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Resizing the meaning of religious sacrifice in
the New Testament: the transition from Old
Testament to spiritual typology

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1. Argument of the analyzed topic

This doctoral dissertation, *Resizing the meaning of religious sacrifice in the New Testament: the transition from Old Testament to spiritual typology*, is intended to be a biblical analysis, with theological and cultural inflections, of *sacrifice*, aiming to clarify its content, meaning and application in the experience of the two Testaments.

In fact, a terminological category with multiple meanings, “sacrifice” opens up a complicated horizon of analysis. Its meaning is notoriously ambiguous. Relevant studies in the sphere of this analysis of *sacrifice* usually follow one of two trajectories: (a) some presuppose a widespread modern understanding of the term “sacrifice” and we see it operational in many New Testament Christological-soteriological concepts; (b) others focus on the meaning of the term “sacrifice” as it emerges specifically from Old Testament ritual texts of early Jewish cult ceremonies, informing only certain Christological-soteriological ideas that are linguistically derived from this terminology. Both approaches have led to somewhat different results in the study of different New Testament passages. Nonetheless, according to both approaches, “sacrifice” is an important interpretive category because it articulates an essential perspective on the act of Christic redemption.

Today, the term 'sacrifice' is commonly used in various domains of religious, public and academic discourse, such that an online search for the term yields mainly entries related to tragic events, crimes, wars and/or martyrdom. In these discourses, the term denotes a voluntary loss in a broad sense, as implied by the term *sacrificium intellectus* - meaning the (voluntary) relinquishing of the capacity for reasoning. Since such a loss often refers to property, health, and life, the term implies deprivation and misfortune^[1]. Interpreted in this way, the idea of sacrifice is often understood as occupying a central place in both the evolution of human society and in the biblical religious domain^[2]. In religious studies, and especially in biblical exegesis, the term “sacrifice” has been associated with the Old Testament rituals of atoning sacrifices. Gordon J. Wenham describes the theology of sacrifice in the Old Testament as an institution of restoration and new life following human repentance: 'The animal is a substitute for the worshipper. Its death atones for the worshiper.'^[3] For Hartmut Gese, the indirect death of a sacrificial animal affects the atonement toward God, so that the redemptive dimension of the death of Jesus Christ can only be understood according to this logic^[4]. Biblical scholars have applied these theories to soteriological and Christological concepts.

Otfried Hofius has explained the relevance of the concepts of *sacrifice* and *atonement* by proposing that the reconciliation of humans in the death and resurrection of Christ always takes place at the divine initiative and is a kenotic event. Often with specific reference to the claim that the Son of Man gave his life as a “ransom for many” (Mark 10:45/Matthew 20:28), this principle has been variously called the “inclusive stance” or the “exclusive stance”^[5]; other scholars have also called it the “existential stance.” Within this approach, terminology such as “sacrifice” or “atonement” is used as a conceptual abstraction or interpretive category - that is, even if the terms are not attested in the texts. With additional aspects such as forgiveness, redemption, and/or substitution, this interpretive category is broad and utilized in various ways in biblical exegetical discourse.

A second biblical approach to the study of “sacrifice” calls for explicit terminology in biblical ritual texts about early Jewish cult ceremonies to define and discuss *sacrifice*. Here, the term “sacrifice” is interpreted in relation to its meaning of consecration and the implicit aspects of dedication, whereas the comprehensive Hebrew term for sacrifice, *qorban*, has been understood as conveying the activity of approaching based on the literal meaning of its root *qrb*, “to approach.”^[6] This negates any specific constitutive connection to the referent of killing. Therefore, sacrifice does not work by killing and has little to do with martyrdom^[7].

Biblical approaches have often focused on a single type of sacrifice (usually the sin offering), one or two ritual elements (especially animal sacrifice and bloody rites), and a theory (atonement). Thus sacrifice has been understood to refer to a variety of references (atonement, holiness, food, as an execution of a murderer (the inscription 'king of the Jews' on the cross; Mark 15:26). Any use of the terminological repertoire that goes beyond an immediate historical description of the event in order to

establish a counter-narrative of salvation, especially of an atoning death, is then understood as figurative[8].

What concerns us in this dissertation, however, is the dimension of sacrifice in the Old and New Testaments and the way in which the concept and its meaning changed its applicability from a practical cultic act at the Temple to its spiritualization in the form of “spiritual sacrifices” in Pauline theology. The major challenge of an approach to the analysis of sacrifice in the Old-New Testament transition is to find a way to conceptualize and organize the disparate strands of scholarly interest on this topic. Instead of the more traditional breakdown between the Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Christian spheres, though impossible to avoid, we have attempted to integrate different scholarly approaches, focusing on broad topics of scholarly analysis and dispute, though there are broad sections on specific issues in Judaic religion and Christianity.

