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From “New and Living Way: An explanation of the Epistle to the Hebrews.”  
by Antony Snell SSM. The Faith Press 1959

## p165 Appendix

### On the meaning of the word ‘blood’ in biblical thought

The Epistle to the Hebrews assumes throughout and states explicitly at 9:22, that the shedding of blood is essential for the forgiveness of sin, and this is taken to involve as sacrificial death: ‘the blood of Christ’ in 9:14 is equated with ‘a death has taken place’ in the following verse. But there is no unambiguous explanation given, either in this Epistle or elsewhere in the Bible, of why the sacrificial shedding of blood produces this atonement between man and God.

The interpretation of the most relevant text, Lev. 17:11, is not undisputed; but a short review of some passages in the Bible ought to help us to interpret it convincingly. First, the word ‘blood’ in the Bible, when not used literally, normally means ‘death’; and very often not simply death as such, but death as involving the guilt of him who causes it. The guilt of shed blood ‘cries’ against him who has shed it, as is first shown in the account of the murder of Abel (Gen 4:10-12), where all three verses should be attended to, and not the first only. Blood is ‘required’ (Gen. 9:4-6) of the shedder of it; that is to say, the guilt of having shed it calls for punishment. The main reason for this is that every life (the individual life of every living creature, particularly human) is specially God’s own peculiar possession and gift, and may therefore not be destroyed without guilt, unless this is done by his specific permission and command. Other passages where blood is spoken of as ‘required’ are Gen. 42:22; 1Kings 2:31-3 (on the incidence of blood guilt); Psalm 9:12; and Luke 11:50,51.

The ‘avenger of blood’ is so called because he vindicates his family after a murder (cf 2Samuel 14:11; Joshua 20:1-5). The most illuminating passage is Num. 35:10-34, where the argument shows that there is no idea at all of the blood’s being still active after death, for if it were so, to slay the murderer would be to release some more active blood, and to make the situation worse than ever. It is certainly the guilt incurred that calls for the murderer’s death; and when verse 33 says that blood pollutes the land, the meaning is that the guilt of the murderer does so, not that the blood itself does so in any way. Similarly with another deadly sin in Jer. 3:1,2, where sexual guilt is said to pollute the land. Again the statement in James 5:4, that ‘the hire of the labourers ... crieth out’ means that the guilt of those who have withheld it does so; it is not that the money is still alive and active in any way. This posthumous crying of Abel’s blood is twice mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews: once in 11:4 the phrase ‘though dead, he still speaks,’ and again in 12:24 where our Lord’s blood is said to speak better than Abel. The second of these passages implies that in a sacrifice blood cries beneficially, as in a murder it cries for punishment: exactly, indeed, as the eighteenth-century Italian

hymn says, 'Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.'

We have now crossed into the area of controversy, and committed ourselves to the view that there can never, either in the case of a sacrifice or a murder, be any question of the blood's having a posthumous active existence; but that shed blood is bound to 'cry' in any case. If shed in accordance with God's provision, it will cry for good; if shed against God's will, it will cry for vengeance. But it is known that many modern writers say something very different from this: that the death of a sacrificial victim is more or less incidental to the operations with its blood which follow in the ritual, and is only necessary in order to 'release the life' for subsequent application as a still active thing. This second view seems to be wholly modern, and to date from about the year 1881, when William Milligan's *Resurrection of our Lord* was published. Its great propagator was Westcott, through his edition of the *Epistles of St John* (1883) and of *Hebrews* (1889). Its most extreme expression is perhaps to be found in F.C.N. Hick's book *The Fullness of Sacrifice* (1930), but it can often be found in a more cautious form in the writings of reputable theologians, though perhaps never of Semitic scholars.

