Rereading Sacrifice: The Semiosis of Blood

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ABSTRACT

Blood gains many distinct meanings from different modes of classification, some of which are calibrated by the representational capacities of sacrifice. The Priestly source from Hebrew scriptures and the early Jewish text Second Maccabees both reread ancient sacrifice traditions, articulating new meanings for blood as part of the transformation from a temple-based locative system of animal sacrifice to a utopian decentered model of human self-sacrifice. The Priestly writers created a new semiosis of blood as the purifying essence of temple sacrifice. Second Maccabees offers a temple-replacement ideology with one foot in the locative notion of temple, and the other in suffering and martyrdom—displaced animal sacrifice—as the path to an individual afterlife. Its new meanings for blood are stimulated by conflict over two competing locative systems (foreign and native) and the need to, even while renewing, ultimately replace the temple cult.

Gil Anidjar, in his recent impressive study *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, treats blood not as "material substance, symbol or metaphor" (Anidjar 2014, 39). Instead, it is a "prism" to study the medieval era. At the same time, he makes a historical claim about the centrality of Christian theological doctrines to a "disciplinary revolution" (39). This revolution replaced a flesh-and-bone concept of national identity from the Hebrew scriptures with a Christian blood ideology still operative today.

The representational meaning of blood has been debated endlessly and often with no clear conclusions. Anidjar warns us against a tendency to read meanings of blood retroactively into earlier texts as well as using blood to naturalize social constructs.[1] But the "prism" quality of blood cannot be explained, this article will argue, without placing it carefully within the larger analytic systems

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1. For example, in a recent study of Christian martyrdom, blood is ascribed a preverbal shock value (Kearns 2008, 35). Kristeva's (1986) spilling out of bodily fluids naturalizes the "abject."

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that regimented its capacity to function as a sign. Two pre-Christian "rereadings" of sacrifice illustrate the semiosis of blood as part of larger systems of social classification: first, Priestly reworkings of ancient Near Eastern sacrifice traditions, and second, the depiction of self-sacrificing deaths that exemplify the "autonomous value of martyrdom" in 2 Maccabees (Momigliano 1975, 87).[2] In the first case, blood gains a new role, "standing for" the essence of sacred sacrifice, while in the second, the altar of the foreign king becomes a site of rethinking sacrifice and the role of human blood. Since both texts are pre-Christian, we can address one aspect of Anidjar's thesis: When does a new interpretation constitute a disciplinary revolution? For other scholars, there was no revolution but instead tremendous continuity over centuries. For Robertson Smith, drinking animal blood that stood for human blood was the core of the most ancient sacrifice traditions, looking backward, as he did, from the Christian Eucharist (Smith 1894, 313). From Freud to the more recent work of Girard (1977), Grottanelli (1981), and Halbertal (2012), scholars posit animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifice. Early Christian meanings for blood are then just a return of the repressed, that is, of the latent meaning of human sacrifice.[3]

The constantly shifting visions of revolution versus reemergence are inseparable from the complex semiosis of blood. We have to jump into a flowing river. Every use of blood in Israelite and the Jewish and Christian theology presupposes, negates, and extends prior uses of blood. No original moment of blood exists. Every vision of cult included vastly different meanings for blood layered on top of each other. Thus, for both of our examples, we will focus on moments of reinterpretation where a set of significations for blood are made in order to clarify a difference in viewpoint.

Preliminary Observations: Why Is a Semiotic Model of Blood Needed?

The meaning of blood is calibrated based on more than one system of classification (sacred/profane, pure/impure; Smith 1987b). Sacred/profane was associated with the king and his placement at the center of a hierarchy of power; pure/impure was a cultic distinction based on a hierarchy of status that also interacts with another distinct system of clean/unclean. With the decline of

2. The term *martyrdom* refers here to an enthusiasm for a spectacular death at the hands of earthly authorities in order to accrue merit and live again at the hands of the heavenly authority. For discussion of the use of the term *martyrdom* with this text, see n. 27.

3. Robert Paul (1996) elaborates on this theory in brilliant detail.

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local kings, the priests were freer to at least imagine their own version of combined, and idealized, systems.

