

AN EXEGESIS OF THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT CEREMONY:
EXODUS 1-8

BY
JENNIFER WYMAN
MARCH 7, 2016

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	2
GRAMMAR	4
Lexical Issues	4
Syntactical Issues.....	5
RHETORICAL FEATURES.....	6
Genre	6
Literary Devices	8
CANONICAL CONTEXT.....	8
LITURGICAL CONTEXT	10
MAGISTERIAL CONTEXT	12
CONCLUSION	13
REFERENCE LIST	15

INTRODUCTION

This exegesis will examine Exodus 24:1-8, the Blood of the Covenant ceremony. In the narrative, the Israelites have gathered at Mount Sinai where God has just given Moses the Ten Commandments and the Ordinances. He instructs Moses, several other leaders, and 70 elders to approach the mountain and worship from afar. Only Moses is to go near the Lord. Moses then addresses the people telling them all the Lord has spoken, and the people agree to obey. He prepares a ritual site and has young men offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Moses then take some of the blood from the sacrifices and dashes half of it against the altar. He reads aloud the Decalogue and the Ordinances and the people again voice their assent. He then takes the other half of the blood and dashes it on the people saying, “See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (v. 8).

It will be important in this study to look at several key elements. For an ancient Israelite, what would this ceremony have meant? How have other Ancient Near East cultures influenced the particulars of this ritual or how it would have been perceived among the people? Linguistically, how does an English translation impact the meaning of the narrative? Is the translation made anemic in meaning due to inadequate language? Are there specific words or phrases that would have carried a different meaning for an ancient reader? Should we be looking at this text head-on, as an historical reality or as a moral lesson? How important is this text today? Do we still read about it in the liturgy? What can a 2000+-year-old antiquated ritual ceremony teach us about what it means to be a Christian? Over the years, has the Church had any input about this covenant making ceremony? Should we write it off as an anachronism, an antiquated story from an irrelevant history, or does it have larger implications in the Divine Economy?

These questions will be addressed systematically in an attempt to uncover a deeper meaning of this text.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Blood of the Covenant narrative, which describes a ceremony alien and a bit off-putting to today's sensibilities, fits nicely within an Ancient Near Eastern context. Various hypotheses categorize sacrificial ceremonies in the ANE into treaty ratification, homage, and communion among others (Laneri 2015, loc. 786). The biblical narrative has components of several of these aspects. In vv. 1 and 2, which describe the elders of Israel worshiping from afar, we see elements of the vassal/suzerain relationship in which the vassal expresses deference and worship by prostrating repeatedly at a distance from the suzerain (Sarna 1991, 150). In v. 4, Moses writes the words of the Lord into the Book of the Covenant. The act of writing "was an essential part of the ratification process of treaties in the Ancient Near East. It made the treaty a legal reality" (151). Public reading of the terms of the covenant, which we see in v. 7, is another element of ANE treaty ratification (Currid 2001, 137).

The importance of animal sacrifice in Mesopotamian rituals and ceremonies cannot be overemphasized. It was not uncommon in many ANE cultures to see animal sacrifice and blood rituals connected with treaties (Laneri 2015, loc. 778). There is evidence that the Hittites, another ANE empire, had a similar covenant ceremony which involved sacrificing a goat and smearing its blood on a drinking vessel¹ (Niehaus 2008, loc. 527-528). In the Syro-Canaanite culture, public sacrifice and animal offerings to the gods played a central role in religious worship (Stanley Spaeth 2013, 62).

The presence of blood in no small way underscores the gravity of the ritual being performed. In the region at this time, blood sacrifice, which was generally present in the sealing of contracts, signified the "highest considerable degree of sacredness inviting parties to the contract" (MacGregor, in Rushdoony 2004, 350). From this we can infer that even a non-Israelite witnessing this ceremony would appreciate the gravity of what was being performed, namely "propitiation through bleeding sacrifice" (Ibid.).

For the Hebrews, sacrifice took on an additional significance. Blood was a "vital bodily fluid [which] constituted the life-force. As such, like life itself, it belonged to God alone. For that reason, its consumption by humans is strictly forbidden, and the blood of sacrifices is dashed on the altar" (Sarna 1991, 152). The gravity of the covenant promise sealed in blood would not be lost on the Israelites. The blood represents kinship and breaking the covenant would result in the shedding of blood (Currid 2001, 137).

