

## THE *AQEDAH* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT – SACRIFICE, VIOLENCE AND HUMAN DIGNITY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the relationship between violence and human dignity in a religious context where sacrifice, even if only at discursive level, is common. The New Testament has two direct references to Gen 22, known as the Aqedah (binding of Isaac), in Heb 11:17-19 and Jas 2:23, but possibly also various other allusions to the Aqedah. In both direct references, and in line with the biblical and most of the Christian (and also Jewish and Islam) tradition, the Aqedah is taken as positive indication of Abraham's faith. A brief investigation of the reception of the Aqedah in the New Testament, leads to the consideration of its wider reach, particularly to what extent sacrifice generally informs the relationship between violence and human dignity in the New Testament. In doing so, the explicit and implicit consequences of this narrative and sacrificial practices are shown to be multi-fold, wide-ranging and ambiguous.*

**Keywords:** Human Dignity, Aqedah, Sacrifice, Violence, Power, Gender

### Introduction: Why talk about Sacrifice?

Invoking sacrifice language has become common today, and is often heard in settings ranging from sport fields to academic halls of learning to relationships. It is, however, particularly worrying when some-one like the former president George W Bush of the United States of America, in the embodiment of neo-colonialism, demanded of American citizens “the willingness to sacrifice for liberty”. This led one scholar to conclude, “It seems to me that the demand for sacrifice is, as a demand for recognition of leadership, a request by the nation’s leaders for their electorates to recognise that that freedom is theirs to offer” (Runions 2006:123). The invocation of and appeals to the religious act of sacrifice amidst the upsurge of violence across the globe – both in the form of the sheer destruction of human life as well as subtle but still indiscriminate violation of human dignity – requires renewed attention for the New Testament’s ostensible endorsement of sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> This paper is however not a study of religious sacrifice per se, nor only an exegetical analysis of New Testament sacrifice-texts, but incorporating such concerns, wants to investigate these documents’ invocation of sacrificial terminology, and the resulting consequences for human dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> Edited version of a paper read at an inter-Faculty consultation between the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch and the Protestants Theologische Universiteit (Kampen) on “Violence and human dignity”, 9-11 November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> At times it appears as though the NT appeals for the termination of sacrifice (e.g. Heb 7:11-28), but it is probably rather sacrifice in a particular, namely Jewish-ritual, form which is criticised. Sacrificial *language* therefore retains a strong presence, high profile and positive portrayal in the NT; e.g. Heb 2:17.

The notion of sacrifice is of course not unique to the New Testament documents, especially not when compared to the Old Testament. But also beyond that comparison, sacrifice is an enduring phenomenon in religion, from the earliest times, which also explains the enduring interest in and value attached to sacrifice in scholarly research. Generally speaking, in the Greco-Roman world, “[s]acrifice stood at the center of a complex set of cultural, social, and political institutions” (Stowers 1995:295). Opinions vary on the nature and impact of sacrifice – in its many forms and with its many purposes<sup>3</sup> – on religion, but there is general agreement about its importance, stressing that sacrificial actions play a ‘key role’ in religion (Drexler 2006:1657), and with some going as far as claiming that “Any explanation of sacrifice is, in fact, a theory of religion in miniature” (Smith 1995:948). In many religions, a tradition of sacrifice developed from practices of actual offerings of various items, ranging from plants, liquids, music and dance and (animal and human) living creatures, to gods.<sup>4</sup> Again, my interest here is broad, trying to account for the impact of sacrifice regardless of its immediate object (inanimate, animal or human), which as practice or as conceptual framework is widely, although by no means exhaustively, attested in biblical and also New Testament times. Without claiming to provide all the answers, the question engaged is what was and is the impact of the New Testament’s ‘spiritualised, metaphorised’ (Drexler 2006:1665) and widespread sacrificial terminology, especially given the grounding role bestowed on Isaac, the son of Abraham and of course, on Jesus, the son of God, for apparently justifying human sacrifice?

While the New Testament has only two direct and unambiguous references to the *Aqedah*, or binding of Isaac as related in Gen 22, which appears in Heb 11 and Jas 2:23, the reach and influence of this narrative has gone beyond the texts directly referring to it. In the texts explicitly mentioning the *Aqedah* (Heb 11 and Jas 2) and in line with the biblical and most of the Christian (and also Jewish and Islam) tradition, Abraham is praised for his faith and obedience to God given his willingness to kill and sacrifice his son, although there was a last-minute divine intervention. For his willingness to obey God beyond the love for and the life of his own son, Abraham was the recipient of praises and promises.

The explicit and implicit consequences of the *Aqedah*-narrative and its New Testament afterlives are multi-fold, wide-ranging and (if not so from the beginning) soon became ambiguous – given particularly the legitimisation of sacrifice and thus the shedding of (human or animal) blood. Three intersecting questions form the perimeters of this short paper. Is sacrifice, and moreover, child sacrifice<sup>5</sup> grounded as a model in the Christian tradition

<sup>3</sup> For a brief summary, cf Drexler (1996:1664-1665) – prominent theorists associated with the respective interpretations of sacrifice are indicated in brackets: sacrifice as gift exchange and renunciation (Tylor; Van der Leeuw); as sacramental meal (Smith); as communicative act (Hubert and Mauss); and, as purifying power (Frazer; Girard).

<sup>4</sup> Such offerings were later replaced by related symbolic designations of penance, exceptional virtue, and even martyrdom. It is perhaps martyrdom which blurs, at least for modern sentiment, the boundary between a tolerant, general acceptance of sacrifice of inanimate objects (and maybe even animals), and the precarious situation that develops when the objects of (those selected for) sacrifice were human, and often children. Given such variety of concepts and practices connoted by the term, some scholars point out the difficulty in defining sacrifice notwithstanding its “key role in the religions of humanity”. Comprising “different kinds of religious phenomena ... that are basically distinct, in the intentions of the actors as well as in the principal theological world pictures and faith systems” (Drexler 2006:1657).

