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ANCIENT SACRIFICE.

BY

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ANCIENT SACRIFICE.

TO our modern intellects all killing of brute or man, for the pleasure of the most High, seems so absurd, that perhaps we wonder how such a notion arose. Nor is the topic very simple. To compose the idea of Sacrifice, or Sacred Act, or Act of Faith (*Auto da Fe*), streams have flowed together from many sources.

A first primitive notion is this: that if for human food we take the life of some tame animal, which is in our power and under our protection, it befits to ask permission from the Author of life. HE gave that precious gift alike to sheep and oxen, as to man; therefore we must not slay lightly and causelessly, but only when we can ask his blessing on the deed. In the case of wild animals, the hurry and tumult of hunting did not permit formalities of slaughter. All that could then be done beforehand, was to offer some preliminary prayer, that should sanctify the hunting.

But from the primary recognition of God as Lord and centre of life, other things followed. In some nations, the blood, as seat of life, was accounted sacred. It then might not be used for food, but was poured out religiously. Mystery being thus added to the blood, a wild and base fancy was liable to arise, that God, or some God, had pleasure in the blood. Again, the man who had skill in slaughtering easily added the religious character to his art, and nothing was more natural than to remunerate his services of butchery and prayer by a portion of the slain beast. Hereby the original *Popa* (or *cook*?) became identified with the *Sacerdos*; and expected

to feed his household by perquisites from the altar. Thus slaughter became a sacred act, performed by a priest when possible. It next became the interest of priesthood to urge sacrifice as a religious duty, that is, the sacrifice of *such* animals as were approved for human food. Moreover, vulgar fantasy conspired to give currency to the belief, that the god himself partook in the sacrifice, especially by its smell. On this the Greek poets are often explicit, and in Genesis we read, "Jehovah smelled a sweet savour," as denoting his acceptance of Noah's sacrifice (viii. 21.)

Human sacrifice undoubtedly had one of its sources in the fantastic picture of a future world, where the departed soul would need various human aids. In the grave of a chieftain were buried not only his armour and his weapons of war, but perhaps his war-horse too, slain to accompany him in the other world. This we know to have been a modern practice among North American Indians. But a great Scythian or Tartar emperor required nobler victims. In the world of spirits he must have, not a single war-horse, but a body-guard of mounted youths: these must be slain for his service; nay, according to Herodotus, to accompany a king of the Scythians (the *Scolotai* in Southern Russia) they ordinarily strangled one of his concubines, his cup-bearer, his cook, his groom, his page, his errand-bearer (or adjutant?), and a stud of horses. We cannot doubt that the same fundamental ideas suggested the slaughters in Dahomey, on the death of a king. Cruel as we must deem these acts, they were not malignant, and did not imply peculiar atrocity in the agents. No life was regarded as of any value, if the convenience of the king required its sacrifice. As, at his command, a dutiful subject rushed into certain death against a formidable enemy, so to accompany a king in the other world was an ordinary duty of loyalty: nor had any one a conscience against killing innocent brethren for this purpose.

Perhaps, if we could know it, the slain were considered blessed, and even thought themselves so. Those killed religiously in Thibet by the arrows of the boy called *Buth*, were accounted holy and peculiarly fortunate, according to the testimony of the Jesuit missionaries of 1661. Not very unlike is the moral complexion of a practice among the ancient Getæ, or Goths of the Danube. A belief in immortality did but make human life cheaper to them. Every fifth year they sent a messenger to their deity, Zalmolxis, to inform him of their needs, and the mode of dispatch was as follows:—He was tossed into the air, and received on the points of three spears. If he died forthwith, the god was accounted propitious; but if the victim or messenger continued alive, he was reviled as wicked, and another was sent in his place. These accounts show how easily, among men accustomed to slaughter in battle, poetical fantasy may lead straight to human sacrifice.

