
A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies (old series)* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

ARTICLE

HEBREW SACRIFICE AND PROPHETIC SYMBOLISM[1]

THERE have been, and still are, many theories as to the origin of the Old Testament sacrifices. They can be regarded primarily as gifts to the deity, the view of sacrifice in general taken by Tylor in his *Primitive Culture*, and upheld in regard to the Old Testament by Wellhausen, Lagrange, and Buchanan Gray. Another view, associated with the name of William Robertson Smith, centres in the peace-offering, which is regarded as a form of realistic communion with the deity. Yet another view, favoured by Dussaud, and advocated by, e.g., E. O. James, on general anthropological grounds, emphasizes the liberation of the life-giving blood of animal sacrifice, for the benefit of God or man. We may certainly agree with G. F. Moore that the manipulation of the victim's blood 'is the one universal and indispensable constituent of sacrifice'. The general tendency amongst Old Testament scholars to-day is, however, to regard the network of sacrificial practice amongst the Hebrews as a syncretism, the origin of which is not to be explained along any single line of inquiry.

I do not propose to discuss these rival theories, amongst which I should regard the gift-theory as giving the widest explanation, and the manipulation of the blood as being one of the chief points of departure. Whatever conclusion we reach on such matters, there remains the deeper question as to the value and meaning of sacrifice for those who had little knowledge of, or interest in, its cruder origins. In the Bible sacrifice is taken more or less for granted as a necessary and self-explanatory element of religion. Even sacrificial theories of the Atonement, when they have followed the Epistle to the Hebrews in applying the figure of material sacrifice to the spiritual sacrifice of the Cross, are apt to leave us there, perhaps asking, 'But why sacrifice at all?' It is worth while, therefore, to try to get inside the minds of those who felt that sacrifice was necessary and self-explanatory. One approach to this desirable end, not yet sufficiently explored, is by way of the parallel phenomena of prophetic symbolism.

(1) *Sacrifice as the personal and efficacious act of the offerer.* In the developed ritual of the Pentateuch the priest takes so large a place that the role of the layman falls into the background, even for the

[1] A paper read to the Oxford Society of Historical Theology on 20 November 1941.

private offerings. But sacrifice was originally the layman's own act, as its earlier history clearly shows. After Saul's victory at Michmash the Israelites were satisfying their hunger from the captured animals without regard to the tabu against their blood. Saul improvised an altar from a great stone at which the oxen and sheep were slain by the people generally, and the blood drained out.[1] This is an example of primitive Semitic sacrifice of the nomadic type, as is shown by Arab customs, ancient and modern. For the Hebrews, all slaughter of domestic animals had its sacrificial aspect. When the Deuteronomic centralization of worship made it no longer possible to dispose of the blood at the local altar, it was poured out on the ground.[2]

Right through the Old Testament period the actual slaughtering of the animal sacrifice continued to be performed by the man who provided it, as in the nomadic period. The priest was not necessary; *his* primary function was that of giving *toroth*, decisions by the sacred oracle. Even when, in the developed ritual of the Passover, the actual offering of the blood was made by the priests, the layman slaughtered his own animal.[3] The area of the Temple was occupied by the representatives of family groups, each with his lamb. At the sound of the horn each slaughtered his lamb, and a priest caught the blood in a basin and passed it to his fellow priest, and so along their line until the last priest could dash the blood against the base of the altar.

That the offering is intended to be a personal act may be seen also in the laying on of the offerer's hands. This is prescribed for the peace-offering, prior to the slaughtering performed by himself, for the burnt-offering, again before his slaughter of the animal, and for the sin-offering.[4] The natural meaning of the laying of hands on the sacrifice is the closer identification of the offerer with his offering. According to Hebrew psychology the hands are psychically as well as physically a part of the personality. By placing them on the animal the offerer says intensively, 'This is mine, and it is I who offer it.' He does not say, 'This is I; let it suffer in my place', for there is nowhere in the Old Testament the suggestion of penalty suffered by the sacrificial victim. But the offerer might be regarded as saying

[1] 1 Sam. xiv. 33–5. [2] Deut. xii. 16, 20 ff.

