

On Leviticus and Hebrews

Perhaps there is some significance in the fact that the book of the New Testament that so closely addresses the Old Testament book of Leviticus, namely the Epistle to the Hebrews, should be as mysterious as that which it completes.

For as Hebrews says, 'Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later' showing that the Epistle to the Hebrews, being of the 'things which were to be spoken later' acts as the 'textbook of fulfilment' for Leviticus. This is hinted at right from the start where in the set of contrasts with 'angels', Hebrews affirms the new Great High Priest as being both better than 'angels' but also importantly, that the word spoken by those angels now needs to be filtered through the certainty of the Incarnation of Jesus, God's own unique and eternal Son.

Hebrews does not disavow this 'word spoken by angels' but rather appeals to us the reader to consider that, since it was of such significance so long ago when first received, surely now in the light of the extraordinary sacrifice of Jesus and attended by the miraculous, it must add to the urgency with which we ought to receive the words of Christ. Hebrews signifies this through the several "take care lest" passages, see e.g. Hebrews 3.12. And it then goes on, having spoken of Christ's profound sufferings, to speak of Christ as being our new High Priest.

All the which might seem of little interest to those in NT times who have apparently no need of priests in the OT mould, but all such sentiments are overturned once we acknowledge that we are all become 'kings and priests', each one of us, as we are allowed to come to know Jesus and His saving of us.

It is now that we start to grasp that a priest is one who both offers sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, *and* who also can intercede on behalf of others in pleading their cause with Jesus; a cause that in the NT understanding is one that is Christ's first and foremost and then in our reflecting his love, is become ours as well; we can do nothing without Him. We are truly become in Christ, 'kings and priests'.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is reflecting on their understanding of the Pentateuch and pivotally, Leviticus, the 'book of how to approach a Holy God', in the light of the revelation of Jesus. Hebrews knows that Jesus is the one 'for whom are all things; through whom are all things'; it starts from the same premiss as Leviticus, namely that *He is the One who Is*, and so takes those ancient words and 're-fits' them, now knowing of God's eternal plan to be His own 'arm' and 'strong right hand'; to be His own 'ram in a thicket' (Genesis 22); to being the one who 'brought salvation' (Isaiah 59.16) Himself.

Hebrews opens as a great spiral in words drawing the revelation of God - the fact of God: His speaking to us - prior to Jesus, together and placing His magnificence all with Jesus, as the One through whom God now Is, to the Israel of God. Only then does the scripture tell us that His Son is the 'heir of all things' and the one through whom all things were made. It is this layering from the

ancient words into the revelation of Jesus which concerns us here, for the *effect* is not unitary (that being, of only a single effect) but rather comprehensive; as Christ is the all-in-all so too the transformation in the person who follows Him is all-encompassing, taking a path from the old self in ignorance of the transforming work of Jesus, into the new realm of *having been transformed*; the which benefit is not for the individual alone yet rather in glorious communion, is there for the transforming of all those with whom we have to do. Thus although we are changed as single persons, we grow as a 'togetherness', as a community, a church, and indeed as the Israel of God.

As Leviticus 17 has to do with the blood, so the blood of Jesus stands centrally in Hebrews. For the magnificence that is our salvation comes not in arrogant displays of power yet rather in an humility that stands in suffering; in a giving of a life that is tragic and alone. Only once the tragedy is known (the 'we had hoped....' of Luke's Emmaus account) does the glory come. And this glory comes in a time-transforming totality that was always present eternally; an ability to transform, that is not confined to The One Being yet is willingly shared by any and all who want to acknowledge the timeless love of God in Christ.

This timelessness chose to enter time and in being 'timely' became temporal temporarily, for the sake of demonstrating that life truly does have meaning; life has indeed an eternal significance. Yet in making the decision to become temporal, this Life in Christ had to in complete honesty take-on, clothe itself in the fragility experienced by those whose only existence to-date has been

within these limits of time. A time bounded by blood at both the beginning and end of life.

Yet far from death, Jesus' blood is the gateway to life. This blood crushes our sins and then through the veil takes us to new places; places which heretofore had only been made free for a very few, whom God might know in this manner. Moses was the one to whom God spoke face-to-face where a 'mere' prophet took second place (Numbers 12.6) yet now in Jesus the way to God stands open where all those whom Jesus accepts, may through Jesus speak with the one 'with whom we have to do'.

Jesus is become the 'mercy seat' (see variously Exodus 25:18-21, Leviticus 16:14-15 and then magnificently Romans 3.25, where what is described as the 'atoning sacrifice' or propitiation, is the same word as used in those passages from Exodus and Leviticus) upon and through which, God speaks with His people and reveals himself to them.

In being with God over the Ark, the covenant box - the location of the mercy seat - we are seeing God in Jesus; no longer do we have to question with Philip where the Father is (John 14.8), for 'all shall know me, from the greatest to the least' (Jeremiah 31.34), and in Christ we find our forever, eternal Sabbath and homecoming rest (Hebrews 4.9). This is the prize in Christ: that through the eternal Spirit and in union with the Father we might in Jesus be dwelling eternally with God and know His indwelling love. Each person in Christ is become a mercy seat - so to speak on the inside - with which to be Christ to all those he chooses to send us to.

And the type or template that instructs us how we might approach a God of such unimaginable holiness, is laid-out in Leviticus. There are sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7), and all the Levitical sacrifices are given meaning and are enabled through Jesus. There is the forgiveness of sins (Leviticus 4, 16) and all sin is forgiven in Jesus. There is the blood (Leviticus 17) and all blood shed since the beginning of time is given meaning in the shedding of His blood. The way to life stands open through the veil of His blood.

Please note a certain confusion as regards this 'veil': Leviticus is clear that there is one curtain or doorway and one veil. There are not two veils. There is only the one veil through which the High Priest, once per year, takes the blood. It is this veil which is the veil in Christ's body, in His blood. In Jesus this veil is 'split from top to bottom' (Matthew 27.51), to enable access to the Father.

And through Christ's intercession (through this split veil) our access to the Father is maintained; in the constant and repeated acknowledgement of His one sacrifice for sin; in the observance of the commandments (these are repeated from within the veil in Leviticus 19, showing their pivotal importance in staying within the veil being the daily Christian life); in our convening for the festivals (Leviticus 23), in complete humility the accepting of our context and place in the scheme of life: duty, loyalty, respect and love. Christ: the all-in-all and us buried with and within Him.

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