

LEVITICUS: THE PRIESTLY LAWS AND PROHIBITIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND AFRICA. By Johnson M. Kimuhu. Peter Lang 2008. Pp. 434. \$89.95. ISBN: 1-433-10200-5.

One very significant and positive development in Biblical scholarship today is the expansion of horizons in the discipline. With the “collapse of history,”¹ using the popular phraseology of Leo Perdue (whose book narrates the story of the losing of grips of the traditional historical method) and, why not, the sprouting of synchronisms in the world of Biblical scholarship, the discipline has witnessed an upshot of a myriad of approaches. Perdue described in vivid terms what he considers to be the goal of his work: to describe the salient features of a select number of recent interpretive strategies in Biblical interpretation and theology, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and to discover grounds for common discourse between their significant representatives. (320-38) Current Old Testament Biblical scholarship, explains Perdue, has shifted dramatically from an interest in history to a concern for literary and contextual interpretations, from the direct concern with the historical development of Israel’s faith (cf. the salvation-history approach of G.E. Wright or John Bright and the tradition-history approach of Albrecht Alt, Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth) to diverse interests, among them an interest in stories and narratives, emphasis on myth, canonical and intertextual developments, literary insights from metaphor and story theologies, narrative theology, a theology of imagination, etc.

If Perdue successfully demonstrated the collapse of history to illustrate the inadequacy of one single approach or precisely to challenge the hegemony of historical methods for interpreting the Bible, using the book of Jeremiah as a test case, it seems that Biblical scholarship would need a complementary masterpiece that would demonstrate the coalescence of history (with non-historical methods). This hypothetical author would also demonstrate the effect of a perfect blending and convocation of different historical and non historical methodologies to explain a Biblical text.

1. Leo G. PERDUE, *THE COLLAPSE OF HISTORY: RECONSTRUCTING OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY* (1994).

Without so designating his book, Johnson Kimuhu has advanced an effort in this direction using the book of *Leviticus*. His book, written from the backdrop of multiple approaches, bears testimony of a convergence of diachronic, synchronic and comparative methods.

The title of the book is clearly transparent without hiding what it really sets out to investigate: the priestly laws and prohibitions in the book of *Leviticus* (ch. 18) from the perspective of the ancient Near East and Africa. Kimuhu enacts his task in the very first page. The whole book could be summarized in the language of the classical stages of a narrative plot: the exposition, complication, climax and denouement. His investigation begins with a notice in the final form of the received text of *Leviticus*, something that could be likened to “exposition.” “In the book of *Leviticus*, the Priestly lawgiver mentions the Canaanites and Egyptians as the nations whose social behavior regarding sexual relationships and matters of kinship should be avoided by Israelites as they enter into the Promised land (cf. 18:1-5).” (1) This is followed by a list of family ties within which sexual relationships and marriages are outlawed, or using a word which turned out to be central in the book, tabooed, (in vv. 6-23 and later in vv. 24-34), together with the serious attention given to offenders of these rules in Chapter Twenty. However, this notice, this exposition, encounters a problem that could be likened to the second moment of a narrative technically called the “complication.” This complication is the sustained claim by the author that there is no evidence in the ancient Near East indicating that “the prohibited sexual relationships and marriages were a major aspect of the lifestyles of the Canaanites and Egyptians.” (1) On the basis of this discrepancy, he identifies questions which direct his investigation: Why does the Priestly lawgiver single out the Canaanites and Egyptians? Does the lawgiver suggest that the incestuous practices in these nations are the same? By admonishing the Israelites not to do as these named nations do, does it mean the former were a “tabula rasa,” so pure and uncontaminated in themselves that they were not to have any relationship with the Canaanites and Egyptians? In the measure in which these questions give clue to the bone of contention and the problems which occupy our author, one could refer to it as the “climax.”

How does the author go about his task, searching for the denouement, the final stage of the narrative tram? Diachronism and synchronism are already household concepts in Biblical scholarship. Alongside these, he introduces a third methodological element: the

comparative method. Inspired by the work of Malul,² who distinguishes two types of comparative approach—the historical comparison approach and the typological comparison approach—he employs the comparative method “to analyze epigraphic and archaeological evidence from the ancient Near East in order to understand the sins of the Canaanites and the Egyptians with regard to the incest and sexual behavior depicted in the Hebrew Bible.” (40-41) This use of a “plethora of methods” (42), is indicative of the richness of the book.

