
Calum Carmichael’s Illuminating Leviticus argues that Biblical law was formed in response to Biblical narrative and not, as many scholars argue, the social conditions of ancient Israel. At stake in his argument is a question about the nature and purpose of law which, Carmichael proposes, is an exercise in identity-building and ideology, not in practical problem-solving.

Carmichael’s argument is based on the development of the laws in Leviticus 10-25 (He omits chapters 18-20 because he dedicated a previous book, Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible, to them.). Carmichael argues that these laws were composed in reaction to the grand narrative of Israel’s beginnings found in Genesis through 2 Kings. In Carmichael’s reconstruction, the lawgiver had this narrative before him. As he sifted through the stories, he responded to them, creating laws to ensure that the injustices found there would not happen again and to trigger historical memory for his contemporary audience. While the lawgiver no doubt drew on the existing legal traditions of ancient Israel and neighboring peoples, Carmichael argues that Biblical law marks the invention of a new tradition intended to recollect, ritualize, and sometimes reverse the inherited history of Israel. The lawgiver, who Carmichael hypothesizes probably lived in the Babylonian exile, then interspersed his laws into the narrative and produced the Pentateuch as we more or less know it today.

Illuminating Leviticus takes us systematically through the Leviticus laws, showing that the details of each legal passage can be explained by reference to a particular Biblical narrative. Carmichael’s method is to identify points in the Biblical law that appear perplexing or impractical, such as a word choice, the order of the laws, or an unusual legal scenario, and to use the linkage to the story as a resolution to this seeming difficulty. In so doing, Carmichael attempts to solve long-standing problems in the interpretation of the legal texts.

After an introduction that sets forth the book’s thesis, Chapter One argues that the laws in Leviticus 10-14 of regarding clean and unclean food, childbirth, and skin diseases are intended as a corrective to wrongdoing associated with the Shiloh sanctuary narrated in 1 Samuel
Chapter Two proposes that *Leviticus* 15’s laws about genital discharges are inspired by the story of Saul, David, and Jonathan in 1 *Samuel* 20. Chapter Three argues that *Leviticus* 16’s scapegoat ritual is an attempt to expunge the offense of Joseph’s brothers recounted in *Genesis* 37-50. *Leviticus* 17:2-9’s laws of animal slaughter, discussed in Chapter Four, likewise hark back to the sins of Joseph’s brothers, as does the blood taboo of *Leviticus* 17:10-16, addressed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six argues that the rules of mourning and marriage for priests in *Leviticus* 21 are a response to the combined stories of the Levite and his wife in *Judges* 19, Eli and his sons in 1 *Samuel* 2-4, and Aaron’s sons in *Leviticus* 10. *Leviticus* 22 and 23’s rules about offerings, animal slaughter, and annual feasts are also connected to the early priesthood and monarchy, he argues in Chapter Seven, as is the passage about blasphemy in *Leviticus* 24, discussed in Chapter Eight. Chapter Nine links the laws of the sabbatical and Jubilee years in *Leviticus* 25 with the years of plenty and famine in the Joseph story. Chapter Ten is a grand finale that connects the laws of slavery in *Leviticus* 25, *Exodus* 21, and *Deuteronomy* 15 to various narratives about slavery in *Genesis* and *Exodus*. A short conclusion underlines the book’s argument, reflects on its implications, and counters potential challenges. Each chapter includes a helpful summary at the end as well as charts along the way that line up the law with the relevant narrative.

*Luminating Leviticus* gives insightful, novel readings that Carmichael gains from cross-reading the legal and narrative passages. Carmichael is also sensitive to the identity politics that fuel law—he suggests that the Biblical lawgiver adapts Egyptian practice as it is remembered in *Exodus* but also tries to differentiate Israelite law from it. Carmichael also engages the question of legal authority, taking the stand that the Biblical lawgiver did not possess the power to execute his laws. Carmichael’s criticism of a simplistic understanding of law as a reflection of and a reaction to social problems should curb the enthusiasm of scholars who extrapolate entire epochs and events from legal passages.

Carmichael’s rejection of basic source criticism—he, in effect, pares down the literary layers of J, E, D, and P into two sources consisting of Narrative and Law—makes one wonder, however, whether Carmichael has traveled too far from the norms of scholarly Bible exegesis. More problematic is the frequent lack of clear evidence for the connections he claims between particular laws and particular narratives. Carmichael is aware of the absence of explicit literary links and has a ready explanation for it: to refer to events before Moses’ time would
have destroyed the lawgiver’s “fiction of Moses speaking contemporaneously.” (41) Moreover, as Carmichael points out repeatedly, the lawgiver deals with typical cases, while narrative is inherently idiosyncratic. But one is left wondering: if the lawgiver’s intention was to trigger historical memory, why didn’t he pull the trigger a little harder? Carmichael’s readings are always creative but not always convincing, and one sometimes feels that he has invented an alleged peculiarity or problem in the text in order to be able to solve it.

One may also question his assumption that law responds to narrative and imagine a more dialectical relationship between the two. The same can be said for Carmichael’s arguments about the relative insignificance of the ancient Near Eastern cultural context—and, it sometimes seems, all social context—for understanding Biblical law. Instead of contrasting his work starkly with that of the “law as response to society” school which Carmichael associates with Jacob Milgrom, Carmichael might more productively choose an approach to law, narrative, and society that sees them in dynamic relationship.

The complexity of the relationship between law, narrative, and society is not the least apparent in Carmichael’s own book. While Carmichael is insightful regarding the contemporary cultural politics that shape the approaches of Milgrom and other Biblical scholars who are his primary interlocutors, he is (understandably) less conscious of the politics that may animate his own arguments. If we reflect on Carmichael’s vision of Biblical law, we find that its insularity is guaranteed: no ephemeral social realities or neighboring cultures intrude.

Carmichael’s book, part of a life’s project “to examine every law in the Pentateuch with a view to demonstrating that each is linked to a narrative” (viii), can be contextualized within a larger and by now well-established movement within the study of law and religion that considers the parallels and connections between law and literature. Carmichael’s book makes a forceful and compelling claim that Biblical law cannot be comprehended without paying close attention to the narrative in which it is embedded. Whether the connection between Biblical law and Biblical narrative is as comprehensive, close, and exclusive as Carmichael claims remains an open question, perhaps to be resolved by his future works.

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