

CHRIST'S SACRIFICE AS APOLOGETIC: AN APPLICATION OF HEB 10:1–18

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Recently the *Nor'easter*, the newsletter for the northeast region of the Presbyterian Church (USA), issued the following warning:

Presbyteries in the Synod of the Northeast recently received a communication from the National Presbyterian Youth Ministry Council asking that congregations be alerted to the dangers posed by “new religious movements which prey on today’s youths.”

The communication was issued by the council in response to a letter received from a mother living in Boston whose teenage son twice has attempted suicide.

In writing to the council the mother reported that the family had found the young man had in his possession materials from an organization calling itself “The Church of Euthanasia.” The organization would appear to distribute satanic music and bumper stickers encouraging self-destruction as well as a newsletter.

“The youth council was very concerned and struggled how to respond,” reports Nancy Rodman, director of the resource center for Monmouth Presbytery and until recently a member of the Youth Council.

“The council decided to write to our own people to alert them that this so-called church is active and that we are concerned about what they are doing.”¹

Suicide attempts in Boston, immolations in Texas, poisonings and shootings in Guyana and Switzerland, satanic sacrifices in Greece—even the briefest perusal across the religious landscape of the late-twentieth century reveals much to be concerned about. Typically the cause of this concern is the self-destructive element within many post-Christian movements. Like the reputed Church of Euthanasia, pre-, sub- and post-Christian movements often issue a most disturbing requirement: what we might term capital commitment. The Church of Jesus Christ, seeking to respond to such a requirement, will find itself driven back for an apologetic to the bedrock confession embodied in such passages as Heb 10:1–18. Those foundational words, so liberating to the Jews and Gentiles of NT times, are applicable to combatting capital religious requirements today. Because Jesus Christ was sacrificed, no one needs to give sacrifice or to be sacrificed. Loss of this truth provides an explanation for both the continuation of demands for sacrifice and the re-

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¹ “Congregations Alerted to Dangers of New Religious Movements,” *Nor'easter* (January/February 1995) 5.

introduction of such requirements today. To examine this thesis we will explore the terminal sacrifice in Heb 10:1–6, Hebrew/Israelite substitutionary sacrifice as opposed to Canaanite human sacrifice, and the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice as detailed in Heb 10:7–18. Finally we will take a brief look at corporal and subliminal human sacrifice today and at applying Christ's sacrifice as hermeneutic to this literally life-and-death issue.

I. THE TERMINAL SACRIFICE IN HEB 10:1–6

The book of Hebrews itself could be seen as a kind of general apologetic written to explain and defend why Christians should no longer seek atonement with God by offering temple sacrifices but should now rely upon faith in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice.

Hebrews 10:1 begins by explaining that the law itself is only a shadow (*skia*), not the *eikōn*, the more clearly defined representation or form of the things to come. Yearly the same sacrifices are offered, but they are never able to make those who attend perfectly cleansed from all their sins. Had this been the case, the writer continues in v. 2, no one would have a sin-troubled conscience, once and for all (*hapax*) having been cleansed. The perfect passive participle of "cleansed" (*katharizō*) indicates a past action with continuing effects. But, yearly, the sacrifices serve as reminders that sin remains. Neither the sacrificial blood of bulls nor of male goats is able to remove sin permanently. But such news should not come as a complete surprise, the writer indicates in vv. 5–7 by citing Ps 40:6–8, ascribing David's words now to Christ. In place of these temporary sacrifices a body (*sōma*) has been prepared for Christ (v. 5).

To readers and hearers of Hebrews a "prepared body" must have set off warning signals. While the context is the superseding by Christ of the substitutionary sacrificial demands of Jewish ritual law, the introduction of a person's body being prepared for sacrifice may have summoned up as well Canaanite and even, perhaps, Greco-Roman religious demands for human sacrifice. Certainly that was the context in which OT sacrifices were conducted.

II. HUMAN SACRIFICE IN CONTRAST TO HEBREW/ISRAELITE PRACTICE

In Genesis 22 we have the dramatic account of Abraham preparing for the blood sacrifice of Isaac, the lesson of Hebrews 10—that God will provide the sacrifice—being graphically demonstrated. What God was combatting here was human sacrifice as practiced by the Canaanites in Deut 12:31, the Moabites in 2 Kgs 3:27, the Sepharvites in 17:31, and in the worship of Baal in Jer 19:5. This is a practice forbidden to Israel in Lev 18:21; 20:2–5; Deut 12:31.

