

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE PURPOSE AND RELEVANCE  
OF THE PROHIBITION  
AGAINST EATING BLOOD

SUBMITTED TO DR. BELCHER  
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## I. Introduction

If the average person on Main Street were asked to list the top five most recognizable icons or elements in American culture, common answers might include apple pie, baseball, Broadway, Thanksgiving, Hollywood, or the Ford Model T. The odds are that “blood” would not be among the top fifty. The vast majority in the industrialized West likely do not encounter or even think about blood on a given day. Even healthcare providers, who are far more accustomed to seeing blood, dispose of it in conspicuously all-red bags indicating a biohazard is contained. Given the borderline-taboo status of blood in this culture, the thought of ingesting it likely strikes the Westerner as unpleasant or even unsafe. The Ancient Near East—and Israel, in particular—was much different. In a world where groceries were “hunted” as the norm, blood was ever present. The shedding of blood in animal sacrifices long predated the Levitical priesthood. Blood was a highly visible component of the ancient Israelite culture, playing an especially prominent role in worship.<sup>1</sup> The command to abstain from eating blood is one of the most often-repeated laws, occurring seven times in the Pentateuch. On one such occasion the command was repeated four times in a single instance (Deuteronomy 12:23-25 ESV).<sup>2</sup>

In some occurrences God provides a rationale for this commandment, explicit or implied. Scholarship has identified a number of theological and exegetical explanations for the blood prohibition.<sup>3</sup> The reasons given most explicitly in the text include the sanctity of life (by way

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<sup>1</sup> Johnny Serafani, “Atoning Blood: the Command Against Eating Blood,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 1 (2009): 38.

<sup>2</sup> John Currid, *Deuteronomy* (Webster: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 255.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the reasons listed in the chart which will be the focus of this paper, Matthew Henry offers the explanations that ingesting blood is unwholesome, hazardous to man’s health, greedy, and “barbarous and cruel” to the animals. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 22. As another example, some commentators see a possibility that in the context of laws on sacrifices, the blood prohibition alongside the fat prohibition could be focused on the idea that the best portion

of the sacredness of blood) and the designation of blood for atonement. These reasons are identified through the context of each occurrence, the meaning of the law in the text itself, and through the development of literary, theological and historical themes. Through examination of these three methods of identification, this paper will argue that the prohibition against eating blood is given for three primary reasons: 1) the sanctity of life, 2) the distinction of Israel from the other nations, and 3) the prominent designation of blood for the purpose of atonement.

## **II. Context**

This law occurs on seven distinct occasions in the following contexts: laws on sacrifices, prohibitions against pagan traditions, and the post-flood re-creation account. Each of these draws out a distinct reason for the law.

First, beginning in the reverse order of the above, there is one occurrence of this law in the context of the historical post-flood re-creation account. The beginning of Genesis 9 stresses the sacredness of blood due to its status as an essence of life which, as we know from the preceding Genesis creation account, comes exclusively from God.<sup>4</sup> As God is—for the first time in recorded history—permitting man to eat animals, he stresses that this permission is subject to the restriction on consuming the animals' blood. "But you shall not eat the flesh with its life, that is its blood" (Genesis 9:4). In this immediate context, having established the sanctity of blood, God moves on in the succeeding verses to distinguish the life of man to be especially sacred. Because man is the only creature made in the image of God, the

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of the animal is reserved for God. Christopher H. Wright, "Leviticus" in *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition*, Gordon J. Wenham et al., eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 126.

<sup>4</sup> Mark W. Chavalas, Victor Harold Matthews and John H. Walton. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 39; Gordon J. Wenham, D. A. Carson et al., eds, "Genesis" in *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 67.

permission to consume meat is also subject to the limitation that no man is permitted to circumvent the protection of God over a man's life and that doing so "will require a reckoning for the life of the man" (Genesis 9:5b).<sup>5</sup> The immediate and historical context of this first occurrence of this law indicates that one reason for the blood prohibition is to observe the sacredness of life and the particular inviolability of human life.

