Household sacrifice is a common feature of the ancient Mediterranean. While offerings are made in temples, a home altar is a frequent sacrificial site.¹ This raises an intriguing question for scholars of Judaism in antiquity: Do Jews also sacrifice on household altars? While Judaism in antiquity is riotously diverse, it often looks very much like other ancient Mediterranean religions.² It would therefore seem reasonable to expect to find at least some Jews offering household sacrifices.³ In fact, we do—though the evidence is slender and sometimes cryptic. In this essay, I will survey the extant literary evidence for Jewish household sacrifice in antiquity. By examining texts from Tobit, Philo, Josephus, the Mishnah, and

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³ In this essay, I focus on sacrifice that occurs in the Jewish home in antiquity. I do not address sacrifice that occurs in Jewish temples in antiquity. However—as the famous case of the Judean temple in Leontopolis indicates—the Jerusalem Temple was not the only temple in which Jewish sacrifice was offered in antiquity (even after the supposed Deuteronomic centralization of the cult).
Julian, we can catch a fleeting glimpse of a household practice that is both unexpected (according to normative views of Judaism) and expected (in light of the Mediterranean character of Judaism in antiquity).

**Tobit: A Wedding Sacrifice in the Home?**

Although Tobit describes events that are set in the eighth–seventh centuries B.C.E., most scholars prefer to date the composition of the book shortly before the Maccabean revolt, with a likely date of ca. 200 B.C.E. The book, in which a poor, blind, pious man named Tobit marries a wealthy, virgin, seven-time widow named Sarah, “is best described as a short Jewish romance.” Carey A. Moore further comments, “More specifically, this particular romance takes the form of the successful quest, where the perilous journey for money and the even more dangerous quest for a bride result in a deadly confrontation and then complete success (i.e., wealth, a bride, and recovered vision).” The poor, blind Tobit ends up wealthy and regains his sight.

The “deadly confrontation” that Tobit must face, and over which he eventually triumphs, is the wedding night itself, since each of Sarah’s previous seven husbands had died on the wedding night prior to the consummation of the marriage. In the spirit of full disclosure, Sarah’s father (Raguel) warns Tobit about Sarah’s dubious marital history: “But, young man, I must be frank with you. I have already given her to seven men, all of them our kinsmen. However, they died on their wedding night! But for now, young man, eat and drink. May the Lord deal mercifully with both of you” (7:10–11).

Undaunted, Tobit proceeds with the marriage and has Raguel draw up a marriage contract (7:13).

On the wedding night, Tobit appears to use a wedding sacrifice to protect himself from the demon who smote Sarah’s previous seven husbands:

> When they had finished eating and drinking, they wanted to retire; so they escorted the young man into the bedroom. But Tobiah remembered Raphael’s instructions, and so he took the fish’s liver and heart out of...
the bag in which he had kept them and placed them on the embers of the incense. The fish’s stench so repelled the demon that he fled to the uttermost parts of Egypt. Raphael pursued him there and immediately bound him hand and foot. When the bride’s parents had left the bedroom and shut the door, Tobiah got out of bed and said to Sarah, “Get up, my love! Let us pray and implore our Lord that he grant us mercy and protection.” (8:1-4)10

Tobit uses the stench of the fish’s liver and heart, which “many days ripe, would have produced a wretched odor,” in order to repel the demon who seeks to take his life.11 This action appears to be similar to a contemporary Greek wedding sacrifice, since it occurs before consummation of the marriage12 and is followed by a prayer. However, Tobit’s sacrifice differs from the Greek wedding sacrifice in that it occurs after the actual wedding, not the day before.13 Further, Tobit’s sacrifice consists of parts of a fish, a sacrificial offering in no other Greek or Jewish practice that I am aware of, whether in temple or home.14

Most likely, this scene in Tobit represents an inversion of an actual ritual. Thus, it may index a well-known ritual. As Catherine Bell reminds us, “ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies.”15 Tobit’s ritual act, therefore, should be understood as an inverted wedding sacrifice. Further, Tobit’s actions are not without precedent. According to Fritz Graf,
Fumigations . . . are perfectly regular rites. . . . Magic ritual\textsuperscript{16} thus uses the common ritual forms, changes only the substances to be burned . . . ; at least the slander spells make deliberate use of rather disgusting substances. The differences are more unmistakable in the bloody sacrifices, first of all in the choice of animals . . . rare victims that as such express a clear-cut reversal in relation to civic religion. The magician uses signs that are easily identifiable.\textsuperscript{17}