In a work couched in two parts of unequal length, the author sets out in Part One to make two demonstrations. The first is to show that there is disagreement in three different levels: disagreement within various Biblical texts, disagreement within the circle of modern Biblical interpreters that the Canaanites and the Egyptians were notoriously licentious, and disagreement concerning the actual nature of the so-called incestuous practices in the lands of Canaan and Egypt. Secondly, the author demonstrates that the condemnation of these nations should be seen in a broader context; that is, in the light of the Biblical motif of polarization of Israel against her neighbors.

In Part Two of the book, the tone is set by the Priestly statement in *Leviticus* 10:10: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the clean and the unclean.” The analysis here takes the form of comparison; interest is on seeing how different tribal societies have situated themselves from this point of view and investigating the problematic occasioned by the need to establish the criteria set in different contexts and societies for determining the pure and the impure and on what basis or authorization one or a group has to impose such prohibitions.

The author sets out his mission in Chapter One titled “Scholarly Works and Methodology” where he makes a literature review and describes his plethora of methodology. Here he makes a background approach to the problem of family laws and forbidden unions, as it regards different ancient societies from the point of view of the disciplines of anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. He reveals that scholars have sought the origin of incest variously: “with exogamy as the framework, early childhood libido, in totem, in the horror of blood, in the need to exchange women for health, in the living-dead, and so on.” (19) Emile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud are invited to the conversation, while their views are critically juxtaposed with those of Robert Jones, Rodney Needham and Juliet

2. MEIR MALUL, *THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN AND BIBLICAL LEGAL STUDIES* (Alter Orient Altes Testament: Bd. 227, 1990).

Mitchell, Joseph Shepher and Robin Fox respectively. But Kimuhu lays particular emphasis on scholarly works, with focus not only on the Hebrew Bible legal system in general but also on the Priestly family laws and forbidden unions, like incest in the book of *Leviticus*. From his analysis, he seems to assert that both Biblical and non-Biblical (that is anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytical) scholarly works converge on the stand that incest prohibitions are universal as law but not homogeneous in application since different tribal societies define incest taboos differently.

With this background, he launches into the text proper to discuss “Family Laws in Leviticus 18” in Chapter Two. It is a question of investigating whether the origin of these prohibitions could be attributed to deviations among the patriarchs. *Leviticus* 18 is placed in its larger context, which begins from *Leviticus* 10:11 and stretches to *Leviticus* 26:46 and is treated mainly from a synchronic perspective. A good deal of intertextual exegesis is employed whereby the texts under consideration are evaluated and studied from the prism of related texts, especially in the patriarchal narratives. The whole analysis establishes the premises permitting our author to affirm that the priestly laws are, judging from the contours of the text in its larger context, not reflections of deviations of the patriarchs. From here begins to emerge a major logic of the fundamental theses of the work. The synchronic perspective does not seem to provide adequate answer to the question. The genre of the text may not be in the narratives but perhaps in the law; therefore what was not explained from the synchronic method of analysis of the text could be explained from a comparative approach, therefore seeing the connection with other codes.

In an attempt therefore to understand the reason why the priestly lawgiver gives the prohibitions that are the bone of contention, the investigation shifts from the Bible to the ancient Near Eastern texts (but often in comparison with Biblical texts) in the subsequent chapters (Three to Eight). One here encounters an extensive exploration of ancient texts under different rubrics, beginning with the histories and practices in ancient Egypt (Chapter Three), family laws among the Ugarit and Canaanites (Chapters Four and Eight), “Hittite and Priestly Family Laws” (Chapter Five), “Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes” (Chapter Six), and “Streams of Tradition and Ancient Near Eastern Laws” (Chapter Seven). In all these chapters, a good mélange of historical, chronological and archaeological, and representational approaches regarding the sexual behavior, especially incestuous practice among these various peoples, is employed. An attentive reader of this

book will meet double or even opposing appreciation. On one hand, one is attracted by the depth of historical sources and, one could say, “archaeological excavations” which the author harnesses to sustain his arguments. In fact, only an informed author could dabble into these extra Biblical realms with the audacity that is his. On the other hand, a critical reader would expect a very critical distance with regard to some of the very highly positivistic historical claims either in the Bible or (and especially) in books dealing with ancient Near Eastern materials. Even though it is announced at the beginning of this block in Chapter Three that “the question of sources will be addressed” (113), and authors are made to confront each other in this historico-archaeological conversation, the reader however has the impression that much confidence or over-confidence is placed on the testimony of individual authors in an area where it is known that most of the information that has come down to us is only as good as conjecture. Dabbling into unsure areas, where many factors would highly militate against historical precision, is something that should be done with utmost caution.

