

Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple

*Symbolism and Supersessionism
in the Study of Ancient Judaism*

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Introduction

Purity, Sacrifice, and Evolutionist Analysis

This book sets out to reexamine modern scholarly approaches to ancient Judaism's temple cult. In part I, we will evaluate current scholarship on purity and sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. In part II, we will evaluate scholarship concerning ancient Jewish views of the temple cult in Jerusalem. The common denominator of parts I and II—and the thesis of this book—is the claim that scholarly understandings of Jewish cultic matters have been unduly influenced by various contemporary biases, religious and cultural. For some interpreters, ancient Jewish sacrifice was but one small step away from the chaotic violence that typified human origins. For others, the temple cult was destined to be replaced—superseded—by other less bloody rituals that would prove to be of greater value, both spiritually and symbolically. The problem with interpretations like these is not just that they are biased. They are also methodologically unsound. But most important, they are also simply inadequate and inaccurate understandings of the evidence before us.

One problem with such readings is that they are conspicuously selective. Scholars will find symbolism in many rituals, but not in sacrifice. They will grant that many ancient Jews did offer symbolic or “spiritualized” understandings of the temple cult. But scholars generally attribute these attitudes only to those philosophers, mystics, sectarians, or later Christians or rabbis who stand outside of the cult in place or time. Practically anyone could understand the cult symbolically, with the exception of the priests and pilgrims who willingly and happily performed cultic rituals.

Another problem with current scholarly approaches is that they often assume what they should be trying to prove. Instead of tracing the history of ideas on the basis of datable evidence, all too

often evidence is dated by virtue of the perspectives it is perceived to express. Texts are plugged into preconceived conceptions of religious history, where trajectories are assumed to run from primitive, pre-Israelite cult practices to ancient Jewish symbolic or “spiritualized” understandings of sacrifice, culminating in the nonsacrificial practices of contemporary Christianity and Judaism. When texts concerning ancient Judaism’s sacrificial cult are placed within such broad, evolutionary schemes, it should come as no surprise that selective and biased readings of the earlier evidence can result. As we will see throughout this book, various forms of religious and cultural supersessionism have prevented scholars from seeing the temple as a powerful source of meaning and symbolism for those who believed in it. This project seeks to expose and counter such approaches, by taking a fresh look at a broad array of evidence concerning ancient Judaism’s temple and cultic practices.

Because we are covering a large body of literature, composed over a long span of time, the argument will have to unfold gradually. But we can introduce and illustrate the approach taken here by starting at the beginning, looking at the selectivity and biases that characterize scholarly analyses of two cultic ritual structures of the Hebrew Bible: sacrifice and purity.

That sacrifice and ritual purity are structurally interrelated can hardly be denied: the two are juxtaposed in the biblical book of Leviticus, with sacrifice treated (primarily, but not exclusively) in chapters 1–10, and purity treated (again, not exclusively) in chapters 11–15. In Leviticus, it becomes clear that ritual purity is the prerequisite for those who would come to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices, for those priests who regularly officiate at sacrifices, and for any animals that are to be offered as sacrifices. Ritual impurity, by definition, is associated with those phenomena that are barred from the sanctuary. Sacrifice, also by definition, involves many activities that—especially according to the priestly traditions—can take place *only* in the sanctuary.

The idea that ritual purity is a fundamental prerequisite for sacrifice is reflected in ancient Jewish literature as well. Indeed, virtually every ancient Jewish literary treatment of cultic themes in ancient Jewish literature, from the Hebrew Bible through rabbinic literature, treats both purity and sacrifice, if it treats one of them at all. This is true of the biblical book of Ezekiel, and of ancient Jewish works such as *Jubilees*, the *Temple Scroll* (11QT), and *Miqsat Ma’aseh ha-Torah* (4QMMT). It is also true of rabbinic works, including the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Sifra. The two ritual structures of purity and sacrifice are virtually inseparable. The reason for this, as Philo put it so clearly, is that purity is required of those who offer sacrifices (*Special Laws* 1:256–261).

