1

Rereading the Hebrew Bible
Discovering the Sacrificial Cult

And Noah . . . sacrificed burnt offerings on the altar. When YHWH smelled the pleasing odor, YHWH said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind.”

Genesis 8:20–21

And Moses took the blood [of the sacrifices] and sprinkled it on the people. And he said, “See the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Exodus 24:8

What do people in the modern Western world mean when they talk about “sacrifice”? This term is usually understood to convey that somebody suffers loss for a particular cause or for the sake of a greater good. It is particularly associated with misfortune or the violent destruction of something, for example, the material being sacrificed or a human life. Such a contemporary understanding is evident, for instance, in a song.
The Sacrifice of Jesus
by Billy Joel that describes a war orphan as a “child of sacrifice,” or another song by Mika that describes life as involving both love and sacrifice—“a little bit of heaven, but a little bit of hell.” Such a negative understanding of sacrifice corresponds to many theories of sacrifice in both theological and anthropological scholarship. In what follows, I shall provide a chronological outline of several theories of sacrifice that have been most influential in these disciplines.18

Scholarly Theories of Sacrifice
Bähr and Vicarious Contact with God
Attempts to understand sacrificial rituals are by no means modern endeavors. Already in 1837 and 1839, the German pastor Carl Christian Wilhelm Felix Bähr published a comprehensive study in two volumes titled “Symbolism of the Mosaic Cult.”19 Its section on sacrificial rituals features a distinctive theory of sacrifice based on the idea of substitution. It presupposes that the earthly realm is separated from the heavenly due to human sin. Bähr’s core question then is: How can humans ever establish contact with God if either one belongs to a different world? For Bähr, sacrifice is a means of connecting these worlds, and this happens, more specifically, through sacrificial blood rites. He states that “bloody sacrifices” are more important than nonbloody ones since they convey more fully what sacrifice is all about.20 Instrumental for understanding such bloody sacrifices is Leviticus 17:11: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and
I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar, because the blood makes atonement through the life.” Bähr takes this passage to refer to the sinful human life that he understands to have been transferred to the sacrificial animal. Since the blood of the animal is applied to parts of the sanctuary, Bähr reasons that ultimately the human life is being brought into contact with the place of the divine presence; this is how substitution occurs. The blood of the sacrificial animal is, therefore, a means through which humans, despite being fundamentally separate from God, can establish contact with God.

Sacrifice as Communal Totemistic Meals

Later in the nineteenth century, two Scottish scholars based their theories of sacrifice particularly on their attention to meals. In 1889, William Robertson Smith, orientalist and professor of Old Testament, published comparative studies titled Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. Six of its eleven lectures are dedicated to sacrifice, which he associates with concepts of taboo and communion. According to Smith, animal sacrifices in the Semitic world were generally the settings for communal meals. Such joyful events constituted and affirmed not only the unity of the clan or tribe members but also the unity of humans with the deities who were usually perceived to be their ancestors. Both levels of communion were understood to sustain the life of the community. Yet sacrifice changed with cultural developments: “When men cease to eat raw or living flesh, the
blood, to the exclusion of the solid parts of the body, comes to be regarded as the vehicle of life and the true *res sacramenti.*"^{23}

Smith’s approach and findings influenced scholars in a variety of fields, among them the cultural anthropologist Émile Durkheim; the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud; and the Scottish social anthropologist James George Frazer. The latter coupled sacrifice with totemism in his voluminous study *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890 and gradually expanded to twelve volumes between 1906 and 1915).^{24} According to Frazer, members of primitive clans or tribes understood each other to be connected through kinship ties that originate in totems, that is, common human or nonhuman ancestors. These totems later evolved into deities. Since communal meals were the setting of sustaining life and reinforcing communal ties, Frazer assumes that these meals were ultimately about eating the totemistic deity.

**Hubert/Mauss and the Idea of Consecration through Identification**

From the end of the nineteenth century dates a lengthy essay titled “Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function,” which soon attained the status of a classic and determined the general interpretation of sacrificial rituals for many decades.^{25} It was cowritten by the French sociologists and anthropologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who both worked at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris. Their essay on sacrifice tackles the main question:
How is consecration achieved during the process of sacrifice?

