

THE WHOLE MEANING OF THE LAW: CHRIST'S VICARIOUS SACRIFICE

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In “The Living Christ,” modern-day prophets and apostles testify that Christ gave “His life to atone for the sins of all mankind” and that this was “a great vicarious gift in behalf of all who would ever live upon the earth.”¹ As Latter-day Saints, we often take this doctrine of vicarious sacrifice for granted as a basic Christian belief, but in the modern world the idea of substitutionary suffering can be difficult for many to believe, even within a Christian framework. Since the Enlightenment, many forms of Christian theology have moved away from this belief as different interpretations of the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death developed that reject the need for a vicarious or substitutionary sacrifice to atone for human sin.² These lines of thinking emphasize the love and mercy of God and argue that God did not need Christ’s suffering on our behalf in order to be able to forgive us, but that Christ’s suffering was merely a way to show God’s love, thereby moving us to repentance and remorse to accept the forgiveness that he was already prepared to give us. In this model, the idea of God’s wrath seems foreign, and it begins to seem unnecessary to have an intermediary.

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In this alternate vision of the Atonement, the seriousness of sin and the consequences of our sinfulness are subtly downplayed as God's mercy is emphasized. If there were no price that needed to be paid or no consequences of eternal death or banishment from God's presence, then it would not make sense to talk about Christ as a substitute, giving "His life to atone for the sins of all mankind." If God were in a position to forgive our uncleanness and debt merely by mercifully declaring the debt waived and our impurity irrelevant, then we would not need Christ's suffering and death as "a great vicarious gift in behalf of all who would ever live upon the earth." The affirmation of the doctrine of the vicarious Atonement of Christ is central to the message of the restored gospel. This paper argues that the truths about the Atonement affirmed in the Restoration correspond to those taught in the Old Testament, particularly those found in the law of Moses in Exodus and Leviticus and also in Isaiah's teachings about the suffering Messiah in Isaiah 53. I will show that the substitutionary sacrifice that we see under the law of Moses is explained by Isaiah as pointing to the vicarious sacrifice of the Messiah. Together these practices and prophetic teachings can strengthen our faith in the Atonement of Christ.

THE ISSUE OF VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

This question of the meaning of Christ's Atonement becomes central to the question of how to read the Bible.³ While the issue of the Atonement is debated by many, it is essential to note that there are other Christians, particularly many evangelical Christians, that also defend the teachings of the Bible and the doctrine of vicarious Atonement. As Latter-day Saints, we can stand with our evangelical friends in defense of a belief in vicarious Atonement, but we have even more to bring to this defense since we are blessed to have additional scriptures providing further witness of both this doctrine of substitutionary Atonement and its role in the Bible.⁴

The Restoration also brings an additional witness to the Bible as the word of God. Given the Restoration's affirmation of the vicarious aspect of Christ's Atonement and what the Bible teaches about it, I hope to show how we can closely study the Bible and take seriously the descriptions about the nature of God and our relationship to him that are found

therein. Taking the message of the Bible seriously allows us to appreciate the spiritual truths taught in the law of Moses about the reality of the wrath of God, our uncleanness before God, and the mercy extended through a suffering Messiah that came as an intercessor to bear our sins and iniquities.

The Book of Mormon and New Testament testify of the role of the law of Moses to provide us with a model of our relationship to God and our need for a vicarious sacrifice to cleanse us and pay the price for our being reconciled with God. We know from the Book of Mormon that the vicarious sacrifices of the law of Moses were given with the intent to persuade “them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was” (Jarom 1:11). This clarification works together with the New Testament witness that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God, “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8) and that we have been redeemed not “with corruptible things . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18–19).

While the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price give additional witness to the vicarious nature of Christ’s Atonement, the Old Testament stands as the first witness of this foundational doctrine. In this paper I seek to summarize some of what the Old Testament has to teach us about the Savior’s “great vicarious gift” for all mankind. One of the key witnesses of this doctrine of vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice can be found in the law of Moses. Here we see the strict demands of God’s holiness and come to appreciate how death and separation from God are consequences for sin. In the requirements of this sacrificial law, we also learn how provisions have been made to reconcile God and humans through the offering of a sacrifice. These sacrifices serve both to cleanse and to ransom the sinner who has offended God and his holiness. As taught in the rituals of the Day of Atonement, through these sacrifices it becomes possible to enter the presence of God. It is the aspect of the law of Moses that deals with substitutionary sacrifice that will be the focus of this paper.

