STATUS AND EFFICACY OF SACRIFICE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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Abstract

The paper discusses the efficacy of sacrifice in ancient Israel. It discusses the contribution of sacrifice to the well-being of humanity and society by examining how sacrifice has contributed immensely to restore, maintain and celebrate human friendship with deity. The methodology employed is secondary sources which consist of consultation of textbooks, magazine, journals, articles and other relevant material available. The paper examines the following concepts: Meaning of Sacrifice; History of the ancient Israel; Origin and theology of sacrifice in ancient purpose, significance and efficacy of sacrifice in ancient Israel. The paper establishes that sacrifice was a basis for Israel’s and Yahweh's healthy relationship. The paper concludes that sacrifice is alive wire and heart of religion.

1. Introduction

Technically, the word sacrifice is a religious term, but when used in a general sense, it has a secular meaning. In general and non-religious sense, sacrifice means foregoing a particular cause that is precious and the denying of oneself certain benefits and advantages. Sacrifice requires giving away something precious for a definite purpose. It is the renouncing of something costly in order that a certain end may be achieved.

Sacrifice in the ancient Israel is not just a mere act of denying oneself of certain benefits or foregoing a particular cause, which is precious. In ancient Israel, the first shedding of blood (Gen. 3:21) for the redemption of mankind was in the Garden of Eden. Throughout the ante-deluvian and the patriarchal narratives up till the settlement of Israel in Egypt, religious obligatory duties, especially sacrifice and worship of Yahweh had been the underlying factor of every Yahweh-Israel relationship.

Sacrifice is a compound word formed from the Latin sacer ‘holy’ and facere ‘to make. They both form sacrificium to mean “sacrifice”. Sacrifice does involve the destruction of victim for the purpose of maintaining or restoring a right relationship of
man to the sacred order. It may affect a bond of union with the divinity to whom it is offered or it may constitute a particular expiation to cover, wipe out, neutralize or carry evil and contracted curse wittingly or unwittingly. In a religious sense the encyclopedia of religion and ethics defines sacrifice as a rite in the cause of which something is forfeited or destroyed for the purpose of establishing relations between a source of spiritual strength and one in need of such strength for the benefit of the latter.

Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English defines sacrifice as an offering to God or god especially of animal by killing it in a ceremony. The Old Testament has no general world for sacrifice except the rather sparsely used qorhan. “That what is brought near” (qrb). Which is practically confined tolevitical literature. The other frequently used words in the Old Testament describe particular kind of sacrifice. These are derived either from the mode of sacrifice. “asZebah (sacrifice), ‘that which is slain’ and Ola (burnt-offering). “That which goes up or from its purpose, as asain (guilt offering), for guilt and battat (sin-offering for sin chatta’l”.

The purpose of sacrifice in Levitieus is to atone (kipper Lev 1:4: etc). The verb may be viewed in three ways to cover from the Arab, kafara to wipe away: form the akkad. Kuppurku to ransom by a substitute.

2. Brief History of the Ancient Isreal

“The first half of the second millennium B.C (roughly 200-1500) brings us to the age of Israel’s origin. The name Israel comes from the Hebrew word Israel meaning God strives. It was the new name given to Jacob after his might of wrestling at par met. Your name, according to his supernatural antagonist, “Shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel for you have striven (sari, from Sara, starve) with God and with man and have prevailed (Gen. 32:28).

Israel’s ancestry could be traced back to the 12 sons of Jacob referred to variously as ‘Israel (Gen. 34:7), the people of Israel (Exo.18) the (twelve) tribes of Israel (Gen.49:16,28), ‘the Israelites’ (Gen.32:32).“The origin of Israel has been traced through ‘Eber’, meaning Abraham (from which Hebrew was derived) back to Shem, who was the eldest of the three sons of Noah”.

“Abraham, obeying God’s call, migrated between 1750 and 1700 B.C from Babylon up to the Euphrates and through Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan. Abraham migrated with his wife Sarah and Nephew Lot. At Abraham’s and Sarah’s old age, God gave them the grace to bear Isaac; Isaac later got married to Rebecca. Who gave birth to twins: Esau and Jacob who was later called Israel (Gen. 32:28). Jacob was blessed by Isaac, and succeeded his father. The descendants of Esau were Edomites who also became Israel’s
enemy later. “Jacob had twelve sons from whom were derived the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen.29:31-30:11). These people are known as the patriarchs (from the Greek word for fathers of tribes).

