

# Land, Rest & Sacrifice: Ecological Reflections on the Book of Leviticus

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## Abstract

The socio-religious regulations of Leviticus offer little-explored perspectives from which to reflect on the relationship between humanity and the non-human creation. The cosmological framework upon which the worldview expressed in Leviticus is constructed places humanity at the fragile interface between creation (order) and chaos (destruction), ever struggling to discern, define and delineate the sacred and the profane.

Several texts in Leviticus portray the land as an active character; capable of vomiting, resting and maintaining a ritualistically demanding relationship with God. Not only does the land appear to have a distinct relationship with YHWH, but in fact that relationship predates YHWH's commitment to Israel. When the people sin, they risk not only the retreat of YHWH's presence from the sanctuary, but also the land ejecting them in order that it might fulfill its ritual obligations.

Each member of the community is responsible for maintaining the well-being of the lived-in world as expressed through obedience to teachings concerning the body, the social group, and cultic behaviour. Within this system, the manifested symbols of created order are those essential elements which enable the sustenance of the whole community: the people, the land, its vegetation and its animals.

Responsible human care for this divinely-established ecology is thus ingrained in, and carefully detailed through, the regulations in Leviticus. Important examples include prescriptions for a sabbatical year for the land to rest and to restore its fertility; the Sabbath day as a space of economic disruption and regeneration; agricultural festivals as cultic boundaries of the life of the community; and dietary and cultic laws regulating the killing of animals for humans (as food) or for God (as sacrifice). Disobedience, or sin, renders both the human community, and the land upon which it lives, polluted and unclean.

A particularly significant measure of controlling or cleansing the resulting pollution, of both the community and the land, is animal sacrifice – the killing of a perfect animal for God has the potential to restore the delicate balance between chaos and creation. Given these observations, Leviticus' conceptions of the land, animal sacrifice and ritualized rest can be perceived as a fruitful biblical locus of reflection from which to engage contemporary ecological ethics and praxis.

# Acknowledgments

I am immensely grateful to everyone who has helped me in a small or great way on the precarious journey that has been writing this thesis.

First, foremost and overwhelming thanks go to my supervisor, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, without whose endless patience, expert counsel, affirming encouragement of and unshakable faith in me, I would in no way have got this far.

Dave Horrell and Chris Southgate who generously gave me so much time, energy, wisdom and support, and Cherryl Hunt and Dom Coad who, in combination with the above, made up a thoroughly lovely group of people to think, discuss, debate, eat, drink and be merry with. Thanks are also due to Carrie, Cate and Emily Horrell and Richmond Hunt for their regular hospitality (and patience).

All my colleagues in the Department of Theology and Religion, past and present, for each helping to make it such a collegial and pleasant atmosphere in which to learn, think and share and for putting up with our endless ecological seminars: Tim Gorringer, Mark Wynn, Rachel Muers, Mike Higton, David Grumett, Esther Reed, Don Murray, Louise Lawrence, Adrian Thatcher, Alastair Logan, Siam Bhayro and Mary Macneill.

Special thanks to Morwenna, Piers, Lydia and Eva Ludlow who so generously and thoughtfully invited us to and hosted us in Princeton, for what was a really enjoyable and useful trip. Thanks also to Kate Skrebutenas who welcomed and accommodated us so kindly at the PTS Library.

Eddie Adams, John Barton, John Rogerson and Stephen Barton who served as the UBEE project's external advisory team and gave up their valuable time to guide us, made our annual colloquia really stimulating and enjoyable events and were always generous in their encouragement and light-handed in their advice. A special note of thanks to John and Rosalind Rogerson for their very generous hospitality in Sheffield on more than one occasion, and to John for his detailed and helpful engagement with my work.

Philip Jenson, Hugh Pyper, David Clough, Harry Maier, Elaine Wainwright, Ellen Davis, Gerald Downing, John Milbank, Anne Elvey, Edward Echlin and Ched Myers who have all taken the time to encourage me in my work.

John Hughes, Brutus Green, Kirsty Mitchell and Siân Hanson who, as well as being loving and supportive friends, provided me with accommodation during various research trips and conferences.

Hayley and Nigel Fox and Drew Worthley, for love and support above and beyond.

Finally, Susannah Cornwall, to whom the debt of gratitude I owe simply cannot be measured. I love you.

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## Introduction

*Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen: vow of rigor, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with idols and we have barely begun to listen to symbols.<sup>1</sup>*

### Why Read Ecologically?

This thesis was written in the context of a wider AHRC-sponsored project focussed on 'The Use of the Bible in Environmental Ethics' (2006-2009). The project developed out of both a recognition of the increasing significance and awareness of the detrimental impact of human activity on the planet, and a certain sense of the insufficiency (and in many cases inadequacy) of the existing responses from within theological and especially biblical scholarship.

There is neither the need nor the space to rehearse in detail here arguments concerning the extent of, or the legitimacy of concerns regarding, the ecological crisis that we face. Besides the established scientific consensus concerning anthropogenic climate change, the reality that the ever increasing global population, and the equally persistent expansion of markets, is putting non-renewable natural resources under mounting strain, and contributing ever more in terms of air, soil and water pollution and non-biodegradable waste, is established beyond all doubt. In addition, these factors are increasing the demand for products and services created by means of deforestation, land clearance, strip mining and other industrial processes that fuel species loss and bring lasting devastation to the natural environments in which they occur.

Increasing awareness and discussion of these issues, framed by the growing social and political concern regarding climate change in particular, has, over the last few decades, facilitated engagement from several quarters,

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, (trans. Denis Savage), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, (1970) 27.

including that of biblical scholarship. To some extent, of course, it makes good sense for the Bible to be thus engaged, given that the Christian churches call it holy scripture and look to its interpretation for inspiration and guidance, and also considering that many of the loudest voices of disdain for ecological consideration have come from certain sections therein. However, it is not at all obvious how one might go about engaging the Bible in both a scholarly, critically informed way and from the perspective of this thoroughly contemporary issue.

To some extent the ball was set rolling by the publication of Lynn White Jr's now somewhat infamous 1967 *Science* article in which he argues that Christian theology is significantly culpable with regard to the ecological crisis, due to the way that it emphasised the notion that there exists a fundamental divide between humanity and the natural world, and legitimated the belief that human progress requires and legitimates the exploitation of nature.<sup>2</sup> White makes it clear that a major aspect of his accusation against Christianity relies on his understanding of both the "concept of time as non-repetitive and linear" and the "striking story of creation" that it "inherited from Judaism":<sup>3</sup>

By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam, and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Although the core of his criticism is directed towards the traditions of Western Christianity, and in particular natural theology, the combination of the

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<sup>2</sup> White Jr, Lynn, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155, (1967) 1203-1207.

<sup>3</sup> While I do not specifically engage White's argument, both of these notions are examined in this thesis (although in a significantly different way, and pointing to (largely) opposite conclusions).

<sup>4</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots...' 1205.

provocative nature of his claims and the lack of sophistication with which he handles the texts that he draws on (but never names), White's argument has made a significant impact on the biblical scholarly landscape, and remains one of the most widely cited contributions to eco-theological discourse. While White's paper was deserving of the critical response it received from biblical scholars keen to point out the substantial limitations of its interpretation,<sup>5</sup> it is only proper to emphasize that, as a medieval historian, he was some way out of his area of expertise. It is also worth stressing that, while White was fiercely critical of what he perceived as the dominant theological traditions regarding creation and nature, the way forward that he proposed was also grounded in theology, this time the life and work of St Francis.<sup>6</sup>

The most important and lasting aspect of White's contribution was the way that it confronted the discipline of biblical studies with the imperatives of ecological ethics and, in a sense, demanded a response. Since then, various trends have emerged with regard to ecological-biblical criticism as part of attempt to take the kind of critique that White expressed, seriously. Some have tended to jump to the defence of what they have perceived as 'brutalized' texts, while others full-bloodedly critiqued texts that they saw as unavoidably 'brutalizing'.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the approach, many have shared the conviction that Joseph Blenkinsopp has forcefully expressed:

This is the point that must be emphasized. The problem lies with us, with the world of diminished moral purposefulness that we inhabit rather than with the ancient

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Barr, James, 'Man and Nature – The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 55, (1972) 9-32.

<sup>6</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots...' 1207.

<sup>7</sup> N.B. Phyllis Trible's famous notion of 'texts of terror'; Trible, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, (1984).

world of Israelites or Greeks. We can explain to some extent how the ecological crisis came about, but we should not use the Bible as an alibi.<sup>8</sup>

Blenkinsopp's assertion raises two issues important for this thesis. First, he astutely notes that critique of the text, as a text, can, if left as such, become an exercise in scapegoating. Such an approach would, like all acts of scapegoating, serve only to maintain the *status quo* and reinforce the denial, as readers, of our (social, cultural, individual) responsibilities. This is a problem because, like good history, good theology is not just about the interpretation or excavation of the past, but also about creative engagement with the present and future.

Secondly, Blenkinsopp makes it clear that he is speaking from within a context wherein abandonment of either the text or the world is not an option. He says,

[F]or those of us who are Jews or Christians, and who believe we are called on to use our God-given critical faculties when reading the Bible as in other respects, there is no other recourse than to keep returning to the Bible if we are to review critically and within a context of faith our own opinions and those of others on such a basic issue as our relation to the environment. Biblical interpretation has always been a constitutive element of the tradition in which Jews and Christians in their different ways understand themselves and their place in the world.<sup>9</sup>

It is from this platform that this thesis builds. I am not choosing to read scripture in the light of the ecological crisis primarily because of any assumption or specific sense of ecological merit therein, but rather because, as a Christian theologian, my duties and commitment to both the world and the scriptures mean that "there is no other recourse".

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<sup>8</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph, 'Creation, the Body, and Care for a Damaged World', in Blenkinsopp, Joseph, (ed.) *Treasure Old & New: Essays in the Theology of the Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, (2004) 38.

<sup>9</sup> Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 38-39.



In this sense, my thesis is founded on the notion that, for the communities of faith that hold the content of the Hebrew Bible to be 'scripture', engaging it in the light of the pressing issues of the day is not based on the logic of utility, but that of necessity. There is no not-reading, there are only worse readings and better ones. A vow of obedience, and a vow of rigor.<sup>10</sup>

One significant attempt to give structure to the rigorous duty of reading ecologically is found in the framework devised and utilized by The Earth Bible project and much of the work associated with the Society of Biblical Literature ecological hermeneutics seminar to which it gave rise.<sup>11</sup> This framework is based around three key hermeneutical traits and six ecojustice principles that are designed to guide ecological readings. There is not the space or need to rehearse the details of that framework here, but it will be useful for our purposes perhaps simply to include some sense of how this thesis differs from the approach laid out by Habel et al within the Earth Bible project.<sup>12</sup>

The ecojustice principles involve an affirmation of: the *intrinsic worth* of the whole universe; the *interconnectedness* of all living things; the notion that the Earth has a *voice* and celebrates and/or cries out against oppression; the inherent *purpose* within the universe, as part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place; the possibility for *mutual custodianship* of the Earth; and the notion that the Earth community engages in active *resistance* to ecological injustices. In utilizing these principles, biblical texts are measured against this standard in order to calculate the extent to which they are ecologically sound or otherwise.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. the quotation from Ricoeur above (note 1).

<sup>11</sup> See Habel, Norman C., (ed.) *Readings From the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible 1, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (2000); Habel, Norman C. and Peter Trudinger, (eds.) *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 46, Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, (2008).

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed presentation of the framework see Earth Bible Team, The, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', in Habel, Norman C., (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible 1, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (2000) 38-53; Habel, Norman C., 'Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics', in Habel and Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, 1-8.

Hermeneutically, the Earth Bible project utilizes three stages, which involve: *suspicion* regarding both a text's likely inherent anthropocentric and patriarchal tendencies and the role of these same forces in the history of the text's reception and interpretation; *identification*, on the part of interpreters, of their kinship with the earth and recognition of their existence within the planet's ecosystem; and *retrieval* of the voice of the Earth and/or Earth community within the text, that has formerly been masked or ignored.<sup>13</sup>

While, as Horrell points out in his introduction to the collection of essays produced by the project of which this thesis is a part, there is clearly much to commend in both the principles and the hermeneutical tasks that the Earth Bible project has identified, there are also interesting questions raised by the notion of doing theological interpretation of the Bible shaped by a set of principles that are explicitly not grounded in theology, tradition or scripture.<sup>14</sup>

One of Horrell's concerns here (and something that we have discussed at length as a team) relates to the potentially limited persuasiveness of such an approach. "But why, for Christians", he asks, "should these principles be found *persuasive*, persuasive enough for ethical commitment and critical evaluation of the Bible?"<sup>15</sup> One crucial factor involved in constructing an ecological interpretative method is thus highlighted by this query – the audience.

Scholars scrutinizing a text are used to asking critical questions regarding the location of its intended audience as well as that of its authors, but we are perhaps less prepared than we should be to clarify the audiences for which, and ends to which, we write. One possible benefit, for example, of framing ecological interpretation within a context that makes few to no theological demands of the

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<sup>13</sup> This is a summary of the descriptions set out in Habel, 'Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics', 2-5.

<sup>14</sup> See Horrell, David G., 'Introduction', in Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavrakopoulou, (eds.) *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark (2010) 8; cf. The Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', 38.

<sup>15</sup> Horrell, 'Introduction', 8.

interpreter, is that it potentially paves the way for a secular application of, or secular interest in, the interpretation and texts concerned. It is not my intention to debate here the merits or otherwise of this type of approach, but rather simply to state that (as implied above) my work relies heavily on the notion of a prior investment in the text as scripture.

While as an academic I address the academic community, shape my method and style accordingly and recognise it as the primary locus for the communication of this contribution to knowledge, as a theologian wrestling with a pressing ethical issue, I also write with an explicitly Christian and Western cultural context in mind. There is a tension between a 'contribution to knowledge' and 'instruction in righteousness'. While I write with an ecclesial context in mind, this is a thesis, not a sermon. I am not trying to instruct, *per se*,<sup>16</sup> I am offering up *reflections* (see below) to communities (ecclesial and academic) for whom teaching and learning are fundamentally discursive, inclusive acts.

The damage caused by the deepening ecological crisis, while already palpable for many people in various places, is, in the short to medium term, sure to increase. Communities of faith, like all global communities, will need resources of strength, inspiration and guidance if they are to have a hope of enacting the kind of change that sustainable living demands, as well as compassionately engaging in the work of responding to the suffering of others. The impacts of ecological degradation are shaping and will further shape the world within which the gospel is to be lived and proclaimed. This is the theological and ecclesiological context into which I write.

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that I do not hope that my reflections are *instructive* (in a broad sense), but merely that they are not delivered as *instruction*.

## Why Read Leviticus?

In terms both of the history of Christian theology and the history of modern biblical scholarship, Leviticus has long been something of an outsider. As Ephraim Radner has argued, from fairly early on in the Christian story, Leviticus has been known as a troublesome read. Speaking of Origen's sustained reflections thereon, Radner notes that

While the efforts of Christian theologians of his era and after to respond to the range of Manichean-like rejections of the Old Testament were largely successful, at least theoretically, Leviticus itself always proved an intransigently difficult case in the concrete. Origen's pioneering exegesis, both as a whole and with respect to Leviticus in particular, was a deliberate response to the widespread sense in the church that the book was both too hard to parse and finally irrelevant (possibly even hostile) to Christian concerns.<sup>17</sup>

My experience suggests that, by and large, little has changed in this respect with regard to the church. The key distinction between this era and the one that saw the birth of modern biblical scholarship, however, was the receptivity of the respective scholars. In short, Origen's enthusiasm for Leviticus was shared by few of the nineteenth century's most prominent critics.

For Julius Wellhausen, perhaps the most famous Old Testament scholar of his day, Leviticus was typical of the late, post-exilic, Priestly material in the Old Testament, which represented bureaucratized, legalistic, stagnant Judaism – as opposed to the dynamic, ethically charged religion of early Israel, best illustrated in the writing prophets.<sup>18</sup> Along with the widespread uptake of what became the

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<sup>17</sup> Radner, Ephraim, *Leviticus*, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible, London: SCM Press (2008) 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Wellhausen, Julius, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Reprint of the Edition of 1885, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, (1994) 3-4. It is, of course, now widely recognized that a certain amount of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic sentiment played a significant role in shaping these

Documentary Hypothesis, came a new rationale with which to justify the marginalization or even vilification of Leviticus.

One of the central motifs of Wellhausen's critique of Leviticus was his perception that its cultic regulations, and particularly its conception of the festal calendar, were underpinned by a thoroughly denaturalizing bent.<sup>19</sup> By shifting emphasis onto regulatory concepts like the sabbath, the purity laws and the centralized sacrificial system, the Priestly writer undermined the natural structure of the agricultural year, rode roughshod over the concerns of the rural majority, and generally translated the alienation from nature and true Israelite culture caused by the exile.

Both the alien status of Leviticus within the tradition, and this conception that it is itself profoundly shaped by a context of alienation, make it an interesting proposition with regards to ecological engagement. This notion of the alien represents a key touchstone for my hermeneutic and is, therefore, explored in the next section.

In addition to the features of Leviticus that make it a distinctive and potentially interesting basis for an ecological reading in terms of its genre and reception history, there are two further aspects to the selection. The first of these is a simple concept, but not one to be underestimated.

Leviticus is a book of canon. Its contents are fixed; they are bounded by limitations that are far beyond any effect that this interpretation can bring about. This is significant in terms of a discipline of focus. Although, where relevant, I have brought other Hebrew Bible texts into my discussions, the primary focus is very much on the ideas, concepts and practices that are encountered by a reader of the final form of Leviticus. One of the key temptations when formulating a

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conceptions. For a critical engagement with Wellhausen's approach and legacy see Levenson, Jon D., *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, (1993) esp. 10-32.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 104.

reading of scripture in the light of a particular contemporary context is to employ a kind of 'wordsearch' logic whereby any and every text that makes reference to a specific term or concept is added to the weight of the argument.

While I recognise solid textual-critical and doctrinal reasons why intra-canonical criticism can be a significant aid to interpretation, the particular risks associated with ecological readings are substantial. There are at once thousands of passages that one could argue bring something significant to bear on readings in the light of contemporary ecological concern, and at the same time precious few and/or none. Depending on the nature of the hermeneutic employed, the problem of a combination of having an almost infinite number of texts to engage and yet needing an extremely careful hermeneutic in order to engage in meaningful interpretation can prove a difficult balance.

Taking a canonical book as the primary focus, to some extent independently of its perceived fruitfulness for the task at hand, is one way to discipline and prove a particular interpretation. This decision obviously speaks significantly to the scope of this thesis. There is plenty of potential to engage other marginal books or characters within the Hebrew Bible and also, to some extent, the New Testament. I am certain, for example, that very fruitful engagement could be undertaken with the objective of using the relationship between Leviticus and the Book of Ezekiel to further undermine notions that ritualistic and prophetic material are from divergent, incompatible poles of the Hebrew Bible's ideological spectrum, or that 'the prophets' were exclusively concerned with inter-personal ethics in direct opposition to cultic concerns. This is just one of many possible ways of extending or complementing the work that I have undertaken, work which is disciplined by attention to Leviticus and that has generally resisted broadening the engagement with scripture other than in instances where it is entirely necessary so to do. The broadening of the

discussion, in terms of scripture, tradition and experience, is one of the tasks that I offer up to the discursive communities for whom I write.

The second aspect is the sense that the worldview instantiated by the priestly writers, expressed within the context of a conception of creation as defined by the establishment of order over chaos through the distinction and separation of things one from another (see chapters 1 and 2), and thus a keen attention to relatedness and organization, is conducive to the notion of 'ecology'. Ecology is defined by Raymond Williams as attention to "the relation of plants and animals with each other and with their habitat" – which then, as a concept, gave rise to an interpretation of politics, economics and social theory "from a central concern with human relations to the physical world as the necessary basis for social and economic policy."<sup>20</sup>

## Towards a Hermeneutic of Strangeness

Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness ... There is a tension ... in the play between the text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.<sup>21</sup>

Leviticus is an obscure text; perhaps wilfully so. It appears at first glance to be rather like a manual of priestly instructions regarding ritual – carefully setting out the regulations regarding sacrifices, purity and impurity, sabbath and

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: HarperCollins, (1983) 111; quoted in Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 26. It is on this basis, and that of the etymological and semantic links between *ecology* and *economics*, rooted in *oikos*, 'household' (see chapter 3 in particular), that (despite the title of the project within which this thesis was produced) I fundamentally favour 'ecology' and 'ecological' over 'environment' and 'environmental'. The latter carries the sense of that which surrounds (*environs*), and is thus distinct from; whereas the former speaks fundamentally of things that abide together (see Horrell, 'Introduction', 1 note 1.).

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Revised Edition, (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall), London: Sheed & Ward, (1989) 295.

so on. And yet, the more it is read, the stronger the sense that the emphasis lies somewhere (slightly) else; that the type (as opposed to level) of its detail cannot straightforwardly substantiate the conception that the text is a comprehensive list of rules which, if followed closely enough, essentially constitute a 'crash-course' in ancient Israelite ritual. On something of a similar note, Erhard Gerstenberger (among others) points out that, even before she begins, the reader of 'Leviticus' has been misled to some extent, by the English name of the book, into thinking that it focuses on the Levites – a notion that obscures the significance of the distinction between such and the priests (cf. Num. 4; Ezek. 44.9-16; 1 Chron. 23-26; 2 Chron. 35.1-19).<sup>22</sup>

Gerstenberger astutely prefaces this point with the observation that "[i]f before reading a text a person does not first clearly determine just what sort of text it is, misunderstanding is unavoidable."<sup>23</sup> However, as he admits, approaching the text as a modern, Western Christian, it is unlikely that a somewhat technical realization such as those above will constitute the sudden and total disenchantment of something that had previously seemed familiar.

How much more difficult must it be for us, given our historical distance, to understand these ancient witnesses correctly! They already seem inaccessible to us, since from our own experience we are familiar neither with the older textual types (genres) nor with the customs and rites they discuss. Who among us has dealt with sacrifices and purity prescriptions, or with temple service and taboo regulations? Even Jews living in the immediate sphere of influence of the Hebrew Bible often feel *alienated* from the priestly laws. Complaints from every quarter, extending even into scholarly commentaries, insist that the strict cultic orientation of the third book of Moses makes it an unusually dry piece of writing. Such complaints prove how *alien*

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<sup>22</sup> Gerstenberger, Erhard, *Leviticus: Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, (1996) 1.

<sup>23</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 1. I think that in the specific situation to which Gerstenberger here refers, his observation is sound. More broadly, however, I would argue that coming to know 'just what sort of text it is' is fundamentally an aspect of the ongoing process of interpretation.



and distant this part of the Bible has become to contemporary readers, and how poorly developed is our own capacity for comprehending past situations of life intellectually and emotionally.<sup>24</sup> (Emphasis mine)

As a modern, Western reader, it seems unlikely that I might unwittingly fall into a naïve, uncritical blurring of the boundaries between the world of text and that of my experience. This is a fundamentally good thing, and in this sense, because of its *alien* nature, Leviticus can be seen to perform a function on behalf of scripture more generally.<sup>25</sup> As Gerstenberger notes,

We become fully conscious of the Bible's strangeness in this respect when we read in the third book of Moses about animal slaughter, blood rites, atonement services, dietary restrictions, and so on.<sup>26</sup>

How, then, are we to engage with this strange and alien text? First, in the context of recognitions of the *alien* nature of this text, it is instructive to return to Wellhausen's claim regarding the inherent *alienation* that he sees within the Priestly literature, which he understands as a fundamental aspect of P's departure from nature, from ethical engagement and ultimately from the historical identity of Israelite faith – and thus its life. Speaking somewhat chillingly of the Priestly redaction of the Torah, he asserts,

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<sup>24</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 1. I am intrigued by both Gerstenberger's recourse to a notion of 'correct' understanding, and also his reference to the "immediate sphere of influence of the Hebrew Bible." More detailed reflection on these points than this passing reference, however, would detract from the focus of the argument.

<sup>25</sup> In such notions, I disclose the fact that a hermeneutics of strangeness represents a conscious departure from the notion, argued by Karl Barth, that the goal of *Sachkritik* is the disappearance or dissolution of any boundary between the text and the interpreter, or even the merging of the two. See in particular Barth, Karl, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns), Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1933) 2-10.

<sup>26</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 2.

[I]t is a thing which is likely to occur, that a body of traditional practice should only be written down when it is threatening to die out, and that a book should be, as it were, the ghost of a life which is closed.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of the prospect of an ecological engagement with a text that is very likely to strike a modern, Western Christian reader as strange and alien, and that has also been accused itself of representing an ideology of alienation from the 'original' concerns of the culture that produced it, at the heart of Leviticus 25 we encounter a notion that has profound resonance:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. (Lev. 25.23)

Read in the light of the common Hebrew Bible trope of the land as a divine gift to the people, and the strong connections between that gift and the Abrahamic covenant, this conception of the chosen people of YHWH being defined, within the context of their relationship to him, as aliens (*g<sup>e</sup>rīm*) in and tenants (*tōšābīm*) on their own land, is somewhat shocking. Little wonder, perhaps, that Gerhard von Rad exclaims (in an essay concerning conceptions of land in the Pentateuch that relies heavily on the land-gift model – see chapter 1), “What new realm of ideas have we entered here?”<sup>28</sup>

Even at this simplistic level of comparison between the traits of the scholarly reading tradition, a personal sense of being confronted with the strange, and a text relating to the conception of the relationships between God, the people and the land, I am already engaging with hermeneutics. In one sense, in recognizing and reflecting upon a connection between these three facets of the

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<sup>27</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 405 note 1.

<sup>28</sup> Rad, Gerhard von, 'The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch', in Rad, Gerhard von, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, London: Oliver & Boyd, (1966) 79-93 (85).

interpretive process, a potential 'way into' the text has been mapped, which is not that dissimilar to a movement from (to borrow, but also distort, the Earth Bible project's categories) a hermeneutics of *suspicion* (of sorts) to one of *identification*, although admittedly not with the earth, but with the people.

On the one hand this is a superficial reflection, which, as I admit, twists and distorts the categories concerned to fit the point; however, given the proviso of this admission, on the other hand I feel some illustrative value remains. The more important thing to note from this recognition of these overlapping concerns is the way it demonstrates the simultaneous presence of multiple 'locations' within the interpretation. The strangeness that I may as a reader feel is a product of my location, what we might call the 'experiential location'. This location will, of course, be constituted differently for each reader, although there is likely to be commonality and continuity where there is a shared language and culture (as is the case in terms of a widespread sense of the 'strangeness' of Leviticus to modern, Western eyes and ears). In the same way, Wellhausen's attribution of alienation to the text is an example of his own experiential location, but confronts me from the location of a tradition of interpretation – we might therefore refer to it as a 'traditional location'. The claim within the text itself, however, is a product of the (likely late exilic/early post-exilic) location of the author or authors,<sup>29</sup> which I refer to as an example of an 'historical location'. Likewise, in the wider context of the chapter and its contextual appeal to Sinai (25.1) there is what we might term a 'narrative location'.<sup>30</sup>

The real hermeneutical work, however, consists not simply in the identification of the various locations, but the attempt to identify areas where

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<sup>29</sup> I am here regarding redaction as a type of authorship.

<sup>30</sup> My proposed scheme relating to 'location' owes a significant debt to the way that Ched Myers distinguishes various 'moments' in his superb political commentary on Mark's gospel, as well as to Lorraine Code's analysis of location; see Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, (1988); Code, Lorraine, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2006)

their various concerns intersect – or rather overlap in *different planes*. The key to this hermeneutical process of identifying fruitful *analogies* between different locations, is, in my view, properly a matter of *educated imagination*.

With regard to the relationship between alienation, imagination and interpretation, I have found the writings of the German social critic, playwright and dramaturgist Bertolt Brecht to be especially helpful. Brecht was interested in revolutionary theatre and Marxist aesthetics and, as such, the ways in which art inspires praxis. What he detested was the way that much theatre, as he saw it, aimed to take its audience on a journey that ended back where it started and in the process purged all creative energy involved.

Brecht believed that art which relies on catharsis in this way could do little but maintain the *status quo*, because catharsis requires emotional investment on behalf of the audience and this, in turn, necessitates working within the context of what is known to be. He perceived a key distinction between ‘what is known to be’ and ‘what is real’, believing, in fact, that the confines of the former often function to insulate people from the latter. In this sense, theatre that begins with what is known can only inspire Narcissism – the stage functioning as little else but a surface of water which the audience scans for its own reflection.

Brecht termed his alternative to Aristotelian drama, ‘epic theatre’: which, while instantiated in a weakened form in his plays, principally refers to the radical dramatic theory formulated in his writings. The central principle of Epic theatre is its refusal to ‘entice the audience in’ – Brecht’s intention was never to entertain, but rather to instruct. He wanted his audiences to engage *critically*, rather than *emotionally*, with what was depicted; “They must think”, he famously proclaimed, “not feel”. In line with this didacticism, he wrote that theatre should never be an event in itself, but rather the representation of an event from the past. In order to maintain this function of the play as a report, he instructed actors that they should not inhabit their roles, but rather narrate them, and encouraged his

audiences to sit back, relax and reflect (to this end he believed that smoking during performances should not just be permitted, but encouraged).

At the very heart of the theory of epic theatre, however, stands Brecht's conception of the role and significance of strangeness. He believed that in order to avoid the grave failings of naturalistic drama (or any theatre that relies on the maintenance of illusion) the audience must be continually confronted with what is strange. To this end, he constructed his famous aesthetic principle of *Verfremdungseffekt* – probably best translated as ‘the effect that makes things seem strange or different’.

This principle is effected through the use of a number of techniques designed to interrupt, to deconstruct the ‘fourth wall’ and to promote the audience’s critical distance and disbelief. Classic examples include: performers interacting with the audience as audience, the translation of all dialogue into the third person and/or past tense, the use of ultra-minimalist and unrealistic props and scenery, the revelation of what happens at the end of the play before it begins, thoroughly unnaturalistic lighting, the inclusion of stage directions in the script, and the placing of musicians on the stage rather than in an unseen position.

It is in this aesthetic principle and the techniques that instantiate it that Brecht demonstrates the influence of montage art on his thinking, and in particular the photography of John Heartfield. In attempting to promote *verfremdung*, Brecht was attempting to bring to the theatre what he saw in montage as an internal ‘logic of space’ where a thing has meaning and location only in relation to the others present.

In an interview in 1934, Brecht spoke of the impact of his theories thus:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with

the characters in a play. The production took the subject matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up ... People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different.<sup>31</sup>

Brecht's insistence on 'practical consequences' and his emphasis on the depictions on stage being both 'so and at the same time not so' highlight his hermeneutical insight.

Brecht's closest friend and most persistent conversation partner, Walter Benjamin, brings out this notion of a parallel between alienation and revelation in his classic volume *Understanding Brecht*. He writes,

The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop action as to represent conditions. But 'represent' does not here signify 'reproduce' in the sense used by the theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to uncover those conditions (one could just as well say: to make them strange [*verfremden*]). This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted.)<sup>32</sup>

Encounter with the strange is a requisite for discovering the true, and thus, epic theatre relies on a synthesis of what is alien and what is native. For Brecht, therefore, strangeness is essential but not absolute. The strange is not irreducibly so, but gestures and bends towards a reality in which it is familiar. This conception of the dialectic is related to Gadamer's insight regarding hermeneutics as located in the 'in-between', the space that opens between familiarity and strangeness, with which this section began.

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<sup>31</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, 'Interview with Luth Otto', in Willett, John, (ed. and trans.), *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, (1964) 70-71 (71).

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *Understanding Brecht*, 2nd Impression, London: Verso, (1984) 18

## Organization & Imagination

Bearing these hermeneutical insights in mind, let us return to Leviticus. Mary Douglas suggests that a crucial aspect of the reason why it has been consistently either severely maligned or simply ignored throughout much of the history of modern Christian scholarship, is the radical strangeness with which its internal logic confronts the 'modern mind'. For Douglas, in opposition to 'rational discourse' which "develops propositions by the logic of non-contradiction"<sup>33</sup> and always moves "in a direction away from the concrete particular towards the universal",<sup>34</sup> Leviticus employs a mytho-poetic, aesthetic logic which relies not on argument, but, rather, on analogy. She notes,

Instead of explaining why an instruction has been given, or even what it means, [Leviticus] adds another and another, thus producing its highly schematized effect. The series of analogies locate a particular instance in a context. They expand the meaning ... They serve in place of causal explanations. If one asks, 'Why this rule?' the answer is that it conforms to that other rule. If, 'Why both those rules?' the answer is a larger category of rules in which they are both embedded as subsets or *from* some of which they are distinguished as exceptions ... In Leviticus, the patterning of oppositions and inclusions is generally all the explaining that we are going to get.<sup>35</sup>

Douglas' presentation of 'aesthetic logic' draws heavily on what Suzanne Langer calls 'presentational' discourse.<sup>36</sup> For Langer, such strings of analogies function as projections lifted from one context to another. As such the employment of analogy, where Aristotelian logic utilized argument, is seen as

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas, Mary, *Leviticus As Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1999) 19.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Langer, Suzanne K., *Philosophy in a New Key: Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1942)

one aspect of a wider structure in which concepts hang together not on the basis of causal relationships, but spatial ones.

As such, Langer's key explanatory example draws on visual art. The mark of a brush on a canvas transforms the flat surface into a space on which objects are depicted. This space is not the infinite space of the universe or any type of specific limited space, like a field or building, but is what Langer termed a 'virtual space' – a space in which, with the addition of each new stroke, the lines and marks become objects that are recognized and contextualized by their relation one to another. "The space itself is a projected image", Langer wrote, "and everything pictured serves to define and organise it".<sup>37</sup> She expands out from the two-dimensional plane to speak of sculpture, architecture, music and dance as other examples of created virtual spaces in which spatial logic is the vehicle for meaning. In this way, as Douglas notes, Langer bears testimony to the Kantian notion that perception is never simply passive 'seeing', but rather is always an exercise in organization.

In *Ecological Thinking*, feminist and ecological philosopher Lorraine Code sets out a rich and lucid account of how beginning to think ecologically constitutes little short of a philosophical revolution. She explains,

My brief for ecological thinking conceives of it as infusing, shaping and circulating throughout the social-material-intellectual-affective atmosphere(s), like the air we breathe. Ecological knowings are enacted and ecological principles derived within a transformative, interrogating, and renewing *imaginary* ... a guiding metaphoric that departs radically from the imaginary through and within which epistemologies of mastery are derived and enacted. As I have noted, my larger purpose is to interrupt and unsettle the instituted social-political-epistemological imaginary of the affluent western world that generates and sustains hegemonic practices of mastery with a

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<sup>37</sup> Langer, Suzanne K., *Feeling and Form*, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, (1953) 77; quoted in Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*, 19.



web of assumptions, of tacit agreements that are everyone's and no one's, about "nature" and "human nature," and how best to know them singly and in their interrelations.<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis original)

Whilst meshing with Douglas' insights regarding the critical role organization, Code speaking insightfully to a conception of the links between ecology and imagination.

Furthermore, her notion of 'ecological knowings' as a 'guiding metaphors' provides a useful semantic framework for reflecting on how I image the relationship – if you will, the *ecology* – of interpretative method to text. There are many 'guiding metaphors' when it comes to hermeneutics. In the section that follows I briefly examine three metaphors for describing the organization of this ecology that I have encountered and found unsatisfying, and reflect on why. I then introduce the central metaphor that I propose to apply in this regard.<sup>39</sup> The three images that I intend briefly to examine all relate the relationship from the perspective of the interpretation and the interpreter; the text is, unless otherwise specified, simply the text.

An image often evoked is that of an interpretive *lens*. The lens sits between the text as text and the eye of the interpreter, and both focuses and shapes – colours, perhaps – the reading. While part of the conceptual basis of speaking of lenses derives from an understanding that each interpretive method functions as a different lens – the interpreter holds the lens that she has constructed or borrowed and views the text through it – I have reservations regarding the

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<sup>38</sup> Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 28-29.

<sup>39</sup> For analyses of the structure and analogies employed in various types of ecological hermeneutic consult the work of Ernst Conradie; e.g. Conradie, Ernst, 'What is an Analogical Imagination?', *The South African Journal of Philosophy* 11 (4), (2004) 103-112; Conradie, Ernst, 'The Road Towards an Ecological Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics', *Scriptura* 93, (2006) 305-314; Conradie, Ernst, *Angling for Interpretation: A First Guide Biblical Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics*, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 13, Stellenbosch: SUN Press, (2008); Conradie, Ernst, 'What on Earth is an Ecological Hermeneutics?', in Horrell, David, G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavropoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark, (2010) 295-313

imaged relationship between the interpreter and the lens. My concern lies with the fact that the eye itself has a lens. We are already always perceiving and interpreting the world of our experience through a lens, and no interpretation is unmediated by such. This means, therefore, that if we talk of utilizing a specific interpretive lens, we are, in reality, already talking of a system of lenses. Here, for me, is where the metaphor has the potential to either become overly-complex, or to completely break down.

It is also established to speak of both a hermeneutical or heuristic *key* and a hermeneutical or interpretive *strategy*. I have not utilized either of these metaphors, on the basis that the first implies a certain *a priori* 'fit' between the key and the implied *lock*. Locks and keys are made together, there is an unproblematically 'designed' aspect to the relationship. Of course, in real terms, few who use this metaphor are likely to argue that their approach is related in this simplistic a way to the fundamental nature of the text. What remains, therefore, is something approaching the analogy of an emergency locksmith who has been tasked with releasing, by any effective means, a lock that has lost its original key. I find this metaphor equally unsatisfactory. Furthermore, rather like the unpleasant image of someone forcing a lock, the language of *strategy* is equally displeasing. The implementation of a strategy is a quasi-military exercise, and carries with it an implicit sense of conflict and disharmony. The interpreter, perhaps, intends to lay siege to the text, surrounding it on all sides and wearing its defences down until it finally yields the treasures within.

In the introduction to *Binding the Strong Man*, which constitutes a masterful survey of biblical hermeneutics, Ched Myers discusses images that relate to the text, and which express how it, and not the interpretation or the interpreter, defines the ecology of the encounter. Drawing on the work of Norman Peterson, Myers notes that for historical criticism the central metaphor is that of the text as a *window* "through which to view historical events making the

text a mere means to an end".<sup>40</sup> By way of a perceived correction to this approach, that Myers and Paterson both consider unsatisfactory, Myers turns to an image that Peterson employs to describe the methods of literary criticism – that of the text as a *mirror*.<sup>41</sup>

While I am not proposing to use an approach specifically related to any of the various methodologies of narrative criticism, I am proposing to employ the concept of the text as a mirror as the overarching, guiding metaphor within this thesis. Right away it is absolutely vital to banish the notion that the text as mirror, in the sense that I intend to employ it, relates fundamentally to a matter of the interpreter's seeing herself reflected in the text. This is not the slogan of a postmodern campaign regarding the incredulity of external referents of meaning. The text as mirror is not the surface of Narcissus' pool.

