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Milgrom, Jacob

Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

The Anchor Bible 3B

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Jacob Milgrom started writing on the Bible in 1955, and has been working on it ever since. We can suppose that this commentary has been in preparation for about half a century. An achievement of this order would have needed that time.

In view of the publisher's intention to use the Anchor Bible series to make the Bible accessible to the general reader, my reaction to the first volume (1991) was that it was too big. At over 1000 pages it was too heavy and bulky to hold, too difficult to find one's way around inside, and it only covered the first sixteen chapters of *Leviticus*. When the second volume gave 600 more pages to only six more chapters, I could not see why it should stop at chapter 22. Since *Leviticus* only has 27 chapters in all, the remaining volume would have to be disproportionately slim. Surely the author has lost control! But here it is, the third volume of the commentary, and it is nearly as massive as the first. In numbers of words the whole project is equivalent to about eight big books. Only when I came to study it did I begin to glimpse the monumental scale of the idea. Now I marvel at the good understanding between publisher and author that allowed this phenomenal book to be published. How impertinent it was of me to have questioned the length, and questioned the literary discipline! My ignorant carping stands rebuked and, like every one else, I bow before the energy of the argument as well as the remarkable erudition.

The book will be like a gold mine for future generations of students. For the kind of book it is (probably there is none other of its kind), it is not too long. The scope of each volume is determined by source critical principles. The task of writing an up-to-date and comprehensive commentary on this third book of the Pentateuch must have been thoroughly daunting. Reading it brings home how much passionate controversy the little book of *Leviticus* has generated over two millennia.

This is not one of these coldly neutral and magisterial commentaries where the author has concealed any opinion of his own. Milgrom does not avoid controversy, he plunges boldly in, dissects the major arguments since rabbinic times, and confidently presses his own view. A tough debater, he brings on the heavy artillery to gun down his opponents' logic or facts. On every polemical issue, he scrupulously gives a large range of alternative opinions. Such procedure in a commentary is often tedious, but here we have the exciting sense of heroic battles fought in sublime causes. He sets out the four contested positions on the meaning of 'the sabbath week,' a problem that gave rise to 'the most long lasting schism in the history of the Jewish people.' It is undeniably recondite, yet his unfolding of the antique debate is enthralling. I begin to understand why he ever wanted to undertake a work of such magnitude.

He is an innovative thinker, and bold. Some of his opinions seem quite idiosyncratic in a narrow context. He needs the big canvas. Against the background of the full historical and philological perspective he deploys the minute details of a well-mastered text to demonstrate that the conclusion he has reached is clinching, inevitable, inescapable, ineluctable (some of his favorite expressions). In the already well-studied book he has discovered new elements, such as the priestly doctrine of repentance, the distinction between abominable animals and unclean animals, the difference between ritual uncleanness conveyed by contact or conveyed from a distance. The latter case illustrates the advantage of the panoramic view.

Milgrom finds that certain grave and deliberate sins directly defile God's tabernacle. This is why it has to be purified annually. The sinner is not directly defiled, it is a case of contamination at a distance, a bit like miasma in ancient Greece. In his first account it sounded speculative and even fanciful. But when it appears in the middle of three volumes all building up a systematic picture of biblical purification rites, it convinces. So much else makes more sense when this is included in the pattern. The example reminds me of an analogy from anthropology. Where witchcraft is recognized, there are generally two kinds, one which works by explicit physical means and one which depends on an invisible personal faculty. In Africa two kinds of occult harm are sometimes distinguished according to intention, some persons are thought to be endowed with the power to harm by simply feeling angry, others do sorcery deliberately with verbal spells and physical magic. Sometimes the two kinds of harming are associated with two kinds of people, distinguished by gender, or by rank, aristocrats and foreigners; one tends to have more serious ill-effects than the other. It is part of a microcosmic dual system, which partners strong elements with weak ones. Likewise, there are two ways of causing pollution, one by contact, one by sin.

In the case of Leviticus, I have noticed how detailed analysis shows the ritual continually twisting two threads, balancing one set of symbols against the other: two kinds of bodily emission, one male, one female; two brothers, one exiled and one the inheritor; two kinds of animals, one set technically impure and the other set abominable. On this line of thinking, the defiling of the tabernacle at a distance would be the strong version of the defiling of human bodies by contact. It is one more stage for elaborating the rich levitical analogy between the body and the tabernacle.

