

LEVITICUS AS LITERATURE

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MARY DOUGLAS

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PREFACE

Like Abraham holding his ground against God (Gen 18: 30), I ask how I can take it upon myself to speak. Without qualifications for interpreting an ancient text, I am presuming to tell the Bible scholars about Leviticus. A friendly professor of Hebrew finding my style uncomfortable (a mixture of grovelling and truculence), advised me to get on with the job in all simplicity. So this is it.

To study the book of Leviticus as an anthropologist has been a project very dear to my heart. It seemed far beyond my reach. Yet not to do it would be to leave dangling a number of threads from early work. Let me explain some things about my training which have influenced my attitude to the Bible. Young anthropologists in Oxford in the late 1940s and 1950s were heirs to an old debate about human rationality, a debate provoked by the experience of science and biased by the experience of empire. Nineteenth-century rationalists centred on what they thought of as the natives' intellectual problems. Gross superstitions, naïve magic, and immoral gods, were explained by reference to moral evolutionism. The mind of the primitive in aeons past had been hampered by illogical mental habits and proneness to letting emotions govern reason, and the same handicaps were thought to afflict present-day backward peoples. However, in reaction, for the students of my generation the main text was Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic* (1937). From this we learnt that people from alien traditions, trusting in their gods and ancestors and fearing their witches, were every bit as logical as we (or just as illogical). It is actually no more 'logical' to believe in a divinely created moral universe than to believe in an amoral self-generating universe. Foundational beliefs stand beyond the operations of logic. Our researches were framed by an interest in the moral construction of the universe and the nature of belief.

In those days it was axiomatic for anthropologists that, however peculiar they might seem to us, the strange beliefs of a foreign tradition make sense. Explanations of other minds based on mystery, mystique, native credulity or mysticism, were out. Moral evolution was replaced by a down-to-earth approach to alternative ways of living and dying. We took on a hardy scepticism and a nuts-and-bolts demand for evidence. The point about doing fieldwork was to learn how a world-view was adapted to what the people were trying to achieve, especially to what they were doing towards living together in society. Hence our attention to ritual and symbolism. Rain rites, for example, would be a collective act of affirmation. The rite did not attempt to prove the priests' control of meteorology, it was done to affirm publicly the moral aspect of the natural order. Spectacular ceremonials to appease the gods were also performed for the sake of influencing each other's minds.

I would never have felt impelled to attempt an anthropological reading of Leviticus if during African fieldwork I had not been confronted by local dietary rules, and so thought of looking up the passage in chapter 11 on the forbidden animals. I actually cited Leviticus and the parallel passage in Deuteronomy in my 'Animals in Lele religious symbolism' (1957). What I wrote ten years later about uncleanness and pollution in *Purity and Danger* (1966) was driven by fieldwork experience, stiffened by training in Oxford anthropology and enriched with some reading about the psychology of perception. But before looking up those baffling chapters, I had never read the Bible, either at school or at university or subsequently. When I came eventually to read the scholarly commentaries on the Mosaic dietary laws I was surprised to find so much disagreement on such an important subject. Though with some minor variations scholars almost unanimously associated the forbidden animals with unpleasant characteristics, there was no agreement and no satisfactory explanation either in the book or outside it about why each particular species should have been selected and not others which might equally be abominated.

Reflecting on these animals I was drawn to focus on the class of unclassifiable things. The forbidden land animals

were certainly described as such a class, and I extended it with some confidence to water creatures and speculatively to those in the air that could not be identified. I proposed a theory of anomaly, a universal feeling of disquiet (even of disgust) on confrontation with unclassifiables. Taking the Levitical classification system as it revealed itself, the said abominable species failed to show the taxonomic requirements of inhabitants of the three environmental classes, land, air, water, and the abominability of species that 'go upon the belly' in all environments went by the same rule: the forbidden animals were species that escaped being classified. Consistently with the main thrust of social anthropology of my period, the argument explained abominability, but denied magicality and favoured the rationality of the Mosaic dietary code. It was gratifying to find that some Bible scholars accepted the idea that the puzzles of the abominable animals in Leviticus and Deuteronomy could be laid to rest, the prohibitions being part of the process of tidying up the classifications of the environment (see Levine's *JPS Commentary, Leviticus* (1989), 243). But a puzzle remained.

