

The Blood for Sprinkling

Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews

Lutheran Theological Journal 33/3 (1999): 124-35

John W Kleinig

The letter of Hebrews reaches its climax in 12:22-24. There we have a vivid account of our present involvement in heavenly worship. After listing seven frightful features of Israel's encounter with the Lord at Mt Sinai, Hebrews declares that we have access to eight invisible and yet gracious realities when we assemble to perform the divine service:

'But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel'.

The most surprising thing about this list is its culmination in 'the sprinkled blood' -, more literally and correctly, 'the blood for sprinkling',¹ -rather than in 'Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant'.

The mention of blood in such texts fills most modern Christians with unease. They concede that the blood of animals played an important part in the ritual of Jewish worship. Yet this bloody business of sacrifice has, they maintain, been abolished by Christ and replaced by something far more spiritual than that. So it comes as something of a shock to hear that Christian worship centres on the blood of Christ, which is somehow sprinkled on us and is supposed to 'speak' something good to us. In what way is the blood of Jesus sprinkled on us, and what does that sprinkling do to us?

The author of Hebrews argues for the superiority of Christian worship over the worship of Israel at the temple in Jerusalem. Steeped in the Old Testament and in the ritual legislation in the Pentateuch, he presupposes that his hearers are far more familiar with the minutiae of Jewish worship than with Christian doctrine and practice. So, if we wish to follow the thread of his argument we need to immerse ourselves in the teaching of Leviticus on the divinely instituted sacrificial ritual. The better we understand that grossly neglected and largely despised book, the better we will understand Hebrews. Our purpose here is to investigate how blood was used in the sacrificial ritual at the temple in Jerusalem and so discover why Hebrews claims that our involvement in heavenly worship somehow depends on Christ's blood.

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT PROHIBITION OF DRINKING BLOOD

Much about the Israelite ritual would initially seem familiar to a Babylonian priest engaged in the study of Israelite religion. Further investigations would have revealed much more that(end of page 124)

was strange and inexplicable: the absence of an idol in the Holy of Holies, the insistence that the sacrifices in no way provided daily food for the Israelite deity, the practice of burning the best meat of the animals on the altar rather than having it eaten by the priests, and the taboo against all forms of divination. In all likelihood he would have been most astonished by the ritual manipulation of blood in the sacrificial ritual.

Why was such care taken to drain every drop of blood from the sacrificial animals for no other purpose than to dispose of it in various ways on the main altar of the temple. Why this strange, barbaric obsession with blood in such an apparently theologically sophisticated group of people? There were three reasons for the taboos associated with blood and its ritual disposal in ancient Israel.²

First, like many people with animist and semi-animist beliefs, the Israelites held that the *nephesh*, the life of a human being or an animal, lay in its blood. Every living creature had a *nephesh*. This *nephesh* was its life-breath, its spirit, that strange life force that pervaded its body and so kept it alive. When a human being or an animal lost its blood, this lifepower would go out from it, and its flesh would die. The Israelite priests described this connection between the *nephesh* and the blood in four ways:

- a. The blood is the life (Deut 12:23);
- b. The life of any flesh (any animate creature) is its blood (Lev 17:14^b);
- c. The life of any flesh is its blood as its life (Lev 17:14^a);
- d. The life of any flesh is in the blood (Lev 17:11).

Both the Israelites and Canaanites agreed that vitality and blood belonged together in some way. Yet they differed radically in their consequent use of the blood taken from animals. Whereas the Canaanites quite commonly ate meat with blood in it, because they held that the blood in it was spiritually energising and life-giving, the Israelites refused to eat meat with blood in it. This taboo against the consumption of blood was based on their refusal to assimilate the spirit of the animal and imbibe any life-power from it (Deut 12:23). The Lord, the God of Israel, had in fact forbidden the consumption of blood by his people. They were allowed to eat meat with the blood drained out of it, but the consumption of blood was strictly proscribed at the pain of excommunication by God himself (Lev 17:10; cf. 7:27). Under no circumstances could the Israelites eat meat with blood in it (Gen 9:4; Lev 7:26; 17:12, 14; Deut 12:16, 23-25; 15:23). It was impossible for the Israelites to gain supernatural life-power from animals by the consumption of their blood.