The text as mirror has a topography, a *terrain* – a contoured surface that throws light in several directions, and that reflects various aspects of the world around, beside, in front of and behind the interpreter. Because of its contours the text as mirror both distorts some of what it reflects and corrects some distortions of the eye. The text as mirror does not reflect the light that meets it evenly, it gives off a patchy reflection; the reflection is itself difficult to interpret, like a riddle.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13.12)

The mirror is preferred not because it conveys the perfect sense – all language is partial and limited – but because it combines a sense of terrain (N.B. *terra*), organization – the mirror shows things as they are in relation (and yet not wholly so), and the concept of partially – of limited scope. Most importantly,

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<sup>40</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 23; cf. Peterson, Norman R., *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, (1978)

<sup>41</sup> See Peterson, *Literary Criticism...*, 19.

however, the mirror is a reflective object. It is something that begins a process of reflection. The exercise in which this thesis attempts to engage is little if not the perpetuation and beginning of processes of serious, attentive, ecological reflection.

In what follows, I have not flagged-up specific instances in which the hermeneutic sketched out above is particularly in operation. The point I wish to express is that these notions permeate the whole of my engagement with the text and with the secondary literature listed. Because the aim of this thesis was not the construction of a hermeneutic, I have placed discussion of it in the introduction and expressed it in a way fairly removed from the detail of the text. However, it should be noted that these observations do not stand *before* the text in my reading, but have emanated *from* my engagement with it. To refer to Gerstenberger's point, noted earlier, someone approaching a text without knowing what kind of text it is will unavoidably misunderstand it. I did not know what kind of text Leviticus was before I began this work. I am not certain that I haven't misunderstood it. I have tried to be diligent as well as imaginative, attentive as well as critical, obedient and well as rigorous and I hope that my encounters with the text can demonstrate a way of opening up a space between what is familiar and what is alien in a way that informs reflection on and interpretation of our familiar and strange world.

# Remember the Land: Cosmos, Cult, Cleansing and Covenant<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the introduction to his 1974 work *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*, William D. Davies laments the way in which, in his opinion, Christian interests and categories have largely dictated the overarching context within which much theological discourse between Judaism and Christianity has occurred.<sup>2</sup> For Davies, an over-emphasis within the dialogue on abstract themes, doctrinal trends and other aspects of Jewish tradition seen as complementary to Christian perspectives, has consistently overshadowed, and, in some cases, completely eclipsed aspects of Judaism that emphasise particularity, locality and groundedness. He states,

Discussion of the interaction between Judaism and the Gospel has been governed almost entirely by those concerns that Christians themselves have deemed important. As a result, it is doctrines in which Christians have been particularly interested, such as those about God, Man, Sin, Creation, Revelation, Prophecy, Reward and Punishment etc., that is, theological and metaphysical abstractions ... The Jewish faith came to be understood largely as a body of ideas with which Christian doctrines could be compared and contrasted: it came to be examined in terms of Christian categories, but seldom in terms native, or peculiar, to itself ... Any local or geographic particularistic elements in Judaism could not but be regarded as insignificant or, at best, secondary, and could safely be overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A version of the central argument of this chapter appears as Morgan, Jonathan, 'Transgressing, Peking, Covenanting: The Character of Land in Leviticus', *Theology* Vol. 12, No. 867, (2009) 172-180.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, William D., *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, (1974); reprint, Sheffield: JSOT Press, (1994) 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 3-4.

This trend has dictated the course not only of Jewish-Christian dialogue, but of many of the strategies and approaches implemented by Christian interpreters of the Old Testament. The key example of the impact of this history that Davies cites is the lack of attention which biblical scholars and Christian interpreters have devoted to the subject of land.

Christian scholars, naturally governed by their own doctrinal interests, easily reject the *realia* of Judaism and, in particular, its traditional concentration on the land ... Although there are innumerable references to the land in the document of their concern, the neglect of this theme has been as marked among Old Testament scholars as among those of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere he refers to land as the “Cinderella of both Christian and Jewish scholarship”.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I engage the concept of land as it is set out in the book of Leviticus and suggest, in line with the general theme of the wider work, the ways in which a creative engagement with the text might potentially stimulate contemporary ecological reflection. In order to contextualise effectively the engagement undertaken and to situate it both theologically and methodologically in the tradition of contemporary Christian theology, I first examine the main interpretive trends and theological /ideological presuppositions that have shaped modern, Christian readings of Leviticus. I then critique the hermeneutical tendency to sacrifice detail and distinctiveness to abstract generality and, in so doing, highlight my conviction that there exists a link between such approaches to texts and the attitudes towards the created world that have defined much of

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<sup>4</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Davies, William D., *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, (1982) xiii, quoted in Davies, Eryl W., ‘Land: Its Rights and Privileges’, in Clements, Ronald E., *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1989) 349-369 (349).

Christian discourse in the modern era, which continue to be found wanting in the face of the challenges of the contemporary ecological crisis.

Before turning to an examination of some key texts concerning land in Leviticus I first of all ground my argument from Leviticus in the priestly conception of creation, the cosmos and the relationship between humans and the earth, as expressed in its most elaborated form in the priestly creation myth of Gen. 1.1-2.4a. I then return briefly to hermeneutical concerns, aiming throughout the chapter to twist together critical reflection on texts and critical analysis of the dominant Christian trends of interpretation.

After situating my engagement with Leviticus' conception of land by virtue of highlighting a well-established interpretive distinction between land as the locus of cultic activity and land as the arena of history, I then set out my interpretations. I argue that the dominant context within which Leviticus presents the land is not that of gift, upon which Deuteronomy's conception relies, but of covenant. Whilst, I argue, the passages in Leviticus that deal with the specifics of land use rely on the concept of the people as tenants, relating to the land as a leaseholder rather than owner, I propose that in a few key passages the land is imaged more widely as a separate character that has a distinct relationship with God, but that is bound up with the people and with God in a tripartite relationship that seems to draw on the language of covenant.

## **The Lay of The Land**

While at the time of its first writing it numbered among only a few studies on biblical concepts of land,<sup>6</sup> in the period since Davies offered his critique, land in the Hebrew Bible has become a considerably more prominent theme on the

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<sup>6</sup> One particularly significant prior work is von Rad, 'The Promised Land...' (see Introduction and discussion below).

scholarly horizon.<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann exemplifies a more contemporary emphasis when he contends that

If God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as a *historical* place in a special way. It will no longer do to talk about Yahweh and his people but we must speak about Yahweh and his people *and his land*. Preoccupation with existentialist *decisions* and transforming *events* has distracted us from seeing that this God is committed to this land and that his promise for his people is always his land.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis original)

While recognition regarding the importance of the theme of land may have increased, equally significant shifts in line with William Davies' critique of the context within which Christian scholarship has failed to fully engage with Jewish tradition and, in particular, its emphases on specificity and locatedness, are regrettably less apparent. Disinterest in and disregard for the material, the particular, the local and the grounded have caused the majority of Christian theologies of creation and covenant, sacrament and salvation to seem hollow and inadequate in the face of the contemporary ecological crisis – and, worse still, they have seemed, to some extent, culpable.

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<sup>7</sup> For example: Zimmerli, Walter, 'The Land' in the Pre-Exilic and Early Post-Exilic Prophets', in Butler, James T., Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger, (eds.) *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honour of Bernhard W. Anderson*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 37; Sheffield: JSOT Press, (1985) 247-262; Davies, 'Land: Its Rights and Privileges'; Lilburne, Geoffrey, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of Land*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, (1989); Weinfeld, Moshe, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA.: University of California Press, (1993); Evans, Bernard F. and Gregory D. Cusak (eds.). *Theology of the Land*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, (1987); Wright, Christopher J. H., *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, (1990); Brueggemann, Walter, *The Land: Place and Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, (1977); Brueggemann, Walter, *The Land: Place and Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edn, Overtures to Biblical Theology, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, (2002); Habel, Norman C., *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, (1995); Davis, Ellen F., *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land* (2nd edn.), 5.



It is my contention that one specific cause of a historic lack of interest in and engagement with Hebrew Bible material on the basis of attention to the particular, has been the mainly Protestant obsession with employing interpretive frameworks that deliberately engage the Hebrew scriptures at the level of the broad overview. Biblical interpretation solely in the service of broad-brush schemas concerned with tracing out narrative or theological trajectories deemed 'useful' on the terms of New Testament interpretation or Christian doctrine, is, to my mind, thoroughly unsatisfactory.

As yet, the recent focus on land as a scriptural theme has given rise to far too few serious theological considerations of how the various insights into land, and reflections on land in the Hebrew Bible might serve as relevant sources for reflection on both the weaknesses in the tradition and the ecological challenges that we currently face.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key perspectives on land in the Hebrew Bible (especially the Torah) is the notion of the land as divine gift. According to this perspective, as part of the fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs, YHWH has granted Israel the land of Canaan as a gift – not as a result of any merit on Israel's part, but as part of YHWH's ongoing self-revelation and the work of drawing Israel into an ever more intimate relationship. This notion of land as fore-promised gift has been central to the majority of reflections on land in the Old Testament that have emerged within Christian scholarship; and, in fact, it is not uncommon (particularly where space is limited) to find it presented as *the* perspective on land in the Pentateuch.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Leviticus presents a theology of land that stands in some tension with this dominant 'promise-gift' tradition. The distinctiveness of the

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<sup>9</sup> Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, Bruggemann, *The Land* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), and Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* are perhaps the only recent examples of contributions that address these concerns.

<sup>10</sup> See Davies, Eryl W., 'Land: Its Rights and Privileges', 349-353; Kaiser Jr, Walter C., 'The Promised Land: A Biblical Historical View', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 138, (1981) 302-312; Bruggemann, *The Land*.

perspective we encounter in Leviticus is bound up with the significance of the lack of emphasis (or indeed the complete absence) therein on notions prominent elsewhere (particularly Deuteronomy) such as 'the promised land', the land as divine gift, the land as Israel's inheritance and the land as Israel's possession. I propose that a distinctive theology of land can be deduced from the perception that Israel's covenant with YHWH is merely one aspect of a tripartite nexus of relationships between YHWH, Israel and the land. I argue that this perspective is interestingly extended by the recognition that humans not only stand to neglect their own covenant duties through neglect of the land, but also to be culpable for the disruption of the relationship between YHWH and the land.

Furthermore, contextualised by, and functioning in relation to, the overarching context of holiness, the concept of the land as an autonomous, ethical agent, as drawn on in the later chapters of Leviticus, provides the basis for an alternative to the widespread conception of land as the passive, divinely provided stage on which the relationship between YHWH and Israel is played out. This distinctive perspective has been neglected within both the traditions of modern biblical interpretation and within contemporary theology. It is my contention that this oversight is all the more significant given that it has the potential to support a more fruitful platform for drawing scripture into dialogue with issues current in ecological ethics than the conceptions of land that have dominated Christian biblical scholarship have hereto enabled.

In a recent article, Randi Rashkover argued that

Christianity needs a theology of the land – a theology that does more than negate the powers that be in the name of divine sovereignty – a theology that restores the earth as the place of the glory of God ... A vacuum remains concerning the character of

right possession, right holding, right materiality, the restoration of the created order as God's order. All too frequently, this vacuum is filled with the rules of realpolitik.<sup>11</sup>

Not only do many of Rashkover's concerns mesh with those in Davies' introduction, but it is also interesting to note that both authors suggest the same texts as at once under-engaged with, and ripe with the potential to address these theological deficiencies and the social, political and ethical problems that have issued from them. Christianity, Rashkover insists, "needs a re-reading of Leviticus 25".<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, in a section addressing a conception of land that he understands as being fundamentally grounded in Leviticus, Davies comments,

It is tempting to relate all the above to recent preoccupation, especially in the U.S.A., with problems of ecology. Primitive as many of the Old Testament ideas may appear, would not greater attention to them as they bear on the land have helped us earlier to acknowledge the ecological dangers that now threaten? It would appear that those who discuss ecology generally neglect these Old Testament concepts.<sup>13</sup>

This quotation stands as an combination of the sort of engagement between Leviticus and contemporary ecological issues that I am suggesting is long overdue, and the kind of language which evokes the profoundly problematic discourse of a bygone era – punctuated, in particular, by the use of 'primitive' as a description of the ideas and practices of the societies of the ancient world, suggesting the authorial assumption that not only is the use uncontroversial, but reflects a widely shared starting point.

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<sup>11</sup> Rashkover, R., 'Reasoning Through the Prophetic', *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, 6.1; available at [http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume6/number1/ssr06\\_01\\_e01.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume6/number1/ssr06_01_e01.html), [last accessed 11/09/10].

<sup>12</sup> Rashkover, 'Reasoning Through the Prophetic'.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 34 (footnote 32).

As Davies' insights highlight in more ways than one, it is not simply that, by failing to seriously engage with large swathes of Jewish tradition, Christian theologians have overlooked ripe opportunities in terms of inter-faith dialogue and mutual theological enrichment. It is also apparent that, in allowing hermeneutical enterprises to be governed by the vestiges of colonial ideologies and the preferencing of the abstract and overarching over the grounded and particular, we as Christians have neglected (and therefore failed in our commitments to) texts that we also call sacred. We would do well to reflect at length on both Davis' insight that "heresy thrives on the neglect of important texts"<sup>14</sup> and her warning that anti-materialist doctrines of creation and anti-Old Testament sentiments are two elements of the Marcionite attack from which the Church has never fully recovered.<sup>15</sup>

As discussed above, in his hugely influential work *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Julius Wellhausen presents a sharply critical interpretation of Leviticus, portraying it as a text that "abstracts from the natural conditions and motives of the actual life of the people in the land of Canaan", deliberately focuses on the "negation of nature" and promotes instead "bald statutes of arbitrary absolutism".<sup>16</sup> The contribution that his work has made to modern biblical studies can hardly be understated. However, it is widely recognised that both Wellhausen's general interpretive framework, and his specific dislike of legal and cultic texts, were significantly shaped by a hostility towards both Judaism and Catholicism from which most contemporary scholars would very much seek to distance themselves. While, for this reason, much of his work is now approached with caution, it seems to me that his interpretation of Leviticus is still the tacit currency in many circles.

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> See also Childs, Bervard S., *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, (1974) 213ff.

<sup>16</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 104.

In the course of an argument which works from a very different starting point with a very different hermeneutic, Ellen Davis argues, in direct opposition to Wellhausen, that

The most detailed scriptural witness as to how we might live within the intended harmony of God's creation is to be found in the part of the Bible that Christians to this day dismiss most readily and even on principle, namely the legal codes ... and especially the Priestly tradition in Leviticus.<sup>17</sup>

I propose that if the spectres of certain ugly, yet persistent, tendencies are confronted and exorcised, Davis' assertion not only presents itself as more creative, more interesting, more ethically fruitful and more true to Christianity's commitment to scripture than do Wellhausen's rather dismal assessments, but also emerges as more convincing in the light of a close examination of the text.

In the context of the contemporary ecological crisis, the attempt to re-examine and re-connect with the marginalised texts, hermeneutical strategies, theological themes and traditions that all seriously engage with the material, the particular, the local and the grounded, has become a project of the utmost urgency. Wellhausen's reading of Leviticus serves as a reminder that we must not, however, embark on the necessary tasks believing that it is only a case of sowing in the gaps; rather, we must recognise that, in fact, our exegetical errors and interpretational oversights have rendered much of what we have cultivated dangerously blighted and in need of being cut back, or indeed ploughed in, before fruitful reinvigoration can occur.

Accompanying the recent rediscovery (or perhaps discovery) of land as a significant Biblical theme has been the recognition of the ideological complexity inherent in both the use and the interpretation of the concept. In the Hebrew

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 82.

Bible, this complexity is fundamentally instanced in the multiple, multilayered meanings of the Hebrew terms *ʾādamāh* and *ʾēreṣ*, which are both usually translated 'land'.<sup>18</sup> Despite sometimes being rather lazily caricatured as basically meaning 'dirt' or 'soil' in the former case, as opposed to 'the whole earth' or 'a nation' in the latter,<sup>19</sup> both terms can, in various contexts, refer to all the nuances of the English term 'land' (agricultural, topological, geographical, political, economic), as well as carrying some other interesting connotations (e.g. *ʾēreṣ* as 'underworld').<sup>20</sup>

Resisting the simplistic polarisation of 'land' as dirt and 'land' as socio-economic and political entity is an essential part of constructing a framework within which it is possible to perceive and interpret the relationships between the grandest global structures and the most basic elements of organic life. Herein lies a point of particular hermeneutical significance: in order to seek out and meaningfully engage with any form of what Davies calls *realia*, it is necessary to work within an interpretive framework which not only attends to that which is most closely concerned with the realities of rooted existence, but also grapples with the realities of language and discourse, and which embraces the tangled mixture of multiple meanings, semiotic tensions, nuances and ambiguities.

Brueggemann addresses this point insightfully at the outset of his study of land. He says,

In what follows, land will be used to refer to *actual earthly turf* ... It will also be used in a *symbolic* sense, as the Bible itself uses it ... It will be important to recognize, both in biblical usage and the contemporary context as well, that land continually moves back and forth between literal and symbolic intentions. And in any particular use it is likely that we shall not be clear on the term, simply because it is a symbol laden with

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that in Leviticus, of the seventy-three occurrences of 'land' in the NRSV, only one translates *ʾādamāh*.

<sup>19</sup> For example Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> See HALOT, vol. 1, 91; also Lewis, Theodore, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, No.39, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, (1989).

dimensions that cannot be separated from each other. A symbolic sense of the term affirms that land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings. This dialectic belongs to our humanness. Our humanness is always about historical placement in the earth, but that historical placement always includes excess meanings both rooted in and moving beyond literalism.<sup>21</sup>

It is fundamental to this study that 'land', in scripture or elsewhere, is not primarily a meta-theme, best understood by analysing and charting its various modes of functioning, before zooming out from a wide set of specific texts. Rather, land is a dirty, earthy, material reality – a living stuff, on which and in relation to which all life exists. It is from this perspective that we are best able to perceive the political, economic, ideological and narrative aspects and functioning of land. By having its explorations anchored in a particular location, namely the book of Leviticus, this study attempts – rather than examining a series of 'related' topics, uprooted from various locations – to get up close to, and operate at the level of, the messy, undulating, *vital*, ground.

Norman Habel has noted that “whatever our context or culture, land is a dominant reality. It plays a role in our construction of the world, whether in personal or social terms”.<sup>22</sup> The dominant modes of understanding regarding land influence and are written throughout every aspect of a society – the word 'culture' is, after all, derived from 'cultivation'.<sup>23</sup> However, the same is true *vice versa*: other sets of ideas that collectively form our notion of reality, and our construction of the world, also affect the way that we understand and respond to land. As such, the story of all human life is fundamentally a story about how we interact with earth – it describes the complex patterns of thought and action through which the world is repeatedly re-shaped and re-made. In this sense,

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<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land* (2nd edn.), 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> As, indeed, is the word *cult*. For an exploration of the relationship between *cult* and *cultivation* in relation to the Hebrew term 'bd see Wyatt, Nicolas, 'When Adam Delved: The Meaning of Genesis III 23', *Vetus Testamentum* 38, (1988) 119.

ideologies of land are always caught up together with theologies, anthropologies and cosmologies as structural elements within the warp and weft of culture; as strands within the 'webs of significance' that we ourselves have spun and continue to spin.<sup>24</sup>

In a world where the existing hegemony promotes an anti-humanitarian, quasi-scientific approach to economics which stimulates and perpetuates the fetishization of growth, but where attention to the health of the global eco-system demands a reduction in our profligate gorging on fossil fuels and the output of poisonous wastes, Christianity requires a theology of creation that is intrinsically materialistic in its approach, holistic in its scope, and robust in its political and practical outworking. If it is to play a truly productive role in the global response to the ecological crisis, Christian theology must unblinkingly confront and weed out its perennial, deep-rooted weaknesses, and work to identify and nurture seeds of recovery.

The central aim of this study is to contribute to this recovery project, through an attempt to engage with one of the most misunderstood and neglected texts in Scripture, in a manner that is open to insights and inspiration from various critical approaches and reading contexts, but which is fundamentally guided by the challenges, questions and critiques that the current ecological crisis is putting to Christian theology.

## **Grounding Land: Cosmology, Anthropology & Boundary**

Within the Pentateuch, the book of Genesis contains the most dominant and influential presentation of the Hebrew Bible's central cosmological and

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<sup>24</sup> See Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, (2000) 5.



anthropological themes. Within this, the Priestly creation myth sets out the clearest demonstration of the concept of a world in which the two most primal forces are those of order and chaos, where the initial acts of divine creation involve the establishment of order by a process of separating and delineating one thing from another, and where the ongoing work of divine creation consists of the maintenance of this well defined and ordered reality.

The account of creation in Genesis 1.1-2.4a is set out within the context of the core concept in Priestly writing: that is, holiness.<sup>25</sup> The central divine acts of creation are acts of separation (*hibdīl*) which bring about order by dividing chaos from cosmos.<sup>26</sup> Following these original separations, in Priestly thought the whole world is divided into two: the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane (in other words, that which is compatible with the divine and that which is not). In this sense, from the start, the priestly conception of creation is expressed in and through explicitly ritualistic terms.

While holiness is primarily a quality indicative of the realm of the divine (so that it does not do justice to the scope of the concept to suggest that it is synonymous with the concept of 'separation'), in practice there exists a direct

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of holiness in Priestly thought see below and Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, (1966) 55-57; Jenson, Philip, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 106, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (1992); Joosten, Jan, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, Vol. 67, Leiden: E.J. Brill, (1996) 123-134; Milgrom, Jacob, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics*, A Continental Commentary, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, (2004) 179-183; Balentine, Samuel E., *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, (1999) 167-172.

<sup>26</sup> While I am, in some ways, sympathetic to the concept of Ellen van Wolde's recent and well publicised claims that *bārā* should not be translated as 'create', but as something closer to 'separate' (and feel that the detail of her argument was probably not wisely served by the nature of the furore created around it) I remain largely unconvinced by her thesis. While I see separation as the key notion operative in the priestly creation myth, I do not consider that 'create' is an inappropriate rendering of *bārā*, and certainly think it is crucial to distinguish between *bārā* and *hibdīl*. For more discussion, see Wolde, Ellen van, 'Why the Verb אָבַד Does Not Mean "to Create" in Genesis 1.1-2.4a', *JSOT*, vol. 34 (2009) 3-23; Wolde, Ellen van, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context*, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, (2009), 184-200; ct. Becking, Bob and Mario Korpel, 'To Create, To Separate Or To Construct: An Alternative for a Recent Proposal as to the Interpretation of אָבַד in Gen. 1:1-2:4a', *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 10, no. 3, (2010); available at [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_131.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_131.pdf), [last accessed 11/09/10].

relationship between the two. The rules designed to prevent transgression of the boundaries of the holy also define the realm of the created community, and open up the possibility of the attainment and maintenance of holiness (i.e. the cultic transferral of something or someone from a state of pollution or opposition to the sacred, to a state of openness to it). It is also significant that, as an outworking of this logic, that which has been separated off for (consecrated to) God can become holy by nature of its proximity to the divine.<sup>27</sup> For the Priestly writers, therefore, holiness not only relates to the ontological character of God and (by extension) the nature of the people as consecrated or separated out from the nations, but it is also bound up with both the process and goal of the whole of creation.

The bounded realms (and tensions) that derive from the functioning of holiness as both a goal and a taboo derive from and reflect the way that the cosmological divisions in Genesis 1 'separated out' mixed elements from each other: heavens from earth, dry land from sea, and so on. In the process, it established order and brought about the conditions necessary for life. Chaos was tamed by being apportioned its own separate realm – a realm whose boundaries it is ever ready to transgress if afforded the opportunity.<sup>28</sup>

A cosmology that describes the initial creation as the act of dividing of one thing from another and the establishment of boundaries implicitly carries the notion that the ongoing maintenance of order will inherently necessitate constraints on human and animal life (a significant point, to which we shall return in detail). Nonetheless, the notion of boundedness also forms a significant aspect of the more specifically anthropological reflections of the Genesis myths, in a way which is often overlooked, or at least not drawn into this kind of discussion.

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<sup>27</sup> Such 'holiness' is not innate to the thing, but is only ever conferred by extension.

<sup>28</sup> N.B. it is the chaotic waters which are separated off in Genesis 1.6-9 which rise up and burst forth as the flood waters in the Noah saga.

In Genesis 1.1-2.4a, the creation myth normally attributed to the Priestly writer(s), the key anthropological principle at work is expressed in Chapter 1. 26-27, where the *ādām* is said to be created in the image and after the likeness of God (*b<sup>e</sup> elem elōhīm*). By contrast, the most fundamental anthropological statement in what is usually called the Yahwistic creation myth (Gen. 2.4b-25) is introduced in Genesis 2.7 where YHWH is imaged as forming the *ādām* from the dust of the *ʿāḏāmāh*, the earth.<sup>29</sup> The full significance of this second notion for theological anthropology is demonstrated when it is re-visited in Gen. 3, where YHWH finishes listing the consequences of Adam and Eve's transgression by emphasising that

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3.19)<sup>30</sup>

The combination of these two key anthropological thrusts in the two creation myths invites the observation that, together, they define of the boundaries of human existence. On the one hand, humans are rulers of creation who bear the image of God; on the other, they are workers of the soil who are themselves firstly, finally and therefore fundamentally, dust from the earth. They are, at the same time, both from and intimately connected to God, *and* from and intimately connected to the earth. In holding these two notions together in tension, a space emerges in between, which defines both the scope and paradox of human existence.

As the narrative continues, the notion that these two anthropological reflections function to define the boundaries of human existence, seems to be reinforced. The 'tipping point' of antediluvian culture, as presented at the outset

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<sup>29</sup> See HALOT, vol. 1, 15. See also Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 49.

<sup>30</sup> N.B. All biblical citations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

of Genesis 6, seems to be the breaking of the boundaries between the human and divine realms that occurs when the 'sons of God' copulate with the 'daughters of humans' producing seemingly semi-divine progeny.<sup>31</sup> Whilst in the narrative it is the divine beings who instigate the illicit interactions, the story also appears to function (much like the image of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Yahwistic myth) as a reflection on human desires to approach and invade the divine sphere. As Shemaryahu Talmon points out,

The reported intermingling of humans with celestial beings suggests an underlying quest of man for the attainment of divine status.<sup>32</sup>

Talmon also notes a parallel with the situation that arises in the aftermath of the great flood with the construction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-10). We might profitably remark that, in the Babel story, not only does the project of building a tower stretching to the heavens represent what Talmon describes as another depiction of humankind's attempt to "arrogate to itself divine status",<sup>33</sup> but also that the text makes it clear that attempts to reach to heaven invariably involve humans in an exercise of undervaluing and impoverishing their fundamental relationship with the earth.

I have suggested that elements of the anthropology laid out in the early chapters of Genesis present a clear, if often overlooked, theological message about the dangers for human culture, which derives from both hubristic attempts to elevate ourselves to divinity, and the often accompanying and equally

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<sup>31</sup> There exists an interesting link between the global outpouring of chaos, precursored by and narratologically connected to this sexual violation of the human/divine divide and the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19, which can also be seen as having been preceded by human attempts to have sexual relations with heavenly beings.

<sup>32</sup> Talmon, Shemaryahu, 'The Biblical Understanding of the Creation and the Human Commitment', *Ex Auditu*, III, (1987) 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> Talmon, 'The Biblical Understanding... ', 110.

damaging tendency to ignore or sever our intimate connections with the earth, from whence we came and to which we shall return.

In the context of these aspects of Genesis' exploration of human nature, William Davies' point about the tendencies in Christian approaches to the Old Testament and Jewish traditions resonates in a significant way. While the notion of *imago dei* derived from reflections on Genesis 1.26-27 supports a set of doctrinal propositions which are central to many Christian theological anthropologies, the significance of the intimate and vital relationship between the *ādām* and the *ʾādāmāh* as described in Genesis 2.7 and 3.19 carries comparatively little doctrinal significance and has received far less attention.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting on the anthropological implications of Genesis 2.7 and 3.19, Talmon states that

This idea ... became a prominent motif in postbiblical Jewish thought, and beyond that was accepted in all civilisations that acknowledge the Hebrew Bible as a cornerstone of their culture.<sup>35</sup>

I would contend that, if Talmon is casting the scope of the latter part of this statement wide in order to draw the tradition of Western Christianity into his observation, then he is being overly optimistic on at least one if not two fronts. His subsequent observation that while the paradoxical notion of the human that emerges from the first three chapters of Genesis "disturbs the modern, rationalistic mind ... it was viewed with apparent equanimity by the biblical writers and by later Jewish thinkers alike",<sup>36</sup> seems to me to trace out a more realistic set of boundaries.

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<sup>34</sup> It is significant, however, that this notion plays an important ritualistic and liturgical role within the context of traditional Christian burial rites.

<sup>35</sup> Talmon, 'The Biblical Understanding... ', 107.

<sup>36</sup> Talmon, 'The Biblical Understanding... ', 108.

Christian theology has largely failed fully and fruitfully to grapple with this subtle, powerful paradox (among many others), in part because it has been dominated for much of its history by the 'rationalistic mind' which Talmon aptly depicts as disturbed by liminality, contradiction and provisionality. Instead of embracing the creative potential of these tensions and uncertainties, Christian interpreters have tended to create schemes in which subtleties and nuanced details are marginalised in the wake of an emphasis on unifying themes and general trends.<sup>37</sup>

I have suggested that it is possible to see the two creation myths in Genesis, together, as defining the scope of human activity as the space between the two boundaries of human nature – represented by the contrasting, anthropological emphases in the two texts. Although the notion of God using the dust of the earth as a modelling material from which to form humankind might well have been too much at odds with the Priestly writers' emphases (particularly those regarding the uniqueness and holiness of God and the mediatory and the managerial vocation of human beings) to have been a product of their worldview, it does chime in interesting ways with the ideology of boundary that underpins much Priestly thought. Furthermore, although it is impossible to know for sure to what extent a Priestly redactor might have perceived a conceptual continuity, it seems to me that (at least) for the reader of the final form of the Pentateuch, there exists an interesting parallel between the way in which these two anthropological notions interact and the essence of the relationship between human beings and the natural world in Leviticus.

In Leviticus, anthropology, theology and cosmology collide and interact in the presentation of a particular vision of the functioning of culture. In a similar

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<sup>37</sup> Uses of terms such as *Salvation History* and (more ironically) *Salvation Landscape* tend to indicate unsatisfactorily broad-brushed approaches to Hebrew Bible interpretation which, by, as it were, zooming out and trying to view 'the big picture', squeeze out the elements which do not fit easily within the proposed framework (see below).

way to the early chapters of Genesis, the divine marks one boundary of reality, and the earth marks the other,<sup>38</sup> but here these notions are not primarily expressive of the internal limits of anthropology. Rather, they involve and engage with the up close nitty-gritty of the real-life – the living space of all reality along with its inherent nuances, paradoxes and tensions. All of these factors are woven together and expressed in the Priestly vision of the mutual interaction of God, human beings and the rest of the created order. In this sense, it might be said that Leviticus centres on the exploration of the relational co-existence of *holiness*, *humanness* and *humus*.

Before turning to an examination of the key texts that I wish to consider, however, I feel it is important to contextualise my approach further by reference to some specific attempts by Christian interpreters to categorize and define Leviticus' conception of land and to express its relationship to other such conceptions within the Hebrew Bible.

## Locating Land: 'History' & Hermeneutics

One of the conceptions that both guides and is explored in this thesis is that there is a fundamental relationship between what we do with texts and how we interpret and construct the world.<sup>39</sup> Culture is always a product of, as well as the basis for, hermeneutics. As such, reflections on the way we read can provide valuable insight into the world we inhabit.

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<sup>38</sup> The fact that *'ereš* can also connote 'underworld' chimes with the emphasis in Genesis 3.19 that the relationship between humans and the earth is intrinsically bound up with human mortality – see above n. 17.

<sup>39</sup> N.B. Heine's famous line: "*Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen.*" – "*Where they burn books, so too will they in the end burn human beings.*" (*Almansor: A Tragedy*, I. 245) Heine, Heinrich, *Tragödien nebst einem lyrischen Intermezzo*, Berlin: Bei Ferdinand Dümmler, (1823) 148.

Of course, such a notion is nothing new. It underpins, for example, Lynn White Jr's famous argument that there is a historical, causal connection between the themes of the Genesis creation myths (in particular Genesis 1) and the realities of modern ecological devastation. Since 1967 when White's essay 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' first awoke Christian theologians and exegetes to the need for much more work on conceptions of the relationship between humans and the natural world in scripture than had been done previously,<sup>40</sup> the focus has mostly been either on how we might construct an ecologically aware reading of certain 'problem' texts (like Gen. 1.28), or on how other (friendly) texts might make a *better* grounding for ecological reflection. Less emphasis, however, has fallen on the question of *how*, as opposed to *what*, we read.

In his influential 1943 essay, 'The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land', Gerhard von Rad asserts that, within the first six books of the Old Testament, there exist two distinct conceptions of land. The first, which he refers to as the 'historical conception', focuses on the theme of the promise of land to the patriarchs and perceives its 'fulfilment' in the conquest of the land of Canaan and Israel's subsequent possession of it. The second, which he refers to as the 'cultic conception', derives from the understanding that the land fundamentally belongs to YHWH – a concept most clearly presented in Leviticus 25.23: "The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants."

In distinguishing these two conceptions, von Rad makes it clear that he sees them as belonging to and reflecting two completely separate modes of discourse. Reflecting on Leviticus 25.23, he comments,

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<sup>40</sup> See White, 'The Historical Roots...', 1203-1207.



What new realm of ideas have we entered here? The saying has evidently nothing in common with that promise of possession of the land which runs right through the Hexateuch.<sup>41</sup>

Later he reiterates that the notion that the land belongs to YHWH is “of a totally different order from that of the promise of the land to the early patriarchs”.<sup>42</sup> The shape and brevity of von Rad’s argument, however, implies that it is more a polarization of the categories ‘cultic’ and ‘historical’ in his thought that drives this insistence, than necessarily the results of textual analysis.

For von Rad there is no doubt that the *historical conception* functions as the dominant perspective on land in the Hexateuch – in fact, more than this, it is one of its most significant concepts full stop.

In the whole of the Hexateuch there is probably no more important idea than that expressed in terms of the land promised and later granted by Yahweh, an idea found in all the sources, and indeed in every part of each of them.<sup>43</sup>

In sharp contrast to the prior consensus (epitomised by Welhausen), von Rad follows Albrecht Alt in understanding the promise of land to the patriarchs as reflective of an ancient tradition and, furthermore (contra Alt), as having priority within the tradition over the promise of descendants.<sup>44</sup> The promise of land functions for von Rad as the basis of the work of the Yahwist (J), who stitches together the traditions of the pre-settlement era, various stories of the ‘age of Moses’, and the notions of the conquest of and settlement in the land of Canaan, into a unified ‘historical’ narrative; and who, in so doing, defines the shape, pattern and theological trajectory of the first six books. In von Rad’s

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<sup>41</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land...’, 85.

<sup>42</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 88.

<sup>43</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 79.

<sup>44</sup> See Rad, Gerhard von, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. I: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, (trans. David Stalker), London: SCM Press, (1975) 167-171.

phrase, “the massive arch leading from promise to fulfilment ... bridges and spans the whole Hexateuch”.<sup>45</sup> Although von Rad argues that, in the process of constructing this hugely influential, theologically motivated narrative, the Yahwist ‘historicized’ the emphases and concerns of material which had been preserved and transmitted to him in a cultic context, his project of ‘historicization’ was so extensive that “there is not one single instance in which the original cultic interest has been preserved”.<sup>46</sup>

While the majority of von Rad’s reflections on the ‘historical conception’ of land and its role in shaping the first six books of the Hebrew Bible focus on the J source, he also points out that the conception was influentially absorbed into the foundations of the book of Deuteronomy. While von Rad’s work on Deuteronomy is too vast to be succinctly or profitably summarized here, the implications of the brief sketch that he offers in this short paper are instructive in the context of our theme.

For von Rad, Deuteronomy is “dominated from beginning to end by the idea of the land which is to be taken in possession”. He continues,

It forms the theme both of the laws and of the paraenetic discourse; our very first observation was that Deuteronomy has fused together in a most intimate way the promise of the land made to the early patriarchs and the tradition of the commandments given at Mt. Sinai.<sup>47</sup>

We must note here a significant feature of the ideology of the argument: while the reader might initially have expected Deuteronomy to relate to the ‘cultic conception’, it is only upon reaching his brief discussion of the book that it becomes totally clear that the way von Rad has defined the ‘cultic conception’

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<sup>45</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I*, 170.

<sup>46</sup> Rad, Gerhard von, ‘The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch’, in Rad, Gerhard von, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, London: Oliver & Boyd, (1966) 68.

<sup>47</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 90-91.

functions to set it as much in opposition to Deuteronomy as to the J material – perhaps even more so. Whether it is explicitly intentional or not, von Rad’s conceptual framework therefore serves to sharply distinguish the notion of land that underlies the theology of Deuteronomy from the notion presented in Leviticus.

Where von Rad does make (brief) mention of the fact that Deuteronomy also contains cultic material and themes, he portrays the interaction as one based around a radical, theologically progressive transformation of pre-existing material which constitutes the creation of a “new style of cultus”.<sup>48</sup> While he recognises that the categories are perhaps less clear cut due to the complexities involved in D’s broad and extensive theological project, he emphasizes that

At all events, Deuteronomy reflects a substantially more advanced situation than that envisaged by the priestly writer.<sup>49</sup>

The ideological message is quite clear – both in terms of narrative context and progressive, ‘transformative’ method, Deuteronomy takes up the baton from J and, at least in terms of its (central) conception of land, conceives of land in terms ‘historical’ as directly opposed to ‘cultic’.

We might instructively recall at this point that, for Wellhausen, Deuteronomy also represents the logic and processes of centralization and ‘denaturalization’ which reach their distorted zenith in Leviticus. As such, he considers Deuteronomy to be (along with, although to a far lesser extent than, Leviticus) once removed from, and inferior to, authentic Israelite religion as most clearly elucidated in the writing prophets. In von Rad, however, we see the opposite configuration. Rather than one being a logic extension of the other, the

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<sup>48</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 91.

<sup>49</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 91.

two books reflect two totally different perspectives. By being presented as standing in the theologically motivated transformative, 'historicizing' tradition of J (the dominant tradition), Deuteronomy is, in an ideological sense, pulled in towards the centre – whilst, simultaneously, Leviticus and the 'cultic conception' are sectioned off and designated as marginal.

This aspect of von Rad's work represents only one example in post-*Prolegomena* scholarship of the creation of grounds for a much more positive reading of Deuteronomy than Wellhausen propounded. Besides von Rad, the work of scholars such as Martin Noth, Claus Westermann, Norbert Lohfink, Hans Schmidt, John van Seters and more recently Walter Brueggemann and David Clines have all, in quite various ways, drawn on the idea of promise-fulfilment as an over-arching theme, and in so doing have further fortified Deuteronomy's place at the centre of Old Testament interpretation.<sup>50</sup>

It might be argued that there is both a doctrinal and a *hermeneutic* aspect to the success of the 'recovery' of Deuteronomy and the (parallel) prominence in Christian interpretation of what I have (outlined and) termed as the 'promise-gift' perspective on land. Of course, there exist rather obvious theological parallels between the Israelite God who promises and gifts the land to the people, and the (predominantly Protestant) Christian conception of God as most fully revealed in the promise of his *Word* and his *Historical* acts of grace.

