

This lecture is inspired by the Letter to the Hebrews. The Letter to the Hebrews is a theological *tour de force*. It transfigures the brutal Roman execution of Jesus into the perfect Mosaic sacrifice. Sacralizing that crucifixion is quite a rhetorical feat. The Author of the Letter brings Mosaic sacrifice ritual to bear in detail on the crucifixion of Jesus, to reveal it as the quintessential offering to God that accomplishes once and for all the human intentions of all ritual sacrifice. It is this account of that death as a sacrificial one that has inspired so much of the ritual of the Christian celebration of it. In particular, the apostolic churches of Catholicism and Orthodoxy have adopted and perpetuated much of the paraphernalia of Mosaic ritual, which passed out of Judaism with the destruction of the second Temple at the advent of Christianity. The Mosaic religion of the Tabernacle and the Temple that had been centered on sacrifice reinvented itself in the Common Era as the Rabbinical religion of the synagogue and the shule; and of the hearth and the heart. Catholic Christianity, for its part, sublated Mosaic ritual, recasting it as sacramental forms with supernatural meanings. The ulterior intention of this lecture is to explicate the religious meaning of those sacramental forms.

Let me begin with the familiar biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. I interpret one intention of this narrative to be prefigurement in the literary sense of Mosaic sacrifice. In the first place, Cain and Abel bring offerings to God, unbidden. There is of course no Law, but neither is there any command. And the narrator does not tell the reader why Cain and Abel do so. The meaning of sacrificial offering seems to be taken for granted. I think that to interpret its meaning we are meant to triangulate with both Natural Law and Mosaic Law.

Aquinas claims that ritual sacrifice is as natural to the human being as speech, and he counts it a virtue of natural religion. Echoing Aristotle, he says that because human knowledge originates from bodily things, it is natural for human beings to express their thinking with bodily things. Gestures and postures are signs of our thoughts, affections, intentions, as much as words. Just as human beings nod the head, bow the body, bend the knee, to show to other human beings reverence, submission, or affection, so also to God.

Gifts are likewise given by human beings as tokens of the heart. Thus do Cain and Abel bring gifts to God: Cain, a tiller of the soil, brings some of his fruits, while Abel, a keeper of sheep, brings God the best firstlings of his

flock (GEN 4:4). Now, the Law of Moses will require the choicest firstfruits of oil, wine, and wheat be offered to the Lord, *for them I have given to you*, says the Lord. Likewise, the firstborn of every ox, sheep, or goat are holy to the Lord: every male that opens the womb is to be offered to the Lord. Thus Abel's best firstlings satisfy the demand of the Law freely, without a command. He does what is right from the heart. Cain, in contrast, falls short of it, and we are told that God looked unfavorably on Cain's offering. Now, if the essence of the sacrifice is the intention of the heart, then it is Cain's heart that God looks upon unfavorably.

This disfavor points to an important disanalogy in Aquinas' analogy with human signing. God has no need of the gifts. On the contrary, he is the giver of the gifts being offered him. In Deuteronomy God admonishes the Israelites while still in the desert about the gifts of the promised land. as follows:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land ... a land where you will eat food without scarcity, where you will lack nothing When you eat and are satisfied, you are to bless the Lord your God for the good land that He has given you.... You might say in your heart, *The power and strength of my hands have made this wealth for me*. But remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to gain wealth, in order to confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers even to this day. (Deuteronomy 8:7ff)

Thus not only the offering but the power to produce it comes from God, so that the only offering possible is an offering of thanksgiving to God for the gift, the giving, and the power to give. Fittingly, in the Law such freewill offerings of thanksgiving are followed by a communion feast before the Lord. The Lord leaves the sacrificial gifts to the givers to enjoy, favorably regarding, rather, the intention of the heart they express. That is the heart of the sacrifice.

