

One more element of the practice of sacrifice must be discussed before analyzing the primary texts. To appreciate these authors' various positions on sacrifice, it is crucial to understand the basic logic on which the practice rests. Insights from cognitive science of religion shed light on this subject by suggesting that rituals such as sacrifice take their logical cue from human social patterns. If gods are a projection of human-like agency, then one can interact with gods just like one would interact with a human.²⁶ For sacrifice in the ancient Mediterranean, I argue, the social logic at work is the logic of reciprocity. The assumption that one can have a human-like reciprocal relationship with a god follows intuitively from the belief that gods are human-like agents.²⁷ This is a critical point for understanding ancient debate over sacrifice. Modern misrepresentations of the logic of reciprocity are partly responsible for the success of the critique model.

Sacrifice is a practice based on the logic of reciprocity as a mode of exchange. To understand this logic, it is necessary to divorce ourselves from the most pervasive modern mode of exchange, economic exchange. It is also necessary to divorce ourselves from notions of altruism, egoism, and *do ut des* relationships. These categories are elements of a particular discourse about action. They are neither objective nor analytical and serve only to confuse discussion of sacrifice by imposing a secondary discourse upon it.

All of these elements introduce categories and relationships that are foreign to the logic of reciprocity. Reciprocity, simply put, is a system of *different and differed return*.²⁸ It is a system in which humans give *things*, in the broadest sense (goods, services, influence, etc.) and subsequently get things back. Because the things exchanged in reciprocity have no definite value (or, if they do, this fact is ignored for the purposes of exchange), balance between parties can never be achieved, nor is it sought. As a result, reciprocity creates a relationship *between the people making the exchange*, not the commodities exchanged. This is the opposite of economic exchange, in which goods or services have finite value, and the relationship created exists between the things exchanged, not the persons exchanging them.²⁹

Because reciprocity creates relationships between people, it tends to index and reinforce power hierarchies. In any given instance of reciprocity, there will usually be one party able to give more and one able to give less. This situation, repeated again and again, over a broad range of reciprocal exchanges, creates complex social networks of nested superiorities and dependencies.

A key component of the social workings of reciprocity is what Bourdieu calls *misrecognition*.³⁰ Within reciprocal exchange, the social consequences of the reciprocal relationship (that is, power hierarchies) are often consciously or unconsciously ignored (misrecognized) by both parties. This allows both parties to view the objects of exchange as free gifts, although each party understands the social realities involved. In our own society, economic exchange is the most prevalent

in the formation of social relationships.

From the time we are children, we all learn the etiquette of gift giving and receiving—the rules of the game. For example, one always removes the price tag before giving a gift. One does not give someone the exact same gift they previously gave you. These rules do not make practical sense, but they make perfect sense within the logic of reciprocity. The actions just mentioned are too close to economic exchange, which we see as antithetical to gift giving. The very language used for reciprocal exchange highlights the misrecognition involved. In gift giving, we use terms like *favor*, *reward*, or *token of appreciation*. We avoid words that would hint at economic exchange, such as *return*, *repayment*, *debt*, etc. Ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebrew had similarly subtle vocabulary.³¹

Despite the phenomenon of misrecognition, we all learn how to recognize the social hierarchies involved in reciprocal exchange and how to manipulate these hierarchies.³² We are all aware that different social situations demand different gifts and that the wrong gift can have serious consequences. Navigating this social minefield takes a fair amount of effort, but it is something that most of us master at a young age. Ancient participants in animal sacrifice had similar mastery in the arts of reciprocity. Different gods and different circumstances demanded different sacrifices. The ritual must fit the occasion, and the offering must fit both the giver and the deity. For example, the various gods of the ancient Mediterranean household generally received different sacrifices, in different locations, and for different reasons as compared to the gods of the city.³³ The basic reciprocal logic, however, is the same in both cases.