The central argument of *Purity and Danger* was that classifications are not otiose. They do something, they are necessary in organization. The pollution theory that I have seen develop over the last thirty years shows that where lines of abominability are drawn heavy stakes are at issue. The classification of the universe is part and parcel of social organization, and the categories are useful in defining who can be admitted where, and who comes first and who comes second or nowhere at all. This works so effectively elsewhere that I was implicitly waiting for it to be found true of biblical pollution (see my 'Sacred contagion' (1996)). It applies well enough, in fairly obvious ways, for the cult of the tabernacle and the dignity of the priesthood, but for the organization of society the doctrine of pollution did nothing except draw a boundary round the people of Israel against outsiders. Nothing happens at the level of action to explain the selection of forbidden animals. Against everything I believe, the cognitive scheme which left these creatures unclassified hung in the air uselessly. If chapter 11 of Leviticus was a case for pollution theory the classifying of the animals should

correspond to some important classifying for the internal organization of society. But the more that pollution theory developed, and the more that pollution was seen as the vehicle of accusations and downgradings, the more I was bound to acknowledge that it does not apply to the most famous instance of the Western tradition, the Pentateuch. All of this volume is an attempt to explain why. General pollution theory still stands, but its application to the Bible is limited. The forbidden animals turn out to have a much more interesting role than ever I imagined.

M.D.

London
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So many people have helped me with the Leviticus project, it is impossible to thank them all, yet it is a great pleasure to remember them. Some had already retired from teaching almost as long as I have (yet I think I am older than the oldest of them). Some started guiding and encouraging me when they were still students, who now are distinguished members of Bible departments all over the world. For example, Ronald Hendel was a student at a summer school in 1983 when he insisted that I should try what I so much wanted to do, and has kept his promise to help me at all stages. Kate Cooper, Richard Lim, Diane Sharon, Michael Hildebrand, and Jonathan Klawans were all graduate students under the usual pressures to finish dissertations when this started, and I am moved to remember how much they did then and still do now to help me.

As I got into the work I had to take note that Israel was in the midst of powerful empires. My woeful ignorance of Greek history and philosophy embarrassingly blocked the way, which I was forced to confess to classical scholars. Marcel Detienne, Geoffrey Lloyd, and Richard Sorabji gave so generously that I do not know how to thank them. The most fruitful ideas on archaic literary styles came from Kathryn Gutzwiller, Aditya Behl, and specially from Simon Hornblower. In divinity schools and departments of religion I drew on friends who were not primarily Bible specialists, Wendy Doniger, Paul Morris, and Simon Weightman, for relevant aspects of Indian religions. I am grateful for the insights of some remarkable Israeli anthropologists who do work on the Hebrew Bible, especially Harvey Goldberg and Don Handelman. Mark Geller, at my own college, is an unfailing source of support and advice on the relation of the Bible to Mesopotamian religions. I am also grateful to Stephanie Dalley in Oxford for the same. A European trying to understand the Bible is likely to find the wholesale

rejection of images a stumbling-block, so I was fortunate to make friends with art historians, Moshe Barasch and Lionel Kochan, who have given deep thought to the aniconic tradition. I thank them and also Miriam Hansen, who has brought her knowledge of modern German philosophy to bear so interestingly on film history.

