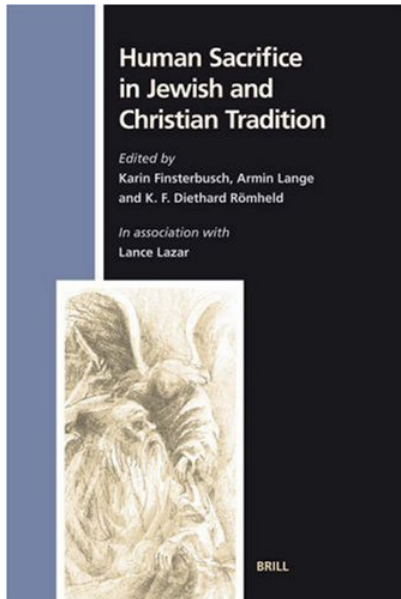


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Finsterbusch, Karin, Armin Lange, and K. F. Diethard Römheld, eds.

Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition

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This collection of essays originated with four conference essays, to which the rest were subsequently added. The first two articles describe the evidence for human sacrifice in ancient societies apart from Jewish and Christian traditions. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” documents the wide variety of practices involving ritual human killing and human scapegoats in ancient Mesopotamian and Levantine societies. She shows that, while these ideas were present together with ideas of atonement and purification, they were not combined in the ways that Jewish and Christian thought connects them.

Gabriele Weiler, “Human Sacrifice in Greek Culture,” organizes ancient Greek references to human sacrifice into nine categories, ranging from expiation and initiation rituals to xenophobia. She notes that, although human sacrifices of these various types contribute prominent themes to stories and myths, none of them have been verified historically: “the reality was always different” (55). There were, however, some instances in which humans were executed in imitation of literary scenes of human sacrifice, such as Alexander of Macedon did to his father’s assassins. The significance of human sacrifice lay, not in ritual practice but rather in the idea’s importance to “the Greek understanding of the world”

(56). Weiler helpfully includes translations of all the important Greek literary selections on human sacrifice at the end of her article (57–64).

The next four articles all address human sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. Michaela Bauks, “The Theological Implications of Child Sacrifice,” engages the theological problems posed by the stories of child sacrifice in Gen 22 (Abraham and Isaac) and Judg 11 (Jephthah and his daughter). She concludes that these stories should be distinguished from the Israelite practice of offerings to *mlk* that legal and prophetic texts polemicize against. These stories rather “belong to the genre of theological commentary” (84). Genesis 22 “presents a paradoxical reworking” of the themes of dedicating the first born and sacrifice of the beloved son in times of duress. Judges 11 presents a tragic perspective. Bauks supposes that “both conceptions belong to the latest theological redactions of the Hebrew Bible” (86).

Karin Finsterbusch, “The First-Born between Sacrifice and Redemption in the Hebrew Bible,” systematically reviews the laws of the firstborn in the Pentateuch in their presumed chronological order. She concludes that the limitation of the firstborn requirement to firstborn *males* was an innovation of the postexilic period. The appearance of this innovation already in Exod 13:11–16 before any of the other firstborn laws in the Pentateuch, however, made it a hermeneutical key for reading all other regulations regarding the firstborn, thereby limiting postbiblical practice to male firstborn only.

Armin Lange, “They Burn Their Sons and Daughters—That Was No Command of Mine’ (Jer 7:31),” engages the topic of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible with a particular focus on the Deuteronomistic Jeremiah redaction. Lange reviews the evidence for child sacrifice in Canaanite and monarchic Israelite culture, concluding that Bronze Age Canaanites sacrificed children in times of crisis (as evidenced in Egyptian battle reliefs) and that Iron Age successor cultures, including Moabites, Phoenicians, and Israelites, practiced various forms of child sacrifice as well. Prohibitions on *mlk* offerings and redemption of firstborn children became normative due to Deuteronomism’s influence in Judean culture from the seventh century on. One might reasonably expect that Lange would therefore interpret the polemics in Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35 as part and parcel of this late seventh/early sixth-century Deuteronomistic polemic. His redaction-critical analysis of the book, however, classifies these passages as part of a late-sixth-century layer that argued against the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple after the exile. He therefore understands the attack on child sacrifice here not as criticizing the actual practice (which had died out by this time) but as an exaggerated polemic against the Jerusalem cult in general. Lange does not consider the more obvious conclusion that these texts, in the historical timeline of child sacrifice practices as he has reconstructed it, undermine his redactional analysis and dating of this Deuteronomistic layer of Jeremiah.

Bennie Reynolds, “Molek: Dead or Alive?” engages the debate over the meaning of *mlk* in Hebrew and Phoenician and its implication for understanding child sacrifice. Reynolds defends the old thesis that *mlk* does not refer to a deity but is a causative participle of the root *hlk* and refers to a kind of offering. Reynolds offers new translations and interpretations of three Phoenician/Punic inscriptions before turning to grammatical usage of *mlk* and *hlk* in the Hebrew Bible. He concludes with a survey of archeological evidence for child sacrifice in Anatolia and the Levant.

Katell Bertholet, “Jewish Views of Human Sacrifice in the Hellenistic and Roman Period,” finds little discussion of human sacrifice in late Second Temple Jewish texts. She suspects that is because of distaste for the subject in Greco-Roman culture. Like Hellenistic literature, Jewish authors tended to depict human sacrifice as a foreign abomination. Other trends in the treatment of the theme in this period included the tendency to depict human sacrifice as prompted by demons while on the other hand depicting willing self-sacrifice (e.g., of Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter) as heroic. The latter tendency contributed directly to the glorification of martyrdom in 4 Maccabees.

