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978-0-521-87724-4 - Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law

Nicole J. Ruane

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, blood sacrifice is the ultimate ritual act.<sup>1</sup> It is the centerpiece of most religious holidays and is portrayed as the chief means of attracting and maintaining the favor of the biblical deity. Many of the biblical laws of the Pentateuch, the first five books, are very concerned with sacrificial

<sup>1</sup> For theories of biblical sacrifice see G. A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); idem., "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," *ABD* V: 870–86; Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman, eds., *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995); H.C. Brichto, "On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement," *HUCA* 47 (1976): 19–56; John J. Collins, "The Meaning of Sacrifice: A Contrast of Methods," *Biblical Research* 22 (1977): 19–34; Douglas Davies, "An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus," *ZAW* 89 (1976): 387–99; R. Dussaud, *Les origines Cananéennes du sacrifice Israélite* (Paris: Leroux, 1941); Christian A. Eberhart, ed., *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011); George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (New York: KTAV, 1971); William W. Hallo, "The Origins of the Sacrificial Cult: New Evidence from Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 3–13; H. J. Kurtz, *Offerings, Sacrifices and Worship in the Old Testament* (trans. James Martin; London: T&T Clark, 1863; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998); James C. Moyer, "Hittite and Israelite Cultic Practices: A Selected Comparison," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* (ed. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer, and Leo G. Purdue; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 19–38; Jan Quaegebeur, ed., *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993); A. F. Rainey, "The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Rituals," *Biblica* 51 (1970): 485–98; Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967); P. Rigby, "A Structural Analysis of Old Testament Sacrifice and Its Other Institutions," *Eglise et Theologie* 11 (1980): 299–351; A. M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus* (Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 3; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1979); W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956); Norman H. Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament," *VT* 7 (1957): 308–17; Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1964); James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially chapter 8.

For general theories of sacrifice see M. F. C. Bourdillon, and Meyer Fortes, *Sacrifice* (London: Academic Press Inc. 1980); Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (trans. Peter Bing; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983);

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procedure. They address several of its key features, from victim selection and the details of blood manipulation and meat division, to issues of who should perform sacrifice, bring offerings, and be excluded from participation in this important rite. Sacrificial rituals affect many elements of life, including the ability to eat various animal products, the maintenance of ritual purity, the choices of animal husbandry, and the establishment of an heir.

Most sacrificial laws place a great deal of emphasis on gender.<sup>2</sup> They often specify the sex of officiants, offerers, and consumers of sacrifice; they are highly specific about the sex of victims as well. In most biblical sacrificial rituals, the primary participants are male: an animal that is “male without blemish” is the most common sacrificial victim, sacrificial priests are male, and, in biblical texts, men bring most sacrificial offerings. The role of females in sacrificial acts is sometimes unclear; however, in many circumstances, the law specifically requires women to bring offerings or requires a particular female victim. Sacrificial laws are therefore highly concerned with the gendered roles and behaviors of both people and animals in this primary cultic event.

This book examines biblical laws of sacrifice to understand the significance of gender in their rituals and the reasons that gender distinctions are so vital in this defining act. It takes as its basic premise that, fundamentally, to sacrifice is to have power. This power may take many forms. Animal and human sacrifice, of course, include the literal power over life and death. But sacrifice is also primarily about material power. To sacrifice is both to have something of one's own – be it created, earned, given, or purchased – and the ability to destroy it. It is, in essence, a display of possession, ownership, and control. To sacrifice is also to have social status and importance: it is to be a parent, an heir, a community member, a property owner. Not to sacrifice is to be without power, without lineage, without possession. It is to be a dependent, not an owner. As a ritual phenomenon involving the destruction, distribution, and processing of material resources, sacrifice plays an integral role in explicating the social and material status of women and men.

Raymond Firth, “Offerings and Sacrifice: Problems of Organization,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 93 (1963): 12–24; Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (translated by W. D. Halls; Foreword by E. E. Evans-Pritchard; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977); Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation. With an Introduction by Burton Mack and a Commentary by Renato Rosaldo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> The term “gender” is a social one, referring to culturally specific roles and behaviors attributed to men and women, whereas the term “sex” is biological, referring to the physical characteristics that are unique to males and females.

