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The Rhetoric of Sacrifice

James W. Watts
Syracuse University

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SACRIFICE IN THE BIBLE

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Christian A. Eberhart

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Contents

1

The Rhetoric of Sacrifice

James W. Watts

The language of sacrifice pervades our contemporary rhetoric of politics, religion, and popular culture. References to sacrifice and depictions of sacrifice can be found in music lyrics, movies, political speeches, and news stories about sports, economics, and biomedical research. It is, of course, ubiquitous in the rhetoric of war. Fascination with the idea of sacrifice is also reflected in the large number of academic theories about its nature and origins. For the past century and a half, scholars of religion, sociology, psychology, and anthropology have advanced theories to explain how sacrifice works religiously and why its practice and effects are so widespread.[1] Yet every attempt to describe and explain "sacrifice" always fails to encompass the whole range of ritual and nonritual behaviors called sacrifices.

The entanglement of theory and ideology in discussions of sacrifice has led some to conclude that the word *sacrifice* describes nothing at all but is rather an evaluative term. The classicist Marcel Detienne argued:

> The notion of sacrifice is indeed a category of the thought of yesterday, conceived of as arbitrarily as totemism—decried earlier by Levi-Strauss—both because it gathers into one artificial type elements taken from here and there in the symbolic fabric of societies and because it reveals the surprising power of annexation that Christianity still subtly exercises on the thought of these historians and sociologists who were convinced they were inventing a new science.[2]

Wilfred Lambert, in describing the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, also avoided the term *sacrifice* because it "is so loaded and ambiguous a term that it is

1. Anthologized by Jeffrey Carter, ed., *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2003).

2. Marcel Detienne, "Culinary Practices and the Spirit of Sacrifice," in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (ed. M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant; trans. P. Wissig; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1–20 [20].

best not to use it. In modern usage *sacrifice* is too dependent on biblical institutions and concepts to be a suitable vehicle to express ancient Mesopotamian practices."[3] A survey of theoretical discussions of sacrifice led Ivan Strenski to conclude that "sacrifice is what might be better called a syndrome, rather than an objective 'thing' with its name written on it."[4] Such skepticism has found a foothold in biblical scholarship as well: in his commentary on Leviticus, Erhard Gerstenberger concluded, "Our attempts to delineate the three notions of offering, community, and atonement as the comprehensive motives represent merely modern rationalizations, and function only in a limited fashion as aids to understanding that cannot completely illuminate the mystery of sacrifice."[5]

These negative judgments can be generalized to say that *sacrifice* is an evaluative term rather than a descriptive one.[6] It expresses value judgments about behaviors rather than describing a distinct form of behavior. An unusual feature of the term *sacrifice*, however, is that it conveys not just one but rather several contradictory evaluations of actions. The following survey will show that evaluations of particular ritual and nonritual acts as "sacrifices" depend on analogies with stories of sacrifice. Such narrative analogies ground the idea of sacrifice, which is meaningless without them, and they account for the opposite valuations that it can convey. Comparative analyses of sacrificial rituals have confused the narrative analogy ("sacrifice") with the rituals to which it is applied.

I will defend these claims by categorizing the major theories about sacrifice in modern scholarship on the basis of their use of rituals and narratives. This categorization shows that the ritual/narrative distinction lies at the heart of the theoretical confusion over sacrifice. I will then turn to the problem of ritual interpretation as it impinges on the debates over sacrifice before concluding with a brief analysis of the principal narrative traditions that have shaped the idea of sacrifice in both popular and academic culture.

3. W. G. Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; Louvain: Peeters, 1993), 191–201 [191].

4. Ivan Strenski, "Between Theory and Specialty: Sacrifice in the '90s," *Religious Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (1996): 10–20 [19].

5. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (trans. D. W. Stott; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 20.

6. The English term *sacrifice* is itself problematic for cross-cultural comparisons because classical languages (Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek) and contemporary non-Western languages do not necessarily contain a term that covers the same range of meanings. Even Latin *sacrificium*, a compound of *sacer* ("sacred") and *facem* ("to make"), thus "to make sacred, to sanctify, to devote," leaves us, as Carter noted, "with a rather general, somewhat vague definition we could call 'religious action,' which is not really a definition at all" (*Understanding Religious Sacrifice*, 3). The classical languages do, of course, each contain rich technical vocabularies describing ritual offerings and their performance, much of which is obscure to modern interpreters.

THEORIES OF SACRIFICE

Modern theories of sacrifice fall rather obviously into two groups based on whether their explanations emphasize *human* or *animal* sacrifices. Of course, most theorists discuss both, but they inevitably explain one in terms of the other, which is more fundamental for their theories.

