SALVATION AND SACRIFICE
IN THE SHARA' MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHERN JORDAN

W. J. Jobling

This study is concerned with presenting a brief selection of some aspects of the epigraphic, archaeological and textual evidence for situations (Sitz im Leben) in which North West Semitic and North Arabian indigenes sought salvation. These selective data reflect upon the phenomenology of salvation as procured through sacrifice and prayer.

This study is also offered as a selective survey and a reminder of some aspects of the realia of sacrifice in the West Asian milieu in which was generated so much of the canonical Biblical literature. In dealing with concepts such as salvation we often forget, or overlook, the Sitz im Leben in which such concepts and their correlative world views were generated, developed, or were mutated.

Turning first of all to the 'AQEDAH we are confronted in Genesis 22:1-19 with the sacrifice of Isaac in the land of Moriah:

'Take your son,' God said, 'your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.' (Genesis 22:2[JB])

In the 'AQEDAH narrative the patriarch Abraham is prepared to be tested by Yahweh and is delivered from officiating at an act of human sacrifice by a divine intervention (Gen.22:11-12) and the provision and substitution of an animal offering (Gen.22:13-14). This passage typifies the general antipathy to human sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and provides the locus classicus for the replacement of human by animal sacrificial victims. In this particular case Abraham's deliverance brings with it blessing and rejoicing as his first-born, Isaac, is restored through the provision of a substitute. Not only does this bear upon the phenomenon of human sacrifice in the Hebrew bible and its suppression but it also relates directly to the provision made in Israelite religion for the offering and sacrifice of the first born (human, animal and cereal), and the developed theology of procuring through such praxis the good will of Yahweh and
hence deliverance from climatic and seasonal misadventure which radically affects the mixed economy of rain-fed western Asia but also deliverance from guilt (‘ASAM) or uncleanness (TAME').

Over against the 'AQEDAH is the incident recorded on the 9th century BC Mesha Stele from Dhiban, east of the Jordan. Here Mesha, King of Moab, recorded that he was delivered from the political domination and aggression of Israel and by this the consequences of his sin:

I am Mesha, son of Kemosh- [...), king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab 30 years, and I reigned after my father. And I made this high place for Kemosh in Qorchah [...] for he saved me from all kings and caused me to triumph over all my enemies. Omri, king of Israel, had oppressed Moab for many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land. And his son succeeded him, and he also said, 'I will oppress Moab.' In my days he spoke [thus], but I have triumphed over him and his house, and Israel has perished forever. And Omri had occupied the [land] of Mehedeba (Medeba), and (Israel) dwelt therein his days and half the days of his son, 40 years, but Kemosh dwelt there in my time. (Mesha Stele lines 1-9a)

In style and terminology comparable to that of the Deuteronomic historian of the Hebrew Bible, Mesha related that such beneficence on the part of ASHTAR-KEMOSH required in response to what appears to be a massive offering or dedication (V HRMT):

And Kemosh said to me, 'Go, take Neba from Israel,' and I went by night, and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, and took it and smote all of them, 7,000 men, [boys], women, [girls], and maidservants, for I had devoted them to Ashtar-Kemosh. And I took from there th[e ves]sels of Yahweh and dragged them before Kemosh. (Mesha Stele lines 14-18)

This epigraphic record bears comparison with the Deuteronomic accounts of Mesha's sacrifice in Mt Seir (in the Shara' Mountains) as recorded in the Hebrew Bible:

But when they reached the Israelite camp, the Israelites launched their attack and the Moabites fled before them, and as they advanced they cut the Moabites to pieces. They laid the towns in ruins, and each man threw a stone into all the best fields to fill them up, and they blocked every water-spring and felled every sound tree. In the end, there was only Kir-hareseth left, which the slingers surrounded and battered. When the king of Moab saw that the battle had
turned against him, he mustered seven hundred swordsmen in
the hope of breaking a way out and going to the king of Aram
[Edom], but he failed. Then he took his eldest son who was to
succeed him and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall.
There was bitter indignation against the Israelites, who then
withdrew, retiring to their own country. (2 Kings 3:23-27 [JB])

