

# *Apollonius of Tyana On Sacrifice*



Offering of fruits to the Moon Goddess (1757) Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo  
Villa Valmarana, Vicenza

## Sacrifice is the pastime of the atheist

The gods are in no need of sacrifices. What then can one do in order to win their favour? One can, in my opinion, acquire wisdom, and, so far as one can, do good to such men as deserve it. This pleases the gods; atheists however can offer sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

**No wonder our cities are visited by calamity when the priests defile the altar with blood.**

The priests defile the altar with blood, and then some people ask in amazement why our cities are visited with calamities, when they have courted displeasure on the largest scale. O what folly and dullness! Heraclitus was wise, but not even he could persuade the Ephesians not to purge away mud with mud.<sup>2, 3</sup>

**It is best to make no sacrifice to God or gods at all.**

'Tis best to make no sacrifice to God at all, no lighting of a fire, no calling Him by any name that men employ for things to sense.

For God is over all, the first; and only after Him do come the other Gods.

For He doth stand in need of naught e'en from the Gods, much less from us small men — naught that the earth brings forth, nor any life she nurseth, or even anything the stainless air contains.

The only fitting sacrifice to God is man's best reason, and not the word [logos]<sup>4</sup> that comes from out his mouth.

We men should ask the best of beings through the best thing in us, for what is good. I mean by means of mind, for mind needs no material things to make its prayer.

So then, to God, the mighty One, who's over all, no sacrifice should ever be lit up.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. II, (Epistle 26 to the Priests in Olympia), p. 427; tr. Conybeare.

<sup>2</sup> [*i.e.*, "When defiled, they purify themselves with blood, just as if any one who had fallen into the mud should wash himself with mud!" (Tr. Patrick) Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* I, 6; full text in our Hellenic and Hellenistic Papers]

<sup>3</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. II, (Epistle 27 to the Priests in Delphi), p. 428; tr. Conybeare.

<sup>4</sup> [A play on the meanings of λόγος, which signifies both reason and word.]

<sup>5</sup> Fragment from an old treatise on sacrifices found "in several temples, and in several cities, and in the houses of several learned men" written in the Cappadocian tongue (Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Bk. III, § 41, & IV, 19) and quoted by Eusebius in *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Bk. IV, ch. 13; tr. Mead.

**The Cappadocian Adept never sacrificed to gods like the rest.**

**Following the example of Pythagoras who sacrificed a bull made out of flour, Apollonius sacrificed a bull made out of frankincense.**

And when he had gone up into the temple, he was struck by the orderliness of its arrangements, and thought the reason given for everything thoroughly religious and wisely framed. But as for the blood of bulls and the sacrifices of geese and other animals, he disapproved of them nor would he bring them to repasts of the gods. And when a priest asked him what induced him not to sacrifice like the rest. Replied Apollonius:

Nay, you should rather answer me what induces you to sacrifice in this way.

*And who is so clever that he can make corrections in the rites of the Egyptians?*

Anyone, with a little wisdom, if only he comes from India. And I will roast a bull to ashes this very day, and you shall hold communion with us in the smoke it makes; for you cannot complain, if you only get the same portion which is thought enough of a repast for the gods.

And as his image<sup>1</sup> was being melted in the fire he said:

Look at the sacrifice.

Said the Egyptian:

What sacrifice, for I do not see anything there.

Said Apollonius:

The Iamidae and the Telliadae and the Clytiadae and the oracle of the black-footed ones, have they talked a lot of nonsense, most excellent priest, when they went on at such length about fire, and pretended to gather so many oracles from it? For as to the fire from pine wood and from the cedar, do you think it is really fraught with prophecy and capable of revealing anything, and yet not esteem a fire lit from the richest and purest gum to be much preferable? If then you had really any acquaintance with the lore of fire worship, you would see that many things are revealed in the disc of the sun at the moment of its rising.<sup>2</sup>

**He merely asked whatever was due to him.**

Telesinus,<sup>3</sup> one of the consuls, called Apollonius to him, and said:

*What is this dress which you wear?*

A pure garment made from no dead matter.

*And what is your wisdom?*

An inspiration, which teaches men how to pray and sacrifice to the gods.

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<sup>1</sup> A frankincense model of a bull.

<sup>2</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. I, Bk. V, § 25, p. 519; tr. Conybeare.

<sup>3</sup> [Gaius Luccius Telesinus]

*And is there anyone, my philosopher, who does not know that already?*

Many, and if there is here and there a man who understands these matters aright, he will be very much improved by hearing from a man who is wiser than himself that, what he knows, he knows for a certainty.

When Telesinus heard this, for he was a man fairly disposed to worship and religion, he recognized the sage from the rumours which he had long before heard about him; and though he did not think he need openly ask him his name, in case he wished to conceal his identity from anyone, he nevertheless led him on to talk afresh about religion, for he was himself an apt reasoner, and feeling that he was addressing a sage, he asked:

*What do you pray for when you approach the altars?*

I for my part pray that justice may prevail, that the laws may not be broken, that the wise may continue to be poor, but that others may be rich, as long as they are so without fraud.

*Then, when you ask for so much, do you think you will get it?*

Yes, by Zeus, for I string together all my petitions in a single prayer, and when I reach the altars this is how I pray:

*O ye gods, bestow on me whatever is due.*

If therefore I am of the number of worthy men, I shall obtain more than I have said; but if the gods rank me among the wicked, then they will send to me the opposite of what I ask; and I shall not blame the gods, because for my demerit I am judged worthy of evil.<sup>1</sup>

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The real "Father in Heaven" abhors any form of blood shedding. The only thing animal man ought to be killing is his arrogance, selfishness, and cruelty. See *Compassion: the Spirit of Truth* (2009), in our Major Works Series, Ch. 8, § "Slay your Mind," pp. 278-92.



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<sup>1</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. I, Bk. IV, § 40, pp. 443-45; tr. Conybeare.