

Lecture XII

"The Offerings of Cain and Abel, and the Origin of Sacrifices Considered"

Part III

by

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"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he, being dead, yet speaks."
(Hebrews 11:4)

[1] Familiarized to the idea of an atonement of blood for sin, and [2] believing the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross to have been the propitiation and satisfaction to God for the transgressions of the whole human race, [and] [3] beholding the Christian sacrifice typified in every ordinance and every offering under the Mosaic law, and [4] certain that the death of the Messiah was foreordained for our redemption from the very beginning of the world--[thus] some eminent theologians have piously conceived that animal sacrifices must also, from the very beginning of the world, have been instituted and commanded by God himself as direct prefigurations of this last and all-sufficient oblation.

Others, again, have been induced to maintain the divine appointment of animal sacrifices after the fall as the best mode of accounting for the preference which was shown to the offering of Abel, while others [maintain the divine appointment] lest they should seem to countenance the will-worship of the Papists, and [while still] others [maintain the divine appointment] under the notion that this opinion would better enable them to refute the objections of the Socinian against the doctrine of the efficacy of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sin.

Such are some of the various motives which have induced theologians to embrace and defend this idea with so much zeal, under so many

disadvantages; and by arguments which, so far from approaching to a solid proof, do not even appear to afford a strong presumption in favor of the existence of any command from God for the general practice of sacrifices as a religious rite, before the promulgation of the Mosaic law.

The truth of this assertion with regard to many of the arguments advanced has already been established. We have shown that there is no reason to suppose that a divine command for animal sacrifices after the fall, if given, was omitted by Moses. We have also shown that neither can the existence of such a command at that early period be fairly or satisfactorily inferred from his narrative. Lastly, we entered upon the consideration of those circumstances, exclusive and independent of the Mosaic history, in which the primitive and divine appointment of animal offerings is supposed to be implied, and found that neither the universal prevalence of sacrifices nor the declaration of St. Paul--that "by faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain"--can be made of any avail to prove the disputed point.

But there remains yet another circumstance to be examined from which the same conclusion has been attempted to be drawn; and that is, the alleged absurdity of sacrifices in the eye of reason and their alleged inhumanity in the eye of nature. This is indeed one of the most favorite arguments of the defenders of the divine appointment of sacrifices after the fall, and scarce any terms seem sufficiently strong to express their opinion of the cruelty and irrationality of animal offerings.

By some the offerings both of Abel and of Cain are represented as almost equally unaccountable; and it is asserted that "unprejudiced reason never could have dictated that destroying the best of our fruits and creatures could be an office acceptable to God, but quite the contrary."¹ Others, while they seem to allow that the vegetable offering of Cain might indeed be the result of rational deductions alone, yet maintain that no such admission can be allowed with regard to the animal sacrifice of Abel. They hold "that no reasonable notions of God could teach men that he could delight in blood, or in the fat of slain beasts."² They speak of "the destruction of innocent and useful creatures as against nature, against reason, and against interest,"³ and condemn it as "an action, than which, nothing could be more, in appearance, ill-fitted to appease the divine wrath, or obtain the divine favour."⁴

1 Delaney's Rev. Examined, Vol. I, p. 125.

2 Magee on Atonement, Vol. II, p. 73, 3d edit.

3 Ibid., copied from Delaney, Vol. I, p. 128.

4 Delaney, Vol. I, p. 134.

Censures like these might appear to most men to have been more than enough to mark the sentiments of these divines. But one, still more zealous than the rest, has completed the climax by, first of all, implying that to take away the lives of innocent and inoffensive creatures, to put them to torture, to spill their blood, and burn their flesh upon the altar of God, is alike contrary to the mercy and lenity and compassion of that infinite Being. He then concludes, that thus to torture them and take away their lives would, "without God's positive injunction, have been an abominable act, and enough to desecrate all their oblations."⁵

Such is the injudicious language of these divines. I call this language injudicious because, by asserting in terms so strong and unguarded the absurdity and inhumanity of animal sacrifices in themselves and the impossibility of rationally regarding them as atonements for sin, the difficulty of vindicating the Mosaic sacrifices as types of the great sacrifice of the cross--and the sacrifice of the cross as the means of reconciliation to God--is increased to an alarming degree. If "the *natural* unfitness of the sacrificial rite to obtain the divine favor and the *total* incongruity between the killing of God's creatures and the receiving a pardon for the violation of God's laws"⁶ be so very manifest, [and] if the doctrine of the shedding of blood for the remission of sins be indeed not only above but contrary to reason, then must we admit that there is far more force in the objections of the Socinian and the Deist than if it were merely an inexplicable doctrine we should be at all compelled to allow.

