

LEVITICUS

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

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LEVITICUS

E P H R A I M R A D N E R



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To my father,
Roy Radner,
in thanksgiving for the sharing of his faith and love,
and for his parents,
Samuel and Ella

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INTRODUCTION

My daughter began a devotional discipline when she was twelve—reading a chapter of the Bible every night, starting with Genesis. She had reached 1 Kings before I learned what she was up to. By the time my son decided to follow his older sister’s suit, however, I was more on target; and I tried to make sure that I asked him about what he was reading as he went along. “I’m starting Leviticus,” he told me one day. He was eleven at the time. I found myself saying to him, without even thinking, “You might want to skim the thing—you know, just a little here and there, and then move on to the next book.” My instinct was to protect him from the *longeurs* of Leviticus. I didn’t want him discouraged so early on in his discipline, which after all, is meant to edify, not drag down into boredom. His response, however, was quick and decisive: “I must read every word,” he said nobly. “It’s the Bible!”

Both reactions—my instinct to free him from the burden of the book, and his to press on through it in every detail—are bound to the character of Leviticus. Origen sums up this inner dynamic: “If you read people passages from the divine books that are good and clear, they will hear them with great joy. . . . But provide someone a reading from Leviticus, and at once the listener will gag and push it away as if it were some bizarre food. He came, after all, to learn how to honor God, to take in the teachings that concern justice and piety. But instead he is now hearing about the ritual of burnt sacrifices!” Origen himself realizes the problem: without the church taking the time deliberately to explain the dull details of the Jews’ sacrificial rites, Sabbaths, and the like, they become but “deadly things.” “It’s the Jews’ business; let them deal with it!” people will say in disgust. So he answers: “But begin from the principle that ‘the law is spiritual’ if we are to understand and explain all the lessons that are read.” It is the church’s responsibility to show the people that the dull details are filled with promise. “For my part, and because I believe what my Lord Jesus Christ has said, I think that there is not a ‘jot or tittle’ in the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:18) that

does not contain a mystery.”¹ Yes, Christians are put off by Leviticus; but still, there is something divine to be received within its words.

Despite Origen’s hopes, however, Leviticus is today probably among the least read books of Scripture, by Christians anyway. It is rarely quoted in the New Testament itself, there being, on one count, only nine direct citations. But one verse—loving one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18)—stands as a centerpiece within Jesus’s teaching about the law (Mark 12:31) and has thereby proved enormously influential within discussions of Christian moral teaching. Furthermore, the sacrificial cult described in Leviticus provides the major framework for at least one New Testament writing—the letter to the Hebrews. In the contemporary ecclesial culture wars, Leviticus has taken on a special, almost emblematic, prominence, standing as a kind of dark bogeyman, throwing up poorly understood but looming injunctions against certain forms of sexual behavior. These prohibitions, in turn, are tarred by association with a host of other Levitical attitudes we have otherwise long left behind. This detail of historical experience has itself given rise to a specific kind of defense for ethical development, dubbed the “shellfish argument” (“we eat shellfish, don’t we? So why can’t we also do *x* or *y* that is prohibited by Leviticus?”). Thus, despite its alien and unwelcoming character, Leviticus is a book that is hard to escape, even though we feel it would be easier, for a lot of reasons, if we could. Our ambivalence, furthermore, probably ends up informing our attitudes toward certain more central facets of the Christian faith. That Leviticus hovers, unavoidably, over the whole discussion of the cross of Christ, the sacrifice of our Lord, and the ritual of our eucharistic remembrances, not to mention over the forms of our common life and relations, means also that these central elements of our faith are themselves tinged with the very tension and confusion that we feel about Leviticus itself.

Critically, the historical line of commentary on Leviticus has followed a process wherein this ambivalence has harvested an alien fruit. Between Origen (the church’s earliest and surely still greatest interpreter of the book) and Jacob Milgrom (the Jewish author of the present era’s most expansive critical study of the book) the evolution of interpretation has moved in a distinctive direction: bit by bit the Christian sacrificial focus upon the book has narrowed through ever elaborated historical interest in the sociological details of ritual, to the point that the text’s even potential Christian character has disappeared almost wholly. In its place, a vast and towering historical reconstruction of Israelite and Near Eastern social cultus has emerged as the book’s residual substance, like a voracious jungle that has overgrown a long-lost human dump and through which readers must move either as painstaking botanists or cruel clearers of the forest, simply to reach the grim detritus of the text itself. Squeezed out completely in this history has been the divinely created and desired breadth of the world itself that the text was designed to comprehend and lay out to view within the context of redemption.

1. Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 27.1; 7.1; *Homilies on Exodus* 1.4 (in Origen 1981: 1.14, 36).

This trajectory of Christian commentary is little more than the outworking of the problem Origen had already noted with respect to the place of Leviticus in popular perception, even in the early church. While the efforts of Christian theologians of his era and after to respond to the range of Manichean-like rejections of the Old Testament were largely successful, at least theoretically, Leviticus itself always proved an intransigently difficult case in the concrete. Origen's pioneering exegesis, both as a whole and with respect to Leviticus in particular, was a deliberate response to the widespread sense in the church that the book was both too hard to parse and finally irrelevant (possibly even hostile) to Christian concerns. And his methods in this regard sought to open the details—the jots and tittles—of the book to the broad range of divine action and purpose in the world of creation and history as a whole. He did this through the use of what he called “spiritual” reading. The complexity of the text's details, from this perspective, corresponded to the almost profligate character of God's all-encompassing work in creation and redemption, and the Christian reader's vocation and privilege was to uncover and engage these details. In this, Origen's approach was in tune with developing rabbinic methods of interpretation, themselves mostly marginalized in today's reading of Leviticus among most Jews, although in each case—Christian spiritual exegesis and rabbinic commentary like the *Rabboth*—there has been recently a minor renewal of interest among historical scholars.²

That the only substantial presence of Leviticus in the New Testament—but what a presence!—is given in the letter to the Hebrews, of course, meant that, for Origen and all subsequent serious Christian interpreters of the book, the spiritual reference of Leviticus would be primarily bound to the body and acts of Jesus as the Son of God. More than any other Old Testament writing, Leviticus demanded of the Christian exegete a figural reading, the theologically comprehensive character of which laid the foundations for the whole theory of scriptural figuration itself from a Christian viewpoint. The reality of the law as a shadow (Heb. 10:1) and of particular sacrifices as images of some heavenly pattern (9:23), that is, given its substantive appearance in the fleshly person and sacrificial history of Jesus (10:20), located the entire Old Testament in a relation of meaning and purpose that was novel and peculiar, certainly in reference to Jewish exegetical precedents for spiritual reading like Philo's. It is one thing to say that the letter of the text indicated some higher spiritual truth; it is quite another to identify that truth as Jesus the Christ. Furthermore, by wrapping Leviticus up, as it were, in Jesus—“sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared me”

2. See the overview by Wilken 1997. Neusner 1986: 119–25 argues that *Vayikra* or *Leviticus Rabbah*, to which I shall refer frequently, marks a dramatic reorientation of rabbinic reflection on Scripture, taking Scripture more seriously as a self-determining authority, as opposed to using it as a store of proof-texts for mishnaic legal commentary. This evaluation certainly places the *Rabbah* (dating perhaps two hundred to four hundred years after Origen, though based on much earlier material) in analogy with Origen's own dramatic reappropriation of Scripture.

(Heb. 10:5, quoting Ps. 40:6)—Jesus himself was interpretively given over to all the details of that book’s (and the Old Testament’s) wide reach.

This last is a crucial point: Jesus is rightly interpreted by Leviticus, so that the actual meaning of what he does, what he teaches, and who he is is informed even by the details of, for example, the laws on bodily fluids, sexual relations, genealogy, and planting. This converse effect of the early church’s figural connection between Jesus and the Old Testament text is even less appreciated today than is the first. If it is difficult to find the meaning and purpose of Leviticus lodged in the body of Christ, it is even more difficult to find the meaning and purpose—the form—of Jesus expanded and explicated by the rich details of Leviticus. Indeed, the loss of the figural connection at its base has resulted in the squeezing out of the world from Jesus himself. Jesus is a “thinner” figure in contemporary understanding than is the dense personal reality he represented for Origen, in part because a book like Leviticus in particular no longer traces the outlines of his being.