As the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–83) advised some time ago, sacrifice should be understood as a process with several stages.¹ Turner was following his predecessors Henri Hubert (1872–1927) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950)—about whom we will have much more to say later. Hubert and Mauss devoted part of their classic 1898 essay *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* to describing the processes of “sacralization” and purification that precede sacrifice.² With regard to the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism, that

process of sacrifice can be said to begin with the processes of ritual purification. Clearly, an integrated analysis of purity and sacrifice is a desideratum.

Yet, surprisingly, one would be hard pressed to find current scholarly works on the Hebrew Bible or ancient Judaism that approach ritual purity with the understanding that it is the prerequisite to sacrifice or that approach sacrifice with the understanding that ritual purity is what leads up to it. The ritual structures may have been integrated in ancient times, but they are hardly integrated in the current scholarly discussion. Typically, monographs and thematic treatments are devoted to only one or the other of these ritual structures.

Some scholarly works, to be sure, treat both purity and sacrifice—even with regard to the Hebrew Bible. But these tend not to be monographs but rather one or another of two genres with an entirely broader focus altogether. General treatments of biblical religion will as a matter of course include introductory surveys of both purity and sacrifice in general.³ But textbooks, understandably, have their limits. To find single works in which these two topics are subjected to detailed scholarly analysis, one must turn to the numerous commentaries on the biblical books of Leviticus and Numbers. Because Leviticus in particular treats both purity and sacrifice, one would expect to find in the commentaries discussions that approach the two ritual structures with similar methods and attitudes. But a review of the commentaries on Leviticus provides further confirmation of the divide separating purity from sacrifice in the current scene: biblical scholars, if they treat both at all, still tend to treat purity and sacrifice rather differently.

Since Mary Douglas wrote *Purity and Danger* in the 1960s, most scholars studying the dietary laws and the purity system(s) of ancient Israel have recognized the need to treat these as symbolic structures.⁴ The laws serve functions, to be sure, but they also may express some fundamental ideas about the body, cosmology, and perhaps even justice.⁵ Jacob Milgrom's recently completed magisterial commentary on Leviticus in the Anchor Bible series is a case in point. As we will see in chapter 1, Milgrom's treatment of the purity laws is complex and sympathetic—precisely what one would expect from a scholar who has digested the thrust of *Purity and Danger*. He argues for an elaborate thesis on the symbolic nature of the ritual purity system in general. Moreover, he pays the dietary rules in particular a high compliment by arguing that their ultimate basis is an ethical one.

Yet when biblical scholars turn back to the first ten chapters of Leviticus, Mary Douglas's general insights are no longer considered terribly informative. Comparatively speaking, scholarship on the Hebrew Bible exhibits very little interest in analyzing sacrificial rituals in the way Douglas analyzed the purity rituals—recognizing the possibility that the ancient Israelite sacrificial rules could profitably be analyzed as a symbolic system.⁶ There are, of course, symbolic explorations of a “piecemeal” sort: for instance, one can find examinations of the symbolic value of the color red in the red heifer ritual.⁷ There are also, to be sure, symbolic explorations of the most general sort: for example, one can find studies that look through and beyond the details of

varied sacrificial rites and narratives and find a fundamental sameness in them all, which can then be analyzed symbolically, as in the works of René Girard.

While biblical scholars frequently approach purity rites as a symbolic system, what we generally find in analyses of sacrifice in ancient Israel is, rather, a concern with origins. And this concern takes two forms. One is the standard discussion—found in numerous commentaries—of the basic theories (about which we will have more to say below) that sacrifice originated as offerings of food for the gods, as gifts to the gods, or as communion with the gods. The other is René Girard's search for the original murder that accounts for all subsequent sacrificial rituals. Again, Milgrom's commentary is a case in point. Although he endorses no single theory on the origins of sacrifice, his treatment of the ritual concedes that the interesting issue is not what sacrifice actually means for the ancient Israelites, but rather how sacrifice came about in the first place.