3. Origin and Theology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Israel

Many believe that the first sacrifice was God’s killing of an animal to provide skin covering for Adam and Eve after the fall (Gen. 3:21). And that the practice of sacrifice precedes the Mosaic Law. Scholars, opine that sacrifice was ordained and suggested by God. It was a revelation from God directly; sacrifice was ordained and suggested by God. But with the story of the sacrifice made by Cain and Abel, it appears they were simply an expression of their feeling of dependence on God and were thankful to him.

The Old Testament depicts early Israel less as nomadic as as a people in the process of sedentarization. The patriarchs already had the large bovines and engaged in agriculture, and it may well be that a closer parallel to Hebrew sacrifice may be found among a tribe such as the African Nuer, whose sacrifice, as described by Pritchard (Nuer) involved the offering of an ox in substitution for sin. The Wellhausen School traced an evolution from a joyous sacrificial meal in the earlier time to sin-offerings and guilt-offerings only in the post-exile period. Wellhausen, regarded the connection of sacrifice with sin as the latest element.

Generally, worship took the most central part of the life of Jews. Right from patriarchs, we see their absolute commitment of the worship of the God of Israel otherwise called Yahweh. It is significant that the first sacrifices mentioned in Genesis were not Zebahim meals, but the gift-offerings of Cain and Abel (Minha, Gen. 4:3-4), and the burnt-offerings of Noah. (Olath, Gen. 8:20, where we have the first reference to an altar). Patriarchal altars are often described (e.g. Gen 12:6-8), when Jacob went to Egypt (Gen. 46:1), he sought God’s will and offers sacrifice (Zebah), which were possibly expiatory. In Egypt Israel is called to a solemn sacrifice in the wilderness (Exo. 10: 25-26) and was distinguished from any offered by the Egyptians (Exo. 8:26).

The establishment of Israel as a tribal organization, which north thinks of as coming only on the soil of Palestine in the time of the judges is taken back by strong biblical tradition to the time of Moses. Chief among the tribal occasions was the three festivals at which sacrifice was to be offered; and it commanded none shall appear before me empty-handed (Exo. 23: 15). “The sacrifices we know best were those of the Passover and the Covenant. The Passover combined the elements of sacrifice as apotropaic and sacrifices as communion meal. “Secured in the knowledge that the blood had been shed to ward off evil, members of each family could sit down to joyful fellowship (Exo. 24: 1-8). In addition,
many other sacrifices, both national sacrifices were those offered in times of disasters or war (Jdg. 20: 26:21:4 Isa 7:9).

The origin of sacrifice in Israel could also be traced to monarchic period. “The building of the temple by Solomon provided opportunity for initiation of (I kings 8:62 ff), regular sacrifices (1 kings 9: 25). But as the sources are books of kings they speak rather of royal participation (cf. 2kings 16:10ff) than that of the people. That everyday cult was in progress, however, is attested by such a verse as 2 kings 12:16, and the frequent mention of sacrifice in the prophets and psalms.

Finally, the priestly code holds the view that Israel found the origin of her sacrifices in the Mosaic great sacrifice in Exodus, it was God’s command to Moses, it discountenanced ancient and patriachical sacrifices.

4. **Various Types of Sacrifice in the Ancient Israel**

In ancient Israel, sacrifices were best classified according to their respective motivations besides the Passovers, specific type of sacrifice, which Israel brought with her in Canaan. There are other types he took over after settlement. Which include the whole burnt offering, the guilt offering and the sin-offering.

From the practical as well as the theoretical point of view, Hebrews sacrifices and offerings are of four classes: gifts and tributes, media of alimentation, media of communication and media of expiation. Each class is, of course, susceptible to further subdivision.

