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## SACRIFICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A RELVANT THEME IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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### **ABSTRACT**

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Throughout its long history, the Christian religion has almost constantly highlighted sacrifice as a relevant theme. Yet various epochs of the same religion have differently interpreted this theme. This study critically examines the contributions of some contemporary scholars to the understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament with a view to enlarging our scope about the teaching of the Church around this topic. In what follows, the study seeks to offer a teaching that will be truly Christian and authentically African and at the same time addresses the needs of the contemporary society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Old Testament is replete with so many wonderful themes which when studied, like a palm kernel that is cracked, reveals what is inside it, which is very useful to us. 'Sacrifice' is one of such themes; it is the subject matter of this little essay. We shall first have a kind of biblical survey of the theme 'sacrifice'. After that, we shall trace the way it has been understood in the history of interpretation in major epochs of the Church, and how some contemporary scholars understand it. Next, we shall see the connection between sacrifice and other important themes in the OT. We shall then conclude with the relevance a proper understanding of sacrifice has for the contemporary world.

### **SURVEY OF THE THEME**

#### **Etymology and Usage**

The term 'sacrifice' derives from the Hebrew *qorban*, Greek *thysia*, *prophoria* and Latin *sacrificium*. The oldest generic term in the Old Testament for sacrifice is the Hebrew word *minha*, which means a gift or a tribute. This gift could be given to men (Gen. 32: 14; 33:10) or to God (Gen. 4:3; Jgs. 13:19). According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967:843), "the use of *minha* as a generic term appears confined to an early period, in which it represented both bloody and unbloody offerings." In the tradition of the pentateuchal priestly writers and in the later prophetic writings, *minha* was used with a specific meaning 'cereal offerings'. Other generic terms for sacrifice were *qorban* (literally meaning the thing brought near- Lev 1:2-9) and *zebah* (which means a sacred slaughtering- Gen. 31:54; Ex. 10:25). The latter was the word most commonly used for communion sacrifice. Its influence can be seen in the word *mizbeah*, a place of sacred slaughtering, i.e., an altar. In referring to sacrifice however, the Old Testament writers indicate a specific type of sacrifice, as for example holocaust (*ola*).

The Latin term *sacrificium* is a combination of the words *sacer* and *facere*. Sacrifice (from *sacer* – sacred and *facere* – to make) simply means: "to make sacred or holy." While *sacer* refers to something set apart from the secular or profane for the use of supernatural powers,

*facere* simply means, "to make." "To make holy" is an approximation of the divine by the human and that is why the primordial referent of sacrifice is the individual. To sacrifice is therefore "to make oneself holy, acceptable or pleasing to the divine." A sense of inadequacy opens an alternative approach to personal offering of possessions which constitute extensions of oneself (property is whatever we mix our labour with).

Sacrifice is therefore the act of offering an object to a god (or other supernatural beings), thereby making them the property of the god, and thus holy. The term sacrifice has however also acquired a popular and frequently secular use, describing some sort of renunciation or giving up of something valuable in order that something more valuable might be obtained.

### **Development of Sacrifice in the Scriptures**

Considering the historic roots of sacrifice Richards (1985), says that the practice of sacrifice precedes the Mosaic Law. The story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4) dates sacrifice back to almost the time of creation, and seems to show that the way to approach God with sacrifice may have been made clear to the first family. Genesis tells us that Cain "brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the first born of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. God's rebuke of an angry Cain suggests that Cain's offering was made in conscious violation of God's known will.

Animal sacrifices continued to be the norm. Noah made them after the flood (Gen 8:20-21). Genesis shows that the patriarchs called on the name of the Lord and offered sacrifices at altars they constructed (Gen 12:8; 13:4). One of Old Testament's most symbolic sacrifices is reported in Gen 22. To test Abraham, God sent him to a distant mountain, where he was to sacrifice his son Isaac. There as Abraham was about to kill Isaac, God called out to him and stopped him, giving him a ram to be used in the sacrifice instead of Isaac. Abraham took the ram, which had been caught by its horns in a thicket, and named the place "the Lord will provide." Job offered sacrifices for sins (Job: 5; 42:7-9).

