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Published in:
Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament

DOI:
[10.1080/09018328.2014.932559](https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2014.932559)

Publication date:
2014

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Citation for published version (APA):
Gudme, A. K. D. H. (2014). “If I were hungry, I would not tell you” (Ps 50, 12): Perspectives on the Care and Feeding of the Gods in the Hebrew Bible. *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 28(2), 172-184.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2014.932559>

“If I were hungry, I would not tell you” (Ps 50,12)

Perspectives on the Care and Feeding of the Gods in the Hebrew Bible¹

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ABSTRACT: In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifices are described as food for Yahweh and thus the sacrificial system corresponds with the general Ancient Near Eastern system of the “care and feeding of the gods.” At the same time, human-divine commensality is problematized in narrative texts such as Judges 6 and 13, where the burnt offering is stressed as the only and necessarily different way the deity may consume food. Finally, some passages, such as Psalm 50, quoted above, explicitly reject the notion that sacrifices and offerings should be required as sustenance for Yahweh since he is the creator and owner of the world and everything in it.

This article offers a survey of various views on sacrifice as food for the deity in the Hebrew Bible and discusses these views in their Ancient Near Eastern context. It is suggested that the main understanding of sacrifice as meal in the Hebrew Bible is one that emphasizes difference through commensality and stresses the incompatibility of the human and the divine sphere through the social locus of the meal.

Key words: Sacrifice, food, meal, ritual, Hebrew Bible, Mesopotamia

1. It is with pleasure and gratitude that I dedicate this article to my three colleagues, Else K. Holt, Kirsten Nielsen and Hans Jørgen Lundager Jensen, from whom I have learnt so much about the Hebrew Bible. An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference, *Food, Kitchen and Cuisine in Antiquity*, in Wrocław, Poland, on the 13-15th June, 2013. I would like to thank the participants in the conference for their helpful comments and suggestions. The completion of the manuscript took place during a research stay in Göttingen, funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, in 2013/2014. I would like to express my gratitude to the AvH association as well as to my host institution, the Georg-August Universität.

In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifices are understood as food for Yahweh, but at the same time this understanding seems to introduce a number of problems to the authors of the texts. If human beings are indeed responsible for their deity's diet, how then, should this relationship be understood? Psalm 50, which I have quoted in the title of this article, is one attempt to come to terms with sacrificial practices and the implicit assumptions that they may lead to about the nature of the deity: Sacrifices may be intended as food for Yahweh, but not as food which Yahweh is any way in need of or dependent upon.² I shall return to this criticism below, but first I would like to turn to what one could call the “mainstream” view of the sacrificial cult in the Hebrew Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible, the most systematic presentation of the sacrificial system can be found in the so-called Priestly writings that run from the Book of Exodus chapter 25 through the books of Leviticus and Numbers. The Priestly writings offer no explanation for or a “theology” of sacrifices, but they do present their reader with a very detailed account of the arrangement of the portable sanctuary, the Tent of Meeting (אהל מועד), and the sacrificial cult that is to take place there.³

The instructions for the construction and furnishing of the sanctuary are inserted as part of the narrative of the revelation on Mount Sinai. This particular setting adds divine authority to the Priestly cultic system; Yahweh informs the Israelites of the required layout of the sanctuary and its furnishings and when the instructions are carried out, Yahweh's divine presence enters the sanctuary and thereby the deity takes up residence in his new dwelling.⁴ In this respect, the Priestly writings express a straightforward theology of presence, which it shares with the surrounding cultures in the ancient Near East.⁵

2. I find it helpful to apply Jason D. Slone's work on “theological incorrectness” to a case like Psalm 50. The general attitude towards sacrifices in Ps 50 is clearly not negative: “I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices, and your burnt offerings are continually before me” (v. 8). But it is crucial that one understands the practice of dedicating sacrifices in the correct way. I sense behind this text a tension between what Slone calls “theological incorrectness”, namely immediate and intuitive reasoning about gods as agents, and theological correctness, which would be the offline reasoning and afterthought about the correct interpretation of a practice. See Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. Cf. Alfred Marx, “The Theology of the Sacrifice According to Leviticus 1-7,” in Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler (eds), *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (SVT, 93; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 103-120.

4. Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOT SS 91; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 45-52.

5. For a most helpful and recent overview of how ANE theologies of presence manifest themselves in texts and architecture, see Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Writings from the An-

The Tent of Meeting consists of a long room, divided into two sections; the adytum, “the Holy of Holies,” and the front room, “the Holy.” A curtain separates the two. Yahweh’s divine presence resides in the Holy of Holies behind the curtain and the Holy contains a lampstand, an incense altar and a table intended for the presentation of the Showbread, which I shall return to below. The Tent of Meeting is surrounded by a courtyard and in the courtyard in front of the entrance to the tent stands the altar for burnt offerings. The layout of the sanctuary reflects a hierarchy that is descriptive of the Priestly world view; the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh resides, is most holy and only the High Priest is allowed to enter it and only once a year, during the purification ritual of Yom Kippur. The front room of the sanctuary is accessible only to priests and the courtyard may be accessed by all Israelites. This graded holiness layout corresponds with the Priestly conception that Yahweh is most holy and that the priests partake in Yahweh’s holiness in order to mediate between the deity and his people.⁶

It is interesting how the layout of the sanctuary and the ritual practices that are carried out there indicate two different approaches to the location of the divine. Hans Jørgen Lundager Jensen has named this the “theo-topology” of the sanctuary.⁷ The smoke from the altar goes *up* to the sky, indicating a vertical axis, but all of the rituals are said to be performed *in front of* Yahweh (לפני יהוה), indicating a horizontal axis.⁸ The two directions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but it is worth noting that they do seem to assume two different locations for the deity; the vertical axis implies that Yahweh resides in heaven, whereas the horizontal axis implies that Yahweh resides in the Holy of Holies in accordance with a theology of presence and as described in Exodus 40.⁹

The every-day sacrificial cult consists of the Tamid (תמיד) offering, which is sacrificed in the morning and in the evening (Exod 29,38-42; Num 28,3-8). The Tamid is supplemented with additional sacrifices on the Sabbath, at the New Moon and at the annual festivals (cf. Num 28-29). The Tamid is made up [of](#) a lamb, sacrificed as a whole burnt offering on the altar, and a grain

cient World Supplement Series, 3) (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

6. Phillip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOT SS, 106; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 89-148.

7. Hans Jørgen Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild: Strukturelle Analyser af Narrative og Rituelle Tekster i Det Gamle Testamente* (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2000), p. 288.

8. Roy Gane, “‘Bread of the Presence’ and Creator-in-Residence,” *VT* 42:2 (1992), pp. 179-203, p. 181-182.

9. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 287; Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe, 50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), p. 110.

offering and a libation of wine.¹⁰ The meat, the grain mixed with oil and the wine reflect the staple ingredients of the common diet.¹¹ One could say that the Tamid offering resembles a stereotypical meal, consisting of a main course and side dishes.¹² The Tamid has often been compared with the twice-daily offerings of food to the gods in Mesopotamian temples, but with the distinctive difference that whereas Mesopotamian food offerings are placed in front of the deity’s statue and then removed again, the Tamid is burnt on the altar.¹³

Another regular occurrence in the sanctuary is the laying out of the Bread of the Presence or Showbread (להם פנים).¹⁴ The Showbread are twelve loaves of bread that are placed on a gold table inside the Holy “in front of Yahweh” (לפני יהוה, Lev 24,6). The loaves are sprinkled with frankincense (לבנה), which is called a fire offering (אשה) and memorial offering (אזכרה) for Yahweh. On the Sabbath, the bread is eaten by the priests and twelve new loaves are put in their place. It is stressed that the Showbread must always be present in the sanctuary in front of Yahweh (Exod 25,30; Num 4,7). The way of presenting the Showbread in front of Yahweh resembles the mode of presenting food offerings in, for instance, Mesopotamian temples, but it should be noted that the Showbread themselves are never referred to as bread for Yahweh. The only part of the Showbread offering, which is explicitly said to be intended for Yahweh is the frankincense, which is presumably burnt on the incense altar (Lev 24,7).¹⁵

10. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 456-457.

