

# A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting featuring several vertical, blurred figures in shades of blue, green, and yellow, set against a background of light, textured brushstrokes. The figures appear to be standing in a row, though their forms are indistinct and merged with the background.

*Chapter 7 excerpts*  
Giving Life  
by Taking It

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Biblical scholars and interpreters have generally assumed that, like the pagan gods of antiquity, the God of Israel wished to receive offerings and sacrifices from his people for his own sake. This chapter argues that the logic underlying the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrificial rites and offerings is fundamentally different: what God sought to promote among his people by means of those prescriptions was the practice of justice, righteousness, and love for him and others for their own good.

## GIVING LIFE BY TAKING IT

In many ways, the sacrificial worship of the God of Israel as it is described in the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish writings was no different than the sacrificial worship practiced among other cultures and nations in antiquity. The God of Israel had a temple dedicated to him at which those who worshiped him offered him animal victims, fruits and grains, drink offerings, monetary gifts, and other precious items. Those who made those offerings did so through priests who were believed to have been designated by God himself to serve as mediators between him and his people. Feasts to honor and celebrate God and give him thanks for the blessings he had bestowed on the people were held regularly, and whenever the people disobeyed God or acted in ways that displeased him they approached him with offerings seeking his forgiveness and renewed favor.

In spite of these similarities, however, the understanding of God reflected in the biblical texts led to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of sacrificial worship that was in important ways fundamentally distinct from that of other peoples. At the heart of this difference was the belief that the God of Israel desired and mandated the offering of sacrifice, not for *his own* sake, but for the sake of his people.

### SACRIFICE IN THE PAGAN WORLDVIEWS OF ANTIQUITY

Although an extremely wide variety of beliefs and practices regarding sacrifice existed among the different peoples known to us from the Second Temple period, certain basic ideas appear to have been common in most of the belief systems of those peoples. The most important of these was that the gods were thought to desire from human beings one thing above all else, namely, sacrificial offerings. When human beings wished to obtain the favor of the gods or put away their wrath, there was virtually nothing that they could give to the gods or do for them other than presenting them some type of offering.

Because those who presented sacrificial offerings to the gods were generally seeking to obtain something from them in exchange for their offerings or to maintain their favor, those offerings were understood as embodying *petitions* or *prayers* to the gods. Those who were about to engage an enemy in warfare, for example, would offer sacrifices asking the gods to grant them victory. Those who were enduring a drought would present sacrifices to the gods asking them for rain. Individuals would offer the gods sacrifices in an attempt to obtain from them things such as healing, protection, wealth, or a

are still capable of living in love for him and one another. According to this understanding of the passage, the sweet smell of Noah's offering reminded God of this truth and thus led him to promise never to bring such destruction on human beings again.

If it was the practice of justice, righteousness, mercy, and love that truly interested God rather than sacrificial offerings per se, it might be asked why there was any need for people to present him such offerings or why he was interested in receiving them. The answer to these questions lies in the intimate relationship between the spiritual and the physical or material in biblical thought, that is, the attitudes and ways of thinking that are internal to human beings and the outward expressions of those attitudes and ways of thinking by means of concrete actions and behaviors. Within the Christian tradition, in large part because of the influence of certain Hellenistic modes of thought, it has often been claimed that what really matters to God is that which is in the heart, the spiritual rather than the physical. The body is seen as being of secondary importance in relation to the soul or spirit. The words attributed to Jesus in his conversation with the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John are commonly understood in this manner. There, after telling the woman that a day will come when those who will worship God in the way he desires will do so neither at the site dedicated to him on Mount Gerizim in Samaria nor at the Jerusalem temple, Jesus adds: "the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for these are the kind of worshipers that the Father seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). Interpreters of this passage often overlook the fact that nowhere does it affirm or imply that the worship of God through external or material means is to be rejected. It simply affirms the same idea that runs throughout the biblical texts as a whole and the writings of Jews such as Philo, namely, that all worship of God must be done "in spirit and truth."

This tendency to value the spiritual and the internal over the physical and the external has often led Christians to condemn as outmoded, superficial, meaningless, or even displeasing to God the practice of outward rites having to do with bodily and physical realities such as those described in the biblical texts and practiced among most Jews throughout history. Such ways of thinking among Christians overlook the fact that Christians also ascribe great importance to the same type of rite by means of their practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In principle, Christians might receive a child or an adult into their community of faith through a ceremony that consisted solely of an exchange of words, without using water or any other material substance. They could also recall the love that Jesus manifested for them in his death, reflect on the forgiveness that they receive from God through Jesus, and express their commitment to living in love, unity, and fellowship as Jesus commanded without eating and drinking together in the way that they do when they celebrate the Lord's Supper. These actions would be much

less meaningful and powerful, however, if they were limited exclusively to the use of words and did not involve bodily actions and material realities such as water, bread, and wine. Furthermore, both these material realities as well as the actions performed with them convey ideas and symbolisms that could never be expressed by words alone.

