Research Article

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Blood Lines: Biopolitics, Patriarchy, Myth

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Abstract: Sacrifice is mainly a patriarchal institution. Nancy Jay argued that sacrifice serves as a ritual supplement and replacement for natural birth, and attempts to establish the dominance and priority of descent through the father over descent through the mother. I demonstrate the cogency of Jay's analysis across a number of traditions. My focus is not on sacrificial rituals, but instead on a series of myths – Hebrew biblical, ancient Greek, and Vedic Indian – that disclose the manner in which sacrifice inhabits a continuum with a broader array of struggles for dominance within the family including, but not limited to, the contestation between patriarchy and matriarchy. In many myths, the kinship group becomes a primary metaphor, both for the competition over scarce goods, including power and authority within the family unit, and for modeling the body politic in a microcosm.

Keywords: sacrifice, incest, birth, Nancy Jay, Claude Lévi-Strauss, kinship, sovereignty, succession, violence, body politic

Ernst Kantorowicz's classic, *The King's Two Bodies*, traces the genealogy of the idea that the king has a second, imperishable body, a legal fiction that originated with the idea that Christ lives on in the body of the Church as its head, and that is sustained even now in the concept of the corporation. In his towering work of scholarship, Kantorowicz does not once pose the question of the gender of the sovereign's body. It passes literally without comment that this body is male. The closest Kantorowicz comes to acknowledging this may be late in the book when, in the context of elaborating the idea that "the king never dies," he recounts the myth of the phoenix, the "self-begotten bird," which was deployed as a metaphor for Christ's resurrection.[1] Lactantius (ca. 250–325 CE) said of this being: "He is son to himself, is his own father, and his own heir./... He is himself, yet not himself, who is the same, yet not the same."[2] The imagery is so familiar to us that we might perhaps excuse ourselves for not focusing at first on what is unique about this (re)birth: the manner in which it bypasses sexual reproduction and, with this, any recognition of the contribution of the female to the generation of life. Attributed to the mythical phoenix, this idea appears as part of that bird's curious and exotic nature. Applied to the Saviour, it accomplishes far more, serving as a charter myth for patriarchal monotheism and a celibate priesthood that was not yet fixed at the time Lactantius wrote.

A similar neglect can be documented in the case of other modern classics of political theology, including Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben. My essay represents a small step toward correcting this neglect, which may heighten awareness concerning how much remains to be done, especially as, while preparing to talk about my theme, I came across numerous threads that could not be followed to their ends, threads that seemed to connect a vast network of related problems: the confounding of sovereignty with patriarchy, but also the elementary structures of kinship, the idea of a primitive matriarchy, the function of sacrifice as a kind of

1 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 388–9.
2 Lactantius, *Carmen de ave Phoenice*, 163ff., quoted in Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 390.

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inversion of natural childbirth, and the role of some myths of origin as comments also on the nature of polity. These themes coalesce around the idea of the body politic, a fitting label for a composite figure that, while fictive, wields real power over our imaginations as well as our physical bodies.

The "family resemblance" that seems to link a number of different myths and cultural traditions with what we might call patriarchal biopolitics is an ideology in which sovereignty and sacrifice are mutually reinforcing and express the shared idea that the body politic is definitively male. The claim of the identity of the Son with the Father – in the Council of Nicaea's famous formulation, not *homoiousios*, but *homoousios* – forestalls competition, from the Mother as well as the Son. Each is reduced to an appendage of the body politic, which may be safely given up. Kantorowicz already gave some reasons for such claims, namely the need to secure the integrity and permanence of the sovereign's agency. Another reason is the patriarchal dream of a world that cuts women out of a share. The claim that the father is solely responsible for the substance of creation can be a way of asserting the legitimacy of his sovereign lineage, precisely in the face of doubt whether the child is in fact his own.

In a now-classic work, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, Nancy Jay noted the "symbolic opposition between sacrifice and childbirth."[3] Sacrifice is a male-dominated institution[4] that seeks to replace the kinship ties created naturally through childbirth with a form of patrilineal descent that is ritual, hence cultural and artificial: "This social bond, created in sacrifice, is limited to males. The sacred umbilical cord created in 'men's childbearing' contains all the ties that bind the male sacrificial hierarchy, but it transcends the ties indexed by ordinary physiological umbilical cords: those binding mother and child."[5] One of the reasons for this effort at displacement was the fact that paternity was never as certain as maternity; therefore, "birth by itself cannot be the sole criterion of patrilineage membership."[6] Some institutions had to be created to ascertain the membership in the male bloodline. Sacrifice, which, like birth, usually involves the shedding of blood, was especially suited for this symbolic role, also because of the logic that opposes birth to violent death, and childhood to the entry into masculine adulthood and participation in the sacrifice.

