Eberhart, Christian A., ed.

*Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*

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Greg Carey
Lancaster Theological Seminary
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

This selection of papers from the 2007, 2008, and 2009 sessions of the SBL “Sacrifice, Cult and Atonement” program unit includes four essays on sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, followed by five on sacrifice in early Christian literature, with an introduction and a conclusion by the editor. The volume includes indices of ancient sources and of subjects. An index of modern authors would have been helpful. As one might expect from a selection of conference papers, the volume offers neither comprehensive coverage of the subject nor the articulation of a coherent methodology or point of view. On the other hand, *Ritual and Metaphor* introduces several diverse approaches to sacrifice—and especially to the capacity of Jewish and Christian groups to adapt and interpret sacrificial discourse in a variety of contexts.

application of sacrificial metaphors to Jesus’ death. The present volume reflects this range of interests.

James W. Watts’s essay stands out as particularly provocative (“The Rhetoric of Sacrifice,” 3–16). Though his essay stands within the book’s Hebrew Bible section and his contribution emerges from a book on Leviticus (Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007]), Watts adopts a cross-cultural and rhetorical approach. Watts argues that sacrificial language derives its meaning not from some abstract system of religious necessity but from stories of sacrifice present in the narrative tradition. To call an act, ritual or otherwise, a “sacrifice” implies a comparison to “some paradigmatic action in a hero’s, or a villain’s, story” (16). Moreover, reflection on sacrifice is rooted in the problems attendant to human sacrifice; in this respect animal sacrifice is always interpreted through some analogy to human sacrifice. Thus, later reflection on sacrifice indicates a disposition toward the “praise and blame, admiration and horror” appropriate to “legitimate and illegitimate killing of human beings” (15).

Noting that the Hebrew Bible never articulates a theory of sacrifice, Eberhart demonstrates that none of the Hebrew terms related to sacrifice refer to the act of ritual slaughter (“Sacrifice? Holy Smokes! Reflections on Cult Terminology for Understanding Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible,” 17–32). All of them, however, include the act of burning that consummates the sacrifice. Biblical sacrifice, then, is not about killing so much as about relationship. Israel brings its offerings into God’s presence, and the fire provides the medium of exchange.

Jason Tatlock shows that, once we abandon the widespread assumption that human sacrifice is foreign to the Hebrew Bible, many texts begin to look very different (“The Place of Human Sacrifice in the Israelite Cult,” 33–48). The Akedah account “embodies the historical development of firstborn sacrifice” in Israel (38): YHWH initially demands the sacrifice of the firstborn, but the provision of a ram reflects the rite’s obsolescence (Exod 13:12–15; 22:28–29; 34:18–20; Num 18:14–17). Moreover, traditions regarding the purgation/atonement of blood by means of slaughter “in the presence of” or “to” Yahweh indicate a ritual element to capital punishment. Those who assert a metaphorical sense for the sacrificial language in these passages now have a lot of work to do. Tatlock concludes by reflecting upon the Servant in Isa 53 as an instance of human sacrifice.

Closing the Hebrew Bible section, Göran Eidevall presents the promising outlines of his study on the use of sacrificial imagery in prophetic rhetoric (“The Role of Sacrificial Language in Prophetic Rhetoric,” 49–61). Working from the assumption that ancient persons would scarcely have dismissed sacrifice as outmoded or immoral, Eidevall
identifies sacrificial discourse applied to (1) the defeat of hostile nations, (2) critique of religious and political leaders, (3) visions of Jerusalem’s restoration, and (4) a future when foreigners will worship YHWH. This sort of paper is perfectly appropriate as a conference presentation, and the project is highly suggestive, but one hopes for more specific findings in a published essay.

Jeffrey S. Siker opens the early Christian literature section by exploring a question that has vexed many theologically sensitive readers: How does the literature characterize Jesus as a Passover lamb who also does away with sin (“Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Sacrifice in Early Christianity,” 65–82)? The Passover lamb has to do with deliverance; by contrast, the two goats—not lambs—of Yom Kippur deal with sin. Dealing especially with Paul and the Fourth Gospel, Siker maintains that early Christians creatively combined Passover and Yom Kippur imagery. The Passover association came naturally, due to the timing of Jesus’ death. But the atonement/purification motif required greater creativity. Moreover, it is the Yom Kippur association that led to reflection on Jesus’ moral purity.

Stephen Finlan helpfully demands precision in how scholars speak of the “spiritualization” of sacrifice and offers six possible meanings for such analysis (“Spiritualization of Sacrifice in Paul and Hebrews,” 83–97). Paul blends the use of sacrifice to describe spiritual states (“present your bodies as a living sacrifice”; Rom 12:1 NRSV) with his conceptualization of Jesus’ death as an efficacious sacrifice (Rom 3:25). Hebrews, on the other hand, promotes an antisacrificial point of view. “Hebrews may be inverting cultic principles, but the inversion still has a cultic shape” (95): though inconsistent in its assessment of sacrifice in the past, Hebrews insists upon the finality of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Timothy Wardle observes that Christians early appropriated sacrificial discourse but were initially reluctant to invoke priestly language in comparison with their use of temple and sacrifice metaphors (“Who Is Sacrificing? Assessing the Early Christian Reticence to Transfer the Idea of the Priesthood to the Community,” 99–114). This relative delay reflects other precedents in Judaism, in which temples and sacrifices were somewhat fluid, but the priestly lineage went unchallenged. Finlan speculates that Christians began adopting priestly metaphors only after Gentiles reached critical mass in the churches and the Jerusalem temple no longer existed. Like Finlan, Wardle seeks precision in the application of “spiritualization” language to describe sacrificial discourse in early Christianity.

Dominka A. Kurek-Chomycz argues for a sacrificial reading of 2 Cor 2:14–16, specifically in terms of incense offerings to YHWH (“Spreading the Sweet Scent of the Gospel as the Cult of the Wise: On the Backdrop of the Olfactory Metaphor in 2 Corinthians 2:14–16,” 115–33). She also demonstrates a strong connection between sacrificial and wisdom
discourses in the link between 2 Cor 2:14–16 and especially Sir 24:15. The power of her interpretation lies in Paul’s contrast between odors associated with death and those identified with life: by Paul’s day incense offerings clearly functioned as sacrifice, and their unauthorized or inappropriate administration could be deadly (126).

A final essay by George Heyman is more theoretically inclined (“Sacrifice, Social Discourse, and Power,” 135–51). Emphasizing the Greco-Roman more than the Jewish context, Heyman points to the social-constitutive function of sacrifice as a primary source of tension between early Christians and their neighbors. He also demonstrates the plasticity of sacrificial metaphors, most notably demonstrated in Christian theological reflection on the significance of Jesus’ death. Within this volume, Heyman’s essay stands out for its strong association between sacrifice and killing.

Eberhart’s brief conclusion reemphasizes sacrifice discourse’s versatility and his contention that the primary referent of ancient sacrificial metaphor lies in offering to God rather than to killing (153–56).

Scholars who specialize in sacrifice will find this volume an excellent source with which to engage the most recent work on the topic, including the research of emerging scholars. Uniformly well written, these essays will also interest nonspecialists who desire a sense of sacrificial language in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity, including readers who desire to bring contemporary theology into conversation with its ancient roots.