

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 (קָדֵשׁ, "holy")—consecrated for sacrifice, not redemption. The three species—cattle (shor, שׂוֹר), sheep (keseh, קֵשׁ), and goats (ez, עֵזׂ)—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, חֶלְבּוֹ תָקִטֵּר) meant offering the choicest portions—internal fat, kidneys, and other organs—as smoke (isheh, אִשְׁהָ) ascending to God. "Sweet savour" (reach nichoach, רָיחַ נִיחָחַ, 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

Psalm 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

אָוֶן כִּי שָׁבַב
H389 But the firstling of a cow H176 But the firstling of a sheep H176
H1060 H7794 H1060 H3775

אַתָּה מְלֵךְ כָּל־עָד
But the firstling of a goat H3808 thou shalt not redeem they are holy H1992 H853
H1060 H5795 H6299 H6944

סָלַב מִזְבֵּחַ עַל־מִזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת־דָם־ם
their blood thou shalt sprinkle H5921 upon the altar H853 their fat
H1818 H2236 H4196 H2459

לְיְהוָה: נִיחַת לְרִיחַת יְרֵאָה
and shalt burn for an offering made by fire H801 savour for a sweet unto the LORD
H6999 H7381 H5207 H3068

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