The same observations should be made with regard to the sacrificial practices described and prescribed in the Hebrew Bible. In principle, people could manifest their love for God by telling him that they loved him with words alone, without making use of their body or any physical or material element. They might express their gratitude to him in the same way, merely by pronouncing their words of thanksgiving out loud or in their heart. When they had done something that was contrary to God's will and were filled with remorse as a result of the pain that their action had caused God and others, they might likewise simply use words to tell him that they were sorry and that they were making a commitment not to repeat such an action again in the future.

By using physical and material elements and substances to perform actions with their body in the presence of others, however, those Jews who lived in the period of the Second Temple were able to express in a much more meaningful and powerful manner the sentiments and intentions that were in their heart. The material offerings that they presented to God served as means by which they manifested to him their love, praise, and gratitude in ways that went far beyond anything that words alone could communicate. The same was true when they were profoundly sorry for something they had done and wished to do something to give expression to that sorrow in a concrete and visible manner. Just as a person who loves another wishes to express that love through physical contact such as embraces and caresses and is not satisfied with the use of words alone, so also those who sought to manifest their sentiments toward God found it much more fulfilling and satisfying to do so through sacrificial offerings and the type of rites and rituals mentioned in the biblical texts.

In addition to allowing people to express in a visible, palpable, and concrete manner the sentiments and intentions that were in their heart, the sacrificial offerings and rites that the biblical texts describe and prescribe served to reinforce those sentiments and intentions and to strengthen them even more. Those who traveled long distances and spent a considerable amount of time, effort, and money to present an offering at the sanctuary in order to express their love, gratitude, and dedication to God tended to grow immensely in that love, gratitude, and dedication as a result of that experience. When those who had done something that God had prohibited out of love for his people manifested their repentance by slaughtering an animal and watching as a priest sprinkled its blood toward the symbols of God's presence and burned part of its remains on the altar, they were brought to reflect more deeply on the consequences of their actions and become even more resolved to avoid disobeying God's commands in the future. Those who presented an animal as an offering of well-being to God and subsequently sat down with their fellow

Israelites and family members in the place that symbolized God's presence to eat of what they had offered grew even further in their commitment to live in communion and fellowship with God and one another and felt their bond with God and others become even stronger.

The gestures and rites involved in the sacrificial worship of Israel's God also afforded experiences that went far beyond anything that might have been accomplished by words alone. All of the senses were involved in those rites as they laid their hand on the animal, saw its blood being sprinkled, dashed, or poured out at the altar, and listened to the crackling of the fire as they observed its remains rising up in smoke together with the sweet aroma of incense. It is likely that they listened to singing and chanting and united their voices to those of others, not only in what was sung but in the prayers earnestly offered up and perhaps in outbursts of joy, devotion, zeal, or contrition as well. Even those who could afford nothing but a turtledove or a pigeon must have felt an enormous satisfaction at seeing their gift to God being consumed on the altar as a heartfelt expression of their love for him and their gratitude for his mercies and his forgiveness.

The experience of offering sacrifice was therefore an extremely powerful one and evoked deep sentiments and intense emotions in those who participated in the rites involved. They not only expressed verbally their gratitude, dedication to God, or compunction at their sin but were able to feel these things in body and spirit down to the core of their being. These rites possessed a power to touch and transform their lives profoundly, and it was for that reason that God had commanded them. They not only served as channels by which people were able to express what was in their heart but also inflamed and aroused the attitudes, sentiments, convictions, and behaviors that God wished to see in them for their own good and that of others.

The symbolisms conveyed by the people's participation in these rites served to contribute to the same objective. The offering of a portion of what belonged to them symbolized the offering to God of everything they had received from him in his grace and mercy. Their entrance into the area outside of the sanctuary with their gift in their hands was symbolic of their desire to draw near to the God whom they adored in order to serve him and dedicate their lives to doing his will. The fat of the animal victims that was burnt on the altar symbolized the offering to God of what was most precious, pleasing, and desirable in life.

