

# THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Can you prove that God's Law was in force BEFORE sacrifices were given? Do you know which laws were "added" and WHEN?

by Ernest L. Martin

THE APOSTLE PAUL tells us that the sacrifices, washings and physical ordinances given to ancient Israel are no longer necessary (Heb. 9:9-14). These physical laws were imposed upon Israel until the time of reformation — until the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

All of these physical rituals foreshadowed, in a variety of ways, the coming of Christ — His sinless life, His atoning power, His resurrection and glorification. They prefigured the working of the Holy Spirit, and showed, in symbolism, many other important spiritual principles.

These physical rituals were all very important for the Old Testament Church — the congregation of ancient Israel. They did reveal the workings of Christ and the Holy Spirit which were to come. However, the physical rituals lost their importance and were not needed when the realities came which they portrayed.

The true Christian today does not need the physical and ritualistic relationship with God that the Israelites of old required. We can worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24). We should seek to obey His commandments and laws without the imposition of physical rituals and sacrifices. Yet we do need to understand.

## The World Misunderstands

The attitude of the orthodox ministers of religion concerning the Old Testament is well known. Most of them brush aside the question of the Old Testament by simply stating that the Christian is freed from the Old

Covenant and is not required to perform the commandments and laws mentioned in the Law of Moses.

The majority of religious denominations today boldly assert that the whole worship system given to Moses — including *all* the commandments and laws — was done away when Christ came.

Thus, people are taught that no one today is really obliged to keep the Ten Commandments — except in principle — whatever that may mean! People hear in the pulpits that it is not necessary to observe the weekly Sabbath or the seven annual Holy Days of God, even though these institutions were ordained FOREVER! They are also told that the *dietary* laws and the agricultural laws governing the use of the land are all abolished. And so to most people today the entire Old Testament is represented as having been *completely done away!*

No scriptural authority is given for such assertions. There is none given, *because no such authority exists!*

In some cases, many modern ministers will flimsily apply for their authority the statements of Paul which clearly refer only to the rituals and sacrifices, in order to have some excuse for their fallacious interpretations of Scripture (II Peter 3:15, 16).

The inspired writers of the New Testament plainly taught that the ONLY laws which were to be ended by the coming of Christ were the "meats and drinks [sacrifices], and divers washings, and carnal [fleshly] ordinances" (Heb. 9:10).

Let us RIGHTLY *divide* the Word of Truth and come to understand the facts regarding this important matter!

## Sacrifices Not at First Commanded!

Where so many people go astray, is in believing that every commandment of God is associated in one way or another with sacrificing or with some ritual, and is *likewise* abrogated. This is pure nonsense! There were evening and morning sacrifices on every day of the year (Ex. 29:38, 39). *Does that mean that all days of the year have been abolished?* Of course not!

Likewise, sacrifices were offered on the Sabbath. Just because the sacrifices have been done away does not mean the Sabbath goes with them (Mark 2:27, 28; Matt. 24:20).

Let us understand this! And we can — from the Bible itself.

A very important scripture concerning the starting of the sacrificial system in Israel is Jeremiah 7:21-23:

"Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh. *For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.*"

Did you notice that carefully? Jeremiah was plainly telling the Jews that

God had told their forefathers about the ways He wanted them to walk and that He had given them commandments that they were expected to obey BEFORE HE SAID A THING TO THEM ABOUT SACRIFICES.

In other words — sacrifices *came later*. God revealed many commandments and laws BEFORE He gave them sacrifices. This particular scripture *alone* is enough to prove that.

Did Jeremiah receive this information by divine revelation apart from any written records? Was this a special revelation to Jeremiah that no one knew of before? Or was this *common knowledge* among the Jews of Jeremiah's time and God was simply calling attention to the known facts that all Jews knew?

The plain truth is that Jeremiah needed *NO special revelation* concerning this fact of history. It was common knowledge to all the Jews who read the Law of God and the history accompanying it.

Yes, in the Bible itself are plain statements that the sacrificial system mentioned by Moses was not begun in Israel for a considerable time AFTER the children of Israel left Egypt! And clearly revealed are many commandments which were given BEFORE the rituals and sacrifices began.

You will be amazed at what some of these commandments were. Jeremiah certainly knew what he was talking about when he said that God had revealed His true spiritual way to Israel *before* giving them sacrifices.

### When DID the Sacrificial System Come Into Force?

This may come as a surprise to some, but nevertheless what follows is absolutely true. The sacrifices and rituals mentioned in the books of Leviticus and Numbers were not officially ordained for observance until the month of Nisan in the SECOND YEAR AFTER Israel came out of Egypt!