<sup>5</sup> References to child sacrifices in the OT include e.g. 1 Kings 16:34 (son of Hiel of Jericho sacrificed during reign of Ahab); 2 Kings 16:3-4 (son of Ahaz, king of Judah, sacrificed); and, 2 Kings 21:35-36a (son of Manasseh, King of Judah, sacrificed). But tensions already exist in the (OT) texts: e.g. Elijah’s ‘anti-sacrificial sacrifice’ sees after the showdown between Elijah and the Baal prophets (who were reputedly involved in child and human sacrifices), him invoking those present in the name of God to kill all the Baal prophets (Bailie 1995:169-173). The place and role of children in biblical, and more specifically, NT times cannot be

through the *Aqedah*, with the potential to legitimise (or at least be seen to legitimise) and so to sanctify killing (of innocents) for a larger, divine purpose?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, since in sacrifice not only religious or devotional issues are at stake, is the embeddedness of sacrifice in relationships of power not also important to consider? Further, and given the particular socio-political setting and nature of first-century society, what was the relationship between sacrifice and engendered communities?

### The Bible, Sacrifice and Dignity: Prospects and Problems

The religious sanction, in the form of tacit acceptance if not always active encouragement, of violence through sacrifice<sup>7</sup> – as the result of Christian perspectives, and interpretation of the Gen 22 account and the death of Christ in particular – displays the collusion between violence and the accompanying threat to human life and dignity quite blatantly. It has been argued that core to all sacrifices is the tension between its two movements: uniting effects of communion through sacrifice, and the separating and preventative qualities of expiation also wrought by sacrifice (Stowers 1995:296-297;300). In the Jewish faith, animals were sacrificed in the Temple, according to the ancient view that the blood from the sacrifice ‘covers over’ the sins of people.<sup>8</sup> Such expiatory descriptions of the salvation brought by Jesus are also found in the New Testament (Ehrman 2008:367).<sup>9</sup>

The context of early Christian sacrifice was, however, much more complex than only focussing on instances where it was presented as symbol of atonement. While space does not allow detailed discussion; at least two important aspects should be noted here. One the one hand, much of the New Testament built upon or simply assumed a sacrificial setting, to an extent more than what can simply be ascribed to its Jewish roots.<sup>10</sup> The various

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discussed here; cf e.g. on the Bible and families, Thatcher (2007:25-50); on Jesus and children, Thatcher (2007:51-77); for practices of children exposure, Osiek (2005:213-215).

<sup>6</sup> “[E]xplicit and detailed charges of infant sacrifice within associations of Jesus-followers come to the fore in the work of Tertullian and Minucius Felix” (Harland 2007:71).

<sup>7</sup> Stowers however cautions against the all too easy alignment of violence with sacrifice in the ancient Greek context. The important aspects of sacrifices were about the distribution, cooking and eating of meat rather than about the slaughter of the animal, which were only an ‘unremarkable, necessary prelude’ to sacrifice (Stowers 1995:297).

<sup>8</sup> Space does not allow discussion of OT texts here, but Cain’s failed sacrificial offering of agricultural products rather than a blood offer has for example in the past been interpreted as an indication of the importance of ritual slaughter for atonement with God – borne out further by the disastrous consequences when Abel is killed. Other interpretations of this narrative, and of sacrificial actions in the OT are numerous but cannot be addressed here. Cf Bailie’s notion that “Like every other society of the time, Israel’s cultural existence was dependent upon its sacrificial system” (Bailie 1995:157).

<sup>9</sup> The technical term for the act of covering was ‘expiation’ (ἱλαστήριον, cf Rom 3:25). Apart from atonement where Jesus’ death is like the sacrifice of animals in the Jewish Temple (e.g. Rom 3:25), cf Ehrman (2008:361-367) for other, different models of salvation in Paul: judicial model where sin is transgression, and Jesus as innocent paid the penalty for others (e.g. Rom 3:23; 6:23) – the model prominently used for referring to Paul’s notion of justification by faith; participationist model where sin is a cosmic power from which, through an intervention possible only from God, Jesus liberated people; reconciliation where mediator intervenes to restore relationship through self-sacrifice (e.g. Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18-20); redemption in which life is ‘purchased’ through Christ’s blood (e.g. Rom 3:24; 8:23), although from whom or what (cosmic forces; devil; sin?) is not clear; or, rescue from some (physical) danger, where someone intervenes to save the one in danger (e.g. Rom 5:7-8).

<sup>10</sup> Among Jews sacrifices were prescribed by the Torah and their role therefore quite pronounced: sacrifices were performed by priests in the temple in Jerusalem according to specific rituals. Priests skinned, prepared and at times even cooked the sacrificial carcass, and in some case worshippers would take home the carcass of parts of it afterwards to share with others at a feast (Ehrman 2008:37,40-41).

portrayals of Jesus all in one way or another presented his death in a sacrificial way, with the cross increasingly symbolising exactly that notion. On the other hand, though, what made the early communities of Jesus followers stand out and to be treated as foreign, was their unwillingness to participate in sacrifices to the other gods of the time (cf Harland 2007:68; Stowers 1995).

Admitting that the Bible is ‘at cross-purposes with itself’ regarding the subject of sacrifice, and even more so with regard to the story of Abraham’s (almost) sacrifice of Isaac, some scholars nevertheless insist that sacrifice – human offers and the practice of sacrifice itself – is what Abraham repudiated in Gen 22.<sup>11</sup> To quote one scholar at length: “This understanding [God blessing Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his own son] may have had a certain coherence in the dark world of human sacrifice to which it hearkens back, and it may have some psychological pertinence, but the true biblical spirit has little nostalgia for the sacrificial past and almost no interest in psychology. What we must try to see in the story of Abraham’s non-sacrifice of Isaac is that Abraham’s faith consisted, not of almost doing what he did not do, but of *not* doing what he almost did, and not doing it in fidelity to the God in whose name his contemporaries thought it should be done” (Bailie 1995:141). Such ingenious phrasing of the complexity might not escape the deeper problem, inherent to sacrifices and contemporary perceptions of sacrificial actions: the acceptance of a sacrificial frame of reference!

In fact, the misunderstanding of the theological role of sacrifice among opponents of the early followers of Jesus,<sup>12</sup> or perhaps simply stereotypical and deliberate distortion intent on vilification, soon gave rise to disastrous rumour-mongering, particularly in the progressively worsening situation they found themselves in until the fifth century. “In many respects, then, what we are witnessing with these allegations against Christians is the convergence of several factors: ethnographic stereotypes of the alien or immigrant cultic association (e.g. Bacchanalia), common allegations against Judean cultural groups specifically, and novelistic or popular stories of the internal threat often associated with criminal or low-life anti-associations ... [T]he inversion or perversion of the shared meal,<sup>13</sup> along with inherent sacrificial connections, stands out as a symbol of the group’s relation to surrounding society, as a sign of an anti-social threat and the epitome of social and religious disorder” (Harland 2007:71-72).

While it is at times difficult to establish the extent to which Jesus-follower antipathy and a well-established tradition of stereotyping and vilifying unnecessarily and grossly aggravated negative perceptions of sacrifice in the early Christian tradition, indications in early sources including the New Testament documents show the importance attached to sacrifice as well as register elements of uneasiness with sacrificial practices. Before some consideration of New Testament *Aqedah*-texts, a brief look at some modern theories of sacrifice may at this stage prove helpful for a more appropriate framing of the full religious but also socio-cultural purpose and effect of sacrifices.

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<sup>11</sup> Bailie (1995:142) insists that “Abraham’s alteration of the sacrificial system was driven by both moral and religious imperatives”, although their content remains unclear. For opposing views, cf e.g. Bremmer (2002:35; 42); Chilton (2008:17-43); Noort (2002:19-20).

<sup>12</sup> Such embittered stereotyping occurred among early Jesus-followers as well, directed to their opponents outside and within; cf e.g. the accusation that Montanists sacrificed their children or used their children’s blood (Harland 2007:72, n48; cf Punt 2008; 2009a).

<sup>13</sup> In Greek cities, shared meals forged bonds between the powerful and the common, supporting the poor in times of crises – sacrifices in this way “mediated power in an indirect and non-threatening way that allowed for negotiation and resistance while reproducing the social order” (Stowers 1995:323).

### Theories of Sacrifice: Two influential Models as Examples

Many different theories exist to explain sacrifice and its role in society, including propitiating the gods, sharing communion with the gods, offering tokens of devotion to the gods, and so on. Beyond religious-theological understandings of it, various social-scientific and other theories have also been offered for explaining the phenomenon of sacrifice,<sup>14</sup> of which only two are briefly mentioned here. *Firstly*, in social-scientific approaches to the New Testament, sacrifice is often seen as related to “rites of passage that permit boundary crossings into areas normally ‘out of place’ to ‘clean’ people” (Neyrey 1996:90-91, referring to Malina). Such explanations of sacrifice are premised on the notion of clean and unclean, or purity and dirt and links up largely with the work of British anthropologist Mary Douglas, who focussed on anthropological notions and explanations of defilement, and explains how dirt refers to things considered polluted, unclean or out of place (Douglas 1966; Neyrey 1996:88).<sup>15</sup> Sacrifice, therefore, is on the one hand about the ordering of society and (its) selves, the regulating of power – a topic to which we will return below.

Other theorists find in sacrifice the very reason for the (continued) existence of human society itself. René Girard’s theory of ritual scapegoating, *secondly*, for example amounts to a theory of sacrifice in that it holds that a “single act of mob-violence in primordial times” is the cause of all religions. The defining theme of biblical literature was for Girard a growing gradual developing uneasiness with sacred violence and its accompanying religious blood sacrifices, together with a stronger focus on those marginalised in the unfolding of history. Ultimately, Girard argued, such themes reached their historical zenith in the crucifixion, the literary summary of which is found in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> “Anthropologically, this was decisive: the crucifixion and the New Testament’s disclosure of its universal meaning. The historical convulsions of our era are an elaborate footnote to these things. Attempts to comprehend these convulsions that fail to take into account the destabilizing effect of the Bible’s aversion for sacrifice and its concern for victims will never get to the heart of the present cultural predicament” (Bailie 1995:114).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Stowers reckons the central place given to sacrifice in sociological theory has been due to the ubiquity of animal sacrifice across the world, and since it tends to be central in communities where property, power, and status have been submitted through descent. The latter explains why sacrificial practices are not found in either hunter-gatherer or achievement oriented, monetary market-based societies (Stowers 1995:295-296).

<sup>15</sup> “Mary Douglas has taught us how views of the body, including issues of the consumption of food, reflect views of society and the boundaries within and around society. Moreover, the boundaries that are violated in the ritual murder and consumption of fellow humans can symbolize the destruction of society itself” (Harland 2007:74). The social body – as macrocosm – is understood as a structured, ordered system concerned with affirming and protecting its boundaries, its order and classifications, and the person’s physical body – as microcosm – within the society is seen to emulate the social sense of order and structure (cf Malina 1993:149-183). Sacrifice’s ordering or structuring function also incorporated the broader purposes of regulating relationships of power in society. In biblical times, where patrilineal descent determined kinship on the basis of essentialised discourses of shared blood, practices of sacrifice also served kinship-related purposes, since as religious rituals they sanctioned blood relations and kept them in place (Hodge 2007:19-42).

<sup>16</sup> Cf e.g. Girard’s confidence that the Bible and Gospels in particular “contain an anthropology of religion far superior than anything the social sciences can provide”, contrasting it to the “shallowness of religious relativism” (Girard, in his foreword to Bailie 1995:xii).

