

**THE SACRED
EXECUTIONER:
Human Sacrifice and the
Legacy of Guilt**
by Hyam Maccoby
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wait for a sign, be it an x ray or a photograph of an ancestor, anything to measure their drift through the matter-of-fact. Yet the changes they undergo are largely superficial. The reader waits for intimations of a more significant change of heart.

The origins of both Judaism and Christianity can be traced to the practice of human sacrifice. What distinguishes the two, asserts Judaic scholar Maccoby, is the response of each to its primitive origins. Many ancient myths include a human sacrifice offered to the gods by a "Sacred Executioner" who becomes both progenitor and scapegoat of his blood-tainted community. Old Testament authors drew upon such myths, altering them piecemeal to reflect the Hebrew belief that human sacrifice was anathema and had to be replaced by other rites. Maccoby's interpretive *tour de force* shows that the Genesis story through the Flood derives from a Kenite tribal myth whose protagonist, Cain, initiates his people's history with a human sacrifice. The Old Testament represents the act as a brutal murder—incited by rebellion against God's expressed preference for Abel's offering. Noah's animal sacrifice after the flood sublimates the ritual human slaughter performed by the mythical Kenite, Lamech, the original Noah. In the Abraham and Isaac story, human sacrifice is explicitly rejected by God, who provides an animal substitute. But, says Maccoby, the rise of Christianity, influenced by the dying-and-reborn gods of Greek religion, was a step backward to human sacrifice. To bear the guilt for such a primitive expiation, Jews became the collective "Sacred Executioner." Fated to wander until the millenium, they would finally be converted or exterminated. The virulent Anti-christ doctrine that inspired Nazi anti-Semitism derived from such visions of the Jews' destiny, argues Maccoby. Deepening our understanding of Old Testament sources, Maccoby challenges the notion of a seamless "Judeo-Christian" ethic.