SACRIFICE AND SALVATION: ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ANTECEDENTS TO REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST

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Introduction

"Sacrifice is as old as religion, and religion is as old as man." The antiquity of sacrifice relates to its universality. Virtually every ancient culture offered sacrifices to supernatural entities; some cultures still do. In the Bible, sacrifice begins in the second generation (Genesis **4**:2-8) and appears throughout the patriarchal and Mosaic periods, culminating in Christ's "sacrifice."

Despite the abundance of biblical material on sacrifice, the origin of sacrifice is ambiguous. Did it arise from people's natural religious instincts or from unrecorded divine appointment?[1] The same uncertainty applies to the rationale for sacrifice; it is not explicitly stated anywhere in the Old Testament.[2] After summarizing some particulars about sacrifice and noting some relevant archaeological remains, the following presentation offers a rationale for sacrifice that connects it with salvation as related to the life and death of Christ.

I. Kinds of Ancient Near Eastern Sacrifice

There were three kinds of sacrifices—grain, drink, and meat offerings. Most important among these were the meat offerings—animal sacrifices. Altars of various sorts were erected in many places for such offerings.[3] One among many Near Eastern altars is the first Israelite "horned" altar, discovered at Beersheba, a stone platform five feet high and nine feet wide. A variety of rituals attended the offering of animals on such altars. Leviticus is given over largely to describing these observances. Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy describe them too.

The most abhorrent practice associated with ancient sacrifice was that of human sacrifice. It comes up frequently in the Old Testament,[4] but always as something despicable.[5] Among the surrounding pagan nations, human sacrifice was common. The great high place discovered at Gezer shows the extent to which child sacrifice was practiced. An early description says,

"All around the feet of the columns and over the whole area of the high place the earth was discovered to be a regular cemetery, in which the skeletons of young infants, never more than a week old, were deposited in jars."[6]

A similar situation was unearthed at Phoenician Carthage in North Africa. Later, L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff argued that population control was a primary factor in such offerings,[7] an idea that does not necessarily refute the sacrificial interpretation.

Child sacrifices were offered in times of national calamity, for expiation of parents' sins, and at dedicatory observances. The most striking biblical example is found in 2 Kings **3**:26-27, where Mesha, king of Moab, offered his oldest son on the city wall as a burnt offering to Chemosh in a desperate attempt to avoid military destruction by the Israelites. Children were used as "foundation sacrifices" at the building of homes, cities, or temples. A possible case in

scripture is that of Hiel, who rebuilt Jericho *"with the loss of Abiram his firstborn and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub"* (1 Kings **16**:34; cp. Joshua **7**:26).

The closest thing to human sacrifice in Old Testament religion is Abraham's subjective offering of Isaac (Genesis **22**:1-19; cp. Hebrews **11**:17-19). The father of the faithful was therefore no less devoted to Yahveh than anyone else would be to his god. One reason for telling Abraham to offer Isaac and then preventing him from carrying it out may have been to show clearly that Yahveh did not really want human sacrifice;[8] he wanted the willingness of his faithful ones to prioritize him in everything. In Mosaism the redemption of the firstborn (Exodus **13**:1-2, 11-16; Luke **2**:23) replaced the sacrifice of the firstborn. In a perverted way, the offering of one's own child would be the most extreme sacrifice he could make, but God did not want that.

II. Purpose and Meaning of Ancient Sacrifice

In pagan worship, sacrifices were sometimes regarded as **(a)** food for the gods.[9] Paul may have had this idea partly in mind when he told the Areopagites that God surely is not served by men's hands *"as though he needed something"* (Acts **17**:25). Although the Bible ridicules the idea (Deuteronomy **32**:37-38; Psalm **50**:12-14), some scholars see a correlation in Yahwism in expressions like *"the food* [lehem] *of God"*[10] and *"smelling the sweet savor"* of sacrifices[11] and in epiphanies like the one to Gideon in Judges **6**:19-24. The sacrifice categories were all food categories, but the feeding reason for edible sacrifice depends on the view of the deity, a low one as Paul implied on Mars Hill.