In addition to the example of reconciliation through the substitutionary sacrifice of animals found in Exodus and Leviticus, we also find in Isaiah 53 prophetic interpretation of how the vicarious sacrifice prescribed

in the law of Moses points to Christ. Isaiah 53 is a unique text in the Old Testament, and it is essential in showing how the law, particularly the element of vicarious or substitutionary sacrifice, pointed towards a messianic Suffering Servant. We often read Isaiah 53 as simply looking forward to the life of Jesus Christ, but close reading reveals how it specifically points to how the Suffering Servant would suffer vicariously as did the animals sacrificed under the law of Moses. Isaiah's interpretation allows us to see the law with an eye focused on the idea of vicarious or substitutionary sacrifice providing reconciliation. Better understanding of the law of Moses will "serve to strengthen [our] faith in Christ" (Alma 25:16).

THE MEANING OF THE LAW

Few of us spend much time thinking about the law of Moses, and when we do look at it, the specifics of sacrifice can feel overwhelming and mystifying. Many of our own feelings of puzzlement in reading the provisions of the law of Moses are expressed by Gordon J. Wenham in his discussion of how to explain Old Testament sacrifice. "How should sacrificial ritual be interpreted? . . . With the sacrifices, the rites of ordination, and even the day of atonement ceremonies the problems of interpretation are often baffling. The rites are usually carefully described, but we are left with few clues as to what was said during them or why they should be performed in a particular way."⁵

As Christians and Latter-day Saints, we are blessed to see how the meaning of the Mosaic sacrificial rituals receives ample discussion in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. In these additional scriptures we clearly learn that these rituals point to Christ and his great and last sacrifice on our behalf. In saying that, however, we often then stop looking closely at the sacrificial rituals. We know the "meaning" of the reference point and so we stop looking at the referent altogether. If, however, we wish our understanding of Christ's Atonement to be deepened and informed by the law of Moses, we must seek out the significance that these rituals held for the Israelites, which would have been clear even when they did not understand that these rituals were pointing them toward a suffering Messiah.

Speaking of the lack of explanation given of the ritual requirements and sacrifices in the Old Testament, Wenham argues that "the reason for

this obscurity is not far to seek. Evidently the meaning of these rites was so obvious that it was unnecessary to spell it out in words.⁶ He then goes on to list some things that seem clear from within the ritual itself:

Opposition between life and death is fundamental to the whole ritual law. God is the source of life, so that everything brought near to God whether sacrificial animal or priest must be physically unblemished. Death is the great evil, and everything suggesting it, from corpses to bloody discharge to skin disease, makes people unclean and therefore unfit to worship God. Another theme is the election of Israel: that the Lord has made an exclusive covenant with Israel explains the choice of animals for sacrifice and why some animals are unclean and therefore not to be eaten by Israelites. Thirdly, in sacrifice it appears that the worshipper identifies himself with the animal he offers. What he does to the animal, he does symbolically to himself. The death of the animal portrays the death of himself. In the animal's immolation on the altar his own surrender to God is portrayed.⁷

When we see the type and shadow of spiritual truths in the law's physical requirements, we realize how they echo the basic doctrines of the gospel. The law points to Christ by setting up a framework within which we can understand the role of the suffering and death of Jesus. As Amulek taught, "This is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:14). The law of Moses was a strict law designed to teach about the price and consequences of sin and also the possibility of ransom and purification (see Mosiah 13:29–30). We are familiar with the expression of this concept from the New Testament: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The same principle was foundational to understanding the law of Moses and the role of sacrifices within that law. Without the sacrifices to reconcile Israel and God, they would be unclean and unfit to have God's presence in their midst.

The high standard of holiness required of the people in order to have the Lord dwell among them is easy for us to miss. We might take for granted the Lord's presence in their midst in his holy house, but the law of Moses was designed to constantly reinforce the need to purify the people,

and even the Temple itself, of the people's sinfulness, which would make them unworthy. The Lord, however, after establishing the requirements of the law and its provisions for making atonement for uncleanness, re-emphasized the need to be worthy to have his presence. In Leviticus 26, he summarizes the blessings that would come "if ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them" (v. 3), promising that only if this is the case, "I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you" (v. 11). The consequences for not keeping the commandments and for becoming unclean are equally stark—the covenant people will be cast out of the promised land: "And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste" (v. 33). In this way the spiritual principle that "no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom" (3 Nephi 27:19) was taught in terms of obedience to the law and worthiness to dwell in the land and have the presence of the Lord in their midst.

