

## **Wednesday July 22<sup>nd</sup>: Animal Sacrifice, Persecution, and Martyrdom**

### **James Rives**

In the last session we explored some of the ways that early Christian writers interpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. Although that interpretation may have begun as a metaphor, as Christian thinkers developed the idea further Christ's self-sacrifice gradually came to replace the traditional practice of animal sacrifice as the primary meaning of the term. How, then, did early Christians understand animal sacrifice? The passage of Hebrews that we discussed in the last session (9-10) suggests one of the ways they regarded the Jewish sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple: that they were temporary and imperfect measures, now superseded by the perfect self-sacrifice of Christ. What about animal sacrifices in the Graeco-Roman tradition? In this session we will trace how early Christians came to regard 'pagan' sacrifices as offerings to wicked demons and how those sacrifices came to play an important role in the Roman persecution of Christians.

### **Paul and the Problem of Idol-Food**

One of the problems that Paul's Corinthian correspondents apparently raised in their letter to him was that some people in their community felt free to eat meat that had come from animals killed in traditional Greek sacrifices to the gods; their argument was apparently that since those gods don't really exist, the fact that an animal had been killed as an offering to them didn't really matter one way or another. Paul took a different view. Although his argument here is not easy to follow, he ends by strongly urging his correspondents to have nothing to do with 'pagan' sacrifices. What is his reason for this? What other questions do you have about this text or its wider context?

### 1 Corinthians 8.1-13 and 10.14-21

NRSV Updated Edition, lightly adapted

(8.1) Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (2) Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge, (3) but anyone who loves God is known by him. (4) Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists" and that "there is no God but one." (5) Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—(6) yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (7) It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (8) "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. (9) But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (10) For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? (11) So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed. (12) But when you thus sin against brothers and sisters and wound their conscience when it is weak,

you sin against Christ. (13) Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

10.14) Therefore, my beloved, flee from the worship of idols. (15) I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. (16) The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (17) Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (18) Consider the people of Israel: Are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? (19) What do I imply, then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything or that an idol is anything? (20) No, I imply that what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to *daimonia* and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with *daimonia*. (21) You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of *daimonia*. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of *daimonia*.

In this passage, Paul uses the term *daimonion* (plural *daimonia*), a variation of the Greek word *daimōn* (plural *daimones*). Although the English word ‘demon’ derives from *daimōn*, the Greek word originally lacked the strongly negative connotation of ‘demon’; it instead denoted a superhuman being similar in some ways to a god but less powerful. Paul, however, is using it here in a rather different sense. At 10.20 he seems to be quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. The passage in question comes from Deuteronomy, the song that the Lord instructed Moses to write shortly before his death, in which he upbraided the Israelites for turning from his worship to that of foreign gods: “They provoked me with foreign things, by their abominations they embittered me. They sacrificed to *daimonia* and not to God, to gods they did not know. New recent ones have come, whom their fathers did not know” (Deut. 32.16-17, translated by Melvin K. H. Peters in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, Oxford UP, 2007). It thus seems likely that that by *daimonia* Paul meant here the gods of the gentiles, whose worship converts to Christianity were supposed to reject.

### **Early Christian Ideas about *Daimones* and Animal Sacrifice**

Later Christian writers picked up on the idea that the gods worshipped by gentiles were in fact evil *daimones*, and developed it into an elaborate theory. We find that theory already fully developed in the writings of Justin Martyr, dating to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Justin Martyr was born in Flavia Neapolis (modern Nablus, some 40 kilometers north of Jerusalem) in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. A student of philosophy, especially Platonism, from an early age, he at some point, probably still in his youth, became a Christian. He eventually moved to Rome, where he established a school of Christian philosophy. It was apparently there that he wrote his defenses of Christianity both against Roman authorities, the *First* and *Second Apologies*, and against Jewish tradition, the *Dialogue with Trypho*. In the mid-160s AD he was arrested, tried, and executed as a Christian.

As you read this passage, think about the following questions. What, for Justin, are *daimones*, and what is their role in human life? What connection do they have with traditional Greek offerings such as animal sacrifices, and why are those offerings important to them? What other questions does this passage raise for you?

Justin Martyr, 2 Apology 4(5).2–6

Translated by Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford University Press, 2009), lightly adapted.

