

Wednesday July 8th: Animal Sacrifice in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish Traditions
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The Changing Meaning of Sacrifice

In these sessions, we will think about the ways that the meaning of sacrifice has changed over time, from its original meaning of a physical offering to the divine (above all, the slaughter of a domestic animal) to its current sense of voluntarily giving up something of value for the sake of something we value even more. The joke in this *New Yorker* cartoon is grounded in this shift of meaning.



"You're quitting school? After everything we sacrificed for you?"

In this session we will explore the role of animal sacrifice in both ancient Greek culture and in Jewish tradition, the two cultures out of which early Christianity developed.

Animal Sacrifice in Graeco-Roman Tradition

One of the most detailed descriptions of a traditional ancient Greek sacrifice comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. In Book 3, Odysseus's son Telemachus, grown to adulthood, has at the prompting of the goddess Athena set off in search of news about his father, about whom he has had no reliable information for many years. His plan is to talk with some of his father's

comrades from the Trojan War, of whom the first he visits is the old king Nestor. Telemachus and his companion Mentor (who unbeknownst to him is Athena herself in disguise) disembark from their ship and meet Nestor. After a long conversation, Nestor invites the two visitors to be his guests for the night, but the disguised Athena declines, changes into an eagle, and flies away. The astonished Nestor responds to this revelation by promising to sacrifice a heifer to the goddess the following morning. As the day dawns, Nestor gives instructions for the preparation of the sacrifice, and then presides over it himself, assisted by his sons.

As you read this passage, think about the following questions. What does the ritual involve? What is its purpose? How does it establish a relationship between gods and humans, and what sort of relationship does it establish? What qualifications does Nestor have to preside over the sacrifice: is he a priest or someone with special status? How does the ritual structure relationships among the human participants? What other questions does this passage raise for you?

Homer, *Odyssey* Book 3, lines 439-63 and 470-72

Translated by A. T. Murray and revised by George E. Dimock, Loeb Classical Library

Stratius and noble Echephron led the heifer by the horns, and Aretus came from the chamber, bringing them water for the hands in a basin embossed with flowers, and in the other hand he held barley grains in a basket; and Thrasymedes, steadfast in fight, stood by, holding in his hands a sharp axe, to fell the heifer; and Perseus held the bowl for the blood. Then the old man, Nestor, driver of chariots, began the opening rite of hand-washing and sprinkling with barley grains, and earnestly he prayed to Athene, cutting off as first offering the hair from the head, and casting it into the fire. Now when they had prayed, and had strewn the barley grains, at once the son of Nestor, Thrasymedes, high of heart, came near and dealt the blow; and the axe cut through the sinews of the neck, and loosened the strength of the heifer, and the women raised the sacred cry, the daughters and the sons' wives and the revered wife of Nestor, Eurydice, the eldest of the daughters of Clymenus. Then the men raised the heifer's head from the broad-wayed earth and held it, and Peisistratus, leader of men, cut the throat. And when the black blood had flowed from her and the life had left the bones, at once they cut up the body and straightway cut out the thigh pieces all in due order, and covered them with a double layer of fat, and laid the raw bits upon them. Then the old man burned them on billets of wood, and poured over them sparkling wine, and beside him the young men held in their hands the five-pronged forks. But when the thigh pieces were wholly burned, and they had tasted the inner parts, they cut up the rest and spitted and roasted it, holding the pointed spits in their hands. . . . Now when they had roasted the outer flesh and had drawn it off the spits, they sat down and feasted, and worthy men waited on them, pouring wine into golden cups.

An Altar from Pompeii

The image below is a relief on an altar that stood in front of a temple in Pompeii; it dates to sometime in the 1st century AD, and so is contemporary with the beginnings of Christianity. It depicts the preliminary stages of a sacrifice of a bull, performed in accordance with Roman ritual procedure. On the left, the man who presides over the sacrifice, with his head veiled, pours a preliminary offering of wine over the fire in a portable brazier. To the left are two assistants:

one, a young boy, holds a jug of wine and a libation bowl; another, a young man, holds a tray. Behind the brazier, another assistant plays a double-barreled reed pipe. To the right of the brazier are the bull and three professional sacrificers/butchers wearing loincloths; the one in the foreground carries an axe with which to stun the bull prior to its slaughter.

As you examine this image, think about the themes and messages it would have conveyed to observers in the 1st century. Piety was certainly one of them, but they would also have included wealth, socio-economic relations, benefaction, and conformity to cultural norms. How might the image have signaled these various themes and messages? What other questions does this image raise for you?



Animal Sacrifice in Jewish Tradition

Animal sacrifice was an essential element in the worship of Yahweh that took place in the Jerusalem Temple. Prescriptions for sacrificial procedure occur through the Pentateuch, but the most extensive set is found in Leviticus 1-7. The text presents these as part of the prescriptions that God gave to Moses in the wilderness at Sinai, but many scholars believe that they come from a section of the text that was composed after the return from the Babylonian Exile in 539 BC and that reflected the worship in the Jerusalem Temple as it was practiced in the 5th century BC; the composers of the text wanted to endow the practices of their own day with divine authority by representing them as part of God's commands to Moses.

As you read these passages, think about the following questions. What different kinds of sacrifices are mentioned in this text? On what occasions and for what purposes are they offered? What is the role of the priests in the sacrifices? What else strikes you about this text? (If you're interested in the larger context, read the whole passage Leviticus 1-7, which contains regulations for all the different types of sacrifice listed in Lev. 7.37, and Leviticus 16, which contains the regulations for sacrifices on the annual Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur.)

Leviticus 1-7 (selections) NRSV Updated Edition

1.1-9: (1) The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, (2) "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock. (3) "If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance on your behalf before the Lord. (4) You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable on your behalf as atonement for you. (5) The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (6) The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. (7) The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. (8) Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, (9) but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall turn the rest into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

4.1-12: (1) The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, (2) "Speak to the Israelites, saying: When anyone sins unintentionally in any of the Lord's commandments about things not to be done and does any one of them: (3) "If it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull of the herd as a purification offering to the Lord. (4) He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord and lay his hand on the head of the bull; the bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord. (5) The anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting. (6) The priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the curtain of the sanctuary. (7) The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant

incense that is in the tent of meeting before the Lord, and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (8) He shall remove all the fat from the bull of purification offering: the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is around the entrails, (9) the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the lobe of the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys, (10) just as these are removed from the ox of the sacrifice of well-being. The priest shall turn them into smoke upon the altar of burnt offering. (11) But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, as well as its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung—(12) all the rest of the bull—he shall carry out to a clean place outside the camp, to the ash heap, and shall burn it on a wood fire; at the ash heap it shall be burned.

7.37-38: (37) This is the rule of the burnt offering, the grain offering, the purification offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the sacrifice of well-being, (38) which the LORD commanded Moses on Mount Sinai, when he commanded the Israelites to bring their offerings to the LORD, in the wilderness of Sinai.

Animal Sacrifice in Graeco-Roman and Jewish Tradition

As we can see from these passages and the image, animal sacrifice in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish traditions shared some fundamental similarities as well as some striking differences. What are some of those similarities and differences?