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Introduction: Ritual Text and Ritual Interpretation

In a book about medieval rituals, Philippe Buc argued: "Texts were forces in the practice of power. They should not be decrypted for (elusive) facts about rituals and then set aside."[1] He arrived at this conclusion by observing that ritual meaning was a gamble and was always contested in medieval societies and in medieval texts. As a result, Buc reached a negative conclusion about how far medieval texts can be used in the study of ritual:

> Ultimately there can be no anthropological readings of rituals depicted in medieval texts. There can only be anthropological readings of (1) medieval textual practices or perhaps (2) medieval practices that the historian has reconstructed using texts, with full and constant sensitivity to their status as texts. The latter is nonetheless much more difficult (especially for data-poor eras), less reliable, and allows only a circumscribed realm of appropriate questions and possible results.[2]

What Buc calls "data-poor eras" must surely include the times in which the ritual texts of the Bible were written. We know so little

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[1] Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 259.

[2] Buc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 4.

about them that dates for the composition of the priestly strand (P) in the Torah/Pentateuch range over five centuries. Yet anthropological readings of ritual instructions and stories in the books of Leviticus and Numbers have multiplied in recent decades. They have been motivated by a wish to use twentieth-century parallels to understand Israel's ancient ritual practices, but they have also been used by interpreters to reconstruct the theological rationales behind the rituals. The search for the "meaning" of sacrifice, for example, remains an abiding preoccupation of biblical scholars as well as other students of religion.[3]

Buc's methodological warnings serve as a useful starting point for reconsidering how to interpret ancient ritual texts and, through them, ancient rituals. To set the stage for the following investigations of biblical ritual texts, this chapter evaluates the search for the "meaning" of the rituals in Leviticus in light of current theoretical debates about ritual. Those debates include disagreements over the definition and contents of the category "ritual" itself. For my purposes in studying ancient texts, I have found the description of ritual proposed by Jonathan Z. Smith most useful. He drew on earlier observations by Sigmund Freud and Claude Levi-Strauss to maintain that ritual draws attention to and makes intentional the ordinary practices of everyday life.[4] "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts."[5] Thus ritual turns everyday routines such as washing oneself, entering and leaving a room, and eating meals into

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[3] As illustrated by the titles of three recent books: Christian Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament. Die Signifikanz von Blut- und Verbrennungsriten im kultischen Rahmen* (WMANT 94; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002); William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); David Janzen, *The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Four Writings* (BZAW 344; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004).

[4] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in *Violent Origins* (ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 191–235 [193–95].

[5] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 109.

deeply meaningful practices by focusing attention on them, formalizing them and, often, by prescribing precisely how they get done.[6] Ritual texts, then, are texts that describe or mandate the performance of such rituals.

I start this methodological review with the work of one scholar, Jacob Milgrom, whose dominant influence over contemporary scholarship on biblical ritual texts is irrefutable. Placing his approach in the context of ritual theories that developed out of studies in anthropology and comparative religions will lay the basis for a new approach to interpreting biblical and other ancient ritual texts.

Jacob Milgrom as Interpreter of Ritual

Jacob Milgrom dedicated his career to explaining the details of ancient Israel's ritual and legal practices. His writings are characterized by close attention to philological details and exhaustive examinations of every ancient parallel that may shed light on the biblical text, as well as constant interaction with the interpretive traditions – ancient, medieval, and modern. These features of his work make it invaluable and essential reading for the study of ritual and law in the Bible. Milgrom's conclusions arose from and depended on his methodological commitments, however, which remained consistent from his earliest writings to his most recent ones. It is these presuppositions that I want to contextualize and evaluate within the modern discussion of ritual generally.

Milgrom has been quite specific about the presuppositions that he used to study ritual texts. In *Cult and Conscience* (1976), he introduced his approach with these words:

> I assume the Priestly Code makes sense. . . . it is a self-contained system – logical, coherent and whole. A system is built on postulates, but, in our

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[6] For a broad survey of "ritual-like" activities under the categories of formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138–69.

case, they are nowhere stated. Instead, they are ensconced in the laws and rituals, especially in their technical vocabulary.[7]

His aim then was to demonstrate the *rationality* of P's regulations within the context of ancient Israelite society.