Furthermore, like any symbolic action, the rites and rituals performed could convey a wide variety of meanings that went beyond anything that words alone could ever express. The different types of food and drink that were placed before God could serve as a symbol of God's care and compassion in giving his people what they needed to sustain their life, the goodness of his gifts, and the manner in which God fed them spiritually and not only materially. Their offerings might also bring to mind their dependence on God and symbolize the work of their hands, their growth and transformation, and

the manner in which they had been brought together as a single people in the same way that the things they had harvested had been combined into a single offering that was placed before the God who had given them life. The slaughter of an animal and the shedding and sprinkling of its blood might symbolize the gravity and cost of disobedience to God's commandments, the manner in which the offerers were to die to themselves and their sinful behavior, the renewed offering of their life up to God, and a recognition that all life belonged to God, among other things.

Although ideas such as these are not stated explicitly in the prescriptions regarding animal sacrifice in the Mosaic law, they clearly seem to be presupposed. As noted above, the most complete type of animal sacrifice was the burnt offering or holocaust, precisely because the animal in its entirety was presented to God after its blood had been drained and its skin removed. Because the offerers kept nothing for themselves, the burnt offerings represented their total commitment to God and his will and the dedication of their entire lives to God. In contrast, the offerings of well-being were seen as means by which God and the offerers gave themselves to one another by sharing the gift that was placed before God. After offering up to God that which they had received from his hand, the people partook of a meal in which they shared not only what they had offered but also their lives with God and one another. The offerings for sin and guilt in turn were means by which those who had sinned consecrated their lives to God once more by offering him something that expressed and embodied their renewed commitment to putting away their wrongdoing and serving others in the way he desired and commanded. They manifested these things not only by means of their offering, which they forfeited in its entirety rather than having some part returned to them, but also by the restitution they made in cases in which they had wronged someone else.

At the heart of all of these sacrificial rites and symbolic actions was the idea that those who offered up gifts and sacrifices to God were at the same time offering up to him their own selves and lives. As we have stressed above, this is what interested God: that his people offer themselves up to him together with everything that they had in order to serve him and do his will, not for *his* sake but for *theirs*. By means of their sacrificial offerings they expressed their commitment to dedicating their bodies, souls, minds, possessions, talents, time, and energies to doing what was good, right, just, and kind in the way that God had commanded out of love for all. Any offering that was not a sincere expression of this kind of offering of oneself or was not presented in that spirit was unacceptable to God. Conversely, no matter how large or small the offering, if it was a sincere expression of one's commitment to God's will and was presented in that spirit, it was pleasing and acceptable to him. In fact, even if one was unable to present a material offering for some reason, such as illness, a lack of material resources, or captivity in a foreign land, the offering of nothing but one's own self, mind, soul, and body was thought to be just as

pleasing and acceptable to God as the lavish and abundant sacrifices of those who had the resources to express their love, devotion, and dedication to God in that manner.

Under normal circumstances, however, it was unthinkable that one might offer oneself up to God without offering up some type of material gift or sacrifice at the same time. For that reason, the Mosaic law includes the command that no one appear before God with empty hands (Exod 23:15; 34:20; Deut 16:16). If one withheld from God the good things that one had received from him and refused to share them with God and others, one could hardly be said to be offering oneself and one's being up to God out of love and devotion for him. The people's love and devotion for God was to take concrete and palpable forms not only through acts of obedience but also through gifts and offerings that served as means by which they dedicated their lives to him.

#### *Finding Meaning and Purpose in the Offering of Sacrifice*

As has already been noted above, for the most part neither the biblical texts nor the Jewish writings of the Second Temple period enter into discussions regarding the meaning and purpose of the sacrificial offerings and rites they describe. There is one exception, however. Writing around the year 40 CE, only about three decades before the temple's destruction at the hands of the Roman army, Philo not only considers the question of the meaning and purpose of the sacrificial offerings, rites, and worship prescribed in the biblical texts but does so at great length.

Despite Philo's careful and painstaking examination of the many different aspects of the biblical prescriptions concerning the sacrificial worship of Israel's God, his writings have tended to be virtually ignored by biblical scholars who have written on this subject. There are primarily two reasons for this. The first is that the question that interests most scholars who write on the subject of biblical sacrifice is that of its *modus operandi*, that is, the manner in which the sacrificial rites were thought to "work" to "effect" something such as atonement, purification, or reconciliation and communion with God. Philo does not address this question in his writings, however. A second reason why scholars writing on the subject of biblical sacrifice often pay little attention to Philo is that throughout his writings he interprets the Hebrew Scriptures allegorically. Because this type of interpretation of the biblical texts tends to disregard questions related to their literal meaning and the intention of their authors, and also because outside of Philo's writings there is little evidence of the same kind of allegorical approach to the Hebrew Scriptures in the Second Temple period, it is thought that Philo's understanding of sacrifice was unique in his day and reflected Hellenistic modes of thought that were otherwise foreign to the Judaism of antiquity.