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In patrilineal societies like that of ancient Israel, in which inheritance is passed from father to son, women are usually without both possessions and dependents. They do not possess their own children – the fruit of their own wombs – nor do they possess the fruit of the flocks, fields, crops, or herds. In such a system, women make few offerings because they have little to offer. However, although women are largely dependents in a patrilineal system, they also hold an ambiguous status. Women in a family have no descendants, but they are parents. They are not a part of the family line, but they are a part of the family. They do not possess their offspring, but they do have authority over them. At times they themselves are resources to be controlled, whereas at other times they have autonomy. And though not the norm, they sometimes wield primary material control in a family. Because women do not fit neatly into the system of lineage and inheritance, that system must constantly adjust to accommodate them, giving them more and less power as circumstances require. Thus, in biblical law, it is vital at times that women sacrifice, and at other times it is vital that they do not: each permutation of sacrificial procedure becomes a redefinition of gender and its status.<sup>3</sup>

Gender is also important in sacrifice for another reason: sacrificial systems are corollaries of reproductive power. This relationship is apparent in the juxtaposition of childbirth with sacrifice, as the late Nancy Jay argued, in which sacrifice is a social and patrilineal corrective to the natural birth given by women.<sup>4</sup> Sacrifice controls and reorganizes human biological reproduction by excluding birthing women from an ideal social form. However, sacrifice is also a corollary of domestication; that is, the controlled reproduction of animals.<sup>5</sup> In a system of domestication, in which the owner manages animal breeding, the owner also has power over, and responsibility for, what the owner has bred. Optimal animal management includes not only supporting those animals that are most useful but also culling those animals that take away from the efficiency of the herd; these are decisions made largely according to the sex of the animal. In societies where most meat is eaten in a sacrificial context, sacrifice becomes the primary means of this disposal. Therefore, sacrificial systems can become both a ritual form of managing the proper social reproduction of human beings (i.e., lineage) and a ritual form of managing

<sup>3</sup> On different gendered constructions of sacrifice see Susan Sered, “Towards a Gendered Typology of Sacrifice: Women & Feasting, Men & Death in an Okinawan Village,” in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert Baumgarten; Boston: Brill, 2002), 13–38.

<sup>4</sup> *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice,” in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, 197–205.

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the practical reproduction of animals (domestication). Indeed, the creation of proper lineage is a form of human domestication; the roles, importance, and value of males and females are important in the selective control of both. Indeed, both forms of “husbandry” allow those in positions of control to make gender-based selections for their material advantage.

That sacrifice helps to construct the ideal reproduction of both humans and animals becomes even clearer when we see, perhaps surprisingly, that in biblical sacrificial thought the ritual treatment of animals according to sex often corresponds to the ritual treatment of people according to sex. Official sacrificial rituals primarily involve males, both human and animal; they consistently exclude new mothers, both human and animal; and where they do include females, females are portrayed as hierarchically inferior or are associated with the secular or defiled. We also find that sacrifice is especially dismissive of the features of active reproduction, excluding any hint of sexual or birthing activity on the part of humans and animals of both sexes. It therefore most usually makes victims of the very young, who are not reproductively active. Finally, we find that the nature and function of each sacrificial ritual change depending on the sex of both its victims and its offerers. The sacrifice of a female cow is portrayed as a quite different offering from that of a young male lamb; a father’s offering of his firstborn son has quite different results from the sacrifice of a firstborn daughter.

Although sacrifice has many purposes, outcomes, and forms, in practice, it is primarily a negotiation of possession. It especially comes into play when ownership is in doubt. So it is in a patriline, where children who would seem to naturally belong to their mothers must become the possessions of their fathers. To take possession, a father asserts ownership over the primary image of the mother’s fertility, her firstborn, by threatening its sacrifice. The negotiation of ownership also comes into play among animals. Just as a mother’s child is not naturally the possession of a man, so the offspring of a cow, for example, is not naturally the possession of its owner, and so sacrificial law outlines the rules by which a baby animal may be taken away from its mother. Sacrifice manages possession in other circumstances as well. The entire priestly system of sacrifice outlined in the book of Leviticus largely reflects the ways in which possessions of the commoner become possessions of the priests. The medium of sacrifice is the means by which this transfer of property, on which the priests depended, is collected and shared. Therefore, sacrificial laws negotiate many aspects of meat distribution, donation, and other division of resources among those in power and their dependents. The relationship between males and females is just one among many of these forms.