Rolf Knierim has insightfully demonstrated the effect of a near-unswerving emphasis on the description of God's acts in History as *the* locus of biblical faith, or more significantly the overarching interpretation of the world in

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<sup>50</sup> For a thorough and interesting examination of the role of this theme in modern Biblical scholarship see Boorer, Suzanne, *The Promise of the Land as Oath: A Key to the Formation of the Pentateuch*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, (1992) 38-99.

scripture as “the sphere of Yahweh’s historical action”,<sup>51</sup> on the interpretation of biblical creation theologies. As Knierim laments:

The theological interpretation of God’s relationship to the world has for long been governed, at least in Old Testament studies, by our preoccupation with history. We have believed to have good reason for this preoccupation because of the Old Testament’s own intensive attention to history. Under this preoccupation, however, we have by and large underestimated the role of another aspect in the Old Testament, namely Yahweh’s relationship to and presence in the order of the world.<sup>52</sup>

I have made it clear from the outset that in this thesis I am engaging in Christian theological reflection, and as such it is obvious that I am not sceptical of theological interpretation *per se*. However, I am forever dissatisfied when explicitly theological concerns are manifest in interpretative strategies that awkwardly attempt to squeeze the text to make it ‘fit’, when theological assumptions are imported wholesale and read back into texts, or worst (and perhaps most self-defeating) of all, when theological interpretive models lead Christian exegetes to simply ignore the perspectives expressed in certain Hebrew Bible material all together.

At one point in ‘The Promised Land’, von Rad interrupts a section reflecting on the complexity of Deuteronomy’s meshing of the promise-fulfilment framework and the Sinai tradition by asking (but never answering)

Does not the promise of land in this conditional form pave the way for a declension from grace into law?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rad, Gerhard von, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. II: The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, (trans. David Stalker), London: SCM (1975) 341.

<sup>52</sup> Knierim, Rolf P., ‘Cosmos and History in Israel’s Theology’, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 3, 59-123 (63).

<sup>53</sup> von Rad, ‘The Promised Land’, 91.

Whether or not these doctrinal concerns are central to von Rad's interpretive method, or say more about the assumptions he holds regarding the key concerns of his audience, I find it a revealing indication of the influence of the kind of sub-text which I perceive to play a significant role in much of the mainstream Old Testament interpretation that I encounter.

I have also made mention of the role in this interpretive scheme of what I refer to as a 'hermeneutic aspect'. In this context, I use this phrase to represent the tendency to construct specific readings and interpretations that support or facilitate reading and interpretation in general. This tendency particularly manifests itself in the widespread desire to decipher 'overarching themes' or 'theological trends' across large sections of the Hebrew Bible. Once the overarching notions that compose the overarching perspective have been defined and their significance charted across various 'key' texts, there exists a temptation to bend exegesis of any seemingly sympathetic text towards that interpretive norm. This process of normalization intrinsically involves the overlooking or de-emphasizing of elements within any given text that suggest a departure from, or a nuancing of, the predetermined norms. In ideological terms, the normalizing process therefore paves the way for the subjection of the specific to the general.

I am not suggesting that general themes or overarching frameworks are never viable or of any use – merely that the gap between discerning and defining key themes, and implementing (consciously or otherwise) an interpretive methodology which thinks of any and all texts primarily in terms related to them, can be perilously small. The theologically inspired preference for monotony and unity – and, when it cannot be conjured from every quarter, the tendency to construct a dynamic of dominance against marginality – has typified much Old Testament study.<sup>54</sup> If for no other reason, the reader might expect a study such as this, rooted as it is in reflections on the contemporary ecological crisis, to be wary

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<sup>54</sup> See in particular Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible...*

of any heavily 'top-down' model of interpretation which defers to an ideology of dominance and marginality, particularly when the key determining factors behind the methodology often remain unvoiced.

While much of the continuing influence of von Rad's article has arisen from the synthesis between his emphases and those which were developing in Old Testament scholarship more generally, it is interesting to note that where the *details* of his argument have been taken up in work specifically focused on the land, emphasis on the 'historical conception' and Deuteronomy has been manifested through a methodology of homogeneity rather than dominance.

In *God's People in God's Land*, Christopher Wright begins by setting out von Rad's conceptions and suggesting that the scheme that he develops around them is in need of revision. For Wright, von Rad overemphasizes the distinction between the two conceptions. As he perceives it, they are in fact "two sides of one coin".

*Theologically*, the land could be viewed from two angles. From Israel's point of view it was the land of promise and gift – the *major theme* of their *historical* traditions. From Yahweh's point of view it was the land which belonged in a unique sense to him, and his prior ownership must be acknowledged by Israel in cultic and legal institutions.<sup>55</sup>  
(Emphasis mine)

Wright proceeds to anchor his inclination to read the two conceptions together in an interpretation of the second half of the so-called 'Song of the Sea'.

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away. Terror and dread fell

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<sup>55</sup> Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 10.

upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as stone until your people, O Lord, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by. You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.

(Exod. 15.13-17)

Following Ronald Clements' argument that the language of verse 17 refers to the whole land, Wright interprets the song as reflecting the tradition that the land belonged to YHWH. This is, he posits,

Evidence for the complementarity of the two ideas – cultic and historical, ownership and gift – at a period earlier than the generally accepted date of the earliest pentateuchal source.<sup>56</sup>

Wright's extremely curt presentation of such a difficult and disputed text as proof of this 'synthesis' of the two conceptions seems extremely dubious. First and foremost, there is no hint of recognition that there are significant ideological issues involved with bringing poetic texts to bear on issues of 'tradition' in this way. However, even if this methodologically dubious move is excused, I am simply not convinced that both of the conceptions are present in the song, either with the clarity or to the extent necessary to justify the use that Wright wishes to make of them. He (and Clements) may well be correct in perceiving an implicitly 'broad' understanding behind the references to the mountain and sanctuary of the Lord; but, even so, this only accounts for one side of the argument. Wright is, it seems to me, assuming that the other – obviously in his view less contentious – *historical* conception is adequately and unproblematically reflected in the song.

The puzzle over what exactly Wright's interpretation is doing in these reflections is illuminated by attention to two details. First, it seems that von Rad's

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<sup>56</sup> Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 11.



emphasis on the ancient promise of land to the patriarchs as the first aspect of the couplet at the heart of the 'historic conception' of land has been replaced here with a notion of the exodus. Wright speaks not of a promise-fulfilment tradition, but of the Exodus land gift tradition, and drives home his point about the invalidity of von Rad's distinction, noting the presence of four references to the exodus tradition in Leviticus 25.

The second significant aspect of Wright's appropriation of Exodus 15 is the explicit appeal to authenticity through antiquity. It is the fact that the Song is thought to date from a "period earlier than the generally accepted date of the earliest pentateuchal source" that clearly stands as Wright's primary motivation for the invocation. Wright's argument relies, it seems to me, on the logic that, if an early text can be shown to bear witness to an integration of cultic and historical concerns, then the notion that there might exist a tension between the two in later texts cannot be valid.

In a related vein, Wright also claims that not only does the (seemingly homogenous) history of Israelite thought deny the distinction, but so too does Israelite practice. He writes,

It is hard to imagine how an Israelite, once settled on the land, could have brought his offering to the sanctuary in acknowledgement of Yahweh's ownership of the land without at the same time reflecting, in the light of the strong settlement traditions to which he was heir, on the fact that the land he had just reaped was God's gift to Israel, the fulfilment of his promise to the fathers, and the climax of the redemptive acts of Yahweh on Israel's behalf. The two ideas must have been correlative and complementary.<sup>57</sup>

Setting aside the perhaps over-playful observation that just because an ancient situation seems hard to imagine to a modern scholar this does not prove that

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<sup>57</sup> Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 12.

things *must* have been another way, it is interesting to note Wright's appeal to a constructed 'historical' reality behind the text in order to normalise the interpretation of, or even fill gaps in, the text itself. This ideological and methodological logic is also apparent with regard to the other main facet of Wright's argument, namely that

It would seem obvious that Yahweh's giving of the land presupposes in itself his prior ownership of it – that is, that as owner it was in Yahweh's authority and power to give the land.<sup>58</sup>

A similar rationale for departing from von Rad is laid out elsewhere by Walter Kaiser:

Why von Rad would confuse the issue and say that since the land belongs to Yahweh, 'it is now quite clear that this notion is of a totally different order from that of the promise of the land to the early patriarchs' is hard to understand. His argument does not stand up to the blunt claims of the text ... While Baal may have been regarded as Lord of the land and the giver of all blessings in pagan Canaanite religion, Yahweh was the Lord of all the earth – His creative word, to use a fine von Rad phrase, had settled that issue. Consequently there were not two viewpoints on the inheritance of the land. It can only be Israel's because it was first Yahweh's land and His to give to whomever He pleased for however long He pleased.<sup>59</sup>

It might seem from the treatment of von Rad above that I would welcome the deconstruction of his notion of sharp discontinuity between the historical and the cultic – between J (and Deuteronomy) and Leviticus. However, what I have attempted to express instead is a dissatisfaction with the ideological foundation

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Kaiser Jr, Walter C., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, (1991) 125-126.

and hermeneutical functioning of von Rad's distinction – and, furthermore, with the one-sidedness of his subsequent interpretation. I have not questioned, however, the validity of the original move. In fact, I consider von Rad's reaction to Leviticus 25.23 – “What new realm of ideas have we entered here?” – to be both an honest and stimulating departure point, and one which chimes pertinently with my own experiences in the book.

Although von Rad's analysis and emphases tend to support the *status quo* in terms of the marginal status of Leviticus, the methodology apparent in Wright and Kaiser paves the way for a less obvious, more insidious bypassing of the book. Von Rad sees Leviticus' perspective on land as radically distinct from what he understands as the Hexateuchal 'historical' consensus, but he lays the foundations for the continued overlooking of the book by construing Deuteronomy as representative of a more 'progressive' attitude towards the interrelation of history and cult.

In contrast, Wright and Kaiser (among others) are explicit about the fact that Leviticus is as equally concerned with this interrelation as Deuteronomy. However, the implicit assumption and practically realized upshot of this homogenizing hermeneutic is that the Levitical version of this synthesis is less accessible and less useful than the Deuteronomistic one. This is exemplified fairly clearly in a section elsewhere concerning 'The Promised Land', in which Kaiser introduces the notion of 'land as gift' by quoting Leviticus 25.23 (as paradigmatic of the concept), and then proceeds, over the course of the section, to refer to Deuteronomy some forty-two times without citing another verse from Leviticus.<sup>60</sup> The implication seems to be that, while all texts bear equal witness to the *gracious gifts* that are typical of God's action *in history*, some texts' testimonies are more equal than others.

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<sup>60</sup> Kaiser Jr, Walter C., 'The Promised Land...', 305-307.

Therein, the hermeneutic utilized by these authors writing nearly sixty years after von Rad demonstrates revealingly that the interpretive desire to harmonize the various strands of the Old Testament into one consistent and overarching ('historical') narrative guided primarily by doctrinal concerns is by no means limited to the earlier decades of the twentieth century, but is also a guiding force, albeit in a somewhat modified form, behind much more recent discourse.

Although I welcome attempts to draw Leviticus more deeply into conversations about land in the Hebrew Bible, the ideological thrust that I perceive behind Wright's and Kaiser's collapsing of von Rad's distinctions does not, I fear, ultimately achieve this in any meaningful way. The methodology employed by von Rad (and, for that matter, by Wellhausen) bears the classic hallmarks of the modernist project: it polarizes, it paints one pole as more representative of the grand narrative; and, in thus promoting it, marginalizes its opposite. The methodology employed by Wright and Kaiser, on the other hand, is equally classical in its representation of its own era. Rather than being defined, distinctions are downplayed. The attempt is not to identify and banish, but to paper over and interpret away any cracks of discontinuity; to disguise any areas of tension. As in all spheres, however, the creation of homogeneity requires a systematic inattention to detail – for it means the sacrificing of particularity and distinctiveness in the face of similarity.

Whether the various interpretive methods that I have outlined from across the history of modern biblical scholarship have promoted a tendency towards dichotomization and the domination of one text (or set of texts) over another, or a tendency towards homogenization and the subjection of all the texts in question to an abstract theological construct, what has mostly resulted is the priority of Deuteronomy, the perspective on land that it propounds, and the

unproblematized passing on of a hermeneutic which, explicitly or implicitly, seeks to flex and mould scripture to fit and reflect doctrinal concerns.

A significant element of the impact of such grand narrative dominated schemes is reflected in a parallel between approaches to the text itself and the theological and ideological outcomes of the interpretive project. The desire to ignore the contours and variations in the ideological landscape of a text (or set of texts) is closely linked to the tendency to overlook and undervalue the local and particular – the grounded, we might say.

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, William Davies' portrayal of much Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (and in particular of the notion of land) as over preoccupied with – and shaped by – doctrinal concerns, and demonstrative of a lack of engagement with *realia*, is a fundamentally important and insightful corrective. It must, however, be nuanced. The full significance of these parallels between doctrinal constructs and interpretive frameworks is, I wish to argue, only illuminated by the recognition that the process of constructing an interpretive framework that issues from the concerns of the reading community, and thus already abstracts from *realia*, is not a notion utterly alien to the biblical texts themselves.

Not only does the understanding of land within the framework of the promised-gift paradigm serve as a useful allegorical construct for Christian interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, but, equally significantly, it already functions therein as a framework within which various aspects of the history of the people of Israel are interpreted. With regard to the interpretation and functioning of the concept of land, there therefore exists an interesting hermeneutical synergy between the processes of internal development and redaction which shaped the Hebrew canon, and much Christian interpretation of it.

It is significant that both underpinning the majority of the interpretations of land in the Hebrew Bible, and driving the intra-canonical construal of the land

as an interpretive framework, is the experience of landlessness brought about by the Babylonian exile. The notion that Deuteronomy and Leviticus respond to the exile in different ways, and formulate significantly different interpretations of land as a result, provides the basis for much of my argumentation regarding the dominance of Deuteronomy within Christian scholarship, and functions as an important aspect of the interpretation of Leviticus' conception of land that I offer in this chapter.

### **(Re)Conceiving Land: Possession? Pledge? Person?**

Having attempted to discern ideological and hermeneutical lessons from the dominant trends and perspectives on land in the tradition of modern Old Testament scholarship, and from von Rad in particular, my intention for the remainder of this chapter is to revisit von Rad's perception that there is something genuinely distinctive about the context and content of Leviticus' perspective on land.

Despite the emphasis I have placed on the potential novelty of Leviticus' conception, as I have implied above, the primary justification for attempting this interpretative project is not an instrumental one, but based rather in an assertion that, as scripture, the book of Leviticus is intrinsically worthy, and indeed demanding, of serious, imaginative and lasting engagement. This having been said, however, comparisons with Deuteronomy, in particular, will provide context and contrast that will both enrich the engagement with Leviticus and assist in highlighting aspects of Leviticus' vision that have gone widely unnoticed and which can be seen to entail critique and offer inspiration in relation to Christian conceptions of both hermeneutics and ecological ethics.

In Deuteronomy, YHWH is the “God of gods and Lord of lords” who has chosen the Israelites out of all the peoples of the world (Deut. 10.14-17). These claims to universal authority are, in effect, put to the test and legitimated in the process of the delivery of a small slave population out of a mighty empire and into a land cleared of its previous inhabitants and granted (*nātān*) to the freed slaves as a gift.<sup>61</sup> Israel must acknowledge (*yāda* ‘) YHWH's sovereign status (see Deut. 4.32-39; 6.12, 20-24; 7.17-19; 11.1-4), and YHWH's continued action in regard to Israel will demonstrate this to the rest of the nations (Deut. 28.7-10). As Clements has noted, one implication of this model of divine action is that it emphasises YHWH as a transcendent ruler.<sup>62</sup>

As we have noted, Deuteronomy primarily conceives of land in the context of the promise to the patriarchs as fulfilled in YHWH's gifting of the land of Canaan to the people of Israel. The land is an inheritance to the people and, as is repeated over and over, will become, upon their entrance, their ‘possession’.<sup>63</sup> In the context of the land as being handed over to the people as a possession, the day to day realities of life in and on the land function both to demonstrate the people's reliance on YHWH and to reflect the relationship between the two. As Moshe Weinfeld puts it,

What is unique about Israel's relationship to the land is neither the divine promise nor the permanence of the patrimony, but rather the religious and moral ramifications of the promise: the belief that, in order to dwell safely in the land, it was necessary to fulfil the will of the God who gave the land. The land was thus transformed into a kind of mirror, reflecting the religious and ethical behaviour of the people; if the people were in possession of the land, it was a sign that they were

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<sup>61</sup> See Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 37-39.

<sup>62</sup> See Clements, Ronald E., *Deuteronomy*, Old Testament Guides, Sheffield: JSOT Press, (1989) 52-53.

<sup>63</sup> Deuteronomy's uses of *yrš*, its related terms and active senses of *nhl* often translated ‘cause to inherit’, ‘take as inheritance’ or ‘take possession of’) in relation to the land are extensive, e.g. 1.8; 1.21; 1.38; 2.31; 3.28; 4.21; 4.22; 4.38; 5.31; 5.33; 15.4; 17.14; 19.2; 19.3; 19.14; 21.1; 21.23; 24.4; 25.19; 26.1; 28.21; 30.16; 31.7; 32.47; 32.49.

fulfilling God's will and observing his commandments; if they lost the land, it was an indication that they violated God's covenant and neglected his commandments ... This view achieves fullest expression in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic Literature.<sup>64</sup>

As Norman Habel has noted, the dual emphases of the mighty work of YHWH in the exodus, and the gift of the 'good land', function as reminders of Israel's indebtedness, as preludes to and as guarantors of the legal covenant (*b'rit*)<sup>65</sup> between God and the people<sup>66</sup> – that is to say, in grateful response to what they have inherited, the people receive and obey the law and therein secure safe residence in the land. As such, it is tempting to suggest that within this scheme the functioning of the land is, or could be construed as, somewhat analogous to that of a bartering token. In defence of the accusation that the writers of Deuteronomy do not take the land *as land* seriously, attention might be drawn to the several well known descriptions in the text of the land's overwhelming fecundity, and the superabundance of provision that it yields.<sup>67</sup> A good example of such a description is found in Deut. 8.7-10:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing ... You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.

While this passage might seem at first to be a series of (admittedly rather fulsome) reflections on a blossoming ecosystem – a space in which life and

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<sup>64</sup> Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land*, 184.

<sup>65</sup> See HALOT, vol. 1, 157-159.

<sup>66</sup> Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 44.

<sup>67</sup> See Davies, 'Land: Its Rights and Privileges', 350.



creativity are evident in every corner – a modern, Western reader might be excused for seeing something rather like a shopping list. If this is perhaps overstating things, it is certainly the case that the reader should be forgiven for wondering what this land *is* besides a provider of goodies for its new occupants. Furthermore, the central function of all the luscious imagery, I suggest, is not primarily to describe and celebrate the intrinsic *fruitfulness* of the land, but rather to draw attention to the *scale* of what the people have received through the provision of YHWH. The focus on the yield of the land can be seen to function primarily as a symbol of YHWH's benevolence and, as Deut. 8.10 makes clear, the emphasis is firmly on the extent to which Israel is indebted to YHWH.<sup>68</sup>

The purpose of highlighting this point was not to crudely suggest that such conceptions of land should be resisted as an example of the commodification of natural resources, or to paint Deuteronomy's perspective on land as ecologically dubious *per se*, but rather simply to flag up an unfortunate ideological parallel. It is extremely significant, particularly in the context of the primacy of such conceptions within Old Testament scholarship, that although this framework initially focuses in great detail on the land, a key purpose therein is to move attention beyond the land and onto the exclusive relationship between the people and YHWH. In this way, elements of Deuteronomy's rhetoric, I contend, lend themselves rather well to interpretations in which land (understood as gift/grace) stands initially in the foreground, but is, in the light of a hermeneutical emphasis on an abstract notion of divine-human relationship, rapidly and radically relegated to the role of mere scenery.

It is, after all, the nature of the construction of 'gifting' that whatever stands as 'gift' should point beyond itself to a relationship in which it does not foundationally figure. It has, in many cases, proved all too easy to extract and transport the model of a divine gift which makes possible a personal relationship

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<sup>68</sup> See Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 41-43.

between God and humans, in a form where the gift concerned is instantiated in any number of forms and where in many cases it bears little intrinsic value within the context of the model as a whole.

For many people, the notion that human interaction with the rest of the created order should be guided by a sense of 'giftedness', which reflects and imbues indebtedness to God and entails accountability, is among the most promising of starting points for contemporary ecological reflection.<sup>69</sup> It might be argued, however, that the legacy of the abstractive colonization of scriptural notions of 'gift' to serve doctrinal ends within Christian interpretation, makes a reconceptualization of the scheme necessary if any such reading is to be truly fruitful.

I suggest that when what is initially concerned is land – real, earthen, dirty land – then the process of symbolizing the 'gift' and abstracting the framework is far from being ideologically, politically or ecologically neutral. While, therefore, it might truthfully be argued that the thoroughly over-simplistic interpretation of Deuteronomy's conception of land presented above does a minimum of justice to the text itself, if it points to a truth in terms of interpretive tendencies within Christian theology (which I am convinced it does) then the implications are both extensive and instructive.

It is my conviction that a profound recognition that it is *land*, real land, indeed a specific land, which contextualizes and mediates the human-divine relationship, is in and of itself hugely meaningful. It is this notion above all others that I find most clearly and stimulatingly explored in Leviticus, in a way that is contextually, semantically and theologically insulated from the tendencies in Christian interpretation to *extract* and *abstract* which I have outlined above.

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<sup>69</sup> This or a similar conviction lies at the heart of most 'stewardship' based models of ecological ethics – see, for example, McGrath, Alister E., 'The Stewardship of Creation: An Evangelical Affirmation', in Berry, Robert J., *The Care of Creation: Focussing Concern and Action*, Leicester: IVP, (2000) 86-87.

We find ourselves, therefore, back where von Rad both started and effectively ended his intrigued and intriguing reflections on land in the third book of Torah. We are confronted once more with the notion that there does seem, on the face of things, to be a radical discontinuity between the model of land as historical promise and gift, and the one presented in Leviticus 25.23 whereby the land belongs to YHWH.

You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely ... the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

While there is a logic to the argument proposed by Wright, Kaiser and others<sup>70</sup> that gifting implies ownership and therefore that there is no conflict between this text and those elsewhere that draw heavily on the concept of 'land as gift', it does not seem satisfactorily to engage with the detail. As I have noted above, it is central to this approach to recognize and engage with the hermeneutic parallels between how one interprets texts about land and how one conceives of real land, and the world more generally. The idea that concern for the health of the earth as a whole is an inconvenience or an irrelevance can only derive from a lack of attention to the earth that surrounds us and exists in the same space as us. This recognition gives rise to the need to think carefully and critically about a reading strategy that is untroubled by detail, that systematically submits small distinctions to larger, harmonizing structures and therein seeks to downplay or interpret-away unusual emphases.

The point in Lev. 25.23 is clearly not that the land *was once* YHWH's possession and is *now* the people's, but rather that, within the context of the people's residence, the land remains YHWH's. The notion that "the land is mine" is thus central to the wider point being made – the current status of the land, that

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<sup>70</sup> See for example Joosten, *People and Land*, 170-171.

is to say its (close) relation to God, serves to define both the boundaries of Israel's practices with regard to the land ("land shall not be sold in perpetuity") and Israel's status in relation to YHWH. The 'ownership' of the land is not, therefore, in and of itself, the most distinctive element in the comparison between this concept and that of the land as gift. Instead the focus falls on the questions of *where* the land is situated and *how* the land functions with the regard to the covenant.

The concept of land as gift is referenced in a few locations in Leviticus (14.34; 20.24; 23.10; 25.2; 25.38) and is thus clearly a part of the priestly thought world; however, as Jan Joosten has pointed out, the overriding notion which "permeates the entire discourse"<sup>71</sup> is that of YHWH as owner of the land. What is more, it is the striking combination of covenantal, ritual and ethical facets therein, which makes the text of 25.23 so intriguing and its ideological implications so wide reaching. Because the land does *not* belong to the people, it cannot be unconditionally bought and sold. The land is YHWH's and, is leased to the people; and, as such, they are held accountable within their most identity defining relationship as to how they treat their most basic economic, political, social and reality defining resource.<sup>72</sup> As in Genesis 1, the overarching context is provided by the notion that all creation is, by its very nature, imbued with, and expressive of, intrinsic limits that must be respected if life is to flourish.

The paramount concern of the writers of Deuteronomy – namely to frame the covenant in such a way as to resolve the tension between the historical promises of God (land and prosperity) and the experience of exile and landlessness – does not seem a pressing one for the writers of Leviticus. In Leviticus 25 the notion that the land has not been given to the people provides a foundation for the more far-reaching notion that Israel's continued residence in

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<sup>71</sup> Joosten, *People and Land*, 173.

<sup>72</sup> Chapter 3 extends this principle in relation to a different theme to the one explored below.

the land is solely connected with her observation of YHWH's 'statutes and ordinances'.<sup>73</sup>

In this respect, a direct comparison with Deuteronomy 26.16-19 is instructive.

This very day the LORD your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul. Today you have obtained the LORD's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the LORD has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised.

While the Deuteronomic writer's task is clearly rather convoluted, for the writer of Leviticus, it seems, there is no necessity to weave such complex links between concepts of divine promise, divine command and legal "agreement".<sup>74</sup> In Leviticus, ancient 'promises' of land and blessing are simply not evoked.<sup>75</sup> For the writers of Leviticus, rather than making *promises to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham*, YHWH made *covenants with them* (Lev. 26.42);<sup>76</sup> and, as explored below, the interpretation of covenant expressed in this verse has considerably more to do with intimate relationship than it does with legal treaty.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See 25.18 – also 18.4; 18.5; 18.26; 19.19; 19.37; 20.8; 20.22; 25.18; 26.3.

<sup>74</sup> Translations such as "you have avowed the LORD to be your God" or "you have affirmed the LORD as your God" – as opposed to the NRSV's "obtained the LORD's agreement" – might better communicate the sense here, if not necessarily the formality.

<sup>75</sup> One possible exception is 20.24 (a verse with distinct similarities to Deuteronomy in style and content). However, one potential half-reference does little but to reinforce that the concept is not important to the Priestly writer(s).

<sup>76</sup> Note the reversal of the usual order – this is especially significant (as explored below) in the light of the fact that the final (and therefore primal) covenant partner mentioned in this text is the land.

<sup>77</sup> This is an irony. At first glance (particularly to a modern, protestant interpreter) the opposite may seem to be the case – i.e. that we have a picture of divine grace in one text (Deuteronomy's 'gift') and a somewhat cold and removed legal contract in the other

If, however, we are to get to serious grips with the true significance of these distinctions, and with indeed Leviticus' theology of land generally, it is imperative to perceive that, like much of the book, Leviticus' understanding of YHWH's relation to the land is constructed in terms of, and must be contextualised with reference to, the concept of holiness.

As Davies notes,

Yahweh's possession of the land was expressed in terms of "holiness", a conception which in its origin had little, if anything, to do with morality, but rather denoted a relationship of separation for or consecration to a god. Since the land was Yahweh's possession, it enjoyed a certain degree of closeness to him; for Yahweh dwelt in the midst of Israel ... Because Yahweh was near to it, his holiness radiated through its boundaries.<sup>78</sup>

This concept of 'dwelling in the midst' is key to the distinctiveness of the Priestly vision of the community of Israel. As Frank Gorman points out,

At the heart of priestly theology is the belief that Yahweh dwells in the midst of the Israelite community and participates in its story. Indeed, this story is mutually shared and enacted by Yahweh and Israel. The holy God dwelling in the midst of the holy community is a constitutive image of Israel's identity.<sup>79</sup>

The priestly worldview, as represented in Leviticus, understands dynamic, contagious forces to be operating in two directions. In the first half of the book (chs. 1-16), the focus is on the operation of the sacrificial system and the work of the priests in specific, physical sanctuary sites. These portions of the text

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(Leviticus' 'tenants and aliens'). However, I hope to demonstrate that these appearances are (at least) somewhat deceptive.

<sup>78</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Gorman Jr, Frank H., *Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus*, International Theological Commentary, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, (1997) 10.

reflect belief in the corrupting and polluting nature of sin, which not only passively insulates the community from the holiness of God, but also actively challenges the holiness of God by rendering the community impure and in contradistinction to the state for which it was created (i.e. separated for and consecrated to YHWH).

In the later chapters (17-27), often referred to collectively as the Holiness Code, the focus shifts to the (parallel) contagious nature of holiness. Rather than focussing on the struggle to protect the holiness of the temple from that which contaminates from outside to inside, these later chapters reflect on the dynamic nature of holiness that (if unhindered), as it were, contaminates from inside to out and creates the potential for the people to be holy as YHWH is holy (19.2).<sup>80</sup>

William Davies' metaphor of 'radiation'<sup>81</sup> is a particularly useful one for depicting the concept of divine presence and the functioning of holiness. The image is that there is a concentration of holiness at the centre where God's presence primarily resides (the tabernacle / temple),<sup>82</sup> but that as the focus shifts out from the sanctuary and its specific functioning, that concentration of holiness radiates out and permeates the whole land.<sup>83</sup> Where holiness is encountered, there is order, and the potential of created things can be realized and brought to fruition. The primary goal of the community is, therefore, to ensure that there is as little resistance to the holiness of God as possible.

The overt (and controversial) statement of YHWH's ownership of the land in 25.23 must therefore be nuanced in terms of this notion. While the land

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<sup>80</sup> The notion that sin / chaos and holiness / order represent (in some sense) two sides of the same coin, and that, without proper regulation and administration, one can easily become the other, is a fascinating and under-acknowledged aspect of priestly thought.

<sup>81</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 29.

<sup>82</sup> This composite phrase is used to express the overlap between the narratological and historical locations of Leviticus (see introduction) that is always operates in discussions of the sanctuary.

<sup>83</sup> For connections elsewhere between the temple / house of God and the land see Ex. 15.17; Isa. 11.9; 57.13; Hos. 9.15; Ps. 78.54. Clements has argued that the request to dwell in the house of the LORD forever (e.g. Ps. 23.6; 27.4; 61.5) also refers to this notion – Clements, Ronald E., 'Temple and Land: A Significant Aspect of Israel's Worship', *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 19, (1961-62).

definitively belongs to YHWH,<sup>84</sup> the emphasis is not on the land as YHWH's *possession*, but as an extension of YHWH's *sanctuary*. When Leviticus claims that the land *is* YHWH's, it is therefore not primarily a proclamation of legal ownership, but an expression of cultic residence: the land is YHWH's *home*. As Joosten puts it,

YHWH's holy presence radiates outwards from the sanctuary throughout the entire land and imposes its demands on all its inhabitants. This fundamental axiom explains the notions of YHWH's ownership and lordship over the land. The land occupied by the Israelites is his because he dwells there in his sanctuary ... The conception of YHWH's ownership and lordship over the land is a cultic one, revolving around the notion of the land as the abode of God.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, in the context of the notion that the land is YHWH's home, the contrast with the portrayal of YHWH in Deuteronomy, which, as we have noted, tends to evoke the analogy of a transcendent ruler, is rendered with greater clarity. While the notion of the land as gift is not an alien one, for the priestly writers of Leviticus YHWH is more landlord than benefactor, and is very much present in the land.

I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (Lev. 26. 11-13)

It is interesting to note that while the sanctuary (in the *midst*) is YHWH's primary residence, the permeation of holiness from the centre outwards is depicted as YHWH walking among the people, around the land – an image which parallels

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<sup>84</sup> See Joosten, *People and Land*, 169-176.

<sup>85</sup> Joosten, *People and Land*, 177.



those used of divine and human co-dwelling in Eden. This permeation of holiness out from the temple / tabernacle makes the land an extension of the sanctuary and therefore, as Jacob Milgrom has noted, makes it holy.

The larger implication of the “the land is mine” is that the land is holy. In the priestly system whatever belongs to God is sacred ... Thus the doctrine of the “holy land”, though not explicitly stated, is implied.<sup>86</sup>

This notion of the holiness of the land sharpens the contrast (which we have noted above) with the understanding of the relationship between YHWH and the land in Deuteronomy. Joosten instructively describes the distinction thus:

The notions of YHWH's presence in the land and hence his lordship over it are entirely absent from Deuteronomy. Indeed, for all its importance in Deuteronomic theology, the land is there entirely desacralized.<sup>87</sup>

A further and particularly significant facet of this concept of the land as holy is that the relationship of proximity between YHWH and the land *pre-exists* the relationship between YHWH and the people. Despite the tradition that YHWH was present with the people in the wilderness and the notion that the temple / tabernacle is the primary locus of YHWH's presence in the land, there is also, as Milgrom points out, a notion that the land has always belonged to YHWH; it has always been YHWH's home.<sup>88</sup> According to this view it is, therefore, this notion of YHWH having guided Israel toward and into his land that properly contextualizes the priestly understanding of the covenant with

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<sup>86</sup> Milgrom, Jacob, *Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 3b, New York, NY: Doubleday, (2001) 2185.

<sup>87</sup> Joosten, *People and Land*, 177.

<sup>88</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2186-2187. This idea is in obvious tension with the notion elsewhere (particularly Josh. 23) that YHWH gained possession of the land through military conquest.

Abraham<sup>89</sup> – it is not so much a promise of future *possession*, as one of future *co-habitation*.

It is also important that if Canaan is not simply a land that YHWH has arbitrarily selected, but his land, then, by inviting the people in, YHWH has introduced them into a pre-existing dynamic. As with all such shifts in dynamic, new boundaries must be defined. As the people enter the land and settle there, conditions of tenancy must be agreed, and the new contexts in which the relationships involved will operate, must be defined. One might say that in YHWH's land, there are ground rules.

While 25.23's brief but dramatic statement that "the land is mine" clearly relies on and represents a host of fascinating dimensions of priestly thought regarding the role and status of the land in general, it must be emphasised that the phrase occurs in the context of a specific pronouncement. In turning to a consideration of this specific context, I refer initially to Joosten's comment that,

The primary object of this verse is not to make a theological point, but to ensure that the redemption and jubilee laws will be observed. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that the theological principle enunciated in this verse is of great importance to the author of H.<sup>90</sup>

Therefore while the wider implications of the notion of divine land ownership resonate through the text and suggest to us interesting avenues for theological investigation, the opening words of the verse make quite clear the specific purpose of the invocation of YHWH's ownership of the land.

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<sup>89</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2187. N.B. Jan-Wim Wesselius has argued in a fascinating essay that one of the key emphases in several of the texts that describe pre-Israelite (and pre-Abrahamic covenant) narratives (including the story of Abram and Melchizedek in Gen.14) is the establishment of the high status of the land of Canaan and in particular of Jerusalem. See Wesselius, Jan-Wim, 'From stumbling blocks to cornerstones: The function of problematic episodes in the Primary History and in Ezra-Nehemiah', in Roukema, Reimer, *The Interpretation of Exodus: Studies in Honour of Cornelius Houtman*, Leuven, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters, (2006) 37-59.

<sup>90</sup> Joosten, *People and Land*, 171.

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. (Lev. 25.23-24)

The central implication of YHWH's ownership of the land is that it serves as a prohibition against permanent transactions involving land. Land tenures can be bought and sold, however the personal, familial, social, economic and ecological implications of such transactions would never be absolute.

This instruction forbidding the kind of land transactions which imply and fortify absolute 'ownership' over land and which often, over time, spawn social stratification and fixed patterns of wealth and resource distribution, falls into a wider set of instructions regarding the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions.<sup>91</sup>

Just as the priestly accounts envisage the work of initial creation as six days of work with the seventh day standing as a day of ritualized rest (Gen. 2.1-3), so, upon entering the land, the people were to organise their economic calendar in accordance with a similar pattern:

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Lev. 25.3-5)

In addition to this pattern of seventh year agricultural resting, in the fiftieth year (after the seventh Sabbath year) there would be a year of release. In this Jubilee year, in addition to another period of agricultural rest and the release of Israelite slaves from their servitude, land which had been transacted would be returned to

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<sup>91</sup> These regulations are analyzed in relation to a different perspective from the one taken up here, in chapter 3.

the family that had originally owned it. Another aspect, therefore, of the notion of YHWH as the owner of the land, involves an implicit principle of land allocation – each family, the logic runs, has been allotted a portion of land from which to meet their needs, and if they had wanted or (more likely) needed to lease this allocation then they could rest assured that after a maximum of forty-nine years it would return to them.

While the Sabbath/Jubilee calendar can in itself be read as a profound vision of the interconnection between social/economic justice relating to land ownership, and agricultural justice relating to farming practices (a point to which I return in chapter 3), it might also seem to posit a rather hierarchical interpretation of the relationship between God, the people and the land. God is the landowner and the people are his slaves (25.55) who work the land to the extent that they can be trusted so to do. There is, however, a subtle detail in these verses that can be seen to open up a contrasting and rather more interesting perspective on the land, its status and function.

Chapter 25 begins,

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. (Lev. 25.1-2)

Notice how it is the land and not the people that is the primary active party in the equation: in this instance it is the land and not the people that shall observe a Sabbath for YHWH. In fact, throughout the verses that introduce and expand upon the notion of the Sabbath year as a period of agricultural and economic rest, language is used that seems deliberately to identify the land as the active agent in what is being instituted. So in 25.2 we find “the land shall observe a sabbath”; in

25.4 and 25.5 we twice read that the rest is “for the land”; and in 26.34 “the land shall enjoy its sabbath years ... the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbath”.

Taken on their own, these few verses may seem to be doing nothing more than displaying a decidedly ordinary way of using poetical, anthropomorphic language to creatively describe the impact of the actions of the people on the land. However, always tending towards the generic is not the best way to understand the creative intricacies of the Hebrew Bible, and I venture to propose that we may credibly perceive something more interesting at work here if we attend to another key text.

Following a section listing several corrupt practices, Leviticus chapter 18 draws to a close with the following lines:

... by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled). (Lev 18.25-27)

Notice, again, how the ritual abuses described culminate in the action of the land – this time the puking out of its previous inhabitants. Norman Habel is typical of many commentators when he asserts that this text should not be too closely aligned with the passage concerning the ejection of the inhabitants of the land in chapter 26. These verses, he affirms, concern punishment for specifically sexual transgressions, which is an entirely different subject to the teaching on land-rest in the later sections.<sup>92</sup> However, Davis has recently emphasised that such strictly compartmentalized thinking with regard to Leviticus cannot do justice to the

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<sup>92</sup> Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 103-104, 109.

creativity of the Priestly writers or to the far reaching insights of Mary Douglas and Jacob Milgrom, among others, who have been at pains to demonstrate the radical interconnectedness of the world that it describes.<sup>93</sup>

For Douglas, Milgrom and many of those, like Davis, that have followed them attentively, Leviticus expresses an embodied imagination that consistently seeks to hold together all aspects of the life of the community it addresses. As Douglas perceived clearly, this vision relies on, and is expressed by, an aesthetic logic which mostly avoids argument and explanation in favour of analogy.<sup>94</sup> If we read in the light of these insights concerning the text's analogical and thoroughly interconnected logic, the question arises as to why we should assume that warnings concerning one type of wrong practice (the sexual malpractice of chapter 18) should be thought of as distinct from warnings about another (the failure to enact the Jubilee rest as laid out in chapters 25 and 26). What if, rather than holding them separate, we interpret the various reflections on land in the later chapters of Leviticus together?

