From child sacrifice to paschal lamb: A remarkable transformation in Israelite religion[1]

John Van Seters (Wilfrid Laurier Univ, Canada and Research Associate, UP)

ABSTRACT

The religious rite of sacrificing children to the deity seems so completely foreign to Judaism and Christianity that it is hard to imagine such a practice as common in Judah in the late monarchy period and sanctioned by royalty and the Jerusalem priesthood. While the practice was condemned by prophets (Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and the Deuteronomic reformers to little apparent effect, it was the genius of the Yahwist to transform the practice into that of redemption of the firstborn male children by means of substitution of a lamb for the child (Ex 13:11-16). The Yahwist, likewise, invented the story of the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn of humans and animals in Egypt, giving rise to the deliverance of the Israelites, as an aetiology for the redemption of the firstborn male children. The Priestly Writer 'improved' on this aetiology by making the substituted lamb the Passover lamb that spared the Israelites from death on the very night that the Egyptian firstborn were slain. This transformation of child sacrifice into the paschal lamb substitution had decisive implications for the religions of Judaism and Christianity.

A INTRODUCTION

The practice of child sacrifice in ancient Israel is a subject that is marked by much controversy and strong differences of opinion. Yet, as the recent book by Jon Levenson, *The death and resurrection of the beloved Son* (1993), indicates, the subject is most important for the history of ancient Israelite religion and its

[1] This article is the result of my recent visit to the University of Pretoria as a research associate sponsored by the South African National Research Foundation, with Prof Andries Breytenbach as my host. A shorter version of this article was offered as a talk at the Reformed Theological Training School ('Hervormde Teologiese Opleding') at Hammanskraal, Pretoria, and as a presentation to the Old Testament graduate seminar with Prof Hendrik Bosman at the Theological Faculty of the University of Stellenbosch. I express my gratitude towards the University of Pretoria and to Prof Andries Breytenbach for making this trip possible.

later developments in Judaism and Christianity. I will not try to review all of the issues involved in this debate, but will pursue a particular line of development in the tradition of child sacrifice that has been overlooked by scholars in their treatment of this subject. Part of the problem with any discussion of child sacrifice, and this includes Levenson's treatment of the subject, is the question of where one begins and how one understands the relationship of various biblical texts to each other. Some of the arguments about these issues must be left to my earlier studies (Van Seters 1998; 2003) and related literature[2]. Nevertheless, I will lay down the bold outline of my thesis, which argues, as the title of this article suggests, that there is a clear connection, a line of historical development, between the practice of child sacrifice in ancient Israel and the notion of a divine redemption of the firstborn of the Israelites by means of a substitution through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, as told in the exodus story. My purpose in this article is to explore this connection.

I think that there can be little doubt about the fact that child sacrifice was practised among various peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean in antiquity, particularly among the Phoenicians but also among Israel's other neighbours. And it is attested in early Greek tradition as the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia suggests. It involved children of both sexes and was not limited to those of very early age. Whether it was restricted to just the firstborn child is not clear. Various explanations for this practice are suggested by the sources, often associated with an act of appeasement of an angry deity for the violation of a religious taboo, but it is not restricted to this.

B THE PROPHET PROTEST

In light of this widespread practice in the region, there seems to me to be little reason to doubt that child sacrifice was also being practised in Ancient Israel during the monarchy, as attested in several biblical texts. Thus, for example, Jeremiah 7:30-31 (cf 19:5-6) reflects a protest against such a practice in the late monarchy that was going on in Jerusalem, sanctioned by the religious authorities there. It states:

> For the people of Judah have done what is wrong in my eyes,' oracle of Yahweh. 'They have set up their loathsome idols in the house that bears my name to defile it. And they have built high places of Topheth in the valley of Ben-hinnom in order to burn their sons and daughters with fire, which I did not command (them) and which never even entered my mind.

[2] The literature on the subject of child sacrifice is quite extensive. Most useful for this study are the works of Fishbane (1985:181-189); Brin (1994:166-281); Levenson (1993:3-17). See also De Vaux (1964:70-73); Albertz (1992:186-187, 190-193); Houtman (1997:241-253).