This little jerk notwithstanding, the work moves with a higher gear in Part Two made of three chapters, where the searchlight shifts and focuses on Africa. In general it is all about understanding “Biblical Prohibitions from the Perspective of Oral Traditions in Africa.” A Bible scholar with African background, I cannot but be excited at the number of problematics the author raises both from the point of view of African social and cultural anthropology and that of African Biblical scholarship. The first of the three chapters (Chapter Nine) titled “The Nature of Taboo,” prompts me to ask the following questions: what justifies the introduction of this concept (taboo) at this point? Is the *Leviticus* injunction described as taboo? Is every interdiction in the Bible to be considered as taboo? While I consider these questions I find out that in different parts of Africa, terminologies like these could have different nuances or accents depending on the locality. In the Igbo³ traditional set up for example, there are many socio-cultural and moral interdictions but not all are necessarily considered taboo. Taboo has to

3. The Igbos are one of the three major ethnic-linguistic groups in Nigeria. These are the Igbos, the Hausas and the Yorubas. They are located in the Southeastern part of Nigeria. Geographically, they are located between latitude 5 to 7 degrees north and longitude 6 to 8 degrees east, occupying an area of about twenty thousand square kilometers. Today in present Nigeria, the Igbos occupy the States of Imo, Anambra, Abia, Enugu and Ebonyi, while yet a significant number are included in the Rivers and Delta States. Its population density is estimated to be around 750 to 1000 in a square kilometer, while they number totally about 40 million in a Nigeria of about 150 million inhabitants. Cf. Igbo People, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbopeople> (last visited Jan. 26, 2010) and sources cited therein.

do with the “unheard of.” It defiles the land and is believed to have the effect of attracting catastrophe on the land and its inhabitants, and at most times, necessitates a ritual process of appeasing the gods or goddesses of the land, who are considered frontally assaulted by the one or ones who committed the taboo. To these considerations, Kimuhu has an answer that is pregnant with significance to all those who find themselves in the confluence of two interests: African origin and affiliation to the academy of Biblical scholarship. And this is actually one of the major contributions of the book; drawing attention to Bible translators and scholars with African background to the relative fluidity or at least non-fixed nature of these concepts which have to be translated and interpreted bearing the local context, the cultural perception and linguistic twists of the people in mind. The second chapter in this part (Chapter Ten) continues to deepen the author’s response to the questions raised above. Kimuhu investigates the specific Hebrew Bible prohibitions beginning with Hebrew words that function as taboo markers; that is, “terminologies that function to mark off untouchable areas, places, objects, or to impose restrictions in relation to holy places” (317); terms like *hwhy vdq* (holy—the Lord formula), *vdq* (holy), the Sabbath, *~rx*, (to separate, to ban), then followed by dietary prohibitions about what are considered as unclean (*amj*) and why they are so considered, and meat prohibitions; and ending with diseases and funerary prohibitions of taboos related to corpses, bones of the dead and graves, without forgetting attention to the form of uncleanness or impurity connected with genital discharges which he subtitled “Male/female Discharge and Childbirth Prohibitions.”

Chapter Three of this second part (the last chapter of the book) goes deeply contextual in discussing these prohibitions read from the backdrop of African interpretation. The author, as would be rightly expected, writes from a definitive perspective peculiar to him, the Kikuyu. His testimony speaks about his perspective: “I grew up in a rural area, far away from urban influence and in a family that practiced Kikuyu traditions. I participated in many traditional ceremonies, rituals, and hunting. This last experience, plus invaluable verbal information received from elderly people in my society, will be used for this section.” (358) He addresses questions such as: Why are some animals and meat considered as impure and some considered as edible? Is there any resemblance to the Biblical injunctions? These are some of the questions the author tries to grapple with. The exercise in this last chapter, among other contributions to the book in general, helps see beyond the Biblical reasons for different prohibitions.