Theories based principally on animal offerings have been espoused throughout the last century and a half. W. Robertson Smith, for example, traced the origins of sacrifice to a community's consumption of the totem animal in a festival meal. He considered other kinds of sacrifice, including human sacrifice, to be corrupted forms of this original communion meal. So for him eating animals lay behind all traditions of sacrifice whether they involve animals or not.[7] Many other theorists have also emphasized the primacy of animal offerings, though in very different ways from Smith and each other. Thus Edward Tylor's gift theory of sacrifice defined the offering of humans as a version of cannibalism, that is, as an alternative food offering to animal meat.[8] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss based their sociological theory on the most complete descriptions of sacrificial rituals available to them, the animal offerings of the Vedic (Indian) and biblical (Jewish) traditions. Human offerings, even "the sacrifice of the god," derive from older animal rites.[9] Walter Burkert traced sacrifice back to the hunting of animals, Jonathan Z. Smith to the domestication of animals, and Marcel Detienne to the cooking of animals.[10] And Nancy Jay, though focusing on sacrifice as a patriarchal rite bent on expelling symbols of "femaleness," followed Hubert and Mauss in seeing animals as the principal vehicles for such expiation.[11]

Over the same time period, other theorists have focused first on human sacrifice. James G. Frazer collected a wide variety of rituals into a theory of sacrificial kingship, in which the ritual sacrifice of kings undergirds most forms of traditional ritual expression.[12] Though few have followed Frazer's theory, many have seen the killing of humans at the heart of sacrifice. Sigmund Freud postulated a primordial patricide at the root of human culture and religion: a band of brothers murdered their father because of his sexual monopoly of the women of the community. But

7. William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (2nd ed.; London: Black, 1907), *passim* but especially 222–27, 245, 353, 361–67.

8. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Brentano's Books, 1871), 375–410.

9. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964; French original, 1898).

10. Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in *Violent Origins* (ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 191–235; Detienne, "Culinary Practices and the Spirit of Sacrifice," 1–20.

11. Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

12. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1922, 1960).

they were horrified by their crime and repressed the memory of it through incest taboos and ritual reenactment of the murder in the form of animal sacrifice.[13]

The theories of Frazer and Freud grew out of, and in turn fed, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century fascination with human sacrifice as a, or even *the*, fundamental human experience. Nobody took this tendency further than George Bataille, who described sacrifice as the most profound, if ultimately futile, attempt by which humans try to reestablish intimacy with nature. Human sacrifices are, he thought, the most extreme and revealing form of this attempt.[14] But the view that human sacrifice is basic to society has circulated more widely in the form developed by René Girard, who changed Freud's thesis into a general theory of violence. When rivalry threatens to destroy a community, Girard argued that sacrifice diverts the rival's aggression onto a victim who cannot retaliate, thus ending the cycle of violence for the time being. Though animal sacrifice performs this function, Girard's more obvious and effective examples of such violent scapegoating involve human victims and range from witch trials to pogroms to the crucifixion of Jesus.[15]

Many recent writers have continued to give priority to human sacrifice. Bruce Lincoln interpreted human and animal sacrifices as symbolic justifications for the violence deemed necessary to maintaining archaic Indo-European society.[16] Maurice Bloch argued that "rebounding violence" underlies not just sacrifices but almost all religious and political rituals and leads to the symbolic or actual domination of others through violence.[17] J. C. Heesterman reconstructed the history of Vedic rituals that transformed life-and-death contests between warriors into ritualized expressions of interior self-sacrifice.[18] And Barbara Ehrenreich, combining elements drawn from Burkert and Bloch, suggested that the primordial experience of *being* hunted by large predators conditioned humans to accept the deaths of individuals for the sake of the larger community, a conditioning ritualized both in sacrifice and in war.[19]

This distinction between theories based on animal offerings and those based on human executions not only points to fundamental disagreements among interpreters about sacrifice. It also highlights the failure of all modern interpretations

13. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (trans. A. A. Brill; New York: Vintage, 1918).

14. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (trans. R. Hurley; New York: Zone, 1992; French, 1948).

15. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977; French, 1972).

16. Bruce Lincoln, "Sacrificial Ideology and Indo-European Society," in *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 167–75.

17. Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

18. J. C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

19. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Metropolitan, 1997).

to deal adequately with the ancient and traditional sources that tend *not* to make the same distinction. In fact, one of the curious features of sacrificial traditions (at least to modern interpreters who often remark on it) is their tendency to view humans and animals as, at some level, interchangeable. The modern insistence that one must be historically or symbolically prior to the other does not correspond with this animal-human equivalence in much of the evidence.