The question of the origins of sacrifice is certainly one of the more important—and justifiably fascinating—questions in the field of religious studies. Yet this fascination with the origins of sacrifice is, in actuality, notoriously selective. Theorists arbitrarily assume that the origin of religion is to be found in sacrifice. Biblical commentators, following suit, exhibit a greater interest in the origins of sacrifice than in the beginnings of other ritual structures. When dealing with the food laws or the purity systems, biblical scholars have long avoided getting sidetracked by explorations into the origins of dietary restriction or the menstrual taboo. When dealing with circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, very few have felt the need to explore the early history of human body marking. But when it comes to sacrifice, the interest shifts to questions of origins. Biblical scholars seem to get along just fine without “theories” concerning most of the rites in the Hebrew Bible, but when it comes to sacrifice, everyone wants a “theory.”

Our concern here is not to evaluate this search per se but to evaluate its impact on biblical studies. It is my contention that the search for the origins of sacrifice should remain largely irrelevant to the work of biblical commentators, who ought rather to be interested in understanding the developed sacrificial system of ancient Israel in its context. The quest for origins is not merely irrelevant; its impact on biblical studies has been largely detrimental. When the search for origins predominates, the search for any contextual understanding of ancient Israelite sacrifice is eclipsed. Moreover, all too frequently interest in the origins of sacrifice results in an evolutionist analysis.

Evolutionism is a difficult phenomenon to define precisely, and there is some dispute among scholars as to the pertinence of the referent to certain theorists. Nonetheless, the term is commonly used to describe a broad array of theories of history—often pertaining to the origin of religion—that trace a more or less linear evolution of human civilization along intellectual, ethical, and religious lines.⁸ Inspired by G.W.F. von Hegel's philosophy of history and Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution, evolutionist theories came into prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the works

of E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) and James G. Frazer (1854–1941).⁹ Perhaps the most notorious example of evolutionist theory is Frazer’s book *The Golden Bough* (published in various forms between the 1890s and 1920s), which traces human development along three successive stages, from an original primitive magic through a later religious stage, culminating in modern science. Surely one of the most pernicious of these evolutionist approaches was expressed in Friedrich Delitzsch’s “Babel und Bibel” lectures (delivered 1902–4), which understood the gradual and eventually complete de-Judaization of religion as a positive development.¹⁰ Evolutionist theories, however, need not be as purely linear as Frazer’s or as patently offensive as Delitzsch’s. Like Hegel, evolutionist theories often trace temporary regressions and wrong turns (these are analogous to Hegel’s stage of “antithesis”). Like Darwin, evolutionist theories often trace the “survival” of aspects of early thought in later societies. The evolutionism of William Robertson Smith (1846–94), as we will see below, exhibits both of these traits. Yet on the whole, evolutionist theories posit broad, definitive, and positive development of human civilization. The theories, moreover, exhibit the presumption of intellectual and ethical superiority of the author’s position. Typically, the highest rung on the evolutionist ladder is occupied by whatever perspective the author advocates, be it monotheism, Christianity, or science.

With regard to sacrifice in particular, evolutionist analyses look something like this. Scholars first speculate on what sacrifice meant, at its origins: for instance, sacrifice was originally understood as divine food. Then scholars find only the faintest echoes of such primitive ideas in the Hebrew Bible: for instance, at least the Israelites—unlike their neighbors—didn’t really conceive of sacrifices as divine food anymore.¹¹ The achievement of the Israelites, according to this evolutionist approach, lies precisely in the fact that sacrifice no longer means to them what it meant to those who preceded them. For those who take the evolutionist approach, sacrifice remains in ancient Israel as a meaningless, vestigial ritual, a relic from a more primitive era.¹² Many theorists find further support for such a claim by asserting that the ancient Israelite prophets were already attuned to the futility of sacrificial worship.¹³ This kind of evolutionism is in evidence in much of the current work on ancient Israelite sacrifice.

There is, with regard to sacrifice, yet another sort of evolutionist argument. This second sort of evolutionism—which can also be termed “super-sessionism”—appears primarily in works of scholarship dealing with later periods of Jewish history. Where one sort of evolutionism begins with the supposition that ancient Israel demonstrated a marked development over the paganism that preceded it (by moving, ever so slightly, away from a literal, mechanical understanding of sacrifice), this second sort of evolutionism is predicated on the assumption that ancient Jewish sacrifice was itself superseded by something better that came later.