11. Meat on the table may not have been an everyday occurrence for ordinary people in Iron Age Palestine, but meat was probably not as rare as it has sometimes been assumed, cf. Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 61-79.

12. Cf. Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101:1 (1972), pp. 61-81; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, pp. 456-457.

13. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 191-192; W. G. Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia”, in J. Quagebeur (ed), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, edited by J. Quagebeur (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 55; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 191-201, particularly pp. 193-194; Tzvi Abusch, “Sacrifice in Mesopotamia”, in Albert I. Baumgarten (ed), *Sacrifice in Religious Experience (Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions*, 93; Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 39-48, p. 43. For a description of the components of a Mesopotamian food offering, see JoAnn Scurlock, “Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion,” in Billie Jean Collins (ed), *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung Nahe und der Mittlere Osten*, 64; Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 389-395 and Salvatore Gaspa, “Meat offerings and their preparation in the state cult of the Assyrian empire”, *Bulletin of SOAS*, 72:2 (2012), pp. 249-273.

14. For a detailed account, see Gane, “Bread of the Presence”.

15. Gane, “Bread of the Presence”, p. 195; Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 295, note 70.

The sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible consists of five main types of burnt offerings, three of which are of importance in the present context.¹⁶ The five types are: The Whole Burnt Offering (עלה); The Grain Offering (מנחה); and The Sacrifice of Well-being (שלמים) which I am going to refer to as the “Meal Offering.”¹⁷ Finally there is the Sin Offering, which is also called the Purification Offering (חטאת), and the Guilt Offering, which is also called the Reparation Offering (אשם).¹⁸

What makes the first three types of sacrifices particularly relevant in the present context is that they are referred to as “food for Yahweh” (להם, Lev 21,6b; Num 28,2b), as a “fire offering” (אשה, Lev 1,9; 13.17; 2,2.3.9.10.16; 3,3.5.9.11.14.16) and as a “pleasing odor” (ריח־ניחוח, Lev 1,9.13.17; 2,2.9; 3,5.16), which would indicate that they are intended as food gifts for Yahweh.¹⁹

In the case of the Whole Burnt Offering, the entire sacrificial animal is burnt on the altar as an offering to Yahweh. In the Grain Offering, a token portion mixed with frankincense and salt is burnt on the altar and “turned into smoke” as a fire offering to Yahweh, whereas the rest of the grain or flour is given to the priests.²⁰ Finally, in the Meal Sacrifice, only the fat and the kidneys are burnt on the altar for Yahweh. The breast and one thigh of the sacrificial animal are given to the priests and the rest of the animal is eaten by the donor and his household as a sacrificial meal.²¹

The hierarchy described by these three types of sacrifices resembles the hierarchy indicated by the layout of the sanctuary, mentioned above; the Whole Burnt Offering is reserved only for Yahweh and as such it resembles the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies. The Grain Offering is shared by Yahweh and the priests and thereby resembles the front room of the sanctuary, the Holy, whereas the Meal Offering is shared both by Yah-

16. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, pp. 131-338; Christian Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament: Die Signifikanz von Blut- und Verbrennungsriten im kultischen Rahmen* (WMANT, 94; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), pp. 16-176.

17. Cf. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 223, who calls it “måltidsoffer.”

18. According to Alfred Marx, atonement is only a secondary purpose of the sacrificial system in the Priestly writings and therefore he draws a distinct line between the offerings that are voluntary gifts to Yahweh and the compulsory offerings that bring about atonement, see Marx, “The Theology of the Sacrifice,” pp. 109-111.

19. For references and terminology, see Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, pp. 348-353; Marx, “The Theology of the Sacrifice,” p. 109.

20. When cooked the Grain Offering could be offered without frankincense (cf. Lev 2,4-10), see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, pp. 198-199.