Of course the heaviest debt is to Bible scholars. I could well have expected to be patronized, openly spurned, or subtly excluded, but instead I felt welcomed into a gracious confraternity. The obvious person to start and to end with is Jacob Milgrom. The text acknowledges his work and I will say more below. Another friend who towers over Leviticus studies is Baruch Levine, whom I only met the once in New York but who has helped me many times since. Robert Murray I have known since he was a young scholastic at Campion Hall at the close of the 1940s. His originality and his insight into the relation of humans and animals in Genesis have been crucial for this study. He is cited in the text, so also are Peter Schafer and Joseph Dan, but I need also to thank them for editorial support in the *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, and similarly, David Klein, in the *Journal of Old Testament Studies*. Others not mentioned in the writing have been indispensable as friends and as scholarly resources ever since I started to work on the Book of Numbers. Graeme Auld, my host for the Gifford Lectures on Numbers in Edinburgh in 1989, has continued to host me with great courtesy through biblical controversy. Rolf Rendtorff whenever I came to Frankfurt used to spread Hebrew works of reference over the tables and chairs in the airport lounge so that he could speedily check his remarks without interrupting a privileged commentary on what needed to be done. Hyam Maccoby, whose book on purity started after I had started on this, but which will be out first, is a good friend who has given me much help. Philip Davies, Giovanni Garbini, and Joseph Blenkinsopp have quickened my interest in the controversies surrounding the history of the Bible. Walter Houston and Gordon Wenham as Leviticus commentators have even been so good as to give expert comments on draft chapters. I must also thank Bernard Jackson for a sustained correspondence on biblical law.

For some time I had realized that Leviticus was not as much in the forefront of current biblical research as it deserved, and had been longing for a seminar that I could attend in which the hoary old problems could be discussed anew. In 1995 John Sawyer and Paul Morris organized a conference on Leviticus at Lancaster University. For anyone trying to make up for a life not spent on Bible studies it was the undreamed of, perfect, gift. I want to thank everyone who came to it, and for their very original and stimulating papers which were subsequently published by John Sawyer as *Reading Leviticus*, many of which I have used in this volume.

I received another such gift when my husband and I spent a month in Jerusalem in 1996 as the guests of the Van Leer Foundation. Jacob Milgrom, Harvey Goldberg, and Moshe Greenberg, with the help of Israel Knohl, organized four seminars on Leviticus. The formidable lions and eagles of Bible scholarship were present, they sat down peacefully with me, did not roar or pounce, and did with great charm and politeness introduce me to important problems I had not otherwise known. Amos Demsky was there, Judith Goldberg, Moshe Greenberg, Sara Japhet, Zev Kalifon, Baruch Schwartz. Moshe Weinfeld was there too, and others up to twenty. Between them the Jerusalem scholars created an exemplary forum in which everyone who was present contributed their grace and learning. And after the seminars they were all ready to talk, solving to my great joy my usual problem of finding anyone to talk about Leviticus. In Jerusalem Shemaryahu Talmon has been a special friend since he lectured in Northwestern many years ago and we found we had an interest in sectarianism in common. In Tel Aviv, where I met other old friends, Al Baumgarten organized a workshop on Sectarianism from which I benefited, as also from his subsequent book. Also in Tel Aviv Edward Greenstein gives me learned and subtle comments on particular issues to this day.

My deepest thanks have to go to Jacob Milgrom. As the doyen of Numbers and Leviticus studies he could have felt affronted at my brashness. He could easily have warned me off at the beginning, but now it is too late. Thanks to his unfailing support I have done what I wanted to do. His habit of replying by return with detailed comments on students'

drafts is well known. Even in illness, or while travelling, he has never spared his help. I fear that if his second volume of the Anchor Bible Commentary on Leviticus is late my importunity has often caused delays. His frankness is famous, and makes it possible to stay friends without always agreeing. It is at least a satisfaction to know that when he catches me out in mistakes that he has failed so far to correct, he will not hesitate to publish a list of my errors.

There are very many more who were generous to me with their time and advice, direct or by correspondence. I must thank the two who struggled to teach me enough Hebrew to read the JPT version and the dictionary, David Meyer and Frank Rosenwasser, and finally, also John Sawyer who accepted to watch over the Hebrew terms that appear here. The brief review shows that I have not lacked support at any stage, and that the shortcomings are entirely my own. I thank everyone who has helped me to come close enough to Leviticus to love it.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AAR American Academy of Religion
- BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs,
Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
(Clarendon Press, 1951)
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- JAAR *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
- JANES *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies*
- JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JCS *Journal of Classical Studies*
- JPS Jewish Publication Society
- JPT *Jewish People's Torah*
- JSOTS *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
Supplement Series
- JTS Jewish Theological Seminary
- OED *Oxford English Dictionary*

The Ancient Religion

I am the Lord who practise steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight; says the Lord. (Jeremiah 9: 23)

