

Sacrifice and Idolatry in Israel

Jewish Tradition

Targum Onqelos

Then the Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go and sacrifice before your God in the land." And Moses said, "It is not proper to do so, because we are taking the cattle which the Egyptians worship to sacrifice before the Lord our God; here we will be sacrificing the cattle which the Egyptians worship and they would be seeing it; would they not intend to stone us?" (at *Exodus* 8:21-22).

Targum Neofiti

And Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said: "Go, sacrifice before the Lord your God in the land of Egypt." And Moses said: "It is not right to do so, because the idols of the Egyptians are an abomination, from which we must take to sacrifice before the Lord, our God. Behold, if we sacrifice the idols of the Egyptians in their presence, it is impossible that they should not stone us" (at *Exodus* 8:21-22).

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, worship with festive offerings before the Lord your God in this land." But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for we would take lambs that are idols of the Egyptians and offer them before the Lord our God. Behold, if we offer the idols of the Egyptians before them, behold it would be right for them to stone us with stones" (at *Exodus* 8:21-22).

Exodus Rabbah

And Moses said it is not right to do so, because the Egyptians worshipped cattle as gods (*Exodus Rabbah* 11.3).

Leviticus Rabbah

The Israelites were passionate followers after idolatry in Egypt and used to bring their sacrifices to the satyrs (*Leviticus Rabbah* 22.5).

Moses Maimonides

How can Jeremiah say that God did not command us about burnt-offering and sacrifice, seeing so many precepts refer to sacrifice? Jeremiah says the primary object of the precepts is this, Know me, and serve no other being: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:12). But the commandment that sacrifices shall be brought and that the temple shall be visited has for its object the success of that principle among you; and for its sake I have transferred these modes of worship to my name; idolatry shall thereby be utterly destroyed, and Jewish faith firmly established (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3.32).

Most idolaters objected to killing cattle, holding this species of animals in great estimation. In order to eradicate these false principles, the Law commands us to offer sacrifices only of these three kinds: "You shall bring your offering of the cattle, of the herd and of the flock" (Lev 1:2). Thus the very act which is considered by the heathen as the greatest crime, is the means of approaching God, and obtaining his pardon for our sins. In this manner, evil principles, the diseases of the human soul, are cured by other principles which are diametrically opposite (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3.46).

For it is the principle object of the Law and the axis around which it turns, to blot out these opinions from man's heart and make the existence of idolatry impossible (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3.29).

II. Pagan Tradition

Manetho

He [Moses] then, in the first place, made this law for them, that they should neither worship Egyptian gods, nor should abstain from any one of those sacred animals, which they have in the highest esteem, but kill and destroy them all; that they should join themselves to nobody but to those that were of his confederacy. When he had made such laws as these, and many more such as were mainly opposite the customs of the Egyptians, he gave order that they should use the multitude of the hands they had in building walls about their city (cited in Josephus *Against Apion* 1.26).

Tacitus

Moses, wishing to secure for the future his authority over the nation, gave them a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practiced by other men. Things sacred with us, with them have no sanctity, while they allow what with us is forbidden...They slay the ram, seemingly in derision of Hammon, and they sacrifice the ox, because the Egyptians worship it at Apis (*Histories* 5.4).

III. Christian Tradition

Saint Justin Martyr

Not because he needed such sacrifices did God command you to sacrifice to him, but because of the sins of your people, especially their sins of idolatry (*Dialogue with Trypho* 22).

The same can be said of Abraham and his descendants down to the time of Moses, when your people showed itself wicked and ungrateful to God by molding a golden calf as an idol in the desert. Wherefore, God, adapting his laws to that weak people, ordered you to offer sacrifices to his name, in order to save you from idolatry, but you did not obey even then, for you did not hesitate to sacrifice your children to the demons (*Dialogue with Trypho* 19).