When we look closely at Philo's interpretations of the sacrificial rites and worship prescribed in the Hebrew Bible, however, it becomes evident that it revolves around the same kinds of ideas just considered above. For Philo, all



Reflection upon all of these truths thus served to promote a spirit of love and thanksgiving in relation to God and to lead the worshipers to consecrate themselves to the type of life that God had commanded for the good of all.

### PROMOTING JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH SACRIFICE

There can be little doubt that many of the interpretations that Philo gives to the Mosaic prescriptions regarding the sacrificial worship of Israel's God are unique to him rather than being common among other Jews in antiquity or grounded in the Jewish tradition of his day. Philo himself acknowledges as much, often commenting that he is speculating or offering opinions that are his alone. At times his interpretations also draw heavily on Platonic ideas, such as the superiority of the soul to the body. Nevertheless, what can scarcely be doubted is that his attempts to find deeper meanings in the Mosaic prescriptions and discern some purpose behind them were common among Jews in antiquity, including those who put the biblical texts into the form in which they now exist and brought them together in a single collection. At some point or another, those who considered those prescriptions must have asked themselves why God had ordained many of the things they contained and what purpose those things fulfilled.

It might have been supposed, of course, that Israel's God had no purpose in prescribing in such great detail the many different aspects of the sacrificial worship that was to be offered to him, other than that of satisfying some type of desire or whim on his part. He simply found pleasure in defining with great precision and in great detail each and every aspect of that worship and then seeing everything that he had commanded carried out precisely as he had ordained. In that case, the only reason why he had designed the sacrificial worship that the people were to offer him in the way that he had and demanded that the priests and people perform all of the different rites and procedures exactly in the way that he had prescribed was that he found that form of worship entertaining, gratifying, or appealing. What had led him to give those commandments was not any concern for his people but pure capriciousness.

For reasons we have seen repeatedly, however, it is highly unlikely that those who examined the Mosaic prescriptions regarding the offering of sacrifice would have thought in such terms. Unlike the gods of other nations, the God of Israel was not interested in satisfying his own whims and fancies and being worshiped in certain ways purely for his own sake, simply because he took pleasure at watching the things he had commanded being carried out down to the last detail. Nor was he attempting to satisfy some type of personal need, since as sovereign creator he needed nothing from human beings. Because there is nothing in the biblical texts to suggest that sacrificial offerings were thought to have some type of magical or mysterious effect on God or the offerers that would benefit them in some way, there was no reason to suppose that God had prescribed those offerings for the purpose of producing

such an effect. If he had given such detailed prescriptions, therefore, it could only be concluded that he had done so in order to bring about something he desired to see in his people themselves for their own sake. Each of the different prescriptions must have been designed to fulfill some particular purpose related to a more general objective. And when that objective was viewed in the context of the story that appears in the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole, it could only be related in some way to the well-being of his people as well as the practice of justice, righteousness, love, and mercy that was necessary for them to enjoy that well-being.

This assumption is clearly present in Philo's interpretation of the prescriptions regarding the sacrificial worship of Israel's God that appear in the Mosaic law. While the original purpose of many of those prescriptions would have been just as much a mystery to Philo as it was to other Jews in antiquity and his interpretations of their meaning tended to be based on mere speculation, he would by no means have been alone in assuming that in some way those prescriptions had been designed to promote a particular way of life and certain behaviors among those who would put them into practice. In most cases, those prescriptions would be thought to fulfill this purpose indirectly by reminding the offerers of certain ideas and reinforcing certain basic truths and beliefs that would in some way contribute to the objective of leading them to live in the way that God had commanded for their own good. The commandments regarding the offering of sacrifice would also have been seen as promoting the fulfillment of that same objective by making it possible for the people to experience in concrete and palpable ways different aspects of their relationship to God, one another, and the world in general. Due to the rich symbolisms inherent in the rites and ceremonies that God had prescribed and the profound manner in which the people's participation in those rites and ceremonies touched and transformed them in body, soul, and spirit, the observance of those prescriptions served to deepen and strengthen the people's commitment to living as God's people and obeying all of the other things he had commanded of them for their own good.

