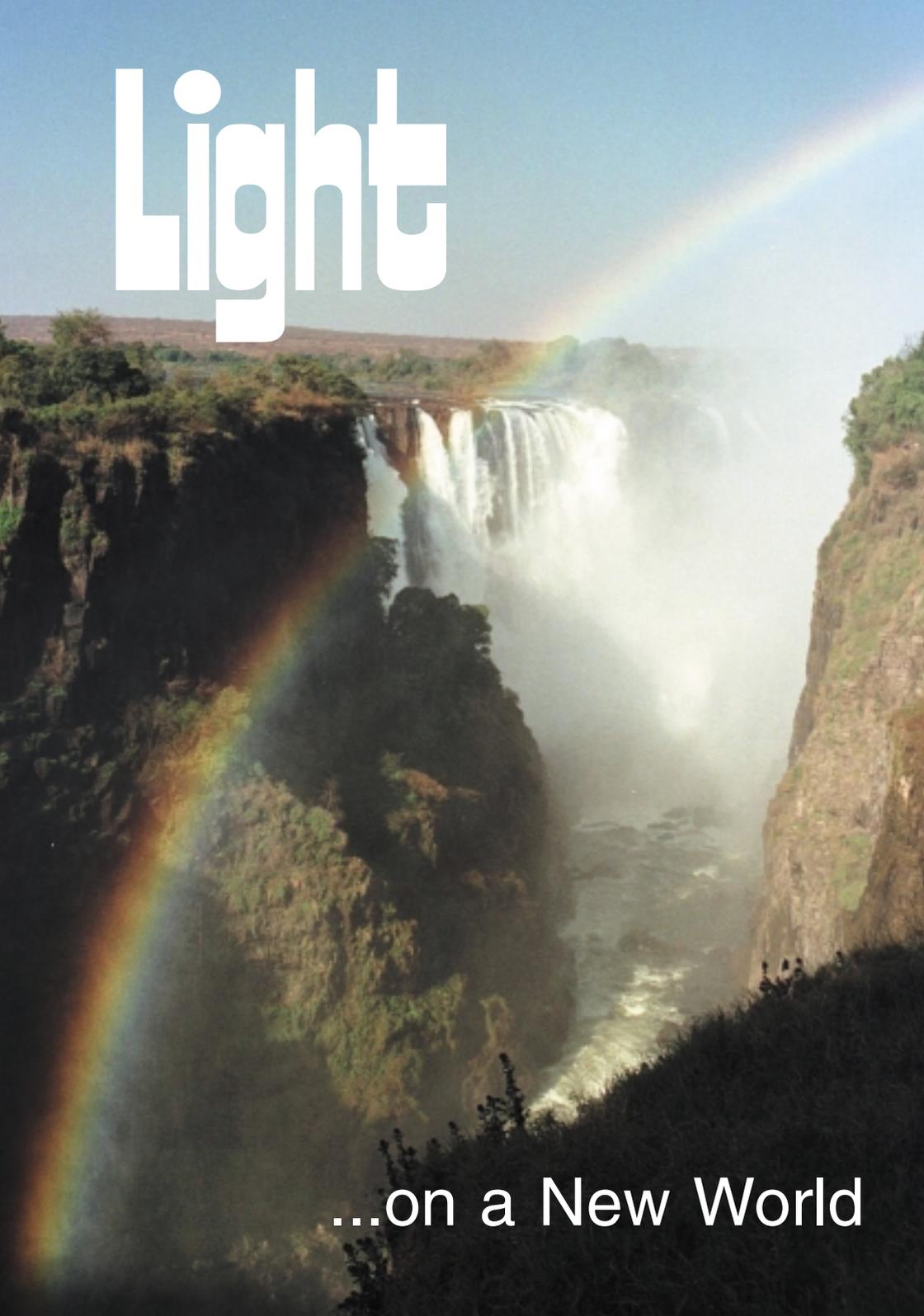


Light

A wide waterfall cascading into a deep gorge, with two rainbows visible in the sky and mist rising from the water.

...on a New World

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Editor: Colin Dryland

Technical Editor: Ken Dennis

Correspondence Secretary: Tony Austin

Publications Secretary: Matt Goddon

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Cover picture: Rainbow over Victoria Falls

