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New Testament Sacrifice: Metaphor or Concept?

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The caption above is not quite adequate, because this article does not deal with all the aspects of sacrifice in the New Testament, but only with sacrifice used in the interpretation of the suffering and death of Christ. In my book *The Christian Doctrine of Salvation* I have a chapter on this subject, and it is particularly on this chapter I have received much criticism. Perhaps it will not be out of place to say a few words in reply, especially as the book is now being translated into some of the vernaculars.

I have been criticized for attempting to remove the sacrificial idea from the interpretation of the Cross. This is, however, not the case. On the contrary, I endeavour to point out as clearly as possible that this metaphor is used in the New Testament to explain one aspect of the Cross, and still more so in Christian hymn writing and devotional literature. An attempt to remove it from Christian Theology can therefore not come into account, if the Theology claims to be based on the New Testament.

But there is a widespread tendency to make the sacrificial idea the all-inclusive category under which the whole Theology of Salvation is to be subsumed, notably so in F. C. N. Hicks' *The Fullness of Sacrifice*. My intention was, therefore, to reduce this category to the proportions it has received in the New Testament. There it is only one among many other metaphors used to illustrate the manifold aspects of the mystery of the Cross. An attempt to make it the metaphor, the all-inclusive category, in the interpretation of the Cross must therefore fail in a theology which wants to build only on the New Testament and is not out to defend a doctrine. It is very instructive, in this respect, to study Vincent Taylor's three books *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (see the account of these works in my book). In the first book he tried with insurmountable difficulty to subsume the whole thing under the sacrificial category. In his second book he had greatly to modify it, and in the third he abandoned the attempt altogether in favour of a quite different approach. What remained of the first attempt was only the idea of 'The Divine Self-offering', which is, after all, a different idea.

I have not tried to remove the metaphor of sacrifice but to give it the proportions and significance the New Testament gives to it.

But, secondly, I have been criticized for making it a metaphor, because, in the opinion of my critics, it is not a metaphor but a concept. The Cross should not be likened unto a sacrifice, it is a sacrifice, the sacrifice fulfilling the idea of all other sacrifices. I must confess that none of my critics, not even all of them together, have been able to convince me in this respect. All other categories, like reconciliation, redemption, ransom, vicarious penalty, encounter, etc., are clearly metaphorical in character, i.e. human actions are used to illustrate and shed light, by way of analogy, on this stupendous Divine action which we call the Cross. Only the category of sacrifice should not be a metaphor but a concept! It is hard to believe.

What is a sacrifice? It is always *a gift offered by human beings to God*. According to the priestly tradition in Israel the sacrificial system was ordered by God Himself, through Moses, for the cleansing of the people from sin, yet only from unintentional sin and ritual uncleanness (Lev. 4 and 5). The prophets, however, challenged this tradition and maintained that God had not ordered the sacrificial system (Jer. 7:22; Isa. 1:12); the only sacrifice demanded by God was a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:16f.). Whether the prophets wanted a cult without sacrifice is a difficult question which cannot be regarded as settled.¹ Anyhow, in Israel, as in all surrounding nations, sacrifices were performed, for different purposes, either to solicit some favour from God, or to thank Him or to appease Him. Mostly it is the last aspect of sacrifice that has been used in interpreting the meaning of the Cross. Such sacrifices can be said to testify to a consciousness of the sacrificer that something has gone wrong in his relationship to God and that something must be done to restore it. In this respect it may be said that these sacrifices point to the work of Christ as the Sacrifice that restores the right relationship between man and God.

When we become aware of our sin we experience God's condemnation of us as sinners. But this is removed by faith in the Cross of Christ. Therefore He can be said to be the 'propitiation' for our sins.

