Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus

*Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* uses rhetorical analysis to expose the motives behind the writing of the central book of the Torah/Pentateuch and its persuasive function in ancient Judaism. The answer to the question “Who was trying to persuade whom of what by writing these texts?” proves to be quite consistent throughout Leviticus 1–16: Aaronide high priests and their supporters used this book to legitimize their monopoly over the ritual offerings of Jews and Samaritans. With this priestly rhetoric at its center, the Torah supported the rise to power of two priestly dynasties in Second Temple Judaism. Their ascendancy in turn elevated the prestige and rhetorical power of the Torah, making it the first real scripture in Near Eastern and Western religious traditions. Rhetorical analysis of Leviticus therefore has implications not only for the form and contents of that book, but also for understanding the later history of the rhetoric of priesthood, of sacrifice, and, especially, of scripture.

Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus

From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts
Syracuse University
To my father,
John D. W. Watts,
in loving gratitude for exemplifying
such a strong model of creative biblical scholarship
and allowing me the freedom to follow it
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Abbreviations


Ant.    Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*

AOAT    Alter Orient und Altes Testament

ARM    *Archives royals de Mari*

BETL    Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologarum lovaniensium


Bib    *Biblica*

BZABR    Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte

BZAW    Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CB:OT    Coniectaneae Biblica: Old Testament Series

COS    *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from*
Abbreviations


CTH Emmanuel Laroche. Catalogue des texts Hittites. Paris:

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/London:
Continuum, 1983–.

DJD Discoveries in the Judaean Desert

FRLANT Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und
Neuen Testaments

HAL Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm.
Hebraisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten


HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

JANES Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies

JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JCS Journal of Cuneiform Studies

JQR Jewish Quarterly Review

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOTSup Supplements to JSOT

JTS Journal of Theological Studies

KAI Kanaänische und aramäische Inschriften. Ed. H. Donner
and W. Röllig. 2nd ed. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz,

KHAT Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament

KTU Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit. Ed. M. Dietrich,
O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartin. AOAT 24/1.

LXX Septuagint Greek translation and verse numbers

MT Masoretic Text

NAB New American Bible version
Abbreviations

NICOT  New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NJPS  New Jewish Publication Society version
NRSV  New Revised Standard Version
NSKAT  Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar Altes Testament
OBO  Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OTL  Old Testament Library
P  Priestly source
RB  Revue Biblique
SAA  State Archives of Assyria
SBL  Society of Biblical Literature
VT  *Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup  Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*
WAW  Writings from the Ancient World
WBC  Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT  Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
ZAW  *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
Preface

This book has its origins in three strands of research that have become more intertwined the longer I have pursued them. The first is rhetorical analysis of biblical and other ancient texts. I became interested in rhetoric when I noticed that the Hebrew Bible instructs its readers in how to use the Torah (Pentateuch) by memorizing it and reading it aloud (Deuteronomy 4: 6–9, 31: 9–13) and then models this usage in stories about prominent characters (Moses in Exodus 24, Joshua in Joshua 8, King Josiah in 2 Kings 22–23, and Ezra in Nehemiah 8), reading it aloud to the assembled people of Israel and Judah. The fact that the text presents itself as suited for public reading suggested to me that it may have been intentionally shaped with rhetorical considerations in mind. Exploring the consequences of this insight for the structure and contents of the Pentateuch led to my book Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch (1999). That book did not, however, present detailed rhetorical analyses of specific pentateuchal texts. This book begins to make up for that lack by subjecting the early chapters of Leviticus to close scrutiny from a rhetorical perspective (Chapters 2 through 6). Using Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the art of persuasion, these studies ask the question “Who was trying to persuade whom of what by writing these texts?” The answer proves to
be quite consistent throughout Leviticus 1–16 and casts these chapters in a rather different light from that in which they appear in most contemporary scholarship. Since biblical texts play rhetorical roles long after their original authors and their intended audiences have died, however, rhetorical analysis must also inquire into their subsequent use for purposes of persuasion. Chapters 7 through 9 present thematic studies of the rhetorical influence of the early chapters of Leviticus on later religion and culture.

Some readers may wonder why I chose Leviticus as the place to demonstrate the usefulness of rhetorical analysis for detailed exegesis of the Pentateuch. Others of its books – most obviously Deuteronomy and perhaps Exodus – might seem more likely subjects for rhetorical analysis. The systematic and didactic tendencies of the first half of Leviticus have not led many interpreters to explain its form and contents in terms of persuasion. These characteristics of the book, however, make it the perfect place to test the thesis that the Torah, as a whole, was shaped for purposes of mass persuasion. If I can demonstrate the power of rhetorical analysis on Leviticus, its importance for much of the rest of the Pentateuch will follow more naturally.

There are other reasons behind my focus on Leviticus 1–16. Another strand of my research involves the use and interpretation of ritual texts. The Torah’s ritual instructions have been an object of scholarly fascination since ancient times, generating a great deal of historical and theological speculation. The division between Judaism and Christianity has also made them a traditional site of interreligious polemic. Victorian-era cross-cultural comparisons and the later, more rigorous observations of field anthropologists stimulated interest in comparing ancient Israel’s practices with those of other traditional cultures. As a result, ritual studies has become a burgeoning field of inquiry within religious studies, and applying its insights to Leviticus has seemed natural to an increasing number of biblical scholars. As a result, ritual studies has become a burgeoning field of inquiry within religious studies, and applying its insights to Leviticus has seemed natural to an increasing number of biblical scholars. Israel’s ritual practices can no longer be observed directly, however, and are known to us only through ancient texts, a situation presenting methodological problems that have been insufficiently analyzed. Chapter 1 lays out the case for
Preface

needing to reconsider how to interpret the meaning and significance of rituals that are available to us only through the mediation of ancient texts written with diverse rhetorical interests in mind. That methodological critique then provides the justification for using rhetorical analysis in the subsequent chapters to establish interpretation of these ritual texts on firmer ground.

My third strand of research has to do with the function of iconic books. It is plain from the religious practices of many modern groups that books of scripture frequently function as material symbols in addition to (or even in place of) serving as texts to be read. Several chapters in this book indicate the ways in which the rhetoric of Leviticus serves, among other things, to elevate its own authority in ritual matters. Chapters 7 and 9 point out that in the Second Temple period, this rhetoric elevated the Torah to iconic status alongside the Jerusalem temple itself. Thus textual rhetoric and ritual practice combined to create ancient Judaism’s most religiously potent icon.

Despite these common interests, the chapters of this book were written as independent essays. Readers may wish to start with whichever chapter piques their interest the most. As my earlier comments indicate, however, the chapters build a cumulative case for using rhetorical analysis to interpret the significance not just of biblical ritual texts but also of the whole Torah and, by implication, the entire Jewish and Christian collections of scriptures and their function in ancient and contemporary religious communities.

Preface

Many people have read and commented on various parts of this book, which is stronger as a result. I owe a debt of gratitude to Carol Babiracki, Dixie Evatt, Frank Gorman, George Heyman, Tazim Kassam, Jason Larson, Heather McKay, David L. Miller, Edward Mooney, Dorina Miller Parmenter, Gay Washburn, and John D. W. Watts as well as interlocutors at various conferences in which I have presented versions of these essays. Responsibility for all remaining defects is, of course, purely my own.
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