

Introduction



The Hebrew term for sacrifice, *korban*, has evolved to designate three different but related meanings. This phenomenon occurred in other languages as well. In its primary use, a sacrifice is a gift, an offering given from humans to God. It involves an object, usually an animal, which is transferred from the human to the divine realm. In its second use, which emerged later, the term refers to giving up a vital interest for a higher cause. Someone may sacrifice his property, comfort, limb, or even life for his children, country, or in order to fulfill an obligation. This latter sense of sacrifice also entails giving, but in this case it is giving *up* or *for*, and not giving *to*.

Owing to the lack of actual transfer, this second meaning of sacrifice does not appear in either biblical or rabbinic Hebrew, nor does it appear in Greek or Latin. While the phrase “x sacrificed to” is abundant in the early layer of Hebrew, the phrase “x sacrificed for,” such as “x sacrificed his interest for,” is absent altogether. The second use arose only in later layers of Hebrew and the European languages. Yet there is an inner logic to the extension of the term’s use from the first sense to the second. Though no transfer has actually taken place in

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giving up individual interests for others or a country, the verb “to sacrifice for” can be construed indirectly as a giving of a gift by the individual to the nation or for the good of others.

The third meaning of *korban* is manifested by an intriguing development in its use in many languages. In Modern Hebrew, *korban* denotes not only an offering but also a victim of a crime; yet in biblical, rabbinic, and medieval Hebrew as well as in Greek and Latin, no such use exists. This additional use of the term “sacrifice”, referring to both an offering and a crime victim, appeared in other languages such as Arabic, Spanish, and German before Hebrew. One of this book’s concerns is to understand the depth of such an extension along with its implications for the complex relationship between sacrifice and violence.

This book is structured following the distinction between the first two senses of sacrifice: “sacrificing to” and “sacrificing for.” Each use directs us to a different field of inquiry. “Sacrificing to” involves mainly the religious sphere. It engages such questions as ritual, substitution, atonement, and the ways in which different religious traditions developed complex alternatives to replace and yet replicate animal sacrifice as the main mode of worship. The study of sacrifice through this lens has received intense attention from different fields of investigation: the sociology of religion, psychoanalysis, anthropology, evolutionary biology, comparative religion, and cultural studies. My book draws inspiration from this immense

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body of literature, but I do not trace or map it in any systematic fashion. I refer to it selectively in line with the argument that I wish to pursue.

Though the historical and textual material for my examination of “sacrificing to” mainly focuses on biblical along with later Jewish and Christian developments, I aim to provide a larger theory of sacrifice and ritual as well as their relation to violence. My investigation does not follow the varied unfoldings of the notion of sacrifice in medieval Jewish mysticism and philosophy, or in modern Jewish thought. Needless to say, this book does not presume to cover the complex field of “sacrificing to” in different religions and traditions. Yet as an attempt to formulate a larger perspective on the subject, *On Sacrifice* strives to uncover a central feature of the phenomenon that will, I hope, resonate with other practices and traditions.

The distinction between a “gift” and an “offering” lies at the core of my effort to elucidate the meaning of the practice of sacrifice. Sacrifice is a specific kind of gift given within a hierarchical structure. The gap that is opened between the gift and the offering makes the possibility of rejection immanent in the practice of sacrifice. Exploring this distinction at the heart of “sacrificing to” will reveal two features that are essential to sacrifice: ritual and violence. Ritual and violence are opposing responses to the same anxiety of rejection. The nature of sacrifice as an offering will thus shed light on the central components of violence and ritual. Understanding sacri-

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fi ce as an offering located within a hierarchical structure will also expose deep tensions that are embedded in the notion of sacrifice as an expression of love and practice of atonement. The rise of substitutes for sacrifice within the Christian and Jewish traditions from the first century onward will be discussed at the end of my consideration of “sacrificing to.” The extremely diverse ways in which these traditions have shaped substitutes to sacrifice will highlight both the nature of sacrifice and the attempts in these traditions to overcome its inherent tensions.

The second part of this book, which is devoted to “sacrificing for,” involves different realms altogether—the political and moral spheres. Self-sacrifice for another individual, value, or collective seems key to much of ethical life and political organization. In Kant’s moral philosophy, as in other moral theories, the core of morality is the capacity to transcend the self along with its drives and interests, and therefore, as Kant formulated it, moral drama resides in the conflict between self-transcendence and self-love. While endorsing the value of self-transcendence, my study of the relationship between self-sacrifice and violence will try to show the way in which misguided self-transcendence has a potential to lead to far greater evils and harms than those that are motivated by excessive self-love. Unraveling the internal relationship between self-transcendence and violence will provide what I believe to be a preferable, deeper account of moral conflict.

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War is a realm in which heroic self-sacrifice as well as utter violence and brutality are manifested. In my attempt to probe the relationship between self-transcendence and violence, I will try to demonstrate that the simultaneous occurrence of these two aspects of war is not accidental and that they are intrinsically connected. Focusing on “sacrificing for” will thus lead to investigating the role of sacrifice in war and the function of the state as a sacrificial bond.

The two parts of this essay—“sacrificing to” and “sacrificing for”—touch on two very different fields of inquiry that can stand independent of one another. Yet in following the ways in which various languages have extended the use from one realm to another, we might discover some shared deep structures that encompass rich and diverse realms of human life.