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Ancient Israelite Sacrifice as Symbolic Action: Theoretical Reflections¹

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A complex of practices commonly identified as “sacrifice” played a central role in the religion of ancient Israel. When modern scholars investigate and interpret ancient Israelite sacrifice, what is this object: “ancient Israelite sacrifice”? To what taxonomic category is it to be assigned? How is it to be understood, made sense of, interpreted? What assumptions about “sacrifice” do scholarly interpreters bring to this specific investigation? What interpretive effects follow from particular assumptions? These broad theoretical and methodological questions form the background for my reflections in this paper on a set of focused questions about sacrifice as *symbolic action*. Assuming that “sacrifice” is correctly identified as a particular type of *ritual* activity, is ritual properly identified and interpreted as *symbolic* activity; and, on this basis, is Israelite sacrifice correctly interpreted as symbolic activity by scholars?² Did *ancient Israelites*

¹ This paper has undergone a long gestational development. Earlier versions of it were presented in the following settings: SBL Annual Meeting (Sacrifice, Cult and Atonement Consultation), 22 November, 2009; Tam Institute for Jewish Studies Seminar Series (Emory University), 1 December, 2009; “Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Retrospect and Prospect” (The Ruth and Joseph Moskow Symposium, Program in Judaic Studies, Brown University), 28 February 2010. I wish to thank Saul M. Olyan for his invitation to take part in the latter conference; I must also thank Bradd Shore, my Emory University colleague from the Anthropology Department, for his feedback on the version of the paper presented in the Jewish Studies Seminar Series. I thank the organizers of the 2012 “Exegetiska dagen” of the Swedish Exegetical Society (especially Göran Eidevall) for inviting me to present the penultimate version of the paper on 24 September, 2012, and for their hospitality in Uppsala. I must offer special thanks to Corinna Körting for making time to read and respond to my paper in the midst of a professional transition and for her cogent and extremely helpful reflections and questions.

² It must be emphasized that “ritual” and “sacrifice” are both scholarly (etic) categories of identification applied to phenomena of ancient Israelite culture. Israelite Hebrew (like many other languages) lacks terms that can be simply and unambiguously translated with “ritual” and “sacrifice” – although both terms appear in some translations of the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., the NRSV renderings of זָבַח as “sacrifice” [Lev 3:1] and הַטְּוָה as “ritual” [Lev 7:7]).

understand and interpret sacrifice to be symbolic activity? Did they intentionally construct and perform sacrificial rituals to function symbolically?

Defining Ritual: Symbolic Activity versus Instrumental Activity

At the outset of my reflections, a crucial *fact* must be noted: the ancient Israelite texts in the Hebrew Bible that present, represent or prescribe sacrificial ritual *never* use the language of symbolic meaning with reference to those practices. We never find statements of the type, “this represents,” “this means” or “this signifies.”³ The interpretive statements that *do* appear are *instrumental* in nature. They refer to *effects* accomplished by performing the rituals. For example, Lev 14:19–20 refers to sacrificial rituals performed in connection with the purification of a person who has recovered from an impurity-producing skin disease (צָרַעַת):

Then the priest should perform the purification offering (חֲטָאוֹת) and effect clearing (וּכְפָר) upon the one being cleansed from his uncleanness (עַל-הַמְטָהָר מִטְמְאוֹתוֹ); then next he should slaughter the burnt offering (עֹלָה), and the priest should offer up the burnt offering and the grain offering (מִנְחָה) on the altar; and the priest will effect clearing upon him and he will be clean.

The language in this passage is practical and pragmatic, prescribing what is to be done to achieve specified effects – which are quite concrete: “clearing” and cleansing from uncleanness. There is nothing in this passage to suggest that its tradent saw any fundamental difference between

³ We do find semiotic statements with reference to non-sacrificial rituals, such as circumcision, Sabbath, placing tassels on four-cornered garments, and observance of pilgrimage festivals, as Jonathan Klawans has emphasized: “Symbol, Function, Theology, and Morality in the Study of Priestly Ritual,” in Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (eds.), *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106–122, here 113–114. I will return to this fact below and consider its relevance for identifying how ancient Israelites might have interpreted sacrificial rituals.

⁴ For this translation of the verb כָּפַר, see Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (FAT, II/50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 186–189; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 466–467. I am persuaded that “effect clearing” (which Hundley adopts from Propp) is superior to the translation “effect removal,” which I proposed in *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 28–29, 135–139.

the ritual actions and effects it refers to and non-ritual actions and effects. The tradent's interpretation of the ritual actions is instrumental, not symbolic.

In distinguishing "instrumental" from "symbolic," I am drawing on and challenging a dichotomy that has played an important role in scholarly discourse on ritual. As Talal Asad emphasizes in his critique of the dominant anthropological approach to ritual: "Modern anthropologists writing on ritual tended to see it as the domain of the symbolic in contrast to the instrumental."⁵ But if ritual should be understood as symbolic rather than instrumental activity, what are we to make of the numerous ancient Israelite assertions of the instrumental effects of their rituals, their claims that rituals *do* things? Many anthropologists and other interpreters of ritual would answer that the sacrificial performances (as rituals) are not *really* instrumental in their effects, since there is no empirically demonstrable connection between means and ends – *as judged by the scholarly interpreter*. Edmund Leach, for example, refers to behavior "directed towards specific ends which, *judged by our standards of verification*, produces observable results in a strictly mechanical way" as "rational technical" behavior – which he distinguishes from ritual. He asserts, moreover, that the category of ritual includes "magical" behavior, "which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors but *not* potent in ... itself."⁶ Ritual can, therefore, be defined as "a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the end is not 'intrinsic', i.e. is either irrational or non-rational."⁷ Jack Goody, who offers this definition of ritual, emphasizes that it is a scholarly construct, extrinsic to the thought world of many of the people to whose ac-

⁵ Talal Asad, "On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism," in Talal Asad (ed.), *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 126–131, here 126; see also, idem, "Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual," in *Genealogies of Religion*, 55–79. For additional critical discussions of the various forms and uses of the dichotomy by anthropologists and other interpreters of ritual, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70–72; Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, 27; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13–19, 111–112.

