

Carroll Studer
K.M.
1987

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Studies in the Development of a Literary Tradition

edited with prolegomenon
and bibliography

by

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The Sacrifice of Isaac is one of the themes which enriched human thought and art. In this volume are collected eminent studies on the subject, which were printed in various and sometimes forgotten sources. The articles study the development of the theme from different points of view, from the Bible up to modern thought and literature.

MAKOR PUBLISHING LTD.

Jerusalem

J. G. FRAZER

CHAPTER VI

SACRIFICE OF THE KING'S SON

The temporary kings are sometimes related by blood to the real kings.

A POINT to notice about the temporary kings described in the foregoing chapter is that in two places (Cambodia and Jambi) they come of a stock which is believed to be akin to the royal family. If the view here taken of the origin of these temporary kingships is correct, we can easily understand why the king's substitute should sometimes be of the same race as the king. When the king first succeeded in getting the life of another accepted as a sacrifice instead of his own, he would have to shew that the death of that other would serve the purpose quite as well as his own would have done. Now it was as a god or demigod that the king had to die; therefore the substitute who died for him had to be invested, at least for the occasion, with the divine attributes of the king. This, as we have just seen, was certainly the case with the temporary kings of Siam and Cambodia; they were invested with the supernatural functions, which in an earlier stage of society were the special attributes of the king. But no one could so well represent the king in his divine character as his son, who might be supposed to share the divine afflatus of his father. No one, therefore, could so appropriately die for the king and, through him, for the whole people, as the king's son.

Tradition of On, King of Sweden, and the sacrifice of his nine sons.

According to tradition, Aun or On, King of Sweden, sacrificed nine of his sons to Odin at Upsala in order that his own life might be spared. After he had sacrificed his second son he received from the god an answer that he should live so long as he gave him one of his sons every ninth year. When he had sacrificed his seventh son, he still

lived, but was so feeble that he could not walk but had to be carried in a chair. Then he offered up his eighth son, and lived nine years more, lying in his bed. After that he sacrificed his ninth son, and lived another nine years, but so that he drank out of a horn like a weaned child. He now wished to sacrifice his only remaining son to Odin, but the Swedes would not allow him. So he died and was buried in a mound at Upsala. The poet Thiodolf told the king's history in verse:—

*“ In Upsal's town the cruel king
Slaughtered his sons at Odin's shrine—
Slaughtered his sons with cruel knife,
To get from Odin length of life.
He lived until he had to turn
His toothless mouth to the deer's horn;
And he who shed his children's blood
Sucked through the ox's horn his food.
At length fell Death has tracked him down,
Slowly but sure, in Upsal's town.”*¹

In ancient Greece there seems to have been at least one kingly house of great antiquity of which the eldest sons were always liable to be sacrificed in room of their royal sires. When Xerxes was marching through Thessaly at the head of his mighty host to attack the Spartans at Thermopylae, he came to the town of Alus. Here he was shewn the sanctuary of Laphystian Zeus, about which his guides told him a strange tale. It ran somewhat as follows. Once upon a time the king of the country, by name Athamas, married a wife Nephele, and had by her a son called Phrixus and a daughter named Helle. Afterwards he took to himself a second wife called Ino, by whom he had two sons, Learchus and Melicertes. But his second wife was jealous of her step-children, Phrixus and Helle, and plotted their death. She went about very cunningly to compass her bad end. First of all she persuaded the women of the country to roast the seed corn secretly before it was committed to the ground. So next year no crops came

Tradition
of King
Athamas
and his
children.

¹ “Ynglinga Saga,” 29, in *The Heimskringla or Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, translated from the Icelandic of Snorro Sturleson*, by S. Laing (London, 1844), i. 239 sq.; H. M. Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin* (London, 1899), pp. 4, 27. I have already cited the tradition as evidence of a nine years' tenure of the kingship in Sweden. See above, p. 57, with note ².

up and the people died of famine. Then the king sent messengers to the oracle at Delphi to enquire the cause of the dearth. But the wicked step-mother bribed the messenger to give out as the answer of the god that the dearth would never cease till the children of Athamas by his first wife had been sacrificed to Zeus. When Athamas heard that, he sent for the children, who were with the sheep. But a ram with a fleece of gold opened his lips, and speaking with the voice of a man warned the children of their danger. So they mounted the ram and fled with him over land and sea. As they flew over the sea, the girl slipped from the animal's back, and falling into water was drowned. But her brother Phrixus was brought safe to the land of Colchis, where reigned a child of the Sun. Phrixus married the king's daughter, and she bore him a son Cytisorus. And there he sacrificed the ram with the golden fleece to Zeus the God of Flight; but some will have it that he sacrificed the animal to Laphystian Zeus. The golden fleece itself he gave to his wife's father, who nailed it to an oak tree, guarded by a sleepless dragon in a sacred grove of Ares. Meanwhile at home an oracle had commanded that King Athamas himself should be sacrificed as an expiatory offering for the whole country. So the people decked him with garlands like a victim and led him to the altar, where they were just about to sacrifice him when he was rescued either by his grandson Cytisorus, who arrived in the nick of time from Colchis, or by Hercules, who brought tidings that the king's son Phrixus was yet alive. Thus Athamas was saved, but afterwards he went mad, and mistaking his son Learchus for a wild beast shot him dead. Next he attempted the life of his remaining son Melicertes, but the child was rescued by his mother Ino, who ran and threw herself and him from a high rock into the sea. Mother and son were changed into marine divinities, and the son received special homage in the isle of Tenedos, where babes were sacrificed to him. Thus bereft of wife and children the unhappy Athamas quitted his country, and on enquiring of the oracle where he should dwell was told to take up his abode wherever he should be entertained by wild beasts. He fell in with a pack of wolves devouring sheep, and when they saw him they

fled and left him the bleeding remnants of their prey. In this way the oracle was fulfilled. But because King Athamas had not been sacrificed as a sin-offering for the whole country, it was divinely decreed that the eldest male scion of his family in each generation should be sacrificed without fail, if ever he set foot in the town-hall, where the offerings were made to Laphystian Zeus by one of the house of Athamas. Many of the family, Xerxes was informed, had fled to foreign lands to escape this doom; but some of them had returned long afterwards, and being caught by the sentinels in the act of entering the town-hall were wreathed as victims, led forth in procession, and sacrificed.¹ These instances appear to have been notorious, if not frequent; for the writer of a dialogue attributed to Plato, after speaking of the immolation of human victims by the Carthaginians, adds that such practices were not unknown among the Greeks, and he refers with horror to the sacrifices offered on Mount Lycaeus and by the descendants of Athamas.²

The suspicion that this barbarous custom by no means fell into disuse even in later days is strengthened by a case of human sacrifice which occurred in Plutarch's time at Orchomenus, a very ancient city of Boeotia, distant only a few miles across the plain from the historian's birthplace. Here dwelt a family of which the men went by the name of Psoloeis or "Sooty," and the women by the name of Oleae or "Destructive." Every year at the festival of the Agrionia the priest of Dionysus pursued these women with a drawn sword, and if he overtook one of them he had the right to slay her. In Plutarch's lifetime the right was actually exercised by a priest Zoilus. Now the family thus liable to furnish at least one human victim every year was of

¹ Herodotus, vii. 197; Apollodorus, i. 9.1 sq.; Schol. on Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 257; J. Tzetzes, *Schol. on Lycophron*, 21, 229; Schol. on Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, ii. 653; Eustathius, on Homer, *Iliad*, vii. 86, p. 667; *id.*, on *Odyssey*, v. 339, p. 1543; Pausanias, i. 44. 7, ix. 34. 7; Zenobius, iv. 38; Plutarch, *De superstitione*, 5; Hyginus, *Fab.* 1-5; *id.*, *Astronomica*, ii. 20; Servius, on Virgil, *Aen.* v. 241. The story is told or alluded to by these

writers with some variations of detail. In piecing their accounts together I have chosen the features which seemed to be the most archaic. According to Pherecydes, one of the oldest writers on Greek legendary history, Phrixus offered himself as a voluntary victim when the crops were perishing (Schol. on Pindar, *Pyth.* iv. 288). On the whole subject see K. O. Müller, *Orchomenus und die Minyer*,² pp. 156, 171.