The notion in 18.25 that the land had previously been held responsible, and indeed punished, for a failure to fulfil its obligation to God with regard to another people is particularly significant in this regard. The addition of a temporal dimension of such wide scope and far-reaching significance to the image of the land as an active party seems to suggest that its use extends beyond quasi-poetic anthropomorphism. It is my contention that these later chapters of Leviticus reflect a genuine, strange and yet profound recognition that land is not an inanimate object, but rather is, in Davis' words, 'a semi-autonomous moral agent'.<sup>95</sup> In a much older study, Martin Buber highlights not only the agency of the land in the Hebrew Bible, but also the nature of its relationship with the

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<sup>93</sup> See Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 80-100.

<sup>94</sup> See Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*, 15-40.

<sup>95</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 100.

people. Commenting on the image of the land crying out against abuse in Job 31.38, he asserts

This is more than a mere poetic metaphor: the image represents a basic belief. In Israel the earth is not merely, as in all other primitive peoples or peoples that preserve their primeval energy, a living being, but it is also the partner in a moral, God-willed and God-guaranteed association.<sup>96</sup>

Buber then turns to Leviticus' notion of the land's sabbath and argues insightfully that:

Just as the people's Sabbath is not a mere rest from work but a holiday dedicated to God, so the sabbath [*sic*] of the land is more than mere fallowness. Just as all living beings in the community are liberated from the authority of all except the Lord on the Sabbath, so too the land has but one Lord in the Sabbatical year. It is a ritually conceived fallowness. It can be said in fact that the idea is that the earth is for a time to be free, so as not to be subjected to the will of man, but left to its own nature.<sup>97</sup>

It is interesting to note that between chapters 18 and 27 of Leviticus, there are ten references to land performing various actions in various circumstances.<sup>98</sup> In these texts the land is described as resting, devouring, vomiting and whoring, all activities with strong cultic overtones. This identification of the actions of the personified land as relating to cultic regulation is particularly significant. The relationship that the land has with YHWH, a relationship which clearly pre-dates YHWH's dealings with Israel, is likewise defined by the boundaries of ritual purity.

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<sup>96</sup> Buber, Martin, *Israel and Palestine: The History of An Idea*, (trans. Stanley Godman), London: East and West Library/Horowitz, (1952) 14.

<sup>97</sup> Buber, *Israel and Palestine*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> See 18.25, 28; 19.29; 20.22, 25.2, 4, 5; 26.34, 38, 43.

As Davies notes,

[T]he potency of the concept of the holiness of the land, though only derived from its relationship to Yahweh, emerges particularly in those passages which so forcibly and vividly personify the land.<sup>99</sup>

And commenting on 18.25-27 he adds,

In this passage the land had been defiled by its pre-Israelite inhabitants, who did not know the Torah, but had broken its demands ... When the land became defiled by the abominations of its inhabitants, the land itself thrust them out. It did this because of its holiness.<sup>100</sup>

Davies' observation regarding the absence of Torah in the context of this account of the land's inability to stomach the ritual abuses of its inhabitants is an apt one. The fact that Torah had not been established in the land emphasizes the fact that the focus in this account is as much on the purgative actions of the land as it is on the rhetoric of the abominable abuses of the Canaanites.

The priestly worldview is predicated on the reality and unavoidability of human sin.<sup>101</sup> One specific recognition of this can be seen in the fact that, while in the priestly creation account, human fecundity is an emphasized and essential element of humans' createdness (as Milgrom points out), it is no coincidence that sexuality and sin are closely related in both the story of the sin in the garden (Gen. 2.17; 3.22) and that of the sin which serves as the final provocation at the outset of the flood myth (Gen. 6.1-4).<sup>102</sup> The relationships of fecundity to

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<sup>99</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 30.

<sup>100</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 31.

<sup>101</sup> This concept is explored in more depth in chapter 2.

<sup>102</sup> See Milgrom, Jacob, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 3a, New York, NY: Doubleday, (2000) 1572ff; also Talmon, 'The Biblical Understanding... ', 114.



corrupting power, and of sex to violence (*hāmās*) are well recognised by the priests.<sup>103</sup>

Alongside the notion that sin is an unavoidable factor of human society runs the recognition that human sin pollutes the sanctuary (see chapter 2) and also has the potential to corrupt the land. In chapter 18 verse 25's graphic illustration of this, however, we encounter the intriguing notion that one of the implications of this polluting effect of sin is that it infringes upon and disrupts the relationship between YHWH and the land. Just as the priests and people strive to make themselves, their sanctuary and their community holy in the recognition of the holiness of God (Lev. 19.2), so too the land must take responsibility for its own holiness. The failure of the people to live as God commands will result not only in their exile from the land, but also in the punishment of the land by God.

Therefore, when the effects of human sin that have contaminated the land are not mitigated through right cultic practice, the land has no choice but to purify itself by casting the defiling people out. The dynamic of this process is what is expressed by the notion expressed in 18.25 that YHWH punished the land for its iniquity. The implication is that the relationship of YHWH to the land is mediated by purity regulations, and functions in a similar way to that of the people to YHWH. However, it is the responsibility of the human community to deal with the effects of its sin – the land does not, it seems, have the capacity to act as a priest or to perform regular ritual cleansing; only humans can fulfil this vocation and, as such, they are obligated to fulfil it on the behalf of the land as well as of themselves.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> I interpret and reflect on Gen 6. in detail in chapter 2.

<sup>104</sup> Given the general emphases of Leviticus and the Hebrew Bible more broadly, it is perhaps accurate to speak of the relationship between YHWH and the land as a 'co-text to' rather than a 'context of' the relationship of YHWH to the people or the people to the land.

Of course, the notion of the land as having puked the Canaanites out because of their ritual impurity is part of a wider project concerned with the construction of foreign nations as the embodiment of idolatry and (particularly sexual) perversion.<sup>105</sup> The primary referent behind the image is, however, the landlessness that was the result of exile in Babylon. This is the significance of the fact that verses 25-27 are framed within the context of a warning about avoiding the replication of this paradigmatically corrupt behaviour:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves ... otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. (Lev. 18. 24; 28)

The way the people must accomplish this avoidance of defilement is, of course, through attention to the stipulations and regulations of the law.

You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. (Lev. 20.22-23)

The flip-side of this warning, however, is the affirmation that observation of YHWH's 'statutes and ordinances' enables a combination of the unhindered permeation of holiness throughout the land and, therein, the widespread realization of fruitfulness and creative potential:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments, and observe them faithfully,  
I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the

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<sup>105</sup> A key aspect of this construction involves references to child sacrifice, homosexuality and other sexual practices that can be interpreted as a rejection of the notion that human fecundity and the creation of offspring are matters too serious to be jeopardized.

trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid. (Lev 26.3-6)

In the detail of these fascinating texts, we find yet another instructive contrast with Deuteronomy. As we have noted, for the Deuteronomic writer, the land functions variously as the setting, the preface, and the guarantor of, as well as a mirror to, the legal covenant between YHWH and his people. Here, however, we find that the land is much more intimately connected with the construal of the covenant being presented. On the one hand, the land seems to be partner to a relationship with YHWH of its own, which is independent of and prior to the people's;<sup>106</sup> on the other, we see that the ritual purity and covenant faithfulness of the people is fundamentally and inextricably connected with the land and with its flourishing, as well as there own.

While much ink has been spilled over Leviticus' instantiation of the so called 'covenant formula' – "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (26.12) – however, to interpret this phrase as the heart of Leviticus' covenant reflections is to overlook both the complexity and the grand scope that the text accords to the relationship between the people and the land, and that between YHWH and the land. As I see it, in Leviticus the covenant relationship into which the people have been invited to come is one which involves the mutual

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<sup>106</sup> The notion that elements of the non-human creation have relationships with God that go beyond and are independent of God's relationship with the people is found in various places in the Hebrew Bible. For reflection on this theme in the Wisdom tradition see Dell, Katharine J., 'The Significance of the Wisdom Tradition in the Ecological Debate' in Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark, (2010) 56-69.

interrelation of *all three* of the parties affected – that is, YHWH, the people and the land.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst experts in biblical conceptions of covenant would likely baulk at the invocation of formal covenant language with regard to these late chapters of Leviticus, it is difficult to deny that at the very least covenantal themes are emphasised in chapter 26. What is more, as John Day has noted, the allusions to the theme of covenant do not seem to simply represent a recapitulation of one particular covenant tradition.

Although Lev. 26: 42 certainly and 26: 9 probably refer to the covenant with the patriarchs, Lev. 26: 15, 25, 44-5 more naturally allude to the Mosaic covenant. Thus, for example, verse 45 implies that the covenant referred to was with the Exodus generation and verse 15 alludes to the covenant in the context of Yahweh's statutes, ordinances, and commandments, which is suggestive of Sinai.<sup>108</sup>

I propose that the invocation of not one covenantal tradition, but at least three, if not more,<sup>109</sup> in this and the surrounding chapters is perhaps indicative of a desire to frame the regulations concerning both the duties of the people to YHWH, the duties of the people to the land and the duties the land has to YHWH, in an explicitly covenantal context that speaks of YHWH's ongoing commitment to both the people and the land. Such a conception would have likely spoken meaningfully into the exilic or early post-exilic period, defining a thoroughly cultic vision for the future restoration of a life of fruitfulness in the land.

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<sup>107</sup> For further reflection on the conception of the tripartite relationship between humanity, God and Earth in the Hebrew Bible see Marlow, Hilary, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2009).

<sup>108</sup> Day, John, 'Why Does God 'Establish' rather than 'Cut' Covenants in the Priestly Source?', in Mayes, Andrew D. H., and Robert B. Salters, *Covenant and Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2003) 91-109 (104).

<sup>109</sup> N.B. Lev. 24.8

The 'covenant' with the three patriarchs, which was apparently not invalidated by the exile, is to be restored;<sup>110</sup> however, now this semi-autonomous character of the land, renewed and regenerated by its sabbath obedience, is drafted into this new, tripartite formulation.<sup>111</sup>

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, in that they committed treachery against me and, moreover, that they continued hostile to me — so that I, in turn, continued hostile to them and brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land shall be deserted by them, and enjoy its sabbath years by lying desolate without them, while they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they dared to spurn my ordinances, and they abhorred my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God; but I will remember in their favour the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God: I am the LORD. (Lev. 26.40-45)

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<sup>110</sup> See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 431.

<sup>111</sup> N.B. This recognition of the covenantal-like status of the three-way relationship between YHWH, the people and the land brings an added depth to the two key descriptions in Lev. 25 of the people's status within the new dynamic into which they have been brought: the designation in v. 23 of the people as "strangers and aliens", and that in v. 55 that understands them as slaves of YHWH.

## Conclusions

This chapter began with William Davies' lament that so often in his experience the theoretical and philosophical demands of Christian doctrine have dominated Christian-Jewish discourse and insulated Christian biblical interpretation from what he describes as the *realia* of lived experience. Following Davies' lead, I have explored this notion of a barrier to the real in terms of interpretations of both Leviticus and conceptions of land within in the Hebrew Bible, highlighting the way in which grand interpretive frameworks derived largely from doctrinal imperatives tend to emphasise 'narrative' and 'history' and therefore the texts that contain such material. Highlighting such emphases as convenient in the light of a desire to 'zoom out' from the detail of the text, I have postulated that the guiding desire in such circumstances is the construction of an interpretation that essentially acts as a signpost to some other, more profound locus of meaning (i.e. the New Testament).

I detailed the historical prejudice against Leviticus within 19<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholarship, which derived mostly from anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic sentiment within what was largely a European, Protestant discipline, noting how these prejudices were made manifest in the notion that early Israelite religion was pure, ethically focussed and historical in nature, whereas later Judaic religion was inward-looking, ritually obsessive and distorted.

While later scholarship, I claimed, moved on from the less palatable of these biases to theoretically accept the legitimacy of Leviticus, in practice it tended to effectively reconstitute the program of its forebears by relegating the priestly concerns in the light of Deuteronomy's more narrative and historical account of Israelite faith. I attempted to frame both these examinations of historical trends within the context of the notion that a hermeneutical approach to the Hebrew Bible

that tends away from *realia* is likely to feed interpretations that speak to other concerns than those of lived, located experience. This, I have proposed, is one possible cause of the general lack of appropriate engagement with ecological concerns within Christian theology and church praxis.

Turning to some of the key texts concerning land in Leviticus, I proposed that the priestly writers tend not to emphasize the notion of the land as a gift from God, but rather describe the people as YHWH's tenants. Interpreting the sabbath and jubilee regulations concerning land as, at most, only part of the rationale behind this (and perhaps indeed emanating from it), I highlighted various texts that appeal to the notion of the land as an actor within the text rather than merely as scenery. Drawing attention to both the cultic context within which the land is depicted as acting, and the use of the language of Sinai, Ararat and the promises to the patriarchs, I proposed that this relationship between God, the people and the land is perhaps fruitfully interpreted as a tri-lateral covenant.

This proposal concerning the covenantal nature of the relationships between YHWH, the people and the land set out in Leviticus constitute a potentially fruitful location for contemporary eco-theological reflection. The text presents its reader with a view of reality wherein not only are recognitions of the human propensity for pollution, and the potential for the community to corrupt the land clearly expressed, but the relationship between the land and the people is also bound up with each of their relationships to God.

In the end, no ethically robust, properly Christian theology of land can downplay either the specific locatedness and experienced materiality of land, or its independence from human experience and relationship to the divine. Both, after all, are aspects of createdness on which Christian doctrine insists. The notion that the failure to give due regard to the physical and spiritual life of the land not only affects the people's relationship with the land and with God, but also disrupts the land's relationship with God, is one with which Christian

communities can (and must) fruitfully engage. What is more, Leviticus' intriguing (and potentially ominous) notion that the land might act to mitigate any such disruption, 'vomiting out' its inhabitants, is especially worthy of sober consideration.



# Lambs to the Slaughter: The Function, Meaning & Ecology of Sacrifice<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

The current ecological crisis is not, as many in the media might have us believe, an ‘apocalyptic’ crisis – at least not in the vernacular sense of the term – in that it will not lead to the destruction of the planet. It is almost certain that, whatever happens, the earth will continue to exist and, most probably, remain able to sustain life. In fact, it could be argued that, to affirm that we humans are on the brink of utterly destroying the entire planet, is not to overcome, but rather to further indulge a hubristic conception of our own significance.

The vision of the future that we are confronted with, by the science that is charting the various kinds of anthropogenic damage currently evident in many regions of the planet, is less theatrical than the imminent, fundamental unravelling or immolation of the entire world. The reality is simply that the impact of the many ecologically destructive trends that human activity has facilitated has called (and is calling) into question the survival of myriad plant and animal species (including, of course, our own) in addition to the well being of countless individuals within those and many other species. The threat to life may not be infinite and ultimate, but it is sobering, vast and real.

One of the most powerful questions ecological ethics poses to us is what we are willing to risk in order to maintain the cultural structures that currently hold sway. What kind of ethical principles are those of us who inhabit the so called ‘developed world’ following (and generating) by seemingly being prepared to endanger so many lives in order to live as we do? Which is the

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<sup>1</sup> A shortened version of the argument of the first half of this chapter appears as Morgan, Jonathan, ‘Sacrifice in Leviticus: Eco-friendly Ritual or Unholy Waste?’, in Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark, (2010) 32-45.

*greater* sacrifice: choosing not to grasp tightly onto the position of dubious privilege that many of us enjoy, and to depart from the destructive practices that maintain it? Or, consciously or otherwise, to exploit that privilege and place our own interests ahead of the lives of numerous other beings?<sup>2</sup>

Defining the current situation in such terms might lead, in the light of the title of this chapter, to the setting up of a clear opposition between ecological ethics on the one hand, and animal sacrifice on the other. Ecological ethics exists in part to aid in steering us away from the bleakest visions of the future to which the available data point and, thereby, to stimulate better practice which will lessen the extent of avoidable destruction, suffering and death. For many, the opposition is thus obvious, almost ontological: one aims to cause us to rethink our many interactions with the world around us in order to prevent destruction and loss of life, and the other involves the deliberate selection of individuals from another species to be slaughtered in order to serve a perceived human need, or fulfil a perceived human cultural 'good'. The life of a non-human animal gives way to the demands of human cultural activity. In fact, the concept of animal sacrifice might easily be presented as representative of the kind of conception of the status of humanity *vis-à-vis* non-human animals that has been responsible for many aspects of the current situation. While he does not specifically make mention of animal sacrifice, it does not involve too profound a creative stretch to imagine Lynn White Jr drawing it into his famous argument<sup>3</sup> that the 'biblical' notion of human dominion over nature is prominent among the most significant ideologies that have nurtured 'the historical roots of our ecologic crisis'.

One aspect of the reasoning behind this kind of interpretation is that animal sacrifice is a socio-cultural vehicle whereby specific concerns, desires or

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Phil. 2.6

<sup>3</sup> White, 'The Historical Roots...'

penalties within human society are expressed and/or enacted through ritual violence committed against the body of a specific creature. Often, according to this type of conception, the non-human animal acts as a substitute for a human victim; either explicitly, or implicitly, in the sense that the ritual killing serves as a kind of release valve which reduces the likelihood of intra-human violence within the society concerned.<sup>4</sup> In turn, behind this question of violence and substitution, to which we shall return in detail, lies the broader question of what ethical principles govern our interactions with other animal species, both those that are unavoidable or necessary to our existence, and those that we have found favourable to certain forms of cultural formation.

## Introduction

In a fascinating scene early on in Nikita Mikhalkov's beautiful but little-known 1991 film *Urga: Close to Eden*, Sergei – a Russian, who in the opening moments falls asleep at the wheel and drives his truck into a lake in the middle of the Mongolian steppe – is offered hospitality by a local shepherd, Gombo, and his family. While Sergei rests, Gombo selects and catches a lamb and prepares to kill it. As Sergei looks on from a distance, Gombo turns the lamb over, sits with one leg across its body to hold it still and, after making a small incision in its belly, swiftly reaches inside the animal and manually disconnects the aorta from its heart. The camera cuts to Sergei and we see that he is severely unsettled by what he is witnessing.

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<sup>4</sup> This type of analysis is most famously associated with René Girard; see Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*, (trans. Patrick Gregory), Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, (1977); Girard, René, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metter), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (1987); Girard, René, 'Generative Scapegoating', in Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G., *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (1987).

As Gombo and his wife Pagma go about draining the blood, removing the organs and feet, and skinning the lamb, Sergei becomes increasingly uncomfortable until, at the point where the couple instruct their young children to help with the work of preparing the animal, he turns away in dismay and disgust. Once the food is ready, Sergei refuses to join the family for the meal, choosing to remain outside and eat from a packed lunch salvaged from his truck. After it becomes clear that the family will not eat without him, and indeed that the lamb has been prepared in his honour, Sergei reluctantly enters the yurt and shares the food.

It is perhaps no surprise that *Urga* – a film about a clash of cultures, between technological and ‘traditional’ ways of life – begins with two powerful scenes relating to death. In the other such scene, just prior to the meal, Sergei explains to Gombo, in a rather panicked way, that there is a human corpse in the grass near to his stranded vehicle. He is shocked and disconcerted to learn that not only is Gombo aware of this, but that his uncle is lying there by design – uncovered and face up in accordance with Mongolian tradition. Beliefs and practices relating to the beginning and end of life are often those held to be most significant within a culture and also those that carry the strongest weight of socialization. It strikes Sergei as almost inconceivable that anyone would deliberately leave a dead body outside, uncovered – to rot, be eaten by birds and seen by anyone who passes – or that anyone could kill an animal by tearing open its heart with their hands; yet Gombo is bemused by Sergei’s scandalized responses to what are, for him, two thoroughly ordinary scenarios.

These two scenes, the meal scene in particular, are, I think, particularly instructive for an attempt to relate a contemporary agenda like ecological ethics to ancient texts regarding animal sacrifice. As modern, Western readers we must be aware that we, like Sergei, are crossing a cultural divide, that we approach the texts from a world that, while not totally discontinuous with that of the text, is

significantly removed from it. Furthermore, we must recognize that the issues surrounding the sacrifice of an animal touch on a realm that we tend to interpret emotively, instinctively and in line with the norms of our own culture.

For example, when I recently explained to a friend over a drink that I was writing about ecological ethics and animal sacrifice, his immediate response was “Surely they’re diametrically opposed?” When I asked him to expand, he explained that in his mind being ecological was all about reducing waste, respecting, conserving and using resources responsibly and learning that we are not above and beyond nature, but inextricably part of the eco-system. When I asked him why he thought animal sacrifice was at odds with this vision, he paused for a while and then said, “Well, it shows that we think of animals as just another ‘resource’ and as less morally significant than us. I mean, from what I’ve heard, it was done in a pretty gruesome way and happened an awful lot – neither of which seem particularly respectful.” He stopped, took a drink and then added, “I wouldn’t mind a sacrifice that was essentially a ceremonial preface to a meal, but aren’t there some in the Bible where they just burn the whole lot up? That”, he proclaimed with certainty, “is just an unholy waste.”

In this chapter I question whether the kinds of interpretation of the logic and functioning of animal sacrifice outlined above constitute an accurate conception of the cultic practice outlined in the book of Leviticus. While remaining mindful of important socio-political and ideological questions regarding the ambiguous ecological and ethical credentials of animal sacrifice, I argue that, upon careful and well attuned attention, the ideologies and socio-cultural attitudes instanced in these ancient priestly cultic regulations are more accurately construed not as parallels of contemporary, Capitalist conceptions of non-human life as near-endlessly expendable, but rather as radically distinct from and inherently critiquing of them.

I propose that both the functioning of the sacrificial system as it is set out in Leviticus, and its wider ideological and cosmological foundations in the priestly writings more generally, raise several intriguing questions about ancient Israelite conceptions of non-human animals, sin and ultimately ecology, and, therein, have the potential to function as stimuli for contemporary eco-theological reflection. I argue that reflections on animal sacrifice in particular can open to the modern reader an insight into an understanding of the relationship between humans and non-human animals which is far more nuanced, intriguing and, potentially, ecologically valuable than the rather unsophisticated analyses that often derive from an unhealthily narrow and regularly rather shallow focus on the assertion of human domination of the rest of the natural world.

I begin with an examination of the ideological and cosmological background to the Levitical sacrificial system intended to demonstrate its grounding in the priestly conception of the structure of the created order and the relationship between humans and non-human animals (as expressed most clearly in Gen. 1-11). On this basis, I explore the notion that the sacrificial system serves as a key example of a wider priestly concern to establish, uphold and habitualize boundaries as a temper to anthropogenic violence and ritual corruption, and as a catalyst to the flourishing of the whole created order.

Examining the details relating to the 'sin offering', I then examine the significant claim that the key context for interpreting the function of non-human animal sacrifice is that of the cleansing of the sancta. From this foundation, I both question the suitability of the overarching concept of substitution (with its various theo-political overtones), and propose that, rather than being a wasteful or cruel practice emanating from the logic of human dominance, animal sacrifice can be perceived to function in priestly thought as an act of humility, deriving from a keen sense of human culpability for the existence and perpetuation of sin, violence and corruption.

Furthermore, building on the notion that the sacrificed animal plays a complex and lauded ritual role, I seek to question traditional assumptions regarding its passivity and victim-hood. I then contextualise this proposal by means of an analysis of the 'two goats' rite of Lev. 16, and a further suggestion regarding the necessity or otherwise of slaughter within the processes of purification.

## **Humility & *Hāmās***

The most fundamental corrective I wish to propose to the kind of analysis outlined above is the notion that ancient Israelite sacrifice, in all its forms, functions as an expression not of domination, but of humility. At the heart of the set of cultic practices that make up the priestly sacrificial tradition stands the insistence that sacrificial practice is a matter of profound seriousness and indeed absolute necessity. The logic to which the priestly writings attest, which they reinforce and indeed from which they proceed, is that regular, officially sanctioned sacrifice is a fundamental requirement for the proper functioning of Israelite society because of the ever-present reality of sin, which corrupts and distorts the right order of creation and distances it from its creator.

The emphasis on the potency of impurity proceeds from the priestly understanding of the importance of the presence of YHWH in the midst of the community. As we noted in the previous chapter, while the whole earth is YHWH's to roam, and the land of Canaan his particular possession (Lev. 25.23), within the priestly tradition the tabernacle/temple is the primary location of the divine presence (Lev. 26.11-12). The holy of holies is envisaged as the space in

which the human and divine realms meet, and whence the divine holiness radiates throughout the whole land, purifying and sustaining it.<sup>5</sup>

However, as Jacob Milgrom has famously argued, as well as being the centre of the emanation of divine holiness, the temple sanctuary is also the target of the polluting affect of impurity. Impurity, which is the opposite of holiness, inhibits its permeation, and can, if things get bad enough, force YHWH to abandon the sanctuary and cause the people to be ejected from the land.<sup>6</sup> This possibility of abandonment and ejection, which essentially functions as the framework for the priestly interpretation of the exile, is a threat not just to the people, but to the wider flourishing of the land and all its inhabitants (N.B. Lev 18.24-28; 26.19-33).<sup>7</sup>

A question arises, therefore, as to how impurity comes about within the context of a creation that the priestly tradition goes to pains to emphasize is *tōbh*, 'good' (Gen. 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Milgrom claims that, while most Ancient Near Eastern religions and mythologies are dominated by the omnipresent fear of malevolent spirits, deities and daemons, in the Israelite priestly ideology the notion of autonomous malevolent deities is collapsed into the notion of humanity as the bearers of corrosive, polluting power.

The basic premises of pagan religion are (1) that its deities are themselves dependent on and influenced by a metadivine realm, (2) that this realm spawns a multitude of malevolent and benevolent entities, and (3) that if humans can tap into this realm they can acquire the magical power to coerce the gods to do their will ... The Priestly theology negates these premises. It posits the existence of one supreme God who contends neither with a higher realm nor with competing peers. The world of demons is abolished; there is no struggle with autonomous foes because there are

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<sup>5</sup> See Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 10-20.

<sup>6</sup> The central motif in the book of Ezekiel – c.f. Ezek. 8.6, 12; 9.9; 10.18-20; 11.9-12; 12.1-6, 17-20; 15.7; 20.38; 22.15; 39.23.

<sup>7</sup> See Morgan, 'Transgressing, Puking, Covenanting...'



none. With the demise of the demons, only one creature remains with “demonic” power – the human being. Endowed with free will, his [*sic*] power is greater than any attributed to him by pagan society. Not only can he defy God but, in Priestly imagery, he can drive God out of his sanctuary. In this respect humans have replaced the demons.<sup>8</sup>

I have several concerns regarding Milgrom’s analysis. First, I am immediately ideologically suspicious of his insistence that the Priestly theology distinguishes itself totally from what he calls ‘pagan’ religion.<sup>9</sup> I am also unconvinced by his *absolutely* demythologized interpretation – I am less sure, for example, that the notion of autonomous forces in opposition to YHWH is total anathema to the priestly tradition, or that it so definitively distances itself from conceptions such as the ‘heavenly council’. I am also in agreement with Philip Jenson’s scepticism of the concept of ‘demonic forces’ (albeit having been conferred to humans) as an explanation of the origins of the priestly notion of impurity in its entirety.<sup>10</sup> However, despite these concerns, I think Milgrom is right to assert the importance of the significance and potency of human sin in the priestly conception.

The centrality of this notion within the priestly worldview explains how Leviticus can begin its instructions concerning sacrifice with the words, “When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the LORD...” (Lev. 1.2). Not only is it assumed that the priesthood, the sanctuary, the whole sacrificial system is necessary, but it is also assumed that the text’s intended audience recognize this, or at least accept it to be the case without the need for demonstration. It is clear that, for the priestly writers, the temple / tabernacle, along with the ritualistic

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<sup>8</sup> Milgrom, Jacob, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 3, New York, NY: Doubleday (1991) 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical discussion of Milgrom’s position see Schmitt, Rüdiger, ‘The Problem of Magic and Monotheism in Leviticus’, *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 8, no. 11, (2008); available at [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_88.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_88.pdf), [last accessed 11/09/10].

<sup>10</sup> See Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 158.

apparatus that surrounds it, lies at the very heart of the Israelite conception of reality. For this reason (and those set out below), we must resist jumping straight into an examination of texts in Leviticus concerning sacrificial activity, and first explore the ideological context within which the sacrificial system described therein is located.

The textual and conceptual connections between the giving of the law and the establishment of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus (Leviticus' narrative location) and the priestly creation myth in Genesis 1 are well established.<sup>11</sup> Just as in Genesis 1 God brings into existence an ordered world from out of the chaos by the word of his mouth, so, in the institution of the law and the establishment of the tabernacle, God speaks again to demonstrate how Israel can maintain, and, when necessary restore, the orderliness of their reality.<sup>12</sup>

As we noted in the previous chapter, at the heart of the priestly creation myth is the notion that order is created through the separation, and thus the distinction, of one thing from another. For order to be preserved, these distinctions must be maintained. As Frank Gorman puts it,

Inherent in such a conceptualization of creation is the idea that the order of creation was brought about through the separation and classification of the basic elements of creation. Order is brought about through divisions, separations, and distinctions between one element and another. It is only as these lines of demarcation, or boundaries, are established that order is realized. If true, it means that these divisions must be recognized and maintained if the created order is to continue to exist and not to collapse into confusion and chaos.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Blenkinsopp, Joseph, 'The Structure of P', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38, (1976) 275-292, esp. 278-283; Gorman Jr, Frank H., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 91, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (1990) 45-52; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> On the link between the wider scheme of Leviticus and the priestly conception of creation see Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard, *The Savage in Judaism*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, (1990) 225.

<sup>13</sup> Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, 41.

In a similar vein, many scholars argue that the purity and dietary laws in Leviticus, and its division of animals into the categories of clean and unclean, are likewise best understood in the context of the divisions and boundaries set up in Genesis 1.<sup>14</sup> Inhabiting, then, this well worn pattern of interpretation, we will, before turning to a careful consideration of the sacrificial material in Leviticus, first ground our reading in an examination of some of the key concepts expressed in the myths of pre-history set out in Genesis 1-11.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most striking aspects of the Priestly creation myth in Genesis 1.1-2.4a is its description of the vegetarianism of the first humans. Although the infamous verse 28 of Chapter 1 instructs the humans to rule over both the earth

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<sup>14</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 47; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Douglas, Mary, *Implicit Meanings: Essay In Anthropology*, London: Routledge, (1991) 276-318; Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*; Wyatt, Nicolas, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (2001) 74; Although Douglas' anthropological approach has been extensively critiqued, and many of her insights are now widely considered somewhat passé, I consider the basic perception of the functioning of the creative work of separation in the priestly myth as a key theological context for the purity, sacrificial and sabbath regulations set out in Leviticus to be thoroughly helpful, as grounded in the relationship between the *hibdîl* of Gen. 1 and the *lāhab' dîl* of Lev. 10.10. Milgrom and Douglas' approach has, however, been specifically criticised, see e.g. Houston, Walter, 'Towards an Integrated Reading of the Dietary Laws of Leviticus', in Rendtorff, Rolf and Robert A. Kugler, (eds.) *The Book of Leviticus*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 93, Leiden: Brill, (2003) 142-161 esp. 160. For discussion of the continuing value or otherwise of Douglas' work see especially Sawyer, John, (ed.) *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 227, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (1997); Olyan, Saul M., 'Mary Douglas' Holiness/Wholeness Paradigm: Its Potential for Insight and its Limitations', *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 8, no. 10, (2008); available at [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_87.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_87.pdf), [last accessed 11/09/10]; Hendel, Ronald, 'Mary Douglas and Anthropological Modernism', *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 8, no. 8, (2008); available at [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_85.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_85.pdf), [last accessed 11/09/10]; Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 55-61.

<sup>15</sup> I wish to stress at this point that the priestly material found in the early chapters of Genesis is not being presented as more authoritative than that contained in Leviticus, and would certainly and strenuously resist any appeal, explicit or implicit, to the priority of that material on any basis, and especially that of antiquity. Unfortunately, despite both the numerous controversies and limitations that disrupt the precise dating of Hebrew Bible material and the problematic issues surrounding redaction and compilation, such appeals to the foundational authority or priority of Genesis are liberally scattered through the history of the interpretation of the Pentateuch, and even persist in some contemporary studies. As has been already emphasised, being the third and, therefore, central book of the Torah, Leviticus has at least as potent a claim to authority as Genesis. However, following the precedent outlined above, and proceeding from an interpretive logic informed by canonical, narratological and stylistic awareness – and particularly influenced by the likelihood of priestly redaction and arrangement of the pentateuchal material – I consider the contents of these chapters (both material usually classified as Priestly and that traditionally attributed to other sources), to provide useful insights into the priestly worldview.

and all non-human animals, the following verse makes it clear that they are not entitled to eat meat.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”. God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. (Gen. 1.28-30)

The key point is that, since death and killing are not aspects of this idealized vision of ‘original’ society, no animals, including humans, are carnivorous. Although it is obvious, it is perhaps worth emphasizing that this deathless, vegetarian scenario signifies that animal sacrifice is also not an aspect of the priestly myth of origins.<sup>16</sup>

Although eating the other animals is explicitly not part of the rule that they are to exercise, humans are distinguished by virtue of being the only animals that eat fruits and grains – i.e. food with seeds – rather than simply green plants.<sup>17</sup> In the light of verse 29, therefore, it becomes clear that what is specifically signified by the instruction in verse 28 to *rādāh* (‘have dominion’) over the earth is the tilling of the ground which makes possible the raising of crops. At the heart of what is being communicated in these verses is the concept

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<sup>16</sup> It is also interesting that while many scholars have noted the apparent presence of temple imagery in the Edenic narrative (e.g. see Wenham, Gordon, J., ‘Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story’, *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division A, Jerusalem, (1986) 19-25; Stordalen, Terje, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature*, Leuven: Peeters (2000)), there does not appear to be any representation of an altar. In this context, the apparent proposition of a mythic temple without an altar, and hence without cultic activity, is an intriguing one indeed.

<sup>17</sup> I take this insight from MacDonald, Nathan, ‘Food and Diet in the Priestly Material of the Pentateuch’, in Grumett, David and Rachel Muers (eds.), *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology*, London: T&T Clark (2008) 18.

that humans are animals whose nature is to be cultured, and as such to be cultivators of the earth.<sup>18</sup>

Much to the disappointment of any reader looking for an excuse to stop eating broccoli, the message is not that humans shouldn't eat green vegetables because they are dull or tasteless (although there is certainly an argument for saying that the ancient Israelites were scornful of them),<sup>19</sup> but rather because they symbolize non-cultivated foodstuffs, not requiring agricultural organization. This having been said, the details should not be overridden: there is crucial metaphorical significance in the allocation of seed yielding plants to humans in the light of the call for they themselves to 'be fruitful and multiply'. This dual identification of the consumption of plant seeds with both human cultural activity and fecundity forms one aspect of a complex subtext in the priestly material concerning the nature of human life, vocation and corruption, to which we shall return in due course.

Part of the reason why Gen. 1.28-30 has been disdained in recent times, especially within eco-theological discourse, is that it is seen as legitimating an understanding of creation that places humanity at the top of a hierarchy; perched above the creation as its local rulers. It is, in my opinion, a futile and disingenuous exercise to attempt to reinterpret the priestly creation myth in order to insulate it from the potency of these criticisms. A hierarchical structuring of creation with human beings at the apex is irrefutably part of the priestly vision. However, there is more to this material than simply the endorsement of humanity as the ontological rulers of creation. As such, the interpretation I offer here is not intended so much as a 'restoration reading' as simply a broadened one.

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<sup>18</sup> A similar argument can be made with regard to God's clothing of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3.21 – an act (presumably) only made possible by the first animal slaughter.

<sup>19</sup> MacDonald, 'Food and Diet in the Priestly Material of the Pentateuch', 18, 28 (note 6).

It would, of course, be methodologically disingenuous and counterproductive in the context of this study (not to mention woefully naïve) for me to take the line that contemporary persuasions and biases should not influence our interpretation of ancient texts. However, one of the methodological goals toward which this thesis and the wider project to which it belongs have orientated themselves is an interpretive approach that attempts to relentlessly draw upon contemporary stimuli, but apply them in as consistent, critically aware and non-distorting a way as is possible.<sup>20</sup> In light of this, I feel it is important to state that, although the priestly creation is, in my opinion, unavoidably anthropocentric and hierarchical, there is far more to it, and to the wider priestly worldview that it frames, than an interpreter who rages and baulks at this first fence might be able to discover.

Of course, we must take seriously and confront ourselves and our texts with the various ideological-critical insights into the profound relationship between hierarchy (especially when in day to day political life that effectively means patriarchy), with its implicit denigration of certain forms of human life, and the denigration of the non-human world. However, despite the fact that the priestly myth sets out a hierarchical ordering of creation with humanity at the top, as rulers, we must also remember that this is a complex, ancient text, and we are not *bound* automatically to associate it, via a reductionistic interpretation of the history of ideas, with the politically and ecologically reprehensible projects of Modernity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, London: T&T Clark, (2010); Horrell, David G., *The Bible and The Environment: Towards a Critical, Ecological Biblical Theology*, London & New York, NY: Equinox, (2010); Hunt, Cheryl, David G. Horrell and Christopher Southgate, 'An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8.19-23 and a Modest Proposal for its Narrative Interpretation', *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, (2008) 546-579; Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, (Forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup> See Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 38; 40-43.

Given the inescapability of the priestly vision of humanity's ruling status, the question that we must pursue is this: precisely what kind of rule are humans expected to exercise within the priestly understanding, and just what kind of relationship between humans and the rest of creation does this dynamic propose?

Moving ahead to Genesis 9, we find a rather different situation to the one laid out in Genesis 1.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it." (Gen. 8.20-9.7)

Here, in a passage which is very clearly intended to function as a postdiluvian parallel to Genesis 1.28-30, we find that the prohibition on eating meat has almost completely evaporated. It appears that only one solitary restriction, a

prohibition on the ingestion of blood, stands to limit Noah and his sons' (and presumably their wives') consumption of flesh.

Between these two instances of the instruction for human beings to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth", of course, stands the Edenic myth, and thereafter, the vignettes that describe the proliferation of sin that causes God to grieve over his creation and to decide to cleanse the earth with water. In describing the condition of the antediluvian world, Genesis 6.11-13 states that

The earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth".

Following the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and first exemplified in the brutality of Cain's attack on Abel, violence begins to proliferate and pervades the pre-historical culture to the point where verse 11 describes the earth as 'filled with violence' (*ḥāmās*). Having begun in human society, as a result of the human disobedience of divine regulation, violence has here become a part of the reality of the lives of *kol-bāšār* ('all flesh') (6.12). Although the floodwaters enact the (ritual) purification of the earth, the violence which brought about its corruption remains a reality of the postdiluvian world by virtue of its effect on all the animals – human *and* non-human – that survived the flood.

As many commentators have argued, this shifting of the boundaries with regard to human diet reflects a recognition of the need to control the violence that has redefined the existence of all animals.<sup>22</sup> In the same way that dietary

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<sup>22</sup>See e.g. Houston, Walter, "'And Let Them Have Dominion...': Biblical Views of Man in Relation to the Environmental Crisis", in Livingstone, Elizabeth A., *Studia Biblica 1978. I. Papers on Old Testament and Related Themes*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 11, Sheffield: JST Press (1979) 165-166; Houston, Walter, *Purity and*



distinctions defined the relationship of humans to non-human animals in Gen. 1, the postdiluvian recourse to meat eating represents the redefinition of that same relationship.