⁶ Edmund Leach, "Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development," in J. Huxley (ed.), *Ritualization of Behaviour in Man and Animals* (Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, vol. 251, no. 772), 403–408, here 403–404, quoted in Gilbert Lewis, *Day*, 16 (emphasis in the original).

⁷ Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *British Journal of Sociology* 12.2 (1961): 142–164, here 159.

tivity it is applied and he issues a strongly worded critique of scholars who fail to keep this fact in view.⁸ He also challenges the conclusion that ritual, if it is “irrational or non-rational” by the standards of scholarly interpreters, must therefore be symbolic.⁹ Nevertheless, many interpreters of ritual approach it with just this assumption, with the result that ritual is widely viewed as inherently and essentially symbolic activity. That this understanding of ritual remains a dominant approach in anthropology is exemplified by the definition of ritual that appears in the article on “Rituals” by the cultural anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd in the new (2008) edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: “a patterned, repetitive, and *symbolic* enactment of a cultural belief or value.”¹⁰ Davis-Floyd elaborates on the definition by explaining that, “a belief system is enacted through ritual,” she highlights as a major characteristic of ritual “the symbolic nature of ritual’s messages,” and she asserts that “rituals work through symbols.”¹¹

Given the dominance of this perspective, it should come as little surprise that scholars of ancient Israelite culture would interpret ancient Israelite ritual as symbolic activity. The value of this approach has lately received vigorous defense and promotion from Jonathan Klawans in his monograph, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 2006),¹² and in two follow-up essays.¹³ Klawans expresses his support for approaches he positively designates as “ubiquitous symbolism,” for which the works of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner (among others) provide inspiration. Such approaches, Klawans notes, “are inclined to find symbolism in many if not all rituals.”¹⁴ In line with the dominant anthropological approach to identifying and interpreting ritual, he asserts that “it is

⁸ Ibid., 147–160.

⁹ Ibid., 151–157.

¹⁰ Robbie Davis-Floyd, “Rituals,” in William A. Darity, Jr. (ed. in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2nd edn; Vol. 7; Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2008), 259–264, here 259 (my emphasis).

¹¹ Ibid., 259, 260.

¹² For my brief critical assessment of this work, see William K. Gilders, Review of *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007): 784–785.

¹³ Jonathan Klawans, “Methodology and Ideology in the Study of Priestly Ritual,” in Baruch J. Schwartz, et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible* (LHB/OTS [JSOTSup], 474; New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 84–95; idem, “Symbol,” 106–122.

¹⁴ Klawans, “Symbol,” 106–107; idem, “Methodology,” 85–86.

very difficult to establish empirically that ancient Israelite rituals accomplished very much at all.”¹⁵ He accepts that ancient Israelites did articulate purposes for their rituals, such as purification and expiation, but challenges taking these purposes seriously:

But of what use is it for scholars to assert that sacrifices served these purposes and achieved these goals? These are not measurable goals, for these are not empirical problems. Neither sin nor defilement exists as such in any empirical, measurable way. Purification and atonement are not therefore real accomplishments of Israelite ritual at all. They are *perceived* accomplishments: the rituals in question are mechanisms of pretense for dealing with problems that exist only in the realm of ideas.¹⁶

Having asserted that ancient Israelites’ expressed goals for ritual behavior “have no empirically measurable correlation with reality,” Klawans proceeds to claim that, “ritual also has communicative roles, above and beyond what believers claim it achieves and alongside whatever it may or may not measurably accomplish.”¹⁷ These communicative roles of ritual are properly treated using the term “symbol.”¹⁸

While Klawans argues that scholars have not carried out enough symbolic interpretation of ancient Israelite ritual, I find myself holding nearly the exact opposite view from him about what might be amiss in current scholarship on ancient Israelite sacrifice: I believe that there has been entirely too much such interpretation. For this reason, Klawans will serve as my major debate partner throughout the remainder of this paper, and I will respond in some detail to his arguments. I will give special attention to his most recent article defending symbolic interpretation, which appears in an edited volume immediately after an article of mine that focuses on Philo of Alexandria’s symbolic interpretation of Jewish sacrifice.¹⁹ Thus, this paper belatedly adds to the debate that took place at the conference

¹⁵ Klawans, “Symbol,” 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112–113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁹ William K. Gilders, “Jewish Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function (According to Philo),” in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, 94–105. This article adumbrates many of the arguments presented in more detail in the present paper.

that saw the genesis of the two papers, which Klawans carried on in his article.²⁰

Critiques of Symbolic Interpretation

According to Mary Douglas, whose work has played a major role in the development of Klawans' ideas about ritual symbolism, ritual is "pre-eminently a form of communication."²¹ My reservations about symbolic interpretation of Hebrew Bible ritual focus precisely on this understanding of symbolism in terms of *communication of concepts*. These reservations are shared by a number of anthropologists and other students of society and culture, who have challenged the dominant approach – especially in the classic form it took in the 1970s under the influence of anthropological heavy-weights such as Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Edmund Leach and Clifford Geertz.