The second reason for exclusive use of blood in the sacrificial ritual was to prevent its misuse in other popular non-Israelite rituals. Some of the Canaanites slaughtered animals and poured out the blood on the graves of their ancestors as food for their spirits. In return they secured protection, vitality and good luck from their ancestors (cf. Ps 16:3, 4). First-born male animals were also sacrificed in such a way that their blood was given to the earth and the underground deities residing in it. In this way the Canaanites gained good crops for themselves and fertility for their animals (cf. Lev 17:5, 6). Blood was even offered up to demons to appease them (Ps 106:34-39; cf. Deut 32:17) and as
.....(end of page 125)

nourishment to ghosts to conjure them up for the purpose of divination by augury or necromancy (Lev 19:26; cf. Isa 57:5-10; 65:3-7). In each of these cases blood was used ritually to secure something supernatural, such as vitality, protection, blessing, power, or knowledge.

All these ritual practices were eliminated by two divine commands. On the one hand, the Lord instructed the Israelites to bring their burnt offerings and peace offerings to the central sanctuary and to offer them to him only there at his altar (Deut 12:20-25). Anybody who offered a sacrifice anywhere else was treated as a murderer and excommunicated from the people of Israel (Lev 17:1-9; cf. Lev 7:27; Deut 12:26, 27). On the other hand, the Lord also decreed that all the blood from the sacrificed animals should be poured out there on his altar (Lev 17:6; Deut 12:27). It could not under any circumstance be used anywhere else and for any other purpose.

The third and most important reason for the taboo on the consumption of blood lay in the Lord's mandate for its use in the rite of atonement. The Lord had forbidden any other human use for the blood of animals so that it could be used only by him for the benefit of his people. Leviticus 17:11 has this singular decree:

‘the life (*nephesh*) of the flesh is in the blood; and I myself have given it to you for making atonement for your lives (*nephashoth*) upon the altar; for it is the blood that atones by means of the life (*nephesh*).³

Thus the taboo on the consumption of blood resulted from the divine institution of the rite of atonement as part of daily sacrificial ritual at the tabernacle and, later, at the temple.

The Hebrew idiom in Leviticus 17:11 is most arresting. In the ritual texts of the Pentateuch the priests are often said to ‘give’, or ‘place’, the blood on the horns of the altar (eg. Exod 29:12; Lev 8:15; 9:9; 16:8 etc).

Elsewhere the Lord uses the same form of the verb *nathan* in the first person as here to make a formal endowment of some portion from the offerings to the priests as their due and stipend (Lev 6:10; 9:34; Num 18:8, 11, 12, 19, 21, 24, 26). But in Leviticus 17:11 the Lord does not use this idiom to grant the blood of animals to the Israelites as food for them. Instead, he institutes the ritual use of blood as the means by which both they and he made atonement for their lives. He grants them atonement through the blood placed on the altar by them.

This word in Leviticus 17:11 founded the rite of atonement as a sacramental enactment. That word did not merely announce what he would accomplish for them in that rite; it actually empowered the rite, so that he worked atonement for his people through their faithful performance of it. That atonement was granted by means of the blood which was placed on the altar. So, by divine decree, the blood of sacrificed animals could no longer be used directly by the Israelites to boost their vitality but was reserved exclusively for the enactment of atonement.

2. THE USE OF THE BLOOD RITE IN LEVITICUS

a. The place of the blood rite in the sacrificial ritual

To understand the blood rite in Leviticus we must establish its exact location in the overarching order into which it was slotted. It did not function by itself but was part of a larger ritual

.....(*End of page 126*)

enactment. Like words in a sentence, its place in the ritual syntax of the daily public sacrifice determined its function and significance.

