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MELCHIZEDEK AND AARON

ON THE very threshold of the Old Testament we meet with the rite of sacrifice and a priesthood. Even as the Cross is the centre of the New Testament, so the Altar is that of the Old Testament. Prayer and sacrifice are the oldest and most universal elements in the history of religion and lie at its root. Moreover, the two are closely related in all primitive religion and in the great ethnic religions of the past as well as in the Bible.

After man's first disobedience, and the tragic story of the first fratricide, we read that both Cain and Abel built an altar and offered sacrifices; the one of the fruit of the ground and the other of the firstlings of the flock (Gen. iv. 3-4). What was the origin of such sacrifices?

W. Robertson Smith once believed that the origins of sacrifice were in all or in most cases totemistic and held that the "communion feast" type of sacrifice was earlier in date and correspondingly more primitive than the type of sacrifice in which there was a gift or offering made over to God. The beginnings of all types of sacrifice, according to this view, were to be regarded as going back to a period and to usages in which primitive tribes banqueted upon their totem animal! But his theory has long since been repudiated by anthropologists.¹

To those who accept the Scriptures as the word of God the answer is evident and all explanations of totemism and sympathetic magic seem far-fetched and fantastic. "It has yet to be proved," says E. O. James, President of the Folklore Society of Great Britain, "that the Hebrews passed through a totemic stage in the evolution of their highly complex sacrificial system. Be this as it may, it certainly cannot now be maintained that 'originally all sacrifices were eaten by the worshippers', and, 'in the oldest sacrifice the blood was drunk by the worshipper, and after it ceased to be it was poured out upon the altar'."

Most anthropologists agree with Westermarck that the idea of substitution is vital in blood-sacrifices. It is the same in primitive practice, as in the Scriptures, that life is redeemed by life and that "the life is in the blood". Atonement by sacrifice is

¹ George A. Barton, *Semitic and Hamitic Origins*, pp. 123, 218 ff.

writ large in the history of all religion but nowhere so clearly as in the Old Testament records.

In primitive sacrifice we have (by analysis of the various modes and kinds of sacrifice) the threefold idea of fellowship, gratitude and propitiation for misdeeds or impurity. They can be put in tabular form. On a following page are two tables of sacrifices; the one is taken from anthropology and the other from the Old Testament. The resemblance is striking and a study of the reference is a key to comparative religion. How and where did this universal rite have its origin? What is its vital significance? Open your Bible at Gen. iii. 21: "And Jehovah God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skins and clothed them."

Archbishop Trench, preaching on that text in Westminster Abbey, years ago, said: "We note in this Scripture that the clothing which God found for Adam could only have been obtained at the cost of a life, and *that* the life of one unguilty, of one who had no share nor part in the sin which made the providing of it needful. So it must necessarily have been. A beast, one or more, must have been slain before these coats of skins could have been prepared; and it must have been slain by the act of God. I do not scruple to say that we have here the first institution of sacrifice; and what is more noticeable still, God Himself the institutor; not merely enjoining, commanding, but Himself ordaining, showing the way; and the central idea of sacrifice, as it afterwards unfolded itself in manifold rites, is wrapped up in this first idea of Paradise."

Surely the mention of an occurrence so apparently trivial in the midst of a solemn history must have arisen from its association with some other transaction of higher importance, and that was none else than the institution of animal sacrifices, an institution undoubtedly of Divine appointment, adapted to the capabilities of men in early ages, and designed to transmit the instruction given as to the only acceptable mode of worship for sinful creatures, by faith in a Redeemer, through the medium of a symbolical rite, which impressively reminded them of that fundamental truth.

"By this clothing," says Keil, "God imparted to the feeling of shame the visible sign of an awakened conscience, and to the consequent necessity for a covering to the bodily nakedness, the higher work of a suitable discipline for the sinner." By selecting

TABLE OF SACRIFICES

In the Old Testament

Offerings are public and private.

Of three kinds { Drink Offerings
Meal Offerings
Animal Sacrifices

These latter were also of three kinds :

1. Burnt offerings—Lev. i. 4
2. Sin offerings for trespass—Lev. iv. 4 ; vi. 6
3. Peace offerings, Thank-offering
Votive offering
Free-will offering

The Sacrificial act include :

1. Presentation of offering
2. Laying on of hands
3. Slaying the animal
4. Application of the blood
5. Burning of the sacrifice

*In Anthropology*I. *Communal Sacrifice*

A festal meal with or without a slain victim
As pledge of kinship with the gods
Here the gods are regarded as kin

II. *Honorific Sacrifice*

A. Periodical gifts of honour to gods
B. Emergency gifts (for rain, etc). The gods considered as rulers who needed to be honoured

III. *Piacular Sacrifice for Propitiation*

The gods as estranged or angry
Blood sacrifice
Hair offering (as part of victim)
Salt covenant (salt—blood)

Thus we have in primitive sacrifice the threefold idea of fellowship, gratitude, and propitiation with a sense of sin or unworthiness.

the skins of beasts for the clothing of the first pair, and therefore causing the death or slaughter of beasts for that purpose, he showed them how they might use the sovereignty they possessed over the animals for their own good, and even sacrifice animal life for the preservation of human; so that this act of God laid the foundation for the sacrifices, even if the first clothing did not prefigure our ultimate "clothing upon" (2 Cor. v. 4), nor the coats of skin the robe of righteousness.