Hahn and Mitch (2012) point out that the significance of the Blood of the Covenant ceremony has more than one level. While it primarily ritualizes both blessings and curses of the treaty, it also symbolizes a sort of death of the Egyptian gods (loc. 3492). The blood of these

¹ The ceremony also includes the sacrifice of an animal which is then consumed at a meal, a fact which offers further evidence of a Hittite influence in this ceremony. Yet, we do not read about the meal aspect of the ceremony until Exodus 24:11 which is beyond the scope of this exegesis.

pagan deities is spilled and offered to YHWH at the same time it is poured over the Israelites as a representation of their powerlessness. It is no small irony that God uses a common custom of ANE worship to reinforce the impotence of such pagan gods.

We also learn from Hahn and Mitch (2012) that this ceremony inaugurates Israel as a “kingdom of priests” (loc.3492). Priests were a common presence in many ANE cultures, specifically king-priests or priestly royalty. These individuals were at the head of society, had dominion over animals, and were responsible for performing rituals and ceremonies (Laneri 2015, loc. 2009). A Sumerian vase unearthed in the early part of the 20th century depicts the bond between the king-priest and the goddess Inanna, reinforcing the strong connection between god and priest in traditional agrarian city-states of Mesopotamia (Ibid., loc. 2185). It would appear that the God of the Hebrews is reclaiming for his people, the Israelites, the institution of the priesthood once bestowed on Adam.

As this narrative describes a covenant pact between God and his people, it is important to take a closer look at the structure of Near Eastern covenant ritual and establish parallels between common cultic practice in Mesopotamia and the biblical account of the Blood of the Covenant ceremony. In particular, the narrative bears many similarities to Hittite suzerain treaties. We find a) stipulations of the covenant (v. 3), b) the document itself (v. 4), the oath (v. 7), and the ceremony ratification and sacrifices (vv. 4-6, 8) (Thompson 1963, 22). The purpose of these treaties was to “secure the interests of the great King and to guarantee the allegiance and . . . economic and military support of the vassal” (Ibid., 13). The initiation and terms of the treaty were done by the suzerain; the only requirement on the part of the vassal was to accept them (Ibid.). We see this play out with regularity in the biblical narrative. God invites his people to approach him, dictates to Moses the terms of the covenant and, by allowing themselves to be doused with sacrificial blood, the Israelites freely enter into the treaty.

Interestingly, nowhere in the narrative do we read of God’s instructions to Moses for how to perform specific elements of the rituals such as pouring the blood into two vessels and throwing it on both the altar and the people. From this we can infer that Moses already knew about these things because such elements of treaty ratification were common enough practice. What is more, Moses likely sat in on meetings about state issues and other matters of government when he lived in Egypt. It is probable he learned about treaty ratification as well.

It is important not to overlook the influence that Egyptian culture had on the minds of the Hebrews. In order to fully extricate them from the stronghold of the Egyptian Pantheon, God needed to assert his dominance over those gods definitively and with finality. He does this by requiring them to take part in a ritual that strongly resembled an Egyptian cultic practice. The difference is, the allegiance the Israelites are pledging is not to an Egyptian god but to YHWH. Egyptians believed that their king “was the earthly incarnation of the solar god” (Stanley-Spaeth 2013, 24). The gods agreed to support this king and the king would rule the people fairly. This agreement was ratified with a sort of ceremony whereby the god formally declared that he bestowed life and blessings upon the king. The king then gives a peace offering to the god at which point the god announces his intention to continue providing the king with life (Ibid.). By

participating in this covenant, the Israelites are tacitly renouncing any prior covenant with Egyptian gods.

Through this analysis we better able to place the Blood of the Covenant narrative within an historical context. God had 400 years of Egyptian influence to overcome, and by incorporating elements of covenant ceremonies from other influential cultures in the ancient near East into the Sinai Covenant, He is effectively severing all previous ties to those cultures. The effect of this is twofold. Firstly, he is requiring unconditional loyalty and obedience under the threat of death which is represented by the dousing of blood. Secondly, by appropriating the ceremonies and rituals of other cultures he both claims them as his own and renders them impotent, effectively killing them and wrenching his people free from their grasp. To get a closer look at how he does this, it is important to look at the language used in the narrative itself. Is to this aspect of the exegesis that we now turn.

GRAMMAR

In this section, both lexical and syntactical issues will be examined in order to gain a fuller understanding of the nuances of the Blood of the Covenant narrative. First, the discussion will focus on how, without a grasp of the Hebrew language, idioms and word usage that would have been meaningful to the Israelites are lost to the modern reader. Then, some of the differences between the original Hebrew and the English translation will be examined to see how such dissimilarities can affect our interpretation of the text. The second part of this section looks at the syntax of the narrative to determine if there are any ambiguities in meaning that can obfuscate our understanding of what is actually going on in this passage.

