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‘*ōlāh*: THE RHETORIC OF BURNT OFFERINGS

by

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The ‘*ōlāh* “burnt offering” is the paradigmatic offering in the Hebrew Bible. Of all the many technical terms from Israel’s cultic worship, the ‘*ōlāh* is most frequently mentioned and, when multiple offerings are listed, it is almost always listed first. The ‘*ōlāh*’s prominence cannot be credited to its actual dominance in ritual: the *šēlāmūm* “peace or communion offerings” that were eaten by worshippers and priests must have outnumbered the offerings burnt whole on the altar. The offerings would otherwise have impoverished both priests and lay people. That expectation is confirmed by passages that list the numbers of both kinds of offerings: ‘*ōlōt* account for only one out of six animals offered by the elders of Israel according to Num. vii, and slightly more than one out of ten at Hezekiah’s Passover according to 2 Chr. xxix. Nevertheless, except when reveling in the sheer number of offerings,¹ the stories and ritual instructions of the Bible grant the ‘*ōlāh* pride of place.

The ‘*ōlāh*’s priority in biblical rhetoric requires examination if we are to understand the motives of the writers and the effects these texts had upon early readers and hearers. That is especially true of the most systematic description of Israel’s offerings in the Bible, the instructions of Leviticus i-vii. I have argued elsewhere that this material contains various indications that it was shaped to persuade readers/hearers not only to follow its prescriptions, but also to accept its authority as *torah*.² In the context of this persuasive effort, we may well wonder what advantage was gained by beginning both sets of instructions (Lev. i-v

¹ E.g. by claiming that Solomon offered 142,000 animals to dedicate the new temple (1 Kgs. xviii 63).

² See J.W. Watts, “The Rhetoric of Ritual Instruction in Leviticus 1-7,” in R. Rendtorff and R. Kugler (eds.), *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (VTSup 93; Leiden, 2003), pp. 78-100.

[LXX i 1-vi 8]; vi-vii [LXX vi 8-vii 38]) with the *‘ōlāh*. But the same question can be asked of biblical rhetoric generally: what does the *‘ōlāh*'s rhetorical preeminence tell us about ancient Israel's religious beliefs and cultural presuppositions?

Explanations for the ‘ōlāh's priority

1. *Convention*: The question of why the *‘ōlāh* is mentioned so frequently and almost always first has received some, but not very much, attention from interpreters. The very conventionality of the *‘ōlāh*'s priority in offering lists has led most readers to accept it without question. There can be no question that this convention was widely shared by the Hebrew Bible's many authors: not only the priestly authors of Leviticus (including H), but also Deuteronomy³ and other non-P strands of the Pentateuch,⁴ the Deuteronomists⁵ and the prophets,⁶ the Psalmists⁷ and the Chronicler⁸ place the *‘ōlāh* first in lists of offerings and even in the paired clichés, *‘ōlāh/zēbah* "burnt offering/sacrifice" and *‘ōlāh/šēlāmîm* "burnt offering/peace offering."⁹ The handful of exceptional cases where *‘ōlāh* follows *zēbah* (paired: Exod. x 25; Hos. vi 6; Ps. l 8; 1 Chr. xxix 21; in a longer sequence: Ps. xl 6-7) or, in one case, *minḥah* (Ps. xx 4), probably reverse the conventional order to emphasize the end of the line or colon by placing *‘ōlāh* there.¹⁰

³ Chap. xii which usually places it first in a string of offering terms but once uses it as an umbrella term for all offerings: vv. 13-14.

⁴ Exod. xviii 12; xxiv 5.

⁵ Josh. xxii (4x); 1 Sam. vi 15; xv 22; 2 Kgs. v 17; etc.

⁶ Isa. xliii 23; Jer. vi 20; vii 21, 22; xvii 26; xxxiii 18; Ezek. xl 42; xlv 11.

⁷ Pss. xl 70; li 21; lxvi 13-15.

⁸ 1 Chr. xvi 1-2; xxi 26; 2 Chr. vii 1; xxix 23-32; etc.

