

Chapter One

Animal Sacrifice

THE EIGHTH CENTURY B.C. INAUGURATED AN ERA of spiritual and moral evolution in Judaism that struggles to continue in our own day. It was a giant leap in consciousness that seemed to emerge, full-blown, in the teachings of the Latter Prophets.

The teachings of those men affirmed the primary importance of social justice, rejected ceremonial and sacrificial religion, and articulated a change from henotheism to monotheism. They also taught that *homo sapiens* is not the end-all or be-all of God's creation—that, in fact, the animal kingdom is an integral part of the Kingdom to come. It would be a peaceable kingdom where “they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” (Isa. 11:9)

Although this change in consciousness regarding animals was first articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old

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Testament), students of religion have traditionally credited India with the concept. They point to the teachings of Buddha and Mahavira, both of whom denounced the sacrifice of animals in the sixth century B.C. The Hinduism of their day required the slaughter of sacrificial animals; it was an integral part of that religion.

As is usual in a sacrificial cult, the priests wielded great power. The power of the Brahmin priests rested on the teaching that only they could offer the kind of sacrifices that were “the atonement for everything . . . the sacrifice that redeems all sin.”¹ Only the priests were empowered to utter the sacred formula over such sacrifices; they were the intermediaries between the gods and men. They alone could ensure that the gods were propitiated and that petitions would be granted. Without their mediation the people would be lost—they would be out of favor with the forces on whom they thought their very lives depended.

Of course, the priests were not going to accept any teaching that repudiated the animal sacrifice that was the cornerstone of their power. Consequently, they saw Buddha and Mahavira as enemies. Not only did these sages teach that sacrificial worship did not secure the blessings of any god, they also taught that such sacrifices were intrinsically evil. They taught that inflicting pain and death on other sentient creatures retarded the spiritual growth of human beings. Since animals are equipped with the same five senses as human beings, they could obviously experience the same sensations of pain, suffering, and fear. To abuse these creatures in the name of any god was an affront to the concept of Deity.

Because these teachings against sacrifice could not be contained within the Hinduism of their time, they became part

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of the separate religions of Buddhism and Jainism. When that happened, the substance of these new teachings stood out in clear distinction from Hindu doctrine. As these new religions developed, the concept of nonviolence toward man and all other creatures was reinforced.

But India was not the setting for the first religious reaction against animal sacrifice. The understanding that the suffering and death of animals was repugnant to the Creator had surfaced among the Hebrews long before Indian sages articulated such concepts. Beginning with Isaiah in 750 B.C., the Latter Prophets condemned animal sacrifice. In so doing these prophets were reiterating the ancient knowledge found in Genesis: Animals were created in love and goodness, just as human beings had been. And humans were ordained to be the loving caretakers of animals, not their cruel abusers.

Although the Judaic prophecies regarding animals and their treatment predated the teachings in India, the message of the Latter Prophets did not stand out in clear relief because their teachings did not break from Judaism to form a separate belief system. Instead, their prophetic message was absorbed into the mainstream of the Hebrew religion and became still another current running through the spiritual history of Israel. Consequently, the warnings against sacrificial religion continued to coexist with a priestly power structure that was still developing complex rituals for slaughter.

This coexistence of opposing viewpoints is a great strength of the Old Testament; it is one of the reasons for its continuing impact on the human race. The Hebrew Scriptures record both the continuity and the changes that took place in Judaism's understanding of God. They tell of the struggle between opposing values that continued for many centuries. The

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Scriptures also provide a continuous, if selective, chronicle of a nation's spiritual journey.

The Old Testament does not gloss over the negative history of its people. The good and the bad, the going forward and the sliding back, the high points of the nation's history and its nadir—all are included in the record. But in reading this record it is important to understand that negative developments do not always receive a negative comment. Often, it is only when a later generation adds to the biblical record that it becomes evident that certain events had not received the unqualified endorsement that earlier accounts seemed to present. The story of Jacob and Esau is a case in point.

Although Jacob cheated his brother of his birthright, the original account in the book of Genesis does not comment negatively on the fact that he deliberately cheated his brother. But hundreds of years after the fact, the Bible does refer to Jacob's deception as something blameworthy. (See Isa. 43:27; Jer. 9:4; Hos. 12:2–3 AMP)

This negative assessment of Jacob's action was not a new thought in Judaism; it had long been present in Israel's discussions and disputations of the incident. Eventually this negative judgment of the event became part of the biblical record.