Whereas in the priestly creation myth humans were distinguished from other animals on the basis of an emphasis on their unique propensity for enculturation, now they are to some extent re-equated with them both through the implicit recognition of a shared tendency towards violence and the explicit reference to the consumption of green plants in 9.3. What distinguishes humans now is not simply the fact that they are permitted to kill and eat animals whereas no one is permitted to kill (or eat) humans, but also that in order to regulate the shedding of blood they must act as priests, ritualizing animal slaughter in acts of sacrifice.

Where predation and self-defence were not an aspect of the vision of Gen. 1.1-2.4a, they are an unavoidable reality of the world of Noah and his family. The legitimation of the slaughter and consumption of other animals is apparently now a necessary aspect of the 'rule' of humanity over the rest of creation, with the killing of animals being envisaged as a regulatory measure. Whereas previously both humans and non-human animals were defined by their location within the perfection of the divine creation – “and indeed, it was very good” – now, no natural harmony exists between animal species.

Norbert Lohfink has emphasised the warlike nature of the language in Genesis 9.2, arguing that the Priestly writers had a concern for documenting an account of Israel's history without recourse to violence and that the state of war that is envisaged between humans and animals functions, primarily through the

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*Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 140, Sheffield: JSOT Press (1993) 254-258; Rogerson, John, *Genesis 1-11*, Old Testament Guides, Sheffield: JSOT Press (1991) 17-25; Anderson, Bernhard W., 'Creation and Ecology', in Anderson, Bernhard W., (ed.) *Creation in the Old Testament*, Issues in Religion and Theology 6, London: SPCK/Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press (1984) 161-169.

workings of the sacrificial system, as a kind of catharsis.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on the theory of sacrifice proposed by René Girard, Lohfink understands the foundation of the sacrificial system to be the envisagement of a society freed from intra-human violence by virtue of a transference of violence into the context of an ongoing war between humans and animals.

The proposal that the priestly conception of the sacrificial system flows from the need to channel violence out of human society through the vehicle of institutionalised violence to animals, seems to feed directly into the kind of anthropomonic interpretations of sacrifice that I began with, seemingly leaving little room for any more ecologically fruitful an interpretation. The priestly writers envision humanity, according to this interpretation, as unproblematically willing and able to assuage the serious threat of violence between humans by ritualizing violence against animals.

As John Rogerson points out, however, Lohfink's analysis seems to fail both to take into account the likely historical setting of the Priestly material and to get to grips with the detail of its vision. To argue on the basis of institutionalization, is to suggest that what we find in the Priestly material regarding sacrifice is a set of instructions that were actually practiced by the people to whom the text was written. As Rogerson argues, this is, in reality, extremely unlikely, given that the number of animals required for the system to have operated as described is most likely well beyond what could have been sustained, especially if the community concerned is that which surrounded the Jerusalem temple in the Persian period (515-323 BCE).<sup>24</sup> The other weakness in

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<sup>23</sup> See Lohfink, Norbert, 'Die Schichten des Pentateuch und der Krieg' in Lohfink, Norbert, (ed.) *Gewald und Gewaltlosigkeit im Alten Testament*, Quaestiones disputatae 96, Friburg: Herder Verlag (1983) 51-110; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Rogerson, John, 'What Was the Meaning of Animal Sacrifice?', in Linzey, Andrew and Dorothy Yamamoto (eds.), *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics*, London: SCM (1998) 9-17.

<sup>24</sup> Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 14-17.

this line of argument is the way in which it overlooks the critical distinction in the material between wild and domestic animals. Rogerson writes:

No doubt the warlike language of Genesis 9.2 expresses the actual relationship between humans and wild animals in the world of Israel's experience, but it does not express the relationship between humans and their domesticated animals, especially when the Old Testament contains laws such as Exodus 23.12, which provides that the ox and the ass should rest on the Sabbath, and Deuteronomy 22.10, which prohibits ploughing with an ox and an ass together. And it was *domesticated* animals that were used for sacrifice, not wild animals.<sup>25</sup>

If we attend to the ways in which domestic animals were provided for and treated within the Hebrew Bible in general and the Priestly regulations concerning sacrifice in particular, Rogerson contends, then what emerges is not so much a picture of animals as a convenient and disposable vehicle for offloading undesirable social ills, but rather a profound reverence and respect. He helpfully notes, for example, that animals were rarely eaten by the ordinary people of ancient Israel, but were instead primarily seen as sources of clothing, milk and cheese or as a crucial part of the economy of agricultural labour, construing domestic animals as highly prized and to be carefully tended over the long term.<sup>26</sup> What is more, the regulations concerning the condition of animals offered as sacrifices seem to suggest that, while domestic animals were of great economic importance, the regulations concerning sacrifices seem to be promoting their ritualistic value over all else.<sup>27</sup> Rogerson ends his article with the following insightful and instructive conclusions:

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<sup>25</sup> Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 13.

<sup>26</sup> See Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 13-16.

<sup>27</sup> Rogerson makes mention of the fact that, while the castration of oxen increases their economic value, it has long been forbidden within Jewish tradition, and whatever the practice may have been at the time of the priestly writings, a castrated ox would certainly not have been fit for the altar. See Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 13 (note 13). It is, of

[I]t may be more accurate to describe the Priestly view of animal sacrifice not as something institutionalized but as an ideology. That ideology was no doubt deeply aware of the dimension of guilt, especially guilt for the wrongdoings that had led to the destruction of the First Temple and the indifferent situation of the Second Temple community ... [I]n the larger context of the Priestly work, this belief in the necessity of offering large numbers of domestic animals was set against a belief in an original conflict-free, and vegetarian, creation. In other words, it can be argued that, for some priests at least, the system of animal sacrifice symbolized the failure of humanity as represented by Israel to live in the world as God intended. Violence among humans, violence among animals, and violence done by humans to animals was not what creation was intended to be. Even if, as Lohfink has suggested, the view of P<sup>s</sup> was that a society free from human conflict could be sustained by animal sacrifices, that community was encouraged to hope for a world completely free from conflict.<sup>28</sup>

If then, the depiction of a universal state of war between humans and animals is not the key to the vision of the world proposed by the postdiluvian narrative, how else might we read its significance in terms of the priestly sacrificial tradition? As Steven Mason has recently and convincingly argued, the paradigm shift in the relationship between humans and non-human animals found in Genesis 9 can be profitably interpreted as being intimately bound up with the covenant God makes with Noah. In opposition to the traditional tendency to interpret God's commitment never again to flood the earth (Gen. 9:8-17) as a unilateral promise, Mason posits a bilateral aspect to the covenant as expressed in verses 1-7.<sup>29</sup> According to this interpretation, God promises never to

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course, worth noting that if the sacrificial system as we find it in the Priestly material was ever instantiated, then the priests would have been among those few in Ancient Israelite society to have had regular access to meat.

<sup>28</sup> Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 16-27.

<sup>29</sup> Mason, Steven, 'Another Flood? Genesis 9 and Isaiah's Broken Eternal Covenant', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.2 (2007) 184-195.

flood the earth again on the condition that human beings take over the role of controlling the effects of violence by regulating the shedding of blood.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, therefore, the move in Genesis from vegetarian idealism to a ritualistically controlled carnivorism becomes framed and contextualized by the recognition that the imposition of strict (cultic) rules and boundaries with regard to animal slaughter is in effect a way of regulating the killing of animals by humans for food. Mason's proposal has much to commend it, not least the ways in which it highlights the density and scope of the classic priestly commandment to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth", frames the apparent connection between the threat from wild animals and human enemies (e.g. Lev. 26: 6, 21-25), and provides an useful context within which the complex issue of the role of blood in the Hebrew Bible can be explored.

Milgrom comes close to this kind of recognition when he helpfully summarizes the function of the postdiluvian regulations as follows:

P's blood prohibition in Genesis appears in the bipartite Noachide law, which states that human society is viable only if it desists from the shedding of human blood and the ingestion of animal blood (Gen 9:4-6). Thus it declares its fundamental premise that human beings can curb their violent nature through ritual means, specifically, a dietary discipline that will necessarily drive home the point that all life (*nepesh*), shared also by animals, is inviolable, except – in the case of meat – when conceded by God.<sup>31</sup>

This interesting and important line of argumentation is perhaps best summarized, however, by Joseph Blenkinsopp in his brilliant essay 'Creation, the Body, and Care for a Damaged World'.

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<sup>30</sup> N.B. it is the 'pleasing smell' of Noah's sacrifice that seems to cause YHWH to determine never to 'curse the ground' again (Gen. 8.21).

<sup>31</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 47-48.

[W]hatever their original impulse, these prohibitions at least help to inculcate a discriminating ethical attitude towards killing for food and a degree of respect for life forms in general. In the first creation no animal or human being [*sic*] kills or is killed for food (Gen. 1.29-30), but in the second creation, the damaged world we inhabit, killing for food is permitted. However, the ritualization of the process known as *kashrut*, including the requirement of draining the blood, that is, the life fluid, inhibits the kind of indiscriminate, thoughtless, and cruel slaughter of animals for their flesh, pelt tusks, or whatever that has been a characteristic human activity from early times (Gen. 9:3-4). Ritualizing, in other words, provides a symbolic context for our interaction with other living forms. It delimits and channels options.<sup>32</sup>

The context of Genesis 9 and the covenant with Noah is key to setting animal sacrifice in its wider ideological and cosmological context. Central to this contextualization is a recognition of the emphasis on the profundity of the impact of human disobedience and sin on the wider created order, and on the relationship between humans and non-human animals in particular. The vision of the priestly writers is of a community that must regularly confront itself with the reality of its own failings, in which members must regularly discipline themselves to make awkward, costly restoration for their impurities and transgressions, both for their own sake and on behalf of others. What is more, in the process of learning to restore that which has been damaged by their pollution, these people must learn to rely on the provision of others, both the priests and God, but also the animals without whom the majority of purgative and regenerate rites could not be completed.

As Philippe Guillaume has noted, the people's chief role in the solemn celebration of the Day of Purification is to do no work and to engage in an act of self-denial (see chapter 3). For Guillaume, *yōm hakkippurīm* is, like the traditional

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<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 44.

New Year festivals of the ancient Near East, a day of humility and humiliation.<sup>33</sup>

This is a day when the continued viability of the Israelite community is called into question, when the hope for renewal and regeneration is overshadowed by the fear of disaster and the triumph of chaos.

I see the recognition of human fragility and need most keenly expressed at *yōm hakkippurīm* as imaged in a more subtle way throughout the ancient Israelite sacrificial system. Each sacrificial act has the potential to be a mini-disaster, and each impurity not dealt with has the potential to pollute and corrupt the sanctuary. As well as living in the light of the blessing of the law and the covenant, dwelling in YHWH's fertile land in which he also abides, the people are keenly aware of their own corruption and need. This aspect of the priestly anthropology is not, however, primarily negative, but profoundly infused with a sense of right order and proper location. As well as beings made in God's image and the rulers of creation, humans are also always creatures of the earth – bound up not just with YHWH, but also with the land that feeds and sustains them. The priests portray a conception of the human being that, as well as taking in the grandest of callings, is also profoundly defined by humility.<sup>34</sup> They are always at once the people that stand at the foot of Sinai and wait to enter the land of plenty, and the family that steps out of the ark and raises a sweet smell to God.

The covenant with Noah and the stipulations that follow concerning the killing of animals bring the reader into what Rogerson calls 'the world of Israel's experience'; whilst in the ideal world described by the priestly creation myth a natural justice existed with regard to inter-species relations, there is, in this

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<sup>33</sup> Guillaume, Philippe, *Land And Calendar: The Priestly Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18*, London/New York: T&T Clark (2009) 96-101.

<sup>34</sup> The scope of the concept of humility that I have utilised is illustrated in the appeal to a concern for the whole land (N.B. *humus*) and all its inhabitants. In this sense the distinction between 'humility' and 'hubris' can be seen to map onto the tensions in Genesis 1-11 between 'multiply' (*rabah*) and 'increase' (*tarob*), which Shemaryahu Talmon has argued carries an implicit concern regarding human self-aggrandisement and pride. Talmon, 'The Biblical Understanding ...', 114-15.

world, a need for boundaries to regulate violence. While the killing of non-human animals by humans is seen as regulatory of the activity of non-human animals, the prohibition of the consumption of blood in Genesis 9.4 stands to regulate human activity. The killing of animals is never to be a wanton activity, and the eating of meat always requires the meat to have been prepared. Hence meat-eating is portrayed as a thoroughly and deliberately cultural and cultic (i.e. 'religious') activity. The regulation regarding blood forms the basis of all the priestly regulations regarding *both* meat eating (where / when it did take place) *and* sacrifice – since the handling of blood encompasses both ritualistic and domestic concerns – reflecting a fundamental and ongoing connection between household practice and temple practice.<sup>35</sup>

I hope that, in examining the detail of some of the early chapters of Genesis, I have laid a solid foundation for the claim that the priestly conception of animal sacrifice, understood (in Rogerson's sense) primarily as an ideology, can be justifiably considered to fundamentally reflect a context of humility and human culpability, rather than one primarily characterized by a notion of unfettered human dominion. Now, by turning attention to Leviticus and the rules and rites that constitute the outworking of the priestly sacrificial ideology, I intend to show that we might well be able to push these insights further, and discover a way of reading animal sacrifice which further questions and nuances

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<sup>35</sup> The consumption of meat for food and the sacrifice of animals on an altar are not, of course, identical, but they do belong to the same ideological sphere and, as we shall see, in terms of the practices laid out in Leviticus, overlap considerably. It is interesting to note that animal offerings are at the centre of the Cain and Abel narrative (4.2-5) as well as the initial response of Noah and his family to the recession of the flood waters (8.20), even before the divine speech which legitimizes meat eating. However, it would surely be churlish to deny that the redefinition of the relationship between humans and animals described in the first few verses of Chapter 9, which as far as priestly thinking is concerned describes the ongoing nature of reality, does not also inform these references. This can be demonstrated aptly in the case of the second example, that of Noah and his family's sacrifice, which relies upon a distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' animals. Although this distinction is first mentioned by YHWH in Chapter 7, it is meaningless to the reader outside of the context of ritual practices based on the distinctions and regulations laid out in Leviticus.



the common assumptions that we began by outlining, and which opens up an intriguing and potentially ecologically valuable line of interpretation.

## **The Sacrificial System & the 'Sin Offering'**

Whereas Gen. 9.4 introduces only one limitation, that of not consuming animal blood, the system of rules regarding purity and sacrifice set out in Leviticus creates a far more complex and regulated framework within which the dynamic of animal killing should operate. Just as in the dynamic envisaged by Genesis 9, the functioning of the tabernacle / temple in Leviticus relies upon a fundamental recognition of the corrupting influence of human sin. Central to the texts that describe the sacrificial apparatus stands the insistence that temple practice is a matter of profound seriousness, indeed of absolute necessity.

Regardless of, or perhaps as a testimony to, how important the accurate performance of the ritual instructions that it contains was to the perceived welfare of all the people, the sacrificial 'system' that we encounter as readers of Leviticus is a complex set of distinct yet related ritualistic practices which are only sketchily described, and which tend to wriggle free from attempts at tidy and complete schematization. Part of the reason for the seemingly opaque nature of the text is that, being both composed by and addressed primarily to the priestly caste, it is very likely that it presumes familiarity with many of the themes, be they theological, ritualistic or practical, upon which it draws.

We must, therefore, be sure to nuance the common claim that Leviticus is a book of detailed ritual prescriptions. While it is certainly true that the book exists entirely within a ritualistic framework and that it contains a large collection of information presented with seeming fastidiousness, it is by no

means a complete guide to ancient Israelite ritual practice, set out so that any novice could follow along.

When it comes to the regulations and prescriptions concerning sacrifice found principally in chapters 1-7, as modern interpreters we have far from everything we need to go on to be sure of what the practices mentioned were for, what they meant, how exactly they related to and differed from each other, and even precisely how they were performed. These remarks are not meant to denigrate the text, or to paint it as some kind of unintelligible cipher, but rather to redress the effect of some of the more forthright approaches to studying this material and to caution would-be interpreters of Leviticus against too positivistic a methodology.

Five (apparently) distinct main categories of sacrifice are discernable: *‘ōlāh*, usually translated as ‘burnt offering’ or ‘whole offering’ (1.1-17; 6.8-13); *ḥattāt*, usually translated ‘sin offering’ (4.1-35; 6.24-30); *’āšām*, usually translated ‘guilt offering’ (5.14-6.7; 7.10); *minḥāh*, usually translated ‘grain offering’ (2.1-16; 6.14-23) and *šēlāmīm*, usually translated ‘peace offering’ (3.1-17, 7.11-36). Most of these sacrifices involved the slaughter of an animal – a bull, a goat, a sheep, a pigeon or a dove – with the exception of the grain offering, although this was often used to accompany other sacrifices which did (see for example 23:13). The initial procedure for most sacrifices was similar, with the actions required towards the end of the rituals varying depending on the type and function of the offering being given.

Philip Jenson helpfully summaries the basic pattern as follows:

A sacrificial ritual comprised several stages, typically (i) the offerer approaches the sanctuary with the animal to be sacrificed (ii) lays his or her hand on it (iii) slaughters it (iv) the priest performs a blood ritual (sprinkling, pouring out, applying) (v) the priest prepares and burns the sacrifice on the altar (vi) the flesh may be eaten and the

remains are disposed of. The detailed rules for the final three stages vary widely according to what kind of sacrifice is being offered for what reason. Thus the thank offering (Lv. 7:12), the votive offering (Lv. 7:16), the freewill offering (Lv. 7:16), and the ordination offering (Lv. 8:22-29) are all peace offerings, but were offered in different circumstances, have special names, and have slightly different procedures. Similarly the ritual for the purification offering described in Leviticus 4 differs from that of Leviticus 5:1-13.<sup>36</sup>

Jenson also points out that *only* the peace offering could be eaten by the offerer (and his family), and even that only after the priest had removed the fat and taken a portion for himself. The priest, however, could eat meat from all the sacrifices except the burnt offering (which was completely immolated on the altar, meaning the priest received only the pelt of the animal), as long as they were not offerings he had made of behalf of himself.<sup>37</sup>

While each of these rites is a potential locus for ecological reflection, I intend to focus on the sacrifice that has traditionally been of most interest to Christian interpreters, the *hattāt*. Firstly, Milgrom has notably argued that the near universal translation of *hattāt* as 'sin offering' constitutes a grievous error, the correction of which highlights some key elements of the ideology of animal sacrifice.

According to Leviticus chapters 4, 12, 15 and 16, the sin offering was necessary to rectify the situation wherein someone had either unintentionally committed an act prohibited by the law, was in need of purification as a result of childbirth or genital discharge or had, as in the case of Aaron's sons, committed a flagrant and deliberate violation. Interestingly, in chapter 8 it also plays a role in the dedication of the altar.

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<sup>36</sup> Jenson, Philip P., 'The Levitical Sacrificial System', in Beckwith, Roger T., and Martin J. Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press (1995) 27.

<sup>37</sup> Jenson, 'The Levitical Sacrificial System', 27.

Milgrom argues that the translation 'sin offering' has fed the (incorrect) assumption that the ritual focuses on the individual offender and that the offering functions to rid *them* of *their* sin. He points out that this is unlikely given that in two of the situations in which the offering is used (purification after childbirth or infection and the dedication of the altar) are situations which do not envisage any specific sin on the part of the offerer.<sup>38</sup>

Directing his argument to the blood manipulation involved in the enactment of the *ḥattāt*, Milgrom highlights the fact that the blood used in the offering is not applied to the offender, but in fact to various parts of the sanctuary (depending on the nature of offence). He argues that while the offender is purified variously by washing, by the passing of time or by the recognition of their fault, blood is required to purge the sanctuary which has become corrupted.<sup>39</sup> According to this interpretation the tabernacle / temple is the target of the polluting affect of impurity, which functions as a kind of miasmic force, attaching itself to the sanctuary and sancta and polluting them from a distance. Although Milgrom's insistence that the *ḥattāt* *never* serves to rid the impure party of their sin but rather *always* functions to cleanse the sancta of its effects has come in for criticism,<sup>40</sup> to my mind there seems little doubt that his basic proposition – that the priestly writers conceived of the sanctuary as the primary locus of the polluting effects of impurity – is a key concept at work in Leviticus (e.g. Lev. 8.14-15; 15.31; 16.15-19).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 253-261.

<sup>39</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 254-256.

<sup>40</sup> See Gilders, William K., *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press (2004) 28-32, 109-141; Kiuchi, Nobuyoshi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature: Its Meaning and Function*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 56, Sheffield: JSOT Press (1987) 14-19; Grabbe, Lester, *Leviticus*, Old Testament Guides, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (1997) 38-43; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 156-160; Willis, Timothy M., *Leviticus*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press (2009) 38-40.

<sup>41</sup> See further Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning...', 10-11, 255 (note 8); Rogerson, John, 'Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Problems of Method and Approach', in Bourdillon, Michael F.C., and Meyer Fortes (eds.), *Sacrifice*, London & New York: Academic Press (1980) 54.

If Milgrom's argument regarding the miasmatic nature of impurity and its ability to remotely 'infect' the sanctuary is accepted, then it proposes a far more overarching social conception of the role of the sin offering and sacrifice in general than that which is often offered. If, as Milgrom claims, offerers do not present themselves and their sacrifice primarily in order to be individually purified of the effects of their sin, but rather in order that the sanctuary be cleansed, then their efforts and more significantly their loss of a valuable animal, are in essence acts that are primarily directed towards the common good. In terms of the conception that the presence of YHWH in the sanctuary enables the flourishing of the whole of the land and all its inhabitants, and the removal thereof threatens the opposite, any individual who acts to protect the sanctuary from the effect of any impurity associated with them (be it through ritual cleansing or the presentation of a sacrifice at the sanctuary), performs a social duty directed towards the benefit of the whole community.

In the light of Milgrom's analysis of the *hattāt*, we are able to posit an interpretation of a key aspect of the sacrificial system that focuses not on transactions that simply involve individuals palming off their guilt onto an animal, but on members of the community acting out of a recognition of their own debt to and embeddedness within the social group. Although it was crucial to the contextual framework of this analysis that we see the sacrificial system as spawning out of a context where human culpability is emphasized, here we can see that it is not simply the case that the people were to be reminded of the voracity and persistence of their sin by the continual functioning of the tabernacle/temple, but it was also the case that the workings of the system bore testimony to the effects of all sin beyond the realm of the individual – indeed beyond the realm of human society. As with the wider priestly conception expressed in Genesis 9, the relentless and corrosive reality of human sin forms the framework within which the relationship of humans and non-human animals

must be brokered. In the postdiluvian narrative the foremost responsibility for managing the relationship falls to humans, not simply because of a recognition of their higher status, but, more significantly, because of their culpability with regard to the controlling dynamic. In Leviticus, we can find this theme reinforced and extended by virtue of the structural emphasis on the fact that individual human sin has implications for the whole human community and, crucially, that human sin in general has implications for those outside the human community – both the divine and also the non-human creation.

This notion that the sacrificial system served, at least in part, to preserve the purity of the sanctuary for the benefit not just of the people, but all the inhabitants of the land – and indeed the land itself – brings us to the core of the claim regarding humility. Conceiving of the system in this way makes it clear that the priestly conception of animal sacrifice did not simply displace human responsibility and needlessly victimize disinterested animals. The animals concerned were not envisaged as external to the problem; they too were members of the community that would be affected by YHWH's abandonment of the sanctuary and the people being evicted by the land. In this sense, the concept of the people's disinheritance of the land implies an impact that goes wider than just the human community.

Some might balk at this idea of the conception of animals as members of the community, interpreting it as a modern, fluffy fiction, but once again we must remind ourselves that, just like Sergei in *Urga*, we carry with us our unspoken cultural assumptions about the 'proper' relationship of humans to animals. The majority of animals used for sacrifice are what we would call 'farm animals': cattle, sheep and goats. While for the majority of modern, particularly urban, Westerners these animals inhabit a very different kind of space from people, the realities of ancient Near Eastern life would have meant (as is indeed the case in many non-urban, non-Western contemporary settings) that such

animals lived in a fashion much more in line with our notion of 'domestic' animals.<sup>42</sup> While they would have been far from modern Western pets, they would certainly not have existed (either physically or ideologically) in an environment completely separated from the family home.<sup>43</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves that the kind of alienation from the agricultural means of production that occupants of modern, Western cities have come to regard as normal would have been far from so for the majority of people since the birth of civilization.

Even if we accept, however, the notion that the practical relationship between an ancient Israelite household and its animals, and the ritualistic conception of animals as part of the community affected by human sin, speaks to a more nuanced, more interesting relationship between humans and animals at work in the sacrificial system, we are still left with the question as to why an animal has to die so that order might be restored.

The simple answer to the question as to why, for Leviticus, an animal has to die for a sacrifice to be performed, is that it does not. We must not forget that with regard to ancient Israel, 'sacrifice' and 'animal sacrifice' are not synonymous terms. Setting aside the broad gamut of activities to which the term sacrifice might be legitimately applied in what we might think of as a more metaphorical sense, there are, of course, a large number of ritualistic offerings and practices which do not require the shedding of animal blood at all. Significantly, wheat, barley, oil, incense, wine, bread and salt<sup>44</sup> are all among the vegetarian sacrificial equipment sanctioned for use in various circumstances and

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<sup>42</sup> For more on the distinction between ANE and modern conceptions of animals see Patton, Kimberley, "'He who sits in the heavens laughs": Recovering Animal Theology in the Abrahamic Traditions', *Harvard Theological Review* vol. 93, issue 4, (2000) 401-434; Borowski, Oded, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira (1998).

<sup>43</sup> See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54-55; Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 149; Rogerson, 'What Was the Meaning of Animal Sacrifice?', 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Note how these are all classic symbols of cultural activity.

for various purposes in Leviticus.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, there are the certain sacrificial rituals which involve animals, but do not demand their death (e.g. the rites of cleansing in Lev. 14.1-7 and 48-53, or the mysterious *‘āzā’zēl* ritual described in Lev. 16.1-22 – see below). However, even setting to one side this important point regarding non-animal and non-lethal animal sacrifice, in the light of what we have already observed I propose that there is a thread of reasoning by which it is possible to examine those sacrificial activities wherein an animal was required to die, in such a way as to highlight potentially fruitful channels for ecological reflection.

### **"As A Sheep Before Her Shearers Is Dumb"**

In the context of ancient Israelite sacrifice, an argument might be offered that is in some senses similar to William Davies' contention regarding land, analyzed in the previous chapter. Davies asserts insightfully that, because the Christian tradition has tended to interpret the majority of Old Testament material through the lens of doctrine, the insights of texts like Leviticus have been largely overlooked. This is, I propose, equally if not more true of sacrifice as of land.

It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of theological reflection in the Christian tradition on Israelite sacrificial practice has occurred in the context of the doctrine of atonement. In his death, Christ becomes likened to Isaiah's suffering servant, who is in turn like a sacrificial lamb. He is the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1.29) and who, being offered "once for all" (1 Peter 3.18 cf. Heb. 9.26; 10.10), puts an end to the need to regulate sin

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<sup>45</sup> On the importance of vegetal and liquid offerings see McClymond, Katherine, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press (2008).



through animal sacrifice, which then came to be interpreted as not just limited in scope, but fundamentally ineffectual (Heb. 10.1-14).<sup>46</sup>

According to the satisfaction theory of atonement proposed by Anselm of Canterbury in *Cur Deus Homo* (1098), rather than being, as the tradition had taught, the result of a cosmic battle with, or ransom paid to, Satan, Christ's death was a solution to the offence caused to God by human sin. Proceeding from the feudal logic that the discrepancy in social status between the parties defined the gravity of an offence by one person against another, Anselm concluded that, since God is infinite in status, any offence against God must also be infinite in gravity. Christ's death functioned in this system as a propitiatory sacrifice for the offences of human sin against a perfect God.<sup>47</sup>

Development of Anselm's model in the light of changing legal and penal practices over the course of the medieval period shifted much of the focus onto the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. Although the sinner is the offender, Christ bears the divine punishment in the sinner's place just as, so the logic runs, a sacrificed animal is in some sense the substitute for the guilty, human, party. The death of Christ, according to this way of reasoning, instances the violent outpouring of divine retribution – a retribution that can only be satisfied with shed blood. The divine violence is justified – because all offences require punishment, and punitive, corporal punishment was the order of the day – but rather than being *proportionate*, that is, involving all those who have offended dying for their crimes, it is *expiatory* by virtue of Christ's absolute innocence: “Like ... a lamb without defect or blemish” (1Pet. 1.19).

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<sup>46</sup> Even though Christ's disciples and the community they established most likely continued to take part in ritual activity at the temple (e.g. Acts 21.26)

<sup>47</sup> For an overview of Anselm's life and theology see Southern, Robert, *Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1990), for a detailed analysis of Anselm's theology of atonement and the implications of *Cur Deus Homo* see Gorringer, Timothy J., *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (1996) 85-103, and for a discussion of contemporary defences and developments of Anselm's argument see Weaver, J. Denny, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, (2001) 179-224.

In the context of such a significant and far-reaching doctrine, it is perhaps not surprising that while subscription to satisfaction models of atonement has waned in more recent times, the interpretation of animal sacrifice that it relies on has remained prevalent in Christian interpretations of sacrificial practice in the Hebrew Bible. Although it focuses at length and in detail on the matter of animal sacrifice, Leviticus – which while being clear to repeat regulation concerning the ‘unblemished’ nature of sacrificial lambs, rams and bulls, contributes little by way of analysis of how the sacrifice achieves its intentions – has therefore tended to be eclipsed in the Christian tradition by texts like the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in Gen. 22.1-18.<sup>48</sup>

Although many contemporary theologians are dissatisfied with the passive understanding of the work of Christ in death that arose out of the satisfaction/substitution interpretation of atonement, the notion that a sacrificed animal is a passive victim to whom violence is done in order to paradoxically vent it, limit it and make restitution for its affects, persists. It is this notion that I seek to question in the light of the priestly conception of sacrifice, as most fully fleshed out in Leviticus.

Partly because of certain overarching theological conceptions that many Christians bring to the Hebrew Bible, and partly due to well-established ideas regarding sacrifice and ritual in various other periods and cultures, readers of Leviticus often tend towards interpreting the sacrificial animal as a substitute for the sacrificer. Even if they are not inclined to think of the animal as literally standing in for a human victim, often a vaguer conception of a symbolic ‘in the stead of’ directs interpretation. Traditionally, the burnt offering has been considered of primary importance, with its prominent role within certain festivals detailed in the Pentateuch (e.g. Num. 28-29), its positioning in the lists of

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<sup>48</sup> This is a text whose interpretation has been warped by a longstanding, disproportionate and ideologically motivated emphasis on the apparently miraculous provision of a ram to be offered in Isaac’s stead.

prescriptions (e.g. Lev. 1-7) and the fact that no part of the flesh of the offering is consumed all having been taken as indicators of its status.<sup>49</sup> The central reason for the interest in the burnt offering, however, has been its apparent association with *expiation* or *atonement*.<sup>50</sup>

According to the standard interpretation, the animal being burnt functions as a substitute, or ransom, for the offerer, dying in his place in recognition of his sin against God. However, as Jenson notes, although there is some evidence for a connection between the burnt offering and atonement *outside* of Leviticus, internal evidence is scant. Moreover, often where we do seem to find an association between the burnt offering and atonement, the purification offering is also mentioned, and it is possible that the expiatory associations apply primarily to the latter (see 5.9-10; 9.7; 12.6-8).<sup>51</sup> Much is made in this context of the 'laying on of hands' (see Lev. 1.4; 3.2, 8, 13; 4.4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8.14, 18, 22). Although many commentators have drawn attention to the fact that the texts that mention this procedure do not allow the reader to draw any firm conclusions regarding its ritualistic function,<sup>52</sup> it is interesting to note that many still affirm the assumption that it must signify a substitution.<sup>53</sup>

The notion of substitution can connote a variety of meanings, some of which are more helpful in terms of interpreting animal sacrifice in Leviticus than others. My reticence to embrace the term derives from both the intense theological overtones with which it is loaded – overtones with the potential to

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<sup>49</sup> See Jenson, 'The Levitical Sacrificial System', 28.

<sup>50</sup> See for example Wenham, Gordon J., *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns (1979) 57-63.

<sup>51</sup> Jenson, 'The Levitical Sacrificial System', 28.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering*, 112-119.

<sup>53</sup> A fitting and interesting example can be found in Wenham, Gordon, 'The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice', in Beckwith, Roger T., and Martin J. Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press/Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, (1995) 75-87. Wenham provides a fairly nuanced survey of several possible meanings of the gesture without demonstrating any one to be compelling, but then appears to revert to the assumption of a conservative and narrow interpretation in the usage that follows (see 82). It is also interesting to note the appeal to the story of Abraham and Isaac (80) – a common yet flawed rhetorical move.

hijack an interpretation – and the fact that often the implicit logic of its application is that the sacrificial animal is essentially an expendable stand-in onto which impurity and/or guilt can be displaced in order to enable the cleansing (and survival) of the human sinner.

I am convinced, however, that this kind of interpretation fails to take both the status and the function of the sacrificial animal within the priestly tradition with the necessary seriousness. For a start, there is good reason to think of the animals that were suitable for sacrifice as possessing extremely high status. These were highly-prized animals, not only practically but also ritualistically. The instructions are clear that, in order to be acceptable, animals used for sacrifice were to be *tāmīm* ‘perfect’, (Lev. 22.21), ‘without blemish’ (Lev. 1.3, 10; 3.1, 6; 4.3, 23, 28, 32; 5.15, 18; 6.6; 9.2, 3; 14.10; 22.19; 23.12, 18.). This insistence is no doubt partly to ensure that weak or lame animals were not offloaded as offerings (Lev. 22.21-25) – a point which testifies to the fact that the inherent economic loss to the offerer was not an insignificant factor.<sup>54</sup> However, more fundamentally, the insistence on physical perfection seems to have been to ensure that the animal was seen as worthy of, and able to live up to, the cultic role required of it. In order to perform its ritualistic role, the sacrificed animal needed to be holy. This, in itself, given the seriousness with which the priestly writers use holiness language and the lengths to which ancient Israelite priests apparently needed to go in order to be fit for their work, suggests interesting implications about the perceived status of such animals.

In the context of the priestly conception of creation as having been ordered by means of a series of separations and distinctions, we see that the role that a sacrificed animal must play is a liminal one – it is required symbolically to span two realms. In priestly thought, such liminality is a deadly serious matter. Clear boundaries separate life and death, order and chaos, the holy and the

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<sup>54</sup> See Rogerson, ‘What Was the Meaning...’, 14-15.

profane; even to approach, let alone transgress, the clearly defined boundaries between two distinct realms is potentially to jeopardize the very fabric of created reality. In being able to span these gaps and transgress these boundaries, to pass from one realm to the other, the sacrificial animal somehow makes possible cleansing from contamination, the restoration of distinctions between things and thus the right reordering of society.<sup>55</sup> Somehow, in the transition from purity to impurity, from life to death, the animal makes a cleansing possible. Its blood, a vibrant symbol of this magical transition, takes on the properties of a detergent which can purify the sanctuary once more.

It is only by virtue of being a member of the (covenant) community that desires the presence of God and would suffer from its withdrawal, but *not* a member of the community of (immediate) culpability for sin, that the animal can play this vital role. Therefore, far from being a poor substitute, the sacrificed animal is a holy thing that performs a role on behalf of humans that they cannot and could never perform for themselves. In this sense, if the concept of substitution is at all a helpful one in this context, we must be clear that, rather than being about the importation of a more disposable alternative to bear the brunt of punishment, it is an exchange that involves the replacement of a less ritually capable and significant animal (the human) with a more ritually capable and significant one (the 'holy' sheep/bull/goat/bird).

By the same logic, while it is perhaps far-fetched to think of the selection process as being on a voluntary basis, it does not seem appropriate to conceive of the animal as a 'sacrificial victim'. It could be argued that if there is a single 'sacrificial victim' it is the human, who is powerless to deal with the effects of their own sin. In making this recognition, we come to see that the flaw in the language of victimhood is its failure to account for the chronology of sacrifice.

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<sup>55</sup> See Davies, Douglas, 'An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977) 396-397.

The sacrificial animal *begins* as a victim, suffering the actual and potential consequences of a particular sin (along with all the inhabitants of the land), but, through enabling the cleansing of the sanctuary and the offender, ends by dissolving the very context of the victimhood of all concerned. The animal does not remain a victim in exactly the same way that the community as a whole is restored from a position of victimization.

## **Purification, Slaughter & the Second Goat**

If any passage in Leviticus has any claim to popular appeal in scholarly circles, then it is the dramatic rite concerning the two goats set out in Leviticus chapter 16. Representing a significant departure from the detailed and deliberate descriptions of the regular sacrificial offerings, the reader here encounters a special annual rite which, along with some other things, seems to involve an offering to a mysterious character, *Azazel*, often interpreted as the representative of a goat daemon who is thought to live in and/or represent the wilderness. Now we're talking! It seems that all the wading through the repetitive, boring bits has finally paid off.

Well, while it is clear that it deserves careful attention, I am (as you might imagine given the shape of what has preceded) less inclined than some scholars to place overarching significance on the elements of this particular ritual that appear to distinguish it so radically from what might be described as the 'regular' sacrificial practices. Although it is, to some extent, tempting to focus the majority of attention onto the two goat offerings encountered in this chapter, and to do so might be seen to couple with the hermeneutical commitment to strangeness (see introduction), I have resisted that approach. There is a

substantial difference, I would argue, between the determination that interpretation should be in part guided by what seems strange and alien, and the focussing of interpretation on what seems merely exciting. In this sense, an element that seems extremely bizarre and alien can in fact conform to something of a stereotype, and therefore an expectation.

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died. The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering. Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer it as a sin offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (Lev. 16.1-10)

Although the rites described in this chapter are associated with the festival of *yōm hakkippurīm*, the Day of Purification, as Ithamar Gruenwald notes, the immediate context in which these sacrifices are introduced is not the context of the annual festival during which the sanctuary is cleansed (in fact this is not mentioned until v.29), but the narrative context of the death of the sons of Aaron

described (albeit enigmatically) in Lev. 10.1-7.<sup>56</sup> Nadab and Abihu are described as having been consumed by fire that came out from the presence of YHWH (Lev. 10.2) after they attempted to offer *זָרָח*, 'strange fire'.

It appears that the offering that they presented was not in accordance with the regulations that had been set out ("such as he had not commanded them"). Exactly what it was that they did or did not do, however, is not detailed. It could be that the *זָרָח* should be interpreted quite literally – suggesting that they used coals of fire from elsewhere than the altar, and that their fire was therefore impure and polluted the sanctuary – or it could read in a more metaphorical sense as simply a way to refer to unsuitable practice. One interpretation derived from the latter sense is that, given the way that the people respond with awe and wonderment to Aaron's offerings in the preceding verses (Lev. 9.22-24), it is perhaps the case that, in addition to specific errors of procedure, having seen the power of the newly established cult apparatus, Nadab and Abihu attempted to offer unwarranted sacrifices in order to obtain for themselves a measure of reflected adulation. What is perfectly clear, however, is that entering the holy of holies is not something that can be undertaken at just any time, or without absolute attention to procedural detail.<sup>57</sup>

In this context, as Gruenwald emphasises, the regulations that follow describe the method by which Aaron might enter into the inner sanctum without dying.<sup>58</sup> The emphasis from the start, therefore, is on, in the wider sense, a solemn duty that poses a serious threat to the one performing it, and in the narrower sense the fact that the details of the procedure hold in some way the key to the protection of the high priest. There is also the notion, suggested by the shape of the chapter, that these procedures are being shown to have originally derived from the need to

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<sup>56</sup> Gruenwald, Ithamar, *Rituals and Ritual Theory in Ancient Israel*, Leiden: Brill, (2003) 202.

