



**Rendtorff, Rolf**

*Leviticus 1,1–10,20*

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Rolf Rendtorff, Nestor of Old Testament scholarship at the University of Heidelberg and throughout Germany, widely known and respected for his enormous contributions to pentateuchal research and the Christian-Jewish dialogue, here returns to (or stays with!) his old focus of interest, the laws and sacrifices in the book of Leviticus. To write a commentary on a biblical book surely requires much dedication and a long breath: publication of this first part of his interpretation alone spread over nine years (1995–2004), and the larger part (Lev 11–27) is still to come. But people in the field are grateful already for the substantial beginning of a master’s work.

According to the old format of the *Biblischer Kommentar*, which started to come out at Neukirchen-Vluyn (Neukirchener Verlag) in 1955 (!), the author must give a translation of the text (preceded, if opportune, by a sectional bibliography and always followed by text-critical examinations) and running commentary, consecutively focusing on the “Ort” (life setting) of the passage; its “Wort,” the verse-by-verse philological, historical, and cultic/religious interpretation; and ending up in a reflection of its “Ziel” (goal), which originally was to expound the theological harvest and kerygmatic intention of the text at hand. Over the years this rather rigid and theologically freighted (Barthian dialectics!) scheme has softened considerably and allowed more individual application and concretization. No one contests it any longer. Rolf Rendtorff certainly is not strangled by

the format. He follows his own insights in exegetical method, extends word research into long treatises, punctuates his interpretation with important excurses, ventilates at length diverging exegetical evidence as well as opinions, adapts the “Ziel”-section to his needs for literary summaries, and so forth. Rendtorff is an extremely careful interpreter, one who probes into the width and depth of biblical affirmations and who, although being a wise scholar of long standing, still is able to marvel at the surprising newness of perspectives. He is also able to revise some of his old findings under the impression of better explanations. Some years back, while working intensively on his own perception of Leviticus, he commented to me how gratifying it was to see so many different interpretations, both Jewish and Christian, of the newly respected book come up in our age.

The quality of Rendtorff's exegetical work is evident on every page. As a form critic he carefully observes speech-patterns and distinguishes (by the indentation of lines, not by different printing, much in contrast to the literary critic Karl Elliger!) several layers of tradition, the oldest being “ritual text.” But he steps back a little from his older view that we possibly could reconstruct the original ritual itself: it remains inaccessible (19–20). As a historian he weighs all arguments for and against a Second Temple origin of Leviticus (see 5–7). As a philologist he spends a lot of time and energy elucidating the semantics of words, mostly, in this case, of technical terms used in ancient Israelite cult (see, e.g., “burnt offering” in Lev 1:3, pp. 26–27; “grain offering” in 2:1, pp. 86–90; “choice flour” in Lev 2:1, pp. 90–95; “ruler” in Lev 4:22, pp. 181–83). Any term that deserves increased attention is treated in a special excursus. There are seven of them spread unevenly through the book, and they do constitute, in a way, the backbone of the commentary. The first one seems to be overstretched. It deals with the “laying on hands” to the animal (Lev 1:4) and extends from page 32 to 48 (the printer apparently failed to put it all into petit letters). Of course, Protestant ideas about expiation and atonement are at stake, but Rendtorff succeeds in calmly discussing theories of “transfer” and “identification,” coming to a very reasonable conclusion: there may not have been clear-cut understandings of both major interpretations in those olden days (45; see also 46, last line, where he refutes his own previous position: “gegen Rendtorff, Opfer 214ff.”). All the other excurses are a little shorter and properly put into petit: on *'iššāh* (Lev 1:9; NRSV = “offering by fire”; Rendtorff has always vehemently fought against this interpretation, postulating “gift” instead [63–66]); on *zābah š'lamim* (Lev 3:1; NRSV = “sacrifice of well-being”; for many decades the author defended the idea that this doubled designation goes back to different types of offering now grown together in a “communal sacrifice” nurturing “communion with God and among participants” [120–26]); on “sin” and “guilt offerings” (Lev 4–5; pp. 147–49); on “blood and life” (Lev 4:5–7; pp. 165–70); on the ritual techniques of “atonement” (Lev 4:20; pp. 176–78); and on “Urim and Thummim” as part

of the high priest's cultic equipment (Lev 8:8; pp. 272–76). All these philological and cultic studies indeed are a very rich treasury of exegetical insights; it would be quite fascinating to compare Jacob Milgrom's selection of and emphases on terms, rituals, cultic meanings, but we should continue with Rolf Rendtorff's roles and capacities in his exegetical approach.

As an expert on Judaism he is very much concerned about the tradition sparked by Leviticus, taken up, for example, in the Qumran Temple Scroll, and—most of all—in the formative rabbinic discussion testified to by Mishnah and Talmud. There is hardly any passage in his commentary where he does not refer to the Jewish fathers, often using their profound wisdom as a direct help to understand ancient thinking and customs. At this point, perhaps, we should be a little critical over against rabbinic interpretation, too. Their wisdom is not an absolute guarantee of correct interpretation. Taking up still other exegetical perspectives we might say: as a literary critic, a religious historian, and a Christian theologian Rolf Rendtorff is quite reluctant to voice opinions on Leviticus, for different reasons, to be sure. One common denominator for all the reluctances may be that Rendtorff's work has not yet been finished by a long shot. There will be ample opportunities to point out backgrounds, contexts, and analogies in all sorts of directions.

Still, keeping in mind Rolf's statement about the plurality of visions guiding interpreters of Leviticus, we may already ask what his most obvious omissions are, so far, in his laudable exposition of this “strange” (at least in our Protestant sight) book. The first part of his commentary hardly refers to that innerbiblical dialogue between lay people and priests, wisdom, prophetic, and temple traditions. Neither is there much emphasis on interreligious traits in Israel's cult (although some references to extrabiblical sources do occur). What weighs more is the lack of anthropological insights into sacrifice and ritual (although Rendtorff does quote Mary Douglas several times). How can we possibly understand ancient cultic practices without taking into account what scores of experts in religious ceremony have found out by studying living ritual proceedings? Rolf Rendtorff took pains to go to modern slaughter houses to get basic information about butchering animals, the forms and tissues of kidneys, liver, stomach, and so on. Why not consult with today's experts on ritualism and religious symbols? Moreover, the problem of gender, both with humans and sacrificial animals, was quite important to the old priesthood. How can we evade the issue in the light of our very different attitudes to cultic purity, on the one hand, and equal rights for women and men, on the other hand? Finally, in a Christian commentary on a biblical book, are we really entitled to refrain from a theological evaluation of the text's meaning for us? The rubric “Ziel” in the *Biblische Kommentar* had been designed for just that purpose: to draw theological conclusions for parish use, so to speak. I do not mean that we must discover a preconceived and prejudiced incompatibility of Leviticus for Christians. Rather, there may lie hidden some

religious symbolism in ancient sacrificial practice, later abandoned by Jews and Christians alike, that still is important to modern people who unabashedly, unrestrictedly kill and massacre lives by the millions every day.