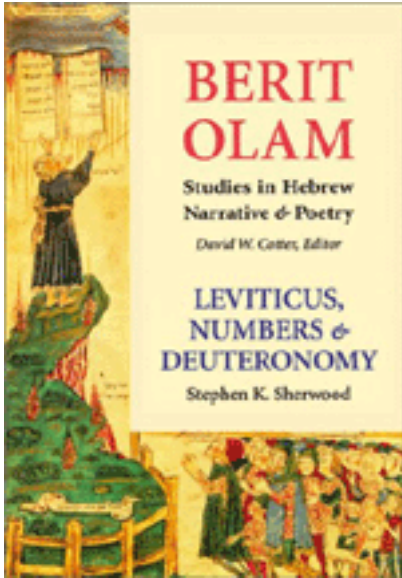


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Sherwood, Stephen

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002. Pp. xviii + 306. Cloth. \$39.95. ISBN 0814650465.

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Stephen K. Sherwood, C.M.F., embarked on probably the most difficult assignment in the Berit Olam series: presenting Leviticus as narration. His discoveries while analyzing the text, although probably unsuccessful in the broad picture of changing entrenched ideas about Leviticus as a holiness code and priestly instruction book, nonetheless shed keen insights and needed light on its narrative elements. He argues that Leviticus cannot be anything but narrative because “it is part of a larger story” (7).

In *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Sherwood, a faculty member at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, tackles the narrative art of these three important books. He investigates their literary properties, remarks on literary devices such as inclusios (“bookends” at the beginning and end of a passage that repeat a word, phrase, or idea), and points out various chiasmic (X-shaped) and concentric (onionlike) word patterns. He looks “for any artful artifice that would betoken careful crafting and purposeful arrangement” of the texts (xi).

He argues that the three books are definitely narrative art not only because of their colorful stories—the sudden deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Miriam’s leprosy, the encounters with Balak and Balaam, Israel’s provision in the wilderness, the

conflicts with Og and Sihon—but also because they “contain extended discourses made by characters” in these stories (xi).

Sherwood argues convincingly how important—nay, how essential—Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were to the writers of the New Testament; he cites the many times Jesus and the New Testament writers referred to Leviticus, for instance (4–7).

Sherwood’s structure is methodical, somewhat boring, but most helpful for a biblical scholar. He places in boldface type various headings common in a narrative analysis of the text: descriptive adjectives, verbs, nouns, rhetorical questions, time, tension in the plot, and the like. He points out that the narrative structure of the laws follows a problem-solution formula in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (1–18, 216–20).

His careful, literary, word-by-word, painstaking analysis (which he acknowledges was helped by modern computer programs) contributes to an appreciation of three books largely overlooked by Christendom yet essential to both Jewish and Christian faiths. He notes that of the 156 Sundays in a three-year lectionary cycle used by the Roman Catholics, Leviticus is read twice, or on 1.3 percent of the Sundays; Numbers is read four times, or on 2.56 percent of the Sundays; and Deuteronomy is read ten times, or on 6.4 percent of the Sundays (4, 97, 199).

He refrains from addressing textual problems associated with the three books because they are outside the scope of the series. He also refrains a bit too much from offering his own insights and opinions. Consequently, when he mentions his own views, it stands out. For example, he observes how frequently Moses carries out Yhwh’s commands. After listing a multitude of verses Sherwood comments, “All of these notices of Moses’ obedience make his exclusion from the land for disobedience all the more remarkable” (120). More insights like this would have given more direction to his book.

Particularly helpful is his study of kinds of words. Use of words has long been a way to determine a book’s themes. Significant in Leviticus, for example, is 102 uses of the verb *qrb*, “to approach, bring near” (10). For Numbers he notes “a paucity of adjectives,” only 1,347 spread over 561 of the 1,289 verses (99). However, Numbers makes up for it by presenting a great number of rhetorical questions, questions with only one possible answer or questions to which no answer is required. Among those he cites as rhetorical questions are Num 12:14: “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven

days?" and 16:22: "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?" (101–5).

Regarding his careful study of words is the observation that *hinneh*, "behold," which peppered the King James Version, is all but absent in modern translations (138). He notes that "behold" served in earlier versions as a narrational tool to alert the reader to a viewpoint or a shift in the focus of attention or to mark the introduction of a new focal point (138). Although he does not press the point, his argument makes one wish that earlier textual indications of emphasis and shift had not been edited out.

Sherwood follows R. E. Clements's view that Deuteronomy comprises four speeches by Moses (220); other works, such as the *NIV Study Bible*, cite three. A major contribution of Deuteronomy is that it significantly enlarges the character of God. Deuteronomy includes God's self-descriptions and actions, statements about him by Moses, a record of his past actions, and descriptions such as Yhwh being a devouring fire (Deut 4:24) or great and awesome (7:21). Sherwood goes on to catalogue verses about what Yhwh hates (the silver and gold that cover idols; Deut. 7:25), what he demands (that the people fear him, walk in his ways, love him, and serve him with all their heart and soul; 10:12), what he will not do in the future (abandon, destroy, forsake or forget the covenant; see esp. 4:31; 10:10; 31:6). His blessings will continue in the future, and there will be punishment in the future for any unfaithfulness. The speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy conclude with God's promise to restore, gather, bring back, and rehabilitate Israel (227).

Berit Olam, an outstanding contribution to biblical literature, is a multivolume commentary filling a needed niche in the field. The commentary's volumes look at the Hebrew Bible's individual books in their final form; the writers approach the canon books as literary works, recognizing the fine arts of storytelling and poetry that make up the biblical corpus and therefore contributing to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the art forms that constitute the biblical text.