Trevaskis, Leigh M.

Holiness, Ethics and Ritual in Leviticus

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This revision of a doctoral thesis supervised by Gordon Wenham addresses the relationship in pentateuchal priestly traditions (P and H) between purity and holiness, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other. Trevaskis aims to demonstrate that “the symbolic meaning of P’s ritual texts reflects a relationship between holiness and ethics” (9). This is a difficult challenge for two reasons. First, many interpreters have maintained that P’s notion of holiness in Lev 1–16 is not ethical, in contrast to that of H in Lev 17–26 (so, e.g., Israel Knohl, Jacob Milgrom). Second, some recent interpreters of Leviticus (including this reviewer) have argued that symbolic interpretations of ritual instructions risk imposing ideas not conveyed by the rituals or the texts that describe them, unless the texts provide symbolic interpretations explicitly. Trevaskis responds to these challenges by arguing that H’s description of holiness is implicit in P and that cognitive linguistics can show the probability of a particular symbol being evoked by a text.

Trevaskis argues that cognitive linguistics supplies the conceptual tools to judge the accuracy of symbolic interpretations of texts. In particular, he adopts the distinction between the primary domain of a word’s meaning that is always implied by its use and secondary domains of meaning that listeners or readers access from their linguistic experiences. He suggests that symbolic meanings occupy such secondary domains. His
use of this classification depends, of course, on having some dependable means of knowing the content of ancient readers’ linguistic experiences. Cognitive linguistics presupposes that texts have meaning only within the context of particular communities of speakers and readers. This could lead a different interpreter to focus on the history of reception. Trevaskis, however, aims to reconstruct P’s symbolic intentions. The only surviving evidence of P’s linguistic experience and context is the Hebrew Bible. Trevaskis must therefore work from this literature alone (19).

Trevaskis devotes the bulk of the book to showing that holiness is implicit in P. One chapter focuses on the lists of kosher animals in Lev 11. Only the last three verses mention holiness, and they are widely viewed as an H addition. Trevaskis does not dispute this but argues that H has “made explicit what is implicit, in a symbolic dimension, within P’s dietary prescriptions” (47). He sides with Milgrom against Knohl in viewing the kosher rules as expressing ethical principles. However, he echoes others’ criticisms of Milgrom’s reconstruction of P’s ethics as teaching respect for life. In its place, Trevaskis argues that, because being “unclean until evening” excluded Israelites from the sanctuary, it evokes an analogy with Adam and Eve’s exclusion from God’s presence (Gen 3:23–24). Therefore, the symbolic meaning of uncleanness is “exclusion from Yahweh’s immediate presence” (101). His argument depends on reading the references to dead animals in Lev 11 as alluding to the discussion of death in Gen 3. He thinks that both Lev 11 and Gen 3 implicitly evoke the threat of exile from the land. “Interpreted in this way, the ‘dietary regulations’ were intended to dissuade the Israelites from experiencing exile as a consequence of rebellion against Yahweh’s will” (106).

Along the way to this conclusion, Trevaskis makes important exegetical observations, such as that the command to שׁקץ, usually translated “despise, abhor,” an animal (11:11), is an extension of the same action as the prohibition on touching an animal (11:8; p. 83). He also suggests an interesting alternative to Milgrom’s famous claim that P regards holiness and pollution as opposed dynamic forces, while their antonyms, clean and profane, represent static states. Trevaskis argues instead that Leviticus presents the holy and the secular both as states, each of which may have the condition of being either polluted or pure (68–69). In an appendix, he provides a “literary” rationale for the lists of unclean animals in Lev 11. There he draws attention to the fact that the flood story repeatedly condemns the bloodshed of animals that crawl “on the earth” and suggests that the impurity of “swarming” creatures presupposes and extends that judgment.

Another chapter discusses the purity rules in Lev 12–15. Trevaskis argues that בשר “flesh” “is partially symbolic of humanity’s rebellion against Yahweh (cf. Genesis 6–9)” (170). Here he provides the most systematic deployment of cognitive linguistics in the book by considering the primary and secondary domains of meaning associated with בשר “flesh”
in the Hebrew Bible. Trevaskis concludes that the ת͡שִׁית disease that infects human flesh as well as clothing and buildings symbolizes God’s judgment on rebellion, that is, on symbolic “flesh” (156–59). He does not maintain that Leviticus judges those suffering from the affliction to be sinners. Instead, he thinks “it seems possible that the legislator has adopted pre-existing cultic customs and utilized them to make a theological point” (159).

Two more chapters focus on the meaning of the word תמים “without defect, perfect” as an aspect of holiness in the rules for the burnt offering in Lev 1 and then in H. He observes that Genesis uses the term to describe Noah and Abraham, where it seems to refer to their integrity. Since Lev 1:4 describes worshipers pressing their hands on the head of a “perfect” offering animal that atones (כפר) for them, Trevaskis suggests that the burnt offering symbolizes the worshiper’s integrity that is offered to God. The chapter does not use the word “holy,” but in an appendix Trevaskis provides a carefully reasoned justification for the widespread view that the burnt offering was “most holy” nevertheless. Trevaskis then turns to lists of blemishes that disqualify animals as offerings (Lev 22:17–25) and priests from sanctuary services (Lev 21:16–24). He suggests that Lev 21 avoids the term תמים because it invokes moral character when applied to humans. It focuses on physical blemishes because the physical appearance of priests and animal offerings symbolizes God’s holiness. Trevaskis nevertheless thinks that readers would also have applied the moral connotations of the term to both priests and animals to symbolize “moral integrity.”

In this book, then, a cognitive linguistic method ends up defining meaning from literary context, which is rather less innovative than Trevaskis’s claims for greater objectivity advertise. His innovation, in comparison to the many other interpreters who prioritize contextual meanings, is that he reads the Pentateuch sequentially and synchronically to establish meanings as they would be developed by readers who read the Pentateuch sequentially as well. The implication is that P intended such a reading in composing the ritual texts of Leviticus.

Dividing the Pentateuch by documentary sources will undermine Trevaskis’ conclusions, at least in so far as he claims to describe P’s original intention. But even at the synchronic level, his results seem reductionistic. Despite the rich detail and variety of P’s ritual legislation, Trevaskis finds a small and repetitive group of symbolic meanings pointing to integrity, sin, exile, and death. There can be no question that these issues loom very large in Leviticus and other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, if P intended to symbolize, then should not one expect its ritual details to symbolize a greater variety of messages, or at least a more richly elaborated message?
Arguments for implicit symbolism in P texts, whether by Trevaskis or others, should be grounded in a richer understanding of the role of symbols in religions than just that they inhabit secondary semantic domains. They also need to justify interpreters’ desire to find symbolic intentions behind authors’ actions rather than just those of readers. For there can be no doubt that Leviticus has, in fact, been read symbolically through much of its history. A different way of defending the argument for a holiness reading of P is to point out that H presents a plausible symbolic interpretation of P, whether P intended it or not. H demonstrates that some ancient readers interpreted P’s ideas of holiness symbolically, and its redaction with P recommends this reading. Furthermore, this combination has in fact been influential in shaping very many interpretations of Leviticus in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

Trevaskis’s argument, however, is that P incorporated and intended to convey this ethical symbolism from the start. In making this claim, he must depend on inductive analysis alone. Many contemporary interpreters make a similar claim based on inductive arguments, but that fact does not avoid the need to explain why we need to find original symbolic meaning in texts that do not make them explicit. Otherwise, the suspicion persists that perhaps P wished simply to get people to do what the text tells them to do, namely, to bring offerings to the sanctuary and follow the priests’ instructions in matters of purity and holiness.