Following their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites were provided a Law that established moral, social, civil, and other standards. The Law clearly defined the way in which Israel was to worship God. It set up a complex but well-defined system of sacrifice, as can be seen in the book of Leviticus. Prior to this time, sacrifices were offered by individuals. However with the codification of the Law, and the development of the ritual of worship, the offering of sacrifice became majorly the function of priests.

During the age of the judges and the reigns of Saul and David, sacrifices were offered at a number of locations particularly where the tabernacle was set up. Despite the fact that only priests were to make sacrifices, families and clans did offer local sacrifices during this era (e.g. 1Sam 16:2-5; 20:6:29).

The most controversial passage linked with sacrifice during this period is Judges 11:29-40. It tells of Jephthah's vow to make an *olah*, a whole burnt offering, of the first creature to meet him after a notable military victory. The first one to run to him was his daughter. This passage is variously interpreted. Was the girl killed despite the Old Testament's rejection of human sacrifice? Or did Jephthah simply dedicate her to perpetual virginity and the service of the Lord?

The era of David introduced dramatic changes in all of Israel. Jerusalem was established as a political and worship center. After David's death, his son Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. This was to be the site at which festivals would be held and the only site at which it was legitimate to offer sacrifices. Gradually however, many in Israel ignored the instruction to sacrifice only in Jerusalem and established their own local 'high places' to worship Yahweh or some god or goddess of the Canaanites. The faithlessness of God's people, who ignored his guidelines for worship, contributed to their being exiled from the land.

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed when Judah was taken captive to Babylon. It was rebuilt after their return. Sacrifices were still offered in Jesus' day at the magnificent temple reconstructed by Herod. But Rome later destroyed that temple in AD 70, and the place ordained for sacrifice was lost to the Jews.

One striking aspect of OT prophecy is seen in Ezekiel 40-48, which tells of a yet future rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple. There the prophet pictures the offering of perpetual memorial sacrifices and burnt offerings. How this picture of the future relates to the NT's affirmation that Christians' self-sacrifice has forever ended the need for animal sacrifice is debated by those who expect a literal temple to be established. The best suggestion seems to be that these are memorials, recalling the work of Christ but having no efficacy in themselves (Richards, L., 1985: 466).

### **TYPES OF SACRIFICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

It is perhaps in Leviticus that we get this in a most systematized form. This sacrificial code (Leviticus) edited and documented by the priestly tradition in the post-exilic period reflects the final stage of the development of sacrifice in Israel. In all, there are five main types of sacrifice in the OT (Lev. 1:1-5:26).

- i. **Holocaust:** This is derived from the Vulgate and Septuagint translation of the Hebrew term *olah*, which signifies something that ascends or rises. Whether this notion of ascent refers perhaps to either the victim's ascent to the altar, or from the altar to God, or both, cannot be definitively determined. Holocaust is a sacrifice in which the entire sacrificial victim was burnt. This can be seen in the meaning of the Greek term *holokautoma*, which means something wholly destroyed by fire. The ritual for the holocaust consists of six steps: the presentation of the victim, the slaughter, the aspersion of the altar, the removal of skin and dissection of the victim (except if it is a small bird), the washing of certain parts, and the burning.