It must be confessed, however, that all the advocates of the positive institution of animal sacrifices after the fall have not been equally sweeping in their condemnations, and that even the most violent have sometimes taken a less decided tone. In their more sober moments they merely assert "that no being has any right to the lives of the creatures, but their Creator, or those on whom he confers that right," and that when Abel brought the firstlings of his flock, "God had not yet given man a right to the creatures, even for necessary food."⁷

Such are their premises, and the conclusion which they deduce from these premises is this: that as "no permission had yet been given to eat animal food, and no" other "pretext could possibly have presented itself to the mind of man for taking away the life of the creatures of God, it is irreconcilable that, by any deductions of unassisted reason, the mind" of

5 Stackhouse's Hist. of the Bible, Vol. I, p. 77. fol.

6 Magee, Vol. II, p. 70.

7 Delaney, Vol. I, p. 132.

Abel "could have arrived at the conclusion that to destroy a part of the creation could be agreeable to the Creator; much less that it could be viewed as an act of homage."⁸ And if it be impossible to imagine how the faith or understanding of Abel could have led him to an animal sacrifice as a rational or innocent mode of religious worship, it must be equally impossible to suppose that God would have vouchsafed [condescended] to approve and sanction it as an acceptable service. Since then we know both that Abel offered, and that God had respect unto his animal offering, we must necessarily conclude, that as such an offering could neither have been made nor accepted as the dictate of reason alone, it must have been suggested to him by the positive revelation of God.

Such is the argument when temperately stated and viewed. But it is an argument which, however correct its premises and however powerful when applied to the believer, can have but little influence upon the mind of the skeptic or the infidel, because the divine institution of sacrifices does not necessarily follow from its admission. There are three sources at least from which it is conceivable that the practice of sacrifices of blood may have been derived: reason, revelation, and superstition.

While the skeptic, therefore, agrees with these divines in the impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal offerings from the principles of reason alone, the inference which he will deduce from that admission will differ materially from theirs. He will only infer that as they did not originate in reason, they must have been the suggestion either of superstition or a divine command. And maintaining that the existence of a divine command for their institution cannot be satisfactorily or even plausibly proved, he will insist upon superstition as their proper and only parent, and thus gain an advantage in objecting to the whole doctrine of sacrifice for sin, which it would be most unwise and, I cannot but think, unnecessary to allow him to enjoy.

At once, therefore, to deprive the adversary of the atonement of this advantage and to disprove the assertion of the advocates for the divine institution of sacrificial atonement after the fall, I shall now proceed in an endeavor to show that the reason of Abel might easily have suggested to him the practice of animal sacrifice as an act of grateful piety, without any specific command for that purpose; and that, in consequence, as his service was a rational service, [so] the faith with which he was endued justly obtained from God a respect both to himself and to his offering. I will

⁸ See an "Essay on the Religion of the Indian Tribes of North America" by Dr. Jarvis, inserted in the Investigator, No. 5, July, 1821, p. 75.

endeavor to show that, taking into our view the circumstances of the dispensation under which our first parents were placed after the fall, the offering up of their flocks as well as their fruits became a natural and a proper mode of religious worship. In a word, [I will endeavor to show] that, taking for granted the truth of what is actually related in Genesis, the origin of sacrifice is not altogether unaccountable on the principles of reason and nature, and that there is therefore no necessity whatever for resorting to the hypothesis of a divine command of which we have neither any traces in the Mosaic narrative nor any proof from any other source.

Now it is evident that the whole force of the argument in support of the unreasonableness of animal sacrifices, if not sanctioned by a divine command, rests upon the supposition, first, that Abel had no justifiable pretext for taking away the life of any of the sentient creatures of the Almighty; and secondly, that even if he could have deemed the deprivation of their life innocent, he could never have imagined that the offering of the slain victim would be received as an acceptable mode of worship.