Second, one occurrence of this law is found distinctly in the context of laws addressing the traditions of the pagan nations surrounding Israel. "You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:26). These laws looked ahead towards Israel's dwelling in the land and the need for them to be holy, set apart from the other nations.<sup>6</sup> Some of these traditions do not seem to have been inherently sinful. Bonar argues based on the use of the Hebrew preposition *ʿal* ("with") that the heathen tradition of eating "around" blood is not even in view.<sup>7</sup> Rather, he believes 19:26 to be dealing with the requirement to drain blood, which would indicate the reason for the law in this context is unrelated to the avoidance of pagan rituals.<sup>8</sup> However, the context strongly suggests this exegesis is unnecessarily splitting hairs.<sup>9</sup> Both consuming blood and ritualistically eating "with" or "around" blood are prohibited, based on the context. The placing of this law directly adjacent to other pagan traditions with no indicated transition whatsoever signals that being set apart from the other nations is in view. In this occurrence of the subject law, the

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<sup>5</sup> Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, 132-133.

<sup>7</sup> This pagan tradition will be further explained and explored in the section on thematic development.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Bonar. *Leviticus* (London: First Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 352.

<sup>9</sup> Hartley, John E. *Leviticus*, eds. Barker, Glenn, David Hubbard and John Watts, vol. 4 of *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 319-320.

historical and grammatical context indicate that a second reason for the blood prohibition is for Israel to be distinct and separate from the other nations.

Third, and most significantly, the context of each of the remaining occurrences is among laws on sacrifices. In this context, the focus is on the work of atonement brought about by the shedding of blood. The prohibition in Leviticus 3:17 closes a section on peace offerings.<sup>10</sup> The law in Leviticus 7:26-27 comes within an elaboration and reiteration of laws on peace offerings.<sup>11</sup> Both Leviticus 17:10-12 and Deuteronomy 12:16, 23-28 deal with the location and methodology of sacrifice.<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 15:23 clarifies that the blood prohibition on sacrifices also applies to foods that are not eligible to be sacrificed.<sup>13</sup> The most prominent and most thoroughly-explained occurrence of this law is Leviticus 17:10-12, in which the law, its rationale, and the consequence for disobedience are all explicitly stated. This comes on the heels of numerous laws regarding how Israel is permitted to approach God, “culminating in the great Day of Atonement.”<sup>14</sup> This placement and the explicit reference to atonement in 17:11, strongly suggest that the concept of atonement is in play when the law occurs in the context of laws on sacrifices. Taken together, the various occurrences of the blood prohibition in the broad context of laws on sacrifices indicate that a third reason for this law is reverence for that particular designation of blood which is atonement.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Hess, Walter Kaiser Jr., and John Sailhamer. *Genesis-Leviticus*, eds. David Garland and Tremper Longman III (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*; 13 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 1:609; Bonar, *Leviticus*, 52-63.

<sup>11</sup> Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* 120; Hess, Kaiser Jr., and Sailhamer, *Genesis-Leviticus*, 1:638-41.

<sup>12</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 34; Samuel Driver, *Deuteronomy*, eds. Briggs, Charles, Samuel Driver and Alfred Plummer, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: Third Edition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 135-149.

<sup>13</sup> Chavalas, Matthews, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 34.

### **III. Meaning and Thematic Development**

Having demonstrated how the various contexts of the blood prohibition point towards the three primary rationales for the command, we move on to examine how the original readers and hearers would have understood this law and its purposes. What did this law mean in its simplest sense? To whom and in what setting did the law apply? Were there consequences or purification provisions for disobedience? In addition, there are historical, literary and theological themes embedded and developed in the blood prohibition which are worth noting.