21 A meal that may resemble the meal in 1 Samuel 1, cf. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 265. The Shelamim distinguishes itself by being the only type of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, where the main part of the flesh of the sacrificial animal is assigned to the donor and his family. The fat (חלב) of the animal and the kidneys (הכלית) are to be burnt on the altar for Yahweh. The fat is called “the food of the fire offering” (להם אשה) and “a pleasing odor for Yahweh” (ריח ניחוח).

weh, the priests and the people and therefore it corresponds with the courtyard, surrounding the temple.²²

The common denominator for the main types of offerings is that they are all turned into smoke on the altar and thereby turned into gifts for Yahweh.²³ The burnt offerings are undoubtedly referred to as Yahweh’s food, but the texts seem to stress that the process of turning the offerings into smoke is a necessary condition for Yahweh’s reception of the gifts. Yahweh “eats” the smoke of the offerings unlike humans who would have eaten the meat or the grain.²⁴ In several passages, the altar for burnt offerings is even called “Yahweh’s table” (שֻׁלְחָן, Ez 41,22; 44,16; Mal 1,7.12), which seems to support the understanding that Yahweh’s diet consists of the smoke from the sacrifices.²⁵

This brings me to the question of commensality. It has often been pointed out that a characteristic feature of the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible was the meal shared by deity and men.²⁶ This discussion has particularly centered on the Meal Offering, the sacrifice where the fat goes to Yahweh, a portion of the meat to the priests and the rest of the animal to the donor and his dependants. In many ways, the Meal Offering resembles the Greek *thusia* and it makes sense to view them as basically the same kind of sacrifice.²⁷ It is true that a shared meal signals a basic form of unity, of coming together, but

22. Marx, “The Theology of the Sacrifice,” pp. 107-108.

23. The terms “fire offering” and “pleasing odour” occur less frequently in relation to the Purification Offering and the Reparation Offering, cf. Christian Eberhart, “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar,” *Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004), pp. 485-493, p. 490.

24. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 293; Eberhart, “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice,” p. 490; Oppenheim, *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, p. 192.

25. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, p. 350.

26. See Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, pp. 190-191 with references; Leo A. Oppenheim stresses that in Mesopotamia there is no commensality in the sacrificial ritual and this sets it apart from the sacrificial practices of the Hebrew Bible, the Greeks and the Hittites, see Oppenheim, *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, p. 191. However, this depends on how one interprets commensality. If eating from the same sacrificial substance, whether it is presented in front of the deity or burnt on the altar, constitutes commensality, and I think it does, then one could argue that the Mesopotamian sacrificial system expresses hierarchy through commensality just as the Hebrew Bible does. However, the hierarchies are expressed in different ways, in Mesopotamia it is a hierarchy expressed through the order and sequence of eating, “who eats first?,” and in the Hebrew Bible, it is a hierarchy expressed by the difference of the portions (see the discussion below) and the difference in methods of consumption (eating vs. inhaling).

27. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, pp. 278-279; Jean-Louis Durand, “Greek Animals: Toward a Topology of Edible Bodies,” in Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (eds), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 87-118; Britta Bergquist, “Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine in the Eastern Mediterranean? A Study of Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in Quaegebeur, *Ritual and Sacrifice*, pp. 11-43, pp. 12-17; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 55-59.

it is also true that the meal is an [pre](#)eminent way of expressing hierarchical differences.²⁸

Inspired by Jean-Pierre Vernant's analysis of the Hesiodic myth of the Greek *thusia*, Hans Jørgen Lundager Jensen has argued convincingly that the Meal Offering in the Hebrew Bible expresses a doctrine about the segregation between the divine and the human realm. The different participants in the meal do share the same animal, but they receive very different portions, and in this difference there seems to be a message about the fundamental ontological difference between god and man.²⁹

This message is further elaborated by two narratives outside the priestly material; in the book of Judges. They are the story of Gideon's encounter with an angel in Judges 6 and the story of Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, who are also visited by Yahweh's angel. In both narratives, the identity of the visitor is known by the reader, but remains a mystery to the host until the very end. Both Gideon and Samson's parents offer their guest hospitality and prepare a meal for him and in both narratives the angel declines and [asks](#) that the meal [be](#) converted into a burnt offering, which is then consumed by divine fire. In both stories; it is the consumption of the burnt offering that finally reveals to the host that the guest was no mere human.³⁰

The [morale](#) of these stories seems to be that Yahweh and his worshippers may consume the same substance, but they consume it in very different ways due to their basic ontological difference.

28. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal"; David P. Wright, "Deciphering a Definition: The Syntagmatic Structural Analysis of Ritual in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8, article 12 (2008), accessed on February 3, 2014: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/jhs/article/view/6210/5244>.

29. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 278 and Jean-Pierre Vernant, "At Man's Table: Hesiod's Foundation Myth of Sacrifice," in Detienne and Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice*, pp. 21-86. For a somewhat similar discussion about the basic difference between deity and humans as described by the sacrificial rituals in P, see David Janzen, "Priestly Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: A Summary of Recent Scholarship and a Narrative Reading," *Religion Compass* 2:1 (2008), pp. 38-52, with references.

30. Lundager Jensen, *Den Fortærende Ild*, pp. 293-294; Nathan MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 124; Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, pp. 70-71. As parallels to these texts, Lundager Jensen mentions Tobit 12,19, where Raphael stresses that he only pretended to eat and drink in the company of humans, and the myths of Adapa and Nergal, where the food of a certain place (the Netherworld or the Heavens) ties the person who eats it to this place or excludes the person who refuses to eat (p. 294, note 68). This is certainly a correct observation with regard to these texts, and in this context it is interesting to consider other Hebrew Bible texts that seem to have no objections to human-divine commensality; consider the angels in Sodom who feasts with Lot in Genesis 19,3 and Abraham's divine visitors in Genesis 18. In the case of the latter, they are not said to sit down and eat *with* their host, but they do eat his food (v. 18,8).

This may also explain the rationale behind the Showbread. The Showbread is laid out on a table inside the sanctuary and after a week they are replaced and then consumed by the priests. Unlike the burnt offerings, the Showbread are never referred to as “food for Yahweh”, whereas the frankincense that is put on top of the loaves is referred to as a fire offering and as a pleasing odour for Yahweh.³¹ It is possible that the ritual of presenting the Showbread in the sanctuary actually stresses the same idea that Yahweh, unlike humans, can only consume substances that are turned into smoke and therefore the Showbread that are merely presented and not burnt cannot be Yahweh’s food.

Michael B. Hundley has suggested that the Priestly authors are deliberately vague when describing the practice of the Showbread in order to veil any implicit anthropomorphism inherent in the practice.³² It has also been pointed out that the Hebrew Bible’s stress on burnt offerings and smoke as the only acceptable substance for divine consumption can be understood as a critique of other sacrificial systems, such as the Egyptian or Mesopotamian, where presentation offerings and not burnt offerings are the main mode of presenting the deity with food.³³

There are passages in the Hebrew Bible that seem to justify this interpretation; Deuteronomy 4,28 is probably the best example. Yahweh speaks to the people of Israel through Moses and he warns them never to make themselves an image and to worship it as a god. He tells them of the land that he has promised them, which they are soon to enter. They are not going to remain in the land long, but they are going to be sent into exile to a place, where “you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell (רוּחַ).” It may be no coincidence that Yahweh stresses his ability to eat and *smell* here and it may be that this passage is directed polemically at the Mesopotamian practice of presenting food offerings to an image of the deity, but there are some problems with this interpretation as well, because it presupposes that the sacrificial systems in Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible are fundamentally different.

The practice of offering burnt offerings, where the sacrificial animal or substance is burnt either partly or entirely on the altar, is primarily found in the Levant, Anatolia and Greece, whereas presentation offerings, where the sacrificial animal or substance is placed in front of the deity and then removed, are dominant in Egypt and Mesopotamia.³⁴ Interestingly, the Hittite ritual system seems to have incorporated both presentation offerings and

31. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, p. 103 and p. 107; Gane, “Bread of the Presence”; Lundager, *Den Fortærende Ild*, p. 295.

32. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, pp. 102-103.

33. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, pp. 102-103 and 111-112; Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, p. 351-352.