The phenomena known to us concerning the Greeks are rather peculiar. In their historical era, they utterly repudiated human sacrifice, yet they unanimously supposed it to have been practised by their ancestral heroes on various occasions; and their poets abound in moralisings about Agamemnon slaying his daughter—the most signal case, but not at all solitary. Yet the earliest poets show total unacquaintance with such tales, which (with abundance of other sensational horrors) are mere after-invention, suggested probably by the practices of other nations. Some of their neighbours had wild fantasies of their own, as in the drowning of horses to a river god. One may conjecture that, as in the passage of an army both horses and men were apt to be drowned, it was imagined that by a voluntary sacrifice of a few horses to the *honour* of the god, his jealousy would be satisfied, and a favourable passage secured.

This opens a new topic. Greeks and Hebrews alike attributed to Superior Powers a certain jealousy of anything pre-eminent in man or in terrestrial things. Thus Polycrates, according to Herodotus, being too prosperous, attempted (but in vain) to propitiate divine jealousy by voluntary sacrifices. But among the Greeks, this never reached to the point of human victims.

The solemn religious sacrifice of select prisoners of war was apparently normal to the Mexican races, and may have been practised by some nations of the Old World. It is imputed to the Carthaginians; but many circumstances lessen the credit of the charge. Nevertheless, it is easy to see, how in the interests of humanity any priest or general might devise the scheme of a formal sacrifice, in order to stop indiscriminate massacre of prisoners. Perhaps not enough is known of the facts, to justify any definite theory. That human sacrifice occasionally arose out of *vows*, is more certain. The vow of a sacred spring (*ver sacrum*), as recorded in Livy (xxii. 10), was limited to the births among pigs, sheep, goats, and oxen, all of which were ceded to the god under certain conditions: but it is too evident in Leviticus xxvii. 28, 29, that the Hebrew vow might legitimately include human children or slaves; in which case the law (as we now read it) expressly forbids the redemption of a human being, but commands that he be put to death, if he have been devoted to Jehovah. The only practical illustration of this which we find in the history is the case of Jephthah's daughter; which suffices to show that this was really the currently received law of early Israel, however rare in practice so extreme and rash a vow. But (what is here to be observed) not the remotest idea appears, in any of the cases of sacrifices hitherto adduced, of its being an expiation or atonement for sin. No doubt, whatever happened, was readily interpreted as entailing some

“gift to the altar,” which was generally a gift to the priest’s table. Thus the birth of a child in a Hebrew family required the offering of a lamb, or at least two young pigeons; not as atoning for any moral sin, but (according to the notion of the early Hebrews) as removing ceremonial uncleanness. The offering is in itself analogous to a baptismal fee paid by a Christian parent to the clergyman. So among the Greeks there was sacrifice preliminary to marriage—*προτέλεια*.

The same remark applies to the other Hebrew sacrifices, which are spoken of as expiatory. They never are supposed to remove moral sin, crime, or its punishment. A thief was ordered to restore the double; but his offence having nothing of ceremonial pollution, no ceremonial expiation was imagined. Nor was it dissimilar among the Romans. If any thing *ill-omened* occurred, such as a monstrous birth, or a shower of stones, or a cow walking upstairs, or a Vestal virgin being unchaste, the consul might be ordered to “allay the omens” by a propitiatory sacrifice; but only external mischief or ceremonial indecorum was contemplated as thus removable. The great day of Atonement among the Hebrews was expiatory of accidental ceremonial neglects alone (*ἀγνοήματα*, Heb. ix. 7). I believe that there is no standing ground at all for an argument which should impute to Hebrews, Greeks, or Romans—the ancient nations best known to us—that any slaying of victims could atone for conscious wilful sin or crime. Whenever misfortune came, they were liable to be tormented by the fear that they had unawares neglected some honour to a god or goddess, some ceremonial duty; as Meleager after the Calydonian boarhunt did homage to other gods, but forgot Artemis: and wherever there was a complex ceremonial law, such forgetfulness might always be suspected. Hence there was no end of such propitiations; but in Greece and

Rome they died out with superstitious fears. Temples received endowments, and priests became too respectable to propagate any self-invented follies for the sake of increasing the sacrifices. Besides, contributions to the *treasury* of temples had also become an established form of piety.

