

Introduction to Tractate Zebahim

In connection with animal offerings, the law in *Zebahim* addresses the role of intentionality in the sacrificial cult, an issue not explicitly addressed in Scripture's treatment of the same subject but deemed by the sages to be implicit therein. It also encompasses issues systematically addressed in the law's examination of a broad variety of topics, e.g., issues related to the mixture and confusion of categories, rules of precedence, and the like. Scripture supplies the facts that the law in *Zebahim* systematizes. Finally, while Scripture does not differentiate among the locations where the altar was located, *Zebahim* systematizes information available about the location of the altar and deals with the diverse rules governing sacrifices at the several locations at which Israel made offerings prior to the building of the Temple. The entire enterprise of *Zebahim* proves to be one of generalization and systematization, but at the same time, the law contains within itself remarkably fresh initiatives of inquiry.

- I. Improper intention and invalidating the act of sacrifice
- II. The rules of sacrifice of beasts and fowl
 - A. Beasts
 - B. Fowl
- III. The rules of the altar
 - A. Disposing of sacrificial portions or blood that derive from diverse sacrifices and have been confused
 - B. The altar sanctifies what is appropriate to it, but not what is not appropriate to it
 - C. Precedence in use of the altar
 - D. Blood of a sin-offering that spurts onto a garment
 - E. The division among the eligible priests of the meat and hides of sacrificial animals
- IV. The proper location of the altar and the act of sacrifice performed thereon

Of the issues that predominate in the law of *Zebahim*—especially the role of intentionality in linking God and Israel—Scripture states little or nothing. But wherever they can, the law's sages find in Scripture the starting point for their own systematic reflection. For its part, Scripture's governing provisions for animal offerings are set forth at Lev. 1: 1–9, 1:14–17, 3:1–5, 4:27–31, 6:27–28, 7:1–7, and 17:3–16.

The main focus of the law in *Zebahim* is not to differentiate types of offerings but to homogenize. What rules apply to *all* classes of offerings on the altar? While Scripture presents the transaction that takes place at the altar by classifying types of offerings, e.g., the burnt-offering, sin-offering, guilt-offering, peace-offerings, firstling, tithe of cattle, and the Passover offering, *Zebahim* forms its own classifications, setting forth rules that apply to all (or most) classes of offerings throughout. Thus the law in *Zebahim* systematizes by identifying the four cultic acts that, properly performed by the priest, render the animal

sacrifice suitable for yielding parts for the altar fires and parts for the priests' consumption. These are

- (1) the act of slaughtering the beast,
- (2) the act of collecting the blood from the neck of the beast in a utensil of service,
- (3) the act of bringing the blood to the altar, and
- (4) the act of tossing drops of blood on the altar.

These four acts pertain to all classifications of offerings of beasts. To all classifications of offerings of fowl two apply:

- (1) pinching the head of the bird from the body and
- (2) draining the blood out onto the altar.

In addition to these laws, since priests eat part of the offering, *Zebahim* provides rules governing how they prepare and eat their portion.