The function of the offering as signifier points to another disanalogy with human signing. One human being signifies their thoughts to another who has no access to them otherwise. But the Psalmist testifies:

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit and when I rise;
 You understand my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down;
 You are aware of all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 You know all about it, O LORD.
 You hem me in behind and before;
 You have laid Your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
 too lofty for me to attain. (Psalm 139:1-7)

To whom, then, is the offeror signifying the intentions of his heart, if not to God, who already knows them even better than the offeror? If it is not for the benefit of God, is the sign rather for the benefit of the offeror, as was the gift?

If so, then we have here another reversal of human signing: the offeror signifies the intentions of his heart, not to make his heart known to God, but rather known to himself before God. By his rituals of sacrifice he rouses his own heart, mind, and body to the worship of God, as does the Psalmist when he addresses his own soul thus:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me bless his holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits. (Psalm 103:1)

However, surely it matters that these ritual acts of self-reflection take place in the presence of God, so to speak. I say *so to speak* because the offeror believes that God is always present everywhere and always cognizant of the offeror. It is the offeror who builds altars and temples dedicated to mindfulness of God. When he approaches these sacred places to bring his mind, heart, and body before God, what does he seek? What desire of his heart does his sacrifice signify? He seems to wish to know himself as he is known by God, the Searcher of hearts, according to the words of the psalmist:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my concerns.
See if there is any offensive way in me;
lead me in the way everlasting.

This judging of the heart of the offeror by God can be seen in God's disregard of Cain's offering. By means of a question, God refers Cain's external offering to his internal disposition:

*Why are you angry, said the LORD to Cain,
and why has your countenance fallen?
If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?
But if you refuse to do what is right,
sin is crouching at your door;
it desires you, but you must master it. (Genesis 4:6-7)*

Why indeed is Cain angry? Does he himself not know whether he meant to do what is right? It is a freewill offering, so no disregard of an express law or command is at issue. And if God has no use for the fruits of the earth, no defect in the matter of the sacrifice matters. The defect is in the intention of the heart. The visible sacrifice is regarded by God as a sign of an invisible sacrifice of the heart, and he looks with disfavor on Cain's.

This first presentation of sacrifice in the Bible reduces it to its bare essentials. The mother of all sacrifices is a freewill offering of thanks for the gifts of God. The presentation of the finest fruits of the creation and work of one's hands is a visible expression of the invisible intentions of one's heart: the heart seeks God's favorable regard, and in it, its own favorable self-regard.

Now, sacrificial ritual as such concerns the external expression rather than the internal intention. It takes the form of conventional signs. This first biblical vignette of ritual sacrifice anticipates a first distinction between offering fruits of the earth and fruits of the womb, or food and animal sacrifices. These two primary types are developed in the next two vignettes of Genesis: the sacrifice of Noah and of Melchizedek.

The story of Noah's sacrifice introduces animal sacrifice in the sense not only of presenting but also of slaying. As with Cain and Abel, there is no command of God's. The sacrifice is a freewill offering of Noah's, as follows:

In Noah's six hundred and first year, on the first day of the first month, the waters had dried up from the earth. So Noah removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month, the earth was fully dry.

Then God said to Noah, *Come out of the ark, you and your wife, along with your sons and their wives. Bring out all the living creatures that are with you—birds, livestock, and everything that crawls upon the ground—so that they can spread out over the earth and be fruitful and multiply upon it.* So Noah came out, along with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. Every living creature, every creeping thing, and every bird—everything that moves upon the earth—came out of the ark, kind by kind.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD. And taking from every kind of clean animal and clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar.

When the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, He said in His heart, *Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from his youth. And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.* (Genesis 8: 13-21)

This narrative prefigurement of Mosaic sacrifice anticipates several of its ritual elements: there is an altar; and there is a distinction made between clean animals acceptable for offering and unclean ones; and there is not only the slaying of the animals but the burning of them on the altar. In form, this sacrifice of Noah's anticipates what the Law will call a whole burnt offering or holocaust, which was not feasted upon, but rather completely consumed by fire on an altar, for a pleasing aroma to God.