#### **A. The Particulars of the Prohibition Against Eating Blood**

At a basic level, what action is being prohibited? When all occurrences of this law are considered together, blood was not to be drunk, and meat could not be eaten that had not been drained of blood.<sup>15</sup> Some have argued that the drinking of blood is not in view, at least in Leviticus 17:10-12, as the Hebrew *אָכַל* *ā·kāl* (“eat”) is generally used to refer to eating of solid foods.<sup>16</sup> Others see the commandment in Genesis 9:4 as simply a requirement to drain blood from meat prior to eating it.<sup>17</sup> However, in each occurrence of this law the focus of the prohibition is on the blood and not on the meat itself. Further, Leviticus 17:13 stipulates how to deal with the blood of a hunted animal, and the instructions conflict with the idea that the draining requirement is the emphasis. “Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth” (Leviticus 17:13). At a minimum, this instance of the blood prohibition requires that the blood be not only drained but covered, and

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 246-47; Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co, 2002), 335.

<sup>16</sup> Baruch Schwartz. "The Prohibitions Concerning the 'Eating' of Blood in Leviticus 17." *JSOT: Supplemental Series* 125 (1991): 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> Chavalas, Matthews, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 39.

to instead consume it in any way—whether by drinking it or eating of the undrained meat—would be disobedience. Deuteronomy 15:23 applies this law both to animals set apart for sacrifice and to blemished animals not suitable for sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

Consequences for disobedience are severe. Both Leviticus 7:26-27 and 17:10 indicate the disobedient person will be “cut off from among his people.” In 17:10, God also states, “I will set my face against that person who eats blood.” Some see this as execution,<sup>19</sup> but others argue the meaning is not so limited and could imply other disciplinary measures, possibly referring to future judgment at the resurrection of the dead.<sup>20</sup> At any rate, having the face of God set against a person marks the disobedient individual to be the enemy of God, which would certainly lead to death, “for none can withstand being set against His face”<sup>21</sup> (see also Psalm 1:5, Joel 2:11, Jeremiah 5:30 and Revelation 6:17).

### **B. Literary Theme: Blood = Life**

The literary theme of equating blood with life is developed through multiple occurrences of this commandment. This “blood = life”<sup>22</sup> theme underscores that one purpose of the blood prohibition is a regard for the sanctity of life. This theme can be traced back to Cain and Abel. “And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Genesis 4:10-11). God connects this theme in the command to Noah in a more explicit manner, saying “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a

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<sup>18</sup> Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 292; Chavalas, Matthews, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 42.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 245-246.

<sup>21</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 42.

<sup>22</sup> Chavalas, Matthews, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 163.

reckoning...Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:4-6). Interestingly, Calvin sees all the law in Exodus through Deuteronomy to be tied back to the Decalogue. Citing the blood = life theme from Genesis 9, he writes, “I have deemed it appropriate to annex all the passages in which God commands the people to abstain from blood, to the Sixth Commandment.”<sup>23</sup> This premise of blood = life is also explicitly stated in Leviticus 17:11 and Deuteronomy 12:23. The theme continues throughout the whole of Scripture. We read that “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). Even in the Apocalypse we see the Great Prostitute who is “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Revelation 17:6). In each case, the death of Jesus or of the saints is intimately linked with the loss of blood. Wenham notes regarding Leviticus 17:11,

“At a basic level this is obvious: when an animal loses its blood, it dies. Its blood, therefore, gives it life. By refraining from eating flesh with blood in it, man is honoring life. To eat blood is to despise life. This idea emerges most clearly in Gen. 9:4ff., where the sanctity of human life is associated with not eating blood. Thus one purpose of this law is the inculcation of respect for all life.”<sup>24</sup>

### **C. Historical Theme: Danger of Heathen Traditions**

From a historical standpoint, there is strong evidence that at least some of the blood prohibition texts have the practices of pagan nations in view. The laws on the proper place of sacrifices in Leviticus 17:1-9, immediately preceding the blood prohibition, refer to one such tradition explicitly.<sup>25</sup> “So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore” (Leviticus 17:7). Additionally, as noted above, Leviticus 19:26-28 distinctly includes the command alongside known pagan traditions: “You shall not eat any

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<sup>23</sup> John Calvin. *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Calvin’s Commentaries; 22 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co, 2005), 3:30.

<sup>24</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 245-46.