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons

It ought not to be wondered at, if also in the Old Testament the same God permitted similar indulgences for the benefit of his people, drawing them on by the ordinances already mentioned [the laws given after the golden calf], so that they might obtain the gift of salvation through them, while they obeyed the Decalogue, and being restrained by him, should not revert to idolatry, nor apostatize from God, but learn to love him with the whole heart (*Against Heresies* 3.15).

Eusebius of Caesarea

For the old covenant was given as a law to the Jews, when they had fallen from the religion of their forefathers, and had embraced the manners and life of the Egyptians, and had declined to the errors of polytheism, and the idolatrous superstitions of the Gentiles. It was intended to raise up the fallen, and to set on their feet those who were lying on their faces, by suitable teaching (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 1.4).

And it was in this intermediate period, while the ideal of the new covenant was hidden from men, and as it were asleep, that the law of Moses was interposed in the interval...It was like a doctor to heal the whole Jewish race, worn away by the terrible disease of Egypt. As such it offered a lower and less perfect way of life to the children of Abraham, who were too weak to

follow in the steps of their forefathers. For through their long sojourn in Egypt, after the death of their godly forefathers, they adopted Egyptian customs, and, as I said, fell into idolatrous superstition. They aimed no higher than the Egyptians, they became in all respects like them, both in worshipping idols, and in other matters (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 1.6).

Saint Athanasius

Therefore, the whole law did not treat of sacrifices, though there was in the law a commandment concerning sacrifices, that by means of them it might begin to instruct men and might withdraw them from idols, and bring them nearer to God, teaching them for that present time. Therefore neither at the beginning, when God brought the people out of Egypt, did he command them concerning sacrifices or whole burnt offerings, nor even when they came to Mount Sinai...but his commandment was given, that they might know him who is truly God and his Word, and might despise those which are falsely called gods (*Festal Epistle* 19.4).

But when Israel chose to serve Baal, and dared to offer sacrifices to those that have no existence, and forgot the miracles performed on their behalf in Egypt, and thought of returning there again; then indeed after the law, that commandment concerning sacrifices was ordained as law; so that...they might turn to him who is truly God, and learn not, in the first place, to sacrifice, but to turn away their faces from idols and conform to what God commanded (*Festal Epistle* 19.4).

Constitutions of the Holy Apostles

Now the law is the Decalogue, which the Lord promulgated to them with an audible voice, before the people made that calf which represented the Egyptian Apis. And the law is righteous, and therefore is it called the law, because judgments are thence made according to the law of nature...But when this people became forgetful of that, and called upon a calf as God, instead of the true God, and to him did ascribe the cause of their coming out of Egypt, saying "These are your gods, O Israel, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt," and when these men had committed wickedness with the "similitude of a calf that eats hay"...then was God angry, as being ungratefully treated by them, and bound them with bonds which could not be loosed, with a mortifying burden and a hard collar, and no longer said, "If you make," but "Make an altar," and sacrifice perpetually...Offer burnt offerings therefore continually, that you may be mindful of me. For since you have wickedly abused your power, I lay a necessity upon you for the time to come, and I command you to abstain from certain meats; and I ordain you the distinction of clean and unclean creatures, although every creature is good, as being made by me; and I appoint you several separations, purgations, frequent washings and sprinklings, several purifications, and several times of rest; and if you neglect any of them, I determine that punishment which is proper to the disobedient, that being pressed and galled by your collar, you may depart from the error of polytheism...He bound them for the hardness of their hearts, that by sacrificing, and resting, and purifying themselves, and by similar observances, they might come to the knowledge of God, who ordained these things for them (*Constitutions* 6.4.20).

Saint John Chrysostom

God saw the Jews choking with their mad yearnings for sacrifices. He saw that they were ready to go over to idols if they were deprived of sacrifices. I should say, he saw that they were not only ready to go over, but that they had already done so. So he let them have their sacrifices. The time when the permission was granted should make it clear that this is the reason. After they kept the festival in honor of evil demons [at the golden calf], God yielded and permitted sacrifices. What he all but said was this: "You are all eager and avid for sacrifices. If sacrifice you must, then sacrifice to me." But even if he permitted sacrifices, this permission was not to last forever; in the wisdom of his ways, he took the sacrifices away from them again (*Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 4.6.5).