Lexical Issues

This analysis will examine each significant word or group of words in the order they appear in the narrative. In v. 1, God establishes a clear hierarchy of authority. In the English translation, we read, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, and Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance” (NRSV). We get the impression that the people as a group are to go to the Lord and worship from afar. Yet, the Hebrew for “go up” (*ālēh*) is in the singular imperative which would indicate that God is speaking specifically to Moses and it is he who stands above Aaron, his sons, and the seventy elders (Hamilton 2011, loc. 12416). Also worthy of a closer look is the word *shâchach* which is often translated as “worship,” a relatively nebulous word that can have a variety of connotations and interpretations. However, this word refers to a specific type of worship, the act of prostrating oneself, or bowing down in a demonstration of subservience and homage to someone or something.² To “bow low” was a common expression of complete submission to authority the Ancient Near East (Sarna 1991, 151). The gesture was to be understood as “part of the formal ceremonial attending the

² The full definition is as follows: “*shâchach*—a primitive root; to sink or depress (reflexive or causative):—bend, bow (down), bring (cast) down, couch, humble self, be (bring) low, stoop” (Strong 2011, loc. 29568).

ratification of the covenant . . . not simply an act of worshipful reverence” (Ibid.). Armed with this new information, we have a better understanding of how God’s instructions to the Israelites place the narrative squarely within the covenant ratifying context. Interestingly, the Septuagint uses the word προσκυνέω (to worship) as well which would indicate that even the Jews during the time of Jesus may not have given much weight to this seemingly not insignificant detail.

In v. 3, Moses tells the people all the “words of the Lord and all the ordinances.” The English translation uses the word “ordinances” for the Hebrew *mishpat*, a term rich in meaning that takes on juridical and contractual overtones. Properly, *mishpat* means, “a verdict pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree, (human or divine law), including the act, the place, the suit, the crime, and the penalty” (Strong 2011, loc. 18987). There is no mistaking the covenant language in this definition. The words Moses spoke are generally understood as the Decalogue and the Ordinances are all the stipulations of the covenant code (Hahn and Mitch 2012, loc. 3492). Here again we gain a fuller appreciation for the gravity and solemnity of the ritual taking place. God is formally declaring the terms of the covenant to which the Israelites must agree. This assent takes place in v. 4, “And all the people answered with one voice, and said, ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.’” ‘In one voice’ is another way of saying ‘with one accord’ (Currid 2001, 135). This is significant because the Israelites are agreeing to the terms of the covenant as a unit. This emphasizes the importance of communion and the establishment of the universal Church. Our faith is strongest when we believe as a collective.

Also in v. 5 are the two types of offerings made to the Lord, the burnt offering (*olah*), and the peace offering (*shelachim*). While the first was completely offered up in fire, the second was often shared by the worshipers is kind of a “shared sacred meal” (Sarna 1991, 152). This not only reinforces the meal sharing aspect of covenant ratification present in many Ancient Near Eastern rituals, it prefigures the Eucharistic aspect of the new Blood of the Covenant ushered in with the Christ.

It is clear after analyzing the lexical differences between the original Hebrew and the English translation that the Blood of the Covenant narrative is in no uncertain terms a formal ceremony complete with ritual genuflecting, covenant ratification, unanimous participation, and priestly ceremony. This exegesis will next examine the syntactical issues present in this narrative.

Syntactical Issues

There are several relevant syntactical issues in the Blood of the Covenant narrative that are worth examining more closely. The “young men of Israel” in v. 5 is slightly ambiguous in Hebrew. It could be translated either “the young men” or simply “young men” (Dozeman 2009, loc. 561). The definite article would imply a specific group of individuals while the indeterminate “young men” suggests a more random selection. Dozeman tells us that the term “can also identify an attendant, such as “the attendants of David (1 Sam 11:15, 12, 25)” (Ibid.). This term would indicate that these men are likely functioning in a priestly capacity in the act of ritual sacrifice

(Ibid.). Given the ceremonial nature of the rest of the narrative, the likely translation includes the definite article.

The Masoretes were careful to place the word “bulls” by itself at the end of v. 5 (Hamilton 2011, loc. 12428). It was clear from this that “‘bulls’ referred only to the well-being sacrifices and not to the burnt offerings” (Ibid.). Several neighboring cultures had a bull as one of their major deities. El and Baal, major gods of the Canaanites, were often represented as bulls (Stanley-Spaeth 2013, 59) and Egyptians worshiped the fertility God Apis. It is possible that God was driving home the point that in order to make peace with him, the Hebrews should no longer nor should they, in the future, worship these foreign gods.