This article pursues an explicitly comparative approach in order to demonstrate the applicability of Jay's thesis also in cultural traditions she did not consider, such as Vedic India. My approach to the problem of how patriarchal monotheism in the biblical tradition articulated with sacrifice is explicitly comparative, and focuses on the stories about sacrifice found across traditions that are sometimes distantly or not at all related. I attempt to apply certain insights from structural anthropology, particularly from Claude Lévi-Strauss's analyses of myth, which have only rarely been applied to the biblical tradition.[7] In some cases, the similarities observed may stem from geographical proximity, such as in the case of Hebrew biblical and classical Greek traditions, which shared a common Mediterranean background. In other cases, such as Vedic India and ancient Greece, these similarities may reflect an older, common origin in Indo-European mythology. Between the Hebrew Bible and Vedic India, no connection is presumed. Even in such cases, as Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss demonstrated already in their classic treatment of sacrificial ritual, a comparison may illuminate some fundamental, shared structures.[8] Admittedly, the principle of selection applied below is inevitably somewhat arbitrary and depends on the limitations of my own knowledge and competence, as well as on restrictions of space. No special claim for the priority of the traditions compared is implied; instead, this essay should be read as an invitation to extend the comparison further.

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3 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xxiii. See also Beers, *Women and Sacrifice*.

4 Walter Burkert's theory of sacrifice, according to which this originated out of the Neolithic practice of men hunting large animals in groups, also coincides to some degree with Jay's theory. Burkert, *Homo Necans*. However, it should be noted that some types of sacrifice, at least in ancient Greece, were conducted by females: the pig sacrifice of the Thesmophoria and also the frenzied *sparagmos* of the Maenads, as depicted, e.g. in Euripides, *Bacchae*.

5 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 84.

6 Ibid., 36.

7 Leach, *Genesis as Myth*.

8 Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, focused explicitly on a comparison of the two most extensively documented classical traditions of sacrifice: those of the Hebrew Bible and Vedic India.

Already in the 1970s, Sherry Ortner had pointed out that rituals were often used to mark the opposition, not only between culture and nature but also between male and female:

> [...] the male... lacking natural creative functions, must... assert his creativity externally, 'artificially' through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, external, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings. This formulation...explains...the great puzzle of why male activities involving the destruction of life (hunting and warfare) have more charisma... than the female's ability to give birth, to create life.[9]

To this list of male-dominated prestige activities, we may now add sacrifice.

Jay noted the political dimensions of sacrifice, the manner in which this served to create a body politic. She quoted William Robertson Smith's statement that, in sacrifice, "the members of one kindred looked on themselves as one living whole, a single animated mass of blood flesh and bones."[10] This body was definitely male and created through an act of violence, meaning not only the killing that characterized animal slaughter – which for Robertson Smith represented the original and typical form of sacrifice[11] – but also the disruption of an earlier matrilineal economy. Jay identified the relation constituted through sacrifice as a political one: "It is on the father-son relation that the sacrificial relation of deity to worshiper is founded, although it was later expanded to include patron-client, master-servant, and king-subject."[12] According to Jay, in ancient Greece and Rome, only patrician families that were organized around a *paterfamilias* practiced sacrifice. In these households, the patriarch was "both magistrate and priest," and his recognition was necessary for participation in the ritual and for membership in the family, which amounted to the same thing.[13] This pattern eventually extended to larger social formations:

> One of the most striking and widespread aspects of sacrifice is its prominence in the development of the state in ancient and pre-industrial societies. ... There is more than efficiency involved in the dependence of ancient states on sacrifice. This dependence reflects the underlying gender and family base of their systems of political domination. Those states depending on sacrifice were what Max Weber called 'patrimonial' states, in which the state is an extension of the ruler's household and political power is inherited within families and lineages.[14]

Evaluating this aspect of Jay's thesis would take us too far afield from both my topic and my competence. However, I should at least gesture at the literature that has addressed the displacement of matrilineality – matrilocality or even primitive matriarchy – by patrilineality and patriarchy, and the connection of this displacement with the rise of the state. In this line we find J. J. Bachofen, J. F. McLennan, Lewis Henry Morgan, Friedrich Engels[15] – and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose 1949 work on *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* attempted to account for the universality of the incest prohibition as the expression of a decision in favor of exogamy, meaning the exchange of women between different groups of men. According to Lévi-Strauss, the taboo on incest, meaning the prohibition against sexual relations with those within a varying degree of consanguinity, was merely the corollary of the demand for sociality or, in the example he used, the desire for a "brother in law," for male companionship beyond the in-group.[16] The taboo also served to reduce competition within the in-group over potential sexual partners. The incest prohibition represented the first intervention, as it were, of culture into nature, as animals do not observe such a prohibition. Lévi-Strauss did not reflect on the potential connection of sacrifice with the construction of male sociality, and indeed, as Jay states, he "did not consider [sacrifice] a worthwhile subject for theorizing."[17] His preferred topic was myth.