I will discuss here several examples of this critical challenge to the standard symbolist approach. I begin with Gilbert Lewis, who has examined in detail the various problems with the symbolic-communicative approach to ritual. According to Lewis, anthropological interpretation often involves scholars imposing meaning because of dissatisfaction with what native informants have told them: "Strange customs tempt an anthropologist more strongly to interpret them when he feels the people have not given him a good enough reason for following them."²² Lewis' judgment on anthropologists applies equally well to biblical scholars in their engagement with the "strange customs" presented in the Hebrew Bible. Lewis also asserts that, "[t]o presume that ritual is essentially a form of communication prejudices what is to be found out."²³

Second, I offer a lengthy quotation from the anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, which ends with another quotation from Lewis' *Day of Shining Red*:

²⁰ The conference, "What the Gods Demand: Blood Sacrifice in Mediterranean Antiquity," took place 19–21 November, 2008 at Boston University. Klawans was the respondent for my paper on Philo.

²¹ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Random House, 1970), 20.

²² Lewis, *Day*, xv.

²³ Lewis, *Day*, 117.

The idea that ritual is essentially communicative and expressive is almost a social compact in anthropology, common as it is to the classic writings of Maurice Bloch, Mary Douglas, James Fernandez, Clifford Geertz, Max Gluckman, Edmund Leach, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Sherry Ortner, Roy Rappaport, S. J. Tambiah, and Victor Turner. How anthropologists get themselves on this wrong track is obvious. Rituals are good things to do fieldwork on. Lots of people gather together; they do things which, when the anthropologist asks about them, involve informants going into details about all sorts of interesting things: cosmology, religious ideas, the social status of all the participants, and so on, and so forth. It almost seems that these events are arranged so that the anthropologist can learn from them. It is a short but utterly fallacious step to suppose that the purpose of the ritual is to communicate or express these ideas to the people, who already know them (and from whom, rather than from the ritual itself, the anthropologist in practice learns them). Even when a ritual can validly be cited as *evidence* that people hold this or that belief, it does not follow that the purpose of performing the ritual is to *communicate* the belief. But anthropologists have been tempted to assert of ritual that it ‘communicates’ the theories or observations about the society in question which the anthropologists themselves want to communicate to their readership. As Gilbert Lewis remarks, this attempt to interpret the ritual as functioning to communicate what the anthropologist has learned or surmised, “can lead to a contrived intellectualisation of ritual in which the conviction that it is to be understood by means of a linguistic model distorts evaluation, and provokes such ingenuity in detection that the actors are told what they mean when they do not know it” ...²⁴

Also worthy of particular note is the work of Talal Asad, who emphasizes the *historical contingency* of symbolic interpretation of ritual.²⁵ Similarly, the French anthropologist Dan Sperber has argued that “[t]he attribution of sense is an essential aspect of symbolic development in *our* culture,” but is not a universal phenomenon.²⁶ Finally, I note a recent piece by the anthropologist William S. Sax, which introduces a collection of papers on ritual efficacy.²⁷ Sax criticizes efforts by scholars of ritual “to

²⁴ Humphrey and Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 73–74; the concluding quotation is from Lewis, *Day*, 117.

²⁵ Asad, “Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual” and the first part of “On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism.”

²⁶ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (trans. by Alice L. Morton; Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 83.

²⁷ William S. Sax, “Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy,” in William S. Sax, Johannes Quack, and Jan Weinholt (eds.), *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (Oxford Ritual Studies; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–16.

find out ritual's hidden logic ..., the things that it really represents – which must by definition be other than those related to us by the natives, since these strike us as nonrational.” He continues:

Nevertheless, the notion that ritual is ineffective is false, and we can show that it is false. We know that shamanic rituals heal, legal rituals ratify, political rituals unify, and religious rituals sanctify. Rituals transform sick persons into healthy ones, public space into prohibited sanctuary, citizens into presidents, princesses into queens, and according to some, wine into blood. One of our most important tasks as scholars of ritual is to explain how rituals accomplish these things (and how they sometimes fail to accomplish them), but it is important to remember that in pursuing this task, we are arguing against the grain of popular understanding.²⁸

Clearly, it is not at all necessary to look to the arguments for the “meaninglessness of ritual” advanced by the Indologist Frits Staal to find cogently-presented critiques of “ubiquitous symbolism.” Nevertheless, at this juncture I would like to offer some clarification on the particular challenge to symbolic interpretation of ritual that comes from Staal, since a significant problem with Klawans’ defense of symbolic interpretation of Hebrew Bible ritual is a misunderstanding of Staal’s argument for the “meaninglessness of ritual.” Klawans has misunderstood Staal on two counts: first, that Staal’s argument is based on the claim that Hindu rituals lack symbolic interpretations; second, that Staal simply applies his conclusion about Hindu rites to other rituals. In response to the first misunderstanding, I note that Staal makes it clear that Hindu rituals *are* interpreted by indigenous ritual performers. Staal does not argue that ritual activity is never *invested* with meaning; his assertion is that meaning is not *constitutive* of ritual – transmitting meaning is not the *purpose* of ritual, not its reason for being: “Like rocks or trees, ritual acts and sounds may be provided with meaning, but they do not require meanings and do not exist for meaning’s sake.”²⁹ Staal offers a blunt judgment on symbolic interpretation: “To construct a world of meaning where there is none is mythology and not a substitute for finding the truth.”³⁰ With regard to Klawans’ second misunderstanding, Staal’s argument for the meaninglessness of ritual goes well beyond what he says about Hindu rites to

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Staal, “The Sound of Religion: Parts IV–V,” *Numen* 33.2 (1968): 185–224, here 218.