<sup>17</sup> Communal remembering and mimetic reliving of that act through community-chosen scapegoats divert natural human aggression away from the community; the scapegoats are sacrificed for the sake of the whole group, and simultaneously strengthen the community and its socio-cultural order. It is within sacrificial systems that “the medicine becomes the poison”, when brutality is condoned in the name of and for the sake of civilisation (Bailie 1995:79-87). For further discussion, cf Punt (2009b). Criticism against Girard as literary theorist is that his theory of culture and religion is too general, universalist, and reductionist, where all cultures in the world are

In the end, such sociological explanations of sacrifice as religiously oriented rituals crucial to social formation and identity are important for understanding the broader reach or sacrificial terminology in the New Testament; particularly since these and other explanations tend to inform our (theological) thinking about sacrifice in subtle ways. But further study of the New Testament *Aqedah*-texts is also required.

### **The *Aqedah* in the New Testament**

The presence, tangible and otherwise, of the *Aqedah* in the New Testament is relatively widespread, given the pervasive importance of Abraham as father of faith for many of its authors.<sup>18</sup> The much longer, complex and often fascinating midrashic and rabbinic tradition and interpretation of the *Aqedah* – of which the relationship to the New Testament's appropriation of the *Aqedah* is still debated – is not addressed here (cf Swetnam 1981:4-22). In two New Testament texts, however, direct references were made to the *Aqedah*, namely in Hebrews 11 and James 2, and other possible allusions are often argued.

#### ***Hebrews 11:17-19***

In Hebrews the focus on sacrifice and its literally bloody significance latches onto the *Aqedah* traditions which were extended towards the death of Jesus on the cross, but which now becomes not only the ultimate sacrifice but paradoxically therefore also the sacrifice that puts an end to all sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> The argument of Hebrews fits in well with the actions of Jesus described in the gospels, regardless of the understanding of the historical Jesus or difficulties in synchronising the gospel accounts.<sup>20</sup> The Gospels' emphasis on Jesus predicting that the Temple will be destroyed, can be understood as either an indication that there will be a new temple totally sanctified for the worship of God in the new age, or, more probably, that there would not be the need for any temple at all, since in the absence of sin cultic sacrifices of animals to bring atonement would no longer be required (Ehrman 2008:265).

In Hebrews,<sup>21</sup> as is often the case in the New Testament when exemplary faith is addressed, Abraham is held up as the prime example of enduring faith. Among the

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ascribed a (same) single origin and purpose. Although pragmatic in nature, the theory's validity for understanding peace and violence in the New Testament is faulted for not dealing adequately with all the documents (Punt 2009b; cf Desjardins 1997:114; 2001:100).

<sup>18</sup> For a wide range of interpretations of the *Aqedah*, even beyond the Christian traditions, cf the essays in Noort and Tigchelaar (2002).

<sup>19</sup> The understanding of Jesus' death as a sacrifice, and even as the sacrifice to end all others, was widespread among the diversity of early Christian groups including the Jewish-Christian adoptionists (or Ebionites) Cf Ehrman (2008:3).

<sup>20</sup> And even earlier criticism of the sacrificial practices by the OT prophets! But what was the reason for this criticism: of sacrifices as theological concept? Of the sacrificial *system* as such? Or of the accompanying attitudes and lack of piety and commitment exhibited by those participating in the system? Were sacrifices criticised or people who were, in the eyes of the prophets, not going about it in the correct way, i.e. having their daily lives correspond to what they purport to accomplish with their sacrifices?

<sup>21</sup> The document 'to the Hebrews' was probably towards the turn of the first century CE directed to second generation followers of Jesus, who had already experienced some persecutions for their faith (imprisonment, loss of property, cf Heb 10:32-34; but not martyrdom, cf Heb 12:4), and who were in all probability from Gentile rather than Jewish stock (cf the reminder about faith in God, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement, issues they were instructed in upon becoming followers of Jesus, cf Heb 6:1-2). The document is not really a letter but as self-styled a 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13:22), it was probably constructed as a sermon – with the standard epistolary elements at the end of the document (benediction, exhortation, travel plans, final greetings and farewell, Heb 12:20-25) possibly added before delivery to the community, or even

νέφος μαρτύρων ('cloud of witnesses', 12:1), Hebrews singled Abraham out for special attention, narrating his faithfulness including his intended sacrifice of Isaac (cf Court and Court 1990:319). This story resonates well with many elements related to Jesus as only begotten Son of God, earlier emphasised in Hebrews, notwithstanding some remaining conflicting issues in the document's Christological views. However, as much as Abraham is claimed to stand as an example from the Jewish tradition in Hebrews, and although Jesus is also presented as being in continuity with that tradition, Jesus is said to be superior to it in every single way.<sup>22</sup> The superiority (and thus supersession) of Jesus is perhaps the clearest to perceive in Hebrews' position on sacrifices.

The *Aqedah*-passage in Hebrews stands within the context of the broader argument of the document that the 'once and for all' ἐφάπαξ, quality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (cf Heb 10:1-18) not only replaced the recurrent sacrificial, ritual practices in the Jerusalem temple,<sup>23</sup> but was also both the ultimately efficient and therefore unnecessary to repeat, act of sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of other analyses of Hebrews' argument, two immediate problems arise for our discussion. On the *one* hand, Jewish sacrifices were not intended to reach a point where they become superfluous, since they were an integral part of the worship of God with the purpose of "the cultic sacrifice of animals to bring atonement" (Ehrman 2008:265).<sup>25</sup> The sacrificial system was not perceived as flawed for failing to reach some final goal or end, since its purpose was liturgical and ongoing.<sup>26</sup> And on the *other* hand, and even more importantly, the argument that the death of Jesus served the ultimate sacrificial purpose differed from the supposedly failed Jewish sacrificial system only in terms of sacrificial object and recurrence. It can, in effect, even be argued that Jesus as ultimate sacrifice ushers in a more problematic dispensation: rather than animals and inanimate objects, Jesus was a human sacrifice. The purpose of the ultimate sacrifice of God's own child as ultimate and thus final atonement is still predicated upon the satisfaction of a God demanding a blood sacrifice, a human sacrifice, a child sacrifice; and, to be frank, the

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because of the increasing popularity of the epistolary genre towards the end of the first century CE.

