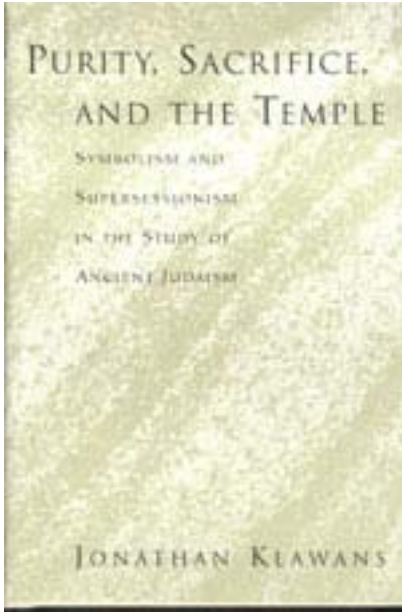


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**Klawans, Jonathan**

***Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism***

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In this important book, Jonathan Klawans demonstrates that scholars have treated the subject of sacrifice with an embarrassing lack of rigor. Klawans argues that in the study of sacrifice, for all its popularity over the past two hundred years, our discipline's misplaced obsession with origins is still unquestioningly accepted. As a result, even the most careful scholars still harbor some evolutionist assumptions about sacrifice that would not be tolerated in discussions of other religious phenomena.

*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* has two stated goals. First, Klawans wants to examine concepts of sacrifice in Israelite religion and ancient Judaism without falling prey to supersessionist assumptions. These assumptions, Klawans maintains, mar the scholarship of historians of all religious persuasions. The Christian tradition teaches that animal sacrifice has been superseded by the death of Jesus, while Judaism takes as axiomatic that animal sacrifice was replaced by prayer and Torah study after the destruction of the Second Temple. (Reformed Judaism goes on to assert that this is a good thing that need never be "changed back.") For Christianity, and for liberal strains of Judaism, animal sacrifice is assumed to be barbaric and outmoded, a transitional phase in God's plan for the world. Since even Christian and Jewish scholars betray a lack of sympathy for the sacrificial practices of their spiritual ancestors, secular scholars find no reason to take it

seriously at all: nothing in our culture provides any compelling reason to support animal sacrifice, even in an abstract way.

One of the most startling revelations that Klawans's book provides is that no emic study of Israelite sacrifice has been written since, well, perhaps since Leviticus, but at the very least since Maimonides. Instead of engaging with the already-developed sacrificial system of ancient Israel within its social and literary context, modern scholars have constantly tried to dig back through prehistory to find the beginnings of sacrificial practice everywhere, collapsing Greco-Roman, Israelite, and Vedic materials into some prehistoric "Big Bang." Perhaps there is nothing wrong with this approach in and of itself, but Klawans argues that no one has taken any *other* approach to sacrifice since William Robertson Smith wrote *The Religion of the Semites* in 1889. Klawans points out that not every book on Jewish circumcision searches for the origins of all body modifications across all cultures. Why is sacrifice in particular treated in this way? In a thoughtful aside, Klawans ventures some possible answers to that question, suggesting that many post-industrial writers and readers feel a deep-rooted anxiety about environmental degradation, animal abuse, capitalist excess, and consumerism. Those anxieties leak into their analysis, just as Victorian obsessions with sex can be detected in innumerable books about phallic cults.

Klawans is not the first to make at least some of these observations. For a generation now, historians have been aware that sacrifice is often yoked into the service of totalizing, reductionistic theories about religion. (René Girard is singled out by Klawans for particularly brutal critique, although no author before Mary Douglas—and only a few after her—come off especially well in his review of the literature.) For much of his career, Jonathan Z. Smith has deplored the strong antiritual bias that plagues the academic study of religion. Sacrifice is often imagined to be the most wasteful, violent, and meaningless example of ancient rituals, which are already "mechanical" and "empty." This is an argument that Klawans uses to good effect and with due respect to those who made it before him.

*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* goes further, however, arguing that criticisms of sacrifice in modern scholarship arise out of stubborn, and surprisingly consistent, misreadings of ancient texts. Scholars who see sacrifice in terms of divine food (following Robertson Smith), or gift exchange (following Mauss), or the management of violence within a society (following Girard), simply cannot justify any of those perspectives from within the biblical or rabbinic traditions: the original texts never interpret what they are doing in those terms. Freudians and neo-Freudians, like Girard, get around this problem by claiming to "read between the lines" in order to find the "unconscious motivations" of the text. Klawans has no patience for this approach. I think this is unfortunate, since reading

against the grain can be a very productive hermeneutical strategy, as can be seen in the work of scholars who seek to understand minority viewpoints on, say, heresy or gender. Nevertheless, I agree with him when he says that sacrificial texts are frequently read with a peculiar lack of charity and with an aggressive theoretical agenda.