⁹ B. Levine described the merismic (cliché) quality of these pairs: "A descriptive analysis of the frequent pairs *‘ōlāh-zēbah* and *‘ōlāh-šēlāmîm* can tell us relatively little about the *šēlāmîm*, in particular, because most occurrences are clichés, or merisms," e.g. Exod. x 25. "The same reservation may be applied to most attestations of the pair *‘ōlāh-zēbah* in biblical sources, some of which actually refer to non-monotheistic rites [Footnote: Ex. 18:12; Jos 22:28; I Sam. 15:22; II Kings 5:17, 10:24; Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:20-22; Ps. 50:18, 51:8]. Even in codified passages, where one would expect a more technical usage to obtain, the pair *‘ōlāh-zēbah* seems to retain a merismic quality" (e.g. Lev. xvii 18). The references in 1 Sam. vi 15 and 2 Kgs. xvi 15 are "largely proverbial. . . . The situation with the pair *‘ōlāh-šēlāmîm* is somewhat different, though there, too, the element of cliché is noticeable" (*In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* [SJLA 5; Leiden, 1974], pp. 21-22).

¹⁰ Even more consistent than the *‘ōlāh*'s conventional priority is the fact that the *šēlāmîm* always come last, both in pairings and in longer lists of offerings (except in

The use of a convention, however, is not self-explanatory. Authors can choose to be conventional or not, and that choice affects how the text will be received by hearers and readers who recognize a convention or a departure from it. Following convention is usually a method for gaining acceptance and, sometimes, for escaping notice. Flaunting convention, on the other hand, intentionally draws attention, but at the risk of rejection. So what rhetorical goals did placing the instructions for the *‘ōlāh* at the beginning of Leviticus try to achieve? The systematic detail of Lev. i and the following chapters would seem to draw attention rather than avoid it. However, the conventional sequence of offerings in Lev. i-iii, *‘ōlāh*, *minḥāh*, *zebah šēlāmîm*,¹¹ underscores the presentation of these chapters as standard, indeed, definitive instructions for Israel’s most important cultic practices. The first pericope (Lev. i 3-9) contains an unusual number of interpretive terms that distinguish this initial portrayal of the *‘ōlāh* as exemplary.¹² So the beginning of Leviticus seems to follow convention: because the *‘ōlāh* always comes first, writers who wish to have their prescriptions accepted as normative will of course treat it first.

Writers, however, rarely aim only to reproduce convention, because that provides little motivation for writing in the first place. We may expect, therefore, to find that texts use conventional figures and structures to hide their innovations. What innovations does the conventional language of the early chapters of Leviticus try to hide? That is difficult to say, but various indicators hint that the prescriptions for the *ḥattā’t* and *’āsām* in Lev. iv-v aimed to change existing practices. J. Milgrom suggested a hypothetical history of the offerings to account for these rhetorical features:

The burnt offering . . . may originally have been the only sacrifice offered except for the *šēlāmîm*, which provided meat for the table. This would account for the widespread attestation in the early sources of the *‘ōlā* and the tandem *‘ōlā wāzebah/ūšēlāmîm*. . . . With the advent of a tabernacle/

Lev. i-v; see below). So one may also ask why, rhetorically, the *šēlāmîm* are always last? I suggest that this is related to the question of the *‘ōlāh*’s priority. The questions are two sides of the same coin.

¹¹ For this exact sequence of terms, see Josh. xxii 23, but cf. the variety of formulations in vv. 27-29.

¹² So C. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament. Die Signifikanz von Blut- und Verbrennungsriten im kultischen Rahmen* (WMANT 94; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2002), p. 69, who pointed to *qōrbān* “offering” (v. 3), *kappēr* “atone” (v. 4), *’iššēh* “fire offering” (v. 9), and *rēyah nīḥōah* “soothing scent” (v. 9).

temple, however, it became imperative to devise specific sacrifices to purge the sacred house and its sancta of their contamination and desecration. Thus the purification and reparation offerings, respectively were devised. These two sacrifices, once introduced into the sacrificial system, became the expiatory sacrifices par excellence and ultimately usurped the expiatory function of the burnt offering for the individual. That these two sacrifices are later than the burnt, cereal, and well-being offerings is shown by the fact that the latter offerings are provided with no cases. The motivations for bringing them are taken for granted. Not so for the purification and reparation offerings: their cases are spelled out in detail precisely because knowledge of them is not widespread.¹³

Though Milgrom's assumptions about the historical setting for these changes are debatable, he astutely described the distinctive rhetorical treatment that the *ḥaṭṭā't* and *'āšām* receive. His last sentence could be stronger, however: P's regulations for the *ḥaṭṭā't* and *'āšām* were written not only to spread knowledge of them, but also to assert the authority of their innovations and deflect criticism, since ritual changes are almost never uncontroversial. The instructions directed specifically to priests in Lev. vi-vii repeatedly emphasize their own status as *torah* and include numerous prohibitions of various practices, all of which indicates that they were written with the expectation of meeting resistance.¹⁴ Therefore, the systematic elucidation of ritual conventions in the early chapters, inaugurated by the instructions for the *'ōlāh*, seems to lay the basis for persuading hearers and readers to accept the rest of P's ritual legislation as authoritative *torah* also.