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. (Psalm 145: 8–9)

Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed. (Psalm 146: 5–7)

Leviticus is usually put into a kind of glass cabinet: it can be looked at, respected, and wondered at, but the real heart of the religion is presumed to be found in other parts of the Bible, especially Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, and the writings of the psalmists and prophets. The tradition does Leviticus wrong. This study's aim is to reintegrate the book with the rest of the Bible. Read in the perspective of anthropology the food laws of Moses are not expressions of squeamishness about dirty animals and invasive insects. The purity rules for sex and leprosy are not examples of priestly prurience. The religion of Leviticus turns out to be not very different from that of the prophets which demanded humble and contrite hearts, or from the psalmists' love of the house of God. The main new feature of this interpretation is the attitude to animal life. In this new perspective, Leviticus has to be read in line with Psalm 145: 8–9: the God of Israel has compassion for all that he made. His love for his animal creation lies behind his laws against eating and touching their corpses. The flocks and herds of the people of Israel are

brought under the covenant that God made with their owners, and the other animals benefit from the promises he made in Genesis after the flood, that he would guarantee the regularity of the seasons and the fertility of the ground. The more closely the text is studied, the more clearly Leviticus reveals itself as a modern religion, legislating for justice between persons and persons, between God and his people, and between people and animals. One of the central problems then becomes the question of why it has been read so differently hitherto.

An anthropologist has one first, necessary, step to make when setting out to study an ancient religion. That step is to locate the religion in some community of worshippers in some known historical time and space. Anthropologists are not trained to interpret utopias. We always try to place the religion to be studied alongside the other religions of its period and in its region. Morton Smith said that it would be misleading to regard 'the religion of Israel as a unique entity'. Surely everyone agrees to that. He went on to recommend thinking of 'the religion of the Israelites as one form of the common religion of the ancient Near East'.¹ Though it sounds such sensible advice, it turns out to be impossible to follow. There is no lack of information about the religions of Canaan, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, or Egypt. But the Bible itself made a clean sweep of its regional connections. Both Deuteronomy and Leviticus fulminate against foreign cults, especially those of Canaan and Egypt. The religion of the Pentateuch claims to have nothing in common with the neighbouring religions. Commentaries on the Pentateuch have been trying for two millennia to reconstitute what the religion of biblical Israel would have been like if those practices had not been abjured.

Look at the catalogue of differences to realize how radically the Pentateuch separated this religion from what had gone before. All the other religions were polytheistic in one sense or another, only Israel's religion was severely monotheistic. There were no subsidiary or rival deities at all, only one true God who forbade any cult to be paid to any others. This

¹ Smith, M., 1971: 21; 1952: 135 ff.

does not mean that the existence of other spirits was denied.² In fact the Bible has a role for angels as messengers of God or as manifestations of God; Satan figures as an independent agent in Zechariah, the angel of God appears in the Book of Numbers to rebuke Balaam. The wicked thing was to pay cult to the spiritual beings around.³ Only the one God has any power, and it is pointless to apply to lesser spiritual beings, as well as an unpardonable insult to the majesty of the one God. Everything else flows from this. It is hard to realize how completely their strict monolatry separated the religion of Israel from the others in the region.

The first major difference is monarchy. The role of king is completely missing in biblical rituals. The peoples in the surrounding regions were all kingdoms, some large, some small; sacral kingship⁴ with cosmological theories about the king's body figured in various forms, with rites for royal inaugurations and funerals. This is not to be brushed aside as unimportant. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are histories of the kings of Israel and Judah; but the kingship has left no trace in the religion. It is true that Deuteronomy gives some superficial advice to kings (not to maintain extravagant harems and stables, and to keep the faith, Deut 17: 14–20); but there is nothing in the cult about the role of the king, alive or dead, and not a word about kings in Leviticus.