- <sup>22</sup> Ironically, Hebrews argued for the inferiority of the Jewish understanding and worship of God when compared to Jesus Christ, from the very Jewish scriptures – not uniquely though, since Paul's argument for justification by faith against the works of the Law is taken from the Law (=Torah), too. However, with an emphasis on the fulfilment of prophecy and the foreshadowing of an expected reality, Hebrews claims that the Jewish scriptures anticipated an all-surpassing future act of God all along (e.g. Ehrman 2008:422).
- <sup>23</sup> Unlike in other contemporary religions in which sacrificial practices were common and widespread partly at least because of a multitude of holy places or temples, among the Jews sacrifices were only offered in the (one and only) Temple in Jerusalem because it was believed to be the place where the heavenly Father had a special earthly abode as well, in the Holiest of the Holies (Ehrman 2008:41). Among the different Jewish groups, who all placed a high premium on sacrifices as an important part of their faith, it was the Sadducees that focused on sacrifices and especially on protecting the continuance of the sacrificial system, by trying to preserve good relations with the Romans (Ehrman 2008:48).
- <sup>24</sup> In other, more or less contemporary documents the practice of sacrifice is also considered abolished. In the Gospel of the Ebionites, for example, words of Jesus are recorded to the effect that Jews no longer need to participate in animal sacrifices in the Temple. With this instruction was connected the insistence that Jesus' followers live as vegetarians, which led to interesting amendments in the gospel accounts (e.g. Mk 1:6 *akridas* [locusts] changed to *akrides* [pancakes] as the food of John the Baptist in the desert).
- <sup>25</sup> Cf Thatcher (2007:180-186;187-198) trying to balance sacrifice and mutuality.
- <sup>26</sup> The claim that Abraham's actions in Gen 22 amounted to "the first great step toward the renunciation of sacrifice" (Bailie 1995:140-143) fails to note Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac, right to the point of drawing his knife, and the praise this text and the later tradition and texts accorded Abraham for his actions; not to mention the importance of the subsequent sacrifice of the goat for the resulting sacrificial tradition. Bailie is probably right, though, in insisting that this story posed a serious challenge to the human and child sacrificing practices of the time.

ensuing religion now becomes predicated on the bloody death of the crucified Jesus as ultimate sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Amidst claims of having replaced, and sublimely transcended, sacrificial *praxis*, is the ideology of sacrifice not now cemented into the religious *thought* of Jesus followers as point of departure, as the norming basis or orientating reference point in a broader web of significance?

#### ***Another reference, and possible allusions to the Aqedah***

In the New Testament one more direct reference is found to the *Aqedah* in Jas 2:21, and various arguments have been offered for allusions to it elsewhere in the corpus.

#### *James 2:21*

The reference to the *Aqedah* in Jas 2:21 is part of the letter's broader argument about authentic faith having to be put into practice.<sup>28</sup> As elsewhere in the Jewish tradition (cf *Sirach*, 1 *Maccabees*, *Jubilees*, and 4 *Maccabees*), the author of James both stressed Abraham's faith explicitly and argued for it being best visible in the binding of Isaac. The gist of the argument of Jas 2:22-23 is that Abraham's justification was brought about by his faith in as much as it was borne out by his obedience, or works.<sup>29</sup> With no proof offered, the assumptions in James 2:21-23 are twofold: the *Aqedah* was obviously connected to Gen 15:6, and the *Aqedah* implies faith.<sup>30</sup> From the earlier context in Jas 2:18-19 where the necessary accompaniment of faith by works is stressed with the hypothetical demon's faith in the unity of God, the argument about the inseparability of faith in works in the author's opinion is sealed with reference to the events of Gen 22 – of which Gen 15 is seen to be the prefiguring grounding (Swetnam 1981:81-83).

#### *Possible allusions to the Aqedah in the New Testament*

Besides the two texts where the *Aqedah* is in full view, other possible allusions to it in the New Testament were suggested. There is no general consensus on whether specific texts do in fact refer to the *Aqedah*, but the following interesting cases have been made for such allusions.

#### *Rom 8:32 and Pauline thought*

Early research on the *Aqedah* in the New Testament already had researchers concluding that once the parallels Abraham-God and Isaac-Jesus are established, Jesus becomes the Passover lamb for Paul (cf 1 Cor 5:6-8). (Lévi; cf Swetnam 1981:4-21). A text which is often cited in

<sup>27</sup> And more generally, and regardless of all refinements and qualifications, as long as "a divinely sanctioned death" is the prerequisite for satisfying "the offended divine entity", then "[t]he conclusion is inevitable that satisfaction atonement is based on divinely sanctioned, retributive violence" (Weaver 2001:225).

<sup>28</sup> The authorship, and therefore provenance and dating of the letter of James remains highly contested. If the apostle James is posited as the author, a generally early date (40's CE) is presupposed; alternatively, if the document is pseudonymous, a later date of by the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE is suggested. Decisions on the introductory issues have a major impact on the interpretation of the letter's focus on the importance of works, especially as works are related to faith.

<sup>29</sup> In Jas 2:23 the reference to the Scripture that was fulfilled is indeed to Gen 15:6.

<sup>30</sup> Various suggestions have been made in the past, comparing Jas 2 with Rom 4. However, although Rom 4:3,9,22-24 cites Gen 15:6, no reference was made to Gen 22 or the *Aqedah*, probably to stress that justification lies outside the control of humans and to avoid the notion that faith in any way deserves a reward (Swetnam 1981:83).



connection with the *Aqedah* is Rom 8:32, mostly because of the phrase οὐκ ἐφείσατο (“he did not spare”) which corresponds with the phrase used with regard to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac in Gen 22:16 LXX.

Other scholars are less convinced that Pauline Christology was framed with reference to the *Aqedah* (and atonement), arguing rather that Paul used other sacrificial imagery within his multifaceted portrayal of the crucifixion. Paul probably made use of traditions of the Passover lamb and about the sacrificial animals of Exodus in his thinking (Lampe 2007:191-209).