Within the Christian tradition, of course, it is often understood that the Jewish sacrificial cult was superseded by Jesus’ sacrificial death. Within the New Testament, this perspective is laid out most clearly in the epistle to the

Hebrews. Ancient Israel's sacrificial service is described in the letter as offering ineffective atonement (Heb. 7:18); its numerous priests limited by their mortality (7:23), and their sanctuary a mere copy of the true temple in heaven (8:1–5). Jesus' priesthood, however, offers an ever-effective atonement (9:12), a perfect sacrifice (9:14) offered in the true holy place (9:11) by the single eternal and true high priest (7:16–17, 21).¹⁴ This ideology often emerges in scholarship on two New Testament narratives in particular (neither of which are even alluded to in Hebrews): the Last Supper and Jesus' overturning the tables in the temple. According to this approach, the temple incident symbolizes or enacts Jesus' rejection of Jewish sacrificial worship.¹⁵ The eucharistic traditions of the Last Supper then constitute an efficacious symbolic act that “inverts” and “replaces” Jewish sacrifice.¹⁶ The reason for all this is that Jewish sacrificial worship was indeed flawed: for some, sacrifice is deemed spiritually inadequate;¹⁷ for others, the temple is deemed too hierarchical or exclusive.¹⁸ Perhaps the fullest attack on the Jewish temple in current scholarship is to be found in the works of Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, who, following René Girard, indicts the temple as a place of violence, vengeance, and victimage.¹⁹ Hamerton-Kelly's judgment is atypically extreme. But as we will see throughout this book, criticisms of sacrifice and the temple are the rule, and sympathetic treatments are the exception. Scholarship on the New Testament tends to adhere to the rule, often in line with traditional Christian criticisms of sacrifice. This perspective has affected scholarship on the Hebrew Bible as well, as can be seen, for example, in treatments of biblical sacrifice that conclude with reference to the New Testament book of Hebrews.²⁰

We cannot suppose, however, that this kind of argument is made by Christian scholars alone. A number of Jewish scholarly approaches to either ancient Israelite or ancient Jewish sacrifice are marked by a similar assumption that sacrifice was destined to be replaced by something better that came later. Already in the Middle Ages, the forward-thinking philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) famously developed an historicist—or evolutionist—approach to ancient Israel's sacrificial laws. In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:32, 69b) Maimonides compares the sacrificial laws to mother's milk (cf. Hebrews 5:11–14!) and claims that God suffered sacrificial worship to remain as a “divine ruse” whose purpose was to eliminate idolatry.²¹ The ideal form of worship is prayer, for, as the prophets have shown, sacrifices are inadequate, and God “can dispense with them” (III:32; 72b). Maimonides' approach is fascinating in its own right and was highly controversial in its day. Less than thirty years after his death, Maimonides' *Guide* was banned by French rabbis—and copies were burned in Montpellier.²²

Yet Maimonides' approach was never rooted out. It came to life again in the nineteenth century with the birth of the reform movement in Germany, which advocated that the traditional liturgy be stripped of references to sacrificial worship. Indeed, practically from the very beginning of modern synagogue reform, rather contentious disputes arose over what to do with sacrificial language in the traditional Jewish liturgy.²³ Some reformers who were more moderate advocated subtle changes, such as rephrasing hopes for the restoration of