Was this the intention of Noah's heart in offering burnt offerings? The text does not tell us the intention of Noah's heart. Rather, it gives us the thought of God's heart. He is appeased enough for the evil inclination of man's heart to vow never again to destroy the living creatures of his creation because of man's evil. So, has sin entered in, and with it the sin-offering? But Noah was saved because he is a righteous man. A sacrifice of thanksgiving for deliverance seems called for rather than of propitiation for sin.

Can we infer the intention of Noah's sacrifice from its prefiguration?

Noah's burnt offerings recall the daily offering that God will command Israel to offer him at the beginning and close of each day, as follows:

This is what you are to offer regularly on the altar, each day: two lambs that are a year old. Offer one lamb in the morning and the other at twilight. With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with a quarter hin of oil from pressed olives, and a drink offering of a quarter hin of wine. And offer the second lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and drink offering as in the morning, as a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD.

For the generations to come, this burnt offering shall be made regularly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you. I will also meet with the Israelites there, and that place will be consecrated by My glory. So I will consecrate the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and I will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve Me as priests.

Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. And they will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt so that I might dwell among them.

These holocausts were kept burning all night and day, for a perpetual offering. The heart of this perpetual offering, the invisible offering it signifies, is Israel's consecration to God. The complete burning up of the animal makes clear that any use of it to man is renounced. This is not a thanksgiving sacrifice for benefits received, to be delighted in before the Lord after blessing

him for it. The holocaust is, rather, an act of adoration and purification. In response to it God will consecrate the Tabernacle and altar that have been dedicated to remembering his presence, power, and favor dwelling among the Israelites. Such a daily recognition is no doubt ordered to fulfilling the first and greatest commandment of the Law:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These words I am commanding you today are to be upon your hearts.

In this way, again, sacrifice is a matter of the heart, indeed of love.

Noah's heart is represented as freely anticipating the demands of the Law to come. And God's favorable regard is expressed as delight in the rising aroma of roasting meat. I take this to be a poetic transference: God's sharing in man's delight in the aroma figuratively expresses God's delight in man's offering it up. It is a poetic expression of God's acceptance of Noah's worship, namely, the delight Noah takes in delighting God. The pleasing aroma will be invoked repeatedly in the Law of Moses as the sign of God's favorable regard of the sacrifice—or more to the point, his acceptance of the worship rising from of the heart of the one offering it up.

God's delight in Noah's sacrifice is followed by an extraordinary grant by God, as follows:

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

The fear and dread of you will fall on every living creature on the earth, every bird of the air, every creature that crawls on the ground, and all the fish of the sea. They are delivered into your hand. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you; just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you all things.

But you must not eat meat with its lifeblood still in it. Surely I will require the life of any man or beast by whose hand your lifeblood is shed.

The roasting flesh that delighted God is in turn given by God to delight man. The slaying of animals for man's food and pleasure is sacralized: it is granted by the Lord, and a sacrificial form of acknowledging his Lordship has been initiated by the righteous patriarch Noah, the Adam of the second creation.

But there is a limit to the divine grant, a perpetual reminder of the Lordship of the Lord who grants it: the lifeblood of the animal is reserved to the Lord and prohibited to man. It is the Lord who gives life, and only the Lord may justly take it away. It is only by a divine grant that man has a right to use the animals for his food and pleasure. But God remains the sole Lord of life, and he will avenge any spilling of lifeblood done without his leave.

This understanding will become the heart of Mosaic animal sacrifice. The essence of the sacrifice will be the collecting of the blood of the slain animal and pouring it out at the base of the altar, or else anointing or sprinkling the altar with it. That will be the essential act of worship. Here is what the Lord says in Leviticus: *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make expiation for your souls upon the altar; for it is the blood that expiates the soul.*

Fatty portions of the animal are then burned on the altar for a sweet aroma, to rise up to God as a sign of the offeror's heart being raised to God's. In peace offerings, the other parts of the animal are shared with the priest and offeror for a sacred feast. This visible feast among men is a sign of an invisible one with God, a communion of the offeror's heart with God's. The offeror seeks the peace of being at one with God—hence the English coinage *atonement* or “at-one-ment”.