<sup>25</sup> Shaul Bar, “You Shall Not Eat With the Blood.” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 50 no. 3 (2022): 160-163.



flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.” Divination through consumption of blood—or eating food in the presence of blood—is a known historical practice of the Sabeans. The Sabeans viewed blood as the “food of the spirits,” and believed that eating blood allowed them to commune with the spirits in hopes of discerning future events and omens. Others found the idea of consuming blood to be unpleasant and would instead drain the blood from hunted animals into a pot and dine as a group around the blood, thinking that they were dining with the spirits and would achieve a similar result.<sup>26</sup> This view of the blood prohibition is corroborated by the Lord’s indictment of Israel in Ezekiel 33:25, saying, “You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you possess the land?”<sup>27</sup> Calvin theorizes that this command—in all post-Genesis occurrences—is tied to separation from the nations in some sense, reasoning that as post-flood mankind continued to decline, “It is probable that all nations neglected God’s command and permitted themselves a universal license on this point,” and that this could have even “prevailed among the family of Shem.”<sup>28</sup> Calvin’s tone here seems to indicate he is aware of the conjecture involved in this view, but the point remains that understanding this historical theme of the heathen traditions and the need for separation of God’s people helps us understand a major purpose of the blood prohibition: to prevent Israel from becoming like the other nations.

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<sup>26</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 362.

<sup>27</sup> Chavalas, Matthews, and Walton, *Bible Background Commentary*, 721.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 3:29.

#### **D. Theological Theme: Sacredness of the Atoning Blood**

An obvious but crucial theme developed through this law is the sacredness of blood and its role in atonement, most conspicuously described in Leviticus 17:1-16. Having dealt with an entire sacrificial system in the preceding chapters, God is now giving very specific instructions on how to deal with blood when it is encountered prior to these sacrifices. Serafani summarizes, “Blood has been the essential element regarding every subject before chapter 17, and it continues to be essential in the rest of the book.”<sup>29</sup>

As stated in the introduction, blood was encountered by ancient Israel in a way with which we in the West cannot identify. Hunting was a reality of life to such an extent that purification and cleansing rituals were provided in Leviticus 17:13-16 dealing with inevitable situations where an animal would be hunted or found dead. Immediately prior to these rituals is the explicit prohibition against eating blood, which specifies that “it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Leviticus 17:11b). During what might have been considered a mundane event of life, Israelite hunters were to be reminded of the sacredness of blood and its designated use for atonement.<sup>30</sup>

Traced back to the first sacrifice in Eden, blood was also prominent in Israel’s history, from both historical and symbolic standpoints. They certainly would have been familiar with this sacrifice and with the subsequent Genesis reference to Abel’s blood. Noah’s post-flood sacrifice involved the shedding of blood. Patriarchal history, particularly that of Abraham, is full of altar-building accounts. The plagues of the Exodus were bookended by substantial amounts of blood. At this point in Israel’s history, “the shedding of blood would become the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 37-38.

summary of Israelite life, involving everything from their daily meals to the daily sacrifices.”<sup>31</sup>

Stemming from the “blood = life” paradigm, a key part of the atonement theme which is particularly developed in Leviticus 17 is the concept that atonement involves taking of one life for another. When blood is poured out, it is able to atone for the life of another because it represents life being taken.<sup>32</sup> Leviticus 17:11 could not be clearer that blood = life, that it is given by God for the purpose of atonement, and that the blood itself—the life—makes atonement for Israel’s lives. The word “atonement” in this passage, כָּפַר (*kā·pār*), is used “as a technical term for the application of blood on the altar for burnt offering.”<sup>33</sup> It carried the idea of a payment of ransom. When combined with the phrase “for your lives” it indicates that those offering the sacrifice were “ransomed from death by the rite of atonement” and were qualified—assuming no other disqualifying factors were present—for entry into the presence of God. Through various methods of contact, the blood purified the altar and the priests (Exodus 29:35-37, Leviticus 8:15) and enabled them to perform a blood rite which would atone for the lives of the congregation of Israel.<sup>34</sup> Blood was reserved for a function of utmost importance, making it most sacred. To eat it would be to disregard its sacredness and distinction, which was worthy of a commandment repeated numerous times so that the people would make no mistake in understanding its importance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 39.