In order to define the essence and function of the “drama” of sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss present a comparative study of sacrificial rituals in Hinduism and in the Hebrew Bible, enriched by occasional examples of Greco-Roman and other cults. Refusing attempts of reducing sacrifice to any single idea, they maintain the complexity of its forms and appearances. Nevertheless, Hubert and Mauss soon focus their study on animal sacrifice. They understand a sacrifice as a consecration of both the victim and the layperson offering it; either one is transformed through a movement from the profane to the sacred realm. The consecration of the victim, on the one hand, occurs in the act of slaughter, which “liberates” the spirit of the sacrificial animal from its physical body. Slaughter is therefore considered the culmination of sacrifice. The consecration of the layperson, on the other hand, is marked by two ritual elements that ultimately constitute a transfer of identity: First, the layperson establishes direct physical contact with the sacrificial animal through the hand-leaning rite or an equivalent action; from now on, she or he is represented through the victim. Second, the layperson partakes of the sacredness “accumulated” in the victim by eating portions of it. Through the interpretation of sacrificial rituals in relation to myths, Hubert and Mauss take their conclusions even one step further: In the end, they conclude that the victim itself becomes divine; animal sacrifice is, in its essence, a sacrifice of the deity.
Koch and Rendtorff: Renewed Interest in Sacrifice and Focus on the Sin Offering

A few other theories of sacrifice have been formulated early in the twentieth century, but overall the interest in matters of the sacrificial cult declined. Reversing this trend, the German Old Testament scholars Klaus Koch and Rolf Rendtorff established a tradition of renewed interest in this subject toward the middle of the twentieth century. According to Koch, the sin offering is a ritual of transferring human sin to a sacrificial animal; sin is then eliminated through slaughter of the animal. Rendtorff questioned this hypothesis. He contributed the specific idea that atonement effects the elimination of both human sin and impurity and contributed a comprehensive study on the development of sacrificial rituals in the Old Testament.

Burkert and the Hunt as the Origin of Sacrifice

The year 1972 saw the release of two very influential studies on the topic of sacrifice: Walter Burkert published a book with the Latin title *Homo Necans*, meaning “The Killing Human,” while René Girard published *Violence and the Sacred*. The titles of both studies set the agenda for the respective analyses of the origins and interpretation of sacrifice. Furthermore, the approaches of both scholars are similar in that both explain sacrifice mostly through their interpretation of ancient Greek myths. To begin with, Burkert, a German classical philologist, wonders: Can “biological” origins of
sacrifice be determined? And what is the connection between violence and religion or, by extension, between violence and human society?

Burkert assumes that sacrifice originated in Paleolithic hunting practices. A hunt did not only provide food. It also had, first, a consolidating effect on human clans and tribes as they needed to settle inner disputes in order to join their forces and become a successful hunting party. Second, the hunt also allowed aggressions within the community to be redirected at the animal prey. The success of the hunt is manifest in its decisive moment, the kill. According to Burkert, the primitive human community was unconsciously aware of the positive group-dynamic and life-sustaining effects of the hunt. Therefore, mythic traditions were developed so as to commemorate, and reflect upon, this crucial endeavor, and sacrifice was instituted to ritualize killing. Myths and sacrificial rituals as vehicles of religion made the positive effects of hunting continuously available at the heart of human society. Yet they also depict the human as dependent on killing for the sake of survival, thus revealing the homo necans. Burkert finally postulates that killing constitutes the core of religion. Christianity, in his opinion, is no exception in this regard.

Girard and Sacrifice as Generative Sacred Violence

René Girard is a French literary critic, historian, and social anthropologist. Most of his work is dedicated to the following questions: Do ancient Greek drama and literary classics of the Western tradition,
albeit fictitious, convey some kind of truth about the existential situation of humanity? And, like Burkert, he asks: Do they offer an explanation for the connection between violence and religion? Based on his analysis of classical literature and anthropological data, Girard develops a comprehensive theory of human society. This literature, while indeed mostly fictitious, reveals human social behavior as being governed by a tendency to imitate others out of rivalry, envy, and jealousy. Girard calls this tendency “mimetic desire.” Such behavior leads to ever-escalating conflicts within society, establishing vicious circles of “reciprocal violence.”

In their efforts to cope with these problems, humans tend to choose outsiders of society, for example members of different ethnic groups or people with injuries, as victims or scapegoats. Cultural order is, according to Girard, typically a response to a crisis. After projecting its problems onto these scapegoats, the dominant society eventually kills them. Girard thus offers an explanation for the disturbing phenomenon that, throughout human history, ethnic and religious minorities (for instance, Jews) were periodically discriminated against and persecuted. He calls this type of corporate mob aggression “generative violence” since it “generates,” at least for a moment, relief in the face of an endless spiral of reciprocal violence.

