

BLOOD IS A RELIGIOUS ISSUE

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WTS) does not see the issue of blood transfusion as being decided by the medical issues. Rather, the WTS's position is determined by its religious understanding, by its ability to interpret Scripture.

In 1983 the "Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses" wrote a four-page letter "To Members of the Medical Profession". Titling their letter, "Blood Transfusion - Why Not for Jehovah's Witnesses?" the WTS stated that the issue is religious:

"It is not our intent here to take issue with the medical or scientific advisability of blood transfusions . . . Our objection to accepting blood is not primarily a medical one; it is a Biblical or religious objection...

"It is for religious reasons that Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept blood transfusions ...

"Let us emphasize that in referring to such acknowledged (medical) dangers, we do not mean that Jehovah's Witnesses object to blood transfusions primarily for medical reasons."

THE SOCIETY'S REASONING

To sustain its rationale on blood transfusion, the Watchtower Society (WTS) holds to the position that 'blood' means 'life'. This position is critical to the WTS's position on blood transfusion.

Reckoning that 'blood' means 'life', the WTS reasons Scripture prohibits the use of blood on the grounds that it would 'sustain' the user. Hence, reasons the WTS, since blood must not be used to 'sustain', a blood transfusion falls under the Scriptural prohibition, since that blood would be 'sustaining' the recipient.

"If animal blood representing life was to be viewed as sacred and not to be taken in to sustain life, obviously human life and blood were to be viewed and treated as even more sacred ... If animal blood, representing life, was not to be taken in for sustenance, that would be even more so of human blood." (The Watchtower, June 15, 1978, page 22)

OLD TESTAMENT APPEARANCES OF 'BLOOD'

In the Old Testament (OT), the Hebrew Scriptures, the word DAM (blood) occurs 362 times. Of these 362 appearances, 203 represent "death by violence". This is about twice as often as the expression "blood of sacrifice". Seventeen occurrences of "blood" relate to the eating of meat with blood while seven connect blood with "life".

"Far and away the most frequent use of the term ('blood') is to indicate death with violence .. For example we read, 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed' (Gn. 9:6), where the first occurrence of the word plainly points to murder and the second equally plainly to execution." ("The Atonement", Leon Morris, page 52)

"It is clear that the commonest use of DAM (Heb: blood) is to denote death by violence." ("The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross", Leon Morris, page 113)

NEW TESTAMENT APPEARANCES OF 'BLOOD'

In the New Testament (NT), the Christian Greek Scriptures, the word AIMA (blood) occurs 98 times. Of these:

- 25 denote a "violent death"
- 12 refer to the blood of animal sacrifices

- 5 expressions of "flesh and blood" occur
- 4 refer to the woman with the issue of blood and, apart from John 1:13,
- the rest refer in some way to the blood of Christ, "on a number of occasions the reference seems plainly to his death, without any necessary implication of sacrifice". (Leon Morris, op cit., page 122).

OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCES

Throughout the Old Testament (OT), 'blood' overwhelmingly means 'death'. Examples include:

- "What profit is there in my blood when I go down to the pit?" (Psalm 30:9)
- "The avenger of blood is the one who will put the murderer to death" (Numbers 35:19. See also verses 26,27 and Psalm 79:10)
- "If you are putting me (Jeremiah) to death, it is innocent blood that you are putting upon yourselves" (Jeremiah 26:15)
- "His blood will be on our heads if a hand should come upon him" (Joshua 2:19)
- "He should be put to death ... His own blood is upon himself" (Leviticus 20:9)
- Compare "Their blood will be precious in his eyes" (Psalm 72:14) with "Precious in the eyes of Jehovah is the death of his loyal ones" (Psalm 116:15).

LEVITICUS 17:11

Of the 362 OT appearances of 'blood', only 7 connect it with 'life'. Apart from the overwhelming statistical evidence, these 7 texts do not support the Watchtower Society's position.

Leviticus 17:11 is a typical example. In the Watchtower's "New World Translation" the text reads: "The soul of the flesh is in the blood"

"The Leviticus passage is ambiguous, for the reference to blood could be understood as signifying the presentation of life or, equally, as indicating the infliction of death. ... This enhances the importance of Numbers 35:33, for in this verse there is no ambiguity." ("The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross", Morris, page 113)

From his study into three texts that relate 'Blood' with 'life' (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:23), A. H. Stibbs concluded:

"A careful examination of the contexts (of these three passages) reveals that in each of the three cases these statements say not that 'blood' is 'life' in isolation, but that the blood is the life of the flesh. This means that if the blood is separated from the flesh, whether in man or beast, the present physical life in the flesh will come to an end. Blood shed stands, therefore, not for the release of life from the burden of the flesh, but for the bringing to an end of life in the flesh. It is a witness to physical death, not an evidence of spiritual survival". (page 11)

NEW TESTAMENT MEANING

The meaning of 'death' given to 'blood' in the Old Testament is carried into the teachings of the New Testament (NT).