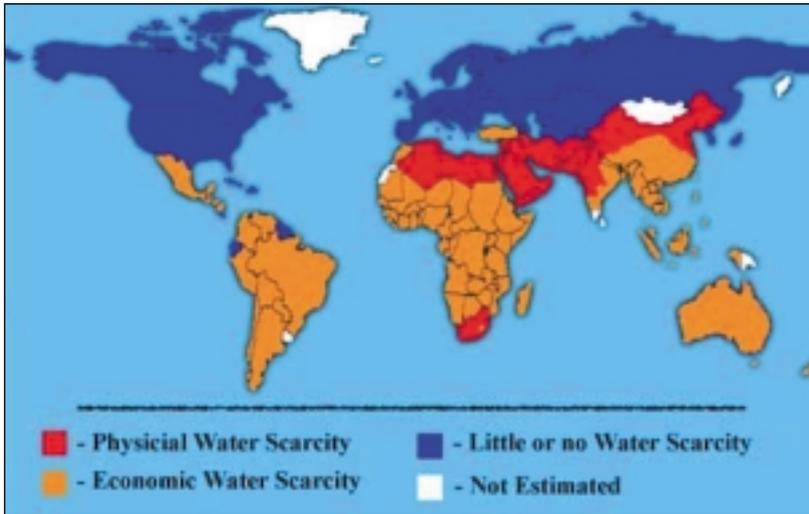


Editorial

THE WATER RESTRICTIONS which are currently affecting London and the South of England are a reminder that water is a precious commodity and essential to human life. It's something that many people take for granted – we just turn on the tap and there it is – an abundant supply of fresh water when we need it.

However in many parts of the world fresh clean water is not freely available and this leads to many people dying from diseases brought about by drinking contaminated water. The effects of prolonged drought in countries like Ethiopia and the Sudan and parts of Central Africa have resulted in failed crops and starvation for many. Indeed some of our overseas readers will have first-hand experience of the suffering caused by both chronic water shortage and water contamination.

Water is a unique substance with remarkable properties. It is the only substance on earth found naturally in three forms – solid, liquid and gas. You can survive a month without food but no more than a week without water. The human body is comprised of 75% water at birth and our brain tissue is 85% water. We lose almost half a litre of water every day just breathing and up to two litres in less than an hour when exercising. The need to replenish our water intake from both food and drink is therefore vital to our continued existence.



Map of World showing areas of water scarcity

The unique properties of water lead us naturally to consider God the Creator of life. The Bible tells us that *'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' [Genesis 1.1]*. Life sustaining water is part of that Creation and our environment has been designed with this in mind. It's an amazing fact that two-thirds of the earth's surface is water and this provides the ideal conditions for us to live in. One of the earliest books of the Bible describes how the earth's supply of fresh water is maintained:

'Behold, God is great, and we do not know him...he draws up drops of water, which distil as rain from the mist, which the clouds drop down and pour abundantly on man. Indeed, can anyone understand the spreading of clouds, the thunder from his canopy? Look, he scatters his light upon it, and covers the depths of the sea. For by these he judges the peoples; He gives food in abundance.'

[Job 36.26-31]

This passage tells us about God’s creative work and his overall control of all that happens in the natural world. This is confirmed by the words of the Apostle Paul: *‘he gives to all life, breath and all things’ [Acts 17.25]*. Yes, God provides us with the right environment to live in and water is an essential part of that environment – but it doesn’t keep us alive for ever! All living things eventually decay and die.

However, if we first acknowledge the existence of the Creator and our utter dependence on him we shall be taking that first vital step towards a new life. In the Bible, precious water is used as a symbol of our need for God. Food and water can keep us alive for 70 or 80 years or more but God offers us food and drink of a different kind. God appeals to us through the prophet Isaiah:

‘Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Incline your ear, and come to me. Hear, and your soul shall live...’ [Isaiah 55.1,3].



Jesus and the woman of Samaria (see page 4)

In these words is God's offer of salvation to all who will listen to Him – life for evermore.

In the New Testament, there is recorded an incident which teaches us the same lesson. A weary traveller was sitting by a well in Samaria. A woman came to the well to fill her water pot and the traveller asked her for a drink. This request took the woman by surprise because she was a Samaritan, a people hated by the Jews - and he was a Jew! The traveller was of course, Jesus and he used this situation to teach a great lesson:

‘...Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life’ [*John 4.13,14*].

Jesus demonstrated to this woman that God's offer of life is centred in Jesus himself – the provider of that life-giving water. But like that Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well, we have to do something about it - we must draw water from the well of God's Word. We must drink it freely in order to understand its message and act upon it.

The purpose of this magazine is to draw your attention to the true hope of everlasting life found in God's Word, the Bible. It is our sincere hope that you will leave no stone unturned but respond to God's gracious offer and partake of this water of life.

Editor

Bible Characters

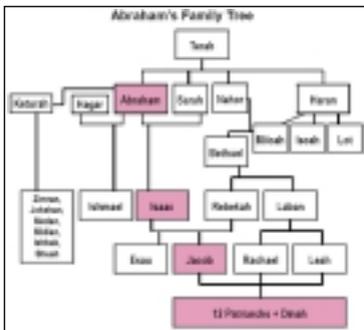
Jacob and Esau

DO YOU HAVE any brothers or sisters? Do you have a good relationship? When you were growing up, did you get along well or were there rivalries and tensions? Did you find yourself competing for your parents' love and attention? If this was the case, then you are not alone.

I expect most people have heard of the term 'sibling rivalry.' For most families it is just a part of growing up and something they grow out of, but for a few the tensions go deeper and even in adult life, the rivalry continues. Such was the case with Jacob and Esau.