On the other hand, there is the unbloody form of sacrifice, which is prefigured in Genesis in the sacrifice of Melchizedek. The story seems to come out of nowhere, as does Melchizedek, in the middle of a narrative about warring kings, as follows:

After Abram returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine—since he was priest of God Most High — and he blessed Abram and said:

*Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth,
and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your
hand.* Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

The new element of Mosaic sacrifice that the story prefigures is priesthood, an order of divinely appointed intercessors. Abraham freely gives to Melchizedek the tithe due the priest under the Law. But the narrative does not give us the lineage of this king nor tell us how he became appointed a priest of God Most High. The Law's ordination to the priesthood of the descendants of Aaron and the tribe of Levi will be a matter of much legal and ritual detail. Notwithstanding, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine to God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, as a thanksgiving sacrifice for deliverance, is clearly approved of by the narrator and by Abraham.

We saw in the passage I quoted above that such cereal offerings were commanded alongside the daily holocausts. But they were also offered on their own, mixed with olive oil and frankincense for a pleasing aroma when a portion was burned on the altar, accompanied by a libation of wine. The

remainder was given to the priest as his “most holy” portion of the offering, to be eaten by him within the Holy Place. If the priest offered a cereal offering for himself, then all of it was burned on the altar for a sweet aroma to the Lord.

Another offering of loaves of bread was offered perpetually on behalf of all Israel in the Sanctuary beyond the courtyard, which contained a golden table for the purpose. There was a perpetually burning menorah beside it, and another golden altar for offering incense during animal sacrifices in the courtyard. The golden table of the Presence was so called because God commanded that twelve loaves of unleavened bread for the twelve tribes of Israel be on it perpetually before his Face, together with two portions of frankincense. Once a week the priests would replace the loaves with fresh ones, and eat those removed in a sacred place. This perpetual offering of the Bread of the Presence was likewise called by the Lord a most holy part of the priest's share of the offerings to the Lord.

Beyond this Sanctuary of the two golden altars and the menorah was the curtained Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant was reserved, which contained the two Tables of the Law; and a portion of the manna that sustained the Israelites during their wandering in the dessert; and the rod of

Aaron which miraculously flowered to prove the divinity of his ordination as high priest. This elaborate provision of a Sanctuary, altars, and a priesthood; and detailed ordinances for the types, times, and rubrics of sacrifice, is all commanded by God expressly through the Law of Moses. God thereby appropriates and regulates human practices of ritual sacrifice. The freewill sacrifices are reformed by God and made duties of religion. God teaches the Israelites how to approach him ritually; and he teaches them how to make peace with him ritually; and he commands them to do so continually.

There is a prefigurement of such divine pedagogy in the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Out of the blue God commands Abraham: *Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.* The text remains silent about what Abraham thought or felt about this command. The informed reader, knowing the story of Isaac's miraculous conception by Sarah in her old age, may well infer that this beloved only-begotten of Abraham's was his dearest blessing from God. The informed reader knows also that God had earlier prophesied to Abraham that his progeny would serve as slaves in a foreign land for 400 years, until God should redeem them.

In the fourth generation your descendants will return here, God tells Abraham, *for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.* Prominent among the iniquities of the Amorites, whom God would destroy by the returning Israelites' genocidal warfare, was the burnt offering of their children to their god Molech. God mentions this practice in particular as abominable to him. So why command Abraham to do it?

Abraham does not question the command, nor remonstrate with God, as he had to save his brother Lot from God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. His carrying out of the ritual is described in dramatized detail:

So Abraham got up early the next morning, saddled his donkey, and took along two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had designated.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. *Stay here with the donkey,* Abraham told his servants. *The boy and I will go over there to worship, and then we will return to you.* Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac. He himself carried the fire and the sacrificial knife, and the two of them walked on together.

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, *My father! –Here I am, my son,* he replied. *The fire and the wood are here,* said Isaac, *but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?* Abraham answered, *God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.* And the two walked on together.