As we shall see, one of the central roles of the element of sacrifice under the law of Moses will be to "make atonement" for those that are unclean—to cleanse and to ransom. This redeeming and cleansing process was essential if the Lord's presence was to remain in their midst. The Lord declared death as the consequence of uncleanness but also provided a means through which the consequence of death could fall upon a vicarious substitute. Even before the giving of the law of Moses, the role of sacrifice as a vicarious substitute is clearly pointed to in the stories of the Old Testament. We can, for example, see this function of the animal as a vicarious substitute in the account of the sacrifice of Isaac. "And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son" (Genesis 22:13). Here the phrase "in the stead of his son" can be understood as a substitution—the animal's death took the place of Isaac's death.⁸

Another example of an animal's death substituting for a human's can be found in the account of Passover in Exodus chapter 11.⁹ The Israelites were spared the death of their firstborn sons when the destroying angel came because of the blood of the lamb which they had been told to put on their doorposts and lintels. The death of the lambs and the application of their blood kept the Israelite sons from dying. Just as with the ram that

was sacrificed, the lamb here took the place of a human death. Both of these forms of substitutionary death clearly point to the gospel message of Christ's role as our substitute, dying in our place and thereby shielding us from death. The importance of this symbolism in pointing to Christ is clearly underlined in the institution of the Feast of Passover as an annual commemoration in the law of Moses and in its eventual transformation into the institution of the sacrament at the Last Supper.

This idea of substitution also plays out in the non-sacrificial part of the law in Exodus. In Exodus 21 we see an example of how a ransom could be seen as substitution for the life that might otherwise be required to balance the life that was taken. In this situation, if a man's ox kills someone's family member, the negligent owner is to forfeit his own life: "But if the ox were wont to push with his horn in time past, and it hath been testified to his owner, and he hath not kept him in, but that he hath killed a man or a woman; the ox shall be stoned, and his owner also shall be put to death" (v. 29). But if the family agrees to accept the ransom or redemption (*koper*) as a settlement, then "he [the ox's owner] shall give for the ransom of his life whatsoever is laid upon him" (v. 30). This ransom functions as a substitution. The legal term *koper* shares the same root as the term "to make atonement for." In its noun form, "it denotes the material gift that establishes an amicable settlement between an injured party and the offending party."¹⁰ Rather than requiring justice or compensation—a vendetta as seen in the concept of "an eye for an eye"—this ransom functions as a substitute that allows the injured party to extend mercy and be reconciled.

Within the provisions in the law of Moses, the death of a sacrificial animal can likewise be understood as a substitution for the death of the sinner. Wenham notes significantly that "all the animal sacrifices have a common procedural core, i.e. gestures that occur in every sacrifice, laying on of the hand, killing the animal, catching the blood and using it, burning at least part of the flesh on the altar. It therefore seems likely that every sacrifice has a common core of symbolic meaning. . . . The animal is a substitute for the worshipper. Its death makes atonement for the worshipper."¹¹ This principle of substitution of the animal's suffering and death for human suffering and death seems to be suggested in Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh

an atonement for the soul.” In reading this passage as a ransom, the blood (the life) of the animal makes an atonement for (ransoms) the soul of the sinner. In commenting on this reading of the passage, Wenham argues that “it is this interpretation that seems to fit the burnt offering best. God in his mercy allowed sinful man to offer a ransom payment for sins, so that he escaped the death penalty that his iniquities merit.”¹²

The means by which the animal’s death “makes atonement” can be seen as the very heart of the system of sacrifice. Lang argues that “the fundamental structure of atonement in Priestly practice finds full expression in [Leviticus] 19:22: ‘With this ram the priest shall make atonement before Yahweh for the sin which he has committed.’”¹³ Just as the *koper* or ransom brought reconciliation and saved the owner of the ox from death, so the priest’s offerings on behalf of himself and others can save them from spiritual death. “The priest acts as a mediator, removing the tension through a sacrifice, provided by the guilty party and sacrificed by the priest. Frequently the text mentions where the act of atonement takes place: ‘before Yahweh,’ i.e., in the temple. It is the priest who performs the act of atonement—generally on behalf of others, but also on behalf of himself and his family (Leviticus 16:6, 11; etc).”¹⁴