Perhaps the last modern interpreter to engage this density most fully (though only as a hope left unrealized by his death) was Blaise Pascal. For Pascal, the problem with the Old Testament and especially with a book like Leviticus was not its seeming irrelevance to Christians. The book might well be construed in a (subjectively) relevant fashion, but what did that matter if the scope of relevance itself was spiritually deformed? The problem with Leviticus and the whole “law and the sacrifices” was that its details, if taken or dismissed in their simple literal character, mirrored a kind of person whose carnal nature was more interested in a superficial life than in being subjected to the hard realities of selfless love for God. Scripture is *difficult*, Pascal insisted, and no more so than when we attempt to decipher the true meaning of the law and the sacrifices. If that difficulty is avoided—by simplifying literalisms that, through their embrace or rejection, dispense us from grappling with the Scripture’s obscurity—then the full depth of God’s character, work, and vocation in Christ will be pushed aside as well (1966: frag. 287). “Objections by atheists: ‘But we have no light’” (frag. 244); that is, “none of this makes any sense, so why bother?” Scripture’s own discussion of the sacrificial ceremonial, for instance, is filled with contradictions, Pascal notes in a lengthy fragment from his unfinished defense of Christianity: in some places (like Leviticus), Scripture says the sacrifices are pleasing to God; in others they are said to be displeasing to God (as in some of the Psalms and Prophets). Yet both cases, because they are Scripture speaking, are the truth itself. Only a figurative reading of the sacrifices, Pascal argues, can reconcile such a contradiction, not in a wooden sense, but by attaching each reality—the positive and negative character of the sacrificial ritual in the eyes of God—to the full historical ministry of Jesus whose own life in the Father’s purposes is marked by a deep obscurity that expresses the profound reality of created human nature and redemption (frags. 257–60).

How does this happen? Because Scripture is the living word of God, our engagement with its reading represents God working with us. And the very details of Scripture, as they exercise our understanding and care, are therefore instruments

of the primary mission of God in our souls. Leviticus—even before it is examined—must be assumed to be a means by which the truth of God is exposed to us for our eternal destiny. The whole of reality comprises two foundational truths according to Pascal: the redemptive love of God, and the corruption of human life and nature. If, that is, Leviticus stands upon a contradiction regarding the character of its referents and their enduring effect—for example, opposing views of sacrifice—it can only be because these referents themselves must be examined as caught up within and as markers of the contradiction itself. That is, what Leviticus says about the sacrifices must somehow mean something that also comprehends what the Prophets themselves say about sacrifice. The two are not simply alternative readings of sacrifice, to be laid before the reader or church and chosen as discerned for this or that moment of history. Each part of Scripture must also represent and express the reality of the world's actual shape as a whole, as Pascal explains it. It is the holding together and exposing of these two truths of redemption and corruption simultaneously that the Christian faith represents and that Jesus himself embodies in the flesh of space and time and that Scripture's writing and reading enacts.

But in this, the entire world and the world's history is implicated: what it means to traverse the centuries, to encounter creation, to navigate the challenges of heart and being, to be confronted by God and to be taken up by God, is here included. “He is a God who makes [men] inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence and love: who makes them incapable of having any other end but him” (Pascal 1966: frag. 449). And scriptural figuration itself somehow enacts the sweep of this historical and metaphysical reality in its very challenge.

The obscurity of the Levitical ceremonial, for example, works both a cosmic light and darkness upon the reader that finds its full substance (and actual origin) in the “humiliated” Christ who expresses the divine love that is Scripture's only purpose to articulate: “If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God” (Pascal 1966: frag. 446; see also 220, 268).

The whole Scriptures thus work as a concurrent “blinding” and “enlightening,” according to Jesus's own explanation of his parabolic teaching on the basis of prophetic speech in general (Pascal 1966: frags. 332–36). “The disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ . . . ‘Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah’” (Matt. 13:10, 13, quoting Isa. 6:9; cf. Mark 4:12). The centrality of this form of speech within the ministry of the Son as whole marks figuration as a supreme instrument of divine love, by which (as Augustine insisted)

