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Sacrifice:

Dining with the Divine

Logan McDermott is a student at UW-Milwaukee pursuing a bachelor's degree in History and a certificate in Ancient Mediterranean Studies. When not in school, he captains the Developmental Ultimate Frisbee team at UW-Milwaukee. While studying history, he found a passion for religious studies because it was a blend of significant ideas throughout history, art, politics, war, economy and culture. He plans to continue studying ancient Mediterranean religion because it has plenty of fascinating evidence on how distant cultures have survived.

In past societies, humans are often seen worshipping a divine hierarchy. By looking at ancient society we can speculate that the divine image is represented by the environment that surrounds them (e.g. nature, community, leadership, and psychology.) When the environment becomes hostile or unbearable, humanity instinctively turns to coping. Some common ways for humanity to cope are mating, eating, praising, and singing, which in certain environments may not be as easy to participate in. The need for these coping methods often appears during times of war, disaster, and economic crises. Religion helps bring humanity out of their environment, allowing them to take a break.

The majority of the time these rituals involved a sacrifice. A sacrifice is an offering of food, drink, and goods, to the divine powers. A re-occurring form of sacrifice was the sacrifice of meat, slaughtering a cow, bull, heifer, steer, etc. These were used as gifts to the gods but also they were to be consumed by mankind. The same with wine or incense, they were offerings to the divine but they were also enjoyed by humanity. This consumption starts in either good or bad spirit but trends into what we commonly refer to as a feast, as seen in the celebration of the Great Ajax and his personal victory against Hector, the Prince of Troy¹.

Troy, losing many of these battles, had to cope spiritually by the same kind of sacrifice. During the gruesome war on the west coast of Turkey 2,500 BCE, or chronologically Troy II, Prince Hector is confronted by King Priam's son, Helenus, who is a religious leader within the society. This religious practitioner studies the flight patterns of birds to receive omens from the gods. A familiar term for this divine interpreter is an *auspice* which in Latin translates to "one who looks at birds." Hector, Troy's mightiest warrior, was obligated to listen to Helenus' dictations due to his religious hierarchy and connection to the divine. Hector, was now taking orders from a bird watcher and was told not to give further ground in battle. Despite the fatigue and low morale of his men, who wanted so badly to see their wives, were forced to continue. Hector saw that this was a time of war and decided Helenus was right to keep fighting. He rallied his men for more battle and pressed them back to the front line. Hector, however, was told to retreat and to relay to his mother the *auspice's* command.

While the men are at battle, the *auspice* wanted the queen to gather the noble women of Troy into the Shrine of Athena. Along with gathering the women, she was to bring with her the most beautiful robe she can find within the city and also twelve heifers. The robe was to be laid out as a gift to Athena, praising fine clothing, and a sacrifice of the twelve heifers will be made

in the deities honor, providing plenty of meat. This ritual sacrifice was made not to gain the upper hand in battle but to keep the forlorn citizens of Troy protected from further hostility. King Agamemnon, the ruler of this foreign army, was currently wasting the Trojans and was likely to sack the city. Near the end of Helenus' command to start the sacrifice, he states, "if only she'll (Athena) pity Troy, the Trojan wives, and all our helpless children."² Athena at this time was fighting alongside the Greek army and by praising her with this sacrifice Helenus was hoping the Greeks would spare some mercy on them.

Had Athena granted them pity or not, this ritual sacrifice provided much relief from the war. Gathering the women in the temple took them away from the walls, and took the distraction away from the men, who needed to keep their minds on battle and not their wives. More so, the women were able to stop speculating their widowhood and start searching their wardrobes for the most majestic gown to present to Athena. At the same time, children could start selecting their fathers' juiciest of heifers for the sacrifice and herd them toward the shrine where they will be slaughtered.

Now during the ceremony, when exhausted soldiers from the Trojan frontline had finished their share of skirmishing, by either breaking their sword, taking many wounds, or being critically fatigued, they would then be able retreat to the goddess' shrine and say their own prayers. The setting of this temple would have been a warrior's ideal retreat. The action of selecting the most beautiful robe in the city would have been a fashion show to all the women. They would have shown up in their most decorative gowns while they prepared the meat left over from the twelve dead cows, killed sacrificed to Athena. After praying mercy to Athena (accepting the Greek soldier's relentlessness), the warrior, with his mind set on killing Greeks, could enjoy a plate of meat served by his beautiful wife and be entertained by his children eager to see their father again.

It is a key factor for these sacrifices to be held in a temple because it helps with the shift out of their environment. Walking through a doorway holds a lot of spiritual meaning³. Once the soldier passed through the doorway into the temple his environment changes from bloodshed and warfare into a place of relaxation and coping were he could step back from life and reflect on his battle.

There is another kind of sacrifice which allows humanity to be thankful for their lives and thankful for the environment that we live in. This can resemble our contemporary practice which holds the term today as "holiday". Celebrating Christmas feast with ham, which is a common staple in our society, allows us to give thanks to the birth of Jesus, a man who martyred himself for our sins, reminding us to now live in an environment of righteousness.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* when the common men, who were not getting equal treatment by their ruler, would often mutter in their homes about how awful of a king Gilgamesh was being, speaking out against their leadership. The King was pleasuring himself with every man's bride before the day of each man's wedding. This was not acceptable to the people; however, Gilgamesh claimed it to be his right by the gods. This was how Gilgamesh justified his leadership over the common man⁴. This is similar to the Christian leadership justifying their global actions, like the crusades in the 11th century CE.