It also needs to be noted that the Hebrew Bible under certain
circumstances appears to condone the slaying of humans in the presence of
a deity. A classic example of this is to be found in 1 Samuel 15 which
like similar passages in the Book of Joshua is concerned with the practice
of HEREM. Thus it is recorded that after Saul's failure to destroy Agag
the king of the Amelekites, Samuel the prophet literally takes the matter
into his own hands, as is evident in the following:

Then Samuel said, 'Bring Agag, King of the Amelekites'. So
Agag came to him with faltering step and said, 'Surely the
bitterness of death has passed.' Samuel said, 'Your sword has
made women childless and your mother of all women shall be
childless too.' Then Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the
Lord in Gilgal. (1 Samuel 15:32-33 [NEB])

While later traditional Judaeo-Christian theology has tended to
reinforce the Deuteronomist's sentiments, the harvest of archaeological
surveys and excavations has produced a large amount of data illustrative
of temple sites, altars and sacrificial impedimenta. Ranging from the
Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem to cultic sites such
as Kuntillet 'Ajrud in Southern Israel and Ras Shamra and Tell Mardikh in
North Syria, this new archaeological data is indicative of the role of
sacrifice in the life of the pre-Islamic Semitic indigenes, whether they
were living within the orbit of sedentary urban situations such as
Jerusalem, Ugarit or Ebla, or belonged to the marginal and desert areas
where the greater percentage of people lived out their lives. Basically
concerned in the socio-economic demands of life lived in the mixed
economy of these rain-fed areas, their preoccupations were with crops and
flocks, and for the most part their daily life was a routine involving a
fairly basic subsistence lifestyle. This environment climatically,
ecologically and socially provided the basic circumstances of their lifestyle
which could be either one for which they thanked the gods or from which
they sought their deliverance or salvation.
Within the non-urban situation lack of cultic facilities and economic stringencies seem to have dictated that in many areas prayers or exhortations for help and salvation were more frequent, though, as will be shown below, there is evidence for sacrificial rites performed ad hoc. Jerome's reference to the Saracen pilgrimage to a temple site dedicated to Venus at Elusa is evidence of a particular instance of a wider cult of standing stones and altars or holy places (MESGIDA) in Syria and North Arabia. In Nabataean the term 'A'RA (cf. Arabic GHARRA) has been identified as associated with the practice of sprinkling blood on altars or cult stones; thus Teixidor now notes concerning the Idol Dushara-A'ra at Bostra:

Etymologically the name A'ra would mean an altar or idol dyed with the blood of victims offered upon it. Moreover, the entry of the lexicographer Suidas on the word Theusares is relevant. He says that the name means 'the god' (theos) Ares (of Petra), an idol of black stone, quadrangular in form, upon which the Arabs sprinkled the blood of sacrificial animals. A curious passage in Porphyry's De Abstinentia (2.56) informs us that certain tribes of Arabia slaughtered children upon the altar, which in turn was worshipped as an idol.

Teixidor also notes that the excavations at Palmyra and HATRA provide ample evidence that this praxis was urbanized there as well and that throughout the east Jordan area and North Arabia baetyls, rectangular stones, thrones or MOTAB were venerated:

The popularity of the baetyl as the residence of the god -- or, rather, of the stone as the place in which the god was embodied -- remained alive in the Near East until Christian times, for in the third century of our era an altar at Dura-Europos was still dedicated to Zeus Betylos.

My own archaeological fieldwork in the 'Aqaba-Ma'an region of Southern Jordan has brought me into contact with the epigraphic and archaeological remains of the pre-Islamic North Arabian Indigenes of some 2,000 years ago. Within these marginal and desert areas which include the Shara' Mountains (Biblical Seir), I have located and recorded several thousand North Arabian (-Thamudic) Inscriptions. This pre-Islamic epigraphic data relates to the history of the earlier Iron Age Hebrew, Aramaic, Moabite, Ammonite and Edomite languages and also has
significance for the study and elucidation of Proto-Semitic and the structural relationship of the wider constituents of the Semitic language family.\textsuperscript{7}