Two of the fifty times *beriyth* (covenant) occurs in the Old Testament are in these eight verses, vv. 7 and 8.³ This is a fairly high percentage, considering the sum total of words in the Old Testament is close to 500,000. This statistic shows us that *beriyth* is not thrown around in casual conversation. It is a term pregnant with gravity, fidelity, and permanence. God does not enter covenants lightly and we should pay attention when we see the word *beriyth*. Because “Book of the Covenant” and “Blood of the Covenant” are used at the end of this passage, we should expect that the subsequent verses continue with and even delve deeper into the covenant ceremony.

By examining the historical and grammatical context of the Blood of the Covenant narrative we begin to get a clearer picture of the context of this passage. Next we will look at rhetorical features in order to gain an even better understanding of what is occurring in these eight verses.

RHETORICAL FEATURES

This section of the exegesis will explore three rhetorical features of the Blood of the Covenant narrative. First, the discussion will focus on the genre of the narrative followed by its structure and then will point out any literary devices employed.

Genre

The Sinai portion of Exodus contains various literary genres working in tandem: cosmic mountain, covenant making, priestly direction, prophetic statements — “all embedded in the cataclysmic language of God’s appearance to humans” (Myers 2005, 141). At the end of this Sinai experience is chapter 24 which serves as a transition between God’s regulations for his people and the construction of the tabernacle (205). Against this backdrop, Exodus 24:1-8 is a straightforward historical account of a covenant ceremony (Dozeman 2009, 562). The author of the passage intended to recount actual events as they occurred. He—or, the redactor—positions the narrative strategically so that its ritual symbolism would not be lost on the ancient reader.

³ Data gathered from Paul A. Boer, Sr., ed., *A Catholic Interlinear Old Testament Polyglot: Volume 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus in Latin, English, and Transliterated Greek and Hebrew* (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2013).

This covenant ceremony sets Moses up as the liaison between the people and God and prepares the people for the theophany that is to come in the subsequent verses (Myers 2005, 205).

Several interesting theories have been put forth about the genre of Exodus as it relates to the New Testament. One of the more compelling of these is the hypothesis of Meredith G. Kline (1975) who argues that the book of Exodus follows the same literary structure as the Gospels and provocatively dubs it “The Gospel of Moses” (Kline 1975, 4). If we accept this theory, the genre of Exodus is a sort of prototypical Greco-Roman biography, the subject of which is not a single individual but a people, the people of Israel. Exploring these hypotheses in detail is beyond the scope of this exegesis. As such, is sufficient to call the Blood of the Covenant narrative an historical account and move on to the structure of the text.

Structure

Exodus 24 deals with the Israelites’ acceptance of the laws given by God and can be divided into two parts: “a) the ratifying of the laws and b) the revelation after the laws” (Butler 2008, 210). In the current exegesis, only vv. 1 and 2 deal with revelation after the laws. Vv. 3-8 is the section of the chapter that discusses the actual ratification of the Laws (Ibid.). It is a fairly distinct division as in the first two verses God is doing the talking and in the last six Moses is the one giving direction.

Presented visually, the structure would be as follows:

The Blood of the Covenant Narrative

- I. The Command for the Revelation—God speaking
 - A. 24:1—The instructions to Moses to approach the Lord with Aaron, and Nadab, and Abihu, and 70 elders
 - B. 24:2— The stipulation that only Moses must go near the Lord
- II. The Ratifying of the Laws—Moses speaking
 - A. 24:3—Moses reads the law and ordinances
 - i. the people assent
 - B. 24:4—Moses arranges the location of the ratification ceremony
 - C. 24:5—Moses directs the people to offer sacrifices to Lord
 - D. 24:6—Moses pours blood on the altar
 - E. 24:7—Moses reads the covenant again
 - i. the people assent again
 - F. 24:8—Moses verbally seals the covenant after the blood has been sprinkled on the people (Butler 2008, 212).

It is interesting to note how responsibility travels first from God, then to Moses, then to the people. All parties must participate in the ceremony, but each there is a clear hierarchy to how each must respond.

Others structure the narrative in a chiasmic pattern which would follow this outline:

A Moses and elders instructed to ascend and worship (vv. 1-2)

- B Words of the Lord/affirmation of the people (v. 3)
- C Words written by Moses (v. 4a)
- D Sacrifices and blood ceremony (vv. 4b-6)
- C¹ Words (book) read by Moses (v. 7a)
- B¹ Words of the Lord/affirmation of the people (vv. 7b-8)

A¹ Moses and elders ascend and worship (vv. 9-11) (Currid 2001, 133).