#### *Other possible allusions*

Other New Testament texts that possibly evoke allusion to the *Aqedah* include John 1:29 and 1 Peter 1:20, given their emphasis on the Lamb in the *Aqedah* traditions.<sup>31</sup> The coincidence of the phrase υἱὸς ἀγαπητός (cf Gen 22:2,12,16 LXX) in Mark 1:11 and gospel parallels, as possibly applied to those destined to die a sacrificial death, has also been seen by some as evoking a reference to the *Aqedah*. A number of themes related to the *Aqedah*, such as God giving his son, are seen to converge in John 3:16. Given connections made between the *Aqedah* and resurrection and/or eternal life in 4 Maccabees and Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, and possible the Torah Shrine at Dura Europos, the ‘third day’ reference in 1 Corinthians 15:4 has also been suggested as another possible intertext along these lines (Swetnam 1981:84-85).

Various interconnections are generally argued to sustain the references of the above mentioned texts to the *Aqedah*: the lamb-imagery’s connection with the *Aqedah* in Jn 1:29 would support *Aqedah* influence in Jn 3:16 while *Aqedah*-allusion in Mk 1:11 and parallels would conversely strengthen the case for Jn 1:29; and, the comparison at Rom 8:32 and Heb 11:17-19 between Abraham giving Isaac and God giving Jesus often becomes the basis for similar reasoning about Jn 3:16 (Swetnam 1981:85).

Much more work is required on these texts to argue a persuasive case for their connection to the *Aqedah*, but intertextual echoes of the *Aqedah* do seem to reverberate throughout different parts of the New Testament. And it is the pervasiveness of the notion of the *Aqedah* – rather than the specific historical reference itself – particularly in how it underwrote sacrifice and violence, and also how all these elements culminated in a particular portrayal of human dignity, that should be investigated further. Only a first few comments are possible here.

### **Sacrifice, Violence and Human Dignity**

One important consequence flowing from the *Aqedah* tradition was the legitimisation of sacrifice together with the shedding of blood broadly conceived, as seen in (among others) the New Testament and the subsequent Christian tradition. However, the impact of the relationship between violence and sacrificial practices extends further, with sacrifice also implicated in the creation and maintenance of patriarchal society and accompanying gender bias. The *Aqedah* tradition seems to be both the basis of and paradigm for ongoing religious legitimisation of violence, for ‘sacred pain’ (Glucklich 1999) – physical and otherwise – that impacts variously on human dignity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The possibility that 1 Pt 1:20 alluded to the *Aqedah* is less likely than for the same to be the case in Jn 1:29, given the *Aqedah*’s relation to the *tamid* offering (Swetnam 1981:84).

<sup>32</sup> Cf e.g. Chilton’s recent study (2008); alternative interpretations to the traditional understanding of Abraham’s faith and morals being tested by God, have been proposed; cf Schrader (2004:251-258) on the *Aqedah*’s

As mentioned earlier, in antiquity sacrifice already impinged on human dignity since it often formed the basis for stereotyped accusations (cf Rives 1995:65-85). Stereotypical charges of human sacrifice was levelled against opposing groups as part of ancient invective, related to accusations of ritual murder and cannibalism,<sup>33</sup> and generally served the purpose of boundary setting, indicating a divergence between themselves and the target of the rhetorical claims (Knust 2006:6). Such forms of epistemological violence may pale in significance when confronted with other effects brought about and kept intact within a sacrificial system. In ways that went beyond character assassination – and its often very real, disastrous consequences – the authorisation and legitimisation of sacrificial tradition structured society in ways that require attention for the consequences flowing from it. Two important instances will suffice here.

### ***Sacrifices, and discourses and rituals of power***

Sacrifices were a primary mode or vehicle of communication between humans and their gods in early times, and also encompassed an immensely powerful social function.<sup>34</sup> “All significant political bodies in the Greek city ... were male sacrificing bodies that conducted no significant political activity without sacrifice” (Stowers 1995:295). This power was pronounced in a context where religious and political spheres were often perceived, experienced and *lived* as integrated. Sacrifices were in the first century CE embedded in a context where politics and religion were intimately connected and at times, actively and strongly, informed each other reciprocally.<sup>35</sup> “[G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods” (Ehrman 2008:27). In addition to encouraging the worshipping of gods, the Empire’s emperors were often included among those worshipped.

Sacrifice was therefore an important element in the Roman emperor cults,<sup>36</sup> where people showed their devotion to the gods through prayer and sacrifice. Daily cultic acts and rituals would for example include some outpouring of wine before a meal in honour of the gods, while periodic festivals would have a group of worshippers, or a priest on their behalf, sacrificing an animal.<sup>37</sup> In Rome, at great celebrations, trained priests would officiate at standardised rituals which also included sacrifices and even set prayers. The self-legitimising assumptions about the efficacy of such rituals of which sacrifices were the

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purpose being to test Abraham’s break from pagan practices, and to continue religious evolution which would lead to the Torah standard of behaviour and worship.

<sup>33</sup> On cannibalism, cf McGowan: “Since eating and death are both human experiences of fundamental importance, it is not surprising that the idea of eating people stirs the emotions and attracts a profound response” (McGowan 1994:414). The term ‘cannibals’ is a corruption of *cannibales* as a description of the Carib people provided to Columbus on his ‘New World’-journeys by the neighbouring Arawak people, to whom the *cannibales* appeared as dogs and were believed to engage with a nearby Amazon community in sexual practices (McGowan 1994:415).

<sup>34</sup> “Viewing sacrifice as a map or ideogram of Greek and social relations clarifies the social and cultural power of the practice” (Stowers 1995:325).

<sup>35</sup> This meant that “[s]acrificial practices at a fixed cult locus regulate patterns of land tenure, inheritance, and kinship” (Stowers 1995:313).

<sup>36</sup> “Except in Roman *coloniae*, imperial cults in the Greek East took the form of Greek sacrifices” (Stowers 1995:325).

