
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VII.

SEMITIC AND ORIENTAL NOTES.

THE REAL MEANING OF SEMITIC SACRIFICE.

ONE of the most pressing needs of the hour is a sound History of Religious Ideas. To be sure, such a history is not the work of a moment; but there are so many problems of religion that seem to require for their solution, or at least reasonable understanding, a prior examination of the genesis of religious ideas, pure and simple, that it is unfortunate that there is not yet a thoroughly full, and withal sound, history of the fundamental ideas of religion. But this is not to be accounted a strange thing. While we are still in doubt as to whether religion is an acquired thing, that is, an invention by man himself to meet his social needs, or an implanted instinct or impulse, which sooner or later will manifest itself, it should not surprise us if we have not made progress faster in the direction indicated above.

But the need is imperative, and for the following very impressive reasons. In the first place, the criticism of the documents of the Old Testament, for example, has passed into a stage where we shall no longer be excited or frightened by anything that the critics may see fit to bring forth. It seems as if there can hardly be, in the armory of scientific (!) critical investigation, anything more startling or amusing than what we have already seen. Still there are some novelties in form, if not in substance, yet to be had. An example is the following, from Lefevre's "Race and Language," just issued in the International Scientific Series. In the chapter entitled "The Semitic World" he says:—

"The peoples whom we are accustomed to call Semitic have always ignored their relations with the biblical patriarch Shem, son of Noah. But if we disregard the letter of the precious record, compiled and recast many centuries after the events which are therein transformed into legendary fables, if we consider in themselves the names of Noah, Ham, Shem, and Cush, we shall readily overlook the inexactitude of the name given by the moderns to the Chaldeans, the Arameans, the Canaanites, and to the Arabs. For Noah is a Semitic god of great antiquity; Nouach, a genius with four outspread wings, god and saviour, the spouse of Tihavti, the fecundity of the abyss; Ham was Khemos, the god of the Moabites, and perhaps identical with the Egyptian Khem; we find Cush among the Cossians or Kissians of the Euphrates and among the southern peoples among whom the Pharoahs fought on the two shores of the Red Sea;

'the vile Cush,' said the Egyptians; but they none the less gave to their royal princes the title Prince of Cush, which shows the importance which they attached to the subjugation of these Cush or Cushites, the Ethiopians of Herodotus, cut in two by Semitic expansion; as for Shem, it is not difficult not to recognize in him Samas, Samson, the sun-god of the Assyrian pantheon."[1]

We are therefore not surprised to read, as the conclusion of this style of scientific investigation, that "such is the new conception of history which rejects, as a chimera, the divine plan and the biblical genealogies; it is the creation of philology." To be sure it is the creation of "philology"; and certainly after we have looked this "creation" in the face, we are reminded of the "behemoth of Holy Writ" as Mr. Barnum used to advertise it, "on the earth is not its like." If M. Lefevre could only take into his hand, for a few brief moments, Mr. Andrew Lang's little sketch, entitled the "Great Gladstone Myth," he would get a very vivid idea of the impression which this style of nonsense makes upon the sane, healthy and practically educated Anglo-Saxon mind; but he would doubtless follow the example of a certain famous philologist, still living, who, when a pet theory of his was received with unbounded merriment, exclaimed petulantly, "Well, it is a scientific view, at all events."

So there is no more room for surprise or wonder on that side of the discussion. But of far more significance and importance is it, that we shall get a proper insight into the rationale of the various rites which formed the practical side of Semitic religious life. The institutions are there, crystallized, and must be explained by some theory or other, and whether they are the result of ideas which preceded them, or whether the ideas which survive are mere attempts to explain them, is one of the questions which we must consider.