² Plato, *Minos*, p. 315 c.

Male descendants of King Athamas liable to be sacrificed.

Family of royal descent liable to be sacrificed at Orchomenus.

royal descent, for they traced their lineage to Minyas, the famous old king of Orchomenus, the monarch of fabulous wealth, whose stately treasury, as it is called, still stands in ruins at the point where the long rocky hill of Orchomenus melts into the vast level expanse of the Copaic plain. Tradition ran that the king's three daughters long despised the other women of the country for yielding to the Bacchic frenzy, and sat at home in the king's house scornfully plying the distaff and the loom, while the rest, wreathed with flowers, their dishevelled locks streaming to the wind, roamed in ecstasy the barren mountains that rise above Orchomenus, making the solitude of the hills to echo to the wild music of cymbals and tambourines. But in time the divine fury infected even the royal damsels in their quiet chamber; they were seized with a fierce longing to partake of human flesh, and cast lots among themselves which should give up her child to furnish a cannibal feast. The lot fell on Leucippe, and she surrendered her son Hippasus, who was torn limb from limb by the three. From these misguided women sprang the Oleae and the Psoloeis, of whom the men were said to be so called because they wore sad-coloured raiment in token of their mourning and grief.¹

Thessalian and Boeotian kings seem to have sacrificed their sons to Laphystian Zeus instead of themselves.

Now this practice of taking human victims from a family of royal descent at Orchomenus is all the more significant because Athamas himself is said to have reigned in the land of Orchomenus even before the time of Minyas, and because over against the city there rises Mount Laphystius, on which, as at Alus in Thessaly, there was a sanctuary of Laphystian Zeus, where, according to tradition, Athamas purposed to sacrifice his two children Phrixus and Helle.² On the whole, comparing the traditions about Athamas with the custom that obtained with regard to his descendants in historical times, we may fairly infer that in Thessaly and probably in Boeotia there reigned of old a dynasty of which the kings were liable

¹ Plutarch, *Quaest. Graec.* 38; Antoninus Liberalis, *Transform.* 10; Ovid, *Metam.* iv. 1 *sqq.*

² Pausanias, ix. 34. 5 *sqq.*; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, iii. 265

sq.; Hellanicus, cited by the Scholiast on Apollonius, *l.c.* Apollodorus speaks of Athamas as reigning over Boeotia (*Bibliotheca*, i. 9. 1); Tzetzes calls him king of Thebes (*Schol. on Lycophron*, 21).

to be sacrificed for the good of the country to the god called Laphystian Zeus, but that they contrived to shift the fatal responsibility to their offspring, of whom the eldest son was regularly destined to the altar. As time went on, the cruel custom was so far mitigated that a ram was accepted as a vicarious sacrifice in room of the royal victim, provided always that the prince abstained from setting foot in the town-hall where the sacrifices were offered to Laphystian Zeus by one of his kinsmen.¹ But if he were rash enough to enter the place of doom, to thrust himself wilfully, as it were, on the notice of the god who had good-naturedly winked at the substitution of a ram, the ancient obligation which had been suffered to lie in abeyance recovered all its force, and there was no help for it but he must die. The tradition which associated the sacrifice of the king or his children with a great dearth points clearly to the belief, so common among primitive folk, that the king is responsible for the weather and the crops, and that he may justly pay with his life for the inclemency of the one or the failure of the other. Athamas and his line, in short, appear to have united divine or magical with royal functions; and this view is strongly supported by the claims to divinity which Salmoneus, the brother of Athamas, is said to have set up. We have seen that this presumptuous mortal professed to be no other than Zeus himself, and to wield the thunder and lightning, of which he made a trumpery imitation by the help of tinkling kettles and blazing torches.² If we may judge from analogy, his mock thunder and lightning were no mere scenic exhibition designed to deceive and impress the beholders; they were

¹ The old Scholiast on Apollonius Rhodius (*Argon.* ii. 653) tells us that down to his time it was customary for one of the descendants of Athamas to enter the town-hall and sacrifice to Laphystian Zeus. K. O. Müller sees in this custom a mitigation of the ancient rule—instead of being themselves sacrificed, the scions of royalty were now permitted to offer sacrifice (*Orchomenus und die Minyer*,² p. 158). But this need not have been so. The obligation to serve as victims in certain circum-

stances lay only on the eldest male of each generation in the direct line; the sacrificers may have been younger brothers or more remote relations of the destined victims. It may be observed that in a dynasty of which the eldest males were regularly sacrificed, the kings, if they were not themselves the victims, must always have been younger sons.

² See *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. i. p. 310.

enchantments practised by the royal magician for the purpose of bringing about the celestial phenomena which they feebly mimicked.¹

Sacrifice of
kings sons
among the
Semites.

Among the Semites of Western Asia the king, in a time of national danger, sometimes gave his own son to die as a sacrifice for the people. Thus Philo of Byblus, in his work on the Jews, says: "It was an ancient custom in a crisis of great danger that the ruler of a city or nation should give his beloved son to die for the whole people, as a ransom offered to the avenging demons; and the children thus offered were slain with mystic rites. So Cronus, whom the Phoenicians call Israel, being king of the land and having an only-begotten son called Jeoud (for in the Phoenician tongue Jeoud signifies 'only-begotten'), dressed him in royal robes and sacrificed him upon an altar in a time of war, when the country was in great danger from the enemy."² When the king of Moab was besieged by the Israelites and hard beset, he took his eldest son, who should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall.³

But amongst the Semites the practice of sacrificing their children was not confined to kings.⁴ In times of great

¹ I have followed K. O. Müller (*Orchomenus und die Minyer*,² pp. 160, 166 sq.) in regarding the ram which saved Phrixus as a mythical expression for the substitution of a ram for a human victim. He points out that a ram was the proper victim to sacrifice to Trophonius (Pausanias, ix. 39. 6), whose very ancient worship was practised at Lebadea not far from Orchomenus. The principle of vicarious sacrifices was familiar enough to the Greeks, as K. O. Müller does not fail to indicate. At Potniae, near Thebes, goats were substituted as victims instead of boys in the sacrifices offered to Dionysus (Pausanias, ix. 8. 2). Once when an oracle commanded that a girl should be sacrificed to Munychian Artemis in order to stay a plague or famine, a goat dressed up as a girl was sacrificed instead (Eustathius on Homer, *Iliad*, ii. 732, p. 331; Apostolius, vii. 10; *Paroemiogr. Graeci*, ed. Leutsch et Schneidewin, ii. 402; Suidas, s.v. *Ευβαπος*). At Salamis in Cyprus a

man was annually sacrificed to Aphrodite and afterwards to Diomedea, but in later times an ox was substituted (Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, ii. 54). At Laodicea in Syria a deer took the place of a maiden as the victim yearly offered to Athena (Porphyry, *op. cit.* ii. 56). Since human sacrifices have been forbidden by the Dutch Government in Borneo, the Barito and other Dyak tribes of that island have kept cattle for the sole purpose of sacrificing them instead of human beings at the close of mourning and at other religious ceremonies. See A. W. Nieuwenhuis, *Quer durch Borneo*, ii. (Leyden, 1907), p. 127.

² Philo of Byblus, quoted by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelii*, i. 10. 29 sq.

³ 2 Kings iii. 27.