<sup>37</sup> “Ritual practices are not the instrument of some more basic power or of social entities outside of ritual but a particular environment within which participants come to embody and negotiate power relations” (Stowers 1995:307).

visually arresting part, which when done according to conventional wisdom and regimen, were underwritten by the apparent successes and opulence, the power and grandeur of Empire<sup>38</sup> (Ehrman 2008:27).

Rituals can in the end only be understood in the context of other local practices from which they see themselves as being distinct from or even in opposition to. Ritual practices such as sacrifices did not, beyond some agreement to participate, require consensus in thought or belief among participants regarding their understanding of symbols. Such practices were therefore set in ambiguity, employing partial misrecognition and constrained power while it reproduced a certain arrangement of power: negotiation and resistance were both constrained and permitted in rituals. As far as solidarity was produced in and through sacrificial rituals, it was based on fragmentation (Stowers 1995:306-309). One effect of this was that, in the context of the Roman Empire and the imperial cult on the one hand and the link between sacrificial practices and kinship on the other, Jewish and Jesus-follower communities not participating in Roman cultic activities could not claim allegiance to the dominant Greco-Roman identity of the time. And they increasingly became counter-communities, with all the tensions and ambiguity it implied!

### ***Sacrificial violence, gender and dignity***

In the first-century Greco-Roman world kinship, ethnicity and ritual were linked to one another, and so also were their implications for social relations, political power and enfranchisement intermeshed. Sacrifice was “a powerful means of organizing all kinds of social relations” given its importance for issues such as procreation, gender, descent and place (Stowers 1995:294). In the work of Nancy Jay the question about the relationship between social structure and sacrifice, once so pertinent in the work of French and British anthropologists, were again in the foreground. Now, however, rather than claiming that sacrifice strengthens the bonds of the group, Jay insists that patrilineal related males maintain their relations and social positions in this way. “Because gender relations link historical social relations to a biological base, they appear natural, inevitable. This apparently natural quality makes gender unequalled as a cornerstone of domination. Growing up in families, people learn, along with gender, systems of domination that can be elaborated on a tribal and state level. Building political systems of domination on gender relations makes political domination to appear inevitable and unchangeable” (Jay 2001:148).

Sacrifice in the ancient context was a construct through which men asserted their claims on children, effectively declaring their paternity in the face of maternity so emphatically present in childbirth.<sup>39</sup> “Patrilineal lines of descent must, therefore, eschew any reliance on

<sup>38</sup> Accompanying actions such as extispicy or the study of the sacrificial animal’s entrails to establish the acceptance of such sacrifices by the gods – as well as other modes of divination such as the study of birds’ flight patterns by augurs, and of course private interactions with the gods through oracles – underwrote the further belief that communication with the gods was dialogical in nature (Ehrman 2008:27).

<sup>39</sup> “Our modern assumptions about the naturalness of ‘ethnicity’, ‘kinship’, and ‘ancestry’ makes it easy for us to gloss over the ways that reckoning race or ethnicity *even by descent* is a social process” (Buell 2001:472). “A child did not become a member of the household at or by virtue of birth... Rather, membership was affected cultically by sacrifice as the child was separated from the pollution of its mother and bonded to the father”. Such sacrificially construed membership applied to the οἶκος, to the γένος or clan (“a locative sacrificing kinship group larger than the οἶκος but smaller and less diverse than a phratry”) (Stowers 1995:315-316). These trends were perhaps most visible in the nurturing passivity evoked in the Thesmophoria festival for women and conversely, the Apatouria festival with its active kinship making (e.g. Stowers 1995:312-320).

physical birth to determine genealogical legitimacy and instead provide some other marker for establishing such legitimacy. Sacrifice is that marker” (Eisenbaum 2005:109). Both gender and claims and counter-claims to rights played an important role in many sacrificial systems, because kinship was the central concern, and kinship is a gender construct of political nature.<sup>40</sup> “Physiology and biology do not create descent groups and patterns of kinship. People do. Thus, the organization of kinship is always political... Sacrificial systems are ways of regulating kinship, descent, and the inheritance of property, in the face of considerations such as lineages producing no male descendants, ideology and power concerns overriding biological parenthood, and the like (Stowers 1995:313).

But it was not only paternity, as Jay argues, but also maternity that was constructed and interpreted through sacrificial practices, by defining the appropriate uses of blood with relation to procreation and gender (Stowers 1995:301).<sup>41</sup> Sacrifice intends to enforce the dominance of the paternal line through the creation of a hierarchical opposition between maternity and paternity. “Greek animal sacrifice worked because it elaborated schemes of hierarchical homologies through an inarticulate medium that inscribed such patterns in the body” (Stowers 1995:331-332). But sacrifices also served to embed and articulate maternal and paternal roles, defining the role of blood in men as opposed to its role in women.<sup>42</sup>

While modern perceptions of sacrifice probably no longer underwrite the full gamut of socio-religious structures and perceptions, the extent to which the power and gender-constructing aspects infused with conceptual frameworks informed by sacrificial logic can be fully divorced from sacrifice, requires attention.<sup>43</sup> Especially since conceptual framing often remains long after practices have ceased, particularly if embedded in self-sustaining religious discourse.

## Conclusion

In pursuing the relationship between violence and human dignity, this brief discussion concerned itself with what one scholar called “the embedding of sacrificial rituals in

<sup>40</sup> Claims to childhood and thus to carry the name of the father or patrilineal line and entitlement to the father’s inheritance was less a matter of physical descent than socio-legal arrangement. This was so for two reasons in particular. One, and notwithstanding the cultural context of patriarchy, the materiality of physical life meant that women who derived their very recognition and in fact acknowledgement of existence from attachment to either a father or husband (or failing which, a related male sibling), were vital for perpetuating human life and the very line of descent. Two, in a context where the legal and socially acceptable sexual activities often saw men fathering children beyond the confines of marriage, not all the male children of the father were considered ‘sons’. Daughters in any way given a patriarchal context, found themselves in a precarious position, seeing also that Roman legislation extended any obligation regarding girl-children only to the firstborn girl; the subsequent girls could be disposed of, whether through exposure or adoption – which apparently saw them growing up for slavery and/or prostitution. Girls were seen as a burden to the household, because of the expense of their dowry and since their labour potential is lost after marriage.

