

THE ANTIQUITY AND CHARACTER OF RITUAL SACRIFICE

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According to the higher critical reconstruction of Hebrew history, ritual sacrifice developed later than the time of Moses. The prophetic movement, beginning with Amos, opposed blood sacrifice as an appropriate way to draw near to God. The reconstruction takes certain statements as reminiscent of this earlier attitude in Israel and call for examination in light of the Wellhausen claim.

A. Amos 5:21-26

Contrary to higher critical opinion, Amos' opposition to feasts, solemn assemblies, burnt offerings, peace offerings, meal offerings, and songs in Israel's contemporary worship was due to (a) their syncretistic nature, (b) their superficial manner, or (c) the polytheistic character of Israel's worship. Amos' objection was not to sacrifice as such, but to sacrifices invalidated by contextual considerations.

A more pressing difficulty lies in 5:25: "*Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel?*" The relevant issues are (a) whether the verse is a statement or a question, (b) whether the question anticipates a "yes" or "no" answer, and (c) whether the "no" answer means that they did not sacrifice in the wilderness, or that they did not sacrifice to Yahveh although they did to other gods, or that they did not sacrifice to Yahveh exclusively and so not at all, because he refuses the worship of polytheists.

1. The verse could be a statement instead of a question, because the question mark ؎ does not appear in the text as pointed by the Masoretes. Since the interrogative particle need not be used and since the Greek Septuagint translates the verse as a question, the better alternative understands it interrogatively even though it good sense to say, "*Sacrifices and offerings you brought to me in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel, but/and/also/yes you (have)-carried/would-carry the shrine of your images. . . .*"

2. "*Did you sacrifice to me in the wilderness?*" could be answered, "*Yes, you did, but they were impure and unacceptable sacrifices (then as they are now) because they were mixed with the worship of other gods*" (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 150).

a. Against the "yes" answer is the Septuagint translation of Amos, which anticipates a negative response. Greek uses μὴ when asking a question that expects a "no" answer; it uses οὐ if a question expects a "yes" reply. The LXX uses μὴ in this case.

b. Luke's record of Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin quotes Amos as implying a negative answer, thus reinforcing the Septuagint rendering at this point.

3. The best alternative is as follows:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness? No, you did not inasmuch as you did not serve me exclusively then; so I gave you up to serve the host of heaven and to wander for those years as proof that I, and not these deities, would determine your

future as to whether you would enter Canaan or not. Sacrifice to me that is not sacrifice to me only is not sacrifice to me at all.”

Not even in the beginning were the people wholly faithful to Yahveh. “*Giving them up to serve the host of heaven*” may sweep out over the subsequent history of Israel instead of envisioning the wilderness wanderings alone.

a. There are several references to Israel’s idolatry during the wilderness wandering: Exodus 4:19; 9:6-24; 17:2-3 as well as before (Genesis 31:30-34; Joshua 24:14).

b. Stephen understood Amos’ comment as at least applicable to the period of wilderness wandering. His speech is chronologically arranged so it says nothing about matters after Solomon’s reign. The verses surrounding the Amos citation pertain to the forty-year period before the conquest. On his own he affirms that when the Israelites made the calf, God gave them up to worship the host of heaven, and says, “. . . as it is written,” quoting Amos 5:25-27.

The beauty of the worship form, either as pleasing to the eye or ear, does not validate the ritual as worship. It is comparable to a secular choir beautifully performing Handel’s “Messiah,” though the people do not believe the message in the libretto. God would be more pleased by less gifted performers who mean what they sing.

B. Jeremiah 7:21-26

Much of what we said above about Amos 6 applies also to this passage. We can add other points about Jeremiah 7.

1. Jeremiah recognized the legitimacy of the sacrificial system and the priestly order: 17:24-27; 31:14; 33:10-11, 17-22

2. Jeremiah presumably supported Josiah’s reform, which included the restoration of Passover observance: 2 Chronicles 35:1-9.

