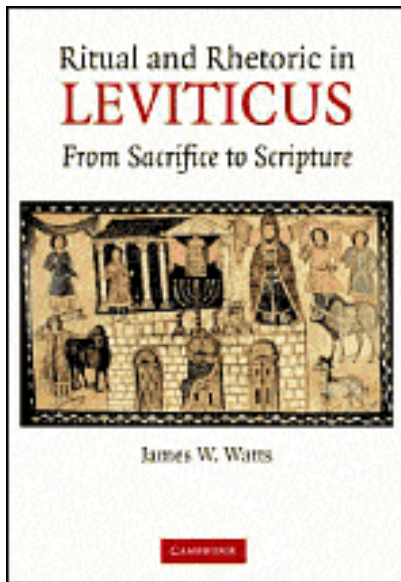


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Watts, James W.

Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture

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When dealing with the priestly material in the Hebrew Bible, especially with Lev 1–16, one has to keep in mind that in the course of the last 2,500 years Jewish tradition has developed its own “Jewish reader response,” which has focused mainly on the legal traditions encompassed in these texts and sometimes has even understood these texts as guidelines for cultic practices. This might be the reason that the question of the literary quality of ritual texts and their genre are still at issue. With regard to the priestly traditions in the Pentateuch, contemporary biblical scholarship still discusses controversially whether these texts’ literary disposition consists of a historical narrative more than a collection of (ancient) laws or whether the priestly material more than all other biblical texts serves as *the* example of a biblical utopia.

The recent study by James Watts is part of this ongoing debate within the scholarly world on the priestly texts in the book of Leviticus, in particular Lev 1–16, which has often enough been regarded as the “theological center of the Pentateuch” (Zenger). With this book, Watts builds upon earlier works (three of the nine chapters being enlarged versions of earlier articles), yet he wants to extend his studies to a rhetorical analysis in detail.

At the outset, Watts clarifies his understanding of “rhetoric: as the “art of persuasion.” To him, the book of Leviticus represents kind of a “rhetorical test-case”: the more the

rhetorical claim of persuasion can be demonstrated here, the more this facet can be applied to other books of the Pentateuch, in particular the book of Deuteronomy, which formulates his educational and pedagogical claim explicitly.

Watts follows the majority of scholars who assign Leviticus (as well as parts of Exodus and Numbers) to the Priestly Code (P). He begins by presenting a thorough history of recent research on the Priestly Code, in which he discusses several academic points of view on the issue, thereby concentrating mainly on Jacob Milgrom and Mary Douglas (alongside William Hallo, Baruch Levine, and others). In particular, the symbolic and rational interpretation offered by Milgrom and Douglas that emphasize the theological underpinnings of the Priestly texts is subjected to a comprehensive criticism. Above all, Watts declines the theological superstructure developed by Mary Douglas according to which the text mirrors the architectural structure of the tabernacle. His critique results in the remark that both scholars have not adequately taken into consideration the distinction between “text” and “ritual.” The emphasis on theology rather than on ritual and society forms his main point of criticism, although Watts admits that Milgrom accentuates more strongly than Douglas the actual practice and ancient rituals that appear behind the texts. In contrast to Milgrom and Douglas, Watts places emphasis on the distinction between text and ritual, focusing on the question of who tried to convince whom of what. In connection with this methodological outline, Watts enunciates his main thesis that “Priestly writers wrote these texts to convince their readers to perform the offerings” (27).

With this thesis, Watts puts forward considerably new accents on which he elaborates in the course of the book. According to its target, the investigation proceeds largely text-chronologically from Lev 1 to 16. Watts aims to prove his theory by a number of distinct discourses on the rhetoric of ritual instructions, the rhetoric of the variety of offerings, as well as the rhetoric of atonement (chs. 2–6). To him, Lev 1–7 represents the prime example of a persuasive agenda. Readers are well served by the fact that Watts always presents a review of previous research that is summarized well against the background of the essential topics at hand. In the sections on the rhetorical function of ritual instructions or of the variety of offerings, Watts discusses primarily the form-critical reconstruction of their oral form (referring mainly to Rendtorff and Koch) and/or the comparative analysis of the ritual’s ancient parallels (referring mainly to Levine).

The major part of the book consists of a more or less elaborate discussion of rhetorical features in each individual textual section of Lev 1–10 and 16, such as the narrative framework, contents, and style (e.g., repetitive style, refrains, wordplays). The repetitive style as well as the literary frame that portrays the whole textual sequence as divine speech serve him as important proofs for persuasive speech. According to Watts, even a text’s ambiguity, lack of clarity, and “textual gaps” point in the same direction. Watts holds the

opinion that the Priestly writers of Leviticus used various literary conventions (royal and oracular rhetoric) to achieve their goal.

