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S. Mira Balberg. *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. xi + 287 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-29592-6.

Reviewed by Seth Sanders

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Commissioned by Barbara Krawcowicz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Read literally, the Torah looks as much like a cookbook as an origin story: much of Leviticus consists of God's commandments on how to prepare and offer animals to him, and the right and wrong way to sacrifice is a key theme from Cain and Abel through Deuteronomy. Yet Jewish animal sacrifice ended almost two thousand years ago, long before the Talmud was written. How did Judaism, a religion founded on performing God's commandments, abandon these religiously central commandments? Balberg's provocative but well-supported answer is: It didn't.

The conventional wisdom Balberg challenges has long been enshrined in scholarship, embodied in a relatively recent survey as Guy Stroumsa's *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (2009). It assumes that Judaism was gradually evolving away from animal sacrifice when it was suddenly forced to stop it entirely when the Romans destroyed its sacrificial center in the Jerusalem temple. On this view, only the destruction of the temple makes Judaism distinctive with respect to sacrifice, because by the time of late antiquity most of the Mediterranean had already transcended animal sacrifice as crude, violent, and material. This paints an artificially regressive picture of sister religions like Islam (slaughtered animals presumably do not care whether they died for a ritual or a rich man's feast, with the exception that Islam requires ritually slaughtered animals to be fed to the poor).

In the face of this conventional wisdom Balberg's study is a revelation, for it turns out that for the most part, when it comes to the ritual law at the heart of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis treated sacrifice as if it never stopped. Building on arguments by scholars like Kathryn McClymond, she goes beyond debunking the assumption of primal violence in sacrifice as a scholarly and theological fantasy to show us the surprising things that the rabbis made it mean.[1] Focused on early Judaism in the Mishnah and parallel corpora (Tosefta, etc.), Balberg demonstrates that the rabbis worked out the specifics of blood in the same way they treated the things they still actually did, such as prayer, *Kashrut*, etc. Why was this?

Balberg shrewdly focuses not on quotable but rare and unrepresentative general statements *about* halakha and the Temple such as "Since the destruction of the Temple the Holy One has only the four cubits of halakha left to him" (*b. Ber* 8a), but on what the early rabbis actually *did* with the Torah's legal heritage (pp. 4, 20). In five chapters she lays out these transformations: the first was to negate the importance of the offerer of the sacrifice: while the rabbis devoted great attention to the role of the priest's intention in ritual, the intention of the giver does not matter. In the second

chapter, she shows that they transformed the sacrificial act itself from one in which an animal was offered as food to God to one in which an animal's blood was treated properly. Third, they negated the role of individual offerings in favor of congregational ones. In Leviticus, many offerings are done on the part of an individual to maintain or repair their relationship with God, but in the early rabbinic literature the offerings that matter are those by the community as a whole. The fourth chapter exemplifies how these transformations come together in the case of the Passover sacrifice. The fifth chapter examines the genre of ritual narrative, a literary account of a ritual performance distinctive of the Mishnah, which works a final transformation in comparison to Leviticus' narrative picture of miraculous events and famous individuals, focusing instead on the mundane and collective. Balberg concludes that the rabbis depicted Jews as a people who sacrifice because it was key to defining them as a people and a religion in late antique discourse. The rabbis effectively created a new theory of ritual that transformed biblical sacrifice from a personal interaction with God into a performance-based relation within the Jewish community.

The broader stakes of Balberg's project are high, because as she notes, sacrifice is one of the main ways "Western" religion has been defined as different from others, as spiritual and verbal where others were physical and material, and this is where an additional thought may be in place. The phenomenon of a shift away from animal sacrifice has important parallels in the history of religions, with its most richly documented theorization taking place in South Asia. The case of Judaism is especially important because it occupies a special place within the image of Western religions: unlike its derivative, Christianity, it is still often stereotyped as tied up in ritual and words.

Blood for Thought is a fresh, powerful, and convincing argument for the distinctive role of Judaism in the history of religions, as well as the relationship between speech and action, human and animal, and the broader human meanings of sacrifice. And it is here that Balberg may slightly undersell the book's significance by mainly locating her book in a narrower historical and regional subfield, arguing that "transformations of sacrifice—both as an idea and a practice—in the Mediterranean region in the course of the first five centuries of the Common Era are among the most defining features of 'late antiquity' as a historical epoch" (p. 22). In fact, as even this brief survey shows, its importance goes beyond the scholarly construct of "late antiquity" to the more widespread and enduring constructs of sacrifice, Judaism, and religion itself.

Note

[1]. “Death Be Not Proud: Reevaluating the Role of Killing in Sacrifice,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 221–42.

Seth Sanders is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Davis.

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