34. James W. Watts, “‘ōlāh: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings,” *VT* 56 (2006), pp.125-137; Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, p. 110; Bergquist, “Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine”.

burnt offerings already at an early stage.³⁵ The practice of offering burnt offerings eventually made their way into the sacrificial systems of Egypt and Mesopotamia, probably sometime in the latter half of the first millennium BCE.³⁶ So although burnt offerings seem to be the primary “mode” of sacrificing in the Hebrew Bible, and presentation offerings seem to be the primary “mode” of sacrificing in Mesopotamia, both modes are present in both sacrificial systems. Or to put it in another way, both sacrificial systems operate on both a vertical and a horizontal axis.

The differences between the sacrificial practices of the Mesopotamian cult and the cult described in the Hebrew Bible have often been stressed both by assyriologists and biblical scholars.³⁷ W.G. Lambert has argued that the idea of sacrifice with its focus on killing and blood manipulation is completely absent in the Mesopotamian cult and therefore one should refrain from even using the term “sacrifices” in a Mesopotamian context.³⁸ However, recent studies on sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible suggest that previous scholarship’s focus on the kill in the sacrificial ritual may rest on a misunderstanding or at least a skewed view of the practice.³⁹ With regard to the question of which terminology to use, I find it advisable to apply a broad definition, such as Catherine Bell’s category, “Rites of Exchange and Communion,” which encompasses a wide variety of gifts to the gods, sacrifices and offerings.⁴⁰ The advantage of a broad terminology is that it allows us to focus on the intention “behind” the ritual, namely to offer a gift and thereby to enter a reciprocal relationship with the deity, and not to stumble over the details of the ritual

35. Gane, “Bread of the Presence”, p. 190.

36. Bergquist, “Bronze Age Sacrificial Koine,” pp. 25-26 with references; Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods,” p. 194; Jan Quaegebeur, “L’autel-à-feu et l’abbatoir en Égypte tardive,” in Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 329-353; Marc J.H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice (Cuneiform Monographs, 25)*; Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 167.

37. Oppenheim, *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, p. 192; Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods,” pp. 193-194; Abusch, “Sacrifice in Mesopotamia”, pp. 39-40; Jean Bottero, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World: Cooking in Mesopotamia* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 43 and 46; Milgrom, *Leviticus*, pp. 440-441.

38. Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods,” p. 198. See the terminological discussions in Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: Offering and Ritual Killing,” in Anne Porter and Glenn M. Schwartz (eds), *Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 291-304 and Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East”, in Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange and K.F. Diethard Römhald (eds) in association with Lance Lazar, *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 3-33.

39. See for instance Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

40 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 108-114.

practice, such as the method of consumption.⁴¹ In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifices were primarily intended as (food) gifts for Yahweh and they were presented to the deity in order to establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between god and man.⁴² In this respect, the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible is very similar to the sacrificial system in Mesopotamia, where gifts to the gods were also intended to create lasting bonds between the deities and their worshippers.⁴³

Although the focus in the Mesopotamian sacrificial system rests heavily on the mode of presentation before the deity, that is on the horizontal axis, the vertical axis is by no means as overlooked as it is sometimes made out to be, and in Mesopotamian texts about sacrifices there are also frequent references to smoke and inhalation. In this context, it is interesting that in the Gilgamesh epic when Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice after the flood, the gods flock around the smoke like flies (XI, 161-163).⁴⁴ This image is not that dissimilar from Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, who inhales the pleasing odor from the burnt offerings.⁴⁵ It is not entirely clear from the text what Utnapishtim’s sacrifice or offering consists of. Aromatics such as reed, cedar and myrtle are the only sacrificial substances that are explicitly named (XI, 157-158). The verb used is *surqinnu*, which means to strew, sprinkle or scatter, and the offering is referred to as *niqû* (XI, 157).⁴⁶ Although *niqû* may also refer to an offering of slaughtered animals it is entirely possible that Utnapishtim’s sacrifice on this occasion consists entirely of burnt aromatics.⁴⁷

41. Cf. Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, *Before the God in This Place for Good Remembrance: A Comparative Analysis of the Aramaic Votive Inscriptions from Mount Gerizim* (BZAW, 441) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 12-13, and see the very helpful discussion in Robin Osborne, “Hoards, Votives, Offerings: The Archaeology of the Dedicated Object,” *World Archaeology* 36 (2004), pp. 1-10.

42. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, pp. 334-360; Daniel Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 15-30; Gudme, *Before the God*, pp. 21-41; Göran Eidevall, *Sacrificial Rhetoric in the Prophetic Literature of The Hebrew Bible* (Lampeter: UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), pp. 31-48.

43. Scurlock, “Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion,” p. 395; Pongratz-Leisten, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” pp. 295 and 298; E. Leichty, “Ritual, ‘Sacrifice’, and Divination in Mesopotamia,” in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1993), pp. 237-242, p. 237.

44. I am most grateful to Julia Krul, who has taken her time to discuss these matters with me.

45. Cf. Eberhart, “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice,” p. 493.

46. Linssen writes about *surqinnu/saraqû*: “Fumigation is a religious act, during which barley, aromatics, flour, incense and aromatic woods are scattered (*sarāqu*) on a censer; the burning of these materials results in smoke which, because of its pleasant smell, pleases the gods, just as did presenting of the food offerings.” See Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, p. 145.

47. For the terminology, see Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods,” p. 195.

However, Utnapishtim's sacrifice is often described as food for the gods.⁴⁸ In *Atraḥasis*, the sacrifice is also called a *niqû* (III v 35-36) and the gods are explicitly said to eat (*akālu*) it (III v 36), but again it is not entirely clear what the sacrifice consists of.⁴⁹ It is possible in both *Gilgamesh* and *Atraḥasis* that the sacrifice consists of some sort of food substance accompanied by aromatics or that the sacrifice simply consists of aromatics and nothing else. Be that as it may, it is clear that smelling the smoke of the sacrifices as a method of consumption, that is the vertical axis, is stressed in both accounts, whereas the aspect of presentation, the horizontal axis, seems to be absent. Another very interesting example is the Sumerian myth about *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*.⁵⁰ Lugalbanda brings a sacrifice to the gods: "He put the knife to the flesh of the brown goats, and he roasted the dark livers there. He let their smoke rise there, like incense put on the fire. As if Dumuzid had brought in the good savours of the cattle pen, so An, Enlil, Enki and Ninḫursaĝa consumed the best part of the food prepared by Lugalbanda."⁵¹

In this account, the stress also seems to be entirely on the vertical axis; the smoke from the roasted goat livers, which is described as "the best part of the food", rises to the gods "like incense" and is then consumed by the gods.⁵²

The sacrifice in the Lugalbanda story corresponds very well with the common Mesopotamian practice of slaughtering animals and preparing them for the deities, cooking their meat for instance by roasting it on a brazier.⁵³ This is an integral part of the Mesopotamian practice of giving presentation offerings to the gods, but the focus of the text seems to be on the ingestion of the sacrifices as smoke and not on the presentation of the meat in front of the deity. In this way, Lugalbanda's sacrifice also resembles the Hebrew Bible's descriptions of Yahweh, who savours the aroma of the sacrifices.

48. See for instance, A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*. Volume I. (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 890. George writes: "These two lines explain in detail how Ūta-napišti made the first ritual offering of food to the gods."

49. W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-ḥas-is: The Babylonian story of the flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 98-99.

50. The text can be found here: <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>; for a summary of the story, see William W. Hallo, "The Origins of the Sacrificial Cult: New Evidence from Mesopotamia and Israel," in Paul D. Hanson, Patrick D. Miller and S. Dean McBride (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 3-13 or Pongratz-Leisten, "Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East," pp. 299-300.

51. The translation here is taken from the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature: <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>.

52. Beate Pongratz-Leisten stresses that the word used to describe the sacrifices is the Sumerian *gizbun*, which is later equated with the Akkadian *tākultu*, "banquet", "Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East," pp. 299-300. A burnt offering in Akkadian would be *maqūtu*, cf. Linszen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, pp. 165-167.

53. Gaspa, "Meat offerings and their preparation"; Bottero, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World*, pp. 42-43.

