

Αἵματεκχυσία: A Comment by Norman H. Young

Avondale College,
N.S.W. Australia

In the January 1978 number of *Expository Times* Dr W. G. Johnsson suggests that αἵματεκχυσία in Heb 9:22 be translated 'sprinkling of blood'. Johnsson indicates in a footnote² that the application (i.e. sprinkling) of blood rather than the shedding of blood is to be preferred on contextual grounds. He quotes approvingly an earlier article by T. C. G. Thornton³ that supports a similar position.

It is doubtful whether this contention will stand scrutiny. It is true enough that the previous verses speak of sprinkling (ῥαντίζειν, Heb 9: 19, 21) with blood as regards the Levitical arrangement. When the author turns his attention to the blood of Christ (Heb 9: 12, 14) , however, he unequivocally in the immediate context speaks of his death: 'Since a death has occurred which redeems' (9: 15, RSV); 'the death of the one who made it' (9: 16, RSV), 'a will takes effect only at death' (9: 17, RSV; 'just as it is appointed for men too die once, ..., so Christ, having been offered once' (9: 27f., RSV).

The transition from the old order's blood aspersions to the redemptive death of Christ is facilitated by the author's choice of αἵματεκχυσία to sum up his description of the Levitical purgations (9: 18-22). Thornton has correctly maintained that in cultic contexts always means 'the pouring out of the blood of a sin offering upon the base of the altar.'⁴ He concludes that αἵματεκχυσία 'refers to the application of sacrificial blood to the altar to effect atonement. This "pouring out of blood" presupposes the death of a sacrificial victim, but does not primarily refer to the victim's death itself.

Now the fact of the matter is that in the cult the pouring out (*šāpak*, *yāšaḳ*) of the blood at the base of the altar is not the means of effecting atonement. The blood application (*nāṭan*, *hizzāh*) on the horns of the altar is the atoning act and the disposal at the altar's base is, as Windisch observes, 'Kein besonderer ritueller Akt'.⁶ Even the Rabbinic sources which Thornton appeals to from the tractate *Zebaḥim*⁷ carefully distinguish the terminal blood disposal from the atoning (*kappārāh*) applications.⁸

Why then did the author conclude his section (9: 18-22) on the old covenant's ratification with a frequent Rabbinic epigram (9:22),⁹ and use such a cultically insignificant word as ἔκχυσις. The answer is that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was well aware that ἔκχεῖν also occurs with the significance 'to pour out blood in death'.¹⁰ Because the sacrificially minor word also has reference to the shedding of blood unto death, the writer chose it to enforce his thesis that the death of Christ—the better sacrifice—fulfils in a supreme way the blood purifications of the old covenant.

It is, therefore, wrong-headed to make the concluding blood canon (9:22) of the old covenant rituals definitive for our understanding of the author's 'better sacrifices' of the new covenant. The sources do not support the contention that the blood pouring at the base of the altar is the atoning act. The word αἵματεκχυσία has no inherent reference, therefore, to some post-Calvary blood application. If there is anything latent in its lexical meaning—'the shedding of blood'—it is the reference to a life given in death. And this, like the Apocalypse's use of the preliminary slaughter (šāḥaṭ = σφάζειν, Rev 5: 6, 9, 12; 13:8) for the redemptive significance of Christ's death, is, to use Austin Farrer's pregnant phrase, a rebirth of images.

References

¹ W. G. Johnsson, 'The Cultus of Hebrews in Twentieth-Century Scholarship' (ET 89 [1977-78]), 104-108.

² *Ib.*, 108, n.28.

³ T. C. G. Thornton, 'The Meaning of αἵματεκχυσία in Heb. IX. 22' (JTS. XV [1964]), 63-65.

⁴ *Ib.*, 64. See Ex 29:12, Lev 4: 7, 18, 25, 30, 34, Lev 8: 15, Lev 9: 9

⁵ *Ib.*, 65.

⁶ H. Windisch, *Der Hebraerbrief* (Tubingen [21931]), 82.

⁷ *Zebahim* 36bff., 51a ff.

⁸ E.g. 'if the residue [of the blood of the sin-offering], which does not make atonement ... the sprinkling itself of the [blood of the] burnt-offering, which makes atonement' (*Zeb.* 51a).

⁹ *B. Yoma* 5a; *b. Men.* 93b; *b. Zeb.* 6a.

¹⁰ LXX: Gen 37: 22, Lev 17: 4, Num 35: 33. Cf. Rom.3:15