The disagreement over the logical and/or chronological priority of animal and human sacrifices can be explained by making another distinction among theories of sacrifice, this one involving their sources of information. We have, on the one hand, descriptions of sacrificial rituals from ancient texts (such as Leviticus) and from modern ethnographers; on the other hand, we have stories—myths, legends, and historiographic accounts—in which sacrifices play a prominent part. Though most theorists invoke both kinds of sources, their theories of sacrifice do not account equally well for both: some theories work better for ritual descriptions than for stories about sacrifices, while others are more apt for stories about sacrifices than for rituals. Furthermore, this distinction among modern theories of sacrifice is congruent with the previous one: theories of sacrifice that view animal offerings as primary work best on ritual texts, whereas those that give primacy to killing humans apply best to stories.

For example, Girard's best evidence for his theory that the sacrifice of scapegoats diffuses violent tensions within a community comes from stories of executions, lynchings, and pogroms, including Jesus' crucifixion (which for Girard exposes scapegoating to criticism and resistance). These stories are only distantly associated with ritual acts, if at all. The application of his theory to temple rituals is strained, and he explicitly disassociates it from the Bible's description of the role of the original "scapegoat" (Lev 16), which is after all not even killed.[20] An underlying concern with communal violence also motivates the theories of Frazer, Freud, Lincoln, Bloch, Heesterman, and Ehrenreich, who must turn to myth, legend, and drama for stories of ritual human sacrifice.

Conversely, Burkert's idea that sacrificial rituals reflect the primordial hunt and the celebratory meal that follows it applies well to the rituals of many cultures, but cannot adequately explain the interchange of animal and human offerings in many of the stories, as he himself has admitted.[21] The emphasis on rituals over stories is even more pronounced in the theories of Hubert and Mauss, J. Z. Smith, and Detienne.

These congruent dichotomies among theories that set animals versus humans and rituals versus stories do not simply reflect different evaluations of the same evidence. They rather point out the fact that sacrificial rituals and stories about sacrifice really are about different things: the rituals usually involve eating food, often animals, while the stories almost always revolve around the killing of hu-

20. Girard disassociated his use of the term from that of Leviticus: see Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," in *Violent Origins* (ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 73–78.

21. On this, see Burkert, "The Problem of Ritual Killing," in *Violent Origins* (ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 173.

mans. They are different enough that using the same term, *sacrifice*, to *describe* both is untenable. Rather, the correlation of stories with rituals under the category of sacrifice represents a second-order interpretation that is not intrinsic to the rituals. Such correlations serve to *evaluate* a ritual on the basis of a story, and do so for purposes of persuasion. *Sacrifice* then is best understood as a normative, rather than descriptive, term.

Theories of "sacrifice" thus turn out to be about two different things. Some deal principally with narrative traditions about killing people and are therefore concerned with normative evaluations of killing and murder. Others deal principally with the ritual killing of animals and are therefore concerned with the social functions of ritual and religion. The two are related only by analogies derived from the normative traditions themselves.

RITUAL PRACTICE AND RITUAL INTERPRETATION

Why has so much effort gone into trying to explain sacrifice? Theorists have been frustrated by the fact that traditional practitioners offer few explanations for sacrifice. That is not for lack of discussions about it in traditional sources. But ritual texts like those in Leviticus, or sermons like those in Deuteronomy, or votive inscriptions like those found throughout the ancient world are more likely to describe and commend a ritual than to explain it.

For example, some of the best-known descriptions of ancient sacrifices can be found in the Hebrew Bible. It contains many stories involving sacrifice, such as Noah's sacrifice of animals after being saved from the flood (Gen 9) and Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac (Gen 22). But it also contains detailed instructions on how and when to offer animals at Israel's sanctuary (Lev 1–7, 16). Yet the stories and even the instructions do not explain *why* one should offer butchered animals to the deity, except in the most cryptic and ambiguous terms. The effect of burnt offerings is often described as an odor pleasing to God (Gen 8:21; Lev 1:9, 13, 17, etc.), which seems to invoke ideas of feeding the deity, while other texts strenuously deny that interpretation (Ps 50:8–14; Isa 1:11). The deity's claim on firstborn humans and animals, the latter substituting for the former, seems to involve demonstrations of divine ownership (Exod 13:1, 12–15). But no text systematically elaborates on the symbolism of a rites' offerings or other ritual elements. That has been left for interpreters, who since ancient times have quarried the possible symbolism of these rituals.

