

Hum 110

March 10, 2004

Gail Sherman

Sacrifices and Stories

Questions underlying this talk: How does the book of Genesis function as a foundation myth? In Nancy Jay's anthropological analysis, what cultural work does sacrifice do? What meanings do narratives of sacrifice encode in Genesis? In my talk today, I argue that, although sacrifice may, as Nancy Jay argues, encode a patrilineal social structure, the narratives in Genesis that treat of sacrifice in fact stage one contest after another between the claims of patrilineal and matrilineal descent, and never fully resolve that conflict; instead, those narratives emphasize the openness from one generation to the next of the question of identity in the people whose foundation myth Genesis forms.

I. Genesis as a foundation myth

- A. Nancy Jay: Sacrifice, gender, and genealogy
- B. What does sacrifice do? Reed, Rome, and Israel
- C. Cain, Abel, and Seth: sacrifice and paternity

II. Covenant and sacrifice in the story of Abraham

- A. Promises, promises: genealogy and covenant
- B. The *Akedah*/Binding of Isaac (22:1-19)
 - 1. Josephus and Nancy Jay
 - 2. Philo

III. The continuation of the covenant

- A. Abraham and Sarah: Isaac (and Ishmael)
- B. Isaac and Rebekah: Jacob (and Esau)
- C. Jacob's blessing of Joseph

IV. The end of the book of Genesis

- A. Sacrifice joins people in community, and conversely, it separates them from defilement, disease and other dangers. This opposition of joining and separating is so widespread that one of the clearest indications that a ritual killing is properly sacrifice is that it is part of a religious system of this kind. Joining and separating aspects of sacrifice have received different names.... I shall use the traditional terms [communion and expiation]...

Communion sacrifice unites worshipers in one moral community and at the same time differentiates that community from the rest of the world. Expiatory sacrifice integrates by getting rid of countless different moral and organic undesirable conditions: sin, disease, drought, divine wrath, famine, barrenness, spirit possession, armed invaders, blood guilt, incest, impurity of descent, pollution of childbirth or of corpses, and so on and on, all having in common only that they must be expiated. What is

differentiated is logically without limit and can be expressed in a single term only negatively, as not the integrated whole, as opposed to it as disorder is to order, as unclean is to clean, or in formal logical terms, as Not-A is to A.

(Nancy Jay, 17, 19)

B. Man born of woman may be destined to die, but man integrated into an 'eternal' social order to that degree transcends mortality...in sacrificially maintained descent groups, 'immortality,' which may be no more than the memory of a name in a genealogy, is commonly a masculine privilege. It is through fathers and sons, not through mothers and daughters, that 'eternal' social continuity is maintained. Nancy Jay, 39-40

C. When the gods and mortal men were settling their accounts at Mekone, Prometheus cheerfully took a great ox, carved it up, and set it before Zeus to trick his mind.

...
[Zeus] thereafter never forgot that he had been beguiled and never gave to ash trees the power of unwearying fire for the good of men who live on this earth, . . .but [Prometheus] within a hollowed fennel stalk stole the far-flashing unwearying fire. This stung the depths of Zeus's mind,

...
so straightway because of the stolen fire [Zeus] contrived an evil for men . . .Zeus who roars on high made women to be an evil for men, helpmates in deeds of harshness. And he bestowed another gift, evil in place of good: whoever does not wish to marry, fleeing the malice of women, reaches harsh old age with no one to care for him; then even if he is well-provided he dies at the end only to have his livelihood shared by distant kin.

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 535-607

D. As Isaac grew up, he endeared himself to Abraham as his only son and because of his many virtues. He was zealous in the worship of God, and loved and honored his parents. Abraham's happiness focused on Isaac as his successor.

To test his obedience, however, God appeared to Abraham. After reminding him of all the blessings he had lavished on him -- Isaac was only one of his many gifts -- **he required that Abraham take his child to Mount Moriah, build an altar, and sacrifice Isaac** on it as a burnt offering.

Abraham never thought of disobedience, for he knew that God's will must be done. He did not tell Sarah or any of their household about God's command, for he was afraid that they might try to dissuade him from obeying God. **He had Isaac and two servants load a donkey with requisites for sacrifice, and they set out for Mount Moriah. They traveled for two days, and on the third, the mountain came into view. Abraham left the servants in the plain and**

continued with his son to the mount, on which King David would later erect the temple.