This principle of substitution is clearly illustrated in certain kinds of sacrifices which require a laying on of one (or both) hand(s) upon the sacrificial animal. This pattern can be seen in Leviticus 1:4: “And he [the person bringing the sacrifice] shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” The animal takes the place of the person in the sacrifice. In addition to its role in the burnt offering, the laying on of hands as symbolizing substitution is even clearer in the Day of Atonement ritual with the scapegoat.¹⁵ We read in Leviticus 16:21 that “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness.” Here the idea of substitution and vicarious sacrifice is spelled out explicitly. It is particularly significant that in this ritual on the Day of Atonement, it is directly stated that the animal will “bear on itself” all their iniquities (see Leviticus 16:22).¹⁶ The sacrifices of the law of Moses functioned as a way for individuals to have their transgressions

transferred and thereby become clean before the Lord. In this “system” the gospel message is clear—God provides a Lamb. We are unclean and in danger of being cut off and dying, but in his mercy God provides means by which a substitute can take our place and make us clean.

While the many specifics of the sacrifice prescribed under the law of Moses can be daunting to grasp, this concept of vicarious sacrifice to reconcile God and humans brings unity to the system and helps point to the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Wenham suggests a helpful way to see the various forms of sacrifice under the law of Moses:

The sacrificial system therefore presents different models or analogies to describe the effects of sin and the way of remedying them. The burnt offering uses a personal picture: of man the guilty sinner who deserves to die for his sin and of the animal dying in his place. God accepts the animal as ransom for man. The sin offering uses a medical model: sin makes the world so dirty that God can no longer dwell there. The blood of the animal disinfects the sanctuary in order that God may continue to be present with his people. The reparation offering presents a commercial picture of sin. Sin is a debt which man incurs against God. The debt is paid through the offered animal.¹⁷

All of these models can then be further connected with the role of Christ’s sacrifice. He dies in our place as in the burnt offering. His blood cleanses us to allow us to dwell in the presence of God as in the sin offering. His suffering and death pays the debt that we owe to God through our sin as in the reparation offering.¹⁸ It is significant that the Hebrew root translated “to make atonement” (*kipper*) can be seen as having a root meaning of to ransom, to purify, and, possibly, to cover.¹⁹ Many scholars will suggest that while the exact etymology of the term may be uncertain, the different senses of this term can be found in Old Testament usage. Each of these concepts points to the role of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

ISAIAH 53 AND THE LAW OF MOSES

With this background we can better understand the role of animals as a vicarious sacrifice in the sinner’s place as they “make atonement” with their suffering and death—they both ransom or redeem and purify. This

understanding prepares us to better appreciate the startling role of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The sacrifices under the law of Moses give us a framework to understand how his suffering and giving his life can function as a vicarious sacrifice.

Isaiah's message is that the mission of the messianic Suffering Servant is to be a vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice. The general idea of Christ's suffering replacing our suffering is very clear in the text. We can first see this in the contrast set up between the suffering that might initially be regarded as divine punishment: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). Isaiah specifically states that those looking at him from the outside might think that he was "smitten of God" (v. 4). But then it is revealed that while the Servant is suffering, it is not for his own sins or transgressions. Isaiah emphasizes that "*he* hath borne *our* griefs," "[*he*] carried *our* sorrows" (v. 4; emphasis added), that "*he* was wounded for *our* transgressions, *he* was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of *our* peace was upon *him*; and with *his* stripes *we* are healed" (v. 5; emphasis added), and finally that "the Lord hath laid on *him* the iniquity of *us all*" (v. 6; emphasis added). The text builds upon the contrast between the expectation that suffering is a consequence for sin and the surprise that this suffering is vicarious or substitutionary. The Suffering Servant has taken our place and endured the consequences of our sins and iniquities.

In addition to these statements, the message of the Suffering Servant giving his life as a vicarious sacrifice is strengthened by specific references to the sacrifices prescribed under the law of Moses. These connections to the sacrifices of the law serve as a very important addition to the general sense of Christ's vicarious suffering gathered in this chapter. These references specifically link the Suffering Servant to the sacrifices offered in the Temple to reconcile God and Israel. Not only is Isaiah prophesying about the future suffering and death of the coming Messiah, but he is linking it to the suffering and sacrificial death of the animals that ritually redeemed and cleansed the children of Israel under the law of Moses.

