Focus Unit: Sanctified Violence in History
An Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between “violence” and “religion” in contemporary social and political life has become an increasingly pressing subject of public discourse. These discussions often take for granted contemporary Western categories such as “the religious,” “the political,” “the ethical,” or “the juridical;” in so doing they employ as universal analytical categories what are in fact historically and culturally contingent terms. In particular, the dominant paradigms used to understand the causes and meanings of “religiously-motivated” violence are in large measure products of the specific history of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world.

This focus unit aims to contribute to a better genealogy of the idea of “religious violence” by exploring, within a comparative framework, the diverse discourses and practices of violence that operated across the full range of ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world from 150 BCE to 750 CE—the era that saw the rise and consolidation of the Roman Empire and the emergence of rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

These four papers analyze the specific strategies and tactics used by various groups in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world.
for distinguishing and legitimating their own discourses and practices of “religious violence” from those of others. We hope they contribute to the growing body of literature on the history of religion and violence, a history whose conclusion we have not yet seen.