2. *Logical priority*: A second explanation for the *'ōlāh*'s prominence in biblical texts asserts that its position reflects its logical priority. A. Rainey fielded this argument when he explained the different sequences of biblical offerings on the basis of their chief interests. He distinguished an administrative order of offerings (*'ōlāh*, *minḥāh*, *ḥaṭṭā't*, *'āšām*, *šēlāmîm*) that is concerned chiefly with the quantity of offerings and priestly prebends, from a procedural order ([*'āšām*] *ḥaṭṭā't*, *'ōlāh* with *minḥāh*, *šēlāmîm*) that depicts the actual ritual sequence.¹⁵ According

¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (AB 3; New York, 1991), p. 176.

¹⁴ See Watts, "Rhetoric of Ritual Instruction," pp. 98-99. The prohibitions are in vi 5, 6, 10, 16, 23 [LXX vi 12, 13, 17, 23, 30]; vii 15, 18, 19, 23, 24, 26.

¹⁵ A. F. Rainey, "The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts," *Bib* 51 (1970), pp. 485-98.

to Rainey, the administrative order lists first the “most holy” offerings, that is, those of which the lay worshiper could not eat, and arranges them in order of number or frequency, from the most frequent, the *‘ōlāh* which was always to be accompanied by the *minḥāh* (Num. xv 1-21; xxviii 1-xxix 40), to the least common, the *’āšām*. This reasoning does not apply to the *šēlāmîm*, which were the most numerous of all but relegated to last in the administrative order because they are not restricted from the laity. Rainey’s description of the administrative order is cogent, but gives insufficient attention to the *šēlāmîm*. More thought should be given to why a focus on the quantity of offerings would wish to leave this category for last, even though it accounted for the vast majority of all offerings. The influence of a broader cultural convention seems to have come into play here.

Leviticus i-v, however, presents the offerings in yet another order: *‘ōlāh*, *minḥāh*, *šēlāmîm*, *ḥattā’t*, *’āšām*. Rainey described this as a “didactic” order, a “pedagogical classification for the training of sacerdotal specialists” in which the offerings are “grouped according to *logical* or *conceptual* association.”¹⁶ The logical categories governing this arrangement are, according to Rainey, the offerings of *rēyah nîḥôah* “soothing scent” in chaps. i-iii as distinct from the expiation offerings of chaps. iv-v. His argument pointed to a real difference in the thematic emphases of this material, though it is not maintained with total consistency: according to i 4, the *‘ōlāh*’s role is specified as atonement, and in iv 31, the *ḥattā’t* of a common person is described as *rēyah nîḥôah lēYHWH*. But more troubling than such quibbles over consistency is Rainey’s failure to explain what is pedagogically advantageous about this “didactic” order. He adduced no evidence outside Lev. i-v that the distinction between expiation offerings and offerings of pleasing odor was formative for Israel’s cultic practice, nor did he explain why the categorization here uses the *rēyah nîḥôah*/expiation distinction rather than the “most holy” distinction used in the administrative order. Is one more “logical” than the other? Why would a sequence which accords neither with the quantity of offerings nor with the procedural order help “the officiant . . . learn the job”? “Logic” is not a self-evident criterion of organization; it must be grounded in some relevant frame of reference if it is to be cogent to the hearers and readers.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 486.

Furthermore, various literary features of Lev. i-vii indicate that it was shaped for persuasive as much as for didactic purposes.¹⁷ Persuasive and didactic goals are not mutually exclusive, of course, but attention to these chapters' rhetorical features raises the question of logic in a different form: how does the presentation of the offerings in these chapters convince hearers and readers that it *is* logical, that is, acceptable, even normative? From this perspective, what was "logical" to an ancient audience may prove to be the same as what was conventional within that culture, and this leads us back to the considerations of convention and innovation above.