These, therefore, are the points we must examine; and if we can show that men had already been authorized to put to death the firstlings of their flocks for a specific and useful purpose, and that the offerings of the animals so authorized to be slain would appear a natural acknowledgment of gratitude to the Being who had devoted them to man's service and subjected them to man's power--if these two propositions can be fairly established we shall feel but little difficulty in admitting that the reason of Abel might alone have led him to an animal sacrifice.

1. Upon the first of these points it is to be observed, that if we turn to the book of Genesis we shall find that no sooner had the Deity reproved and pronounced the sentence upon our first parents after their transgression, than it is immediately written that "unto Adam and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). That the animals from whose bodies the covering of man was thus taken had fallen a prey to the power of death in the ordinary course of nature and decay will scarce be maintained by any who reflect that nature had not hitherto been subject to any course of decay, and that the power of death had only just been introduced with the power of sin into the world. It has been, therefore, more generally asserted by those who conceive that sacrifices had already been instituted by God, that they were the skins of those animals which had been slain in sacrifice, of which this particular use was made.

But the defense of this opinion involves the very subject upon which we are

at issue. It supposes that early and divine institution of sacrifices, about which we are disputing, to have been already proved; or at least to be capable of sufficient and satisfactory proof from some other source independent of the argument on which we are now employed. This, however, as we have seen in our previous examination of the sources from which such proof is attempted to be drawn, is by no means the case.

Nor is this the only disadvantage under which the opinion labors. For it is asserted by none that sacrifices, if appointed by God at all before the flood, were appointed before the sentence pronounced upon our first parents. It appears, however, from the narrative of Moses, that the appropriation of the covering of animals for the raiment of man took place, if not at the very time, yet immediately subsequent to the denunciation of death as the penalty of the original transgression.

Hence it is evident that the institution of animal offerings and the clothing of the human body must have been almost, if not exactly, contemporaneous events; and that, consequently, the skins which were taken for this purpose must have been the skins of almost, if not the very first, creatures which were slain in sacrifice.

But is it not then most singular, if sacrifices and the clothing of man were appointed together, that Moses, while relating so carefully the appointment of the one should have been altogether silent upon that of the other, when that other was not only of at least equal importance but also both a simultaneous and connected circumstance? Of, if we only suppose them to have been appointed nearly about the same time, is not the omission still equally singular? For in this case an alteration must be assumed to have been made in the ordinance of sacrifice after its original institution. The skin, which together with the rest of the victim was at first offered up as a whole burnt-offering unto the Lord, must now be conceived to have been afterwards separated for the use of man, and the body alone to have been consumed upon the altar.

The difficulty of maintaining that Moses omitted to mention the original institution of sacrifice is thus considerably increased, and we have to assume not only that he omitted the divine command by which the rite was established, but also the authority by which the mode of its celebration was changed. Upon the whole, therefore, it is not only so much more simple to suppose that these animals were slain for the very purpose of affording covering to man, but it also occurs so unavoidably to the mind of every ordinary reader as the natural inference from the words, that I cannot but

consider it as the true conclusion--more especially when the objections to any other mode of interpretation are duly weighed.

Here then, if the representation we have given of the matter be at all correct, we may perceive that Abel had indeed a justifiable pretext for taking away animal life; certainly not for sustenance, but yet for another special and scarce less essential purpose. In fact, as God by his word had before allowed to him the destruction of the fruits of the earth for necessary food, so did he now by his own solemn act sanction to him the destruction of living and sentient creatures for his necessary raiment. For "we are here told that *God made these coats* for them; that is, he gave them leave to kill the animals, and perhaps direction how to adapt their skin to the parts of their bodies: for it is certain, that God is frequently said to *do that, which is done by his order* and approbation." Such is the observation even of Kennicott⁹ himself. And how, after such an admission, he came to adopt the opinion that the slaying of the animals was for sacrifice and not for the more obvious end of clothing our first parents, it is difficult to explain without referring it to his preconceived notions of a divine command for the institution of the rite at the fall.

