

Throughout the Bible there is the recurring image of blood that is mysterious to modern Christians. We think in abstract concepts like atonement and salvation. But if we really want to understand this idea as the Bible explains them, we need to understand its cultural language which includes the imagery of blood.

Remember ancient Hebrews thought in concrete ways, expressing abstract ideas in terms of things they could see, touch and smell. In Hebrew, a person is not stubborn – he is "stiff-necked". When God spoke to them about blood, He spoke in this image-based language. Rather than being completely literal about what God said about blood, we need to understand it as the image they saw. Only then can we properly translate it into our own language.

The ancient Hebrews believed that the blood of a creature contained its life. They could observe that a bleeding person or animal would grow weak and eventually die with enough blood loss. It seemed logical to the observers that the life then was in the blood. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood...* Lev. 17:11 Because of this general belief, it was understood that drinking the blood of a powerful animal would allow a person to acquire its life and thus take on some of its power.

The Bible is unique among documents of its time for forbidding the consuming of blood. Although they could kill and eat animals, God Himself owned the "life" of the creature, and the blood had to be given back to him by being poured on an altar, or on the ground.

When we read this as ancient regulation we might reason that it is outmoded and not for our modern times. If we look at it as God speaking to their understanding of the times; to teach them that God alone is the creator and possessor of the life of every creature – then a new and more comprehensive understanding of life is available.

*Every moving thing that lives will be food for you; just as I gave you green plants before, so now I give you everything — only flesh with its life, which is its blood, you are not to eat. I will certainly demand an accounting for the blood of your lives: I will demand it from every animal and from every human being. I will demand from every human being an accounting for the life of his fellow human being. Whoever sheds human blood, by a human being will his own blood be shed; for God made human beings in his image. Gen 9:3-6 (CJB)*

In Genesis 9:6 God was teaching an important moral law. The bloodshed of a human life, that he made us in His image, is precious to God. By taking a human life, we are destroying the one thing in creation that uniquely bears God's likeness. The sanctity of life may seem second nature to us, but the idea was unprecedented in ancient, pagan cultures. This singular idea has transformed our entire civilization to the point that it is what makes us "civilized".

Jews have a profound way of expressing this idea that comes from the first case of shedding of innocent blood, Cain's murder of Abel. *The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood (literally bloods) cries out to me from the ground. Gen. 4:10 (NIV)*

The Hebrew word for blood is *dam*, and the plural is *damim*. When the Bible talks about murder, or "bloodguilt", it usually uses the plural form, *damim*. Using the logic that the blood contains the life of a person, to speak of blood in the plural implies that a murder doesn't just take the life of one person, it takes the lives of many. Jews therefore have a tradition that the voice of the "bloods" crying out from the ground was actually the voices of all of the future descendants of Abel that would have ever lived.

Related to this understanding that the blood contained the life of a person was the idea that the blood of an innocent victim of murder would curse the ground (the phrase "to shed innocent blood" meant the murder of innocent people, in whatever manner.)

The "shedding of innocent blood" was such a great crime that the only way to get rid of it was to take the life of the murderer. If the murder was unknown, an animal had to be sacrificed to atone for the murder. Otherwise, if not atoned for, it eventually would bring terrible judgment. The sin that finally caused God to let kingdom of Judah be destroyed was the shedding of innocent blood. This referred to the murder of the prophets and faithful Jews, and the abhorrent practice of infant sacrifice.

Jesus also said that this would bring judgment on His generation as well, when Jerusalem would be besieged and the temple burned. God would punish the corrupt temple leaders because of the righteous blood that they shed: *And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Matt 23:35 (NIV)*