- ii. **Peace Offerings:** This refers to a sacrifice which is partly destroyed, with part of the victim eaten by the offerer or priests. The major aim of this sacrifice is the preservation of harmonious relationship between the participants and God. This is symbolized in the shared offering. The major segments of the ritual are the imposition of hands, the slaughter, and the aspersion of the blood on the altar.
- iii. **Cereal Offerings:** This is the unbloody offering of vegetable products. Its Hebrew term is *minha*; its basic meaning is gift or tribute. Although it was originally an independent sacrifice, it later became a supplement to holocaust and peace offerings.
- iv. **Sin Offering:** This could be offered for any of the people of God. The aim of the sacrifice is to restore the covenant relationship between God and his people, whenever that relationship is marred by sin. The major sections of this sacrifice are the generous aspersion of blood on the altar, and the disposal of slaughtered victim. For the very poor members of the community who cannot afford an animal for this sacrifice, a bird, and in extreme poverty, an *ephah* of flour was accepted (Lev. 1: 14-17; 2:2).
- v. **Guilt Offering:** This resembles the sin offering in many ways. It seems the distinction between the two had been lost in history. Be that as it may, the dominant significance of this type of sacrifice is atonement and remuneration. 1Sam 6:3ff and 2Kgs 12:17 suggests that at times it was possible for money to be paid in place of this sacrifice. Note that in matters of injustice, guilt offerings were not accepted until restitution had been made. This included not only the restoration of the other person's property, but an additional one-fifth of the value of the object in question as compensation (Lev. 76:75).

### **PROPHETIC CONDEMNATION OF ISRAEL'S SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS**

Sacred history records the failure of generation after generation of Israel to keep the Mosaic Law. It is not surprising to find the prophets condemning Israel's approach to worship as they condemned their other failures. Isaiah and other prophets sought to reestablish the link between sacrifice and social concern, between worship and morality. Through Isaiah, the Lord cried out: "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me... Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.... Take your evil deeds out of my sight, seek justice, and encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow' (Isaiah 1:13-17; cf. Jer.7: 20-23; Amos 5: 21).

The Old Testament contains many of such warnings that urged the Israelite worshiper to purer interior dispositions and a great obedience to the Lord than was occasioned by bloody sacrifices (1Sam 15:22; Prov. 22:27; Sir 34:18-1`9). This is particularly true in the Prophets. By their criticism of hypocritical external worship, they paved the way for New Testament concepts of sacrifice.

The prophets' criticism of Israelite sacrifices was so severe that many scholars have questioned whether they attacked sacrifice itself as an institution or merely the ritual abuses that they observed. Recently the common opinion among Catholic, Protestant and Jewish exegetes is that the prophetic condemnations were directed at hypocritical ritualism and not at the institution as such.

Along with their sharp criticism of the cult, however, the prophets did exhibit respect for sacrifices (Is.19: 19-21). They spoke respectfully of the Temple and the Temple liturgy (Jer.7: 5-11; 26:2) Hosea considered the cessation of sacrifice a punishment for the nation (3:4; 9:4-5). The School of Jeremiah envisioned a place for sacrifice in the purified worship of the future (Jer.17: 26; 33:18). Their attacks on sacrifice, then, were part of their general criticism of a decadent and impious society.

### **THE THEME IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION**

In this section seeks to underscore how sacrifice has been understood since the end of the Old Testament era. Particular emphasis will be laid on these three periods: the Patristic, the Protestant reformation, and the Catholic Counter Reformation periods.

Israelite sacrifices during the time of Christ were in many ways similar to what we see in Leviticus (which is a post-exilic priestly document). NT writers however (except the author of the letter to the Hebrews) were not concerned with Old Testament sacrifices. The author of the letter to the Hebrews was concerned with contrasting the Levitical sacrifices with the sacrifice of Christ. He depicted God as the initiator of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, but he also maintained that these were mere pre-figures of the sacrifice of Christ, in which He was both High Priest and victim (Heb. 7: 1-11:18). He argued that the sacrifices of the Old Law were temporary, whereas Christ's sacrifice was eternal and unique (Heb. 8: 1-2; 9:25-26; 10:11-14; 12:2). In any case, the mortal and sinful priests of Israel had been replaced by Christ, the Son of God who was without sin (Heb. 7: 11-8:6), and the sacrificial victims of the Old Testament had been replaced by Christ, the perfect victim.

In other words in the New Testament, the concept of sacrifice is radically changed. Christ's life, death, and resurrection have won for us everything we need. In simple terms, we are saved "by his blood" (Rom 5: 6-11). Because of this, every Christian can now offer his or her life as a living sacrifice offered for worship and reconciliation (Rom 12:1). We see hence that in the NT, sacrifice became spiritualized, it became the living sacrifices of the life of Christians. All the various responsibilities and activities of life are linked to this Christian dedication, which should be characterized by constant thanksgiving. Eph. 5.19-20.

In Judaism also, we notice that with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the Jews no longer had a place to offer sacrifice, for by then sacrifice to Yahweh had become centralized only in Jerusalem. The Jews however reinterpreted sacrifice. In the absence of a physical temple for sacrifice, they began to understand the body as the temple of God, and a good ethical life as the best sacrifice that can be offered to God.

### **PATRISTIC PERIOD**

Sacrifice reflected so much in the patristic era. Justin related the Christian Eucharist to sacrifice in his apologetic writings. As a fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi, the Eucharist takes over the place of the OT sacrifices as effective worship. The Eucharist is the

communion in the real body and blood of Christ, and as such, it commemorates the Last Supper, the Calvary event, and the Resurrection; and it gives the Father worthy thanks for these events of redemption.

Irenaeus also talked about Eucharist as the true, spiritual offering of the body and blood of the risen Christ that nourishes people's life unto the life of the risen Christ. However, he applies the notion of sacrifice to Christian life as well. He stressed the importance of the community's sincere self – offering to the Father, and its profession of faith in the final resurrection. St. Augustine however insisted on the personal self – giving of the self to God. Thus he said that every work of mercy toward others or ourselves, if it be directed to God, is truly a sacrifice.

Thus patristic Fathers hold that the Eucharistic action is the sacrifice of both Christ and the Church, and that it is linked both with the Last Supper and with the Calvary event. Thomas Aquinas in the medieval period borrowed a lot from the thesis of Augustine on sacrifice. He however dwelt more upon the obligation of offering sacrifice, rather than upon an analysis of the nature of sacrifice.

### **MODERN PERIOD**

This period is characterized by the raising of doubt by Protestant Reformers on the validity of the Mass as truly efficacious sacrifice, and the defense by the Catholics in the council of Trent. The Protestants insisted that the Calvary Event was the all-sufficient and unique sacrifice that rendered further sacrificial acts useless. In other words, no other sacrifice has the same effect as the Calvary sacrifice. However, for the Catholics, there is no distinction between the Mass and the sacrifice of Calvary. Christ is the same victim offered. Catholic theologians until well into 20<sup>th</sup> century discussed the Mass as sacrifice almost totally in terms of its link with Christ's passion and death. Thus, the death of a victim received an emphasis it never previously had, especially as compared with the medieval era in which emphasis was laid on sacrifice as a virtue. While therefore the earlier centuries had stressed the element of "making sacred", later developments gradually underscored the aspect of "giving up something."

### **Contemporary Period**

The contemporary Catholic theology of sacrifice is seen best as part of the wider development of *soteriology*. Christ's saving actions are seen as an integrated whole which begins in the incarnation and ends with the Pentecost. These events are seen as stages in the redeeming acts of Christ, rather than as discrete events. The Eucharist continues to enjoy the name sacrifice because it is Christ in the midst of the Christian community who continues His decision to give Himself for the sake of His brethren. The Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass is the same with the sacrifice of Christ.

### **SCHOLARLY DISCUSSION OF THE THEME 'SACRIFICE'**

There are various and varied understandings of sacrifice, based on the author's interests, and the field of study within which the author operates. For Rahner and Vorgrimler (1985: 457), sacrifice is the act whereby an authorized person, representing a group of worshippers, changes a material offering in such a way as to withdraw it from profane use, place it within the 'sacred' sphere and thus dedicate it to God as an expression of a loving self-surrender to the holy God; to make it when accepted and sanctified by God, the sign in the community's sacrificial meal of God's gracious will to enter into communion with man.

Some other scholars (Rahner *et al*, 1970) hold that sacrifice designates the attitude of man before God. It is the expression of man's total dedication to God. It makes the special relationship of man to God visible in a way that excludes any one-sided humanization or secularization of the notion of God. While it is true that sacrifice can only be offered to God, the explanation of the attitude can only start from men's relationships to one another.

Be that as it may, what is sacrifice for the Jews of the Old Testament? According to J. Castelot and A. Cody (in Jerome Biblical Commentary), we cannot understand the Jewish notion of sacrifice, without understanding their concept of God. For the Jews, God was unique, transcendent, all-powerful, supremely self-sufficient, and personal. And he requires a personal and rational response from his people. "Sacrifice then was the external expression of a personal response to a personal God. It was not a mechanical, magic gesture with an efficacy unrelated to the interior dispositions of the one offering it. If sacrifice was not motivated by sincere interior disposition, it was empty formalism; a mocking of true divine-human relationship" (Brown *et al*, eds. 1968). In other words, sacrifice was not just a gift to acknowledge God's sovereignty and dominion, or only a means of effecting union with him, or just an expiation. It was all these combined. For McKenzie (1974), sacrifice mainly expresses thanksgiving and joy, rather than, or more than, any other sentiments.

According to Ellis (1963: 36), although "...the indispensable elements of sacrifice consist in the internal acts of worship, thanksgiving, and propitiation, it must never be forgotten that man because of his very nature, part spiritual and part material, must be allowed to express externally his interior spiritual sentiments of worship." What this means is that although Leviticus speaks mostly of the externals of sacrifice, it also implies the spiritual aspect which should be going on simultaneously in the heart of the sacrificer. Wherever the internal elements of worship are lacking in a sacrifice, there is no true sacrifice. For Ellis (1963), scholars who say that only the externals of sacrifice are required in the Old Testament are mistaken; "Mere externals constitute formalism, effecting and expressing not sanctity and worship, but legalism and sanctimoniousness. Leviticus says little about the internals of sacrifice precisely because it takes them for granted and because it is essentially a book of rubrics (just like Catholic Roman Missal)." The statement "obedience is better than sacrifice" (1Sam. 15:22) supports the above thesis.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament, according to Heinisch (1955), were meant to promote the relationship between God and his people. They were not meant to feed God. Expressions

such as "When God smelt the pleasant odour..." (Gen. 8:21) are anthropomorphic. This is proved by Ps 50:13 "Do I eat the meat of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" Sacrifices were rather meant to continually remind Israel of their dependence on God, to continuously foster a yearning for God in the heart of His people, to rouse them to love him more, with increased fervour and vigour, and to serve Him with a virtuous life. It evokes in the sinner the consciousness of guilt, urging him/her to do penance and repent. They are not meant to reduce personal piety. They are instead meant to increase and promote holiness. Sacrifices also blot out sin. This can be understood through an indirect reading of 1Samuel 3:14: "The guilt of the house of Eli could not be expiated by sacrifices and offerings". It can be implied from the above passage that sacrifices blotted out other types of guilt, but not the type committed by the house of Eli. The sins expiated through sacrifices are sins that are not exceptionally grievous offences committed in open defiance of God. They are rather minor offences and ritual impurities. We have to note however that sacrifice in itself has no power to remove sins. Its effect is only due to the grace and mercy of a gracious God.