This seems to be a clear reference to child sacrifice in which Jeremiah not only strongly rejects the practice, but also denies that it was something commanded by God. The language used here 'to burn with fire' (שׂרף באשׁ) is the same as that used in the prohibition in Deuteronomy (12:31). An alternate expression 'to hand over [to the deity] by means of fire' (עבר hiphil + באשׁ) is found in Deuteronomy 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6 (cf Jr 32:35), so these two expressions must mean the same thing[3]. The objects of this 'handing over' are stated as both sons and daughters, although it is nowhere expressly stated that they are all firstborn children, nor are their ages given – whether or not they are babies. The text also suggests that it was the Jerusalem Temple priesthood who represented the practice as something commanded by God. Elsewhere this same practice of child sacrifice is viewed as foreign, associated with the cult of Molek (Lv 18:21; 20:2-5; Dt 12:31; 2 Ki 23:10; Jr 32:35; Ezk 23:37-39)[4]. But this is probably not the name of another god, only the deliberate perversion of the title *melek*, 'king', as in 'King of Glory', used of the God of Israel in connection with the Temple (Ps 24). Consequently, there was a reform movement in the late monarchy that attempted to get rid of this custom of child sacrifice from Israelite religion and to brand it as foreign.

Ezekiel, in 20:25-26, seems to confirm this practice of child sacrifice, but at the same time he contradicts Jeremiah on the matter of divine law and therefore on the foreign origin of the law. In speaking about God's treatment of the Israelites in the wilderness after bringing them out of Egypt, Ezekiel quotes the deity as saying:

> I for my part gave them decrees that were not good and laws by which they could not live. I defiled them by their gifts when they handed over every first-birth of the womb (כל־פטר רחם) in order that I might devastate them, that they may know that I am Yahweh.

The law envisioned here uses the same language for the act of offering, to 'hand over' (עבר hiphil) as in Deuteronomy and Kings without the reference to fire, but in addition it does refer specifically to the 'first-birth' (פטר רחם)[5] and seems to be inclusive of both males and females. The text also suggests that, contrary to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, such a law was to be found in a collection of commandments associated with the wilderness law-giving tradition. Given his close association with the priestly tradition of Jerusalem and the prior

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3 R P Carroll (1981:303-304 note 14) follows Weinfeld (1972) in the view that the prophets were polemical and misrepresented the actual practice of dedication.

4 The suggestion that the practice was connected with foreign gods and not Yahweh seems to me a later development of the theme. On the Molek cult see J Day (1989); G C Heider (1985; 1992; 1995); J Lust (1988); M Weinfeld (1972).

5 W Zimmerli (1979:411) takes this text as a reference to child sacrifice. See also M Greenberg (1983:368-370).

indications from Jeremiah, it is reasonable to conclude that it was a priestly tradition. Ezekiel shows throughout his prophecy that he was heavily indebted to the priestly tradition. At the same time Ezekiel shares with the Deuteronomy the revulsion at such a practice and seeks to reconcile the contradictory situation in which it places him.

Another prophetic text that appears to make reference to child sacrifice is Micah 6:6-8, which states:

> **6**How shall I approach Yahweh and do homage to God on high? Shall I come to him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? **7**Would Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? **8**He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what Yahweh expects from you: to do what is just, to love faithfulness, and to live in humility with your God.

This passage is regarded by most scholars as a late text and cannot refer to an eighth century practice of child sacrifice (Wolff 1982:142-145: McKane 1998: 177-178). The contrast that it sets up between sacrifice as a way of pleasing God, whatever the amount or quality may be, and that of being just, faithful and humble before God, says nothing about a specific practice. The same comparison could be made long after the practice of child sacrifice was abandoned. So the text is not going to help us very much in our understanding of child sacrifice in the monarchy period.

In looking for a law that might answer to the remarks by Ezekiel about such a divine command to sacrifice children, given to the Israelite in the desert wanderings period, some scholars point to the commandment in Exodus 22:28-29 [29-30]. This law states:

> The firstborn of your sons you are to give to me.
> Thus you will do to your oxen (and) your sheep.
> Seven days he/it is to be with his/its mother;
> On the eighth day you are to give him/it to me.

This law does not fit the requirements as the original law behind the prophetic texts, for a number of reasons:

1 It restricts the 'giving' to sons only; the prophetic texts mention both sons and daughters.

2 It makes a very close connection between the offering of firstborn sons and firstling animals, but animals are not mentioned in the Jeremiah and Ezekiel texts.