Milgrom also emphasized the *realistic* character of Israel's cultic rules, that is, that they describe real features of ancient Israel's religion and society. He repeatedly denied that the rules and laws of Leviticus and Numbers are utopian: they do not simply dream of a pure cult and society but describe actual practices, or at least what the writers hope will become actual practices. As a result, Milgrom claimed to be describing the rational system that underlay, not just ritual texts, but also ancient Israel's cult and society, at least in so far as they conformed to the prescriptions of Leviticus and Numbers. And he suggested that in large measure they did: in his Numbers commentary, Milgrom said that the laws "provide a window to the life of ancient Israel."[8]

In taking this approach, Milgrom consciously assumed a particular position on the spectrum of interpretive approaches to the Bible's ritual rules, one in which he has a lot of company. He also took a position on the spectrum of theoretical approaches to the study of ritual. It is his position in the latter context that I want to describe more fully here.

The view that the rituals of an ancient or indigenous people are rational and realistic can readily be recognized as the distinctive thesis of a particular school of anthropologists influential in the middle of the twentieth century. On the basis of Emile Durkheim's arguments that societies generate their own symbolic representations, a series of researchers interpreted rituals and beliefs in such "functionalist" terms to show that they are rational within the culture in which they are

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[7] Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentence* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 2.

[8] Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers Bmdbr*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xxxvi.

found.[9] Thus E. E. Evans-Pritchard, to choose a famous example, demonstrated the internal consistency of the beliefs of the Sudanese Nuer people and their effectiveness within Nuer society. He thereby undermined older views that characterized ancient and primitive peoples as superstitious, that is, irrational.[10] Mary Douglas's famous studies of purity rules applied such functionalist anthropological approaches to ancient Israel's practices, among other cultures.[11] A subsequent phase of anthropological research has argued for the independence of some symbolic and ritual systems from social structures, emphasizing the self-contained rationality of such systems even more.[12]

Milgrom was well aware of this anthropological research, and he referred approvingly to the methods of anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, and Douglas.[13] Therefore, though he did not represent himself as an anthropologist, placing him in this company does no injustice to his work. Milgrom's insistence on the rationality of Israel's rituals corresponds with the same claim made by these anthropologists for various indigenous practices and beliefs. His claim that the biblical legislation is realistic corresponds with the functionalist view that religious beliefs mirror society and serve to support social structures. He made the connection himself by using, as an epigram for his article "Rationale for Cultic Law," the following quotation from Turner: "Anthropologists . . . hold that at their 'deepest level' ritual reveals values, which are sociocultural facts."[14]

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[9] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (tr. J. W. Swain; New York: Free Press, 1965 [French original, 1912]).

[10] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974 [1956]); see also Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

[11] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

[12] E.g., Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic, 1973).

[13] Even if he differed with details of the latter's views on Leviticus; see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16, Leviticus 17–22, Leviticus 23–27* (Anchor Bible 3; 3 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1991, 2000, 2001), 1:442–3, 726, 728.

[14] Milgrom, "Rationale for Cultic Law: The Case of Impurity," *Semeia* 45 (1989): 103–10 [103].

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Placing Milgrom in this company provides a useful context within which to evaluate his contribution. Like the anthropologists discussed above, Milgrom has been very concerned about defending biblical ritual practices against charges of superstition or empty ritualism. His demonstration of the systematic relationship between purity regulations and sacrificial practices and his search for how such practices reinforce ethical norms have been major factors in moving biblical studies away from the derogatory assumptions of previous generations of scholars, just as these anthropological studies have placed a brake on generalizations about "primitive" beliefs and practices.