When he made the whole universe, God made earthly things subject to human beings. . . . But providential care over human beings and of things beneath the firmament he handed over to angels whom he had established over them. But the angels transgressed this appointed order, succumbed to intercourse with women, and begot children—who are called *daimones*. They then went on to enslave the human race to themselves, partly through magical changes, partly through fear and through the punishments which they inflicted, partly through instruction about sacrifices and incense and libations— things they have needed ever since they were enslaved by passions and desires. And they sowed amongst human beings murders, wars, adulteries, licentiousness, and every kind of evil. Hence it is that poets and storytellers, not knowing that the things which they have recorded were done to men and women and cities and nations by the angels and the *daimones* they begot, attributed these things to the god himself, and to the sons who were begotten as if from him by the sowing of seed and from those who were called his brothers and their children as well. For they— that is, the poets and storytellers— called them by the names which each of the angels gave to himself and to his children.

Justin based his account of the origin of these evil *daimones* on a passage in Genesis (6.1-4) that describes how the sons of God slept with the daughters of men and begot the heroes of old, and even more on the elaboration of this story in later Jewish texts (especially 1 Enoch 19), but he reinterpreted these legends in terms of the Greek tradition of *daimones*.

Justin's teaching about *daimones* and gentile worship seems to have been widely accepted by other early Christian thinkers. One of these was Origen, one of the most important (and in later times most controversial) theologians of the early church (about AD 185-253). The following passage comes from an address that he wrote probably around AD 235 to his friend and patron Ambrose, apparently after he had been arrested on a charge of being Christian; its main purpose is to exhort him to remain steadfast and, if necessary, to die rather than engage in idolatry.

As you read the passage, think about the following questions. Why, according to Origen, do *daimones* need animal sacrifices? Why is it important for Christians to avoid it?

Origen, Exhortation to Martyrdom 45

Translated by John J. O'Meara, Origen: *Prayer/ Exhortation to Martyrdom* (Newman Press, 1954), lightly adapted.

Some give no thought to the question of *daimones*: that is to say, to the fact that these *daimones*, in order to be able to exist in the heavy atmosphere that encircles the earth, must have the nourishment of exhalations and, consequently, are always on the lookout for the savor of burnt sacrifices, blood, and incense. Since they attach no importance to the matter of sacrifice, we would express ourselves on this subject. If men who give sustenance to robbers, murderers, and barbarian enemies of the Great King are punished as criminals against the state, how much more will they be punished justly who through offering

sacrifice proffer sustenance to the minions of evil and thus hold them in the atmosphere of the earth! . . . In my opinion, when there is question of crimes committed by these *daimones* operating against men, they who sustain them by sacrificing to them will be held no less responsible than the *daimones* themselves that do the crimes. For the *daimones* and they that have kept them on earth, where they could not exist without the exhalations and nourishment considered vital to their bodies, work as one in doing evil to mankind.

### **Animal Sacrifice and the Roman Persecution of Christians**

Although it seems that Roman officials began to regard being a Christian as a punishable offense starting in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, they generally seem not to have been proactive in seeking out Christians, but simply handled individual cases when some people accused others of being Christian. That changed in AD 250, when the emperor Decius issued a decree that everyone in the Roman empire had to take part in a traditional animal sacrifice and obtain an official document certifying that they had done so. Although his decree does not seem to have been directed specifically at Christians, it created a serious dilemma for them: either to comply with the decree and take part in an animal sacrifice, which in the eyes of Christian thinkers such as Origen was a very serious offense, or to refuse and thus risk imprisonment or even death.

Our best evidence for Decius' decree comes from a number of papyrus documents discovered in Egypt that are the certificates issued in compliance with the decree's provisions. What specifically did the decree require people to do? To which gods in particular were people required to sacrifice?

#### A certificate of sacrifice from the reign of Decius

Translation by John R. Knipfing, "The Libelli of the Decian Persecution," *Harvard Theological Review* 16.4 (1923) 345–90, no. 7, slightly modified.

*1<sup>st</sup> Hand:* To the commission chosen to superintend the sacrifices. From Aurelia Ammonarion of the village of Theadelphia. I and my children, Aurelius Didymus, Aurelius Nouthius, and Aurelius Taas, have always and without interruption sacrificed and shown piety to the gods, and now in your presence in accordance with the edict's decree we have poured libations and made sacrifice) and tasted the sacred victims. I request you to certify this for me below. Farewell.

*2<sup>nd</sup> Hand:* We, Aurelius Serenus and Aurelius Hermas, saw you sacrificing.

*3<sup>rd</sup> Hand:* I, Hermas, certify it.