³⁰ Ibid., 216.

make the case that ritual is pre-linguistic behavior; Staal argues, not only from Hindu practice, but from the existence of ritualized behavior amongst animals. Whether or not one agrees with Staal's arguments, they must be engaged on the basis of accurate understanding.³¹ Staal challenges the notion that ritual actions are *constructed* for the *purpose* of communicating meaning (just as languages are constructed in order to communicate). That is what he means by the "meaninglessness of ritual."³²

In responding to Staal and other critics of "ubiquitous symbolism," Klawans makes several arguments that I would like to address. First, according to Klawans, "The case for the symbolic or non-symbolic nature of rituals needs to be made on a case-by-case basis."³³ I am in basic agreement with Klawans on this point, because I am not firmly wedded either to the view that ritual is inherently symbolic-communicative or to the argument that it is inherently "meaningless." However, a significant difficulty with Klawans' dictum is that it conflicts with the theoretical sources to which he appeals for his focus on symbolism: for Douglas, Turner, and others, symbolism is an *essential*, definitional characteristic of ritual as such, *not* something to be identified on a case-by-case basis; in line with this perspective, Klawans himself asserts that sacrificial ritual has "inherent symbolic meaning."³⁴ In my view, one of the severe problems with the dominant approach to ritual is precisely this insistence that symbolism is *definitional* of ritual as a cultural practice. If one assumes, as so many anthropologists do, that symbolism is an *essential* characteristic of ritual, one will approach Israelite sacrifice so as to deploy this assumption – Israelite sacrifice will be interpreted as symbolic activity. I would be quite happy, therefore, to follow Klawans' dictum and set aside the automatic assumption that ritual is essentially symbolic: the question of symbolism should be addressed on a case-by-case basis. However, it must be recognized that this marks a significant departure by Klawans from the domi-

³¹ See Catherine Bell's clear summary and explanation of Staal's argument, in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71; see also my brief discussion of Staal's thesis: William K. Gilders, "Anthropological Approaches: Ritual in Leviticus 8, Real or Rhetorical?" in Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (eds.), *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 233–250, here 238.

³² A similar critique of scholarly meaning-making is articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, in *The Logic of Practice* (trans. by Richard Nice; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 18.

³³ Klawans, "Symbol," 109; idem, "Methodology," 88.

³⁴ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 67.

nant paradigm, which, as Klawans recognizes, holds that ritual has “inherent symbolic meaning.”

Second, Klawans asserts that, “it matters little that symbolism may be secondary, and it matters even less that symbolism may be absent elsewhere.”³⁵ Here, I must strongly disagree with Klawans. These things may not matter if one has pre-determined to identify and elaborate symbolic meanings for ritual actions one encounters, against all contrary evidence. However, if one is even mildly skeptical about symbolic interpretation being the best approach to ritual, it matters a great deal if symbolic interpretation is demonstrably *secondary* (and therefore, not integral) to ritual, and it matters if it is found to be absent in some societies. This demonstrates that it is *not* universal and not constitutive of ritual, which means that we do not have to approach rituals looking for it. The fact that we find societies in which symbolic interpretation is “absent” (in various senses of that word) grants us the freedom to consider seriously that it *might* have been absent from ancient Israel. If symbolic interpretation of ritual was absent from ancient Israel, it would be a serious *misrepresentation* of that society to construct elaborate symbolic systems that never actually existed in any ancient Israelite mind. In my view, the evidence strongly suggests that the Israelite tradents who composed the ritual texts we now possess did *not* have a strong interest in symbolic interpretation of sacrifice. They were interested mainly in two things: 1) setting out details of practice; 2) identifying certain metaphysical effects of proper ritual performance, which they presented in instrumental terms.

Symbolic Activity and Interpretation in Ancient Israel

I have suggested that ancient Israelites did not think symbolically about sacrifice; they did not interpret it that way and they did not perform sacrificial rites with symbolic communication in mind. Given these claims, it is important to clarify that I am not arguing that ancient Israelites were incapable of symbolic expression or interpretation. For several reasons, such an argument would be absurd! First, it is clear that ancient Israelites used language (spoken as well as written), which is an inherently symbolic activity. Second, it is no secret that the prophets engaged in symbolic

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 68; *Idem*, “Symbol,” 109.

acts.³⁶ Third, it is clear that we do find some semiotic statements about ritual in the Hebrew Bible.³⁷

Klawans adduces the latter two pieces of evidence to demonstrate that ancient Israelites did indeed engage in symbolic actions and interpreted some ritual acts symbolically. In presenting this evidence for Israelite use of symbols, Klawans has revealed little that was not already known, and has not in fact demonstrated that ancient Israelites interpreted *sacrificial* rituals symbolically. In her published response to an earlier version of this paper, Corinna Körting has ably responded to Klawans' argument about prophetic symbolic action.³⁸ I will, therefore, focus on Klawans' appeals to semiotic interpretations of ritual found in the Hebrew Bible. I will concede Klawans' basic point and will make it more specific to my focus on sacrifice. Clearly, if we can find that (especially) the Priestly writers applied semiotic interpretations to rituals, we cannot reject the *possibility* that they would have done this in cases where such interpretations are lacking.

However, there are some further considerations. First, we must wonder why they offered such interpretations in some cases and not in others. It is at least possible that they did not see all ritual as being amenable to such interpretation. They may have operated with quite different categories of practice. We place circumcision, Sabbath, pilgrimage festivals, and sacrifice all together under the category of "ritual." But would they have done so? To fully explore this question is beyond the scope of the present paper – but it should be addressed: How did Israelites categorize activity; what were their native taxonomies?

Second, we must note that the semiotic meanings given are not *inherent* to the rituals. We could not identify them apart from the explicit interpretations. Leviticus 23:42–43 on the practice of dwelling in "booths" during the festival of Sukkot is an excellent case in point: "You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (NRSV). In the absence of the explicit interpretation of the act of dwelling in such shelters given in this text, it is doubtful that it could be associated with memory of the exodus from Egypt. Rather, interpreters

³⁶ Klawans, "Methodology," 88–90.

³⁷ Klawans, "Symbol," 113–114.

³⁸ Körting, "Response to William K. Gilders," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 78 (2013): 23–28.

would likely refer to the (probable) origins of the practice in the construction of temporary shelters in vineyards and orchards during the autumn harvest period; or they might refer to the practice of erecting shelters for deities in a cult place during a New Year festival.³⁹ In the case of Sabbath observance, if we had Gen 2:1–4a, but not Exod 20:11 and 31:12–17 (esp. v. 17), we *might* still be able to connect Sabbath with *imitatio Dei*, extrapolating from God’s primal act of rest to human conduct. However, we would also need to note that this interpretation is completely absent from other sources, which give quite different explanations, some of which are semiotic while others are strongly instrumental (compare, e.g., Deut 5:15 and Exod 23:12). In no case is the meaning of Sabbath simply given in the observance; we must be told what the observance means by texts that function for us as the equivalent of native informants in an ethnographic field context.⁴⁰ As a number of scholars have insisted, the meanings of an allegedly symbolic action cannot be derived from the action itself; they are provided by a specific cultural context: “symbols are without meanings aside from the connotations assigned to them.”⁴¹ Symbolic meaning is contextual and conventional, not inherent. Thus, in the absence of symbolic interpretations of sacrificial ritual, we cannot simply assume that such interpretations existed.

What is a “Symbol” and How Do We Identify One?

To this juncture I have not directly engaged questions about the definition of the term “symbol” and the determination of what counts as a symbol. Klawans asserts quite dismissively that asking such questions is to “quibble” and indicates his commitment to using “*symbol* in its more common, inclusive sense.”⁴² However, he does not in fact identify this definition, perhaps because he regards it as obvious. However, the meaning of “symbol” is in fact far from clear and agreed upon. Indeed, one of the central

³⁹ On these two explanations of “booths,” see Jan Wagenaar, *Origin and Transformation of the Ancient Israelite Festival Calendar* (BZAR, 6; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 23.

⁴⁰ On this understanding of the role played by biblical texts, see Gilders, “Anthropological Approaches,” 235, 239.

⁴¹ Jerome M. Levi, “Symbols,” in William A. Darity, Jr. (ed. in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2nd edn; Vol. 8; Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2008), 249–253, here 250.

⁴² Klawans, “Symbol,” 114.

questions in this ongoing debate about the meaning of ritual activity focuses on the meaning of the key term “symbol.”

Clifford Geertz makes it clear that how we define “symbol” matters a great deal and calls for “precision” in determining its meaning.⁴³ He continues, “This is no easy task, for, rather like ‘culture,’ ‘symbol’ has been used to refer to a great variety of things, often a number of them at the same time.” Geertz then outlines several definitional identifications of what a symbol is, before offering the following as the one he prefers: a symbol is

any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol’s ‘meaning’.... The number 6, written, imagined, laid out as a row of stones, or even punched into the program tapes of a computer, is a symbol. But so also is the Cross ..., the expanse of painted canvas called ‘Guernica’ or the bit of painted stone called a churinga, the word ‘reality,’ or even the morpheme ‘-ing.’ They are all symbols, or at least symbolic elements, because they are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible form, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.

Clearly, Geertz is offering an expansive definition and conception of “symbol,” which encompasses almost *everything* that could be termed a “cultural activity.” I have little difficulty with this notion of symbols being “concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.” In this sense, certainly, ritual is “symbolic,” but so is *most* human activity. However, even when Geertz’s definition is affirmed, the understanding of “symbolism” is often narrowed by an analogy with language: in this approach, just as language is a system of symbols used to communicate, ritual, likewise, is a system of symbols used to communicate. As Geertz’s own metaphor puts it, a symbol (like a word) is a *vehicle* that *conveys* a conceptual meaning; its role is to convey the conception.

For Geertz and many other symbolic anthropologists, *anything* can function as a symbol if it functions as a vehicle for a conception. But how do we determine that something is functioning as such? Gilbert Lewis explores this question at length and highlights the various problems with the identification of symbols, and the frequent resort of scholars to the

⁴³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 91.

distinction between technical, practical activities and non-instrumental, non-rational or irrational actions.⁴⁴ Lewis argues that symbols must be identified in another manner, not through seeing a disconnection between means and ends, but because symbol are like a metaphors:

If symbolism involves the notion of one something standing for or representing something else, it must depend on a particular classification that separates the one thing from the something else it represents. It rests on an intellectual perception of the boundaries of the categories.... This involves awareness. The same arguments apply to “metaphor” when it is used by anthropologists in relation to the ideas, words or actions of other people. The people must recognize distinctions between two concepts for one to be used *metaphorically* for the other by them.⁴⁵

In short, for something to be a symbol, it must be recognized to stand for something else, from which it can be distinguished in some way: “A symbol of something is not the same as the thing itself.”⁴⁶ Because the association between things requires conscious awareness of a specific system of classification, it *must* be conventional.

Peircian Semiotics: Symbols, Indices, and Meaning

The American “father of semiotics,” Charles Sanders Peirce, emphasized the conventionality of symbols, and therefore sought to distinguish symbols from other types of signs.⁴⁷ I have found Peirce’s distinction between *symbols*, *icons* and *indices* (*indexes*) as three types of signs extremely helpful to my work with ancient Israelite ritual. Klawans, however, offers this dismissive judgment on use of Peircian categories: “And if one turns

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Day*, 6–38 (passim).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ For a helpful entry to Peirce’s theory of signs, see Justus Buchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), 98–119. On the relevance of Peirce’s ideas for the understanding of sacrificial ritual, see Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6–7. See also Roy Rappaport’s subtle elucidation and critique of Peirce’s theory in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54–68. For a lucid discussion of Peircian semiotics from the perspective of a different tradition of semiotics, see Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Liturgia condenda, 17; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 75–83.

to semiotics in order to displace the term *symbol* with *index*, one has not really countered the views of those who use *symbol* in its more common, inclusive sense.”⁴⁸ Klawans has clearly misunderstood my approach and therefore crudely misrepresents it. Any fair reading of my monograph and subsequent articles would recognize that I have not displaced “symbol” with “index,” but have simply highlighted the need for greater precision in identifying particular signs as symbols.⁴⁹ With Peirce I would assert that not every *sign* is a *symbol* and that it matters whether an object or action is communicating symbolically or indexically. In *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible*, I argue that there is a great deal in ancient Israelite ritual that is, indeed, communicative, and I try to be precise about how it is communicative, clear about my categories and their meanings. In this concern for clarity and precision, I align with the scholars whom Klawans claims to follow, all of whom have taken care to define their terms.

A symbol, Peirce emphasizes, “is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object.”⁵⁰ The meaning of a symbol is assigned to it, and is not inherent in the thing itself. An index, however, “is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object.”⁵¹ An indexical sign “is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand.”⁵² While discussing examples of indices, Peirce provides perhaps his simplest definition of an index: “A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focusses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience.”⁵³ This explanation clarifies that Peirce’s category of the index includes deliberate human actions that indicate something. Thus, in his refinement of Peirce’s theory, Roy Rappaport refers to “Constructed Indices” which “are deliberately constructed and employed by humans to indicate whatever they do indi-

⁴⁸ Klawans, “Symbol,” 114.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Walter J. Houston’s review of *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible* in *JTS* n.s. 58.2 (2007): 569–571; note, also, the recent engagement with my work by Houston’s student, Michael B. Hundley, in *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, 29–32, 35.

⁵⁰ Peirce in Buchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings*, 102.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 108–109.

cate.”⁵⁴ Such constructed indices, while conventional in the sense that they are dependent on human intention for their operation, do not depend on convention for their significance. Rather, as Nancy Jay clarifies, “Because the relation of sign to signified is not conventional, indices can be understood across cultural and linguistic boundaries. They *indicate* their object rather than represent it.”⁵⁵

An example of an ancient Israelite ritual action will help to clarify the importance and utility of these distinction: the hand-pressing gesture in a sacrificial complex, which takes place (according to the text) immediately after the offerer brings the animal to the shrine: “To the entrance of the Tent of Meeting he must bring [his offering; קָרְבַּן] for its acceptance before Yhwh. He should press his hand upon the whole-burnt offering’s head, and it will be accepted for him to effect clearing on his behalf [lit., “on him”]” (Lev 1:3b–4). I cite this example in particular because the hand-pressing gesture is juxtaposed with interpretive statements about instrumental effects: acceptance and “clearing.”

The hand-pressing can be identified as a symbolic gesture in Peircian terms if its meaning is determined by convention (by a socially established “law”). The act itself has no inherent significance, which is evident from the diversity of scholarly interpretations that have been offered. David P. Wright (following Jacob Milgrom) argues that pressing with one hand indicates ownership of the animal by the offerer, while pressing with two hands (as is prescribed in the “scapegoat” ritual; Lev 16:21) indicates transfer of sins and impurities.⁵⁶ However, the texts themselves never point to the practical difference between using one hand or two as significant. It could be that pressing with two hands rather than one, rather than being the mechanism for sin transfer, is designed simply to highlight the difference between the “scapegoat” and a regular sacrifice. Or, use of two hands, as Lev 16:21 prescribes, may be a “fossilized” action (to use a designation Klawans resists), a difference in practice between the Priestly tradition and the tradition from which the scapegoat ritual was adopted.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 63.

⁵⁵ Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 6.

⁵⁶ David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (SBLDS, 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 17, n. 6; idem, “The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and in Hittite Literature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 433–446

⁵⁷ As Körting notes in her “Response,” the “scapegoat” ritual seems to fit uneasily into the ritual complex of Leviticus 16.

While the symbolic meaning of the action is not nearly as certain as scholarly arguments might suggest, the indexical character of the action is quite clear. By pressing a hand on the head of the animal, the offerer creates a relationship-of-fact, an existential relationship, with the animal. It is clearly connected with the offerer. Thus, what is subsequently done with the animal has reference to the offerer. Here, we seem to have a “constructed index.” Indeed, many of the arguments about the meaning of the action implicitly draw on the indexical quality of the action for their force, without, however, employing explicitly Peircian terms.