Frequently occurring among these North Arabian inscriptions from Southern Jordan are prayers to the gods Dushara, (al-)LAT, Atarsamaim, Nuhay and Ruda.\textsuperscript{8} While it must be emphasized that the elucidation of the North Arabian language and culture is still in its infancy and hence any conclusions at this stage must be tentative, there is a recent and growing amount of epigraphic and archaeological data from surveys and excavations within the Arabian Peninsula.\textsuperscript{9} This new evidence suggests that the Bene Qedem (Sons of the East), as the Hebrew Bible called them, were of considerable cultural and political significance for the North West Semitic traditions and that their Input and alliance with their western counterparts was not insignificant. A good example of the North Arabian linguistic nexus with the North West Semitic may be inferred from the recently published alphabet ostracon from Khirbet es-Samra.\textsuperscript{10} This ostracon provides vital evidence of the interaction and possibly direct relationship with the North West Semitic alphabetic system of writing, for, as E.A. Knauf has noted in his presentation:

\begin{quote}
... from \textit{ba}' to \textit{ta}' the order of letters follows the Phoenician-Aramaic alphabet of 22 letters, to which are added the additional Arabic phonemes at the end.
\end{quote}

Thus diachronically this evidence links the floruit of the North Arabian alphabetic orthography with Late Bronze Age Ugarit and the more southerly Iron Age alphabet orthographies mentioned above.\textsuperscript{11}

Given these introductory remarks about the significance of the relationship of North Arabian epigraphy for the North West Semitic tradition attention is now drawn to the prayers which the North Arabian Indigenes address to their gods for help or aid using the verb \textit{S\textsuperscript{CD}}.

(l) \textsc{H. NHY. W. 'TRSM. S'D(DN)}
\textit{O Nhy and Attarsam, help me}. (ARMA. No.127)

(ii) \textsc{H. RDW. WNHY. wc TRSM. S'DN. cL. WDDY.}
\textit{O Ruda and Nuhai and \textsuperscript{c}Attarsam, help me in the matter of my love}. (ARNA. No.23)

(iii) \textsc{H. 'T(R)SM. S'DN. TLYT}. 
O 'Atta(r)sam, help me, Taliyat. (Ha'll, No.160)

(iv) H. TRSM. S'D. 'L. WDDY. SLM. QD.
O, Attarsam, help All, my beloved, with soundness of physique. (Ha'll. No.161)

(v) L. HBB. BN. BNLH. BN. HBB. W. DKR. SDR. SKMLH. W. HBB. KTT.
By HBB son of BNLH son of HBB, and may SDR remember SKMLH, and HBB inscribed (it). (JS-AM)

(vi) WD'. DSRY. ZMLT. W. GR. KTT.
O, Dushara, judge (?) ZMLT, and GR wrote (it). (WJ-AM)

(vii) W. DKRT. LT. MN'. W. 'FSY. W. NSBLH.
And may (al-)LAT remember (favourably) MN', and 'FSY and NSBLH. (WJ-AM)

While it is recognised that the North Arabian verb S'D does not have the traditional connotation 'sacrifice', as denoted by the verb DBH, it is suggested that these prayers are interesting non-sacrificial examples of a context in which the aid of the deity is sought, and the force of the verb S'D and the objectives nominated in (ii) and (iv) syntactically and semantically may be construed as matters of deliverance.12

More directly related to the usage of S'D and the veneration of 'Atarsamaim is the inscribed icon of 'Atarsamaim which I discovered in the Wadi edh-Dhiqa in the fifth season of the Survey in 1984.13

