

RITUAL AND RHETORIC IN LEVITICUS: FROM SACRIFICE TO SCRIPTURE. By James W. Watts. Cambridge University Press 2007. Pp. 217. \$85.00. ISBN: 0-521-87193-X.

This is one of a significant number of new books on *Leviticus* that take a variety of fresh approaches to an overlooked part of the Bible. Other authors have concentrated on specific terms and ideas in *Leviticus*, or used ritual theory, sociology or pop culture to open the text in new ways. Watts's contribution to this field focuses on the rhetoric in *Leviticus* 1-16.

The basic question Watts addresses is: "Who was trying to persuade whom of what by writing these texts?" (xv) This, at least, is the focus of the first six chapters. The final three chapters are somewhat different in orientation, looking at the text of *Leviticus* as it is used in history.

The first chapter is an overview of recent approaches to *Leviticus*. Watts highlights the work of Jacob Milgrom and Mary Douglas, dealing more briefly with recent books and new questions. He then outlines his own questions and the specific concerns of this book.

In all of this, Watts still assumes P as the author of *Leviticus* 1-16. While this remains the common understanding of current scholarship, it would be helpful for Watts to acknowledge the limitations this assumption places on his examination of *Leviticus*. Is "P" merely a shorthand for "we don't know anything about this text's author but he was probably a priest," or is Watts asserting more than this?

In this introductory chapter, Watts also makes a careful distinction between rituals and texts. He notes that the purpose of *Leviticus* 1-16 is not necessarily linked to the purpose of the ritual being prescribed. (29) In doing this, he places himself clearly on the side of those who focus on the text of *Leviticus*, rather than on the rituals presumably behind the text.

The second chapter is a continuation of the argument in Watts's earlier book, *Reading Law*,¹ which dealt with the rhetoric of the Pentateuch in general. Here he writes specifically about the rhetorical features of *Leviticus* 1-7: the divine voicing of the text (48) and the

1. James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield Academic Press 1999).

prescriptive formulations. (52) What is curious to me is that these are the only rhetorical features he finds. So his conclusion (“No doubt these chapters . . . intend to persuade the people of Israel and their priests to perform the religious offerings and to do so correctly, as specified here.”) (60) is based on little evidence of rhetorical intent. I will deal with this question in more detail below.

In Chapter Three, Watts argues that the *‘ōlāh* (burnt offering) is the “purist form of divine service” since it is “devoid of almost any profit to the priests.” (71) Thus *Leviticus* begins with the ideal of selfless service, but needs to include other offerings, otherwise priests would have no income. (72) In this way, it promotes selfless devotion to God, parallel to the way the word “sacrifice” is used today. (77)

Chapters Four and Six deal with specific issues of translation in *Leviticus*. Chapter Four tackles *Leviticus* 4-5, and the problem of the translation of the words usually rendered as “sin” and “guilt” offerings. Watts notes that these chapters in *Leviticus* are much more specific about the offense for which the offering is made than is *Leviticus* 1-3. This suggests that the writer cannot assume that the reader already knows the details of these offerings. For Watts, this means that the writer is expecting more resistance to these ideas, and employs more rhetoric to increase the likelihood of positive reception.

This chapter becomes quite technical in delineating various uses of various Hebrew terms. The overall point is that the constant repetition of words is wordplay for rhetorical effect, especially when the author uses emotional terms like “sin” and “guilt.”

Chapter Five looks at *Leviticus* 8-10, the only large-scale narratives in *Leviticus*. Watts notes the major problem of the rhetorical analysis of *Leviticus*—we don’t know the who/when/where of the author or the original readers. We also don’t know the full story of the incorporation of this material into the Torah. Besides this, the rhetorical situation of the text of *Leviticus* changes for later readers. (101-102) Despite these serious obstacles, we do see that the Bible contains evidence of intent to persuade, and continues to persuade people of certain things. For Watts, this means there is still a place for rhetorical analysis.

