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James W. Watts

Unperformed Rituals in an Unread Book

I was invited to address the Sacrifice, Cult and Atonement Section of the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Diego in 2014 on a panel about “Writing a Commentary on Leviticus: Reflections on Methodology and Sacrificial Rituals.” Just the year before, I had published the first volume of my HCOT commentary on Leviticus.¹ The panel organizers asked me (1) to outline my distinct methodology or approach in writing the commentary and (2) to reflect on sacrificial rituals in the book of Leviticus. My paper reproduced parts of the Introduction to my commentary. It appears below with only slight supplementations by kind permission of Peeters Publishers.

1 My Approach to Writing a Commentary on Leviticus

My commentary begins with two questions that have haunted me since I began writing it: What is the significance of an unperformed ritual? What is the meaning of an unread text?

The most basic purpose of commentary is to explain the meaning of a text and the significance of its contents. One of the purposes of the HCOT commentary series is also to describe the history of the text’s interpretation, that is, its meaning over time. In a commentary on the book of Leviticus, however, these three goals frequently lead in different directions.

Synagogues since antiquity have read the entire Torah through over the course of one year, or sometimes three years. The sounds of the words of Leviticus and the images they evoke have played a central role in Jewish ritual. In traditional Jewish education, children first learn to read Hebrew by reading Leviticus. The offerings mandated by Leviticus, however, have fallen into abeyance since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE. For the ancient rabbis and their successors, studying Torah along with prayer and acts of charity took the place of offerings that are no longer possible. In Jewish synagogues, the instructions for offerings get read, but do not get performed as written.²

1 J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

2 See the summary in Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 75–7, 80–2. For more details and examples, see G. Bodendorfer, “Der Horizont einer Exegese des Buches Levitikus in den rabbinischen Midraschim,” in H.-J. Fabry/H.-W. Jüngling (ed.), *Levitikus als Buch* (Berlin: Philo, 1999) 343–71;

Christians, by contrast, do not read Leviticus very often, if at all. Churches do not usually include verses from Leviticus in the lectionary readings for public worship, except to read portions of chap. 19 as preface to the love commandment in 19:18 and to ground some major holy days in the festival calendar of chap. 23.³ They especially avoid the rules for offerings, having inveighed since antiquity against any practice of animal “sacrifice.” One frequently hears of attempts to read the Bible through that foundered on the book of Leviticus, or skipped it altogether. Yet key terms and ideas from the book, such as sacrifice, atonement, sin, guilt, priesthood, purity, holiness, love of neighbor, and Jubilee have played central roles in Christian theology and practice from antiquity to the present.⁴

Leviticus is also scripture for a third religious tradition. Samaritan ritual practices and polity differ in crucial respects from those of Jews and Christians.⁵ The most famous difference is that Samaritans still perform the Passover sacrifice annually as the rules in Exodus 12 prescribe, though not the temple offerings of Leviticus 1–7. Unlike Jews and Christians, Samaritans continue to be led by a hereditary high priest claiming descent from Aaron, just as Leviticus, Exodus and Numbers mandate.

Despite these differences, all three religious traditions that revere Leviticus as scripture prohibit people from performing many of its ritual instructions. That has stimulated attempts to interpret their meaning in non-literal ways using midrash, typology, allegory, theology, and ideological critique.

I think that biblical commentary should focus on explaining a book’s meaning as scripture, because it is its status as scripture that generates most of the interest in commentary in the first place. Now theological interpretation is the approach that most Christian commentators take for addressing questions of scripture.⁶

H.K. Harrington, “The Rabbinic Reception of Leviticus,” in R. Rendtorff/R. Kugler (ed.), *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (VTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 383–402; Z.J. Braiterman, “Martin Buber and the Art of Ritual,” in M. Zankl (ed.), *New Perspectives on Martin Buber* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 111–24.

3 See F. Just, “Lectionary Statistics” on the Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* (2009), online at <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm> (accessed 12/21/2015).

4 See the summary in Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 77–80, 83–6. For more details and examples, see E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 208–22, 279–81; A. Firey, “The Letter of the Law: Carolingian Exegetes and the Old Testament,” in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 204–24.

