

Introduction

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Both Leviticus and Numbers begin with the claim that what is set out in them was delivered by the Hebrew God to Moses at the Tent of Meeting, in the desert, on the way from Egypt to the promised land (Lev. 1:1; Num. 1:1). Numbers goes further, giving the date of delivery as well, as the second month in the second year of the exodus from Egypt (1:1). Leviticus ends on this note: “These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mount Sinai” (Lev. 27:34).¹ Numbers ends with, “These are the commandments and regulations that the Lord enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho” (Num. 36:13). Even assuming that the notations back and front are bookends added by editors, Leviticus is largely static topographically and chronologically, whereas Numbers is more dynamic in this respect and takes us almost to the point of entry into the land, much like the end of Deuteronomy, which goes one step further, including Moses’ death and the transfer of his authority to Joshua, already mentioned in Numbers 27 and actualized in Deut. 34:9.

The frame, then, is similar if not identical, and materials parallel to and overlapping Exodus and Deuteronomy appear frequently, albeit with variations. Though Leviticus and Numbers in many ways differ in content and presentation several distinct features unify the two books. Those are: insistence on a desert community that accepts Moses’ leadership at times grudgingly and unwillingly; the centrality of the Tent of Meeting, already built and functioning; the centrality of Aaron and his priestly family for the community, in a cultic role but in other roles as well; the importance of properly conducted cult and worship, including minute instructions for priestly functioning and behavior; and the contention that social legislation and the hoped-for ethical performance it would safeguard, partly repetitive (see Leviticus 19, unanimously assigned to the H (Holiness Code: Leviticus 17–26) source; and the Decalogue Exodus 20 = Deuteronomy 5) falls within the sphere of religious regulation and religious ethical behavior. Since the latter feature is pronounced in both books, it is of little consequence for the end-product text (MT) whether the H source, to which part of Leviticus is assigned, predates most or part of other chapters in Leviticus and Numbers, most of which are assigned by scholars to various versions of the P (Priestly) source.

It is therefore no surprise that, out of the thirteen essays in this volume, five are focused on cultic, priestly, and theological matters (in order of appearance: Shemesh, Wong, Lipton, Lee, and Fontaine). It is also not surprising, given the interests of our contributors in general, that six essays deal with matters of social ethics, especially as they are applied to gender matters and community identity (Jacobus, Dor, Rees, Vaka'uta, Geffney, Ahiamadu), with Shemesh and Lipton's essays dealing with both clusters of topics. Two essays extend the ethics discussion into present-day ecology concerns (Clayville and Kelly). The remaining essays, once again, are about the ethics of religious behavior and human rights (Lee and Fontaine). In sum, then, our contributors are more interested in the ethical implications of the so-called Holiness Code and Priestly source than in their formal features of arranging the community as a cultic entity and of regulating the cult itself.

Four of the contributors are American (Clayville, Kelly, Gafney, Fontaine), one of whom is African American (Gafney). Two are British (Jacobus and Lipton, the latter a new immigrant to Israel). One contributor is from Australia (Rees), one from Oceania (Vaka'uta), one from Nigeria (Ahiamadu), two from Hong Kong (Wong and Lee), and four from Israel (Shemesh, Dor, Brenner, now also Lipton). Most of the contributors are Christian or post-Christian of various affiliations; the British/Israeli ones are Jewish or diverse faith convictions. Since several of the essays focus on the same text (notably in the case of Numbers 25) or issue, we leave it for our readers to ponder to what extent any particular authorly faith conviction, in addition to the obvious geographical and community factors, influences the readings here offered.

PART 1: ISSUES IN LEVITICUS

Kristel Clayville and Joseph Kelly focus on environmental issues that can be linked to Leviticus. In so doing they center a topic that, for most readers, would be considered marginal within the frameworks of the P and H writings.

Clayville, in "Landed Interpretation: An Environmental Ethicist Reads Leviticus," is concerned about land agency from an ethical viewpoint. Having explained her own liminal position personally, religiously, and geographically, she claims that the whole of Leviticus can be read from an environmental ethics angle but limits herself to a discussion of the Holiness Code. She reads mainly from the perspective of Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*, and this enables her to distinguish two competing systems concerning the land and its ecology and human ecology in the Holiness Code, leading to conclusions about human liminality as exemplified by the sojourner, the *ger*: "The *ger*'s liminality situates him or her between nature and culture, pointing both backward and forward to Israel's past experiences and future life with the

land.” Clayville sees the tension between the two ethical systems concerning the land in Leviticus as an opening rather than a hindrance.