Finally, to nail down one of the author's theses in the book that there are "similarities between the Hebrew Bible and other tribal societies" (365) using the Kikuyu as a case in point, Kimuhu discusses translation problems inherent in rendering some of these concepts in local languages. It is not just a question of finding out the Kikuyu equivalents of the "taboo markers" given already in Chapter Ten: *b/t*, (abomination), *amj*, (unclean), *#qv* (abominable), *~r,x* (ban/separate), *vdq* (holy), etc. but the kind of problems that these Hebrew concepts and words posed in the work of translation of the Hebrew Bible into Kikuyu language, an enormous work which according to the author began in 1902 and terminated in 1965.

Any engaged reader of the book has many different reasons to score the work positively. Without spilling ink on the style, clarity of language and logic of presentation of the book, it suffices to mention in general three (there could be more of course) strong legacies that Kimuhu's work merits. The first attraction of this work is on a purely methodological level, and this is on two counts. In the first place, Kimuhu's book goes beyond theoretical assertion and assures that the different methodologies and approaches could be more co-operative. Beginning to read this book, the reader may get the impression of an undue diversion into sociology, psychology or cultural and social anthropology. In his very first chapter titled "Scholarly Works and Methodology," an impatient reader may not understand the appeal to the non-Biblical scholarly works and the voracious references to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. But at the end, this interdisciplinary approach scores one of the most beautiful points for the book in that it represents a dominant strand in modern Biblical scholarship where the Bible is studied from the lens of various human sciences and disciplines. We have earlier observed the shift in current Biblical scholarship from a primary use of historical methodology towards the application of newer approaches (what Brueggemann describes as "hermeneutical maneuverability"),⁴ which can be classified generally as either literary readings or contextual interpretation. The author runs the axis of these social scientific disciplines to attack the problematic posed by the study of family laws and forbidden unions from the perspective of *Leviticus*. He ends up therefore posing, in clear terms, and answering the question: "what is the significance of

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Editor's Forward* to LEO G. PERDUE, *THE COLLAPSE OF HISTORY* ix (Walter Brueggemann, John Donahue, Sharyn Dowd, Christopher Seitz eds., Fortress Press 1994).

comparative cultural study in the understanding of the Hebrew Bible family laws and forbidden unions”? Even authors who may consider themselves as theoretical purists, whether it be in the case of historical or literary approach, will now understand that facile distinctions⁵ would today fail to do justice either to the present state of Biblical scholarship or to the exegesis of particular texts. But Kimuhu is not just content in demonstrating that the different methodologies could make a successful convocation. He scores another point from a methodological point of view that one could penetrate the cultural world of a people, even of remote tribes and cultures, through the data in the Biblical world and that one could better appreciate these data when viewed through the lens of diverse cultural optics.

The point above relates directly to a second legacy which is the assertion that the Bible is anthropology. This is not so much of a new discovery as a new way of asserting a known truth. Kimuhu has succeeded once again to nail it down in a clearer and practical way. The scientific study of the Scriptures has revealed that the Biblical texts, especially the foundational narratives of the Pentateuch, are not to be considered only as texts commanding religious belief and affiliation as such, but also as mythical narratives that have foundational significance for human societies. André Wénin writes, and correctly too, that “the Bible effectively offers major narratives which have structured the human being, or which give a clue to his structuring—I do not know the best way to put it, even if it does so by the imagination that it proposes.”⁶ (10) It is true therefore that many questions relevant to man, both in his traditional and modern situation, have been neglected by Biblical scholarship. Part of the reason is the myopic appreciation of the Bible as simply and only a text with normative value. No doubt, a major use of the Holy Book is to push man to confront alternatives to his status quo in thinking and acting, but it is not only that. For the religious message may not be the very essence of what the Bible is all about or the only thing the Bible has to tell us, at least, in the foundational texts. Alongside the religious use, the Bible is also a literary text and in fact, it is striking that today “in some non religious milieu, there is always recourse to that text, as if to a fundamental narrative that helps to reflect on what it means to be human; a mythical text sort of.”⁷ Kimuhu knows

5. STEVEN L. MCKENZIE & STEPHEN R. HAYNES, *TO EACH ITS OWN MEANING: AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL CRITICISMS AND THEIR APPLICATION* (Westminster/John Knox Press 1993).

6. JEAN-PIERRE LEBRUN & ANDRE WENIN, *DES LOIS POUR ETRE HUMAIN (HUMUS ENTRETIENS)* 10 (Éd. Èrès 2008) (French) (author’s translation).