3. *Ritual priority*: Despite Rainey's argument that the administrative and didactic orders, in which the *ʿōlāh* comes first, should not be confused with the performative order, in which it did not, several scholars have argued that the *ʿōlāh* did in fact have ritual priority. B. Levine argued that the essential function of the *ʿōlāh* was to attract the deity; it was a signal to draw God's attention to the worshiper and the other offerings. He concluded that it must therefore be offered first:

One normally invited the deity to a common, shared sacrificial meal [*šēlāmîm*] . . . after he had been invoked by means of an *ʿōlā*. . . . On this basis, it is eminently clear why the *šēlāmîm* sacrifice, understood as a gift of greeting, a present to the deity, would follow the *ʿōlā* and not precede it. Until the deity indicated his readiness to "come" to his worshippers, it would have been less appropriate to offer such a gift to him.¹⁸

Levine regarded the *ḥattāʾt* that precedes the *ʿōlāh* to be "a preliminary rite, which did not affect the *ʿōlāh-zebaḥ* or *ʿōlāh-šēlāmîm* dynamic as we have explained it. The actual approach to the deity began with the *ʿōlāh*, whereas the *ḥattāʾt*, in such cases, was a prerequisite to invoking the deity."¹⁹ Milgrom also considered the essential function of the *ʿōlāh* to be to "entreat" the deity prior to making the other offerings, but he entertained a broader significance for it: "Entreaty covers a wide range of motives: homage, thanksgiving, appeasement, expiation."²⁰ He put forward a historical hypothesis, in which the *ḥattāʾt* was at a given point prefixed to the original ritual sequence of *ʿōlāh*

¹⁷ See Watts, "Rhetoric of Ritual Instruction," pp. 94-96.

¹⁸ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, p. 175.

followed by *šēlāmîm* (see above). The *‘ōlāh*'s priority in most biblical texts reflects its original ritual priority and this historical memory explains its continuing significance in Israel's later cult.²¹

It seems unlikely, however, that every *šēlāmîm* could have been preceded by an *‘ōlāh*. In times and places where any slaughter of livestock from herd or flock was regarded as an offering to be shared with the deity (so Lev. vii 1-9), the cost would have been prohibitive. Though most biblical stories that recount temple ceremonies deal with great national events or with individuals afflicted with unusual ailments, in which *‘ōlôt* figure prominently, stories that focus on an individual's ordinary worship do not mention the *‘ōlāh* (e.g. 1 Sam. i 3-5, 21, 24-25; ii 13-17; xx 6; cf. Judg. xiii, where a *šēlāmîm* is turned into an *‘ōlāh* on the orders of an angel). Of course, it may be that the function of the *tāmîd* "daily" burnt offerings in the sanctuary at dawn and at dusk (Num. xxviii 3-8) ensured that, every day, an *‘ōlāh* preceded (and followed!) all other offerings in the temple. In that case, the *‘ōlāh* may have had ritual priority in the temple cult (or, at a minimum, in texts intended to govern that cult) though not necessarily in the people's ordinary ritual experience. The question of the *‘ōlāh*'s ritual priority then comes down to what one considers the limits of a "complete" ritual. That would have varied depending on who was interpreting the extent of a ritual, and for what purpose.

4. *Theological/symbolic importance*: A fourth explanation for the *‘ōlāh*'s prominence in the Bible points to its theological or symbolic importance. Milgrom concisely stated this view: "When the sacrifices are prescribed they are listed in order of their sanctity (i.e., importance), and therefore the ubiquitous and venerable *‘ōlā*, burnt in its entirety as a total gift to God, comes first."²² However, the observation that the *‘ōlāh* is especially sacred and important cannot be found in the biblical texts, except as an inference from the priority it receives there. Nowhere is the *‘ōlāh* labeled as any more sacred than the other "most holy" offerings (that is, all of them except the *šēlāmîm*). This therefore does not explain its prominence, but only points it out.

Milgrom implied, however, that it is the *‘ōlāh*'s character as a whole offering, donated entirely to God (except for the hide which goes to

²¹ Ibid., p. 488.

²² Ibid.

the priest: Lev. vii 8), that singles it out for special treatment. That is, the biblical writers regarded this offering as most representative of Israel's worship, as best expressing the proper worship of God. It is notable that almost all of the regular temple offerings (morning and evening, Sabbath, new moons, festivals, etc.) mandated in Num. xxviii-xix are 'ōlôt accompanied by cereal and drink offerings (occasionally a sin offering is added: monthly, xxviii 15; at festivals: xxviii 22; xix 11, 16, etc.). Therefore the 'ōlāh exemplifies the temple cult of the priests, apart from the lay people's participation in it, as pure gift to the deity devoid of almost any profit to the priests. The implication of its rhetorical prominence then is that the 'ōlāh represents the purist form of divine service.