These anthropological approaches have been criticized, however, and it is fair to ask to what extent Milgrom's work is vulnerable to the same criticisms. One criticism has noted that a focus on the meaning of symbolic systems, either in terms of their social function or in terms of their internal consistency, has difficulty dealing with change over time.[15] These approaches have trouble taking into account phenomena such as anachronistic meanings and symbols that no longer apply directly to the culture in which they are found or, on the other hand, symbols and rituals that are intended to promote change rather than serving to preserve the status quo. As a result, some theorists of ritual have moved to more performative approaches that emphasize the conscious volition of the individual or group engaged in these practices.[16]

On the face of it, Milgrom's description of the rituals of Leviticus does not appear vulnerable to the same criticism. He certainly recognized and looked for historical changes in ritual practices.[17] He went

[15] For this criticism, see, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 207–8.
[16] See, e.g., Victor Turner's theories of "dramatism" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969]) and Catherine Bell's survey of performative approaches (*Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 72–83).
[17] Jonathan Klawans has criticized Milgrom for using theories of historical evolution on the grounds that they prevented Milgrom from describing a consistent symbolic interpretation of the sacrifices in Leviticus. Taking Douglas's theory of purity as a model, Klawans called for a consistently symbolic interpretation of all of Leviticus

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to great pains to trace the historical relationship between different ritual and legal texts, and argued at length for re-ordering the Penta-teuchal sources to place the composition of P prior to Deuteronomy in Israel's monarchic period. He even occasionally noted "vestiges" of older beliefs in P's legislation, though he dismissed their significance for the overall system.[18] Thus historical concerns have been very much at the forefront of his work.

At another level, though, this criticism finds some foothold in Milgrom's approach. He dealt with change *between* different texts but presupposed a unified and static symbolic system within the texts themselves and the rituals they describe. For example, in "The Chang-ing Concept of Holiness," Milgrom argued that H ("holiness" texts that dominate the latter part of Leviticus) expanded P's strict appli-cation of the idea of "holiness" in reaction to the criticisms of Isaiah of Jerusalem.[19] So one text (H) revises the views of an earlier text (P) in reaction to the criticism found in a third (Isaiah). As a descrip-tion of the ways texts and their writers interact, there is nothing inher-ently implausible here. It is not clear, however, from his discussion how such arguments were translated into ritual and legal practice, if at all. What Milgrom calls the *realism* of the texts, that is, their equivalence to Israel's ancient practices, becomes less and less evident the more the interaction of the texts is emphasized, just as the "functionalism" of

("Ritual Purity, Moral Purity, and Sacrifice in Jacob Milgrom's *Leviticus*," *Religious Studies Review* 29/1 [2003]: 19–28). Milgrom has responded to Klawans by insisting that only P texts represent rituals in a consistent symbolic system; H texts as well as the Hebrew prophets employed looser, metaphorical formulations ("Systemic Differences in the Priestly Corpus: A Response to Jonathan Klawans," *RB* 112 [2005]: 321–9). In contrast to Klawans, my critique (below) makes virtually the opposite criticism of Milgrom's work and the work of many other scholars, especially Douglas: by interpreting Leviticus in terms of symbols and metaphors that are not explicit in the text, they impose a theology on it that the book does not express.

[18] E.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1:44; idem., "The Changing Concept of Holiness in the Pen-tateuchal Codes with Emphasis on Leviticus 19," in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* (ed. J. F. A. Sawyer; JSOTSup 227; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 65–75 [65].

[19] Milgrom, "Changing Concept," 74–5.

symbolic systems becomes less evident to anthropologists in the face of historical social change. Given the ancient debates in Israel over how rituals should be practiced, the *actualization* of a particular view in Israel's ritual practices needs separate demonstration.

A second criticism has been leveled at functionalist and symbolic approaches to ritual that questions whether rituals can be explained effectively by reducing them to systems of meanings at all. Are rituals only means for communicating symbols? Maybe not. This criticism points out that ritual practices, such as animal offerings, are usually far older than their interpretation by ancient texts, not to mention by modern ethnographers and interpreters. It is difficult to show that any one symbolic interpretation of them is widely shared by those who participate in the rituals themselves. In other words, the power of a ritual for its participants may not necessarily depend on its symbolic interpretation, or at least on the participants' agreement on any one symbolic interpretation.