BACKGROUND

You may know the story of Abraham and how he was called out of Haran by God and told to go to the land of Caanan. There he had a son called Isaac. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twin sons, Jacob and Esau.



Children are important in any culture, but with this family, there was extra importance being placed on these sons because of the promises that God made to Abraham and Isaac: *'...Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him'* [Genesis 18.18].

Obviously this could only happen if there were children. For many years Abraham and his wife Sarah could not have children, which made Isaac all the more precious when

he was born. Likewise, Isaac and Rebekah were unable to have children to start with [Genesis 25.21], so when Rebekah finally conceived, expectations were running high.

JACOB AND ESAU



Isaac blesses Jacob

What do we know about the two sons of Isaac? What do we know about their personalities? Indeed, what do we know about the personalities of their parents, Isaac and Rebekah? Does the story have a hero or a villain? Or are we being given a glimpse into a real family of real human beings with their fallible human natures?

We know that these accounts are recorded in the Bible for our guidance and yet we must also remember the commandment of Christ: *'Judge not, that you be not judged'* [Matt 7.1]. These are not academic case studies but real people and I would suggest that we should not judge them any more that we should judge one another. With this in mind, let us turn to where we first meet the twins.

And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.

Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

[Genesis 25.25-28]

The name Esau means 'hairy' and it was simply a description of his appearance. The name Jacob, on the other hand was given more because of his personality than his appearance. It means 'supplanter' – someone who would oust or take the place of another. If we were running in a race and grabbed someone's heel, there is a good chance that the other runner would fall over and we could take their place or supplant them. As we proceed, we will see that the name is also prophetic, because it tells in advance the sort of person that Jacob would be.

We can see that Esau was '*a man of the field*' - someone who liked being out in the country hunting. Jacob on the other hand preferred to stay around the camp. It seems hard to believe that they were twins. It should also be noted that Isaac and Rebekah both played favourites, which must have added to the tension and rivalry. Isaac's reason for preferring Esau was the game he caught and prepared. It seems that both Isaac and Esau were undone by their love of good food.

On one fateful day, Jacob was in the camp, doing the cooking and Esau had been out in the field all day.

'Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary". Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this

day”. And Esau said, “Look, I am about to die; so what profit shall this birthright be to me?” Then Jacob said, “Swear to me as of this day”. So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob’

[Genesis 25.29-33].

If we examine the actions of these two brothers, what do we find? Jacob is always looking for ways to get what he wants. There is no reason why he should have refused to give his brother some stew. If we think of the hospitality given to total strangers in the Bible, surely Jacob should have given some food to his brother without conditions. Esau on the other hand, seems to be over-reacting and perhaps his objective is to get his brother to serve him.

When Rebekah was pregnant with the twins, the Scripture tells us that *‘the children struggled together within her’* [Genesis 25.22]. Here, years later, things had not changed.

It is interesting to consider whether the selling of the birthright was legally binding. There is a 15th Century BC clay tablet from Nuzi, an ancient trade centre in Assyria, where a man named Tupkitilla transfers his inheritance rights to a grove, over to his brother in exchange for three sheep. This shows that one brother could sell inherited property to another. Neither Esau nor Isaac appeared to question the fact that Jacob had obtained the birthright (see Genesis 27.36, 37).

JACOB’S BLESSING

If we return now to Genesis chapter 27 and Isaac’s request for some venison, we wonder what was going on behind the scenes.

‘So Rebekah spoke to Jacob her son, saying, ‘Indeed I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, ‘Bring me game and make savoury food for me, that I may eat it and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.’ Go now to the flock and bring me from

there two choice kids of the goats, and I will make savoury food from them for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall take it to your father, that he may eat it, and that he may bless you before his death' [Genesis 27.6,9].

This shows us two things; it shows us how important these blessings were thought to be in those days. Also, we are given an insight into the mind of Rebekah. When she became pregnant, God told her: *'Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.'* [Genesis 25.23]

Rebekah knew that Esau the elder brother would serve Jacob the younger. That was undoubtedly God's intention. It was always going to happen. The mother and son would have been wiser to wait for God to bring it about in His own time and in this is a lesson. God is in control and doesn't make mistakes.

The length to which mother and son went to deceive Isaac is incredible. To our minds, perhaps, the placing of the goatskin on Jacob's hands may seem far-fetched, but what we don't know is the extent of Isaac's failing health or the hairiness of Esau! The account continues:

'...Isaac said to him, "Come near now and kiss me, my son. Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mothers' sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!"' [Genesis 27.26,28, 29]

So this was the blessing that Rebekah had been so desperate for Jacob to get.

ESAU'S BLESSING

Then we know from the account that Esau returned from his hunt and prepared a meal for his father. Is this out of obedience to his father or out of anticipation of the blessing he would receive?