5 For Samaritan beliefs and practices, see R. T. Anderson/T. Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 117–34; for early Samaritan history, see G.N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6 Most influential in recent decades has been the canonical approach of B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979). M. Douglas abandoned her anthropological methods to adopt a theological approach also, in *Leviticus as Literature*

But Leviticus does very little explicit theology compared to many other biblical books, and even less compared to later summaries, *halakhot*, commentaries and harmonies. There is, of course, theology in the book. God appears as both a character and a subject of discourse. The book emphasizes the theological importance of crucial ideas represented by words such as קדש “holy,” כפר “mitigate or atone,” חטאת “sin, sin offering,” אשם “guilt, guilt offering,” טמא “pollution,” אהב “love,” etc. Leviticus does very little, however, to define these terms. It does not expound on their meaning or describe their relationship to one another.⁷ Instead, it demands that Israel maintain the positive qualities and avoid or counteract the negative ones by observing its regulations. It asks its hearers and readers to interpret its teachings by their practices, rather than their words. Theological interpretation therefore runs against the grain of the book’s plain meaning. Theology turns instructions for ritual, moral and legal practices into symbols of religious doctrines.

A rhetorical approach to Leviticus as a scripture can bridge the gap between the plain meaning of the Hebrew text and its various interpretations in subsequent traditions better than theology can. Rhetorical analysis asks “Who is trying to persuade whom of what with this text?”⁸ The persuasive impact of a text depends on who is speaking, who is being addressed, and for what purpose. More accurately, it depends on who the listener or reader thinks is speaking. Similarly, persuasion depends on listeners’ or readers’ judgment about who is being addressed. They frequently decide that it is someone other than themselves. Many Christians view most of Leviticus as addressed to Jews rather than Christians.⁹ Historians read ancient texts, including the Bible, as addressed to ancient audiences rather than themselves. These decisions determine how readers and listeners interpret the purpose of the text, why it has one message and not another, what effect it aims to have on its audience, and how real audiences actually respond. From such a rhetorical perspective on persuasion, the “meaning” of the text derives from its use in a particular relationship, and the text has no meaning apart from such a relationship. Its meaning necessarily changes whenever the parties to the relationship change.

The history of how a text has been used, however, will not explain why its authors wrote it this way. To explain the unique form and contents of a particular

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Recent theological treatments of Leviticus have included E. Radner, *Leviticus* (Brazos Theological Commentary to the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), and M. W. Elliott, *Engaging Leviticus: Reading Leviticus Theologically with its Past Interpreters* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012).

7 For more on this point, see W. K. Gilders, “Commentary as Ethnography,” in this volume.

8 J. W. Watts, *Reading Law: the Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 32–60.

9 As I have discovered by questioning many Christian students in my university classes over the years.

text, we must try to reconstruct what rhetorical relationship its authors intended for it. We need to determine who they were, whom they were trying to persuade, and of what, so as to figure out why they shaped the text in this way. Such work is necessarily speculative, and never definitive.¹⁰ Nevertheless, because the text's rhetoric functions only in the context of a relationship between speaker/author and listener/reader, estimating their identities is essential and basic work in order to read any text as a communication between people and as persuasive rhetoric. Since biblical texts contain overt evidence of an intention to communicate and persuade, and since they are commonly read that way within the religious traditions that cherish them as scripture, rhetorical analysis proves very helpful for understanding both their original and later functions.

Finally, ancient authors shaped their works primarily for oral recitation by scribes and aural reception by everyone else.¹¹ They may also have included features noticeable only to sages who committed the text to memory.¹² Analysis of pre-modern texts must therefore pay particular attention to those features designed to affect aural reception, such as refrains, word plays, and sudden verbal and thematic juxtapositions—of which there are very many in Leviticus.

2 The Instructions for Ritual Offerings in Leviticus

Leviticus distinguishes itself by its emphasis on rituals, and interpreting it requires discussion of the nature of rituals and ritual texts to a greater degree than anywhere else in the Bible. Interpreting Leviticus therefore provides an opportunity to meld the traditions of biblical scholarship with the insights of other disciplinary fields concerned with ritual aspects of religion, such as the history of religions, sociology, and anthropology, and now the separate specialty, ritual studies.

