

Immerse Day 41 :: March 30

I must admit that whenever I have read these first several chapters of Leviticus, I am usually first somewhat bored and then appalled by the thought of all that blood dripping down the sides of a gorgeous altar.

The rules for burnt offerings seem to add complexity where none is needed. Who really cares whether it's Aaron's sons or someone else's sons who sprinkle the blood against the altar, arrange the wood, and arrange the quartered animal pieces on the burning wood? Does it really matter where all the fat gets burned, even the head? Isn't the point to offer the animal, burn it as an offering, and ask for redemption? What is the point of all this complexity? Why a ritual at all?

However, the part of this ritual that extends beyond my comprehension is the smell. I mean.... eww. Just yuck! If every worshipper brought an animal, slaughtered it at the door of the Tent of Meeting and sprinkled its blood on the altar, the Tent of Meeting must have absolutely reeked of death and rot and feces and.... just yuck! Not to mention the smell of burning blood, flesh, and entrails. I have burned a few dinners, and the smell of burned meat lingers. I'm not a fan of kidneys or liver, but the smell of those dishes turns my stomach before they're burned. I imagine burned liver and kidneys have a particularly pungent odor. Then the bread. The smell of burned bread is also acrid. And, those smells don't disappear quickly. Those odors linger.

The smell must have been overpowering in and of itself, but smell is only one of humans' five senses. Those smells existed in concert with the sounds of bleating animals who must have been terrified, the hissing of muscle and tendon on a hot fire, and the images of men putting their hands on animals' heads and, hopefully, feeling a rush of remorse. They must have felt the sweat of those terrified animals under their calloused hands as they forced them forward, animals that had trusted their owners to provide food and shelter prior to those moments before their slaughter.

I wonder if this assault on the senses made a powerful impression on anyone who approached the Tent of the Meeting, and as such, if it was a steady reminder to all involved that sin stinks. I wonder if this ritual entrenched an association between sin and fear; sin and loss; sin and betrayal. Likewise, I wonder if the complexity of the ritual required elevated engagement and solidified a more solid connection between God and his people.

The verse "It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord" repeats often. And, I also wonder how the smells, sights, sounds, and feeling of sacrifice could be described with the word 'aroma'? What about it is pleasing to our Lord?

I read it again and tried to focus on something I used to teach my students in high school English. What takes up the most space in the text? What repeats? What came before this section and what follows it? How does this section fit into the larger picture that the author is attempting to paint?

The rules take up the most space. We learn about what qualifies as a sacrifice and what purpose the sacrifice serves. A sacrifice is giving up the best of one's wealth and that sacrifice leads to "atonement". We learn about Aaron's sons' role in society, and we are introduced to the idea that setting aside the first portion of God's gifts is not wasteful, but rather holy. In the days prior to slaughter, perhaps the Israelites thought about God every time they looked at that lamb or goat and fed it a little better or changed its water a little more frequently. Perhaps God made himself known to them, through these rituals, on a daily basis. Perhaps Aaron's sons moved closer to God every time they cleaned the lampstand or dusted the almond shaped blossoms on the altar and were reminded of God's attention and care. Considering this extended view of sacrifice and rituals into the Israelites daily life, I become more curious about rituals' influence on their culture. What happened when the ritual was interrupted?

I read about Worship Rituals in Packer and Tenney's book *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, about what happened later in the OT. I read that after Rome conquered Judea and burned the temple to the ground, temple worship disappeared. The loss of temple worship decimated the priesthood, and because they had no sustainable income and no role in society, Aaron's sons' and their descendants lost their influence and authority. The loss of the temple, followed by the loss of the priesthood, followed by the loss of a people's ability to atone for their sin...perhaps followed by the loss of a nation's awareness of their sin reveals a concatenation, that once out of existence, contributed to a separation from God that the Israelites probably smelled, tasted, felt, and heard on a daily basis. The thought of that impenetrable silence is more appalling than the blood on the altar.

Perhaps the aroma that pleased God was proximity to his children as they participated in a ritual he created. He designed a ritual, deeply embedded it in each of their five senses, and tied it to their daily lives so that God and his children remained inextricably connected? Perhaps the Israelites' proximity to God delighted him as he watched them build, drop of blood by drop of blood, a complex, social system that required and resulted in a steady connection to him.

I'm fairly certain I'm missing a lot when I read Leviticus. There is likely so much more to understand about the culture and the rituals identified in this part of the Bible. I'm definitely feeling like I'm at the beginning of my understanding here and am looking forward to reading and thinking more....