Such an understanding of the meaning and purpose of the prescriptions regarding sacrificial worship that God had given his people would have been especially evident to them when they considered God's commands regarding the celebration of the three annual festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles. These festivals clearly had the purpose of bringing the people to recall key moments in their history, especially from the period of their exodus from Egypt and their sojourn in the wilderness. Each of these feasts was also associated with an agricultural celebration, namely, the gathering of the first fruits as well as the spring and autumn harvests. At each of these festivals, sacrifices were offered and the people celebrated by eating of what had been sacrificed.

Virtually all Jews in antiquity would have recognized that these festivals had been designed to contribute to the practice of justice and righteousness among them in several ways. Above all, they reminded the people of their

identity as God's chosen people whom he had redeemed from slavery in Egypt to be his own possession. As such, the people were to live in conformity with his will as he had made it known in the commandments, which promoted justice and righteousness. As they celebrated these festivals, the people were not only to remember the events of the past but also to reflect on their meaning. At Passover, they were to recite anew the story of the exodus of their ancestors from Egypt, while at the Festival of Tabernacles they were to recall the time their ancestors had spent in the wilderness by dwelling in the same type of tents or booths that their ancestors had inhabited during that time. Because the three major festivals were associated with the harvest of fruits and crops, they were also to be an occasion for the people to reflect on the kindness and mercy that God had shown them by providing them with the things they needed to sustain life. As they were reminded of God's gracious activity in their history and in his creation as a whole, they would be brought to dedicate their lives more fully to serving him by doing his will.

There can be little doubt that those who contemplated the commandments regarding things such as the high priest's vestments, the layout and adornment of the sanctuary, the ark of the covenant, the lampstand, the showbread, and the altar of incense understood their meaning and purpose in much the same way that Philo did, even if their interpretation of the meaning and symbolism of these things differed from his. All of these symbolic objects and realities served to remind the people of certain truths regarding God, in particular his sovereignty and his love as the creator and sustainer of all that existed and of his people Israel in particular. While those objects and realities might fulfill this function in regard to the people as a whole, they especially served to remind the priests and Levites dedicated to God's service in the sanctuary of these and other truths, thus underscoring for them their unique and special role in promoting among the people the type of life he desired and commanded for the good of all.

In a number of passages in the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices, it is said explicitly that certain aspects of those prescriptions are to serve as a memorial or reminder of particular beliefs and truths. The Festival of Passover is called a memorial, as is the unleavened bread that the Israelites were to eat during the festival (Exod 12:14; 13:9; Deut 16:3). Other of the feasts that God prescribes are also said to serve as memorials or reminders for the people (Lev 23:24, 42-43; Deut 16:12). In Num 10:10, the sacrifices are referred to as a memorial explicitly. A number of texts also speak of a "memorial portion" in relation to the sacrificial offerings, which suggests that this portion was to serve as some type of reminder, though precisely what the people were to recall is not entirely clear in the texts.<sup>20</sup> The stones on the ephod, a linen apron which formed part of the high priest's vestments, were to serve as a memorial, similar to the way in which the stones on the breastplate worn by the high priest served as reminders of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exod 28:12, 17-21,

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20. See Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12; 6:15; 24:7; Num 5:26.

29; 39:7). The half shekel paid by all Israelites is called a memorial as well (Exod 30:16). According to Deut 26:1-11, those who brought their offerings of first fruits before the priests were to recite a summary of the story of Israel's redemption as they did so. In this way, their identity as God's chosen people dedicated to doing his will with everything that he had given them was reinforced once more.

Many other aspects of the sacrificial worship prescribed in the Mosaic law had the same purpose of reminding the people that they were his chosen possession and promoting in them a spirit of gratitude and loving service. Virtually all of the sacrificial offerings were seen as expressions of thanksgiving to God. The logic of these offerings is expressed in the prayer attributed to David in 1 Chr 29:10-19. There he tells God:

Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for everything that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and the power to make great and to give strength to all is in your hand. . . . For all things come from you, and what we have given to you is from your own hand. . . . O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is your own (vv. 11-12, 14, 16).

In this prayer of David, we see the stress on God's sovereignty as Lord of all and the recognition that, because all things belong to him, those who make offerings to him are simply giving to him what is already his own. As they recalled that not only their possessions but also their very lives and existence were God's own, those who presented God with their offerings acknowledged his loving and gracious lordship over their lives and became strengthened in their commitment to doing his loving and gracious will.

