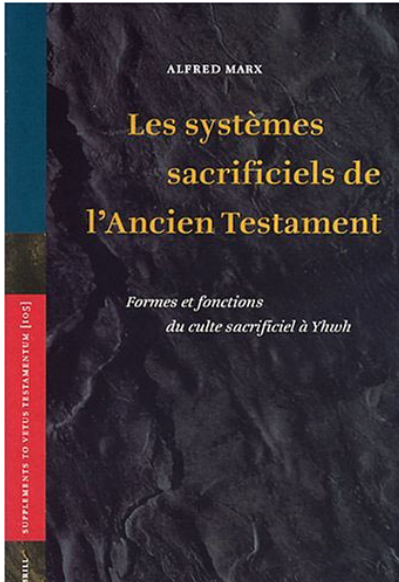


RBL 05/2007



**Marx, Alfred**

*Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament: Formes et fonctions du culte sacrificiel à Yhwh*

Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 105

Leiden: Brill, 2005. Pp. vi + 266. Cloth. \$117.00. ISBN 900414286X.

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Alfred Marx aims to describe sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible in a systematic way without flattening the variety and contradictions within the corpus or ignoring historical changes to the rituals. The major chapters of the book take up, in turn, the terms and categories used for sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible (ch. 1), its descriptions of the kinds of things to be sacrificed (ch. 2), its descriptions of sacrificial rituals (ch. 3), the place and functions attributed by biblical texts to sacrifice (ch. 4), and the changing conceptions of sacrifice in the exilic and Second Temple periods (ch. 5). Marx tries to avoid flattening the diverse data of the Hebrew Bible by dividing chapters 1, 2, and 4 into separate discussions of the information gleaned from the Priestly strand (P) of the Pentateuch, from Ezekiel, and from Chronicles together with Ezra and Nehemiah, preceded first by a review of scattered references in other biblical books. The lack of information about ritual performance in Chronicles and Ezekiel causes him to limit the scope of chapter 3 to scattered texts and P.

As a result, this book provides a very useful catalog of ritual terms, materials and practices that is sensitive to variation between genres and to change over time. On the basis of that catalog, Marx makes some interesting observations and draws some important conclusions about the presentation of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.

Let me start with several of Marx's negative conclusions. He observes that the words "giving" and "gift" are very rarely attributed to sacrifice (50–51, 76). The motif of gift therefore cannot be considered a central motif of Israelite sacrifice. Other materials and goods may be given to God but are never sacrificed, which shows that transfer of goods to God is not sacrifice's principal function. Marx is well aware of the economic stakes involved in animal offerings but sees their significance instead in being living foods that sustain life. "Le sacrifice a à faire avec la vie, non avec la richesse" (76).

Neither is sacrifice fundamentally about killing (109–10, 136–38). The actual killing of the animal had little significance within the rituals, so sacrifice cannot be interpreted primarily as a form of violence. Marx notes that the metaphorical application by psalmic and prophetic texts of sacrificial language to the actions of the divine warrior never spills over into descriptions of actual animal offerings. Ritual killing, whether by laity or Levites, is not given a distinct significance. Marx observes, however, that it does mark a turning point in the ritual. As the final act of the presentation rites usually performed by laity before the priests take over, killing and butchering the animal marks the transition from the profane to the sacred realms (110). He also concedes that, in P at least, sacrifice represents the violence inherent in human lives that depend on the death of living things for their sustenance. In P's unique attention to vegetable offerings (Lev 2), Marx sees it anticipating an eschatological time marked by nonviolence (222).

Neither is sacrifice propitiatory in function. The Hebrew Bible rarely portrays sacrifice as a means to appease YHWH's anger or to forestall divine punishment. Prayer and fasting play this role instead. Sacrifices are presented after rescue has been assured, in thanksgiving for deliverance. Marx suggests that the sacrifice at the end of the flood story (Gen 9) presents a paradigm for this understanding of its role (146–48).