One element of the paper's relevance lies in its systematic presentation of how *sacrifice* evolved from the Old to the New Testament, for one of the fundamental differences, among others, between the Jews and the early Christians, lay in the way they related to sacrifice. First of all, it should be noted that there is the general *secular* meaning of the word *sacrifice*: the giving up of something in order to obtain something else that is considered more valuable. What is given up can be almost anything, as long as it is considered to be of at least some value to the sacrificer. Sacrifice is constituted by some kind of personal separation from the object of the sacrifice. Sacrification is *by* someone, *of* something and *for* something, but never *to* anyone. Because of the deprivation factor, there is always some sadness or misfortune connected with it. In other words, sacrifice is something generally to be avoided, or at least to be kept as distant as possible. Thus, there is almost always some “calculation” involved, at least to ensure that the good obtained is of greater value than what is sacrificed. In some usages, the associations are extremely negative, as, for example, in the Germanic languages, where the same word, *opfer*, means both 'sacrifice' and 'victim'. These secular connotations are ubiquitous and so deeply ingrained in the way we think, speak, and feel that it is almost impossible to avoid them[9].

Then superimposed on this secular meaning is the general religious sense in which sacrifice is understood as the offering of something of value to God. It can be defined as a gift presented to God in a ceremony in which the gift is destroyed or consumed and symbolizes the internal offering of commitment and surrender to God. The purpose is primarily for the offerees to acknowledge God's lordship, but also to achieve reconciliation of themselves (and possibly others) with God, to give thanks for blessings received, and to ask for new blessings for themselves and others. One can see here the obvious distinction between internal and external sacrifice. But this general religious sense is something common to many religions. It is not yet specifically Christian[10].

Christian sacrifice, of course, has its roots and draws much of its theology from the sacrificial practices of ancient Israel. What eventually became the specifically Christian concept of sacrifice was already beginning to develop deep in the Old Testament, in the opening pages of the *Book of Fāza*, where, in chapter 4, we read of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, and in chapter 8 of Noah's sacrifice after the flood. For even here, in these early material sacrifices of animals and food, we find the biblical authors explicitly emphasizing the vital importance of the religious provision with which the sacrifice is offered. From the outset, God alone decides what is an 'acceptable sacrifice'. But this was not an arbitrary decision. For in God's progressive self-revelation to the Hebrews, especially through the prophets, God made it increasingly clear that observance of the covenantal requirements of justice and mercy are absolute requirements for offering sacrifices pleasing to God and, by implication, for any appropriate religious act. The next major development in pre-Christian Judaism, which also became an essential part of the early Christian idea of sacrifice, was the identification of sacrifice with *atonement* and *reconciliation* or *redemption*, and then the realization that what actually brought reconciliation, atonement, and communion with God was not so much the actual performance of a sacrifice as the fact that it was performed according to the law, that is, in accordance with God's will. Finally, spurred on by the situation in which many Jews could not get to the Temple, which had finally become accepted as the only place where sacrifices could be offered, there arose in Judaism the explicit awareness that prayer and virtuous acts of mercy and service (i.e., living and acting according to God's will) brought

about precisely what sacrifices properly offered in the Temple brought about, namely, reconciliation, atonement, and communion with God. The early Christians, while rejecting the material sacrifice in a temple, learned from and took up this spiritualized Jewish idea of sacrifice. But in so doing, they "Christologized" it, so to speak. For this is what was referred to in *Romans* 12:1: 'you should present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, for your spiritual worship you should present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, for your spiritual worship'.

This is the biblical background to the general Christian understanding of sacrifice as the offering of *something* to God. This offering can be something quite valuable, such as dedicating one's life to priestly service or monastic life with vows of poverty, virginity and obedience. It may also be the offering of something much less costly, such as simply renouncing sin, a dehumanizing passion. But, as we learn from the Savior Jesus Christ's praise of the widow's little offering in *Mark* 12:43 and *Luke* 21:3, it is not the size, it is not the quantity that is the issue. The range of sacrificial significance or 'sacrificial consciousness' can vary considerably. There is, on the one hand, the deep and sometimes profoundly heroic level of personal self-giving/offering that characterizes a life especially dedicated to following the Christian pattern of life. But, on the other hand, there may be very little of this level, as, for example, in the case of a child who is conditioned by the pious family custom of "giving something up" and who only later comes to appropriate such a practice as an aspect of personal self-giving in union with Christ. Thus, there may be considerable variation in the extent to which these sacrificial actions are more or less merely outward actions that Christians do or fulfill, or are truly Christological in their inner inspiration.