In analyzing the rhetoric of *Leviticus* 8-10, Watts notes the orality of the original reception of the text—it would have been read aloud, either to oneself or, more often, to others. (103) As oral text, repetition becomes a key rhetorical strategy. Watts points out the refrain of obedience to divine command in *Leviticus*. (103-104) In this refrain, the focus is not on the rituals but on the priests themselves. (109) The cost of priestly non-compliance to divine command is illustrated in *Leviticus*

10:1-3 with the enigmatic story of Nadab and Abihu and their destruction for offering “strange fire.” For Watts, this is a rhetorical device to explain that “priests do a dangerous job, and almost always do it well.” (113) The later story of Aaron’s mysterious ruling in 10:16-20 adds to the “mystique of the priestly office,” again serving to reinforce “the monopolistic claims of Aaronide priests.” (129)

The sixth chapter focuses on a specific term, *kipper* (usually translated “atone”), and analyzes it as rhetoric. Watts concludes that P uses *kipper* with meanings ranging between “wipe off/purify” and “compensate/pay.” (133) For Watts, the only English word with this range of meaning is “atone,” although “atone” has theological connotations beyond *kipper*. (133)

Analyzed as rhetoric, Watts believes that P uses *kipper* to reinforce the priests’ monopoly over Israel’s cult. (134) He finds this to be a theme addressed subtly in *Leviticus*, largely through assumption and repetition.

The next three chapters are quite different in scope and tone from the first six. They highlight the function of *Leviticus* 1-16 in later contexts. These are also the most interesting chapters, breaking significant new ground. While much of Chapters One through Six adds to a long discussion on topics already well rehearsed in scholarship, the final chapters ask new questions and help us rethink common assumptions.

Chapter Seven looks at *Leviticus* 1-16 in the context of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. During this time (roughly 535-175 BCE), a single family seems to have controlled the high priesthood in Jerusalem, and accumulated more and more political power over the Jewish people. (145-146)

Watts believes that scholars have failed to recognize the importance of priesthood and of *Leviticus* 1-16 due to a bias against priests and rituals, and a preference for kings and prophets. (157) He notes that priesthood is the “most celebrated office of leadership in the Torah.” (162) Watts then reevaluates the history of the hierocracy in Second Temple Judaism positively, as opposed to the disastrous failures of later rebellions. (167) He concludes that the Second Temple period was a time when the rhetoric of *Leviticus* 1-16 would have been appreciated.

This is an informative chapter, but the parallels between the priestly hierocracy of the Persian period and *Leviticus* are overstated. Watts states that “*Leviticus* 1-16 can only have been written to buttress the privileges and rights of the Aaronide priests.” (154) This is a

possible explanation for the writing of *Leviticus*, but is it not equally plausible that it was written to limit priestly power? It is Moses, not Aaron, who receives and proclaims the law. Moses is also given specific authority over Aaron in *Leviticus* 10. This means that the text pictures a community whose leadership is separate from and above the office of the high priest. Moses is clearly the ideal ruler in *Leviticus*, so a high priest would be an inferior form of leadership.

Further, *Leviticus* 4 clearly distinguishes between the sins of the priests and the sins of a “ruler” (4:22), indicating that the text assumes someone in authority who is not (at least necessarily) one of the priests, and who is clearly differentiated from the high priest. The office of “ruler” is not specific, but its existence limits priestly authority to activities within the temple. Thus, the rights and privileges of priests are simultaneously buttressed and constrained.

In Chapter Seven, Watts again looks at the larger implications of *Leviticus* by examining the ongoing use of the term “sacrifice.” He has mostly been using “offering” until this point in his description of the rituals prescribed in *Leviticus*. For Watts, “sacrifice” is an evaluative judgment rather than a descriptive term. After rehearsing various theories of sacrifice (176-180), Watts ties the meaning of “sacrifice” to narrative, especially the *Aqedah* (*Genesis* 22; *Qur’an* 37), rather than to ritual. He concludes with the fascinating idea that it is not appropriate to use “sacrifice” to describe the rituals in *Leviticus* “unless one intends to make a normative claim by doing so.” (192)

This chapter is one of the places where Watts investigates the way the needs and interests of scholars and ordinary readers affect our understanding of *Leviticus*. Yet beyond noting this effect, he also shows us one place where we can make a simple change in vocabulary to allow the text to speak in its own terms (as much as possible). The connections Watts makes between ritual and narrative also provide an avenue for future study.

