

Numbers 18:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But the firstling of a cow, or the firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they are holy: thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shalt burn their fat for an offering made by fire, for a sweet savour unto the LORD.

Analysis

But the firstling of a cow, or the firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they are holy: thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shalt burn their fat for an offering made by fire, for a sweet savour unto the LORD. Unlike human firstborn (verse 15), firstborn clean animals were qodesh (קֹדֶשׁ, "holy")—consecrated for sacrifice, not redemption. The three species—cattle (shor, שׁוֹר), sheep (keseh, כֶּשֶׂה), and goats (ez, עֵז)—comprised primary sacrificial animals, representing Israel's pastoral economy.

"Thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar" followed standard sacrificial procedure—blood representing life poured out in death, applied to the altar as atonement. "Burn their fat" (helbo taqtir, הִלְבּוֹ תִקְטֹרֵט) meant offering the choicest portions—internal fat, kidneys, and other organs—as smoke (isheh, אֶשָּׁה) ascending to God. "Sweet savour" (reach nichoach, רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ, literally "aroma of satisfaction") is anthropomorphic language indicating divine acceptance and pleasure in the offering.

The distinction—human firstborns redeemed, animal firstborns sacrificed—taught that acceptable substitution requires appropriate categories. Animals could substitute for humans in death because God accepted them; but only God

incarnate could ultimately satisfy justice for human sin. Christ, the Lamb of God, became our firstborn sacrifice (Colossians 1:15, 18), both God and man, the only sufficient substitute.

Historical Context

Firstborn clean animals were brought to the sanctuary throughout the year as they were born. Exodus 13:13 and Deuteronomy 15:19-23 provide additional regulations. Unlike other sacrifices which worshippers could eat portions of, firstborn animal sacrifices gave meat to priests (verse 18), making them part of priestly support. This practice continued throughout temple periods. The prohibition against redeeming these animals (unlike unclean animals' firstborn) emphasized their complete consecration. Archaeological evidence of ancient Israelite animal husbandry confirms that cattle, sheep, and goats dominated livestock holdings, making these firstborns a substantial contribution to priestly support.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does the blood and fat of firstborn animals point forward to Christ's sacrifice of His life (blood) and best (fat) for our redemption?
2. What does God's 'sweet savour' pleasure in these sacrifices teach about how He receives Christ's sacrifice on our behalf?
3. How should the principle of giving God firstborn clean animals—the natural increase of your flocks—inform your stewardship of income and investment returns?

Interlinear Text

אֵן	בְּכֹרֹת	שֹׁרֹת	אֵן	בְּכֹרֹת	כֹּףֹשׁבֹת	אֵן
H389	But the firstling	of a cow	H176	But the firstling	of a sheep	H176
	H1060	H7794		H1060	H3775	
בְּכֹרֹת	עֵז	לֹא	תִפְדֶּה	קֹדֶשׁ	הֵם	אֵת
But the firstling	of a goat	H3808	thou shalt not redeem	they are holy	H1992	H853
H1060	H5795		H6299	H6944		
דָּמָם	תִּזְרֹק	עַל	הַמִּזְבֵּחַ	וְאֵת	חֵלְבֵם	
their blood	thou shalt sprinkle	H5921	upon the altar	H853	their fat	
H1818	H2236		H4196		H2459	
תִּקְטֹרֶה	אֶשֶׁה	לִי	נִיחֹם	לִיהוָה:		
and shalt burn	for an offering made by fire	savour	for a sweet	unto the LORD		
H6999	H801	H7381	H5207	H3068		

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