Our Lutheran communion service has many different ritual components within a single general order and sequence. Similarly, the daily temple service had a fixed order of enactment which determined the nature and function of each part, even as each part contributed to its general purpose.⁴ The skeleton of the daily service consisted of the morning and evening offering of a male lamb, together with its cereal offering of grain and oil and its libation of wine (Exod 29:38-41). The fundamental pattern of the ritual proceeded in three stages. First came the disposal of blood from the lamb on the altar, followed by the burning of incense by the priest on duty in the holy place. Then the burning of the lamb on the altar was followed by the blessing of the congregation by the priest on duty. Finally, the priests ate a meal made from their portions of the sacrifices. The second stage, the burning

of the lamb, was the central part of the ritual. Through it the Lord met with his people and gave them access to himself (Exod 29:38-46).

The sequence of the blood rite, the burning of the lamb, and the meal constituted the basic order and pattern of the divine service of Israel. It was modified and augmented in three ways. First, while this was the public sacrifice for the nation and the whole congregation, lay people added their own sacrifices to it. The commonest of these was the peace offering (Lev 3:1-17). As with the burnt offering, the blood from the peace offerings was poured out on the altar, and certain prescribed parts were burnt on the altar. The family and guests of the people who brought it ate the meat from these private peace offerings in their festive banquets. The sequence for the peace offerings was the same as for the burnt offering: disposal of blood, incineration on the altar, and consumption of a holy meal. Further public sin offerings and burnt offerings were added, as prescribed, to the daily sacrifice for special occasions, such as the three great pilgrim festivals and the Day of Atonement. Ordinary people could add other sacrifices to their peace offerings, such as guilt offerings for minor acts of desecration, sin offerings for purification, burnt offerings to fulfil a vow or as a freewill offering in homage to the Lord, sacrifices of thanksgiving for divine deliverance. Yet all followed the same basic sequence: blood rite, incineration and meal.

The account of the inauguration by Moses of the daily service at the tabernacle in Leviticus 9:1-24 gives us the clearest picture of the daily order of events. Rainey has used it to argue, quite correctly, that the various classes of sacrifices were offered in a set order.⁵ First came the sin offering together with its twin, the guilt offering, as the preparatory rite. The focus in these was on the blood rite and the act of atonement. Then came the burnt offering, followed by the peace offerings together with their cereal offerings and libations of wine.

The blood rite was part of the preparatory section in the daily service of ancient Israel. It cleared the way for the entry of the priests into the Lord's presence as well as for the Lord's meeting with his people at the altar in the daily burnt offering. Its performance by the(end of page 127)

priests highlighted its theological and ritual significance, for even though those who presented the animal for sacrifice slaughtered and dressed it, only the priest could dispose the blood in the prescribed way on the altar.

b. The various forms of the blood rite

The death of the animals was not in itself ritually and theologically significant, for the act of slaughter was not the method by which the animal was offered to God. Slaughter was merely the way by which blood was separated from the flesh of the animal and so prepared for ritual use. Ritually speaking, the disposal of blood was the first theologically significant enactment in the daily sacrificial ritual. Unless the blood rite was performed, nothing could be burnt on the altar and no-one could eat anything in the Lord's presence. Without the application of blood on the altar, no priest could enter the Holy Place, and no benediction could be pronounced on the congregation. So, if we are to figure out what was accomplished by the manipulation of blood in the sacrificial ritual, we need to examine how the priests disposed of it.

The commonest form of the blood rite occurred with the disposal of blood from the burnt offerings and peace offerings. In both these cases the blood was 'splashed' (*zaraq*)⁶ from bowls on the four sides of the altar. The blood then ran down to the base of the altar and into the drains.

The blood from the sin offerings was handled in a completely different way, which emphasised that the disposal of blood was the key element in this class of sacrifices. Since

the sin offering was the prescribed sacrifice for the cleansing of people and things from various forms of impurity, the treatment of blood from it was a matter of precise legislation. Two different rites were used for the disposal of the blood: the minor blood rite and the major blood rite. The minor blood rite disposed of blood from the sin offering for a member of the congregation. While part of the blood was 'daubed' (*nathan*)⁷ with the forefinger on the four horns of the altar for burnt offering, the rest of it was 'poured' out (*shaphak*)⁸ upon the base of the altar. (This verb was translated in the LXX by *echeo* which is used in the New Testament for the words of Jesus about his blood in the Lord's Supper).⁹