The most explicit connection to the law of Moses is Isaiah 53:10: "Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin." The Hebrew text behind the translation "an offering for sin" is *asham*, the name of a sacrifice under

the law of Moses discussed in Leviticus 5–7, what the King James Version refers to as the “guilt offering.”²⁰ This sacrifice is also referred to as a trespass offering or sacrifice of reparation.²¹ This passage in Isaiah 53:10 is saying that “the Messianic servant offers himself as an [*asham*] in compensation for the sins of the people, interposing for them as their substitute.”²² The phrasing in Isaiah 53 is unusual in that with the reparation offering, people are normally described as “bringing it,” but here the phrase is “laying down,” which follows Abraham laying Isaac down on the altar (see Genesis 22:9).²³ On the significance of the Servant’s death being described as an *asham*, Hartley comments: “The choice of [*asham*] to describe his sacrificial death may be twofold. First, it communicates that the servant’s death compensates God fully for the damages he has incurred by mankind’s sinning. Second, the servant’s sacrifice provides expiation for every kind of sin, inadvertent and intentional. That is, the servant’s sacrifice provides expiation for any person who appropriates its merits to himself, no matter how grave his sin.”²⁴

Another striking phrase in Isaiah 53 identifies Christ’s death as that of a lamb.²⁵ The statement that “he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (v. 7) takes on new significance in this context of ritual language. Christ is like the lambs that were used in sacrificial offerings. This would have been central to Passover (see Exodus 12), of course, and also many other sacrifices under the law of Moses. Because of the New Testament testimony of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), we take this identification of the Messiah as the Lamb of God for granted. As a consequence, this imagery can seem so familiar as to lose its meaning. In other words, we assume that the Messiah came to suffer and die. But for the Jews at the time of Jesus the idea of a suffering Messiah was actually not prevalent; rather, they assumed that the Messiah was coming as a political deliverer.²⁶ It seems very likely, then, that this idea of a suffering Messiah may have easily slipped away at other times when the Israelites were in states of apostasy.²⁷ To appreciate how fresh and powerful Isaiah’s vision of a suffering Messiah would have seemed to those personally familiar with the sacrifices of the law of Moses, consider how consistently the coming Messiah was revealed to Nephi as the Lamb of God (see 1 Nephi 11–14). This would seem to fit

with Nephi's confidence in Isaiah's words' power to "more fully persuade . . . to believe in the Lord their Redemee" (1 Nephi 19:23).

From the perspective of the sacrifices under the law of Moses, another phrase in Isaiah 53 takes on additional meaning. We read that Christ was "cut off out of the land of the living" (Isaiah 53:8), language that evokes the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus 16. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when all of Israel was cleansed, two goats were selected. One was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies to cleanse the Temple and the people (see Leviticus 16:15–20). The other had hands laid upon its head to transfer to "him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat" (Leviticus 16:21). Then that goat was "cut off out of the land of the living," sent "into a solitary, literally, 'cut-off land' . . . , recalling the Servant's being cut off from the land of the living."²⁸ Leviticus 16:22 specifically says that "the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited." This clear statement is unique in regards to sacrificial animals and finds a parallel in Isaiah 53:12, where the Servant "bare the sin of many," again a unique usage in the Bible for a human being.²⁹

When we can see this dimension of vicarious sacrifice embedded in Isaiah's message we gain a tremendous depth of understanding of the role of redemption and sacrifice. We better appreciate how Isaiah both looked forward to Christ and also backwards to the law of Moses (or, rather, sideways since the sacrifices would have been ongoing in his day). We can better understand the requirement of payment and cleansing to allow us to be in the presence of God and become as he is and how through vicarious sacrifice our ransom and cleansing is brought about. The role of Christ's sacrifice becomes clearer with an examination of this dimension of vicarious suffering under the law.

THE WHOLE MEANING OF THE LAW

The sacrifices of the law of Moses lay out for us a vivid picture of how we are reconciled to God. We are unclean and the consequence of our sin and uncleanness is spiritual death, to be forever cut off from the presence of God. Rather than separating himself from us and leaving us to the condition that we merit, God in his mercy provides a means by which we

can be reconciled. The giving of the life of the sacrificial offering vicariously takes the place of our lives, and by applying this blood we are made clean. Mercy is extended, but justice and the demands of the righteousness of God are not ignored. No unclean thing can dwell in the presence of God, and we cannot cleanse ourselves on our own.

This doctrine of vicarious suffering is taught in the law of Moses. Then in Isaiah 53 we find a prophetic interpretation of how God's forgiveness comes. It is not in the death of the animals that we truly find cleansing and redemption, but in the suffering and death of the messianic Suffering Servant who suffers and dies in our place. Isaiah's connection of the role of the Messiah and the sacrifices under the law of Moses finds ample additional witness by Book of Mormon prophets. In fact, the messianic reading of the law seen in Isaiah 53 finds a fascinating parallel in the words of Abinadi. Understanding the dimension of vicarious sacrifice in Isaiah 53 and its connection to the law of Moses helps to explain why Abinadi quoted this passage to the priests of King Noah in its entirety. They thought they could be saved by obedience to the law alone (see Mosiah 12:32). By sharing Isaiah 53, he was showing them how they should understand the law of Moses. With Abinadi's prophetic interpretation of Isaiah 53, it is clear that the Suffering Servant "brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7) is Christ, who "shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death" (Mosiah 15:7).