"In the New Testament the word 'blood' ... is much more often used, as in the Old Testament, in a metaphorical way of referring to violent death, and of connecting other people with it." (Stibbs, page,16)

Examples of typical New Testament passages include:

- "Until when, Sovereign Lord holy and true, are you refraining from judging and avenging our blood?" (Revelation 6:10)

Here "blood" clearly means their "death", whether the means resulted in a physical flow of blood or not. See also Rev. 17:6; 18:24.

- "I (Pilate) am innocent of the blood of this man... His blood come upon us (Jews) and upon our children." (Matthew 27:24,25)

Here, Pilate and the crowd use the word 'blood' to describe Jesus' death.

- "We have been declared righteous now by (Jesus') blood. We have become reconciled to God through the death of his Son." (Romans 5:9,10)

These parallel statements in Romans clearly show that by 'blood', Jesus' death is clearly meant. See also Col. 1:20.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT AGREE

After examining these occurrences in the Old and New Testaments, Morris concluded:

"Thus it seems tolerably certain that in both the Old and New Testaments the blood signifies essentially the death." (ibid., page 126)

In "The Meaning of the Word 'Blood' in Scripture", A. M. Stibbs wrote:

"'Blood' is a vivid word-symbol for referring to someone's violent death ...

"In the New Testament the word 'blood', while it is sometimes used in its direct literal sense to describe actual blood, is much more often used, as in the Old Testament, in a metaphysical sense as a way of referring to violent death, and of connecting other people with it." (pages 10,16)

TRANSFUSIONS NOT SYMBOLISED

Scripture, therefore, consistently uses the word 'blood' to refer to "death" (usually a violent one), even when the emphasis is not on the actual flow of blood.

In Scripture, blood on the altar declared life had been taken and blood on the ground showed that the beast was dead before it was eaten. The blood showed that life had been poured out in death.

No blood transfusion satisfies the meaning of death that is given to blood throughout Scripture. The blood in a transfusion does not indicate the death of the donor. There is no death required for blood to be donated for a transfusion. This shows that the medical procedure does not relate to the teaching or to the intent of "blood" in Scripture.

Donors can consciously and willingly give their blood without having to die. Indeed, people may, in planning their medical treatment, have some of their own blood stored should they need it later (autologous transfusion). Their stored blood does not indicate their death. Rather, it demonstrates their determination to remain living.

SACRIFICIAL DEATH

A study of sacrifice and slaughter clearly shows that when Scripture refers to the "blood" the meaning being given is "death". This blood demonstrated that death had been inflicted.

This blood was tied to that of edible, sacrificial beasts. Fishes' blood was not considered, even though those animals might be edible, since they played no part in the sacrificial system. Human blood was not even thought about; not only did it come from a non-edible source, it was worthless sacrificially - there is only one who is unblemished and not deserving of death: Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The Scriptural meaning of blood, namely death, finds no satisfaction in the modern medical process of blood transfusion. Death is not essential to or an integral part of the process. When the process results in death, this is incidental, even accidental, and certainly not fundamental. Since a donor is not required to die, the collected blood does not symbolise death. A transfusion is essentially the transfer of body tissue, a process not objected to in principle by the WTS.

In a blood transfusion "death" is not passed from one person to another and there are no eternal benefits from a blood transfusion. But in Scripture "blood" DOES refer to death, usually a violent one, blood is NOT passed from one person to another, and there ARE benefits on the eternal plane (with respect to the blood - the death - of Jesus Christ).

The WTS says its stance on blood transfusion is determined by its understanding of Scripture. Since this is faulty, it casts doubts on the Society's teachings on blood and its ability to interpret Scripture.

POSTSCRIPT: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

Jesus made very clear the implications of the meaning of "blood" for Christians. He commands his followers to "drink" it – his blood!

If the edict to abstain from meat with blood extends to the rejection of a transfusion then, by implication, Jesus' command to drink blood would do the very opposite! But neither position is true.

"There is nothing in the ideas of the Bible about 'blood' which is at all comparable to the modern practice of blood transfusion. Nowadays, one man can sometimes say of another, 'He gave his blood to me'. This is not a right thing to say of Christ." (Stibbs, page 29)

Since telling his followers to drink blood has no bearing on the medical practice of blood transfusion, then telling people to abstain from drinking blood likewise has no relevance to the medical procedure.

To "drink Jesus' blood" is a metaphor for benefiting from his death. This is essential for salvation. To "eat Jesus' flesh" and to "drink Jesus' blood" means to partake of the eternal benefits of his death.

"Such language describes NOT participation in His life but appropriation of the benefits of His life laid down. To eat His flesh and to drink His blood is to confess that only through His death can I live." (Stibbs, page 23)

Never does Scripture say that Jesus Christ gave his blood to the believer, this could never be. He does not give his death to us. Rather, Scripture speaks of Jesus' blood (his death) being given for (in place of) the believing Christian's death.

Jesus' blood (death) is never given to a Christian. In a transfusion, however, a donor's blood is given to the recipient.

In a transfusion there is no death required, there is no appropriation of benefits on the eternal spectrum, there is no benefit gained from a death. In a transfusion the blood IS given TO a recipient whereas in Scripture the blood itself is NOT given TO the Christian, simply the BENEFITS of the blood are given.

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