More appropriately, a sacrifice was a **(b)** gift to the deity. The worshiper could give it simply to honor God, but often it was additionally motivated by a desire for some benefit. To the *honor category* belong sacrifices like those Solomon offered at the dedication of the temple, as well as thank offerings for benefits already received.[12] There were peace offerings, which included wave offerings and heave offerings. To the *benefit category* belong sacrifices designed to obtain a special favor like victory in battle (Saul in 1 Samuel **15**) or to appease the anger of the deity. Since Yahveh, however, was a God of principle, not just a God of power, sacrifices were for more than propitiating God's anger; they were also for expiating people's sin. Human behavior is not just a matter of "rubbing God the wrong way"; it is sin. So, sacrificial categories included sin and guilt offerings. Other benefit sacrifices were purification offerings and sacrifices that accompanied the consecration of people and things. Some have suggested that all sacrifices were for getting something (*do ut des*), but that taints a worshiper's motives. Sacrificing meant acknowledging God in all aspects of human experience. Giving in order to praise needs to be kept primary in normative Old Testament sacrifice at least.

One important generalization in our study is that sacrifices were offerings as an extension of the self, an extension of the worshiper's identity. (1) In the Old Testament a sacrifice had to be taken from one's own flock (Leviticus **1**:2); hence, it could not be a wild animal or a domestic animal from someone else's flock. After the plague on Israel because of David's sin, when Araunah the Jebusite offered to give him the oxen, the yokes, and the threshing floor itself (2 Samuel **24**:18-25), David replied, *"I will not offer burnt offerings to Yahveh my God that do not cost me anything"* (**24**:24). In the case of human sacrifice, it was the offering of one's own child

(or slave or attendant) that was thought to be efficacious. Sacrifices had to be one's own possessions, produce, or progeny.

(2) Placing hands on the head of the animal identified people with their sacrifices as well as symbolically transferring their sins to it. The worshiper did that with the scapegoat (Leviticus **15**:21) but with the burnt offerings as well.[13]

(3) In Mosaism, to be acceptable, sacrifices had to reflect the character and inner disposition of the offerer.[14] God rejected Cain's sacrifice because it was not "of faith" (Hebrews **11**:4). Whereas pagans might think they could offer sacrifices effectively without heartfelt devotion to the deity, that was not possible with the heart-knowing God Yahveh. A sacrifice was not inherently effective; the ritual itself did not obtain the benefit (Psalm **40**:6-8a < Hebrews **10**:1-12). Offerers had to mean it; that is, they had to identify with it.

(4) Identification is also implied by the requirement that the sacrifice had to be without blemish. It could not be something that the offerer did not want or would get rid of anyway—a sick or deformed animal (Leviticus **22**:17-25).

(5) Identification with the sacrifice is shown in the metaphorical use of sacrificial language. Such phraseology appears in Old Testament texts like Psalm **1**:13-14; **51**:16-17; and Isaiah **66**:20. It is particularly prominent in the New Testament. Christians are to be living sacrifices (Romans **12**:1; cp. **6**:13, 16, 19; 1 Corinthians **6**:20), people who offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter **2**:5), sacrifices that praise (Hebrews **13**:15). The Gentiles were an acceptable offering to God (Romans **15**:16). At the end of his life, Paul told Timothy, *"I am already being poured out as a liquid offering, and the time for my departure has arrived"* (2 Timothy **4**:6; cp. Philippians **2**:17?).

III. Meaning of Christian Sacrifice: Self-Sacrifice

The distinctives of Hebrew sacrifice are important because they relate to meaning. (1) The first distinctive of Mosaic sacrifices was their connection with sin.