Chief among the institutions of Semitic worship and practice is that of sacrifice. And it is of imperative need, as affecting the immediate religious life of to-day, that some understanding of its inner history and meaning shall be spread abroad generally. This appears in the growing discussions of the self-consciousness of Jesus himself, as the Messiah, and the endeavor to obtain a picture of the Master's own conception of his mission as Saviour of the world. While it is exceedingly likely that he held, with his contemporaries, the commonly received ideas of the Jewish ceremonial and worship, there is still reason for believing that he must have had a deeper insight into the rationale of his own life and death, as these were brought to his consciousness, as the necessary elements in the accomplishment of his work.

It is customary still to make comparison between the sacrifices of the Old Testament and the death of Christ; there remains still a vast mass of literature and teaching which has for its express aim the demonstration of the completeness of the parallel between them. There are a

[1] Race and Language, pp. 201, 202.

large number of passages in the New Testament which seem to bear out this hypothesis, and there are not wanting passages in our Lord's own words which call attention to the similarity of the place which the sacrifices occupied in the old dispensation to the place which he is to occupy in the new. The very institution which of all others is the bond of the New Covenant—that of the Eucharist—has these same elements in its character. Whether the primary idea that moves the great bulk of the Christian church in the observance of the Lord's Supper to-day is expiatory or communional would be an interesting question for investigation.

It is therefore plain that a rationale of the sacrificial institutions of the Old Testament is not a matter for mere scholarly curiosity. It is intimately associated with the religious conceptions which move us to-day. But it must be evident that in the increasing body of material which pertains to the religion and habits of worship of other Semitic peoples than the Hebrews, the investigation cannot be confined to the Old Testament. The Phœnicians, the Assyrians, and the Arabs have all of them rites which in form and matter are very similar to those which are described in the Old Testament. There are among them, as among the Jews, sacrifices for special seasons. of animals and cereals, with a prescribed ritual for each. In the broad outlines it is possible to trace the racial characteristics in them all. Where similar conditions of life and climate prevail, it is not too much to say that they are substantially identical. The comparative method must therefore be employed, and that freely, and without regard to any preconceived notions as to the character of the acts themselves. So much of our Old Testament knowledge is made useless for scholarly purposes, in that we read into our interpretations of the Old Testament our religious life and knowledge as derived from the New Testament. This obviously tends to obscure the contemporary view of the matter. There are hindrances enough without this one added. The frequent redaction of most of the material of the Old Testament books has had the effect of removing the description of the ritual, especially of the earlier forms, so far from the time of its practice, that there is often insuperable difficulty in the way of satisfactory explanation.

Moreover, it is at this point that the severest tests of the permanent value of the Old Testament for our religious life will be made. The religion of the Hebrews does not, as it once did, stand to our thought as the only revelation which has interest for the world. Indeed, as early as the prophet Micah[1] this was clearly understood. So that we must find a somewhat different ground for the exclusive interest which we maintain in the religion of the Hebrews than that which has hitherto satisfied us. That our anxiety for light on the rites and ritual of the Hebrews will always exceed that which we shall have for any other, there is no doubt. The facts of Christianity, as in historical succession to Judaism, will always insure that. But that we may gain a clearer light upon Christianity,

[1] Micah iv. 4–5; cf. also Psalm lxxx. 7.

and the New Testament, we are forced to examine, and, if we can, to understand, the ideas of the Old. The better these are comprehended, the more we shall probably see the inseparableness of the two. In the interest then of an enduring and rational Christianity, we must investigate anew the Old Testament sacrifices with a view of determining, after having ascertained their precise meaning and office, their proper relation to the New Testament, and especially to its chief Person.