That point is underscored by biblical stories of human sacrifice. The stories of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. xxii), Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. xi 31), and Mesha of Moab and his son (2 Kgs. iii 27) all describe the offering of one's child as an 'ōlāh. Though the stories' evaluations of such acts are mixed, they underscore the idea that to offer an 'ōlāh is to give up something of great value. The prominence of the 'ōlāh in biblical rhetoric emphasizes this ideal of self-denial, even though it prohibits the specific act of child sacrifice (Exod. xiii 13; Lev. xviii 21; xx 3-5; Deut. xviii 10). The child sacrifice stories suggest that offering an 'ōlāh indicates a willingness to give God much more than just an animal.

The rhetorical effect of the 'ōlāh's priority

The ideal of self-less devotion to YHWH could not, however, dictate the actual functioning of the cult because it would have starved the priests and impoverished the laity. The economic backbone of the system had to be the *šēlāmîm*, whose meat was shared by priests and the lay worshipers, and the grain of the *minhāh* which also provided food for the priests (as sometimes did the *hattā't* and the 'āšām according to Lev. vi 18-vii 10; cf. chaps. iv-v). Of these offerings, the deity received only the blood, the fat, and a token portion of the meat or grain. In terms of quantity, the *šēlāmîm* and *minhōt* had to provide the bulk of the priests' livelihood, and their regularity was ensured by mandating that first-born and first-fruits offerings be brought to the sanctuary at various times during the year, as well as tithes to support the Levites (Num. xviii 12-32). As these texts from Leviticus and Numbers

show, the P writers were quite concerned to claim divine authority for the system of priestly and Levitical income.

Thus the rhetorical priority of the *'ōlāh* in the Bible did not represent the relative economic importance of the kinds of offerings, but in fact inverted it. The *'ōlāh* came first to emphasize the religious ideal of self-less devotion to God. The biblical and especially the priestly writers did not place the ideal of self-less devotion in opposition to the economic necessities of the temple cult, but they did emphasize the former which had the effect of down-playing the latter. The prominence given the *'ōlāh* disguised the priests' self-interest in promulgating these regulations, just as depicting them as divine commands to Moses disguised the priestly authority behind the writing of these texts.²³ Leviticus and Numbers authorized the economic claims and religious authority of Jerusalem's priests, but they hid this reality by foregrounding the self-less ideal represented by the *'ōlāh*. They therefore pictured the regular priestly services as consisting mostly of *'ōlōt* offerings (Num. xxviii-xix), though their days must actually have been spent mostly dealing with the people's *šēlāmîm*.

I do not mean to depict the P writers as especially devious or underhanded, but only to explain how the priority and emphasis that they put on the *'ōlāh* supported the persuasive goals behind Leviticus i-vii in particular and the P legislation in general. Their strategy resembles the fund-raising appeals of modern congregations: though the bulk of the budget inevitably goes to the payroll and much of the rest to maintaining the buildings and grounds, their appeals usually emphasize the congregation's community and charity programs, because these best represent the congregation's goals and ideals and are most likely to motivate people to provide financial support. Similarly, though P wrote detailed instructions about the priests' income and the *šēlāmîm* offerings of the people, it began its instructions with the *'ōlāh* and returned to the *'ōlāh* repeatedly to emphasize the ideal of self-less devotion to God, and to portray the priests as exemplifying that ideal through their service.

The P writers did not invent this strategy. The convention of the *'ōlāh*'s priority throughout biblical texts demonstrates that it was a

²³ See J.W. Watts, *Reading Law: the Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, 1999), pp. 146-47.

commonplace, even a cliché, of Israel's religious rhetoric to give pride of place to the *‘ōlāh*. In adopting and amplifying this convention, the P writers enhanced the persuasiveness of their instructions and the likelihood that they would be accepted as normative *torah* for Israel's worship, as indeed they were. They also obscured their innovations and drew attention away from how their legislation served priestly self-interests.