<sup>32</sup> Bonar, *Leviticus*, 325.

<sup>33</sup> John W. Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling: Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews.” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33 no. 3 (1999): 129.

<sup>34</sup> Kleinig, “Blood for Sprinkling,” 129-130; Schwartz, “Prohibitions,” 50-55.

<sup>35</sup> Currid, *Deuteronomy*, 255.

#### IV. Jesus and the Blood Prohibition

All purposes of this law dealt with in this paper were once-for-all perfectly fulfilled by Jesus. The Apostle Peter notes that Jesus embodies the sanctity of life as its Author (Acts 3:15).<sup>36</sup> Peter would later describe the blood of Jesus as not just sacred but “precious,” providing a priceless payment of ransom as the imperishable life of the Son of God (1 Peter 1:18-19). The shedding of his blood enables his followers to put off the practices of the ungodly: the modern-day counterparts to the pagan traditions of the Ancient Near East. We have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers” (1 Peter 1:18). We are saved to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” We are called to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of [our] mind” (Romans 12:2). The sacrificial blood of Christ has made this holy living possible.

The most significant purpose of the blood prohibition fulfilled by Jesus is undoubtedly the once-for-all atonement. The book of Hebrews itself is among the most extensive of commentaries on the blood prohibition and its fulfillment. To the author, the blood rite in Leviticus pointed to Christ’s work of atonement. The atonement worked by the blood through the Levitical priests prefigured the better—and efficacious—atonement worked by Christ in the heavenly sanctuaries.<sup>37</sup> Hebrews is abundantly clear on the significance of Christ’s blood in particular, addressing the blood in the context of the Levitical high priests’ work where they entered the most holy place.

“Into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people...But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that

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<sup>36</sup> Bonar, *Leviticus*, 325.

<sup>37</sup> Victor C. Pfitzner. *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 118-119.

is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:7, 11-14).

The offering of the life of Jesus—worked atonement in a once-for all way which the blood of animal sacrifices could never do. These former sacrifices were sufficient for the temporary earthly sanctuary, but the “heavenly things” required a better sacrifice, and Jesus provided this in a final, eternal sense (Hebrews 9:23), fulfilling the atoning work of blood prefigured by the Day of Atonement.<sup>38</sup>

The “hard saying” of Jesus in John 6:53 is worth addressing at this point: “So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day’” (John 6:53-54). Many in the audience were offended by this as, no doubt, the Jews were keenly aware of the often-repeated OT prohibition against eating blood. While the need to reject a fully literal interpretation of this saying of Jesus is obvious, some interpreters have asked whether Jesus had the future sacrament of communion in view.<sup>39</sup> Roman Catholics appeal to this saying when defending the doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>40</sup> There are many exegetical reasons in many other Scriptures to reject this doctrine which are outside the scope of this paper, but with regard to this passage in question, there is an interpretation far preferable. Notably, John does not

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<sup>38</sup> Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 41-42.

<sup>39</sup> Manfred Brauch, F.F. Bruce, Peter Davis, and Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 500.

<sup>40</sup> Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “Accept His ‘Hard Saying.’ Jesus told us to eat His body and drink His blood--and He wasn’t being metaphorical,” *Our Sunday Visitor* 93 no. 7 (Jun 13, 2004): 14.

record an account of the Lord's Supper, unlike his Synoptic counterparts. This hard saying of Jesus in John 6:53 is better understood as articulating the same theological truth behind the Lord's Supper which Jesus articulated in the Synoptics' accounts. John the Apostle, whose style often included recording sayings of Jesus with a spiritual meaning misunderstood by the unbelieving hearers, was doing just this in John 6:53, and this saying is best understood as John's version of "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).<sup>41</sup>

## **V. Application**

As argued above, the purposes of the prohibition against eating blood were to emphasize the sanctity of life, to prevent assimilation to the pagan traditions of Israel's neighbors, and to honor the sacred designation of blood for the working of atonement. The purposes behind this law are fully fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. However, this law, unlike nearly all laws in Torah, was specifically addressed in the NT church in such a way that it was indicated to be a continuing obligation for at least some period of time. In some areas the church continued to observe this into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> An understanding of the full passage, the culture, and the writings of Paul are helpful in discerning the relevance of this command today.