all readings of Scripture are to be judged: “Look at all the prescribed ceremonies and all the commandments not [explicitly] directed toward charity, and it will be seen that they are figurative. . . . Everything which does not lead to charity is figurative. The sole object of Scripture is charity” (1966: frags. 267, 270). And this charity, encompassed by the exfoliating figurative expositions of the scriptural text, takes in the world: “God diversified this single precept of charity,” Pascal concludes (frag. 270), so that whole of creation and our “curious” minds could be comprehended into its referential reach. And this is only because the precept and its scriptural multiplication derives from “the world exist[ing] only through Christ” and “Jesus Christ [being] the object of all things, the centre toward which all things tend. Whoever knows him knows the reason for everything” (frag. 449). Although the forms for reading Leviticus are not given in advance, we therefore know that *any* proper Christian reading of the text will *somehow* detail the redemptive work of the humiliated Christ upon the broken hearts of human beings and of the whole created order. “Figural” reading is the name we give to the outworking of this “somehow.”

Pascal’s peculiar Augustinian anthropology notwithstanding, the foundation for his approach to Leviticus was both traditional and traditionally expansive, in the line of Origen’s early direction:

The letter is seen just like the flesh [of the incarnate word], but hidden inside of it is the spiritual sense that is grasped like [his] divinity. This is what we shall find as we peruse the book of Leviticus, with all of its descriptions of sacrificial rites, its diverse offerings, and the ministries of its priests. These are all things that, according to their letter—which is like the flesh of the word of God and the clothing of his divinity—both the worthy and the unworthy can apprehend and understand. But “happy are the eyes” [Luke 10:23] that see the divine Spirit hidden within, beneath the veil of the letter; and happy are those who apply to this hearing the pure ears of the inner man. If not, they shall clearly perceive in these words “the letter that kills” [2 Cor. 3:6]. (*Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1)

For Origen, as for Pascal, the incarnational image here is more than a metaphor: the figural meaning of the text represents and encloses the whole history of God’s work with the world, the movement of the Logos in creation, judgment, and redemption, and the movement of the human soul within this larger current of divine work. As students of Origen have pointed out, his method of spiritual exegesis—whether considered in its twofold scheme of letter and spirit or in its more elaborate threefold scheme of “history, morality, and mystery”—is less the pursuit of a formal exercise than it is an engagement with a word that is understood to be intrinsically reflective of the full historical work of the Spirit that animates it. We are called to read the Scripture as participants in a divine economy through which the meanings of material realities—worldly and written—are given in these realities’ disclosure of divine life.³ The full range, therefore, of Levitical referents

3. See Marcel Borret’s careful introduction in Origen 1981: 1.22–34.

reflects the creative breadth of the Logos himself, in his Spirit-led mission from the foundation of the world and into the church's life as bound to the incarnate one's body. The degree to which and the manner in which figural exegesis is bound up with the development and maintenance of a Nicene trinitarian theology is unclear. Certainly, there is no logical determinism involved. But there is no doubt that the formative, embracing, and creative character of Scripture's written word, in Origen's view, as it comprehends the very shape of history, sustains the rapprochement and finally the identity of Logos and divinity, in a way that some developments of Antiochene exegesis could not.⁴ The christological implications of Origen's scriptural figuralism in this sense surmounted those of his asceticism, the latter of which could easily lead in subordinationist and even Arian directions (see Kannengiesser 1991). Jewish figuralism, with the same sense of the word's (and its words') creative initiative, interestingly also founds the development of Judaism's most richly differentiated divine metaphysic, such as that in the Kabbalah.

Origen was not the only reader of Leviticus in the early church, but he was by far the most powerful. Even while other theologians, from Tertullian through Augustine, might approach the book most frequently in terms of its place within the *history* of God's pedagogy of Israel, when it came to the actual meaning of specific texts, Origen's spiritual exegesis dominated. And medieval exegesis tended to follow, rather than build upon this tradition. Origen's influence proved decisive through the sixteenth century, either directly or through intermediaries like Hesychius of Jerusalem and then later compilations like the *Glossa ordinaria*. There are in fact more extant manuscripts of Origen's *Homilies on Leviticus*, in Rufinus's Latin translation and paraphrase, than of his other commentaries on the Hexateuch, for the book itself provided the clearest application of the exegetical method based on multiple senses that was central to medieval reading. Furthermore, the elaborated evolution of the Western church's sacramental culture proved a fertile parallel, figurally and in its own signifying right, to the cult of ancient Israel, and the book of Leviticus proved a sturdy imagistic bulwark in this regard to liturgical life. To a real extent, this actually tended toward the desiccation of the exegesis of Leviticus, as the book's objects and referents were increasingly given rote explications that simply followed the fittings of current ecclesial practice.