The general view for which this appendix argues is to be found stated and defended against its modern rival by the following writers among others: J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* (1902); Austin Farrer in *The Parish Communion* (ed. A.G. Hebert, 1937); A.M. Stubbs, *The Meaning of the Bible* (ed. A. Richardson, 1950); and by Leon Morris in two articles in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (October 1952 and April 1955) and in chapter three of *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (1955). One quotation from Denney's book may be useful (pp. 271-2 of the fourth edition): 'It is by no means necessary ... that we should adopt the strange caprice which fascinated Westcott, 1 [it could still be called a 'strange caprice' without sarcasm in 1902] and distinguish with him in the blood of Christ (1) His death, and (2) His life; or (1) His blood shed, and (2) His blood offered,; in (1) His life laid down, and (2) His life liberated and made available for men. No doubt these distinctions were meant to safeguard a real religious interest ...; but I venture to say that a more groundless fancy never haunted and troubled the interpretation of any part of Scripture than that which is introduced by this distinction into the Epistle to the Hebrews and the First Epistle of John. ... He did something when He died, and that something he continues to make effective for men in His Risen Life; but there is no meaning in saying that by His death His life — As something other than His death — is 'liberated' and 'made available' for men; on the contrary, what makes His risen life significant and a saving power for sinners is neither more nor less than this, that His death is in it.

Denney is right in being specially suspicious of the Platonizing and unscriptural phrase about 'liberating' or 'releasing' life through death. It suits well with the doctrine of the *Phaedo*, but makes nonsense in the Bible: in the Old Testament it is plain and clear nonsense, for there is no belief anywhere that any personal life persists after a death. The few texts (Dan. 1:2; Is 25:8; and doubtfully Psalm 17:15) which point to a future life refer to a resurrection, a remaking by God of what has once wholly perished in death. The belief that ghosts remained in She'ol makes nothing

against this; as G.A.F. Knight says (From Moses to Paul, p 31) ‘the shades of She’ol are not in any sense the continuing lives of men who have died.’ The belief that ghosts are in She’ol is in no way an intermediate step between the belief that death makes an end of you and the belief in a future resurrection; it is therefore irrelevant to the subject under review. And in any case, no one would maintain that these ghosts possessed any living blood.

The clue to the solution of this disagreement is to be found in the meaning of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, ‘life’ with which blood is equated, explicitly in the texts Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11, and Deut. 12:23, and implicitly in the whole theory of sacrifice. It does not mean the principle of life, or ‘life’ as a general noun, but the special individual life of any living creature. It is this *nephesh* which is destroyed when the creature is killed, and it is irrelevant to argue that life goes on though this creature’s life does not. Hebrew has another word for ‘life’ in the more general sense, a word which does not come into the discussion about blood at all.

Perhaps an adherent of the view we are opposing might argue in this way: the manipulation of the blood, after the death of the sacrificial victim, is an important part of the ritual; therefore this blood must be in some sense alive after that death. But this argument would only have force if the ritual action were supposed to belong to a different action from the killing of the victim. In fact there is no such separation of the two actions. The blood has to be poured out to the Lord because it is especially his own, and is the *nephesh* he gave, which man may take away only in the specially permitted context of the procedure known as sacrifice. For the obligation to pour out or apply ritually the blood, see Exod. 29:12; Lev. 4:7; 5:9; 8:15.

The crucial passage in Lev. 17 may now be examined, but it is important to regard the context in which verse 11 is there set. It is the opening chapter of the so-called Holiness Code; and it says that if any one kills an ox, lamb, or goat, without offering it to the Lord, ‘blood shall be imputed to that man; he hath shed blood; and that man shall be cut off from among his people.’ That is, the taking of life otherwise than in the authorized ritual context brings mortal guilt. Then follows the total prohibition of eating any manner of blood, explained by the crucial verse 11, which in the Hebrew text says ‘for the life (*nephesh*) of the flesh is in the blood. and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls (*naphsoth*); for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life (*nephesh*).’ This may be paraphrased thus: ‘the life of the body whose life it is is in the blood; and I have made special provision for you, that by offering this life blood in sacrifice at the altar you may not only be able to kill your domestic animals without guilt, but further that the “crying” which the shedding of blood causes may, in this sacrificial procedure, make atonement for your own souls (i.e. lives or selves), whenever you need such reconciliation with God. It is the blood which effects this atonement, because in this case it is shed under conditions which God has graciously laid down. If done under other conditions, this taking of life would bring mortal guilt upon you, as the preceding verses of the chapter asserted. Thus in a sacrifice God lets you offer him that which is most distinctively his own, the life of the victim.’ In the LXX version, the last part of the verse is much more definite than the Hebrew is: and it is this which the interpreter of Hebrews needs to regard.