This failure to explain sacrifices is typical of many traditions. Thus animal offerings were central rites for ancient Roman society, yet this highly literate culture produced little speculation about their meaning.[22] When explanations were offered for traditional Greek rites they seem to be rationalizations of existing practice,

22. John A. North, "Sacrifice and Ritual: Rome," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (ed. M. Grant and R. Kitzinger; New York: Scribner's, 1988), 981–86.

usually in the face of criticisms, or rationalizations for changing the tradition.[23] In every case, the ritual action seems to be demonstrably older than the interpretations offered for it by the religious traditions in which it is practiced. Thus Muslim sacrifices for Eid adapt pre-Muslim Arab rites to symbolize the submission to God that is at the heart of Islam. The Christian Eucharist that memorializes the sacrifice of Christ adapts the Second Temple Jewish Passover sacrifice that memorialized the exodus from Egypt, which itself was an adaptation of older rites associated with the traditional agricultural cycle of Syria-Palestine. In the process of adaptation, traditional interpretations of sacrifice tend to emphasize motivations for performing the rite, usually grounded in the imitation of a story—whether of Abraham/Ibrahim and Isaac/Ishmael, or the exodus, or the Last Supper and crucifixion—rather than explaining why the ritual takes the particular form that it does. The goal of such stories is to motivate worshipers to preserve past traditions through present practices.

On the other hand, some traditions distinguish themselves by their preoccupation precisely with the question of ritual meaning. The Brahmanas propose elaborate interpretations of Vedic rituals. The Talmud subjects Israel's offerings to minute investigation and debate. Christian theology has often been obsessed with understanding Christ's atonement and the Eucharist that commemorates it. These traditions for interpreting the *meaning* of sacrifice derive from similar historical settings: they all reflect on ritual slaughter as a practice of the past *no longer* enacted, or which *should* no longer be enacted, or which should *only* be enacted in a very different way. Sacrifice must then be interpreted because of the discontinuity between past and present practice. The Indian ritualists prescribed rules to control ancient rites and internalized sacrifice as self-sacrifice.[24] The rabbinic tradition debated the meaning of offerings in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction that prevented their enactment.[25] Christians declared Christ's death the final sacrifice that precludes other sacrifices and struggled with how to understand its nonviolent ritual reenactment with bread and wine.[26] The quest to understand the meaning of sacrifice arose in each case out of the consciousness of sacrifice as a thing of the past that needs to be replaced with ritual and/or interpretation. The same is also true of academic theories of sacrifice which, like their predecessors in Hindu, Jewish, and Christian cultures, often seem to be preoccupied with the reasons for sacrifice's disappearance and the conditions for its replacement or even revival.[27]

23. Detienne, "Culinary Practices," 5.

24. See Heesterman, *Broken World of Sacrifice*, 3–5, 53ff.

25. See the discussion of Jonathan Z. Smith, "Trading Places," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 13–28.

26. See George P. Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifices: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2007).

27. In addition to the theorists already mentioned who display this tendency, one should mention Wolfgang Giegerich. He proposed that sacrifice should be regarded by Jungian depth psychology as a fundamental archetype. Giegerich argued that the practice of ritual sacrifice provided the only "mode in all of known history by which the soul was truly able to access or generate actuality," an access that has been missing in the last two millennia

Symbolic interpretations thus seem to multiply around *unperformed* rituals, at least those not performed by the interpreter. Of course, almost everyone both performs and interprets rituals, but often not the same ones. We usually do not interpret our own rituals, but only those of others because we need explanations only for activities foreign to us. Our own rituals are "obvious" and as a result receive little if any interpretation. Thus Western university professors have spent far more time and effort interpreting sacrificial rituals and many others that they rarely, if ever, participate in, than they have explaining the graduation rituals of commencement and convocation which their colleges and universities perform at least annually.

Sacrifice complicates the problem of interpretation, because people use the word *sacrifice* for both ritual and nonritual acts, and for behaviors both native and foreign to modern interpreters. That is because *sacrifice* gets applied through a particular kind of interpretation, one always based on stories.