In place of these common misperceptions about Israelite sacrifice, Marx argues that the Hebrew Bible presents sacrifice as feudal tribute (50, 77–80, 86–87, 202–4). Sacrifice is a meal offered to YHWH as a sign of homage, expressing deferential submission. The primary function of sacrifice in the Bible is to organize the relationship between Israel and YHWH along feudal lines in which YHWH is the ruler and the Israelites are the subjects. The sovereign owns the land, and the subjects owe him loyalty and rent. Sacrifice is therefore Israel's response to the gifts that YHWH has given them. "Israël ne donne pas, il restitue" (86). But the exchange is uneven, with Israel only giving back a token part of what it has received. An exchange of life circulates between YHWH and Israel, and the fat and blood reserved for YHWH represent the essence of life. Sacrifice portrays YHWH's similarity and difference from humans—similar in consuming the same foods as humans, radically different in receiving portions prohibited to humans (blood and fat). Marx notes that the feudal emphasis appears already in the fact that the

first sacrifices mentioned in the Bible are firstborn and firstfruits offerings (Gen 4), emblematic of the theme of feudal obligations that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. By manifesting this feudal relationship between Israel and YHWH, Marx argues that sacrifice served a properly theological function in ancient Israel by manifesting a God who is both transcendent and near at hand, other and similar, inaccessible and yet familiar (222).

Marx, whose previous book dealt with vegetable offerings (*Les offrandes végétales dans l'Ancien Testament*, 1994), sees P's depiction of vegetarian offerings as a particularly revealing meditation on the feudal theme. Meal offerings represent the minimal needs of life (bread, flour) but also the tribute due a sovereign (80–85). In contrast to meat, cereals and especially bread were the normal food of ancient Israelites. Oil, wine, and honey, on the other hand, characterized festive meals and were also Israel's principal exports. Vegetable offerings could thus represent the land itself. They were not simply substitutes for animal offerings but represented the minimum necessities for life and the characteristic produce of the land. Offering them expressed submission to the divine host. They are what their name indicates, *minḥāh* "tribute."

Marx makes a strong case for a feudal interpretation of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. It is a plausible hypothesis for how sacrifice was regarded by ancient Israelites as well, though here the constraints imposed by having only literary evidence recommends caution. Marx begins his book with an optimistic assessment of our ability to understand the meaning of sacrifice as practiced in ancient Israel: "L'Ancien Testament est ainsi l'une des rares sources écrites permettant de connaître de façon précise le fonctionnement du sacrifice et son rôle dans une société antique" (3). Later he qualifies that optimism, noting that it is impossible to determine the importance of sacrifice in ancient Israelite life. One can only summarize the functions attributed to it by the authors of the texts (144–45). Nevertheless, he argues that, although P does not provide a systematic description of the sacrificial cult, it participates "à un système rigoureux, élaboré avec un soin extrême et selon une parfaite logique" (156). Thus, despite the great care with which Marx has tried to distinguish the depiction of sacrifice in different texts and periods, he still presents a synthesis that goes beyond the text's authors to a conception that existed somewhere, in some people's minds, in ancient Israel and Judah. Who conceived of sacrifice in this way, and when, remains unclear.

A second methodological difficulty involves Marx's use of the word "sacrifice" itself. Of course he notes the obvious point that "sacrifice" in the ancient world is not summarized by a singular noun, nor does it describe a single phenomenon but is plural and designated by varied terminology (15). That fact, however, does not stop him at several points from distinguishing what is and is not a sacrifice. Thus, in noting rightly that the sacrificial

system represented in the Hebrew Bible changed over time, he observes that some rites became sacrifices that were not such originally (e.g., the Passover rite), new sacrifices were invented (the *ḥaṭṭā't* and the *'āšām*), and others disappeared (libation with wine, absent from Ezek 40–48) (48). He also argues that, while nonliving materials and goods could be donated to YHWH, they were never sacrificed (76). In making these distinctions, Marx is pointing out some real differences in how the texts describe different categories of offerings. He never makes clear, however, what exactly the word “sacrifice” means in this context and why it is particularly helpful for making these distinctions.

The least effective part of this book is the last chapter, which reconstructs the motives behind exilic and postexilic changes in sacrifice. Marx argues that, since the sacrificial cult did not forestall the exile, it would not be restored in exactly the same way as before. The revisions that P and Ezekiel introduce into the rituals were intended to render the cult more effective (211). He also argues that the reestablished cult aimed to integrate new forms of piety that had become popular during the years of the temple's abandonment. P integrated submission to Torah and the importance of routine purity, while Chronicles gave a central place to the prayer of adoration (218). Here Marx's argument rests on supposition more than evidence. Although the modifications advanced by P and Ezekiel are reasonably clear (in the case of Chronicles, the differences could have more to do with the author's emphasis than with changes in ritual practice), nowhere do our extant texts give direct evidence that such motives lay behind them.

These criticisms aside, this book provides a very helpful catalog of the offerings of Israel as presented by the Hebrew Bible and points out neglected features of that presentation that challenge long-standing stereotypes of how biblical sacrifice works and what it means. It is an important resource for studying biblical rituals and the religious ideas they may reflect.