On the other hand, it should be quite clear that *we cannot sacrifice Christ*, we cannot offer Him to God. Already here the analogy breaks down, indicating that we are using a metaphor. Now it may rightly be said that *He offered Himself*: it is a self-sacrifice. Thereby, however, we have come far away from the

¹ I cannot in this brief article enter on a discussion on this much debated problem. Only this much may be said, that Old Testament research now seems fairly unanimous in the opinion that the sacrificial system in Israel was mostly a heritage from the Canaanites, and that the 'desert tradition', the primitive Mosaic religion, was much simpler in this respect.

original idea of sacrifice, a gift offered by human beings to God. This is made still more clear when we recall that here it is *not we* who are giving something to God, but it is *He* who is giving to us: 'God gave His only begotten Son'.

All this indicates that the category of sacrifice as used in the New Testament to illustrate the meaning of the Cross, is a metaphor, and, like all metaphors, liable to limitations and inadequacies, inasmuch as it can only shed light on *one* aspect of the meaning of the Cross, and even that only imperfectly and by way of analogy; ultimately, like all metaphors, its analogy breaks down. But it serves to give a hint at one effect of the Cross.

Now, it has been said by my critics, thirdly, that I have come to this result because I have given too little weight to New Testament exegesis. In one respect I accept the criticism, insofar as I have given far too little room in my book to exegetical problems. But this deficiency is due to lack of space. I wish I had had the opportunity of supporting my views by a full exegesis of all my references to Scripture. But that would have demanded a quite different book.

As an argument against my view of the sacrificial metaphor, however, I make this criticism a boomerang on my critics. In several places in my book I have pointed out that the advocates of the all-inclusiveness of the sacrificial category read the idea of sacrifice into texts which do not contain it. My critics, both in reviews and discussions, have produced object lessons of such a procedure.

Isaiah 53 is a common victim in this respect. This chapter is said to use 'sacrificial language' throughout. This is of course supported by U. E. Simon in *A Theology of Salvation*. But I am not convinced by his exegesis. Verses 4-6 are said to indicate a sacrifice. Do they? 'He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed'. These words do not take us to the altar in a temple where a slaughtered victim is laid as an offering to God, but to the courtyard of a prison where a man is flogged and punished for the sake of another. This is not the metaphor of sacrifice, but of vicarious punishment.

The words 'as a lamb that is led to slaughter' (verse 7) may, but must not necessarily, be understood as a hint of a sacrifice. The context makes it highly improbable that it was a sacrifice that was in the mind of the prophet. The second member of the parallelism, 'as a sheep that before its shearer is dumb', shows that this was not the case. The prophet is speaking of the humble silence of the Suffering Servant, and for that purpose he uses the similes of the silence of a lamb led to slaughter and a sheep before its shearer.

'He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (verse 12) is said to refer to the sin-bearing sacrificial victim. This seems to me more than doubtful. The sacrificial

victim makes no intercession. Is not the Servant here rather patterned on the prophet who bears the iniquities and sins of the people on his heart and makes intercession for them ?

There is only one clear reference to sacrifice in the whole chapter, viz. in verse 10: 'When thou shall make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed'. But this is just one metaphor among all the others.

Now recent Old Testament scholarship has detected a cult-pattern in this chapter. This whole prophecy of the Suffering Servant is built upon the pattern of cult-hymns used at the annual festival in which the King, the representative of the deity, is symbolically attacked by hostile forces, dethroned, humiliated and punished, perhaps even killed symbolically, only to be raised again after a short while, victoriously triumphing over his enemies, resuming his power and his throne in glory. The very idea of vicarious suffering should have had its origin in such rites and motives. Be that as it may. If the prophet has had such procedures in mind, he has used them freely, by way of allusion, to convey a message of quite different kind, viz. the vicarious suffering of the Servant of the Lord.

Clearly we listen in this chapter to a prophet-poet who is conveying his message, in a poet's manner, by using a number of different metaphors, among them also *one* referring to sacrifice. To say that the whole chapter speaks in sacrificial terms, is clearly to read into many verses a meaning which they do not contain. And this seems to me to be inadequate exegesis.

