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Response to William K. Gilders¹

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First I would like to thank William Gilders for a highly learned and very stimulating paper. I was at once drawn into the discussion. Yet I have to admit that he is giving me a challenge. As a respondent I understand my task as opening up a vivid discussion. This I will definitely try to do, but I have to admit that I do agree with him. I agree completely with Gilders that we should speak about symbolic actions only in those cases where the texts also do it. We have to take seriously that “[t]he interpretative statements that *do* appear are *instrumental* in nature,”² as he says. Therefore I will not defend a symbolic understanding of Israelite sacrifice. What I want to do, on one hand, is to give some examples of ritual practice and related questions that should challenge a symbolic understanding of ritual texts. On the other hand, I would like to defy the instrumental reading as well. In addition, I want to discuss possible changes of understanding in ritual activity towards a symbolic understanding, and I would like to connect the theoretical question of ritual practice to the unavoidable critical reading of sources.

Before doing all this, the relevance of the subject has to be stressed. In an influential article Gese³ reads the atoning death of Jesus against the background of the priestly sacrificial cult. The key to this reading is the replacement of the sinner by an animal, activated through the laying on of hands as part of the sin-offering (חטאת). The animal dies as a substitute.⁴ Is the death of the animal to be understood as a real death of the sinner, as

¹ This response is based on the version of the paper Gilders presented at the Exegetical Day of the Svenska exegetiska sällskapet, September 24th, 2012.

² William K. Gilders, “Ancient Israelite Sacrifice as Symbolic Action: Theoretical Reflections,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 78 (2013): 1–25, here 6.

³ Hartmut Gese, “Die Sühne,” in *ibid.* (ed.), *Zur biblischen Theologie: Alttestamentliche Vorträge* (3rd edn; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 85–106, here esp. 105–106.

⁴ Gese, “Sühne,” 97.

a *symbolic death*,⁵ or is death necessary at all? The last question especially might show the implications of the subject for Christian theology.

A) The questions of goals, perceived or real accomplishments

Ritual as a strategic way of acting⁶ can be performed in order to cause a specific effect. The biblical texts provide us sometimes, but not always, with information about the effects. This can give us hints for how to interpret single actions. In the case of the laying on of hands it is, e.g., the position of the gesture in the chronology of the ritual that provides the hint. The laying on of hands in the context of the sin offering connects the sinner with everything that happens out of his reach, after he has given the animal to the priest. The sinner is laying on his hands because the animal shall be offered on his behalf.⁷ This is an act he cannot perform himself. Another interpretation of the gesture has been the transference of sin onto the animal.⁸ But this interpretation has been neglected, because it would need a two-handed act.⁹ As we can see, there is room for interpretation, and still, this does not make the act a symbolic one. Therefore, once again: Ritual as a strategic way of acting can be performed in order to produce a specific effect. How could this effect be produced if the act itself is merely symbolic, if it simply communicates a meaning?

According to Klawans and many others this would probably be the wrong question. Klawans says: “Neither sin nor defilement exists as such in any empirical, measurable way. Purification and atonement are not

⁵ Cf. Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen: Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priesterschrift und zur Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (2nd edn; WMANT, 55; Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 220f.

⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67–168; cf. also Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 14–20.

⁷ Cf. Corinna Körting, *Der Schall des Schofar: Israels Feste im Herbst* (BZAW, 285; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1999), 179–185; Mark Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Siphrut, 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 59–60.

⁸ Cf. Janowski, *Sühne*, 209; Ina Willi-Plein, *Opfer und Kult im alttestamentlichen Israel* (SBS, 153; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1993), 94.

⁹ René Péter, “L’imposition des main dans l’Ancient Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977), 48–55; Cf. also David P. Wright, “The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and in Hittite Literature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106/3 (1986): 433–573, here 436.