<sup>57</sup> For an analysis of *זָרָח* see Laughlin, John C. H., 'The "Strange Fire" of Nadab and Abihu', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, (1976) 559-565.

<sup>58</sup> Gruenwald, *Rituals and Ritual Theory...*, 203-204.



respond to the specific impurities created by the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, and then to have been licensed more widely for annual use on the Day of Purification.

Aaron is to wash himself, dress in the appropriate ritual garments and then make a *ḥaṭṭāt*, 'sin offering' of a bull or to make *kippur*, 'atonement', for himself and his household. It is worth noting in this regard the detail of the first mention of the *ḥaṭṭāt*:

The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. (Lev. 16.2-3)

It seems that it is specifically *because* YHWH will appear in the cloud upon *ḥakappōrāt* ('the mercy seat') that Aaron is required to make the *ḥaṭṭāt*.

Interestingly, Gruenwald perceives that implied in this usage is a sense of the verb *kipper* other than that which, as we have seen, Milgrom employs to describe the function of the *ḥaṭṭāt*.<sup>59</sup>

"In the context of the *ḥaṭṭāt*", Milgrom declares, "*kipper* means purge and nothing else".<sup>60</sup> For Gruenwald, however, this context suggests another concept possibly connected with *kipper*, that of 'covering'.<sup>61</sup> Whilst some scholars have argued that this proposed connection between *kipper* and covering, which is

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<sup>59</sup> For detailed analysis of the various meanings of *kippur* see in particular Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering...* 87-109; Sklar, Jay, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions*, Hebrew Bible Monographs, 2, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, (2005), esp. 44-79; Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible*, 28-29; Levine, Baruch A., *In The Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 5, Leiden: Brill, (1974) 56-77.

<sup>60</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 255.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Elliger, Karl, *Leviticus*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck), (1966) 71; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1079-1080.

quite an old idea, is invalid<sup>62</sup> and it has certainly generally fallen out of favour, Gruenwald employs it to suggest that it is part of how Aaron is to shield himself from the divine presence. Certainly there seems to be a suggestion that as well as in some sense paralleling the cloud of the divine presence, the smoke produced by Aaron's censer of burning incense acts as a shield, literally a smoke screen, for his protection, "or he will die"(16.13).<sup>63</sup>

Next Aaron was to take two goats and (lit.) 'stand them near (the face of) the LORD'. Although the text is very cryptic, the next section is generally understood to describe a process something like as follows: lots were to be cast, one 'for YHWH' and one 'for Azazel' (*la 'āzā'zēl*), and thus one goat would be revealed to be the goat for YHWH and the other as the goat for Azazel. The goat for YHWH would be killed and its blood manipulated, in conjunction with the blood of the *ḥaṭṭāt*, in order to achieve the cleansing of both the sanctuary and the altar in front of the sanctuary. Once the purification of the sancta was accomplished, Aaron was to lay his hands on the head of the goat for Azazel, confess the iniquities of the people and place them on the head of the goat and then send it away to be led into the wilderness by someone appointed to the task.

The key question that emerges from this intriguing passage is: what does this ritual involving the two goats, and in particular the goat described as *la 'āzā'zēl*, achieve that the regular sacrifices that we have already considered do not (or perhaps cannot do)? Given the relative popularity of this chapter and thus the number of people who have engaged with it, the array of possible interpretations on offer is substantial. As Guillaume wryly observes,

The debate has reached a level of fantastic refinement which proves the incoherence of the biblical sacrificial system ... Far from being an impediment, the incoherence

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<sup>62</sup> See for example Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 44; Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> See Balentine, Samuel E., *Leviticus*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, (2002) 128.

supports the system, since it requires the intermediary of specialists—namely, the priests of ancient Israel and the exegetes of modern academia who both make a more comfortable living out of it than if they had to breed the sacrificial animals by themselves.<sup>64</sup>

Milgrom's answer to this question is to propose that Azazel is the name of a pre-Israelite daemon/satyr that survives in the tradition in name only and has, in line with Milgrom's general scheme, been thoroughly divested of any power or personality than it once had. The name remains, he argues, as a general term for the location with which the daemons would traditionally have been most closely associated, the wilderness.<sup>65</sup> The sacrifice occurs, he argues, in order to purge the sanctuary of impurities caused by those who deliberately broke the law and were thus unable to enter the sanctuary to make restitution.<sup>66</sup>

The details of Milgrom's contextualization of the function of the goat 'for Azazel' which follow are instructive.

First, the goat sent him [*sic*] is not an offering ... it is not treated as a sacrifice, requiring slaughter, blood manipulation, and the like, nor does it have the effect of a sacrifice, namely, propitiation, expiation and so on ... Moreover an animal laden with impurities would not be acceptable as an offering either to God or to a demon (cf. v. 26). Second, the goat is not the vicarious substitute for Israel ... because there is no indication that it was punished (e.g. put to death) or demonically attacked in

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<sup>64</sup> Guillaume, *Land And Calendar*, 97-98 note 54.

<sup>65</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1021.

<sup>66</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1061-1065. This raises, however, an interesting question about Milgrom's interpretive scheme. Although he sees remorse as part of the non-sacrificial aspects of the rite that an unclean person undertakes for their own cleansing (alongside ritual washing and waiting) which he uses as the basis for his argument that sacrifices should not be thought to cleanse the sinner but only the sanctuary, he also holds that flagrant corruptors could not be 'sacrificed for' by someone else. However, presumably other people excluded from offering at the sanctuary could be (e.g. women or disabled people)? Was remorse not at least a part of the distinction in these cases?

Israel's place. Instead of being an offering or a substitute, the goat is simply the vehicle to dispatch Israel's impurities and sins to the wilderness/netherworld.<sup>67</sup>

For Milgrom, unless the goat dies or experiences vicarious violence, then it is not a sacrifice. In order to establish this position, he first needs to assert that although according to verse 5 both goats are described as *ḥaṭṭāt*, given that the goat 'for Azazel' is not a sacrifice, *ḥaṭṭāt* cannot here have its usual meaning, but rather 'may have been chosen for its philological sense "that which removes sin"'.<sup>68</sup> Then, secondly, he must argue that, although the goat for Azazel appears to be understood as able to make expiation (v. 10), it is in fact not. Both of these moves are in line with the logic of Milgrom's identification of vegetal offerings as simply either additions to, or substitutes for, animal offerings.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst, like Milgrom, I am convinced that animal sacrifices seem to have general priority over other types of offering elsewhere in Leviticus, and I am also concerned not to allow the instructions in this chapter priority over those defined more precisely elsewhere as the standard, frequent offerings, I do not feel the need to squirm around in order to demonstrate why this interesting case should be excluded from the general reckoning. Even if one wishes to emphasize the function of animal sacrifices as compared to non-animal sacrifices, and my emphasis so far in this chapter testifies fairly well to that intent, it seems that here, as with the prescriptions for cleansing a leper in chapter 14.1-7, there is found a sacrificial rite that involves a non-human animal but does not require its death. At the very least I want to say that this is not insignificant.

It seems to me that, out of desire to insist absolutely that the priestly writers were staunch monotheists and absolute de-mythologizers, Milgrom is forced to play down the role of the goat 'for Azazel' in order that his

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<sup>67</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1021.

<sup>68</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 1018.

<sup>69</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 195-202.

interpretation does not impute too great a role to Azazel. One of the upshots of this is that his interpretation relies all the more on slaughter as *the* mode by which the goals of the various sacrificial rites are realized.<sup>70</sup>

While I have tried to demonstrate that, when considered in the light of the rich and complex tradition of ancient Israelite sacrifice, the ritual killing of non-human animals can legitimately be interpreted as something other than cruel and/or wasteful, I have no particular desire to defend ritual killing as the *only* method which the tradition understood as efficacious, and am intrigued by Milgrom's apparent desire to do something approaching just that.

McClymond offers a substantial and provocative retort to the notion that it is only by reference to acts of violence that ancient Israelite sacrifice can be explained. She begins with the observation that the slaughter of sacrificial animals does not appear to require ritual expertise or authority given that it is not the preserve of the priests, as indeed we might expect if the act of killing itself were central to the function.<sup>71</sup> Taking the *‘ōlāh* as an example she points out that it is the lay person that is to present the bull, ram or male goat, lay their hands on its head and slaughter it (*šāḥat*) before YHWH (Lev. 1.4-5). It is only then that the priests are to perform the expert work of using the animal's blood, dividing up the carcass, washing it and arranging it in the proper way on the altar. Furthermore, she points out, it is what happens before arriving at the sanctuary – the selection of an appropriate animal – and after the slaughter – the various uses of the blood, the dividing, arranging, burning and consumption of the carcass – that distinguishes one sacrificial rite from another. Given that each

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<sup>70</sup> There is perhaps, therefore, an interesting parallel between Milgrom's position on non-human animal sacrifice and the historical shift within Christian thought away from the *Christus Victor* model of atonement (which afforded a key role to Satan) towards models based on penal substitution, which emphasized the role of violence against the body. For more on the *Christus Victor* model see Aulén, Gustaf, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Typs [sic] of the Idea of Atonement*, (trans. Arthur Hebert), London: SPCK, (1931); Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, (1992) 149-150; Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, 14-15.

<sup>71</sup> McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 56.

sacrifice seems designated for a different function, it would be strange if the crucial aspect of that function occurred during the most generic aspect of the process.

McClymond summarizes her argument thus:

First, the manipulation of the blood and the distribution of the various portions of the body are the distinguishing features of individual sacrifices ... In addition, killing procedures work with other procedures—particularly the manipulation of the blood and the distribution of the portions—to shape the distinctive identity of any sacrificial rite ... The slaughter of the animal victim helps accomplish the overall objectives of particular sacrifices only insofar as it is performed correctly along with earlier procedures, such as the offering's selection, and subsequent procedures, such as the proper distribution of portions. In other words, killing in the context of Jewish sacrifice ... is important not for what it accomplishes on its own but for what it [sic] accomplishes in relationship with other actions.<sup>72</sup>

After insightfully considering the *role* of slaughter in the sacrifice, McClymond then briefly but instructively turns to the *nature* of the sacrificial slaughter in an attempt to further demonstrate a lack of emphasis on violence in the ancient Israelite sacrificial tradition. Concluding a discussion very much in sympathy with the themes I have set out in this chapter, she asserts that:

A review of biblical and rabbinic discussions of sacrifice leads us to rethink stereotypic—and often emotionally charged—notions of killing. For example, in contrast with a seeming obsession with violence in modern theorizing, the rabbinic references to animal slaughter are relatively matter of fact. They do not characterize animal slaughter as particularly violent or distasteful. The absence of detailed instructions in the biblical and mishnaic texts, and the fact that lay people performed the slaughtering, seem to imply that any (adult male) Israelite worth his salt knew

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<sup>72</sup> McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 59.

how to cut an animal's throat correctly. In addition, the slaughter was performed publicly in the outer courtyard area, so presumably it was not tremendously traumatic to onlookers. Subsequent kashrut laws require that animals slaughtered for food be killed painlessly, suggesting that Judaism has consistently been concerned with *avoiding* pain and violence in animal slaughter. Given this expression of concern, it is hard to argue that the sacrifice of an animal victim should be interpreted as a violent or even dramatic event.<sup>73</sup>

In the light of these two stages in her argument, McClymond then turns to a consideration of Leviticus 16 and the goat for Azazel. She notes Milgrom's unwillingness to accept the release of the second goat as an offering, but asserts that Leviticus 16 'indicates that the goat "performs expiation" in some way.'<sup>74</sup> She continues:

[T]he language of the passage suggests that this second goat is included in the general sacrificial activity. I would argue that the he-goat is, in fact, part of the sacrifice, not killed, but manipulated in a different way. A theoretical approach that views killing as only one of many possible sacrificial manipulations allows us to consider other ways of understanding this act as "sacrificial."<sup>75</sup>

In an analysis of the aspects that he considers reflect the concerns of the earliest Priestly material (P<sup>s</sup>), Guillaume has called into question the role of killing in the 'two goats' ritual further still.<sup>76</sup> He argues that, originally, both goats would have been kept alive. Considering the more blatant references to the slaughter of the goat 'for YHWH' (v. 15) and language that emphasizes the goat 'for Azazel' as being the living goat (v. 21) as later additions, he argues that the description of both animals as *l'hattāt* in verse 5 functions as an example of *hattāt*

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<sup>73</sup> McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 59-60.

<sup>74</sup> McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 64.

<sup>75</sup> McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 96-101.

meaning simply 'sin' as opposed to 'sin offering'.<sup>77</sup> He argues that, set against the background of the people's marking of the Day of Purification with solemn rest and 'self-denial' (fasting), which he interprets as acts of humiliation, the two goats are both associated with the people and declared guilty because of their sins. The fact, thereafter, that one goat is led away into the wilderness and one remains in front of YHWH, is a reflection of the Priestly source's unconditional interpretation of the covenant. Though the people are guilty, and deserve to be thrown into the wilderness, they will not be abandoned.<sup>78</sup>

While I am not entirely convinced by Guillaume's conception of the Day of Purification rite as a 'non-sacrifice', and cannot, of course, align my argument with his too closely on account of the huge role that source critical distinctions between P and non-P material play in his interpretation, I find his argument instructive in as much as it is defined by the *similarity* between the goats rather than the difference. Both goats start off playing the same role, and it is only what is done to them after their designations that distinguishes them.

This notion of the fundamental similarity between the goat for YHWH and the goat for Azazel seems to me to relate to McClymond's point that it is the manipulation of sacrificial animals that makes their role 'sacrificial'. I agree with McClymond that both goats are rightly considered as sacrifices, one providing blood that can purify the sancta, one acting as a ritual vehicle for the sins of the people and carrying them off into the chaotic realm. This de-emphasis on slaughter can perhaps also be seen as an emphasis on the traits of the animal.

We have already noted that, in the priestly tradition, the human culpability for sin renders them unable to cleanse themselves or rectify the polluting effect of their sin on the sanctuary, and eventually the land. As such, it is only non-human animals that can perform the crucial act of boundary crossing,

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering*, 62-65.

<sup>78</sup> Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 99.



or whose blood can act as a ritual detergent or covering, all of which are necessary in order to enable purification and renewal to take place. Even so, there is something about a perceived emphasis on slaughter that detracts from the claims that animals are precious and revered members of the household and community, that a sacrificial animal takes on an extremely high cultic status and that it is performing a function on behalf of humans that they are unable to perform for themselves.

In the recognition that the focus is not on slaughter, but on the manipulation made possible thereby – most commonly and crucially of the blood and the carefully divided carcass – a different perspective is opened up on the role of the sacrificial animal. However, in the light of the two goats ritual we can perhaps take things further still with the recognition that manipulation is not just something that happens after slaughter, but is to some extent independent of it. Living animals, like the goat to Azazel and the bird in Lev. 14.6, can also be sacrificed and manipulated, and can bring about ritual cleansing. In this sense, the purifying blood of a sacrificed bull is as much a cultic ‘skill’ as the ability of the sacrificed goat ‘for Azazel’ to trek into the wilderness as a ritual vehicle bearing the people’s sin. Both animals are fit to perform a function for which their human ‘masters’ must rely on them. In this sense, I interpret the ritual action of the laying on of hands as being as much about a bond of hope (that the animal will be able to perform a complex and risky task both on behalf of the one bringing the offering and the whole community) as it is an identification with, or the transference of sin to, the creature. As Patton astutely argues:

[C]lose examination of most systems of sacrificial thought often reveals not only an intense bond between sacrificer and victim, but also —and even more counter intuitively from a rationalist standpoint —a kind of sublimation of the animal, even resulting in its apotheosis. To dismiss this process by waving the apotropaic wand of

our age, the label of "oppression", or to treat it as elaborate social pretext for the deployment of collective values ... is to preclude any deeper comprehension of the religious role of animals in such systems. We must be less certain: wise as serpents, innocent as doves, and above all humble before beliefs much older and far more psychologically and mythopoetically complex than our own self-righteous and often sterile postmodern platforms.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusions

This chapter began with the identification of a series of assumptions that a modern, ecologically aware reader might bring to the sacrificial material in Leviticus regarding the antithetical nature of ecology and animal sacrifice. First, that animal sacrifice implies and necessitates assent to the conception of a destructive, anthropocentric, hierarchical, domination paradigm. Second, that animal sacrifice is unavoidably cruel and disrespectful to animal life. And third, that it is inherently decadent and wasteful.<sup>80</sup> It is my hope that, over the course of this chapter, I have been able to meaningfully address and disrupt these assumptions.

I have argued, by means of close attention to the broader context of the priestly conception of the relationship between humans and non-human animals, and by nudging the conversation beyond the (often assumed) context of sacrifices as making satisfaction for individual sin, that the act of animal sacrifice can be interpreted as an act of humility rather than hubris. I have sought, also, to demonstrate that other assumptions regarding the low status, passivity and victimhood of the sacrificial animal are unjustified in the context of Leviticus'

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<sup>79</sup> Patton, 'He who sits...', 403.

<sup>80</sup> N.B. Guillaume rather disappointingly describes the *ʿōlāh* as "waste *par excellence*". Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 90 note 30;

conception. With regard to the question of waste, it was, in a sense, my intention to undermine this objection before it had ever been raised by presenting the scenes from *Urga* as a hermeneutical context. It seems clear to me that such a conception of wastefulness intrinsically assumes the definition of its opposite; that is, to say that something is wasteful is to assume that we know what the opposite of waste looks like. In claiming that sacrifices are a waste if they do not provide food, for example, my friend demonstrated a cultural predisposition regarding the irrelevance and inefficacy of sacrifice. The animal's life was truly wasted because after it was killed its body was totally immolated, robbing it of any *real* purpose. Such a charge of wastefulness is severely weakened once the priestly conception of sacrifice is explored in depth and on its own terms.

At the broadest level, it has been my intention to convey the notion that careful attention to the precise role and function of the sacrificed animal serves to lead us still further from the conceptual paradigm wherein humans *use* other animals to rectify *their* problems. Not only is the world of ancient Israelite priestly thought not ruled by issues of utility, but it relies on and expounds a conception of reality in which humans, non-human animals and the earth itself are inextricably bound up in a set of relationships with YHWH that require humans to commit to regulating the proliferation of violence, which is the result of human sin, and require certain non-human animals to function as mediators and agents of purification on behalf of the whole community.

The hermeneutical complexities involved in drawing an obscure, ancient, ritualistic text into conversation with contemporary ecological ethics cannot be overstated. However, for communities of faith, the challenge of continually rereading and reinterpreting sacred texts and instantiating their wisdom in the here-and-now is one which simply cannot be avoided and must not be abandoned. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I am convinced that the most fruitful way ahead involves the construction and utilisation of bridges of

imaginative analogy between our own location and that of the text, in full recognition of the fact that neither is ever fully known or truly independent of the other, but that both collide in their provisionality within the community of interpretation. In the context of this kind of hermeneutical project, it is my conviction that, more than simply enabling a construction of a defence of the Levitical sacrificial system against accusations of negative ecological value, it is possible to discern, in the details of its conceptualizations of sin, human culture, non-human animal life and ecological interdependence and accountability, practices and principles that can serve as fruitful stimuli for contemporary eco-theological reflection.

In the priestly conception, animal sacrifice does not only rely upon the reality and potency of human sin in the obvious, practical sense that it functions in a large part to reverse the pollution of the sanctuary. By virtue of the wider context of the priestly conception of the relationship between humans and non-human animals in which it operates, it also entails the more specific recognition that human sin, and the violence that it breeds, necessitates a specific, non-ideal, ordering of the created world and the regulation of human and all animal life. It confronts its readers with a vision of an institution at the heart of the community, which demands from its members that they pay close attention to the ways in which their personal activities, interactions and experiences can serve to have a negative impact on the created community as a whole. In the course of regulating the people's activity by the maintenance of appropriate boundaries, and directing them to make reparation for the effects of the impurity that they have created or encountered, the priests conceived of a world where the best way of ensuring the flourishing of the community as a whole was through a system whereby each household regularly gave up valuable resources so that overarching order could be renewed and maintained for all.

Furthermore, the recognition that, by virtue of their status as members of the community, but not party to the culpability for sin that humans bear, the non-human sacrificial animals have the ability to perform a ritualistic role that humans could not play for themselves, has far-reaching implications. While it is perhaps pushing things too far to attempt to present sacrificial animals as willing, vicarious participants in (for example) the purification of the sanctuary, there is, I believe, something profound in the recognition of the priestly writers' perceptions of the limits of human endeavour. Regardless of our ethical assessment of the validity, or otherwise, of animal sacrifice, I posit that the sacrificial system's inherent acknowledgment that part of dealing with the corruption of human society is recognising the effects that it has on the rest of the created order is a theologically profound and ethically generative one.

The sacrificial system as a whole, however, goes beyond the core concept that offerings can function to enable the cleansing of the sancta. Sacrificial rites are also celebrations, spontaneous outpourings of gratitude or joy and gifts to God that represent a recognition of the giftedness of the world. Although these types of offering are often parcelled up with those related to cleansing, there is a somewhat distinct concept relating to the giving up of something good, something precious, to God from whom all good things ultimately come. The dual emphases, therefore, on the duty of the people to recognize, confess and act to counteract the effects of their sin and the duty to thank and celebrate YHWH for all the gifts of life by willingly giving up, willingly sacrificing, a portion of the best and most important things that they have, both, I submit, have great potential to serve as grounds for edifying and corrective ecological reflection.

Perhaps, in this context, Milgrom is not so far from the mark when he comments that in the Priestly writings "we can detect the earliest groupings [*sic*]

toward an ecological position".<sup>81</sup> His probing question a few pages later certainly posits a challenge to the dominant contemporary cultures as to the grounds on which we might justify ignoring or trivializing the insights instantiated in the ancient Israelite sacrificial system.

How would Israel's priests see our world today? Without hesitation they would spot the growing physical pollution of the earth: oil spills, acid rain, strip mining ozone depletion, nuclear waste. [Likewise] they would be aghast at the unending moral pollution of the earth. How long [they] would cry out, before God abandons God's earthly sanctuary?<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics*, 33.

## “Six Days Shall Work Be Done”: Sabbath Ecology & the Economics of Rest

*Nay, by another path thou needs must go  
If thou wilt ever leave this waste’, he said,  
Looking upon me as I wept, ‘for lo!*

*The savage brute that makes thee cry for dread  
Lets no man pass this road of hers, but still  
Trammels him, till at last she lays him dead.*

*Vicious her nature is, and framed for ill;  
When crammed she craves more fiercely than before,  
Her raging greed can never gorge its fill.*

Dante, *Hell* (Canto I, 91-99)<sup>1</sup>

*At the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: My children! If you accept the Torah and observe my mitzvot, I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in my possession.*

—And what, asked Israel, is the precious thing which Thou wilt give us if we obey Thy Torah?

—The world to come.

—Show us in this world an example of the world to come.

—The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have examined the ecological potential of the notions of land (chapter 1) and sacrifice (chapter 2) in the book of Leviticus. Whilst fundamentally affirming the intertwined nature of these perhaps seemingly distinct themes, I have also characterized my reading and interpretation as being primarily focussed on relationships between, in the former case, human beings and the non-animal world and in the latter case, human beings and non-human animals.

In this third and concluding chapter, I will examine the ecological potential of Leviticus’ conception of rest. In line with the general scheme of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, (trans. Dorothy L. Sayers), London: Penguin, (2001), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional Jewish story, cited in Heschel, Abraham, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Co., (1948) 73; quoted by Balentine, *Leviticus*, 183.

thesis, in addition to tracing out overarching strands that highlight connections between this theme and those of the previous chapters, I will here shape my reflections on the ecological potential of the theme of rest by focussing primarily on the context of the way in which it relates, both at the level of text and the proposed contemporary engagement, to the inter-relationships between human beings.

Beginning with a thumbnail sketch of contemporary economics, and in particular the hegemonic concept that growth is a fundamental necessity, I will contrast the vision of a dominant culture that has largely come to deplore restriction, with the notion found in classical philosophy that limits are absolutely necessary for the promotion of human social and ecological flourishing, and the common good. I then argue that there are parallels between the classical notion of economics as derived from the practices of the home, set towards the realization of the common good and served therein by the imposition of limitations, and Leviticus' conception of the Sabbath as the foundational context within which the priests locate the life of the community.

I propose thereafter that, in the priestly tradition, Sabbath is fundamentally rooted in the theology of creation and functions as a created locus for reflection on and redoubled commitment to participation in God's ongoing work of leading the world into life. Sabbath is, I argue, the means by which time is charted and divided, the concept around which the festal calendar is ordered and shaped, and the principle by which all work is disciplined and oriented towards the common good. The regulations concerning the sabbath year and the year of jubilee, I then argue, demonstrate a perception of the fundamental interconnectedness of human economic relationships and the relationship between humans and the wider creation.

For the priestly writers, the principles and regulations of the Sabbath tradition stand at the very heart of the economic, political, cultic, social and



agricultural life of the community of Israel. The nature of the relationships that they trace out, and the vision of reality to which the many provisions, restrictions and endorsements gesture, provide rich and fruitful grounds for contemporary eco-theological reflection.

## Household or Boundless World?

As any reader of classical or New Testament Greek will know, the English word *economics* has its roots in *oikonomia*, literally ‘the law of the house’, but connoting, more broadly, something like ‘household management’. While this ancient notion of the prudential oversight of the various resources of the domestic realm is reflected in the common description of the thrifty use of a thing as ‘economical’, it has fallen away from the wider sense of the term as modern economics has become sharply focused on financial transaction, and the promotion thereof.

In his classic distinction, Aristotle contrasts *oikonomia*, which he understands as directed towards the basic needs of both the household (*oikos*) and the wider community (*koinonia*), with systems of trade focused on the accumulation of money (*kapeliké* and *chrēmatistikē*) which he sees as ‘unnatural’ – tending away from the conditions necessary for the good life, and thus a danger to both the house and the community.<sup>3</sup>

One particular aspect of his dislike of the theory and practice of ‘money making’ is its apparent lack of concern for limits.

Of the art of acquisition there is one kind which is natural and is a part of the management of a household. Either we must suppose the necessities of life to exist

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the distinction between *oikonomia* and *chrēmatistikē*, see Daly, Herman E. and John B. Cobb, *For The Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward the Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*, 2nd Edition, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, (1994) 138-158.

previously, or the art of household management must provide a store of them for the common use of the family or state. They are the elements of true wealth; for the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited, although Solon in one of his poems says that,

‘No bound to riches has been fixed for man.’

But there is a boundary fixed, just as there is in the arts; for the instruments of any art are never unlimited, either in number or size.<sup>4</sup>

For Aristotle – and, I wish to argue, for the priestly writers – limits and boundaries are key to ‘natural’ existence. Given, of course, that it is in the nature of humans (like most other creatures) to be social, it is society that suffers from this failure to perceive the boundedness of nature. Ulrich Duchrow summarizes Aristotle’s position thus:

People who wished to live forever, with ever-increasing wealth in the form of money, have not understood what a “good life” is, i.e. a life in community (*koinonia*), and in the end destroy themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of contemporary economics, dominated as it is by the demands of finance capital, the notion that economics is and should be as constrained by what meets the wider needs of the community and thus be subject to certain limits, has become vastly relegated in the wake of a near universal concern for free markets and unhindered growth. It could be argued that in the pursuit of unlimited growth we are, as a species, destroying not just ourselves but many others also. According to today’s globally prevailing logic, economies are like bacteria that must feed and incessantly expand in order to survive. Stasis,

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, (trans. by Benjamin Jowett), New York, NY: Cosimo Books, (2008) 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Duchrow, Ulrich, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action*, (trans. Elaine Griffiths, et al.), Utrecht: International Books, (1995) 21.

let alone decline, means death. We can see this very clearly right now, living, as many of us are, under the dreaded banner of recession, which creates political panic and provokes market instability everywhere anyone dares speak its name. This insistence on infinite growth, however, is a historical and cultural anomaly that binds human societies and the natural world within a context that is thoroughly alien to the general overarching patterns of both.

There is one contradiction between the religion of the Market and the traditional religions that seems to be insurmountable. All of the traditional religions teach that human beings are finite creatures, and that there are limits to any earthly enterprise. A Japanese Zen master once said to his disciples as he was dying, "I have learned only one thing in life: how much is enough." He would find no niche in the chapel of the Market, for whom the First Commandment is "There is *never* enough." Like the proverbial shark that stops moving, The Market that stops expanding dies.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly it is of limited use to concoct too sharp a contrast between ancient and contemporary modes of economics by painting all antique practice as concerned with only the gentle, daily subsistence of the household and utterly removed from the greed and brutality of modern, cut-throat Capitalism. Aristotle recognised the approach he was critiquing from the activities of his own society; evidently credit capital was already a significant aspect of the economic affairs of his community. What is more, many ancient people and empires were clearly motivated by expansion, and there are likewise ancient examples of such desires contributing to ecological damage – one such being the various periods of significant deforestation of the hills of Lebanon, intensively logged for the purposes of military expansionism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cox, Harvey, 'The Market as God', *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 283 no. 3, (1999) 23.

<sup>7</sup> See Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 36.

However, unlike those of the past, the contemporary human community must, one way or another, face up to the reality of its ability to corrode the global ecosystem in ways and to an extent that have never previously been possible. The reality for this generation, like no other, is that the planet is beginning to creak and stretch as a result of the outworking of our ideological investment in the notion of unrestricted, unending growth.

It is perhaps possible to understand why the boundless expansion of economic activity might have seemed like a desirable goal, and one that would fairly unproblematically equate to increased wellbeing, when Adam Smith completed *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776.<sup>8</sup> The emerging Industrial Revolution promised a brave new world, and the various resources needed to fire its engines and pump its pistons must have seemed as good as boundless. Likewise, it is easy to see how, for the passionate vanguard of Industrial Capitalism, ever-increasing output fairly closely equated to the possibility of a better quality of life.<sup>9</sup>

Two-and-a-bit expansive centuries later, however, and the picture looks very different. If it was ever legitimate to assume that bigger must equal better, and that expanded production necessarily brings with it increased wellbeing, it is

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<sup>8</sup> We should note, however, that even Smith, hailed as he is as the grandfather of modern Capitalism, was far more sceptical about the notion of utterly unbridled economic activity than many contemporary commentators care to mention.

<sup>9</sup> N.B. Polanyi's famous opening to *The Great Transformation* – "At the heart of the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century there was an almost miraculous improvement in the tools of production, which was accomplished by the catastrophic dislocation of the lives of the common people." Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, (1944); reprint, (1957). However, whilst I see this overarching perspective as essential to any analysis of the period, I also think an empathy with the early-industrial mind can be a useful corrective to certain unhelpful tendencies. Those involved in ecological thinking and eco-political action often seem to express a kind of Ludditism that is inherently opposed to the idea of technological sophistication and scientific 'progress'. Let me be clear, while I am suspicious of the powerful myths of progress and technology, I do not harbour inherent suspicions regarding technological innovation. Advances in technology have brought wonderful things to many people, and I do not just refer to pious examples in areas like healthcare. The computer on which I am currently working is an amazing thing, as are many of the consumer luxuries that the richest of the world's people enjoy. Whilst there are many things produced that are intrinsically worthless, there are as many if not more things that are brilliant and beautiful. The existence of such things is not intrinsically sinful, but it does give rise to questions of privilege, inequality, maximalization and sustainability.

certainly highly dubious to do so today. By means of the emasculation of organized labour in the West in the 1970s and 80s, industrial capital – within which growth was largely bound up with production and tangible materials – has given way to finance capital, and the primary mechanisms behind the global economic expansion have become credit and debt.

As David Harvey argues, the defeat of the unions and the globalisation of the labour market, as realized by the regimes of Thatcher, Reagan and those who looked to their leadership, allowed the world's largest economies to implement successive policies of wage repression and the international outsourcing of labour. Despite astronomic increases in the amount of available wealth, since the 1970s the income of the average household in the United States has remained more or less stagnant.<sup>10</sup> This squeezing of the wage share, which has been mirrored throughout the members of the OECD<sup>11</sup> and even in China and elsewhere, created the problem of a lack of demand, a problem that was in turn 'solved' by the increased availability of large amounts of credit. While in one sense this transition from industrial capital to finance capital might seem theoretically to be a positive one in ecological terms – a diminishment in the centrality of the direct exploitation of natural resources and a diversification of global economic interests away from labour – it has in fact had the opposite effect.

For the early proponents of industrial capitalism, the potential for growth might have seemed theoretically boundless, but it was however clearly limited by its dependence on the availability of labour and the materials necessary to fuel production. Clearly drawing on Aristotle, Marx perceived and critiqued the inherent ambivalence within Capitalism towards these 'natural limits' and diagnosed this trait as an aspect of its unswerving tendencies towards the

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey, David, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile Books, (2010) 12ff.

<sup>11</sup> The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

creation of alienation and the destruction of the social. Speaking of the very concept of capital, Marx notes in the *Grundrisse* that “every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence exploration of all nature in order to discover new, useful qualities in things; universal exchange of the products of all alien climates and lands; new (artificial) preparation of natural objects, by which they are given new use values. The exploration of the earth in all directions, to discover new things of use as well as new useful qualities of the old; such as new qualities of them as raw materials etc.; the development, hence, of the natural sciences to their highest point; likewise the discovery, creation and satisfaction of new needs arising from society itself; the cultivation of all the qualities of the social human being, production of the same in a form as rich as possible in needs ... is likewise a condition of production founded on capital ... For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, entrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive to toward all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces.<sup>13</sup>

However, while this tendency towards the circumvention of natural limits might have troubled a radical prophet like Marx, for the most part, there was little reason for the leading conservative and liberal minds of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: foundations of the critique of political economy* (rough draft), (trans. Martin Nicolaus), London: Penguin, (1993) 408.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 409-410.

centuries to think of this tendency as ultimately problematic, given that the ultimate limits of nature seemed to be well outside the purview of human activity.

With the advent of 'late' (or finance) capitalism, however, the implicit, pragmatic notion that the ultimate physical boundaries that might limit growth are sufficiently far off to render them more or less insignificant, has given way to a conceptual framework in which the key economic forces are largely envisaged as unyoked from any of the constraints of material existence – what matters are numbers, and they are not matter.

As the ultimate limits of the material world have begun to creep into view, the emphasis within the governing economic systems has moved further away from a direct relation to the material order and towards immaterial finance as the key economic product and driver. And yet, while it might no longer lie at the heart of the prevailing economic philosophy, tangible production remains a key element of economic growth. There is, therefore, a huge tension at the heart of contemporary economic analysis. Within the context of microeconomics it is still absolutely necessary to think in terms of the limits of an enterprise in order to define what is known as 'optimal scale' – activities should be up-scaled only to the point where increasing marginal cost is equal to declining marginal benefit. However, it seems that in the macroeconomic realm there is no longer any perceived need to think of any activity as being subject to the limitations of optimal scale.<sup>14</sup> In the wider context, the potential for and necessity of growth is infinite.

Within the context of this logic, finance, we have discovered, is excellent at creating the conditions for the accumulation of vast amounts of profit, and (when coupled with a philosophy of ever-widening deregulation, i.e. the circumvention of limits) more than ample opportunities for its re-investment.

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<sup>14</sup> See Daly and Cobb, *For The Common Good*, 144-146.

Given the imperatives of competition and growth – as realised in the re-capitalisation of profit with the goal of further expansion – and the desires of the wealthy to spend a significant proportion of their surplus (and the less wealthy to spend a far larger proportion of their credit) on goods and services, production must increase. In other words, output, and thus the problem associated with it, has increased in addition to further alienation from both the means of production and from the natural restrictions, limitations and idiosyncrasies involved in the procurement of and operation on the *subjects of labour* (i.e. raw materials).

Regardless of attempts to escape ‘natural limits’, our economic systems are, nevertheless, subject to them. As Marx also perceived, “from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it.”<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis original). The question, therefore, is not whether we can escape limits, but whether we can escape the obsession with growth.

Towards the end of 2009, Gordon Brown cheerfully suggested that, despite the downturn, we could expect a further doubling of the world economy over the next two decades. Similarly, earlier this year, President Obama spoke of a return to ‘normal’ growth rates of 3% p.a. by 2011. Harvey comments,

If so, there will be over \$100 trillion in the global economy by 2030. Profitable outlets would then have to be found for an extra \$3 trillion investment. That is a very tall order. Think of it this way. When capitalism was made up of activity within a fifty-mile radius around Manchester and Birmingham in England and a few other hotspots in 1750, then seemingly endless capital accumulation at a compound rate of 3 per cent posed no big problem. But right now think of endless compound growth in relation not only to everything that is going on in North America, Oceania and Europe, but also east and south-east Asia as well as much of India and the Middle East, Latin

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 410.



America and significant areas of Africa. The task of keeping capitalism going at this compound rate is nothing if not daunting.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas they must once have seemed insignificantly remote, the limits of the earth's resources are coming ever more clearly into view; and, indeed, in various respects, we are pushing up against the boundaries of its ability to sustain a global economic culture based on incessant growth. Unlike Koch's snowflake, economic activity cannot expand infinitely within a finite space. The obvious reality is that, at some point, we will have to part ways with the doctrine of incessant expansion; or it is the impacts of growth, and not recession, that will threaten the viability of our existence.

Indivisibly wrapped up with the ecological destruction that we see around the world, is the question of wealth distribution. As Richard Lowery asserts,

Unrestrained consumption at the top of the economy turns vast resources of natural resources into unusable and irretrievable thermal energy, while producing more garbage and other pollution than the natural environment can process in the foreseeable future. On the underside of the world's economy, international debt wreaks havoc with the social and natural environment. Rural poverty prompts mass migrations into sprawling cities that are not socially and ecologically viable...The poor cut down trees for fuel, shelter, and space to grow crops just ahead of the desert that creeps closer with every felled tree. While wealth, education, and good health care yield low or no population growth in rich nations, population explodes among the industrializing world's poor, to the severe detriment of the natural environment...Maldistribution of the planet's wealth, especially the crushing burden of international debt, is leading to environmental disaster. Gentler, more ecologically

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<sup>16</sup> Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 27-28.

sound lifestyles must include a better distribution of wealth and debt relief for poor countries.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, everywhere except within the realm of ‘pure economics’ – a term that makes devastatingly clear just how far removed the dominant contemporary conception is from Aristotle’s – the profoundly negative impacts of our seeming inability to settle for anything other than continual expansion are already straightforwardly recognizable and troublingly widespread. Fortunately for those of us who live in the world’s wealthiest and most ‘developed’ societies, we benefit from an inbuilt mechanism which ensures that the majority of the negative effects of our unabated insistence that limited resources can and must give rise to unlimited bounty, end up being squeezed out on the societies of the so called ‘developing world’ (terminology that itself bears witness to the perceived imperative of economic expansion).

The world’s poorest people have for some time borne, and will always bear, the brunt of the impact of air and water pollution, deforestation, waste accumulation, depletion of soil quality, desertification and increasing erosion, rising sea levels, food and water stress, and violent conflicts over controlled access to oil and minerals, which are all caused by or exacerbated by the unhindered drive for growth. Whilst all of these problems continue to bring the negative effects of the doctrine of unceasing expansion into ever-clearer perspective, it could be argued that global warming and peak oil have become chief among the ecological concerns of the leaders of the world’s largest economies primarily because their effects are more difficult to predict and less localised in scope. In other words, it seems that the chickens of the Western ideology of more, better, further, richer are now *also* coming home to roost.