The second goal of Klawans's book is, unfortunately, not pursued very effectively after the first chapter. Klawans makes the case that, for the Israelites, purity and sacrifice were intimately connected. The rules for one depend on the rules for the other, and discussions of the two concepts always appear together in biblical ritual material. Thanks to Mary Douglas, ritual purity is now taken seriously in biblical studies. No historian will dismiss Leviticus as a primitive attempt at legislating hygiene after reading *Purity and Danger*, and even those who do not apply purity law in their own religious lives will generally admit that Israelite legal codes served a genuinely useful social and symbolic function. Klawans seems to want modern scholarly interest in, and respect for, ritual purity to "spill over" into analyses of sacrifice, and he spends much time in this book expressing his frustration with the authors who have tried (and, in his opinion, failed) to treat sacrificial practice fairly.

The rest of Klawans's book is made up of case studies. In order to break free of evolutionist assumptions, he treats his material thematically rather than chronologically, which serves his argument well. The only chronological division occurs between the two halves of the book, the first of which deals with biblical sources and the second with late antique material. Within those sections he treats sacrifice and purity in light of broad themes such as prophecy, cosmos, and priesthood, with a final chapter on the way these ideas were addressed in early Christian texts.

Some of these chapters are very strong. I was impressed by Klawans's treatment of prophetic indictments of sacrifice within the Hebrew Bible, so often used by Christian apologists as a stick with which to beat Judaism, and also used by modern Jews to justify liturgical and theological reforms that exclude sacrifice even from the text of prayers. The academic left has traditionally defended the position that a person can be a fervent patriot even as she critiques a governmental policy with which she disagrees. It is an argument that has a special urgency in today's political climate, and it is a shame that the same logic is so rarely applied to the Jews who loved their temple but hated the hypocrites who, in their view, misunderstood or abused it. At the end of the book, Klawans claims that Jesus and Paul were no different from these other Jews. The antipriestly and antitemple material in the New Testament is all late (Revelation and Hebrews) and unconcerned with the historical Jesus.

Other parts of the book were less successful. The fourth chapter contains a lengthy argument about angelology and Platonism whose relevance was not entirely clear to me. In this chapter Klawans points out that talk of the “spiritualization” of the Jerusalem temple is often code for the dismissal of the *actual* temple as irrelevant (what Jonathan Z. Smith might call transforming “symbol” into “mere symbol,” and a point to which Klawans himself returns in the final chapter of his book). Indeed this is an important concern. But the fine distinctions Klawans draws between “heavenly temples” and “heavenly cities with temples in them” seem to have little to do with purity and even less to do with sacrifice. There is certainly a kind of supersessionism implicit in the vocabulary used to discuss mystics’ visions of celestial temples, and no doubt that bias in the literature deserves its own study, but it did not fit well with the rest of this book.

This reviewer found Klawans’s overarching argument very persuasive, but it would have been much more so if the author had paid closer attention to the texts themselves. Klawans’s analyses often seemed rushed. The reader is frequently provided with a string of references in parentheses, followed by a blunt conclusion and a blanket condemnation of two hundred years of scholarship. For all his concern about taking priestly material seriously, it felt as though Klawans spent little time on the Torah; Leviticus is frequently invoked but rarely analyzed, while Numbers makes almost no appearance in the text at all. Josephus is covered in three pages, Philo in seven, the *Temple Scroll* in six. One of the things that made Douglas’s work so great was her minute attention to detail. Even those who disagree with her cannot fail to be impressed at the questions she puts to her texts, word by painstaking word. There is very little of that sort of close reading in *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*.

That being said, there is much in this book to consider, and much to admire. Many of Klawans’s arguments are very subtle, and a short review cannot do justice to them all. He introduced me to ideas that I had never considered before: the predication of the sacrificial system upon ownership and property; the importance of the selection of an animal from a flock; the role of the metaphor of fire and consumption in descriptions of God; and the concept of “economic purity,” to name only a few. Even the ideas that have common currency in biblical studies are addressed in creative and refreshing ways here: the differences between ritual and moral purity; the roles of prophets and priests; the differences between Qumran and Jerusalem. However, I could not help but wish that each chapter of this book were a book of its own, so that Klawans could allow the texts to make their own case for the importance of sacrifice, purity, and temple worship. So much rich and fascinating material is glossed or left out, particularly among late antique sources, which are too often treated superficially. It is my hope that the observations that Klawans makes here are expanded into more books soon, both by Klawans himself and by other scholars who realize the importance of what he is saying.