

Does the Bible Condemn Blood Transfusions?

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A few years ago I lost a good friend. He would often call me late at night to discuss various concerns and our mutual interests. He was a world renowned scholar, an English professor, and he also published several books as is required of professors, one of which was the most important book in his academic area. I also am a night person, so his evening calls were welcome. On one of the last calls, he related that he had to have open-heart surgery but would not accept a blood transfusion, a choice that created problems. He found a doctor willing to do the surgery without blood who explained the expected outcome was good with a transfusion, and risky without.

When I asked his reasons for rejecting blood he mentioned that a Red Cross unit was near the university where he taught. He observed many of those who sold their blood there looked like unsavory characters who, he felt, added risk to the blood obtained. I mentioned the Red Cross surely had screened all donors and felt the risk was very low. He also mentioned that the Bible, at Genesis 9:4, prohibited eating blood which he interpreted as requiring refusing transfusions. I later found that he died on the operating table in spite of the best efforts of the doctor and surgical team.

I later did some research on Genesis 9:4 which reads in the King James Version, "But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat." A careful reading of this verse shows that the Hebrew words do not prohibit eating *blood*, but only *meat that has blood in it*. The New Living Translation says, "you must never eat any meat that still has the lifeblood in it." Since the Hebrew word

translated “blood” modifies the word “meat,” we cannot construe the passage to mean that the eating of blood itself is forbidden. Rather, it was only *meat with blood in it* that was prohibited.

The original Hebrew in Genesis 9:4 also does not say that meat with blood in it is forbidden, but that flesh (or “bodies”) *with blood still in it* (or them) are prohibited as food. In this passage, the words “blood” and “soul” are synonymous. It is also clear that *only animal bodies* can be eaten *that no longer have their soul or life, the blood, still in them*. Genesis 9:4 clearly says that God has given humans permission to consume animal flesh, but the animal’s flesh must first be drained of blood in order to ensure that the animal is dead before it is consumed. Thus, the purpose of Genesis 9:4 is to ensure that humans do not eat live animals to respect life. If the animal is dead, it no longer has life in it, thus the sanctity of life would not be profaned if the meat were consumed.

Dr. Paul Kretzmann summarized the reason for this law by noting Genesis 9:4’s “provision was added to prevent man’s degeneration to coarse and brutal barbarism or even savagery.” For thousands of years people have consumed live animals—a cruelty that this passage was designed to prevent. Pagan cultures believed that the “fight” of the animal could be transferred to the eater if it was consumed while the animal was still alive. The animal “life” rapidly left while it was being consumed, and the ancients reasoned that it went into the person eating the animal. It was also believed that other qualities of the animal, including strength, power, and wisdom, could likewise be transferred by eating live animals.

This idea can be traced back to ancient Egypt where the princes bathed in blood as a form of resuscitation and recuperation. In Rome, men would rush into the arena to drink the blood of dying gladiators in the hope of acquiring some of the victim’s valor. For many centuries the idea of blood as a restorative source was not restricted to its uses as a draught or for bathing, but as a means of transferring the animal’s spirit to the eater.

Genesis does not state that blood *is* the life, but that “life” is *in* the blood. Life-sustaining elements, both food and oxygen, are literally carried by, and thus are physically in, the blood. A major function of blood is to transport nourishment to the cells and remove their waste products. Thus, “to shed blood” was synonymous with killing or murder in most ancient languages. The number of persons that die each year as a result of refusing blood transfusions is estimated at around 1,000. Although undesirable side-effects of transfusions sometimes occur, on the whole,

medical science has been able to greatly improve human health through the judicious use of blood transfusions.

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