While building the altar, **Isaac**, now age 25, **asked his father what victim they would offer. God would provide the victim, his father replied.** But when the altar was finished, Abraham laid the split wood on it and all was ready, and then he said to Isaac, "My son, through many prayers I implored God for your birth. And when you came into the world, I lavished everything on your upbringing, and my highest happiness would have been to see you grow to manhood and become heir to my dominion when I died. But since it is now God's will that I resign you to him, bear this consecration valiantly. Depart this life not by the common road, but sped on your way to God by your own father through the rites of sacrifice."

Isaac received these words with gladness. He exclaimed that if he were to reject the decision of God and of his father, he would deserve never to have been born at all. Indeed, if this were his father's decision alone, it would have been impious to disobey. With that, he rushed to the fateful altar.

And the deed would have been done had not **God interposed. forbidding him to kill the lad**, God said that he did not desire human sacrifice but had only wanted to test Abraham's obedience. Since he was now sure of it, God was glad that he had bestowed so many blessings upon him, and would continue to watch over him and his people. Isaac would live a long life and have numerous descendants, who would become wealthy, inherit the land of Canaan, and be envied by all men.

After God had spoken, he produced a ram for the sacrifice. Then father and son, greatly rejoicing, embraced one another and returned home to Sarah after the sacrifice, and they lived in bliss.

Not long afterward, Sarah died...."

(Josephus, *Antiquities* A I, 213-236; trans Paul Maier, 30-31).

D. ...so Isaac was saved, since God returned the gift of him and used the offering which piety rendered to him to repay the offerer, while for Abraham the action, though not followed by the intended ending, was complete and perfect, and the record of it as such stands graven not only in the sacred books but in the minds of the readers. But quarrelsome critics who misconstrue everything and have a way of valuing censure above praise do not think Abraham's action great or wonderful, as we suppose it to be. They say that many other persons, full of love for their kinfolk and offspring, have given their children, some to be sacrificed for their country to serve as a price to redeem it from wars or drought or excessive rainfall or pestilence, others for the sake of what was held to be piety though it is not really so. ...That the deed deserves our praise and love can be seen in many ways. First, then, he made a special practice of obedience to God, a duty which every right-minded person holds to be worthy of all respect and effort. ...Secondly, since human sacrifice was not in that country, as it is perhaps in some, sanctioned by custom which is so apt through constant repetition to weaken the realization of the terrible, he would have been the first himself to initiate a totally new and extraordinary procedure, and this, to my mind, is a thing which no one could have brought himself to do even if his soul had been made of iron or adamant, for, as it has been said, it is hard work to fight against nature....Further, he had a most potent incentive to love in that he had begotten

the boy in his old age and not in his years of vigor...here we have the most affectionate of fathers himself beginning the sacrificial rite as priest with the best of sons for victim.

...But the story told here is not confined to the literal and obvious explanation, but seems to have in it the elements of a further suggestion, obscure to the many, but recognized by those who prefer the mental to the sensible. ...The proposed victim is called in Chaldean Isaac, but if the word is translated into our language, Laughter. But the laughter here understood is not the laughter which amusement arouses in the body, but the good emotion of the understanding, that is, joy. This the Sage is said to sacrifice as his duty to God, thus showing in a figure that rejoicing is most closely associated with God alone. For mankind is subject to grief and very fearful of evils...but the nature of God is without grief or fear and wholly exempt from passion of any kind. The frame of mind which has made this true acknowledgement, God, who has banished jealousy from his presence in his kindness and love for mankind, fitly rewards by returning the gift insofar as the recipient's capacity allows. Philo, 85-99

Selected bibliography:

- Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode. The Literary Guide to the Bible. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Feldman, Louis H. Jew And Gentile in the Ancient World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Gottwald, Norman K. The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Jay, Nancy. "Throughout your generations forever:" Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Josephus, trans. Paul L. Maier. Josephus: The Essential Writings. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1988.
- Kraemer, Ross Shepard. Her Share of The Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Kugel, James L. Traditions of the Bible: A guide to the Bible as it was at the start of the Common Era. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Philo, "On Abraham." *Philo*. Vol VI. Trans. F.H. Colson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1935.
- Spiegel, Shalom.trans Judah Goldin. The last trial : on the legends and lore of the command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice: the Akedah. Philadelphia : Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967.