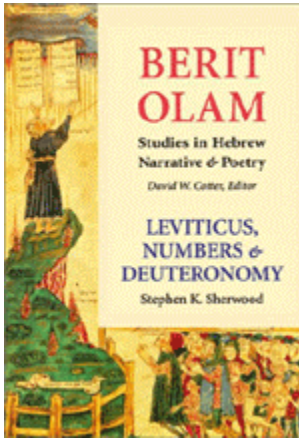


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Sherwood, Stephen

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry

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The present volume in the Berit Olam series does in accordance with the series subtitle not aim to be a verse by verse commentary with translation and notes, but an attempt to apply the techniques of narrative criticism to the biblical books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Focussing on the final form of the text Sherwood approaches these books as narrative. Are these books then works of narrative art? Sherwood does not hesitate to answer this question with a definite 'Yes' (xi-xiii). After all they do not only contain a number of colorful stories, they are also part of a larger story stretching from Exodus to Deuteronomy. So what else could they be (7-8)? Codes of law? Sherwood does not think so. Even when taken together the collections of law in these books are neither unified nor complete. He prefers to consider these legal materials as discourses made by the characters in the story, which contribute to their characterization. The narrative character of the books is derived from both the narrative verbs introducing the legal materials and the literary devices that are being used such as chiasmus and inclusio (3-4). The inclusion of these materials within the larger context of the story from exodus to conquest by means of narrative verbs taken for granted, the literary techniques employed do not necessarily put these texts in the category of literature. The devices are well known editorial techniques used in the process of legal innovation within Ancient Near Eastern law and may well point to a similar process in Old Testament law.

In the Introduction sections (3-44, 97-140, 199-240) preceding the Notes sections (45-94, 141-195, 241-292) the attempt to approach these legal materials as narratives is put to the test, when Sherwood insists that they exhibit a narrative structure (13-18, 216-220). The mostly casuistic laws are read as dramas in which a problem arises for which

the law in question is the solution (13, 216). Once Sherwood has to revert to descriptions such as: ‘Problem: What is YHWH’s will regarding sexual morality (...)? Solution: Instruction’ (15), or: Problem: A man takes a new wife. Solution: Exemption from military service’ (219), the inherent failure of such an approach may be obvious.

This approach also has serious implications for the characterization of the main protagonists in the legal materials: YHWH and Moses, discussed in the Introduction sections (20-34, 110-132, 220-229). The characterization more often than not turns out to be a mere enumeration of what the character in question says or what is being said about him. The occasional summary statement about YHWH: ‘The story world portrays the character “the LORD” as one who foresees future conditions and makes provisions for them’ (12), or: ‘The character “YHWH” in Numbers is a person who is very specific about what he wants. He makes his will known by giving detailed instructions (116)’, are really too trivial to be of any help. The statement made about Moses on the blurb: ‘Our interest and sympathy are captured by the poignant image of the great liberator looking across the Jordan to see the promised land that he himself will never enter’, admittedly presents a fine characterization of the man, but one searches the commentary in vain to find any consideration to that effect. The only summary statement made about Moses may be found in the Notes: ‘Speaking is going to be what characterizes Moses in Deuteronomy’ (242). The naive reader may well be inclined to put this characterization to the test. Does the story world really portray Moses as a man with a severe speech impediment spending his dying hours – in a futile attempt to postpone the inevitable forever – citing a seemingly endless number of rules and regulations.

Other literary considerations discussed in the Introduction sections are of uneven quality. The remarks on the importance of these biblical books as a background for the New Testament added for the benefit of Christian readers may occasionally shed some light on the New Testament text in question. The background for these texts may, however, more often than not simply be found in contemporary rabbinical discussions as later written down in Mishnah and Tosefta. The subsumption of the punishment of lapidation for a blasphemer as mentioned in Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34; Acts 7:58 under Numbers 15:35-36 in fact dealing with the lapidation of a person who breaches the Sabbath (98) instead of Leviticus 24:14, may simply be an error. The omission of the demonstrative act of washing the hands by Pilate in Matthew 27:6 vis-à-vis Deuteronomy 21:6 misses out on a golden opportunity. The discussion of time and place, plot and structure are generally adequate and helpful for the narrative sections of the books in question (Leviticus 10; 24:10-23; Numbers 11-26; Deuteronomy 1-4; 34). The same may also hold true for the paragraph dealing with the manipulation of knowledge and reading positions in the narrative sections. The attempt to explain cases of unintelligible legislation as examples of the narrative technique of character elevation: “The character YHWH presumably knows the rationale for the purity laws but the reader does not” (63), however, demonstrates once again the improbability of approaching legislative texts as narrative.

The Notes sections that follow the Introductions focus on the literary aspects of the text. The bold faced captions present a mere outline of the text, whereas the

interspersed notes tend to highlight an inclusio or chiasmus in a verse, section or chapter. Occasional philological notes may or may not contribute to a better understanding of the text. Should we really take the introduction *nefesj ki* in casuistic law as inducing some narrative tension as to whether or not someone's 'desire' (*nefesj*) to meet the condition will be fulfilled (48-49)? How should one in this case understand the 'desire to sin unintentionally' in Leviticus 4:2 (52)? However, many issues of interpretation have - deliberately - not been addressed. This approach seems to limit the usefulness of the book as a companion to the text first and foremost to the narrative sections of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.