The priority of the ‘ōlāh in the history of religion

The place of the *‘ōlāh* in biblical rhetoric in general, and in the priestly rhetoric of Leviticus and Numbers in particular, led to the burnt offerings of the Jerusalem temple becoming representative of the Jewish religion by the Second Temple period, and probably much earlier. Jews, however, were not alone in focusing especially on burnt offerings. In the first millennium B.C.E., the religions of the Levant, Anatolia and Greece all featured burnt animal offerings on altars, but that had not always been the case. The cultic traditions of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and perhaps also of the Minoans and Myceneans, focused on food offerings to the gods to the point of defining the purpose of the human race as the feeding of the gods.²⁴ However, they presented cooked food to the deities; they did not roast it on altars in temple courtyards.²⁵

The tradition of burnt offerings nevertheless predates Israel. It can be found in the ritual texts from Ugarit and of the Hittites/Hurrians from the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E. Though no ritual text from these cultures describes the precise manner in which they were offered (the Ugaritic offerings were placed on altars, but no text specifies that a burnt offering was entirely burnt), the names of some Hittite and Ugaritic offerings were constructed out of verbal roots in each language meaning "to burn," which suggests that they may have functioned similarly to Israel's *‘ōlāh*.²⁶ The Ugaritic ritual and narra-

²⁴ See W. G. Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven, 1993), pp. 191-201.

²⁵ B. Berquist, "Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine in the Eastern Mediterranean? A Study of Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East," in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven, 1993), pp. 11-43.

²⁶ For the linguistic comparison, see M. Weinfeld, "Social and Cultic Institutions in

tive texts already emphasized animal offerings burnt whole or in part over all others, and they paired burnt offerings (*šrp*) with peace offerings (*šlmm*) just as biblical texts do. *šrp* and *šlmm*, in that order, are regularly paired and sometimes identical in amounts in Ugaritic ritual texts; often a long list of offerings will culminate in the declaration that these are for a *šrp*; then the declaration that they are for a *šlmm* begins the following list.²⁷ D. Pardee concluded that “Bloody sacrifice is the *sine qua non* of a complete ritual carried out in the official cult at Ugarit.”²⁸

The practice of burning offerings gained popularity during the first millennium and spread from its original home in north-west Syria. Burnt offerings clearly played a central role in Phoenician rituals of the early first millennium B.C.E., and were exported by them to their colonies across the Mediterranean, and perhaps to Greece as well.²⁹ References to burnt offerings and depictions of burning altars began to appear in Assyrian records and artwork in the 8th-7th centuries B.C.E., presumably due to Syrian religious influence.³⁰ Farther east, fire altars had become an identifying feature of Zoroastrian practice as well, though no animals were burnt on them. This may have been an independent cultural development. However, by the 4th-3rd centuries, burnt offerings on horned altars in the Syrian/Palestinian style had become a feature of many Egyptian temples, along with priests bearing titles such as “superintendent of the burnt offerings of Amon and the slaughterhouse of meat.”³¹ By the turn of the era, then, animal offerings on burning altars had become a prominent and ubiquitous feature of the religions of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world.

the Priestly Source against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background,” in *The Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 95-129, esp. pp. 106-109. For a discussion of Ugaritic ritual procedures, see B. A. Levine and J.-M. de Tarragon, “The King Proclaims the Day: Ugaritic Rites for the Vintage (KTU 1.41/1.87),” *RB* 100 (1993), pp. 76-91; for the text and translation of this ritual, see D. Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (WAW 10; Atlanta, 2002), pp. 56-65.

²⁷ E.g. Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, pp. 27-29, 48, 63-64, 68, 75, 77, 85, 92.

²⁸ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, pp. 3-4.

²⁹ On Phoenician/Punic rituals, see E. Lipiński, “Rites et sacrifices dans la tradition Phénico-Punique,” in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven, 1993), pp. 257-81. The influence of Phoenician ritual practices on the Greeks was suggested by Berquist, “Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine,” p. 42.

³⁰ Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink,” p. 194; Berquist, “Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine,” pp. 25-26.

³¹ Jan Quaegebeur, “L’autel-à-feu et l’abattoir en Égypte tardive,” in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven, 1993), pp. 329-353.