Christians agree that everything in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the New Testament and, most specifically, in the Christological event: the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But we often have difficulty in recognizing the truly radical nature of the Christ-event. Of course there are variations in the interpretation of Christ's sacrifice for humanity. For example, Catholic Christians have argued for the idea of the Mass as sacrifice, and Protestant theologians have argued against it, but from an Orthodox point of view, both sides have made the same methodological mistake of not looking first first firstly at the Trinitarian Christ-event to ask what the early Christians were trying to express when they began to refer to Christ's death and the Eucharist in sacrificial terms.

The traditional Western theory of the atonement includes or ultimately boils down to something like the following: (1) God's honor is tainted by sin; (2) God required a bloody victim to pay for that sin; (3) God is reconciled to the victim; (4) the death of Jesus, the victim, functioned as a payment that purified salvation for us. [\[11\]](#) Such a theory of atonement, when it is absolutized, as it often is, and when it is pushed to its "theological" conclusions and made to replace the Incarnation itself as the central doctrine of Christianity, ends up turning God into a "sacrification claimant" and Jesus Christ into a "punishment bearer." Without belaboring the obvious, sacrifice is a word laden with less than happy connotations and implications. These are inevitably evoked by the mere mention of the word 'sacrifice'. However, getting around the problem by simply refusing to use the word does not seem to be a viable option either. The word is simply too closely identified with central Christian belief and practice. The Roman Catholic tradition, all the more so from the perspective of its historical development, cannot simply abandon words and concepts such as "Sacrifice of the Mass" or "Holy Sacrifice" and still consider itself Catholic. And for Christians in general, not just Catholics, if you eliminate "the sacrifice of Christ," you eliminate Christianity itself. The so-called "problems with sacrifice" must be faced and solved doctrinally.

A biblically and patristically based theology of sacrifice must be developed from which the idea of genuine Christian sacrifice can be drawn. This can be formulated prudically in a specific trinitarian way, in a way that begins to enable us to make sense of all these problems and challenges. First of all, Christian sacrifice is not an object that we manipulate, nor is it something that we do or do without. It is first and foremost an event of mutual self-giving that takes place between persons. It is, in fact, the most deeply personal and interpersonal event we can conceive or imagine. It begins, somehow in fine if moment, not with us, but with the self-giving of God the Father in the gift of the Son. It continues, in

a second “moment,” in the “response” of the Son, in his humanity and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the Father and for us. And it continues in a third “moment” - and only then does it begin to become Christian sacrifice - when we, through human actions that are empowered by the same Holy Spirit, begin to enter into that personal, mutually giving and mutually communicating relationship that is the life of the Holy Trinity. Anything less than this, and especially anything less than this, is simply not *Christian sacrifice*.

2. Topicality of the theme in biblical research

Sacrifice is not just a concept that can be analyzed culturally, religiously, historically, psychologically. It is an experience of a significant event which has a motivation and a purpose. The sacrificial system, in all the complexity of its meanings and functions from ancient times to the present day, pivots around the human being oriented towards God / divinity / god, depending on the religious sphere. The differences in the purposes and meanings of sacrifice are framed by the cultural and religious differences in which sacrifice has been / is practiced. What interests us in this doctoral thesis is the analysis of the transition of sacrifice from ritualized religious practice in the Old Testament (burnt offerings, burnt offerings, sacrifices for atonement) to the spiritualization of sacrifice in the New Testament (“duvochnic sacrifices”). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnate for our salvation, is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament as having practiced/participated in the Jewish pattern of sacrifices as laid down in *Leviticus*. Neither did the holy apostles. But, nevertheless, the redemptive work of Christ is portrayed as a sacrifice in the Pauline epistles, a sacrifice that brings us back into the horizon of divine grace, into sonship with God the Father and incorporates us by the Holy Spirit into the Church.

From this we can deduce the nuances and the difficulty of approaching sacrifice from a historical-theological perspective in the two testaments. It is certain that there are differences of substance between the Old Testament sacrifice and its approach, even metaphorical, in the New Testament.