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9 Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," 14. See also ibid., 11.

10 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 33.

11 Yelle, "From Sovereignty to Solidarity."

12 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 33.

13 Ibid., 45.

14 Ibid., 148–9.

15 Bachofen, *Mutterrecht*; McLennan, *Primitive Marriage*; Morgan, *Ancient Society*; Engels, *The Origin of the Family*. For a discussion of the history and debates concerning primitive matriarchy, see Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*; Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*.

16 Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

17 Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xi; see also ibid., 137ff.

This earlier work served as the foundation for Lévi-Strauss's famous analysis of the Oedipus myth, in which he concluded that the central dilemma with which myth struggles is that between two alternatives: "birth from one" versus "birth from two," or autochthony versus sexual reproduction.[18] When Oedipus kills his father, marries his mother, and bears children with her, he is choosing the first alternative. As we know, this choice ultimately goes awry, not only for him but also for the cursed fruits of the incestuous union with Jocasta. Later, in his *Science of Mythology*, Lévi-Strauss reframed the central opposition that is negotiated in myth, though never fully resolved, as that between culture and nature.[19] This opposition is broader as well as more amorphous than the earlier one between autochthony and sexual reproduction, which can be reinterpreted as a subset or variant of the nature-culture divide, given that non-incestuous sexual reproduction also represents, according to Lévi-Strauss, the first cultural institution. Yet by moving further away from his early reading of the Oedipus story as a struggle with the problem of incest or autochthony, Lévi-Strauss appears to have forgotten or repressed what Ortner pointed out, namely that the distinction between nature and culture is also often gendered, by being identified with the opposition between female and male.

Jay's thesis helps us to understand various origin myths, including some from traditions that she did not herself consider. Let me begin with the Hindu story of the creation of the world through an act of sacrifice of a being named "Man" (Puruṣa) from *Rig Veda* 10.90.[20] This myth, which is only one of several cosmogonies in the Vedas, states that everything in the world was created through the sacrifice and dismemberment of this primal man, including the four *varṇas* or divisions of the caste system. This has been taken as a reflex of an earlier Indo-European practice of human sacrifice, which is possibly expressed also in the Norse story of the giant Ymir.[21] The fifth verse of the Vedic hymn states: "From Puruṣa came Virāj, and from Virāj, Puruṣa was born again." The name "Virāj" means sovereignty or splendor, but what is more important is that the word is of the feminine gender, so that the statement translates to: "the male gave birth to the female, who gave birth to the male again." The idea of a movement from male to female, and back again, is repeated later in the *Atharva Veda* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.[22] As I have detailed elsewhere,[23] the same idea was expressed more than 1500 years after the *Rig Veda* in the *haṃsa* mantra – *haṃsaḥ so'ham* – which diagrams this movement through chiasmus and repetition. This formula draws on earlier expressions of the self-identity of the creation with the deity and of the female with the male. Self-identity is not equality, however, as the male definitely comes first. The *haṃsa* mantra drew on another cosmogonic myth, from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4,[24] according to which at the beginning there is only one, male being in the world. Out of loneliness, he splits himself into two halves, male and female – somewhat like Plato's androgyne,[25] but in this case voluntarily – which then copulate. The female part is ashamed of this incest, and transforms into different creatures to escape, but to no avail, as she is pursued by the male, who also transforms. Through their union, all living things are born. The whole cosmology is not merely incestuous but also panentheistic: everything is generated from a single substance, an assumption which, if we believe that myths are only a parallel form of reasoning, represents a kind of logical parsimony, similar though not identical to the *creatio ex nihilo* of Genesis.