Thus the Torah's emphasis on burning animal offerings and on the *ʿōlāh* as paradigmatic of Israel's worship identified Jewish cult practice with a tradition of worship that was gaining popularity in many first millennium cultures. The priority of the *ʿōlāh* in biblical rhetoric is part and parcel of a wider rhetoric that transcended Israel's boundaries and was reshaping the religious world of antiquity. The biblical writers cannot have been aware of the long-term changes in religious practice that their rhetoric reflected and supported. This development cannot, therefore, be credited to internal religious developments in Israel and its progression probably cannot be traced redactionally in the Bible, as Levine attempted to do.³² Israel inherited it along with the practice of burnt animal offerings as the conventional rhetoric and practice of divine worship.³³ The biblical writers then used it to promote an ideal of self-less devotion to God.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Jerusalem temple's alignment in this regard with other prominent cult institutions of the Persian and Hellenistic empires must have helped gain it respect from non-Jewish rulers as an ancient (i.e. conventional) institution worthy of respect and support.

The Bible's idealization of the *ʿōlāh* as representing self-less devotion had major ramifications for subsequent religious traditions. Though the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. brought to an end, for the most part, the offering of animals among Jews and animal offerings fell into disfavor among Christians for other reasons, the ideal of the *ʿōlāh* continued to shape the religious imaginations of Jews and Christians. Rabbinic literature devoted great attention to the details of the Temple service, now existing only in text and memory. Christian theology reinterpreted the execution of Jesus of Nazareth with the imagery of biblical animal offerings as well, and combined it with the typology of Abraham's offering of Isaac to turn the crucifixion into the ultimate *ʿōlāh*.³⁵ Both traditions used the same imagery to interpret

³² B. Levine, *Numbers 21-36* (AB 4A; New York, 2000), pp. 400-403.

³³ E. Gerstenberger argued that "The completely burned sacrifice is probably an Israelite peculiarity" (*Leviticus* [tr. D. W. Stott; OTL; Louisville, 1996], p. 34). Though the Hittite and Ugaritic evidence does not contain proof that he is wrong, the similarities in ritual practices and terminology between the texts of these cultures argue less for discontinuity than for continuity in their treatment of the burnt offering.

³⁴ Though this ideal may be implied in the older Hittite/Hurrian and Ugaritic rhetoric and practice of burnt offerings, I cannot find any text that makes it explicit.

³⁵ J. D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, 1993).

deaths due to religious persecution as examples of the ideal of total devotion to God.³⁶ These interpretive applications of the *‘ōlāh* to non-cultic experience gave rise to the idea of “sacrifice” that has shaped both traditions to the present day. The Muslim practice of *qurban*, the slaughter of an animal as representative of one’s submission to God, gives concise expression to this developed symbolism of self-sacrifice here re-applied to animal slaughter (though not as a whole offering).³⁷

In other words, the word “sacrifice” now means relinquishing something of great value, rather than providing food for God. I do not know whether that idea was already attached to the burnt offerings of the late-Bronze Age kingdoms of Syria and Anatolia. What is clear is that the Bible’s rhetorical elevation of the *‘ōlāh* as the paradigmatic offering of Israel’s cult established self-less devotion as the religious ideal. That allowed the idea of “sacrifice” to embark on a cultural career often totally unconnected to the practice of burnt animal offerings.

Abstract

The *‘ōlāh* offering receives pride of place in most lists of sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible, including the ritual rules of Leviticus. Its prominence in these texts suggests that the writers expected its mention to have an effect on their audience. This rhetorical effect must be evaluated and understood before the references to the *‘ōlāh* can be used to reconstruct ancient religious practices reliably. A comparative analysis of the rhetoric about the *‘ōlāh* suggests that its priority burnished the image of priests as devoted selflessly to divine worship and drew attention away from their economic interests in the sacrificial system mandated in the Torah. The effect of this rhetoric in later Jewish and Christian traditions was to separate the ideal of “sacrifice” from any necessary connection to actual animal offerings.

³⁶ See D. Boyarin, *Dying for God* (Stanford, 1999); George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifices: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Ph.D. Dissertation; Syracuse University, 2004).

³⁷ The Qu’ran depicts the story of Abraham’s offering his son as exemplifying the fact that both of them had “submitted their wills” to ‘Allah (24.1.5). The Qu’ran’s instructions for animal sacrifice (of camels, cattle, sheep and other animals) for pilgrims on the Haj and for all Muslims who can afford it, are found in 22.28,30,34-37, the last reading “It is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches Allah; it is your piety that reaches Him: He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify Allah for His Guidance to you and proclaim the good news to all who do right” (see <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/022.qmt.html> for three different translations).