To be exact, the Bible shows that it was *eleven months and fifteen days* after coming from Egypt — to the very day — that the sacrificial system began. This means that *nearly a full year passed before official sacrificing began*.

This is a very important truth, for in that near one-year period there were many commandments given to Israel — some of which were ordained FOREVER. And by virtue of being ordained BEFORE sacrifices or rituals, they take on a new distinction and importance.

### How Did Sacrifices Originate?

To understand this whole subject adequately, it will be necessary to realize that sacrifices did not originate with Moses or the children of Israel. We are told in the Biblical record that *Cain and Abel* offered sacrifices in the days of Adam (Gen. 4:1-7). Later when Noah left the ark, he built an altar and sacrificed (Gen. 8:20). From the time of Noah, peoples all over the earth began to offer sacrifices of one kind or another.

All the records of ancient nations show their knowledge of sacrificing, either to the true God or to pagan deities of their own imagination. It was customary to offer "thank" offerings when particular blessings would come. Also there were "propitiatory" offerings if a person thought he had offended God in any way.

We are told that Abraham built an altar and sacrificed to God (Gen. 12:7). Also Jacob (Gen. 35:1). Jacob undoubtedly taught his twelve sons the necessity of sacrificing. And, even in the days of Moses, we find that sacrificing was no new thing to the Israelites in Egypt. They were sacrificing while they were in Egypt. You will notice that Moses told Pharaoh that he wanted to take the people of Israel into the wilderness three days' journey and *sacrifice* (Ex. 3:18; 5:3).

*But wait a moment!*

Jeremiah said that God did *not* command the Israelites to sacrifice when they were coming out of Egypt, and yet we find that Israel wanted to go into the wilderness expressly to sacrifice. Is there a contradiction here? Did Jeremiah really know what he was talking about?

Of course, Jeremiah *knew his history*. He was fully aware that sacrificing *was no new thing* to the children of Israel. He knew they were sacrificing long before they left Egypt. And he also

knew they wanted to go three days' journey into the wilderness in order to sacrifice.

Then what did Jeremiah mean?

The answer is quite plain! Jeremiah is saying that God did not give them a *sacrificial system*, with rules and regulations for sacrificing, when they came out of Egypt. The Israelites were sacrificing before they left Egypt and they sacrificed after they left Egypt and even BEFORE the sacrificial system was established by God. But let us understand an important difference between the sacrifices offered BEFORE the sacrificial system was inaugurated and those sacrifices which came AFTER the sacrificial system was enforced.

The difference is this: *ALL the sacrifices offered BEFORE the establishment of the sacrificial system were VOLUNTARY SACRIFICES* — offered at the sole discretion of, and in the manner most suitable to, the offerer himself.

WHERE IN GENESIS DOES GOD COMMAND *HOW* SACRIFICES WERE TO BE OFFERED OR *WHEN* THEY WERE TO BE OFFERED? Sacrifices were well known, but there was *NOT* a sacrificial *system!*

The sacrifices of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and even the sacrifices of Moses and the children of Israel BEFORE the sacrificial system came into effect, were *strictly voluntary*. There are no elaborate rules about sacrificing in Genesis.

### The Building of the Tabernacle

After being told that an official sacrificial system was to be commenced in Israel, Moses was again called back to Mount Sinai. God began to reveal more and more about the sacrificial and ritualistic system which He was going to start in Israel.

God told Moses that he should immediately make a Tabernacle as a central place of worship for all the people. Moses was told that it was in this Sanctuary or Tabernacle that the sacrificial altar was to be placed. The command to make this Tabernacle as a Sanctuary for God and for the central place of worship is found in Exodus 25:1-9.

The remainder of Exodus 25 is God's instruction concerning the construction of the *mercy seat* and the *ark of the*

*covenant* which Moses was to make and put in a particular section of the Tabernacle. Then in Exodus 26 comes the command to make *curtains* for the Tabernacle which would separate certain areas from others in the Sanctuary. And in Exodus 27 we find the directions for making the *altar of sacrifice*.

Then in Exodus 28 Moses is told that Aaron and all his descendants are to be the priests of Israel. *This is the very first indication that Moses had concerning the priesthood being given to Aaron and his sons.* Moses had no idea, until now, that his brother and nephews were to be the priesthood for Israel.

In Exodus 29 Moses was told how the priests would be consecrated and ordained when the time would come. And lastly, in Exodus 30, Moses was told to make an *altar of incense* which was to be placed near the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.

