

*DISCOVERIES OF A VICARIOUS ELEMENT IN  
PRIMITIVE SEMITIC SACRIFICE.*

IF there should be found in the library of the ancient city of Ur clay tablets on which Assyriologists should read that victims were to be offered as substitutes for men it would be considered an important discovery. If at all points in lands, where men of Semitic speech and lineage have lived, inscriptions of a similar age and purport were brought to light, proof positive would be thought to exist, not only of vicarious sacrifice among the ancient Semites, but also of the probable existence of such an element from the earliest dawn of Semitic history.

Ancient records on stone, clay tablets, skins, papyrus, and parchment are considered of the highest importance. The sensation of the discovery of the Sinaitic manuscript has not been forgotten, nor the importance of the great find of the Tell el-Amarna tablets. At the present day there is nothing which so fascinates the Biblical scholar in Bible lands as the discovery of some inscription—Greek, Roman, Phœnician, or Hebrew.

But there is a new field of archæological investigation, not less important in its opportunities and in its results, where we may listen to the speech of the childhood of the Semitic race and witness its usages.

At the first blush this field, when described, may seem to be purely imaginary. Such changes have taken place in the ideas and habits of men, so far as we have studied history, that it may seem incredible to us that the Semitic world, which has felt more or less the impress of such historic religions as Christianity and Islam, should have preserved any certain traces of primitive Semitic belief and usage. But there were extensive populations in whom neither the baptism of Christianity nor the sword of Islam

produced conversion. The Bedawin never yielded anything but the most nominal allegiance to Islam. Indeed, saving a few phrases taken from the Koran and turning toward Mecca, they were in no genuine sense Moslems. The same may be said of the Fellahin. They have remained true to the beliefs and practices of their fathers from hoary antiquity. No scholar who has been much among them, and who has carefully studied them, doubts this. Indeed it has passed into a proverb that the East, as represented by the Nomads and the Fellahin, so far as they have dwelt apart from civilization, has remained unchanged. To this statement might be added another, which holds for Syria and Palestine, that among professed Moslems and Christians primitive beliefs and usages may be found cropping out as surely as in some localities primitive rock appears, notwithstanding the predominance of later geological formations.

Among the Arabs, the Fellahin, and even the professed Christians and Moslems of Syria and Palestine is a field of unsurpassed importance for investigation by the Biblical interpreter or the student of comparative religion. There may be laid bare at the present day a stage of belief and usage to all intents and purposes precisely the same as when God began to make a revelation of Himself through the sacred Scriptures.

The writer of this article has not sought to establish any theory through the investigation of this field—quite the contrary. His first visit to the Holy Land, Egypt and the Sinaitic peninsula for a period of fourteen months, was purely to satisfy the longing of a Biblical student to see the lands, which, for many years, had engaged his attention. Had he been told what line his studies would take it would have been a great surprise to him. It is true that early in his travels in the autumn of 1898 among the sacred groves and high places of Northern Syria he first received the suggestion of the investigations which were to engage his

attention during three successive summers (1900-1902). But it was farthest from his thought to establish any theory.

He left Syria in the summer of 1899 with the full persuasion that the lamented W. Robertson Smith was fully justified by the facts which the writer had observed in maintaining that the "sacrificial meal" was the earliest form of sacrifice. His surprise was therefore very great when fact after fact appeared completely disproving this theory as he sought confirmation for it, and establishing, as it seemed to him and his companion,<sup>1</sup> in the most absolute way that the vicarious element in sacrifice is a primitive Semitic idea, or perhaps better, usage. Some may ask, Did not this idea come to the Arabs from Judaism and Christianity through Islam? This is as good as impossible. Islam has never been hearty in its reception of the notion of vicarious suffering, though that notion existed in the time of the companions of the Prophet, as the author of an Arabic work translated by Sir William Muir has shown in a powerful way.<sup>2</sup> But its present existence is rather in spite of Islam than because Islam has any predilection for vicarious suffering. It seeks in the mouths of orthodox exponents to explain away everything which might indicate such an idea. There is no evidence whatever that Arabs and Fellahin have derived their phraseology and usage, which point so infallibly to vicarious suffering, from Islam. On the contrary, the primitive character of these ideas has made it impossible for Islam to surpress them.

Sacrifice was a primitive institution among men who never heard of the Old Testament, millenniums before there was any record of a Divine revelation concerning it. The same is true of blood-sprinkling. In another place<sup>3</sup> the writer has discussed these institutions in the light of sur-

<sup>1</sup> Rev. J. Stewart Crawford.

<sup>2</sup> *The Torch of Guidance to the Mystery of Redemption*, London.

<sup>3</sup> *Primitive Semitic Religion To-day*, London, 1902.

prising discoveries, as it seems to him, made last summer. Positions which he then deemed firmly established through many examples have been so confirmed through recent investigations as to possess the strongest certainty.

1. The fact is established that among all classes of people, not only among Arabs and ignorant Fellahin, but also among nominal Christians and the various sects of Islam, sacrifice exists. All over the Moslem world on the tenth of the pilgrim month the dahiyeh sacrifice, as it is called, is slain.