[3] Mishnah, *Pesachim*, v. 5, 6.

[4] Lev. iii. 2, 8, 13; i. 4, also 10 according to LXX; iv. 4 (priest for himself), iv. 15 (elders representing congregation), iv. 24 (ruler for himself), iv. 29, 33 (ordinary Israelite); cf. 2 Chron. xxix. 23. There is no mention of the laying on of hands in connexion with the guilt-offering, which in this and some other respects stands apart from the other sacrifices, and belongs rather to the realm of 'compensation'.

by the laying on of hands, 'This is I, for it is my act and so an extension of myself.'[1] The act, however, is not the killing of the victim, which is merely a necessary means to the provision of the blood or the making of the gift, or the sharing in the common meal. The cardinal act in sacrifice is the presentation to the deity. Nor does the laying on of hands transfer the sin of the offerer to the victim in sacrifice proper. That transference is made to the goat for Azazel, but this is not a sacrifice to Yahweh at all, and is clearly distinguished from the sacrificial goat of the Day of Atonement. In the sacrificial sin-offering the disposal of the blood 'atones', i.e. acts negatively by wiping away or covering the breach of tabu. In the peace-offering the initial presentation of the blood brings the circle of worshippers positively into communion with the deity, a communion reinforced by their common meal upon the victim. In the burnt-offering we get as close to the pure gift as is possible.

That the personal act of sacrifice was generally regarded as doing something, i.e. as 'efficacious', hardly needs demonstration. This is implied, on the one hand, in the detailed attention given to sacrifice in the Old Testament. This would be meaningless unless sacrifice were meaningful, to a degree far beyond a figurative and merely declaratory symbolism. Not less is the efficacious realism of sacrifice implied in the prophetic denunciations of reliance upon it, and upon its multiplication. Both priests and people believed that sacrifices made a difference in their relation to God. Just what the difference was is a point on which prophetic symbolism may throw light, for here, too, we shall find personal acts conceived to be efficacious by their entrance into the divine purpose, and their consequent participation in the divine power.

(2) *Prophetic symbolism as parallel to sacrifice.* By prophetic symbolism is here meant the whole series of *acts* performed by the prophets in connexion with, yet in relative independence of, their oral prophecies.[2] Such acts are illustrated by Isaiah's walking about Jerusalem half-clad and barefoot, by the breaking of an earthenware flask by Jeremiah in the presence of chosen witnesses, by the enactment of the siege of Jerusalem by Ezekiel. As a detailed example we may take the yoke borne by Jeremiah to represent the yoke of Babylonian dominion which is to be worn by the nations. First, he

[1] Cf. Pedersen, *Israel*, p. 128: 'The actions are not sent away from the soul, they are the outer manifestations of the whole of the soul, the traces of its movements; its "ways", the Hebrew calls them.'

[2] I have discussed these at greater length in a paper read to the Society for Old Testament Study in 1927, and published in *Old Testament Essays* (edited by T. H. Robinson, with introduction by D. C. Simpson).

was ordered by Yahweh to make and wear a symbolic yoke of wood,[1] and to make this the basis of oracles to the surrounding peoples and to Zedekiah. Then a rival prophet, Hananiah, offers an optimistic oracle, also in the name of Yahweh, saying that the yoke of Babylon is broken. To make this oracle the more efficacious, he takes and breaks the wooden yoke borne by Jeremiah.[2] Jeremiah is not empowered to make any immediate reply, but subsequently receives another oracle, to the effect that Yahweh will make an iron yoke in place of the broken yoke of wood.[3] On the other hand, when the court prophet, Zedekiah, made iron horns to enact Ahab's pushing the Syrians in defeat before him, Micaiah does not violently remove these, but declares that the inspiration of the act and of its accompanying word was due to a divine deception of the court prophets, meant to bring Ahab to destruction.[4]

