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978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

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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.

James W. Watts is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University. He is the author of *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narratives* (1992) and *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (1999) and editor of *Persia and Torah: The Theory of the Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch* (2001).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*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*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | page XI |
| <i>Preface</i> | XV |
| 1. Introduction: Ritual Text and Ritual Interpretation | 1 |
| <i>Jacob Milgrom as Interpreter of Ritual</i> | 3 |
| <i>Recent Ritual Interpretations of Leviticus</i> | 11 |
| <i>Reading Mary Douglas Rereading Leviticus</i> | 15 |
| <i>The Difference Between Texts and Rituals</i> | 27 |
| <i>Rhetoric and Ritual Interpretation</i> | 32 |
| 2. The Rhetoric of Ritual Instruction | 37 |
| <i>The Search for Ritual Genres</i> | 39 |
| <i>Rhetorical Features of Leviticus 1–7</i> | 46 |
| <i>The Rhetorical Purpose of Leviticus 1–7</i> | 55 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 61 |

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| 3. The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings | 63 |
| <i>Explanations for the 'Öläh's Priority</i> | 64 |
| <i>The Rhetorical Effect of the 'Öläh's Priority</i> | 71 |
| <i>The Priority of the 'Öläh in the History of Religion</i> | 73 |
| 4. The Rhetoric of Sin, Guilt, and Ritual Offerings | 79 |
| <i>Leviticus 4–5 in Context</i> | 82 |
| <i>Jargon and Wordplays in Leviticus 4–5</i> | 85 |
| <i>The Rhetoric of Wordplays in Leviticus 4–5</i> | 90 |
| 5. The Rhetoric of Ritual Narrative | 97 |
| <i>Leviticus 8–10 in Contemporary Scholarship</i> | 98 |
| <i>The Rhetoric of Leviticus 8–10</i> | 103 |
| <i>Parallels and Intertexts of Leviticus 8–10</i> | 118 |
| 6. The Rhetoric of Atonement | 130 |
| <i>The Meaning of Kipper</i> | 130 |
| <i>The Rhetoric of Kipper</i> | 133 |
| <i>Kipper as Leitmotif</i> | 136 |
| <i>Atonement in Later Religious Rhetoric</i> | 139 |
| 7. The Rhetoric of Priesthood | 142 |
| <i>The Aaronide Hierocracy</i> | 143 |
| <i>The Many Rhetorical Situations of Leviticus</i> | 151 |
| <i>Priesthood in Later Religious Rhetoric</i> | 154 |
| <i>Reevaluating Hierocracy in Second Temple Judaism</i> | 161 |
| 8. The Rhetoric of Sacrifice | 173 |
| <i>Theories of Sacrifice</i> | 176 |
| <i>Ritual Practice and Ritual Interpretation</i> | 180 |
| <i>Stories of Sacrifice</i> | 184 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| 9. The Rhetoric of Scripture | 193 |
| <i>Scriptural Authority</i> | 195 |
| <i>Ritual Accuracy and Ritual Legitimacy</i> | 199 |
| <i>Ritual Text and Ritual Performance</i> | 204 |
| <i>The Authority of Torah</i> | 209 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 214 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 219 |
| <i>Index of Biblical Citations</i> | 237 |
| <i>Index of Other Ancient Literature</i> | 243 |
| <i>Index of Authors</i> | 244 |
| <i>Index of Subjects</i> | 250 |

Abbreviations

- 4QMMT* E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4. V. Miqsat Ma'ase ha-Torah* (Discoveries in the Judean Desert 10) Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.
- ANET* *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Ed. James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Ant.* Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*
- AOAT* Alter Orient und Altes Testament
- ARM* *Archives royales de Mari*
- BETL* Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
- BHS* *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1983.
- Bib* *Biblica*
- BZABR* Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte
- BZAW* Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
- CB:OT* Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
- COS* *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from*

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978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

- the Biblical World*. Ed. William W. Hallo. 3 vols.
Leiden: Brill, 1997, 2000, 2002.
- CTH* Emmanuel Laroche. *Catalogue des textes Hittites*. Paris:
Klincksieck, 1971.
- DCH* *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Ed. David J. A. Clines.
Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/London:
Continuum, 1983–.
- DJD* Discoveries in the Judaeen 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
Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1967–1995.
- HKL* R. Borger. *Handbuch der Keilschriftliteratur*. 3 vols.
Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967–1975.
- 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* *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. Ed. H. Donner
and W. Röllig. 2nd ed. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz,
1966–1969.
- KHAT* Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament
- KTU* *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*. Ed. M. Dietrich,
O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartin. AOAT 24/1.
Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976.
- LXX* Septuagint Greek translation and verse numbers
- MT* Masoretic Text
- NAB* New American Bible version

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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 |
| <i>RB</i> | <i>Revue Biblique</i> |
| SAA | State Archives of Assyria |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| <i>TDOT</i> | <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–. |
| <i>VT</i> | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| VTSup | Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| WAW | Writings from the Ancient World |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WMANT | Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament |
| <i>ZAW</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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978-0-521-87193-8 - Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

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. 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

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James W. Watts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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.

Three of these chapters are expanded versions of articles previously published in other venues. Chapter 2 appeared as "The Rhetoric of Ritual Instruction in Leviticus 1–7," in *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (ed. R. Rendtorff and R. A. Kugler; VTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 79–100. Chapter 3 was published as "‘*Olah*: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings," in *Vetus Testamentum* 66/1 (2006): 125–137. Chapter 9 presents a slightly expanded version of "Ritual Legitimacy and Scriptural Authority" that appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/3 (2005): 401–417. I am grateful to E. J. Brill and the Society of Biblical Literature for permission to reproduce them here.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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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