The silence on this subject is sometimes explained by saying that the last editors of the Pentateuch wanted no more of kings and so went straight back to the primal religion of the time of Moses. Genesis is about the beginning of the world, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are about a time long before kings, so why should anyone expect there to be anything about kings in a document which antedated them? This answer is not so obvious as it seems, no religion stands still. In just a few years a lived religion syncretizes and elaborates different themes, so that it is generally diffi-

² 'Worship of several deities is compatible with monotheism, one has only to believe, for example, that the supreme ("true") deity has created beings inferior to itself but superior to men and has ordained that men should worship them.' Smith, *M.*, 1952: 165 n. 111.

³ Sawyer 1984.

⁴ Frankfort 1948.

cult to say what came first and what came last. The scholarly opinion is that the Pentateuch was edited soon after the fall of the last king, which makes it exceedingly strange that kings left no mark on it. A literary *tour de force* eliminated monarchy from ancient texts about rites in which the role of king had been central for at least 600 years.

Ancestors were also eliminated. Ancestors are humans who have been decorporalized, in other religions they have become spiritual beings, intelligent agents with some powers to act. Consistently, Israel's religion ruled out cults of ancestors and propitiation of ghosts. There are plenty of signs of cults of the spirits of the dead in the Bible, but the religion recorded by Leviticus and Deuteronomy abhors interaction with the dead, there is no official cult of ancestors. They also rule out belief in demons. When access to both demons and spirits of the dead is forbidden, divination, as a technique for consulting the dead or other spiritual beings, becomes impossible. Except the oracle of the high priest, all forms of divination were banned. If this were the only change it would have left a devastating gap in the religion, affecting ritual, doctrine, and practice. Magic, as a set of cultic techniques for recruiting the powers of minor spiritual beings to the purposes of the magician or his client, was ruled out too. This does not mean to say that at a popular level magicians and oracles were not consulted, there is plenty of evidence that they were, but officially in Leviticus they were banned. There were to be no more horoscopes or auguries, no auspicious times for engaging in work or war and inauspicious times for staying at home, only the one holy sabbath day of God. Add to all this that images were banned because of their association with idolatry, and the gulf between the religion of the Bible and those of the surrounding peoples can hardly be exaggerated.

Even more significant would be the gulf between the writers and their own past. A complex oracle provides a complete system of the world in which the diviner locates the particular information that his client brings, and from it draws a wealth of distant implications enriched by assiduously gathered local understandings. Abolishing divination would have eroded a mnemonic system and obliterated a store of know-

ledge, and more, it would have dealt a lethal blow against the coherence of knowledge. Without the practical use in consultation the grand system of balanced analogies would atrophy into a jangling mumbo-jumbo. These gaps in information would be one source of pressure for Leviticus' new synthesis, but no one could have been able to reconstitute the religion as it had been.

To present an ancient religion as if in its original form, but actually purged of its central elements, calls for a great effort of rethinking. Cutting out polytheism, kingship, oracles, ancestors, demons, magic, diviners, healers, and images meant that very little of the superseded religion would be left intact. The Levitical resynthesis has been so skilful that the reader is easily lulled into accepting the antique pastoral scene. Only very alert scrutiny discovers where the seams have been stitched over and the gaps closed, sometimes real gaps in knowledge. The basis for the synthesis has three planks, three principles which govern what the religion of Leviticus took and what it rejected from the religions in the region. The first is the justice of God. The central teaching of Leviticus is God's righteousness. The second is the covenant which laid down his relations with his people. This means not one covenant, to be sure, but the whole series, the covenant with Noah, the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, culminating with the covenant on Sinai.

The third principle is circumcision, the sign of the covenant. For the people of Israel and for no one else, there are two modes of affiliation: one is natural descent from father to son, the other is cultural, alliance through the covenant.⁵ Leviticus is an elaborate teaching of the difference between sexual and ritual reproduction. It opposes natural fertility to the ritual for making heirs to God's promise. Descent by the seed of the loins on the one hand, and the cut and blood of the circumcised penis on the other, its laws keep the two bodily fluids, semen and blood, meticulously apart. It is not likely that these three principles were new. The justice of God, the covenant, and the two dispensations, nature and law, were the basis of his people's religious belief. Whatever else had been rejected, these central principles

⁵ Goldberg 1996.

were stable.