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## INTRODUCTION

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## NANCY JAY, GENDER, AND SACRIFICE

Scholars have been aware for some time that sacrifice plays a part in the creation of gender roles. In 1989, the classicist Marcel Detienne stressed that gender distinction and political hierarchy are integral aspects of sacrificing. In an examination of women in the Thesmophoria festival in honor of Demeter Thesmophus, Detienne observes that

to determine the status of women in matters of sacrifice is to enter by the back door into the system of ritual acts in which eating behaviors constantly intermingle with political practices – a system in which the proximity of the culinary and the political may lead in some cases to a fundamental issue: the division between the masculine and the feminine.<sup>6</sup>

Detienne notes that women's social status is reflected in female exclusion from particular sacrificial acts: "Just as women are without the political rights reserved for male citizens, they are kept apart from the altars, meat and blood."<sup>7</sup> Even in the Thesmophoria, a women's festival, the division and hierarchy between the sexes are maintained through a dramatic inversion of usual sexual roles. In the end, women's secondary status is reconfirmed and along with it "the male privilege to shed blood is preserved at a time that it seems most threatened."<sup>8</sup>

However, the most comprehensive work on gender and sacrifice is by Nancy Jay. In her monograph, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity*, Jay analyzes several different sacrificial systems, including parts of the Hebrew Bible, and concludes that sacrifice is a chief cultural means of establishing paternal descent and inheritance. It is especially prominent in patrilineal societies. Unlike maternity, which can usually be proven and is rarely called into question, paternity is never fully guaranteed. In response to this dilemma, Jay argues that patrilineal systems require an alternative "birth" that would confirm paternal descent for legal and social purposes and establish the fixed group of males belonging to the patrilineage. By providing the dramatic action of ritual killing, "an act as definite and available to the senses as birth,"<sup>9</sup> sacrificial systems transcend the physical birth from a mother and

<sup>6</sup> "The Violence of Well-Born Ladies: Women in the Thesmophoria," in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (ed. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant; trans. Paula Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 129. For critique see Robin Osborne, "Women and Sacrifice in Ancient Greece," *The Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 392–405.

<sup>7</sup> "The Violence of Well-Born Ladies," 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 36.

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offer a male birth into male society. In this process, which establishes continuity from father to son, women give birth but have no descendants. For Jay, sacrifice is a means of social organization that establishes hierarchies, marginalizes women, and establishes cultic structures in direct opposition to women's own natural processes. It is the "remedy for having been born of a woman."<sup>10</sup>

Jay's theory is based in large part on the fact that many sacrificial systems exhibit an opposition between birth and sacrifice. This opposition manifests itself in the exclusion of childbearing women from sacrificial rites and especially by associating childbirth with impurity that is incompatible with the cult. The opposition is an example of sacrifice's ability to define in-groups and out-groups by forging communion among the included while emphasizing the expiation of the excluded. In patrilineal kinship systems, Jay argues, matrilineality and childbearing women themselves must be expiated and are excluded from sacrificial rites. Like Julia Kristeva, who comes to many similar conclusions, Jay sees sacrificial practice as suppressing what Kristeva calls "the abject feminine" (i.e., the female elements of reproduction and motherhood that are threatening to patriarchal power).<sup>11</sup> In suppressing the female element, sacrifice undoes sexuality and real reproduction in favor of an ideal male reproduction that is asexual and ultimately leads to immortality – be it socially, by the unending male line, or theologically, with the eternal life of believers.<sup>12</sup> The new vision of reproduction banishes sexuality and death and in the process links them with the feminine and the impure.

Jay's work is extremely persuasive, and many of her insights hold up under scrutiny, but they require some correctives, particularly within the complexities of a single sacrificial tradition. As noted earlier, the material effects for women in a patrilineal society, which Jay mentions but does not examine, are of utmost importance for understanding the significance of sacrificial behavior. The ability to have access to and control over material resources is central to the status of women in any society; biblical laws of sacrifice show not only where this access is restricted but also where it is permitted. As some critics have shown, Jay does not substantively address the many instances of women who do sacrifice or the function of their offerings.<sup>13</sup> The biblical laws address

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>11</sup> *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Kelley Ann Raab, for instance, points out that Jay did not address the question of women as sacrificers and what it would mean for women to sacrifice. See "Nancy Jay and a Feminist Psychology of Sacrifice," *JFSR* 13 (1997), especially 82–89. Pointing out the likelihood that women priestesses probably offered to goddesses, Raab concludes that Jay's understanding of sacrifice applies only to men and not to women. Raab shows that in patriarchal systems

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several situations in which women make offerings, and they clearly show that women are capable of having some control over wealth and access to social power. In addition, in Jay's few discussions of women who sacrifice, they are portrayed only in terms of their fertility with no reference to economic factors. For instance, Jay suggests that only women in non-childbearing roles, such as older (postmenopausal) or celibate women, participate in sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> However, we must consider that these women are likely to have been somewhat economically independent or were directly reliant on a cult for their livelihood.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, there are important economic ramifications from their inclusion and exclusion. The gender divisions in sacrificial activity are more complicated than just the juxtaposition between childbearing and sacrifice. Jay's work sometimes suffers from an overly simplified view of gender that does not consider wealth, class, rank, nationality, and other factors that complicate gendered roles.