⁴ On this subject see Dr. G. F. Moore, s.v. "Molech, Moloch," *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, iii. 3183 sqq.; C. P. Tiele, *Geschichte der Religion im Altertum*, i. (Gotha, 1896) pp. 240-244.

calamity, such as pestilence, drought, or defeat in war, the Phoenicians used to sacrifice one of their dearest to Baal. "Phoenician history," says an ancient writer, "is full of such sacrifices."¹ The writer of a dialogue ascribed to Plato observes that the Carthaginians immolated human beings as if it were right and lawful to do so, and some of them, he adds, even sacrificed their own sons to Baal.² When Gelo, tyrant of Syracuse, defeated the Carthaginians in the great battle of Himera he required as a condition of peace that they should sacrifice their children to Baal no longer.³ But the barbarous custom was too inveterate and too agreeable to Semitic modes of thought to be so easily eradicated, and the humane stipulation of the Greek despot probably remained a dead letter. At all events the history of this remarkable people, who combined in so high a degree the spirit of commercial enterprise with a blind attachment to a stern and gloomy religion, is stained in later times with instances of the same cruel superstition. When the Carthaginians were defeated and besieged by Agathocles, they ascribed their disasters to the wrath of Baal; for whereas in former times they had been wont to sacrifice to him their own offspring, they had latterly fallen into the habit of buying children and rearing them to be victims. So, to appease the angry god, two hundred children of the noblest families were picked out for sacrifice, and the tale of victims was swelled by not less than three hundred more who volunteered to die for the fatherland. They were sacrificed by being placed, one by one, on the sloping hands of the brazen image, from which they rolled into a pit of fire.⁴ Childless people among the Carthaginians bought children from poor parents and slaughtered them, says Plutarch, as if they were lambs or chickens; and the mother had to stand by and see it done without a tear or a groan, for if she wept or moaned she lost all the credit and the child was sacrificed none the less. But all the place in front of the image was filled with a tumultuous music of fifes and drums to drown the shrieks

Sacrifice of
children to
Baal
among the
Semites.

¹ Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, ii. 56.

² Plato, *Alcinos*, p. 315 c.

³ Plutarch, *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*, *Gelon I.*

⁴ Diodorus Siculus, xx. 14. Compare

Clitarchus, cited by Suidas, *s.v. σαρδάνιος γέλωσ*, and by the Scholiast on Plato, *Republic*, p. 337 A; J. Selden, *De dis Syris* (Leipsic, 1668), pp. 169 sq.

of the victims.¹ Infants were publicly sacrificed by the Carthaginians down to the proconsulate of Tiberius, who crucified the priests on the trees beside their temples. Yet the practice still went on secretly in the lifetime of Tertullian.²

Canaanite
and Heb-
rew custom
of burning
children in
honour of
Baal or
Moloch.

Among the Canaanites or aboriginal inhabitants of Palestine, whom the invading Israelites conquered but did not exterminate, the grisly custom of burning their children in honour of Baal or Moloch seems to have been regularly practised.³ To the best representatives of the Hebrew people, the authors of their noble literature, such rites were abhorrent, and they warned their fellow-countrymen against participating in them. "When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found with thee any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that useth divination, one that practiseth augury, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a consulter with a familiar spirit, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee."⁴ Again we read: "And thou shalt not give any of thy seed to pass through the fire to Molech."⁵ Whatever effect these warnings may have had in the earlier days of Israelitish history, there is abundant evidence that in later times the Hebrews lapsed, or rather perhaps relapsed, into that congenial mire of superstition from which the higher spirits of the nation struggled—too often in vain—to rescue them. The Psalmist laments that his erring countrymen "mingled themselves with the nations, and learned their works: and they served their idols; which became a snare

¹ Plutarch, *De superstitione*, 13. Egyptian mothers were glad and proud when their children were devoured by the holy crocodiles. See Aelian, *De natura animalium*, x. 21; Maximus Tyrius, *Dissert.* viii. 5; Josephus, *Contra Apion.* ii. 7.

² Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 6. Compare Justin, xviii. 6. 12; Ennius, cited by Festus, s.v. "Puelli," pp. 248, 249, ed. C. O. Müller; Augustine, *De*

civitate Dei, vii. 19 and 26.

³ "Every abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods," Deuteronomy xii. 31. Here and in what follows I quote the Revised English Version.

⁴ Deuteronomy xviii. 9-12.

⁵ Leviticus xviii. 21.

unto them : yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto demons, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan ; and the land was polluted with blood."¹

When the Hebrew annalist has recorded how Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, besieged Samaria for three years and took it and carried Israel away into captivity, he explains that this was a divine punishment inflicted on his people for having fallen in with the evil ways of the Canaanites. They had built high places in all their cities, and set up pillars and sacred poles (*asherim*) upon every high hill and under every green tree ; and there they burnt incense after the manner of the heathen. " And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments."² At Jerusalem in these

Sacrifices
of children
in Tophet.

days there was a regularly appointed place where parents burned their children, both boys and girls, in honour of Baal or Moloch. It was in the valley of Hinnom, just outside the walls of the city, and bore the name, infamous ever since, of Tophet. The practice is referred to again and again with sorrowful indignation by the prophets.³ The kings of Judah set an example to their people by burning their own children at the usual place. Thus of Ahaz, who reigned sixteen years at Jerusalem, we are told that " he burnt incense in the valley of Hinnom, and burnt his children

¹ Psalms cvi. 35-38.

² 2 Kings xvii. 16, 17.

³ " And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire," Jeremiah vii. 31 ; " And have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt offerings unto Baal," *id.* xix. 5 ; " And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech," *id.* xxxii. 35 ; " Moreover thou hast taken thy sons and thy daughters,

whom thou hast borne unto me, and these hast thou sacrificed unto them to be devoured. Were thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain my children, and delivered them up, in causing them to pass through the fire unto them ?" Ezekiel xvi. 20 *sq.* ; compare xx. 26, 31. A comparison of these passages shews that the expression " to cause to pass through the fire," so often employed in this connexion in Scripture, meant to burn the children in the fire. Some have attempted to interpret the words in a milder sense. See J. Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum* (The Hague, 1686), i. 288 *sqq.*

in the fire."¹ Again, King Manasseh, whose long reign covered fifty-five years, "made his children to pass through the fire in the valley of Hinnom."² Afterwards in the reign of the good king Josiah the idolatrous excesses of the people were repressed, at least for a time, and among other measures of reform Tophet was defiled by the King's orders, "that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech."³ Whether the place was ever used again for the same dark purpose as before does not appear. Long afterwards, under the sway of a milder faith, there was little in the valley to recall the tragic scenes which it had so often witnessed. Jerome describes it as a pleasant and shady spot, watered by the rills of Siloam and laid out in delightful gardens.⁴

Did the Hebrews borrow the custom from the Canaanites?

Custom of the Sepharvites.

It would be interesting, though it might be fruitless, to enquire how far the Hebrew prophets and psalmists were right in their opinion that the Israelites learned these and other gloomy superstitions only through contact with the old inhabitants of the land, that the primitive purity of faith and morals which they brought with them from the free air of the desert was tainted and polluted by the grossness and corruption of the heathen in the fat land of Canaan. When we remember, however, that the Israelites were of the same Semitic stock as the population they conquered and professed to despise,⁵ and that the practice of human sacrifice is attested for many branches of the Semitic race, we shall, perhaps, incline to surmise that the chosen people may have brought with them into Palestine the seeds which afterwards sprang up and bore such ghastly fruit in the valley of Hinnom. It is at least significant of the prevalence of such customs among the Semites that no sooner were the native child-burning Israelites carried off by King Shalmaneser to Assyria than their place was

¹ 2 Chronicles xxviii. 3. In the corresponding passage of 2 Kings (xvi. 3) it is said that Ahaz "made his son to pass through the fire."

² 2 Chronicles xxxiii. 6; compare 2 Kings xxi. 6.

³ 2 Kings xxiii. 10.

⁴ Jerome on Jeremiah vii. 31, quoted in Winer's *Biblisches Real-*

wörterbuch,² s.v. "Thopeth."