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<sup>17</sup> Lowery, Richard H., *Sabbath and Jubilee*, St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, (2000) 2-3.

We must not, however, reflect only on the ecological ends of the doctrine of incessant expansion – the effects that many economists have tended to dismiss as ‘externalities’ – but also on the theological and anthropological implications of its conceptual dominance.<sup>18</sup> As those who exist beneath the mandate of constant growth, we all have a growth related economic function to perform. In the North and West, ours is rarely to labour incessantly (at least not manually) – that duty generally falls to our poorer neighbours in the South and East, who must work harder, longer and for less than anyone else in order to stay employed. Rather, by contrast, at the core of the wealthy Western duty is the imperative incessantly to consume.

Of course, playing the role of unceasing consumers requires us to sacrifice the possibility for contentment. In order for the economy to grow continually, our appetite for consumption must be as insatiable as production is unceasing. In order for us to play this role well, our desires must never be fully satisfied by what we already have or by things that are not bought and sold. As a result, we must work more or borrow more and more (which is also a kind of economic work) in order that we might consume more.

In order to consume, of course, we must have the requisite means. In addition to driving debt to unprecedented levels, in combination with various technologies, these economic designs have dissolved the boundaries between time for work and time for rest. The limits of what counts for a day’s or week’s work are being stretched to breaking point by the imperatives of economic growth. It is near-universally possible, and indeed laudable, for those who wish to, to exchange a proportion of what might have been rest time, for additional work time. Indeed, some decide to offset their rest to a different stage of life altogether, choosing to work almost continually when they are young, in order

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the anthropological implications of the contemporary model, see Daly and Cobb, *For The Common Good*, 85-96, 159-175.

that they might be able to live 'well' later. Others are happy to spend vast sums of borrowed money now, often with little regard for how the debt will be repaid in the future. It cannot be a coincidence, I feel, that the closer one gets to the economic centres of the 'developed' world, the more prevalent this kind of behaviour becomes. It is also not hard to recognise that both of these traits have an ecological correlate.

This strange system is the result of the paradox recognised by John Maynard Keynes that, *in extremis*, producers of goods and services within a capitalist system need to pay their workers less and less while hoping that their competitors do the opposite, in order that there is sufficient excess floating around to create demand for what is produced. The fact that this situation would never sustainably arise in the real world has meant that the only way employees can be paid less – and yet have enough money to support more production – is through the creation of a credit culture and the simultaneous dissolution of the limits surrounding economic productivity. In short, if we cannot earn more for the work we do, and yet must buy more (in order to sustain and promote growth), then we must either work more for the same money,<sup>19</sup> or borrow the money we cannot earn, or (commonly) both.

Interestingly, given the extent of the implications of this role that we are bidden to carry out, it is surprisingly rarely that any of us stops to inquire as to exactly why it is such an imperative that, year on year, quarter on quarter, economies should grow. Or why a shrinking economy is such a terrible fate.<sup>20</sup> Even in a society reeling from the effects of an international economic crisis, few voices can be heard to ask publicly whether the set of assumptions that modern

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<sup>19</sup> Or, in a twist of the same logic, we must work more 'efficiently' – which, in cases where technology cannot take up the excess weight, often boils down to more work for fewer people.

<sup>20</sup> For a disturbing, but informative analysis of the inevitability of an economics of recession, see Heilbroner, Robert, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect: Updated and Reconsidered for the 1980s*, New York, NY: Norton, (1980); cf. Daly and Cobb, *For The Common Good*.

economics has made gospel – and the realities with regard to work, consumption and satisfaction which they have made a reality – really has much good news to offer, even to those of us who enjoy the vast majority of the spoils. These are all thoroughly theological as well as ecological and anthropological concerns.

I have taken time and care to set out an interpretation of the dominant current economic ideology in order that I might construct a fruitful context for engaging the products of an imaginative engagement with Leviticus' conception of the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions. As I have attempted to demonstrate methodologically, engagement with such ideologies should not be simply on the basis of the functioning of various types of economic activity, but also in terms of the anthropological (and thus also cosmological) concepts that underpin the theories and practices by which such activities are governed.

The contemporary context can, I have argued, be instructively critiqued in the light of the concern for 'natural limits' set out by Aristotle and taken up by (among others) Marx. According to this interpretation, both ecological and anthropological limits have been transformed, by capital, into barriers which must be circumvented. The conclusion of this analysis is that, as Marx suggested, Capitalism has eroded the grounds for the recognition of what he interestingly chose to refer to as 'sacred limits'.<sup>21</sup> In a sense, the central proposal of this chapter is that, in attending to the priestly conception of the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions as they are represented in Leviticus, we are likewise concerned with the importance of sacred limits.

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<sup>21</sup> See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 542.

## Sabbath, Creation & Boundary

In stark contrast to the image of a culture fast bound to the notion that limits are an affront to freedom and economic output must continually increase, in the late chapters of Leviticus we encounter the vision of a society defined by the regard for certain regulatory boundaries and whose economic activity is regularly punctuated by pauses; by deliberate cessations of normal economic activity. These pauses come in the form of holy days, ritual feasts and, of course, Sabbaths.

The term *šabbāt*, ‘Sabbath’, derives from the root *šbt*, and while the exact nature of the etymology of the term remains unclear, its basic meaning relates to ‘cessation’ or ‘completion’, and, by extension, ‘rest’.<sup>22</sup> The recognition of a foundation in the idea of cessation, serves to frame the general understanding of ‘Sabbath rest’ within the context of an interruption, a punctuating pause, which disrupts the flow of work-time and opens up space for a different dynamic.<sup>23</sup> It is a space not just for ‘not working’, but also for being regularly attuned to that which makes the people of YHWH the people of YHWH. In this sense, Sabbath is not just about rest as defined by abstinence from work, but also about ritual, remembrance and reorientation.

Not only is the Sabbath instantiated in the Decalogue (Exod. 20.8-11) and therein explicitly grounded in the priestly creation account, but it is also invoked widely across the entire Hebrew canon. It is upheld as a day on which everyone, all labourers, slaves and even labouring animals, ceases working (cf. Exod. 23.12).

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<sup>22</sup> HALOT, vol. 4, 1407-1412; Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1959; Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 87; Guillaume, P, *Land and Calendar: The Priestly Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18*, London / New York: T&T Clark, (2009) 40.

<sup>23</sup> This is not, however, to suggest that the Sabbath rest is primarily to be conceived as passive, and to be interpreted primarily in terms simply of an absence of the work that it regulates. By contrast, upon returning to this point in greater detail below, I will argue that, in the priestly conception, Sabbath rest is best understood as a profoundly active form of ritual participation in the divine rest which creates space for reflection, instruction and the refocusing of attention.

As such, to say that the Sabbath is a significant concept within the traditions of the Hebrew scriptures, or that it would have had a significant impact on the organisation of any society within which it was enacted, are both huge understatements. In an ancient context, the notion of designating one day in seven as a day of complete rest would have carried massive political, social and religious weight. In discussing what the Sabbath day might have looked like from the perspective of outsiders to the community of Israel, Milgrom suggests that:

It occasions no surprise to learn that in the Babylonian Exile it was the Sabbath that attracted non-Israelites to cast their lot with the returning exiles (Isa 56:2-6) and that by the end of the Second Temple period many Hellenistic communities had adopted the Sabbath as a day of rest.<sup>24</sup>

It certainly seems that for the authors of Leviticus, who most likely wrote into an exilic or early post-exilic context, the Sabbath tradition is profound enough and sufficiently securely founded in the social imagination of the community for it to function as the core structural concept underpinning the priestly conception of the festal calendar. Chapter 23 begins as follows:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: These are the appointed festivals of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals. Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work: it is a Sabbath to the LORD throughout your settlements. (Lev. 23.1-3)

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<sup>24</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1962. Although I think Milgrom's point is valid, I am not entirely convinced by his appeal to Isa. 56, which I would argue is a far more complex text – concerned with tensions between the group that has left and the community that remains in the land – than this fleeting appeal might suggest.

Following on from this statement, the chapter sets out the calendar of annual festivals, grouped around key Sabbath days, emphatically marked by the cessation of labour. Six times the passage instructs the people that they should do “no work at your occupations”; twice it commands “complete rest”; and, with regard to the holiest day of the year, *yōm hakkippurīm*, it straightforwardly repeats verse 3’s insistence on there being “no work”.

It is essential to observe the way in which, as soon as the notion of the “appointed festivals of the LORD” (*mōv ‘adēy yhw̄h*) is introduced, it is interpreted by virtue of a reference to the seventh day as a Sabbath. Not only does the invocation of the pattern of seven days (six and one) recall the structure of the priestly creation myth, but, as Gorman implies, there is a further link between the mention of *mōv ‘adēy* in Leviticus 23.2 and the creation of the luminaries as markers of the events of the ritual calendar (*mōv ‘adīm*).<sup>25</sup> Just as the heavenly lights divide time and provide a temporal context for the priestly story of origins, so here the Sabbath – the result of the final act of creation in the narrative – is to be the instrument by which time (and hence the cultic year) is measured, divided and therefore ordered.<sup>26</sup> Given these profound links, in order to attempt to grasp a fuller sense of the hefty notion of the Sabbath day, it is necessary to place consideration of Lev. 23 temporarily on hold and to begin elsewhere.

As with several other of the key concepts with which we have dealt, both in terms of the final form of the Hebrew canon, and more specifically its priestly literature, it is clear that the key ideological function of the Sabbath day is expressed in the priestly creation account of Genesis 1.1-2.4a. Jon D. Levenson summarises the profundity of the functioning of the notion of Sabbath within the priestly creation myth and wider creation theology thus:

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<sup>25</sup> Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Blenkinsopp, ‘Creation, the Body, and Care...’, 41.



Both overtly and covertly, the text of Genesis 1:1–2:3 points to the seventh day as the meaning of creation. The priestly theology of creation is inextricably associated with the observance of the Sabbath. And inasmuch as it is the P creation story which now serves as the overture to the entire Bible, dramatically relativizing the other cosmogonies, it is fair to say that the text of the Hebrew Bible in the last analysis forbids us to speak of the theology of creation without sustained attention to the sabbatical institution.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, affording no *absolute* preference in my reading for either source/historical-critical features or narrative/canonical features, it follows from this that I am interested not only in how the concept of Sabbath is key to the priestly myth of origins and the wider priestly theology of creation, but also in how the same is true in reverse.<sup>28</sup> In order to understand the priestly conception of the Sabbath and Jubilee traditions, we must (once again) refer to the central tenets of the priestly understanding of creation, and specifically the details thereof as expressed in the priestly myth of origins.

In the priestly myth, following the description of six days of divine creative labour, we find the narratological origins of the Sabbath as a day of complete rest from work, in the assertion that “on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” (Gen. 2.2). The priestly creation myth is woven carefully around a seven-day structure<sup>29</sup> and reaches its rhetorical peak with this declaration concerning the divine rest on the seventh day.

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<sup>27</sup> Levenson, Jon D., *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, (1988) 100.

<sup>28</sup> I mean here to make explicit my commitment to the preferencing of interpretive strategies that engage divergence and tension without deference to chronology or ‘development’, over propositions relating to source-critical causation.

<sup>29</sup> As well as various other uses of a heptadic structure, see Cassuto, Umberto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part I, From Adam to Noah: Genesis I – VI.8*, (trans. Israel Abrahams), Jerusalem: Magnes Press, (1961) 1.13-14. N.B. Levenson: “Although the heptadic structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is not limited to the seven days of creation, the latter seems to be its source.” Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 100.

As described in chapter 1, the key idea underpinning the priestly understanding of the activity of divine creation is the idea of the separation of one thing from another (*hibdil*), and thereby the institution of boundaries. This dual motif, of creation and division,<sup>30</sup> is the chief vehicle by which the priestly writers describe the ordering of the chaotic pre-existent matter. Therefore, whilst within the narrative scheme the separation off of a day after the conclusion of the work of making the 'heavens and the earth' and everything in them (Gen. 2.1) represents something of a discontinuity from what has preceded, it is crucial to recognise that, in the context of creation as separation, the division and establishment of a boundary around the seventh day in fact functions as the crowning aspect of the divine creative work.<sup>31</sup>

The Sabbath is established as the day blessed by Elohim, the day in which he rests from his labours. It is possible that we encounter here something of a reflection of a common trope of Ancient Near Eastern mythology of gods tiring of work and requiring rest (e.g. see Exod. 31.17). However, if that notion does lie in the background of this instance, it has been significantly remoulded for a new purpose. Often in uses of this trope, the gods in question are tired out from their general responsibilities, or their service to higher deities, and are compelled by their weariness to create human life to bear the burden of their exhausting labours. While several examples can be found, this aspect of the trope is clearly expressed in the Babylonian creation cycle *Enuma Elish*, wherein humanity is formed from the blood of the vanquished god Kingu in order to bear the burden of divine labour.

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<sup>30</sup> Contra to the recent proposition by van Wolde, I perceive the priestly conceptions of creation and separation to be related, but distinct – see chapter 1 (note 23).

<sup>31</sup> See Guillaume, *Land And Calendar*, 40ff. N.B. Moltmann, Jürgen, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London: SCM, (1985) 188.

When Marduk heard the speech of the gods,  
He made up his mind to perform miracles.  
He spoke his utterance to Ea,  
And communicated to him the plan that he was  
    considering.  
    ‘Let me out blood together, and make bones too.  
Let me set up primeval man: man shall be his  
    name.  
Let me create a primeval man.  
The work of the gods shall be imposed (on him)  
    and so they shall be at leisure.<sup>32</sup>

The priestly vision in Genesis, by contrast, is not of a god who creates humanity due to weariness and in order to establish a slave workforce to toil in a world necessarily requiring it, but of a god who creates humanity as part of a bountiful world and who blesses and establishes a day of rest at the end of his labours in order that humans, in emulation of the divine, might also rest from theirs. This is not divine rest at the expense of human rest, but the institution of a day for humans to partake ritualistically in the larger divine rest.

The Sabbath is not simply the end of the week, but also its beginning – its regeneration. The language of Gen. 2. 2-3 makes clear that the divine rest is not *the end* of divine activity, but is rather, merely, *at the end* of this particular aspect of the creative work. As Guillaume has it, “Elohim created in order to continue to make”.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in the sense that it is envisaged in regenerative terms, the Sabbath is itself a site of ongoing creation in which human beings are called to participate. What is more, this sense of the Sabbath as something other than merely the end of the account of divine making in the priestly myth, comes into

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<sup>32</sup> Dalley, Stephanie (ed.) *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, (trans. Stephanie Dalley), Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2000) 260-261.

<sup>33</sup> Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 45.

sharper focus if we distance ourselves from the traditional, but questionable, interpretation of the *b're'shit* of Gen. 1.1 as invocative of a definitive, ontological 'beginning'.<sup>34</sup>

Although the injunction for humans to follow God's lead and likewise partake in rest on the seventh day is not explicit in the priestly creation myth, it is, of course, heavily implied. Humans are created as the last living beings, and are blessed. However, not only is the Sabbath blessed, it is also sanctified (2.3) – the only of the creatures to be proclaimed holy. The implication of the divine creation, blessing and sanctification of, and rest upon, the seventh day, is that the cessation of work is fundamental to the rhythms that characterise and shape all life. Despite being appointed as rulers over all living creatures, humans are thus demonstrated as being subject to the regulation and limitations of time and space. It is the Sabbath, and not the creation of humans, that is the pinnacle of the priestly creation narrative, and therefore it is rightly the context for ongoing reflection thereon.

Certainly the commandment concerning the Sabbath in Exodus chapter 20 makes it clear that partaking in the rest of the Sabbath is an aspect of the human responsibility to partake in the ongoing work of the divine creation. After completing the making of the world in six days and resting on the seventh, God *consecrated* the Sabbath day and *made* it holy (Exod. 20.11).<sup>35</sup> This notion clearly serves as the context for the instruction to the people to *keep* the Sabbath holy (v. 8). What God has *made* holy, humanity must *keep* holy – a sentiment which

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<sup>34</sup> See Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 33-35, 39; Williamson, Hugh, 'Once Upon a Time ...?', in Rezetko, Robert, Timothy Lim and Brian Aucker, (eds.) *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 113, Leiden: Brill, (2007) 517-528. For support for the traditional interpretation (on theological grounds), see Rad, Gerhard von, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (trans. John H. Marks), London: SCM, (1972) 48; Eichrodt, Walther, 'In The Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible', in Anderson, Bernhard W. (ed.), *Creation In The Old Testament*, *Issues In Religion and Theology* 6, London: SPCK, (1984) 65-73.

<sup>35</sup> Although the Decalogue is not traditionally held to be Priestly in origin, this material clearly parallels various of the theological concerns of the priestly writers. See e.g. Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 194 note 3.

chimes with the priestly conception of ritual work. It could be argued that we encounter here the notion that a crucial aspect of the human vocation consists in the perpetuation of the divine sanctification of the Sabbath, directed as it is toward the flourishing of the created order. For Balentine the very ordering of the commandments expresses the role of the Sabbath as a mediatory space between devotion to God and right-communion with others.

The ordering of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:1-17; cf. Deut. 5:6-21) positions the command to observe the Sabbath day (Commandment Four) between the mandate to love God with unqualified religious devotion (Commandments One through Three) and the mandate to live ethically in community with others in ways that reflect one's love for God (Commandment Five through Ten). This structure for the commandments suggests that keeping the Sabbath day holy is the primary ritual by which Israel calibrates its obedience to God's ultimate design for its life. To profess love for God without the corresponding deeds that manifest this love to others will not constitute the obedience God requires; neither will it sustain the "very good" world God has created.<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting to note that, while Sabbath is defined by abstention from labour, it is the only one of the listed elements of the creation in the priestly myth that comes about as a result of what might be described as a 'physical' activity on behalf of Elohim. The other elements of creation are called into existence by the divine voice (Gen. 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26) – the same 'voice' that instructs Israel through the law. But the day of rest is not spoken into existence; rather, it is created by being enacted. Curiously, then, Sabbath represents not passive inactivity, but rest that is both active and creative.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> As Lowery notes, it is demonstrative of this notion that in Gen. 2.2b – "and he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done" – that the active verb relates to rest, while 'work' is present only as a noun. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 88.

Reflecting on the origins of the Sabbath tradition in Leviticus, Balentine perceptively discerns two interrelated aspects of the grounding of Sabbath observance in the priestly theology of creation.

First, the command to keep the Sabbath day holy, that is, to sanctify the day by setting it apart from the other six days, engages the people in an act of imaging God ... While God bestows upon the day its foundational quality of holiness, Israel is summoned to complementary acts of sanctification that sustain God's primordial work. The explicit rationale for doing so is that Israel's *work* and *rest* should image God's work and rest in creating and sustaining a world that always yearns to realize its capacity to be "very good" ... Second, observing the Sabbath prepares Israel for a working-resting-working rhythm that sustains and extends what God "finished" at creation with ongoing acts of creaturely creativity. While the rest envisioned is total and involves a complete cessation of work, it is also a rest in the anticipation of the return to work. In other words, the Sabbath is an uncoupling from work that enables and energizes the resumption of work, now freshly charged with the memory of ultimate objectives: to uphold and nurture the very good world God has entrusted to the human community.<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis original)

The Sabbath is, therefore, not simply a day off, but a theologically rich concept which draws together the key priestly themes of the creation of order through separation, delineation and the establishment of boundaries, an insistence on the inherent (very) goodness of the created world, and the human responsibility to act in the world in accordance with the pattern envisaged in the creative activity of God. Sabbath is the crown of creation, in the sense that it is instantiated through divine creative action as a day of rest that orders and contextualises the rest of the work of creation. As the end of the week, but also the site of the week's regeneration, the Sabbath structures all of existence by

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<sup>38</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 174-175.

functioning as the key boundary marker of time. The sun and the moon bring a shape to each day, but the Sabbath brings a shape to the week and (as we explore below) beyond that to the whole of the year.

The vision in Genesis 2.1-3 is not of Sabbath rest as simply a passive withdrawal from activity, but as the act that completes the divine creative work. The vision of the observance of the Sabbath day of rest in Leviticus, therefore, is set in the context of the notion of an idealised created order which stands as plentiful and sustaining (*tōbh*). As the last section of the priestly creation myth describes it, the primeval chaos has been tamed by acts of divine separation, and in the ultimate separating act, a space has been divided off within which it is possible to stop, rest and reflect. This is a creation turned towards abundance, and, as such, the sanctification of the Sabbath echoes and perfects the blessing of the birds, fish and humans, and underscores the divine desire for creation's flourishing.

The Sabbath day frames and shapes the festal year, therefore, because it is grounded in an affirmation of the divine creation of a fundamentally good world in which flourishing is best served by the setting aside of time for the community to corporately rest from work and thereby partake in the rest of God. It contextualises the sacral calendar by virtue of being a regular instantiation of the general concept shared by the more elaborate holy festivals: that time for work must at certain, special times give way to time for celebration, worship and remembrance.

In broader terms, it is possible to interpret the priestly insistence on the regular observance of the Sabbath in three ways: as a day of rest around which the weekly and annual timetables are constructed; as an instantiation of the imperative never to forget both the fundamental goodness of the creation and the ongoing divine work of ordering and sustaining life; and as an assertion that the human vocation is a reflection and outworking of the divine labours. The

Sabbath is, in this sense, a day to perceive and proclaim that the world is 'very good', regardless of how bleak the current horizons might be.

Somewhat in tension with this, however (in classic priestly style), the idea that, in coming close to the holy through ritual observance, a person enters a risky, liminal space, is also likely reflected in the notion of the Sabbath day. As a ritual marker which represents in some sense the completion, site of regeneration, and key interpretive context of creation (envisaged as the ongoing unfolding of divine order directed toward universal flourishing), the Sabbath day stands at once as an end, a beginning and a space of mediation – an 'in between'. Furthermore, it is a holy space and is therefore a space in which a special kind of encounter with the divine becomes possible – analogous, to some extent, with the innermost areas of the sanctuary. Within the priestly worldview, such spaces are always shrouded with dangerous possibility.

Further support for the notion of there potentially being an underlying context of jeopardy with regard to Sabbath observance is perhaps to be found in a possible but murky relationship between Sabbath and the new moon. While the precise nature of the relationship between the origins of the Sabbath as a cultic festival and the new moon festivals common to several cultures of the Ancient Near East, the sabbatical and lunar calendars<sup>39</sup> and the nature of the transition from one to the other, is unclear, references to Sabbaths alongside new moons are found in various places in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>40</sup> As Grabbe points out, if there ever was any significant connection between the two, in Leviticus it has been well hidden.<sup>41</sup> However, the notion of a possible ancient link remains, and is especially intriguing given that, across the Ancient Near East, the period of the

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<sup>39</sup> N.B. Gerstenberger's claim that it is only by means of the use of a lunar calendar consisting of 28-day months that the specific festival days set out in Leviticus 19 could be guaranteed to fall on a Sabbath: Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 341.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. 2 Kings 4.23; Is. 1.13; 66.23; Ezek. 46.1; Amos 8.5; Hos. 2.11. (note also Judith 8.6)

<sup>41</sup> Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 86.



new moon was considered to be a dangerous, disrupted time, envisaged as a death followed by a renewal.<sup>42</sup>

An equally interesting possibility is raised by Destro, who notes the mirrored relationship in Leviticus between impurity, which punctuates and disrupts the normal, and the periods of restorative time imposed by the priests as a key aspect of the restoration of impure people to full communal life.<sup>43</sup> It could be argued that, in some sense, the Sabbath synthesises these two qualities of disruption and restoration with regard to time.

This supports the assessment of the priestly conception of Sabbath observance as a solemn and serious cultic duty that celebrates the completion of the ordering of creation and its 'very good'-ness, and disrupts any firm ideological links between the creation of the fundamental conditions for agricultural, economic and social fruitfulness and human labour.

The ancients knew well that the natural rhythms of production point to a cessation of growth as the basis for regeneration – one crop dies and in so doing yields seeds that sprout and give rise to the next. Tending crops can add to the fruitfulness of the harvest, but regardless of how committed the farmer is, it is not possible for regeneration to happen without the death of what has preceded. The careful management of seed involves close attention to the way in which a new crop issues from the fragile, liminal space that exists after the withering of the last.

Leviticus may well have been produced by an elite, scholarly community to some extent alienated from the agricultural means of production. Nonetheless, it seems to me that its writers saw clear parallels with, and drew upon, agricultural wisdom when they taught that the re-establishment of a culture in the wake of social, economic, political and spiritual disaster would be well served

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<sup>42</sup> N.B. a possible link to a sense of *šbt* related to the concept of death/annihilation as an ultimate form of cessation, see HALOT, vol. 4, 1407; BDB, 992.

<sup>43</sup> Destro, 'The Witness of Times', 126-127.

by the institution of a regular, sanctified time dedicated to the cessation of work, and to active, celebratory resting, grounded in a theology of creation that emphasised the inherent goodness of the world.

## **Sabbath as Pattern**

As we have noted, the Sabbath was not just a period of time, but also in some sense the key marker of time. The priestly creation myth envisages the two great lights marking the passing of a day, but it is with the Sabbath that the more important responsibility for dividing off weeks resides, and in Lev. 25, this property of Sabbath as a divider is used to delineate and shape the annual festal calendar. Of course, being the work of the priestly writers, this conception of Sabbath as a marker of time does not invoke a notion of time understood in purely pragmatic or philosophical terms, but rather one that is thoroughly ritualistic.<sup>44</sup> The instruction regarding the Sabbath day in the Decalogue (Exod. 20.8) demands not only that the people “remember the Sabbath day”, but also that they “keep it holy”. This mandate to preserve the sanctity of the Sabbath speaks not only to ideological connections with the priestly work within the sacrificial system and the ritual maintenance and restoration of the sanctity of the sanctuary, but also to the use of the Sabbath (and the holy festivals that it structures) for cultic practice.<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that when, in Leviticus chapter 19 the commandment regarding the keeping of the Sabbath is twice invoked, it is explicitly linked first with the commandment to honour one’s father and mother (Lev. 19.3), and then with the instruction “reverence my sanctuary”

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<sup>44</sup> Guillaume helpfully (if briefly) addresses the distinction between (modern, protestant) emphasis on time as History (see chapter 1) and this priestly notion of time as ritual rhythm. Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> Note also Joseph Blenkinsopp’s excellent argument regarding the connection in the Priestly material between the creation of the world and the construction of the tabernacle: Blenkinsopp, ‘The Structure of P’, 276-278.

(Lev. 19.30). Both of these imperatives are grounded in the same theological reasoning: "I am YHWH". It is clear that within the priestly conception the Sabbath mediates between creation, covenant and cult.

This mediatory role can be seen as expressed in the function of the Sabbath within the priestly myth of origins. If the narrative were to follow the general pattern of Ancient Near Eastern creation myths, once the creation of humanity has occurred, we would expect to see a description of the building of a palace / temple by the newly created humans, both in praise of the creator god and to function as her / his earthly dwelling. Given the emphasis that the priestly writers develop regarding the temple / tabernacle as the locus of the divine presence elsewhere, it is perhaps surprising that what we in fact find is the divine, not human, 'construction' of a dwelling, not in space (*per se*), but time. As Milgrom puts it,

[T]he God of Israel builds for himself ... a temple, not in space, but in time – the Sabbath ... Thus the act of sanctifying time by the God of time makes it his exclusive possession.<sup>46</sup>

If legitimate, this assertion regarding the divine locatedness in time as opposed to space (see chapter 1), suggests a huge tension in priestly thought. It is perhaps the case that this tension relates to the impact of the Babylonian exile. It seems clear that for an exilic or otherwise diaspora community, a more de-centralised emphasis would have been more appropriate than an unswerving insistence on a central sanctuary (even an idealised, future-located one) administered by a rigidly defined priesthood. I remain, however, extremely sceptical about the accuracy of and ideological motivations behind the drawing of a sharp distinction between time and space.

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<sup>46</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1962.

Milgrom goes further, picking up on this aspect of the priestly origins of Sabbath and describing the emphasis on the Sabbath day in Leviticus 23 as evidence of a shift towards an egalitarian context.<sup>47</sup> He says,

This chapter is addressed to the Israelites. The priests are not included, as they were in the previous pericope (22.17-33), even though they are indispensably and inextricably involved in the cultic offerings (e.g. v.11). Nonetheless, the priests' role is deliberately muffled. Center stage is occupied by the people.<sup>48</sup>

For Milgrom, of course, this change of emphasis functions as evidence of the redaction of the authors of the H source who were less exclusively focussed on purely cultic concerns, and more theologically and ethically egalitarian than the earlier authors of P. However, I am suspicious of drawing such a sharp ideological distinction between two sections of the text, and have chosen not to rely on a source critical distinction between P and H as an explanatory mechanism for irregularity. I am therefore less inclined to see the outlining of the sacred calendar as contextualised by an emphasis on the Sabbath day as surprising, particularly in the light of the analysis of its conceptual foundations set out in this chapter. After briefly describing Milgrom's argument regarding the incongruity of the Sabbath at the outset of chapter 23, Balentine notes,

From another perspective, however, the placement of the Sabbath instructions at the beginning of the list of holy days is quite appropriate, for it effectively provides the theological model on which the rest of the calendar is built.<sup>49</sup>

Given that I have chosen not to follow Milgrom's (or any other) source critical approach, but instead choose to speak in terms of nuanced and, at times,

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<sup>47</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1961.

<sup>48</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1951; cf. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 173.

<sup>49</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 174.

competing ideological and theological emphases within a single, final-form text, the proposal of this 'shift' takes on a slightly different significance. While I concur with Balentine that it is possible to interpret this text in a way that makes good sense of its construction without having to appeal to specific arguments from redaction – and the interpretation set out in this chapter draws heavily on this logic – I am aware of and troubled by the potential theological convenience of this approach.

Diverting, briefly, from the main flow of the argument, I feel it is important to clarify my position with regard to this specific issue. One of the reasons I have steered away from a reliance on source critical analysis relates to a perception of the potential for a problematic hermeneutical schema (akin to that diagnosed and critiqued in chapter 1), whereby one source (or set thereof) becomes favoured over another (or others) to the effective exclusion of the latter from the discourse. It appears to me that it can easily become the case that the aspects of the text which appeal to the interpreter are distinguished from those which do not, and that these distinctions are then used to form the basis for an argument from source, in which either early ('traditional') material or later ('radicalizing') redaction is favoured.

However, a similar issue can, of course, arise in the context of a final-form interpretation. I have therefore chosen to pause at this point to emphasise, at the least, a conceptual desire not to simply allow a potentially more attractive, more palatable (read more familiar, modern, democratic) theological context to hijack proceedings. As Milgrom himself points out, if there is a movement to a more egalitarian emphasis, then it is certainly not to the exclusion of the central mechanisms of priestly influence, along with all the political and ideological baggage they entail.

Whether or not we perceive a shift in emphasis from priestly regulations to those focussed on the actions of the laity as representative of a significant

movement away from an ideology of centralised authority, as with many aspects of Leviticus, even a brief ideological critical interpretation of these texts leaves little room to deny that the priestly writers are continually engaged in an attempt to establish in their writings the ideological legitimacy of the structures of power and influence over which they themselves preside. Aside from this potentially distinctive ideological aspect of the centrality of the Sabbath day, it is not difficult to construe the shaping of the creation myth around a seven day structure that establishes and points towards the cosmic importance of the sabbatical calendar, festal observance and of course thereby the priesthood, the sanctuary and its cultic apparatus, as an obvious example of the wilful investment of an ideology with what Eliade has called “the prestige of origins”.<sup>50</sup>

I am committed to the position that, although ideology is unavoidably distorting, because there is no such thing as un-interpreted reality, we have no way of doing discourse that circumvents the effects of ideology. Therefore, if we are to find fruitful ways of interpreting this material, we must do so within the context of these ideological overtones. I have chosen, rather than being ultimately cynical about the priestly motives, to indulge the notion that these humans were enthralled by their own story. The extent to which any shift towards egalitarianism reflects theological revision, ideological nuance or political pragmatism, is thoroughly open for interpretation. However, I want to be explicit about a refusal to allow an ideological context extrapolated from what is a fairly subtle piece of interpretation to dominate and exclude other, better attested contexts.

After this brief, but necessary, detour into hermeneutical clarification, I wish now to return to the key concept of time. As we have seen, in addition to his broad analysis regarding the evidence of a likely exilic context in Leviticus 23

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<sup>50</sup> See Eliade, Mircea, *Myth and Reality*, (trans. William Trash), London: Allen & Unwin, (1964) 21-38.

derived from the apparent emphasis on 'lay' Sabbath practice and perhaps something of a lack of detail with regard to sacrificial activity,<sup>51</sup> Jacob Milgrom posits that the sanctification of the Sabbath as *time* (as opposed to *space*) offers additional evidence of a drift towards a more egalitarian position.

While I am critically aware of the political implications of a drive away from centralised conceptions of power, I hesitate significantly to follow this line of argumentation too closely for another key reason. I am keenly aware that within the context of the history of Old Testament study that I laid out in chapter 1, an emphasis on the dimension of *time* can easily be read and understood as an appeal to *History* in that way that I have described as so destructive of Hebrew Bible interpretation. I, like Rolf Knierim, would insist that any profound emphasis on time in this context must engage with the key distinction between historical and cultic conceptions of time. In the priestly material, alongside and in complement to a thoroughly cultic conception of space, there is a cultic conception of time. This conception, as Knierim observes, is thoroughly cyclical in nature. Speaking of the priestly understanding of creation, he asserts:

There is one basic notion that is intrinsic to the understanding of cosmic space in the Old Testament theology of creation: the notion of cyclic time. Cyclic time is that structure of reality in which the same order of the cosmos keeps recurring in a never ending pattern of successive cycles. Cosmic space not only has a beginning. It also has a time. This time is cyclic...P does not only speak of creation as the first in the sequence of historical events, an event that belonged to the past as soon as the next event happened...The Priestly writer also speaks of an event that has remained as an ever present reality throughout all of history...Therefore, creation appears for P as the unshakable realm of God's presence in the world, in contrast to the shaking course of human history.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23-27, 1951, 1953; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 348; Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 87-88; ct. Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 188.

<sup>52</sup> Knierim, 'Cosmos and History...', 80-81.

Not only, therefore, is the recognition of the distinction between historical and cyclical time crucial, it is also vital to perceive that the emphasis on creation in the priestly writings – from which the sabbath tradition springs and to which it is inextricably linked – and on cyclical, as opposed to linear, historical time – which provides the regenerative framework within the sabbath tradition – is in and of itself already a response to historical experience.

A similar point to Milgrom's is made by Jenson, who argues that the priestly writers offer an explicitly non-cultic conception of the Sabbath day, and gestures towards the possible significance of a temporal as over and against spatial context. He says,

The general and non-cultic character of holy time arises perhaps because time cannot be easily aligned with a grade in the spatial or personal dimension. Every Israelite and every place experienced the same passing of time, and a holy occasion would be holy for all, not just the priests and the sanctuary. If holiness is a mark of the presence of God, then the general character of the Sabbath indicates that God dwells in the midst of his people on this day to a special degree.<sup>53</sup>

I am intrigued by the way Jenson holds together his (admittedly hesitant) claim that there is no obvious spatial dimension to holy time, with the assertion that "God dwells in the midst of his people on this day to a special degree". The second of these two notions, it seems to me, provides at least some plausible grounds for conceiving of a strong link between holy time and holy space in a way that poses a significant question to the first. Jenson's claim that the Sabbath is explicitly non-cultic, to which I take serious exception, seems to be based on the fact that work (or rather the avoidance thereof) is "a secular rather than a

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<sup>53</sup> Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 196.



cultic criterion.”<sup>54</sup> My keen uneasiness with regard to this analysis derives mostly from the seeming employment of a somewhat narrower definition of ‘cultic’ than I would want to use in relation to priestly material, as well as an apparently sharp distinction between the ritualistic and secular realms which I am unconvinced can be maintained in relation to priestly thought.

As I have already detailed, I interpret the priestly vision of the whole of reality as being coloured with a thoroughly ritualistic hue in such a way as to make it difficult to definitively separate off an absolute category of the ‘non-cultic’. Certainly my suggestion in chapter 2 that the priestly work of cultic sanctification functions as specific, formal instantiation of the human mandate to sanctify the world, stands in opposition to a straightforward notion of work as a purely secular activity.<sup>55</sup>

It also seems to me that, in their propositions, both Jenson and Milgrom assume, to some extent, that a sharp distinction between time and space is native both to the community originally addressed by the text and to the interpretive communities for which they write. Setting aside the fact that the findings of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics make such a division difficult to justify in a contemporary context, it seems to me that a society which primarily measured time by the movement of the sun across the sky – that is to say, which primarily charted it in thoroughly spatial terms – might be similarly disinclined to see the two as absolutely distinct.<sup>56</sup>

To my mind, however, the key context for this discussion regarding the relationship between holy time and holy space are the parallels drawn between the Sabbath and the sanctuary that are explicit in the priestly texts that detail the

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<sup>54</sup> Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> I consider the use of the term ‘secular’ in this context to be both historically and theologically problematic.

<sup>56</sup> For reflections on various conceptions of time see Lynch, Kevin, *What Time Is This Place?*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, (1972); Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, (1966) 26-28; Davies, Paul C. W., *Space and time in the modern universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1977).

construction of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus. There is a clear desire in these texts to trace a connection between the people's construction of the tabernacle and the divine creation of the world, in which the Sabbath has a crucial role to play.<sup>57</sup>

The encounter in which God dictates the instructions regarding the construction work to Moses, begins on the seventh day (Exod. 24.16). Thereafter, the stipulations are described in a series of seven speeches, the last of which focuses on the centrality of the Sabbath day to Israel's relationship with YHWH.

The LORD said to Moses: You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed." (Exod. 31.12-17)

When work on the tabernacle begins, the instructions regarding the Sabbath are repeated (Exod. 35.2-3). What is more, there is a clear parallel between the expression used to express the completion of the building project, "Moses finished the work" (Exod. 40.33) and the phrase that describes the end to God's making and paves the way to the creation of Sabbath in Gen. 2.2, "God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day". To my

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<sup>57</sup> For a summary of the traditions relating the construction of the tabernacle to the creation see Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, (1913) 150.

mind, the point is unmistakable. Not only does the construction of the sanctuary parallel God's construction of the world, but the holy function of the sanctuary is analogous to the holy function of the Sabbath. Like the Sabbath, the sanctuary is both where God rests and also the locus of humanity's invitation to partake in the sanctification and restoration of the world.

In the context of these parallels and analogies, it is possible to interpret the Sabbath as a pattern, a conceptual blueprint for describing the apparent areas of contact between the ongoing work of God in creation and the mandate for humans to partake in the work of restoring and sanctifying the world. Such contact, even if only conceptualised, can only occur in a sanctified location. The sanctuary is the physical manifestation of that location, and the Sabbath is its conceptual twin. This recognition of this parallel does not function to dissolve any distinction between holy time and holy space absolutely, but simply to nuance it.