2. But aside from this sacrifice, among all except Protestant Christians and those who have come under their influence, thousands of victims are killed mostly in payment of vows.

Among Moslems these sacrifices are set apart by the repetition of the first Sura of the Koran, and among some nominal Christians at least, perhaps in imitation of the Moslem custom, by the repetition of the Apostles' Creed. Some of those Arabs who cannot even repeat the first Sura say: "In the name of God, God is great."

No part of the animal comes upon an altar unless the threshold of the house or olerine is regarded as such, when the blood of the victim is sometimes shed, or the rock used by some Arabs be regarded as such. Indeed, fire is never used for the consumption of any part of the sacrifice.

3. All of the flesh which has been used in sacrifice, after the priest<sup>1</sup> has received his due,<sup>2</sup> is eaten by the one sacrificing and his friends, or by the poor, but this is not necessarily the case. If an Arab, who has immolated a victim at the grave of an ancestor, has not time to eat it, the slaughtering suffices. This is also true with respect to thousands of victims slain yearly in the valley of Muna, near Mecca. They are not eaten by those offering them, but are buried or left to the Arabs, thus showing that

<sup>1</sup> The Moslems use the term "servant" instead of priest.

<sup>2</sup> This due is a hind quarter.

the significance of the sacrifice is in the slaughtering. Thence it is clear that eating is not an essential part of sacrifice.

4. Sacrifices are declared to have a vicarious character. The practice of offering a sacrifice on the completion of new houses is universal. When the Arab sets up his tent of goat's hair for the first time he slays a victim, unless he is too poor. Nominal Christians and Moslems of all sects do the same. Even Protestants sometimes cannot withstand the clamour of their friends of another faith. Concretely stated, the necessity for such sacrifice is this: "Every building must have its death-man, woman, child, or animal. God has appointed a redemption for every building through sacrifice."<sup>1</sup> If the animal dies the inhabitants of the house can live.

Sacrifice for the dead illustrates the same general principle. The tendency of Islam is to change the meaning, so that the sacrifices are often conceived of as donations of food given to the poor. But this is not the primitive Semitic conception. It is rather expressed by the formula given by a woman of the Şygaḍ tribe of Arabs, who said of sacrifices for the dead that they were *fejr dem 'an ruḥ el-meyetim*, "the bursting forth of blood for the spirit of the dead." They also say they kill animals for their dead on behalf of his spirit. They call them *fedou*. They go before him as light, serve him in the next life as he approaches God. They become a *Reffareh* for his sins.

The sacrifices offered at the reconciliation of the avenger of blood to the murderer of a near relative might be supposed to partake mostly of the character of a sacrificial meal. But peace must first be established through death. The blood of the animal is shed for the murderer before the avenger of blood will kiss his beard in token of reconciliation, and partake of the feast which follows as a sign that

<sup>1</sup> *Primitive Semitic Religion*, p. 65.

they are one in fellowship. It is *dem bedl dem*—"blood for blood," that is the blood of the animal is for that of the murdered man. The idea is also expressed by the sentence *fejr ed-dem ghatta dhak ed-dem*, "Shed-blood covered that blood," that is, the blood of the victim covered that of the murdered man.

5. The terms employed in indicating the essential element in sacrifice, including those just given, must be considered conclusive evidence of the existence of the idea of vicarious sacrifice among the primitive Semites. The expression *fejr ed dem*, "the bursting forth of blood," is of almost universal application with respect to sacrifice.

The word *fedou* is very common, and was thus defined by the khâtih of Deir Atiyeh in the Syrian Desert: "*Fedou* means that it redeems the other, in place of the other, substitute for the other. Something is going to happen to a man, and the sacrifice is a substitute for him. It prevents disease, sufferings, robbery and enmity. . . . Repent of your sins, and hope that God may cover your sins. Both repentance and the *fedou* cover."

Another said in regard to *Reffareh*, which is from the same root as the Hebrew *kipper*, when asked, "Does it cover sin?" "Who knows whether it covers sin, or how many sacrifices can cover sin? God only can cover it, but they offer it in the hope it will be covered."

It is certain from a great number of examples gathered from all parts of the country that slaughtering was the original form of sacrifice, and that the meal which follows is merely incidental.

It is also clear that the life taken is more or less in place of another, as the expressions "head for head," "spirit for spirit," show. The victim dies that man or animal may live. This idea seems to run through every kind of sacrifice where animal life is surrendered.

Nor is it less certain that the Bedawin from time imme-

morial have received the custom of shedding substitute blood from the cradle of the Semitic race, nor is it less true that such vicarious sacrifices, which are counter to the spirit of Christianity and Islam, have had power, in connexion with other primitive institutions, to maintain themselves to the present time.

If this be so, whatever use may be made of the fact, it is not difficult to see that such investigations, if properly conducted, are not less important in studying the history of Divine revelation than the unearthing of ancient literatures, whether on stone, parchment, clay tablets, or papyrus.

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