10 The problem of authorial intentionality, which is the epistemological challenge of how to determine an author's intentions in writing, played a major role in challenges to biblical historical criticism by formalist literary critics in the 1980s (drawing on the New Criticism of the 1950s and 60s) and by post-modern critics in the 1990s (drawing on the continental philosophy of the 1970s and 80s). The critics pointed out that the intentions of authors can never be reconstructed with any certainty, and that appreciating many kinds of literature (such as poems and hymns) obviously does not require reconstructing a single authorial meaning. Nevertheless, the process of hearing or reading a text always requires the audience to think about who is addressing them so they know how to identify its genre correctly and know how to respond, including the question of whether the author's meaning and intention is relevant to their interpretation or not. A nuanced evaluation of the outcome for biblical studies can be found in J. Barton, "Reading the Bible as Literature: Two Questions for Biblical Scholars," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 1 (1987) 135–53.

11 Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 24–8.

12 Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 159–65.

There is, however, a deep methodological conflict between ritual and textual approaches, one that has bedeviled many attempts to employ ritual theory in biblical scholarship. The problem, in essence, is that we do not have access to ancient Israel's rituals, only to texts that happen to describe or refer to them. We cannot observe Aaronide priests purifying themselves and then making offerings in Jerusalem's temple, or any of the comparable practices of ancient Jews, Israelites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. We have only stories that use rituals to further their plots and ritual instructions that urge hearers and readers to do as they say. The authors of texts describe rituals to further their own goals in writing texts, not to reflect whatever purposes may have lain behind a ritual's performance. The application of ritual theories must always be deferred until those textual interests have been accounted for, or else the latter will undermine the conclusions of the former. Even in the very rare instances when writers try to explain a ritual, the textual medium itself impedes that goal. The problem, as several interpreters of biblical rituals have recently argued, is that texts are not rituals and rituals are not texts.¹³

Written texts usually encode rhetorical purposes different from the goals that motivate ritual performances. Even in modern cultures, most ritual texts exhort their audience to perform a ritual or instruct them in how to perform it rather than explaining what it means. On the other hand, great effort goes into interpreting rituals that we no longer perform or that are performed in cultures other than our own.¹⁴ Symbolic interpretation of ritual is therefore a symptom of ritual strangeness, not a typical feature of ritual performance itself.

The dominance of symbolic theology in Western religions, however, blinds theorists and interpreters to the fact that not all or even most rituals receive symbolic commentary traditions. Many rituals function culturally without requiring verbal explanations of their meaning or purpose. When anthropologists or tourists do inquire about a ritual's meaning, they frequently discover that there are as many interpretations as there are participants and observers. Multivalence is a characteristic feature of rituals and does not impede their social functions.¹⁵

13 See W.K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004), 9–11; W.J. Bergen, *Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture* (JSOTSup 417; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 7–9; J.W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–32; D.P. Wright, "Ritual Theory, Ritual Texts, and the Priestly-Holiness Writings of the Pentateuch," in S.M. Olyan (ed.), *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 197–209. I have recently summarized and reviewed the progress of this discussion in J.W. Watts, "Text Are Not Rituals and Rituals Are Not Texts, with an Example from Leviticus 12," in C. Nihan/J. Rhyder (ed.), *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

14 Such as sacrifice: see J.W. Watts, "The Rhetoric of Sacrifice" in Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric*, 173–92.

15 F. Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26/1 (1979) 2–22; J.Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 108; R.L. Grimes,

Interpreters who choose one interpretation over another risk either taking sides in traditional contests over ritual meaning or else imposing a meaning that does not appear in the ritual's cultural context at all.

The persuasive intent of many of Leviticus' regulations aims rather obviously to motivate people to make offerings in the Tabernacle or its later replacements, the temples of YHWH in Israel and Judah, or Yehud and Samaria. The book aims to convince Judeans and Samaritans to identify with the people of Israel whom the book addresses (1:2, etc.).¹⁶ By doing so, they oblige themselves to bring offerings to the sanctuary and obey the other stipulations of Torah and to accept the ritual and interpretive authority of the Aaronide priests (10:10–11). P's concern for centralizing the cult does not involve its location, as in Deuteronomy, but rather its personnel. P insists that only the descendants of Aaron may exercise priestly duties at the altar. Leviticus therefore seems to reflect the interests of the Aaronide dynasties of the Second Temple period who controlled multiple temples dedicated to the worship of YHWH.¹⁷

P, however, does not describe offering rituals in stone temples but in the tent sanctuary, the Tabernacle, that accompanied Israel's wilderness wanderings. The problem, then, that confronts Jewish and Christian readers of whether and how to apply the book's instructions in different circumstances was posed by the priestly writers from the beginning. But they did not leave it to every reader or hearer of these instructions to resolve questions of application by themselves, nor did they vest interpretive authority in a class of scholarly scribes or rabbis as post-Second Temple Judaism did, or in a divine prophet-messiah and his apostles as Christianity did. Leviticus 10:10–11 gives only the Aaronide priests the authority to determine how to apply Tabernacle rituals to later circumstances. The interpretive demands deliberately posed by the utopian setting of the wilderness Tabernacle reinforce P's rhetorical goal of empowering Aaronide control over Israel's religion – a goal amply fulfilled in Judea until 70 CE and still effective among Samaritans to this day.