Such realistic acts were 'common form' amongst the prophets of all types. How are we to explain them? Certainly not by saying that they are merely dramatic gestures, natural to the Semite, illustrating the spoken word. They were sometimes performed quite independently of it, as when Jeremiah broke the earthenware flask.[5] The Hebrew conceived the spoken word as an act of irrevocable nature, as we may see from the stories of blessings and curses. Similarly, he conceived the act as a 'word' of intenser kind, which initiated and liberated objective forces. The arrows shot by Joash, with the hand of the dying prophet Elisha upon his, were actual contributions to the victory over the Syrians.[6] The prophetic act, by being in miniature or fragmentary form that which God will accomplish, becomes part of the means through which God will bring it about. The prophet's act enters into the purpose, and so acquires the power, of Yahweh. The prophet might equally well have said, 'Thus doth Yahweh' of his own symbolic act, as he does say, of his own spoken word, 'Thus saith Yahweh'.

It ought to be clear that this does not reduce prophetic symbolism to symbolic magic. The *forms* of acted symbolism were no doubt derived from such a source, but they were sublimated by the religious faith of the prophets. Magic constrains the unseen; religion means surrender to it. These acts of prophetic symbolism do not in any way constrain God; they are performed at His command in order to achieve, or help to achieve, His own purpose. They are paralleled by the dramatic acts which accompany primitive prayers and are felt to add to their efficacy. In both the prophetic and the petitionary

[1] Jer. xxvii. 2. [2] Jer. xxviii. 10.
[3] Jer. xxviii. 13 f.; cf. the LXX (xxxv. 13).
[4] 1 Kings xxii. 11, 19 ff. [5] Jer. xix. 1 ff. [6] 2 Kings xiii. 16.

'word' the more or less of visible act which accompanies it makes a difference. Word and act find their unity in the purpose of their human agent; their efficacy will depend on their relation to the divine purpose.

When we compare the symbolic acts of the prophet thus interpreted with the sacrificial acts of the worshipper, we can hardly fail to find the resemblance impressive. Both are products of Hebrew realism; both are the visible manifestation and actualization of an inner attitude and purpose, interpreted through the accompanying words. Both are conceived to be efficacious, as doing something and making a difference, beyond any subjective reactions to them. Perhaps it is not without significance that Ezekiel, the prophet who performs more symbolic acts than any other, is also the prophet who gives to sacrifice the largest place in his ideal reconstruction of the future.

Objection may be raised to the tracing of such a parallelism on the ground that the prophetic act is prospective, and concerned with the future only, whereas the sacrificial act is largely retrospective. But we may reply that the prophetic act is always rooted in the past and carries on something already begun, whilst the sacrificial act is always meant to affect future relations to the deity, even if, as often, it is formally an atonement for the past. Both kinds of act are in truth at once prospective and retrospective.[1]

Another apparent dissimilarity between the prophetic and the sacrificial act might seem to be that the prophetic act is always *ad hoc*, the spontaneous expression of the activity of the living God, whereas the sacrifices are stereotyped parts of an elaborate system. But here, also, the dissimilarity is more apparent than real. There is indeed a difference in 'quantity', if only because the sacrifices were the product of many centuries of development, and are the ritual satisfaction of a need that was general and continuous. But prophecy in Israel had a much shorter history, belonged to individuals, and in its higher forms to very few of them. If we knew more about mass-prophecy, such as that of Ahab's court prophets, we should probably find that its behaviour, in word and in deed, was conventional and stereotyped. A mass fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, whether at Pentecost or in a religious revival of modern times, always tends to conventional forms of expression, in act as in word. As it happens, we have far more data for sacrificial acts than for the prophetic, but the difference of quantity does not affect the value of the comparison.

[1] The Hebrew sense of time was very different from ours, as the 'tenses' of the Hebrew verb are sufficient to show. Emphasis fell on the content, not on the formal divisions of the time process, as with us (cf. Pedersen, *Israel*, pp. 489–91).