One other ground of sacrifice has to be named—that which accompanied the making of a COVENANT. The sacrifice was supposed to add force and security to the promise or oath. How this should be, is perhaps most clearly explained by the ancient Roman practice recorded by Polybius (iii. 35), of swearing "*per Jovem Lapidem*," as the vulgar called it. He who was to swear, took a stone in his hand, and said: "If I intend or practise anything against this engagement, I pray that while all other men remain safe in their own countries, under their own laws, with their own modes of life, their temples, and their sepulchres, I alone may be tossed out, as this stone is now." With these words he flings the stone out of his hand. In the third book of the Iliad, when a treaty is to be made, a sacrifice and libation of wine is essential. Agamemnon slays the lambs, and the chieftains pour wine on the earth. The people around pray,— "Whoever shall first transgress the treaty, as this wine is spilt on the ground, so may his brains be spilt!" We can hardly doubt that the same was the meaning of the sacrifice: "As these murdered lambs fall helpless, so may he who breaks the treaty be murdered." In the Hebrew Pentateuch, Moses is represented (Exod. xxiv. 8) as sprinkling the people with "the blood of the covenant." But it can hardly be too often repeated, that neither here or in the sprinkling of the door-posts with blood of the Paschal Lamb, does the remotest idea show itself of atonement for sin.

The modern Jews, I believe, unanimously uphold that interpretation of their law, which alone is sug-

gested by intelligent criticism : moreover, the learned and eloquent writer of the Christian " Epistle to the Hebrews " appears fully to admit all that is said above. He is indeed guilty of one great confusion, occasioned by the ambiguous sense of the Greek word *διαθήκη*, which, primarily meaning a *disposition* of affairs, is used either for any special arrangement, *i.e.*, covenant, or for a man's Last Will and Testament, which is to take effect after his death. It is undeniable that in Heb. ix. 16, 17, 20, the writer has argued illogically by confounding Covenant and Testament—and has bequeathed to Christendom the absurd phrases, Old and New *Testament*. But he is consistent in his declaration that the legal ceremonies, whether gifts or sacrifices, did not touch " the conscience " (ix. 9) of the worshipper, and could only " purify the flesh " (ix. 13) ; and that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (x. 4, 11) ; nor does it anywhere appear that he mistook the slaughter of the Paschal Lamb for a sin-atonement, as perhaps we must admit that Paul does, on comparing 1 Cor. x. 16, 18, with 1 Cor. v. 7. It is therefore the more astonishing that the writer to the Hebrews or any of his Christian contemporaries learned in the Hebrew law could have dreamed of finding there a weight of analogy for the wild idea, that the violent death of a righteous being by the hands of wicked men can be construed as a sacrifice pleasing to God, which purifies the conscience of believers. Had he argued as follows : " If the blood of bulls, offered by a priest in the performance of his duty, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, HOW MUCH MORE shall *the blood of a holy prophet, wickedly shed*, purify your consciences from a sense of sin," his words would not have been plausible. The argument is visibly monstrous. But by throwing into the back ground the fact that the murder of Jesus was an odious crime, and of course, in every