Even considering the modern parallel of gift giving, reciprocity played a much larger role in ancient Mediterranean society than it does in our own. Thus, it was natural that when these people imagined superhuman beings, or gods, they modeled their relationships with these beings on their relationships with each other. That is, they imagined a system of reciprocity with the gods that mirrored the system of reciprocity that governed their everyday life.³⁴ Sacrifice was one key practice of this relationship.³⁵

Understanding the logic of reciprocity is crucial to dispelling the most prevalent modern misunderstanding of sacrifice, the notion that the gods needed sacrifice. For most in the ancient Mediterranean, the statement “the gods do not need sacrifice” was a simple truism that derived from the nature of the universe. It was not a reason to abstain from sacrifice. Sacrifice was not an indication that the gods were beholden to humans for food, attention, or praise. Such conclusions are a misunderstanding of the logic of reciprocity. To cite a modern (albeit potentially apocryphal) parallel, students give apples to teachers. We do not conclude from this that teachers are too poor to buy their own apples, or that they subsist solely on apples, or that they are dependant on student-brought apples in order to survive. Rather, we parse this action for what it is, an attempt to foster a relationship of reciprocity. Sacrifice is no different. In each situation, the reciprocal relationship is paramount, while the actual items exchanged are secondary.

logic of reciprocity allows us to move beyond the critique model. Ancient authors who discuss sacrifice are not critiquing some universal essential meaning of the act. Rather, they are themselves attempting to argue for one particular interpretation. They are attempting to impose their own discursive parsing of sacrifice upon the practice; they are trying to say definitively what sacrifice does, how it works, and how it should be done. These authors are not typical or average sacrificial participants. They are members of an elite, literate, educated class that comprised a very small percentage of ancient society. Their explication of the meaning and purpose of sacrifice was part of their participation in a larger field of cultural production that brought them power, authority, and prestige through textual expertise.

Exempla

I will discuss three examples to illustrate the approach outlined above.³⁶ These texts span several cultural contexts and several centuries, yet each author is trying to accomplish the same thing: the imposition of a singular interpretation on the practice of sacrifice.

One of the early commentators on sacrifice is Plato. Plato identifies what he takes to be two areas of potential problem with sacrificial practice: (1) the moral condition of the sacrificer, and (2) the conception of the gods that the sacrificer holds in his or her head.

Plato is concerned that people think morality does not matter in sacrifice. He is one of the first philosophers to voice this concern, which is echoed by almost every other writer on the topic. He writes in *Laws*:

For the wicked man is unclean of soul, whereas the good man is clean; and from him that is defiled no good man, nor god, can ever rightly receive gifts [δῶρα]. Therefore all the great labor that impious men spend upon the gods is in vain, but that of the pious is most profitable to them all.³⁷

A few simple but often overlooked points can be made about this passage. First, the passage is not a critique of sacrifice itself, only a critique of a particular view of the conditions necessary for the ritual to be efficacious. The view of sacrifice Plato rails against relates directly back to my earlier discussion of reciprocity. It is one that sees sacrifice as *automatic* reciprocity. Plato argues that, just as a good man would not accept gifts from a wicked man (and thereby enter into a reciprocal relationship with him), the gods will not accept sacrifices from a wicked man. Thus, sacrifices made by immoral individuals are useless because they will not produce the desired reciprocal relationship. The gods cannot be bribed with sacrifices to overlook wrongdoing. On the other hand, the sacrifices of good people will be accepted and will bring the favor of the gods. In other words, sacrifice does not automatically put the gods in debt; other factors are in play, just as in human relationships.

