

Christian A. Eberhart. *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically*. Fortress, 2011. \$9.99.

This book offers a fascinating study of the concept of sacrifice in the Bible. The author begins with a survey of major scholarly theories about sacrifice across religious systems of belief and practice, some of which in their more recent guise call into question the lynchpin of the entire orthodox Christian faith, namely the positive interpretation of the death of Jesus. In recent theory sacrifice is indelibly rooted in violence and death and generally viewed negatively. (It is difficult for modern readers to view Jesus' sacrifice in terms of anything but the violence of his death, even though the common meaning of "sacrifice" in general denotes any sort of voluntary self-deprivation.) In the very popular theory of Rene Girard, the closest one comes to a positive evaluation of Jesus' death is that it brought to the light of day the mechanism of generative violence that underlies religious sacrificial killing, and does so in order that people can renounce it (20-21). Even more potentially damaging to orthodox Christianity is the accusation that any God who would require the death of his son is a vengeful, sadistic, and child-abusive God.

Following his survey of scholarly views, the author devotes the bulk of the book, three-fourths of it, to a nuanced survey of sacrifice in the Hebrew Testament. The remaining quarter of the book examines Christological atonement metaphors in the Christian Testament. The reason for devoting so much time to Hebrew Testament texts is that the concepts of "sacrifice" and "atonement" that capture Christian understanding of the death of Jesus in the Christian Testament are expressed primarily through metaphors derived from the Hebrew Testament and are therefore properly understood in light of their First Testament meaning.

Ancient Hebrew religion involves five different types of sacrifices: the burnt offering, the cereal offering, the sacrifice of well-being, the sin offering, and the guilt offering. All but the second involved the slaughter of an animal. But the meaning of the sacrifices varied. The sacrifice of *burnt offering* was about encountering God, the sacrifice being the gift an inferior brings as a token of homage to the superior. The attention in the sacrifice was less upon the destruction of the animal than on the work of the fire in changing the sacrificial material from something earthly into something heavenly. As smoke it rose up as a pleasing odor to God. It is therefore not the killing that is central but the burning. Burning is in fact important for all types of sacrifices. Connected with the burning is another aspect, that of food. But this aspect has to do with maintaining relationships and honor, not God's need for nourishment. The *cereal offering* involves burning a portion but consuming the rest as food. It is primarily an occasion for joy and festivity. The *sacrifice of well-being* also involves an animal. It resembles the burnt offering, except that most of the animal is consumed by the family as a celebration, with some given to the priest. The *sin offering* involves an elaborate blood ritual and removal of rest of the animal to be burned outside the camp or to be consumed by the priest. This sacrifice is for atonement. The question here is, however, exactly what effects atonement? The rabbis seem to have connected it with the application of the blood. In Lev 4:1-5:13, however, the burning rite is also involved. It is significant that for this sacrifice the poor who cannot afford an animal may substitute a tenth of an *ephah* of fine flour. In that case it is the burning, not the blood application effects atonement. In addition, the effect of the blood application is not to eliminate human guilt but to cleanse the objects to which it is applied and render them sacred. The *guilt offering* is the least frequently mentioned sacrifice. Interestingly this requires not only a sacrifice but a monetary payment.

Few modern Christians have any sound knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, nor any sense that the two Testaments are deeply connected rather than discontinuous. The most stunning

conclusion of Eberhart's study is that the sacrificial rituals prescribed in the Hebrew Testament "lack any particular emphasis on death or violence" (11)! Nor is any sense that sin demands an innocent victim. Eberhart's second important conclusion is that "New Testament soteriology does not focus exclusively on the death of Jesus, but has a *broader incarnational dimension that includes his entire mission and life*" (11). This conclusion flies in the face of a widespread Christian tendency to "reduce the life and resurrection," in contrast to the death, "to marginal flash scenes," as was done most stunningly in Mel Gibson's 2004 movie *The Passion of Christ* (3). It is not surprising that traditional Christian theology has taken such a hit on its central doctrine when popular understanding of Jesus' death and Jesus' saving work has focused narrowly on Christ's suffering as vicarious and as a substitute for our own deserved suffering.

Eberhart's exposition of sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures brings to light a clear alternative to the understanding of that term so prevalent both in much Christian discourse about the meaning of the death of Jesus. But it is very difficult for Christian readers to grasp an alternative. Vicarious suffering lurks in the mind behind every text and metaphor, regardless of whether that metaphor comes from the sacrificial cult or economics or politics. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah combined with the Lamb of God who takes away sin seem to organize the other texts into an organic unity despite the rarity of their occurrence. The doctrine of substitutionary atonement has had the same power. It simply tells a story that makes some sense of how one man's death can save others. If ancient understand was different, it is rarely if ever explained in a way that modern people can grasp. When, for example, blood is said to purify from sin, we ask, How could it do that? The texts that speak about that do not tell us the mechanics. The economics of exchange, in which an innocent party undergoes the suffering deserved by the guilty party, is what makes sense to us.

And yet a careful study of the New Testament reveals that the Gospels never use the term "sacrifice" in referring to Jesus. In fact, only one passage in Ephesians and several passages in Hebrews call Jesus a "sacrifice"! The Ephesians passage reads, "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:2). This is clearly an exhortation to a certain kind of behavior and surely cannot be referring narrowly to Christ's violent death (106). Hebrews does envision a better cult than that of the old covenant. In this case it is Jesus' death that becomes the precondition of accessing heaven (113). Yet one does not come away from reading Hebrews with a sense that a vengeful God has demanded the sacrifice of an innocent victim. The tone of Jesus' sacrifice in Hebrews is one of generosity on Jesus' part out of sympathy for human weakness. Eberhart's study includes a host of other relevant passages and motifs and metaphors: the "Blood of Jesus," "Jesus the (place of) Atonement," "Jesus the Lamb," "Jesus Becomes a Curse," "Jesus Dies for Us," "Jesus Gives His Life for Us," Reconciliation, Redemption. In one of his summary comments, he observes that the sacrificial metaphors occur in paraenetic and Christological contexts, some pointing to Jesus' life and mission as acceptable to God and others to his death through which his blood was made available as a source of his life that has power to eliminate sin and make humans sacred. He emphasizes that the blood is not connected with vicarious dying (122). In another summary paragraph Eberhart the wide range of contexts from which the early Christians drew their metaphors for speaking about the meaning of Jesus for salvation. They need to be attended to individually, noting that vicarious death is a motif in only some of them, and indeed in secular rather than cultic metaphors (130).

This is a small book, measuring 7 x 4¼ inches and barely ½ inch thick. But it offers very rich fare in very digestible form. Given the importance of this subject for Christian faith, and the

struggles so many modern Christians have in response to the topic, this book is “must reading” for every Christian preacher. First of all, simply to read Eberhart’s account of theories of sacrifice in the scholarship of the past two centuries is very illuminating. These theories have profoundly shaped modern understanding, even among people who never heard of the scholars who propounded them. Secondly, the guided tour Eberhart gives us through the Hebrew Testament, in order to give us a detailed and more sophisticated knowledge of the varieties of sacrifice in Biblical religion as prescribed and described along the way, is utterly fascinating and surprising. As is usually the case in regard to matters of which a person has only the most superficial knowledge, an immersion in what lies below the surface turns out to be far more complex and very different from its popular and scholarly caricature. Finally, Eberhart’s exposition of the New Testament metaphors and texts that capture the meaning of the death of Jesus exhibit the fertility and prolific results of the early Christian imagination when people spoke of the salvation they experienced through the entirety Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Next to that any given theory by itself feels like impoverishment, and recent accusations and condemnations the result of hostile spin.

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