(3) *The 'sacramental' character of prophetic and sacrificial acts.* The resemblance of the two groups is brought out by speaking of that 'sacramentalism' which belongs to both. I use the word in the wide sense of such a definition as this: 'a sacrament is any spatio-temporal reality which by its occupation of space or time expresses to us God's will and purpose and enables us the better to co-operate with them.'[1] In this broad sense we may certainly call Jeremiah's act, in breaking the earthenware flask, a sacramental one. It expressed the will and purpose of God towards Jerusalem which was itself to be broken. It was also felt by the prophet to contribute to the accomplishment of that purpose, and was intended to bring the witnesses into co-operation with it. The semi-private breaking of the flask had to be done before the public announcement of the breaking of Jerusalem; it was the first in a chain of events. Here, then, we have an example of sacramental efficacy which can be used to elucidate the similar sacrificial act, one performed by the same type of mind, in the same age. We should thus be led to think of the sacrificial act as accomplishing in the material world a fragment of what is sought in the spiritual. But that very terminology is misleading, for it suggests a divorce of the two realms which did not exist for the Hebrew mind. The great prophets had no outlook on a life beyond death; the visible order or disorder was their one world. All the more passionately they declared the establishment of God's purpose here and now, and by the mode of declaration furthered it. Similarly, the worshipper was not buying a place in heaven when he offered his sacrifice; he was trying to get things right here and now. His method may be described as an anticipation of the ἀνακεφαλαίωσις of St. Paul and Irenaeus. He does in part what he seeks to establish as a whole, and he does it in the most realistic fashion he can. So, in the peace-offering, by eating together the flesh of the sacrificed animal the worshippers would feel that they were establishing, *and already enjoying*, a realistic communion with one another and with Him to whom the animal had been offered, since the presentation of the mysterious blood effectively brought Him within the circle of fellowship; they were 'bound in the bundle of life with Yahweh their God'.[2] They would feel both physically and spiritually strengthened, for they did not distinguish the two realms as we do. In a somewhat different approach, yet with similar realism, the offerers of a burnt-offering, once assured that it was accepted, felt like humble subjects whose king had graciously accepted their gift, and could not now withhold his protection. They had *ipso facto* established themselves

[1] O. C. Quick, *The Christian Sacraments*, p. 104. [2] Cf. 1 Sam. xxv. 29.

as his protégés. Again, the bringers of the sin-offering believed that the blood disposal in which it centred restored the connexion broken by the infringement of some tabu. The new act had undone what the old act had done; that is why the blood 'atoned'. It is inevitable that *we* should feel the means inadequate to achieve the end, for we are living in a world of larger and more spiritual conceptions and categories in regard both to God and man. Yet, as so often happens, the naïve and untutored instincts of the race may adumbrate some deeper truth, when relieved of their crudities.

We may describe the general realm to which belong the gestures of primitive prayer, the symbolic acts of the prophets, the sacrificial acts of the worshipper, as that of representative realism. The whole Hebrew ritual and religious system depended on the principle of representation. The particular *time* which is made sacred is a fragment of all time, which belongs to God; in this sense the Sabbath is made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. The particular *place* which is set apart as holy represents the ideal consecration of the earth, the fullness of which is God's glory. The particular *offering* is the concentrated expression of the loyalty of life, and within its limited domain does bring that consecration to pass. As we have seen, the Israelite's gift was an extension of himself, and by being made holy it did so far consecrate everything else that was his, bringing it under the aegis of God. That seems to me to offer a true parallel to the prophet's symbolic act, which did all that was in the prophet's power at that moment to make the purpose of God actual. The prophetic act did effect a change in the events of time, by bringing God's will into history, as well as by representing the larger event which God Himself would perform. The sacrificial act did effect a change in the sacrificer's relation to God, by being what it was intrinsically, as well as by representing a larger whole of devotion. We may regard both kinds of act as further differentiations of primitive prayer. This, too, was marked by what Heiler has called 'dramatic realism' in its accompanying acts of prostration, kneeling, gestures of the liveliest kind. These are felt to *do* something, and they point to a philosophy of prayer in which the human purpose is taken up into the divine *as a constituent part of it.*