**The LXX says ‘for its blood will make atonement for life.’**

**We must now apply this possibly rather arid exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews. The high priest did indeed enter annually into the holy of holies ‘with blood of others,’ and he presented this blood when he got there. But Christ, by contrast, did not enter the true sanctuary with blood, or take any blood there at all; he entered it through (i.e. by means of) his own blood, shed once for all on the Cross. His blood belongs entirely to the body of his flesh, the veil which at his death was broken through and passed beyond. As is said in 1Peter 3:18, he was ‘put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the spirit’; on the Cross he put off once for all the body of flesh and blood, was really dead on Holy Saturday, and on Easter Day was raised by God’s power in a spiritual body, so that he ‘became a life-giving spirit’ (1Cor 15:45). We too are to die to the life of flesh and blood as he did, and to live to and by the spirit which he gives (Rom. 8:11; and see also 1Cor 15:50; Gal. 5:24, and Col. 2:11)**

**The next stage of the argument, which has in view Heb. 9:11-14 and 10:19,22, is well stated by A.M. Stibbs on page 25 of the pamphlet to which reference has been made: ‘Christ’s resurrection and ascension, which are significantly not mentioned in this whole context, were not stages in the sacrificial presentation of himself or of his offering to God. Rather, they were subsequent stages of triumph and exaltation for his humanity, consequent upon a work already finished and a victory already won. The ascension was not part of Christ’s atoning work. It was the enthronement of the high priest whose work of making propitiation was already finished. Christ did not offer his glorified body to God, but the body of his flesh in death, the body of flesh and blood in which he bore our sin. And just as he entered into God’s presence “through his blood,” or by reason of his human death, so all his people are bidden to have boldness to enter into the holy place by the same blood of Jesus, appropriating for themselves the benefits of his death, and walking in the way which, because of his dying for us, now stands open. “By the blood of Jesus” means, therefore, through the death of Jesus and its realized significance.’ Our own commentary on the relevant parts of the Epistle amply bears out this paragraph from Stibbs, particularly where in the comment on 9:11-14 attention is drawn to the careful use of tenses in the Greek verbs. To the same effect, we notice in the first Epistle of St John that the blood cleanses (1:7), but it is the spirit and not the blood that gives life. (John 6:63).**

**An obvious objection arises to much of our argument from the terms in which the eucharistic sacrament is spoken of. Plainly there is a sense in which we here and now feed on our Lord’s body and blood. It is not possible here to deal with eucharistic theology, but one or two things may be said: (a) the New Testament does not try to define the eucharistic elements by themselves, but tells us what we are thereby partakers in, namely in our Lord’s risen body and in his sacrificial death; (b) we must beware of altering the theology which we find in the New Testament under the influence of a post-biblical attitude towards the Eucharist which often regards the species as ‘things’ rather than the personal communion of the giver.**

**Some of our conclusions may now be put in summary form: (i) the blood of any creature is equated with its life, and the taking of this life always involves results either**

of guilt or of benefit, since the life is especially God's own: guilt if it is taken by us at our will, and benefit if it is offered directly to God by the sacrificial way he has appointed. (ii) The reason that blood more often means death than life in the Bible is simply that death, the taking of life, has these results. A life while it goes on is normally called a *nephesh*; in relation to its being cut off and destroyed it is called 'blood.' (iii) since there was no belief in the continuance of a life after death, blood has then no active existence at all, though the effects of it having been shed remain. Its ritual application is a part of the procedure by which the life may be offered to God in sacrifice when it has already been destroyed. (iv) Our Lord's saving work is to be conceived on the same principle: he offered the perfect sacrifice by giving his life to death on the Cross, and as a result of his having done this (Heb. 2:9), God raised and exalted him to be where he now is, our perpetually available high priest in heaven, awaiting the full manifestation of the victory he fully achieved by virtue of his death.

‘*“Blood of Christ,”*’ says J. Behm in his article in Kittel's Theological Dictionary to the New Testament, ‘is, like *“Cross,”* only another and a more vivid expression for the death of Christ when it refers to salvation’ (Kittel, vol. 1, p. 173)