Thankfully the hushed voices of these oppressed men reached the ears of the gods and they returned an answer to their prayers by creating another power, a man named Enkidu, who balanced out the control of the strong King.⁵ This indicates that the gods were capable of hearing our most quiet voices.⁶ Looking at the setting around 2500 BCE along the rivers of

Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, the environment may not have been too favorable for man. This would have caused a lot of these voices to lash out against their ruler, neighbor, employer, etc.

Unfortunately, before mankind understood this sensitive hearing, generations before Gilgamesh, the listening gods were frustrated with the collective babel and complaining growing in humanity. So to teach humanity a lesson that the environment they are born into will not always favor them, the gods decided to give the Mesopotamian people something to actually complain about. So, acting as non-benevolent and abusive as possible, like most pagan gods who represent an environment of constant attack, they decided to eliminate the noise or babel, by exterminating human existence with a great flood.⁷

During the flood there was no one capable of providing food offerings, there was nothing to eat. The only food was for saving throughout the duration of the great flood. The Gods had nothing to feed on and as we have seen, if the gods are not happy, neither was humanity. Fortunately, a Mesopotamian named Utnapishtim and his wife had survived the flood. Ea, God of the sweet water (meaning the good kind of rain, rivers, etc.) had warned Utnapishtim in a dream. He spared Utnapishtim because the man had remained loyal to his religion. Instructing him to build a boat, Ea saved Utnapishtim from extinction. Ea saw this man was strong enough to live in the current environment without fuss, so Ea believed that he should be saved.⁸

After drifting for a time and waiting for prosperity to come again, Utnapishtim finally reaches dry land. Utnapishtim and his wife made a hefty sacrifice with their remaining food stuffs (holding a large banquet), Utnapishtim exclaimed while passing his story, "seven and seven again cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle."⁹ They held this sacrifice to worship the god Ea, the sweet water who saved them. However, at the smell of a savory stew, the remainder of the starving divine swarmed the offering of food like a pack of flies consuming every mouth-watering bite.¹⁰ This shows that the divine power (the higher power) needs common man and their hard work to keep filling their endless God like stomachs.

With full bellies from the sacrifice and happy that humanity had survived the great flood, the Gods decided they were out of line to judge mankind so heavily and made the two humans immortal, insuring that if the higher power gets out of line again and tries to erase humanity, Utnapishtim and his wife will act as representatives for mortals or common man and be sure to continue the offering of food to the divine.

Mankind needed to know when to continue these offerings. So to further alleviate humanity, Ishtar, goddess of love, with joy and nostalgia in her heart presented her jeweled necklace at the sacrificial ceremony, aiming to rectify that day.¹¹ Also being the goddess of love, she may have been promoting re-population after the genocide. So, every time a large flood would come or a terrible storm would brew, humanity could look to the necklace, resembling what we today might call a rainbow, and remember the day when humanity created a symbiosis with the divine and their environment. Instead of complaining about the bad weather, humanity could feast and mate with the divine while they wait for the storms to pass.

The Egyptian gods were also demanding of their food offerings. The Nile River when low would bring a draught and cause a crash in commerce.¹² The pharaoh had no longer held the economy from his agricultural labor which supported Egypt. The people having low income had to compensate, they were not able to afford cattle or incense to sacrifice. This did not please the gods and their environment became hostile. As irrational as the Mesopotamian gods, they would let a million men perish on earth.¹³ Understandably, working hard to cultivate land during draught conditions, rationing food, and starving, would all lead mankind to its limits. When the

draught or economic crash came people had become violent and weapons would be drawn on each other, surrounding the people in an environment of violence and irrationality.¹⁴ The Egyptians knew though, that if they praised the gods well enough they would bring back the prosperity of the Nile, giving them a peaceful environment to think about. By playing instruments, singing, decorating their homes, and mating, during times of duress, the gods willed the Nile (economy) to rise in the city of the Ruler and once that happens the Egyptian people could start their sacrifices again with prime incense and a plethora of domestic animals to slaughter.

This fear of the Divine and the ability to distract themselves from the growing violence taught Egyptian people how to be patient and more importantly be thankful when prosperous times come, making sure to sacrifice when their environment lets them. This ability to banquet helps keep a sense of relaxation throughout the land, showing them it is important to take off work and burn some incense, basking in the fruits of their previous hard labor.

A god fearing man would not want to kill their bull because they had the privilege to, they would have believed that to be wasteful and gluttonous.¹⁵ Humanity was primarily interested in killing their bull when they needed to. They sacrificed to let go and escape to the divine setting, also to remember the value of their own life within the current environment. They let go of their prized objects because the objects that were most prized were the objects that were used for divine sacrifice. Giving up what matters most, for food, family, and community.

¹ Robert Fagles, *The Iliad*, (U.S.A., Viking Penguin, 1990), 224;360

² *Ibid.*, 198;111

³ Judith Beall (*The Ancient World*, UW-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, October, 2012).

⁴ N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, (London, Clays Ltd, St. Ives plc, 1972), 68

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62

⁷ *Ibid.*, 108

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112

¹² *Reader*, 20

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20

¹⁵ Robert Fagles, *The Odyssey*, (U.S.A., Viking Penguin, 1996), 302;31