CHRONOLOGY AND THE WRITING

In spite of this, the strong impression remains that the Pentateuch must have been the book of a totally reformed religion. Royal rites eliminated, no kings, no spirits of the dead, no local fertility spirits, no shape-shifting demons, no oracles, no magicians or diviners. The Pentateuch is written in an attempt to rebuild faith and trust, not on new but rather on old foundations. Leviticus goes back to a primordial revelation, it is fundamentalist in the sense that its teachings are founded on the word of God given to Moses and recorded by him. Why does a people make a clean sweep of its old religion and adopt overnight a radical, puritanical, egalitarian bias? Such an overthrow of old institutions would be undertaken after a major catastrophe. When would that have been? Robertson Smith opined that Bible studies had reached 'a point where nothing of vital importance for the historical study of the Old Testament religion still remains uncertain'.⁶

He said that a hundred years ago, but in the passage of time the chronology of writing the texts remains uncertain.

A s
to the history itself, the period between the ninth and fifth centuries BCE gave plenty of cause for religious revival: a continuing record of foreign war, invasion, destruction, deportation, and political disaster. Both Israel and Judah drawn violently into western Asiatic political affairs were quite unable to direct their own. In the eighth century the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated in war, laid waste, and made tributary to Assyria. In the sixth century the southern kingdom of Judah was defeated in war, Jerusalem captured, the king, nobles, and learned men deported, and the temple destroyed. Between the two catastrophes, is it necessary to choose the one to which the Pentateuch responds? The choice of a precise date could perhaps be evaded and yet a

⁶ Smith, W. R., (1889) 1972.

context be found for the writing of the Bible in the extended period of tribulation. Moshe Weinfeld (writing of Deuteronomy 30: 4 and 4: 27) said: 'Most scholars tend to assign these passages to the post-exilic period. But this is unnecessary. In the background to these passages there is clearly the fact of a captivity and of an extensive dispersion, . . . but not necessarily the captivity of Judah, since it could be the captivity of Samaria.'⁷

It helps the reading of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to recall that the books were composed and edited during a long period of continuing political upheaval. Though they are different, at least that much common context can be proposed for them: the anguish of living with the disasters of war and the need to rebuild solidarity, this would be the context and the impetus for producing the Pentateuch. But, alas, the bad experience of invasion and defeat is too general to provide a guide to interpretation. To this day it is the lot of too many peoples; some react to it one way, by resort to rejection of the world and a call to fundamentalist renewal, others by trying to establish legislative control, others by gestures of reconciliation. The responsibility of deciding whether Leviticus relates to the eighth or fifth century or earlier, or later, cannot be completely evaded. Just for the sake of writing about the book, some standpoint in time has to be adopted. For lack of historical skills in the region the anthropologist can only accept the largest scholarly consensus, and this at present points to the post-exilic period, the Second Temple community in the fifth century.

The new version may have been first worked out intellectually by the writer of Leviticus, using very old fragments of laws, and subsequently applied to the reform of the cult. Alternatively, the laws could have emerged unsystematically in the course of organizing ceremonies and teaching, the practice first, and the ratiocination and the doctrinal synthesis afterwards. Another possibility again is suggested by the studied elegance and powerfully contrived structure. A literary composition that is so impressive could suggest that writing a theological treatise was the full achievement. The sceptical likelihood that the book is a beautiful fantasy, a

⁷ Weinfeld 1976: 35.

vision of a life that never was, hangs heavily over the interpretation. But in this study the question will be kept open so as to leave room for an anthropological reading.

RECONSTRUCTING THE PRIMORDIAL RELIGION

The priestly editors intended no doubt to reinstate the pure Mosaic legacy, shorn of accretions. Ironically, it would have been much the same exercise as William Robertson Smith's when he tried to discover the most primitive elements of the religion of the Semitic peoples. The priests tried to reach back, beyond their kings, to the original form of the religion that God had given to Moses. Likewise, Robertson Smith tried to reach back beyond the Bible that they edited. His method was to study the surviving forms of what he called pagan religions in Arabia, religions which he believed to have been unaffected by the Bible teaching.