sacrifices into nostalgic memories of sacrifices offered long ago (and this is still done in contemporary American Conservative prayer books). Other more radical reformers advocated a fuller elimination of sacrificial terms and references (as is still done in contemporary American Reform and Reconstructionist prayer books). These disputes can in no way be separated from Jewish scholarly approaches to sacrifice, because the history of modern Jewish historical scholarship is wrapped up in the history of synagogue reform, in figures such as Abraham Geiger.²⁴ We should therefore not be surprised that a good deal of Jewish scholarship on the Hebrew Bible or ancient Judaism operates on the assumption that sacrifice is hopelessly outmoded and meaningless. In 1869, with reference to his own edition of the prayer book, Geiger wrote: “even if it be assumed that, in ancient times, sacrifice was an adequate expression of the adoration of God, sacrifice has long since made way for a more spiritual worship service, and its reintroduction is unthinkable.”²⁵ More recently, a similar perspective on sacrifice led Elias J. Bickerman to conclude an essay entitled “The Temple” with the judgment that the Roman emperor Titus (who as a Roman commander supervised the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E.) was “certainly the greatest religious reformer in history.”²⁶ Obviously, Maimonides’ approach remains compelling for modern Jewish exegetes and theologians who deny the traditional Jewish view that sacrificial worship is destined again to become the norm for Jewish worship.²⁷ We will see the continued impact of this understanding of matters throughout this book, but especially in chapter 1, with regard to the Hebrew Bible, and in chapter 6, with regard to the history of early rabbinic Judaism.

The view that ancient Jewish sacrifice was destined to be replaced by a morally superior mode of worship like prayer is, in fact, structurally akin to the argument that the temple was destined to be spiritualized by the eucharist. In both cases, what becomes important in subsequent religious developments is also seen as inherently superior, of greater spiritual and even symbolic value. Both of these arguments are frequently bolstered by the claim that ancient Israelite sacrifice was itself an activity that was morally superior to that which preceded it. Perhaps inspired by the world wars and genocides of the last century, a number of scholars have been impelled of late to search for the origins of human violence. Curiously, it is not uncommon for scholars to tie the origins of human violence to the early history of sacrificial practice. Needless to say, there is little evidence for the claim that sacrifice originated in efforts to respond to or curb early human violence: how could there be evidence for such a theory? There is even less evidence that today’s postsacrificial humanity is any less violent than it was before sacrifice began or while sacrifice was widely practiced. But the frequency with which such assertions are made (as we will see below) reflects a third, distinctively modern bias against sacrifice—one that differs from, but nonetheless now supports, the Christian and Jewish biases we have just discussed. This is the claim that sacrifice is inherently violent and immoral.

None of these perspectives, true or not, are of use when trying to determine what ancient Israelite sacrifice meant to those Israelites who believed in

its efficacy. But all of these perspectives play a significant role in the current discussion of the themes we will consider. As we will see in chapter 1, they lurk behind the fact that while purity rites are generally treated fairly and sympathetically today, sacrifice still tends to be dismissed with derision.

To put these religious and scholarly approaches in their place, it might be helpful to consider some arguments long ago raised in *defense* of sacrifice. It is well known, but not always sufficiently appreciated, that the history of animal sacrifice in the West did not end with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Sacrificial rituals continued to be practiced throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. Then, as Christian leaders and emperors became more and more powerful, they began closing pagan shrines. Greco-Roman religious life began to face its end, but it didn't go without a fight. Among the philosophers who defended the old religions was one Platonius Sallustius—a friend and ally of the emperor Julian, who briefly reinstated the old Roman cults from 361 to 363 C.E. This Sallustius authored a tract, *On the Gods and the World*, which is little read or known today.²⁸ But it contains some rather sharp arguments in defense of sacrifice. First, Sallustius notes that it is fitting to give to the gods *in kind*, as they have provided. They have given life, and life should be given to them. Sallustius goes on to challenge the presumed superiority of prayer: “Prayer without sacrifice,” said Sallustius, “is only words” (*On the Gods* 16). Or, in the words of the modern cliché, talk is cheap. Sacrifice, however, costs.

The goal here is not to defend the practice of sacrifice, or to denigrate the practice of prayer. But Sallustius's defense of sacrifice—with its biting critique of prayer—ought to help us appreciate that polemics can be written the other way around. Had the history of religion turned out differently from the way it did, perhaps someone would have to write a book about the fact that scholars denigrate prayer more than they should. But that's not how things worked out.