Heinisch (1955) noted that in Israel, the theory of sacrifice did not always square up with the practice. Many Jews adopted pagan attitudes in offering sacrifices. They often showed little concern for the true spirit of sacrifice (oblation and surrender of self to God, reflected in ethical life). They believed that by presenting fatter offerings they could influence and pacify God, and get him to do for them what they wanted. They forgot that the most essential thing in a sacrifice is not what is offered, but the heart with which it was offered. It was this misunderstanding of the true spirit of worship and sacrifice that necessitated the condemnation of sacrifice by the prophets. What the prophets condemned was the aberrations in sacrifice, and not the act of sacrificing in itself. What God was unhappy with is not sacrifice in itself, but rather sacrifices offered without the proper spiritual dispositions. This can be proved from the fact that Isaiah did not oppose the reforms of King Ezekiah, and Jeremiah did not oppose the reforms of King Josiah, though both were cultic reforms.

In the scholarly discussion on sacrifice, scholars have debated on the essence of sacrifice. They tried to answer the question regarding the essence and/or essential action in a sacrifice. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1981:128) insists that "often the act of sacrifice involves the destruction of the offering, but this destruction – whether by burning, slaughtering, or whatever means – is not in itself, the sacrifice. The killing of an animal is the means by which its consecrated life is "liberated" and thus made available to the deity, and the destruction of a food offering in an altar's fire is the means by which the deity receives the offering. Sacrifice as such, however, is the total act of offering and not merely the method in which it is performed.

For Glazier and Hellwig (1994:781) however, "the essence of Hebrew sacrifice" is the "killing of the animal." To this extent the animal represents the worshipper(s). In other words, its destruction represents their total self-effacement before the all-powerful God, and in a sense a just punishment for their sin. This view implicitly suggests that creatures must placate/please God, and/or that divine anger must be overcome by the punishment of



sinner. Thus sacrifice has often been associated with atonement, but atonement seen as propitiating or satisfying divine wrath.

More recently, emphasis has shifted to understanding sacrifice as a "giving" or offering of self in a quest for union or reunion. In this regard, the essence of sacrifice is no longer in the killing of the animal, but in its offering. Life is seen in the blood (Lev.17: 11). Releasing blood from the animal enables the releasing of life for union with God. Here, blood represents human life. Only now the shedding of blood is not for submission or punishment, but as an offering of life to be joined with God. Naturally, in releasing blood an animal dies, but killing is not the essence of sacrifice. Implicit in this view is not a God to be placated, but a God who graciously provides sacrifice as a means for union with Him, and for overcoming the alienation of sin. Sacrifice is, for that reason, associated with atonement, but atonement is now understood as expiating or removing sin by being reconciled or becoming "at-one" with a merciful God.

Many other scholars and historians of religion have proposed many other things as the essence or essential act in a sacrifice, on which the sacrificial ritual and symbolism repose. These include gift, homage, expiation, communion with God, etc. Whatever be the case, we conclude that sacrifice seems too complex a phenomenon to be reduced to a single radical element. Its practice did not arise from theoretical considerations of the nature of communion between man and God. Where one or more of the above elements is missing, the symbolism of the sacrificial act is altered.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'SACRIFICE' AND OTHER OT THEMES**

As we saw above, one of the ideas underlying the term 'Sacrifice' in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the idea of a gift to God. It was a way of expressing homage, adoration, thanksgiving, etc., to God. (*cf.* Lev.1, Gen.8: 20-21). Sacrifice is useless except when accepted by God, who accepts only from those with the proper dispositions. This was the major context for the development of the theology of divine acceptance. Sacrifice was also a means of atoning for sins. But the Old Testament is somehow explicit in its insistence that the expiatory effects of sacrifice was not based on the human action involved, but on the creative action of God that makes persons or things acceptable to himself, or that averts the course of evil set in motion by the transgression of human beings.

In relation to covenant, sacrifice was seen in Israel as a bilateral contract between humanity and God. People give gifts to God, and God reciprocates by granting man some boon. However, this idea of gift was such that God had an imperative right since anything that man could offer him first came from his bountiful divine hand (*cf.* Ps.24:1, 50:9-13). In offering sacrifices, the Israelites did hope to obtain God's blessing. But it must be noted here that in sacrifice, man symbolically bound himself to God; and God, by accepting what has been sacrificed, bound Himself in some way. However, God had no need of the gift and there could be no proportion between the gift and God's favour. In a sacrifice, the fact that the one

victim had both been offered to God and eaten by the worshippers brought the two parties together in a spiritual communion, consolidating the covenant bound between the two.

Women also played a role in sacrifice in Israel. This therefore brings out the relationship between sacrifice and the role of women in the Old Testament. Following Childbirth, a woman was required to offer a holocaust and a sin offering (Lev.12:1-8). For people who considered marriage as something sacred, childbirth as the greatest of blessings, and sterility as a curse, a new mother was certainly not by the very fact of her motherhood in a "state of sin". But she had come into contact with, as it were, the creative power of God and consequently, had to be "purified" in the ritual sense before resuming normal activities. Analogously, the Church, which, considers matrimony a sacrament and reveres motherhood, has a ceremony of "Churching" after childbirth, with this same idea in mind.

Sacrifice was also closely related to justice in that God accepted sacrifices only when the one offering the sacrifice was relatively just. In the book of Amos 5:22-24, God rejected the sacrifices of the people because of their injustice and oppression. This shows that justice was a necessary condition for the acceptance of any sacrifice by God.

### **CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

From all that we have seen above, it is clear that the Old Testament does not support human sacrifice, even though it was practiced in nations surrounding Israel. Hence it is probably legitimate to wonder whether there is any link between Ancient Near East tradition of human sacrifices, and the suicide bombings in the Near East today. Suicide bombings are organized and financed by those who believe that they are appointed by God to lead the people politically and religiously. They believe that the lives of those who carry out the actual bombings are in a sense a sacrifice to God. The bombers themselves believe they are doing what pleases God, and that they will be rewarded accordingly, as can be seen in their last words before they detonate the bombs. Does this not show that these Muslims, whose religious heritage dates back to the Old Testament, who see Abraham as their patriarch, have moved away from a proper understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament? The *salah* they celebrate is a clear indication of the rejection of human sacrifice by God. Yet such bombers can move away from the celebration of the *salah*, and go at once to carry out a suicide mission. A proper understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament can change a lot in this area.

Old Testament rejection of human sacrifice has a lot of relevance for African Traditional Religion (ATR), for up on till recently (for it is no longer so widespread), human sacrifices was said to be the norm in ATR. ATR can learn from a proper understanding of sacrifice in the OT that God does not wish that human beings be brutally murdered in the name of offering the best sacrifice to him.

According to Agnew (1995: 846), "...the affinity between images of bloody ritual sacrifice and incidents of violence continues to be a source of problems. (Because of that – *my insretion*)

... early Christians were forbidden to seek martyrdom deliberately...," in the belief that they are doing something pleasant to God." Today it is recognized that the value given to the crucifixion makes the sacrifice of Christ vulnerable to various ideological interpretations through which the Church can legitimize the violence of ordinary life (Agnew, 1995). It is in line with this that liberation theologians, in reaction to the institutionalized violence in South America, have argued that a spirituality that is based on co-suffering with Christ can, and does justify the sufferings caused by unjust social structures. They make efforts to develop a theology that does not legitimize suffering, a theology that instead makes a preferential option for the poor and oppressed the center of ethical and religious life.

Agnew (1995: 846) notes that "Likewise, feminist theologians have recognized that the call to surrender and oblation has served to reinforce the patriarchal situation that limits women's expectations to passive, subordinate, and auxiliary roles; equates 'becoming Christ-like' with having no self of one's own, and insinuates guilt about even the smallest move towards self-affirmation."

## **CONCLUSION**

It is not an over statement to say that sacrifice is a very important theme in religious studies. This is because there is no known religion that does not have one form of sacrifice or the other. A study such as the one we have done has a lot to offer Christianity in particular and humanity in general. As ministers of the gospel, it equips us with lots of information that are very important and relevant for the ministry

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