The End of Sacrifice is a short but incisive book that explores five major anthropological vectors that converged in late antiquity to transform religion and the world. Stroumsa’s thesis is “that the transformations … that we may detect in Late Antiquity are above all of a religious nature, and … their study is essential to a better comprehension of the religious transformations under the Roman Empire” (10–11). He argues that some human events such as the massive societal mutations of late antiquity cannot be explained by summarizing the simple actions of people but is more akin to revolutionary evolution or a scientific paradigm shift greater than the sum of individual human actions (2). To explain these mutations, Stroumsa’s foundational premise is that religion, specifically the religion of Second Temple Judaism, was the catalyst that caused such a leap in human societal evolution in late antiquity. As a result, one of Stroumsa’s goals for the book is to challenge an erroneous assumption of modern scholarship: that the great transformation(s) of late antiquity was simply a shift from pagan polytheism to Abrahamic (Christian) monotheism (5). Stroumsa attempts a further corrective by underscoring the religious (and most especially Jewish) influence in these transformations and specifically points to the abolition of blood sacrifice as a turning point. Stroumsa also emphasizes Islam and Manichaeism religious influence as well as Jewish and Christian.
While Stroumsa believes that there are five major evolutionary vectors that met to transform Western and Near Eastern society, he recognizes that there are other minor lines of transformation (he believes his five are the most significant). Each of these vectors is the subject of a chapter. The book has no formal introduction, five chapters only, one on each vector. The style is fluid and conversational. This book was originally published as *La Fin du sacrifice: Les mutations religieuses de l’Antiquité tardive* in 2005 by Odile Jacob, and it is based around Stroumsa’s lectures at the Collège de France.

The first chapter, “A New Care of the Self,” considers the first vector of transformation: the “broadening of the concept of the human person” that occurred in late antiquity (23). Here Stroumsa argues that the transformation in late antiquity was led by a radical change in the view of personhood—most especially seen in the present condition and future hope of an individual person. Prior to late antiquity, the Greco-Roman world understood the care of self and person primarily as a call to “salvation by knowledge … the transformation of the subject by its divination” (13). This was largely predicated on a popular Platonic worldview, wherein a person would, within civic constraints, “return” to one’s divine, internal nature (16). Stroumsa cites as an example of this the Greco-Roman idea of spiritual conversion—connecting to a philosophical school or tradition. Thus the care of the self was, at least in contrast to later mutations, largely characterized as communal, impersonal, intellectual, and an affirmation of the eternal soul. In contrast to this, the transformations of late antiquity resulted in mutations in the care of the self that was largely characterized as individual, personal, moral, and a denial of the flesh. Unlike the common worldview of antiquity, the new (Jewish and Christian) viewpoint that arrived in late antiquity was not a return to eternity but a repentance of sins before God, in whose image the person was created. Stroumsa argues that personal eschatology went hand in hand with this transformation and that late antiquity saw a shift toward “the fate of the person after death” (8). Especially the resurrection of the body was an indelible line in the sand between pagans and Christians as well as antiquity and late antiquity (9).

In chapter 2, “The Rise of Religions of the Book,” Stroumsa argues that the second vector of transformation in late antiquity was the “emergence of a ‘textual culture’” (43). The religious and cultural proclivities of antiquity were decidedly oral—in the care of the self, “the most essential doctrines … can only be divulged to a small group of disciples and must remain oral” (52). This fear is echoed by Plato in his *Seventh Letter*, in that writing “becomes quickly uncontrollable as that writing circulates” (52). This gels with the Greco-Roman understanding of the person, but as the world moved toward greater urbanization it also moved toward greater interiorization of religion. Instead of oral recitation or the public reading of texts, texts became private, as people increasingly read privately and wrote more than ever (44). Judaism and Christianity especially forged a new role for texts in the world. Stroumsa likens the paradigm shift to an Islamic concept, *ahl al-kitāb*, the
“religion of the Book” (applied in the Qur’an to Judaism and Christianity) (35). He points out that the early Christians were so adept at textual communication strategies that they should be thought of as not just a “religion of the Book” but the “religion of the paperback” (35).