3 It restricts the practice to very young children, whereas this is not indicated in the prophetic texts.

4 It uses terminology for the act of offering quite different from Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

So we must set aside our treatment of this law for the moment.

C THE YAHWISTIC TRANSFORMATION

The instructions in Exodus 13:11-15 that Moses gives to the people of Israel just after they have left Egypt are much more promising for the purpose of finding some connection between biblical law and the prophets, especially Ezekiel's reference to a law on child sacrifice given to the people in the wilderness. Following the regulations that have to do with the celebration of the feast of Unleavened Bread in verses 3-10, the author, the so-called Yahwist, gives the following instructions through Moses regarding the firstborn of humans and animals:

> **11**When Yahweh brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, **12**you shall hand over to Yahweh all that first opens the womb (כל-פטר רחם). All the firstling (פטר) offspring of your cattle, the males, belong to Yahweh. **13**Every firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every human firstborn (כל בכור אדם) among your sons you shall redeem. **14**And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' You shall say to him, 'By a strong hand Yahweh brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage. **15**For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, Yahweh slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of humans and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to Yahweh all the males that first open the womb; but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.'

Now in this detailed regulation we have the verb 'hand over' (עבר hiphil) used of the offering of the firstborn, just as we have it in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. However, this law does not include the additional phrase 'by fire', because unlike the prophetic statements about child sacrifice, this handing over allows for redemption. Likewise, Exodus 13:12a uses the phrase 'all who open the womb' (כל-פטר רחם), as in Ezekiel. This strongly suggests some connection between this law and the practice of child sacrifice the prophets are talking about. Exodus 13: 12b-13 then goes on to make a series of qualifications. The first of these is to include animals and then to suggest that the phrase 'first-birth of the womb' (פטר-רחם) has reference to animals, not to humans. Originally it clearly referred to human offspring, as in Ezekiel, and is here secondarily applied to animals. The second qualification is to restrict the offering to 'males', but the text is a little ambiguous as to whether this refers only to the animals or to the humans as well. The restriction of the 'first-birth of the womb' to one sex, however, is obviously a secondary adjustment of the tradition, since the 'first-birth' can be of either sex. The third qualification is to make a distinction between clean and unclean

animals, such as an ass, and in the latter case they must be redeemed with a lamb. The major innovation, however, is the extension of this redemption to humans (v 13b), and here the terminology changes and the human offspring are designated as 'the firstborn of humans (בכור אדם), your sons', which now makes unambiguous the restriction to males. This is followed by a historical aetiology that justifies this redemption of sons (vv 14-16). In verse 15b 'all the male first-birth' (כל־פטר רחם הזכרים) are now the animals and they are to be 'sacrificed', but the firstborn (בכור) of the sons are to be redeemed. If the prophets knew of the requirement to redeem the child instead of sacrificing him, they would certainly have drawn attention to it. So this law must be later than these prophets. It is a deliberate modification of the older practice. Furthermore, as with our other law in Exodus 22:28-29, we have the 'handing over' of the firstborn of animals very closely associated with the dedication of the human firstborn. This strongly suggests that the offering of the firstlings of animals has also been connected with the human firstborn offerings *later* than the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel as well.

Now when we turn to Deuteronomy, we find a very different law about firstlings that has nothing to do with firstborn humans and seems to stem from a quite different tradition. It states in Deuteronomy 15:19-20:

> Every firstling (כל־הבכור) that is born among your herd and your flock, the male, is to be consecrated to Yahweh, your God. You are not to work the firstborn of your oxen and you are not to sheer the firstborn of your sheep. Before Yahweh you are to eat them, annually, in the place where Yahweh chooses, you and your household.

The law knows nothing about the requirement to offer or redeem unclean animals like the ass and nothing about the dedication of humans in any form[6]. The terminology used for the firstborn (בכור) is quite appropriate when restricted to males, whether animals or humans, and must be original. It is also different from the form of the law that seems to stand behind Ezekiel and the law in Exodus 13:12. The question therefore arises as to whether or not this reflects a quite different religious tradition.