‘He also had made savoury food, and brought it to his father, and said to his father, “Let my father arise and eat of his son’s game, that your soul may bless me”. And his father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” So he said, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau”. Then Isaac trembled exceedingly, and said, “Who? Where is the one who hunted game and brought it to me? I ate all of it before you came, and I have blessed him - and indeed he shall be blessed.”’ [*Genesis 27. 31-33*]

It seems that even though Jacob gained the blessing through deceit, it was still valid and could not be taken from him. It is clear from Isaac’s reaction when he discovers the deception, that he was totally unaware that he was pronouncing a blessing on the wrong person.

But this is more than the blessing of a father to a son. It is a kind of spoken and binding prophecy that comes from the Lord himself, spoken through Isaac as a spokesman to the person God intended to bless. We can see other examples later in Genesis. Isaac’s blessing of Jacob and Esau was in one sense not his to give.

‘When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me – even me also, O my father!” But he said, “Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.” And Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and

now look, he has taken away my blessing!” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

[Genesis 27.34-36]

Isaac could not give the same blessing again, so he did what he could for his favourite son.

‘Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: “Behold, your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck” *[Genesis 27.39,40]*.

ESAU’S CHARACTER

From a human perspective, Esau had every right to be upset. His brother had robbed him of a powerful blessing and he was left with the remnants. It is interesting though how our perceptions become blurred over time. In our minds, our mistakes become the fault of others. It’s easy to forget that Esau agreed to sell his birthright - he gave it up freely.

Esau had previously gone against the wishes of his parents by marrying pagan Hittite women *[Genesis 26.34,35]*. This seems to be an act of defiance towards his parents and moved him further into the world of the ungodly. However, after being denied the blessing of the firstborn son, we see him trying to make amends by taking another wife from the family of Abraham *[Genesis 28.6]*. It’s so easy to stand in judgement of Esau, and yet his sin was something we’re all guilty of – rebellion against God. Let’s then stand in humility and try to learn from Esau’s mistakes.

There is no doubt Esau was a gifted man. He is described as a

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

'skilful hunter' [Genesis 25.27]. But talents alone do not make a person of noble character. The ease with which Esau sold his birthright, his anger, bitterness, threats of violence and his acts of rebellion are all the fruit of a poor character. We find no evidence that Esau looked to address his character issues. We know that much later, when Jacob returned to the land, the two brothers made their peace, but they were never going to be close.

JACOB'S CHARACTER

Jacob it seems, was scheming and impatient. He gained the birthright, which would have gone to Esau. This presumably means that he would have got a double portion of Isaac's belongings, but this was not enough. Jacob also wanted the blessing that his aged father would traditionally give to his first-born son Esau. However he was the man chosen by God to fulfil the Divine promise made to Abraham and from him came the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. In his life he also displayed complete trust in God so that when he grew old and was about to die he blessed the son's of Joseph saying '*God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys*' [Genesis 48.15,16].

LESSONS FOR US

Both Jacob and Esau had their weaknesses, although as I stated at the beginning, our responsibility is to learn from these examples, not judge the individuals concerned. God had a plan in spite of Jacob's character. God worked on Jacob's character and changed it, as the subsequent chapters in Genesis prove, but his plan and purpose with Jacob is not dependent upon Jacob's goodness and worthiness, but on God's grace and His plan. This is made very clear in Paul's letter to the believers at Rome (Read Romans 9.10-16).

Even though Esau was a real person, he also stands in Scripture as

a symbol for those who are of the world, led by their appetites and instant gratification. The Divine assessment of his character is given to us in these words: *'Pursue peace with all men, and holiness without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone should fall short of the grace of God...lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright'* [Hebrews 12.14-16].

Jacob on the other hand, represents those who God has chosen and who keep separate from the world. He was not a perfect individual, just as no believer today is perfect. Jacob might not have always pleased God but he became father to Joseph, a great figure in the history of the Jewish Nation and a strong symbol of Christ. Also, Jesus is Jacob's direct descendant, so we can see how important he is to God's plan.

So what can we learn from the examples contained in this story? Like Esau, we cannot thwart God's plan; Like Rebekah and Jacob, we cannot rush God's plan. But we can try to understand God's plan and purpose for the world, which is laid out in His Holy Word, the Bible. The Lord Jesus Christ is central to God's plan and to our individual salvation and God has appointed the day and the hour for Christ's return - we cannot change that. The events in the lives of Jacob and Esau have been recorded for our benefit and we have the opportunity to learn from these Bible characters while there is still time - because what we **can** change is ourselves.

Andrew Longman
Milton Keynes, UK

The Law of Moses – its relevance today

Sacrifice

IN CONSIDERING ANY subject it is important at the outset to define the terminology used. The Concise Oxford Dictionary definition of 'sacrifice' implies two distinct shades of meaning:

- ◆ Slaughter of animal or person; surrender of possession as an offering to a deity.
- ◆ Giving up something for the sake of something else.

The first definition of sacrifice is something that is totally alien in today's so-called enlightened society. However, in Bible times animal sacrifice was an integral part of the worship of God. In New Testament times after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, animal sacrifice had no place in the Christian's approach to God. This was not because sacrifice was no longer important but that the sacrificial work of Jesus in laying down his life was a totally effective, once-and-for-all sacrifice which made the offering of animals an unnecessary ritual.

