Learning the Communal Sacrifices

Dear Journal,

Today[[1]](#footnote-1) in school[[2]](#footnote-2) we started our instruction on the different sacrifices performed by our people. I didn’t realize how many there are. Mr. Pabbi, my teacher, gave us a list at the beginning of the lesson, but I didn’t follow well. I think we’re going to go through them more the rest of the week. He said today was a background day. We started by reading some of the Torah because that’s where each sacrifice comes from. My people have been giving these offerings ever since God told Moses how to in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers (Gertzel 7).

Mr. Pabbi also talked a lot about why we give sacrifices to God. That part made a lot of sense to me. There are three big reasons. Our sacrifices are substitutes for us, they bring us closer to God, and they give up something of ours. The animals that we give to God die as a sort of stand in for us. We sin, become impure, or fail God in some way every day and these animals can take the blame so that God isn’t upset with us. He also said that the “essence” of the offering is getting closer to God. I don’t really know what that means, but it makes sense because the words sound similar. There’s also an element of giving something up. We sacrifice to show God that He means so much to us that we are willing to get rid of meaningful or expensive things (“Jewish Practices & Rituals”).

The last thing we talked about was what can be sacrificed. Obviously only clean animals can be offered to God, but every animal also has to be perfect. There can be no blemish, defect, or ailment. Because we give only the best to God, we have to look over every animal carefully. Then, the priest[[3]](#footnote-3) does the same. The priests even check “under the belly and thighs” (Philo 195). The animals are usually quadrupeds or birds. “Quadrupeds” sounds very complicated, but it just means an animal with four feet and the birds are either pigeons or doves. Mr. Pabbi said that we would go into what to sacrifice when and how tomorrow. For today, we finished by saying that a lot of sacrifices also have flour, oil, or wine involved too.

Sincerely,

Me

Dear Journal,

Did you know that a sacrifice could be happening right this minute for me? Every morning and every night a priest sacrifices a lamb as a thank offering at the Temple Mount for all of my people. That lamb is completely burnt and given to God (Sanders 17). Then some of the best incense is given inside of the Temple, just before the Holy of Holies. Mr. Pabbi explained the incense and burnt offerings make a pair just like each human is a pair. The burnt offering is like our bodies and the incense like our minds or souls. All of each human is symbolically given to God twice a day (Philo 197).

On the Sabbath the priests do all of this, but two lambs are burnt in the morning and at night instead of one because it is the birthday of the whole world. Also, on the Sabbath, the priests put out 12 loaves of bread. They get stacked in two piles to symbolize the equinoxes and the natural process that God put together (Philo 197).

When we have a new moon the priests also sacrifice differently for all of us. Of course, the same daily ritual of a burnt offering and incense is still happening, but they add to it. When there is a new moon the priests sacrifice ten animals. They use seven lambs, two oxen, and one ram. The new moon is full and perfect, so it cannot have just one whole burnt animal. Ten is a perfect number and that is just what the new moon warrants. Ten animals wholly burnt for God in order to bring my people to Him, thank Him, and act as substitute for our wrongdoings. Because of the completion of the new moon we also bring wine and fine meal in oil as a sacrifice. Everything is brought to fullness or completion with the new moon, so we offer a bit of all things (Philo 201).

Sincerely,

Me

Dear Journal,

The priests also offer sacrifice for the entire population during festival times. Mr. Pabbi said that every festival is different, but the sacrifices are for both my people and the Gentiles. Then, he talked and talked about each festival and their specifics. He said that they were really complicated though. I definitely missed some of it because I just can’t write that fast[[4]](#footnote-4).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is fairly sacrifice intensive. It only lasts for seven days, but the priests perform ten offerings each day (Philo 203). These are also in addition to the daily offerings. That means seventy festival offerings, seventy wholly burnt offerings, plus 16 daily offerings of a wholly burnt offering. I was afraid to ask, but I have no idea where all of the animals come from.

The Feast of First Products is the same way. It only lasts for one day in the spring when the corn harvest comes, but it is the same set of ten animals burnt wholly. With this festival, meant to give the first of the harvests to God, there are also two lambs and some loaves of bread given for the priests to eat, for they worked alongside God in protecting the harvest (Philo 207).

The Feast of Tabernacles made my jaw drop. We’ve celebrated it so many times, it’s one of my favorite festivals, but I had no idea how many animals we gave to God. While my family lives in our little tent for the seven-day festival seventy calves, fourteen rams and ninety-eight lambs are wholly burnt at the Temple. During this time, there is an additional sin offering that the priests get to eat. Mr. Pabbi tried to explain why the sin offering still happens, but it’s a bit complicated. I think he was trying to say that we can’t celebrate joy when we are not free from sin. So, every single day for seven days the priests sacrifice ten calves, two rams, fourteen lambs, and a kid.

We had some time for reflection today during class after learning about the Feast of Tabernacles. Mr. Pabbi said he wanted us to think about the ways we get closer to God. I thought about what I alone have put onto the animals that were sacrificed just this morning for me. They are so exact[[5]](#footnote-5) in all that they do so that I can be close to God. Some days, I wish I were a Levite.

Sincerely,

Me

P.S. There are even more types of individual offerings too. I need to read more of the Torah for myself. My dad says we’re actually going up to the Temple next week to bring our own sacrifice and he wants me to help. My face dropped when he told me, so he said that I could just watch like other kids if I want (Sanders 114). I think I want to help sacrifice though. Wish me luck.

Works Cited

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1. Almost everyone across the ancient world sacrificed in the same way, so not only would a young boy know what these sacrifices looked like but would also have a general idea of how to perform them (Sanders 107). However, they probably wouldn’t have understood the significance of the different offerings nor have recognized that they are different at all. He also probably wouldn’t have been inside the Temple to witness any of the communal sacrifices at this point. If his parents had made the pilgrimage a toddler or young child would’ve stayed with other family (Sanders 114). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I understand that the school I’m imagining my student going to is very modern. He wouldn’t have learned like this, but, rather, would have probably learned from his father or in a synagogue while studying the Torah. For the sake of narrative and modern understanding I will write as though he is a student in fourth or fifth grade in a modern school. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I will use the general term “priest” for all priests and Levites. Most of the hands-on sacrifices are performed by priests, but occasionally Levites do play a role. However, many sources don’t specify and it isn’t important here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I will gloss over some festivals and not mention others. There are so many with so many intricacies that it just isn’t feasible for them to all fit here. Moreover, there isn’t always a conclusion agreed upon by most scholars. The main sources contradict each other frequently. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While I am describing the priests’ duties exactly and they did perform rituals with perfect precision, we aren’t really sure what they looked like. I have used Philo’s work, but there are places that Josephus or Midrash or other sources (Sanders 103) give different processes for the same festivals or sacrifices. Furthermore, the names of the offerings aren’t always clear. They don’t always translate well into English or other languages, so it’s hard to know exactly what they were for. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)