To a people who believed that with their own actions in following the law's provisions they were saving themselves, Abinadi emphasized that the law pointed to the true source of redemption: "For were it not for the redemption which he hath made for his people, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, I say unto you, were it not for this, all mankind must have perished" (Mosiah 15:19). As we have seen in the provisions of the law of Moses, the priests "made atonement" (cleansed, ransomed) for their sins and the sins of the people through the sacrifices. Under the law, provisions were made for human sin and transgression, and people could be made right with God again. The danger with this ritual system is that it can seem closed and under our control. If we do all the right things, participate in the required ordinances, then we might feel as though we have saved ourselves.

The deep irony of this perspective is that the rituals that people participated in were specifically designed to point to our profound uncleanness and spiritual death, being cut off from the presence of God without divine intervention. Abinadi ended his commentary on the question whether we could be saved by the law of Moses by answering: “And now, ought ye not to tremble and repent of your sins, and remember that only in and through Christ ye can be saved? Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come—teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father” (Mosiah 16:13–15).

Like the people living under the law of Moses, in our day we can also overlook the underlying message of the ordinances provided to cleanse us and bring us into the presence of God. We might be tempted to feel that it is our obedience to these ordinances that saves us. Understanding the message of vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice at the heart of the law of Moses can also help us look and see Christ’s vicarious and substitutionary sacrifice manifest in the ordinances of our day. As we recognize our own condition of uncleanness and spiritual death, separated from the presence of God, we are better able to appreciate how God reaches out to cleanse and ransom us from our unclean state.

Isaiah begins chapter 53 by asking, “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (v. 1). He then proceeds to explain how the arm of the Lord is revealed—in the suffering and death of the Messiah as a vicarious sacrifice on our behalf. As Christ spoke to the shattered and chastened Nephites in 3 Nephi 9, he specifically referred to this arm of mercy that he has extended to us: “Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive” (v. 14). Isaiah shows us the price that was paid for that arm of mercy to be extended toward us. He also reminds us how much we need mercy and that our obedience alone cannot save us. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

Learning to better understand the law of Moses and its symbolic teaching about the Atonement helps provide us with a framework to appreciate the fulness of the gospel. These elemental images of life and

death, cleanness and impurity, and of substitutionary sacrifice help us learn to see the symbols that point to our relationship to God as we receive the blessings of the ordinances in our day. Recognizing that “all we like sheep have gone astray” brings us down into humility when we recognize that our ability to enter into the presence of the Lord comes only through his arm of mercy. Like the scapegoat whose death cleansed the people and allowed the Lord’s presence to remain in their midst, even so with Christ—“The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” As Amulek testified, “This is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:14).

While the idea that mercy is available simply out of the loving goodness of our Father may sound like an attractive doctrine, the Old Testament bears witness to the true source of mercy. The provisions of the law of Moses teach that the consequence of our uncleanness, our sins and transgressions, is to be banished from the presence of God and to die. The provisions of the law of Moses also teach that mercy is possible through the suffering and death of a substitute. In Alma’s words, “mercy cometh because of the atonement” (Alma 42:23). Isaiah testifies that “he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). The Lord speaks to us today, pleading that we accept the mercy that he has made available to us through the Restoration. “Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the Great I Am, whose arm of mercy hath atoned for your sins” (D&C 29:1). His arm of mercy has been revealed in our day and he invites us to accept his invitation to leave behind spiritual death and uncleanness. He invites us into his presence.