The second definition of sacrifice is a concept much more familiar to people today. It is a familiar cry of parents who have gone without certain pleasures in order to provide better things for their children. In this usage of the word, the sense is of giving up something that we value or enjoy in order to give to someone else. As we shall see as we progress, these two aspects of the subject come together in The Law of

Moses. The offerings that were made to God had to be of the very best, something valued and treasured by the giver, as a token of the love and respect the giver showed to God. In a similar way, the Christian concept is one of self-sacrifice, a giving of ourselves to God's work, when again, only the very best of our efforts will be acceptable.

This article will now trace the Scriptural teaching concerning sacrifice as it is presented to us in both Old and New Testaments. Such an exercise is not an academic study of the religious ritual of an ancient civilization. It is a practical illustration of the way in which the Christian should learn to approach God and to serve Him.

THE NEED FOR SACRIFICE

Animal sacrifice is not a practice that mankind devised, but was ordained by God Himself as an essential requirement for men and women to approach Him acceptably. The reason for this is described in the early chapters of Genesis. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden to tend it and care for it. They enjoyed peaceful and idyllic surroundings with but one restriction placed upon them. This restriction was a test of their obedience to God's clear commandment not to eat the fruit of a particular tree [*Genesis 2.16, 17*].

The punishment for disobeying this clear instruction was equally clear - death. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and in so doing sinned. God was true to His word and man was punished for his disobedience. However God, as well as being a God of justice, is also a God of mercy. Although condemning man to die, God also opened up a way for the human race to escape the consequences of sin and live for ever. This process of reconciling men and women to God is the essential message of the Bible and sacrifice is a vital ingredient of that message.

After eating of the fruit of the tree, the record tells us that Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with aprons made of fig leaves. This covering was inadequate and it was God Himself who provided an appropriate covering. This covering

was made from the skins of animals. This obviously required that the animals must first be killed and so death, as the consequence of sin, first came within Adam and Eve's experience [*Genesis 3.21*].

This simple account of what happened to our first parents, reveals some important fundamental principles about the way that God deals with men:

- ◆ **God required them to demonstrate obedience to His laws of their own freewill.**
- ◆ **The covering they devised for themselves was totally inadequate.**
- ◆ **God provided a covering for their sinful nature.**
- ◆ **This involved the slaying of an animal and the shedding of blood.**

The killing of the animal would impress upon Adam and Eve the punishment that would now come upon them. They too were destined to die because of their disobedience. It was because of their guilt that the animal had to be killed and this would act as a powerful reminder of their true position before God and their need for His mercy and compassion if they were to become acceptable to Him.

The general principles that are outlined above were later formally incorporated into a very strict code of laws. These were to govern the daily life of the Jewish people. This code has become known as the Law of Moses.

SACRIFICE UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES

Although generally known as the Law of Moses, the various regulations and commandments were not the work of Moses but the revealed will of God [*Exodus 19. 3-7*]. The terms of the Law were the

conditional clauses in a covenant or agreement that God entered into with the nation of Israel. After delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, God gathered all the people to Mount Sinai and there spoke to them through Moses:

‘Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to me above all people...And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...’ [Exodus 19.5 6]

This promise of God is a very important part of His purpose with the human race. He declared His intention to separate out from all the people in the world a group of men and women who would obey His commands. In Old Testament times these commands were set out in the Law of Moses, which revealed a code of conduct and morality which if followed, would result in Divine favour and blessing.

The Law of Moses covered every aspect of life and it was impossible for men and women to keep the Law perfectly. The Law made provision for man to recognise his failings and then to approach God to seek forgiveness. Just as in the case of Adam and Eve, this approach to God required the shedding of blood in recognition of the Divine punishment - that death is the consequence of sin. The weakness of the Law of Moses was that man was continually breaking that Law and therefore repeatedly coming under the curse that the Law contained. There was therefore a continual need for sacrifices to be offered, sin to be recognised and repented of and Divine mercy to be asked for.

As well as the sin offerings the Law provided for a number of other offerings to be made. Many of these related to services of thanksgiving to God - for example following the ingathering of the harvest, the birth of children etc. In everything the Israelites were reminded of their dependence upon God for the blessings of this life and of the need for mercy, that they might inherit a better life in the future.

THE QUALITY OF THE SACRIFICES

The Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy show that the Law very carefully prescribed the types of offerings that were to be made, according to the occasion and the circumstances of the offeror. One aspect of this specification is repeated time after time in the Law. The animal that was to be sacrificed had to be perfect, '*without blemish.*' [Exodus 12.5; Leviticus 1.3] This establishes a very important principle in relation to the things we offer to God. The offering must be of the very highest quality. There was no tolerance of the attitude that said '*that animal is superfluous to my needs - it will do for God!*' On many occasions during their history God condemned Israel for this attitude.

“And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favourably?” says the LORD of hosts' [Malachi 1.8].