⁵ The Tel El-Amarna tablets prove that "the prae-Israelitish inhabitants of Canaan were closely akin to the Hebrews, and that they spoke substantially the same language" (S. R. Driver, in *Authority and Archaeology, Sacred and Profane*, edited by D. G. Hogarth (London, 1899), p. 76).

taken by colonists who practised precisely the same rites in honour of deities who probably differed in little but name from those revered by the idolatrous Hebrews. "The Sepharvites," we are told, "burnt their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim."¹ The pious Jewish historian, who saw in Israel's exile God's punishment for sin, has suggested no explanation of that mystery in the divine economy which suffered the Sepharvites to continue on the same spot the very same abominations for which the erring Hebrews had just been so signally chastised.

We have still to ask which of their children the Semites picked out for sacrifice; for that a choice was made and some principle of selection followed, may be taken for granted. A people who burned all their children indiscriminately would soon extinguish themselves, and such an excess of piety is probably rare, if not unknown. In point of fact it seems, at least among the Hebrews, to have been only the firstborn child that was doomed to the flames. The prophet Micah asks, in a familiar passage, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" These were the questions which pious and doubting hearts were putting to themselves in the days of the prophet. The prophet's own answer is not doubtful. "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"² It is a noble answer and one which only elect spirits in that or, perhaps, in any age have given. In Israel the vulgar answer was given on bloody altars and in the smoke and flames of Tophet, and the form in which the prophet's question is cast—"Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?"—shews plainly on which of the children the duty of atoning for the sins of their father was supposed to fall. A passage in Ezekiel points

Only the
firstborn
children
were
burned.

¹ 2 Kings xvii. 31. The identification of Sepharvaim is uncertain.

See *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, iv. 4371 sq.
² Micah vi. 6-8.



no less clearly to the same conclusion. The prophet represents God as saying, "I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments wherein they should not live; and I polluted them in their own gifts, in that they caused to pass through the fire all that openeth the womb, that I might make them desolate." That the writer was here thinking specially of the sacrifice of children is proved by his own words a little later on. "When ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons to pass through the fire, do ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, unto this day?"¹ Further, that by the words "to pass through the fire all that openeth the womb" he referred only to the firstborn can easily be shewn by the language of Scripture in reference to that law of the consecration of firstlings which Ezekiel undoubtedly had in his mind when he wrote this passage. Thus we find that law enunciated in the following terms: "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine."² Again, it is written: "Thou shalt set apart unto the Lord all that openeth the womb, and every firstling which thou hast that cometh of a beast; the males shall be the Lord's."³ Once more: "All that openeth the womb is mine; and all thy cattle that is male, the firstlings of ox and sheep."⁴ This ancient Hebrew custom of the consecration to God of all male firstlings, whether of man or beast, was merely the application to the animal kingdom of the law that all first fruits whatsoever belong to the deity and must be made over to him or his representatives. That general law is thus stated by the Hebrew legislator: "Thou shalt not delay to offer of the abundance of thy fruits, and of thy liquors. The firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me. Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep: seven days it shall be with its dam; and on the eighth day thou shalt give it me."⁵

Thus the god of the Hebrews plainly regarded the first-

¹ Ezekiel xx. 25, 26, 31.

² Exodus xiii. 1 *sq.*

³ Exodus xiii. 12

⁴ Exodus xxxiv. 19. In the Authorised Version the passage runs thus: "All that openeth the matrix is mine; and

every firstling among thy cattle, whether ox or sheep, that is male."

⁵ Exodus xxii. 29 *sq.* The Authorised Version has "the first of thy ripe fruits" instead of "the abundance of thy fruits."

born of men and the firstlings of animals as his own, and required that they should be made over to him. But how? Here a distinction was drawn between sheep, oxen, and goats on the one hand and men and asses on the other; the firstlings of the former were always sacrificed, the firstlings of the latter were generally redeemed. "The firstling of an ox, or the firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they are holy: thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shalt burn their fat for an offering made by fire for a sweet savour unto the Lord." The flesh went to the Levites,¹ who consumed it, no doubt, instead of the deity whom they represented. On the other hand, the ass was not sacrificed by the Israelites, probably because they did not eat the animal themselves, and hence concluded that God did not do so either. In the matter of diet the taste of gods generally presents a striking resemblance to that of their worshippers. Still the firstling ass, like all other firstlings, was sacred to the deity, and since it was not sacrificed to him, he had to receive an equivalent for it. In other words, the ass had to be redeemed, and the price of the redemption was a lamb which was burnt as a vicarious sacrifice instead of the ass, on the hypothesis, apparently, that roast lamb is likely to be more palatable to the Supreme Being than roast donkey. If the ass was not redeemed, it had to be killed by having its neck broken.² The firstlings of other unclean animals and of men were redeemed for five shekels a head, which were paid to the Levites.³

Hebrew
sacrifice of
firstlings:
redemption
of the first-
lings of
men and
asses.

We can now readily understand why so many of the Hebrews, at least in the later days of their history, sacrificed their firstborn children, and why tender-hearted parents,

Sacrifice of
firstborn
children
perhaps

¹ Numbers xviii. 17 *sq.* Elsewhere, however, we read: "All the firstling males that are born of thy herd and of thy flock thou shalt sanctify unto the Lord thy God: thou shalt do no work with the firstling of thine ox, nor shear the firstling of thy flock. Thou shalt eat it before the Lord thy God year by year in the place which the Lord shall choose, thou and thy household," Deuteronomy xv. 19 *sq.* Compare Deuteronomy xii. 6 *sq.*, 17 *sq.* To reconcile this ordinance with the other

we must suppose that the flesh was divided between the Levite and the owner of the animal. But perhaps the rule in Deuteronomy may represent the old custom which obtained before the rise of the priestly caste. Prof. S. R. Driver inclines to the latter view (*Commentary on Deuteronomy*, p. 187).

² Exodus xiii. 13, xxxiv. 20.

³ Numbers xviii. 15 *sq.* Compare Numbers iii. 46-51; Exodus xiii. 13, xxxiv. 20.

regarded as
an act of
heroic
virtue

whose affection for their offspring exceeded their devotion to the deity, may often have been visited with compunction, and even tormented with feelings of bitter self-reproach and shame at their carnal weakness in suffering the beloved son to live, when they saw others, with an heroic piety which they could not emulate, calmly resigning their dear ones to the fire, through which, as they firmly believed, they passed to God, to reap, perhaps, in endless bliss in heaven the reward of their sharp but transient sufferings on earth. From infancy they had been bred up in the belief that the firstborn was sacred to God, and though they knew that he had waived his right to them in consideration of the receipt of five shekels a head, they could hardly view this as anything but an act of gracious condescension, of generous liberality on the part of the divinity who had stooped to accept so trifling a sum instead of the life which really belonged to him. "Surely," they might argue, "God would be better pleased if we were to give him not the money but the life, not the poor paltry shekels, but what we value most, our first and best-loved child. If we hold that life so dear, will not he also? It is his. Why should we not give him his own?" It was in answer to anxious questions such as these, and to quiet truly conscientious scruples of this sort that the prophet Micah declared that what God required of his true worshippers was not sacrifice but justice and mercy and humility. It is the answer of morality to religion—of the growing consciousness that man's duty is not to propitiate with vain oblations those mysterious powers of the universe of which he can know little or nothing, but to be just and merciful in his dealings with his fellows and to humbly trust, though he cannot know, that by acting thus he will best please the higher powers, whatever they may be.