*1<sup>st</sup> Hand:* [Dated 14 June, AD 250]

Whereas earlier instances of Roman persecution were strictly local, the decree of Decius created a crisis for Christian groups all across the empire. Christians who refused to comply with the decree were imprisoned and some executed; others went into hiding or tried in various ways to circumvent the decree; perhaps surprisingly, a large number seem to have complied, as the following passage indicates.

Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 7-8 (selections)

Translation by Maurice Bévenot, *Cyprian: De Lapsis and De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate* (Clarendon Press, 1971).

Forthwith, at the first words of the threatening enemy, an immense number of the brothers betrayed their faith, not laid low by the onslaught of the persecution, but they laid themselves low by a voluntary collapse. . . . Many were defeated before they joined battle, laid low without engaging the enemy, and accordingly did not even leave for themselves the appearance of having sacrificed to idols unwillingly.

Cyprian was the bishop of Carthage in North Africa (near modern Tunis), one of the largest cities in the Roman empire; he went into hiding when the decree was announced but kept in touch with his congregation by means of letters. As enforcement of the decree began to wind down, he was faced with a major problem: what was to be done with the many Christians who had complied with the decree ('the lapsed', as he called them)? The passage above comes from a pamphlet he wrote in the spring of AD 251 to fellow leaders of the church in North Africa in advance of a summit meeting that he had called to decide on church policy. Reading between the lines of his writings, it seems clear that at least some of those Christians who had complied with the decree did so not simply out of fear, but because they actually didn't regard participating in an animal sacrifice as such a grave matter. What might their reasoning have been?

The decree of Decius seems to have made it clear to church leaders that, as Origen had warned some fifteen years before, "some give no thought to the question of *daimones*" and "attach no importance to the matter of sacrifice." Their response was to double down on their insistence that participation in animal sacrifice was absolutely incompatible with adherence to Christianity. This message was spread not only through sermons and treatises, but also through stories about Christians who had gone to their deaths rather than engage in animal sacrifice. One of these is the account of the martyrdom of a man named Carpus, who lived in the Greek city of Pergamum in what is now western Turkey.

*Acts of Carpus* 1-8 (summary and select quotations)

Quotations from sections 3, 6, 7, and 8, in the translation of Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford University Press, 2017), lightly adapted.

The *Acts of Carpus* begins with Carpus and his companion Papyrus brought before the Roman governor. The governor asks Carpus his name, and Carpus responds by stating that his "first and chosen name is Christian, but if you seek my worldly name, it is Carpus." The proconsul then reminds him of the imperial decrees requiring people to honor the gods and advises him to sacrifice. Carpus repeats that he is a Christian, declares that he worships Christ, and states that he does not sacrifice to idols. He then continues with a brief disquisition in order to explain himself further: "it is impossible for me to sacrifice to the deceptive images of *daimones*, since those who sacrifice to them are like them." Just as those who worship the true God become like him, "so too do the men who serve these idols become alike to the folly of *daimones* and perish with them in Gehenna." And indeed, it is just that they should be destroyed along with the devil, who because of his innate wickedness has deceived humanity. "Know then, governor, that I do not sacrifice to these idols." After a further brief exchange in which the governor repeatedly presses

him to sacrifice, Carpus responds with a second disquisition about the relationship between God, *daimones*, and humans. After one final refusal to sacrifice, the proconsul has him tortured and turns his attention to Papyrus.

The *Acts of Carpus* presents the conflict between the martyr and the Roman governor in terms of a nonnegotiable mutual exclusivity between Christian identity and the practice of animal sacrifice: according to Carpus, his Christian allegiance is what precludes his obeying the governor's orders. Rather than simply refusing the order, however, the author of the text has Carpus provide a detailed explanation for his refusal, one that draws on the long-standing Christian interpretation of animal sacrifice as sustenance for wicked *daimones*. The *Acts of Carpus* thus not only does it models the way that good Christians should respond to animal sacrifice, but it also provides an explanation for why they should respond in that way.

In the years after Decius' decree, demands to sacrifice became a feature of the more systematic Christian persecutions that took place under the emperor Valerian (AD 257-258) and especially the emperor Diocletian and his colleagues, which began in AD 303 and continued off and on until AD 313. It is thus not surprising that, after the emperor Constantine became a Christian, he and his successors gradually suppressed the practice of animal sacrifice altogether, so that by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century it had effectively disappeared.