As we have already noted above, these same ideas were stressed by means of the burnt offerings or holocausts. Because the animal victim in its entirety was presented to God by being burnt on the altar, there could be no self-interest on the part of the offerers, since they retained nothing of the victim's remains for their own use or consumption. While in many cases the offerers were undoubtedly hoping to receive some type of blessing from God in response to their offering, it was stressed to them that they could not purchase God's favor or bribe him with gifts (Deut 10:17; 2 Chr 19:7; Sir 35:14). Any who viewed their offering in that manner would be provoking God to anger rather than obtaining his favor. According to the beliefs reflected in the biblical texts, when God looked into the hearts of the offerers, what interested him was determining whether they were truly committed to living in accordance with his will for their own good. If that was the case and their petition involved something that might promote their well-being and that of others as well, it was expected that in most cases God would grant them their petition. However, it was also recognized that God might deny their

petition in order to accomplish some purpose or objective that he regarded as more important or more conducive to their well-being than that which they sought. When he did choose to respond in that manner, God was not rejecting them or withholding from them what was good for them. On the contrary, he was acting in their best interest, since at times he had a better plan for them or wished to strengthen or correct them by means of some type of hardship, want, or affliction. Therefore, what God sought in the offerers was that they simply trust in his love, sovereignty, and goodness by accepting whatever response he gave to their petition as a means by which he sought their well-being and the well-being of his people as a whole. It was this spirit and attitude that he sought to see in the hearts and minds of the offerers, not for his own sake but for theirs.

The offerings of well-being reinforced some of these same ideas as well as others. The fact that the offerers dedicated a portion of their offering to the priests and divided the rest among themselves in a meal served to emphasize the idea that the blessings of shalom and well-being that they received from God were to be shared with others and to be a motive for rejoicing and celebration in their lives. This type of sharing was of course a central component of the commitment to justice, righteousness, and mercy that God sought to bring about in all of his people. The rejoicing and celebration that were to be reflected in the sacrifice and meal reinforced the idea that true joy was to be found in this type of sharing and in serving God and others rather than in a life of selfishness and avarice. The offerings of well-being might also be understood not only as an expression of gratitude for the blessings received from God but also as a petition for continued well-being for oneself and others in the future. To make such a petition was to acknowledge God as the source of well-being. Yet because the condition upon which God granted such petitions was that those who made them be committed to doing his will by practicing justice, righteousness, mercy, and solidarity with others, those offerings also served as means by which such a commitment was reinforced. The fact that many of the sacrificial offerings were presented by the people and priests on behalf of others rather than on their own behalf also made those offerings an expression of love for others and thus helped that love to grow and extend out further. In these ways and others, the offerings of well-being served to strengthen the bonds that united the members of the community to one another and increase their commitment to sharing with others the blessings that God had given them.

As Philo stressed, the offering of the first fruits served as a reminder that everything came from God's hand and was therefore to be dedicated to his service. For that reason, not only were the people to give back to God a portion of what they had received from him, but they were also to give him the first and best of all that he had provided. Because the first fruits and tithes were kept by the priests and Levites in order to sustain them, these offerings also contributed to the ongoing worship of God at the sanctuary that

promoted justice and well-being among the people by constantly reminding them of the truths associated with that worship. Like the other offerings, the first fruits provided the people with a concrete and palpable means by which they might express their gratitude to God and also served to reinforce not only their faith in God as sovereign creator and provider but also the spirit of gratitude and commitment to obeying his will that God wished to see in them for their own sake.

The idea that the people belonged to God as his possession, together with all that he had given them, was reinforced as well by the practice of redeeming the firstborn.<sup>21</sup> In the case of clean animals that were fit for sacrifice, the firstborn was to be given to God in the form of a sacrificial offering. If the animal had a defect or if it was an animal that was not fit for sacrifice, it still belonged to God but was in essence to be purchased back from him through the payment of a monetary amount (Lev 27:11-13, 27; Num 18:15-16). In the case of donkeys, if the firstborn male was not purchased back from God, it was to be destroyed in order to prevent it from being kept as a possession by the animal's owner as his own (Exod 13:13; 34:20). Of course, the firstborn male children were not to be sacrificed to God, yet because they belonged to God they needed to be purchased back from him by means of a payment as well (Exod 13:12; Num 3:46-47; 18:15-16). While in a sense this may be understood as a form of substitution, it is important to stress that a firstborn son was not under any type of death penalty or subject to death if he was not purchased back from God. Much less was any type of redemption from sin or guilt thought to be involved. Instead, the idea was that those who belonged to God were to be dedicated fully to God's service, as the child Samuel was in 1 Samuel 1:20-28. Thus, when people purchased back from God a firstborn male child, this was understood not in terms of redeeming the child from a death penalty on account of someone's sins but rather in terms of making it possible for the child to remain with his parents so as to live as part of his family. Obviously, even though that child would not be dedicated to God's service at his sanctuary, it was expected that he would be dedicated to God's service elsewhere and in other ways, together with the other members of his family.