Tal Ilan, “Gender Difference and the Rabbis: Bat Yiftah as Human Sacrifice,” investigates whether modern interpretive concerns with the story of Bat Yiftah (Jephthah’s daughter, Judg 11) were anticipated in rabbinic reflections on the same story. Like modern readers, their theology could not allow the possibility that God would command human sacrifice, even as a test, and they criticized Jephthah for failing to know that Torah did not require him to fulfill his vow. They also turned his daughter into a better scholar of Torah than he, adding this rabbinic ideal to her heroic characterization in Judg 11—a move similar in motive if not content to that of some contemporary feminist interpreters.

Peter Lampe, “Human Sacrifice and Pauline Christology,” surveys possible references to Christ’s death as a sacrifice in Paul’s letters. He concludes that Paul made analogies between the crucifixion and the Passover sacrifice as well as the covenant offerings of Exod 24. Paul did not, however, depict the crucifixion as a sin offering for atonement or draw an analogy with Gen 22. Characterizations of the Eucharist in sacrificial terms do, of course, appear in the Gospels.

Rainer Walz, “The Collective Suicides in the Persecutions of 1096 as Sacrificial Acts,” deals with the medieval historiographical narratives of the Jewish martyrs at the time of the First Crusade. Jews responded to the pressure to convert or die in a wide variety of ways, including in a few cases killing their own families before committing suicide. The chroniclers depict such acts as sacrifices. In doing so, Walz demonstrates that they drew on several literary traditions of Jewish martyrdom, though even then the writers themselves struggled with these extraordinarily disturbing stories. Walz concludes that

the Ashkenazic traditions prompted rather different responses to persecution than did medieval Sephardic culture.

Jasper Hopkins, “God’s Sacrifice of Himself as a Man: Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur deus homo*,” provides a close philosophical analysis of Anselm’s satisfaction theory of the atonement. He demonstrates that, in Anselm’s theory, understanding Christ’s death as a sacrifice depends completely on the doctrine of Christ’s two natures (divine and human) and that only the human nature suffers and is sacrificed. Hopkins nevertheless concludes that Anselm’s reasoning is undermined by a few key equivocations.

A 1947 essay by Viktor von Weizsacker, “‘Euthanasia’ and Experiments on Human Beings [Part I: ‘Euthanasia’],” is introduced by Udo Benzenhöfer and Wilhelm Rimpau. Von Weizsacker was a German doctor and director of research institute connected to experiments on euthanized children during World War II. Writing while the Nürnberg medical trial was underway, he argued that the sacrifice of a few individuals for the sake of the whole people provides the strongest case for euthanasia. Nevertheless, he criticized nationalist socialist policies of euthanasia for using the idea of sacrifice in “a mendacious and degenerate form” that did not factor in proper medical concerns for solidarity and mutuality (297). For Weizsacker, sacrifice may properly justify medical killing because it involves not just biological life but the transcendent part of an individual, and community, as well.

Yaakov Ariel, “Still Ransoming the First-Born Sons? *Pidyon Habben* and Its Survivals in the Jewish Tradition,” describes the continuing tradition of ritually ransoming firstborn sons. The key feature of the ritual involves symbolic payment of silver coins to a *kohen* (priest) and is remarkable for being one of the only ceremonies in rabbinic Judaism that requires the presence of a *kohen*. Ariel traces the history of the ritual and notes its revival and revision in recent Jewish practice.

Randall Styers, “Slaughter and Innocence: The Rhetoric of Sacrifice in Contemporary Arguments Supporting the Death Penalty,” documents the role of sacrificial rhetoric invoking ideas of atonement and expiation in arguments by defenders of capital punishment in American law. He points out that, as evidence of false convictions in death penalty cases has mounted due to DNA evidence, defenders of the penalty have shifted from pragmatic arguments to claims for the moral necessity of capital punishment. They explicitly ground that moral necessity in definitions of sacrifice derived from biblical and theological sources.

Human Sacrifice provides a wealth of data about killing and its justifications in various cultures and periods of Western history. Its contribution lies in gathering this material

together in one volume. Though there are occasional cross-references, the volume would have benefited from more thorough interaction between the writers that would clarify the implications of one essay for the conclusions of another. Several authors worry about the definition of “sacrifice,” but no common meaning has been mandated across the essays. The theoretical problem of what exactly the word refers to, if anything, has received considerable attention in recent literature,¹ but those discussions are not addressed in detail here. This volume’s presentation of the range of Western sacrificial practice and rhetoric demonstrates the problem by its diversity but does not do anything to resolve it.

More integration would have strengthened the analysis of some of the specific data as well. The four essays on the Hebrew Bible cover many of the same texts and evidence, but it is left to the reader to notice their similarities in emphasis but different interpretations of particular data. Bertholet’s essay on human sacrifice in late Second Temple Jewish texts invokes the Hellenistic context as an explanatory factor but has not benefited from Weiler’s survey of that material. The rather shocking appeal to transcendence to justify killing in both von Weizsacker’s discussion of medical sacrifice and in many contemporary American justifications of the death penalty cries out for comparative analysis and theoretical treatment, not to mention ethical and theological response. The authors of these essays at most glance briefly at some of the literature that engages the subject of sacrifice at these levels, but do not address them directly. *Human Sacrifice* nevertheless provides a commendable service in gathering diverse materials that when juxtaposed here vividly illustrate the need for cross-cultural theoretical study.

1. E.g., Marcel Detienne, “Culinary Practices and the Spirit of Sacrifice,” in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (ed. M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant; trans. P. Wissig; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989; French 1979), 1–20 [20]; W. G. Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 191–201 [191]; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. D. W. Stott; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996; German 1993), 20; Ivan Strenski, “Between Theory and Specialty: Sacrifice in the 90s,” *Religious Studies Review* 22/1 (1996): 10–20 [19]; James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 8.