The method was inherently flawed: there is no reason to suppose that religions in the region would have remained static over the millennia; there is no justification for the moral evolutionism by which he hoped to track certain changes. Robertson Smith tried to relate the Bible religion to set phases in the development of humankind, from most primitive hunters, to less primitive pastoralists, to settled communities of agriculturalists. A text that referred to sedentary farmers was taken to be later than one that referred to nomadic cowherds. He thought that the rest of Arabia would have escaped Bible influence, so if he could study religions of pastoralists, whether pagan or Islamic, he would have a line on what had preceded the Bible religion. In spite of these obvious weaknesses, his results suggest what would have been involved in introducing an anti-monarchical, monotheistic religion in that region.

First he found the relations of the worshippers to their gods to be governed by a close tie between the people, their territory, and their god. In a region of small, sparse, and scattered communities each would have had its own god as their final resource, maintaining their local moral order; in

their endemic feuds with each other the gods would have been hostile to the enemies of their worshippers. A king who wanted to consolidate a larger political unit would inevitably be forced into the position of defending the weak against the strong, and so the ideal of kingship would have been seen as the source of 'even-handed justice through the nation, without respect of persons'.⁸ He quotes the Hebrew prophets on the one true God as the king of absolute justice. As patron-client relations linked persons to persons, so the worshipper was seen as the client of his Baal, the name for the local god. It follows that when only one God was to be worshipped, that one God would take on a patron's role, and his congregation became his client: he would be invoked as the fount of absolute justice.

The concern for fertility in Baal worship is equally important for Leviticus. A republican-minded congregation can accept a religion without kings, so long as the idea of justice is transferred to the one God. But no congregation that has been in the habit of expecting its god to watch over its conceiving, birthing, and rearing of infants and of livestock will be ready to do without its fertility cult. If the one true God were to supersede the local Baal deities, he would have to take on their responsibilities. Fertility is not something that is just wanted in a general way, it is the aggregated longing of particular women to conceive, the wish of particular men to have descendants, the anxiety of particular mothers for the life of their own babies, of particular farmers for their own livestock and crops. Mere talk is not going to be enough to assuage these ardent personal desires. It is all very well for the God of Genesis to tell his creatures to go forth with his blessing on their breeding, or to declare that he will give numerous descendants to Abraham and Isaac. There has to be something that these anxious worshippers can do in the here-and-now to bring their particular cases to his mind. There have to be offerings that they can make to direct his life-giving power to their own lives and to the vegetation and animals on which they depend. In the Canaanite religions first fruits were

⁸ Smith, W. R., (1889) 1972: 73.

⁹ 'As the Kirta epic and other Ugaritic texts indicate, El, the supreme god at Ugarit, was concerned with healing, specially infertility' (Avalos 1997: 454).

offered to the Baal.⁹ The Pentateuch redirects all sacrifices and the first-fruit ceremonies to the honour of the one God.

Redirecting the positive cults that honoured Baal to the worship of the God of Israel is an easy accommodation to monotheism. But what to do about cults to avert the harm caused by demons? The priests can hardly take over the therapies designed to subdue or chase demons away without acknowledging their dangerous power. Nothing is said about any demons in Leviticus, unless Azazel mentioned in the scapegoat ceremony (Lev 16: 8, 10, 26) is one. Demons were important in Canaan, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and all around. They had the ability to transform themselves into animals, so they were partly corporeal, they had a putrid smell, they could suffer death and when they died a corpse was to be found, usually the corpse of an animal. They inhabited wild places, desert, mountains, and woodland; from their usual haunts they could come out and catch a person and strike him or her with illness. They attacked pregnant women, caused miscarriages, made women and cattle barren, and killed off babies. Demons, in the Canaanite beliefs, were regarded as impure, antithetical to the cult of Baal. In so far as the Baal was a source of fertility, demonic agencies would be a standardized explanation of barrenness and failure.¹⁰

