



Volume 61 | Issue 1

Article 18

5-1-2018

Cranz's "Atonement and purification: Priestly and Assyro-Babylonian perspectives on sin and its consequences" (book review)

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Recommended Citation

Rosauer, Greg (2018) "Cranz's "Atonement and purification: Priestly and Assyro-Babylonian perspectives on sin and its consequences" (book review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 61: Iss. 1, Article 18.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.1915>

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Book Reviews



Cranz, I. (2017). *Atonement and purification: Priestly and Assyro-Babylonian perspectives on sin and its consequences*. Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 2. Reihe. 92. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 178 pp. 59,00 €. ISBN 9783161549168

In a revision of her doctoral dissertation, Isabel Cranz reevaluates the premise that the Israelite cult differentiated from ancient Near Eastern (ANE) rituals because of the Priestly source's monotheistic outlook. Rather than a monotheistic critique of ANE rituals, the Priestly writers were defending the supremacy of the Aaronide priests against other competing Israelite priestly groups. To argue her thesis, Cranz reconstructs the cultic situations of Šurpu, an Assyro-Babylonian incantation text, and portions of Leviticus. The comparison highlights two distinctions: (1) Šurpu assumes a causation between sin and physical suffering, whereas Leviticus does not assume physical suffering resulted from moral failure; and (2) Šurpu's priests were specialists serving a royal class without a centralized temple for ritual practice, whereas Israelite priests served the entire community at a centralized temple. In essence, her comparison serves to show that the differences between the Priestly source and Šurpu are the result of how their ideas of sin, suffering, guilt, and social context were manifested in the ways the respective ritual specialists (or priests) were professionalized. Israel's cultic differences from ANE rituals were thus not the result of an overt theological apologetic. Rather, Cranz argues that the Israelite focus on a centralized location and the unique shape of the Priestly source's cultic rituals "can be explained by the Aaronide's need to justify their monopoly over the sacrificial service at the sanctuary" (p. 144).

The technical nature of Cranz's thesis make it inaccessible to those not already familiar with Pentateuchal source criticism and comparative ANE literature. Cranz's historical-critical method brackets out revelation and theological explanations *a priori* and depends upon speculative reconstructions of source material and the social context behind it. Even allowing for these presuppositions, her use of a comparative approach is tangential to her thesis – i.e., she could have argued her point without recourse to Šurpu. Her attempt at modifying the scholarly critical consensus from understanding monotheism as the driving force behind the formation of the Israelite cult to understanding, rather, that the Priestly source was motivated by protecting their professional territory and livelihood, assumes too much. The book is not recommended unless libraries support doctoral programs in comparative ANE literature with an emphasis on Israel's cult or OT source criticism.

Reviewer

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