This observation is important. Even Origen's homilies, especially if read in sequence as a whole, can become wearisome in their unrelenting insistence upon the spiritual referents of the text. But it is crucial to note the character of this insistence, for its limitations lie less in the motive than in the pinched unidirectional dynamic of his interpretations, which jump almost immediately, over and over again, to the New Testament texts dealing with levels of virtue and vice and the ascetic soteriology with which he tended to work, however richly. By the Middle

4. Maegher (1978: chap. 1) employs the useful distinction between "disclosive" and "creative" aspects of the scriptural word, which, while they could oppose one another, could also in some theologians (like Origen and Augustine) complement each other.

Ages, this habit had made Leviticus, in many instances, no more than a handbook of Christian tropes that did little, in fact, to open the scriptural text to the fullness of the incarnational implications that Origen himself held as foundational. Curiously, a better place to see this scriptural opening and even incarnational implication is in Jewish exegesis, as it developed its midrashic methods and traditions, which are still employed especially in the orthodox hassidic interpretive communities and founded on the reality that the temple's disappearance redirected the localized cultic laws toward other referents.⁵

The *Leviticus Rabbah* represents a critical, indeed essential, fertile, and in many ways easily adapted exegetical orientation for Christian reading of Leviticus in particular. While the *Rabbah* assumes wider referents—spiritual in a broad sense—for the objects of the text, these are never reduced to what become the free-floating emblematic catalogues of the Christian Middle Ages. Rather, these referents are always discerned through the traversing of the history of Israel and its scriptural persons, from Adam and Cain to Abraham and into the times of the kingdoms and beyond. If, for instance, a purificatory rite is being examined, its meaning is derived only through a dynamic sifting of the lives and intratextual discussions, as it were, of Abraham and David, of Israel and Persia, of Isaiah and Moses, as their own lives engage the realities of sin and forgiveness. Each speaks to the other, with Leviticus as a kind of narrative forum. Obviously, the chronological character of narrative here is drastically loosened, but the narrative and temporal moorings of Leviticus are heightened, not lessened, through its words being suffused by the history of Israel and its people. And this, frankly, is a greater witness to word made flesh—because the landscape of Scripture is always inhabited by a people with whom God is engaged—than are the almost abstracted symbolizations that end up dominating Christian exegesis of Leviticus and that, for all the Reformers' rejection of their fabricated particularity, still inform the Protestant reduction of the Old Testament's cultic and even legal material to contemporized moral allegory. Under the best of circumstances, "the letters of the Jews are black and clean / And lie in chain-line over Christian pages," "hedg[ing] the flesh of man" (Shapiro 2003: 109, in a poem entitled "The Alphabet"). When the "barbed wire" of Israel's scripted history is removed, the flesh, as it were, threatens to dash away across the pages and purposes of the Bible like a convict on the run.

Yet even despite the drift into leaden symbolism, the medieval tradition nonetheless managed to keep the "letter" of Leviticus from turning into a mere husk, for concurrent with the formalizing of typological and allegorical readings of the book, Christian exegetes maintained a strong and continued conviction that the interplay between literal object and spiritual meaning within the text was a crucial

5. Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Megillah* 31b says: "Abraham said, '... but when [the temple] does not [exist], what will become of [the sacrifices] then?' God said, 'I have appointed for them the chapters about the sacrifices: whenever they read them, I will reckon it to them as they had brought the offerings before me, and I will forgive them their sins.'" Prayer and suffering became posttemple atoning substitutes for sacrifice.

sign of the outworking of *God's* acts of judgment and mercy in the history of the world and of the human soul. The *Glossa ordinaria*, citing Hesychius, introduces Leviticus as the place where God exposes humankind to the “good law” of life and the “bad law” of death, spoken of in Ezek. 20:11, 20 and here given in the single words of the text to the Spirit-led or Spirit-abandoned individual and people (Patrologia latina 113.297). The whole drama of salvation is played out in the text and the text's actual reception, as the figural interpretive enterprise engages the hearts and hopes of the book's readers. This was exactly the view Pascal embraced with a passion: “Each man finds in these promises [of the law and sacrifices] what lies in the depths of his own heart; either temporal or spiritual blessings, God or creatures; . . . [and] those who are looking for God find him, without any contradictions, and find that they are bidden to love God alone and that a Messiah did come at the time foretold to bring them the blessings for which they ask” (1966: frag. 503). And finding God, they find, turning back to the letter of the text, all the creatures of God as they are properly to be loved.