The Scope and Structure of the Book

This project seeks to reach beyond the current antisacrificial bias. In particular, we seek to trace and counter the various evolutionist approaches that seem to predominate over current scholarly understandings of ancient Israelite and Jewish cultic matters. This book consists of two parts, with a rough chronological divide between them. In part I, we focus on biblical Israel, while in part II we will focus on the literature of ancient Judaism (Second Temple and rabbinic periods). In part I, we will see how the selective (and often evolutionist) fascination with the origins of sacrifice has had a detrimental effect on scholarly understandings of biblical Israel. In part II, we will see how various Christian and Jewish ideas about the replacement of sacrifice (or its “spiritualization”) have impacted negatively on the understandings of a whole array of ancient Jewish texts dealing with cultic matters. Parts I and II address two different epochs, in chronological order: biblical Israel and ancient Judaism.

But within each of the two parts, we address our topics not chronologically but thematically. The order in which matters are presented allows for the smoothest presentation of the particular arguments: as we will see, the understanding of the prophets (chapter 3) depends on the analysis of the Pentateuch (chapter 2), and the interpretation of the New Testament (chapter 7) builds on the surveys of the rabbis (chapter 6) and Qumran (chapter 5). Certainly thematic clarity ought to have at least as strong a claim over a book's structure as chronology has. Moreover, siding with thematic clarity over chronology has the added advantage of aiding in the effort to eschew evolutionist analyses. A chronological presentation can lead to the *impression* that one has traced a linear development. It is hoped that the book's thematic analysis will lead to the conviction that evolutionist constructions have had too great a hold over scholars of biblical Israel and ancient Judaism.

In chapter 1, we will survey a number of theoretical approaches to purity and sacrifice, with an eye toward those theorists whose work has had a significant impact—for better or for worse—on the understanding of the cultic rituals of the Hebrew Bible. As we will see—and as I have already intimated—scholarly approaches to ancient Israel's cult rituals tend to be unintegrated (separating purity from sacrifice) and differentiated (understanding purity symbolically and sacrifice historically). Over the course of this chapter, we will review the theoretical works on purity and sacrifice that currently loom over the discussion. We will also look back to a time when things were very different, in order to reflect better on why things might be the way they are today.

In chapter 2, we will turn to the biblical rituals themselves, and offer a preliminary effort toward understanding purity and sacrifice in ways quite different from those that are more common. We will seek to reach beyond the current antisacrificial bias, by studying sacrifice and purity in tandem, using similar methods, with a willingness to grant that sacrificial rules could be just as symbolic as purity rules are generally understood to be. The integrated symbolic approach to both purity and sacrifice offered here will work toward understanding what ancient Israelites might have believed about the purpose and meaning of their sacrificial cult. In particular, we will see that much of the symbolism can be understood in light of two central theological ideas—*imitatio Dei*, and the concern to attract and maintain God's presence dwelling in the sanctuary.

In chapter 3, we will turn to the prophetic literature, with an eye toward reexamining the kinds of challenges raised there to the sacrificial system. Certain prophetic passages are seemingly critical of the cult—and indeed, such passages in part motivate the dominant antisacrificial bias. As we will see, however, the prophets do not in fact reject the practice of sacrifice or its meaning, although there are indeed a number of reasons why the prophets took a particular interest in the sacrificial practices of their contemporaries.

In part II, we will bring the analysis of part I to bear on an understanding of Judaism in the Second Temple and early rabbinic periods. After briefly reviewing a number of recent works that treat understandings of the cult in ancient Judaism (introduction to part II), we will examine our themes as they

are developed in ancient Jewish literature in general (chapter 4), in the Dead Sea Scrolls in particular (chapter 5), in rabbinic literature (chapter 6), and in the New Testament (chapter 7).

In chapter 4, we will discuss two overarching ancient Jewish understandings of the temple: (1) that the temple represented the cosmos and (2) that the Jerusalem temple was understood as the earthly analogue of the heavenly temple. All too often, these ideas are understood as “desacralizations” of the temple or as “spiritualizations” of the cult. I will argue, however, that these two notions help us understand what the cultic rituals meant in that time for those Jews who remained loyal to the temple and its practices. As we will see, these two ideas continue and develop the understandings of purity and sacrifice to be traced in chapter 2: the concerns with *imitatio Dei* and attracting the divine presence. We will also see that the two symbolic approaches to the temple—that it represents the cosmos or corresponds to a heavenly analogue—do not constitute criticisms of the temple.