It is difficult to maintain continuity in writing about a book, which seems on first reading to pay little respect to order. Impurity, demons, and sacrifice are central to the first volume and recur in chs. 23-27. Dealing once with these topics and then holding them ready to be revived in the later volumes could well strain the structure of the whole commentary. However, certain continuing themes give unity. Doctrinal links create clusters of related matters. For example, biblical monotheism implies rejection of demons, and also underpins the impurity laws, because in other religions of the region impurity was associated with demons.

Obviously the history of the text assures some continuity. One cannot make up one's mind on the stratigraphy of Leviticus and just leave it. The results of recent source criticism influence Milgrom's own views, so he needs to refer to it throughout the three volumes.

Source criticism is obviously a horrendously technical subject, and of basic importance. All agree that parts of Leviticus are of great antiquity, and interlaced with later segments. Milgrom does not shirk the linguistic evidence. Scholars used to be divided between those who, following Wellhausen, took the date of Leviticus to be late, and those who took it to be as early as the 8th or 7th century. The letter P, which used to stand for the whole priestly work, now refers to only a small part of Leviticus, chapters 1-16. The rest of the book is attributed to several other priestly sources labeled H, for Holiness. The translation of chapter 23 uses four typefaces to show, sentence by sentence, which texts belong to which H source. Milgrom's choice on source criticism reconciles the two sides. P is very early, parts of H come from the reign of Hezekiah, and the final redaction by H was late. If H, as he says, is the final redactor of P, there is nothing to argue about. Priestly P is enfolded in priestly H.

For this Milgrom depends heavily on Israel Knohl's recent analysis of the sources of Leviticus and praises it warmly. It is important to his whole interpretative endeavor. He uses the dating inferred from vocabulary and syntax to reconcile other conflicting interpretations. I am pleased that he steadfastly defends the reputation of the priestly editors. He has assembled textual evidence to refute the old charge that they were a privileged, isolated elite, unconcerned for their congregation's moral dilemmas and hard times.

Of his many original ideas the only one that I do not find useful is a comprehensive distinction between life and death underlying the theology of Leviticus. There is no critical edge to the idea that all the laws of the living God of Moses are on the side of life, to reject his ways is to choose death. Pious, yes, and harmless, but too general for interpreting the rules of corpse contamination or anything else. It is like saying that the American Constitution is on the side of motherhood and apple pie. I felt the same discomfort with Claude Lévi-Strauss's use of exactly the same principle for discovering the ultimate meaning of all mythology.

Some previous commentators have remarked on disorder in the arrangement of Leviticus. Milgrom deals with this creatively, showing how the book is organized by a simple ring form, which pairs off analogous chapters against each other across a mid-point divide at ch. 17. Therefore the repetitions are the signs of structure. As an

enthusiast for ring composition I am delighted with this approach. Ring composition depends on some repetition for building a structure out of matching units of contrast and similarity. Consequently repetition, which has troubled some commentators, is not a problem for Milgrom.

The author's personality shines through the learned tome. This person is passionate and combative. He loves a fight, he takes risks, he is magnanimous. It is a singular honor to be in his list of people to whom he addresses a disarming set of 'Responses,' 'Rejoinders' and 'Admissions of Error.' Each piece seeks primarily to reduce conflict, and each delivers a compliment, as when he writes, 'Schenker and I differ only by a semantic hair' (p. 2446), and 'I can only wish that every author will be blessed with a reviewer like Victor Hurowitz' (p. 2452).

The book is an unexpected mixture of scholarship and humor. When someone so sensitive to nuanced meanings of words in Hebrew achieves comical effects in English, it is never by mistake. The fun slips past the austere façade when Milgrom solemnly introduces 'detergent' instead of 'purifier,' or 'semolina' for the wheat cakes of the cereal offering, or 'baked, toasted and fried' for the different ways of cooking the latter. In my childhood semolina was a hated nursery pudding; the idea of toasting it for the priests would have reduced us to helpless giggles. And sometimes he takes the English language the other way, making a scientific word stand in for a common one, such as 'ingest' for eating blood, and 'lustration' for simple washing. If this is to make it sound fresh and new, it succeeds.

Milgrom's achievement reminds me of David Noel Freedman's description of the author of Psalm 119.

It is like a high wire act in a circus, where the acrobat after establishing himself on the wire, initiates a series of maneuvers that become more complicated and dangerous as he proceeds, drawing gasps of fear and astonishment from his audience, and seems on the brink of falling but manages to hang on, and brings the whole house down with an impossible feat (Freedman, 1995).

To have first imagined and then produced this magnificent commentary is just such an impossible feat.