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Ritual Sacrifice in Judaism

The Hebrew word “korban” has many meanings. It can have the connotations of vow, oath, or even gift, but the meaning that is most telling of the word is sacrifice (Klawans 160). The practice of ritual sacrifice has a long, meaningful history in Judaism. According to Leviticus 17:11, “For the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have therefore given it to you [to be placed] upon the altar, to atone for your souls. For it is the blood that atones for the soul” (“Complete Tanakh”). This is merely one of many examples of how important the sacrifice was to Jewish people. For example, Leviticus chapters 16 and 17 are entirely devoted to describing the requirements and practice of ritual sacrifice (“Complete Tanakh”). However, although ritual sacrifice plays a large part in the history of Judaism, the practice, for people of this religion, is now largely lost. This paper will describe the different types of ritual sacrifices found in Judaism, delve into the meaning behind these sacrifices, discuss the unknowns surrounding the topic of ritual sacrifice, and, finally, give an overview of how Jewish people work against the forces of time to continue with the practice of ritual sacrifice in the modern world.

Sacrificial offerings, though often discussed as a single practice, actually come in many different forms and each has its own motives and outcomes. While preparing for a sacrifice, the animal, along with the priest who will perform and the people who will attend the sacrifice, must be purified before entering the sanctuary (Klawans 134). During the time when the practice of these sacrifices peaked, the sanctuary where sacrifices were carried out was the Second Temple in Jerusalem. This temple was built on a hill called the Temple Mount, which was believed to be “the place that the Lord will choose” as his dwelling, according to Deuteronomy 12:14 (Gilders). As this was a place God deemed worthy enough and holy enough to hold a sacrifice, no impurities were allowed to enter (Klawans 134). Although there were subcategories of sacrifices, as well as those that fit somewhere outside of these few, the main five types of Jewish ritual sacrifice were as follows: Olah, Zebach Sh’lamim, Chatat, Asham, Food and Drink Offerings, and Parah Adumah. First, the Olah, also known as the burnt offering, was traditionally performed every morning and evening. In this, the oldest and most common sacrifice, an animal was brought to an altar and burnt in its entirety as an offering to God. Zebach Sh’lamim, the peace offering, was meant to thank God and praise Him for everything He did for His people. In this sacrifice, some of the offering was burnt, and the rest was divided among the attendees to consume. With the Chatat, or sin offering, the animal would be sacrificed to God to atone for one’s sins. Some of the sacrifices could not be eaten, such as if the person committed a terrible sin, but typically, the priest would eat the offering. Likewise, after an Asham, or guilt offering, the priest would eat the sacrifice. The last type of sacrifice, food and drink offerings, represent the fruits that have come from mankind’s labor on Earth. In this sacrifice, part of the offering is burnt for God and the rest is shared among the attendees (Qorbanot).

Just as there are so many variations of sacrificial practices, there are multiple meanings behind the sacrifices. As previously stated, the most common types of sacrifice included burning the offering for God. This was to create odors that were pleasing to God. In fact, the main purpose of the twice-daily burnt offering was to supply this scent so God would want to remain nearby, and His presence would remain inside the sanctuary without interruption. In addition to this idea, there is the factor of imitatio dei, or “imitation of God”. In order to attract God’s attention and become more like Him, the Jews would interpret his power and character into symbolic steps of ritual sacrifice. This imitation of God would begin with the Jews selecting the animal sacrifice, similar to how God has power over His creations on Earth, even mankind. Next, the Jews had power over’ the animals life or death, as God is omnipotent and holds that power in relation to us. The third example of imitatio dei is the use of sacrificial flames as a visual representation of how God was a “consuming fire”, a metaphor which represented His violence as well as His power (Klawans 142). Finally, the Jews believed that their ritual sacrifice had a symbolic connection to God creating the universe. According to this belief, God’s spiritual energy and life force flows out of Him. This energy condenses and “freezes”, eventually becoming physical matter. The people’s sacrifice is a reversal of this process, with the heavenly fire “melting” the matter and returning it to its original state of pure spiritual energy.