It was in Exodus 31 that God told Moses whom He had chosen as the master workmen for the *building* of this Tabernacle and all its furnishings. However, we find that even before Moses returned to camp to notify the workmen, the people rose up in rebellion against Moses. Aaron made a golden calf. The next three chapters reveal the indignation of God at this rebellion, and the intercession of Moses on the people's behalf, and finally the repentance of the people for the evil they had done.

Then in Exodus 35 and 36 we find the workmen beginning to build the Tabernacle. The materials for the Sanctuary were collected and it was finally built (Ex. 37). Then the altar on which to sacrifice was constructed (Ex. 38). And lastly, the clothing for the priesthood was made and finished (Ex. 39).

### The Raising of the Tabernacle

Now we come to a most important chapter for the proper understanding of this subject — chapter 40. When you read the contents of this chapter, you will understand why it has been necessary to carry you through the book of Exodus chapter by chapter.

Why is this particular chapter impor-

tant? Because it is in chapter 40 that we have the record of *WHEN the sacrificial and ritualistic system began in Israel.* Let us notice the beginning of this chapter *carefully!*

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, *On the first day of the first month shalt thou set up the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation*” (Ex. 40:1-2).

Note the second verse in particular. Moses was commanded by God not to raise up the Tabernacle until a particular day of the year. True, they were to have everything *ready* for the erection of the Tabernacle. They were to have all the furnishings completed beforehand. But, the Tabernacle could not be officially raised and set up as the central Sanctuary for Israel until the first day of the first month in *THE SECOND YEAR* after the children of Israel came out of Egypt.

Now notice that *on that exact day — and not before* — Moses was told to set up the *altar of incense* (Ex. 40:5) and also the altar of burnt offering (Ex. 40:6). In verse 10 Moses was commanded to anoint, or officially consecrate, the altar of sacrifice. Then in Exodus 40:12-15 Moses was instructed *to ordain the priesthood.*

If there is any further doubt when all of these things took place, notice Exodus 40:17: “And it came to pass *in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was reared up.*”

The following verses in Exodus 40 show that Moses put everything into the Tabernacle and officially consecrated everything pertaining to sacrifice and ritual. And Moses officially *ORDAINED* the priests to their offices *on that day — NOT BEFORE!*

### Why Is This Important?

The above information clearly shows that up to this time the Israelites had *no Tabernacle* in which to offer sacrifices, *no altar* on which to place them, *no priesthood* to officiate at the sacrifices and rituals. This was all done on the first day of the first month in the *SECOND YEAR AFTER* they came out of

Egypt. This is the very day that God commanded the Israelites to begin their official sacrificing to Him — *not before!*

Jeremiah certainly knew what he was talking about when he said that God did not command the Israelites about sacrifices at the time they left Egypt. It was almost a complete full year before the sacrificial and ritualistic system began!

### Sacrifices Could Be Offered Only at the Sanctuary

Once the official sacrificial system began in Israel, God commanded that no sacrifices of this ritualistic system could henceforth be offered *except* at the official altar in the Sanctuary. This is important to note, for in times past, the people could individually, without a priesthood, offer their sacrifices just *anywhere* they pleased.

But now notice the instruction of God. In Leviticus 17:2-5, God says that if an Israelite did not bring his sacrifice to the one official altar which was at the door of the Tabernacle, that person would be cut off from among his people. And we further read in Deuteronomy 12:13, 14: “*Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: but in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee.*”

This fact, that all the sacrifices in Israel could only be offered *AT THE SANCTUARY, OR ON THE ALTAR IN THE SANCTUARY,* proves how important it was to sacrifice correctly and at the one Sanctuary. It shows how important the altar and the Sanctuary were to God. This shows why the altar and the Sanctuary *HAD TO BE BUILT AND SANCTIFIED BEFORE* the sacrificial system could begin. And certainly, there had to be a *PRIESTHOOD* established and ordained before the sacrifices could commence. It was a gross sin ever to offer a sacrifice without a priest at the altar sanctifying the offering.

Now it becomes quite clear why there had to be a Sanctuary, an altar and a priesthood *before* the sacrificial system

could begin. And the children of Israel had none of these until the beginning of the *second year* of their Exodus!

### Israel Did Offer Sacrifices Before the Sacrificial System Began

The differences between the *voluntary* sacrifices offered *before* the official system began, and the commanded sacrifices within the official system should be sufficiently understood by now. If the fundamental differences are understood — that one was *voluntary* and the other *commanded* — then we will have no difficulty in comprehending any text of Scripture between Exodus 12 and Exodus 40 which might be a little obscure on the surface.