The major blood rite was used for the blood from the sin offering for the high priest as the leader of the congregation and from the sin offering for the whole congregation. In this case the blood was brought by the priest into the Holy Place. There the priest dipped his forefinger into the blood and 'sprinkled' (*hizzah*) it seven times on the curtain which divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (Lev 4:6, 17). This sprinkling was directed towards the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. Then the priest 'daubed' (*nathan*) blood upon the horns of the incense altar (Lev 4:7, 18) before leaving the Holy Place and pouring out the rest of it upon the base of the altar for burnt offering. Both the 'sprinkling' and the 'daubing' are said to be done 'in the presence of the Lord'. In this way the blood was brought into contact with him.

The major blood rite for a public sin offering was modified significantly for the ritual of the Day of Atonement when the rite of atonement was the central ritual enactment (Lev 16:6-19). On that annual day of cleansing, the high priest brought into
(end of page 128)

the Holy Holies the blood from the bull offered up as a sin offering for himself and the priesthood, and the blood from the male goat offered up as a sin offering for the people of Israel. This was the only occasion when anyone ever entered that sacred place. The blood from those sin offerings was, as it were, his ticket for entry. The purpose of his entry into the Holy of Holies was to sprinkle some of that blood seven times with his forefinger on the mercy seat and on the floor¹⁰ in front of it (Lev 16:14, 15). After leaving the Holy of Holies, he sprinkled blood in the same way¹¹ on the altar for incense and on the floor of the Holy Place (Lev 16:16^b). Finally, he daubed blood on the horns of the altar for burnt offering and sprinkled blood seven times on it with his forefinger (Lev 16:18, 19).

The exact prescriptions for the disposal of blood of blood for a sin offering indicate that the blood rite is the focus of this sacrifice.¹² Only in the case of a sin offering was blood brought either into the Holy Place or into both the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place. Only in the case of a sin offering was blood daubed on the horns of both the altar for incense and the altar for burnt offering. Only in the case of a sin offering was blood sprinkled on the most holy things: the mercy seat, the incense altar and the altar for burnt offering, as well as on the floor of these most holy places. Obviously, the performance of both and minor blood rite and the major blood rite enacted something significant

c. *The significance of the application of blood in the daily sacrifice*

Leviticus 17:11 tells us what was accomplished by manipulation of blood. The Lord declares: 'I myself have given the blood to you for making atonement for your lives upon the altar'. Two things are here noteworthy. First, only blood that has been somehow applied to the altar for burnt offering had ritual significance for the Israelites. Secondly, the rite of atonement was enacted through the application of blood on the altar. A strange synergy occurred. As the priests placed the sacrificial blood on the altar for burnt offering, the Lord himself performed the act of atonement.

Many scholars have spilled much ink over the etymology and meaning of the Hebrew word *kipper*: atone.¹³ That question is not our present concern. The following points must suffice

for the purposes of this paper. First, *kipper* is used here as a technical ritual term for the application of blood by the priests on the altar for burnt offering.¹⁴ The altar for burnt offering was cleansed from impurity by the rite of atonement (Exod 29:31^b) so that it could be consecrated for the performance of atonement (Lev 8:15). Secondly, the combination of the verb 'atone' (*kipper*) with the phrase: 'for your lives' meant that the people who offered the sacrifice were 'ransomed' from death by the rite of atonement. The blood of the animal compensated for the life of a person. As a result, that person escaped death. Thirdly, the act of atonement resulted in the purification of people and sacred objects from ritual impurity which would otherwise have disqualified them from admission into God's presence. Once people and objects had been cleansed from impurity by the rite of atonement, they could come safely into God's presence without the risk of destruction from his holiness. Lastly, by the act of atonement with the blood from the sin offerings, people who
(end of page 129).....

had been defiled by sin were forgiven by God and so qualified for entry into the Lord's presence. They could therefore be sure that the Lord would accept them and receive their petitions.