The offering of the firstlings in Deuteronomy as an annual celebration belongs together with the other harvest festivals in Deuteronomy 16:9-15, namely, that of offering the first fruits of the land to Yahweh. It is best, therefore, to see this as the first agricultural festival associated with the birth of animals in the spring and comparable to the other harvest festivals. This would also make it closely associated with Passover in 16:1-8. This larger association suggests that

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[6] To suggest as some scholars do, that Deuteronomy ignores the redemption of unclean animals and humans, is special pleading. This redemption involved the sacrifice of animals. Where and when this happened would need to be regulated just as much as the offering of the firstborn of the clean animals.

one should understand the term 'firstborn of the herd/flock' in the same way as the other harvest festivals. As with the first fruits of the land, it merely refers to the first animals within a herd of cattle or flock of sheep during a given year, as many as are needed for the community or family festival. Since these animals are to be eaten by the household after they are sacrificed, this limited number is quite appropriate for this purpose. The restriction to male animals is quite appropriate for this purpose because it has less impact upon the herd or flock.

The law in Exodus 13:12-13 seems to be a compromise between the two religious traditions, the one having to do with the firstborn of humans and the other with the firstlings of animals[7]. Furthermore, the restriction of all the offerings, humans and animals, to *males*, also seems to be derived from Deuteronomy's firstling law. All the references to the sacrifice of human offspring in Deuteronomy, Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel make no such distinction between male and female. Indeed, the use of the term 'first birth', literally, 'opening of the womb' (פטר רחם), makes it unlikely that any distinction between the sexes was intended and the restriction of this term to males must be secondary. No such problem is involved with Deuteronomy's use of 'firstborn' (בכור). What the author of Exodus 13:11-16 has done is switch the terminology such that פטר רחם refers not to humans but to animals and בכור now refers to humans, specifically, the firstborn sons. In any case, the texts in Exodus 13:12-13 and 34:19-20 cannot be earlier than either the prophetic texts or the Deuteronomic Code. The very idea of child sacrifice is condemned in Deuteronomy and the Dtr tradition without qualification. The redemption of the male humans *was a way of transforming the practice of child sacrifice.* It recognized the right in law of offering all firstborn to God, whether humans as in Ezekiel or animals as in Deuteronomy, but it introduced the requirement of redemption for humans, which was not in the older religious tradition.

Thus, a major transformation of tradition is reflected in Exodus 13:11-16 in which the festive consumption of male firstlings of Deuteronomy is combined with the first-birth law of "handing over" humans to the deity, and this new combination is given an entirely new meaning. The spring festival aspect completely disappears and it becomes a matter of "handing over" both humans and animals to the deity. The firstborn law is restricted to males, like Deuteronomy's male firstlings, and it now includes *all* animals. This means that the law must redeem the unclean animals, which cannot be sacrificed, with a lamb substitute. The redemption of the unclean animals is then extended to humans. They are also redeemed with a lamb. This change in the old law is justified by a historical explanation about how God slew the firstborn, both humans and animals, in Egypt, but spared the firstborn of the Israelites. The story of the final plague of the death of the firstborn of humans and animals and the

[7] Another version of this law in Ex 34:19-20 specifies that the animals to be dedicated are 'an ox or lamb', as in the firstlings law of Deuteronomy.

sparing of the firstborn of the Israelites was invented by the Yahwist as a way of transforming the unacceptable practice of child sacrifice. The redemption of the firstborn thus becomes a positive 'sign' and a means of remembering the exodus deliverance. Not to redeem one's firstborn son is to deny one's redemption from Egypt and therefore to deny one's place among the people of Israel.

Note also that the law that redeems the firstborn instead of sacrificing him is no longer placed later in the wilderness as in Ezekiel, but is decreed at the very time of their departure from Egypt and is closely associated with the law requiring the keeping of the festival of Unleavened Bread, that celebrates the exodus from Egypt.

D THE PRIESTLY WRITER'S REVISION OF THE FIRSTBORN REDEMPTION

The Priestly Writer accepts J's transformation of the tradition by introducing it with the general statement of principle in Exodus 13:2:

> Consecrate to me every firstborn of the first-birth of every womb among the Israelites, both human and animal; it belongs to me.

P uses the verb 'consecrate' (קדשׁ) in place of 'to hand over' (עבר hiphil) to represent the act of offering. The verb 'consecrate' can have two senses. When it is used of animals is certainly has to do with sacrifice, as it does in the Deuteronomic Code's law on the firstlings in Deuteronomy 15:19-20. However, when it is used of humans, such as priests and Levites, it never means sacrifice, but refers to a special setting apart for religious use.