"The sin offering was a sacrifice of a special kind, doubtless peculiar to Israel and first mentioned at the consecration of Aaron and his sons."[15]

". . . ancient polytheists had no sense of sin comparable to that found in the Old Testament. Sin in Mesopotamia was such that it could be dealt with by the priest ('asipu), who pronounced an incantation. Sin and impurity were conceived of in a physical way and were dealt with by rites of expulsion . . . ."[16]

In the biblical religion, God's character sets the meaning of sacrifice and therefore the meaning of Christ's "sacrifice."

(2) The second distinctive of Hebrew sacrifice was its emphasis on the blood.[17] That uniqueness evidently relates to picturing life as being in the blood[18] rather than in some vital organ like the brain, which connects then with prohibitions against eating blood.[19] The shedding of blood means dying an unnatural death.

The New Testament presents Christ's atonement in some fifteen or twenty images. Most prominent among them is sacrificial language. In keeping with the preceding two peculiarities of Mosaic sacrifice, Jesus Christ did not die from disease or old age; he shed his blood. He did not just die; he was killed. Second, since his whole incarnation was for saving people from alienation because of sin, his death was part—the culminating part—of his effort to lay a foundation for dealing with our sin in the physical realm.

Beyond the meanings of ancient Near Eastern sacrifices generally and unlike the preceding sacrificial shadows and types in ancient Israel, Christianity calls for self-sacrifice. It calls for the real thing, the only real thing that can meet the natural requirements of the case. As the *"Lamb of God"* without moral blemish, he submitted himself to the will of the Father to the point of self-sacrifice. No longer can people substitute something else for themselves. They cannot substitute the sacrifice of a possession for the sacrifice of the self. That is one implication of Paul's comment that we are *"bought with a price"* (1 Corinthians **6**:20; cp. **7**:23; Acts **20**:28; 1 Peter **1**:18-19; Revelation **5**:9). Not "owning" ourselves means we have forfeited autonomy; we have committed ourselves to the predominance of God over self, prioritizing his will over ours. It is not satisfactory—and never has been—to sacrifice something we identify with or sacrifice part of our "extended identity"; we must sacrifice our own identities. We cannot identify "indirectly" with God by giving him something else that we identify with. We must identify directly with him by giving up the autonomy of self.

Among several other things, when we make commitment to Christ, we say with him, *"Not my will but yours be done"* (Matthew **26**:39, 42; and synoptic parallels). The Father's will for Jesus was to obey to the point of violent death on a cross (cp. Philippians **2**:1-11). When we identify with Jesus, not only does God offer to view us as righteous *like* him who carried his obedience to the last measure of devotion in painful physical death—the benefit aspect of sacrifice; we must first give the honor aspect of sacrifice. We commit ourselves to Christ's lordship, values, and purposes, to doing the *same* thing Christ did if God wills. When we identify with Christ, we offer self-sacrifice.

It is a serious thing to become a Christian. We must sacrifice our very self.

Endnotes

[1]Note, for example, Steve Barnabas, "Sacrifice," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (1963), p. 737.

[2]Cp. A. R. S. Kennedy, "Sacrifice and Offering" in *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* ([1909] 1989), p. 818.

[3]For one recent report on some altar discoveries in the Near East and the use of "incense altars," see Menahem Haran, "Alter-ed States: Incense Theory Goes Up in Smoke," *Bible Review* (February, 1995), 30-37. The main concern of the article is to evaluate some forty small altars dating from the tenth to seventh centuries B.C. They measure from six to twenty-six inches high and less than a cubit square. Although they were previously considered incense altars, the author contends that they were for grain offerings because few of them have any indications of burning.

[4]Leviticus **18**:21; Deuteronomy **12**:31; **18**:10; 2 Kings **3**:27; **16**:3; **17**:17 (daughters); **21**:6; **23**:10; 2 Chronicles **28**:3; **33**:6; Psalm **106**:37-38; Isaiah **57**:5; Jeremiah **7**:31; **19**:5; **32**:35; Ezekiel **16**:20-21; **20**:31; **23**:37-39; Micah **6**:6-7.