In at least two other respects the parallel between prophetic symbolism and sacrifice is suggestive and illuminative. The first is that both require the interpretative word to make them articulate. Isaiah's captive garb needed the accompanying oracle to link it with the captivity of Ethiopia. The sacrificial gift also had to be particularized as an act of thanksgiving or reconciliation or petition; only the language of the ritual, partly reflected in the Book of Psalms, could

give to the offering the precision of the offerer's intention. This articulate accompaniment was an essential part of the act, in both cases, and would normally challenge either the merely mechanical observance of a rite, or vulgar curiosity as to the vagaries of 'a man of God'. The proper interpretation of the sacramental act belongs to its sacramental efficacy.

The other point is that both kinds of act are believed to go back to the will of God. Both are ascribed to the divine command and that command is essential to their validity. The sacrifice may be the syncretism of many usages, the product of long generations of slowly changing observance, though later ascribed to an initial command given through Moses. It must at any rate acquire the divine sanction, and that sanction ultimately becomes the primary ground for confidence in its acceptance, the confidence sought at an earlier date in the observation of the victim or the official declaration of the priest. The prophetic act also is divinely inspired; Isaiah is commanded, 'Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins' before he ventures to perform the act in this context. The prophetic act ceased with the functioning of the prophet, but the systematized sacrifices became, as they have been called, 'the apotheosis of obedience'.[1] We recall the words of Ben Sira, in xxxv. 4, 5:

> See that thou appear not in the presence of the Lord empty-handed,
> For all these things (are to be done) *for the sake of the commandment.*

Only along this line shall we do justice to the spirituality of the higher Judaism. 'The final form of the sacrificial law of the Old Testament comes to us from men who valued the prophetic teaching, and the age of Judaism treasured alike the Law and the Prophets. It sought by the Law to guard the prophetic principles, and it conceived of the ritual as the organ of obedience, not the substitute for it. But it is clear that it conceived of the ritual as potent, and not alone as acceptable, and the power with which it was charged was divine power.'[2]

(4) *Theological value of the parallelism.* If Hebrew sacrifice is interpreted along the lines suggested, we shall see more clearly the meaning of the age-long antithesis between ritual and righteousness; we shall gain an historical approach to the sacraments of the New Testament; we may even find a suggestion for the philosophy of atonement.

[1] J. M. P. Smith, *Biblical Ideas of Atonement*, p. 60.
[2] Professor H. H. Rowley, in a written communication.

The prophets, as we know, strongly denounced reliance on the offering of sacrifices when this was divorced from the social righteousness which was essential for Israel's right relation to God. If ritual and righteousness were separated, and a choice had to be made between them, there can be no doubt as to their choice; 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'[1] From this standpoint they unhesitatingly condemned the religiosity of their times. But statements made in religious controversy are always likely to be coloured by what they oppose and deny as well as by what they uphold and assert. The prophets were virtually compelled to over-emphasize, or to emphasize too exclusively, one side of the ritual-righteousness antithesis, in order to make their meaning clear—to say, in effect, righteousness only, in order to say, not ritual only. It would be difficult to conceive the maintenance of Israelite worship at all, which the prophets certainly contemplated and desired, without some sort of sacrifice. Buchanan Gray's characteristically cautious statement[2] seems to be perfectly accurate:

> We cannot safely conclude that all the prophets denounced sacrifice under all conditions; purged of its abuses they may have been ready enough to see the continuance of eucharistic sacrifice; it would have been much less compatible with their criticism of the popular religion to admit either the expiatory or the propitiatory validity of sacrifice.

