
With Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism (2000) Jonathan Klawans positioned himself as an excellent scholar of early Judaism. He belongs to a small group of academics capable of moving competently between diverse fields like Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Josephus, Philo, New Testament, and rabbinic literature: topics that are frequently living an insulated life of their own. His recent monograph is by virtue of its topic related to his former book, but the argument is expanded by focusing on symbolism and elaborated to cover also the intellectual history of scholarship. In fact, the study reverberates from an apologetic tenor. It is a plea for a historical (and, perhaps, nostalgic) appreciation of the symbolism that organised the purity and, particularly, the sacrificial system of the temple.

Contrary to a long and dominant strand of scholarship within anthropology and the study of religion that has tended to treat purity and sacrifice as dichotomous entities, Klawans attempts to dissolve the bifurcation by treating purity as a prerequisite for sacrifice: in order to sacrifice one needs to be in a state of purity. Complementary with his criticism of prevalent trajectories in anthropology and the study of religion, he criticises traditional studies of sacrifice within biblical studies and the study of Judaism. The time-honoured approaches are suffering from evolutionism (sacrifices are by nature primitive relics of a savage religion type) and anti-ritualism (rituals are merely exterior acts inferior to words and the spirit of the heart). Both sentiments mirror Protestant biases, reformed Jewish prejudices or contemporary aversions to animal sacrifice. The entailment of these perceptual filters is that sacrifice is perceived as a fossilized vestige of a religion long surpassed either by the death of Jesus, the synagogue, or the triumph of modern rationality. Contrary to this line of thought, Klawans pleads for a historical acknowledgement of the sacrificial system of ancient Israel.

The book consists of two main parts each divided into three or four chapters followed by a brief conclusion summarising the main results of the study. Whereas part one concentrates on purity and sacrifice in biblical Israel, part two focuses on Second Temple, symbolism, and supersessionism. Ch. 1 paves the theoretical way for the subsequent discussion by giving a critical review of the understanding of purity and sacrifice in anthropology and the study of religion (from Robertson-Smith to contemporary symbolic understandings with a harsh critique of the theories of origins found in the works of Girard and Burkert). It is a reasonable critical exposition that suffers only from its neglect of recent cognitive studies (e.g., Boyer and Attran).

The discussion is pursued in ch. 2 by an examination of the Hebrew Bible. Sacrifices are said to serve a twofold function by enabling the imitatio dei (through the institution of sacrifice Israel is metaphorically imitating God) and by attracting
and maintaining the divine presence. Klawans endorses the view that sacrifice comparable to symbolic understandings of purity should be interpreted metaphorically and symbolically. Unfortunately, however, no clear definition of symbolism and metaphor are given. The pioneer study of Lakoff and Johnson is taken into account, but not the important works of Fauconnier and Turner. I sympathise with Klawans’ preference for symbolic approaches (cf. 67), but it would have been beneficial, if he had taken the criticism raised against them more seriously (e.g., Sperber). It might have helped him to spell out more clearly the analytical level of the study. A number of formulations imply that Klawans is discussing the issue at the level of parole, but surely that cannot be the case. It is more apt to think—in compliance with the title of Schmidt’s monograph How the Temple Thinks—of the issue at the level of langue.

In ch. 3, it is persuasively documented how the prophetic critique of the cult was not a totaliter et aliter attack against cult and ritual as often surmised, but rather directed against the moral corruption of the participants (stolen property lies at the heart of the critique). Ch. 4-7 expand the discussion to include Josephus and Philo (ch. 4), Qumran (ch. 5), Rabbinic literature (ch. 6), and an examination of the Last Supper, the temple incident as well as the alleged spiritualisation of sacrifice in the New Testament (ch. 7). Similar to part one, this section is replete with interesting and thought-provoking ideas that deserve extensive discussion. I have, however, the impression that the argument at this point tilts over. Rather than pursuing the questions pertaining to the symbolic system of sacrifice and purity, Klawans becomes absorbed by substantiating, how different forms of Judaism continued to endorse temple worship and, accordingly, the sacrificial system. Although interesting in itself, this part is never fully integrated into the theoretical framework of ch. 1. Since Klawans is adamant about his status as a historian, it is problematic to see how the different gospel accounts are fused into a single portrayal without paying sufficient attention to the different viewpoints on the status of the temple mirrored by them. Klawans’ harsh criticism of Hebrews for supersessionist antitemple, antisacrificial, and antipriestly polemics also appears (apologetically) exaggerated given the obvious Platonic similarities to Philo’s view of the temple. In fact, it is regrettable that Klawans does not include the discourse over the meaningfulness of sacrifices and the allegedly criticism of traditional religion in a Graeco-Roman philosophical context into his discussion. It would have been beneficial to his examination of both Philo and early Christianity. Similarly, it could have contributed to situating these writings and the traditions they embody in their larger cultural and social context and not treating them as “insulate Jewish phenomena.”

Be that as it may. There are many contestable points in the book, but it is beyond doubt a seminal study for the interpretation of purity and sacrifice within biblical studies and early Judaism. More importantly, however, it is a work that persuasively challenges our habitual ways of thinking not only with regard to