Here, it is clear that the central point of the narrative includes the sacrifices and blood ceremony. The laws and ordinances encompass the ritual and the words of the Lord protect and sanctify the ceremony.

Literary Devices

There are few obvious literary devices employed in the Blood of the Covenant narrative, but that is not to say there are not some more subtle elements of rhetoric. For instance, what stands out readily is the abundant use of the word “all,” seven instances in 236 words. The word occurs at key moments of the narrative. “Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do” (v. 3). And again, “And Moses wrote down all of the words of the Lord” (v. 4). Further down in v. 7, “And they said, “all that the Lord has spoken we will do . . .” The word “all” even closes out the passage, “See the Blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (v. 8).

The author appears to be driving home the point that God will not settle for anything other than total obedience, total commitment, and total fidelity to Him. The emphasis on the stipulation that the Israelites be “all in” is reinforced years later when we hear from Jesus’s lips that, “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt 5:18). The law being formally ratified with the Blood of the Covenant ceremony is an eternally binding one, one that will not be dissoluble until “all is accomplished.”

This tie in with the New Testament puts us in a good place to discuss the canonical context of the narrative.

CANONICAL CONTEXT

The Blood of the Covenant passage introduces the beginning of the end of the larger structure of this section of Exodus which opens with the Israelites arrival at Sinai in chapter 19 and ends with Moses’s retreat to the top of the mountain for 40 days at the end of chapter 24. The first eight verses that make up the Blood of the Covenant narrative are only the beginning of the larger ceremony that concludes at verse 11 with a meal between the privileged few who were allowed to ascend the mountain. It is a short chapter, one that effectively serves as a transitional one between the Decalogue and the community laws of the previous chapters and the building of the tabernacle in the subsequent ones (Myers 2005, 205). Verses 1-8 prepare the way for the

following nine, and function in a preparatory fashion. Without the people's assent, there would be no need for the ritual meal or, really, anything else. A covenant cannot be established without acknowledgment from both parties and there would be no moving forward without the Blood of the Covenant ceremony.

Within the larger scope of the book of Exodus, the Blood of the Covenant narrative is one more step towards the freedom from Egyptian bondage. Broadly, the book can be separated into two distinct sections, redemption from Egypt (chs. 1-18) and the revelation at Sinai (chs. 19-40) (Hahn and Curtis 2012, 14). Beginning in chapter 19, Israel is finally free to extricate itself from the grip of Egyptian influence and begin her covenant with the Hebrew God. Once God outlines the terms of the covenant, Israel gives outward signs of her fidelity by sacrificing the old gods and creating a blood bond with YHWH. This is a pivotal point for Israel as she must demonstrate her commitment to this new treaty by following through with more than mere words and ceremony something which, as we will see in chapter 32, she fails to do.

Situated within the entire Pentateuch, the Blood of the Covenant narrative is very close to the center of the chiasmic structure:

Genesis — prologue, past (+ future)

Exodus 1-12 — Israel in Egypt **ISRAEL AS IDOLATER**

Exodus 13-18 — Israel in the wilderness

Exodus 19-40 — Israel at Sinai

Leviticus — Israel at Sinai (lifestyle is oriented to the liturgy)

Numbers 1-10 — Israel at Sinai

Numbers 11-22 — Israel in wilderness

Numbers 22-36 — Israel at the plains of Moab **ISRAEL AS IDOLATER**

Deuteronomy — epilogue, future (+ past)

(Bergsma 2016)

We can see from this that Israel is entering the heart of its relationship with God, one that is oriented to the liturgy. It becomes clear that God is steering his people away from idolatry and towards a liturgical relationship with him.

Telescoping out even further, we begin to see how the Blood of the Covenant narrative prefigures the New Covenant. The language is rich with the promise of salvation. To begin with, this is only one of two places in the Old Testament that we see the term Blood of the Covenant (the second is in Zech 9:11) (Hamilton 2011, loc. 12525). The weight of Jesus's words in Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24 is driven home when we realize that he is referring to this very episode. "For this is the Blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The covenant Jesus is fulfilling and replacing with this grander, New Covenant is the one that was instituted at Sinai.

Further, the author of Hebrews is careful to point out the connection between the covenant at Sinai and the New Covenant.

For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and

hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the Blood of the Covenant which God commanded you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:19-22).

The author goes even further and appears to have purposely phrased the passage to emphasize the Eucharistic words of Jesus: "This is my Blood of the Covenant" (Mt 26:28) (Hahn and Curtis 2010, loc. 24680). In doing this, "He is drawing a parallel between the founding of the Old Covenant at Sinai and the founding of the New Covenant at the Last Supper" (Ibid.).

It is important here to say a few words about the significance of the shedding of blood. In the Exodus narrative, the blood on the altar is noteworthy for several reasons. It symbolizes the kinship and family bond between YHWH and the people of Israel. It warns of what will happen to either of the covenant partners should they break the terms of the oath. It is a sign of Israel's renunciation of Egyptian idols. And, it marks the ordination of Israel as a "kingdom of priests" (Hahn and Curtis 2012, loc 3511). In the New Covenant, Jesus adds a new role for the shedding of blood, the forgiveness of sins. The blood of this New Covenant, the blood of Jesus, is imbued with a further salvific grace, forgiveness. As Jesus makes it clear that he is not dissolving the old covenant but fulfilling it, we can infer that the terms under which the Israelites were baptized in blood have now come to realization. Our kinship with Yahweh is fulfilled; with our baptism, we are all priests of a sort; when we accept the covenant no other gods have sway over us; and, there is no more threat of death, just forgiveness—the new terms of the covenant for which we need to ask and receive.

LITURGICAL CONTEXT

The Blood of the Covenant narrative appears several times in the Roman lectionary. It is said on the 16th Saturday in Ordinary Time in year 1 (USCCB 2016). It may be said as a ritual Mass for the Institution of Acolytes. It may be said as a Votive Mass for the Most Holy Eucharist. Most importantly, it is said in year B at the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) (Bergsma and Pitre, n. d.) Let us first look at the 16th Saturday in Ordinary Time and see how the readings relate to one another.

The Responsorial Psalm is taken from Psalm 50 which is titled, in the NRSV, the Acceptable Sacrifice. As its name indicates, the Psalm exhorts the reader to make a sacrifice of praise to the Lord and to keep the promises made to Him. Then, "call upon me in time of distress; I will rescue you, and you shall glorify me" (Ps 50:15). Here, God is recalling the covenant he made with Israel at Sinai, asking her to remember her side of the pact, and telling her that he will honor his.

Linking the Gospel (Matt 13:24-30) to the Blood of the Covenant narrative is a bit trickier. In it, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat that has been sabotaged with weeds. Instead of pulling up the weeds lest the wheat gets damaged, the owner instructs the workers to let everything grow as it will. When the harvest time comes, the wheat will get separated from the

weeds. If we step back from the Blood of the Covenant narrative and look at it with a broader lens, there are some parallels between these two passages. Not all the Israelites were righteous men and women as is evidenced by the magnitude of their transgressions and their consistency in breaking their oath to God. Yet, God wanted to save them anyway, or, at least give them the opportunity for salvation. How do you determine the wheat from the weeds? People are capable of good and evil, we are capable of being both wheat and weed. That the Israelites failed in their oath time and time again is not an indication that they are unworthy of salvation. Were that true, salvation would be ontologically unattainable. It is merely indication that they are weak, they succumb to their concupiscible and irascible appetites, their will is misled. God allows the wheat to grow and mingle with the weeds because at one point or another we have all been both.

The unifying theme of the readings at the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) is, as the name indicates, the blood of Christ. The first reading is again Exodus 24:3-8, the ceremony of the Blood of the Covenant at Sinai. Psalm 116 is a Psalm of Thanksgiving as the psalmist praises the Lord asking “How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me” (Ps 116:12)? He then declares that he will take the cup of salvation and call on the Lord. He will offer sacrifice and takes a public vow of fidelity to God. The message of sacrifice is similar to that in Psalm 50. Yet, there is a deeper message of Thanksgiving and recommitment on the part of the psalmist. The refrain for the Psalm is “I will take the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord.” This cup he speaks of can recall either the blood oath taken at Sinai or prefigure the blood of the New Covenant instituted at the Last Supper. Positioned between the Exodus narrative and the Gospel—which will be the institution of the Eucharist—this Psalm links the Old Covenant with the New.

The lectionary uses Mark’s account of the Last Supper (14:12-16) to complete the Corpus Christi readings. Interestingly, the Gospel does not begin at supper, it begins with Jesus’s disciples asking him where they should prepare the Passover. Jesus then proceeds to give detailed instructions about where to go, what to say, and preparations to make. This is reminiscent of Moses’s instructions to the people of Israel at Sinai to make sacrifice and burnt offerings. Jesus as the new Moses does not instruct his disciples to make animal sacrifices, merely to prepare the place where the sacrifice will take place. Jesus is assuming the role of sacrifice, and it is his blood that will be poured out on the altar, and dashed on the people.