The inscribed icon or rock drawing is situated in a small Wadi within the Wadi edh-Dhiqa complex some 20 kms south of Wadi Raimm. The icon and inscription are the centre piece of a large panel of fairly well preserved rock drawings on the face of a large rock shelter which stretches along the northern side of the Wadi. Less well preserved drawings occur further along the Wadi on the more exposed walls of the shelter. Stretching out into the Wadi from the rock shelter are stone circles and stone wall foundations and considerable evidence for a consistent use of the area as a shelter and animal pen up to the present day. A well concealed fodder storage cave has been excavated into the ground and along the base of the rock wall some 50m to the left of the icon.
The central figure or icon is humanoid in shape. It is 1.5m high, and across the shoulders measures 0.54m, tapering down to a width of 0.50m across the curve of the inscription, to 0.39m across the feet. The moonshaped head of the icon is rounded and has a diameter of 0.25m. Geometrically positioned eyes, a nose and a mouth are the principal facial features. A semi-circular line is incised below the circular head and may be indicative of either a collar or neck. The head is positioned between the two shoulders which are emphasised. No arms occur although two vertical lines extend from the shoulders and may represent an outer garment, or cloak hanging from the shoulders. Truncated legs and what appears to be a stylised penis are appended to the lower part of the torso. On either side of the icon are well executed drawings of caprids and bovids. In some cases the details of the animal figures are quite extensive and realistic and may reflect details of the pastoral economy of the area some two thousand years ago.

Extending from the right bottom corner in a semi-circle is the inscription:

H. 'TRSM. S'D. B. KF. W'LY. W'D. W. MDD.
O. 'TRSM help KF and 'LY and 'D and MDD.

Within the North Arabian epigraphic repertoire this inscription fits into the brief formulaic pattern of prayers addressed to North Arabian deities generally. This inscription is syntactically similar to prayers from the Ha’il area in Saudi Arabia addressed to Attarsam.

The veneration of the deity 'TRSM by the Ancient Semites has a considerable historical pedigree. The prominence of the Saracen veneration of the astral deity 'TRSM and the association of this name with that of the Morning and Evening Star, Venus, is well attested in both the Sinai and Southern Palestine. Elusa in Southern Palestine was an important cult centre for the Saracen veneration of Venus. The deity is variously represented from place to place and a variety of animals was often deemed sacred to the deity. It may be coincidental, but those occurring on this panel were also known to be sacred to 'TRSM in other areas. It may be that the bulls and goats in this instance were considered sacred to 'TRSM in this area and that their fecundity was the object of
the prayer (S\textsuperscript{D}) ascribed to the deity. It is worth noting that within the North West Semitic religious tradition the Hebrew Bible attests the offering of bulls and goats to Yahweh. The Hebrew prophetic tradition was often critical of this aspect of the local cultus, thus:

Hear the word of Yahweh,
you rulers of Sodom:
listen to the command of our God,
you people of Gomorrah.

'What are your endless sacrifices to me?'
says Yahweh.
'I am sick of holocausts of rams
and the fat of calves.
The blood of bulls and of goats revolts me.'
(Isaiah 1:10-11 [JB])

This is the first occurrence of this icon in this area and it compares interestingly with other inscriptions which I have found in which the gods Dushara and (al-)LAT are invoked to remember (DKR) particular devotees.\textsuperscript{14} In this particular case however it should be noted that, as Professor Nielsen has adduced in South Arabia, human sacrifice was offered to the Morning Star (or Venus), which was iconographically portrayed as an infant boy to whom child sacrifice was offered.\textsuperscript{15} The Byzantine Narratives of Saint Nilus preserves a corroborative tradition that in the Sinai Nilus and his son Theodulos were captured by Saracens who intended to sacrifice young Theodulos to the Morning Star.\textsuperscript{16} On this occasion the Byzantine narrative records that such were the nocturnal festivities of the Saracens that they overslept until the Morning Star had faded after the sunrise, and so eventually Nilus and his son Theodulos were able to escape. This can be compared with Jerome's record of a Saracen temple dedicated to Venus at Elusa in Southern Israel.\textsuperscript{17} Both Jerome and the Nilus Narratives preserve valuable ethnographic evidence of the pre-Islamic North Arabians and their religious practices. Now it is recalled that the Moabite Stone recorded that human beings, captured by Mesha in his war with the Israelites at the Yahwist shrine on Mt Nebo, were devoted (HRM) to ASHTAR-KEMOSH. Thus in the Iron Age a male deity was venerated with what appears to be human offerings or victims not far north from Wadi edh-Dhilqa. The proper names ASHTAR-KEMOSH and 'Atarsamaim and the gender and sacrificial connotations of their
respective inscriptions would suggest that within this southern part of the
East Jordan area there was a continuity of human sacrifice associated
with the veneration of the Morning and Evening Stars, the planet Venus. Further to the west across the Wadi Arabah Nabataean religious practices are evidenced by excavations at Mamshit and Avdat, while St Jerome records in his Life of St Hilarion that Saracens annually visited Elusa to worship Venus at a temple site situated there. The association of Yahwism with these practices was not as divorced as the 'Aqedah and allied passages in the Hebrew Bible would suggest. Thus during the reign of the Judaean King Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and the North Israelite King Hosea (2 Kings 17:17. Cf. 2 Chronicles 28:3) human sacrifices are recorded. Also consideration of the reforms of Josiah make it clear that the worship of the sun, moon and astral deities (2 Kings 23:5) were popular and probably were accompanied by sacrificial rites which incorporated appropriate animal and possibly human sacrifice.

