

PARASHAH SEVENTY-SIX

Leviticus 3:1–17; Isaiah 43:21–28; James 1:13–15

notes by Tim Hegg

Peace with God

In our *parashah* this week we learn of the laws regulating the שְׁלָמִים (*sh^elamim*) sacrifice. Since the word *sh^elamim* is based upon the Hebrew root ש.ל.מ which generally denotes a sense of “peace,” “complete,” “whole,” the traditional English translations have opted to call this particular sacrifice a “peace offering.” The JPS and NRSV translations opt for “well-being” offering, while the NIV has “fellowship offering.” The Stone translation adds the word “feast” — a “feast peace-offering,” and the NEB, apparently taking its cue from 1Ki 8:61, translates “shared offering.”

These differences in translation reflect the controversies that have arisen among modern biblical scholars as to just what this sacrifice was, and more importantly, what it accomplished within the Tabernacle or Temple service of ancient Israel. Further, since many modern biblical scholars take the view that Israel’s religion evolved within the basic milieu of the Ancient Near East (the so-called “history of religions” movement that gained prominence in the late 19th century along with the Documentary Hypothesis), some seek the meaning of the *sh^elamim* sacrifice by comparing it with similar offerings noted in other ANE religions, particularly those described in Ugaritic and Akkadian texts (so Levine in the *JPS Torah Commentary* and Milgrom in *Leviticus* 1.220f, *Anchor Bible Commentary*). Such an anthropological perspective essentially denies any possibility that Israel’s religion was divinely prescribed and revealed to Moses. If, however, we believe that God did, in fact, reveal to Israel the manner in which they were to conduct their worship of Him, then we will accept the Scriptures themselves as laying the primary foundation for Israel’s worship, allowing the sacred text to unfold both the manner and the meaning of priestly service and sacrifices.

If we look at the Lxx translation of שְׁלָמִים, we discover something quite interesting. Every time that this particular kind of sacrifice is found in the Torah, the Lxx translates it with σωτήριον (*soterion*), the basic meaning of which is “salvation.” Outside of the Torah, we find two other Greek terms used for translation: τέλειος (*teleios*, “complete, perfect”) and εἰρηνικός (*eirenikos*, “peace, peaceful”). These latter two Greek terms obviously conform to one of the general meanings of the Hebrew root ש.ל.מ. But why would the Lxx translators have chosen *soterion*, a word generally denoting “salvation” or “deliverance,” to translate *sh^elamim* throughout the Torah? Some have suggested that this translation puts the peace offerings in the category of those sacrifices that atoned for sin, and thus brought “salvation.” But while all of the sacrifices described in the Torah for the Tabernacle service surely have to do with atonement in one way or another, the peace offerings seem to have as their specific import the celebration of Israel’s covenant relationship with God and the benefits that this relationship bring. Most likely, then, the Lxx translation would suggest this and could be understood to mean “a sacrifice that celebrates salvation” (so Averbeck, *NIDOTTE*, on שְׁלָמִים).

We first encounter the peace-offerings (*sh^elamim*) in Ex 20:24, which are said to be from the “herd” or the “flock.” In Ex 24:5, Moses sends young men of Israel to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to Adonai on the altar he built at the foot of Sinai. These sacrifices were part of the covenant ratification ceremony in which part of the blood was applied to the altar and part sprin-

kled upon the people. We encounter peace offerings a second time in Exodus, at the Golden Calf event (Ex 32:6).

It is not until we come to *VaYikra* (Leviticus), however, that the peace offerings are detailed. In general, we discover that the primary difference between the peace offering and the whole burnt offering (עֹלָה, *'olah*) detailed in the first chapter of Leviticus is that the meat of the peace offering is eaten by the priests as well as by the people. Its primary focus, then, is one of celebration. This emphasis helps us to understand why the תְּרוּמָה (*terumah*, “contribution offering”) and תְּנוּפָח (*tenuphah*, “wave offering”) are also kinds of *sh'lamim* offerings. The same is true of the Pesach sacrifice, the meat of which is consumed by the offerer and family.

According to our *parashah*, the *sh'lamim* may be either a male or female animal from the herd (meaning larger animals, i.e., bovine) or the flock (meaning smaller animals, i.e., sheep and goats). That which is offered on the altar to Adonai is the blood, the fat that surrounds or covers the internal organs, the kidneys and the liver. The blood, of course, is never consumed, whether of sacrifices or animals slaughtered for food. For sacrificial animals, the blood is always dashed upon the altar. In the case of animals slaughtered for food, the blood is discarded, that is, “poured out on the ground.” This emphasizes the principle stated in Lev 17:11–14, that the blood contains the life and its only legitimate use, therefore, is sacrificial, where the principle of life-for-life is demonstrated. If it is not put on the altar, it is to be discarded.