It is along this ideational route that our analysis proceeds. Of course, not with exhaustive pretensions of approaching the subject, we propose this polyvalent analysis of the theological reason why Christians no longer practiced Temple sacrifices. What is the meaning of sacrifice for the Christian? How do we understand the sacrifice of the incarnate Logos for humanity? The answers are necessary and, more than that, challenging in contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation.

Sacrifice has, for over a century, had an almost mesmerizing power over the fields of classics and religious studies. It has served as a site for theorizing, theologizing, and polemic from the emergence of these fields to the present. I will only summarize the voluminous and very important works on the subject before the rather arbitrary watershed moment in the mid-1990s when biblical scholarship on sacrifice moved in new directions. Interested readers can find excellent summaries of these earlier works in C. Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997)[\[12\]](#), the first chapters of which are almost an essay on early interpretations of sacrifice. The elaborations on sacrifice in *Brill's New Pauly*, which has authors H. Cancik, H. Schneider, C.F. Salazar and D.E. Orton[\[13\]](#) also provide an excellent introduction especially the discussion of the theory of sacrifice. J. Carter's edited volume, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (2003)[\[14\]](#), is also very valuable, as it brings together succinct excerpts from many of the most important theories from the 1800s through the 1990s. Although Carter's extracts are necessarily brief, they offer a wide range of influential approaches to the subject. A quick foray into this volume alone shows how extremely varied the approaches to sacrifice have been. In G. Ekroth[\[15\]](#), C.A. Faraone and F.S. Naiden[\[16\]](#), J.W. Knust and Z. Várhelyi[\[17\]](#) can be found several arguments of previous studies. Researchers' interest in this field is now quite old, and recent years show no signs of weakening, although it is certainly changing.

Over the last three decades there have been a significant number of academic conferences devoted to sacrifice, several of which have produced volumes of essays[\[18\]](#). There is also a section of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) devoted to the subject of “Sacrifice, Worship and Atonement”, which has produced a volume edited by C. Eberhart[\[19\]](#).

The variety - and at times disparity - of the current work defies any attempt to summarize or establish a single direction. If a general theme emerges, it is that scholars are less sure how coherent or important sacrifice, as a category and concept in the first place, can be. As J. Rives observes, "the monolithic place of animal sacrifice in accounts of ancient religions is now beginning to be questioned."[\[20\]](#) A 2008 conference at the University of Chicago directly addressed this issue, with the provocative title "The Centrality of Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Religion: Ancient Reality and Modern Construct". Other scholars have expressed concern that the term *sacrifice* itself is problematically vague and theologically vague. They call for more critical reflexivity in scholars' use of the term[\[21\]](#).

Rather than a monolithic view of sacrifice as a cultural phenomenon in its own right or as a universal human *je ne sais quoi*, many current studies endeavor to integrate the analysis of sacrifice into specific historical, social, and ritual networks. More recent work has tended to question the special role that animal sacrifice in particular has played in earlier studies. For a number of reasons, earlier studies have tended to separate 'blood sacrifice' from other types of offerings (grain, fruit, vegetables, wine, oil, etc.). One reason for this privileging of animal offerings is the special symbolic role that blood came to have in ancient Jewish religion and, more importantly, in early Christianity[\[22\]](#). Several recent studies have questioned the separation and privileging of animal offerings. Thus, the two main current trends present in many scholarly works are a reintegration of animal sacrifices with other forms of offerings and a recontextualization of all sacrifices, animal and non-animal, in broader historical, economic and social contexts. These advances in the scholarly discussion of sacrifice are part of similar theoretical trends in the study of ancient Mediterranean religion in general.

The theme analyzed in this thesis is topical for other reasons as well. We note here the way in which some Christian or pseudo-Christian factions assume sacrifice as a mode of sacrifice to God. Not infrequently, church history has taken note of sects which, through deviant, pathological behavior, have applied self-mutilation in order to practice a supposed moral purification. Specifying the frameworks of sacrifice on biblical grounds avoids deviation towards such forms of psycho-religious extremism, which have nothing in common with Christian practice.

In another vein, it is important to point out that the experience of Christian martyrdom has been constantly present since the earliest Christian centuries, but is still present today. The sacrifice undertaken in witnessing to Christ as the true God in a multi-religious world is a step towards holiness. The cause of sacrifice is also its goal: salvation.