More positively, our parallelism suggests that for the prophets everything depended on the spirit in which an act was performed. Their own symbolic acts were, genetically, the continuance in form of widespread symbolic magic which they themselves certainly condemned. Yet the psychology of symbolic magic was taken up into their faith in Yahweh and sublimated by the performance of similar acts, not to constrain Him, but as constrained by Him. Similarly, we may say that they condemned the *opus operatum* of sacrifice, so long as it was not lifted up into the spirit of true devotion to Yahweh, and true obedience to His moral requirements. Then the character of sacrifice would be changed, and it might become as acceptable to God as were their own symbolic acts.[3]

The advantage of approaching the New Testament sacraments over genuinely Hebrew soil is obvious; it saves us from doubtful excursions into Hellenistic realms. In Romans vi. 3–5 the mere act

[1] Hos. vi. 6; the word, *hesed*, is much larger than the English suggests, and might almost be rendered 'loyalty', i.e. in the neighbourly relation.

[2] *Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, p. 89.

[3] Cf. the teaching of Matt. v. 23, 24, which is, as Montefiore says, 'perfectly Rabbinic and usual'.

of baptism, as submersion in water, could legitimately be regarded by the anthropologist as a form of symbolic magic. But, in the apostolic exposition of its meaning, a double reference redeems it from this, provided it is the act of a believer who can say with the apostle, 'I am crucified with Christ'. On the one hand the water-baptism symbolically reproduces the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, on the other the death to sin and the resurrection to life of the believer made one with Him by faith. The apostle does not teach that the act will infallibly produce the results he assumes, but it seems not less clear that he regards the act as instrumental to the results, since his appeal is to the act of baptism. Thus his standpoint may be said to resemble that of Jeremiah in regard to the broken earthenware. Jeremiah might have said to the witnesses in after days, 'You shared my faith in the fulfilment of the divine oracle when we broke the flask together; by that breaking you shared in advance the breaking of Jerusalem which is now coming upon us.'

In regard to the Lord's Supper, it is worthy of note that Professor C. H. Dodd is ready to accept prophetic symbolism as the best approach to it:

> In solemnly setting apart the bread and the cup He was making them the pledge of life in the Kingdom of God. In speaking of the broken bread as His body, and associating the cup with His blood, He was effecting in a symbol that sacrifice of Himself which He was about to accomplish in fact. In giving to His disciples the bread to eat and the cup to drink, He was associating them with Him in that sacrifice and its consequence. . . . To this we must add that in accordance with the nature of prophetic symbolism the significant act was not a mere illustration, but an 'efficacious sign'—in other words, a sacrament.[1]

Finally, there is the important question whether the argument can be carried beyond the realms of history and exegesis into a constructive doctrine of the Atonement. Was even symbolic magic groping dimly and obscurely after a truth set forth more clearly and freed from superstition in prophetic symbolism and in the higher use of sacrifice, and yet more clearly in the Christian sacraments, whilst attaining its supreme example in the Cross of Christ? That truth would be, to borrow the words of Bishop Hicks in another connexion, that 'acts done in this world are valid in the other'.[2] It would depend on the acceptance of the view that time is not the shadow of eternity, but a true part of it. It would suggest that history itself

[1] *A Companion to the Bible*, edited by T. W. Manson, pp. 386 ff.; see also his remarks in *Christian Worship*, edited by N. Micklem, pp. 73 ff.

[2] *The Fullness of Sacrifice*, p. 174.

needs to be redeemed, and that its redemption was begun in the transformation wrought on the Cross. It would find the eternal validity of that redemption in its being already a true part of the eternal order, revealing redemption because actually redemptive, and not a 'mere' symbol of the unseen. Such questions face every theologian who is not content to use the classical metaphors of ransom, sacrifice, penalty, representation, without asking what justification they have in the eternal order.[1] The worth of a theological doctrine is tested by the extent to which it can be plotted on an eternal background. Symbolism has brought us to the fundamental issue for philosophical theology, and indeed for all metaphysics, the relation of time to eternity.

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[1] I have developed this argument in *Redemption and Revelation* (Nisbet, 1942).