The fact that the fat (חֵלֶב, *cheilev*) also is put upon the altar is not because fat was considered a delicacy in the ANE. Rather, the fat represented abundance and well-being. Remember, for example, the seven fat cows in Pharaoh’s dream that represented seven years of plenty (Gen 41:25f). Note also that the same word (*cheilev*) is used to describe “wheat” in Deut 32:14, where the Hebrew literally has “the fat of the kidneys of wheat,” no doubt an allusion to the sacrificial prescriptions such as contained in our *parashah*. The point is that the “finest of wheat” is described using the word “fat.”

Moreover, in the Semitic mindset, the internal organs are the seat of one’s emotions. This is why Solomon can speak of “kidneys rejoicing” (Prov 23:16) or why John can speak of “closing up one’s inward parts” as an expression of being stingy (1Jn 3:17). The liver (כֶּבֶד, *kaveid*), being the heaviest organ (thus כֶּבֶד, with the basic meaning “to be heavy”), can be symbolic of one’s entire emotions: “My spirit is greatly troubled; My heart (literally, “liver”) is poured out on the earth... (Lam 2:11).

With this background, it is easier to understand why the inner organs of the animal along with the fat that covered them is offered on the altar. These represent the inner life of the offerer. Having symbolically designated the animal as his representative by placing his hands upon its head, the inner organs of the sacrifice represent the offerer’s own inner self—his true intentions and gratitude. The fat represents the abundance of life which he has enjoyed because of God’s provision. The blood that is dashed upon the sides of the altar represents the giving of life, reminding us that the well-being of the offerer is the result of deliverance (salvation) gained at the cost of life. (Note that the ordination offering for Aaron and his sons, which appears to be a type of peace offering, is specifically stated to make atonement, Ex 29:33.)

Thus, the *sh'lamim* or peace offering is a celebration of the life that has been given by God to His people, a life of abundance because it is lived in the scope of His very presence. As the fat of the sacrificial animal is put upon the flames of the altar, already consuming the burnt offering, the flames no doubt burst forth, symbolic of the joy and thanksgiving offered up to God for the life

He had imparted to His people. The fact that our *parashah* specifically includes the notice that this sacrifice was a “pleasing aroma to Adonai” (vv. 3, 16) makes it clear that God not only receives such a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, but that it is something in which He delights.

But the celebration of the peace offering is not only upward, it is also communal. The people of the community shared in eating the meat of the sacrifice, priest and non-priest alike. Even though the sacrifice is made by one individual, the whole community rejoices together in it. This is to remind us that no one in the community of the redeemed lives his or her life unto themselves. The life of one is cause for all to rejoice, even as the sorrow of one is cause for all to sorrow (cf. Rom 12:15).

The *haftarah* was obviously chosen on the basis of verbal similarities as well as similar themes. Verse 24 speaks of “the fat of your sacrifices” which no doubt has the *sh^elamim* in mind, while the entire pericope is dealing with the theme of sacrifice. But here the prophet is chastising the people because they have failed to bring the sacrifices to God. Why? Because the sacrifices were too great a burden upon them? No. In fact, God has laid no great burden upon Israel. Rather, they had burdened Him with their sin. Isaiah’s message is that Israel had taken for granted the life they had been given. Instead of bringing peace offerings to celebrate God’s goodness and grandeur, and the life they enjoyed because of His mercies, they were content to rely upon other nations and their gods for their present and future needs. In their affluence, they had forgotten that God is the only true source of life.

This is why we chose James 1:13–15 to accompany our Torah *parashah*, for in these verses James reminds us to take into full account that our lives are bound up with God and the salvation He has made for us through His Son, Yeshua. How often we go through our day, completing the tasks at hand, and fail to reckon with the fact that all we have and all that we are or hope to be, is the gift of God’s grace. The reason that we have breath and life itself is because God has granted them to us. Indeed, all that is good in our lives flows from the fountain of God’s goodness. On the one hand, it is easy to celebrate our physical health, our material comforts, and our friendships and family. But how often does the contemplation of our soul’s salvation move us to celebration—to offering open and abundant “peace offerings” in which all may participate in our joy of knowing God? Even in the midst of life’s troubles and difficulties, Israel was never to lose sight of the redemption God had made for them, a redemption that brought them into close and lasting friendship with the Almighty. Nor were they to take for granted that the fountain of all of life’s benefits was nothing more nor less than God’s own presence within their midst.

The same is true for us. Consider Paul’s declarative statement in Rom 5:1 – “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Yeshua Messiah.” Peace with God — that is the eternal status of all who have trusted in Yeshua for their salvation. Have we taken such peace for granted? Have we failed to celebrate the greatness of this peace? May our hearts be stirred to celebration on a daily basis!