Despite generations of attempts to naturalize and motivate these systems, they turn out to be confusing and seemingly arbitrary social constructs. Few universals are convincing, and even these have limited explanatory value.[4]

Careful readers cannot help but notice this dilemma.[5] Milgrom, a formidable reader of ancient purity texts, surveys and correctly rejects generations of scholarship about the meaning of impurities (Milgrom 1993). He states flatly that the classification "impure" has no intrinsic significance. Despite this, he condenses the four phenomena declared "unclean" as gleaned from the Torah texts (death, blood, semen, and scale-disease) using the surprising example of Nuer religion to argue that the ancient Israelite common denominator is death (Milgrom 1993, 109). The fact that someone as sophisticated as Milgrom has to resort to weak universals shows the helplessness of the endeavor.

Menstrual blood is a particularly clear example of the problem. Bodily fluids, having both an "insideness" and "outsideness," are good candidates for delineating the boundaries and thus domesticating the individual and the social bodies.[6] Incest and cannibalism delineate social boundaries in terms of mixing liquids.[7] Blood, classified in relation to semen, for example, defines permissible sexuality while classified in relation to flesh, permissible eating. Blood is thus a heavy lifter in what Obeyesekere (1990) calls the "work of culture." It calibrates in *both* the eating/cannibalism and the sexuality/incest classification systems and is unlikely to calibrate the same in both. Menstrual blood, since it associated with female genitalia (gendered female), is, psychologically speaking, overdetermined to defy even two calibrations. It is an oversimplification to say that it is unclean because of its association with death (no conception has taken place).[8]

The major breakthrough remains Mary Douglas's powerful analysis of "out-of-placeness" (Douglas 1966). She shifted the argument from finding the substantive equivalent of impurity to the more complex task of seeking the underlying delineation of a category. The overarching point is that these are

4. Alan Dundes (1990) makes a strong case for birth envy among males as a possible universal. See also the judicious comments on false universals related to semen and blood in Héritier-Augé (1989).

5. Klawans (1995), for example, is scrupulous in this regard.

6. Following Smith's phrase, the domestication of sacrifice (Smith 1987a). The transformation of animals through the selective killing of domestication produces the animals to be sacrificed in the first place.

7. Invaluable on this point are Obeyesekere (2005) and Héritier (1999).

8. Thus, David Biale (2007) can reverse the claim by arguing that menstrual blood stood for life because of a connection with fertility.

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relational systems, dependent on shifting modes of classification more complex than any single equation (blood equals *x*, *y* unites everything declared unclean).

Milgrom rejects "wholeness," posited by Douglas as the contrasting classification to "out-of-place," since this terminology occurs only rarely in Hebrew scriptures. A better contrast might be "completely in-place," which can be troped by a series of terms including but not limited to "wholeness."[9] What is "out-of-place" has to be set in terms of other shifting ideas of what is "in-place" (Smith 2004, 230–31).

Abandoning substantive categories is easier said than done. While the basis of classifications may be arbitrary, once set in motion, the categories have a life of their own that seems built on consistent and motivated symbolism. Ancient and modern readers seek an exegetical key to unlock classifications, a key that reinforces the social value of the system.

Problematic at yet another level, sacrifice is itself a system of representation that needs to be regimented. The classic model of Hubert and Mauss is a useful rudimentary representational theory since it is not built around a specific interpretation (sacrifice = gift) but instead emphasizes the potential array of "standing for" relationships.[10] The object sacrificed (victim, gift, oblation) is "intermediary" between the "sacrifier" (the one who performs the sacrifice) and the divinity in some way standing for the sacrificer (on whose behalf the sacrifice is performed; Hubert and Mauss [1899] 1964, 11).[11] The model does not claim to narrow down this "standing for" relationship. Every sacrifice is inherently a substitute since it only partially represents the sacrificer. As a flexible representational system, sacrifice, as noted above about blood, is useful for carrying out the "work of culture." This social efficacy has been noted by Nancy Jay and Stan Stowers, among others, primarily in the area of creating models of gender, but it extends far beyond this realm.

The implication of this extended digression is that we may find ourselves following blood by following it indirectly, by seeing how blood replaces and

9. Biale, for example, rejects the idea that semen after sexual intercourse is "out-of-place." But that depends on the culturally specific notion of slopping over versus bounded and not on what seems to make sense to the modern reader.