By offering fish organs instead of a typical animal sacrifice’s organs in order to repel the demon, Tobit inverts the Greek household wedding sacrifice. This inverted ritual saves his life and his marriage.\textsuperscript{18} It does not, however, give us direct evidence for Jewish household sacrifice in antiquity. Although it does seem that Tobit is indexing and inverting a standard practice, at best Tobit provides us with circumstantial evidence for Jewish household sacrifice in antiquity.\textsuperscript{19}

**Philo: Passover Sacrifice in the Home?**

While Passover is a pilgrimage festival, not every Jew can make the journey. The Torah preserves conflicting reports as to whether a Jew can offer the paschal sacrifice outside of the Jerusalem Temple.\textsuperscript{20} This amb-

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\textsuperscript{16} Although Fritz Graf nuances his usage of the term “magic” in his introduction (\textit{Magic in the Ancient World} [trans. Franklin Philip; Revealing Antiquity 10; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999], 1–19), I prefer to avoid a prolonged discussion of this methodological minefield here. In this context, I would replace the phrase “Magic ritual” with “Inverted ritual.” Suffice it to say that I consider the term “magic” in ancient contexts to be a locative and perspectival term of accusation and, in modern contexts, to serve too often as a means of establishing a normative theological hierarchy.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 230–31.

\textsuperscript{18} To be clear, I am not saying that the very act of offering a wedding sacrifice as protection inverts the ritual; it is the different order and the unique sacrificial victim that index the inversion. However, many Greeks considered the wedding sacrifice itself to serve as protection during what the Greeks understood to be a potentially dangerous time. On Greek wedding sacrifice and the perceived perils of the wedding night, see Oakley and Sinos, \textit{Wedding}, 11–12.

\textsuperscript{19} Satlow speculates about the possibility of a Jewish household wedding sacrifice based on Tobit and two other texts: Philo, \textit{Special Laws} 3.80; and Josephus, \textit{Jewish Antiquities} 4.245 (\textit{Jewish Marriage}, 174–75). However, neither Philo nor Josephus explicitly (and perhaps not even implicitly) mentions that a Jewish wedding sacrifice occurs in the home. I therefore do not treat either text in detail.

\textsuperscript{20} On the one hand, Deut 16:5–7 explicitly states: “You may not slaughter the Passover in one of your cities that Yhwh, your God, gave to you; except at the place that Yhwh, your God, will choose to cause His name to dwell, there you shall slaughter the Passover in the evening, when the sun sets, the appointed time of your departure from Egypt. You shall roast it and eat it in the place that Yhwh, your God, will choose; and you may turn back in the morning and go to your tents.” On the other hand, while discussing some of the laws about the paschal offering, Exod 12:46 notes, “In one house [the Passover] may be eaten; you shall
guity creates a loophole for those who need (or desire) to remain in their cities during Passover, while still being able to offer the paschal sacrifice (or Passover). Perhaps discussing this phenomenon, Philo, a Jewish philosopher who lived from ca. 20 B.C.E.–ca. 50 C.E., remarks,

On this day [the 14th of Nisan] every dwelling-house [ἐκάστη δὲ οἰκία] is invested with the outward semblance and dignity of a temple [ἱεροῦ]. The victim is then slaughtered and dressed for the festal meal which befits the occasion. The guests assembled for the banquet have been cleansed by purificatory lustrations, and are there not as in other festive gatherings, to indulge the belly with wine and viands, but to fulfil with prayers and hymns the custom handed down by their fathers. The day on which this national festivity occurs may very properly be noted. (Special Laws 2.148–49; emphasis added)22

If “every dwelling house is invested with the outward semblance and dignity of a temple,” then the occurrence of a household sacrifice in accordance with Passover does not seem unlikely. While scholars have debated the meaning of this passage,23 I believe that a literal reading makes the most sense: on Passover, some Jews (at least in Alexandria, where Philo resides) offer a sacrifice in their homes. In doing so, their homes become like a temple and they become like a priest.25 Perhaps this is only a once-a-

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21. Jews currently observe Passover on the 15th day of the month of Nisan. For a discussion about the history of this change in date, including an explication of the Philo passage at hand, see E. P. Sanders, Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63 BCE–66 CE (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1994), 133.