A full analysis of Plato's comments on sacrifice would not be surprising, predictably, a Platonic view of sacrifice.³⁸ That is, it is a parsing of the practice through the lens of Platonic thinking on the nature of the divine and the cosmos.³⁹

This analysis can be repeated for all the classical schools of philosophy with similar results. In each case, philosophers attempted to interpret the practice of animal sacrifice, what it means and what it does, according to their own understanding of the gods and the cosmos.⁴⁰ The Stoics, for example, argue against popular anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods; however, their support of sacrifice is well known.⁴¹ There is nothing wrong with animal sacrifice in the Stoic view, so long as correct (i.e., Stoic) interpretations were maintained. The Stoics argued that the divine was a power that pervaded all matter. Humans, for their part, must understand this and act in accordance with nature. Animal sacrifice was an opportunity to reinforce these Stoic interpretations and ideals.⁴² Epicureans, as I mentioned above, saw sacrifice as an opportunity to contemplate Epicurean beliefs, despite their assertion that the gods are not active in the human world.⁴³

To describe these comments as critiques of sacrifice is misleading and inaccurate. Most importantly, this interpretation masks the reality of what these writers (be they Platonists, Stoics, or Epicureans) are attempting to do—that is, impose their own interpretation on a key religious ritual.

Similar conclusions can be derived from the analysis of Hebrew Bible texts, of which I will give two examples. Hebrew Bible statements on sacrifice are some of the most well known of the so-called critiques. This is the case because the Hebrew Bible served as rich source material for later Christian authors, who took these passages out of context and presented them *as if they were critiques*—that is, they used them as proof texts for their own positions against animal sacrifice. In their original context, however, these passages are not critiques. In fact, I argue that these texts are an excellent example of the alternate model I am proposing. The first text I would like to discuss is Psalm 51:15–19:

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

It is clear in this example that the first part of this passage, if taken out of context, could appear to be a biting critique of animal sacrifice; and, in fact, this is exactly how later Christian authors used it.⁴⁴ However, when the passage is seen in the context of the psalm as a whole—or even, as here, in the context of the next few lines—a different picture emerges. The psalmist is playing on the theme of God's chastisement but continued love for Israel. Burnt offerings are unacceptable given the current state of estrangement from God, but contrition will lead to reconciliation.

God will restore Jerusalem and its ruined temple; proper sacrifices will resume. For the psalmist, ideal sacrifice requires a restored Jerusalem and a restored relationship between God and Israel.

The Hebrew Bible prophets provide a similar example. Despite the remarkable endurance of Weber's priest-versus-prophet model, it has been shown time and again that the Hebrew Bible prophets were not outside critics attacking Judean cult.⁴⁵ Many of the prophets were themselves priests or other cultic functionaries.⁴⁶ They do not reject the practice of animal sacrifice to Yahweh, nor do they critique the basic logic of this act. Rather, just like the texts above, they provide an interpretation of the act of sacrifice in light of their understanding of Yahweh and the cosmos. The main feature of this interpretation is the assertion that the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is more important than the amount of stuff sacrificed. An example of this is a passage from Isaiah:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or lambs, or of goats. (Isa 1:11–12)

Once again this isolated passage appears to condemn sacrifice, but when the book of Isaiah is considered as a whole a different picture emerges. There is no suggestion in Isaiah that the temple cult with its animal sacrifices should be abolished. Rather, the text dwells on the notion that Israel must repent, reform, and return to God. Only then will their sacrifices be appropriate. Again, the logic of reciprocity is foremost. Yahweh's good will cannot be bought. Lavish sacrifices are not necessarily more efficacious sacrifices, nor are they automatic. In other words, the author of Isaiah is arguing that specific moral states must accompany animal sacrifice; endless sacrifice without the correct moral state is useless and is actually offensive to God. None of this is a critique of sacrifice itself, only a critique of what the author of Isaiah sees as an incorrect interpretation of Yahweh and his relationship with his people. Exactly the same conclusions hold for the other Hebrew Bible prophets.⁴⁷

To summarize my argument thus far, all of these authors—both Greek philosophers and Hebrew Bible prophets—wanted to continue the practice of animal sacrifice, *but under their own terms and with their own interpretation*. For these authors, sacrifice was an appropriate and efficacious action only if understood through their discursive parsing, informed by their understanding of the gods/god and the workings of the universe.