Even sublimated or stylized forms of self-sacrifice were abominable to God. When Elijah faced off against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the weapons were divine fire and vicarious sacrifice. The priests of Baal call

on their god and nothing happens, so they resort to self-flagellation and laceration, sacrificing themselves symbolically to appease and entreat heaven. Elijah does nothing of the sort, resorting only to prayer. Then he finishes their futile sacrifice for them.

Such practices as lacerating oneself, passing one's children through fire, and spilling human blood upon the ground to fertilize it are abominable to God. The Canaanites lost the land for sacrificing in such manners to false deities. Alberto R. W. Green sees "strong implication" that even Israel began to view human sacrifice as "an acceptable aspect of their Yahwistic belief," due to the ritual being "common to most groups in the region of whose cultural background they were a part." The "denunciations of this rite by Israel's early prophets" as "contrary to Yahweh's will" are "an indication that, even during the earlier period, its existence should be construed as a misconception of early Yahwism."²

The OT evidence, however, can make one's conclusion even more definite than this careful statement of Green's. In Jer 19:4–5 the prophet declares that because the people have continued to build altars to Baal where children are sacrificed as burnt offerings, God will make Judah and Jerusalem be besieged, fall by the sword, and die (19:6–9). As the land was taken from the Canaanites, so it will be ripped away from Israel and Judah by God allowing their exile, estranging them from the land that their practices are cursing. Throughout OT times God was teaching people, as Ps 51:16–17 explains, that the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart. As Prov 8:35–36 counsels, the one who finds God finds life, and the one who does not find God only hurts one's own self. Anyone who hates God loves death.

That point was not simply historical but was contextual as well to the widening NT Church, surrounded as it was by the Greco-Roman culture of Israel's overlord. Catherine Kroeger observes that the pagan religious context of the recipients of the NT epistles was built on myths filled with violent imagery of goddesses and gods causing death. As a result, the cult of Artemis involved ritual murder. When it was sublimated, as for example in Haloo, a man was symbolically nicked in the throat with a knife. In Sparta youths were ritually beaten before the altar of Artemis Orthia. While goats were substituted for sacrifice at Brauron, the Taurians were said to sacrifice strangers and shipwrecked sailors. Tatian reports such sacrifices at Rome in the second century. Tertullian censured not only Diana of the Scythians but also Mercury of the Gauls, Saturn (Kronos) of the Africans and Jupiter of the Latins for requiring human sacrifice for appeasement. Carthage, according to Diodorus of Sicily, in national emergency would put hundreds of infants into the bronze arms of Kronos, from which they would roll into a pit of fire. While Phoenicians offered dozens of infants yearly, the Albanians in synecdoche offered a temple slave each year to Selene, a deity at times identified

² A. R. W. Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 199.

with Artemis, while at Ephesus a yearly processional in the goddess' honor involved great slaughter of bystanders, according to Symeon Metaphrastes.³

This penchant for bloodletting was to provide a legacy for paganism, continuing on through the middle ages. When archeologists Anne Ross and Don Robins examined the sacrificial remains of Celtic and Danish victims sunk into bogs to appease the deities, "bloodthirsty" was the word they found best described the pagan practice. Druidic sacrifice was noted and detailed by ancient travelers such as Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus.⁴

Against such a tenacious and pernicious history of human sacrifice spilling out across cultures, belief systems and millennia, the writer of Hebrews could understand if Jews and God-fearing Gentiles cringed at the mention of a human body sacrificed in Christ and retreated to the substitutionary temple sacrifices permitted to Israel. Such a reason, perhaps, may partly explain why a careful exposition of the significance of what Christ's death meant was provided.

III. THE EFFICACY OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE IN HEB 10:7-18

The scandal of what appeared to have been mere human sacrifice in Heb 10:5 having been explained, the writer now hastens to show that the impetus of this action has been God's. Just as God provided Abraham with a sacrifice, so does God provide humanity with one permanently in Christ. As v. 6 explains that God takes no pleasure in whole burnt offerings, so Christ declares in v. 7 that, just as the Scriptures prophesied, he has come to do God's will—that is, give an offering in which God will take pleasure. Since the law decreed whole burnt offerings and sin offerings that did not please God, so in doing God's will Christ abolished those practices so that people might be sanctified through a once-and-for-all offering of the body of Jesus Christ (vv. 9-10). What priests had to do yearly, Christ had only to do once. Then in completion he returned to his rightful place of honor in the Godhead.

At this point the passage takes a most ferocious turn. Verse 13 states: "Henceforth he has been waiting until his enemies are placed as a footstool under his feet." Verse 14 reminds us that Christ has accomplished his work of sanctification. The Holy Spirit bears testimony to this fact, reintroducing a thought similar to that of Ps 51:17: God wants a covenantal law written not on lawbooks but on hearts and minds. Such a covenant of love and of will eliminates past lawlessness and brings God's forgiveness: "But where forgiveness of these is, no longer is offering made for sins" (v. 18).

The sacrificial act of Christ, which is the central revelation of the entire new covenant, holds at bay a most sobering scenario of human sacrifice both

³ C. C. Kroeger, "God/dess of the Past," *The Goddess Revival* (A. B. Spencer, D. F. G. Hailson, C. C. Kroeger, W. D. Spencer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 60-63. Cf. Tatian *Advice to the Greeks* 29.1; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 3. While *The Goddess Revival* warns of the danger of shifting toward a predominantly female (or male) definition of God, a positive theology for women can be found in A. B. Spencer, *Beyond The Curse* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985).

⁴ W. D. Spencer, "God as Male," *Goddess Revival* 240-241 n. 28.

capital and subliminal. When that central bedrock fact is lost, all sorts of horrors are inflicted in the pursuit of religion. Such sobering reality is not confined to history but marks the sweep of the panorama of competing faiths we see around us in our global religious context today.

IV. HUMAN SACRIFICE CORPORAL AND SUBLIMINAL TODAY

Theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo has observed: "Sacrifice is prominent in all world religions. Actually it is inconceivable to have a religion without some form of sacrifice."⁵ Indeed the African context in which Adeyemo writes is most instructive to those of us in western cultures currently experiencing a resurgence of paganism in the neopagan movements.

In various African countries a revival of traditional religions is happening under the political-cultural rubric of "national identity," and with them clandestine human sacrifices are being promoted. Particularly onerous to Africans are the divine emanations termed lesser divinities and the ancestral spirits who represent human concerns to the Supreme Being. These lay great blood burdens on humanity. The revelation that Christ's death was the once-and-for-all sufficient sacrifice needed in all human endeavor is breathtakingly liberating when blood sacrifice can be demanded by, for example, some important Yoruban and Ghanaian rites, as when a wise Ghanaian woman, possessed of the Kra of Nyame (spirit of the Shining One) is expected to preserve the well-being of a village by sacrificing her daughter at puberty or a niece to bury under a village's sacred tree. Or an Akan king might be required to sacrifice a young man to ensure "revival of the king's spirit."⁶

When Joseph Martin Hopkins conducted a survey in Malawi he discovered that contemporary businesspeople, seeking to prosper their businesses, were often directed to sacrifice a family member, the parts being used for spells.⁷

The significance of each requirement of human sacrifice, of course, varies within each faith. Edward Tylor viewed sacrifice as "a gift made to a deity as if he were a man." He likened a worshiper to "the suppliant who bows before his chief, laying a gift at his feet and making his humble petition." That the deity likes the gift he considers a "ruder" conception than that "the virtue lies in the worshiper depriving himself of something prized."⁸ The ultimate prize is the giving of human life. E. O. James saw sacrifice as necessary, involving "the destruction of a victim for the purpose of maintaining or restoring a right relationship of man to the sacred order," to "effect a bond of union" by neutralizing evil.⁹ For Walter Burkert it is "the basic experience

⁵ T. Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel) 33.

⁶ *Ibid.* 41.

⁷ J. M. Hopkins, "Theological Students and Witchcraft Beliefs," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11/1 (1980) 60-61.

⁸ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Holt, 1989) 2.375-376.

⁹ E. O. James, *Sacrifice and Sacrament* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962) 13.

of the 'sacred.' *Homo religiosus* acts and attains self-awareness as *homo necans*.¹⁰ People can identify with God by themselves taking hold of the power of life and death. Hubert and Mauss contend that "sacrifice always implies a consecration; in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain."¹¹ One sacrificed is permanently sanctified. Royden Keith Yerkes sees the modern understanding as "renunciation, usually destruction, of something valuable in order that something more valuable may be obtained," standing in contrast to the ancient meaning of pleasing or averting the deities.¹² Hermann Strack sees that modern meaning also operative in ancient times, however—especially before sea voyages, at the beginnings of wars and before battles when the lives of a few were sacrificed in entreaty for the lives of the many.¹³ If James Frazier and other early anthropologists viewed sacrifice as a form of magic, more recent scholars have disagreed—not only from such western viewpoints as Alberto Green's and M. F. C. Bourdillon's¹⁴ but also from scholars with eastern viewpoints like Emeke Ikenga-Metuh. He asks:

How justifiable is it to study African religious beliefs with western conceptual schemes? Is this not reductional? Does this not involve grave risks in attempting to fit African beliefs into foreign moulds? These fears seem justified because evolutionists, anthropologists, and even Christian theologians often tend to misrepresent African beliefs.¹⁵

He points out that Igbo sacrifices are primarily offered to placate spirits, remove pollution from the earth, and ward off evil. The concept of the mythic dimension of sacrifice has most prominently been refined and developed in our time by Joseph Campbell, whose discussion of sacrifice as seeding the earth with human blood has provided for many a framework for understanding the role of sacrifice in current neopaganism.¹⁶ And this list of the meanings of sacrifice in various faith schemes ancient and modern is hardly exhaustive. But despite the variety of significance for sacrifice, the common denominator that runs throughout non-Christian religions is the common need to sacrifice. To this common defining element the sacrifice of Jesus speaks most potently.

V. APPLYING THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS AS AN APOLOGETIC TODAY

In the most general sense current religions can be classified into three broad categories: power faiths, lifestyle faiths, and relationship faiths. While

¹⁰ W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983) 3.

¹¹ H. Hubert and M. Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago) 9.

¹² R. K. Yerkes, *Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religions and Early Judaism* (New York: Scribner, 1952) 2, 6.

¹³ H. Strack, *The Jew and Human Sacrifice* (London: Cope and Fenwick, 1909) 30.

¹⁴ M. F. C. Bourdillon, "Introduction," *Sacrifice* (ed. Bourdillon and M. Fortes; London: Academic, 1980) 7.

¹⁵ E. Ikenga-Metuh, "Essence and Meaning of Sacrifice Among the Igbo of Nigeria," *JRT* 41/2 (1984–85) 19.

¹⁶ See particularly J. Campbell, *The Way of the Seeded Earth, Part 1: The Sacrifice* (New York: Harper, 1988).

no categorization does justice to the subtleties and distinctions that mark each off from another, certain distinctives in their perspectives, particularly regarding their use of sacrifice, do appear to emerge. Power religions are those traditional (as opposed to written scripture) faiths that seek to balance power between the human and the divine. The traditional Canaanite faiths we cited earlier would fit here, as would pre-Columbian Carib faith and African traditional religions and their new world extensions in Haitian Voudoun, Latin Santeria, Brazilian Condoblé, Trinidadian Shango and Jamaican Obeah. The pagan systems that permeated Europe and produced Druidism into the neopagan revivals of Wicca and Asatru also qualify as power religions. For these, sacrifice is done to appease God's emanations or to enlist the divine through those powers to enhance one's life. For the Teton Dakota, communion with the gods was achieved after fainting from the exhaustion and pain of thrusting a sharpened stick through one's skin in the sun dance. For many Native Americans, sacrifice has been a part of the ritual of life's passages. In the sweat lodge practices women pierce their arms with eagle feathers or men pierce their chest or back and secure themselves to trees. When these fastenings are torn away, the blood poured out as an oblation on the earth is thought to return strength. In modern Wicca, sacrifice is sublimated as new initiates are blindfolded and their ankles and hands tied.¹⁷ Spells in power religions across cultures and systems often require blood sacrifice before pagan deities. Thus in contemporary goddess worship and in the secular men's movement the reintroduction of pagan deities as archetypes and even in worship has become one of the most distressing aspects for Christians, particularly considering the past penchant for spilling blood. Even when sublimated, the call for sacrifice is disturbing as when Starhawk celebrates Christ's crucifixion but deprecates the resurrection:

In estranged culture, the image that links the male with mortality is, of course, Christ crucified. The iconography of Christianity is hardly different—as many have pointed out—from that of the ancient Virgin Goddess and her sacred child, who dies only to be reborn into immortality. Perhaps that similarity explains some of the power of Christianity—its hold on the heart and the mind. For the image of the tortured male body on the cross confronts our unconscious hope that maleness itself can remove us from the sphere of mortality, from death and pain. But instead of forcing us through that confrontation to a deeper connection with our own mortal flesh and life, Christianity cheats us with the false promise of an otherworldly resurrection.¹⁸

