

A young boy around the age of eight is reluctantly waiting out the hours of his Sunday Hebrew School class. The topic today is Genesis, and the creation of man. The boy had always been skeptical about this part of the Torah, and well, most parts of the Torah, but for one reason or another, today he decides to finally voice his opinions. He raises his hand, and when his teacher calls on him, he lectures the teacher on Australopithecus Afarensis, the Sahara Pump Theory, and fossil and DNA evidence proving the evolution of man. But then, something happens. While the raging atheist trapped in the boy's tiny body is outraged, the budding anthropologist in him becomes fascinated. Here was someone so devoted to their religion that they would simply discard the vast libraries of scientific evidence against it. Maybe religion was more powerful than the boy thought. And right there, his little mouth shut up. Thus began my lifetime fascination with the development and purpose of religion in the evolution of humankind. From a young age I have been fascinated by the extremes that people's religions and beliefs would drive them to, specifically, the sacrifice of people and animals.

Throughout countless cultures, from all the eras of man, there has been a general acceptance of the notion that the destruction or sacrifice of innocence and purity brings redemption to the destructor; sacrifice also preserves something important. This notion manifests differently throughout different cultures and time periods, but the themes are generally consistent. The question is how this notion became so widespread and accepted, and why.

The destruction of something pure and innocent as a way to preserve something else can be observed very literally by studying the Carthaginians. The ancient civilization of Carthage encompassed all of what is now Tunisia. Simply uttering the name "Carthaginian" conjures thoughts of one of the most notorious traditions of the ancient world: child sacrifice. Carthaginian children were sacrificed by their parents to the god Ba'al Hammon. Ba'al Hammon also had another name—to the Greeks, he was the Titan known as Cronus.¹ Cronus is the father of most of the Greek pantheon of gods, including Zeus, the king of the gods. Zeus killed Cronus because he discovered that Cronus was eating his own children. It makes sense then that the worship of such a god would include the ritual sacrifice of children and infants. They were placed in the arms of a giant bronze statue of Ba'al Hammon, which was heated to extremely high temperatures, causing the children to be burned alive. When the child began to be consumed in flame, its limbs contracted and the mouth opened, forming a grin. This grin is why the process is known as "sardonic laughter."² Once the child had contracted to a small enough size, it slipped through the hands of the statue and fell into a brazier, where it was fully engulfed in flame.

The motives for this brutal sacrifice are still disputed among scholars. The more widely accepted opinion is that the children were sacrificed by their own parents, so the parents would be granted a favor by the gods. Child sacrifice is also considered to have been a method for the high priests to control the population of a city. Children were seen as the purest forms of humans, and therefore the most desirable to the gods. In this case, it appears that the high priest

¹ Stager, Lawrence E. "Join Academia.edu & Share Your Research with the World." Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite or Population Control. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10,1 (1984): 30-51 (with Lawrence E. Stager). Academia.edu, n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

² Browne, Malcolm W. "Relics of Carthage Show Brutality Amid the Good Life." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1 Sept. 1987. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

imposed these ideals into the minds of the people as a way to control them.³ Various surrounding cultures had been sacrificing animals for centuries, the Carthaginian priests just took the motives for these sacrifices and applied them to children, making it easy for citizens to comply because they had already accepted similar ideals.

The Aztecs also engaged in a form of child sacrifice, but it was a much less gruesome. Every year, chosen children had their finger nails removed and in the process were forced to cry. Their tears were then collected and given as an offering to the rain god Tlaloc. If Tlaloc received the tears, then the rain that year would be frequent, and the harvest would be fruitful.⁴ While on the surface this seems completely different than the Carthaginian sacrifices, it is actually based in very similar logic. Children are viewed as the purest and most innocent form of humanity. The significance of sacrificing a child is that the sacrificer destroys a symbol of purity, thus soiling its perfection. Purity is seen as the differentiating factor between child and adult, and is such a strong concept that by destroying a symbol of purity and offering to a god, it is seen as gifting the god with a physical representation of purity itself, a force so strong that it is suitable for an all-mighty being. Causing children pain and collecting their tears accomplished the same thing as killing them. The untouched innocence and joy of the children was being destroyed, and in the case of the Aztecs, it was taken from them in the form of tears and then gifted to the gods in an attempt to reward the despoiler.

In the ancient days of Judaism, the concept of destroying purity was used to accomplish a different goal. Instead of destroying purity as a way to get a favor from the gods, purity was sacrificed as a way to heal impurity. This is exemplified in the sacrifice of the red heifer. The red heifer was a red cow, which was unscathed, unharmed, and perfect in every way. It must never have been milked or mated with another animal. Each year, such a cow was chosen and sacrificed atop an "altar of burnt offering,"⁵ a special altar designed specifically for this sacrifice. The heifer's ashes were then saved and used for ritual purification. Normally, bathing in special blessed water could redeem an act of impurity. However, if a person committed the ultimate act of impurity (coming in contact with a dead body), he or she required the ashes of the red heifer. This is an example of the essence of purity being used to heal rather than reward, where purity is sacrificed as a tool for redemptive cleansing.