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.”¹⁰ But is *empirical measurability* the right criterion to distinguish between, e.g., perceived and real accomplishments? Klawans presents in his article a longer list of criteria for how to distinguish between the putative and the actual or the practical and the communicative. Well, I do not want to diminish the symbolic completely, which is the communicative power of ritual activity. Yet, this rather complicated act of theorization seems to my mind not to fit with the ritual descriptions we have. If I would like to understand how the ritual functioned for the historical Israel I cannot speak about gods, demons or spirits as imaginary beings, “made into *res*, real ‘things’, by social action contingent upon language,”¹¹ which means to use modern concepts for ancient texts and descriptions. If I would like to take seriously what I read, then, e.g., the bathing of the High Priest during the Day of Atonement effects his purity and is not just a symbol for his purity. “Perceived or not” is not a problem for those performing and writing down the rituals.

I would like to add another example coming from a different area of cult. In Ps 57:8–9 (MT) we read about awakening the dawn by music. Instruments are used to cause an effect. There is no hint of a metaphorical or symbolical understanding. The sound has an effect. The dawn, formerly in Ugaritic texts identified with *šahar* as a divine being, breaks and makes way for Yhwh’s presence.¹²

¹⁰ Jonathan Klawans, “Symbol, Function, Theology, and Morality in the Study of the Priestly Ritual,” in Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (eds.), *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106–122, here 112.

¹¹ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (9th edn; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008 [1999]), 9.

¹² Cf. Friedhelm Hartenstein, “‘Wach auf, Harfe und Leier, ich will wecken das Morgenrot’ (Psalm 57,9) – Musikinstrumente als Medien des Gotteskontakts im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament,” in M. Geiger et al. (eds.), *Musik, Tanz und Gott* (SBS, 207; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007), 101–127, here 102–106.

B) Klawans: “Israelite rituals were intended to function in a communicative way, to act as public reinforcements of communal memory”¹³

If rituals as symbols communicate and express ideas to the people, if they are performed in order to establish a belief system, as Davis-Floyd points out¹⁴, where is then the sense in performing them in hiding? Most of the ritual activity of the Day of Atonement, e.g., happens behind temple doors or curtains. Even the priests are not allowed to stay in the temple when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on that specific day (cf. Lev 16:17). Nobody can see what happens. How can this be understood as communicative? Klawans stresses, as said, the symbolic actions of the prophets. But to my mind the ritual activity described in the priestly texts and the prophetic symbolic acts are not comparable for two reasons: First, when Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot (Isa 20:3) for three years he definitely did this in public. And, second, he did it in order to communicate a meaning, to provoke a change of mind among the people, but not in order to effectuate like a cultic ritual effectuates cleanness or atonement.

An instrumentally understood ritual does not need the public; a symbolically understood ritual does need it, as far as I can see. But how could people know about what happens? Perhaps a public reading? But does this communicate in the same way as a symbolic act?

I hope that I have made my critique against a symbolic understanding of ritual rather clear. Still, I would like to present an example that might support Klawans’ approach to expect both the symbolic and the instrumental uses of ritual:

Out of the larger complex of ritual activity on the Day of Atonement it is especially the transference of Israel’s sin on the scapegoat and its way into the desert (Lev 16:21–22) that has been understood symbolically. The significance of the laying on of hands is clear and the whole ritual communicates what cannot be seen otherwise: Israel’s sins and transgressions are transferred onto the goat and taken away. This act is situated before the temple and therefore could be seen. The blood rituals performed on

¹³ Klawans, “Symbol,” 114.

¹⁴ Robby Davis-Floyd, “Rituals,” in William A. Darity, Jr. (ed. in chief) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2008), 259–264, here 259, 260.

the Day of Atonement could be understood as instrumental while the Azazel ritual expresses in a symbolic act – in public – what happened because of the blood rituals. The Azazel rite as an elimination rite is alien to the priestly system. It has completely different roots than the blood expiations.¹⁵ Yet, a symbolic understanding might help to understand why it is mentioned at all as part of the complex ritual for the Day of Atonement. The Azazel ritual is definitely alien in Lev 16, might be a redactional addition (cf. vv. 6, 11 that frame the passage of the Azazel goat) and has nearly no parallels in the priestly writings, perhaps with the exception of the bird ritual in Lev 14:49–53, while the other parts of the ritual have parallels and connections with other texts and traditions.