7. *Id.*

how best to describe this. In his words, “the Hebrew Bible exhibits very close affinities with other tribal societies as far as the ‘pure-impure’ rules are concerned, both in their formulation and content.” (2) He therefore succeeds in applying a “Hermeneutic of Appropriation,” a phrase coined by C.R. Romero,⁸ which entails dialectic between the text and the interpreter’s own situation. Even if the Bible is read for religious motives, I agree with Simon that “the glory of the religious reading of Scripture is not a search for some quasi-scientific confirmation of traditional verities but the exposition of religious questions that have been neglected by Biblical scholarship. Questions that are genuine produce answers that are true.”⁹ Religious questions are intermingled with cultural ones in the measure in which religion is one of the deepest expressions of a people’s cultural world.

Finally, the contribution of the book to contextual Biblical scholarship, especially its relevance to the African approach, is unmistakable. The time has passed when Biblical scholarship must fit into the Procrustean bed prepared for it by Western scholars, as many have seen most of the narratives and symbolisms as equally reflecting cultures and realities from many other parts of the globe and from different epochs. Coming from the standpoint of the *Leviticus* prohibitions, many African scholars could also affirm with the author, from their various tribal and cultural backgrounds, that “similarly, among the Kikuyu people, there were many rules and taboos that regulated their socio-religious life, and even though we do not have many words that reflect this idea in Kikuyu, the world of Kikuyu religion was nonetheless not sin but taboo-centered.” (365) Take again the Igbo cultural world for example. The institution of marriage in the traditional set up is so regulated that before marriage takes place, a series of investigations would be carried out to make sure that those related even remotely do not marry each other. Since societies are still organized in kins, kindreds and clans, intermarriage is often outlawed among members of the same kindred or clan and all descendants of a common ancestor see themselves as blood relations. Within this very large family, sexual unions, seen as incest and therefore taboo, are highly prohibited.

8. C. GILBERT ROMERO, *A HERMENEUTIC OF APPROPRIATION: A CASE STUDY OF METHOD IN THE PROPHET AND LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY* (Princeton Theological Seminary 1982).

9. URIEL SIMON, *READING PROPHETIC NARRATIVES* xvii (Lenn J. Shramm trans., Ind. Univ. Press 1997).

In a similar vein, the note of warning which closes the book is very timely to the landscape of African Biblical scholarship. The author closes this masterpiece with the sentence:

Translating the Hebrew Bible into a language whose old cultural value system is diminishing and yet alive in the minds of some members of the society is an event that is not only fascinating but also difficult. Needless to say, Bible interpreters or translators in areas where people have divided loyalties—they have one foot in the west and the other firmly rooted in their culture—need to be well informed about both the original culture of the Hebrew texts and the recipient culture into which the former is being translated. (384)

Literacy is only just gaining ground in Africa, and many tribal groups and languages are still in their pioneer work of translating the Bible to render the Holy Scripture readable in their own native language. While in the past, the Church had battled with the problem of canonicity—which books are to be included in the canon and which should not—the problem of ideological translations—either reflecting Catholic or Protestant doctrinal sensitivities in the translations—these are no longer so much of a problem as the task of rendering the Hebrew Bible into proper translations that will at the same time respect the integrity of the sacred text and adequately reflect the cultural environment so that “each of us will understand in his own native language the mighty works of God.”¹⁰ Kimuhu suggests using dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence translation, or communication equivalent. Referring to J.P. Sterk’s article *Translation as Re-creation*¹¹ he writes: “This kind of translation makes it appear as if the source text has been written directly in the target language and tries to make it possible for the source language text to be immediately understood in the target language’s wording.” (366)

To achieve a sustained logic in a volume of 434 pages with extensive bibliography and detailed general index (one regrets the lack of index of Biblical quotations) is a feat. Sustaining a logic and a connecting thread in a work that attempts to investigate three different domains—the Hebrew Bible, ancient Near Eastern texts and African oral traditions—is again formidable and constitutes the new challenge to both Biblical scholars, ancient Near Eastern scholars and African scholarship. This is a new challenge that is only but launched. Kimuhu

10. Cf. Acts 2:8. The French Jerusalem Bible puts it very beautifully: “que chacun de nous les entende dans son propre idiome maternel.”

11. J.P. Sterk, *Translation as Re-Creation*, 45 TECHNICAL PAPERS 109 (1990).

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has of course not the last word in it. That the work has grounds to be criticized is only, I would say, a crack that permits the searchlight of investigation to go through.

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