However, this is not just primitive science or *pensée sauvage*. The sequence of myths, which is compressed eventually into the few syllables of the *haṃsa* mantra, expresses a definitive choice in favor of patriarchy. It is not merely the case that the male gives birth to the female, but he also gives birth to himself again, and that through an act of "splitting," which may represent sacrifice, just as later the syllables "ha" and "sa" of the *haṃsa* mantra were understood to constitute a metaphorical sacrifice, that coordinated with the in- and outbreaths. This is the cut that excises the contribution of the female to generation. In certain late Vedic texts, we

18 Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," 216.
19 Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*.
20 Text in van Nooten and Holland. Translation in Griffith.
21 Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society*, 21.
22 *Atharva Veda* 14.2.71, quoted in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.4.20. Text and translation in Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*.
23 Yelle, "Intertextuality, Iconicity, and Joint Speech," 57–63.
24 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4. Text and translation in Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*.
25 Plato, *Symposium*, §§189d-191e, 542–4.

find the idea that the father is reborn, as it were, in the son.[26] This identity is established only through the male line, and it is this line that bears the privilege as well as the obligation to sacrifice, precisely for the sake of the fathers, or male ancestors. One had to have a son in order to insure that the proper rituals would be performed for one's own sake in the afterlife. As the *Laws of Manu* later state, a son (*putra*) is needed to save one from the hell called "Put."[27] That this was also an attempt to supplement or replace natural birth is shown by the rituals for the "shaping" or even "perfecting" (*saṃskāra*) of "twice-born" (*dvīja*) males. Vedic sacrifice perpetuated this cycle of intergenerational (male) indebtedness, until eventually it was revaluated as a cycle of rebirth and suffering. The Buddha mocked the *Puruṣa Sūkta* by stating that Brahmins are born, not from the mouth of Brahma (i.e. Puruṣa), but from their mothers' wombs.[28]

The next story is from ancient Greece: Kronos' overcoming by his son, Zeus, in Hesiod's *Theogony*.[29] Kronos, a Titan who has become ruler by castrating his own father Ouranos, is "mindful lest anyone else of Sky's illustrious children should have the honor of kingship among the immortals. For he had heard from Earth and starry Sky that, mighty though he was, he was destined to be overpowered by a child of his [...]."[30] So he swallows his children as soon as they have been born. His wife, Rhea, finally hides her last-born son, Zeus, and gives her husband instead a stone in swaddling clothes to swallow. (The Francisco Goya painting of Saturn devouring his children is more gruesome, because instead of being swallowed whole the child is chewed up.[31]) Rhea's trick succeeds, and Zeus grows in secret until he is mature enough to vanquish his father and take his place as the ruler of a new regime of Olympian gods. In other accounts, Kronos or Saturn, the first king, still rules on a distant island and returns once a year, at the Kronia or Saturnalia, when there is an inversion of the social order, reflecting, perhaps, the antinomian aspects of sovereignty.[32] Kronos was a homonym of Khronos or "time,"[33] and the myth can refer to the succession of the generations, which involves death and the continuation of life through progeny. Yet natural succession is exactly what Hesiod's Kronos attempts, unsuccessfully, to prevent, through violence that can be interpreted as a perverse inversion of childbirth: the children are taken into the body, rather than being pushed out from the body, and through a different opening; the act of eating is a form of re-incorporation, by which Kronos reverses the loss of his seed. Eventually, what Kronos fears comes to pass, and he is deposed by his own children. This may be a comment on the futility of the attempt to halt time.

Although, like the Hindu myth, the story of Kronos devouring his children represents a male effort to undo or replace natural birth, it is less clear that the Greek story has to do with sacrifice. Later, human and even child sacrifices were said to be demanded by Kronos or Saturn.[34] And the power of the father to put the children to death – the *vitae necisque potestas* – was asserted as the traditional prerogative of the patriarch or *paterfamilias*,[35] a figure whom Kronos exemplified. This was also often interpreted as a power to sacrifice, a power poignantly illustrated in some other cases, such as those of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia,[36] Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac,[37] and Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter.[38] It appears significant that, in each of these cases just mentioned, the child that is sacrificed has not *yet* reproduced. Part of the poignancy of the Jephthah story comes from the fact that his daughter is allowed time to mourn her virginity, that is to say,

26 Bodewitz, "The Hindu Doctrine of Transmigration."
27 *Manu* 9.138 offers a fictitious etymology in support of this. Text and translation in Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law*.
28 *Assalayana Sutra*, Middle Discourses 93. See discussion in Gombrich, "Recovering the Buddha's Message."
29 Hesiod, *Theogony*, §§453-506, 38–43.
30 Ibid., §§459-63, 38–9.
31 Francisco Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, ca. 1820-23. Prado Museum, Madrid.
32 Versnel, "Kronos and the Kronia." On the concept of sovereignty as antinomian, see Yelle, *Sovereignty and the Sacred*, 18–20.
33 Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, II.25, 185.
34 Vico, *New Science*, §191, 64.
35 The discussion of Filmer and Hobbes is given below. Where both of these proponents of absolute sovereignty accepted the sovereign's power of life and death, the liberal theorist Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, presented the most famous counterargument against Filmer.
36 Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*.
37 Genesis 22, RSV.
38 Judges 11.