[5]The case of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:29-40) may be an exception. It is difficult to accept, however, as a case of human sacrifice because it seems inconceivable that a divinely chosen judge would fulfill an unwitting vow in this way. Nevertheless, the wording of the text can be so taken. For an alternative explanation, see for example Gleason Archer's *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1974, rev. ed.), pp. 278-79.

[6]R. A. S. Macalister, *Bible Sidelights from the Mound of Gezer*, pp. 73-74.

[7]"Child Sacrifice at Carthage—Religious Rite or Population Control?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* X (1, 1984), 30-51; see also XII (1986), 50-61. For a general treatment of human sacrifice, see E. E. Carpenter, "Human Sacrifice," *ISBE*, IV (1988), 258-60; also A. R. W. Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, 1975. A special article on the 1987 New York exhibit of Phoenician relics appeared in the New York Times, written by Malcome W. Browne, "Child Slaying an Ancient Culture's Ritual"; it was published in *The Manhattan Mercury*, (Manhattan, Kansas) on Friday, September 4, 1987, B12.

[8]Genesis recounts the testing of Abraham's complete trust in Yahveh. It was first a test of the degree of his devotion in which he showed himself as committed to God as any pagan would be in offering his firstborn son. Second, since Isaac was his only son, giving him up meant giving up Abraham's own lineage, a supreme "sacrifice" in a culture that stressed having descendants; spiritual sons of faith would replace physical sons. Third, Abraham had to exercise extreme faith in the form of sanctified imagination to harmonize God's promise of a lineage through Isaac with his command to sacrifice Isaac. These seemingly inconsistent things Abraham supposed would be made compatible by resurrecting Isaac afterwards (Hebrews **11**:17-19; in Genesis **22**:5, before the sacrifice Abraham told his young men, *"We will return to you."*).

[9]One famous example occurs in *Enuma Elish* **6**:5-8. See *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. by J. B. Pritchard (1969, 3rd ed.), p. 68. Another case is in *The Gilgamesh Epic* **9**:150-69, *ibid.* p. 95.

[10]Leviticus **3**:11, 16; **21**:6, 8, 17, 21, 22; **22**:25; Numbers **28**:2.

[11]Genesis **8**:20-21; Leviticus **1**:9, 13, 17; **2**:2, 9, 12; **3**:5, 16; **4**:31.

[12]Cp. Noah's sacrifice after being delivered from the flood (Genesis **8**:20-22) and Jephthah's vow of sacrifice after successful battle (Judges **11**:29-40).

[13]Exodus **29**:10, 15, 19; Leviticus **3**:2, 8, 13; **4**:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; **8**:14, 18, 22.

[14]1 Samuel **15**:22 (cp. Hosea **6**:6 < Mark **12**:33); Psalm **50**:23; **51**:16-19; Proverbs **21**:3, 27; **15**:8; Ecclesiastes **5**:1; Isaiah **1**:10-17; Jeremiah **6**:16-21; **7**:21-26; Amos **5**:21-26; Micah **6**:6-8; cp. Matthew **5**:23-24.

[15]J. J. Reeve, "Sacrifice (OT)" in *ISBE*, IV (1939), 2644.

[16]E. E. Carpenter, "Sacrifices and Offerings in the OT," *ISBE*, IV (rev. ed., 1988), 264.

[17]*" . . . the particular blood rites that are central to Israelite sacrifice are not paralleled in Mesopotamian religion. Magic, rather than the will of the deity, pervades the pagan cults . . . ."* (E. E. Carpenter, *ibid* .).

[18]Genesis **9**:4; Leviticus **17**:11, 14. A person or animal cannot live if its blood is shed; hence, blood came to represent the identity of the person. A similar thing can be said of the breath, or spirit. Since a person cannot exist without breathing, by synecdoche the breath, or spirit, stands for the person.

[19]Genesis **9**:4; Leviticus **3**:17; **17**:10-16; Deuteronomy **12**:16, 23; cp. Acts **15**:20, 29.