

Sacrifice

The paradigm of sacrifice in the Bible, and indeed in Islam, is the sacrifice of Abraham. The faithfulness of Abraham in offering up his son has caught the holy imagination of every faith. The Biblical account is found in Genesis twenty-two. `And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.'

This text has precipitated one of the great battles between the books, with Jews and Christians on one side and Muslims on the other, for the Qur'an reports a similar test for Ishmael rather than Isaac. The key to understanding the text is in the phrase 'thine only son'. The fact is that, even according to the Bible, Isaac was never Abraham's only son. Either the Bible has made a terrible mistake here, or we are dealing with something else.

There is a consistent and coherent explanation.

All over the world there are rites of passage as they are called for young people about the time of puberty. Nearly all of them include some kind of symbolic acts representing the death and rebirth of the initiate. Very often they include a substitution sacrifice to represent the death of the youth. The phrase 'thine only son' fits consistently into a rite of this type, as does the rest of the conversation in the chapter.

The phrase is obviously a part of the liturgical formula for the sacrifice of the firstborn. Normally the firstborn is the only son thus sacrificed, but in the case of polygamy, when the rite is repeated for the firstborn of each wife, it may not be literally true. In the case of Isaac it was not, but since it was a part of the ritual formula, the phrase was used in his case as it undoubtedly had been somewhat more accurately used in the case of Ishmael earlier. Both the Qur'an and the Bible report matters correctly.

This consistent understanding of the text not only reconciles the Bible and the Qur'an, but deflates the belief in human sacrifice. To imagine this to be a real test, in which Abraham actually agrees to offer his son, and is stopped from killing him only at the last moment, is to lay the foundation for accepting human sacrifice. The result in Christian theology is to make a human sacrifice the core of belief.

The fact that Abraham lived in a society which according to archaeologists actually committed human sacrifice sheds light on the meaning of the text. Although such sacrifice was expected in the time and place, still Abraham did not engage in it. He engaged in a substitution ritual which in itself indicates more clearly than anything could that the Bible tradition does not accept human sacrifice under any condition.

Sacrifice in Islam occurs during the pilgrimage and at other important occasions such as the birth of a child. The sacrificial animal must be of a clean sort. It is placed facing Mecca, the name of God must be pronounced, and it is cut so that the arteries of the throat and windpipe are severed and the blood drained. Sacrifice in Islam can generally be replaced with fasting. On sacrifice, note Ali (1988: 120a).

The first examples of sacrifice in the Bible are narrated without a command in Genesis 4:3–7 and 8:20–21. The first command to sacrifice in the Bible was given to Abraham (Genesis 15:9). It is significant that the faith which claims to represent the faith of Abraham, Islam, is the one in which sacrifice is retained to this day.

The rather fluid system of family sacrifice of the patriarchal period, which is very much like that of Islam today, gave way to a complex temple system of sacrifice as described in the Torah and the prophetic writings. This sacrificial legislation appears to have had the function of systematizing and limiting sacrifice among a people whose generosity was likely to cause at times the problem of oversacrifice, if the sacrifices every six steps at the removal of the ark at the time of David is any indication. The sacrificial legislation of some parts of the Torah conflicts with the practice in others and with the sacrificial system described in the final chapters of Ezekiel. This indicates the possibility of some variation.

There is apparently an early trend against blood sacrifice in the Bible as well. We see this especially in the Psalms and the prophets. Psalm 51:16. 'For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.' Isaiah 1:11 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? said the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.'

Since the temple at Jerusalem was lost in the seventh decade of the Christian era, there has been no sacrifice in rabbinical Judaism. In Christianity, the sacrifices of the Hebrew Scriptures are considered as types prophetic of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, after which no sacrifice can take place. The sacrifice of Jesus is either re-enacted or remembered in the Eucharist where the bread and wine are blessed and thought to be, contain or represent the body and blood of the sacrificed Jesus.