Tradition
of the
origin of
the Pass-
over

But while morality ranges itself on the side of the prophet, it may be questioned whether history and precedent were not on the side of his adversaries. If the firstborn of men and cattle were alike sacred to God, and the firstborn of cattle were regularly sacrificed, while the firstborn of men were ransomed by a money payment, has not this last provision the appearance of being a later mitigation of an older and harsher custom which

doomed firstborn children, like firstling lambs and calves and goats, to the altar or the fire? The suspicion is greatly strengthened by the remarkable tradition told to account for the sanctity of the firstborn. When Israel was in bondage in Egypt, so runs the tradition, God resolved to deliver them from captivity, and to lead them to the Promised Land. But the Egyptians were loth to part with their bondmen and thwarted the divine purpose by refusing to let the Israelites go. Accordingly God afflicted these cruel taskmasters with one plague after another, but all in vain, until at last he made up his mind to resort to a strong measure, which would surely have the desired effect. At dead of night he would pass through the land killing all the firstborn of the Egyptians, both man and beast; not one of them would be left alive in the morning. But the Israelites were warned of what was about to happen and told to keep indoors that night, and to put a mark on their houses, so that when he passed down the street on his errand of slaughter, God might know them at sight from the houses of the Egyptians and not turn in and massacre the wrong children and animals. The mark was to be the blood of a lamb smeared on the lintel and side posts of the door. In every house the lamb, whose red blood was to be the badge of Israel that night, as the white scarves were the badge of the Catholics on the night of St. Bartholomew, was to be killed at evening and eaten by the household, with very peculiar rites, during the hours of darkness while the butchery was proceeding: none of the flesh was to see the morning light: whatever the family could not eat was to be burned with fire. All this was done. The massacre of Egyptian children and animals was successfully perpetrated and had the desired effect; and to commemorate this great triumph God ordained that all the firstborn of man and beast among the Israelites should be sacred to him ever afterwards in the manner already described, the edible animals to be sacrificed, and the uneatable, especially men and asses, to be ransomed by a substitute or by a pecuniary payment of so much a head. And a festival was to be celebrated every spring with rites exactly like those which were observed on the night of the great slaughter. The

divine command was obeyed, and the festival thus instituted was the Passover.¹

Originally the first-born children seem to have been regularly sacrificed: their redemption was a later mitigation of the rule.

The one thing that looms clear through the haze of this weird tradition is the memory of a great massacre of first-born. This was the origin, we are told, both of the sanctity of the firstborn and of the feast of the Passover. But when we are further told that the people whose firstborn were slaughtered on that occasion were not the Hebrews but their enemies, we are at once met by serious difficulties. Why, we may ask, should the Israelites kill the firstlings of their cattle for ever because God once killed those of the Egyptians? and why should every Hebrew father have to pay God a ransom for his firstborn child because God once slew all the firstborn children of the Egyptians? In this form the tradition offers no intelligible explanation of the custom. But it at once becomes clear and intelligible when we assume that in the original version of the story it was the Hebrew firstborn that were slain; that in fact the slaughter of the firstborn children was formerly, what the slaughter of

¹ Exodus xi.-xiii. 16; Numbers iii. 13, viii. 17. While many points in this strange story remain obscure, the reason which moved the Israelites of old to splash the blood of lambs on the doorposts of their houses at the Passover may perhaps have been not very different from that which induces the Sea Dyaks of Borneo to do much the same thing at the present day. "When there is any great epidemic in the country—when cholera or smallpox is killing its hundreds on all sides—one often notices little offerings of food hung on the walls and from the ceiling, animals killed in sacrifice, and blood splashed on the posts of the houses. When one asks why all this is done, they say they do it in the hope that when the evil spirit, who is thirsting for human lives, comes along and sees the offerings they have made and the animals killed in sacrifice, he will be satisfied with these things, and not take the lives of any of the people living in the Dyak village house" (E. H. Gomes, *Seventeen Years among the Sea Dyaks of Borneo*, London, 1911, p. 201). Similarly in Western Africa,

when a pestilence or an attack of enemies is expected, it is customary to sacrifice sheep and goats and smear their blood on the gateways of the village (Miss Mary H. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, p. 454, compare p. 45). In Peru, when an Indian hut is cleansed and whitewashed, the blood of a llama is always sprinkled on the doorway and internal walls in order to keep out the evil spirit (Col. Church, cited by E. J. Payne, *History of the New World called America*, i. 394, note²). For more evidence of the custom of pouring or smearing blood on the threshold, lintel, and side-posts of doors, see Ph. Paulitschke, *Ethnographie Nordost-Afrikas, die geistige Cultur der Danakil, Galla und Somali* (Berlin, 1896), pp. 38, 48; J. Goldziher, *Muhamedanische Studien*, ii. 329; S. J. Curtiss, *Primitive Semitic Religion To-day*, pp. 181-193, 227 sq.; H. C. Trumbull, *The Threshold Covenant* (New York, 1896), pp. 4 sq., 8 sq., 26-28, 66-68. Perhaps the original intention of the custom was to avert evil influence, especially evil spirits, from the door.

the firstborn cattle always continued to be, not an isolated butchery but a regular custom, which with the growth of more humane sentiments was afterwards softened into the vicarious sacrifice of a lamb and the payment of a ransom for each child. Here the reader may be reminded of another Hebrew tradition in which the sacrifice of the firstborn child is indicated still more clearly. Abraham, we are informed, was commanded by God to offer up his firstborn son Isaac as a burnt sacrifice, and was on the point of obeying the divine command, when God, content with this proof of his faith and obedience, substituted for the human victim a ram, which Abraham accordingly sacrificed instead of his son.¹ Putting the two traditions together and observing how exactly they dovetail into each other and into the later Hebrew practice of actually sacrificing the firstborn children by fire to Baal or Moloch, we can hardly resist the conclusion that, before the practice of redeeming them was introduced, the Hebrews, like the other branches of the Semitic race, regularly sacrificed their firstborn children by the fire or the knife. The Passover, if this view is right, was the occasion when the awful sacrifice was offered; and the tradition of its origin has preserved in its main outlines a vivid memory of the horrors of these fearful nights. They must have been like the nights called Evil on the west coast of Africa, when the people kept indoors, because the executioners were going about the streets and the heads of the human victims were falling in the king's palace.² But seen in the lurid light of superstition or of legend they were no common mortals, no vulgar executioners, who did the dreadful work at the first Passover. The Angel of Death was abroad that night; into every house he entered, and a sound of lamentation followed him as he came forth with his dripping sword. The blood that bespattered the lintel and door-posts would at first be the blood of the firstborn child of the house; and when the blood of a lamb was afterwards substituted, we may suppose that it was intended not so much to appease as to cheat the ghastly visitant. Seeing the red drops in

¹ Genesis xxii. 1-13.

² See for example Father Baudin, in *Missions Catholiques*, xvi. (1884) p.

333; A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast*, pp. 105 sq.

the doorway he would say to himself, "That is the blood of their child. I need not turn in there. I have many yet to slay before the morning breaks grey in the east." And he would pass on in haste. And the trembling parents, as they clasped their little one to their breast, might fancy that they heard his footfalls growing fainter and fainter down the street. In plain words, we may surmise that the slaughter was originally done by masked men, like the Mumbo Jumbos and similar figures of west Africa, who went from house to house and were believed by the uninitiated to be the deity or his divine messengers come in person to carry off the victims. When the leaders had decided to allow the sacrifice of animals instead of children, they would give the people a hint that if they only killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the door-posts, the bloodthirsty but near-sighted deity would never know the difference.

Attempts to outwit a malignant spirit.