In Exod 13:14-16, it is emphasized that the commandment to redeem the firstborn served as a sign to remind the Israelites of the manner in which God had put to death the firstborn of the male animals and human beings in Egypt before delivering the Israelites from their bondage there, although of course the firstborn of the Israelites who had smeared the blood of sheep on the doorways of their homes had been spared. This commandment therefore represents one more example of a practice designed to remind the people of fundamental truths, such as God's sovereignty over all life as well as their identity as the people whom God had made his own by electing them through Abraham and subsequently redeeming them from their slavery in Egypt.

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21. See Exod 13:11-16; 22:29-30; 34:19-20; Lev 27:26; Num 8:17; 18:15-18; Deut 12:6.

In addition to mandating the redemption of the firstborn male children in every Israelite family, the Mosaic law speaks of God taking the Levites for himself in the place of the Israelites' firstborn (Num 3:40-45; 8:14-18). In Num 8:17-18, God's election of the Levites is also said to serve as a reminder that God struck down all the firstborn in Egypt. Once again, when the Levites are said to be taken in the place of the Israelites' firstborn sons, this was not thought to involve any type of substitutionary death. Instead, the idea was that God took for his service at the sanctuary only a portion of the people, even though in principle the people as a whole were to be dedicated to serving him there. While *all* of the people belonged to God and were to be a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6), the Levites took the place of the other Israelites and their firstborn by consecrating themselves fully to God's service and carrying out the tasks associated with the priesthood.

In Exod 30:11-16, God tells the Israelites through Moses that all of them are to give a half shekel as an offering to support the sacrificial worship carried out at the sanctuary. While many English translations of this passage refer to this payment as a ransom for the lives of those who make it, such a translation can be misleading if it is understood in the sense that by paying the half shekel the people avoided having to forfeit their lives by being put to death. Because the idea is simply that each individual Israelite is expected to provide support for the sacrificial worship offered at the sanctuary, the allusion to ransoming or purchasing one's life or soul should be interpreted in the sense that each Israelite male is to make the necessary payment on his own behalf. If any idea of substitution is thought to be present, this substitution should be understood once more in terms of being excused from the obligation to dedicate one's life to God's service at the sanctuary. The payment of the half shekel, which as noted above is explicitly called a memorial, reminded the people that their life, their body, and their being as a whole had been given to them by God and thus belonged to him as his possession. In essence, by means of the half shekel they were purchasing themselves and their lives back from God so that they might belong to themselves in a sense, even though they would continue to belong to God as well.

The common people's support for the priests and Levites and for the temple service as a whole was also a means by which God was thought to strengthen his people's commitment to living in justice, love, and solidarity. Because the sacrificial worship carried out at the sanctuary had this as its objective, all of the support that the people provided for that worship contributed either directly or indirectly to the fulfillment of that objective. Those who gave of their time and resources to make that worship possible and to sustain and embellish it were therefore expressing their love for God and one another. The more the people participated in that worship, the more they would grow in their love for God and others. By using their gifts and energies to make that worship more attractive and appealing to others and bringing greater honor and glory to God, they would also bring

more people to love and serve God so as to find in him the happiness and well-being he desired for all.

Because the worship of Israel's God at his sanctuary was one of the primary means by which he sought to bring about in all of his people the way of life that would allow them to be blessed, it was important for the people to support the persons and activities related to that worship through their gifts and offerings. Of course, it was important for them not to neglect the poor and needy as they presented their resources as gifts and offerings to God, yet even their efforts to adorn and enhance the worship of God at his sanctuary could be seen as an act of love for the poor and needy, since those who would participate in that worship would be strengthened in their commitment to serving those who needed their help. By supporting the priests and Levites through their monetary contributions and by giving them the share of their offerings that the law prescribed, the common people made it possible for them not only to carry out the rites that made the people grow in their love for God and others but also to instruct the people in God's good law and fulfill other duties aimed at accomplishing that same objective.

The offerings that the people provided for the priests and the temple service as well as the payment of the half shekel that the law mandated also served as a means by which the people made the public sacrifices offered at the sanctuary their own. Because their contributions made those sacrifices possible, they were means by which individual Israelites became joined to the rest of God's people in order to thank and praise God for his goodness and acknowledge his sovereignty over their lives and the world as a whole. The prayers that were offered up to God by means of the daily, weekly, and monthly offerings were thus those of the people themselves and not merely those of the priests who pronounced them, since it was the people's support for the temple service that made those prayers and offerings possible. By contributing to the temple service, the common people made it their own.