For example, you will notice in Exodus 24:1-8 that Moses and some of the children of Israel *offered sacrifices* when they agreed, the first time, to observe the Old Covenant that God made with them. Now let us clearly understand that the Sanctuary had not been raised up, the altar was not yet built, and there was yet no priesthood to offer official sacrifices. To put it plainly, *the commanded sacrificial system had not yet come into effect*. What kind of sacrifices, then, were these?

Let's note carefully the text itself: "And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and builded *an altar* under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel" (Ex. 24:3, 4).

This particular altar that Moses built here WAS NOT *THE ALTAR* that was to be put in the Sanctuary. That altar was not even completely *described* until Chapter 27, and was not built until Chapter 38, not put into the Sanctuary until Chapter 40 — or in the second year of the Exodus. Moses simply built this particular altar to offer some *voluntary* sacrifices in order to have the necessary blood for the ratification of the Covenant. These sacrifices were NOT a part of the official sacrifices which came later.

Let us go on a little further with the text: "And he sent *young men* of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the Lord" (Ex. 24:5).

Now notice a significant fact in this verse. Observe that these offerings were not offered *by priests* as commanded in the Law, but by *YOUNG MEN* of the children of Israel. Why "young men"? Simply because there were, as yet, no official priests in Israel. Aaron and his sons were not ordained until the day the Tabernacle and altar were set up — the day the *commanded sacrificial system* began.

It would have been wrong for just ANYONE to offer sacrifices AFTER the beginning of the second year of the Exodus. *But before this time*, God did allow voluntary offerings to be sacrificed by *anyone* in Israel and on individual altars which were not located in any Sanctuary.

Why shouldn't God allow this? Noah built an altar and sacrificed on it (Gen. 8:20), so did Abraham (Gen. 12:7), Jacob (Gen. 35:1), and even Moses when the children of Israel were coming out of Egypt (Ex. 17:15). And so, here we find Moses offering *voluntary* offerings to God like those which had been offered centuries before.

There was no priesthood or Sanctuary established, so there was nothing wrong in this. It was only AFTER the Sanctuary had been built that God forbade sacrifices by anyone, except a priest be in attendance. It was only AFTER the sacrificial system began that God forbade offering sacrifices anywhere but on the altar in the Sanctuary.

### Another "Difficult" Point?

There seems to be a difficulty in Exodus 33:7-11. Here the Bible plainly states that a tabernacle had already been set up before the beginning of the second year as mentioned in Exodus 40.

Is there a contradiction in Scripture?

The answer to this "difficulty" is apparent when we understand the original Hebrew in these verses. The Hebrew word *obel* used here and translated "Tabernacle" can just as easily be rendered "tent" — a common *residential* tent. But when speaking

about the Tabernacle in which the *altar* was placed, and where sacrifices were offered, it is *mishkan*, a totally different word.

This tent being described in Exodus 33 was merely a temporary place of worship to fulfill an emergency need. Notice, *Moses* called it "The tabernacle of the congregation" — not God! This tent was not the official Sanctuary commanded by God at all. Besides, there is *no mention* of any sacrifices at this temporary worship tent. To explain clearly, we might call this Moses' temporary home, office or headquarters. No problem or contradiction here! And remember, even if they had sacrificed in this tent it was still allowable to do so, as explained.

### Another Point That Needs Settling

It is quite clear in the Bible that the Aaronic priesthood did not exist until the beginning of the second year of the Exodus. Yet in Exodus 19:22 and 24 there are direct references to "priests" being in Israel even before the Ten Commandments were given to Moses.

Actually, every nation of antiquity had its religious priests. Usually it was the head of the nation, clan or family who acted as the religious intermediary between them and God. For example, when Noah, Abraham, Jacob and the others officiated at their individual altars and offered sacrifices, they were acting in the capacity of priests. They were the heads of their families and directly responsible to God for the spiritual welfare of those families.

We read that Job, as head of his family, officiated as a priest for his household by offering sacrifices *before* there was a Sanctuary established for the people of God (Job 1:5). Also, it was common for other nations to have their own priesthoods. We can also notice that the father-in-law of Moses was the priest of Midian (Ex. 2:16). This office of his father-in-law was held in respect by Moses, for it represented Jethro as head of the Midianite people.

So, like all other peoples, Israel while in Egypt had certain heads of families to act as priests until a priesthood could

be officially inaugurated in Israel by God Himself.