**Whole Burnt Offering**

In ancient Israel, “burnt offering was the primary sacrifice that provided atonement and dealt with the guilt of sin.” The whole burnt –offering was sometimes called ‘olah and sometimes ‘kahi’ in Hebrew. As noted earlier ‘olah’ indicates that the offering“went up “in smoke to God while kahi connotes that it was wholly consumed on the Altar. The first offering God describes is the burnt offering. Whole burnt offering figures were rare in the early period but appears to have predominated much of the latter period.

In the Ugaritic text 9:7, the burnt offering was connected to forgiveness of souls (schnps). Burnt offering is made at least twice a day. The sacrifice evidently expressed complete dedication to God.

**The Peace Offering**
The peace offering is called shelamin. This term seems to express the idea that these sacrifices were for the maintenance or restoration of good relations with God. This would seem to connect well the sense of “peace” or well-being and the realization that man’s well-being rested on right relation with God. Sometimes, these sacrifices are referred to under the term zabahm, a general term for sacrifice which merely indicated that they are slaughter.

In the holiness codes as well as the priestly code. There are three varieties. These are the thanks-offering, the in fulfillment of a vow and the free will offering (Lev.22:21ff). The thank-offering was an expression of gratitude for God’s mercies received, it is into the category of a meal consumed by the offered and may therefore have originated in the festive banquet which celebrated the successful issue of anything and only later have come to be associated with the idea of appreciating divine favor. The votive offering was a fulfillment of a condition promised which had been made and which condition had been fulfilled. The free will offering seems to be the spontaneous expression of the devotion of the offering to the deity. In these sacrifices, the blood was disposed off against that altar and the fat burned on the altar; part of the flesh became the dues of the priest and part was eaten, an accounts for why devout calls them “communion offering”. “Peace offering is used to express praise to God and fellowship with others.

Guilt Offering

This is otherwise known as asham in Hebrew. It is often confused with sin offering by modern scholars. The in-corporating of asham into the sacrificial system first appears in the priestly code, which dates from the fifth century B.C but its institution was certainly known at an earlier date, for there was an occasion of Abinelechchideal Isaac for exposing the philistine to possible payment of an asham by passing off Rebecca as his sister, as well as the situation when the plague ridden. Philistines who are anxious to placate Yahweh were advised by their priests to accompany the return of the captured ark with payment of asham.

In guilt offering, the blood is thrown against the altar and not poured at its base, the fat of the victim is burnt on the altar and the flesh is eaten by the priest. Something more than the animal sacrifice is always involved with the guilt offering. There must always be some payment (Lev.7:22ff 5:16) De Vaux calls it a reparation sacrifice. The general governing the guilt offering was that the offender had to repay what he had withheld, plus one fifth of its value and in addition offer a rain as sacrifice.

Sin Offering
The Hebrew term for sin offering is hatat and it is usually rendered sin. The rites of sin offering were performed not only in respect of such moral misdeeds as refusing to testify but also in order to remove the contagion of leprosy. It also served to cancel latent pollution at the major festivals as well the consecration of priests, (Exo. 29: 9-34; Lev. 8: 10-14). Anything or anyone that came in contact with what was unholy was affected by it and needed to be treated accordingly. It brought the person or object into a proximity with God which could be dangerous and such thing had to either be washed or destroyed.

5. Purpose and Significant of Sacrifice in Ancient Israel

The early Hebrew-forefathers were nomads, and no doubt had some connection with Aramean nomads, who worshipped the moon-god. In Ur of Chaldea and Haran in Mesopotamia, the cult of sin was well established. Ancestors worship was also universally practiced; the great patriarchs were practically deified; for example, the ghost of Samuel, called forth the by the witch of Endor at King Saul’s request to as “Ecohim” which means “god”. Circumcision, though not exclusive to Israel, was by them regarded as a religious ritual. Child sacrifice must have been a communion religious practice e.g. Abraham and Isaac and Jephtha’s daughter. It is recorded that gods were also recognize in rocks, storms, trees of fire.

The Hebrews must have part in all these as they wandered from pasture to pasture, and passing from one territory to another might mean a change of religious allegiance, for what was clean with the god of one region might be unclean with that of another region, and the action of the gods, however arbitrary, could not be queried. Thus, fear played a large part in early religion, and gifts and sacrifices must constantly be offered to appease the anger of the gods. Some believed that charms and amulets must be worn in order to avert misfortune from minor gods and to bring good luck.

