

Sacrifice in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World

James Rives

The idea of sacrifice is fundamental to Christian belief: in celebrating the Eucharist we say ‘Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast’ and we describe the Eucharist as a ‘sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving’. But what do we really mean when we speak of sacrifice? How did the idea of sacrifice come to play such a central role in Christian belief and worship? In these sessions we will explore the ritual of animal sacrifice in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish traditions, the role of animal sacrifice in the persecution of Christians, and how early Christians transformed the idea of sacrifice in their theology and worship.

Each session will focus on a different set of issues, as indicated below. As a basis for discussion, I will provide a set of texts and discussion questions for each session in advance, although no preparation is required. Everyone is welcome to attend any or all the sessions.

Wednesday, July 8th: Animal Sacrifice in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish Traditions

In this session we will learn about the ritual of animal sacrifice in the two cultural traditions from which Christianity developed. Our key texts will be Homer, *Odyssey* Book 3, lines 418–72, for the Greek tradition and selections from Leviticus 1-7 for the Jewish tradition.

Wednesday, July 15th: The Death of Jesus as Sacrifice

In this session we will examine some of the key texts that interpret Jesus as a sacrificial victim. These include I Corinthians 5.6-8 (with Exodus 12.1-20 as background), Mark 14.12-25, and Hebrews 9-10.

Wednesday, July 22nd: Animal Sacrifice, Persecution, and Martyrdom

In this session we will discover how early Christian leaders interpreted the traditional Greek ritual of animal sacrifice and how it played a role in the conflict with the Roman imperial government. Key texts will include 1 Corinthians 8.1-13 and 10.14-21, short passages from the works of the early Christian writers Justin Martyr, Origen, and Cyprian, a ‘certificate of sacrifice’, and a selection from the account of the martyr Carpus.

Wednesday, July 29th: The Christian Transformation of the Idea of Sacrifice

In this session we will explore some of the ways that early Christians, working from the idea of Jesus’ death as the perfect sacrifice, extended the meaning of ‘sacrifice’. Key texts will be short selections from the early Christian manual known as the Didache, the works of Justin Martyr, a brief passage from the account of the martyr Polycarp, Romans 12, and 1 Peter 2.