This experience of relief lies at the basis of religion and is, therefore, considered sacred. Humanity reenacts this experience in sacrificial rituals by substituting an animal for the human scapegoat. Thus Girard, like Burkert, defines sacrifice as an act of killing, specifically as collective murder.
An essential feature of the scapegoat mechanism is that those perpetuating it remain unconscious of these “things hidden since the foundation of the world.” However, Girard claims that this mechanism is exposed in several biblical stories, for instance those of Abel and Joseph, because they maintain the innocence of the victims. The mechanism is ultimately revealed, and thus forever broken, in the New Testament Gospel narratives since they depict Jesus as being subjected to corporate mob violence but reject the illusion that such aggression could rightfully be directed toward him. Portrayed as the blameless Lamb and the innocent servant of God, Jesus is indeed a scapegoat of society. Thus the hidden mechanism of generative violence is exposed. All humans who become aware of this mechanism are invited to renounce it and instead to engage in peaceful behavior. In light of this, Girard is critical of christological approaches or atonement theologies that depict Jesus once more as a sacrifice.

**Gese and Atonement as Substitutionary Incorporation into the Holy**

The quest for the meaning of sacrifice continued in the field of religious studies as well. In 1977, Hartmut Gese, professor of Old Testament at the University of Tübingen in Germany, published the essay “The Atonement,” in which he describes sacrifice as a vicarious process. Gese’s key question is: How could ancient Israelites and Judeans and, on the other hand, early Christians communicate with the holy God given the general human stigma of sin?
For Gese, “sinfulness . . . is irreparable. It involves guilt that encompasses life itself, a situation where one’s existence is forfeit.” Given this human predicament, it is God who provides atonement (Hebrew root $kpr$) to reestablish contact with humans. Sacrifices are a ritualized way of achieving such atonement. Several assumptions pave the way for Gese’s theory: First, while biblical texts distinguish between different types of sacrifice, Gese presupposes that “those which involve the shedding of blood occupy a special place.” Second, he thinks that, in postexilic times, the entire sacrificial cult served the purpose of atonement. And third, he goes on to claim that the sin offering ($ha\texttt{\textasciitilde}\texttt{t\texttilde}^\prime t$) became the main paradigm of all types of animal sacrifice.

For Gese, atonement is essentially accomplished through two essential features: the hand-leaning gesture and the blood rite. When the offerer places one hand on the animal’s head, Gese affirms that she or he identifies with the sacrificial animal and thus transfers his or her identity. The process of atonement concludes through the blood ritual. After the sacrificial animal is slaughtered, its blood is sprinkled within the space of Israel’s sanctuary. It is particularly brought into contact with the Ark of the Covenant, the very place of God’s presence. This act is to be interpreted in light of the previous act of identification with the animal: “By a substitutionary sacrifice of life, Israel is brought into contact with God himself. In a ceremony that enacts the approach to God’s presence even to the point of ultimate physical contact and still preserves the outward sublimity
of that contact in the sprinkling of the drops of blood, the primeval phenomenon of the saving encounter with God is carried out.”48 This atonement cult, provisional in nature, later provides the paradigm for the early Christian understanding of atonement through the death of Jesus.49 With these features, Gese’s understanding of atonement is reminiscent of earlier theories of sacrifice, particularly those of Bähr and Hubert/Mauss. It became very influential, especially in German theology.

Milgrom and Sacrifice in Jewish Interpretation

The Jewish rabbi Jacob Milgrom was professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of California, Berkeley. Facing a tradition of interpretive approaches to cult and sacrifice dominated by Christians, his core question is: What does the Jewish tradition contribute to this debate? In his earlier works, Milgrom applied insights from this rich tradition especially to the interpretation of the sin offering; later he broadly drew on it for the writing of voluminous commentaries on the books of Leviticus and Numbers.