The attempt to outwit a malignant and dangerous spirit is common, and might be illustrated by many examples. Some instances will be noticed in a later part of this work. Here a single one may suffice. The Malays believe in a Spectral Huntsman, who ranges the forest with a pack of ghostly dogs, and whose apparition bodes sickness or death. Certain birds which fly in flocks by night uttering a loud and peculiar note are supposed to follow in his train. Hence when Perak peasants hear the weird sound, they run out and make a clatter with a knife on a wooden platter, crying, "Great-grandfather, bring us their hearts!" The Spectral Huntsman, hearing these words, will take the supplicants for followers of his own asking to share his bag. So he will spare the household and pass on, and the tumult of the wild hunt will die away in the darkness and the distance.¹

The custom of sacrificing all the firstborn, whether of animals or

If this be indeed the origin of the Passover and of the sanctity of the firstborn among the Hebrews, the whole of the Semitic evidence on the subject is seen to fall into line at once. The children whom the Carthaginians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Moabites, Sepharvites, and probably other

¹ W. E. Maxwell, "The Folklore of the Malays," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 7 (June 1881), p. 14; W. W.

Skeat, *Malay Magic*, p. 112. The bird in question is thought to be the goat-sucker or night-jar.

branches of the Semitic race burnt in the fire would be their firstborn only, although in general ancient writers have failed to indicate this limitation of the custom. For the Moabites, indeed, the limitation is clearly indicated, if not expressly stated, when we read that the king of Moab offered his eldest son, who should have reigned after him, as a burnt sacrifice on the wall.¹ For the Phoenicians it comes out less distinctly in the statement of Porphyry that the Phoenicians used to sacrifice one of their dearest to Baal, and in the legend recorded by Philo of Byblus that Cronus sacrificed his only-begotten son.² We may suppose that the custom of sacrificing the firstborn both of men and animals was a very ancient Semitic institution, which many branches of the race kept up within historical times; but that the Hebrews, while they maintained the custom in regard to domestic cattle, were led by their loftier morality to discard it in respect of children, and to replace it by a merciful law that firstborn children should be ransomed instead of sacrificed.³

The conclusion that the Hebrew custom of redeeming the firstborn is a modification of an older custom of sacrificing them has been mentioned by some very distinguished scholars only to be rejected on the ground, apparently, of its extreme improbability.⁴ To me the converging lines of evidence which point to this conclusion seem too numerous and too distinct to be thus lightly brushed aside. And the argument from improbability can easily be rebutted by pointing to other peoples who are known to have practised or to be still practising a custom of the same sort. In some tribes of New South Wales the firstborn child of every woman was eaten by the tribe as part of a religious cere-

¹ 2 Kings iii. 27.

² See above, pp. 166, 167.

³ As to the redemption of the firstborn among modern Jews, see L. Löw, *Die Lebensalter in der jüdischen Literatur* (Szegedin, 1875), pp. 110-118; Budgett Meakin, *The Moors* (London, 1902), pp. 440 sq.

⁴ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*,³ p. 90; W. Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*,³

p. 464. On the other hand, when I published the foregoing discussion in the second edition of my book, I was not aware that the conclusion reached in it had been anticipated by Prof. Th. Nöldeke, who has drawn the same inference from the same evidence. See *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, xlii. (1888) p. 483. I am happy to find myself in agreement with so eminent an authority on Semitic antiquity.

mony.¹ Among the aborigines on the lower portions of the Paroo and Warrego rivers, which join the Darling River in New South Wales, girls used to become wives when they were mere children and to be mothers at fourteen, and the old custom was to kill the firstborn child by strangulation.² Again, among the tribes about Maryborough in Queensland a girl's first child was almost always exposed and left to perish.³ In the tribes about Beltana, in South Australia, girls were married at fourteen, and it was customary to destroy their firstborn.⁴ The natives of Rook, an island off the east coast of New Guinea, used to kill all their firstborn children; they prided themselves on their humanity in burying the murdered infants instead of eating them as their barbarous neighbours did. They spared the second child but killed the third, and so on alternately with the rest of their offspring.⁵ Chinese history reports that in a state called Khai-muh, to the east of Yueh, it was customary to devour the firstborn sons,⁶ and further, that to the west of Kiao-chi or Tonquin "there was a realm of man-eaters, where the firstborn son was, as a rule, chopped into pieces and eaten, and his younger brothers were nevertheless regarded to have fulfilled their fraternal duties towards him. And if he proved to be appetizing food, they sent some of his flesh to their chieftains, who, exhilarated, gave the father a reward."⁷ In India, down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the custom of

¹ R. Brough Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, ii. 311. In the Luritcha tribe of central Australia "young children are sometimes killed and eaten, and it is not an infrequent custom, when a child is in weak health, to kill a younger and healthy one and then to feed the weakling on its flesh, the idea being that this will give the weak child the strength of the stronger one" (Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, p. 475). The practice seems to have been common among the Australian aborigines. See W. E. Stanbridge, quoted by R. Brough Smyth, *op. cit.* i. 52; A. W. Howitt, *Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, pp. 749, 750.

² G. Scriviner, in E. Curr's *The Australian Race*, ii. 182.

³ A. W. Howitt, *Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 750.

⁴ S. Gason, in E. Curr's *The Australian Race*, ii. 119.

⁵ Father Mazzuconi, in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, xxvii. (1855) pp. 368 sq.

⁶ J. J. M. de Groot, *Religious System of China*, ii. 679, iv. 364.

⁷ J. J. M. de Groot, *op. cit.* iv. 365. On these Chinese reports Prof. de Groot remarks (*op. cit.* iv. 366): "Quite at a loss, however, we are to explain that eating of firstborn sons by their own nearest kinsfolk, absolutely inconsistent as it is with a primary law of tribal life in general, which imperiously demands that the tribe should make itself strong in male cognates, but not indulge in self-destruction by

sacrificing a firstborn child to the Ganges was common.¹ Again, we are told that among the Hindoos "the firstborn has always held a peculiarly sacred position, especially if born in answer to a vow to parents who have long been without offspring, in which case sacrifice of the child was common in India. The Mairs used to sacrifice a firstborn son to Mata, the small-pox goddess."²

Thus it would seem that a custom of putting to death all firstborn children has prevailed in many parts of the world. What was the motive which led people to practise a custom which to us seems at once so cruel and so foolish? It cannot have been the purely prudential consideration of adjusting the numbers of the tribe to the amount of the food-supply; for, in the first place, savages do not take such thought for the morrow,⁶ and, in the second place, if

Different motives may have led to the practice of killing the firstborn.

¹ Livy, xxii. 9 sq.; Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus*, 4.

² Livy, xxxiv. 44.

³ Dionysius Halicarnasensis, *Antiquit. Rom.* i. 24.

⁴ Schwegler thought it hardly open to question that the "sacred spring" was a substitute for an original custom of human sacrifice (*Römische Geschichte*, i. 240 sq.). The inference is denied on insufficient grounds by R. von Ihering (*Vorgeschichte der Indoeuropäer*, pp. 309 sqq.).

⁵ Dionysius Halicarnasensis, *Antiquit. Rom.* i. 16. 1. Rhegium in Italy was founded by Chalcidian colonists, who in obedience to the Delphic oracle had been dedicated as a tithe-offering to Apollo on account of a

dearth (Strabo, vi. 1. 6, p. 257). Justin speaks of the Gauls sending out three hundred thousand men, "as it were a sacred spring," to seek a new home (Justin, xxiv. 4. 1).

