THE SACRIFICIAL LAWS OF LEVITICUS AND
THE JOSEPH STORY

In this study, Calum Carmichael offers a new assessment of the Joseph story from the perspective of the biblical laws in Leviticus 1–10. These sacrificial laws, he argues, respond to the many problems in the first Israelite family. Understanding how ancient lawgivers thought about Joseph and his brothers’ troubled behavior leads to a greater appreciation of this complicated tale. The study of the laws in Leviticus 1–10 in relation to the Joseph story provides evidence that all biblical laws, over 400, constitute commentary on issues in the biblical narratives. They do not, as commonly thought, directly reflect the societal concerns in ancient Israelite times. Through close reading and analysis of the biblical text, Carmichael reveals how narrators and lawgivers found distinctive and subtle ways of evaluating a single development in a narrative from multiple perspectives. Thus, the sacrificial rules addressing idolatry, keeping silent about a known offense, confessing wrongdoing, and seeking forgiveness become readily understandable when reviewed as responses to the events in the Joseph story.

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The Sacrificial Laws of Leviticus and the Joseph Story

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PREFACE

I address a topic that turned out to be a considerable surprise, as exciting a quest as I have ever undertaken in my long scholarly career. The sacrificial laws in Lev 1–10, which on the surface seem obscure, dull, and mysteriously sacerdotal in character, become straightforwardly intelligible if we view them as responding to the many issues in the story of Joseph in Gen 37–50. Making judgments on the twists and turns of the saga, the biblical lawgivers produced laws to address the many problems experienced by the first Israelite family. Joseph infuriates his brothers by telling them that in a dream they, represented as sheaves, bow down to him. The brothers slaughter a goat and dip Joseph’s coat in its blood to make Jacob believe that a wild beast has killed his son. In Egypt, the guilty brothers confess to this deception among themselves. Sacrificial rules addressing idolatry, keeping silent about a known offense, confessing wrongdoing, and seeking forgiveness become readily understandable when viewed as responses to these events. The Joseph story reverberates even in the New Testament. The parable of the Good Samaritan, including the famed injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is a miniature version of that early tale.

In quoting the biblical texts I rely on the King James Authorized Version (AV) but change the translation where necessary. The AV is almost always a more literal rendering of the Hebrew and Greek original than other translations. It also has the merit of helping to remind us that biblical law and literature is the product of ancient times and places.

I began the book during my time as the Herbert P. Smith Distinguished Visiting Professor of Law, University of Cambridge, England, and wish to thank the Cambridge Faculty of Law for inviting me. I am much indebted to my wife, Debbie, for her critical comments and close attention to every facet of the manuscript.
ABBREVIATIONS

AB      Yale Anchor Bible
AJCL    American Journal of Comparative Law
AV      Authorized Version
CH      Code of Hammurabi
D       The Deuteronomic literary strand in the Pentateuch
EOW     Studies in Comparative Legal History: Collected Works of David Daube, Volume 4, Ethics and Other Writings, ed. Calum Carmichael (Berkeley, 2006)
ET      English text
GRBS    Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
H       The Holiness Code of Lev 17–26
HBM     Hebrew Bible Monographs
HCOT    Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HL      Hittite Laws
HSS     Harvard Semitic Series
HT      Hebrew text
HTR     Harvard Theological Review
ICC     International Critical Commentary
JBL     Journal of Biblical Literature
JBQ     Jewish Bible Quarterly
JE      The Yahwistic and Elohistic literary strand in the Pentateuch
List of Abbreviations

JHBH  Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences
JPS  Jewish Publication Society
JPSTC Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JJS  Journal of Jewish Studies
JSJSup Supplements to the Study for the Journal of Judaism
JSOT  Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTSS Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LQR  Law Quarterly Review
LXX The Septuagint
MAL Middle Assyrian Laws
MT The Masoretic Text
NEB New English Bible
NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OTL Old Testament Library
P The Priestly literary strand in the Pentateuch
RIDA Revue Internationale des Droits de l’Antiquité
RJ Rechtshistorisches Journal
RSV Revised Standard Version
SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SHR Scottish Historical Review
SJ Studia Judaicarum Slavica
SVT Supplement Vetus Testamentum
TL Studies in Comparative Legal History: Collected Works of David Daube, Volume 1, Talmudic Law, ed. Calum Carmichael (Berkeley, 1992)
TSAJ Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
VT Vetus Testamentum
VTSup Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC Word Bible Commentary
ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZSS Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte