect, was asking Israel to ritually slaughter the "gods" the Israelites once served in Egypt. Sacrifice was to be a form of penance for the Israelites' idolatry (see [Joshua 24:14](#); [Ezekiel 20:7-8](#); [Acts 7:39-41](#)).

There were other meanings attached to the sacrifices of Israel as well.

As we observed in considering the "guilt" and "sin" offerings, sacrifice often served as an act of renunciation and sorrow for sins. The "blood" of the animal symbolized the life of the one offering the sacrifice. Recognizing that his sins deserved death, the person offered the animal's life in place of his own.

Elsewhere, sacrifice was a "gift" that acknowledged God's sovereignty over creation.

By making a sacrifice from the first-fruits of the earth and their flocks, worshippers were giving a part of themselves - something they needed to live - to thank God for His blessings (see [Leviticus 23:10-14](#); [Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Exodus 13:1-2](#); [Numbers 3:11-13, 44-51](#)).

C. The Thank Offering

In the Temple liturgies reflected in the Book of Psalms and in the prophets' writings we see a growing understanding - that holocausts were not all that God required; that He demanded an "interior" or "spiritual" sacrifice as well.

Spiritual sacrifice was not opposed to animal sacrifices. Ideally, the sacrifices the Israelites offered in the Temple were to reflect their offering of themselves with a contrite and humble spirit to do God's will.

For the prophets, however, there was a "disconnect" between the sacrifices the people offered in the Temple and the condition of their hearts.

Isaiah said their lack of faith and justice made their offerings "worthless" (see [Isaiah 1:10-16](#); also [Amos 4:4-6](#); [Malachi 1:10,13-14](#)).

Jeremiah reminded them that God did not command holocausts upon freeing the people from Egypt. Instead he desired His people to walk in His ways and listen to His voice (see [Jeremiah 7:21-24](#); [Micah 6:6-8](#)).

Over time, Israel came to see that love, not sacrifice, is what God truly desires (see [Hosea 6:6](#)).

Psalms 40 specifically mentions the animal sacrifices, grain offerings (oblation), holocausts and sin offerings. God did not want or seek these, the psalmist sings. Rather, He wants "ears open to obedience" and hearts that delight in doing God's will.

[Psalm 40:1-11](#) is classified as one of the todah (pronounced tow-DAW) psalms (for example, Psalms 18; 30; 32; 41; 66; 69; 118; 138).

Todah is a Hebrew word that means "thank offering" or "thanksgiving." In fact, it is often translated by the Greek word eucharistia, which is where we get our word, "Eucharist."

Many of the psalms were written to accompany the offering of the todah sacrifice, a specific type of "peace offering" involving a sacrificial meal of bread, meat and sometimes wine, offered with friends and family in the Temple (see [Leviticus 7:1-21](#)).

A person made this "sacrifice of thanksgiving" and offered the "cup of salvation" (see [Psalm 116:13-14, 17-18](#)) for having been delivered by God from some life-threatening circumstance - a serious illness, persecution, or any mortal danger.

In singing the todah psalms, the worshipper glorifies God and celebrates the new life granted to him by God's saving deeds.

Psalm 69 is a good example of a todah psalm. It begins with a plea for God's help ("Save me, O God!"), includes a long lament about the afflictions the believer faces, and ends by glorifying God with thanksgiving, praising His name and exhorting others to hope in the Lord.

Psalm 22, which Jesus prayed on the Cross, is another todah psalm. The psalm starts with a cry of dereliction ("My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"), recounts the torments at the hands of evildoers, and concludes on a note of triumph - praising God for hearing and saving the psalmist.

Many other psalms were composed as "processional hymns" to accompany the Israelites' sacrifices in the Temple. And they, too, disclose a similar "inner meaning" of these sacrifices.

In these psalms, sacrifice is joined with praise to God for delivering the Israelites from their foes and oppressors (see [Psalms 54:6-7; 66:5-9, 13-20; 107:21-22; 116: 3-4, 8-9, 17-18](#)).

In offering praise and thanks, the worshipper was pledging to give His life to God in thanksgiving: "I am bound, O God, by vows to you; your thank offerings I will fulfill. For you have rescued me from death...that I may walk before God in the light of the living" (see Psalms 56:12-13; 40:6-8; 51:16-17; 50:14,23; 141:2).

Later Old Testament texts even offered "role models" for the sacrifice of the heart that God requires (see [1 Samuel 15:22](#); [Proverbs 21:27](#); [Sirach 34:18-19](#)).

Isaiah prophesies God sending a "servant," who will offer his life for the people (see [Isaiah 42:1-4](#); [49:1-6](#); [50:4-9](#); [53:11](#))

This servant is compared to a sacrificial lamb upon whom God "laid...the guilt" of all the people. Crushed for the sins of the people, pierced for their offenses, he "gives his life as an offering for sin" (see [Isaiah 53:1-11](#)).

In the heroic witness of its martyrs, Israel also developed a notion of people freely handing themselves over in obedience to God's law and to make atonement for the sins of the nation (see [2 Maccabees 6:12-7:40](#)).

D. Everywhere They Bring Sacrifice

Sacrifice moves in the direction of praise and spiritual worship in the Old Testament. But sacrificial worship is not expected to disappear from Israel.

Even the prophets, who sharply criticize the Israelites' for their hypocrisy, saw a place for sacrifice in a new and everlasting kingdom of David (see [Jeremiah 17:25-26](#); [33:16-18](#)).

Isaiah even foresaw "an altar to the Lord" in the land of Israel's arch-nemesis, Egypt. In the kingdom to come, he said, even the Egyptians would offer sacrifices and oblations and fulfill vows to the Lord.

On the threshold of the New Testament, in the final book of the Old Testament canon, Malachi prophesies the same thing - but on a far grander scale. He sees people the world over bringing sacrifice to God:

"For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name is great among the nations. And everywhere they bring sacrifice to My Name, and a pure offering." (see [Malachi 1:11](#)).

IV. Study Questions

1. What is the first sacrifice recorded in the Bible?
2. Who is the first priest mentioned in the Bible?
3. Why did Moses originally ask Pharaoh for permission to leave Egypt?
4. What did the Ark of the Covenant contain? Where was the Ark housed when Israel became a kingdom?
5. What are the five basic types of sacrifice prescribed in the Old Testament?
6. What is the todah sacrifice?

For prayer and reflection:

Do you understand your worship in the Mass as a form of sacrifice?

Try preparing for Sunday Mass by reading some of the todah psalms (for example, [Psalms22: 69](#); and [116](#)). See if this helps to deepen your appreciation of the Mass.

Do you understand life as an offering of obedient sacrifice to God?

Read and pray over Psalms 40 and 50 and the story of the Maccabean martyrs (see [2 Maccabees 6:12-7:40](#)). Ask for the strength to make yourself an ever more acceptable offering to the Lord.