After noting that Western scholarship prefers texts over rituals, Chapter Nine argues that scriptural authority originates in ritual. (195) He uses parallels with other ancient texts that form the basis for “correct” ritual practice to show the early authority of ritual texts. He further demonstrates that the authority of the Torah first applied to the Temple and ritual practice, and was only later expanded beyond this. (213) This is not to dismiss the educational role for the Torah early on. Rather, the educational role, and hence the authority of the Torah, originates with ritual prescription. (215)

The book ends with a complete bibliography and four indices. This makes it an especially useful resource for further research.

The major concern I have with this book regards the very basic issue of rhetoric. Watts seems to think that rhetoric is largely equivalent to the text's efforts to bolster its own authority. (59) He also extends rhetoric to assumptions that are presented as "natural" within the text.

This is a very limited understanding of rhetoric. The problem is that the text of *Leviticus* 1-16 contains little that could be understood as rhetorical devices specifically designed to persuade someone of anything besides the authority of the text itself. Even here, the authority of the text is presented, but is not argued. Description and prescription are not rhetorical devices.

Watts states that the rhetoric of *Leviticus* is "subtle" (136), that it plants certain notions. (139) But how do we know the difference between rhetoric and simple assumptions? Sometimes assumptions are simply commonly held beliefs, items that have no need for rhetoric. If we all agree on certain matters (e.g., the authority of the priesthood), the text serves other purposes. Even if *Leviticus* is preaching to the choir, one would expect more evidence of preaching. *Leviticus* 1-16 would hardly win high marks for rhetorical effectiveness as a public speech, unless sleep learning is being employed.

This leads to the question of how *Leviticus* would have been used. What would have been the rhetorical situation in which the text was employed? Watts argues that these texts were used during rituals in the temple, but here we run into the problem of how *Leviticus* 1-16 could be used to regulate ritual. It contains too little detail to usefully correct specific practices, as scholars have long noted. The reader is informed only that practices should exist, but again this is simply assumed rather than argued.

One of the examples Watts uses is the story of Nadab and Abihu and their offering of "strange fire" (*Leviticus* 10:1-3; Watts 106-129). Yet this story is not about the authority or necessity of the priesthood, nor about the possible problem of non-Aaronide priests. Both Nadab and Abihu are priests, sons of Aaron himself. Further, there is nothing in the story to persuade the laity to bring offerings to one group of people rather than another. The danger is not to the lay person, since it is the priests who are punished. At best, it provides the lesson, "do not try this at home, kids," but I find little evidence in the larger text to suggest that the Israelite people regularly practiced offerings without some kind of priest present. If, on the other hand, the story was written to illustrate (for the priests) the importance of doing things correctly, it

would hardly need to wax rhetorical about the importance of the priesthood (and it doesn't wax much of anything).

In the end, I find the question of rhetoric to be self-fulfilling prophecy. Watts goes looking for rhetoric and finds rhetoric. This book provides many new insights and analyses of *Leviticus* 1-16. It certainly adds much to the current discussion, as well as opening new areas for further deliberation. What it does not do is convince me that *Leviticus* 1-16 was written for rhetorical purposes.

Perhaps the difficulty could be overcome by simply substituting the idea of *discourse* for *rhetoric*. The study of discourse is the analysis of the interaction between text, reader/listener and culture. This is really what Watts is looking at. Discourse can be studied in relation to any sort of text. Rhetoric can be part of the way a text is written, but texts can affect readers without being deliberately rhetorical. Discourse language would allow Watts to study *Leviticus* without needing to argue that it was written for rhetorical effect (the one thing he fails to demonstrate).

The only other major drawback to this book is its price. While my publisher still wins the award for overpriced books on *Leviticus*, Cambridge is doing its part to keep this book out of the hands of people who might otherwise be tempted to defile it with their unclean hands.

The past decade has seen a remarkable resurgence in scholarship on *Leviticus*. Watts makes a significant contribution to the field with this book. His analyses and suggestions will become a necessary part of any further scholarly study. Non-specialists who read this book will come away with a new understanding of and appreciation for an overlooked part of the Bible.

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