10. The model is rejected by numerous scholars who privileged some representational models of sacrifice over others. As just one example among many, Halbertal (2012, 25) argues that the best gift is "not crude bribe or nourishment" but a noninstrumental gift that cannot be reciprocated. Halbertal's notion of noninstrumental love, while it may be useful for theological purposes, devalues animal sacrifice and ritual in general.

11. This remains true even when the person bringing the sacrifice is the sacrifice. He still "stands for" something in himself in the same way blood does. This is one of the reasons martyrdom is so rich in semiotic possibilities, as discussed in the next section.

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interacts with other bodily fluids, how it has a place and then violates its place, and how it must find a place within one system even as it violates another.

Biblical Bloodhounds

For the Priestly source, the work of a minority group of specialists, the setting up of the sacrificial system is the climax of the Torah story and organizes all interactions of the Israelites with their deity (Anderson 1991).[12] Priestly sacrifices are presented not as a casebook of specific instances but as an idealized vision of sacrifice and the priestly role in general. Incorporating ancient ideas about the priesthood such as descent from a priestly family and physical integrity, the Priestly view presents a new ideology built around blood signification.[13]

For the Priestly source, humans are constructed in such a way as to be incapable of true obedience.[14] Some means of atonement for the inevitable disobedience of humans is necessary. For these priests, the means of rectifying the error of disobedience centered on the temple cult of animal sacrifice. It was for them the most flexible and efficacious antidote to everything that ails human-divine interactions. Priestly action and, in particular, their use of blood mediated between human and divine. Blood was their ultimate purifying agent.[15]

As clarified by Milgrom, animal blood is the “ritual detergent” used to cleanse the sanctuary of its pollution (Milgrom 1991, 711). The blood sprinkled inside the sanctuary decontaminates the sanctuary and is needed because the pollution that accompanies sin affects not only the sinner but also the sanctuary itself. Once the system is operational, individuals can make use of the various sacrifices for many purposes including atonement. The “in-place” integrity of priests signified by their genealogy and their physical body, free from blemish, was extended by their blood manipulations that worked in the cult as a kind of fumigator, purifier, and “replacer” all wrapped into one.

The Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16 has become a touchstone of modern scholarship, since it seems to regiment the meaning of all other sacrifices. One of a series of complicated rituals carried out on the Day of Atonement, the rite is presented in a condensed and enigmatic form described

12. For a recent discussion of the integrity of the Priestly source, see Baden (2012).

13. On the ancient Near Eastern priesthood, see Waerzeggers (2008).

14. This stance is not unique to the Priestly source but is also found explicitly stated in what can generally be called “non-Priestly” material.

15. This was not the only role for blood, as discussed below. It also contrasts, as noted by Anidjar, with the use of flesh-and-bone imagery to signify identity and group membership.

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in one short, prescriptive unit (Lev. 16:6–10, 20–22, 26). In basic outline, Aaron casts lots over two goats, designating one for the Israelite deity and one for "Azazel." The priest places his hands on the goat for Azazel, recites Israel's sins, and then sends it out into the wilderness. The person who sends it away is unclean and cannot return to the camp until he has ritually bathed.[16] In the rite as imagined in the Priestly source, cleansing the inner sanctum involves two types of actions: some sins can be transformed by the application of animal blood while others (deliberate sins) have to be picked up and carried out of the sanctum since they cannot be transformed (Schwartz 1995).

In many interpretations it is understood to represent the killing of an innocent victim in order to cleanse a community of its sins.[17] This model, however, is a questionable rereading of the Priestly rereading of an ancient disposal rite.

Animals were agents in many disposal rituals, for obvious reasons. The context for disposal rites was a worldview in which being "in place" was central to the cosmic order. Replacement rituals were essential to reestablishing order.[18] The capacity of animals to carry things off was part of the rectification system. The animal "replaced" the pollution from the inner sanctum to the edges of the inhabited world where it belonged. The animal's body carrying off the pollution outlined the structure and ritual goal (an indexical icon). These rituals were neither automatic nor magical.[19] No doubt the animals had additional specific significations beyond their capacity to carry off the pollution, as did their decoration and other aspects of the rites.

