



## Scott Shauf, *Jesus the Sacrifice: A Historical and Theological Study*

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The nature of sacrifice is undoubtedly a crucial concept for biblical exegetes and theologians alike. It lies at the heart of the Hebrew Bible and undergirds early understandings of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. However, contemporary scholars often have a distant and shallow knowledge of sacrifice compared to first-century Christians. It is this underdevelopment that Scott Shauf attempts to correct in *Jesus the Sacrifice: A Historical and Theological Study*.

Shauf's goal is relatively straightforward; he overviews the nature of sacrifice to clarify how first-century New Testament readers would have understood its role in early Christianity. After introducing the purpose of his work (chapter 1), he briefly overviews the scholarship on sacrifice throughout the last 200 years (chapter 2). He then offers a rough taxonomy of the Jewish sacrificial system as understood in the Hebrew Bible (chapter 3) and during Second Temple Judaism (chapter 4). Next, he examines the New Testament, first separating the texts which refer to sacrifice generally (chapter 5) and then investigating passages that interpret Christ's work specifically (chapter 6). Finally, he concludes with a summary of some of the theological implications of his research (chapter 7).

Even a cursory glance at this structure reveals the biggest difficulties with Shauf's work: his topic is massive. The sheer scope of literature needed for such a study is enormous, and it is especially harrowing in a book that doesn't even break 250 pages. Considering this scale, it is not terribly surprising that Shauf must use some strategic short-cuts to offer the overview he intends. For example, he navigates around the challenge of source criticism in ancient Judaism by reading the Hebrew Bible primarily through the lens of first-century understandings. This decision is entirely justified since his focus is on early Christian views of sacrifice, allowing him safely to bypass critiques of anachronism.

However, not all of his strategies are as easy to defend. For example, the second chapter, during which he traces the scholarly developments on the nature of ancient sacrifice, is only seven pages long. Admittedly, it would be a mistake for him to spend too much time following a diverse set of theories that only indirectly impact his thesis. However, such a dramatically sparse engagement severely hinders the practical use of his work – requiring an interested reader to continue research well beyond the bibliography of the text.

Nonetheless, when it comes to his survey of the biblical text, Shauf is much more careful. He challenges the common assumption that sacrifices function within a limited scope of religious life. Instead, he sees sacrifice as a broad series of activities that bring about a dynamic relationship between the worshipper and God. At the core of his claim, he summarises the process of sacrifice as one in which the offer transfers the victim (i.e.

the gift, which is not always a slaughtered animal) from the human realm to the divine. In doing so, ‘communication takes place between the offeror and the divine’ (p. 7). Shauf intends to disrupt what he sees as an unfortunate ‘evolutionary’ perspective amongst past scholarship where sacrifice is an activity for primitive cultures when compared to more modern ones (p. 10). Instead, he argues that the essence of sacrifice is congruent with more contemporary religious expressions. In the biblical text sacrifice serves as the means for Jews to participate in their covenantal relationship with God and provides an interpretive framework through which early Christians made sense of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. This framework unites the various chapters of Shauf’s work, and the reader will walk away from this book with a renewed sense that the right relationship with God lies at the heart of biblical sacrifice.

With this emphasis in mind, however, it is somewhat surprising that, in the book’s concluding chapter, Shauf suggests that sacrifice is ‘necessary’ only in the sense that the intention and meaning behind sacrifice are necessary. As such, he strongly implies that Christ’s death is only appropriate because of the cultural framework in first-century Jewish theology. This conclusion appears to come directly from a presumed understanding of Christian (specifically low-church Protestant) worship and ecclesiology. Since Christian worship no longer engages sacrifice in a communal way – as was the core of the Jewish understanding – there must not be any ontological significance to these activities. I wonder, however, if Shauf’s opinion on these matters would change if he engaged with a sacrificial understanding of the eucharist. I anticipate that connecting contemporary liturgical practices to those of ancient sacrificial acts may give more hope for seeing sacrifice as inherently efficacious and more strongly congruent with Christian worship than Shauf maintains.

Nonetheless, even with some of these disappointing moments, Shauf’s work is well worth the read. It will prove beneficial to both the undergraduate student and professional researcher alike. Indeed, I would affirm that this work is one of the best resources of its kind published to date, and I have already recommended it to several colleagues. Shauf is able to bring to life a realm of study often missed (or thought to be too dull to engage), and by exploring its implications in such a readable manner, his work will no doubt bring this topic into greater clarity for both the biblical scholar and the theologian.

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## David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*

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‘The writing of this book has taken twenty years since its conception ... The overwhelming experience during these twenty years has been of the extraordinary