What heightens the significance of these divine grants is the fact that priests receive the only grants of centralized leadership authority in the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch, through P, gives only priests leadership over a centralized hierarchy in Israel and a hereditary right to wield that authority.

For me, that makes Leviticus a particularly fascinating text through which to think about the nature and rhetoric of scripture. The different polities of Samar-

Ritual Criticism (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990), 16–18; C. Bell, *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 88–93; and N.J. Ruane, "Constructing Contagion on Yom Kippur," in this volume.

16 H. Nasuti, "Identity, Identification, and Imitation: The Narrative Hermeneutics of Biblical Law," *JLR* 4.1 (1986) 9–23.

17 D.M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 212–14; Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 107–11.

itans, Jews and Christians represent different political choices made at various points in their histories, and those choices have left their mark on the contents of their canons of scripture.¹⁸ For Samaritans, the Pentateuch alone is scripture, because the Torah's privileging of the Aaronides still matches their community's polity. For Jews and Christians, the Pentateuch has been contextualized not only by a larger Hebrew canon, but also by Talmudic literature in one case and a New Testament in the other. Both Talmud and NT displace Aaronides from their central position as the authoritative interpreters of law and religious practice.

Yet while Jewish and Christian canons and histories of interpretation displaced Aaronide leadership, they retained Leviticus and the Pentateuchal rhetoric that established Aaronide pre-eminence. Political contests for denominational and congregational leadership continue to reflect Leviticus's ideas, even when they do not cite its texts. For example, debates over whether women and openly gay men should be allowed into the ranks of rabbis, Torah scribes, priests and ministers still regularly employ a rhetoric of purity that evokes the menstrual and sexual rules of Leviticus 12, 15, 18, 20 and 21.¹⁹ Since Jewish and Christian congregations do not intend to empower the descendants of Aaron in these roles, this rhetoric occupies an interstitial space between the plain meaning of Leviticus and its completely metaphorical interpretation. The book's designation of priestly authority continues to haunt subsequent re-allocations of it, despite the profound changes in congregational polity, theology, and political culture that have taken place over two millennia.

So what is the significance of an unperformed ritual? And what is the meaning of an unread text?

The intuitive answer, that unperformed rituals and unread texts have no meaning, is clearly wrong in the case of Leviticus. The rituals depicted in its text mean a great deal, because Jews, Samaritans and Christians continue to ritualize Leviticus as part of their scriptures. Leviticus's status as the third book of scripture has remained virtually uncontested throughout the histories of these three religions, despite the fact that people do not observe many of its offering instructions or, among Christians, even read much of its text. It retains its place among the sacred scrolls and books reproduced by each religion.

Therefore if the job of commentary is to explain the meaning of Leviticus, it cannot stop with the book's words, much less their original referents. The mean-

18 J. W. Watts, "The Political and Legal Uses of Scripture," in J. Schaper/J. C. Paget (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 1.345–64.

19 For examples, see K. De Troyer, "Blood: A Threat to Holiness or Toward (Another) Holiness?" in K. de Troyer/J. A. Herbert/J. A. Johnson/A.-M. Korte (ed.), *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003) 45–64. Some have argued, however, that the Christian marginalization of women in worship on the grounds of their impurity owes less to Leviticus than to ancient medical beliefs: so J. Schultz, "Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers on Menstrual Blood," in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, 97–116.

ings of Leviticus have been broadcast by the sounds of its words and the sight of the books and scrolls that contain it as much as by semantic interpretations of its contents, which have themselves been manifested in ritual and legal performances as well as in sermons and commentaries. Out of all this emerges the phenomenon of scripture, of which Leviticus is an original and integral part.²⁰

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²⁰ See now J. W. Watts, *Understanding the Pentateuch as a Scripture* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2017).

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