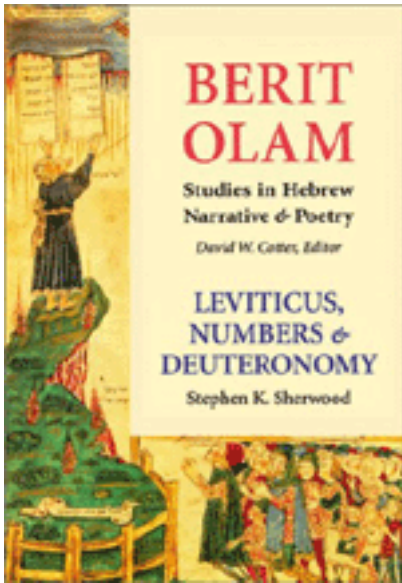


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**Sherwood, Stephen**

*Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

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Stephen K. Sherwood's commentary on the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy provides a distinctive approach to the final forms of these three books of the Pentateuch. In this volume of the Berit Olam commentary series, Sherwood reads these texts from the perspective of narrative criticism. He argues that the law of Torah is not only embedded within a narrative framework but itself functions as a form of narrative discourse.

The key to this distinctive approach lies in his perception of the incomplete nature of the laws that are promulgated and the extensive use of character discourse in these texts. "These discourses are part of a story and contribute to the characterization of their speakers" (xi). As Sherwood sees it, the discourse of instruction defines the characterization of YHWH as lawgiver, Moses as prophet, and Israel as a people. The setting of these texts in the wilderness prior to Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan points to the liminal quality of the narrative. The wilderness experience is one of liminality between the promise of the land and the entrance of Israel to claim that promise. It is the experience of liminality in the wilderness that provides a narrative moment from which to look at the past and prepare for the future.

In his general introduction Sherwood emphasizes that this volume reflects only on the literary aspects of the text and establishes the foundation for his claim of the narrative character of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. His methodology is atomistic rather than integrative. One example of this is found in his plotting of the number of times a name occurs to demonstrate that the narrative of the three texts focuses on the characters of YHWH/Elohim and Moses. The plotting of the name occurrence shows that YHWH/Elohim is the primary character/speaker in all three books. It also shows that Moses' name hardly appears in Deuteronomy, whereas the name "Moses" occurs frequently in the book of Numbers. The schematic presentation of this information receives little discussion beyond stating that "these three books are in every sense books of theology—works of narrative art in which the main character is YHWH/God" (xvi). I question whether or not the frequency of the appearance of the names of YHWH/Elohim and Moses is sufficient to define the books as theological, narrative, or legal texts. Further discussion of the significance of these differences would have helped the reader understand how such information supports his argument for narrative art.

The introduction to each of the individual books provides the skeleton on which to hang the discussion of the various narrative elements noted. The most useful part of this section is the discussion of how often the book appears in the worship lectionary and the listing of the quotations and references to the texts that are found in the New Testament.

When the incidence of use in Christian worship is compared with the extensive listing of New Testament references and quotations, Sherwood provides scholars and preachers of the New Testament with a concrete demonstration of how the Torah functions as the foundation of much of the description and characterization of the New Testament. A discussion of the relationship between the use of these texts in Christian worship and the use of these texts in the New Testament itself may have led to a fuller discussion of the narrative function of these books in the early Christian period.

The rest of the introduction to each book is composed of series of lists and graphs. Sherwood notes particular verbal forms, nouns, and phrases that are characteristic of the text and graphically displays where particular narrative elements are to be found. The discussion of the narrative characteristics of the books, such as narrative time and narration time, the manipulation of past, present, and future in the plot development, and the narrative tensions explored in the texts, are straightforward. Characterization is demonstrated by particular words and deeds through which the character is self-depicted as well as the words and traits that are used by other characters to express their experience of the character. YHWH, Moses, and the narrator are the primary characters in all three books. Sherwood lists the particular actions and speech characteristics of each without much commentary on what these aspects contribute to the depiction of the

character or to character development. Symbols and images found in the text are also listed without demonstrating how they contribute either to the character or to the plot of the narrative itself.

One of the most interesting discussions in the introduction to each book is the discussion of the manipulation of knowledge and the various reading positions that can be taken. Again these are listed, but here there is some discussion of how the manipulation of knowledge leads to dramatic tension. Sherwood discusses the consequence of knowledge in the context of sin against the holiness of God as the focal point of narrative tension in the book of Leviticus. The manipulation of knowledge within the text and for the reader is his best support for the thesis that the book of Leviticus can be read as a narrative. Whereas in the book of Leviticus the character of God is elevated by God's knowledge of sin, in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy the primary elevation in terms of knowledge occurs with the reader's knowledge that Israel's enemies will be defeated.

The notes on the actual text are sparse and text-critical. In most cases they do not add much to the argument that Leviticus and Numbers can be read and understood effectively as narrative texts. As a series of speeches made by Moses just before Israel enters into the land, Deuteronomy expresses narrative tension in the retelling of the past and anticipation of the future. More could have been said about the extensive use of speeches in all three books as a narrative element.

This commentary is useful as a resource on the text and for categorizing particular narrative aspects of the books. It is useful for giving the reader some new ways of thinking about aspects of narrative within these three texts. Yet, as Sherwood himself says of Leviticus, this commentary is "not a page turner" (4). This volume provides an anatomical description of a body, its skeleton, sinews, muscles, blood vessels, and nerves. However, there is no breath, no *nephesh* to bring the body to life. It is not enough to say that Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are narratives. The mere presence of narrative elements does not make the text function as narrative. What is needed is to demonstrate how these elements work together to create a narrative world and to create distinctive characters that are changed by the narrative tensions of the text. Sherwood provides an accounting of the narrative elements of these books, yet he fails to persuasively argue for reading these texts as narratives rather than as law. It remains for these dissected elements to be woven together and filled with the breath of living texts.