The explicit instrumental statements in the text indicate the goal of the action, making clear that it is necessary for the sacrifice to work to the benefit of the offerer. While it is not clear exactly what the offerer is accomplishing by pressing his hands on the head, whatever that effect is, it leads or translates into acceptance and “clearing.” Thus we can see how important attention to practical detail is in this case.

I return now to the question of the “intrinsic” relationship between action and effect. Klawans argues that there is a difference between the hand-pressing action and a pragmatic act (such as slaughtering the animal, which clearly does bring about its death).⁵⁸ But in the language of the text itself there is no such differentiation. We may also note that an action can have an effect even if we do not know why it has that effect. The notion that hand-pressing does not *really* do anything because the effect is invisible to us is our problem, not that of the ancient Israelite tradents, who clearly affirm the efficacy of the ritual act.

Concluding Reflections and Recommendations

The basic problem I see in Jonathan Klawans’ approach to ancient Israelite sacrifice is that he advocates that biblical scholars do *more* of what has come under increasing criticism by anthropologists and other students of ritual. In my view, if biblical scholars are going to draw on anthropological and ritual theory to talk about ancient Israelite ritual – and I strongly believe that we should – we have an obligation to take seriously the critical voices being raised within anthropology and ritual theory. Turner, Douglas, Geertz and others made important – and necessary – contributions to the study of ritual, taking it beyond the interpretations derived

⁵⁸ Klawans, “Symbol,” 115.

from structural-functionalist models.⁵⁹ But students of culture are becoming increasingly aware of the weaknesses in their theories. In particular, there have been many cogent challenges to the model of “ubiquitous symbolism.”

In ancient Israelite ritual practice we do see “concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.” But this is because ritual is a cultural practice, not because there is something especially symbolic about it in distinction to other types of activity.⁶⁰ Ritual is clearly the object of various types of meaning-making. In this sense, meaning is inherent to ritual. But to refer to ritual as inherently *symbolic* activity is problematic, given that specifically symbolic interpretation is often either secondary or absent. Secondary or absent symbolism cannot be “ubiquitous”! We should see symbolic interpretation as just one possibility for meaning-making. Symbolic interpretation will be found in some contexts and will be lacking in others. We should be attentive to when it occurs and consider why.

The fact that particular contexts determine the particular meanings that will be attached to ritual practices was treated in my essay on Philo. It was a point I should have made more forcefully, since Klawans clearly missed it. In discussing Philo, I pointed out that the Alexandrian Jewish scholar did not interpret sacrifice in terms of the preparation of food (“cuisine”), which distinguishes his understanding from both what we find in the Hebrew Bible and in Greco-Roman culture.⁶¹ The point, in short, is that we cannot assume that a ritual action will communicate some concept unless we first know what the concept is. The communication does not take place apart from the specific interpretation of the act.

Klawans rightly insists that the question of symbolic meaning should be treated on a case-by-case basis, and he insists that his concern is *only* with its application to ancient Israel – his most recent article repeatedly emphasizes his focus on interpreting *only* ancient Israelite sacrifice.⁶² There can be no doubt that the biblical scholar’s focus must be on ancient Israel and the particular evidence we have. But we can never avoid bringing general theories to bear, intentionally or unintentionally. The impetus

⁵⁹ See Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 61.

⁶⁰ See also Goody, “Religion and Ritual,” 157: “For it can be said, in an important sense, that all social action is ‘expressive’ or ‘symbolic’ of the social structure, because the more general concept is simply an abstraction from the more specific.”

⁶¹ Gilders, “Jewish Sacrifice,” 99.

⁶² Klawans, “Symbol,” 106, 109, 111, 116, 117.

for Klawans' own position is a general theory, as he acknowledges. Critical theories should be tested, which is just what I am doing here. Comparative evidence should also be brought to bear.

Klawans argues that our approach to ancient Israelite sacrifice should be "sympathetic." I agree. But sympathy cannot displace scholarly rigor. A certain type of "sympathy" can be taken too far when it leads us to shape evidence to create a positive image of ancient Israel – in terms of 21st century Western values. Clearly, there must be limits to sympathy. We find such limits in Klawans' own work, when he rejects the reality of ancient Israelite claims to the efficacy of their ritual acts and refers to them as "pretense" or merely "putative." In contrast, I would affirm a hermeneutic of critical good will, which tries to take seriously what our native informants tell us, even if we do not actually agree with or believe it. I find a helpful model for such an approach in the work of Gilbert Lewis. For example, in his discussion of the penis-bleeding practice of the Wogeo people of New Guinea, Lewis takes seriously their indigenous theory of menstruation as ridding women of semen acquired during intercourse (which endangers them), which theory explains why men induce bleeding from their penises – in order to rid themselves of dangerous pollutions acquired from women; this is male "menstruation," which to the Wogeo is just as *real* as female menstruation. Lewis strives to make sense of the Wogeo practice in its own terms and shows how it can make sense even in our terms:

Their concept of "menstruating" differs from ours – men and women both "really" menstruate. Men do not menstruate symbolically, they menstruate. If I say I went to London, then just because you walked and I went by car, you would not feel that because you went naturally and I went artificially that I went symbolically. The concept of going (in "went") does not bother about this distinction. If I choose nonetheless to report that Wogeo men "symbolically" or "metaphorically" menstruate, I must accept that I have imposed my own categories on what they do. I tell you about my categories, not theirs. And you may prefer what I tell you to what the Wogeo say because my categories correspond with yours and those of the Wogeo do not.⁶³

With Lewis' model in mind, I fully affirm attention to what Victor Turner termed "indigenous interpretation (or, briefly, the exegetical mean-

⁶³ Lewis, *Day*, 112.

ing)” of ritual.⁶⁴ In taking this approach seriously I want to attend to the fact that such exegesis is often not “symbolic”; it makes instrumental claims. Such claims should be taken seriously, and an effort should be made to work out how they make sense within the framework of ancient Israelite cultural assumptions.