The same kind of deferred judgment occurs regarding the sacrifice of animals. For centuries the Scriptures presented a seemingly one-sided view of the practice—a view that implied sacrifice was unquestioningly accepted in Israel. But during that time there was an undercurrent that opposed such worship. And with the advent of the Prophet Isaiah in the eighth century B.C., that current surfaced and entered the mainstream of

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Hebrew life. Opposition to the entrenched rituals of sacrificial worship then became part of the biblical record.

Because widely divergent viewpoints like these can only appear as contradictions in a short-term view of events, an overview of the Bible is necessary. An overview provides a long-term perspective. We see that it is conflict—not contradiction—that the Bible is reporting. Many ideals struggled for supremacy in Judaism over the centuries, and the various books of the Old Testament provide different perspectives on those conflicts.

Without an overview and without a knowledge of the deferred judgment that is applied to some biblical events, it would seem that suddenly, for no discernible reason, there was a reaction in Judaism against the sacrifice of animals. This sudden reaction would be doubly confusing because at the time that the prophets began speaking out against the slaughter, the cult of Temple worship was at a zenith. And the ritual slaughter of animals was at the heart of that worship.

The priests who officiated at the sacrifices had enormous religious and political power. Like their Hindu counterparts, the Israelite priests had a vested interest in sacrificial worship. They had developed complex and intricate rituals for slaughter, all with appropriate prayers to God. Those rituals had become completely integrated into their sacred tradition.

By the time Isaiah began his prophetic ministry, slaughtering animals in the name of God had assumed the nature of an additional commandment in the eyes of the people. But Isaiah, and those who followed him, called the people back from their violent worship. The Lord, they said, had never asked for the slaughter of His own creatures: It was Man himself who had instituted sacrificial worship.

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The prophets also tried to reestablish the teaching contained in the book of beginnings—the book of Genesis. Genesis taught that animals, like human beings, were created by God; that God had concern for their welfare, just as He had for human welfare. And as surely as the Lord had established a covenant with human creatures, so He had also covenanted with other creatures—with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air.²

The prophecies of men like Isaiah, Micah, and Amos reiterated that the sacrifice of animals was an abomination in the sight of God, an unholy practice that demanded repentance. Isaiah was the first of his era to prophesy against the sacrificial cult:

The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. . . . Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. (Isa. 1:11, 15–16 NIV)

Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea were equally vocal about the evils of animal sacrifice. They all spoke out in the name of God against the killing taking place on the altars:

For Ephraim in his sin has multiplied altars, altars have become his sin. Though they sacrifice flesh as offerings to me and eat them, I the Lord will not accept them. Their guilt will be remembered and their sins punished. They shall go back to Egypt. . . . (Hos. 8:11–13 NEB)

They would “go back to Egypt” because, when they lived in captivity there, the sacrificial cult was not yet an established

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Hebrew tradition. The prophet knew his people had to go back in their understanding to a time when they had not been conditioned to accept animal sacrifice as a necessary part of their worship.

The prophet Jeremiah also addressed this issue of the development of sacrificial worship and pointed back to the time when the Hebrews were first freed from their captivity in Egypt:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them saying, “Obey My voice and I will be your God and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.” Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their own heart, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day. . . . (Jer. 7:21–25 NAS)

The Prophet Amos raised his voice in condemnation of sacrificial worship. He, too, reminded the people of the time when their ancestors left Egypt; a time when the rituals of animal sacrifice had not yet become a cornerstone of their sacred tradition. During the forty years of wandering in the wilderness they were taken care of by God—there was no need for elaborate ceremonies and festivals. Speaking in the name of the Lord, Amos forcefully declared:

I hate and despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. When you offer me holocausts, I reject your oblations, and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened

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cattle . . . but let justice flow like water, and integrity like an unfailing stream. Did you bring me sacrifice and oblation in the wilderness for all those forty years, House of Israel? (Amos 5:21–22, 24–25 JB)

If the chosen people were to continue their spiritual leadership, they would have to accept the prophets' message. They would have to accept that God was not pleased by a worship in which His creatures were dragged, in a frenzy, to be slaughtered in His name.

The Prophet Jeremiah voiced God's indictment of the human race as a species that took advantage of the most helpless in its midst—a race that abused those without the power to protect themselves. He juxtaposed the abuse of powerless humans with the slaughter of helpless animals on the altars of the Temple.

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways. . . . Do not trust in deceptive words saying, This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord! . . . [but] if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place . . . then I will let you dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers. . . . (Jer. 7:3–4, 6–7 NAS)

The call for the rejection of animal sacrifice was also the call for a religion marked by social justice. Ceremonies, sacrifices, and religious feast days were not pleasing to the Lord. The relief of the sufferings of the helpless and the oppressed constituted the true worship of God.

