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Review of The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically

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Christian Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. \$9.99. 978-0-8006-9738-9. 170pp.

Reviewed by James F. McGrath

Christian Eberhart's book *The Sacrifice of Jesus* compresses a wealth of information into a tiny volume, placing contemporary theological, Hebrew Bible and New Testament studies into creative and stimulating dialogue with one another. The book begins with the centrality of the cross - and the perplexity and discomfort this sometimes causes. To avoid putting the cart before the horse, Eberhart turns next to sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, considered on its own terms, and not merely as a way of interpreting the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, it is perhaps because of concern with the latter that there has been a tendency to equate sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible with slaughter and violence. Eberhart notes that certain components that have stuck out to Christians – such as blood application – are the exception rather than the rule with regard to sacrifice, and for some sacrifices even killing an animal was not essential. Eberhart offers a detailed consideration of ancient Israel's sacrificial system, convincingly drawing the conclusion that killing was not a central feature of sacrifice, and that sacrifices were not substitutionary.

When the focus turns to the use of sacrificial metaphors in the New Testament, the information previously surveyed allows the reader to understand New Testament terminology in a new light – such as the imagery of sprinkled blood, and the Eucharistic meal. While the image of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” is familiar to all Christians, few are likely to have noticed what Eberhart points out, namely that lambs were not the animals typically used for expiatory sacrifices such as the sin and guilt offerings. The imagery of sacrifice and of Jesus “giving up his life” denoted the significance of Jesus' life as a whole, and not exclusively his death. The prevalence of secular metaphors (such as redemption and reconciliation) in early Christian interpretation of Jesus' death is also noted. Sacrifice, Eberhart's study concludes, primarily has to do with *approaching God*, and in the New Testament Jesus is offered *by God* as the “place of atonement.”

This book provides a wonderful overview of biblical data relevant to Christian soteriology. It will serve the needs of New Testament and Hebrew Bible scholars, Christian theologians, and pastors and church groups interested in serious discussion, providing both a broad survey of key information as well as a distinctive and persuasive perspective that many will find extremely valuable.