the fact that she will never bear children.[39] The traditional explanation of the preference for virgin offerings is that these are more pure and therefore more acceptable to the gods. This does not seem to account for all of the details satisfactorily. In the Akedah, or Binding of Isaac, the crux is not only that God demands infanticide as a test of loyalty, but also that he has promised Abraham that he will bear generations,[40] a promise that the deity then appears to renege upon, by asking the patriarch to murder his son. Through a *deus ex machina* the grisly event is halted, but this only cements the manner in which sacrifice functions as the foundation of a masculine covenant, a biopolitical institution that supplements, supplants, and sometimes negates natural birth. The blood of sacrifice substitutes for that of birth or menstruation; death substitutes for life. All of this seems tailor-made to cut women out of the deal. As Yvonne Sherwood puts it, "the sacrifice of women [is] at the heart of sacrifice."[41]

Students of myth have long noted the patriarchal ideology in the ancient stories. To placate the gods and launch the Achaean fleet toward Troy, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia.[42] Her sacrifice launches not only the Greek fleet, but also a whole series of tragic consequences for Agamemnon and his family. Upon returning victorious from war after a number of years, he is slain by his wife Clytemnestra,[43] who is killed in turn by their son Orestes, whose intent is to avenge his father.[44] Because of this matricide, Orestes is pursued by the female spirits of vengeance, the Erinyes. The cycle of violence ends only when Orestes is acquitted due to the intervention of Athena, and the Erinyes are given a new role, as the Eumenides, benevolent spirits. Note that, apart from Iphigenia's, the other murders are not obviously sacrifices. Instead, they are about broader conflicts, perennial and universal, that involve the family unit.

In his ground-breaking, though highly speculative work on "Mother-Right" (*Mutterrecht*), J. J. Bachofen noted already the culmination of patriarchy with the trial of Orestes, where Apollo states:

> The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere.[45]

Further evidence for Apollo's argument is the goddess who casts the deciding vote to acquit Orestes of matricide: Athena, who was born from Zeus's brow, rather than from any woman's womb.[46] This episode also represents the triumph of the legal culture of the city of Athens, in place of nature and of mother-right. Athena's own origin reinforces this point. According to certain myths, Zeus heard the prophecy that he would bear a daughter who was wiser than him and a son who would take his place on the throne. So he turned his first wife, Metis, whose name means "wise counsel," into a fly, and swallowed her.[47] Yet she was already pregnant with Athena, who grew inside Zeus until he was forced to bear her from his skull. The story appears to repeat some tropes from the myth of Kronos. Fear of being replaced leads the present king to attempt to halt the natural cycle of sexual reproduction, through an act of cannibalism or infanticide.[48] Another example is Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaus of Pisa, whose husband was prophesied to kill her father. Oenomaus challenged and slayed many suitors before finally being overcome by Pelops, who was aided by Hippodamia.[49]

A similar fear of being replaced by the next generation is evidenced in the story of Oedipus. Like Kronos, and Zeus, and Oenomaus, Oedipus' father, King Laius, hears a prophecy that he will be supplanted.[50] This is

39 Judges 11:39.
40 Genesis 17:7.
41 Sherwood and Hart, *Derrida and Religion*, 28.
42 Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In some versions, a deer substitutes for Iphigenia in the sacrifice, analogous to Isaac's replacement by a ram.
43 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*.
44 Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*.
45 Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, §§657-660.
46 See the discussion of the myth of Zeus and Metis below.
47 Hesiod, *Theogony*, §§886-900, 924; 72–5, 76–7.
48 King, "Reproduction Myths," notes the denial or replacement of sexual reproduction in such stories.
49 Waldner, "Hippodamia."
50 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*.

what induces him, like Kronos, to commit infanticide, by exposing the babe on a mountaintop. In none of these cases is the prophecy averted. The monstrous act of child murder, whether technically a sacrifice or not, is a prerogative of sovereigns: of gods and kings. What is striking, in retrospect, is how Lévi-Strauss, in his exposition of mythologic, managed to ignore not only the role of gender in the story of Oedipus but also the protagonist's status as a sovereign. This status was signaled already in the title of the first installment in Sophocles' trilogy – *Oidipous Tyrannos* – Oedipus the tyrant. Jean-Pierre Vernant interpreted Sophocles' tragedy as a condemnation of tyrants:

> There is a reason to explain… the themes that we have detected in the saga of the Labdacids: lameness, tyranny, power won and lost, the continued or blocked sequence of generations, direct or deviated succession, the correct or deviant nature of sexual relations, agreement or misunderstanding in communications between fathers and sons… The reason is…in the way that the Greeks imagined the figure of the tyrant, [who is]… an individual at once elect and accursed. By rejecting all the rules that the Greeks regarded as the basis for communal life, the tyrant placed himself beyond the social pale. … The wayward, solitary path along which the tyrant, rejecting the beaten track and the posted route, ventures, exiles him far from the city of men,… relegating him to an isolation comparable both to that of a god, who is too far above men to come down to their level, and to that of a wild beast, so dominated by its appetites that it can brook no restraint.[51]