24. While Philo asserts that this occurs in every (ἐκάστη) home, I adopt a more minimalistic stance. This approach allows for the fact that Philo might be speaking in hyperbole, crediting to everyone the practices of a few. Further, some Alexandrian Jews may have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, meaning that their homes would not have been seen as a temple that night.

25. See Sanders, Judaism, 134. For an argument against Sanders’s interpretation of this passage, see Leonhardt, Jewish Worship, 31-33. I find Leonhardt’s argument to be based on the same “ambiguous” evidence that Leonhardt accuses Sanders of basing his argument
year event and, on all other occasions, Jewish household sacrifice does not occur. Additionally, even if this occurs only on Passover, there remains a distinction between a temple (the home) and the Temple (in Jerusalem)—an important distinction, given that Philo is writing while the Jerusalem Temple is still standing. And, as noted above, since the Torah offers conflicting advice about where the Passover can be offered, perhaps household sacrifice can occur only on Passover.

What, then, can we conclude from Philo? It would seem that, at least on one occasion (and perhaps only in one community?), Jewish household sacrifice is allowed and perhaps widely practiced. Extrapolating much beyond this limited observation is not advisable. But it certainly is intriguing.

**Josephyus: Household Sacrifice for Good Cheer?**

Passover may not have been the only occasion for Jewish household slaughter in antiquity. Josephus (37–ca. 100 C.E.) suggests that Jews could choose to offer sacrifices in their own homes for private festivals (as opposed to public required ritual sacrifice):

> Furthermore, any persons sacrificing animals at their homes [κατ’ οἶκον θύουσιν] for their own good cheer [εὐωχίας] and not for the ritual [θρησκείας] are bound to bring to the priests the maw, the jaw, and the right leg of the victim. ([Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 4.74](#))

Josephus here comments on Deut 18:3, which discusses the priests’ due from the sacrifices offered by the people. According to Josephus, this portion must be given to the priests even if the sacrifice is not a bibli-

26. As Sylvie Honigman reminds us, we should be careful not to ignore regional differences because, in doing so, we run the risk of falsely extrapolating data from one area to another, conflating evidence, and muddying the historical picture. See her “Jewish Communities of Hellenistic Egypt: Different Responses to Different Environments,” in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern* (ed. Lee I. Levine and Daniel R. Schwartz; TSAJ 130; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).


cally mandated, public sacrifice. In this case, then, a private sacrifice made in the home must conform to the requirements for any other sacrifice. Though some might label this slaughter as nonsacrificial, or profane, the fact remains that it is treated like other sacrifices.

While Josephus’s comment is suggestive, it is difficult to extrapolate. Perhaps some Jews offer such sacrifices in their homes when they wish to celebrate good cheer (one possible example would be a wedding sacrifice). However, this does not address several issues, including whether this is a frequent occurrence, whether this is viewed as problematic to some Jews, or whether one could offer a biblically mandated sacrifice in the home. Once again, we are left with much in the way of intrigue but little in the way of incontrovertible evidence.

**Mishnah: Rabbinic Evidence for Household Sacrifice?**

Two of the previous potential household sacrifices do not occur regularly: that of the occasional wedding and that of the once-a-year Passover. However, meat is consumed throughout the year, even in places located a great distance from Jerusalem and its Temple. An allowance for this reality occurs in Deuteronomy. According to Deut 12:15–16, 20–25, clean animals can be slaughtered wherever one lives, as long as the blood is poured out on the ground “like water,” and as long as the animals slaughtered are not required for temple sacrifice.30 The Deuteronomist’s accommodation31 for those too distant from “the place where Yhwh, your God, will choose to place his name” (see Deut 12:21) includes the prescription of pouring the animal’s blood on the ground. Only Temple priests can handle blood, and therefore household slaughter does not allow non-priests any direct contact with the “life” (see Deut 12:23).32 However, as long as one pours out the blood on the ground and does not consume it, the sacrifice of (obvi-