The basic ritual for the act of atonement involved the 'splashing' of blood from the burnt offering and the peace offerings against the sides of the altar. There is some debate about the exact theological significance of this. The clue to its significance is given in the law for the presentation of the burnt offering in Leviticus 1:3-9. Before the blood from the animals was splashed against the altar, they were 'accepted'¹⁵ by the Lord. This acceptance of the animals was the condition for the Lord's acceptance of these people and his favourable treatment of them in the rite of atonement. The splashing of the blood from the sacrifices qualified them for admission to God's presence and give them access to his favour.¹⁶ He would receive their petitions and grant them his blessing.

The function and significance of ritual 'daubing' with blood is much more certain. Leviticus 8:15 tells us that the blood from the sin offering was 'daubed' on the horns of the altar to 'purify' it.¹⁷ This may seem rather strange to us, because we have a limited understanding of ritual impurity - only our guilt from sin disqualifies us from the Lord's presence. The Pentateuch, however, teaches that the impurity of sin is an evil, life-threatening, disordering power which does not just taint the evildoer; it also taints the victims of the deed and contaminates their natural and social environment. Hence, even places and objects had to be cleansed for impurity before they could be sanctified by God's holy presence and used in the divine service. Thus, whenever a sin offering was presented, the blood from it was daubed either on the horns of the incense altar (Lev 4:7, 18) or on the horns of the altar for burnt offering (Exod 29:12; Lev 4:25, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9; 16:18). In this way the blood that worked atonement cleansed those altars from any possible defilement through their contact with unclean people.

The only occasion when a person was 'daubed' with the blood from the sin offering was at the ordination of the priests. In that case the high priest placed blood from the ram for ordination on the right ear, right thumb and the right big toe of the candidate for ordination (Exod 29:20; Lev 8:23). Like the altar, the candidate was cleansed from all impurity and so prepared for his consecration as a priest. His ear was cleansed so that he could hear the voice of God. His hand was cleansed so that he could handle the holy things of God. His foot was cleansed so that he could walk on holy ground.¹⁸ The rule was that only what had been made ritually clean could come unscathed into God's presence and share in his holiness, for impurity was entirely incompatible with God's holiness, like darkness with light.

The third and most significant form of the blood rite was the act of 'sprinkling' with blood from the sin offering of the high priest or the nation. Here the blood was 'sprinkled' either on the curtain of the Holy of Holies or, on the Day of Atonement, on the mercy seat, the altar for

incense and the altar for burnt offering. The purpose of this was to cleanse these most holy things and most holy places from the 'impurity' of the Israelites (Lev 16:16, 17, 19). Furthermore, by its application to the mercy
.....(*end of page 130*)

seat the blood became most holy. It thus served to reconsecrate the altar for burnt offering (Lev 16:19).¹⁹

The sprinkling of blood played a most significant part in the ordination of a priest. On that occasion the high priest, after daubing the ear, thumb and toe of the candidate, took some of the blood from the altar of burnt offering, mixed it with the holy anointing oil, and sprinkled that mixture of blood and oil on the ordinands and their vestments (Exod 29:21; Lev 8:30). Since the altar was most holy, whatever touched the altar was made holy by contact with it (Exod 29:37).²⁰ The blood received its holiness from God via the altar and conveyed that holiness to the priests as it was sprinkled on them and their vestments. They were thereby consecrated for holy service in God's presence. As holy people they had access to the holy God of Israel. There they stood on holy ground and handled the holy things of God. The blood from the altar qualified them for their participation in the divine service.

Something similar to this happened only once before, early in the history of Israel. When the Lord made his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, he consecrated them as his holy priestly people by means of a most unusual ritual enactment. At God's command, Moses offered burnt offerings and peace offerings on an altar built at the foot of the mountain. He poured out half the blood from these sacrifices on the altar and sprinkled the other half over the people. He then said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words' (Exod 24:8). In this way he consecrated Israel as the holy people of the Lord, just as the sprinkling with blood consecrated the priests at their ordination.²¹

In sum: through the application of blood from the sacrifices the Lord worked atonement for his people at the sanctuary. Five things were accomplished by means of that blood. Through the 'splashing' of blood from the daily burnt offerings and peace offerings, the Lord accepted his people and qualified them for access to his gracious presence. Through the 'daubing' of the blood from the sin offerings, the incense altar and the altar for burnt offering were cleansed from impurity. God pardoned the people who presented these offerings and freed them from the stain of sin.²² Through the 'daubing' of their extremities with blood the candidates for the priesthood too were cleansed from impurity. Through the 'sprinkling' of blood the most holy parts of the sanctuary were both purified and reconsecrated. Lastly, through their 'sprinkling' with blood the candidates for the priesthood were consecrated for service in the earthly tabernacle of the Lord. The blood that was used to work atonement also delivered its benefits ritually to the congregation.