That Leviticus contained the world was a Jewish conviction and, retrospectively rightly ordered in Christ, was a Christian assumption derived from Origen's incarnational reading of the text. And still in the Middle Ages the assumption was elaborated so as to induce sometimes an almost joyful appropriation of the book's referents toward a celebration of creative blessing. Bede had early used Ps. 19's praise of the law to explicate the order of the Pentateuch, with each book somehow illustrating a kind of historical progression from natural law through to the written law and finally to the new law of the gospel. Within this schema, Bede suggested that Leviticus represented a kind of “clarifying” word on the distinctions of these contrasts, with God speaking to the movement from nature to Christ. The call by God to Moses for ordering the offerings of the people that opens the book becomes, in this reading, the figure for the whole world's gathering in faith, and the animals and objects are each laid out in the text as embodied images of the evangelical work of drawing in the nations through time (Patrologia latina 91.331–34). The reader of Leviticus, then, is asked to engage a kind of map that traces the work of God in history and whose apprehension provides a living structure to the actual life of the world in which the reader lives. Although attempts were made to render this kind of exegesis methodical in its ascetic exercise, with one sense of the text purportedly built upon another (literal first, then allegorical, then moral)⁶ and following the progress of the soul's ascent to God, the actual practice of figural reading in its details strikes us as conspicuously unordered. Indeed, medieval commentary on a book like Leviticus appears like a random pile of symbols. But the coherence and relationship of the details is given, not so much in a methodological outline of reference, as in the underlying assumption that the book as a whole depicts the work of God in Christ on a cosmic scale, comprehensive enough to demand the wealth of detail figured in the book's verses. In this sense, the associative method

6. See Borret's introduction in Origen 1981: 1.25–34; also Davis 2005: 76–77.

of medieval exegesis, whereby images from the primary text are brought into relation with other parts of the Bible not out of a systematic logic but merely through linguistic concordance, is deliberately arbitrary, from a human perspective, for it submits, first of all, the ordering of the figures to the initiative of the divine letter, given as an array of scriptural articulation that is granted a kind of inherent verbal networking. And, second, it assumes that the economy of Christ has preestablished these connections through the simple reality of his “subjecting all things to himself” (1 Cor. 15:27–28). A power of divine gravity directs the ordering of figuration as a kind of magnetism of form.

The letter to the Hebrews, in fact, locates the work of God depicted in Leviticus in the actual *body* of Christ. This underlying reality, grasped by Origen and made central in all subsequent Christian commentary, includes not only the more obvious sacrificial details of the book, but also the communal laws of Israel’s familial and civic relationships, whose referents must ultimately extend to the church as members of Christ. More broadly, the body of Christ in its personal and ecclesial aspects is seen to be the vehicle by which all of creation is brought into the reconciling purpose of God (Col. 1:15–20). Thus, it persists as the referent even of the disparate details of animal and plant existence that populate the text within its legal demarcations. The world-historical character of the exposition in Hebrews of the fate of Christ’s body demanded such a sweep (Heb. 1:1–3), and, at least through the seventeenth century, it still informed the reading of Leviticus in a crucial way, as Andrew Willet’s elaborate 1631 commentary shows.⁷ Just as the Son and the Father are one (John 10:30), and whoever sees the Son has seen the Father (12:45), so the divine will behind the law of Leviticus finds its formal exposition within the body of the Son himself as it reorders the whole of creation.

While some modern commentaries, particularly of a traditional Protestant orientation, maintain a strict figural reading of the sacrificial images of Leviticus, applying them to aspects of a carefully articulated atonement theology, even these have long been cramped by a single doctrinal focus that reproduces, in its own way, the disembodied emblematic universe of medieval exegetes. Calvin’s example, though more supple than his followers’ approach, nonetheless shied away from all but the most prominent sacrificial metaphors for Christ, leaving most of the book useful only in terms of its depiction of and exhortation to self-disciplined obedience and the virtues attendant upon it.⁸ Leviticus fell prey to the general

7. Willet’s commentary (part of a series he completed on several books of Scripture) is an extremely useful and detailed compilation of exegetical arguments from both antiquity and his own era, including many Roman Catholic and Reformed commentators. He refers regularly to Rashi as well and despite his own Puritan Anglican convictions treats most of his sources fairly if unimaginatively.