Her goal is to call for a similar symbolic, willing death of the male to fertilize the earth:

And the God descends. Beautiful Boy, He is named Adonis, Osiris, Dionysos. The women mourn: the Goddess mourns, their tears stain the ground; His blood runs in red carpets of flowers. Kore is the poppy; He is the anemone. He chooses to go down because, like Icarus, He has flown and found that His attempt to escape earth brought only another sort of destruction. Now He wants to know His body, His bones from the inside; He feels life stirring in Him, rising

¹⁷ A. B. Spencer, "God is Reflected," *Goddess Revival* 165, 266 n. 28 (cf. also pp. 188–190).

¹⁸ Starhawk, *Dreaming The Dark* (Boston: Beacon, 1982) 89.

up from below, and He wants to know its source, to abandon Himself, to be one with that source. For that, He is willing to sacrifice.¹⁹

This kind of mythology was one prime reason victims were sunk into bogs. A graphic portrayal of the need for males to die in fertility religions has been fleshed out powerfully by Mary Renault in her novel *The King Must Die*. Satanism, of course, is the far extreme of power religion.

Lifestyle religions as exemplified most in eastern faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism practice a sublimated form of sacrifice in their often extreme asceticism. Withdrawal from eating meat, from sexual union, from ownership of material things is required to achieve holiness. According to the Bhagavad-Gita, "sacrifice, charity and penance are never to be given up; they must be performed by all intelligent men. They are purifying even for the great souls." It cautions, however, that these should be regarded as duties and no result should be expected. They are necessary to our purification.²⁰ While the plight of those victimized by unscrupulous avatars, languishing in poverty while their divine masters bask in luxury, is what springs most to Christians' minds, particularly since our eyes have been opened by the abuse of our own false televangelists, the difference is that sacrifice in extremities proportional to the purification one seeks is laid upon all followers of eastern religions.

Relationship religions that stress prayer and communication with the divine like Judaism and Christianity and their offshoots—Islam, Mormonism, Rastafari, Jehovah's Witnesses, syncretistic faiths—incorporate freedom from sacrifice to the measure that they take the ultimate sacrifice of Christ seriously, gauging by the degree of salvific duties required and extent of their apprehension of the full purification offered by God in Christ's sacrifice. Further, no longer do some Orthodox Jews or apocalyptically-misled conservative Christians or Christian cultists need to look forward to sacrifices again being offered someday in the temple. Since the once-and-for-all death of Christ has been offered, the dimmer shadows of offering are no longer needed.

To all of these faiths as they proliferate in our increasingly shrinking global community, the sacrifice of Jesus does speak powerfully. No mystery exists why so many ancient pagans, traditional religion adherents, or Taino-Arawaks rejoiced at the first proclamation of the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Burdened by demands that they give up their produce, their livestock, their children, their lives in the name of religious duty, they rejoiced as the good news of Jesus truly proclaimed release to those religiously captive.

Today all around us that burden to sacrifice is being laid on people again. Forgetting what the good news of Jesus combatted, our contemporaries are turning again to faiths that, bereft of Jesus' fully efficacious sacrifice, have hidden within them subliminal or overtly corporeal demands for sacrifice.

¹⁹ Ibid. 90.

²⁰ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1968) 18.5–6.

The most potent apologetic message Christians can bring is the good news of Jesus' sacrifice as detailed in Heb 10:10: "At God's willing, we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all."²¹

²¹ In translating this last verse, readers may puzzle over whether "sanctified" or "being sanctified" is the best rendering. A. T. Robertson suggests one compare the descriptive durative use of the present participle in v. 14 with the perfect passive of *hagiazō* used in v. 10 (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934] 891). The periphrastic perfect, which is a construction using the present tense of *eimi* and the perfect participle as we see in v. 10, is usually intensive but can be consummative (cf. H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1957] 232 [4], 202 [2]). Robertson in his discussion of the extensive considers the durative to have "punctiliar" or "consummative effect." As the point of this passage is that Christ's sacrifice has sanctified us "once and for all," that we are no longer in a process similar to that under the old covenant wherein sacrifice needs to continue, the punctiliar or consummative rendering seems the most accurate. For those who wish further reading, an application of the truths of this passage in ministering to those who are suffering can be found in A. B. Spencer and W. D. Spencer, *Joy Through the Night: Biblical Resources for Suffering People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).