In reviewing the recent reports of the excavations on the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Dan Bahat has drawn attention to accounts that record that when Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem he constructed a temple of Venus/Aphrodite on the site where the later Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built. It is arguable that, as with the references to shrines built by Solomon for Kemosh and Melkom on the hill facing Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7), the Holy Sepulchre site -- specifically nominated by Bahat as being on the hill of Golgotha -- had a past history of association with the veneration of Venus and as such complemented the Temple Mount site which in Hadrian's rebuilding programme was dedicated to Jupiter. If Bahat is right this brings the Venus-Asherah nexus to Jerusalem and as with the texts attesting the veneration of 'Yahweh and his Asherah' at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in Southern Israel in the 8th century BC, further amplifies the nexus of YHWH the God of Salvation (Psalm 88:2; Isaiah 12:2), with this broader religious tradition of the North West Semites and North Arabians. Thus it is within a close geographical area of the Levant and North Arabia and against an extensive diachronic graph of high frequency occurrence that this new epigraphic archaeological evidence from Wadi edh-Dhiga must be placed.
On the broad canvas of the veneration of Venus in the Semitic Quadrangle the deity addressed as 'ATRSM in the rock overhang provides further new epigraphic evidence which combines icon and inscription. This allows us to recognise important visual characteristics which significantly supplement the message of the pre-Islamic North Arabian indigenes' perception of their primary deity. It also provides evidence for the indigenous background of Arabia out of which the later Judaeo-Christian concepts of Salvation emerged. Not only are the recent studies of the syncretistic Natabaeans and their religion gradually beginning to elucidate the cohesiveness of the religious world views of Graeco-Roman Palestine in the early Christian era, but the works of scholars such as Javier Teixidor have succeeded in elucidating much of the character and pervasive strength of the folk religion of that era. This background directly seizes our attention when we read something of the ethnic mixture implied in the background of those involved in the formative years of the Christian tradition as recorded in the New Testament:

Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled, each one bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished. 'Surely' they said 'all these men speaking are Galileans? How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya round Cyrene; as well as visitors from Rome -- Jews and proselytes alike -- Cretans and Arabs; we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God.' (Acts 2:5-11 [JB])

Notes


5. op. cit., p.86.

6. op. cit., p.87.


15. Cf. D. Nielsen, Handbuch der Altarabischen Altertumskunde
16. 'Colunt autem illam ob Luciferum, cujus cultu Saracenorum natio
dedita est. Sed et ipsum oppidum ex magna parte semibarbarum est
propter loci situm.' C. Migne, Patrologia Latina XXIII:42, 27. Cf. also J.
Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades (London 1977), p.156 et
passim; P. Mayerson, 'The desert of Southern Palestine according to
Byzantine sources', Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 107
(1963), 162 & 'The city of Elusa in the literary sources of the
Fourth-Sixth Centuries', IEJ 23 (1983), 247.


21. D. Bahat, 'Does the Holy Sepulchre Church mark the burial of

22. G.W. Ahlstrom, Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion [Horae
Soederblomianae V] (Lund 1963), pp.52-57 et passim.