In the book of Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Bible, the people have sinned to the point where they require a day of atonement. On this day, a lamb known later by the name Azazel had a red cloth tied to its horns. Acting as a representation of the sins of man, the lamb was sent off to the shore of the Dead Sea to die, its death redeeming the sins of those who cast it out. In this case, the lamb represents the same things as the red heifer, but according to the ancient texts, the lamb is seen as a greater form of purity than the cow, therefore its death redeems on a higher scale.⁶

William Holman Hunt's painting *Scapegoat* depicts this event. Hunt, along with other religious scholars, views this lamb as a sort of "prototype Jesus."⁷ Jesus died for the same reason

³ Stager, Lawrence E. "Join Academia.edu & Share Your Research with the World." Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite or Population Control. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10,1 (1984): 30-51 (with Lawrence E. Stager). Academia.edu, n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

⁴ INAH/AP, Photograph From. "Pictures: "Important" Aztec Child Burials Found in Mexico City." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, 31 July 2012. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

⁵ Henry, Matthew. "The Altar of Burnt Offerings." *Exodus 27 Commentary*. Bible Gateway, n.d. Web. 06 Nov. 2013.

⁶ Landow, George P. "The Scapegoat." *The Scapegoat*. A Victorian Web Book, n.d. Web. 06 Nov. 2013.

⁷ Landow, George P. "The Scapegoat." *The Scapegoat*. A Victorian Web Book, n.d. Web. 06 Nov. 2013.

as this lamb—to redeem the sins of humanity. This is why he is often referred to as “The Lamb of God.” Jesus, whether you are a Christian or not, is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in all of history; his legacy has shaped much of the development of the human race. For those who believe in him, his power is unmatched, and he is worth devoting the essence of existence to. Because his purpose was to die for the sins of humanity (the ultimate act of purification), then the act of destroying purity is by default one of the most important notions in all of human existence. This explains why this concept continues to shape human reasoning to this day, as well as why the concept of virginity is still so valued and revered in today’s culture. While ritual sacrifice has for the most part been eliminated from the practice of most modern religions, the concept of the spoiling of innocence and purity has been transferred onto a more contemporary scenario. While it is still not nearly as valued as it was in ancient times, the loss of virginity still carries a significant weight to most people and religions on the planet.

One of the most extreme cases where the loss of virginity is still valued is in South Africa. Since it’s beginning the 80’s, the HIV pandemic has ravaged South Africa; it is now estimated that 1 in 9 South Africans carry the virus.⁸ At some point in the last few years, a myth began circulating that having sex with a virgin would cure a person of HIV or AIDS. Despite having no scientific evidence, and obviously being completely false, this myth somehow became widely accepted in the rural parts of South Africa. The result was 67,000 reported cases of rape against children in 2012, as opposed to 37,500 reported cases in 1998.⁹ This statistic shows that the current number of cases has nearly doubled because of the myth being introduced. The ages of the children being assaulted gets lower and lower and the number of assaults continues to grow rapidly. It is now at the point where infants under one year old are regularly raped. The majority of the time, the raped child dies. It is unthinkable that something so monstrous, a practice that has been disproved literally every time it has been enacted, maintains such wide acceptance. This may be another example of the extreme power of the destruction of purity and innocence, including the power of virginity, still has on people. It is the same power that can drive people to sacrifice their own children. Millennia after millennia of acting on this ideal have engrained it into our minds. The education system in South Africa—especially for poorer populations—is complete garbage, and much of the population remains undereducated. Because good education is scarce, many South African people resort to getting an education through the only other widespread form: religious education. Because the sacrifice of purity holds power throughout many religions, it is taught to many South African people because religious education is often the only one available.

On a contrasting note, the association of the sacrifice of purity with the acceptance of religion may explain why in countries where atheism rates are rising, premarital sex rates are rising as well. Because religion doesn't have as much power over people’s mindset in those countries, on average people don’t place as high a value on virginity. However, this doesn’t mean that the concept of virginity has no value at all. While it might not be for religious reasons, most people still view the loss of virginity as an important life event. This trend may be evidence of ideals that are still embedded deep in human minds, from so many thousands of years of accepting the significance of purity and innocence.

⁸ Johannesburg, Jane Flanagan in. "South African Men Rape Babies as 'cure' for Aids." The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, 29 Nov. 0011. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

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In all the cultures that partake in the sacrifice and destruction of purity, the sacrifice is about isolating the essence of purity; in order to do so, it requires the destruction of what had been previously deemed pure. It's not the dead lamb that is being given to the gods—it is the purity itself that is being presented as sacrifice. By killing the lamb, you take its purity, and then hand it over to your god—that's why it is referred to as "taking virginity" rather than "destroying virginity." The essence of virginity belongs to its captor, and it is the essence that holds the power. What if having these tendencies is actually a specifically evolved trait? However gruesome and terrible the carrying out of this idea may have been, it provided benefits to the cultures that practiced it. Because the application of this ideal requires so much devotion to carry out, it helped strengthen people's commitment to their religion. For many years, scientists have explored the theory that religion is an evolutionary advantage;¹⁰ many believe that religion was developed as a mechanism to increase trust in groups and promote social cohesiveness.¹¹ It is possible that a predisposition for the destruction of purity (as an aspect of religion) may be a naturally selected trait as well.

¹⁰ Durkheim, É (1912) *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, Livre I: Questions préliminaires. Chicoutimi, Québec: Bibliothèque Paul-Émile-Boulet de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi.

¹¹ Alcorta C S, Sosis R (2005) Ritual, Emotion, and Sacred Symbols: The Evolution of Religion as an Adaptive Complex. *Human Nature*, 16(4), pp. 323-359.

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