

Human Sacrifice in the Bible

I have always been troubled by the instances of human sacrifice in the Old Testament. Biblical literalists completely miss the point of the story about Abraham offering his son, Isaac, as a human sacrifice. They viewed Abraham's obedience to God's command as perfectly OK, even admirable. That is the problem with viewing all parts of Scripture as carrying equal weight and being equally "truthful." One must resort to work-a-rounds and rationalizations to explain God's behaviors which are contrary to the teachings of Christ.

The question we should be asking is not whether the story is literally true or not, or whether or not God was justified in condoning human sacrifice. The question we should be asking is why the story is there in the first place. By viewing the story as myth, rather than literal history, we don't have to justify God's actions. Instead, we are able to view the story as representative of an evolution of human thought regarding the nature of God and how we should be relating to God.

Eventually, all traces of human sacrifice were expunged from the Hebrew religion. Nevertheless, the sacrificial system of worship continued, until AD 70. Animal sacrifices were offered for various purposes: to feed God, appease God's anger, thank God for His blessings, and for the expiation of sins. As time went by, the focus changed from the external act to the internal attitudes of heart. It is not the killing of an animal that pleases God, but the change heart that accompanies it. *"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."* (Hosea 6:6)

I believe Jesus understood this. His teaching was all about internals, not externals. Evil deeds originate in heart and that is where the solutions may be found, as well. Jesus' followers also understood this but had an inadequate view of Scripture. In their attempt to understand and attach meaning to Jesus' death, they looked to the Hebrew Bible for clues. They failed to completely understand and recognize the progression of thought. Rather than viewing Jesus' death as a demonstration of Godly love and humility, they viewed it as a human sacrifice, offered to God to take away the penalty for sins and appease a very angry God. For some, this was a way of escaping the consequences of their sins by figuratively heaping them onto a scapegoat (Jesus) and getting rid of them in a somewhat artificial way.

Jesus died for us in the sense that He died for our benefit. He demonstrated humility and sacrificial love, and provided an example for us to follow. We atone for our sins by repenting of them in our hearts, not by heaping them onto Jesus and thereby absolving ourselves of personal responsibility. We atone for our sins by identifying with Christ as we die to sin and are resurrected together with Him to new and changed lives. *"We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer"* (Romans 6:2)

Richard Goyette