Although sacrifice was an important Jewish ritual for so long, there is much that remains unknown about the practice. Likely, the most frequently asked question is how the Jewish people began these ritual sacrifices. And to that question, there would be no straightforward answer. Because their sacrificial offerings and reasons vary so widely, it is likely that there is no one explanation or theory for all of these offerings (Klawans 133). Another unknown is what was spoken during these rituals. Although there is significant detail of the actual steps of the different sacrificial offerings, texts written about the sacrifices rarely acknowledge what was said (Gruenwald 182). The theory then arises that the Israelite sanctuary, and therefore the sacrifices inside, was actually silent. According to Israeli Bible scholar and historian Israel Knohl, “All the various acts of the priest are performed in silence […] Priestly speech is only found outside the temple or apart from the essential cultic act” (Knohl 17). The final aspect of ritual sacrifice in Judaism that will forever be debated is whether it is actually for God or simply for the people. In Hosea 6:6 God says, “For I desire loving-kindness, and not sacrifices, and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (“Complete Tanakh). Some scholars take this to mean that the attitude and behavior of the people are of greater importance than the sacrifice they give to God. Some Jews even believe that God does not actively wish for His people to sacrifice to Him. With this argument, they quote lines such as Jeremiah 7:22, which says, “For neither did I speak with your forefathers nor did I command them on the day I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning a burnt offering or a sacrifice” (“Complete Tanakh”). Rather than ritual sacrifice being a gift for God, it is a form of a Pagan ritual the Jews continue because it is tradition and they believe it to be sacred. In this theory, God removes the Pagan elements by directing the sacrifice toward Himself. An argument that goes along with this theory is that God preemptively commanded His people to sacrifice only in a sanctuary, such as the Temple, in order to make it more difficult for the Jews to sacrifice (“Why Do the Jews”).

In modern day, ritual sacrifice in Judaism has largely come to an end. The decline of this practice occurred in the year 70 C.E., when the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army. After the Temple was destroyed there was no proper place to offer sacrifices, so they eventually stopped. For the most part, Jews have now turned to prayer and studying the laws of sacrifice rather than actually carrying out ritual sacrifice (Qorbanot). However, in recent years, the number of Israeli Jews preparing sacrificial offerings and taking them to be sacrificed in Jerusalem has increased. Although the temple is long gone, the Temple Mount remains one of the holiest places for Judaism. But this hill is also one of the holiest places to Muslims. To Muslims, the hill is referred to as the Noble Sanctuary (Stub). It is also home to important Muslim structures such as the al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock (“Why Do the Jews”). This rift created a national law meant to ease the conflict between the two religions, which caused non-Muslims to be banned from entering the area, much less preforming ritual sacrifices. Because of this law, all Jews who attempt to access the hill are barred by police, and any potential sacrifices they may have are confiscated by the authorities. Some groups hope to eventually construct a third temple in Jerusalem, but in the meantime, they hold “practice drills” for the Passover sacrifice. Although this is not considered a real sacrifice since they are not physically capable of holding the ceremony on the Temple Mount, every step is taken to make the practice as accurate as possible. This process includes someone dressing up in priestly robes, slaughtering an animal, and scattering its blood upon an altar (Stub). Of course, there are those who are opposed to the idea of reviving sacrifice. Certain verses from the Torah can be interpreted to mean that people’s attitudes and behavior are of far greater importance than providing an animal sacrifice. Examples of these verses are Psalm 40:6 which says, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required,” and Psalm 51:16-17, stating "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (“Why Do the Jews”). With this understanding, these readings advocate for actively altering one’s character and healing one’s spirit rather than passively giving an offering to appease a god.

Ritual sacrifice has long been a central part of Judaism. This ancient practice has many differing categories, meanings and reasonings, unknowns, and modern-day connections. Rather than simply being something Jews must do in order to appease their creator, ritual sacrifice gives people a closeness to God by relating to Him in ways they may have never thought possible. Jewish ritual sacrifice has extensive history and meaning that must never be allowed to be forgotten. Although there are aspects of ritual sacrifice that are either debated over or simply lost in time, the mystery surrounding it makes it that much more unique. Even today, with barriers, controversy, and new interpretations preventing people from engaging in the practice, people are finding ways to keep the essence of the ritual alive.

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