NOTES

1. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” *Ensign*, April 2000, 2.
2. An overview of these different views addressing the question of Jesus’ death can be found in James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) and Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). A brief history of the changing views on the meaning of Christ’s life can be found

in works such as John McIntyre's *The Shape of Christology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, 2nd ed. rev. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) and John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

3. An example of how the assumptions of the Enlightenment frame how to interpret the Bible can be seen in John Goldingay's rejection of seeing vicarious suffering in Isaiah 53. He sees this nonvicarious reading as preferable because "it thus does not fall foul of Immanuel Kant's argument that in connection with guilt and punishment one person cannot stand in the place of another person. By its nature guilt is not transferable. A court does have the power to decide not to punish a person for their guilt, and also to pardon them so that they cease to be guilty" (John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* [London: T&T Clark, 2005], 484). He will, however, argue for a kind of vicariousness to the Servant's suffering in that "the speakers' first new realization about the servant's suffering would then be that it came about not because of his own wrongdoing but because he was sharing their fate as wrongdoers. Like the suffering of someone such as Jeremiah, the servant's suffering issues from his identification with the lot of the people as a whole" (Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 501). For an argument for reading Isaiah 53 as vicarious suffering, see J. Allan Groves, "Atonement in Isaiah 53," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 61–89.

4. For summaries and overviews of other Christians' defense of substitutionary sacrifice see such discussions as Simon Gathercole, "The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21 (2003): 152–65; Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007); Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 67–116; Sylvain Romerowski, "Old Testament Sacrifices and Reconciliation," *European Journal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (2006): 13–24.

5. Gordon J. Wenham, "The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 76–77. An older but classic study of the theology of sacrifice in the Old Testament and its connection to Christ is Andrew Jukes's *The Law of the Offerings: The Five Tabernacle Offerings and Their Spiritual Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Classics, 2004). It was originally published in the mid-nineteenth century, and this reprint is of the seventeenth edition. A classic twentieth-century text that also continues to be appreciated by those looking to the law of Moses as a type of Christ is Leon Morris's *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960). While both of these works have helpful insights and continue to be important resources for the Christian perspective on the sacrifices of the law of Moses, I will be drawing primarily on the more recent scholarship of Gordon J. Wenham. Other contemporary discussions of these issues are listed in note 3.

6. Wenham, "Theology," 77.

7. Wenham, "Theology," 77.

8. Speaking of how to interpret the imposition of hands on the sacrificial victim, Wenham argues that "the most probable explanation of the imposition of the hand in sacrifice is that thereby the victim is identified with the offerer. This has been identified by Edmund Leach who states, 'the plain implication is that, in some metaphysical sense, the victim is a vicarious substitution for the donor himself.'" He continues, "This interpretation is strengthened by the comment in some Hittite texts that the animal is a substitute for the worshipper. It is further confirmed by [Genesis] 22:13 which states that Abraham offered up the lamb 'as a burnt offering *instead of his son*'. Now while this could be taken simply as a statement of fact, it seems more probable that Genesis 22, like many stories in Genesis, is also paradigmatic and elucidates the OT understanding of sacrifice in general. It shows an animal suffering vicariously in a man's place" (Wenham, "Theology," 79–80).

9. See the discussion in David Peterson, "Atonement in the Old Testament," in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today*, ed. David Peterson (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), 4.

10. B. Lang, "Kipper," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fahry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 7:301.

11. He continues, "Its immolation on the altar quietens God's anger at human sin. But to say that every animal sacrifice has a common core of ritual meaning is not to say that in other respects the sacrifices are not very different and have a diversity of symbolic meaning" (Wenham, "Theology," 82).

12. Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 61. It is important to note that this passage is heavily debated and those who hold different views on how to read it will have correspondingly different views on the role of substitutionary sacrifice in the law of Moses.

13. Lang, "Kipper," 292.

14. Lang, "Kipper," 292.

15. Wenham observes: "The laying on of hands may indicate that the animal is taking the place of the worshipper. The worshipper is offering himself to God through the sacrificial victim. 'The plain implication is that, in some metaphysical sense, the victim is a vicarious substitution for the donor himself.' Or alternatively the laying on of hands transfers the worshipper's sins symbolically to the animal. Both of these meanings seem to be attested in Scripture." He continues, "It does not seem necessary to decide between these explanations. Both fit in well with sacrifices making atonement, i.e., the animal serving as a ransom for the life of man. One may regard the animal either as dying in the worshipper's place as his substitute, or as receiving the death penalty because of the sin transferred to it by the laying on of hands" (Wenham, *Leviticus*, 62).

While noting that this is a debated question, Wenham argues against those who simply see laying on of hands as indicating ownership, arguing that the meaning of pressing (*samak*) is stronger and that "the very action of pressing down on the animal's head suggests an attempt to establish an identity between worshipper and

victim.” He continues, “Another possibility is that the imposition of hands conveys the worshipper’s sins to the animal, which then dies in the worshipper’s place. This is certainly the most probable interpretation of [Leviticus] 16:21, where in the day of atonement ceremony the high priest lays *both* his hands on the scapegoat’s head, confesses ‘over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel . . . all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness’” (Wenham, “Theology,” 79; emphasis in original).