Changes in the understanding of ritual activity

Our main subject is a symbolic understanding of the sacrificial cult. Yet, as Klawans also brings Israel's festivals and pilgrimages into the discussion of symbols and function, I would like to introduce my next question with some remarks on Zion and the pilgrimage to Zion. In some prominent studies Zion has been called a symbol. Ollenburger, for example, does this in his study on "Zion, City of the Great King."¹⁶ In search for the "'cognitive-normative' focus"¹⁷ of the symbol "Zion," he also points to the physiological pole, in this case Zion as a mountain, and stresses that the cognitive-normative focus and the physiological pole are held together in a functional relation in ritual. I do not want to go into a deeper discussion of Ollenburger's approach. I mention it because he gives at least a little attention to what he calls "physiological pole" or, simply said, the concrete place. I have been asked rather often whether the Zion of the biblical psalms is a mere symbol. My answer is no. The texts speak about a physically reachable place (cf. esp. Ps 122). Its qualities go partially far

¹⁵ Cf. Bernd Janowski and Gernot Wilhelm, "Der Bock, der die Sünden hinausträgt," in Bernd Janowski et al. (eds.), *Religionsgeschichtliche Beziehungen zwischen Kleinasien, Nordsyrien und dem Alten Testament: Internationales Symposium Hamburg 17.–21. März 1990* (OBO, 129; Freiburg, Schweiz and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 109–169; David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* (SBLDS, 101; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 25ff.

¹⁶ Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (JSOTSup, 41; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987).

¹⁷ Ollenburger, *Zion*, 20.

beyond the visible when it is called the beautiful elevation in the far north (Ps 48:3), but it never loses “contact” with the concrete place.

This focus changes. If we are willing to use Ollenburger’s terminology again, I would say that the cognitive-normative focus becomes more important than the physiological pole. In some cases the symbolic power of Zion even has the ability to transfer, so to speak, the physical pole – I think here, for example, of the Rastafarian movement, having their Zion in Ethiopia.¹⁸ But more often Zion becomes the goal for an inner, spiritual pilgrimage. Zion as a symbol evokes now or covers also the act of pilgrimage.

Challenges for an “instrumental” understanding

This last point is mainly related to the question of sources. Gilders says in his paper that the Israelites were mainly interested in two things: 1) setting out details of practice; 2) identifying certain metaphysical effects of proper ritual performance.¹⁹ Yet, the sources we have, the ritual texts of the Hebrew Bible, are not pure advices for how to perform a ritual. When it comes to the ritual of the Day of Atonement it has often been stated that the instructions do not provide enough information in order to conduct the ritual – and that it is very difficult for the High Priest at some stages to follow them strictly. In this respect we can speak about “setting out details,” as Gilders says, identified with some metaphysical effects. But why only details? Yet, in addition, the rituals we can read about in the Hebrew Bible are included in longer narratives. The death of Aaron’s sons (Lev 10), for example, serves as a reason to explain why the High Priest is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year (Lev 16). My question is how can we bring together the very specific kind of literature we have with an understanding of ritual as instrumental action, directed at achieving specified social or personal goals?²⁰ Do these texts already transform ritual activity?

Another challenge is connected to the question I just posed: The ritual for the Day of Atonement essentially needs the blood application on the *kapporet* (the mercy-seat). How could we read Lev 16 as an important text

¹⁸ Cf. Volker Barsch, *Rastafari: Von Babylon nach Afrika* (3rd edn; Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2010), 66–80.

¹⁹ Gilders, “Ancient Israelite Sacrifice,” 14.

²⁰ For this kind of discussion see also Gane, *Cult*, 25–42.

for ritual practice during the Second Temple period if we are not sure if there ever was an ark of the covenant with a *kapporet*? Does this mean that we cannot even speak about a symbolic ritual act but rather about a *text* using symbols and symbolic acts in order to express its theology?

This response provides more questions than answers. Yet, as I said initially, a response has to be understood as opening up a vivid discussion and I do hope that this response might serve its purpose.