

○ REVIEW OF WESLEY J. BERGEN'S *READING RITUAL: LEVITICUS IN POSTMODERN CULTURE*

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David Jobling reviews *Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture* by Wesley J. Bergen (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2005).

[M]ost of the activities described in Leviticus 1-7 have been transformed into something else. The action of animal sacrifice on an individual scale has been transformed into corporate factories hidden from view. The action required for the forgiveness of sin has been removed to a hilltop in Israel some 2000 years ago. The basic needs of justice and restitution have been moved into the courts... The language of sacrifice has been taken over by sports teams, army recruiters, politicians, and marriage counselors. The role of priest has been taken by scientists (132).

Wesley Bergen's topic is the cultural diffusion of a biblical text – an obscure and alien text for the US 'Christian' mainstream – and the ritual activity to which it testifies. His primary interest is ritual: he engages at length with ritual studies and seeks out cultural after-effects of Leviticus which themselves take the form of rituals. But he gives sophisticated attention to the problem that access to ritual in ancient Israel is mediated by a text. For Jews, Leviticus is a sign of the absence, the impossibility, of a ritual, since there is no more Temple. But the text – the ritual reading of it – also enables some sort of 'imaginative performance' of the lost ritual.

After an Introduction covering critical issues, Bergen offers five relatively independent chapters (2–6). Chapters 2 and 3 are very engaging. In Chapter 2, he asks what has become in our culture of the slaughter of animals for food. He draws on personal experience of the slaughterhouse industry, finding it highly ritualised, both the slaughter itself and its links (via MacDonald's) with a capitalist cult of consumption. Its rigorous hiding of itself from public view is worthy of a mystery religion. In Chapter 3 Bergen looks at 'the Church of Monday Night Football' (in relation to Leviticus 4). He interprets it as a ritual of American enculturation, exclusively for males. He impressively argues that the advertisements accompanying the game function like the Leviticus text, telling participants what to believe about the ritual.

Chapter 4 is for me the most impressive, and I would have put it first. Though the religious sacrifice of animals is alien to North American experience, there are parts of the world, especially parts of Africa, where it is routine behaviour, and this can defamiliarise our assumptions. Bergen has done a great deal of research on sacrifice in Africa. He effectively contrasts the African emphasis on real physical effects of sacrifice with the western need to analyse it theologically. He notes how Africans' direct identification with the Old Testament has led to conflict with missionaries and been a major reason for the establishment of African independent churches.

Chapter 5 finds Bergen at his most impassioned. The main way that blood sacrifice has been expressed in US history is through war, which is saturated with the language of sacrifice. The

spilling of blood has been so necessary for national identity that the periodic sacrifice of generations of its young has marked its whole history. This is not a very original chapter but Bergen does a good job in reviewing various understandings of the ritual aspects of US militarism.

Chapter 6 seems to me the least successful. Bergen undertakes the massive task of summarising 'the afterlife of Leviticus 1-7 in the church'. He pursues two lines: (1) how sacrifice language got processed through the death of Jesus into the ritual of the Eucharist, and (2) how sacrifice came, in crusade mentality, illogically to include sacrificing enemies in order to avenge Christ's death. He attempts to establish connections between these two points, but I found them confusing.

Chapter 7 gives the book an original and helpful ending. Bergen creates a conversation between three aspects of himself, the scholar, the Mennonite pastor, and the postmodern gadfly thinker, and he is believable in each of these roles. This conversation resumes many of the discussions of the earlier chapters, lighting them up from new perspectives and assisting the reader to digest them.

Bergen is a skilled and passionately engaged cultural critic. He fearlessly follows Leviticus 1-7 wherever in twenty-first century culture it takes him. The book will be of interest to biblical scholars and cultural critics alike. It will engage students and appeal to a 'wider audience' more successfully than many books that overtly set out to do so. The bibliography is notable for breadth as well as length – in each of the many places where Leviticus leads him, Bergen has made himself knowledgeable enough to deserve a hearing.

Finally, some notes on usage: 'Lead' is repeatedly used as the past/passive participle of 'to lead'. 'Media' is construed as singular and plural within a single line (78). On the credit side, 'priorize' is preferred to the absurdity 'prioritize'.