At each place of settlement, an altar was set up to the local god; this might be an ordinary stone and the head of the family who was also the “priest”, officiated before it in a simple manner. Those whom Moses took out of Egypt were certainly worshipping different gods. Monotheism, the faith in the one true God (Yahweh) came later as a result of centuries of struggle and divine discipline of Israel.

The time of Moses and the Exodus may be taken as the beginning of Israel’s religious history. Moses was God’s chosen instrument to unite the Israelites through a religion common to all the tribes in order to make them a nation. Details of the actual ceremony of enacting the great covenant at Sinai are given in Exodus 24:3-8, but in short, it went as follows: An altar was built, representing Yahweh, and over against it, the people stood. Oxen for burnt-offering and peace offering were slain and their blood was
drained into bowls; part of the blood was dashed against the altar the rest was sprinkled over the people, “Thus the blood united them with Yahweh and with one another. Yahweh became a blood-member of this people and Israel became a united nation under Yahweh. But the people broke their own side of the solemn contract again and again thus proving the standard was too high for man. In order to promote fellowship with God, sacrifices were to be made. Sin had put the Israelites in the wrong with God but sacrifice was offered to atone. Taylor supported this idea by saying, “the favor of gods is sought, hostility is minimized: and a sort of bribe is given to avert the anger of an offend god. But, Etudes enables us to know that the sacrifice of the semnites to which the ancient Israel belonged did not simply depict hungry gods, rather it expressed the idea that everything belongs to God. To offer God a sacrifice was, therefore, to acknowledge God’s right. Also, it was expression of the desire to draw near to God.

Smith does not consider sacrifices as a gift, but a communion with the deity. When the deity partook of a banquet prepared by the sacrifice in ceremonial rites, he united himself physically and spiritually to the offerer order to impart some special and mysterious benefits to him. So also, ancient Israel used sacrifice to establish a union with Yahweh thereby making communication between the sacred and profane worlds possible. Israelite was able to maintain communication with Yahweh through sacrifice.

In conclusion, through covenants, God drew the people for Israel into a relationship with himself. But sacrifice enables the people to express their relationship with God in three main ways:

a. When the Israelites wished to appreciate God for his goodness to them as a nation and as individuals, sacrifice could express this thanksgiving especially the thank-offering (Lev. 7:12) and the burnt offerings (Lev. 1:10-13).

b. When they wished to share fellowship with God, sacrifice in which the worshippers are part of the sacrificial animal provided for this need through a communal meal, for example the peace offering (Lev. 3:1-5)

c. When the people were moved to make atonement for their sins both as individuals and as a nation, sacrifice gave ritual expression to their desire for healing of broken relationships, and went alongside confession and restitution e.g. the sin offering (Lev.4), the guilt offering (lev.5) the annual Day of Atonement (Lev.16)

6 Efficacy of Sacrifice in Ancient Israel
Man is aware that life is uncertain and he knows that there is always an unseen force behind his total existence. He is therefore willing to do everything that may attract the favor of such force, most especially, when it is believe that such a force could be offered and is anger incurred to offer him some gift will assist well to secure the good favor and blessing of the force. This concept was a reality to the Israelites and they made it a primary motive of their sacrifice.

Sacrifices in the post exilic period were intended to reconcile man to God and to obtain divine forgiveness. Sin brought the wrath of God on the sinner; “you shall not go for other gods...lest the anger of the lord your God be kindled against you” (Deut 6:14-15), his anger mounted against Israel because they have no faith in God (Psalm 78:21-22). The divine wrath is aroused by sin of every kind, and many sins are specifically mentioned including violence (Ezek.8:17-18), afflicting widows and orphans (Exo.22:22-24), adultery (Ezek. 23:27) and covetousness (Jer. 6:11-12). With more than 580 references to the wrath of God in the OT, Israel was left in no doubt as to the strong divine opposition to every form of evil. But he was left in no doubt either as to the love of God. That love was shown in many ways, specifically in the sacrificial system which shows God’s gracious provision for his sinful people, as the repeated commands laid down in Leviticus make abundantly clear on the issue of blood on the altar. It specifically said, “the life for the flesh, is in the blood and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls (Lev. 17:11). The same could be said of the whole of the sacrificial system.