STORIES OF SACRIFICE

The religious motivations behind Hindu, Jewish, and Christian discussions of sacrifice explain readily why they have developed so far beyond the explanations of ancient ritual practitioners. They do not, however, explain their preoccupation with sacrifice in the first place. That emphasis stems not from the ritual traditions they study, but rather from narrative roots. The need to explain certain paradigmatic stories is what motivates the concern with sacrifice. A fascination with ritual has confused the discussion of sacrifice, however, because the two topics are not intrinsically connected, despite what most religious traditions and academic theorists assume.[28]

The meaning of the English word *sacrifice* derives entirely from narrative traditions, and mostly from specific narratives reinterpreted continuously over the millennia. Most important to its definition have been a small group of stories: the Hebrew Bible's story (called the Aqedah in Jewish tradition) of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, and its variant in the Qur'an; the Greek tragedies' depictions of ritual and nonritual sacrifice; and the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus' execution by Roman soldiers as a divine sacrifice atoning for human sin.

("Killings: Psychology's Platonism and the Missing Link to Reality," *Spring* 54 [1993]: 5–18 [16]; see the critique by James Hillman, "Once More into the Fray: A Response to Wolfgang Giegerich's 'Killings,'" *Spring* 56 [1994]: 1–18; and Giegerich's response, "Once More the Reality/Irreality Issue: A Reply to Hillman's Reply," online at http://www.rubedo.psc.br/reply.htm). Giegerich developed his thesis at greater length in *Tötungen: Gewalt aus der Seele* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1994).

28. Wesley Bergen, to mention only one example, charted the changing meaning of *sacrifice* from Leviticus to its modern application to acts of war under the heading "the afterlife of Leviticus 1–7 in the Church" (*Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture* [JSOTSup 417; London: T&T Clark, 2005], chap. 6). I suggest instead that such modern uses of the word reflect the persistent influence, not of Leviticus' ritual instructions, but rather of stories of ritual slaughter, most especially Gen 22.

These stories are all notable for their *lack* of ritual contents. Jesus' crucifixion was obviously not a sacrifice to the soldiers who performed it nor to those who witnessed it, though both first-century Romans and Jews were active participants in blood rituals on other occasions. Only religious reflection on this political execution transformed the evaluation of it by labeling it a "sacrifice," in fact the ultimate and final sacrifice.[29]

I believe a similar claim can be made about the prominence of sacrificial themes in Greek tragedies. They portray human sacrifice as extraordinary and perverse when practiced by Greeks (e.g., in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*) and routine only when practiced by barbarians, where it attests to their depravity (as in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*). They cast the motif of sacrifice over the theme of murder with which the plays are principally concerned. In these plays, ritual offerings come to represent the reciprocity and equivalence that characterize violence spiraling out of control. But it is the plays that make this identification; there is nothing to suggest that Greek temple rituals usually conveyed such ideas to their participants.

The Aqedah (Gen 22; Qur'an 37) does depict a ritual, but as in the Greek tragedies here human sacrifice is clearly portrayed as an aberrant act: that is what gives the story its tension. The story depicts the rite and its meaning as turning on the interchangeable nature of human and animal offerings, precisely the feature of these traditions that modern theories have such trouble coping with. But this crucial feature of this narrative tradition *introduces* substitutionary ideas into the interpretation of sacrificial practice. The story's emphasis on this point shows that such ideas were not necessarily part of the ritual practices themselves; they had to be introduced by an interpretive overlay of stories.[30] Such an overlay is even more explicit in the Passover story and ritual instructions (Exod 12–13) that transform the old agricultural festival of unleavened bread into a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt and, specifically, the escape of Israel's firstborn from death by the substitutionary slaughter of lambs. The story thus overlays an old ritual meal consisting of animal meat, among other things, with the themes of human sacrifice and salvation.

These stories have wielded enormous influence over Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and academic thought about ritual and sacrifice. The Aqedah, and especially speculation about Isaac's voluntary role in it, played a key role in Christian reinterpretation of Jesus' crucifixion as (self-)sacrifice.[31] Both stories' elevation of the ideal

29. Ibid.

30. For some of the same reasons, Carol Delaney challenged the notion that "sacrifice—whether human or animal, ritual practice or theoretical discourse—is the most appropriate context for the interpretation of the story" (*Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 70; see 70–104).

31. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, 107–85; Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). The abiding interest in this story in Jewish and Christian scholarship, not to mention broader religious culture, is attested by the large number of recent books devoted to it. In addition to the

of self-sacrifice fueled traditions of martyrs in ancient Judaism and Christianity.[32] The Qur'an's version of the story explicitly grounds the practice of Muslim *qurban*, the ritual slaughter of camels, cattle, sheep, or goats, in symbolic imitation of 'Ibrahim's submission to God. And controversies over the meaning of the Christian Eucharist, the ritual meal that commemorates Jesus' sacrifice interpreted in light of both Passover and the Aqedah, foreshadow in form and sometimes substance contemporary academic debates over the meaning of sacrifice generally.[33]

