

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

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In the second session, we discussed how early Christians came to understand Christ's death as a sacrifice; they eventually regarded it not merely as a sacrifice, but the one true and perfect sacrifice. In the third session, we traced their reinterpretation of traditional Graeco-Roman animal sacrifice as an offering to evil demons and a practice absolutely incompatible with adherence to Christianity. In this session we will explore how early Christians, building on the new understanding of sacrifice as something exemplified above all in Christ's perfect self-sacrifice, extended the idea to encompass other practices and behaviors.

The Eucharist as Sacrifice

From an early date, some Christians began to refer to the ritual of the Eucharist as a sacrifice. The earliest explicit evidence for this comes from an anonymous text known as the Didache, the 'Teaching'. It is very difficult to date; in its extant form it probably dates to the 2nd century AD, but many scholars believe that it contains earlier material that may go back to the 1st century AD.

Didache 14.1-3

Translated by Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Baker Books, 1999)

(1) On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks (*eucharistēsate*), having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. (2) But let no one who has a quarrel with a companion join you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled. (3) For this is the sacrifice concerning which the Lord said, "In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name I marvelous among the nations."

The Greek word for 'give thanks' makes it likely that this passage is referring specifically to the ritual of the Eucharist. The author not only describes that ritual as a sacrifice, but includes a quotation from a passage in the prophet Malachi (1.11 and 14) that refers to the traditional animal sacrifices that took place in the Jerusalem Temple. What is the author's point in quoting this passage? What does his use of this quotation suggest about the way that he understood the Eucharist?

Malachi 1.6-14

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(6) "A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the Lord Almighty. "It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' (7) By offering defiled food on my altar. But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' By saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. (8) When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not

wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty. (9) "Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?"—says the Lord Almighty. (10) "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands. (11) My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the Lord Almighty. (12) "But you profane it by saying, 'The Lord's table is defiled,' and, 'Its food is contemptible.' (13) And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the Lord Almighty. "When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the Lord. (14) "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the Lord Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations."

Justin Martyr, in the dialogue that he wrote about the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, develops this idea further. What does Justin imply is the connections between the Eucharist and the animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple?

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 41.2-3

My translation

(2) Hence God speaks through Malachi, one of the twelve [prophets], as I said earlier, about the sacrifices offered by you at that time: 'I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord; and I will not accept your sacrifices from your hands, because from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be glorified among the gentiles, and in every place incense and a pure sacrifice will be offered to my name, because my name is great among the gentiles, says the Lord, but you profane it'. (3) He prophecies the sacrifices that are offered to him in every place by us gentiles, that is, the bread and the cup of the Eucharist, saying that we glorify his name but you profane it.

On what basis did these writers conceptualize the Eucharist as a sacrifice, one that they could equate with the animal sacrifices previously offered in the Jerusalem Temple? On the surface, the two practices had very little in common: one involves the ritual consumption of bread and wine, the other the slaughter of an animal. In a passage from another of his writings, Justin suggests an answer. What is it?

Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 1.66.2-3

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

We do not receive these things [the bread and wine of the Eucharist] as common bread or common drink. But, just as Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh by means of a word of God, and had flesh and blood for our salvation, just so we have been taught that the food which has been Eucharistized through a word of prayer which comes from him is the flesh

and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh— from which food our blood and flesh are nourished by metabolic process.

Martyrdom as Sacrifice

As we discussed in the second session, early Christians came to understand Christ's death as a self-sacrifice. When members of their community were condemned by Roman officials and executed on the charge of being Christian, they came to describe their deaths as well as a kind of sacrifice. The following passage is an account of the death of the martyr Polycarp, in the Greek city of Smyrna, which took place in the 150s AD. In what ways does the author portray Polycarp as a sacrificial offering?

Martyrdom of Polycarp 14.1-2

Translated by Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

They did not nail him down, but they tied him. With his hands placed behind him and bound, like a ram marked out from a great flock for an offering, prepared as a burnt offering acceptable to God), he looked up to heaven and said: "Lord, God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you . . . , I bless you because you have found me worthy of this day and hour, to receive, among the number of your martyrs, a share in the cup of your Christ for the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be accepted among these in your presence today, in a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you, the truthful and true God, have prepared, revealed beforehand, and fulfilled."

Sacrifice in the Daily Life of Christians

If early Christians gradually came to interpret the ritual of the Eucharist and the deaths of martyrs as sacrifices, they applied the idea more loosely to living a Christian life from more or less the very beginning. Two passages illustrate this tendency.

One comes from Paul's letter to the Christians of Rome, in which he urges his audience "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice." We are now so used to this phrase from the liturgy that it's difficult to imagine how vivid and paradoxical it must have seemed to his original audience. What would their point of reference have been for the term 'sacrifice'? Why would the idea of a 'living sacrifice' have seemed paradoxical? What does Paul seem to have meant by that?

Paul, Romans 12

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(12.1) I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. (2) Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of

the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (3) For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (4) For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, (5) so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (6) We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; (7) ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; (8) the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

(9) Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; (10) love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. (11) Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. (12) Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. (13) Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

(14) Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. (15) Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. (16) Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. (17) Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. (18) If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (19) Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” (20) Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” (21) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Another key text comes from the first letter of Peter, whose author urges his audience “to offer spiritual sacrifices.” Again, would this have seemed paradoxical to the original audience? Why? What does the author seem to have meant?

1 Peter 2.1-5 and 11-17
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(1) Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. (2) Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— (3) if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (4) Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and (5) like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

(11) Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. (12) Conduct yourselves honorably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. (13) For the Lord’s sake be subject to every human authority,^[a] whether to the emperor as supreme (14) or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. (15) For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. (16) As servants of God, live as free people,

yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. (17) Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

The Changing Meaning of Sacrifice

Although the *New Yorker* cartoon is of course a joke, I hope that we can now see how that joke is based on an important cultural and theological shift in the meaning of sacrifice. Although this is a gradual and complex transformation, what strikes you as the most important changes and developments?



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