

Noah's Offering

"Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and . . . sacrificed burnt offerings on it" (Gen 8:20-22). This is the first altar mentioned in the history of the human race. Cain and Abel may have had altars but historical evidence is lacking. Noah's offering is the second occasion where man offered a sacrifice in the record of the God-man relationship.

Noah's relationship with God is readily apparent before this occasion of bringing an offering to God. He was a "righteous man, blameless among his people" and like Enoch he walked with God" (cf. 5:21 and 8:9). He lived a life of obedience in building the ark. The author of Hebrews writes about Noah's relationship with God as follows: "By faith Noah, when warned about things not seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Heb 11:7). In Gen 7:1 Noah is divinely designated as "righteous in this generation" and together with his family was saved while God's judgment came upon the rest of the human race.

Top priority for Noah after leaving the ark was to foster his relationship with God. With everything about him devastated on earth he constructed an altar and offered animal sacrifices. Very likely it was an expression of Noah's gratitude and thanksgiving to God for God's goodness to him. As a pleasing aroma it was accepted by God confirming Noah's continued favor in a vital relationship with God. God's response was the renewal of the divine covenant with Noah and his family.

Expressing his gratitude to God through this offering in which the animals were totally consumed on the altar Noah renewed his attitude of faith and obedience which had been his pattern of living in his relationship with God.

Offerings by the Patriarchs

Our knowledge is limited as to the significance and meaning that sacrifice had for the patriarchs. In the Genesis account there are only three references to offerings made by the patriarchs -- one by Abraham in chapter 22 and two by Jacob in 31:54 and 46:1.

The building of an altar is noted more frequently. Abram built an altar at Shechem (Gen 12:7), at Bethel (12:8), at Hebron (13:18), and on Moriah (22:9). Isaac built an altar at Beersheba (26:25). Jacob built altars at Shechem (33:20) and at Bethel (35:1-7). The only record of an offering sacrificed on one of the altars mentioned is the ram sacrificed as a burnt offering in substitution for Isaac on Moriah by Abraham (22:13).

Altar building was at times associated with a divine-human encounter. After Abram in obedience to God's call reached Shechem as a stranger among the Canaanites it says that "the Lord appeared to Abram." After hearing the assuring promise "To your offspring I will give this land" Abram "built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him."(12:7). This altar marked the place of God's special revelation and promise confirming his vital relationship with God.