When they arrived at the place God had designated, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar, atop the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

Just then the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, *Abraham, Abraham! –Here I am!*, he replied. *Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him*, said the angel, *for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me.*

Then Abraham looked up and saw behind him a ram in a thicket, caught by its horns. So he went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. So to this day it is said, *“On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”*

This dramatic resolution of the ritual action hearkens to the enigmatic reply of Abraham to Isaac's question: *God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.* Was this what Abraham expected? Or hoped? Or wished for? Did he believe it? In any case, if it was an expectation, it was met; if a hope, it was realized; if a wish, it was granted; believed or not, it proved true. The narrative began with this much explanation to the reader: *God put Abraham to the test.* That he passed the test is perhaps clearer than what the test was.

This offering of Abraham's was not a freewill offering, but rather commanded by God. It was a duty of obedience. Was it a thanksgiving offering? Did Abraham take delight in making it? Presumably not. Was it an act of submission, an acknowledgement of the Lord's lordship over the lifeblood of Isaac? Perhaps it was. Was it an act of love of God above even love of Isaac? Was adoration the intention of Abraham's heart? The narrative does not say. Rather, it reveals the thought of God's heart: *Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me.*

God approves Abraham's awe of him, as well as his willingness to give back to God the son God gave to him. God then provides Abraham with a ritual expression both of his awe and of his willingness to spare God nothing. It is the ritual principle of substitution. In the Law of Moses, the offeror or priest will lay his hands upon the victim, to identify the victim with the offeror and the offeror with the victim, before first slaying it and then offering it on the altar. Thus, ritually, every offering is a self-offering. By providing Abraham with the ram to slay instead of his son, God provides a ritual sign of Abraham's willingness to not withhold even his beloved son from God,

but even more than that, to acknowledge that there is nothing God has not given and may not take away.

This is still true. The willingness of Abraham must be the willingness of every believer. God has always provided the offering. The only question has ever been about the willingness of the offeror's heart to give it up to God. In the Law of Moses, every Israelite will be commanded to offer his firstborn son to God, in remembrance of God's destruction of the firstborn of Egypt: God commands every Israelite to redeem his firstborn by the sacrifice of a lamb. God has provided this ritual substitute as a perpetual reminder of the unconditional awe that is owed him and of the imperative of a perpetual readiness to show it.

[PREGNANT PAUSE]

Now, what has any of this to do with the crucifixion of Jesus? Well, his crucifixion is called a sacrifice in many places in the New Testament. And Jesus himself uses sacrificial language to describe his death to his disciples at his Last Supper with them, the supper itself being the communion feast following a thanksgiving offering of the Paschal lamb following the Law of Moses. Jesus had commanded Peter and John to procure the *Pasch* for the

supper, which meant its being sacrificed at the Temple by the priests, who poured out its blood at the base of the altar and gave back the body for a feast. When Jesus sits down with his twelve Apostles to the communion banquet, he says, *With desire have I desired to eat this Pasch with you before I suffer* (LK 22:15). Why? What was the intention of Jesus' heart that night before he died?

When at the usual blessing of the bread Jesus adds the words, *Take and eat. This is my body, which is given up for you*, he is using the language of sacrificial oblation (LK 22:19). He uses even more express sacrificial language in blessing the cup of wine: *Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins* (MT 26:27-28). I have cited Matthew. When Luke and Paul cites Jesus' words, they add this imperative, *Do this in commemoration of me*. Then Paul adds this gloss: *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show the death of the Lord until He comes* (COR 11:26). How is that? How would consecrating bread to eat and wine to drink show the Jesus' death on the cross? How is that signified?

This final command of Jesus' to his Apostles to commemorate his death in this way is a complex anticipation of that commemoration. He teaches them both what is to be commemorated and how it is to be commemorated.

He had anticipated his violent death before, much to the consternation of his Apostles, telling them that he is to be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, to be condemned, mocked, and crucified. But it is on this final night with them that he interprets that death for them in sacrificial terms: his blood will be poured out and his body offered up as a sin offering, to ratify a New Covenant with them and with many in his blood. He enjoins them thus to remember his death as a sacrifice by means of a Passover rite of blessing bread and wine, a rite transformed into a cereal sacrifice by his identification of it with his bodily sacrifice. Made by him into signs of his sacrifice on the cross, the consecrated bread and wine become a sacramental sacrifice in their own right. They are in truth the cereal sacrifice of the eternal Melchizedek, the true High Priest of God Most High, who has entered with his own glorified blood into the Sanctuary of God's Majesty to intercede for sinners.