It is this narrative tradition, rather than ritual practices, that determines how and when the word *sacrifice* is applied. Thus ritual slaughter may or may not be a "sacrifice" depending on how a tradition applies the stories of sacrifice. For example, the regulations governing Jewish *kashrut* slaughter, limited to religiously licensed professionals and inspected by rabbis, are far more rigorous than the minimal instructions for Muslim *qurban*, which any man may perform simply by slitting the animals' throat while invoking the name of 'Allah. Yet the latter is a sacrifice according to Muslim teachings because it imitates the sacrifice of 'Ibrahim, while the former is not a sacrifice in Jewish tradition. Jewish sacrifices that imitate Abraham, Moses, and Aaron cannot be performed outside the long-since destroyed Jerusalem Temple. Imitation of stories of sacrifice also permits the application of the term to rituals in which there is no slaughter (e.g. the Catholic Mass, pilgrimages, ascetic disciplines for spiritual attainment), to slaughter that involves no religious ritual (e.g., the deaths of martyrs and soldiers, laboratory animals killed in medical experiments), and to a vast array of behaviors that involve neither ritual nor slaughter (e.g., gifts to religious organizations, labor on others' behalf, any kind of self-denial for the sake of a common good, etc.). What unites all of them is the claim, either by an interpreter or by the actors themselves, that the action imitates a story of heroic sacrifice. Sometimes the story is quite explicit, such as when Christian martyrs or ascetics claim to imitate Christ. At other times, the narrative connection is implicit in substitutionary themes derived from religious

three above, see Louis A. Berman, *Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Mishael Maswari Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: The Motif of the Aqedah (Binding) in Literature* (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal Press, 2001); Jerome I. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003); Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and the reprinting in 1993 of Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah 1899–1984* (trans. Judah Goldin; New York: Schoken, 1967).

32. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Heyman, *Power of Sacrifice*.

33. For example, the theories of Tylor, Hubert and Mauss, Jay and Ehrenreich clearly emphasize the propitiatory function of sacrifice in making conditions more favorable, like the "ransom" theory of the atonement. The theories of Freud, Burkert, Girard, Lincoln, Bloch, and Heesterman point to its expiatory role in ridding the individual and society of the effects of violence, similar to the "satisfaction" theory of the atonement. Girard's notion that the New Testament Gospels' account of Jesus' death serves to expose and counter sacrificial violence clearly reproduces, in an appealing sociological form, the "moral influence" theory of the atonement.

tradition, such as the claim that "they died so that others may live" to validate the deaths of soldiers or laboratory animals.[34] But the theme of substitutionary sacrifice is enough to ground the moral evaluation in ancient narrative traditions.

Sacrifice is not, however, an unequivocally positive term. It can convey strong condemnation rather than praise. Such negative usage appears frequently in political rhetoric, such as the charge that someone is sacrificing people or principles for personal gain. Religious rituals may also be condemned as "sacrifices": in Florida, local laws banning ritual animal sacrifice and their enforcement against Santeria priests generated a long legal struggle that illustrates a profound animosity to such rituals in modern American culture.[35] To some degree, such aversion reflects the fact that powerful stories about sacrifice in Western culture involve, first, the limitation of legitimate sacrifice to scripturally ordained rites and, second, the *end* of all such sacrifices, either in the destruction of Judaism's ancient Temple or in Christian emphasis on the finality of Christ's sacrifice. These stories therefore render all contemporary ritual slaughter unnecessary and even idolatrous.

Sacrifice has long been a site of interreligious conflict. Greco-Roman rulers persecuted Jews and Christians by forcing their participation in pagan rites. This history and the belief in the finality of Christ's sacrifice prompted concerted efforts by later Christian rulers to suppress ritual animal slaughter in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Such experiences have given the idea of animal sacrifice connotations that evoke horrified antipathy in Western culture.

This horror also grows out of a deeper narrative root: stories of human sacrifice have terrified and fascinated cultures from the ancient Greeks and Israelites to contemporary Europeans and Americans. The Bible, besides emphasizing the substitutionary theme in the Aqedah, Passover, and crucifixion stories, polemicizes against the ritual slaughter of children (Lev 18:21; 20:3–5; Deut 18:10; Isa 66:3) while also preserving ambiguous stories of its practice by the patriarch Abraham (Gen 22), the Israelite judge Jephthah (Judg 11:29–40), and the Moabite king Mesha (2 Kgs 3:27). The same tension appears in Greek religious traditions (contrast the tragedians' nuanced treatment of violence with the Athenians maintenance of the human *pharmakos*, to be exiled or executed in times of crisis) and Roman historiography (contrast for example Livy's admiring account of the Roman consul

34. Robert N. Bellah noted that Abraham Lincoln introduced non-sectarian Christian symbolism into American political discourse when he commemorated dead soldiers in the Gettysburg Address with the words "those who here gave their lives, that the nation might live." He then demonstrated the ways in which memorials to the "sacrifices" of war dead have evolved into central shrines and rituals of the American civil religion ("Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World* [New York: Harper & Row, 1970], 168–89; see also Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 69).