This point is likely to surprise many readers, so a brief review of some of the arguments for it may be helpful. John North noted among the ancient Romans, for example, a general lack of expositions of the meaning of their own ritual offerings. Despite a pervasive preoccupation with correct ritual practice, "a striking feature of this tradition is the degree of variation to be found in the interpretation and even the reporting of the rituals of annual festivals." North concluded that "an important characteristic of Roman ritual is its capacity to take on new levels of meaning as new situations arise. . . . It is precisely because of the shortage of fixed theology or doctrines that ritual programs can adjust themselves – through omitting, adding, misunderstanding, and reinterpreting – to new conditions of life."[20] Making the same observation from a more theoretical perspective, Jonathan Z. Smith argued

[20] John A. North, "Sacrifice and Ritual: Rome," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (ed. M. Grant and R. Kitzinger; New York: Scribner's, 1988), 983, 984.

that rituals serve to call attention to the details of regular life rather
than focusing on deep issues of meaning. He concluded therefore that
the purification and sacrificial rituals of Jerusalem's temple, for exam-
ple, served primarily to draw distinctions: "There is no possibility of
decoding the meaning of the causes of impurity – they signify sheer
difference. Nor is there any relationship of equivalence between the
modes of purification and the forms of impurity – they signify sheer
change in status, sheer difference. . . . For it is not the term but the
relations that mattered."[21] Walter Burkert criticized all theories of the
original meaning of this or that ritual behavior. He pointed out ritu-
alistic animal behaviors and argued that "ideas do not produce ritual;
rather, ritual itself produces and shapes ideas, or even experience and
emotions."[22] Fritz Staal went so far as to conclude that "ritual is pure
activity, without meaning or goal."[23]

Again, the fact that Milgrom is interpreting texts shields his work
from the brunt of this criticism, because texts convey verbal meanings
in much more obvious ways than do rituals (even if a precise description
of how texts convey meaning confounds philosophers – a problem I
will not delve into here). As Milgrom readily pointed out, however, bib-
lical texts describe and prescribe rituals, but do not bother to explain
them. Biblical interpreters, unlike ethnographers, cannot interview
Israelite priests and ask them to interpret the rituals themselves. (Even
if they could, one might wonder to what extent the explanations would
have been made up simply to answer the ethnographer's questions.) So
interpreters of ritual texts must seek explanations on the basis of the
ritual acts themselves. When the texts do not provide symbolic expla-
nations of the rituals they describe, interpreters find themselves open
to the charge of imposing symbolic systems not intrinsic or necessary

[21] Smith, *To Take Place*, 108.
[22] Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: An Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (trans. P. Bing; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; German original, 1972), 28.
[23] Fritz Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26/1 (1979): 2–22 [9].

to the rituals.[24] To put this point in Milgrom's terms, the *rationality* of the rituals and their textual descriptions may be questioned, not as in previous generations as a way of denigrating the thought of ancient or indigenous peoples but rather as pointing to the possibility that the rituals of any society cannot be reduced to and explained as symbolic systems alone.

None of this is to deny the contribution that Milgrom has made to understanding ancient Israel's religion by showing that the Bible's ritual legislation *can* be understood as a rational symbolic system that *could* have regulated actual ritual practice. In fact, I personally do not doubt that some people did in fact understand the rituals in systematic ways similar to those that Milgrom has described and that such considerations did shape ritual practices at some times. But who did so, and when?[25] The relationship between symbolic interpretation, ritual, and text still needs to be explored for all the periods of Israel's ancient history, insofar as we have any evidence for it.

Milgrom has accomplished a necessary task for biblical studies by demonstrating that biblical ritual can be interpreted rationally and realistically. The comparisons I have made here do not undercut this accomplishment but rather point out that they prepare the way for the next step. The theoretical problem of ritual and its relationship to society and interpretation needs to be worked out in the triangular relationship between Israel's ancient rituals, texts, and society as that relationship changed over time.

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[24] Bryan D. Bibb made a similar point, noting that both performances of rituals and the ritual texts that describe them contain ambiguities that leave worshippers and readers room for personal interpretation. Eliminating the ambiguities by elaborate logical constructions or detailed source critical divisions undermines this function ("This Is the Thing that the Lord Commanded You to Do: Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus" [Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005], 99–100).

[25] Milgrom was aware of the multivalence of sacrifice, at least cross-culturally (*Leviticus* 1:443; "Systemic Differences," 322), but he did not grapple with the methodological problem that such multiple meanings, much less an absence of any symbolic interpretation at all, pose to any description of a symbolic system behind ritual practices.

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