⁶ The Australian aborigines resort to infanticide to keep down the number of a family. But "the number is kept down, not with any idea at all of regulating the food supply, so far as the adults are concerned, but simply from the point of view that, if the mother is suckling one child, she cannot properly provide food for another, quite apart from the question of the trouble of carrying two children about. An Australian native never looks far enough ahead to consider what will be the effect on the food supply in future years if he allows

they did, they would be likely to kill the later born children rather than the firstborn. The foregoing evidence suggests that the custom may have been practised by different peoples from different motives. With the Semites, the Italians, and their near kinsmen the Irish the sacrifice or at least the consecration of the firstborn seems to have been viewed as a tribute paid to the gods, who were thus content to receive a part though they might justly have claimed the whole. In some cases the death of the child appears to be definitely regarded as a substitute for the death of the father, who obtains a new lease of life by the sacrifice of his offspring. This comes out clearly in the tradition of Aun, King of Sweden, who sacrificed one of his sons every nine years to Odin in order to prolong his own life.¹ And in Peru also the son died that the father might live.² But in some cases it would seem that the child has been killed, not so much as a substitute for the father, as because it is supposed to endanger his life by absorbing his spiritual essence or vital energy. In fact, a belief in the transmigration or rebirth of souls has operated to produce a regular custom of infanticide, especially infanticide of the firstborn. At Whydah, on the Slave Coast of West Africa, where the doctrine of reincarnation is firmly held, it has happened that a child has been put to death because the fetish doctors declared it to be the king's father come to life again. The king naturally could not submit to be pushed from the throne by his predecessor in this fashion; so he compelled his supposed parent to return to the world of the dead from which he had very inopportunately effected his escape.³ The Hindoos are of opinion that a man is literally reborn in the person of his son. Thus in the *Laws of Manu* we read that "the husband, after conception by his wife, becomes an embryo and is born again of her; for that is the wifeness of a wife, that he is born again by her."⁴ Hence after the birth

A belief in the rebirth of souls may in some cases have operated to produce infanticide, especially of the first-born.

The Hindoos believe that a man is reborn in his son, while at the same time he

a particular child to live; what affects him is simply the question of how it will interfere with the work of his wife so far as their own camp is concerned" (Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, p. 264).

¹ See above, pp. 57, 160 sq.

² Above, p. 185.

³ Father Baudin, "Le Fétichisme," *Missions Catholiques*, xvi. (1884) p. 259.

⁴ *The Laws of Manu*, ix. 8, p. 329, G. Bühler's translation (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxv.). On this Hindoo

of a son the father is clearly in a very delicate position. Since he is his own son, can he himself, apart from his son, be said to exist? Does he not rather die in his own person as soon as he comes to life in the person of his son? This appears to be the opinion of the subtle Hindoo, for in some sections of the Khattris, a mercantile caste of the Punjaub, funeral rites are actually performed for the father in the fifth month of his wife's pregnancy. But apparently he is allowed, by a sort of legal fiction, to come to life again in his own person; for after the birth of his first son he is formally remarried to his wife, which may be regarded as a tacit admission that in the eye of the law at least he is alive.¹ dies in his own person.

Now to people who thus conceive the relation of father and son it is plain that fatherhood must appear a very dubious privilege; for if you die in begetting a son, can you be quite sure of coming to life again? His existence is at the best a menace to yours, and at the worst it may involve your extinction. The danger seems to lie especially in the birth of your first son; if only you can tide that over, you are, humanly speaking, safe. In fact, it comes to this, Are you to live? or is he? It is a painful dilemma. Parental affection urges you to die that he may live. Self-love whispers, "Live and let him die. You are in the flower of your age. You adorn the circle in which you move. You are useful, nay, indispensable, to society. He is a mere babe. He never will be missed." Such a train of thought, preposterous as it seems to us, might easily lead to a custom of killing the firstborn.² Painful dilemma of a father.

doctrine of reincarnation, its logical consequences and its analogies in other parts of the world, see J. von Negelein, "Eine Quelle der indischen Seelenwanderungsvorstellung," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, vi. (1903) pp. 320-333. Compare E. S. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus*, i. 218 sq.; *id.*, *Primitive Paternity* (London, 1909-1910), ii. 196 sqq.

¹ H. A. [J. A.] Rose, "Unlucky and Lucky Children, and some Birth Superstitions," *Indian Antiquary*, xxxi. (1902) p. 516; *id.*, in *Folklore*, xiii. (1902) pp. 278 sq. As to the Khattris, see D. C. J. Ibbetson, *Outlines of Panjab Ethnography*, pp. 295

sq.; H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, i. 478 sqq.; W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh*, iii. 264 sqq.

² The same suggestion has been made by Dr. E. Westermarck (*The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, i. (London, 1906) pp. 460 sq.). Some years ago, before the publication of his book and while the present volume was still in proof, Dr. Westermarck and I in conversation discovered that we had independently arrived at the same conjectural explanation of the custom of killing the firstborn.

The same notion of the rebirth of the father in the son would explain why in Polynesia infants succeeded to the chieftainship as soon as they were born, their fathers abdicating in their favour.

Further, the same notion of the rebirth of the father in his eldest son would explain the remarkable rule of succession which prevailed in Polynesia and particularly in Tahiti, where as soon as the king had a son born to him he was obliged to abdicate the throne in favour of the infant. Whatever might be the king's age, his influence in the state, or the political situation of affairs, no sooner was the child born than the monarch became a subject: the infant was at once proclaimed the sovereign of the people: the royal name was conferred upon him, and his father was the first to do him homage, by saluting his feet and declaring him king. All matters, however, of importance which concerned either the internal welfare or the foreign relations of the country continued to be transacted by the father and his councillors; but every edict was issued in the name and on the behalf of the youthful monarch, and though the whole of the executive government might remain in the hands of the father, he only acted as regent for his son, and was regarded as such by the nation. The lands and other sources of revenue were appropriated to the maintenance of the infant ruler, his household, and his attendants; the insignia of royal authority were transferred to him, and his father rendered him all those marks of humble respect which he had hitherto exacted from his subjects. This custom of succession was not confined to the family of the sovereign, it extended also to the nobles and the landed gentry; they, too, had to resign their rank, honours, and possessions on the birth of a son. A man who but yesterday was a baron, not to be approached by his inferiors till they had ceremoniously bared the whole of the upper part of their bodies, was to-day reduced to the rank of a mere commoner with none to do him reverence, if in the night time his wife had given birth to a son, and the child had been suffered to live. The father indeed still continued to administer the estate, but he did so for the benefit of the infant, to whom it now belonged, and to whom all the marks of respect were at once transferred.¹

¹ Capt. J. Cook, *Voyages* (London, 1809), i. 225 sq.; Capt. J. Wilson, *Missionary Voyage to the Southern Pacific Ocean* (London, 1799), pp. 327, 330, 333; W. Ellis, *Polynesian*

Researches,² iii. 99-101; J. A. Mourenhout, *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan*, ii. 13 sq.; Mathias G. * * *, *Lettres sur les îles Marquises* (Paris, 1843), pp. 103 sq.; H. Hale, *United*

This singular usage becomes intelligible if the spirit of the father was supposed to quit him at the birth of his first son and to reappear in the infant. Such a belief and such a practice would, it is obvious, supply a powerful motive to infanticide, since a father could not rear his firstborn son without thereby relinquishing the honours and possessions to which he had been accustomed. The sacrifice was a heavy one, and we need not wonder if many men refused to make it. Certainly infanticide was practised in Polynesia to an extraordinary extent. The first missionaries estimated that not less than two-thirds of the children were murdered by their parents, and this estimate has been confirmed by a careful enquirer. It would seem that before the introduction of Christianity there was not a single mother in the islands who was not also a murderess, having imbrued her hands in the blood of her offspring. Three native women, the eldest not more than forty years of age, happened once to be in a room where the conversation turned on infanticide, and they confessed to having destroyed not less than twenty-one infants between them.¹ It would doubtless be a gross mistake to lay the whole blame of these massacres on the doctrine of reincarnation, but we can hardly doubt that it instigated a great many. Once more we perceive the fatal consequences that may flow in practice from a theoretical error.

In some places the abdication of the father does not take place until the son is grown up. This was the general practice in Fiji.² In Raratonga as soon as a son reached manhood, he would fight and wrestle with his father for the mastery, and if he obtained it he would take forcible possession of the farm and drive his parent in destitution from home.³ Among the Corannas of South Africa the youthful son of a chief is hardly allowed to walk, but has to idle away his time in the hut and to drink much milk in order that he may grow strong. When he has attained to manhood his

States Exploring Expedition, Ethnography and Philology (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 34.

¹ W. Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*,² i. 251-253.

² J. E. Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*

among the Islands of the Western Pacific (London, 1853), p. 233.