Jesus, ushering in the New Covenant, does not read the words of the Book of the Covenant as did Moses. As it foreordained in Jeremiah 31:33 and reiterated in Hebrews 10:16, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

It is worth mentioning that in Exodus 11, the people share a meal together in the presence of the Lord. Like the Last Supper, the covenant is completed with a meal in the presence of God. Once the disciples drink from the cup of the New Covenant, they enter into a new treaty with the Lord, one that does not nullify the old but rather perfects it.

Examining these readings, it becomes evident that the Blood of the Covenant narrative is an essential part of the liturgy, one that reinforces the role of covenant theology in the Divine

Economy. The next and final section will look at how the Magisterium regards and interprets the Blood of the Covenant narrative.

MAGISTERIAL CONTEXT

Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* specifically references the covenant God made with Israel on Mount Sinai in the blood of the covenant narrative. The document includes it in the description of the Old Testament Divine economy in article 14:

In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (see Ex. 24:8). To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. (*DV* 14)

It would seem that the framers of Vatican II recognized the significance of this narrative enough to equate it with the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15. On the road to salvation after the fall, the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel at Sinai marks one of the high points in salvation history as is evidenced by the status it is given in *Dei Verbum* as one of the major covenants of the Old Testament.

Again in *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI saw fit to include the covenant at Sinai in his brief summary of salvation history as it is traced through the Bible from Abraham to Moses and then through Christ. He includes this reference in his discussion about the Christology of the word intimating that already at Sinai, God had set his plan in motion and begun to prepare the way for Christ. God, Benedict tells us, led Israel slowly along the path to salvation, that they might “gradually understand his ways more fully and more clearly, and make them more widely known among the nations” (*VD* 11).

Pope John Paul II uses Exodus 24:8 as an example of how blood is purifying and consecrating in *Evangelium Vitae*, his encyclical about the dignity and inviolability of human life. The blood sprinkled on the Israelites at Sinai prefigures the blood of Christ “which redeems, purifies, and saves; it is the blood of the Mediator of the New Covenant “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”” (*EV* 25).

St. Jerome draws a parallel between the parable of two sons and the Israelites at Sinai. In the parable there are two sons; the first, when told by his father to go work in the yard, refuses then relents and changes his mind. The second readily agrees to work but does not go. Jesus condemns the second son, likening him to those who heard John the Baptist’s message but did not listen to him. Jerome, referencing Exodus 24:3, likewise condemns the Jewish people who assented to the covenant. The first son, he tells us, are the Gentiles, who “having done penitence, labored in God’s figured phone by their labor for the obstinacy of refusal...” (Jerome, in Aquinas 1841, 725). The Lord is giving the Israelites a clear message in Exodus 24:1-8. “I am the Lord

your God, you shall worship me and I will love and protect you. If I do not, may my blood be spilled.” The people, in their ignorance and weakness, fail to take the covenant seriously, much like the first son in Jesus’s parable.

Finally, in his fourth homily on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians, St. John Chrysostom compares the Israelites to children who do not yet know what is best for them or how to control themselves. God is the patient father and Moses the exasperated schoolmaster who desperately wants the Israelites to behave themselves. At the same time they lament their freedom and the hardships that brings, longing for familiar servitude of Egypt, they cry with one voice that they will be obedient to all the Lord has spoken (cf. Ex 24:7) (Schaff 1889, 278).

Throughout history, the Church has recognized the Blood of the Covenant narrative as a key moment in salvation history. From the covenant making aspect to the sanctification in blood to the hollow words and fickle nature of the Israelites, the passage has been a promise, a foreshadowing, and a lesson.

CONCLUSION

Since we now have a clearer picture of Exodus 24:1-8, we are in a better position to analyze the passage in light of the four senses of Scripture.

Literal Sense

The Blood of the Covenant narrative is an account of the covenant making ceremony between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The passage is not metaphorical nor is its historical truth in question. The sacred author intended to impart an event that truly occurred at a specific location. The manner in which God spoke to Moses and the assent of the people as a unit may be subject to interpretation. However, as stated earlier, it is very likely is a prototypical Greco-Roman biographical account of Israel’s time at Sinai.