The Israelite priests were unwilling to completely abandon the basic model (perhaps since it was so very ancient). But disposal rites did not fit well with the priests' view of their own role, since the animal has its own agency as a "replacer." The priests constantly inserted themselves into the rituals, as if to have a monopoly as the conduit of all ritual (divine) agency.[20]

The priests took a disposal rite and assimilated it to a sacrifice by substituting blood from a slain animal as the "collector" of the sins. The use of blood was not widespread in the ancient Near East; it appears in only a small selection of rituals, including one example as a cultic cleanser.[21] Much more commonly,

16. Classic commentaries include Milgrom (1991) and Levine (1989).

17. Made most famous by Girard but used by numerous other scholars.

18. Disposal rites in other cultures take on different mediating roles, as do "scapegoat" rituals.

19. Contra Milgrom (1976, 399).

20. See the insertion of roles for the priest in both the Suspected Adulteress Rite (Num. 5:11–31) and the Recitation over First Fruits (Deut. 26:1–11).

21. The Hittite text Ulippi (iv, 38–40) states: "They smear with blood the golden god, the wall, and the utensils of the entirely new god. The new god and the temple become clean" (Wright 1987, 36 n. 37). For a more recent translation and discussion of the ritual, see Miller (2004).

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the corpse of an animal (bull or sheep) was used as the cleansing agent, or ritual detergent, in Milgrom's terminology, for the sanctuary. Key to the Priestly rereading is the shift from animal body to blood.

The payoff for the Priestly theoreticians is that in their system of consecration, animal blood becomes a "golden indexical" capable of transforming whatever it touches (Parmentier 1997, 77). The reticence about blood, noted by scholars, may be in part strategic (Geller 1992, 99–100; Gilders 2004, 77). Blood is maximally useful when its signification is both profound and enigmatic.

In its maximalist reading of Israelite sacrifice, the Priestly writer has made the cleansing of the sanctuary the best sacrifice of all. The centralization of cult in Jerusalem set the location of cultic sacrifice; the priest centralized it further by subordinating all sacrifices to being mere shadows of the purification of the inner sanctum. This use of blood implicates both the hierarchy of power, since it is put to sacred use, and the hierarchy of status, since it is used to cleanse.[22] The Holiness Code comes after this and tries to up the ante by making the entire cult into a trope of the inner sanctum and the rest of the world into the outer sanctum (Knohl 1995).

In the new version of the rite, the "Escape-goat," loaded with the sins of the Israelites, is explicitly equated with an animal that is killed in a sacrifice (the second goat). The resulting ritual, one animal killed and one sent off into the wilderness, remains ambiguous with many commentators worrying about the final outcome for the "Escape-goat."[23] The seams of this rereading remain visible.

A rare moment when blood is given a set equivalence occurs in Leviticus 17:11, the only direct equation of blood and atonement, stating: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life." This statement may originally have been a statement about the use of blood in the cult and not an abstract theological claim (Schwartz 1991). As such, it has no implication for noncultic use of blood, or even for all cultic uses.

Despite this, the statement is often read in a decontextualized manner as an abstract regimenting principle used in other places to organize interpretations of sacrifice, evidence of the unintended consequences of articulating interpretive principles. To the extent that this principle becomes a universal key, it limits the "standing for" capacity of blood and thus its social efficacy.

22. In other biblical instances, blood works quite differently.

23. Hence the later rabbinic insistence that the goat is pushed off a cliff.

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As Richard Parmentier explains, "the assignment of fixed symbolic meaning to objects, the *ti* plant and turmeric for instance, may be an indication that these objects have lost the power to create social contexts" (Parmentier 1994, 69).[24] The formulaic blood = life may also point to the idealization status of the sacrificial system, its "entextualized," turned-into-text status (Silverstein and Urban 1996).

In a related but distinct claim, Deuteronomy 12:23 permits animal slaughter outside of the sanctuary, but warns: "Make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh." Even when the slaughter does not have to be undertaken at the sanctuary, the cultic signification of animal blood is contagious. The semiotic meaning is not set, since the demarcation of "eating blood" is left open even as a cultic residue permeates every killing but does not endow it with the full status of a sacrifice. A new fixing of signification will be needed to pin down what the "eating blood" is, and that system will expand independent of the cult. It will have social consequences to the extent that rulings can be debated and contested or determined by a central authority.

