

Old Testament History, Literature, and Theology

Sacrifices, Feasts of Israel, and the Book of Numbers

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Leviticus, Sacrifices, Atonement, Feasts, Pentecost, Yom Kippur, Numbers, Nazirite Vow, Priestly Blessing, Lament

Abstract

This lecture provides an in-depth examination of the ancient Israelite sacrificial system and sacred calendar in Leviticus before transitioning into the theological narratives of the book of Numbers. Dr. Ted Hildebrandt categorizes Old Testament sacrifices according to their distinct functions in addressing multifaceted aspects of sin, including anger, pollution, guilt, damage, and broken communion. He further maps the major Jewish festivals onto Israel's agricultural seasons and examines foundational passages in Numbers, highlighting the archaeological importance of the priestly blessing silver scrolls. Finally, the lecture establishes a critical theological distinction between sinful, faithless complaint and faithful, relationship-affirming lament as modeled by Moses in the wilderness.

Outline

I. Leviticus Review and Sacrificial System

A. Overview of the Sacrificial System

1. Misconception of sin as a unitary concept vs. a complex set of problems
2. Function of sacrifices as specific ritual responses to distinct facets of sin

B. Facets of Sin and Corresponding Ritual Responses

1. Divine anger requires propitiation (appeasement through favorable action)
2. Defiling pollution requires purification (cleansing, often using water)
3. Guilt and shame require atonement (providing a covering)
4. Personal or communal damage requires reparation (restitution and repayment)
5. Broken communion requires confession and restoration within the community

C. The Central Role of Blood in Sacrifices

1. Hebrews 9:22: 'Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin'
2. Typological harbinger pointing to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ
3. Strict Prohibition in Leviticus against consuming animal blood

D. Five Major Types of Levitical Offerings

1. Whole Burnt Offering (Leviticus 1)
 - a. Entire animal consumed on the altar; most expensive sacrifice
 - b. Offered daily morning and evening as total dedication to God
2. Sin or Purification Offering (Leviticus 4)
 - a. Graduated requirements based on social status (priest, leader, commoner, poor)
 - b. Allowance of two turtle doves for the poor (e.g., Joseph and Mary in Luke 2)
 - c. Portions assigned to priests as divine provision for their sustenance
3. Reparation, Trespass, or Guilt Offering (Leviticus 5)
 - a. Requires fourfold restitution/repayment prior to ritual sacrifice
 - b. Shared meal portion designated for officiating priests
4. Fellowship or Peace Offering (Shalom; Leviticus 3)
 - a. Expressed as freewill offerings, completion of vows, or thanksgiving (todah)
 - b. Communal meal shared between worshiper, family, and priests
5. Grain Offering (Leviticus 2)
 - a. Bloodless offering of fine flour from wheat or barley mixed with olive oil and salt
 - b. Strict prohibition of yeast; accompaniment of specialized sanctuary incense

II. Festivals and Feasts of Israel

A. Agricultural Seasons of Ancient Israel

1. Contrast between New England four-season climate and Israel's two-season climate
2. Four to five months of dry summer vs. winter early and late rainy seasons
3. Dew as crucial summer moisture source for Mediterranean flora

B. Spring Festivals (Wheat and Barley Harvest)

1. Passover (Pesach) and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23)
 - a. Commemorates rapid exodus from Egypt with lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread
 - b. Parallel with New Testament Easter and crucifixion of Christ
2. Feast of Weeks / Pentecost (Shavuot)
 - a. Celebrated 50 days (seven sevens plus one) after Passover
 - b. Marks conclusion of grain harvest; parallel with outpouring of Holy Spirit in Acts 2
3. Biblical Practice of Gleaning for the Poor
 - a. Commandment to leave unharvested field corners and dropped grain for the needy
 - b. Dignified labor model for poor care exemplified by Ruth

C. Fall Harvest and Festivals (Grapes, Figs, Olives)

1. Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah)
 - a. Marking the civil New Year with the blowing of the shofar (ram's horn)

- b. Eschatological associations with the future return of Christ and the last trumpet
- 2. Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur; Leviticus 16)
 - a. Most sacred high holy day involving somber self-reflection and fasting
 - b. Ritual of two goats: one sacrificed on mercy seat, one released as scapegoat
 - c. Historical context of the 1973 Yom Kippur War
- 3. Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sukkot)
 - a. Commemorates forty years of wilderness wandering and temporary shelters
 - b. Modern construction of sukkah huts with palm branches and festive traditions
- D. Special Sabbath Cycles
 - 1. Weekly Sabbath (Shabbat) from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset
 - 2. Sabbatical Year (Shemitah; Leviticus 25): resting land and releasing debts every seven years
 - 3. Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25): land returned to original family inheritance every fifty years
 - a. Prevention of extreme poverty and perpetual accumulation of land wealth
 - b. Theological reason for 70-year Babylonian exile: compensating unkept land sabbaths
- E. Historical Post-Exilic Feasts
 - 1. Feast of Purim (Book of Esther)
 - a. Celebrates deliverance of Jews from Haman's plot under Queen Esther and Mordecai
 - b. Festive synagogue reading of Esther where children drown out Haman's name
 - 2. Feast of Hanukkah / Feast of Dedication
 - a. Commemorates Maccabean revolt (165 BC) against Antiochus Epiphanes and temple cleansing
 - b. Mentioned in John 10:22 as observed by Jesus

III. The Book of Numbers: Wilderness Wandering and Theology

- A. Overview and Theological Significance of Numbers
 - 1. Narrative setting: forty years of Israel's journey through the wilderness
 - 2. Core themes: provision, leadership challenges, complaint, and divine discipline
- B. The Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6)
 - 1. Three core prohibitions: avoiding dead bodies, consuming no grape products, leaving hair uncut
 - 2. Function: voluntary temporary or lifelong consecration of body, food, and family to God
 - 3. Completion ritual: offering sacrifice, shaving head, and burning hair on altar
 - 4. Biblical examples: Samson, Samuel, and the Apostle Paul (Acts 21)
 - 5. Theological distinction: Jesus as a Nazarene (from Nazareth), not a Nazirite
- C. The Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24–26)
 - 1. Content: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you...'

2. Archaeological breakthrough: Gabriel Barkay's discovery of Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls (c. 600–700 BC)

3. Significance: Earliest physical piece of Biblical text extant, predating proposed exilic P-source dates

D. Literary Cycles of Complaint in Numbers

1. Recurring six-stage pattern: Problem → Complaint → God's Anger → Mediation → Relenting → Summary

2. Two-verse mini-cycle example in Numbers 11:1–2 (Taberah)

E. Distinguishing Faithful Lament from Sinful Complaint (Numbers 11:4–25)

1. Israel's sinful complaint over manna: faithless desire to abandon God and return to Egypt

2. Moses' intense prayer of lament: honest, relationship-affirming confrontation seeking God's help

3. Divine response: distribution of spiritual burden onto seventy elders of Israel

4. Theological implications: validity of honest lament and understanding divine anger in biblical discipline