The only direct argument by which he has attempted to establish his opinion is the assertion that "it may be presumed, God would not have given" man permission to destroy his creatures only for the purpose of raiment "when there were yet so few creatures in the world."¹⁰ But besides the assumption of the fewness of the creatures, which is here so confidently yet without authority laid down, it will be still more hard if the creatures were indeed so few to account for their being appointed to be slain for sacrifice, which by its frequent repetition would occasion a still more rapid diminution of animal life than the clothing of man could possibly, in that early state of society, have required.

2. Having now seen that Abel had not only a justifiable pretext but an undoubted authority to destroy animal life for raiment, we must in the next place proceed to examine whether, considering that to be the case, he could reasonably suppose an offering of the animal so destroyed would be accepted as a religious service by the Being who had given him the authority.

Upon this point, however, if we regard his offering as merely of a eucharistical nature, we shall feel, I apprehend, but little serious difficulty.

⁹ Two Dissertations, p. 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 70.

If indeed we choose to call and to explain all eucharistical sacrifices as *gifts*, and if [in] interpreting gifts in the sense which the word usually bears when adopted in the ordinary transactions of common life we choose still further to assert that "they carry with them the idea of a *bribe* to God," [then] we no doubt advance what is both true in itself and decisive against their propriety in that particular sense.

But when, instead of speaking of such sacrifices as gifts, we omit the ambiguous word and speak of them only as offerings before the Lord and as acts expressive of the gratitude of the offerer for some benefit he has received, the vegetable sacrifice of Cain and the animal sacrifice of Abel are then placed upon the same footing and may be alike accounted for upon the principles of reason alone. For doubtless we are bound not only to be grateful in our hearts but also to express it by our lips, and to accompany our words by corresponding actions. And doubtless we are bound to pursue this conduct in acknowledgment of every kind of blessing, whether of raiment or of food.

Since, therefore, it is generally and justly allowed¹¹ that Cain might be led by the mere principles of nature to bring an offering of the produce of the earth as an acknowledgment of the divine goodness in appointing to him the fruits of the ground for food, it must be allowed also that the same reasoning might lead Abel to bring an offering of the firstlings of his flock as an acknowledgment of the divine goodness in appointing to him their skins for raiment. In this manner it is easy to conceive that animal sacrifices would then appear neither an unnatural nor an irrational mode of testifying a grateful sense of a blessing so specially and singularly conferred, though to us they are no longer even an innocent service.

As Christians we have embraced a religion which, by the positive and superior precepts of revelation, has superseded the exercise of reason in devising the forms of outward godliness. We live under a Gospel which, by prohibiting all further oblations of victims from the hands, has reduced the offices of piety to the mere spiritual offerings of the heart and lips.¹² But before any peculiar form of worship had been either forbidden or prescribed, and before the vanity of all other sacrifices had been proclaimed and their propriety terminated in the final sacrifice of the cross,

¹¹See Kennicott's Two Dissertations, p. 200.

¹²I have added these remarks because some have been weak enough to argue that if sacrifices were a reasonable mode of worship in the Patriarchal ages and under the Mosaic law, their practice must be equally proper under the Christian dispensation. Hence they infer that as sacrifices would now be deemed irrational service, they never could have been otherwise.

it is neither difficult to conceive that reason should have prompted an offering of everything from which benefit was derived nor irreverent to suppose that God would accept such offerings as one of the most unequivocal testimonies of a sense of gratitude and dependence.

As God, therefore, had actually provided man with raiment by the destruction of animal life, the destruction of animal life in the presence of the Lord and the presentation of the slain victim upon his altar in return became one of the most natural modes of expressing gratitude for the means appointed for the communication of one great necessary of life. It was at once an innocent, a pious, and an appropriate act of homage.

Thus have we examined the only remaining argument of those who assert the divine institution of sacrifices immediately after the fall and proved it to be equally inconclusive with the rest. When we consider the circumstances in which Abel stood, it appears that an offering of the "firstlings of his flock" is not inexplicable upon the mere principles of reason and piety alone. Consequently it is not necessary to suppose that he acted in obedience to the positive command of God in order to account for his having adopted that peculiar mode of worship.