3. THE BLOOD THAT SPEAKS

We are now in a position to examine the place of Christ's blood in Christian worship according to the book of Hebrews.²³ The writer of Hebrews regards the performance of the blood rite by the Israelite priests as a type for Christ's work. He fastens on four aspects of the blood rite from the Old Testament: the entry of the high priest with blood into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:7-12, 24, 25), the sprinkling of priests at their ordination (9:13, 14),

.....(end of page 131)

the sprinkling of the tabernacle and its liturgical appointments on the Day of Atonement (9:21, 23), and the sprinkling of Israel with the blood of the covenant by Moses at Mount Sinai (9:18-20). These acts prepared God's people for the far greater ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary.

Hebrews distinguishes between three different phases in the work of Jesus the high priest. First, we have the self-offering of Jesus as a sacrifice for us by his suffering and death (Heb 7:27; 9:14, 15, 26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14). Secondly, we have the entry of Jesus with his blood into the heavenly sanctuary through his resurrection and ascension (4:14; 6:19, 20; 8:1; 9:12, 24, 25; 10:12, 20). Thirdly, in the heavenly sanctuary he now represents us and liturgises on our behalf in the presence of his Father (6:20; 8:1, 2, 8; 9:24). There he not only intercedes for us and leads us in our prayers (7:25) and praises (2:12; 13:15); he also sprinkles us with his blood (9:14; 10:22; 12:24). Since he has taken up that blood into his Father's presence, it is now most holy and powerful. Jesus does not just sprinkle his blood on our bodies, as the priests who served in the earthly tabernacle did (9:13); he sprinkles it on our conscience (9:14), our heart (10:22), so that we can serve the living God in the heavenly sanctuary (9:14). That blood ransoms and redeems us (9:12). Like the blood of the Passover lamb, it protects us from the evil one (11:28). It cleanses us entirely, body and soul, from all impurity. It makes us perfectly holy, even as Christ is holy (10:24; cf. 2:11; 10:10, 14; 12:14). Since Christ sprinkles us with his blood, we may serve as priests together with him in the heavenly sanctuary. Through the blood of Jesus we have the right of entry, the privilege of unrestricted access, into the most holy place (10:22-24). We can therefore approach our heavenly Father with faith and hope and serve him by our love for each other. We stand together with the angels and the whole communion of saints in heavenly Jerusalem and join Jesus as he leads us in the performance of the heavenly liturgy (10:22-24). All this depends entirely on the blood of Jesus which is sprinkled on us.

Many modern interpreters have great difficulty with this concentration of Hebrews on the blood of Jesus. So they engage in an exegetical sleight of hand, maintaining that all the references to Christ's blood speak about the past work of Jesus rather than about his present ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Priestly language is said to be used figuratively and dramatically to describe what Christ accomplished for us by his death and resurrection. Blood, for them, is a metaphor for Christ's sacrificial death rather than an actual substance. Yet Hebrews speaks about the blood of Jesus as something real and available to his readers.²⁴ His blood cleanses God's people for divine service (Heb 9:14). They can profane his holy blood by deliberate sin (10:29). They have freedom of access into the heavenly realm here and now through the blood of Jesus (10:19). But, most remarkably, when they assemble for worship as a congregation, they come to Jesus and his 'blood for sprinkling that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel' (12:24). One can hardly escape the realistic use of this term in Hebrews.²⁵

This language surely makes sense only if the author of Hebrews is

.....(end of page 132)

speaking about the Lord's supper.²⁶ The most amazing feature of Christian worship, viewed from the Old Testament, is the command of Jesus to drink his blood. When we drink the blood of Jesus, he sprinkles us inwardly in our heart and conscience. By that sprinkling we are cleansed from dead works and are consecrated for divine service in the heavenly sanctuary.