Jesus thus provides that his bloody sacrifice on the cross be commemorated by an unbloody one. In himself he has provided his Apostles with a new offering and a new priesthood. The death of the cross is a sacrifice he himself will offer but once, but believers will re-offer it perpetually in the form of a cereal sacrifice signifying it. Moreover, in the eating of it, this cereal

offering of the sacrifice of the cross takes the form also of a communion sacrifice of thanksgiving for it. *Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed*, writes Paul: *Let us keep the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Thus do I come at last to the Book of Hebrews, which explicates in detail this identification by Jesus of his crucifixion with a Mosaic sin offering. To anticipate, the Author identifies Jesus' death not only as a sacrifice of atonement, but as the consummating sacrifice of all sacrifices—not just by way of analogy with, but as a fulfillment of them all.

The Letter begins by declaring that we are in the last days of divine revelation because in these days God has spoken to his through his Son, who is the radiance of his glory and the seal of his substance. He sets the keynote of his Letter when he says, *After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.* We will see, in fact, that this provided act of expiation must extend on high, in that it has its expiatory effect from a heavenly Sanctuary, of which the Mosaic Sanctuary was but an earthly image.

The Letter declares that God's intention was to bring many sons to this heavenly glory, and it was fitting for him to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering (2:10). He shared in our humanity so that

by his death he might destroy the power of death and the fear of death (2:14-15). *For this reason*, writes the Author, *he had to be made like his brethren in every way, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, in order to make expiation for the sins of the people*. Thus the identification of Son with the people and the people with him began, in the first place, with his taking on their humanity—the Son of God becoming the Son of Man—and, in the second place, with his suffering the death they suffer for their sins.

Next begins the Author's explication of his sacrifice in terms not of the Paschal lamb of the Passover, but of the sacrificial goat of the Day of Atonement. Once a year, the high priest was commanded by the Law to offer sacrifice in expiation of the sins of the whole people of Israel. On that day alone the high priest, dressed in the linen ephod, entered into the inner Sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, with the blood of the goat, to sprinkle the ark with the blood. *We, however, have a great high priest*, writes the Author of Hebrews, *who has passed through the heavens* (HEB 4:14ff). This disanalogy with the Mosaic high priest's proves more significant than any analogy: Jesus enters the Sanctuary that is eternal, and the blood is his own glorified blood.

The Author appeals to the figure of Melchizedek to explain further the difference of Jesus' priesthood:

Every high priest is appointed from among men to represent them in matters relating to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ...

No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not take upon Himself the glory of becoming a high priest, but He was called by the One who said to Him: *You are My Son; today I have begotten you.* And in another passage God says: *You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*

During the days of Jesus' earthly life, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him and was designated by God as high priest in the order of Melchizedek. [HEB 5:1ff]

This appeal to Melchizedek clearly resonates with Jesus' injunction to commemorate his death with an offering of bread and wine. But an eternal ordination of him by his Father as high priest is the Author's main point. Jesus's priesthood is from eternity and to eternity, a source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. A further disanalogy with the priesthood of Aaron is that this High Priest can sympathize with the sinners he saves, not by being a sinner, but by suffering sin, and his assimilation is perfected by his

willingness to suffer it. His offering is not a ritual substitute for himself. His sacrifice is himself; yet not offered for himself, but rather for others.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain, writes the Author, *because you are dull of hearing. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity.* [See! He too thinks the reading list is boring!] The Author bids our hope enter into the inner Sanctuary, behind the curtain, where Jesus has entered on our behalf, as a high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (6:19-20). In a continuing comparison with Melchizedek, the Author explains that Jesus became a priest not by a law of succession, but by the power of an indestructible life (HEB 7:16). This rests the power of Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice on his resurrection. It is because he now lives forever, because he can no longer die, because his divine life is an indestructible life, that his priesthood and its effect is permanent. It is also why he can save *completely* those who draw near to God through him.