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31. While this accommodation appears in D, Jacob Milgrom concludes that, “D’s reputed innovation of common slaughter [in Deuteronomy 12] has a legal precedent. In fact, it is not even an innovation. D has based itself on the earlier law of P that countenances common slaughter except in the case of sacrifices” (*Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 29; see also 9–10). This debate does not alter my argument, as I merely need to prove the existence of this pericope, not its innovator. I leave aside questions regarding the “true” innovator of this legislation.

ously, permitted) meat can occur within the Jewish household. Though several categories of sacrifice are excluded from this accommodation (see Deut 12:11, 13–14, 17–18, 26–27), the fact remains that some meat can be slaughtered outside of the Jerusalem Temple.

Rabbinic legislation in the Mishnah (and beyond) perpetuates the Deuteronomist’s accommodation for household slaughter. While one must be careful both not to read rabbinic literature as normative and not to view the words of a document redacted ca. 200 C.E. as prescriptive and/or descriptive for pre-70 C.E. Judaism, the continuity of this custom in literary evidence further proves the possibility of Jewish household sacrifice. *Mishnah Hullin*, which details the slaughter of meat that is not consecrated for Temple use, states:

They may not slaughter [in such a way that the animal’s blood falls] neither into the seas, nor into the rivers, nor into the utensils;

but one may slaughter [so that the blood falls] into a pool of water, or in a boat on top of utensils.

They may not slaughter [in such a way that the blood falls] into a pit under any circumstances;

but one makes a pit in his house, so that the blood may flow into it;

[however], in the market one may not do so, in order that one not appear to imitate [the customs of] the heretics. (m. *Hullin* 2:9)

The “heretics” (הерыוטים), who sacrifice in the marketplace, are distinguished from the proper rabbinic Jew, who slaughters in the home in the prescribed fashion. The text thus differentiates Greek (public—in the marketplace) and Jewish (private—in one’s boat or home) sacrificial slaughter. Therefore, the private sphere of the home serves as a legitimate place for slaughter.

This pericope, however, does not help to determine whether one could offer a small sacrifice in the home. This question is answered by the passage that immediately follows it:

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33. I use the term “permitted” rather than “kosher,” since the latter term is never applied to food in the Hebrew Bible.


36. I thank Daniel Ullucci for this point.

37. This point is further driven home in *t. Hullin* 2:19, when, in discussing what can occur in the home, it states: “And if one does not want to soil his house, he slaughters [so that the blood flows] into a utensil or into a pit.”
One who slaughters for the sake of a Burnt-offering, for the sake of a Peace-offering, for the sake of a Suspended Guilt-offering, for the sake of a Passover-offering, [or] for the sake of a Thank-offering, his slaughter is invalid.

But R. Simeon declares it valid.

[If] two [people] hold the knife and slaughter [a single animal], one for the sake of any of these [offerings], and the other for the sake of a valid thing, their slaughter is invalid.

One who slaughters for the sake of a Sin-offering, for the sake of an Unconditional Guilt-offering, for the sake of a Firstling, for the sake of a Tithe, [or] for the sake of a Substitute-offering, his slaughter is valid.

This is the general rule:

Any thing that is [offered for the sake of] a vow or a Freewill-offering – [if] one slaughters [it] for the sake of its name, it is invalid;

but [any thing] that is not [offered for the sake of] a vow or a Freewill-offering – [if] one slaughters [it] for the sake of its name, it is valid. (m. Hul- lin 2:10)38

This mishnah discusses one who slaughters a nonsacrificial animal outside of the Temple and designates the animal as appropriate for sacrifice, without having been previously consecrated. Those sacrifices that one can consecrate (and are offered out of obligation) are valid if offered outside of the Temple, while those that one cannot consecrate are invalid.39 Therefore, this pericope specifically mentions a valid offering (in the eyes of rabbinic law) made outside of the Temple.