8. Since all the ceremonial law is fulfilled in Christ, their only value now is to show us how, in moral terms, to live now with Christ. Calvin comments on Lev. 3:1: the Israelites’ obedience to the details of sacrifice teach us moral subjection to the rule of Christ in terms of different virtues, like scrupulosity of devotion, thanksgiving, attentiveness, and so on (1996: 2.333–35).

skepticism about figural readings that crept over the churches after the Reformation divisions, and its content quickly proved uninteresting to the growing doctrinal-historical approach to the Scriptures that took its place. At best, the book provided sensationalist fodder to skeptical opponents of scriptural authority as a whole, as is still the case. By and large the book has fallen readily into the most marginalizing exercises of historical-critical inquiry. To be sure, by the end of the nineteenth century, the consignment of Leviticus to the dustbin of “Judaic superstition” at the hands of deist and rationalist polemics was alleviated slightly by the rise of anthropological inquiry and the developing interest in comparative religion as a discipline. New insight into the character of sacrifice and holiness as more general elements of *human* religiosity provided Leviticus with a reburnished profile as a major literary example within the collection of data being assembled by scholars to plumb the depths of the religious psyche of humanity. At the same time, the book’s place within the evolving theoretical frameworks of documentary criticism of the Bible was always important. But none of this did much to encourage the actual *reading* of Leviticus as a living word from God within the Christian church, and the book continues to languish in the backwaters of last-ditch Bible studies and in the initial rush of introductory Scripture courses.

This commentary takes its place within the course of the traditional reading of Leviticus that came to its end, at least as a living thing, in the early modern period. It is not a history of interpretation, but a theological reflection; and so it uses only a small number of prior readers, Christian and Jewish, more as types of understanding, prying open a hearing in the heart (see list at end of this chapter). My use of Jewish commentary, for instance, will be highly anachronistic and acultural, engaging interpretations of the Torah outside the context, usually, of the Talmud and the talmudic tradition. My goal is not to understand that tradition in itself, with respect to Leviticus, so much as to open lines of interpretation to Christian readers that might otherwise be clouded due to our own historic hermeneutic prejudices and presuppositions. And the approach of this commentary *is* that of a Christian reading, bound to the life of church and its reality as the body of Christ, but deeply informed by the Jewish discipline of treating the Scriptures as a still-inhabited universe. But because of this, it is a difficult reading, attempting to outline the obscurities, not the simplicities, that determine our calling as followers of one of whom “the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:38), though by whom the world was loved in the Son’s own death (John 3:16). The reading of Leviticus, in this sense, is a hard and narrow way (Matt. 7:14); it is a kind of discipleship whereby our own hearts are exposed to the world’s edges even as they are challenged and transformed by the world’s redeemer. This is a reading filled with images of becoming, as the encounter of the text with Christ’s world transforms all that is in it, text and world together. Things and objects become new; they do not only stand for one another. Well might we yearn for protection from such an encounter; but in this we would desire wrongly. If in fact “Jesus also suffered outside the gate” (Heb. 13:12), and in this showed forth the meaning of those beasts burnt outside the camp in Lev.

4:21, so in the very act of apprehending such a truth with joy, we too “go forth to him outside the camp” (Heb. 13:13), we too follow.

If there is a movement that takes place in Leviticus—a movement discovered in its reading—it is not only the movement of the human soul as it is snared by the challenges of a spiritual text and taken to a new place of love, for this could happen only if there were a prior movement of the Spirit, one in which the Son of Man goes forth into the world and through it and with it goes to the Father, and if this prior movement were the foundation of the text and its details. This is the great following we undertake, and through it, the hard reading of this book marks out the good work of his will (Heb. 13:21), in which we listen, with all creation, to the call: “Arise! Let us be going to our Father” (cf. Mark 14:42; Luke 15:18).

Frequently Cited Commentaries

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