This is not to say that *no* ancient authors critiqued or rejected the practice of animal sacrifice. There is evidence for a small number of groups throughout the Greek and Roman periods who reject the practice of animal sacrifice and abstained from it. These include some Pythagorean, Cynic, and Orphic groups.⁴⁸

I do not wish to discount the importance of these groups to understanding ancient positions on sacrifice. Rather, I wish to stress the need to separate this data from the texts and authors discussed above. *Some* Greek and Latin cultural producers did in fact critique and reject animal sacrifice as a religious practice, but they

are a minority. Many other producers debated the meaning and purpose of sacrifice *without* questioning the actual practice itself.

In short, not every discussion of the meaning and purpose of sacrifice in ancient texts is a critique. The critique model is the result of the imposition of essentialist interpretations of sacrifice on ancient thinkers, interpretations that these people did not hold (i.e., sacrifice feeds the gods or sacrifice bribes the gods). Once the critique model is rejected, it is possible to appreciate the complexity and sophistication of ancient debates over this practice. It is also clear that this debate is taking place among a small number of elite, literate cultural producers, each vying to impose their own interpretation on the practice of sacrifice. Christian texts must be seen as part of this ongoing competition.

Christian Data

In the remaining space, I would like to highlight the ways in which the previous discussion forces a reevaluation of the early Christian data. How do Christian authors fit into the ongoing cultural competition we have sketched? If early Christian authors were not “spiritualizing” sacrifice or critiquing some essential meaning of sacrifice, what were they doing? A final benefit of this brief foray into Christian positions is that it illustrates the historical origins of the critique model I have argued against, and it begins to explain the pervasiveness of this model.

I begin with two key observations on the early Christian data. First, positions on sacrifice within Christian authors are highly dependent on chronology. This is a simple observation, but it has been argued against so frequently that it bears highlighting. In short, the finely articulated positions on animal sacrifice found in later Christian authors (from the second century onwards) are not present in the earliest Christian texts. This change, therefore, demands explanation. Second, Christian positions on sacrifice do not show smooth progression or linear development. Rather, early Christian texts contain numerous independent, often contradictory responses to animal sacrifice.

The earliest sources (Paul and the New Testament Gospels) show no rejection of animal sacrifice. Paul, as a Judean, rejects Greco-Roman animal sacrifice. He does this on the grounds that Greek and Roman gods are not real gods, only the Judean god is a real god and only he is worthy of sacrifice.⁴⁹ Paul fully supports the Jerusalem temple cult and never suggests that anything replaces or supercedes it. The New Testament Gospels take a similar position. They say nothing against animal sacrifice. In fact, they imagine Jesus and his followers participating in animal sacrifice. The so-called Last Supper in the synoptic Gospels is, after all, a dinner of sacrificial meat.⁵⁰ The book of Acts even portrays the disciples frequenting the temple after Jesus' death and resurrection.⁵¹

The gospel texts are particularly important because of their dates. With the possible, but in my view unlikely, exception of Mark, all of the Gospels were written

written *after* many Christians had become de facto nonparticipants in sacrifice. But the texts themselves do not give any reflection of this fact. This is a key piece of evidence; it shows that historical circumstances (distance from Jerusalem for many Christians before 70 CE and the nonexistence of the temple after this date) made Christians nonsacrificers *first*. It was left to later Christian writers to theologize this situation and provide an explanation for Christian nonparticipation.

The Christian group that ultimately won the historical battle (Burton Mack calls them the “centrist Christians”)⁵² had a particular problem to deal with. The centrist Christians, in contrast to other Christian groups (e.g., the Marcionites and Valentinians), believed that the Jewish god was also the Christian god and that the Jewish scriptures were also Christian scriptures. This meant that they had to explain why so much of their own sacred writings were rules and regulations for animal sacrifice.⁵³ According to the centrists’ own scriptures, God wanted animal sacrifice. Why then did the Christians not do it? Moreover, if God wanted a sacrificial cult in Jerusalem, and the Hebrew Bible clearly indicates that he does, why did he allow the Romans to destroy his temple? These were major problems for the centrists and vulnerable points in their battles with other Christian groups.⁵⁴