Often enough Watts confronts his rhetorical observations with the background of the contemporary history of religion, thereby following previous assumptions according to which the Priestly texts reflect the social and economic situation of the Second Temple period or even late monarchic Judah. Watts relates the fact that Lev 4–5 shows extensive wordplays in particular with the terms חטאת and אשם to the historical context of the breakdown of the Judahite kingdom and the following Second Temple situation in Jerusalem, claiming that the introduction of the חטאת and אשם offerings (as new offerings in addition to מנחה and שלמים) served to augment the temple's economic stability. Likewise, in Lev 8–10 (see ch. 5) Watts draws the conclusion that the narratives serve “to legitimize the ritual authority of the Aaronide priests by telling about their initiation by Moses himself on the basis of divine commands” (97). Similarly, the aim of the rhetoric of atonement was meant to stabilize cultic privileges and the Aaronide priesthood (see ch. 6).

In order to elucidate and circumstantiate P's *Sitz im Leben*, Watts evaluates the rhetorical analyses against the background of Israel's historical and social-religious situation and environment of the Persian and Hellenistic period (ch. 7). To him, the Priestly texts show a great effort to stabilize the Aaronide priesthood and the hierocracy:

Even this superficial survey of priestly history shows clearly that Leviticus' portrayal of the preeminence of the high priest and the Aaronides' monopoly over the priesthood corresponds historically to the situation of the Jewish and Samaritan priests in the Persian and Hellenistic periods.... It is therefore to this period and this hierocracy that P's rhetoric applies, either by preceding the hierocracy and laying the ideological basis for it ... or by reflecting and legitimizing an existing institution. (149)

The last chapter is dedicated to the question of the rhetoric of scripture and scriptural authority. Here Watts lays the focus on the reading aloud of the text. On the basis of comparative analysis of ancient cultures using older texts for the purpose of reviving ritual traditions and validating its ritual performance, Watts concludes that the reading of the text was meant “to acquiesce the ritual and political agenda” that had been put forward by the priests. According to Watts, it was not “the” law as such that had gained (sacred) authority in the course of history, but “the Torah's rhetorical structure [that] combined lists of ritual instructions with criminal laws, narratives, and sanctions” (215). The book includes a bibliography and several indexes.

Watts's study provides the reader with some new insights into the rhetorical peculiarities of the Priestly texts, yet some remarks may be allowed here. First, although Watts brings up some of the rhetorical features in Lev 1–16 (e.g., repetitive style, refrains, wordplays), he refers mostly to those elements that have already been discussed, and sometimes in much greater detail (cf. already M. Paran, *Forms of the Priestly Style in the Pentateuch: Patterns, Linguistic Usages, Syntactic Structures* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989]). On the other side, he leaves out other characteristic aspects of P's style such as patterns of time and spatial dimensions as well as symbolic measurements and relative orders of magnitude. P's idiomatic language of repetitive formulae and ritual style patterns takes up at length spatial and temporal categories. In particular, the narrative on the erection of the tabernacle illustrates that the pattern of time and spatial dimensions functions as an important means for the literary stylization of personal relations. Another aspect to be mentioned here is the topic of emblematic terms and names: P shows a variety of emblematic names, such as Bezalel ("in the shade of God") or Oholiab, bearing the tent (אהל) in his name. The topic of emblematic terms and names becomes even more relevant, since the question whether there was ever a group of priests in Babylonia or Jerusalem that traced themselves back to Aaron is still at issue. It is remarkable that P presents the Aaronides as the only representatives of Israelite priesthood, thereby allowing only Aaron and his sons to perform the actual priestly tasks, whereas in all other biblical (and extrabiblical) documents the house of Zadok hold this position almost exclusively. Scholars repeatedly tried (and still try) to clear these texts from their "stigma of fictionality," trying to prove, at least, an imaginable historicity (E. Otto assumes a splitting-off of the Aaronides from the Zadokites in the postexilic period; see his "Gab es 'historische' und 'fiktive' Aaroniden im Alten Testament?" *ZABR* 7 [2001]: 403–14). In any case, we do not know a priestly lineage that is not descended from Zadok, but on the basis of the texts' rhetorics an assumed (historical) Aaronide priesthood becomes *the* cornerstone in Watts's argument. This difficulty is connected with a second critical observation: very often the rhetorical investigations are actually based on historical or political (background) information, which, in a second step, as kind of a *circulus vitiosus*, is yet again extracted from the texts' rhetorical features. Last but not least, the sections on ritual purity have been left completely aside. This is regrettable not only because these texts show many rhetorical features of their own that are not found in the section on the various offerings but also for the fact that in these chapters the human individual (a parturient, a menstruant, a woman who oozes, a man experiencing seminal emission, a man who oozes) come to the fore more than the priests, and economic or political interests can, therefore, be asserted only restrictedly for these texts.

Still, Watts's investigation has once again drawn attention on the rhetorical aspects of the P texts. The book represents an important contribution to the field of rhetorical analysis

of biblical texts, since it extends its thematic subject matter so far under debate. At the same time, Watts's study shows that this research is still in the beginning. Hopefully, this area of study will be processed more strongly in the future.