In chapter 5, we will evaluate the criticisms leveled against the temple in ancient Jewish literature, particularly among the texts discovered at Qumran. As we will see, the Dead Sea sectarians built on and developed the prophetic tradition (discussed in chapter 3) in order to articulate a sharper criticism of the Jerusalem temple, its practice, and its personnel. After carefully schematizing the various antitemple polemics, we will consider the degree to which the Qumran sectarians rejected the temple. We will then consider the question of whether the Qumran sectarians replaced the temple—even provisionally—in some fashion. As we will see, the Qumran sectarians emulated the temple in a number of ways, but they did not consider their communal rituals or institutions to be effective replacements for the temple. Nor did they “spiritualize” sacrifice. The scholarship that magnifies and even praises the sectarian rejection of the temple has fallen into the trap of endorsing the ancient and modern rejections of the temple. Instead of endorsing such criticism, I will suggest that the criticism needs to be more carefully scrutinized.

In chapter 6, we consider the approach to the temple taken in rabbinic literature. Our first task will be to consider the degree to which the rabbis adopted the criticisms of the temple articulated at Qumran. We will then consider the ways in which the rabbis responded to the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. As we will see, like the Qumran sectarians before them, the rabbis ascribed cultic significance to a number of extratemple rituals, without maintaining that the temple has been effectively replaced or superseded by something else. Again, scholars who themselves appear reluctant to recognize the temple’s meanings have mistakenly attributed to the rabbis a number of antitemple ideas that are in truth not to be found in rabbinic literature.

In chapter 7, we will consider the approach to the temple taken in the New Testament. We will focus in particular on two events said in the Synoptic Gospels to have occurred in Jesus’ last days: the New Testament narratives concerning Jesus’ overturning the tables in the temple and his institution of the eucharist at the Last Supper. Many scholars view both of these events as articulating criticisms of or even rejections of the Jerusalem temple. Here too,

I will argue, biases against the temple and its cult have exerted too much influence on the discussion. We will consider alternative interpretations of both narratives, building on the conclusions of the previous three chapters. We will conclude this chapter with a brief survey of some New Testament texts that do criticize the temple, such as the book of Hebrews. Thus we will conclude with the beginnings of the antisacrificial biases that we have briefly discussed here.

It is hoped that each of the following chapters will shed light on its stated topic and that therefore the book as a whole will contribute to the understanding of our themes in selected literature stretching from the Hebrew Bible through the Talmud. But I also hope to drive home a number of more general methodological points. First, the project will argue for the importance of analyzing sacrifice in particular in a balanced and fair manner, using methods consistent with those applied to other related ritual structures (such as ritual purity). Second, I will continuously point out—and refute—a number of evolutionist theories or assumptions that continue to predominate, or at least crop up in, the scholarly discussions of our themes in the various literatures we will survey. Third, the work will highlight some of the ways in which the study of Judaism and Christianity in antiquity continues to be too heavily influenced by contemporary religious and cultural perspectives toward—and critiques of—sacrifice.

The field of religious studies is probably destined to be populated by scholars who adhere to a large or small degree to the religions they study. It would be hypocritical of me to decry this phenomenon, for I cannot rightfully wish things were otherwise without wishing myself out of work. Moreover, it has also long been known that atheistic and secularist biases can produce their own distortions of religious phenomena—the figures of James Frazer and Sigmund Freud may come to mind.²⁹ But I think that those of us who study the history of Judaism and Christianity while maintaining a commitment to one tradition or the other can do better than we have done. In this book, I will try to do my part, by identifying in particular a number of scholarly understandings of various ancient Jewish and early Christian texts that, in my view, too closely reflect certain religious attitudes—both Jewish and Christian—toward ancient Judaism's sacrificial cult.