Furthermore, the text designates the firstborn in a very curious way. It creates a hybrid phrase כל־בכור פטר כל־רחם, which seems to combine J's firstborn בכור, used for humans, with first-birth, פטר, used for animals. So the priestly tradition has clearly accepted J's transformed of the tradition as well.

Nevertheless, P takes the origin story about the substitution for the firstborn human by the sacrifice of the lamb one step further. In the Yahwist's earlier account of the tenth plague Moses simply announces to Pharaoh (Ex 11:4-7):

> Thus says Yahweh: 'About midnight I will go forth in the midst of Egypt; and all the firstborn (בכור) in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits upon the throne, even to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of the animals. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor shall be again. But against any of the people of Israel, either man or animal, not a dog shall growl; that you may know that Yahweh makes a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel.'

In this version of the story the Israelites themselves, living apart in the land of Goshen, did not have to do anything until the plague struck and then Pharaoh and his people expelled them from the land as quickly as possible. The act of sacrificing the lamb substitute later in the land of Canaan was understood as an individual family act of dedication on the birth of the firstborn son in commemoration of the redemption from Egypt.

The Priestly Writer introduces into this basic account of the exodus event the inauguration of the Passover with its sacrifice of the paschal lamb as the very means by which the Israelites were spared from the tenth plague. It is now the slaughter of the yearling lamb, one for each household, and the placing of the blood on the doorposts and lintel that *redeems* the Israelites on that fateful night. In particular, it redeems the firstborn male who is the object of the tenth plague. This is a significant transformation of the Deuteronomic form of the Passover to accommodate the theme of the redemption of the firstborn taken over from the Yahwist. There is no need to look for some anthropological explanation in apotropaic rites in the placing of the blood on the doorposts. Its function is simply to signify the location of those places in which the lamb as substitute for the firstborn has been sacrificed. The Priestly Writer makes the sacrifice of the paschal lamb and its blood the actual means by which the Israelite firstborn were spared (Ex 12:1-13). The redemption of the firstborn of the Israelites by means of the lamb is surely significant in the light of the explanation in Exodus 13:11-16. The Priestly Writer's Passover therefore seems to represent the combination of the Deuteronomic Passover that was connected with the exodus event (Dt 16:1-7), coupled with the Yahwist's regulations regarding the Unleavened Bread (Ex 13:3-10) and the sacrifice of the firstlings with its use of the lamb as a means of redemption of the firstborn (Ex 13:11-16), and Deuteronomy's annual consumption of firstlings by families as in Deuteronomy 15:19-23.

This means that in the latest version of the Passover story in Exodus we have an amazing transformation from the common religious practice of sacrificing children into their redemption by the paschal lamb, and this in turn symbolises the redemption of the entire people from Egypt. At the same time, Judaism retains the notion of the dedication of the individual male child through the rite of circumcision on the eighth day and the dedication in the temple with a substitute animal sacrifice. Note the account of the dedication of Jesus in the temple 'according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord' (Lk 2:23-24). This dedication of children is retained in various forms in Christianity as well. Furthermore, the death of Jesus in Christianity is interpreted as both the death of the beloved and only begotten son of the Deity, a remarkable reversal, and also as the paschal lamb, sacrificed for the redemption of mankind.

E CONCLUSION

We have come a long way from the common practice of child sacrifice in ancient Israelite religion. It must have been very important because it drew a lot of attention. First, child sacrifice was condemned by the prophets as an evil practice and we today can sympathise with this view. But just condemning it was not enough. So this was followed by its radical transformation through association with the exodus story of redemption from Egypt. Now the whole focus was on the redemption of the child through the offering of the lamb as a substitute. And this lamb in turn becomes the Passover lamb whose blood not only spares the child, but also symbolises the redemption of the whole people. That is already a remarkable transformation in the Israelite religion. But then Christianity takes over the theme of sacrifice of the child in which it is now the son of God who is offered for the sin of humanity. Furthermore, the Passover becomes transformed through the passion of Jesus, who becomes the paschal lamb for the redemption of the people of God. At the same time Christians still dedicate infants to God, whether through baptism, christening or other rites. The roots of such religious beliefs and practices are very deep and very strange.

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John van Seters, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, and Research Associate, Department of Old Testament, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa. *E-mail: john.vanseters@sympatico.ca*