What are your multiplied sacrifices to me? . . . I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. . . . I hate your

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new moon and your appointed feasts. . . . Cease to do evil. Learn to do good; seek justice; reprove the ruthless; Defend the orphan, plead for the widows. . . . (Isa. 1:11, 14, 16–17 NAS)

Not only did the prophets point out that sacrifices and ceremonies were man made substitutes for the true worship of God, they also faced their people with the fact that the violence done to sacrificial animals was reflected in the violence that human beings were willing to inflict on each other. And slaughtering animals, as an act of worship among the Hebrews, was eventually reflected in the practice of human sacrifice.

Although Judaism never condoned human sacrifice, by the time of the Latter Prophets the sacrifice even of their own children had become widespread among the people. Some of those who believed that God was pleased by the slaughter of animals eventually concluded that He would be even more pleased by the sacrifice of human flesh—the flesh of their own children.

In the Book of Micah, that prophet made the connection between the sacrifice of human flesh and the sacrifice of animals.

With what shall I come before the Lord. . . . Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil: *Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?* He has told you, O man what is good . . . do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:6–8 NIV emphasis added)

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In their oracles, the Latter Prophets frequently connected man's violence toward animals with the violence he directed toward other people. Just as frequently, they linked a world of peace and prosperity with a world where animals, as well as human beings, would be free from exploitation.

A peaceable world was necessarily a world in which no creature would destroy or be destroyed. It was a world where all could live their lives in security and safety. The eleventh chapter of Isaiah describes this peaceable kingdom as a time and place wherein the human race will strive to live in accord with the Divinity in whose image it was created. And in that kind of world, the animal kingdom will reflect the goodness and mercy that will be the hallmark of human affairs.

. . . with righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice.
He will give decisions for the poor of the earth. . . . The wolf
will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the
goat and the calf and the lion and the yearling together: and
a little child will lead them. (Isa. 11:4, 6 NIV)

The prophet went on to further describe this peace that will be evident among the animals as well as among men.

The cow and the bear make friends, their young lie down
together. The lion eats straw like the ox. The infant plays
over the cobra's hole; into the vipers lair the young child puts
his hand. They do not hurt, nor harm, on all my holy
mountain, for the country is filled with the knowledge of the
Lord as the waters swell the sea. (Isa. 11:7-9 JB)

This knowledge that fills the world "as the waters swell the sea" is the knowledge of a rule of justice and compassion. It is

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a rule that people will finally accept; a rule that rejects the unjust and violent behavior that human beings demonstrated so often.

Like Isaiah, the Prophet Micah spoke of a time when people will be willing to put into practice what they learn—a time when they will act in a way that conforms to the way God would have things done:

Come and let us go to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways. . . . Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation. And never again will they train for war. And each of them will sit under his vine and under his fruit tree with no one to make them afraid. (Mic. 4:2–4, NAS)

Still another of the prophets—Hosea—prophesied that there would be no more war. There would be no war because human behavior would be marked by love and compassion. It would be a time when men and women would renounce their violence because they had had enough of the misery and suffering they had created. And in a world marked by love and compassion, human beings would not only live in peace with each other, they would also live in peace with the beasts of the fields and the birds of the air.

In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land so that all may lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. (Hos. 2:18–19 NIV)

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The prophets taught that God's blessings would abound only in a world where human beings rejected violence and "no longer taught war." But the journey toward that peaceable kingdom demanded that the sacrifice of animals stop. A people who remained insensitive to the travesty of a worship that called for the terrorizing and slaughter of other creatures was a people whose spiritual development was being retarded; a people who had not yet taken their first step toward a millennial world.

Amazingly, though the Latter Prophets called for the reform or abolition of many of the institutions and practices that had been sanctified by the Hebrews, their message survived in the scriptures of their people. Their words were preserved because they spoke to Judaism's deepest roots. These men of God had not introduced new concepts into Israel; they had reintroduced themes that went back to the very beginning—back to the time of Genesis. And their great age of prophecy was a sign that it was time for the human race to recover its spiritual heritage. Speaking in the name of God, the prophets let the people know that it was time for the world to once again reflect the qualities that God had ordained at the Creation—love, compassion, and mercy for all creatures.

1. John D. Noss. *Man's Religions*, 6th Ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), p. 83

2. See Chapter Three, "After The Flood."