Believing Jews of the day had been raised to understand and respect the writings of Moses, and the reading of these Scriptures was rightly practiced in the first century Church as it is today (Acts 15:21). As James reasoned in his Jerusalem Council remarks, Gentile disregard of a so often-repeated law by eating meat from which blood had not been drained

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<sup>41</sup> Manfred Brauch, F.F. Bruce, Peter Davis, and Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 498-500; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 247-48.

<sup>42</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 248; Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 32.

would have surely confused and even offended these Jewish believers. This was a first century universal Church in its infancy—its most vulnerable state—as it learned how to function under the authority of the Apostles without the forthcoming NT canon. Jew and Gentile were, for the first time, learning not just to co-exist but to co-labor in love toward one another. In such a state, the Apostles saw prudence and wisdom in instructing Gentile believers to observe this prominent OT command for the time-being.<sup>43</sup> This understanding is corroborated by Paul in his authorization of eating all things, provided there was no offense to the brothers or misunderstanding by onlooking unbelievers (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, 10).<sup>44</sup>

If the blood prohibition only survived the once-for-all atonement for a brief period of cultural relevance, what then does this mean for the universal Church today? Once again, the purposes of the law guide us in answering this question.

First, God’s people today are certainly called to continue honoring the sanctity of life. All life is God-given, and Christians should oppose and work against practices that diminish its value. Believers should surely care for the lives of the fatherless, the widowed, the aged and the unborn. The sacredness of the blood of animals in Genesis 9:4 indicates the even greater sacredness of the blood and life of mankind, made in the image of God.<sup>45</sup>

Second, while many of the Ancient Near Eastern practices of divination and omens through the use of blood are—particularly in West—culturally irrelevant today, the importance of separation from the sinful practices of the ungodly remains an unequivocal commandment to followers of Jesus. The abstinence from eating blood symbolized Israel’s

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<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 32; Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 43.

<sup>44</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 32; Ross, *Holiness to the Lord*, 337.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 29-30.

separateness from the nations, but it does not serve this purpose today. However, the call remains to “Be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 19:2, 1 Peter 1:16).<sup>46</sup>

Finally, this commandment serves as exhortation to the Church to ponder and show reverence to the once-for-all atonement and the symbolism of it contained in Communion. Through various rites of splashing, sprinkling and daubing, the OT blood served to provide acceptance for the people into God’s presence, the cleansing of the altar, and the consecration of the priests. The blood of Jesus today does everything for God’s people that the blood of goats and bulls did for ancient Israel and the Levitical priesthood. He has atoned for our sins through the shedding of his blood (Hebrews 7:27). We are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus that has been taken into the heavenly temple, providing us with access to God and enabling us to serve God with confidence (Hebrews 9:14, 10:22, 12:24).<sup>47</sup>

As a practical example of this last application, God’s people can consider our approach and focus as we observe Communion. The focus is most often on the gift of the body of Christ broken for us, and there is sometimes an imbalance between this and the significance placed on the blood by the minister and his fellow worshipers.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this stems from a similar imbalance between the comfortability with blood of the West and of ancient Israel. However, the sacredness and the eternal efficacy of the atoning blood of Jesus deserves equal weight in our thoughts and heart devotion during this sacrament. Let us examine our hearts and consider whether a modification of our approach and heart worship through the sacraments would increase our gratitude for the gift of the Father, the work of the Son, and the washing regeneration by the Spirit.

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<sup>46</sup> Serafani, “Atoning Blood,” 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> Kleinig, “Blood for Sprinkling,” 129-133.

<sup>48</sup> Kleinig, “Blood for Sprinkling,” 133.



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