3. Ideational lines, methodology and research objectives

The ideational lines along which the analysis in this doctoral thesis is carried out involve the research objectives: to specify the vocabulary of sacrifice in the Old and New Testaments; to evaluate and frame the Old Testament sacrifice, in its multivalent dimensions, in the anthropological and historical theorizations developed in the last two centuries; to highlight the particularity of sacrifice in the New Testament writings in its rescaling from act to spiritualization. One component of the research is reserved for Christian analysis, from several perspectives of biblical study, of the way in which sacrifice is received by the Apostle Paul. Pauline theology is the filter through which sacrifice, in its Old Testament practice, is rescaled. Reference to paragraphs from *Romans*, *Galatians*, *Corinthians*, *Ephesians* will be eloquent in the exercise of argument.

On the whole, our tendency is not to put the Old Testament sacrifice and that of the New Testament in a relation of value and quality. What we propose to point out is the particularity of the practice of sacrifice in the two Testaments and how through the redemptive work of the Savior Jesus Christ, who became incarnate to fulfill the Mosaic Law, not to destroy it, the meaning of ritual sacrifice is inapplicable to Christian ritual practice. Ultimately, the Holy Eucharist as realized in Christian liturgical practice also has a sacrificial dimension.

For the purpose of an argument, the appeal to a biblical methodology of analysis was more than necessary. While no methodological approach will ever be satisfactory, our analysis will explore several levels: historicity, sacrificial theory, intertextuality and systematic comparison. An analytic approach to

sacrifice without appeal to its historicity is impossible, but it is much more accurate if one also appeals to the theoretical frameworks (anthropological, cultural, and historical) relevant to the biblical study of sacrifice. Intertextuality has been widely accepted within biblical studies. At the same time, it has been criticized as unclear and confusing. From the noutheatental perspective, it could be broadly interpreted as the general implication and incorporation of the Old Testament within the New Testament. The use of the Old Testament in the New Testament has seen a surge of interest in recent years. After all, “Christianity did not arise out of a vacuum,” as Steve Moyise remarks, “but is in direct continuity with the religion enshrined in what Christians now call the Old Testament.”^[23] Undoubtedly, the Pauline texts interact with the Jewish Scriptures perhaps more than any other book in the New Testament. In particular, the engagement of *the Epistle to the Hebrews* with Old Testament sacrificial texts is part of the author's reconstruction and retelling of important ritual narratives, which can be defined as the scripturalization of worship. Engaging with this dynamic allows an examination of key terms such as 'atonement', 'redemption', 'spiritual sacrifice'.

The use of specialized dictionaries and lexicons, as well as biblical commentaries, is a real help, and indispensable in current biblical analysis. Their presence is evident in the bibliography. It should also be noted that we have made extensive use of English-language literature, given the fact that the topic is thoroughly explored in Western research.

4. Structure of the paper

The paper is structured in four chapters, each chapter consisting of several sub-chapters. Chapter I - *Religious Sacrifice: anthropological and historical theorizations and approaches* - frames the following sub-themes that open the amount of analysis: sacrifice - definition, constitutive elements and meanings; theorizations of sacrifice (E. B. Tylor, W. Robertson Smith, J. G. Frazer H. Hubert, M. Mauss, K. Meuli, W. Burkert, R. Girard, M. Douglas, F. Schmidt); the practice of sacrifice in the ancient Mediterranean area; sacrifice in the cultural context

Chapter II - Sacrifice in the Old Testament - frames a series of themes which aim to explore the meaning, structure and application of sacrifice as a ritual act: the nature of Old Testament sacrifice; approaches to Jewish sacrifice from the perspective of anthropological and historical theorizing; the sacrificial system in the Pentateuch; types of sacrifice; the application and meaning of sacrifice in non-Pentateuchal texts; the interpretation of human sacrifice; the attitude of the prophets towards sacrificial offerings at the Temple. Chapter III - *Dimensions of sacrifice in the New Testament: the transition from the sacrificial act to its spiritualization* - is the densest in approach. The analysis covers the following thematic sections: the terminology of sacrifice in New Testament literature; sacrificial frameworks and images in the New Testament: the New Testament attitude towards Old Testament sacrifices; Pauline theology of sacrifice; the complexity of the sacrificial dimension in the Epistle to the Hebrews; the spiritualization of sacrifice in the new Christian logic and way of living; the significance of “spiritual sacrifices” in 1 Peter 2:4-10 at the confluence of Christianity and Hellenism.

Chapter IV - *The Reception and Profiling of Christian Sacrifice in the Theology of the Apostolic Fathers* - is intended as an exploration of how the Apostolic Fathers, organically connected with the lived experience of the early Christian communities, related to the Temple sacrifice. The last two sections are devoted to the Trinitarian dimension of Christian sacrifice and Eucharistic sacrifice.

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