Christian estimate, horrible to God, and converting it into a *voluntary* offering of *himself*, he seeks to glorify the event. "Christ (says he) *through the Eternal Spirit* offered himself *without spot* to God" (ix. 14): and again, 25, 26, "Nor yet that he should offer himself often, . . . but once, . . . to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." It is notable how such a writer becomes a victim to other men's blunders, error attracting error. Thus he quotes the Greek Septuagint, "a body hast thou prepared me," as the translation of Psalm xl. 6 of our Version, which, on the contrary, agrees with the Hebrew, "mine ears hast thou pierced." Out of this spurious word "body" (x. 5, 10) he actually makes an argument which reverses the obvious sense of the Psalm. The Psalmist insists, "God does not want *sacrifice*, but scorns it: he wants *obedience*:" but this writer makes out that the Psalmist means, "God does not want the sacrifice of *bulls and goats*, but the sacrifice of a *spotless prophet*." The Psalm says nothing about bulls and goats, but about sacrifice and sin-offering absolutely. Now let us concede that we have a right to forget the part which wicked men took in the death of Jesus, and to treat it as his own voluntary act; imagine for a moment that it had been strictly so—(which ought to make this argument *better*, as well as clearer)—and what will be the position of things? Jesus will be made out to have *slain himself* "for the sins of many," in order to "sanctify" his disciples, and "purify them from an evil conscience" by his "one sacrifice for sins" (Heb. x. 12, 14, 22). Would not every Christian shudder at having such a historical fact put before him, as a mode of salvation? One is apt to seem slanderous and blasphemous, in naming the possibility as a hypothesis; yet I repeat, it ought to make the argument of the writer to the Hebrews *a fortiori* valid, if there is any validity in what he has written. It does

appear most marvellous, that in protesting against the Hebrew ceremonies as carnal and weak, because they dealt only with impurities of the flesh, the Christian teachers should have (for the first time perhaps in the world's history) propounded so very carnal and revolting an idea, that the blood of a holy prophet (whether shed violently or voluntarily) can justly remove from our consciences a sense of sin and sanctify us to God. We need not press the extreme weakness of mind which could dwell upon his "suffering without the gate" (Heb. xiii. 12). Nothing but artificial inculcation of this doctrine ("the blood of Jesus") can sustain it among us. Every intelligent English child is shocked when he first hears of "hoping pardon through his blood," and wonders how "blood" is concerned in the matter. The doctrine, in fact, is lower by far in carnality than any thing in the Jewish ceremonial; lower, perhaps, than anything that we have a right to impute to Greeks or Romans. *Animal* sacrifice is discarded, to establish a *Human* sacrifice as cardinal to divine religion! It is a sufficiently mean idea, that the gods love the steam and smell of animal slaughter; but it is still more shocking to imagine that the bloodshed of a holy person is in any sense "a sacrifice for sin," "a propitiation" (or mercy seat? Rom. iii. 25), "an offering and sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour" (Eph. v. 1), and that by a belief in it, or by a trust and reliance upon it, we become delivered from an evil conscience, that is, from a sense of God's displeasure for our sins. Are we really to believe, that the most High was pleased by the crucifixion of Jesus? If it be said, "No, he reprobated the deed, but he was pleased that Jesus so meekly submitted to an inevitable fate," this is mere evasion; for, all comparison of it to a legitimate sacrifice then vanishes. If not death, but mere torture had been inflicted, the "meek submission" remains as praiseworthy as

before ; but, except as an example of conduct, nothing here (be it death, or be it torture,) has any relation to our consciences, or has the least tendency to deliver us from a sense of guilt, if the remembrance of past sins trouble us.

Unitarian Christians are in general unwilling to admit that the "atoning blood of Christ" is taught in the New Testament. It is not taught exactly as Archbishop Anselm is said first to have defined it, as "*compensation*" paid to God for remitting the punishment of man ; but that Paul, John the apostle in the Revelations, the writer to the Hebrews, and the First Epistle of Peter, inculcate *purification* by the sacrifice of Christ, it seems useless to deny. That the Epistle of James is wholly silent on this and other matters, is true : and I think, it instructively shows, how rapidly James was isolated in holding fast to the original doctrine of the Jerusalem Church. When that Church perished corporately with Jerusalem in the war of Titus, no authoritative protest remained among Jewish Christians against the notions which prevailed with the Gentile churches.

It is a remarkable fact, that in the modern Evangelical Creed this most untenable and most unspiritual doctrine of Human Sacrifice is made *paramount*. The Divinity of Christ is chiefly valued, because without it "the Atonement" cannot be sustained. But nothing can sustain "the Atonement." It must be thrown over, equally with Eternal Punishment and Vicarious Sin, to make Christian doctrines even plausible to deliberate and impartial thought.

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