To take demons out of the religion would leave a huge gap. It is not just that the worshippers are wishing for fertility, but also that they are wanting to understand the innumerable losses and diseases which they are in the habit of ascribing to demons. If they are told not to fear demons any more, how are they to explain their misfortunes? Leviticus finds one solution for the two problems, replacing the demons and satisfying the need for explanations. Briefly, Leviticus separated the theory of impurity from belief in demons, and classified impurity as a form of *lèse majesté*, an attack on God's honour as the covenanted lord of the people of Israel. The simple move, expressed in rules for controlling ritual contagion, teaches the people not to blame non-existent demons for misfortunes. The rules prescribe action to remove impurity, washing in the case of minor impurities, sacrifice in the case

¹⁰ Stuart 1991.

of bloodshed, genital discharges, and the set of skin afflictions called leprosy. Leviticus prescribes a sacrifice for atonement once a year for the sanctuary and altar to be purified. In the new synthesis the congregation which would have been very worried about attacks from demons now finds that demons cannot harm them. But they still suffer from all the things that used to be attributed to demons. They are taught that they are safe so long as they keep the rules and control impurity. In the ongoing history of the religion Leviticus' doctrinal effort to transcend fear of demons is a modernizing move which stands parallel to the effort of Christian doctrine to transcend fear of incurring physical impurities, focusing the congregation's attention on fidelity to the love of God.

The adaptation of the folk religion to the new doctrine creates another problem. When impurity was associated with demons any animal might become impure as the result of an attack: the impure animal was a victim. There would have been no conflict between the doctrine of a merciful, just, and loving God who made the animals, and the theory that an animal might become a source of impurity. But now that demonic agency is excluded, the idea emerges that the impure animals might be noxious in themselves, abominable. This is the established reading of animal impurity. But here we ask why the good kind God would create abominable animals? In Genesis chapter 1 God made teeming, fecund animals, in the waters and in the skies, saw that they were good, blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth. Having made these living creatures the God of Genesis does not suddenly turn round in Leviticus and revile them. God is not capricious and inconsistent. Concentrated in God is the life-giving power of the local Baals, God is the protector of animal and vegetable life. Of course he would not let his human clients abuse his other creatures. The God of Leviticus requires an account of blood of animals shed.

Ritual purity is a kind of two-way protection, a holy thing is protected from profanation, the profane thing is protected from holiness. The idea that hands that were clean become unclean after touching a holy thing is paradoxical for us, but

¹¹ The *Mishnah*, 6th Division, Tohoroth (Cleanness), 4-6.

seems to have been acceptable to the early exegetes. When asked why anyone who touched the scriptures had to wash their hands, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai explained the 'uncleanness' of scriptures by saying, 'as is their preciousness so is their uncleanness'.¹¹ By declaring that the holy scriptures 'make the hands unclean' the rabbis were accepting the double-edged paradox of holiness, inherently dangerous, liable to break out and needing to be protected from profane intrusion. This is very hard for a secular culture to understand.

In this chapter and in pages to follow the term 'theology' is used. In a non-denominational sense, theology means a theory of God, his attributes, and his actions. Among some Jewish and Christian Bible scholars there is a half-joking convention that 'theology' is Christian and that the word does not apply to the Jewish religious thinkers. Theologians are specialized practitioners, but theology, like philosophy, may be homespun, popular, and implicit. It can never, by the nature of the subject, be exhaustive, it is not necessarily coherent or even very well articulated. Leviticus reveals itself as a theological treatise in the full sense of the word, and fully in the biblical tradition. Its teachings about God's grandeur, his unswerving justice and unfailing compassion, are best read in the light of the prophets and psalms. So far from being disorganized, it systematizes a theory of divine justice which underlies Genesis and Exodus.

However, real difficulties beset the reading of Leviticus. Judah was conquered by Rome; Judaic and Christian thought, along with Greek and Roman, are the foundation of Western civilization. In the long powerful push to modernity the reading of the Bible was successively transformed. Every succeeding age marvels at how well the Bible speaks to its own understanding. No doubt it has suffered reinterpretations, but it seems to stand as a beacon of clarity and light in spite of radical changes of emphasis. After all the centuries of rereading two books in the Pentateuch remain obdurately opaque, the priestly books of Leviticus and Numbers. This is partly due to a rhetorical style which defies straightforward reading. Numbers is redeemed by its narrative; it takes the history of the people of Israel from the time they escaped from Egypt to their arrival at the River Jordan. But Leviticus