

THEME SECTION / SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

Maternal Sacrifices

*A New Gaze at Sacrificial Patterns
in Jewish Cultures*

Elisa Carandina (ed.)

INTRODUCTION

ELISA CARANDINA, *INALCO, Paris*

The phrase *maternal sacrifice* brings together two conceptually dense terms, entwined in an even more intricate dynamic. First, *sacrifice*: a term whose definitions have often been deemed inadequate to capture the multifaceted practices and meanings it evokes. James Watts distinguishes between “narrative traditions about killing people,” which focus on the moral evaluation of violence, and “the ritual killing of animals” (2011, p. 8), which emphasizes the social and religious functions of ritual. To these two levels, we may add a third: the metaphorical sense of sacrifice as the renunciation of something valuable to attain a higher goal.

Secondly, *maternal* is a term that could provoke similar skepticism, if not for what Samira Kawash has described as a body of scholarship that “simultaneously insists on the particularity and specificity of motherhood while at the same time rejecting any notion of a fixed or essential aspect of maternal experience, desire, or subjectivity” (2011, p. 972).

The ambiguity of the expression *maternal sacrifice* also lies in its capacity to be read as either an objective or a subjective genitive. It may refer to sacrifices made by mothers – potentially even including self-sacrifice – or to those inflicted upon them or on the figure of the potential mother, such as in cases of matricide or the sacrifice of the virgin-daughter. These two interpretative directions intersect with the ritual, narrative, and metaphorical dimensions of sacrifice.

At the heart of the different approaches to *maternal sacrifice* lies a common concern that all the contributors to this monographic section address in their own way: presence. The presence of the mother within a sacrificial framework raises fundamental theoretical challenges. One of the most provocative is posed by Nancy Jay, who articulates an opposition between childbirth and sacrifice in what she famously called “a remedy for having been born of woman” (1985, p. 283; see also 1992). To affirm the mother’s presence within sacrificial structures – or even to entertain the possibility of her presence – is already to make a significant contribution to the theoretical discourse on sacrifice. Exploring how, and in what position, women are situated within these frameworks provides powerful insight into women’s roles, self-perceptions, and representations across the many contexts of Jewish cultural expression.

Focusing on the ancient world, this monographic section seeks to enrich the scholarly conversation by tracing non-exhaustive, yet compelling, constellations of textual and visual spaces – each approached in search of traces of maternal presence.

Corrado Martone addresses the possible presence of women in the Qumran community, situating this question within a broader inquiry into the very definition and textual construction of that community. Engaging various disciplinary approaches, Martone revisits the textual corpus and its editorial history to offer a new perspective – one in which figures such as the “daughters of truth” and “mothers of the community” are repositioned within both textual and extratextual contexts.

Isabella Scortegagna brings an anthropological lens to the transformation of the *Soṭah* ritual, exploring how its evolution from ordeal to trial reframes it as a collective admonition directed at the female community. In her reading, the public humiliation of the suspected adulteress serves as a symbolic sacrifice aimed at renewing the covenant between women and God. The woman – already presumed guilty of transgressing family values – is turned into a scapegoat for the collective.

Shana Strauch Schick compares interpretations of maternal figures in Exodus from late antique Jewish texts in the Land of Israel and the Babylonian Talmud. Through a focus on Miriam, she examines the figure of the hero’s mother in relation to the cultural construction of matricide, drawing connections with Zoroastrian and Christian texts.

Ilaria Briata examines the story of a mother who cannibalizes her son during the 70 CE siege of Jerusalem, tracing its echoes in Hebrew and Ladino sources. Through close readings, she interrogates the compatibility of motherhood and sacrificial agency, situating this disturbing episode within a broader mythological constellation. Her analysis probes the symbolic and corporeal dimensions of maternal sacrifice in Jewish narrative imagination.

My own contribution turns to the contemporary Israeli context. I am deeply thankful to the editorial and scientific board of *Henoch* for exceptionally accepting my article, which – though centered on modern cultural production – remains anchored in biblical motifs and their reconfiguration in a present-day artistic framework. Heiman’s triptych *Našim šokevot, Tipologiah* (*Lying Women, Typology*) revisits the episode of Judges 19 and reframes it as an act of maternal sacrifice. By reappropriating Gustave Doré’s illustrations of this pericope, Michal Heiman restores subjectivity to the anonymous woman at its center. Her artistic gesture invites viewers to resist the erasure of this character’s subjectivity – a woman raped by a mob and dismembered by her husband – by re-inscribing her in her own story.

From one article to the next, the muted voices of mothers return to question our methods of reading sacrifice and our assumptions about maternal figures. Their presence invites us to revisit foundational categories and to rethink how gender, ritual, and narrative intertwine.

Bibliography

- Jay, Nancy (1985), "Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman", in Atkinson, Clarissa W. et al. (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Boston (MA): Beacon Press, pp. 283–309.
- Jay, Nancy (1992), *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity*, Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- Kawash, Samira (2011), "New Directions in Motherhood Studies", *Signs* 36, pp. 969–1003.
- Watts, James W (2011), "The Rhetoric of Sacrifice", in Eberhart, Christian (ed.), *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, Leiden/Boston (MA): Brill, pp. 3–16.