16. See Peterson, “Atonement in the Old Testament,” 15.

17. Wenham, *Leviticus*, III.

18. Wenham suggests that “it may not be necessary, however, to choose between the idea of substitutionary atonement, of the ram dying in the sinner’s place, and of reparation, of the ram somehow compensating God for the loss he has suffered as the result of sin. In some degree substitution seems to form part of the theology of all the sacrifices: reparation may be the specific component of the reparation offering, just as purification is the distinctive aim of the purification offering” (*Leviticus*, III).

19. The debate over how to interpret *kipper* is wide-ranging. Part of it is connected to various possible cognates in other Semitic languages. Part of it is connected to theological issues of interpretation, related to the question of whether this should be understood as expiation or propitiation. For a summary of several of these points see B. Lang, “Kipper,” in *Theological Dictionary* and Richard E. Averbeck, “Kipper,” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 2:689–710. Both review the scholarship and give summaries of several influential interpretations. Simply put, the etymological issues stem from possible roots with the Hebrew term *koper*, “ransom,” and the Akkadian “to purify” or “to cover,” and from the Arabic cognate, which both Lang and Averbeck suggest has generally been seen as having difficulties (see Lang, 290; Averbeck, 692). Several suggest that both purification and substitution should be seen as the meaning of *kipper*; see, for example, Émile Nicole, “Atonement in the Pentateuch,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Ch.E. Hill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 47–49.

20. For a discussion of the translation of *asham*, how the *asham* was offered, and a debate over *asham* as sacrifice, see J. E. Harley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 76–79. Kellerman illustrates the debate over interpreting this term, noting that as some see it as “restitution for trespasses,” or “to atone for a sacrilege,” others see it limited to “unintentional, inadvertent transgressions,” but another sees it as “atonement for intentional sins,” while some see it as a “fine” or “restitution” (D. Kellerman, “Asham,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, rev. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974], 1:432).

21. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 79–80 on trespass offering; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 354 on sacrifice of reparation. Blenkinsopp notes: “This type of sacrifice was

the indispensable means for the removal of guilt and liability for punishment in especially serious cases of encroachment on holy objects and places. It also served to make reparation for a range of transgressions (probably not listed exhaustively in the relevant ritual text, [Leviticus] 5:14–26 [5:14–6:7]), such as theft, fraud, and the swearing of false oaths” (p. 254).

22. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 80.

23. John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah* 40–55 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 2:320.

24. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 80.

25. The term can also be understood more generally and could also be translated “goat” (Wenham, *Leviticus*, 110).

26. This can be seen even in the case of the Apostles. Consider, for example, Matthew 16:21–23.

27. On the question of the influence of this text see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 40–55, 81–92. He has a discussion of the impact of Isaiah 53 in biblical times and comments: “One would think that the depth and originality with which the religious idea of prophetic instrumentality is worked out in [Isaiah] 40–55, most remarkably in the form of substitutionary suffering in 52:13–53:12, could hardly fail to leave its mark on religious thinking in the later Second Temple period. It has nevertheless proved difficult to pin down clear and substantial indications of its influence in the extant literature prior to the common era (see most recently the survey by Martin Hengel 1996, 49–91). The situation provides another occasion for regret at the scarcity of source material for the period and the uncooperative nature of the few sources that we do possess” (84).

Another insight on the difficulty of knowing the impact of Isaiah 53’s vision of a suffering Messiah can be seen in this comment by Martin Hengel: “We cannot claim that Isa. 53 had no kind of messianic interpretation in pre-Christian Judaism. It is simply the case that too few texts have come down to us from the pre-rabbinic period.” He continues, “So far, then, we have no clear text from pre-Christian Judaism which speaks of the vicarious suffering of the Messiah in connection with Isa. 53. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility of such a tradition, and there are some indications in favour of it, but the basis provided by our sources is too restricted. At all events, a suffering Messiah did not belong to the widespread popular Messianic hope in the time of Jesus and a crucified Messiah was a real blasphemy” (*The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 59).

28. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 40–55, 351. Also, Wenham says “‘cutting off’ could refer to the fact that the place to which the goat was led was ‘cut off’ from the camp, perhaps by a deep valley, so that the animal had no chance of returning to Israel and bringing back the guilt of their sins. Alternatively, it could refer to the fact that it was taken to a place where its life was ‘cut off’” (*Leviticus*, 233).

29. Peterson, “Atonement in the Old Testament,” 15.