Similarly, although Jay asserts that childbearing women do not sacrifice in patrilineal societies, this is untrue for biblical law.<sup>16</sup> According to Lev 12, for example, as soon as a new mother is deemed cultically fit, the first thing she *must* do is make an offering. Moreover, outside of the legal texts, mothers are given extra portions of sacrificial meat (1 Sam 1:4–5) and are thereby rewarded for bearing children. These laws do not so much exclude motherhood as keep it in check by circumscribing the birth element, but they also reward it through participation in sacrificial activity and a greater share of resources. We can also note that some wives, who are accused of adultery, are *forced* to make offerings (Num 5:11–31). Thus sacrificial laws do not systematically exclude

women do make offerings and she argues that women's participation transforms the nature of sacrifice. She understands both men and women's ability to sacrifice as a need to overcome the power of the mother; women too have hostility against their mothers. For critique see Jonté-Pace in the same volume (pp. 68–9) who argues that women sacrificing are just a minor variation in the pattern in which women are allowed to act like men but the social structure is upheld.

<sup>14</sup> *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Older women are often widows who work outside the home or have some control over their husband's estate; consecrated virgins often made earnings as part of their status and, at least in the ancient world, were known sometimes to control a great deal of wealth. For example, in Mesopotamia, the En priestesses of the second millennium B.C.E. controlled much of the wealth in the sanctuary of their deities, and the *naditu* were unmarried women from wealthy families who lived in temple cloisters (Hennie Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 491, 502–04). Cloistered or consecrated women were also often dependent on the cult, which took on the authoritative role of paterfamilias over them (Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in her *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997], 98; hereafter, *Missing Persons*).

<sup>16</sup> *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, xxiii. She does, however, give some exceptions; see 153–54, n.2.



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childbearing women, as Jay argues, but, through specific rules, enter into a careful negotiation of the relation of women, men, reproduction, and society.

Additionally, in presenting sacrifice primarily as an opposition to female reproductive power, Jay does not sufficiently address the fact that male sexuality and reproduction are problematic for biblical sacrificial systems as well. Although women are more closely tied with reproduction, and as a result viewed more problematically, it is not just female birthing that should be undone by the social act of sacrifice, but ultimately all biological reproduction is superseded by it. For P and other biblical writers, ejaculation and intercourse are incompatible with sacrifice. Similarly, Jay's insights need to be expanded with regard not only to the male role in procreation but also to the general image of masculinity. The priestly laws of both purity and sacrifice often portray masculinity as a highly fragile and delicate construct. It can be undone not only by women's reproductive power but also by a number of other phenomena such as illness, injury, lust, and defeat. Although it is true, as Jay and Kristeva assert, that women's bodies are portrayed as threatening and frightening, cultic texts portray masculinity as frightening and highly dangerous. The circumcision of male children, the preponderance of male animal sacrificial victims, the constant threat throughout the Bible of the sacrifice of male children, and even the necessity for sacrifice itself all speak to this fact. Ultimately, no human man can fully achieve the cultic masculine ideal; it is attainable only by its deity.

Finally, a question that arises throughout this book is that of legitimate and illegitimate sacrifice. Jay's theory applies to formal, public, accepted sacrificial systems. Her theory rests on data from male-authored texts and field data collected by men who usually discussed male-centered and public rituals. Yet scholars of Israelite religion have firmly established that women's religious activity is often excluded by the male authors of the Bible either as unimportant, not "religious," or heterodox, or, since it took place largely in the private and domestic realm, because it was unknown to them. We must ask, then, whether the form of sacrifice on which male-dominated written texts focus is indeed the only form of "sacrifice" or whether women were also making offerings separate from the recorded system. There are hints of such activity in the biblical texts. For example, in Jeremiah women officiate in the offering of cakes and libations for the Queen of Heaven (7:18; 44:15-30), which the prophet decries as heretical and causing the wrath of Yahweh. Solomon's foreign, idolatrous wives are also portrayed as sacrificing and burning incense to their deities (1 Kgs 11: 8). The prophet Ezekiel accuses the female Jerusalem of slaying her sons and daughters and offering them to foreign gods (16:20-21). Though a metaphor, the image of the unsupervised offering by a female is



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intertwined with illicit and dangerous religious activity. It therefore seems likely that women were conducting all kinds of “sacrifice,” but that it was not in an officially recognized form. These examples of illegitimate offerings illustrate the power that women might have when they sacrifice and slaughter and the threat it poses to patriarchal control. The biblical writers, who largely supported official forms of sacrificial activity, would have good reason to omit or disdain certain examples of female sacrifice.