Christ Jesus lives eternally to intercede for sinners, who are under the power and fear of death, the wages of sin (ROM 6:23). Such sinners have need of such a high priest, says the Author, *who is holy, innocent, undefiled, set apart from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does*

not need to offer daily sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the people's: this he did once for all when he offered up himself (HEB 7:26ff).

The Author proceeds to explain that the sacrificial rituals of the Law were expressions of desires they could not fulfill and signs of what was yet needed and yet to come. He describes the Sanctuary of the Mosaic Tabernacle as arranged by the Holy Spirit to show the way into the heavenly one. *It is an illustration for the present time, he writes, because the gifts and sacrifices being offered were unable to cleanse the conscience of the worshipper (HEB 9:9).* He called them external regulations for purification of the body. They concerned only ritual purity, a legal fitness to approach the altar of Moses.

But what the heart of the approaching sinner desires is the purification of his guilty conscience. And the Law can never by the same sacrifices year after year make perfect the offerors who draw near, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (HEB 10:1-2). Those sacrifices are intended as an annual remembrance of sins. The Law, the Author says, was only a shadow of the good things to come, not the realities (HEB 9:11ff):

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come, he went through the greater and more perfect Tabernacle that is not made by hands and is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by

the blood of goats and calves, but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, thus securing eternal redemption.

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that their bodies are clean, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, purify our consciences from works of death, so that we may serve the living God!

In sum, Christ *has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself* (HEB 9:26). But self-sacrifice is not self-explanatory, is it? The Author offers us offer us some account. He ascribes the 40th Psalm to Christ, as follows:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:
*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
 but a body you prepared for me.
 In burnt offerings and sin offerings You took no delight.
 Then said I, Here am I: It is written about me in the scroll:
 I have come to do your will, O God.* (HEB 10:5-7)

And by that will, asserts the Author, we have been sanctified through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The essence of Christ's sacrifice was his willingness to do the will of God. And the will of God was that he accept crucifixion at the hands of sinners, and beg forgiveness for them from the cross they prepared for him.

This suffering of their evil, his victimhood at their hands, is the completion of his sacrificial identification with them, the consummation of his taking flesh to dwell among them. And now the people must identify with their victim. In his crucifixion narrative, John upon the death of Jesus quotes this prophecy of Zechariah's: *They shall look upon him whom they pierced; and they shall grieve for him as one grieves for an only-begotten son* (12:10). The removal of sin begins with this grievous recognition. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* is the cry of the just man in the hands of his enemies. When the Son of God makes this cry his own, and the evil of human sin is displayed in him crucified, it receives God's final judgement. This final conviction is God's final appeal to the human conscience. *Finally he sent his Son, thinking: They will revere my son* (MT 21:37).

Christ obediently accepts this death. For what? He tells the Roman ruler who condemned him to it: *I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the Truth*. His death was the price of his bearing witness to the world of the truth about sin, and about righteousness, and about judgment (JN 16:8). Crucifixion was the price of our salvation set by the rulers of this world, the rulers of Temple and Empire. Christ's acceptance of this price in his blood

was a freewill offering of it to God to achieve God's will. He tells Pilate, *You would have no power over me whatever if it was not willed above*; and he tells Peter, *Do you not think I can call on my Father to at once put at my disposal twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?* For this is the way of saving sinners willed by the Father. He who knew no sin became sin for our sake by suffering our sin (2 COR 5:21). *The love of God was shown for us most of all in this*, writes Paul: *that while we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us* (ROM 5:8). In an awful reversal, God did not spare his own Son, but offered him as a sacrifice for us all, writes Paul (ROM 8:32). God has provided us with the sacrifice to offer Him, the acceptable propitiation for our sins: Christ's willingness to pay our price.