Ancient Israel were covenant people; God drew the people to himself. Sacrifice was efficient in enabling people to express their relationship with Yahweh in various ways. The Israelites used sacrifice as one of the major ways of appreciating God for his goodness over the nation or as individuals, thank offering (Lev. 7:12) and burnt offerings Sacrifice has also been used as a means to share fellowship with God, (Lev.1; 10-13). Sacrifices in which the worshippers are some parts (Lev. 3: 1-5), also for healing of broken relationships between Yahweh and the nation vis-a-vis individuals. The people made atonement for their sins with sacrifice, alongside confession and restitution e.g. the guilt offering (Lev. 5), the sin offering (Lev.4) and the annual day for Atonement (Lev.16.)

Moreover, sacrifice served as a means of substitution in ancient Israel. Many present day preachers and some modern writers supposed that the main purpose of the sacrifice system in Israel was to provide a substitute to carry the guilt and bear the punishment due to the sinner. But the facts of the sacrificial system (e.g. as described in Lev.16) do not seem to support this idea. The only animal that was
burdened with the sins of the people was the second goat in ritual for the Day of Atonement and this was not sacrificed but driven out into the wilderness (Lev. 16: 21, 22)

Most of the laws governing sacrifice in ancient Israel laid emphasis on the purity and wholesomeness of the animal to be used (Lev. 22:17-25). The probable meaning of sacrifice is that by giving a valued possession to God, the sacrifice is thus efficacious in imparting sign of sincere intention to serve Yahweh. The life of the animal given in sacrifice was symbolic of the human life being given up to the service of the lord (Lev. 17:11) (Deut. 12:23). The gift was significant when it expressed the love and devotion of the giver.

The following theological phenomena are evident effects of sacrifice:

1. Sins is defiling the sinner making him unfit to approach a holy God unless he uses sacrifice to atone the sin
2. Sacrifice purifies and cleanses sinners from the sin
3. Our salvation is at a cost of God
4. Those for whom the sacrifice is offered respond by upright living offering their bodies as a living sacrifice

Sacrifice also, served as expression of adoration and devotion in ancient Israel. The burnt offering best gave expression to the sentiment of adoration and devotion though they may not be excluded from the meal and peace offerings. In other words, sacrifice meant worship which is a welcome exercise of the soul. Such was Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac. The daily burnt offerings were intended to represent an unbroken course of adoration and devotion, to keep the right relations with the Deity. On particular occasions, special offerings were made to insure this relation, which was especially needed at the time.

Old Testament saint had no assurance that his prayer would ever be answered without sacrifice. “Sacrifice and prayer go extremely closely together, as appears at the outset in the words used for each hetir, originally a technical term of sacrificial language; it is used in Hebrew to mean ‘to pray’; Conversely, biqqes et-yhwh, ‘to seek Yahweh’ serves as a phrase for ‘to sacrifice’ (Hos. 5:6)”. Prayer such as accompanied the act of sacrifice are also preserved in the Psalter; for instance, the supplication of the king going forth to war, prayers at the presentation of vows and thank offerings, festival liturgies and so on.

6. Conclusion

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In ancient Israel sacrifice played enormous part in their religious history. It was the real essence of their worship, the live-wire and heart of their religion. The Israelites were strongly convinced of the necessity of sacrifice, not only because it was obligatory on them as God’s commandment in His ordinances and law, but they felt incomplete and insecure both before Yahweh and their enemies until due sacrifice were offered. They were of strong idea that there have to sacrifice to atone for their sin, whether against Yahweh or their neighbors. Various sins and on the breach of the law were abomination before Yahweh and they must be properly expiated for by means of prescribed sacrifice. To disregard or fail to appropriate sacrifice was to incur the serious anger of Yahweh on them and to make the future very gloomy. When due sacrifice had been offered, the offender felt secure and established.

Finally, sacrifice was meant for dedication and consecration. It may be performed by individuals, or corporately by the community, while there were specified sacrifices, periodic sacrifices were offered as need arouse. So sacrifice played a lot of roles in the religious life of the Israelites, and had brought the mercy and saving hands of Yahweh on them.

References


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