The connection of the blood for sprinkling with the Lord's Supper is reinforced in Hebrews 12:24 by the mention of Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant (cf. 8:6; 9:15). This recalls the words spoken by Jesus on Maundy Thursday about 'the new covenant in his blood' (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). This blood 'speaks' to us, because it is administered ritually with the words of Jesus which proclaim and convey the forgiveness of sins to us through it (cf. Matt 26:28). In the eucharist the blood of Christ speaks God's 'grace' to us (cf. 13:9).

It is no wonder, then, that the description of our involvement in the heavenly liturgy culminates in the mention by Hebrews of 'the blood for sprinkling'. That blood cleanses us for divine service, and through that blood we share in the holiness of Christ our great high priest. Apart from that blood, our worship would be merely earth-bound, local, human and ineffectual, but by the power of that blood it is heavenly, catholic, divine and effectual. By the blood of the covenant which we receive in holy communion, God the Father equips us with everything good, so that we can offer pleasing service to him and glorify his Son, together with all the angels in the heavenly assembly (Heb 13:20, 21).

CONCLUSION

We finish with three brief observations. First, if it is true that the most astonishing thing about the institution of the Lord's supper by Jesus was Jesus' command given to drink his blood, why has there not been much more reflection in the church on the significance of the blood in holy communion? The church has instead focused on the gift of Christ's body and the significance of that for us. This imbalance needs to be rectified. If we preach and teach the power of Christ's blood, which we, wonderfully, receive in the sacrament, we will recover something vital for the mission of the church to postmodern young people, as well as to people in animist cultures. Both have a much sharper awareness of their impurity than their guilt. Both are fascinated by the power of holiness. Neither are they as squeamish about blood as the fastidious children of the Enlightenment.

Secondly, we need to take another look at all the passages in the New Testament that speak about what Christ accomplishes for us with his blood, such as our present justification (Rom 5:9) and our cleansing from all sin (1 John 1:7). To interpret Jesus' blood as meaning no more than his sacrificial death leads to spiritual and liturgical impoverishment. Could it not be true that many of these texts allude to the Lord's supper?

Finally, evangelical and pentecostal preachers have much to say about the power that is found in the blood of the lamb. By this preaching they move people profoundly and minister to them effectively. They speak realistically about the blood of Jesus as something presently available to

.....(end of page 133)

all people. Yet if challenged to explain what they mean, most are quite at a loss to say where and how that blood is conveyed to us right now. Blood seems to be no more than a figure of speech for what was transacted on the cross.

We who believe that we drink the Lord's most holy and precious blood in the sacrament do not preach enough on its power in the hearts and lives of our people. It has power to purify and justify, to heal and protect, to deliver and to conquer, to make holy and to give divine life. As we confess in the *Formula of Concord*, Christ's blood is 'a quickening beverage' which

'actually cleanses us from all sin' (FC SD VIII, 76, 59). There is power in the blood of Christ. It does indeed speak something far better to us than the blood of Abel. It proclaims and conveys our promised eternal inheritance. Our life is truly in the blood of Christ.