Neither is it at all more necessary to call in the aid of such a supposition to relieve us from the alleged impossibility of accounting, upon any just grounds, for the divine preference of the offering of Abel instead of that of Cain. The reasonableness of the former has appeared in the progress of our investigation to be as clear as that of the latter, and the sentiment of gratitude--seeking every appropriate method of expressing itself whether by actions or by words--has been found upon inquiry to explain and to justify both the bloody sacrifice of Abel and the bloodless sacrifice of Cain. For the two great and most comprehensive blessings we enjoy are those of food and raiment; and we have shown that while the one of these two brothers was offering up a natural service of praise and thanksgiving for the appointed means of sustenance, the other was doing the same for the appointed means of clothing.

The reasonableness therefore of Abel's service, when aided and sanctified by the righteousness of his person through that faith and holiness in which Cain was deficient, afford a just and intelligible foundation for the superior respect with which both himself and his offering were received. Had his offering been contrary to reason and repugnant to nature, no doubt it would have been difficult (however preeminent his holiness or faith) not only to explain how his understanding could have been led to adopt it as a mode of

religious worship, but also to suppose that God would have accepted and sanctioned it when brought. But the moment we perceive that this act of homage had its foundation not in a superstitious but a rational piety, every objection vanishes and the whole becomes capable of a sound and satisfactory defense. It was right to prefer the reasonable service of righteous Abel before the reasonable service of unrighteous Cain.

The difficulties of the question being thus removed, and the hypothesis of the divine appointment of sacrifices having been shown to be both unsupported and unnecessary, we might now quit [leave] the subject. It is impossible, however, to forbear the addition of a few incidental remarks which seem to render it by no means improbable that the faith of Abel, in a deliverance from the consequences of the fall, was in some degree demonstrated by his offering itself. For it is evident that the destruction of animal life was made, or directed by God, for the very purpose of obviating that sense of shame and nakedness which was one of the first and most melancholy effects of transgression.

To hide their shame, our first parents had already resorted to an expedient of their own invention. But no sooner had God denounced upon them the sentence of certain [death], and [then] relieved them by the promise of some final and remarkable triumph over their adversary from the dreadfulness of eternal death, than he superseded their own imperfect efforts to obviate the consequences of their sin by shedding immediately the blood of the animal creation in order to supply them with a different and a better mode of effecting the same end.

It is by no means unnatural, therefore, to imagine that Abel (in bringing "of the firstlings of his flock") had a reference to these several considerations, and that the gratitude which he expressed by his offering for the raiment with which he had been clothed was more especially a gratitude for the means of removing that sense of moral shame he experienced in his nakedness, together with a reliance upon the contemporaneous promise of a future and more complete emancipation from the evils of the fall. And if this should be once allowed, it is easy to perceive how his faith was signified by his offering and, consequently, in what sense the Apostle more peculiarly intended to declare that "by faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain."

But whatever be the opinion we form with respect to the sentiments of Abel himself, we can scarce doubt that God in this action, and Moses in introducing his account of the mode in which raiment was thus provided for

man, had a peculiar view to the manner of our redemption through the death of Christ. For nothing is more remarkable than the frequency of those passages in scripture by which the pardon of transgression is represented under the metaphor of *hiding* or of *covering* sin. Nor can it escape the recollection of any that the skin of the victim was reserved in the Mosaic ritual for the priest who was the medium of atonement.

It cannot therefore be considered as a position altogether unreasonable to maintain, that the method of obviating the natural consequences of the fall by the shedding of blood was intended to be viewed by us (who live when the scheme of redemption has been completed) as having some connection with that more effectual shedding of blood by which God had determined (as we know, from the very foundation of the world) to cover also all our spiritual nakedness and shame. For in both instances it is the Lord God who himself interposes for our good; and in the latter as in the former, a raiment of righteousness is appointed for our acceptance and use, [and it is one] more excellent than any we had provided for ourselves.

It is not necessary, indeed, to view the subject in this light; for the introduction of the fact "that the LORD made coats of skins and clothed them" may be defended even in its ordinary and more unimportant sense. But when we regard it in combination with the other circumstances I have noticed, it seems to assume a more definite character, and there appears to be a reason for its introduction which makes it not unworthy of being thus pressed upon our attention.

Lecture XII from *On Scripture Difficulties* by C. [Christopher] Benson (Cambridge: Printed by J. Smith, Printer to the University, for Baldwin, Cradock, & Joy, London, 1843). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, and long paragraphs have been divided.