But where shall the study of sacrifices begin? It is obvious that sacrifices, even in their simplest stages, show already a highly developed sense of personality, both with respect to the worshipper and to the deity. The sacrifice marks a relation as already crystallized into a habit, whether it is in the form of a doctrine as yet or not. The practice is there, and the worshipper has a definite conception of both his deity and himself. Hence the sacrifice itself is to be approached in the light of the proper thought of the worshipper himself. This is hardly to be dignified with the name of belief. And Professor Smith is right in so far that the practice of religion offers a surer method of approach than its formulæ do. But neither the observance nor the explanation of the observance is essentially the primary phenomenon in the problem. The starting-point is the worshipper himself. This would be to say, practically, that the first approach to the question is psychological. And so it is. To this day, it is of far greater interest and enlightenment to know the mind of the devotee, as giving the key to his practices, than to simply record them, with or without his explanation attached. The question is not a little anthropological, with the religious nature and the philological evidence merely as adjuncts to the main question. We must discover the sources of the consciousness of personality, and in that consciousness find the spring of religion itself. If religion is the product of human thought, and develops merely as the human animal, after reaching a certain stage, finds himself in need of certain supplementary acts, which he afterward explains as best he may, it ought to be possible to show the course of that development, and indicate at what point the idea comes into view. Indeed it ought to be possible to trace to their starting-point the sensations which produced the idea.

It will possibly be answered to this demand for the study of personality in the primitive races, that we get light on that as we unfold their religious rites, and endeavor to get a simple and rational explanation of them. But this is not enough. The internal evidence is the most necessary. Without it, we are left absolutely in the region of conjecture; or, at least, so absolutely that we can never affirm anything with decisiveness. But can we secure the other? We think it is within the region of possible things, and some attempts have already been made. In the Bampton Lectures for 1894,[1] Mr. Illingworth has some very impressive words in this very connection. He says:—

"Personality is the gateway through which all knowledge must pass.

[1] Personality, Human and Divine, by J. R. Illingworth, M.A.

Matter, force, energy, ideas, time, space, law, freedom, cause, and the like are absolutely meaningless phrases, except in the light of our personal experience. They represent different departments of that experience which may be isolated for the purposes of special study, as we separate a word from its context, to trace its linguistic affinities, or pluck a flower from its roots, to examine the texture of its tissues. But when we come to discuss their ultimate relations to ourselves and one another, or in other words to philosophize about them, we must remember that they are only known to us in the last resort through the categories of our own personality, and can never be understood exhaustively till we know all that our personality implies. It follows that philosophy and science are, in the strict sense of the word, precisely as anthropomorphic as theology, since they are alike limited by the conditions of human personality and controlled by the forms of thought which human personality provides."

There is here a keynote which needs very much to be sounded in the literature of sacrificial investigation. It may make a difference, almost world-wide, in our conception, to approach it thus from the interior, as against the mere history of the expression of the inner life. The latter will not be less interesting or any less important, as showing the forms of the thought, but it is in the personality of the worshipper, as the same can be discovered by psychological investigation, that we shall find the true rationale of his acts. If it be objected that it is too far removed from the objects of our study, and connecting with too many variations in human circumstances since then, the reply is, that we must simply trace worship, and the instincts connected with it, to the bottom, and divest ourselves of every addition which time and civilization have made. If it be not possible to do this, in examining the emotions of the human mind, in its adoration of its deity, it certainly will be impossible to find out the meaning of sacrifices by analyzing the entrails of slain beasts.

It is plain, from what has already been said, that whatever result is reached in this inquiry, will necessarily have a large place in determining what the prevailing conception of sacrifices should be, as we examine them in the Old Testament. If it should be developed that the human spirit gives unequivocal testimony to the effect that the consciousness of sin is arrived at apart from a legal or tribal consciousness, the inference that sacrifices have a necessarily expiatory character is in a fair way of establishment. But if, on the other hand, the consciousness of guilt is developed only in connection with the social life, and in response to social claims, wherein the deity is a partaker, that of course makes expiatory sacrifice in the beginning an impossibility. Or whether the ideas of divine wrath and expiation are necessarily corollary, in the worshipping mind, is another question. At all events, if the meaning of sacrifice is ever to become clear, the psychology of worship must first be explored and certain results obtained.

A. A. BERLE.

BOSTON, MASS.