It should be quite clear that the priests mentioned in Exodus 19:22 and 24 were *not* from Aaron, for it was about a year later when the official Aaronic priesthood was begun.

### What Does This All Mean?

When we understand that the sacrificial and ritualistic system established under the Old Covenant was not brought into force until the beginning of the second year of the Exodus, then we have an important KEY to know what was done away with in the time of Christ. This KEY will show us what belonged exclusively to the sacrifices and rituals, and it will show us what was separate and distinct from them.

Also, we now have proof, by studying the Biblical history, of what commandments the Israelites were commanded to observe *BEFORE* the sacrifices and rituals were ever commanded. Understanding these things will show us some important commandments of God that were never a part of the sacrificial and ritualistic system — and these commandments are *obligatory for the people of God today!*

### Commandments Israelites Kept BEFORE Sacrifices

You will notice that the Sabbath command was understood in Exodus 16 before the Ten Commandments were given on Mount Sinai. Notice that there is not a word about sacrificing!

Also, when God's Eternal Law, the Ten Commandments, was later stated in a codified form (Ex. 20), there is still *not even a hint of sacrificing!*

Also notice that God's annual Holy Days were commanded in Exodus 23:14-17. And here again, *not a mention of sacrificing!* And too, God made a special covenant with Israel in Exodus 31:12-17 in regard to the Sabbaths — weekly and annual — as being the ONLY REAL SIGN between Him and His

people that they are truly His chosen ones. Again, *not a word about sacrifices!*

In fact, the children of Israel were commanded to keep all of God's commandments, statutes and laws (Ex. 15:25, 26) before Moses knew anything of a sacrificial or ritualistic system. It is a matter of history that the children of Israel KEPT EVERY ONE OF THE SABBATHS AND HOLY DAYS *for one whole year* before the sacrificial system was introduced.

Of course, when the sacrificial system was finally ordained in the second year, sacrifices were offered on *every* day of the year. And, we should not be surprised that the weekly Sabbath, because of its solemnity, would have *more* sacrifices than ordinary days. Also, when the important annual Sabbaths would arrive there would be a corresponding increase in the physical sacrifices to point out the holiness of the annual Sabbaths. This is the reason you find sacrifices mentioned on the Sabbaths and Holy Days in Leviticus 23. That part of Scripture was intended primarily for the instruction of the priests and it describes how sacrifices were to be offered on the High Days.

### The Passover Sacrifice

Mention ought to be made of the sacrifice of the lamb at the Passover time. Was this sacrifice a part of the sacrificial system established later? No! This particular sacrifice is totally unlike any other mentioned in the whole of the Old Testament. This is one sacrifice which was eaten by the offerer *as a meal in his own residence*. It did NOT have to be offered in the presence of a priest nor did it have to be killed on the altar in the Sanctuary. The Passover sacrifice was a *family* responsibility.

It is clear that the Passover sacrifice was unique in itself and that it was NOT an integral part of the sacrificial system, for it was ordained *almost a year before*. And it was totally unlike

any of the sacrifices mentioned in the book of Leviticus. It was NOT a sacrifice to atone for any particular sin. Rather, it was *symbolic* of the Messiah who was to come, and His sacrifice for our sins.

In fact, the Passover sacrifice *has not been abolished today*. It has only been CHANGED. Instead of the lamb we now have the bread and the wine. That is the reason Paul tells us that the lamb is not our Passover anymore, but rather, *Christ is our Passover* (I Cor. 5:7). That is, we now partake of Christ — figuratively, His body and His blood. The body of Christ, not the lamb, is our Passover! (Write for our FREE booklet *How Often Should We Partake of the Lord's Supper?*)

None of the sacrifices in the sacrificial system, however, were changed by Christ like the Passover — which was NEVER a part of that system. There is no question about the fact that the Passover was a unique sacrifice completely separate from the sacrifices of the commanded sacrificial system.

We have seen that Jeremiah certainly knew what he was talking about in Jeremiah 7:21-23. God NEVER commanded the Israelites to sacrifice *until* the start of the second year of their Exodus!

We are thus assured that the commands to keep the Ten Commandments, the weekly Sabbath and the annual Holy Days were in force for a whole year *BEFORE* the sacrificial system began. And so, we can confidently say — with absolute PROOF — that *what was not originally a part of the sacrificial system did not vanish away with the sacrifices when they found their reality in Christ.* □

If you are not yet a subscriber to TOMORROW'S WORLD, a magazine of Biblical understanding published by the Ambassador College Graduate School of Theology, be sure to request a free subscription.