Milgrom begins his new interpretation of the sin offering with a fundamental insight about sin. As a burden for human individuals, sin is forgiven through remorse. Yet depending on its severity, sin also has the effect of staining Israel’s sanctuary.50 Rabbinic interpretation of Scripture emphasizes that the specific purpose of the sin offering is not the elimination of human sin but of the defilement of Israel’s sanctuary. Hence, Milgrom prefers to call the sin offering a “purification offering.”51 Such purification is achieved through sacrificial
blood: While the priest applies it in special areas or to various objects of the sanctuary, the defilement is transferred to the body of the sacrificial animal. It is finally eliminated when the animal is either burned outside the sanctuary or eaten by the priests.52

Sacrifice from the Perspective of Ritual Studies

During the past centuries, a multitude of scholarly theories of sacrifice has been proposed. They have centered on ever new aspects or have interpreted sacrifice from ever new perspectives. Critical of the arbitrariness of these choices, some scholars have recently questioned the basic tenet that sacrifices must be seen as symbols that represent something else, for example, food, and that sacrifice can only be understood from within a larger interpretive framework. These scholars are also critical of previous tendencies to single out particular sacrificial procedures while neglecting others. They ask: Is not each distinct ritual procedure, or each sacrificial ritual as a whole, inherently multivalent? Is a ritual not meaningful through the entirety of its actions? And can sacrificial rituals not convey meaning immediately, that is to say, through their actual gestures? Such questions can lead to a critical attitude toward any interpretive framework and thus also toward religious systems as such. In the words of Ithamar Gruenwald: “In my understanding of rituals and their ritual theory, there is no room for the inevitable inclusion of theological considerations.”53 These larger interpretive
frameworks are frequently referred to as “ideolo-
gies.” Representatives of this approach turn to
anthropology, ritual studies, and other disciplines
to guide their readings of sacrificial rituals. For
example, William K. Gilders, professor of Hebrew
Bible at Emory University, argues that sacrificial
blood rites in the Hebrew Bible create direct con-
nections or establish immediate meaning.54 They
indicate the privileged social status of priests who
are in charge of rituals and mark the sanctuary as
sacred space. Gilders is critical not only of mod-
ern scholarly interpretations of sacrifice as sym-
bols. But he also questions those biblical texts that
provide “native” explanations for distinct ritual
actions, such as the rationale in Leviticus 17:11
that atonement is achieved through blood, which
is life.55

Martin Modéus uses a similar approach in
his study of the communion or peace offering
(šēlāmîm). Due to the ambivalence of the term
sacrifice, he thinks that its real meaning cannot be
determined. Therefore, he understands sacrifice as
a means of accentuating social occasions through
ritualization. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, the
šēlāmîm offering calls attention to situations in
which priests are consecrated or humans express
their gratefulness. In addition, the meal associated
with this type of sacrifice also connects the par-
ticipants as a social community.

In general, these scholarly approaches to sac-
rifice are particularly attentive to communal
interactions and observe how the social status of
various participants is determined.
Summary and Further Reflections

For several centuries, sacrifice has been the subject of scholarly scrutiny that has yielded a variety of different interpretations. Earlier studies, influenced by Charles Darwin’s idea of biological evolution, attempted to explain sacrifice within the broader history of religious development. Likewise, the growing interest in foreign cultures that was the result of European colonialism gave rise to many studies of sacrifice in comparative perspective. It must be mentioned, however, that all comparative treatments are necessarily in danger of importing concepts that are alien to particular cultures and that those comparative treatments were for a long time dominated by the quest for universal theories or the search for one central element. The conclusion by Hubert and Mauss, for instance, that an animal sacrifice could be considered as a sacrifice of the deity, if applied to the religion of ancient Israel and Judah, appears to be without warrant in the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Despite all this scholarly attention, no consensus has been achieved regarding the meaning of sacrifice; to the contrary, there is an increasing number of different theories on this subject matter. Sacrifices are interpreted as means of identification, substitution, or consecration for humans; they are thought to enable members of social groups to commune with one another and with deities; and so on. Recently, theories that see sacrifice conveying loss or destruction, or that link sacrifice directly with death and murder, have become very prominent. Could this development
be influenced by Sigmund Freud’s explanation of human culture through negative aspects of the psyche? Whatever the reasons, these theories only affirm the objections raised above, that sacrifice and atonement inevitably connote death, are inherently violent, lead to a problematic image of God, and thus appear to provide the potential for a Christian identity crisis (see pp. 4–8). This could, furthermore, lead to problematic attitudes among Christians, especially if being Christian is understood as imitatio Christi in the sense of replicating Christ’s example, including his passion and death on the cross. Thus S. Mark Heim warns:

The spirituality of identification with Jesus’ sacrifice can sour in an individual psyche into a questionable brew of morbid fantasies and masochistic eroticism. Ascetic forms of self-mortification are threaded through Christian history . . . for which we would almost certainly seek clinical attention today. . . . Victims of domestic abuse don’t need advice to persevere in their suffering as a way of sharing in Christ’s redemptive work. . . . The cross should carry a label: this religious image may be harmful to your health.56

The problem of sacrifice and atonement needs to be tackled at its root, however, which is Israelite and Judean sacrifice as it is described in detail in the Hebrew Bible. To highlight but two problems with most of the above interpretations and definitions of sacrifice, there is a surprising fixation on animal sacrifice (often called “bloody sacrifice”). Carl Christian Wilhelm Felix Bähr assumes that blood application rites conclude a process of
substitutionary incorporation into the Holy and posits the special status of animal sacrifices. In a very similar fashion, Hartmut Gese’s concept of atonement also centers on sacrifices “which involve the shedding of blood.” Further examples of this opinion can be provided: D. R. Jones states that “sacrifice is pre-eminently bloody sacrifice.” Questioning the validity of one general theory of sacrifice, Philip P. Jenson nevertheless singles out the sin offering (which he calls purification offering) and its blood application rites to elucidate the entire sacrificial system of Leviticus. The situation is similar in studies of atonement. Emile Nicole, for instance, when discussing this topic as it relates to the Pentateuch, investigates mostly blood rites that are interpreted in light of Leviticus 17:11.

In contrast, any type of sacrifice from other materials such as plants is usually neglected. Already Hubert and Mauss suggested that it is arbitrary to use the term sacrifice only for animal sacrifice and not vegetal materials; they argue that either kind of sacrificial material is destroyed by the altar fire and thus consecrated. Yet how can a theory that focuses on animals and blood application rites provide the rational for the ritual of offering grain, oil, and frankincense? There seems to be more to sacrifice. In a recent publication, Kathryn McClymond observes the tendency of scholars to “exaggerate the importance of killing, characterizing it as the essential feature of sacrificial activity,” while they ignore or minimize other ritual activities. Likewise, not every act of killing qualifies as a sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.
A second problem is the recurrent assumption that, in the Hebrew Bible, identification or substitution occurs between humans and animals. Hartmut Gese, who makes this feature a key aspect of his atonement theory, believes that identification is constituted through the hand-leaning gesture.63 This, however, remains an argument ex silentio: no Hebrew Bible text actually states anything to that effect.64

The Geography of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible

Aware of the fact that previous theorizing has been characterized by a rather narrow focus and some questionable assumptions, it is worthwhile for us to investigate sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible anew. As a positive side effect, this endeavor will allow us to become familiar with those parts of the Bible that are usually unknown to most Christians. We will soon notice, however, that sacrifice, when connected to the priestly traditions of the Hebrew Bible, emerges with a different meaning. This has considerable and surprising ramifications for understanding the New Testament metaphor of the sacrifice of Jesus, and thus the concept of atonement.

In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of previous theories on sacrificial rituals in the Hebrew Bible, the following aspects shall guide my investigation: First, I will not single out one type of sacrifice and claim that it is representative of all other types of sacrifice. I will also avoid paying exclusive attention to animal sacrifices at the expense of
sacrifices offered from vegetal materials. Instead, I will study all types of sacrifice specified in the most detailed priestly regulations, namely those in Leviticus 1–7. Second, I will not single out one, or just a few, ritual elements such as blood rites. Instead, I will pay attention to all ritual elements (as much as the limited scope of the present study permits) and particularly to their combination. This approach has recently been called “polythetic,” meaning that several ritual activities are interpreted as sequences of connected or progressive events. Third, I shall pay special attention to evidence in the biblical texts that some elements of sacrificial rituals are emphasized while others are not. I shall thus pay attention to indications of how ritual elements are organized hierarchically. And fourth, I shall pay attention to the progression and dynamics of sacrificial rituals as they approach and move through sacred space, eventually arriving at the most holy altar. I shall also study these rituals in relation to the significance of the sanctuary.

Especially with regard to this last aspect, it is suitable to start with a brief sketch of the location of sacrifice; that is, with basic information on, and an outline of, sanctuaries in ancient Israel and Judah. As sacred locations, they form the conceptual and architectonic framework of worship and sacrificial rituals. Without such a sketch, it is neither possible to visualize adequately how the ritual proper unfolds nor to understand its dynamics and significance.