3. There is no record that Jeremiah opposed temple ritual as such.

4. The word for “concerning” (*עַל־דְּבָרִי*) in 7:22 is an unusual phrase that occurs only here and in Deuteronomy 4:21*; 2 Samuel 18:5*, 2 Kings 22:13; Psalm 7 (heading); Jeremiah 14:21.* In the references with asterisks, the word shows something of its distinctive flavor: “*out of a concern for.*” In derivation the expression indicates “*on the words of.*” It has associations then with meaning. This observation brings onto Jeremiah 7:22, the following sense: “*I did not give you commandments out of a concern for getting sacrifices offered to me.*” The theology of sacrifice was not a pagan one in which the sacrifices were for the gods, as Paul indicates in Acts 17:25: people do not serve God as though he needs anything. The Old Testament sacrifice was for the offerer, either because the death of the animal substituted for the death of the sinner that offered it or because it expressed love to the God who gave life and breath and all things, including the offering the worshiper brought to him.

C. Isaiah 1:10-17

Isaiah’s objection to the Israelites’ ritual worship and his refusal to accept it resulted from the sinfulness of those who in prayer spread out hands to him that were covered

with blood. If Isaiah were objecting to the solemn assemblies as such, he would be objecting to prayer, which is listed among those acts of worship that God was refusing. Yahveh, God of Israel, knew hearts, so, unlike the pagan gods, he would not honor people's worship whose hearts were not in harmony with the meaning of the outward ritual (cp. Jeremiah 14:10-12; 6:18-20).

D. 1 Samuel 15:22

"To obey is better than sacrifice." Mark 12:33 quotes the prophet Samuel after Saul's ill-advised sacrifice. Saul had offered sacrifice in preparation for battle against the Amalekites. Forcing the sacrifice without Samuel's promised presence made it look like faring well in battle resulted automatically the ritual sacrifice. God honors obedience more than ritual observance.

E. Hosea 6:6

As cited in Matthew 9:13; 12:7, the Hosea statement reinforces the previous points on the importance of a proper heart over a proper ritual. The passage illustrates relative negation, where the form of the statement is an affirmative-negative ("I desire goodness, not sacrifice"; cp. 1 Corinthians 1:17) while the meaning is more ("I desire goodness more than sacrifice"). The parallelism in 6:6 bears out that point: "*I desire the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.*" Disinterest in the form was also not acceptable (Malachi 1:6-14; Hosea 4:19).

F. Micah 6:6-8

Personal life quality takes precedence over impersonal ritual. Jesus speaks when he says to leave the sacrifice beside the altar, be reconciled to the offended brother, and then return to offer the gift (Matthew 5:23-24). The character of the worshipers determines the acceptability of their worship. No matter how extreme—a thousand rams or the gift of a person's child—it is not acceptable unless accompanied by appropriate character.

G. Psalm 51:15-17

God was not pleased by sacrifice *per se*. To be meaningful, animal sacrifice had to rest on the prior sacrifice of a contrite heart and a subsequent obedient life. "*Then you will delight in the sacrifices of righteousness, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering*" (cp. Proverbs 21:3, 27; Ecclesiastes 5:1).

H. Psalm 40

Psalm 40 brings another dimension to sacrifice as Hebrews 10:1-12 shows in citing Psalm 40:6-8a. In the previous texts, the sacrifices were not acceptable because of the way people offered them. In this passage they are not sufficient because of their nature. The blood of bulls and goats cannot remove human guilt (Hebrews 10:4), presumably because amoral animals

are not appropriate substitutes for moral people. The sacrifices were divinely ordained as early as the Mosaic legislation and, if properly offered, were valid but not inherently effective to the saving of people's souls.

Several texts in the Old Testament reflect negatively on the sacrificial system. In the estimation of many higher critics, (a) Amos and Jeremiah speak against this institution as such with the implication that ritual sacrifice had no part in Israel's national heritage. Other passages (b) speak against this institution improperly observed with the admonition to change the heart to validate the ritual (Isaiah, Samuel, Hosea, Micah, and Psalm 51). Finally, Psalm 40 (c) speaks against that institution as inherently ineffective for the cleansing of the human conscience from sin. In passages that call for proper observance, God's distinct character as holy creator and heart-knower means, on the one hand, that sacrifice was not for feeding him and, on the other hand, that he cannot be deceived by (1) the pleasantness of the form to eye or ear or by (2) the extremeness of the act like rivers of oil, a thousand rams, or the sacrifice of a person's own child.