35. For the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case of the *Church of the Lukumi Bablu Aye, Inc., et al.* v. *City of Hialeah*, see http://www.religioustolerance.org/santeri1.htm.

Decius who sacrificed himself to guarantee the gods' favor on Rome's armies with Roman horror over stories of human sacrifice among the Celts).[36]

The disparity between legends of human sacrifice and ritual animal offerings has led some scholars to wonder if the ritual slaughter of humans was ever regularly practiced in the ancient world. There is far less archeological and textual evidence for it than the narrative traditions would have us believe.[37] Yet there is enough to show that the phenomenon was not entirely imaginary. The strongest archeological evidence comes from the Punic *tophets*, graveyards of Carthage that contain votive inscriptions with burials of children, often a two- and four-year-old together in the same grave. Votive offerings of animals also appear in the same graveyard, showing that the substitution theme did work its way into ritual practice in the Phoenician/Punic tradition.[38] Later textual evidence for the ritual slaughter of humans includes the orders of Pope Gregory III to the Archbishop of Mainz (in 731 C.E.) that Christians not be allowed to sell slaves to non-Christians for use as sacrifices.[39] Of course, this case is mediated through Gregory's Christian definition of *sacrifice*, but presumably ritual slaughter is what the German buyers had in mind. Yet we do well not to assume too much: anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemic in antiquity already featured the "blood libel", the completely unfounded charge that Jews and Christians mixed the blood of slaughtered prisoners or babies into the unleavened breads eaten at Passover and in the Eucharist.[40] Thus human sacrifice loomed much larger in ancient imagination, especially when it involved distant ancestors or contemporary enemies, than it did in any ancient ritual practice that we can clearly document. And when the rituals did involve human victims, narrative's priority over ritual is clearly expressed in the *imitatio Dei* theme (hence *imitatio narratio*) at work in ancient child sacrifice. Parents sacrificed their children in imitation of myths of divine sacrifices of deities.[41] The same motivation still plays a part in religiously motivated killings of both children and adults.[42]

36. Livy, *Hist.* 8.9; for Roman views of the Celts, see Julius Caesar, *Gallic Wars* 6.16 (trans. W. A. McDevitte. and W. S. Bohn; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869).

37. For a convenient, and skeptical, summary of the ancient evidence for human sacrifice, see Delaney, *Abraham on Trial,* 71–86.

38. See E. Lipiński, "Rites et sacrifices dans la tradition Phénico-Punique," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; Louvain: Peeters, 1993), 257–81 [279–80].

39. See Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson, *A Source Book for Medieval Economic History* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1936; reprint, New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1965), 284.

40. The earliest reference to and refutation of the blood libel against Jews appears at the end of the first century C.E. in Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:80–111.

41. See Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son,* 25–35; Delaney has extended the analysis and critique of the mimetic influence of this story to the modern day (*Abraham on Trial,* 5–68, 233–50).

42. Recent examples of killings motivated by the murderer's perception of divine orders include the cases of the Mormons Ron and Dan Lafferty, who killed their sister-in-law and her fifteen-month-old daughter in 1984 (for a detailed account, see Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* [New York: Anchor, 2003]), of the Catholic/Charismatic Christos Valenti, who killed his youngest daughter in 1990 in California (a trial chronicled in detail by Delaney, *Abraham on Trial,* 35–68), and of the Jew Richard Rosenthal, who, after murdering his wife in 1995 in Massachusetts, impaled her organs on stakes in an altar-like pattern (see Susan L. Mizruchi, "The Place of Ritual in Our Time," *American Literary History* 12, no. 3 [2000]: 474–76). Perhaps the case of the evangelical Andrea Yates, who drowned her five children in Texas in 2001 on the orders, she stated, of the devil, should also be counted as a "sacrifice." The cases are united, however, only by the religious element of claims of supernatural prompting. But this, like the broader cultural notions of sacrifice generally, is established in people's minds by narrative examples.