In addition, I would urge extending Klawans’ insistence on treating the issue of symbolism on a case-by-case basis to ancient Israel itself: we should not assume that the presence of symbolic action or interpretation in one context means that it was “ubiquitous” in ancient Israel as a whole. We must consider that some actions would have been treated symbolically while others would not have, by different interpreters, in different contexts.

In the Hebrew Bible, we find an intriguing constellation of semiotic interpretations attached to a variety of practices that appear to have taken on special importance in the period after 586 B.C.E., first in the absence of the Temple and then in the fraught situation of national restoration and reconstruction.⁶⁵ It appears that semiotic interpretation was of special utility in these contexts. I would *tentatively suggest* that it served to grant new value to practices that could be undertaken in the absence of the Temple, or which could be performed by all Israelites in a variety of contexts. Many of these actions form, assert, or maintain identity. The semiotic interpretations increase the significance of the rites in relation to identity. Sabbath is an excellent case in point. The Aaronid interpretation of Sabbath found in Exod 20:11 and 31:12–17 highlights that Israelite observance of Sabbath is not simply an act of social justice, nor even of memory of enslavement in Egypt, but of *imitatio Dei*, a sign of the unique bond between the Israelites and their God.⁶⁶

Interpreters must be clear about when they are identifying “native” symbolic interpretations (emic interpretations) and when they are offering symbolic analysis as scholarly observers (etic interpretations). It is mis-

⁶⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 50.

⁶⁵ I address here a question Körting raised in her response to the presentation version of my paper and thank her for stimulating my thinking on this issue.

⁶⁶ A similar argument, for the exilic or post-exilic setting of circumcision as a “sign,” is made quite effectively by Saul M. Olyan, “An Eternal Covenant with Circumcision as Its Sign: How Useful a Criterion for Dating and Source Analysis?” in Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (eds.), *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (FAT, 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 347–358.

leading to refer to Freud's theory of subconscious symbolism when one's argument is that ancient Israelites themselves held and deployed symbolic understandings of sacrifice. Yes, as Klawans asserts, "symbols ... can operate subconsciously."⁶⁷ But how are we to access the subconscious experiences of the long-dead authors of biblical texts? Methodologically, it makes much more sense to focus on the expressed thoughts of those tradents, as these can be recovered from the texts they wrote.

This does not mean, of course, that we cannot also examine aspects of meaning that go beyond those offered by our native informants. As Stanley K. Stowers emphasizes, "the scholar's own interpretations must go beyond those of the participants,"⁶⁸ because the workings of society and the effects of actions are frequently invisible to people acting in specific contexts. The distinction between "stated" and "unstated" goals, which Klawans puzzlingly presents as if it were his own innovative contribution to the discussion,⁶⁹ has long been recognized. This was a major emphasis of my study of indexicality in biblical representations of sacrificial practice in *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible* – to show how ritual actions could be communicative without there necessarily being conscious intent on the part of the actors.⁷⁰ To aid in understanding this important distinction, I invoked Robert Merton's distinction between "latent" and "manifest" functions,⁷¹ inspired by David P. Wright's use of them,⁷² which Klawans dismisses, "because 'manifest functions' is a strange way to refer to stated motivations for behavior that has no empirically measurable correlation with reality."⁷³ Klawans may well be correct about the problems

⁶⁷ Klawans, "Symbol," 109.

⁶⁸ Stanley K. Stowers, "On the Comparison of Blood in Greek and Israelite Ritual," in Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin (eds.), *Hesed ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 179–194, here 189.

⁶⁹ Klawans, "Symbol," 113: "To these distinctions I propose adding the following ..."

⁷⁰ I nuanced this approach in a follow-up article in which I suggested that indexicality could be mobilized intentionally, drawing especially on Rappaport's interpretation of Peirce: William K. Gilders, "Why Does Eleazar Sprinkle the Red Cow Blood? Making Sense of a Biblical Ritual," *Journal of Hebrew Studies* 6 (2006) (online: http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_59.pdf).

Thus, I made a case for Israelites making use of ritual specifically to communicate. But I tried to be precise about the mechanism of communication, using Peircian terminology and categories, identifying indexical rather than symbolic communication.

⁷¹ Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 181–191 (esp. 181).

⁷² Wright, *Disposal*, 3, n. 3.

⁷³ Klawans, "Symbol," 112.

with Merton's categories in their own terms. But there is no significant difference between the position I was advancing and the one asserted by Klawans when he refers to "stated" versus "unstated" goals or functions of ritual. In addition to Merton, I cited Stowers and affirmed my full agreement with his dictum.⁷⁴ Yes, the scholarly interpreter of ancient Israel and its literary artifacts must go beyond what the texts say. But the scholar must be clear that this is what is being done, as Lewis notes: "If I choose nonetheless to report that Wogeo men 'symbolically' or 'metaphorically' menstruate, I must accept that I have imposed my own categories on what they do."⁷⁵ Obfuscation of the distinctions between "indigenous" and scholarly interpretations should be avoided.

⁷⁴ Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 180, 181–182.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Day*, 112.