MORE THAN SACRIFICE IS REQUIRED

The quality of the offering presented to God was important, but so much more important was the quality of the heart that gave it. A simple story from the life of King Saul will illustrate the principle. Saul had been given a clear commandment from God to fight the Amalekites and to utterly destroy them. Saul obeyed God in part but decided not to kill all the livestock that had been taken as booty. Instead of destroying them, he offered the best of the captured flocks as a sacrifice to God. Again, this attitude was roundly condemned by God through His prophet Samuel who said to him:

‘...Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams’ [1Samuel 15.22].

It was a similar failing that caused Jesus to condemn the Pharisees. They were punctilious about keeping the ritual of the Law but were often oblivious to the spirit enshrined in the Law. Jesus approved the comment of one of the scribes:

‘...you have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices’ [Mark 12.32, 33].

This level of appreciation caused Jesus to say that the scribe was ‘*not far from the kingdom of God*’. This attitude is the platform from which all sacrifice must be offered. If we love God with all our heart and mind, then we will give Him of our very best. If we love our neighbor as ourselves, then we will share all that we have with him. This brings the consideration of sacrifice and offering firmly into the Christian way of life. We can do no better than to consider Christ’s own giving of himself in sacrifice.

CHRIST - THE LASTING SACRIFICE FOR SIN

We have already noted how that in the beginning our first parents sinned by disobeying God’s command and as a consequence were condemned to die. This fact clearly suggests that the only possible way to eternal life is through perfect obedience to God’s will. It was just such a life that Jesus led - he had a perfect understanding of God’s will. That understanding led him to great trial and personal tragedy. But he remained perfectly obedient to the very end.

It was this perfect life which ensured that Jesus could be raised from the grave to enjoy eternal life. But Jesus’ life of obedience was much more than a personal triumph, it was a triumph in which all of us can share. The sacrifices of the Law of Moses were not effective in permanently covering sin - the animal had no conscious awareness of

good or bad. The death of the animal merely reminded the offeror of his own subjection to sin and death and his reliance upon God's mercy. In contrast, the willing offering by Jesus of his life was a perfect sacrifice, a sinless life being freely given for the benefit of others.

The perfect sacrifice of Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law of Moses and took away the need for daily sacrifices as Paul wrote to the Colossians: *'He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross'* [Colossians 2.14]. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us about the imperfections of the Law of Moses and contrasts this with the perfection of Christ's offering:

'And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God...For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified'
[Hebrews 10.11-14].

Firstly, there was the necessity of a perfect animal that had to be offered. This essential characteristic of perfection pointed forward to the only sacrifice that could ever be effective. Jesus was called by John the Baptist, *'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'* [John 1.29].

Secondly, the person making the sacrifice had first to recognise his or her fault and then be associated with the death of the animal. The message in New Testament times was exactly the same and is equally valid today:

'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...'
[Acts 2.38]

This was the Christian message proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Paul, in writing to the believers at Rome, powerfully shows how true Christian baptism by total immersion in water, is a symbolic association of the believer with the death and resurrection of Jesus. By such a close association with the sacrifice of Jesus, his offering can be fully effective in covering our sins and opening up the way to everlasting life. However, the New Testament makes it very clear that the hope of eternal life is not achievable by a once-off association with Christ through baptism. Baptism is essential but not sufficient of itself. It marks the beginning of a new life in Christ, a life like that of Jesus, given as an offering to God.

SACRIFICE IN THE CHRISTIAN ERA

In an appeal to the believers in Rome, Paul wrote:

‘I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service’ [*Romans 12.1*].

Paul is not instructing them to make a literal sacrifice as Jesus did, but to develop in their lives the essential characteristics of an offering acceptable to God. In the same chapter of Romans, Paul itemises the characteristics that God finds pleasing - to be charitable, kind, zealous, patient, prayerful, humble, forgiving - indeed the very characteristics that marked Jesus out as the perfect man. Very often, exhibiting these virtues involves us in real sacrifice, a giving of ourselves to benefit others.

All men and women are basically selfish, with a primary concern for their own well-being. The Christian way of life should be the reverse; God and Christ must come first, our fellow men and women second and ourselves last. This way of life is contrary to every natural instinct and to develop the right attitude demands a determined disciplining of mind and action. Our brief study of the requirements of

the Law of Moses shows that our approach to such discipline must not be half-hearted. A token gesture of following Christ is comparable to offering a crippled or lame animal from the flock, an unacceptable response to someone who has given us everything.

At the beginning of this article we mentioned parents who make a sacrifice for the benefit of their children. Such a consideration is more than simple analogy; it is a literal expression of what God has done. We are all disobedient, ungrateful and undisciplined children, worthy only of punishment. Yet our Heavenly Father has provided a means of becoming reconciled to Him.

