

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*. Edited by Jennifer Wright KUNST and Zsuzsanna VÁRHELYI . Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii + 330. Hardcover, £45.00/\$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-973896-0.

If a reviewer must deal with a volume of essays by fifteen hands, about four societies (Egypt, Israel, Greece, and the Roman Empire), and about five religions (add Christianity to Roman paganism), he may be relieved that, to judge from the title, he has to deal with one period, one sea, and one rite, but this feeling is deceptive: the subject of this book, the rite of "sacrifice," is controversial. David Frankfurter's essay, "Egyptian Religion and the Problem of the Category 'Sacrifice,'" shows that, if "sacrifice" means what Classicists commonly suppose, there was no such thing in Egypt. Frankfurter's essay is in the first section of the book, entitled "Theorizing Sacrifice," but the same evangel appears in an essay in the second part, "Negotiating Power through Sacrifice," for here James Rives, in "The Theology of Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek World: Origins and Developments," shows that "sacrifice" was not an important subject for Greek and Roman writers until well into the Common Era, a conclusion that means that early objections to sacrifice, as by Xenophanes, were not objections to the rite, a subject that did not interest these writers, but objections to eating certain foods. At this point, the cautious reader (including the reviewer, sworn to caution) might wonder when or where "sacrifice" is to be found, but this volume has not yet reached its peak or nadir, its third section, "Imaginary Sacrifice," in which Kathryn McClymond, in "Don't Cry Over Spilled Blood," shows how the *Mishnah* deals with "ritual errors" in the performance of sacrifice, but does so centuries after Israelite sacrifices ceased to occur.

McClymond raises the question of what "sacrifice" means. Does it mean animal sacrifice more than, or instead of, vegetal or liquid sacrifice? The ancient evidence says otherwise, and Stanley Stowers, in the lead essay in the "Theorizing" section, conveys as much through his title, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences, and Textual Mysteries." Stowers is unfair to essences, which include incense, but his attack on meanings and mysteries is polemically understandable. A sacrificial offering was first of all a

donative, not a mammal. If an offering need not be a mammal, it need not be violent, a conclusion that raises objections to the two best-known theories of sacrifice, those of Walter Burkert and the French duo of J.-P. Vernant and Marcel Detienne. When acts of violence are nonetheless associated with sacrifice, we ought to interrogate our sources, as emerges from Zsuzsanna Várhely's "Political Murder and Sacrifice: From Roman Republic to Empire." In "The Embarrassment of Blood: Early Christians and Others on Sacrifice, War, and Rational Worship," Laura Nasrallah does likewise, too, but includes state-sanctioned violence. Roman and Christian writers who associate some killings with sacrifice are playing a prose version of the game that Albert Henrichs has shown that the tragedians play—the game of rhetorical transgression.

Then there is the other stand-by of recent theories—the notion that sacrifice consolidated communities. Once Christian emperors banned public pagan sacrifices, private pagan sacrifices were all that remained, and so a rite that once was sometimes communal (for it was never always so), became private, as noted by Michele Renee Salzman in "The End of Public Sacrifice: Changing Definitions of Sacrifice in Post-Constantinian Rome and Italy."

If scholars using the term "sacrifice" have been too sure of what it means, they also have been too sure of the attitude of their sources—Henrichs' lesson, again, illustrated in this book by Fritz Graf's "A Satirist's Sacrifices: Lucian's *On Sacrifices* and the Contestation of Religious Traditions." About sacrifice as about other things, Lucian is funny because he is clear-minded. His image of Zeus walking about Olympus, looking out portals for sacrificial smoke, for prayers, and for hymns, captures the absurdities of communication with this anthropomorphic god better than any Christian polemic, if only because Lucian's image could be turned against any such god. This image cuts too deep. Yet as Graf says, Lucian's critique is neither destructive nor reformist. Here Graf links up with Rives' point about the limits of ancient pagan interest in any theory of sacrifice.

If a writer like Philo uses *thusia*, "what burns," in lieu of common Hebrew terms that mean "what ascends," like *holah*, but that often mean something else, like *zebah shelamim* and *minchah* do, then, as William K. Gilders shows, we can trace the problem of defining sacrifice to several centuries before Christianity. In the same spirit, Philippa Townsend, in "Bonds of Flesh and Blood: Porphyry, Animal Sacrifice, and Empire," shows that Porphyry was a relativist as well as polemicist.

If the circumcision of Jesus counts as a sacrifice (and Andrew S. Jacobs argues that it did, in "Passing: Jesus' Circumcision and the Strategic Self-Sacrifice")

and if the rabbinic “Story of the Ten Martyrs,” victims of Hadrianic persecution, is one of sacrifice as well as martyrdom, as though the two terms were interchangeable, then “sacrifice” has become all too capacious a term. This book’s two studies that define sacrifice—“Symbol, Function, Theology, and Morality in the Study of Priestly Ritual,” by Jonathan Klawans, and “Contesting the Meaning of Animal Sacrifice,” by Daniel Ullucci, do not solve this problem. Read this book to learn why you do not need to read books on this subject.

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