Cultural producers of the centrist camp devised various creative solutions to these problems. For example, the author of the Epistle of Barnabas argued that God never really wanted sacrifice. All of the passages in the Hebrew Bible that appear to mandate animal sacrifice were actually, according to this author, allegories for Jesus and the Christian church. Thus, according to Barnabas, the whole edifice of the Jerusalem Temple was an unfortunate case of overly literal reading.⁵⁵ God had tried to make this clear through the prophets, but was ignored.⁵⁶ Here, one sees a Christian author in the process of creating the critique model. The author of Barnabas claims that the Hebrew Bible prophets critiqued sacrifice and tried to put a stop to it. He does so by taking Hebrew Bible passages (including the two presented above) out of context and presenting them *as critiques*.⁵⁷ Christianity, in this author’s view, enacts these critiques and performs the correct, nonsacrificial, worship that God had always intended.

Other early Christian authors fashioned other positions. For example, Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) argued that God had created sacrifice as a stopgap measure to cover the interim before Jesus came. He claimed that God gave the Judeans their sacrificial cult in an attempt to prevent their habitual apostasy and idol worship (the logic apparently being that worshipping the right god in the wrong way is better than worshipping the wrong god altogether, *Dial.* 22.11). Once Jesus had come, however, sacrifice’s *raison d’être* vanished, and Judeans, in Justin’s mind, were supposed to become Christians.

Here one sees the supersessionist model being formed. Justin argues that Christianity is the *replacement* for animal sacrifice, which was always meant to be temporary. Other Christian authors formulate still more positions, which cannot be elaborated here. These included the ideas that Jesus’ death was a replacement

Christian practices like the Eucharist are equivalent to sacrifice.⁵⁸

The key thing to notice about these positions is that they do not cohere well. Did God never want animal sacrifice? Or is Jesus an animal sacrifice? Or are prayers better than sacrifice anyway?⁵⁹ The centrist position is not one position; it is not even a logical chain of positions. It is a collection of different arguments from different periods and different authors all useful against different opponents (Romans, Judeans, other Christians, etc.). This process of agglomeration is characteristic of the centrist group and is one of its keys to success. As Christianity evolved and different opponents arose, the centrists could almost always find a solution in one of their vetted texts or, more commonly, in a recombination of passages from several texts.

To conclude, it is critical to see early Christian authors as elite producers engaged in a competition to define the true nature of sacrifice against various opponents. Such a model is far more illuminative to the Christian data than notions of spiritualization or critique. Many Christian authors of the second century onward do, in fact, reject the practice of animal sacrifice as a useful religious ritual. However, the proper context for understanding such texts is not some imagined tradition of critique. Instead, it is a field of cultural competition in which textual producers vied with each other to define the meaning and purpose of a nondiscursive ritual.

The competitive success of particular positions within this arena was contingent, as always, on a complex matrix of historical events, including the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the success of one particular group of Christian elite (the centrists) with its own collection of consecrated texts. This context, I hope, begins to remove the lens of Christian theology through which so much of the history of the practice of animal sacrifice has been viewed.

Notes

This chapter is a distillation of some of the key points of my dissertation. For a full discussion, see Daniel Ullucci, “The End of Animal Sacrifice” (Brown University, 2009).

1. I lay aside for the moment the question of whether sacrifice pleases the gods. The majority of the texts discussed below assume that sacrifice pleases the gods, but this is very different from saying that the gods *need* sacrifice. A key goal of this chapter is to explicate these crucial differences.

2. The two main models I employ from Bourdieu are 1) the extension of the concept of “capital” to noneconomic systems (such as culture) and 2) the assertion that much of social life consists of competition for various types of capital. Bourdieu’s theories of capital and social competition are spread out across many of his writings; for a concise summary and discussion, see David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 73–82.

3. For a full discussion of cultural producers and their interest in broad questions of meaning, see Stanley Stowers, “The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences, and Textual Mysteries,” chapter 1 in this volume.