This involved the provision of Jesus, who willingly laid down his life as an effective sacrifice for sin. God allowed His only son to be crucified by wicked men in order that we might benefit. That benefit is not just a passing fancy or a temporary advantage, it is the supreme blessing of everlasting life to be enjoyed on a beautified earth. This is what the calling of God is - He has shown us His purpose through His Word; He has provided for the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ - but He also demands a response from us.

Stephen Irving
Norfolk, UK

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Bible Animals

The Ass or Donkey

THIS INTERESTING ANIMAL is descended from the African wild ass. Donkey is the name given to the ass when it is domesticated. Both versions of the name are also used by some as a metaphor for stupidity but the animal itself is far from that!



The Donkey has some similarity in appearance to a horse but is much smaller in size, has narrower hooves and larger ears, a stiff erect mane and a tufted tail. It is also noticeable for its loud bray. They are mostly

grey in colour with white patches to the nose, eyes, underbelly and legs. There are some albino or white donkeys.

Asses were tamed and used by man long before the horse and camel. Portraits of the animals feature on monuments found in the Sumerian culture around 3,500 BC. Over the centuries since biblical times the animals have been introduced to many other parts of the world. The Spanish colonists took them to the America's, where today some of our readers would know them as the '*burro*'.

The donkey is described as the poor man's horse and it was most

certainly a very useful animal to any family in Biblical times and still is in many countries today. For example they are not expensive to keep, they eat only about a quarter of what a horse would eat and are well able to feed and live on any rough herbage they manage to find for themselves, including thistles.

Unfortunately, this most valuable animal has probably been the subject of more misuse and abuse than any other domesticated beast, yet it has served mankind faithfully over thousands of years. In our modern times we refer to those among us who willingly do the hard labour as those who do the ‘donkey-work’ and that appears to have been the lot of this lowly little animal.

The Ass or Donkey is mentioned in the Bible about 130 times. One of the earliest references is to Ishmael, the son of Abraham, being a ‘wild man’, or as the modern versions rightly translate it, ‘a wild **donkey** of a man’ [*Genesis 16.12 NIV*]. This just about sums up the nature of this man, being likened to the ‘wild ass’ that roams the desert freely and is subject to no man. Some of the descendants of Ishmael can still be found among the Bedouin who wander the deserts of the Biblical wastelands, free and unrestrained, living well away from the civilized settlements, in fulfillment of this Bible prophecy.

Donkeys were an important part of the economy in biblical times, and a man’s wealth was measured by the number of animals he owned. Abraham was given many useful animals, including male and female donkeys, by one of the Pharaohs when he travelled into Egypt [*Genesis 12.16*]. We note too that Job, one of the greatest men of the East, possessed along with other large herds of animals, five hundred female donkeys. Later, after the calamities in his life, we are told he possessed one thousand [*Job 1.3 ; 42.12*]

The donkey’s usefulness for all sorts of physical tasks is well known in the Bible. In farming it was used to pull a plough and even

today in Israel, this can still be seen on the Arab farms. In their laws, the ancient Israelites were told firmly that they were not to attempt to plough with a donkey and an ox yoked together [Deuteronomy 5.21; 22.10]. The unfairness of the burden on the smaller donkey must have its applications to our behaviour in human life as well.

Later in the farming year, the donkey was used to carry the fruits of the harvest, followed by the task of towing a threshing sledge over the grain. They also became the motive power used to move the heavy millstones which ground the grain into flour. The donkeys were made to shoulder most of the heavy work on the land, such as turning primitive devices to raise water from the wells, to crush grapes and many other heavy tasks.

The Bible refers to one of the sons of Jacob like this, *'Issachar is a strong donkey, lying between two burdens'* [Genesis 49.14]. While this is a prophecy of the future condition of the tribe, it also draws attention to the huge loads put upon the small donkey by some people. In fact there is a reference in the Mosaic Law to the way the Israelites should behave towards a collapsed and overloaded donkey, *'If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden .. you shall surely help him with it.'* [Exodus 23.5].

The clear Scriptural teaching here is that even if people don't get along with each other, they were expected to help each other, particularly when one of their animals, like the donkey, lay in distress. This, surely, is the principle later taught by Jesus, that we should *'love our neighbour'* and *'do good to those who hate you'* [Matthew 5.43,44].

Jesus also seems to have applied this law to rebuke the Pharisees when they were arguing with him whether it was right to heal on the Sabbath day, when he said to them, *'Which of you, having a donkey .. that has fallen in a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?'* [Luke 14.5]. Jesus was pointing out that the Mosaic Law only ruled out servile work but allowed for good works or acts of

mercy, even on the Sabbath. If it was right for them to help their donkey out of trouble on the Sabbath, it must surely be more in keeping with God's mercy to assist a human being in distress?