There were two sin offerings under the Law. The first was to atone for unintentional sins that rendered the offeror ritually unfit to approach the altar. The second was to offer satisfaction for sins against others, including reparations. But such legal exoneration did not have the power of eternal forgiveness and regenerative sanctification wielded by the risen Christ, according to Hebrews:

But when this Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time, He waits for His

enemies to be made a footstool for His feet, because by a single offering He has made perfect for all time those who are being sanctified. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First He says:

This is the covenant I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put My laws in their hearts and inscribe them on their minds. Then he adds: Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. (HEB 10:12ff)

In Christ we have the sinless intercessor who has pleased God perfectly with his perfect self-offering. God accepts his bloody intercession for sinners as an acceptable propitiation for their sins, and God has provided it to sinners as the acceptable offering to him for their sins. *Therefore, writes the Author, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way opened for us through the curtain of his body.* Here the visible body of the risen Christ is represented as the veil of his invisible divinity in the Sanctuary of God's glory. Those who draw near with sincere heart and sure faith may do so with confidence only because their hearts have been sprinkled with blood that has power to sanctify them for entry. *Let us hold resolutely to the hope we profess, writes the Author, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. If we deliberately go on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no further sacrifice remains, but only a fearful expectation of judgment (HEB 10:23ff).*

It is in his commanded commemoration of it that Christ's sacrifice on the cross becomes a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a eucharistic sacrifice. The form of this commemoration has been set by Christ himself as an oblation of bread and wine. In the risen Christ, God has provided for both the sacred offering and the sacred banquet. In the Catholic Church, the consecrated bread and wine are believed to be sacramental forms: God-given signs that contain the mystery they signify and effect what it pledges. What they signify is Christ's body offered up and blood poured out as a sin-offering; and what they effect is the forgiveness of sins and the sanctification of believers.

To begin with, the Church in its liturgy presents to God at its altars gift-offerings of bread and wine, as in the Law, as fruits of the earth and works of human hands, and God is blessed for his blessings. In the Law of Moses, the oblation of such offerings was signified by an alteration of it, namely burning a portion on the altar for a sweet aroma. In these new rites of the New Covenant, God is entreated to effect the alteration by his Holy Spirit, according to the words of Christ: the bread becomes his body and the wine his blood, and under this sacramental separation of his blood from his body is shown forth ritually his death on the cross, for the adoration of believers.

This sacramental presentation of Christ's saving death on the cross is then offered to God as a true sacrifice on behalf of those offering it, a sin-offering acceptable to God for the forgiveness of their sins and their consecration to him in Christ. It is at the same time also a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for this same forgiveness and sanctification. It is a sacrifice provided to the offerors by God for the benefit of the offerors, who feast on it before God in a sacred communion rite, each communicant taking and eating their priestly portion of this most holy food in the holy place.

The forms of Mosaic sacrifice are signs that could not fulfill the human desires they signified. But they have all been fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice. The forgiveness they sought has been secured by Christ; the sanctification they sought is in the power of Christ; the salvation from the power of death they sought is promised by Christ; the peace with God they sought is in Christ—and only in Christ. Christ's sacrifice effects every intention that every other human sacrifice can but signify. In the Bread of his indwelling Presence, he descends among the offerors in the form of a most holy food, thereby to come dwell within them as their heart's desire. This living Bread that comes down from heaven has power to nourish the spirit of the offeror with intimate

knowledge of God's love for it; and this blessing cup can save the offeror's soul from death by making it a partaker of Christ's divine life. Indeed, those who with a sincere heart and sure faith partake of it, are made partakers in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

In the spirit of the Letter to the Hebrews, the Apostolic churches of Christianity have brought to bear on their sacramental offering to God of Christ's sacrifice much of the ritual of Mosaic sacrifice. What perished from Judaism with the destruction of the Temple lives on in Catholicism. In Rabbinic Judaism sacrifice is *perforce* perpetuated only in devotional practices and spiritual symbolism; and in much of Protestantism, because of a decided eschewal of ritual sacrifice. Islam has neither sacrifice nor priesthood. It is only in the catholic and apostolic churches of Christianity across the earth that the prophecy of Malachi is believed to be fulfilled to the letter:

My name will be great among the nations, from the rising of the sun to the setting thereof. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 1:11)