Chapter 3, “Transformations of Ritual,” picks up at the end of chapter 2, where Stroumsa begins to mention the role of sacrifice in the mutations of late antiquity. This chapter is the linchpin of the book. Stroumsa writes: “More than any other singular action, it was the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 CE, as a result of the Jewish revolt, that activated the slow—overly slow—transformation of religion to which we owe, among other things, European culture” (63). The abolition of sacrifice in Judaism may have resulted in the eventual cessation of blood sacrifice by the third century, but it opened the door to a new kind of sacrifice: the martyr. Stroumsa notes, “The martyrs and virgins no longer bring the sacrifice—they are the sacrifice” (77). Even in Christianity, a religion against human sacrifice, religious convictions redefined human sacrifice by turning its adherents into martyrs in eucharistic fashion (73–74). Blood sacrifices became imitations of Christ’s sacrifice.

In the fourth chapter, “From Civic Religion to Community Religion,” Stroumsa argues that the fourth vector that transformed religion and the world in late antiquity was a shift in religious worship experiences. Prior to late antiquity, religion was practiced as “the observance of rites” civitatis. The author explains that this religious model in use in antiquity, which was “established upon the public and collective character of religion, had given way to what I propose calling the new model of religion, in which authority is no longer exterior and public, but rather interior or internalized, whether in the self or the sacred Book. In the new model, subjective forms of religion such as faith or piety are dominant” (92). For Stroumsa, the great societal transformation during this period had little to do with the polytheism-monotheism cross-currents and had everything to do with the interiorizing move of religion in the minds and hearts of (average) people. Society was transformed as the city-state, in part held together by civil blood sacrifice, gave way to community, in large part created and held together by the personal faith commitment of the person in each community (and organized by the Book held in regard by that community).

Stroumsa’s final chapter, “From Wisdom Teacher to Spiritual Master” examines the final major trend that pushed the world in a new direction in late antiquity: the move away from “philosophical guide” to “spiritual director” (116). Stroumsa contends that the wisdom teacher provided knowledge to his disciples, but the mutation in late antiquity opened the door to spiritual guides who would instead accompany their disciples on the journey of salvation (as exemplified in early monasticism). In this chapter Stroumsa also
asks the question of whether Christianity was the creator of many of the mutations of late antiquity or just the benefactor.

*The End of Sacrifice* is a small book that uses broad strokes to paint a picture of a complex shift in human society. In light of the goals of the book, there are two issues: Does the book capture the nature and essence of the transformation that occurred in late antiquity, and does the book adequately explain these natures and essences to create a meaningful theory of religious transformation? To the first question: without a doubt, Stroumsa offers a cogent, insightful, and valuable overview of these transformations and captures his subject well. His focus on the internal, personal, and subjective factors in the transformation (rather than the more-often discussed outward expressions) offers a highly attractive theory very competitive with the conventional view. With the second question, there are several yellow flags that arise when the details of the author’s arguments are carefully sifted. For example, Stroumsa argues that the church fathers “invented” the view that the Hebrew temple sacrifices were a concession to a pagan-influenced people (79), but given Stroumsa’s tendency to (correctly) highlight continuity, these types of statements within the book seem to fall flat (not to mention the questions raised by Hos 6:6 and Matt 9:13, for example). Another example is the seeming equation of Philo’s Isaac-as-Messiah with Paul’s Jesus-as-Messiah (83); while Stroumsa makes a valid point that Philo’s Isaac is not a commonly discussed theme in the ancient world, it will take more than simply saying “numerous texts support this argument” (82) to be taken seriously (not to mention that this also moves against Stroumsa’s greater argument of continuity also, beyond other issues with this comparison in general). Similarly, Stroumsa’s contention that Greco-Roman literature occupied a nearly equal importance to the Old Testament within Western Christianity (53) or that Christian martyrs were a recasting of human sacrifice for Christianity (77) appear to have been written with something of a tin ear to the Christian experience in the first centuries of the modern era. A final example is Stroumsa’s tendency at times to play loose with historical influence, especially when it comes to using Manichaeism and Islam to identify influences in Judaism and Christianity. While there are undoubtedly interesting continuities between some aspects of Christianity and Islam, for example, reading early Christianity in light of Islamic theology (34–38) or likening twenty-first-century Islamic “suicide bombers” in any way to ancient religious practice of blood (human) sacrifice (73–78) seems to undermine Stroumsa’s much more worthwhile theory. These auxiliary details would be better omitted—or if included, need to be better explained (and supported). Still, these weaknesses do not overturn the author’s theory and quite possibly are the result of the nature of lecture-series-turned-book. In conclusion, the *End of Sacrifice* makes an important contribution to our understanding of late antiquity and, given its size, is a highly worthwhile time investment for today’s academic reader. Highly recommended for
students, libraries, and general readers interested in the fascinating socioreligious mutations of late antiquity that gave rise to the modern world.