ENDNOTES

1. See V.C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, 42, 186.
2. See D.J. McCarthy, 'The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice', *JBL* 88 (1969), 166-176; J.M. Grintz, 'Do Not Eat on the Blood', *ASTI* 8 (1972), 78-105; D.J. McCarthy, 'Further Notes on the Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice', *JBL* 92 (1973); J.C. Brichto, 'On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement', *HUCA* 47 (1976), 22-28; N. Fuglister, 'Sühne durch Blut – Zur Bedeutung von Leviticus 17,11', *Studien zum Pentateuch* (ed G. Braulik, Herder, Wien, 1977, 143-164; A.M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus*, Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs (1970), 234-257; F.H. Gorman, Jr, 'The Role of Blood in the Kipper – Act: Blood as Symbol of Life and Death', *The Ideology of Ritual*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1990, 181-189; B.J. Schwartz, 'The Prohibitions Concerning the "Eating" of Blood in Leviticus 17', *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. G.A. Anderson and S.M. Olyan, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1991, 34-66; R. Rendtorff, *Leviticus*, BKAT III, 3; Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1992, 165-170.
3. The sense of the proposition: *beth* in the last phrase has been the matter of some contention. I follow B.J. Schwartz, 'Prohibitions Concerning the "Eating" of Blood in Leviticus 17', *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. G.A. Anderson and S.M. Olyan, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1991, 47, and J.E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Books, Dallas, 1992, 274-276, who give a good summary and assessment of the various options in interpretation.
4. See J.W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1993, 101-104.
5. A. Rainey, 'The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts', *Bib* 51 (1970), 485-498.
6. Burnt offerings: Exod 24:6; 29:16; Lev 1:5, 11; 8:19; 9:12; Ez 43:18; peace offerings: Exod 24:6; 29:20; Lev 3:2, 8, 13; 7:14; 8:24; 9:18; 17:6; Num 18:17.
7. Exod 29:12; Lev 4:25, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9; 16:18.
8. Exod 29:12; Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; Deut 12:27. The verb 'yatzaq' is used as a synonym for *shaphak* in Lev 8:15; 9:9.
9. The unusual Greek word *haimatekchysia* found only in Heb 9:22 is used for this activity. According to D J Pursiful, *The Cultic Motif in the Spirituality of the Book of Hebrews*, Mellen Press, Lewiston, 1993, 69f, and V.C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 42, 132, it refers to the application of blood rather than its provision by the sacrificial death of Christ.
10. See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Doubleday, New York, 1991, 1032, who quite correctly notes this often overlooked detail of the rite which helps us make sense of the contention in Hebrews 9:21 that the tent was sprinkled with blood.
11. See G.J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1979, 232, and J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1033f.
.....(end of page 134)
12. The best treatment of the sin offering as a sacrifice for purification comes from N. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1987.
13. See B.J. Schwartz, 'Prohibitions', 51-60, for a clear summary of the debate and sound discrimination between the various levels of meaning evident in its usage.
14. Both B.A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, Brill, Leiden, 1974, 64f, and R. Rendtorff, *Leviticus*, 177), rightly recognise that in cultic texts the verb *kipper* is used as a technical ritual term for the performance of the rite of atonement.
15. As indicated by the NIV footnote to Lev 1:3, it is not clear whether the animal or the person making the offering is acceptable to the Lord. Both senses are probably

intended. By accepting the animal for the sacrifice, the Lord accepts the person who has brought it.

16. See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 149.
17. Milgrom, 522, 528f.
18. See J.E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 116.
19. See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 529, 534.
20. Note that Jesus affirms this principle in Matthew 23:19.
21. See E.W. Nicholson, 'The Covenant Ritual in Exodus XXIV 3-8', *VT* 32 (1982), 74-86, for the interpretation of the sprinkling in Exodus 24:3-8 as a rite for the consecration of Israel as God's holy, priestly people rather than the ritual sealing of the covenant; cf. T.E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991, 258.
22. See Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10; Num 15:25, 26, 28. The niph'al form of the verb indicates that the Lord forgives the people through the performance of the rite for atonement.
23. I owe much of what follows to the commentary of Vic Pfitzner (*Hebrews*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1997), who refers repeatedly to the significance of the application of blood in Hebrews. See especially 41-43, 127-133, 141-145, 186, 198.
24. Pfitzner emphasises this repeatedly. He claims that 'the blood of Christ ... continues to cleanse (9:14, 22) and to provide access to God's presence' (129; cf. 42, 69, 141, 143, 186).
25. B.A. Schwartz, 'Prohibitions', 49, quite rightly notes that the Hebrew word for blood is always used literally in the Old Testament. This should make us wary of too readily ascribing a figurative sense to it in the New Testament, especially in the book of Hebrews, which is so steeped in the ritual language of the Old Testament.
26. See Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 42, 132f, 143, 145, 203f.

.....(end of page 135)