The vicarious sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross is thought to be an essential requisite for the forgiveness of sin. Muslims have generally, but not universally, denied the crucifixion altogether. Obviously that is a stand the Bible does not share, since the crucifixion is definitely maintained in the Gospels. The substitution theory, known from the Gospel of Barnabas, does not seem reconcilable with

the canonical Gospels. The swoon theory, whereby Jesus was crucified but did not die, is somewhat more tenable, but requires the assumption that the disciples were ignorant of the true facts.

What is in conflict with Islam is not the death and resurrection of Jesus as such. It is the vicarious sacrifice for sin which is absolutely and altogether unacceptable. The easiest and most direct path to that goal is merely to deny the crucifixion altogether. But in so doing, the Muslim must reject the Gospel narrative.

The Christian doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus has only two Biblical sources. The first is the allegorical interpretation of the sacrificial system of the Hebrew Scriptures. The second is the metaphorical application of the Paschal lamb to Jesus in the writings of Paul and Peter. There is no Gospel justification at all.

The only condition for forgiveness in the Gospel is in Matthew 6: 14–15. We are forgiven as we forgive others. The Christian doctrine, despite being so central to the faith, has only the most tenuous Scriptural foundation. Although Muslims do not do so, they could find a far firmer basis for their rejection of a vicarious sacrifice for sin in Scripture than the Christians find in favor of their doctrine.

I shall not discuss further the historicity of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Some of the non-canonical Gospels do not even mention it. One, the Gospel of Barnabas, even denies it outright. It is undeniable, however, that the New Testament teaches the historical crucifixion and resurrection. But this does not imply that the New Testament teaches that this was a sacrifice in atonement for sin which God required in order to be able to forgive sins.

There are two facts that cannot be denied. First, the Christian establishment maintains that Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross and without that sacrifice God could not forgive sin. The second historical fact is that the followers of Jesus Christ went on participating in the sacrificial system of the temple in Jerusalem until its destruction in AD 70.

The amazing truth is that the apostolic church, for more than a generation after the ascension of Jesus, still offered the Old Testament sacrifices. Did they not know that Jesus had already paid the price for sin? Or was that a belief that only arose later? The only consistent answer is that it is a later belief, one completely unknown to Paul, Jesus or any of the disciples of the first century.

The epistle to the Hebrews clearly teaches that Jesus replaces the temple service, its sacrifices and its priests. But the historical fact is that such belief came only in connection with the destruction of the temple. What really happened is that the followers of Jesus continued their Jewish worship of the one true God until that worship system was destroyed.

After that, Jews had only the synagogues and Christians only their primitive churches. The temple sacrificial system ended for both. But while the Jews continued to bewail the temple for two thousand years, the Christians were comforted in another way. The devastated Christians, some of whom no

doubt thought their sins could no longer be forgiven with the temple destroyed, sought comfort in Jesus Christ. When they needed him most, he came in to replace the temple, its services and its priests.

But it is quite a different thing to maintain that God demands a blood sacrifice in atonement for sin. Sacrifices were always a part of worship. Cain and Abel wanted to bring a sacrifice to God. So did Noah and Abraham. The first command to sacrifice was given to Abraham (Genesis 15:9). The people in early times were more generous than people today, so God had to limit sacrifice during the time of Moses (Exodus 36:6–7).

All of the regulations about sacrifices in the books of Moses tell how little should be offered, not how much. But it was next to impossible to get the people to see this. Later, in David's time, when the ark was removed to Jerusalem, they stopped to offer sacrifices every six steps (2 Samuel 6:13). Ancient people wanted to honor God and affirm their sincerity in prayer by offering sacrifices. But God never required anything but sincere repentance in order to forgive sins. 'Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required.' Psalm 40:6.

The practice of blood drainage in slaughter as well as sacrifice is one of the things the Jerusalem council maintained for Gentile converts (Acts 15:20,29). Despite the variation in practice, the maintaining of purity code in the kind of sacrifice and the method of slaughter is a constant from beginning to end.