Vernant turns Oedipus into a version of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, who is simultaneously above and beneath the social order.[52] In another essay, Vernant identifies Oedipus with the *pharmakos*, a victim chosen annually at Athens from the lower orders, feted as a temporary king, and subsequently exiled or ritually slaughtered.[53] Oedipus is also an example of the pattern that Marshall Sahlins described as the "Stranger King," a ruler who comes from outside, and whose behavior is marked by transgressions, such as murder, incest, and cannibalism.[54] In Oedipus's case, he first had to be cast out, and then raised elsewhere, so that when he returned home it was as a kind of revenant, who did not recognize his father or mother, and committed crimes upon them. What links such banned figures, as we know following Agamben, is that each is an expression of sovereignty.

It could indeed be the case, as Vernant contends, that such behavior is characteristic of the tyrant. Yet from another perspective, this is just the manner in which all kings (potentially) behave, particularly when confronted by the threat of a successor. Nor is Oedipus' parricidal violence atypical for a challenger to the throne. The violence depicted in each of these myths arguably expresses the bloodshed that numerous theorists have identified as associated with an interregnum, the often-messy handover of rule from one king to another. It was precisely this moment that James George Frazer alluded to at the beginning of *The Golden Bough*, when he narrated the figure of the priest in the grove at Nemi outside Rome, a priest who was both king and murderer and who waited with drawn sword for a challenger to attack him and assume his position.[55] Frazer interpreted this myth and many others partly as an allegory for the agricultural cycle and the change of seasons. Yet in less natural and more social terms, what the wheel of time brings is a change of rule. "The King is dead; long live the King."[56] It is this changing of the guard that both Kronos and Laius attempt, vainly, to forestall. Kantorowicz also highlighted precisely such moments of succession or interregnum as those in which the self-identity of the sovereign is secured by the legal fiction of his immortality and rebirth. The king's second body or *corpus mysticum* is the expression of this fiction. And as we have seen, this mystical body is male, even when such gender is neither marked nor remarked upon. The boundaries of this body are fixed by the limits of the sacrificial community, of which the king is the head.

The original version of this community was the family, as headed by the *paterfamilias*, who as noted above possessed the power to put his own children to death, which was interpreted as a power to sacrifice. This is the precedent that Robert Filmer invoked in the seventeenth century in defense of the divine right of kings. Filmer

51 Vernant, "The Lame Tyrant," 226–7.

52 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

53 Vernant, "Ambiguity and Reversal," 113–40. On the *pharmakos*, see Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, 139–65.

54 Sahlins, "The Stranger King;" Sahlins, "The Stranger-King or, Elementary Forms of the Politics of Life."

55 Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 1–2.

56 Ibid., 827.

traced this right by descent from Adam, the first king and patriarch, as well as the first man and human. Filmer stated, "that *Adam* and the *Patriarchs* had Absolute power of Life and Death, of Peace and War,... within their Houses or Families [...]"[57], noted that "the Judicial Law of Moses giveth full power to the Father to stone his disobedient Son,"[58] and mentioned Judah's sentence that Tamar be burned.[59] Filmer cited Jean Bodin's definition of a family as "all Persons under the Obedience of One and the Same Head of the Family," and other definitions that identify a family as "those that feed together" and "those that sit by a Common Fire, or Smoak"[60]: food, fire, and smoke. The family that sacrifices together, hangs together. Or at least some of them hang. Engels later followed Lewis Henry Morgan in claiming that

> The original meaning of the word 'family' (*familia*) is not that compound of sentimentality and domestic strife which forms the ideal of the present-day philistine; among the Romans it did not at first even refer to the married pair and their children, but only to the slaves. *Famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man. ... The term was invented by the Romans to denote a new social organism, whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with rights of life and death over them all.[61]

The Roman *paterfamilias* was a despot. Filmer superimposed this model on the biblical Adam, although the first man never exercised his right to kill his own children. Still, from one patriarchal system to another, there may not have been such a great difference. As Yvonne Sherwood writes,

> The genealogical/reproductive model in the book of Genesis is monogenesis: from the body of the father to the body of the son. Purely male genealogies run like an umbilical cord from father to son to grandson. ... Birth has to be substituted by sacrifice as 'birth done better' or reproductive powers have to be given to the mother through the intercession of the father to a God gendered as male. Filmer literalises the familial politics of Genesis to produce a dystopia far more disturbing than the Genesis-based model [...][62]