Elsewhere, Genesis 9:4–6 outlines yet another related but distinct claim: "Flesh whose life is in its blood may not be eaten. . . . Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." Again, the system for determining the limits of permitted food is entirely enigmatic. The act of shedding human blood has two distinct significations, two delicately balanced meanings: first, shedding of blood makes a person liable, and, second, shedding blood "replaces" that liability. Far from being a simple equation of blood and life, this model differentiates between two types of bloodshedding that stand for completely different types of actions (or the second shedding would require its own further shedding).

Several biblical texts intimate that some practitioners considered child sacrifice as the highest form of sacrifice (Anderson 1991); this claim would appear to implicate a signifying role for human blood. Yahweh, just like other ancient Near Eastern gods, had the theoretical right to demand child sacrifices in extraordinary circumstances. The earliest biblical texts, Levenson argues, presume that the firstborn son belongs to Yahweh (Levenson 1993, 3). Exodus 22:28b-9 requires sacrifice of firstborn sons: "You shall give me the firstborn among your sons. You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks:

24. Signs undergo differential shifting as the historical context changes, with some retaining their context-creating functions.

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seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me."[25]

Child sacrifice was not, however, a part of any standard cult and was not carried out on a regular basis (Smith 1975, 477). The language is of extremity, fixing the limits of the system, not of regularity. The rite filled a very special role. As the most valuable "crop," these firstborn were to be sacrificed only when an outstandingly valuable and dramatic sacrifice was needed. In what appears to be an extraordinary moment, 2 Kings 3:27 states: "So he [the king] took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him up on the wall as a burnt offering." The biblical author disapproves of this story, offering it as one more example of the failings of kings.[26] Disapproved or not, as the representative of the nation, the king's son is the best of all possible sacrifices offered in a desperate attempt to change the outcome of a battle.

In these examples, child sacrifice exists within a particular model of sacrifice. All firstborn sons belong to the deity because they are a direct result of divine fertility. Biblical sacrifice involved only domesticated animals, whose births result from the interconnection between the selective kill of human breeding and divine fertility (Smith 1987a). Firstborn sons similarly are a nexus between correct human behavior (by the father) and the divine blessing of a great name (descendants) given by the deity.

Given this system, the son's death signifies the permanent death of the father's name. The father gives up the primary greatness of a king promised to him by the deity—the promise that his seed will continue to rule the nation. The sacrifice is the ultimate gift of the king's future "great name," that is, his royal descendants. That the "first born" is a social construct, that is, a choice must be made among sons as to who exactly is the firstborn, does not change the symbolic status of the firstborn.

Because of the limited concepts of life after death, killing a firstborn son is a dramatic gesture about fertility and the future. The myth of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22), Levenson rightly insists, has nothing to do with the substitution of animal for human sacrifice (Levenson 1993, 12–13). Instead, in this story, the "obedient father" is praised for being ready to sacrifice his son. The call to sacrifice a human is a test. If it had been normal practice, it would not be much of a test. Here the substitution is being worked in the other direction, human

25. Abandoned only at a "late date" according to Levenson (1993, 3–17).

26. The practice was denounced in other verses, such as Jer. 7:31: "And they built shrines of Topheth in the valley of Ben-hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in fire—which I never commanded, which never came to my mind."

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for animal. This substitution is soundly rejected: the proper sacrifice is an animal. Sacrifice in this story creates the category of perfect father, as the near-sacrifice of Isaac ends up being a male generative act.

Priestly writers, via a series of institutionalized practices, memorialize the special tie between the deity and every firstborn son. The Levites constituted a group of sanctified firstborn sons (Num. 3:12–50, 8:17–18). Monetary redemption in place of sacrifice was also possible (Num. 3:45ff., 18:15ff.; Lev. 27:27). Firstborn redemption was also associated with the Passover lamb. All of these "standing for" relationships have displaced any potential use of child sacrifice, even in extreme circumstances. The "pinnacle" of child sacrifice is in conflict with the Priestly view of animal blood as the ultimate purifier and replacer. Human blood, and worst of all, any blood connected to females, cannot have a cultic role.