Saint Aphrahat

On account of their evil impulse, God commanded that they even bring as an offering before him that thing which they had worshipped. They should eat the flesh of sheep and oxen, which they had not wanted to eat because they were sacrifices. And note that when he distinguished many animals of purity for them, only from the sheep and oxen did he mandate sacrifice from them (*Demonstrations* 15.4).

You should know...that because God determined concerning them that they should not worship calves, the gods of the Egyptians, he distinguished for them among foods and commanded them to sacrifice offerings of the very things they had feared in the land of Egypt. For the Lord had no need of sacrifices and offerings. But in order to restrain the Jews from sacrifices and offerings so that they should not worship the gods of the peoples—when they would enter the land and be mixed among the peoples—as they had worshipped the gods of the Egyptians when they had entered Egypt and been mixed among the Egyptians, he therefore forbade and restrained the Jews (*Demonstrations* 15.6).

The Didascalia Apostolorum

The Law consists of the ten sayings and the judgments, these which God spoke before the people made the calf and worshipped idols. This is the simple and light Law. In it there is no burden, no distinction of meats, no incenses, nor offering of sacrifices and burnt offerings...So then the Law is easy and light, of no weak voice. But when the people denied God...they denied and said: "We have no God to go before us; and they made a golden calf and worshipped it" ...Therefore the Lord became angry, and in the heat of his anger—yet with the mercy of his goodness—he bound them with the second legislation, and laid heavy burdens upon them and a hard yoke upon their neck... Indeed, the second legislation was imposed for the making of the calf and for idolatry (*Didascalia Apostolorum* chapter 26).

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Accordingly, with regard to both kinds of men it was expedient that the Old Law should contain many ceremonial precepts. For in that people [Israel] there were many prone to idolatry; wherefore it was necessary to recall them by means of ceremonial precepts from the worship of idols to the worship of God. And since men served idols in many ways, it was necessary on the other hand to devise many means of repressing every single one: and again, to lay many obligations on such like men, in order that being burdened, as it were, by their duties to the Divine worship, they might have no time for the service of idols (*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, Q. 101, a. 3).

Wherefore another reasonable cause may be assigned to the ceremonies of the sacrifices, from the fact that thereby men were withdrawn from offering sacrifices to idols. Hence too it is that the precepts about the sacrifices were not given to the Jewish people until after they had fallen into idolatry, by worshipping the molten calf: as though those sacrifices were instituted, that the people, being ready to offer sacrifices, might offer those sacrifices to God rather than idols (*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, Q. 102, a. 3).

In all the respects mentioned, there was a suitable reason for these animals, rather than others, being offered up in sacrifice to God. First, in order to prevent idolatry. Because idolaters offered all other animals to their gods, or made use of them in their sorceries: while the Egyptians (among whom the people had been dwelling) considered it abominable to slay these animals, wherefore they used not to offer them in sacrifice to their gods...For they worshipped the sheep; they revered the ram (because demons appeared under the form thereof); while they employed oxen for agriculture, which was reckoned by them as something sacred (*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, Q. 102, a.3).

The literal reason of the paschal banquet was to commemorate the blessing of being led by God out of Egypt. Hence by celebrating this banquet they declared that they belonged to that people which God had taken to himself out of Egypt. For when they were delivered from Egypt, they were commanded to sprinkle the lamb's blood on the transoms of their house doors, as though declaring that they were averse to the rites of the Egyptians who worshipped the ram (*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, Q. 102, a.5).

Nicholas of Lyra

"Let us go on a journey of three days" (Ex 3:18). It does not say of one or two days, because this would not be sufficiently far enough away from the Egyptians, who would stone them if they knew they were sacrificing animals which they worshipped as gods (*Postilla super totam Bibliam* at Exodus 3:18).