In an earlier work, *The Anarchy of a Limited or Mixed Monarchy*, Filmer traced patriarchy back to God's curse in Genesis 3:16. Women's servitude came as part of the Fall, together with sexuality and childbirth.[63] Kingship is both eternal and paternal. We could, of course, go back even further, to the creation story in the second chapter of Genesis, where Eve is created out of a bone in Adam's side. If the very substance of the human family is derived from this one source, then the rule of this singular being is a form of (incestuous) biopolitics, as well as a matter of simple logic. That logic is, at base, the argument that the rule by one man is best.

1 Concluding Reflections on Myth

These reflections on several apparently similar myths from different cultural traditions – Hindu, Hebrew biblical, and ancient Greek – lead to some more general observations. While supporting, in broad terms, Jay's thesis regarding the manner in which sacrifices operate, as a patriarchal (and ideological) supplement for natural birth, a survey of myths suggests that not all of the myths concern sacrifice per se, but that sacrifice instead may reflect a broader dynamic, which we might term the problem of *economy*: the struggle among various parties regarding the distribution of scarce goods. Although we are now conditioned to think of economics in purely rationalist terms, and in the context of markets and money, the etymology of the term "economy" as the "rule" (*nomos*) of distribution within a "household" (*oikos*) shows that, originally, the term had reference to the family, which as we have just seen is a complex entity fraught with its own internal

57 Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 35.
58 Ibid., 38.
59 Ibid., 13.
60 Ibid., 34–5.
61 Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 31.
62 Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming*, 319.
63 Filmer, *The Anarchy of a Limited or Mixed Monarchy*, 6.

dynamics and power struggles, not all of which can be reduced to purely material considerations. Both Bernhard Laum and Carl Schmitt have traced the Greek term *nomos*/*nemein* to the idea of "distribution" (*Verteilung*): in Laum's case, the division of the meat from an animal sacrifice,[64] and in Schmitt's case, the division of the land for pasturing, which he illustrates by the Schechem covenant following the Conquest of Canaan.[65] Although both of these thinkers, therefore, connect economy with sacrifice – in Schmitt's case, indirectly – we see that, in broader terms, economy means the division and distribution of various goods, including authority, within a given social or biopolitical unit. Sacrifice is a primary, but not the only means of effecting this distribution.[66]

Indeed, often in these stories of intrafamilial conflict, there is no explicit mention of sacrifice. The Oedipus story involves attempted infanticide, parricide, and incest, and while the closely related story of Kronos might suggest child sacrifice (via the metaphor of ingestion or cannibalism), this is subordinated to the theme of contestation over sovereignty or the succession of power. This does not mean that these stories are completely unconnected with sacrifice: in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the story of Kronos is followed closely by the story of the trick at Mecone, where the gods were deceived into accepting an inferior portion of the sacrifice.[67] They retaliated through Pandora. Not only the generations of the gods, but also humans and gods were in competition with one another, a competition for which sacrifice often served as a metaphor. In the Bible, the competition of humans with gods is expressed, *inter alia*, in the stories of the Fall from Paradise[68] – where humans threaten to become like gods and are expelled from Eden before they can taste the fruit of immortality – and the Tower of Babel, where humans are brought low before they can reach heaven.[69] These stories appear to emphasize the need for a clear boundary between humanity and divinity, a principle reinforced also by the events of Genesis 6, where God sets an upper limit of 120 years on the mortal lifespan, and sends a flood that destroys the Giants (*nephilim*), offspring produced by the union of the Sons of Heaven and the Daughters of Men. Each of these episodes serves to bring humanity further from divinity. Yet none has any direct connection with sacrifice.

We therefore need to be careful when using the category of sacrifice to analyze the ancient myths, because this category may obscure similarities and differences both within and across traditions. The biblical stories of Isaac, Jesus, and Jephthah's daughter are much more obviously about sacrifice than are the Greek myths discussed above. Yet, like some similar stories in other traditions, they use the family unit and kinship as the basic metaphor for expressing problems of the economy. Child-killing is evidently a trope shared by a number of ancient Hebrew and Greek myths, which is sufficiently shocking and presumably always added a dramatic element. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the idea that the first-born males – whether animal or human – are consecrated to God,[70] i.e., devoted in advance as sacrifices in fulfilment of a covenant between God and the people of Israel, is a recurrent theme. Human males are included in the list of intended victims, but the suspension of this death sentence through the substitution of animal victims or through service by the Levitical priesthood (which performed the sacrifices), indicates an effort to separate from and criticize the practice of child sacrifice associated with closely related Semitic traditions, including Canaanite religion. Jephthah's unnamed daughter is a sad exception.[71] Although her sacrifice is said to be conducted in accordance with a vow (*neder*), it coincides with two forms of the *ḥerem* or devotion to destruction: the war-*ḥerem* carried out against Canaanite cities[72], and the dedication of an individual, human victim.[73]