Leviticus 20:3 states directly that Molech worship contaminates the sanctuary: "Anyone among the Israelites, or among the strangers residing in Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stones. And I will set my face against the man and will cut him off from among his people, because he gave of his offspring to Molech and so defiled My sanctuary and profaned My holy name."

The Priestly theoreticians were probably pleased to encounter the Rite of the Red Heifer (Numbers 19), whose ashes could cleanse humans from corpse contamination. The rite preserved animal blood for temple use while offering a means of purification for use outside of the temple that resembled a sacrifice (a killing of an animal). Animal blood can theoretically be equated with human blood, but when that happens, the Priestly vision of cult comes to an end.

Rereading Sacrifice as Self-Sacrificing Death

Second Maccabees marks the emergence of what Momigliano called the "autonomous value" of martyrdom (Momigliano 1975, 87). Later Christian (second century) and Rabbinic models of martyrdom are refinements of its basic model of willing self-sacrifice (van Henten 1997).[27] New readings of sacrifice mesh with new "standing for" possibilities for blood. The logic of the self-sacrificing death was intimately intertwined with the promise of an afterlife, that is, the idea of resurrection of the dead. Second Maccabees includes one of the earliest extant references to individual resurrection of the dead, and

27. For later rabbinic models, see Rajak (1997), Passamaneck (2003), Boustan (2011), and Boyarin (1999); for Christian models, see Bowersock (1995), Castelli (2004), and Moss (2013).

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it appears specifically in the context of the promised rebirth after the self-sacrificing death.[28]

Second Maccabees includes a short report of the torture and death of Eleazer (6:18–31), the story of the death of a mother and her seven sons (7:1–41), and the story of Razis's death (14:37–46). Recounted at greater length than the other deaths, the family story details the torture and death of seven brothers under the watchful eye of their mother and the foreign king, Antiochus. The last son is exhorted to his death by his mother, who urges him to die rather than perform a sacrifice under the king's auspices. The incident takes place at the altar, and the story ends with the final phrase, "Let this be enough about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures" (2 Macc. 7:42).

These stories do not include an explicit identification of human flesh as sacrificial flesh, just as many prior sacrificial stories imply rather than abstractly outline "standing for" relationships. In a subtle manner, the deaths of the mother and sons, along with the death of Eleazer just before, are cast as rereadings of sacrifice in terms of both their content and placement. Taking place at an altar at the moment of sacrifice, the plotline moves from refusal of some meat (sacrifice) for the false king and his gods in favor of the cooking of other flesh for the true deity (sacrifice). Simultaneously, the placement of the stories marks a turning point in the military conflict that leads to the ultimate defeat of the foreign king and his soldiers. The Jews realign themselves with their deity by means of their submission to the spectacular blood-producing death demanded by the deity (van Henten 1997).

While one obvious opponent is the foreign king, whose power is mocked by the self-sacrificing death, this substitute sacrifice also displaces the Priestly sacrificial system. Its potential stems from the new model's basic realignment of elements of the animal sacrifice system: following the Hubert and Mauss sacrifice model, "sacrifier"/supplicant and the victim are the same, and the priest is totally displaced. This collapse has immense implications for the representational function of the sacrifice.

The self-sacrificing death is not built around an explicit demand to discontinue animal sacrifice. It articulates with other rituals that replace sacrifices even while the temple still stood, such as the temple reconsecration festival called "The Festival of Booths" (2 Macc. 1:9)." A story of temple violation/rescue is used to undergird several of these new nonsacrificial rites. Once established, and the lines of holy celebrations redrawn, it is impossible to put

28. Compare Dan. 11:2.

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the genie back in the bottle. Put another way, it is one small step in the long transformation that led from the ancient Near Eastern temple-centered animal sacrifice cult to the Late Antique emergence of the sage or holy man who embodied holiness and displaced the temple.[29] In 2 Maccabees, we see the conflict between two different locative models of sacrifice in the same holy location (Jerusalem). The holy center of the temple is not completely replaced, but the text makes a strong rhetorical argument for the superiority of the displaced sacrifice.[30]

With 2 Maccabees, the human body is the site of only slightly displaced sacrificial activity (blood near an altar).[31] The dismemberment and "cooking" of the human body, and not the dead body of the animal, mediates between the deity and his followers. The impressive effervescence of these deaths is inseparable from the question of what a human body is in the first place and to whom it belongs. Gone is the fertility model according to which the deity gets back one-tenth of the fecundity he ensures. Instead, the self-sacrificing death leads to rebirth via the Divine Father.

