

Where Did “Corban” Come From?

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I have people ask me about our university name. “Who’s Corban and how much did he give?” “Isn’t ‘corban’ a bad word in the Bible?” “Is corban contagious?” You get the idea. “Corban” has a long important history--a history our university chose to describe its future.

The Ancient Roots

Ancient languages related to Hebrew (called Semitic languages) expressed the idea of drawing near through the common verb *qrb* (the verb form of our noun “corban”). In contexts where the verb *qrb* described the bringing near of an offering or serving of a meal by a servant, the person bringing the offering or meal shrank into the background. The sentences literally read like the offering came near or the meal came to the master with no human help (“The offering came near” was the idea). The grammar focused attention on that which was offered and the recipient rather than the server. This language revealed the reverence for the one receiving the offering, whether a god or master. M.M. Bravmann notes that irony was inherent in the verb’s ancient Near Eastern usage.¹

In non-worship contexts, the Hebrew verb *qrb* described a person or object “coming near” something. Moses came near the camp of Israel and saw their celebration (Exo 32:19). Esther came near the king to ask his favor (Esth 5:2). This concept of moving closer took on greater significance when the focus was the LORD.

When Old Testament believers came near to the LORD, they drew near to His awesome greatness. Moses removed his sandals as he neared the LORD (Exo 3:5). Israel trembled as they stood near enough to see the wonders of the LORD on Sinai (Deut 5:25). To come near the LORD represented a sacred approach.

This rich term *qrb*, was utilized by the Old Testament authors to express the reverence of a worshipper bringing sacrifice near to Yahweh. It not only described the action of coming near (the verb form *qrb*), but also that which was brought near, the sacrifice itself (this is the use of the noun form *qorban* – “corban”).

Sacred Approaches

The term “corban” (Heb. *qorban*) is found 80 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Leviticus houses forty of the instances; Numbers, thirty-eight and Ezekiel, two. All of them refer to sacrifices in worship. In fact, “corban” holds a crucial place in sacrificial terminology.

The very first instructions for Israel’s sacrificial worship introduced the idea of “corban:”

¹ Bravmann actually calls this irony a ‘linguistic taboo,’ but that seems too strong a conclusion. *Studies in Semitic Philology* (Leiden: Brill) 1977, pp. 465-7.

When any of you brings an offering (corban) to the LORD, bring as your offering (corban) an animal from either the herd or the flock” (Lev 1:2).

After giving detailed orders for the each of the offering types (Lev 1-7), Moses then summed up Israel’s sacrificial worship with the word “corban:”

These are the regulations...for the Israelites to bring their offerings (corban) to the LORD (Lev 7:38-39).

With its crucial position in both the introduction and conclusion to sacrificial regulations, as well as, its extensive use in reference to these offerings, “corban” stands as the central term for sacrifice in the Old Testament. Richard Averbeck goes so far as to say it is “one of the most important terms for understanding the gift aspect of the nature of offerings and sacrifices in the OT.”²

Corban and Jesus

Beginning February of 1968, Benjamin Mazar excavated south and southwest of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In the fill near the southern wall, Mazar discovered a fragment of a stone cup from the second Temple period, the time of Christ. The cup had two doves etched on it just under four inscribed Hebrew letters: Q-R-B-N. “Corban.”

The Jewish Mishnah records that in the time of Christ stone vessels were set apart for use by worshippers to carry small sacrifices to the Temple. These vessels, like the Corban vessel, were inscribed as sacred. The presence of the two doves on the cup indicates that it was likely used by parents bringing a sacrifice after the birth of a child. The Mishnah says new mothers would carry the cups with their sacrifices to the Nikanor Gate, one of the four gates to the Court of Women. Since women could not go beyond this court, a priest would meet them at the gate. He would take their sacrifice and offer it on their behalf. The sacrifice represented their faithful obedience to the Word and their worshipful devotion to the Lord. Perhaps Mary and Joseph used a similar cup to dedicate Jesus at the Temple (Lk 2:22-24). Though the Pharisees perverted the sacred practice of Corban (Mk 7:11), devoted worshippers of Jesus’ day understood well the sacred significance of bringing to the Lord’s presence a gift dedicated to Him.

Venerable Word – Valuable Lesson

The ancient word *qorban* (“Corban” as we know it) carries with it important truth for us today. First, as Israelites came near the LORD, they did it by means of holy sacrifice. We have been brought near to God by means of the holiest sacrifice, Jesus. “You who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). Second, those Old Testament offerings belonged to the LORD, dedicated to Him alone. Though our ultimate sacrifice has been made for us, we today still dedicate offerings to the Lord. “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to the God” (Rom 12:1). We continue to draw near to God, on the basis of Christ’s work, and offer all we have. We offer ourselves, a gift dedicated and brought before our awesome God.

² *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 1997, 3:980.