64 Laum, *Heiliges Geld*, 29.
65 Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 345.
66 And it should also of course be recognized that myths about sacrifice and sacrificial practices are distinct, although both may be viewed, in structuralist terms, as forms of mediation, or what I am here calling distribution.
67 Hesiod, *Theogony*, §§535-57, 44–7.
68 Genesis 3.
69 Genesis 11.
70 Exodus 13:1–2.
71 Judges 11.
72 Judges 6.
73 Leviticus 27:28–9.

Despite these cultural specificities, there are some similarities between Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter and Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, which is also performed with the intention of placating the gods and receiving a benefit in exchange. Where Jephthah receives victory in battle, Agamemnon gains the ability to launch the Greek armada towards Troy. Both of these cases can be interpreted as expressions of the *do ut des* theory of sacrifice[74] and of the notion that a human victim, especially a (virgin) child, is especially valuable and therefore more effective. In the case of Jephthah's daughter, the fact that the victim is chosen apparently at random or by fate is a common idea found, e.g. in the Eastern European story of Master Manole and his wife,[75] which is usually classified as a foundation sacrifice (Bauopfer).

The idea that God asserts ownership, via sacrifice, over every firstborn male, is first made explicit as part of the Mosaic legislation. However, even before this, in the binding of Isaac, this idea may be present. Isaac is Sarah's firstborn, and at an advanced maternal age. In the case of Jephthah's daughter, she is his only child, and his line is extinguished. (He is said to have been born to a prostitute, which may overdetermine the idea that his line did not deserve to continue.) In any case, he was only a Judge or temporary ruler. In the case of Jesus, whose death is also interpreted as a sacrifice, he is notably God's firstborn male child; unlike with Isaac, the child is not withheld. This fulfills the command of Exodus 13:1-2 while also ending it permanently: the Letter to the Hebrews claims that, henceforth, no further sacrifices are required. From a political perspective, Jesus's death prevents his royal line from continuing, enabling the sublation of Hebrew kingship through the "Kingdom of Heaven" idea. The identity and continuity of sacred kingship are secured, by being distinguished permanently from worldly rule.

I am tempted to see here a difference between Hebrew and Greek ideas of kingship. Where a number of the Greek stories (of Kronos, Oedipus, and Oenomaus) are more evidently concerned with succession than with sacrifice, even most of the stories of sacrifice from the Hebrew Bible that we have been considering are connected in some way with the problem of rulership and its legitimation. This is certainly how these accounts were read by early modern theorists, not only Filmer but also Thomas Hobbes, for whom the story of Jephthah was mainly about the sovereign power over life and death.[76]

In all of these stories of dysfunctional families, whether they involve infanticide, parricide, matricide, incest, cannibalism, etc., the family unit appears as an organic entity that exhibits tensions both within itself and in relation to what exists beyond its boundaries. The kinship categories of endogamy vs exogamy, or consanguinity vs affinity – the most extreme form of endogamy being incest or even autochthony – become metaphors that permit reflection on these tensions. Lévi-Strauss treated the contradiction between these two options, namely "birth from one" or "birth from two," as if they were primarily logical abstractions, which in the case of cosmogonic myths that have to explain the origins of a diverse world, may perhaps be the case. Yet in other contexts, as we have seen, these metaphors are used to reflect upon the rather more pragmatic and even mundane conflicts between male and female, or one generation and the next, as well as on the manner of connection between human and divine. Matthew 1, which provides Jesus with two different genealogies – one royal and human, the other divine – tries to have it both ways. To Lévi-Strauss's question, "birth from one" or "birth from two," Matthew answers "Yes." Because the category of divinity is connected, not only in the Hebrew Bible but generally, with kingship, we could subsume many of these myths under the single idea of the body politic, understood as a composite or corporate form, marked by both continuity and extension, both identity and alterity. What makes the bodily metaphor so intuitive, and the stories based upon this metaphor so poignant, is that we are all embodied and mortal creatures.

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74 Van der Leeuw, "Die *do-ut-des*-Formel in der Opfertheorie."

75 Stamatoiu, "The Anthropological Archaeology of the Builder Myth."

76 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 21. Hobbes was not explicit regarding his view of sacrifice, presumably because he wished to demystify this as a theological misconception of the sovereign's monopoly over violence.

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