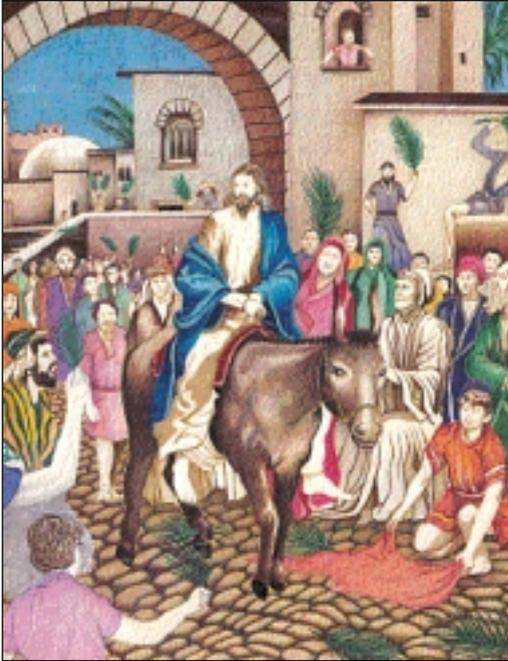
The donkey's usefulness though was not only in bearing the burdens and hard labour, it didn't end there – the she-asses give a supply of nutritious milk for the family, a popular food in Biblical lands that is known to be valuable to people suffering from some illnesses like tuberculosis. We even have stories of royals, like the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, extravagantly bathing in asses milk.

Of course, the donkey was also a cheap and reliable means of personal transport. The animal could be easily mounted and was much more easily managed than a horse. The Bible record talks of *'a whip for the horse and a bridle for the donkey'* [Proverbs 26.3]. Even today the donkey is not fitted with a bit in its mouth, it usually has a muzzle bridle with reins attached, so that the rider just pulls the animals head to right or left to guide it. The other good thing about riding a donkey is its sure-footedness. It can travel over the roughest of terrain with comparative ease, where a horse or camel could well stumble or fall.

Some donkeys were bred specially as mounts for nobility and rulers. In the book of Judges we read: *'Abdon the son of Hillel... judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys'* [Judges 12.14]. This gives us some idea of the wealth and influence of this ruler, with his male offspring each possessing their own donkey. In another place, in Deborah and Barak's song, we read about, *'you who ride on white donkeys, who sit in judge's attire'* [Judges 5.10]. These albino donkeys it seems were prized and reserved for riding on special occasions.

But of course, for the Bible student, the most special occasion when a donkey was ridden upon is recorded for us in the Gospel records, when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The Jewish Passover was only two days away, the city was crammed with people and the time had

come for Jesus to reveal that he was the real king of Israel. Jesus and his disciples were very near Jerusalem, in the village of Bethphage and he told two of them to *'Go into the village...you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it...they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments on it, and he sat on it'* [Mark 11.2-7].



Jesus rides into Jerusalem

The marvel of this event is that an untrained donkey colt doesn't readily allow anyone to sit on its back! But this rider was not anyone, was he? – it was Jesus the Saviour of mankind, and the humble little donkey carried Jesus the two miles into Jerusalem, seemingly with no bridle, onwards through a noisy, shouting, rejoicing crowd of people, from which the little animal would normally have bolted. This unusual behaviour was surely a miracle in itself.

One wonders too how many of those welcoming Jesus riding this donkey, realized that they were witnessing the fulfillment of the words of an Old Testament prophet; *'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; he is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey'* [Zechariah 9.9].

Jesus didn't come triumphantly riding on a horse, the steed of a

conqueror, but on the lowly little donkey. He came to Jerusalem at this time, not to conquer, but to redeem mankind. The animal he rode symbolized peace and not war. It is obvious from the biblical record that the significance of the whole event was lost on the majority of those watching, including Christ's own disciples. Even they didn't appreciate that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to offer himself as a sacrifice, but he had come as the humble lowly servant of all mankind and the ride on the humble lowly donkey fitted in with the pattern of events leading up to his crucifixion.

The Second Coming of Jesus by contrast, is portrayed very differently; *'behold, a white horse. And he who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war... And he has on his robe and on his thigh a name written KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS'* [Revelation 19.11,16].

The wonder of this is that the Bible, God's Word, invites us to join hands with Jesus when he returns to set up God's Kingdom, when he will subdue and change this world we live in. When he will put an end to all the unfairness, abuse and cruelty of this present world, a state of affairs that is perhaps symbolized for us in the life of the humble little donkey.

Ken Dennis
Kent, UK

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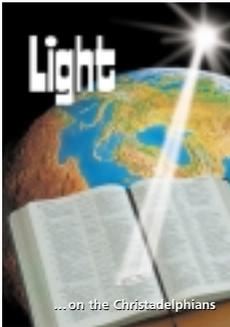
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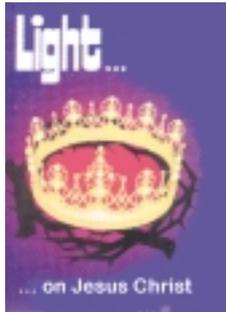
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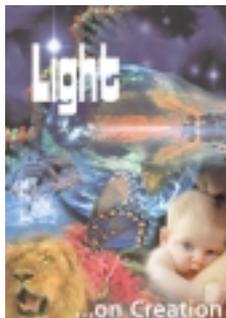
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