## SACRIFICE

Another difficulty in the study of biblical sacrifice regards the definition of “sacrifice.” As Kathryn McClymond has shown, we generally use the term “sacrifice” to refer to the killing of an animal, whereas in reality that action is only a small part of a much larger sphere of activity of making libations and offering grain and other foodstuffs.<sup>17</sup> The slaughter of animals, although so important to modern theories of sacrifice, is not even mentioned in most biblical texts describing animal offerings. Far more important are the acts of burning and blood manipulation and the distribution of the offering among the offerer, the officiant, and the deity. Moreover, a particular sacrificial victim may have been intentionally bred or selected years before its actual slaughter so that the husbandry of the animal is also an intrinsic part of its offering.<sup>18</sup> It thus becomes difficult to know where “sacrifice” begins and ends. Furthermore, James W. Watts has shown that the term “sacrifice” in modern English has many implications that have little to do with the food offerings made in biblical rituals.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he argues, what one person may view as a “sacrifice,” another might view as a different sort of event. For example, Christians view the crucifixion of Jesus as a sacrifice, yet the Romans merely viewed it as an execution. Therefore, “sacrifice” is, as he says, by nature an evaluative and not a descriptive claim; “sacrifice” is in the eye of the beholder. Its definition is relative and culturally dependent, and sacrificial events and their legitimacy change throughout time and place. Sacrifice, then, is part of a much larger ritual complex, it is extremely difficult to define, and it varies by perspective.

Because a definition of sacrifice is elusive, for the purposes of this study we will consider “sacrifice” to mean the range of ritual activities, including oblations, expiatory acts, and ritual killings of both people and animals,

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60–61.

<sup>19</sup> Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 173–80.

that are given specialized ritual terms associated with offerings made on an altar or otherwise given to a deity. These terms include, for example, *‘ōlā* (“whole burnt offering”), *zēbah* (“peace offering, slaughter offering”), *ḥaṭṭā’t* (“sin offering, purification offering”) and *mōlek* (a specialized form of child offering). Relying on this terminology keeps us within the viewpoint of the biblical writers even when we might not consider certain unusual actions to be “sacrifices.” For example, in the scapegoat rite of Lev 16, two live goats are together called a *ḥaṭṭā’t* (sin offering). One is slaughtered and parts of its body are burned on the altar for the deity – and thus it appears to be a “sacrifice” – yet the other goat is the “scapegoat” over which the priest confesses the sins of Israel and which is then driven out into the wilderness, but is never killed. Both are given the same terminology though they are treated in very different ways. Similarly, the rite of the red cow in Num 19 is also called a *ḥaṭṭā’t*, but many scholars have been reluctant to call it a “sacrifice” because it is conducted in a highly unusual fashion, including taking place away from an altar. Prioritizing the biblical terminology allows us to avoid judging whether these particular rites are properly “sacrifices” based on modern or idiosyncratic assumptions of what that term means.

Although the goal of this book is to understand biblical sacrifice on its own terms, the non-native term “sacrifice” (from Latin *sacer facere*) indicates a most important aspect of its function: the essence of sacrifice is of making something sacred. The victim or object of sacrifice becomes holy and thus divinely accepted; its acceptability is shown by the very fact of its consecration or destruction. Victims must be perfect or unblemished in order to be sacrificed and the fact that they are sacrificed affirms their unblemished status. Conversely, whatever is “blemished” or “imperfect” cannot be offered, and therefore what cannot be offered is imperfect. One of the functions of sacrificial acts, then, is to define and represent what is holy, and thus ideal, and what is not. The laws of sacrifice discussed throughout this book give very clear examples of the process of defining and redefining the perfect with regard to gender; in the process they define gender itself.

Although the sacrificial process of defining is primary, the criteria for the definitions of consecrated and unholy are almost never explained. They are almost unilaterally attributed to mysterious divine choice and not to any clearly stated reasoning. The biblical text never explains why God wants specific victims, only that he wants them. Readers are never told, for example, why a red cow should be the proper victim for a rite that remedies death, why a priestly *‘ōlā* must be a male, or why in Genesis 22 God demands Isaac as a sacrificial victim. This appears to be the case because the reason for the offering is profound and multifaceted, but also because it is often