One of the many lessons from these stories is that the body certainly does not belong to the earthly authorities but instead to the deity. They can do whatever they want to it but have no power over its ultimate disposal because they cannot fix its representational capacity once and for all. The death is neither tragic nor desperate, since the body does not belong to the human world in the first place. The dying person "stands for" the sacred, or perhaps more specifically the divine body is made manifest via the transforming human body.

The model of the self-sacrificing death reinterprets many of the basic semiotics of animal sacrifice, shifting away from the "channeling" system of animal sacrifice in the Priestly writings. Evil forces are still at work throughout the world and especially in humans, but they can be dealt with one human body at a time as each person is sacralized just as the animal used to be. The person dismembered offers his or her body willingly. Long descriptions of an agonizing death replace the details of animal slaughter. Even the earthly authority's body is "reclaimed" at the end of the text in the fantasy that Antiochus becomes a follower of the same deity (2 Macc. 9:13–29).

29. See Brown (1971), Smith (1978, 187–89), Stroumsa (2009), and Fraser (2009).

30. Reinterpreted sacrifices can take place in both the homeland and the diaspora, so those models are not decisive here.

31. This had nothing to do with the royal or judicial setting of the torture and the point of view of the authorities.

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In the case of human self-sacrifice, animal blood no longer has the status of representing an essence of the sacrificial system. Animal blood plays no role in the entire text, failing any formal link with the sacrificer or the deity. The reinterpreted sacrifice rite of self-sacrifice includes a new theory of semiotic representation of human blood with a kaleidoscope of possible new meanings.

Enduring torture and shedding blood is the sign of willing self-sacrifice and that shedding can itself be displaced by the "redness" of wine. Again this is a substantial shift from the earlier system, while the red heifer represented in part based on its redness, the "standing for object" still had to be an animal.[32] The "standing for" object does not have to be an animal anymore, as the redness of blood is regimented via a new fixing.

As always, this rereading stands on top of and critiques older ideas. Human suffering as a "standing for," as an objectification, makes previous interpretations of sacrifice look suspect. Retroactively, the priest ready to cast blood around the altar looks as if he operates at a less divine, more automatic level (though that interpretation would have appalled the priests).

As a rereading of sacrifice, the self-sacrificing death is a two-edged sword: its power can be unleashed against any earthly authority and not just the already-dead foreign king against whom the author of 2 Maccabees retroactively railed decades later. This threat, when it is not used against foreign kings, resulted in containment efforts by religious authorities who had to control the freelance charismatic power of the martyr. Some of the social roles ("performative power") of priests accrue to the martyr. The seven sons did not need a priest to officiate at their death. Their mother outlined the meaning of their deaths and the implications of their obedience for everyone.

The lingering question of the relationship between the earlier Hebrew scriptural models of sacrifice and the appearance of the human flesh in the self-sacrifice death remains. Unless we teleologically read the new ideas back into the old, basic meanings have altered. Second Maccabees may be a vital step in the "disciplinary revolution" Anidjar was looking for. By producing blood through the means of torture, a body is manipulated in order to point to the power of the heavenly manipulator behind its human agent, in this case, the deity. The powerful deity can make and remake the body, just as he can make and remake the world itself. The voluntary nature of the act of self-sacrifice mystifies the aggression even as the martyr's stance is made concrete by the "sheer material factualness of the human body" (Scarry 1985, 14).

32. Milgrom (1991, 271) emphasizes the need for the redness of blood for purification even though the part of the cow employed in the rite is the ashes.

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Only with the replacement of animals with the willing human death can the eating of the sacrifice gain the cannibalistic overtones that Robertson Smith posited and Freud copied. It will take only a light touch to topple the remaining commitment to the specific temple sacrificial cult and its blood purifications. Second Maccabees has cut loose the old moorings of the meanings of blood and the Priestly purification trumped by a new pious signification for blood.

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