In “USDA or YHWH? Pursuing a Divinely Inspired Diet,” Kelly’s “interest in the text of Leviticus (and by extension Deuteronomy), specifically the legislation surrounding food, is shaped largely by current ethical issues surrounding industrialized agriculture and foodways in America.” Concerns about hunger, food health, food, and democracy and capitalism in an age of technology and industrialization may contribute to understanding religious dietary laws, and vice versa. He analyzes the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, as well as several New Testament sources, to see how those operate in his specific North American, Christian, democratic contexts. He concludes that, between biblical traditions and contemporaneous state regulations, an ethical moral ground concerning many aspects of food production and consumption is possible to achieve.

Yael Shemesh discusses another ethical matter in his essay, “Do Not Bare Your Heads and Do Not Rend Your Clothes” (Leviticus 10:6): On Mourning and Refraining from Mourning in the Bible.” Following the personal experience of her father’s death and the mourning customs her family practiced, Shemesh discusses four cases in which biblical characters did *not* mourn for their dead: Aaron for his sons (Leviticus 10), David for his infant son (2 Sam. 12:15–25), the Shunammite for her son (2 Kgs 4:8–37), and Ezekiel for his wife (Ezek. 24:15–24). In two of these cases, the first and last, a divine command prohibits the mourning rites. Shemesh, an Israeli and a practicing Jew, considers the social and moral significance of mourning rites and of refraining from them, in addition to the role women must have played in such rituals and occasions.

In “Slave Wives and Transgressive Unions in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Laws and Literature,” Helen Jacobus contends that much of the drama of marital relations in the Torah, in stories as well as in legal codes, is based on the original, implied audience’s knowledge of the biblical as well as the Ancient Near East (ANE) law codes. She finds that the narratives on sexually transgressive behavior in Genesis and beyond are mirrored in a group of relevant ANE laws and corresponding biblical laws. Therefore, she writes, “Without modern interpreters aligning knowledge of ancient legal texts with the biblical narratives, the story lines lose their dramatic impact, significant layers of meaning, and possible legal and societal implications.” Once again, this essay proves the value of demarginalization and recentering, in that it works from contemporary experience to a notion of recentering ancient sources.

“The Notion of כפר in the Book of Leviticus and Chinese Popular Religion,” by Sonia Wong, is one of the two essays in this volume from the background of Chinese/Hong Kong culture. Wong begins by problematizing the term “Chinese popular religion,” applying it to both indigenous and

diasporic systems. Then, following Archie Lee's cross-cultural method, she reads the Levitical notion of כפר, *k-p-r* Piel, often rendered as "expiate, atone, purify," in dialogue with Chinese popular religious culture. She concludes that recognizing the mechanism of *k-p-r* is invalid for her culture, even reprehensible; according to her, "The [Levitical] cathartic power of purification and reparation offerings is absent in Chinese popular religion. The complex and elaborated rituals in Leviticus function as a kind of penance and passage to the reintegration of the guilty party into the community. In contrast, in Chinese popular religion, ritual offerings are not efficacious: they do not contribute to the absolution of sins and the resolution of guilt."

In the last essay of part 1, "Golden Do's and Don'ts: Leviticus 19:1-17 from a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)," Carole Fontaine insists that in her capacity as both bible scholar and sociopolitical activist she feels that texts of the Holiness Code, and Leviticus is general, has much to offer to issues of human rights in our contemporary world, or in her language, HRBA issues. Her case study is Leviticus 19, which she analyzes in detail to show—whatever its provenance—that it can function as a blueprint for a just, contemporary society.

PART 2: ISSUES IN NUMBERS

With Diana Lipton's essay, we move from Leviticus to Numbers, and to a cluster of articles that has gender and violence, especially violence against women, as its focus. Finally, the last two essays in this section branch out from gender rights to human rights.

In "'Bitter Waters' (Numbers 5), Flood Waters (Genesis 6–9), and Some Theologies of Exile and Land," Lipton writes: "In this essay, I offer an intertextual reading of the Sotah ritual of the bitter waters (Num. 5:1-31) and the flood narrative (Gen. 6:1—9:28). I argue that they function as structural, ritual, literary, and theological equivalents of, respectively, divorce as described in Deut. 24:1-4 and exile as interpreted in many prophetic texts, especially in Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 29:1-14) and Ezekiel (e.g., Ezekiel 36), as a punishment and solution for wrongdoing." Her essay, which developed over time from an earlier version, exemplifies how conscious contextualization of one's unique journey can fruitfully work for understanding biblical passages and for creating links and productive associations beyond the personal and even the narrowly communal.