On the basis of this evidence, the sacrificial systems in the Hebrew Bible and in Mesopotamia may not have been understood by their practitioners as being significantly different from one another and certainly not as incompatible as they are sometimes described in modern scholarship.⁵⁴ Therefore I find it unlikely that a text like Deuteronomy 4,28 is directed especially against the Mesopotamian practice of giving presentation offerings to the deity. Deuteronomy 4,28 is clearly part of the idol polemics in the Hebrew Bible and as such a criticism directed broadly against worshiping divine statues (e.g. Ps 115,2-8; Isa 44,9-20), but it is not a criticism against presentation offerings as such.⁵⁵ The sacrificial systems in the Hebrew Bible and in Mesopotamia both stress the importance of the vertical axis, the smoke that rises to the sky, and they both relate to the deity’s presence on a horizontal axis as well.⁵⁶ The stress may be placed differently in the two systems, but this does not justify a description of these two systems as significantly different from one another.

I would like to end this article by returning to Psalm 50,12 and the question that the text raises, namely whether Yahweh is dependent upon sacrifices for food. The answer that Psalm 50 itself gives is an emphatic “no”!—“If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine.” Human beings cannot offer anything that Yahweh does not already have and therefore the smoke from the sacrifices may be a pleasing odour and a tribute that Yahweh appreciates, but it is not a prerequisite for Yahweh’s survival.⁵⁷ This view is supported by classical cult critical passages, such as Isaiah 1,11-12 and Amos 5,21-22, where Yahweh refuses to accept the sacrifices brought to him by the Israelites. If Yahweh is at liberty to refuse these offerings, he cannot be dependent upon them.⁵⁸

54. Cf. JoAnn Scurlock, “The Techniques of the Sacrifice of Animals in Ancient Israel and Ancient Mesopotamia: New Insights Through Comparison, Part 1,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44:1 (2006), pp. 13-49, who writes, “The most striking difference between this [the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible] and ancient Mesopotamian gods’ meals is not the method of presentation, but the comparative poverty of the offerings.” (p. 38).

55. For an up-to-date discussion of idol polemics in the Hebrew Bible, see Sonja Ammann, *Götter für die Toren. Die Verbindung von Götterpolemik und Weisheit im Alten Testament*, Diss. theol., Göttingen 2014.

56. The importance of the horizontal axis in the Hebrew Bible becomes increasingly clear if one includes the practice of dedicating durable offerings, votive objects, to Yahweh. See Gudme, *Before the God*, pp. 37-90 and 135-147.

57. For a very helpful survey of various ANE attitudes to the care and feeding of the gods and the deities’ relationship to their food, see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, pp. 204-205, 281-283, 331 and 360-361. Hundley concludes, “While it is not always clear to what extent the gods or their statues needed food, it is abundantly clear that the gods desired it and would go to great lengths to get it.” (p. 366)

58. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer*, pp. 70-71; Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, pp. 113-114; Eidevall, *Sacrificial Rhetoric*, pp. 42-48 with references; Scurlock, “The Techniques of the Sacrifice,” p. 23.

Sacrifices are described as food for Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible and as such the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible does not differ significantly from the general ancient Near Eastern practice of the “care and feeding” of the gods. It is stressed that the sacrifices are turned into smoke and inhaled by Yahweh, because in the Hebrew Bible this is the only way a divine being can consume ordinary food, and thus the understanding of Yahweh’s “eating habits” seems to be entirely focused on the vertical axis in the theo-topology of the sanctuary. This is also the case in the presentation of the Showbread, which may be an attempt to stress Yahweh’s particular way of eating, because even if the loaves of bread are presented horizontally *in front* of Yahweh, only the frankincense is in fact said to be offered *to* Yahweh. In this way, human-divine commensality is problematized and the burnt offering is stressed as the only and necessarily different way the deity may consume food. One should not view the stress on verticality, however, as an implicit criticism of for instance the Mesopotamian cult, simply because these two sacrificial systems are not sufficiently different to warrant such a conclusion. The overall understanding of sacrifice as food for Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible is one that emphasizes difference through commensality and stresses the incompatibility of the human and the divine sphere through the social locus of the meal.