The Christian belief that God requires the blood of an innocent human being before He can forgive is somewhat disconcerting. It does not seem that the Bible maintains the doctrine. The Bible does comfort those who lost the temple with the fact that Jesus Christ remains and is far better than any priest or sacrifice. It does legislate the limiting of sacrifices at the time of Moses, so that there would be less slaughtering of animals in every place.

In no place does Jesus declare that he was a sacrifice in atonement for sin. The only condition he ever set for forgiveness of sin was that we forgive one another (Matthew 6:14–15). The apostles later used language that emphasized the necessity of believing in Christ for forgiveness, and in this they were consistent with the concept of divinely appointed leadership.

This is not to deny that the innocent suffering and even death of a sinless human being is redemptive. This belief goes far back into Judaism long before the appearance of Jesus. It is very much in evidence at the time of the Maccabees. It continues after Christianity and appears in Islam with the tragic martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala.

But none of these deaths satisfy the demands of a stern God thirsting for blood or exacting the necessary ransom or penalty as the Christian doctrine would have it. All of the references to the blood of Christ and his sacrifice on the cross can be understood either as redemptive in this sense, or as metaphorical of the Gospel experience. This is supported by Jesus himself when he says, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'

The idea that God is in the sin business, that He takes pay for sin, is a strange one. It seems Biblical that there is no penalty to be paid to him. `The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life.' Romans 6:23. It is strange that Christians claim that sin is forgiven by grace alone, and then inconsistently go on to maintain that God requires a blood sacrifice.

If God's grace is infinite and sufficient, no sacrifice can add to it. If God's grace is not sufficient, then He is not God. This is the real point. It is non-Biblical gods who require human sacrifices. When such trinities of gods are superimposed in the place of the God of Biblical revelation, then human sacrifice naturally follows along. This is the origin of the Christian doctrine. Human sacrifice is not acceptable in the Bible.

What is the Gospel experience of which the expressions of sacrifice in the experience of Jesus are metaphors? According to Paul, the sacrifice that God requires is the sacrifice of ourselves and of all we have in His service. `I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.' Romans 12:1-2.

There are specifically two subjects in this passage. In verse one there is a description of `reasonable service'. The word `service' refers specifically to worship. For Paul, the core of liturgy is the sacrifice of oneself as a living gift to God. Such sacrifice alone is holy and acceptable to God. Animal sacrifices, the offering of formal prayer, the recitation of Psalms and other inspired texts of praise and worship, and calling on the name of God, all are vain and useless without the desire to offer oneself as a living sacrifice to God.

In verse two there is reference to everything else, all that is not liturgical. It entails `proving' what is the will of God. Paul does not refer to mechanical obedience on one hand, or even the obedience of love and loyalty as such on the other. Rather, he gives a method of attaining the good, acceptable and perfect will of God in everyday life.

Paul sees a two-step process. The first step is the mental preparation. It is the willingness not to conform. There is probably nothing so difficult to give up as conformity. But the doctrine of the unity of God quite definitely and directly implies that conformity, that is, obedience to the common opinions of the time and place, is idolatry. The unity of God has not space to spare for public opinion and conformity to it. It has only room for conformity to the will of God. Conformity to anything else is unacceptable.

The second step is the mental transformation. Like the first step, this is the reasonable effect of liturgical self-sacrifice. The act of giving oneself as a living sacrifice in worship has definite repercussions on the rest of life. It transforms the mind, bringing the soul into conformity to the will of God. It is very likely that this Pauline concept of personal liturgy and its spiritual ramifications differ little from Islamic concepts of prayer in prostration.

It seems that Islam best represents the Biblical description of sacrifice. It includes the possibility on certain occasions to sacrifice clean animals by draining the blood.

There is a healthy limitation of sacrifice, and recognition of the heart condition of the worshiper as of primary importance.

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