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Why is Leviticus so bloody?

The bloodiness of the opening chapters of Leviticus seems totally disconnected with Christian principles - unless there's another way of looking at this.

Burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings – all of them produced lots of blood and all ended up with dead animals. Thus begins the book of Leviticus, which seems to define religion in terms of bloodiness and seems disconnected with New Testament spirituality. Christians accept that sacrifice partly explains the Easter story, but why does the Old Testament promote so much blood-letting?

A fascinating optical illusion consists of a mask-like image that seems to flip from concave to convex as you look at it. First you see it as the back of a mask, with shadows looking like recesses; then your eyes flip the image so that the mask appears in relief, as if the face is looking outwards. That is what happened to me one day as I read chapter 17 of the book of Leviticus. The passage commands the wandering Israelites not to offer sacrifices outside the camp or anywhere inside it, except at the centralised “tent of meeting”. These verses do not promote sacrifices; they restrict them! This opens a theme that recurs throughout the Old Testament, and especially in the historical books, where king after king is criticised for failing to stop the people from sacrificing in “high places”¹. Perhaps we should look at the context?

When the laws of Moses spoke about blood sacrifice they were not introducing a novel concept. Sacrifices were common practise in most of the nations and tribes surrounding the Hebrews; and they were probably universal in primitive times. The aim of Mosaic Law was not to multiply sacrifices, but to reduce them. Moses listed a small number of animal species that could be offered as sacrifices; other nations, and probably the Hebrews themselves, were accustomed to using all kinds of creatures for these rituals - even including humans. Archaeological discoveries and ancient textual records tell us that human sacrifices were carried out in many cultures; and the practise was familiar enough to the Israelites that it was necessary to make a specific law to ban the practise². In the book of Genesis, we are told that Abraham complied readily to the apparent command to sacrifice his son, Isaac... so it seems that human sacrifice was a familiar concept to him³; but God showed him that it was not acceptable.

Levitical rules limited the animals that could be sacrificed; they defined the purposes for which sacrifice was acceptable; they restricted the ways in which the ritual could be done and who could do it (the priests); and they limited the locations where sacrifices could be offered to just one place. So, despite first appearances, Leviticus was *reducing* the bloodiness of worship, *not increasing* it. And the reduction process continued, as prophet after prophet declared that sacrifice was secondary⁴ and there were better ways to worship God. What mattered was not the rituals, but how people lived their lives.

In the year AD70, the Jerusalem temple - the only place where sacrifices could legally be offered - was utterly destroyed by a Roman army. By then, the process was complete. The only sacrifice

that really made any difference had already been offered by the only person qualified to do it⁵ – the man we know as Jesus the Christ.

Leviticus may seem bloody, but it is quite compatible with the New Testament... its restrictions on bloody sacrifices start the trend that points to the Gospel of mercy and peace.

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¹ 1 Kings 3:2-3; 12:31-32; 13:2; 13:32-33; 14:23; 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3-4; 15:4; 15:35; 16:4; 17:9; 17:29; 17:32; 18:4; 18:22; 21:3; 21:5; 23:8-9; 23:13; 23:19-20; 2 Chronicles 11:15; 14:3; 15:17; 17:6; 20:33; 21:11; 28:4; 28:25; 31:1; 32:12; 33:3; 33:17; 33:19; 34:3

² Deuteronomy 18:10

³ Genesis 22:1-17

⁴ 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6; 51:16; Proverbs 15:8; 21:3; Isaiah 66:3; Amos 4:5; Malachi 1:10

⁵ Hebrews 10:4-14