Numbers 25 is a difficult passage: Structurally, since it moves from an incident with "the daughters of Moab" at Ba'al Pe'or to one with a woman "Midianite" and back, raising the question, first, of how many incidents and, second, from what locations/periods and provenances this one story is amalgamated; ethically, since it involves killing in the name of Yhwh and a

plague caused by Yhwh; gender-wise, since females are accused of “whoring” in the sense of pagan worship; othering, since the accusation is leveled at ethnically foreign women and the Israelite men they presumably “seduce”; and ethically again, since the revenge killing is carried out by the priests, headed by the priest Phinehas, overlooking the proscription of bloodshed and killing by priests. One chapter in a whole book. Perhaps not so very significant considering that the preceding stories of the spies (Numbers 13–14) and Balaam (chs. 22–24) are longer and perhaps more meaningful for the whole journey described. Nevertheless, and probably because of the problems underlying it—problems of violence, xenophobia, identity versus the other, gender stereotypes—this passage has received much attention in recent scholarship, which is reflected in this contextual collection. Four contributors chose to write about this passage, each from her or his own context. In “From the Well in Midian to the Baal of Peor: Different Attitudes to Marriage of Israelites to Midianite Women,” Yonina Dor writes from an Israeli context. Anthony Rees, in “Numbers 25 and Beyond: Phinehas and Other Detestable Practice(r)s,” writes from an Australian aboriginal context. In “Indicting YHWH: Interpreting Numbers 25 in Oceania,” Nāsili Vaka’uta writes from an Oceania (Tonga) context. Finally, Wil Gafney, in “A Queer Womanist Midrashic Reading of Numbers 25:1-18,” writes from an African American context.

Still within gender relations but from another viewpoint, Amadi Ahiamadu considers female inheritance in “Assessing Female Inheritance of Land in Nigeria with the Daughters of Zelophehad Narrative (Numbers 27:1-11).” In his own words, “The choice of the narratives about Zelophehad’s daughters is intended to highlight its relevance to understanding the inheritance rights of women in Nigeria. The side-by-side reading of the two disparate cultures, across time and place, helps us analyze a problem in the Niger Delta areas that demands an attitudinal change with respect to female inheritance of land. . . . It serves as a textual example from the Bible that can be used to assess the Nigerian understanding of the whole concept of inheritance.”

Moving from gender to the more general human rights sphere, in “Reading Iconoclastic Stipulations in Numbers 33:50-56 from the Pluralistic Religious Context of China,” Archie C. C. Lee describes his personal experience of evangelical Christian missionaries’ forced iconoclasm and the cultural trauma, crisis, and loss that Christian converts of Chinese descent experienced as a result. He then contextualizes his family’s experience against the background of the Chinese Taiping movement of the nineteenth century, then reads the iconoclastic passage of Num. 33:50-56 in the light of his own contextualization. Most of us are hardly aware, in our religious and/or cultural zeal for betterment, of the cultural price asked and paid in conversion. Lee’s essay is a timely reminder about the price paid and the damage done in the wholesale

annihilation of the old rather than its integration with the new, even when the recipients are willing.

With this essay we conclude. Fontaine (in chapter 6) is explicit about her wish to “defend” Leviticus as a worthy human rights document. This is far from older scholarly treatments of the P and H sources, which insisted on the formal, narrower, self-interested nature of these alleged Torah sources. Other contributors, as well, focused on issues that may seem less important to mainstream scholarship on these Torah books. In this volume we may have skipped a lengthy discussion of technical cultic minutiae or foregrounded events, but the contributors, and we the editors, have tried to demonstrate how such texts, perhaps despite themselves, can serve as positive or negative teachers in disparate contemporary communities.

EDITORIAL NOTES

The editors worked to make this volume accessible both to scholars and to interested readers who have no knowledge of Hebrew. Throughout the volume Hebrew words are presented either in transliteration or in Hebrew letters. In the latter case, a transliteration of the Hebrew words mostly follows in italics, in popular rather than academic transliteration, for the sound of the original language. Translations of the Hebrew words are supplied, be they in Hebrew font or in transliteration. Authors in this volume, as in other volume, use various forms of the Hebrew God’s names: YHWH, Yahweh, and Yhwh.

NOTES

¹ Biblical quotes in this introduction are from the JPS translation unless otherwise stated.