Charges of human sacrifice have remained a favorite way of vilifying enemies ever since. For example, the blood libel resurfaced as a pervasive expression of anti-Semitism in modern Europe from the fourteenth through the twentieth centuries. The accusation of human sacrifice becomes even more powerful when it can claim some justification in fact. In the sixteenth century, the Aztec's ritual slaughter of prisoners horrified the invading army of Cortez, though these men were quite accustomed to slaughtering people themselves. It was their recognition of the Aztec ritual as not just an execution, but a "sacrifice," that first horrified the Spaniards and then became their justification for conquering and converting the peoples of Central and South America.[43] Nor did the eighteenth-century Enlightenment put an end to such thinking. Sacrificial rhetoric, both positive and negative, played a powerful role in nineteenth-century French politics and contributed to the war fever in most European countries before World War I.[44]

Yet beyond such polemics, the theme of human sacrifice has remained an abiding source of reflection in literature, art, and political culture: for example, consider the human sacrifice that begins the spiral of violence in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the frequent paintings of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter by Renaissance and Baroque artists, and the preoccupation with sacrifice in nineteenth-century academic research and American novels of the same period.[45]

The rhetoric of sacrifice alternates between praise and blame, admiration and horror because its underlying narratives explore the ambiguous boundaries between the legitimate and illegitimate killing of human beings. That is its natural subject. Its application to animal slaughter depends on making some equivalence with human stories, either positively through a substitutionary theme—usually animal in place of human, but also human/god in place of all animals and humans—or negatively by implicating animal slaughter in stories of human martyrdom, for example, the hero chose martyrdom rather than sacrificing animals to idols. Theories of sacrifice that try to treat it as descriptive of rituals will always founder on the normative and narrative nature of their subject.

43. The reactions of the Spanish soldiers were recorded in the eyewitness account of Bernal Diaz del Castillo (*The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* [trans. A. P. Maudslay; New York: Farrer, Straus & Cudahy, 1956]).

44. For the situation in France, see Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For the rhetoric before World War I, see also Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

45. Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Thus *sacrifice* is a value-laden term whose meaning is determined by stories, not by rituals. Calling some act a "sacrifice" is to claim that the act is comparable to some paradigmatic action in a hero's, or villain's, story. It is the rhetoric of sermons and didactic texts that connects the term *sacrifice* to specific rituals. In these contexts, it is clearly an evaluative label, not a descriptive one, which undermines its descriptive use in academic theories. It is, therefore, inappropriate to describe the offerings of Leviticus as "sacrifices" unless one intends to make a normative claim by doing so.

It might seem odd to argue that a word does not mean what everyone thinks it means. After all, does not usage determine meaning? Yes it does, but words can carry connotations that native speakers do not think about explicitly, despite the fact that they may use those connotations regularly and expertly. My point is that, by missing or ignoring the normative connotations of *sacrifice* that derive from narrative analogies, scholars of religion have confused rituals of eating with controversies over killing humans. Only by separating the two can they be clearly analyzed for what they are, and only then can we begin to understand how they came to be related in normative applications of the word *sacrifice* to ritual practices involving food.

2

SACRIFICE? HOLY SMOKES! REFLECTIONS ON CULT TERMINOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING SACRIFICE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Christian A. Eberhart

Cultic sacrifices are mentioned and described throughout the Hebrew Bible, they are central to the worship of ancient Israel and Judah, and they are a true treasury for metaphorical language. Yet their interpretation is the subject of much debate among modern scholars. In this essay I intend to make a contribution to this debate by studying "native" interpretations of cultic sacrifices as they are manifest in comprehensive technical terms employed in the priestly texts of both the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint. I will thus focus on Hebrew words such as קרבן, מנחה, זבח, אשה, and ריח ניחוח, and on the Greek word θυσία. In these reflections, I will describe specific meanings of these technical terms while being attentive to their common implications. I argue that the modern endeavor of interpreting sacrificial rituals or of developing theories of sacrifice can benefit from paying attention to aspects of such "native" interpretation of sacrificial rituals. In particular, these early interpretative layers broaden the modern perceptions of sacrifice through their focus on the burning rite. Ritual sacrifices then emerge, for example, as dynamic processes of approaching the altar or as tokens of reverence to God. These reflections are corroborated by the usage of such cultic terminology in the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature, as well as by its metaphorical usage in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

1. INTRODUCTION: TERMINOLOGY AND AMBIVALENCE

What is a *sacrifice*? This term refers to universal phenomena in human cultures throughout history. When the term *sacrifice* references religious rituals, it is recognized by scholars in anthropology, history, and religion alike as a crucial factor that helps to decode basic principles of interaction and exchange within these cultures.

In honor of Rudolf Leopold Eberhart, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.