³ J. Williams, *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (London, 1836), pp. 117 sq.

father produces two short, bullet-headed sticks and presents one to his son, while he keeps the other for himself. Armed with these weapons the two often fight, and when the son succeeds in knocking his parent down he is acknowledged chief of the kraal.¹ But such customs probably do not imply the theory of rebirth; they may only be applications of the principle that might is right. Still they would equally supply the father with a motive for killing the infant son who, if suffered to live, would one day strip him of his rank and possessions.

The custom of the deposition of the father by his son may perhaps be traced in Greek myth and legend. Cronus and his children.

Perhaps customs of this sort have left traces of themselves in Greek myth and legend. Cronus or Saturn, as the Romans called him, is said to have been the youngest son of the sky-god Uranus, and to have mutilated his father and reigned in his stead as king of gods and men. Afterwards he was warned by an oracle that he himself should be deposed by his son. To prevent that catastrophe Cronus swallowed his children, one after the other, as soon as they were born. Only the youngest of them, Zeus, was saved through a trick of his mother's, and in time he fulfilled the oracle by banishing his father and sitting on his throne. But Zeus in his turn was told that his wife Metis would give birth to a son who would supplant him in the kingdom of heaven. Accordingly, to rid himself of his future rival he resorted to a device like that which his father Cronus had employed for a similar purpose. Only instead of waiting till the child was born and then devouring it, he made assurance doubly sure by swallowing his wife with the unborn babe in her womb.² Such barbarous myths become intelligible if we suppose that they took their rise among people who were accustomed to see grown-up sons supplanting their fathers by force, and fathers murdering and perhaps eating their infants in order to secure themselves against their future rivalry. We have met with instances of savage tribes who are said to devour their firstborn children.³

¹ J. Campbell, *Travels in South Africa, Second Journey* (London, 1822), ii. 276.

² Hesiod, *Theogony*, 137 sqq., 453 sqq., 886 sqq.; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, i. 1-3.

³ Above, pp. 179 sq. Traces of a custom of sacrificing the children instead of the father may perhaps be found in the legends that Menoeceus, son of Creon, died to save Thebes, and that one or more of the daughters of Erech-

The legend that Laius, king of Thebes, exposed his infant son Oedipus, who afterwards slew his father and sat on the throne, may well be a reminiscence of a state of things in which father and son regularly plotted against each other. The other feature of the story, to wit the marriage of Oedipus with the widowed queen, his mother, fits in very well with the rule which has prevailed in some countries that a valid title to the throne is conferred by marriage with the late king's widow. That custom probably arose, as I have endeavoured to shew,¹ in an age when the blood-royal ran in the female line, and when the king was a man of another family, often a stranger and foreigner, who reigned only in virtue of being the consort of a native princess, and whose sons never succeeded him on the throne. But in process of time, when fathers had ceased to regard the birth of a son as a menace to their life, or at least to their regal power, kings would naturally scheme to secure the succession for their own male offspring, and this new practice could be reconciled with the old one by marrying the king's son either to his own sister or, after his father's decease, to his stepmother. We have seen marriage with a stepmother contracted apparently for this very purpose by some of the Saxon kings.² And on this hypothesis we can understand why the custom of marriage with a full or a half sister has prevailed in so many royal families.³ It was

Legend of Oedipus, who slew his father and married his mother.

Marriage with a widowed queen sometimes forms a legitimate title to the kingdom.

Marriage with a stepmother or a sister, a mode of securing the succession of the king's own children, and so of transferring the inheritance from the female to the male line.

thus perished to save Athens. See Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 889 sqq.; Apollodorus, iii. 6. 7, iii. 15. 4; Schol. on Aristides, *Panathen.* p. 113, ed. Dindorf; Cicero, *Tuscul.*, i. 48. 116; *id.*, *De natura deorum*, iii. 19. 50; W. H. Roscher, *Lexikon d. griech. und röm. Mythologie*, i. 1298 sq., ii. 2794 sq.

¹ See *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. ii. pp. 269 sqq.

² See *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. ii. p. 283. The Oedipus legend would conform still more closely to custom if we could suppose that marriage with a mother was formerly allowed in cases where the king had neither a sister nor a stepmother, by marrying whom he could otherwise legalise his claim to the throne.

³ Examples of this custom are collected by me in a note on Pausanias,

i. 7. 1 (vol. ii. p. 85); For other instances see V. Noel, "Ile de Madagascar, recherches sur les Sakkalava," *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* (Paris), Deuxième Série, xx. (Paris, 1843) pp. 63 sq. (among the Sakkalavas of Madagascar); V. L. Cameron, *Across Africa* (London, 1877), ii. 70, 149; J. Roscoe, "Further Notes on the Manners and Customs of the Baganda," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, xxxii. (1902) p. 27 (among the Baganda of Central Africa); J. G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, ii. 523, 538 (among the Banyoro and Bahima); J. Dos Santos, "Eastern Ethiopia," in G. McCall Theal's *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, vii. 191 (as to the kings of Sofala in eastern Africa). But Dos Santos's statement is doubted by Dr. McCall Theal (*op. cit.* p. 395).

Brother
and sister
marriages
in royal
families.

introduced, we may suppose, for the purpose of giving the king's son the right of succession hitherto enjoyed, under a system of female kinship, either by the son of the king's sister or by the husband of the king's daughter; for under the new rule the heir to the throne united both these characters, being at once the son of the king's sister and, through marriage with his own sister, the husband of the king's daughter. Thus the custom of brother and sister marriage in royal houses marks a transition from female to male descent of the crown.¹ In this connexion it may be significant that Cronus and Zeus themselves married their full sisters Rhea and Hera, a tradition which naturally proved a stone of stumbling to generations who had forgotten the ancient rule of policy which dictated such incestuous unions, and who had so far inverted the true relations of gods and men as to expect their deities to be edifying models of the new virtues instead of warning examples of the old vices.² They failed to understand that men create their gods in their own likeness, and that when the creator is a savage, his creatures the gods are savages also.

Kings' sons
sacrificed
instead
of their
fathers.

With the preceding evidence before us we may safely infer that a custom of allowing a king to kill his son, as a substitute or vicarious sacrifice for himself, would be in no way exceptional or surprising, at least in Semitic lands, where indeed religion seems at one time to have recommended or enjoined every man, as a duty that he owed to his god, to take the life of his eldest son. And it would be entirely in accordance with analogy if, long after the barbarous custom had been dropped by others, it continued to be observed by kings, who remain in many respects the representatives of a vanished world, solitary pinnacles that topple over the rising waste of waters under which the past lies buried. We have seen that in Greece two families of royal descent

¹ This explanation of the custom was anticipated by McLennan: "Another rule of chiefly succession, which has been mentioned, that which gave the chiefship to a sister's son, appears to have been nullified in some cases by an extraordinary but effective expedient—by the chief, that is, marrying his own sister" (*The Patriarchal*

Theory, based on the Papers of the late John Ferguson McLennan, edited and completed by Donald McLennan (London, 1885), p. 95).

² Compare Cicero, *De natura deorum*, ii. 26. 66; [Plutarch], *De vita et poesi Homeri*, ii. 96; Lactantius, *Divin. Inst.* i. 10; Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum*, xii. 4.

remained liable to furnish human victims from their number down to a time when the rest of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen ran hardly more risk of being sacrificed than passengers in Cheapside at present run of being hurried into St. Paul's or Bow Church and immolated on the altar. A final mitigation of the custom would be to substitute condemned criminals for innocent victims. Such a substitution is known to have taken place in the human sacrifices annually offered in Rhodes to Baal,¹ and we have seen good grounds for believing that the criminal, who perished on the cross or the gallows at Babylon, died instead of the king in whose royal robes he had been allowed to masquerade for a few days.

Substitu-
tion of con-
demned
criminals.

¹ Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, ii. 54.