Furthermore, because the prayers that were offered up together with the public sacrifices invoked God's blessings not only for Israel but for all the nations of the world and their leaders, the support that the people provided for those prayers and sacrifices was an expression of love not only for their fellow Israelites but for people of all other nations as well. When people pray for others and ask God to bless them, they are strengthened in their own commitment to living and acting in ways that benefit others and enable them to enjoy God's blessings. For that reason, the people's support for the public offerings led them to grow in their love not only for God but for all of the peoples of the earth, no matter what their nationality or ethnic background. Of course, the people made the public sacrifices and the prayers that accompanied them their own not only by their financial support for those offerings but also by turning toward the temple to join themselves to the prayers and sacrifices being offered to God at the hour in which they were being presented. Every day, both at morning and at night, they were thereby brought



to offer up with their fellow Israelites petitions that invoked God's blessing on themselves as a people and on every other people throughout the world as well. As noted above, these ideas are repeated frequently by Philo, who insists that the sacrificial worship of Israel's God at the Jerusalem temple is offered not only on Israel's behalf but also on behalf of human beings as a whole. As such, the worship in which every individual Israelite was to participate constituted an expression of love for all people everywhere, whether those people acknowledged it as such or not, at the same time that it served to reinforce such love in each of the Israelites who joined in that worship.

Above all, the offering of sacrifice promoted the type of values that God wished to see instilled in his people. The command for them to present him their offerings encouraged generosity and sharing among them. By bringing the people together not only to celebrate God's gifts and recall the story that united them but also to acknowledge together their sins and implore God's forgiveness, the offering of sacrifice helped generate the kind of solidarity and mutual love that was vital to the people's well-being. The simplicity of much of the sacrificial worship fostered humility and temperance. The concessions to the poor that allowed them to offer birds and measures of flour rather than costly animals taught the people that in their daily life they were to make the same type of concessions and allowances for those less fortunate. The commandment that all were to redeem themselves by paying the same price of a half shekel independently of whether they were rich or poor stressed that all human lives were of equal value and thus that all people were to be valued equally, no matter what their social status. The prohibition against the consumption of blood and the commandment that all blood was to be offered to God or disposed of on the ground similarly emphasized the value of all life and reinforced the idea that no life was ever to be taken lightly (Lev 17:10-14; Deut 12:16, 23-25; 15:23). The offering of the blood and fat of the sacrificial animals to God underscored not only the idea that all life belonged to God but also that he was to be given that which was most prized and precious in life. The offering or redemption of the firstborn and the offering of the first fruits communicated the same idea. The care and concern that the people were to show for the needs of the priests and Levites were also to lead the people to show the same care and concern for those who served God in other ways, as well as other members of the community who depended on the kindness and generosity of their sisters and brothers in order to meet their needs.

By instilling greater love and dedication to God, therefore, the sacrificial worship prescribed in the law also stimulated greater love among the people themselves as well as a greater commitment to the practice of justice and righteousness. Because the God they worshiped with their sacrifices needed and desired nothing for himself but was dedicated entirely to the well-being of his people as a whole, to love and serve him by definition meant loving and serving those whom he loved. One could not be consecrated to the God who was committed above all else to the well-being of all without sharing

fully that same commitment. Similarly, to respect as holy not only God but also the people, places, and objects dedicated to his worship was by definition also to accept as holy his command that all be cared for and treated with dignity, respect, and kindness. Any who did not treat others in this manner were failing to treat God in that manner as well. By continually reminding the Israelites of their identity as God's chosen and holy people and the manner in which God had acted throughout their history, the sacrificial worship God had prescribed reminded them as well of the task and purpose for which he had chosen them, namely, to be a "kingdom of priests" in relation to all other peoples (Exod 19:5).

In all these ways, then, the biblical prescriptions regarding the sacrificial worship of God promoted a life of justice, love, and righteousness among his people and strengthened them in their commitment to living in accordance with the commandments he had given them to promote their happiness and well-being. It was for that purpose that he commanded that his people offer him sacrifice and took delight when they did so in the way he intended, expressing to him their love and dedication and renewing their commitment to obeying his commandments for their own good. By receiving from their hand the gifts and offerings that transformed their hearts and lives, God gave them life. If he desired and demanded sacrificial offerings of them, it was not for *his* sake but for *theirs*.