<sup>41</sup> Cf Cohen (1999:363-307) on changes in the Jewish community regarding descent with the rabbinic innovation of the principle of matrilineal descent; cf Buell 2001:472.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Aristotle defined blood as the basic vital substance common to humans and animals, and the vehicle for the spark of procreation; medical ideas about blood created and naturalised gender roles: men and their blood/semen were active, creative and dominant, the source of human identity while women and their blood/menses were passive, supportive, nurturing, imperfect and in need of men’s active power for biological fulfilment (Stowers 1995:303-304).

<sup>43</sup> Is Soskice therefore going far enough in emphasising the disruptive and subversive nature of NT symbols, challenging prevailing norms pertaining e.g. to blood (Soskice 2007:88-99) – is there not beyond such subversion also the need for a new grammar and vocabulary pertaining to these matters?

particular cultures”<sup>44</sup> (Drexler 2006:1665). So, for example, the language of sacrifice is today still often heard variously but clearly in appeals for donation, in calls for justice, in the rhetoric of conflict and war, and the commendation of martyrs. Rather than presenting a “cultural crisis associated with a sacrificial system whose mythological power was waning and whose rituals were malfunctioning” (Bailie 1995:142-143), the New Testament’s portrayal and underlying narrative of Isaac’s binding presupposes and condones sacrificial logic through its indebtedness to the *Aqedah*.<sup>45</sup> When sacrifice is perceived as social cure, legitimated with references and appeals to the *Aqedah* – and maybe less often, to Jesus’ death on the cross<sup>46</sup> – it has the potential to reach the opposite of its intended effect (cf Chilton 2008:3-6).<sup>47</sup> Sacrifice as notion then not only (fatally) attacks the dignity of victim but also of the originator and/or participant – the ‘perpetrator’ – notwithstanding how complex each of these positions may be, how strongly they are intertwined with one another, or how much the one is defined through the other.<sup>48</sup> On the one hand, it may be fair to speak of a destabilising effect located in the “Bible’s aversion for sacrifice and its concern for victims” on the remaining ‘historical convulsions’ of our time<sup>49</sup> (Bailie 1995:114; cf above). However, on the other hand the remaining sacrificial discourse present in contemporary theology has been shown through history not to bode well for human dignity, whether dignity’s primary reference is gender, social power, or other manifestations.

The politics of genocide, the psychology and sociology of subjugating women, the defence of retribution in the criminal justice system, and cultural mechanisms of identifying scapegoats all point to the pervasive language of sacrifice active in many areas of people’s lives today. Then again, the often veiled relationship between sacrifice and violence,<sup>50</sup> and also religion’s connecting role in the relationship, can be revealed in a study of the *Aqedah*

<sup>44</sup> Cf Stowers’ caution not “to abstract sacrificial practice from particular social contexts and to abstract sacrifice into some supposedly universal psychological, social, or epistemological trait” (Stowers 1995:331).

<sup>45</sup> Stowers’ comment on Greek sacrifice rings true here as well: “By locating humans within the cosmic hierarchy, the myth of sacrifice legitimated and naturalized the social hierarchies of the polis that were also mapped and indexed by sacrifice” (Stowers 1995:326).

<sup>46</sup> The thesis of the comprehensive study by Swetnam on the *Aqedah* in Hebrews, and the light that the former casts on the latter, is that Hebrews “is thinking of the death and resurrection of Jesus in terms of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham as portrayed in Gn 22 (the *Aqedah*) and as developed in the Jewish tradition” (Swetnam 1981:2).

<sup>47</sup> In an analogous way, Briggs argues for the link between social and theological processes of domination in Paul’s thinking as it emerged in his letters, so that the ownership of bodies in first-century CE slavery is downplayed by the notion that God owns the human bodies and existence of early Christians (Briggs 2000:119).

<sup>48</sup> Concern for the effects of the sacrificial system also leans the other way: Avoiding the “cult of the victim” (amounting to the aspiration to victim-status as crucial to self-definition and self-preservation over a wide range of fronts) without neglecting the importance of the biblical tradition’s concern for the victim: “In one form or another, all of the world’s great religions urge their faithful to exercise compassion and mercy, as does the Judeo-Christian tradition. But the empathy for victims – *as victims* – is specifically Western and quintessentially biblical” (Bailie 1995:19).

<sup>49</sup> “The trio of ritual atrocity (human sacrifice, cannibalism, and sexual perversion) has a long history in discourses of the other and the trio raises its head again not only in accusations against Jews, ‘heretics’, and witches in the medieval and early modern periods, for instance, but also in the more recent ‘Satanic ritual abuse’ scare of the 1980s” (Harland 2007:73).

<sup>50</sup> Even where the sacrificial victim has a positive role – à la Girard – on society, on the one hand, it on the other hand perpetuates the system as well as its ongoing sanctioning; cf Bailie (1995).

in the New Testament.<sup>51</sup> Exposure does not resolve the problems related to sacrificial thinking, but is uncovering not often the first step in trying to understand the impact and effect of a system such as the sacrificial tradition on human dignity?<sup>52</sup> And often the requisite starting point for effective programmes of actions to counter the risky effects of a tradition?

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<sup>51</sup> Other issues remain and could not be discussed here: admitting to the differences between the “farmer-warrior-citizen in classical Attika” and the early followers of Jesus from Greek stock, Stowers rightly stresses that the first Christians were an ‘urban phenomenon’ (cf Meeks) and lived in a social space defined by Empire – and, it can be added, with implications for emerging Christian notions of sacrifice! Stowers raises another question: “Why [did] Christians [create] a new form of nonanimal sacrifice in the Eucharistic cult of the fourth and the fifth centuries?” (Stowers 1995:331).

<sup>52</sup> “Only with difficulty is it possible to retrieve from the biblical text an alternative perspective to the dominant ideology which has so permeated the text” (Rowland 2006:659).

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