The story of Melchizedek is the first sudden reference to the priest as well as sacrifice, and Abraham the friend of God is in the centre of the picture. This strange character appears abruptly in the narrative of Abraham's victorious return from battle against the four kings (Gen. xiv). That chapter has been assailed by the critics but defended by the archaeologists. Dr. Zenos writes: "Of the historicity of Melchizedek doubts have been expressed. But as it is admitted that the account contains a historical kernel, such doubts are not justified." He is called "the priest of the God Most High and King of Salem". (This is not, as critics allege, the Salem of John iii. 23 but Jerusalem.¹) He combined in himself the priestly and royal office "and brought forth bread and wine" for Abraham and blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram of the Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth". Then we read Abraham gave him tithes of all the spoil. It is not strange that this priest should appear again in the Messianic psalm of David centuries later: "The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. cx. 4). Nor can we explain away its Messianic character, for Christ Himself appropriated it in His conversation with the Jewish scribes (Matt. xxii. 44; Mark xii. 30; Luke xx. 42). And to make assurance doubly sure we have the fuller account of the Melchizedek priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews (v. 6; vi. 20; vii. 17). It is in the seventh chapter that the characteristics of Melchizedek are depicted and his relations to the Levitical (Aaronic) priesthood contrasted. That of Aaron was provisional, that of Melchizedek permanent (verses 11-14); the former, hereditary and official, the latter personal and eternal (verses 15-19); the former, without the solemnity of an oath, the latter with it and therefore final, sufficient, universal and enduring (verses 20-5). The weaving

¹ H. S. Gehman in *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* gives five reasons (Art. "Melchizedek").

together of these references in the Bible is a proof of its inspiration by One Author. How else could Genesis, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Epistles fit together as a Yale key does to its lock!

And it is when we lay side by side the long and somewhat tedious detailed regulations of the Aaronic priesthood in Leviticus that we see the splendour of the New Testament priesthood and of Jesus Christ our High Priest.

The Bishop of Derby, the Rt. Rev. A. E. J. Rawlinson, in an article on "Priesthood and Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity", sums up the character and significance of the offerings under Aaron and his priesthood. "There were offerings of these three kinds—sin-offerings, burnt-offerings, peace-offerings—in the completed system of the Old Testament and commonly found in that order: and in this there is appropriateness. 'Before sinful man can draw near to God,' it has been written, 'he needs something to remove the barrier between himself and God, something to "make atonement" for himself.' This is provided by the sin-offering. When the sin-barrier is removed, he is free to dedicate himself afresh to God, and it is his duty to do so; and this was the 'intention' of the burnt-offering. Finally, in the peace-offering the sacrificer expressed that sense of fellowship with God, which is the Divine response to self-dedication."¹

And he suggests that, in the Book of Common Prayer, the Communion Service contains the same elements and (in Cranmer's day) in the same order—Christ's propitiation for sin, the offering of ourselves, and the sacrificial offering of thanksgiving.

John the Baptist was not only Christ's forerunner but the last of the Old Testament prophets. His message, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world", is inexplicable except against the background of atoning blood-sacrifice for sin from Abel to Malachi. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin either in the Old Testament or the New. The Epistle to the Hebrews is a dark mystery unless we have the Old Testament key. And it is not *one* key but a whole bunch of keys, all of the same pattern.

The story of the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world stretches from Genesis to Revelation. John the Baptist and John the Evangelist both saw the Lamb in the midst of the Throne.

¹ *The Expository Times*, February 1949, pp. 116-121.

The story of the Passover Lamb with its blood on the lintel and door-posts (Ex. 2. xii), the sacrifice on the day of atonement, David in the 51st Psalm, and Isaiah when he saw Christ's glory as the Spotless Lamb of God (Isa. liii)—all these spoke the same symbolic language to convey the same deep truth.

Just as I am without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid'st me come to Thee
O Lamb of God, I come.

Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the guilt, the stain, the bondage of sin—the sin of the world. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells of a better priesthood than that of Aaron; a better altar; a better sacrifice and better promises. Yet we must read the story of Aaron to understand the story of our High Priest, Jesus Christ, a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. Two hundred years ago Isaac Watts wrote:

Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away,
A Sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they.

My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine,
While like a penitent I stand,
And there confess my sin.

All of Aaron's priesthood with its ministry and its multitude of symbolism is the type of Christ's eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. Aaron's priesthood stopped abruptly by his death. The story is told in the Book of Numbers xx. 23–9, and John Ruskin gives a Christian artist's interpretation of the tragic episode. "And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in mount Hor, by the coast of the land of Edom, saying, Aaron shall be gathered into his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given unto the children of Israel, because ye rebelled against my word at the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up unto mount Hor: and strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his

son: and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, and shall die there. And Moses did as the Lord commanded: and they went up into mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there in the top of the mount: and Moses and Eleazar came down from the mount."

Moses stripped Aaron of his priestly garments. Then Aaron died on mount Hor and Moses led his son Eleazar down the slope. Here is Ruskin's striking comment: "But who shall enter into the thoughts of the High Priest, as his eyes followed those paths of ancient pilgrimage; and, through the silence of the arid and endless hills, stretching even to the dim peak of Sinai, the whole history of those forty years was unfolded before him, and the mystery of his own ministries revealed to him; and that other Holy of Holies, of which the mountain peaks were the altars, and the mountain clouds the veil, the firmament of his Father's dwelling, opened to him still more brightly and infinitely as he drew nearer his death; until at last, on the shadeless summit—from him on whom sin was to be laid no more—from him on whose heart the names of sinful nations were to press their graven fire no longer—the brother and the son took breastplate and ephod, and left him to his rest?"¹

O Lord Jesus, our only High Priest, who canst be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, for Thou wast tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin, we plead Thy perfect sacrifice on the Cross and take refuge under its shadow. Amen.

SAMUEL M. ZWEMER

New York

¹ *Modern Painters*, Vol. iv, chapter xx.