These two mishnaic passages suggest that slaughter can occur in the home. It seems reasonable to conclude that, for some purposes and on some occasions, home sacrifice is permissible. The rabbis condone (and even practice?) such actions under specific circumstances. Of course, generalizing much beyond this observation is not advisable. Once again, we are intrigued but not wholly satisfied.

39. This concept appears also in m. Zebahim 13:1, which discusses Temple sacrifice: “[If] one slaughters [consecrated animals] and offers up [the offering] outside [the Temple], he is liable for the slaughter and liable for the offering up. R. Yose the Galilean says: [If] he slaughtered [the animal] inside and offered [it] up outside, he is liable. [If] he slaughtered [it] outside and offered [it] up outside, he is free [of liability]; for he has offered up outside [of the Temple] only something invalid. They said to him: Also, the one who slaughters inside and offers [it] up outside, since he took it outside, has invalidated it.”
Extant evidence for Jewish household sacrifice is not confined solely to Jewish sources. In Against the Galileans (written ca. 363 C.E. in Antioch), the Roman emperor Julian mentions the occurrence of Jewish household sacrifice. In the midst of a longer discussion critiquing the “Galileans” (i.e., Christians), Julian remarks:

Why is it, I repeat, that after deserting us you do not accept the law of the Jews or abide by the sayings of Moses? No doubt some sharp-sighted person will answer, “The Jews too do not sacrifice.” But I will convict him of being terribly dull-sighted, for in the first place I reply that neither do you also observe any one of the other customs observed by the Jews; and, secondly, that the Jews do sacrifice in private places [ὅτι θύουσι μὲν ἐν ἀδράκτοις Ἰουδαῖοι], and even to this day everything that they eat is consecrated [ἱερά]; and they pray before sacrificing, and give the right shoulder [see Deut 18:3] to the priests as the firstfruits; but since they have been deprived of their temple, or, as they are accustomed to call it, their holy place, they are prevented from offering the firstfruits of the sacrifice of God. But why do you not sacrifice, since you have invented your new kind of sacrifice and do not need Jerusalem at all? (Contra Galileos 305D–306A; emphasis added)

Julian’s comments match the picture of Judaism painted by rabbinic evidence; certain sacrifices, which are considered consecrated, continue to be offered outside of the Temple, while those sacrifices that cannot be consecrated outside of the Temple (i.e., firstfruits), “they are prevented from offering.” These sacrifices can be offered in “private places,” of which the home would be the most likely candidate. While there are a variety of issues with this text, there does seem to be an underlying kernel of historical truth: in antiquity, (some?) Jews sacrifice (in some form) in their homes.

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40. While Wilmer Cave Wright translates ἐν ἀδράκτοις as “in their own houses,” I follow Finkelstein in rendering it “in private places.” Julian does not use the precise word for houses here (cf. the Josephus passage cited above), though a home setting certainly is implied (and, in any case, would not contradict the meaning). However, some Jews apparently report to Julian that they can only sacrifice in the Temple. For references, see Wright, The Works of the Emperor Julian (3 vols.; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1923), 3:406 n. 1.


42. On the type of sacrifice to which Julian is referring, see Finkelstein, “Julian,” 42–43; and Moshe David Herr, “The Identity of the Jewish People before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple: Continuity or Change?” in Levine and Schwartz, Jewish Identities in Antiquity, 228.

43. For an excellent summary of these issues and the scholarship on this passage in
Conclusion

As William H. C. Propp reminds us, “Controlled fantasy is relatively benign, and indeed it prepares us for future discoveries. Speculation is harmful only when it parades as certainty.”44 This article is an exercise in disciplined speculation. Tobit, Philo, Josephus, the Mishnah, and Julian offer suggestive evidence for Jewish household sacrifice in antiquity. Each case must be understood on its own terms. Even when taken together, however, the full weight of the data may not tip the scales from speculation to assertion. In sum, the data may not be substantive enough to alter the traditional view of the ancient Jewish household altar.

general, see Finkelstein, “Julian,” 38–83. Further, see Ullucci, Christian Rejection, 143–44. Finkelstein also concludes that there is significant evidence for the possibility of Jewish household sacrifice in antiquity.