Allegorical Sense

There are several things happening in this narrative that prefigure the New Covenant economy. Moses’s actions are Christlike. He is the messenger for God just as Jesus speaks for his father (cf. Jn 12:49; Jn 8:28; Jn 5:19). The blood sprinkling is a kind of cleansing baptism that joins Israel to God as kin. Jesus’s blood cleanses us from our sins and we become part of his family in the Church. The words, “blood of the covenant” are used only one other time, when Jesus speaks them at the Last Supper (Mk 22:24). The Old Covenant that was ratified at Sinai is being fulfilled and absorbed into the New Covenant being ratified at the Last Supper.

Tropological Sense

Morally, the Blood of the Covenant narrative can teach us about fidelity, obedience, and the importance of keeping an oath. God is giving the Israelites an example. “This is my promise, and I will not break it lest my blood be spilled.” Because God is neither matter nor form, he has no blood, therefore it cannot be spilled. God is essentially telling the Israelites that he will keep his part of the oath under all circumstances. It is impossible for him not to. It would go against his

nature. However, God is requiring the same thing of the Israelites. Although he knows they will not be able to keep their oath, he makes them take it anyway so that they might be his kin and so they might begin to appreciate the seriousness of making such a promise.

This passage also speaks of love. It speaks of a deep love that God has for his people that, although there might be weeds among the wheat and although they will undoubtedly slip and fall, He is still willing to adopt them as His own and promise them salvation.

Anagogical Sense

This narrative looks towards heaven as much as it seeks to create order on earth. Throughout these eight verses is evidence of God's enduring love for his people. With the covenant ceremony, the Israelites are eternally linked to God by blood. They are now His people and as such, they have been given the right to future salvation that will be realized in Jesus Christ. Through covenant language and sacrificial symbolism, God is giving his people a clear sign that He has claimed them for His own forever.

In this exegesis, we have examined the historical, grammatical, rhetorical, structural, liturgical, and Magisterial aspects of Exodus 24:1-8, the Blood of the Covenant narrative. Through these analyses and by analyzing Aquinas's four senses of Scripture, we now have a better understanding of the significance of this passage.

REFERENCE LIST

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1841. *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew*. Edited by John Henry Newman. Vol. 1. Oxford: John Henry Parker.
- Benedict XVI. 2010. *Verbum Domini*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Bergsma, John. 2016. "Pentateuch: Lecture 2." Lecture, St. John Paul the Great Catholic University, Escondido, CA.
- Bergsma, John, and Brant Pitre. n. d. *Introduction to the Pentateuch*. Prepress draft, no publication information available.
- Boer Sr., Paul, ed. 2013. *A Catholic Interlinear Old Testament Polyglot: Volume 1: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus in Latin, English, and Transliterated Greek and Hebrew*. Veritatis Splendor Publications. Kindle Edition.
- Butler, John G. 2008. *Analytical Bible Expositor: Exodus*. Clinton, IA: LBC Publications.
- Catholic Church. 1965. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum*.
- Currid, John D. 2001. *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Volume 2: Exodus 19-40*. Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press. Logos Edition.
- Dozeman Thomas B. 2009. *Exodus: Eerdman's Critical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company. Logos Edition.
- Hahn, Scott, and Curtis Mitch. 2010. *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.
- . 2012. *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Exodus*. 2nd Catholic Edition. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.
- Hamilton, Victor P. 2011. *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. Kindle Edition. This is the relationship
- Kline, Meredith G. 1975. "The Old Testament Origins of the Gospel Genre." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1): 1-27.
- Laneri, Nicola, ed. 2015. *Defining the Sacred: Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion in the Near East*. Philadelphia: Oxbow Books.

- Myers, Carol. 2005. *Exodus: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Niehaus, Jeffrey J. 2008. *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications. Kindle Edition.
- Rushdoony, Rousas John. 2004. *Commentaries on the Pentateuch: Exodus*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books. Logos Edition.
- Sarna, Nahum M. 1991. *The JPS Torah Commentary*. Philadelphia: Jewish publication Society. Logos Edition.
- Schaff, Philip, ed. 1889. *St. Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series. New York: Christian Literature Company.
- Stanley Spaeth, Barbette, ed. 2013. *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Strong, James. *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary of the Bible*. 2011. Miklal Software Solutions, Inc. Kindle Edition.
- Thompson, Rev. J. A. 1964. "The Ancient near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament." Lecture delivered in Cambridge at a meeting convened by the Tyndale Fellowship for biblical research. London: The Tyndale Press. Kindle Edition.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2016. "Daily Readings." <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/072713.cfm>.