Another phrase which has suffered like treatment is that of 'the blood of Christ', which often without reservation is interpreted as 'the sacrifice of Christ'. Yet it should be clear that 'the blood' in Biblical languages, often has nothing at all to do with sacrifice, but stands for the violent death of somebody: Abel, Zachariah (Gen. 4:10; Luke 11:50); 'the blood of the prophets' (Matt. 23:30), 'the blood of all men' (Acts 20:26). 'The blood of Christ', in a number of cases, stands simply for his death, his surrendered life. This is so in the phrase: 'the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood' (Acts 20:28) with its clear reference to the idea of 'ransom', of liberation, redemption, by one life given for another. The same is the case with 'redemption through his blood' (Eph. 1:7), 'loosed us from our sins by his blood' (Rev. 1:5), 'Thou wast slain and didst purchase unto God by thy blood men of all tribes' (Rev. 5:9). 'The Lamb', in the book of Revelation, according to Dodd (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*) is not the sacrificial lamb, but the leader-lamb of God's flock, the Messiah, who is slain in battle in front of the flock, thereby saving the life of the flock.

A word which has been quoted against my view is St. Paul's phrase 'justified by his blood' (Rom. 5:9) which is said to prove that justification and sacrifice, in St. Paul's thought, are inseparable, and that sacrifice therefore cannot be taken as a metaphor but as a concept. But the very word 'justified' points in a different

direction. It does not take us to an altar where the priest is handling the sacrificial victim, but to a court of law, with a judge, a law, an accused, a trial, a verdict; which, paradoxically enough, is an acquittal, because somebody else has suffered the death penalty on behalf of the guilty. That these ideas were in the Apostle's mind is corroborated by the preceding verses: 'For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: for peradventure for a good man (i.e. one who has been good to some one) some one would even dare to die' (5:7). Unless we come to this passage with a predetermined mind and an established doctrine, we would not find support in it for the sacrificial interpretation of the Cross.

The same can be said of phrases like: 'having made peace through the blood of his Cross' (Col. 1:20) and: 'ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ' (Eph. 2:13). The context in both cases speaks of 'enemies', 'reconciliation', and shows clearly that what was in the Apostle's mind was not the idea of sacrifice but the metaphor of reconciliation (*katallage*) which is a metaphor quite different from that of sacrifice.

There are cases in the New Testament where 'the blood of Christ' undoubtedly refers to sacrificial blood as in phrases like 'sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ', 'with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish, and without spot, even the blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:2, 19), and: 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). But they are comparatively few. The sacrificial metaphor is sparingly used in the New Testament.

There is only one writer, viz. the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who has made extensive use of this category in interpreting the Cross. But he seems to have had a special purpose in view. Evidently he was writing to Jewish Christians who were wavering and in danger of falling back into the Jewish faith, because they found it hazardous to abandon their ancestral sacrifices and the priestly system prescribed by the Law. The writer points out to them that there is no need of such fears, because all sacrifices have been fulfilled in the one Sacrifice of Christ, who is the true High Priest. But even so, He is not offered by man; He offered Himself.

The sacrificial system is used in the New Testament in the interpretation of the Cross, and I have, in my book, taken it into account.¹ But it is used in a restrictive manner by the Apostles and by Jesus Himself. It does not occupy the dominant position it has been given later in Christian theology. And when it is used in the New Testament it is used in the same way as other metaphors, i.e. as hinting at one aspect of the richness of the mystery of the Cross.

My sole intention in writing this article is to warn against a tendency which may prove dangerous in the theological field, viz.

¹ See pp. 128ff. and 163ff. ; in the 2nd ed. pp. 129ff. and 164ff.

the tendency to subsume the whole content of the Christian revelation under the idea of sacrifice. Thereby the Christian faith is in danger, not only of being narrowed down to just one aspect of the Cross, but also of being changed into sacramentalism and sacerdotalism. The danger is particularly great in India, because the Hindu environment of the Church is saturated with these things. It has recently been suggested that here, in sacramentalism, is the real point of contact between the Christian faith and Hinduism, and that it would be a profitable way of approach, which we therefore should attempt. I feel the other way. It would probably be a means whereby Hinduism would obscure the Gospel and envelop the Christian faith, like so many others, in its many elastic folds. If the Apostles found it necessary to make a restrictive use of sacrificial ideas in their interpretation of the Cross, this necessity is no less in India.

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