By means, perhaps, of an expression of this nuanced relationship from the perspective of Sabbath, Adriana Destro conceives of a kind of synthesis of two conceptions of time: a general principle, of 'total' time; and a more spatially related notion, derived from the action of the partition and repetition of certain types of time.<sup>58</sup>

Generally speaking, acts of conceptualizing and of structuring time presuppose cultural habits and enforce social conventions. Often cultures develop, on the one hand, a concept of total or whole time and on the other, an idea of partition and

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<sup>58</sup> For more on the conception of time in the priestly writings see Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 102-122; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 182-209; Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, 33-34, 55-58; Destro, 'The Witness of Times', 124-138, esp. 124-127; Navone, John J., 'Time in the Old Testament', *The Bible Today* 9, 423-426; Haywood, Robert, 'The Sanctification of Time in the Second Temple Period: Cases Studies in the Septuagint and Jubilees', in Barton, Stephen C., *Holiness Past and Present*, London: Continuum, (2003) 141-167; Barr, James, *Biblical Words for Time*, Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, (1962) 86-109; Wyatt, *Space and Time...*; Knierim, Rolf P., 'Cosmos and History in Israel's Theology', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 3, 59-123; Beckwith, Roger T., *Calendar, Chronology and Worship: Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, Leiden: Brill, (2005) 1-4;

repetition of temporal spaces. This is crucial here: the priestly conception of time seems to derive strictly from these two interrelating principles.<sup>59</sup>

Returning to Leviticus 23, it is perhaps possible to perceive this notion of ‘temporal spaces’ as a meaningful expression of the way in which the Sabbath functions as a pattern with regard to the festive calendar. The Sabbath is the foundation for the division of all time into sacred and profane spheres. The fact that the seventh day is holy, means that the other six are not. However, the sacred and the profane are not utterly unrelated – as with all of the divisions and distinctions that for the priestly constitute ordered, created reality, the two are in tension.

The Sabbath is the regular, weekly site of ritualised rest, but it is also the pattern according to which the great celebrations and ceremonies of the year are conducted. The holy days of the festivals, like the regular Sabbaths, punctuate profane, ordinary (working) time with pockets of holy time. Unlike the Sabbath, however, they are not uniformly regular within the year, but are grouped around specific, significant moments. They function as Sabbaths in some ways, but not in others.

This ambiguity regarding the relationship between the regular Sabbath day and the festal holy days is manifest with regard to Lev. 23 in the issue of the interpretation of the construction *šabbat šabbātōn* (which is unique to priestly writing). The use of the phrase poses a question as to whether what is being described at the head of this list of holy festivals is the regular, weekly day of rest, or a special form of it intended to mark out and emphasise the specific convocations at the centre of the various cultic celebrations. While this formulation is generally considered to function as a superlative – “a complete

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<sup>59</sup> Destro, Adriana, ‘The Witness of Times: An Anthropological Reading of *Niddah*’, in Sawyer, John, (ed.) *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 227, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, (1997) 126.

Sabbath”<sup>60</sup> – Guillaume argues that the grammatical basis for this is weak, and that it should, in fact, be read as a diminutive.<sup>61</sup>

Guillaume’s argument, part of an attempt to trace specific developments within the shape of the priestly calendar, posits that, originally, the reference to *šabbat šabbātōn* in verse 3 concerns not the general Sabbath, but a special form of it to be used within the annual celebrations, and that this and the reference to *šabbātōn* in verse 24 were simply meant to indicate that these days were less ritually significant than the Day of Purgation and the Festival of Booths. However, he continues, later additions altered the descriptions of both autumn festivals, proclaiming *yōm hakkippurīm* as marked by a *šabbat šabbātōn* (v. 32) and the Festival of Booths as framed by two days described as *šabbātōn* (v. 39).

While he describes this process as part of a shift in focus “away from the festive character towards the prohibition of work”, it is difficult to discern precisely where Guillaume thinks this analysis suggests about the motivations of the redactor, or where it leaves the reader of the final form text.

I remain largely unconvinced by Guillaume’s interpretation, mainly because I see no reason as to why a redactor would lower the intended status of the autumn festivals to be on a par with a supposed general festive day (v. 3) and the Festival of Booths (v. 24) without simply dispensing with the construction altogether. Although he does not make it explicit, it seems to me that Guillaume’s argument leaves him in the somewhat inert position of having to conclude that as the text stands, the phrase *šabbat šabbātōn* is essentially meaningless.

Alternatively, I am considerably more attracted to the traditional rendering of *šabbat šabbātōn* as an attempt to make an amplified appeal to the Sabbath day as the context within which the annual calendar is set. Not only is it clear that the primary function of the *šabbat šabbātōn* is the observance of a period

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<sup>60</sup> See e.g. Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23-27, 1959; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 340-342; Noth, Martin, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, London: SCM, (1965) 168;

<sup>61</sup> Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 88-89.

of complete rest from labour, but verse 3 contextualises the proclamation by describing it as a *šabbat* to YHWH. Whilst these are not the first references to the Sabbath in Leviticus, they are the first to be accompanied by any detailed description as to what Sabbath observance should entail. If we interpret the detail supplied as unnecessary elaboration, assuming standard Sabbath observance to be too ubiquitous a notion to require description, then, certainly, we might tend to distinguish between this and the earlier references, especially the repeated but unelaborated instruction to “keep my sabbaths” in chapter 19.<sup>62</sup> However, it could equally validly be interpreted as an attempt to emphasize the status and significance of Sabbath observance, and specifically to link it to the more elaborate ritualistic practices of the annual festivals. While I prefer this latter track, regardless of exactly its *nature*, the *context* of the connection between the regular Sabbath, the *šabbat šabbātōn*, the brief references in chapter 19 and the celebration of the festivals detailed in chapter 23, posits a continuum of holy observance which is grounded in the structure of the week and emphatically echoed in the shape of the agricultural year.

As such, I feel it suffices to say that, even if the original intention was to convey something radically different from what would have been understood by the regular *šabbat*, the nuance is now thoroughly unclear. Although I am intrigued by the detail of this unusual usage, for the most part I take my lead from several commentators in not investing significant weight in the notion that it refers, fundamentally, to something discernibly distinct from the weekly Sabbath.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Lev. 19.3, 30. Cf. 16.31.

<sup>63</sup> Whereas Wagenaar has attempted to establish grounds for an interpretation of *šabbat* as a general reference to an end point in the P material in the passage (Wagenaar, Jan, *Origin and Transformation of the Ancient Israelite Festival Calendar*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 6, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, (2005) 85), the vast majority of commentators see no need to fundamentally distinguish between the *šabbat* of the *šabbat šabbātōn* and the regular Sabbath day.

Proceeding from the foundation of the Sabbath day as the divided off and sanctified apex of creation, and a close association between Sabbath and Israelite cultural identity, the calendar year is ordered in relation to specific times for ritual activity and sacred celebration, which divides ordinary time from holy time.<sup>64</sup> Within this division, particular emphasis falls on the first and seventh months, signifying the division of the year into two halves. The two halves are then further divided by means of six festivals, three in the first half – Passover and Unleavened Bread (4-8), Firstfruits (9-14) and Weeks (15-22) – and three in the second – Trumpet Blasts (23-25), the Day of Purification (26-32) and Booths (33-36, 39-43). Two festivals, one in each half – Passover in the first and Booths in the second – are emphasised through the stipulation that they last seven days.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to these, and arranged around them, seven ‘holy convocations’ are detailed throughout the year (vv. 7, 8, 21, 24, 27, 35, 36). All the single day festivals, and the first and seventh days of the first and last festivals (Unleavened Bread and Booths) are thus marked out as days upon which, like the Sabbath, the people are instructed to refrain from work. In addition to the repetition of the instruction regarding ‘complete rest’ and the central role that the weekly Sabbaths play within the ordering of events within the longer festivals, the emphasis on divisions in accordance with, and by repetition of, blocks of seven, further embeds the reader in the profound ideological context of the Sabbath day.<sup>66</sup> The year is ordered according to the festivals, but the festivals are ordered according to the Sabbath.

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<sup>64</sup> N.B. Gen 1.14; cf. Ps. 104.19.

<sup>65</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27, 1964-1965*; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 338-340; Balentine, *Leviticus*, 172-173; Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 127-128; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 189.

<sup>66</sup> See Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 187.

## Sabbath, Plenty & Self-Denial

So far I have reflected on the way in which the Sabbath day functions, both in terms of its wider conception within the priestly worldview and its specific role in Leviticus 23, as a boundary marker and site of regeneration. I have argued that Sabbath is the ultimate example of the separation and sanctification which is the ongoing work of creation, and, by extension, a pattern – a festal day that, as a more frequent occurrence than the annual holy times, gives shape to the week and both disturbs the mundane and imbues it with purpose. Before considering how these qualities of the Sabbath day are conveyed on a larger scale in the observance of the Sabbath year and the Jubilee, I will first attend to a third aspect of the nature of the Sabbath principle, which bolsters and unites the qualities previously identified in a conceptual context that can, I wish to argue, speak meaningfully into our contemporary ecological crisis – that of discipline.

The concept, which we have touched upon already, of the Sabbath day as a cultic representation not only of rest but also of plenty, is strengthened by reference to the context of the narrative location, and in particular to what lies behind – the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness period. In addressing the question of the distinctiveness of the introductory invocation of the Sabbath day in Leviticus 23, Erhard Gerstenberger traces an interesting connection between this occurrence and references to Sabbath celebration in the priestly accounts of the wilderness period following the people's departure from captivity.<sup>67</sup> He notes that, in both Lev. 23.2, 3 and 23, added to the description *šabbat šabbātōn* is the phrase *miqra' y qodesh* "a holy convocation", which links this verse with references to a holy Sabbath in the priestly accounts in Exodus 31.15 and 35.2.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 341.

<sup>68</sup> We might also add Exod. 16.23.



For Gerstenberger, this unusual formula is evidence of the distinctive nature of the *šabbat šabbātōn* in Leviticus 23, set against the backdrop of other ‘wilderness context’ material. As I noted above, I am not totally convinced by the need to draw a sharp distinction between the *šabbat šabbātōn* and the nature of the regular, weekly Sabbath day (as is Gerstenberger’s intent).<sup>69</sup> However, this link between the somewhat grand, introductory reference to the Sabbath at the top of the description of the sacral calendar in Leviticus, and the Sabbath references explicitly set within the narrative context of the wilderness wanderings, potentially throws instructive light on connections between the function of the Sabbath day in the priestly creation myth, Sabbath practice in Leviticus, and the Sabbath tradition as envisaged in the context of the exodus.

Reflecting on the Torah’s grounding of Sabbath principles in creation theology, Levenson highlights the way in which, as a creation account of a different ilk, the exodus story reinforces one of the key distinctions between the core anthropological principles of the Torah as compared to other Ancient Near Eastern corpuses, and thus functions as another key locus of sabbatical logic.

[T]he historical event of the exodus from Egypt provides the human community the same experience of rest and relief that the creation of humanity provides the lesser gods in *Enuma elish* and *Atra-Ḫasis*. One might put the transformation this way: in this Israelite literature humanity has assumed the position of the lesser gods of Babylonia, so that creation now works not against the human interest, but for it. The Sabbath, the sabbatical year and the Sabbath of sabbatical years, that is, the Jubilee, recollect God’s primordial rest in a form that human beings do not dread, but instead can share. Israel participates, through the very forms of her collective existence, in the divine rest that consummated creation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 340-342.

<sup>70</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 103.

The idealised vision of a created order overflowing with bounty within which human beings partake ritually in the “divine rest that consummated creation” would no doubt have often been far removed from the everyday reality of the communities to which these texts first spoke. Regardless, however, of its history of praxis, the concept of regular, ritualised cessation of everyday labour stands as a radical and continually relevant challenge to the logic of production as something self-standing, to the notion that incessant toil is a necessary correlate of humanity’s vocation as ‘rulers’ of creation, and to the belief that it is primarily human work that makes for the fruitfulness of the created order.

In some senses, the paradigmatic instantiation of this aspect of sabbatical logic can be seen in the wilderness stories of the provision of manna and quails in Exodus chapter 16.<sup>71</sup> The story is prefaced by the people’s famous expression of disgruntlement at the conditions of the wilderness.

If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Exod. 16.3)

Despite having realised freedom from slavery in a way that instantiates the very character of Israel as the people of YHWH, the characters in this story are apparently regretting the fact that they have had to sacrifice the short-term benefits of being alienated slaves (i.e. being provided with food) for the long term dream of becoming a distinctive, flourishing community which will last in perpetuity. This snippet of their grumblings can be interpreted as representative of the fact that they were yet to shake off the logic of empire under which they had been living – “At least there we would have died with full stomachs.” This

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<sup>71</sup> See Fretheim, Terrence E., *Exodus*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, (1991) 181-187; Meyers, Carol, L., *Exodus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2005) 125-128; Childs, Brevard S., *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, (2004) 283-292.

apparent murmur of complaint, therefore, is in fact a profound question striking at the heart of the notion of the creation of the people in the divine call from out of slavery.<sup>72</sup>

Into this scenario come quails and manna. It is crucial to notice, however, that these game birds and 'rain bread' are not primarily to sate the people's hunger, but to test them with regard to that which has replaced the logic of empire (exploitative labour), the logic of Sabbath (holy rest).

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." (Exod. 16.4)

The instructions that follow, of course, centre on the collection of a two-day supply on the sixth day so that the people can rest from the gathering on the Sabbath (v. 5). Notice that while the food is a *test*, the gift is the Sabbath (v. 29).<sup>73</sup> The substance of the test lies in developing the faith and discipline needed to not gather food on the Sabbath. A fixation with the satiation of short-term needs must give way to a desire for long-term flourishing. As Childs notes, "God gives them a double portion of bread, but demands a different way of life."<sup>74</sup> This different way of life is a way that reflects the character of YHWH, the god who calls Israelite slaves out of Egypt, and the reality of his creation. As Lowery perceptively notes, just like the priestly account of the creation of the world, the priestly account of the creation of the people in the event of the exodus begins with chaos and ends with Sabbath.<sup>75</sup>

It is interesting to note that the manna possesses not only the property that, regardless of how much of it is gathered, the same amount is obtained (vv.

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<sup>72</sup> See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 285.

<sup>73</sup> See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 286.

<sup>74</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 291.

<sup>75</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 96-97.

17-18), but also that of being resistant to storage (vv. 19-20) – the exception being the provisions of the sixth day, half of which will keep in order to provide sustenance for the day of rest (vv. 22-25). A crucial aspect of the message of manna, it seems to me, is that its nature prevents the people from locating the key to long-term flourishing in the fruits of their labour rather than in YHWH's gift of Sabbath rest.<sup>76</sup>

One of the most striking aspects of this wilderness feeding story is the way in which the people are instructed to remember the curious manna<sup>77</sup> – and therefore the lesson concerning how it met the people's need independently of their labour and allowed for Sabbath rest – by taking an omer (the amount that is provided for each family's need (vv. 16-18)) and placing it in a jar “before the LORD, to be kept throughout your generations” (v. 33). That this jar, and therefore the lesson regarding the nature of manna and the instructions for and limitations of its use, was of high cultic significance is demonstrated by its being positioned by Moses “before the covenant, for safe keeping” (v. 34).

The parallel account of this story in Numbers adds an intriguing detail with regard to the gathering of the quails:

Then a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the

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<sup>76</sup> We might instructively recall at this point that the enslaved Israelites in Egypt were compelled to build storage cities for the Pharaoh (Exod. 1.11).

<sup>77</sup> The name is likely derived from the question “what is it?” – the Israelites' incredulous response to their first encounter with the food in Exod. 16.15.

people with a very great plague. So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. (Num. 11.31-34)

Those among the people who could not live with the limits of the wilderness freedom to which YHWH had led them, found themselves bemoaning the fact that, in Egypt, not only were their basic needs met, but they were able to enjoy a variety of foods:

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (Num. 11.5)

We might be excused from thinking that this description of culinary life in Egypt referred to an experience at a holiday resort rather than the context of a period of slave labour. The extent to which these people have been unable to escape the hegemonic ideology of their former imperial masters is expressed in the curious use in verse 5 of the expression 'for nothing' (*hinām*). That this group apparently considers there to have been no cost to eating in Egypt – the ultimate demonstration that they have lost the ability to tell freedom from slavery.

Just like the exotic produce of Egypt, manna represents far more than just a particular type of sustenance. Food never comes from nowhere; it is a thoroughly cultural thing and, as such, it tells a story about the context of its own existence.<sup>78</sup> In this story, manna and melons represent two divergent ideologies – one within which harsh slave labour can become as 'nothing' in the eyes of the slaves in the light of access to certain commodities, and another which absolutely resists the logic of slavery with the logic that communal flourishing can only be

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<sup>78</sup> N.B. Feuerbach's famous dictum that "der Mensch ist, was er ißt" – "A man is what he eats".

achieved through a self-denying commitment to sufficiency. Alas, 'the rabble' in the story could not embrace the required principle of self-discipline, the monotony of manna, and gave in to their desire – 'the craving' (*'āvah*).

Despite the fact that the version of the story in Numbers occurs in a different context, not explicitly linked to the Sabbath,<sup>79</sup> there are clear links to the Sabbath tradition. Setting aside the strong connection through the simple fact of the parallels with the Exodus narrative, there is a clear connection between the depiction of those who could not see liberation in manna and demanded meat being struck down by a plague, and the command to put to death any people found guilty of polluting (*hālāl*) the Sabbath (Exod. 31.14; Num. 15.32-36; cf. Ezek. 20.16, 24.). This link, I propose, consists foremostly in the conception of the importance of the notions of sufficiency and self-discipline within the Sabbath principle. Sabbath, in other words, is a conceptual vehicle for what John Taylor famously called "a theology of enough".<sup>80</sup>

The overtly didactic account of the first instantiations of Sabbath practice in Exod. 16 illustrates the notion that, given their landlessness and the harsh conditions that they found themselves in, what was required of the wilderness wanderers, above all else, was the sustenance of a belief in YHWH as the divine provider who would meet their need, and the re-education of their fearful desires to control an excess.<sup>81</sup> This connection between the Sabbath tradition and the disciplining of the desires is drawn out and amplified in the instructions concerning the celebration of the festal year in Leviticus 23.

The first celebration of the year is focussed around the Passover (*pesah*)<sup>82</sup> sacrifice and the pilgrimage festival of unleavened bread (*maṣṣōt*). These two

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<sup>79</sup> Note that this material is generally considered to not be Priestly in origin.

<sup>80</sup> See Taylor, John V., *Enough is Enough*, London: SCM, (1975) 40-62, esp. 52-54.

<sup>81</sup> See Gorringer, Timothy J., *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses*, London: SCM, (2001), esp. 109-112.

<sup>82</sup> N.B. Milgrom considers 'passover' to be an erroneous rendering of *pesah*, which he translates and interprets as 'protection'; see Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1970-1971.

events are generally thought to have originally constituted two separate festivals that have, within this schema, been combined.<sup>83</sup> Although it is impossible to be certain precisely when the combination of the two occurred, the basis of the association seems to issue fairly straightforwardly from reflection on the exodus tradition, which holds that, on the night that YHWH spared the lives of those Israelites who marked their doors with blood, they (hurriedly) ate, along with the *pesah* lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs in preparation for their journey (Exod. 12.8).

The outline of the festival seems to assume the more detailed accounts of the two rituals in Exod. 12.1-20 and Num. 28.17-25, but, even so, gives a surprisingly fleeting description of the observation of the *pesah*, in favour of a seeming emphasis on the activities concerning the festival of unleavened bread. As well as an invocation of the night that the faithful of the Israelites were protected from *ha mašhīt*, 'the destroyer' (Exod. 12.23), the *maššōt* is reminiscent of the manna that fed the people during their period in the wilderness, which is, for the priestly writers inextricably associated with the discipline of Sabbath observance. As Guillaume points out, according to the account of the Israelite wanderers' arrival in Canaan in the book of Joshua, the people stop eating manna only when it is replaced with wild grain during the festival of *maššōt* following the first Passover in the land (Josh. 5.10-12).<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the insistence that the festival is bookended by holy convocations – days on which, akin to the Sabbath, no work was to be done (v. 7) – given the strong Sabbath framework that we have already demonstrated to be at work in this chapter, the discipline of making bread without yeast can itself be

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<sup>83</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 342; Balentine, *Leviticus*, 175-176; Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 89-90; Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 128; Noth, *Leviticus*, 166-167; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 189-190; cf. Milgrom, who, taking Leviticus 23 to be an 'early' text, thinks that the festivals are separate here and only combined later, in Deuteronomy (16.1-7) and texts that he holds to be post-exilic (Ezek. 45.21; Ezra 6.20-22; 2 Chr. 30.2, 5, 13, 15; 35.17) – Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1971-1972.

<sup>84</sup> See Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 91-94.

interpreted as an act of discipline (if not self-discipline, then family discipline) that sits absolutely flush with Sabbatical logic. Furthermore, given that the festival of unleavened bread is a pilgrimage (*hāg*), there is also the matter of the people being committed to making a journey to either a local altar, or (in later times) to the central, Jerusalem sanctuary.<sup>85</sup>

Following swiftly after the festival of *maṣṣōt*, come two festivals in celebration of the harvest. As the first of the two festivals explicitly associated with the agricultural calendar, the festival usually referred to as 'Firstfruits' dictates that, before any of the yield of grain harvest (in this case most likely barley, which ripens in spring) can be enjoyed, the first sheaf, along with an animal and grain offering and a libation of wine, must be brought to the priest as an offering of thanksgiving (vv. 9-14).<sup>86</sup> After an interval, the priest then raises the sheaf as a presentation to YHWH, and it is only after this ritual has been observed that it is permitted for bread to begin to be made from the new grain (v. 14).

Once seven weeks have passed since the raising of the first barley sheaf, on the day after the seven Sabbath, the fiftieth day,<sup>87</sup> a similar festival begins, which consists of the offering of two loaves of finest quality (leavened) bread in addition to burnt offerings of seven lambs, a young bull and two rams, a grain offering and liquid libation, a goat for a sin offering and two lambs as a well-being offering (vv. 15-19). This second grain festival is usually equated with the festival referred to in Numbers 28.26 as the Festival of Weeks; however, in Leviticus, this name is not used. While the Festival of Weeks is traditionally

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<sup>85</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 176.

<sup>86</sup> It is also likely that this gesture represented a last-gasp petition for an abundant harvest; see Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1985; Balentine, *Leviticus*, 176-177.

<sup>87</sup> As Milgrom notes, it is possible that this stipulation of fifty days refers to a period of great anxiety which coincided with the arrival of the hot, dry sirocco wind, which is known to cause shifts in humidity which can cause plants to wither. The Arabic name for the sirocco is related to the Arabic and Hebrew for fifty, in reference to the fifty days that it is renowned for blowing for, between April and June – i.e. during the grain harvest. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1999-2000.



associated with the end of the barley harvest, Milgrom has argued that it should, instead, be understood as the beginning of the wheat harvest.<sup>88</sup> Certainly there seems merit to Milgrom's assessment of the festival described in Leviticus 23, given that, according to verse 16, the offering does not just consist of grain, but specifically of *new* grain (*hādāšāh*).

At the beginning of the section setting out these two grain festivals, the context of the narrative location is made explicit by the use of the phrase “when you enter the land that I am giving you...” (v. 10). One possible explanation (or, at least, consequence) of this interjected reminder of the wider, narrative setting of the text is that of a juxtaposition of the life that lies behind the people (the exodus/wilderness wandering tradition) and the life that awaits them in the land – between the manna (the ‘fruit’ of the wilderness) and the bounteous fruits of the harvest of the land. One implication of such a connection is the promulgation of the notion that, when the people enter the land, although they will then be able to enjoy the plentiful fruits of agricultural production, they should not forget the lesson of the manna – that is, that the primary aim of labour should be the provision of the community's need through a disciplined approach to planting and harvesting, rather than an individualistic desire to maximise yield to the exclusion of others. The *new* test,<sup>89</sup> therefore, is whether ‘enough’ will remain enough within a context that has the potential to yield more; in which their bread is fully leavened.

This proposed reading of a connection with the Sabbath logic, as represented by manna, is supported by the inclusion, at the end of the prescriptions for the first three festivals (the middle of the festal year), of an instruction regarding leaving a proportion of the crop and the gleanings when a field is harvested.

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<sup>88</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1991-1992.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Ex 16.4

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 23.22)

This instruction is an exact repetition of the one found in chapter 19 verses 9 and 10, with the middle section, which relates to practice regarding vineyards, simply removed.<sup>90</sup> The clear point seems to be a reinforcement of the notion that with blessing comes responsibility – a responsibility on behalf of each farmer to be disciplined about ensuring that their own labour contributes to the common good and makes provision for the most vulnerable in society. This prohibition against securing every last gram of what is available, and rather abiding by the discipline to take enough and leave the excess, combined with the insistence that what is left should be available to those on the margins, is a perfect example of the logic of Sabbath economics.

Whilst these two festivals have an explicitly agricultural overtone,<sup>91</sup> in one sense they appear to speak to a certain level of alienation from the agricultural means of production. Although there is a certain lack of precision built into the timetable (“when you enter the land ... and you reap its harvest”, as per Lev. 23.10), clearly there is a tension between the priestly desire to establish an ordered year and the need for certain festivals to be tied to agricultural patterns that do not follow a precise timetable.<sup>92</sup> If Milgrom is correct that the second grain festival marks not the end of the first (barley) harvest, but the start of the second (wheat) harvest, then there is something of an issue with regard to the

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<sup>90</sup> Which makes sense given that the grape harvest is in the summer, not the spring; see Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 305; Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2010.

<sup>91</sup> For detailed analysis of agricultural patterns in ancient Palestine, see Frick, Frank S., ‘Ecology, Agriculture and Patterns of Settlement’, in Clements, Ronald E., *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1989) 67-93.

<sup>92</sup> See Wagenaar, *Origin and Transformation...* 74-78. N.B. also Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 376-377 who makes a similar argument regarding the Sabbath year.

stipulation of fifty days between the two. Milgrom, however, defends the agricultural credentials of the text to some extent by pointing out that (as a result of what he sees as a series of redactions) the pilgrimage aspect of the offering of the first fruits of the grain harvests has been deemphasised, which sets it in contrast to for example Exod. 34.22 and Deut. 16.10 (cf. Exod. 23.16-19) which would seem to require farmers to make pilgrimage during the period that the harvest is being gathered.<sup>93</sup>

One way of expressing the tension would be to conclude that, while the priests were not ignorant of agricultural factors, their emphasis was firmly on the clear division of the calendar by means of reference to a series of Sabbaths which gave the year its shape, but also framed the calendar, and therefore the agricultural year, within a particular theological context.

The common theme across these first three festivals is one of joy, celebration and thanksgiving. The year begins with a remembrance and celebration of the exodus from Egypt – release from the exploitation of empire. Then the two grain harvests are celebrated, each one functioning as a reminder of the bounty of the land and the blessing of access to it, and bearing witness, through the offering up of the first fruits, to the mercy and provision of YHWH. Balentine expresses it thus:

[W]hen the three festivals of the first half of the year are considered in sequence, each contributes a verse to a common hymn of thanksgiving. That thanksgiving is anchored in Israel's peculiar and palpable realization of creation's bounty. Given the gift of freedom and a land of their own to inhabit, the memory of which Israel rekindles each year with the rituals of Passover and Unleavened Bread, offering thanks for the first fruits of barley and wheat this land bestows upon them is but a

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<sup>93</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 1994-1996.

logical, we may even suppose spontaneous, response to the God who continues to bless and prosper Israel so faithfully.<sup>94</sup>

As discussed in chapter 1, one of the key concepts underpinning the relationship between the people and the land in Leviticus is the notion that the land does not belong to the people, but remains the possession, and indeed covenant partner, of YHWH. As such, it is likely that the Firstfruits festival functioned as a reminder that the land was YHWH's and therefore its produce belonged to him.<sup>95</sup>

As Blenkinsopp notes,

Ownership by the deity was reinforced by the practices of tithing, offering of the first fruits, the fallow year, and the year of release, which, again theoretically, excluded the granting of leasehold of a period in excess of fifty years (Lev. 25:8-55). Stipulations about the gleaning rights of the poor (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21) were a reminder of the link between self-restraint and distributive justice.<sup>96</sup>

The restatement of the stipulations concerning the handling of the harvest and the treatment of the poor and alien, therefore, reinforces the notion that living on and from YHWH's land means not only living by YHWH's regulations, but being a part of the divine desire for the flourishing of all creation. This participation is an outworking of what it means to be holy – a pursuit that is grounded in the emulation of God: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (19.2). As Balentine notes, in this context, it is perfectly logical that an emphasis on self-discipline and responsibility for the weak follows immediately behind the outline of the agricultural festivals.

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<sup>94</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 177-178.

<sup>95</sup> See Buber, Martin, *Israel and Palestine*, 3-6; Pedersen, Johannes, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. III-IV, London: Milord, (1926) 306.

<sup>96</sup> Blenkinsopp, 'Creation, the Body, and Care...', 50.

In this context, then, it should not be surprising that the last words of the final observance of the first half of the year remind Israel that with great blessing there always comes great responsibility. Returning to a command that has already been given (19:9-10), v. 22 reiterates that Israelites must mirror God's compassion for them by extending a like compassion for the more vulnerable persons in their world ... The self-identification formula that concludes this command, "I am the Lord your God," grounds Israel's ethical responsibility once again in the overarching commission that ultimately governs every aspect of its life: "I am," therefore, "you shall be".<sup>97</sup>

The logic of the Sabbath proceeds from a radical, *a priori* affirmation of the goodness and bountiful nature of creation, towards the notion that this innate fruitfulness is best preserved by careful attention to limits and disciplined practice, directed at the common good. Parenthetically, the point about the ultimate end being increased flourishing and fruitfulness is reinforced further by a comparison with the instructions regarding the fruit harvest in Lev. 19, which come later on in the chapter from the first mention of the commandment regarding field edges and gleaning rights, and are likely based on ancient customs.<sup>98</sup>

When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall regard their fruit as forbidden; three years it shall be forbidden to you, it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all their fruit shall be set apart for rejoicing in the LORD. But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that their yield may be increased for you: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19.23-25)

In addition to a relatively explicit link between obedience, discipline and fruitfulness, as tenders of fruit trees will recognise, there is some fairly sound horticultural advice on offer. It makes good sense for the fruits of the tree not to

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<sup>97</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 178.

<sup>98</sup> See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 275.

be allowed to proceed to full ripeness for the first three years, but rather for the buds to be removed before they fruit.<sup>99</sup> Not eating the ripened fruit in the fourth year, therefore, functions as an act of thanksgiving in the same way as the logic of the grain festival.<sup>100</sup> What is really interesting, however, is the fact that the term translated by the NRSV as 'forbidden' (*'ārelīm*), literally means 'uncircumcised', speaking of a profoundly corporeal link between the fruitfulness of humans and that of plants (circumcision being partly to do with the perception that it increases the fertility, 'fruitfulness', of the penis).<sup>101</sup>

The seventh month is the most sacred of the year, containing each of the three festivals celebrated in the second half of the year, which, combined, account for a third of its days. It is surely no coincidence that this festal month occurs between the end of the harvest and the arrival of the rainy season. Whereas the theme of the festivals of the first half of the year was thanksgiving and joy within the context of a recognition of bountiful provision, these sacred observances appear to focus on reflection, remembrance and a refreshed commitment to fidelity on the community's part, in the hope that God will provide rain for the season to come.<sup>102</sup> Completing the circle, the last festival of the year places the emphasis back on thanksgiving. Therefore, in the overarching pattern, which begins with the fundamental recognition of bounty and an expression of gratitude – both in terms of ritually giving back to God and in terms of exercising self-discipline and compassion for the weak – and is followed by a period of reflection and regeneration which gives way again to gratitude and humility, it is possible to see the theological grounds of the Sabbath day writ large over the festal year.

The second half of the festal year commences with the blowing of a horn. Aside from the complete prohibition of work, the seeming primacy of

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<sup>99</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1677-1679.

<sup>100</sup> See Elliger, *Leviticus*, 260ff.

<sup>101</sup> See Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 141-176.

<sup>102</sup> See Balentine, *Leviticus*, 178-179.

remembrance,<sup>103</sup> and a possible link between the sounding of a horn and the proclamation of a need to make ready (as in a time of war),<sup>104</sup> or to command divine attention,<sup>105</sup> detail is sparse with regard to the festival of Blasts. It is, however, described as a 'day of complete rest'.

Focus turns quickly to the two most important festivals of the year, the Day of Purgation (vv. 26-32) and the Festival of Booths (vv. 33-36). In considering *yōm hakkippurīm* in this context there is no need to rehearse the detail of the prescribed sacrifices and rites that we considered in chapter 2, not least because the description of the celebration found here contains very little of the detail set out in Lev. 16. or Num. 29. With the context having switched from one focussed on the activity of the priests to one centred around the actions of the people, there can be found in these instructions the fullest and most interesting example of the theme of discipline that I have been tracing through festal calendar.

In recognition of the extremely high status of this day, and, I would argue, of the connection between ritualized rest and regeneration, the instructions regarding the cessation of labour are intensified so as to match the Sabbath day itself. Whilst specific days marked by an abstention from work are explicitly connected to the observance of all the annual festivals (except the first festival of grain), here the point is made emphatically. The instructions state: "you shall do no work during the entire day" (v. 28); "anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people", "you shall do no work" (v. 31) and "it shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest" (v. 32). Above all the practical arrangements that the people would have been expected to make in preparation for the sacrificial activities, it is by far the prohibition of work and another prescription, unique within the chapter, that are emphasized.

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. Num. 29.1; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 349; Balentine, *Leviticus*, 179.

<sup>104</sup> See Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2017-2018; Balentine, *Leviticus*, 179.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves and present the LORD'S offering by fire; and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the LORD your God. For anyone who does not practice self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people. And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people. You shall do no work: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements. It shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.

(Lev. 23.26-32)

Besides the insistence that, as with the regular Sabbath (Exod. 31.14-15; Num. 15.32-36), anyone transgressing the instruction regarding a complete cessation of work will perish (v. 30), we encounter an element not associated with any of the other festivals detailed in the chapter, the instruction that the people 'deny themselves' (v<sup>e</sup> *'innītem 'et-naphšōtēkem*) on pains of being 'cut off' (vv. 27, 30-31).<sup>106</sup> Usually translated 'deny yourselves' (NRSV), 'afflict yourselves' (RSV, ESV, ASV) or 'practice self-denial' (JPS), v<sup>e</sup> *'innītem 'et-naphšōtēkem* means literally 'deprive your throats', and is usually taken to connote fasting.<sup>107</sup>

The people are to fast, as well as to abstain from all work, out of recognition that they too are profoundly involved in the rites of purgation that are happening in the dark places of the sanctuary on their behalf (cf. Lev. 16.29-31).<sup>108</sup> Balentine suggests that this self-denial both emphasizes and constructs a corporeal experience from the people's knowledge of their dependency upon God

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<sup>106</sup> The *kārat* punishment referred not just to being 'cut off' from the people by means of execution, but likely also carried an association with a tradition to do with being cursed and thus separated from one's ancestors in the afterlife. For a detailed account of Milgrom's interpretation of *kārat* see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 457-461.

<sup>107</sup> However, as Milgrom points out, it can have a broader range of meaning, (cf. Num. 30.14, Ps. 35.13 and Dan. 10.12), which includes something approximating 'humble your souls'. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 131.



(and the High Priest).<sup>109</sup> It seems to me that we can find here further evidence of the Sabbatical logic that self-discipline and conformity to limits is a pre-requisite to purgatory cleansing, and thus to regeneration and renewal.

Balentine helpfully summarises the combined lay and priestly rituals enacted on *yōm hakkippurīm* as follows:

On the Day of Purification, all creation yearns for a chance to hear God say once again, “Everything I have made is indeed very good” (cf. Gen 1.31). The echo of creation’s liturgy could not be clearer. As God rested on the seventh day in order to celebrate and enjoy a world perfectly fitted for the best life could offer, so Israel must image God by setting aside this day for a time of celebration and renewal in order that it might resume the life God has ordained. On this day, when Aaron enacts the paradigm for priestly ministry ... when he cleanses the sanctuary, the priests and “all the people of the assembly” ... both Israel and the world it serves stand at the juncture between past and future.<sup>110</sup>

The final festival of the year is the pilgrimage of Booths. Although for the priests it is not more cultically important than *yōm hakkippurīm*, it is likely that the pilgrimage of Booths was considered by the laity to be the most significant festival of the year – which perhaps explains it being referred to elsewhere as *heḥāg*, ‘the pilgrimage’, or perhaps ‘the festival’ (1 Kings 8.2, 65; 12.32; Ezek. 45.25; Neh. 8.14; 2 Chron. 7.8-9), and here, in verse 39, as *hag-YHWH*, ‘festival of the LORD’.<sup>111</sup>

As it is described in Leviticus 23, the festival seems to have something of a divergent focus. It seems, in fact, to be described twice, once in terms that emphasize its sacrificial aspects – “seven days shall you present the LORD’s offerings by fire ... it is a solemn assembly” (v. 36) – and once in terms that focus

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<sup>109</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 134.

<sup>110</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 135.

<sup>111</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27, 2027*; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 348.

on distinctive instructions regarding the cultic use of tree branches and boughs in the context of a week-long period of rejoicing (vv. 39-43). What is more, while the festival is referred to as “the festival [or pilgrimage] of booths” at the outset of the first description in verse 34, the booths themselves are not mentioned until verse 42, when their introduction seems rather abrupt. In fact, the whole chapter progresses abruptly, with the instructions moving swiftly from the now standard context of a prohibition on work and description of sacrifices, to joyful tree-waving and then to ceremonial hut-building. Furthermore, it is also apparent that there are two loci of meaning operating within these descriptions – a reference to the end of the harvest in verse 39 (“when you have gathered in the produce of the land”) and a reference to the story of the exodus from Egypt, in the context of which verse 43 describes the purpose of the festivities in terms of ongoing remembrance.

Whether we interpret these curiosities with reference to the combination of material from disparate sources (which is the less imaginative approach), or we see the text as a result of a somewhat cloudy, shifting tradition, we are still left with the question as to why those who produced the text in its current form, produced it this way. Following Gorman, I interpret the two descriptions as thoroughly compatible, and demonstrative of a self-consciously evolving tradition.

Verse 39 relates this festival to the gathering of the produce of the land, whereas v. 43 relates it to the Yahweh-Israel story, that is, the time of Israel’s dwelling in “booths” when Yahweh brought them out of Egypt. This dual explanation provides clear evidence for the ongoing interpretive process within Israel as it sought to give new historical meaning to what were at one time primarily agricultural festivals. This interpretive process functions to weave together the fertility of the land and the national story. The separation of nature from history, with the accompanying belief that “true” Israelite faith was “historical”, fails to account for the evidence of the texts.

Israel recognised that its life on the land and its life as a redeemed community had significant theological connections.<sup>112</sup>

As Gerstenberger points out, although there is a link in terms of temporary shelter, we have no textual (or logical) reason to believe that the wilderness wanderers would have been understood as having lived in booths made from tree branches.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Grabbe helpfully notes that the tradition “probably arose from the practice of farmers who would build a temporary shelter (booth) in the field to sleep in, enabling them to protect the harvest and make best use of the daylight until the harvest was gathered”.<sup>114</sup>

It seems likely, therefore, that what Lev. 23’s conception of the festival of Booths represents is the reinterpretation of an existing celebration to mark the end of the agricultural year, within the context of a theological tradition that serves to bring new meaning to both. The relief that accompanies the end of the harvest is associated with the relief of settling in the land after years of wilderness life. In the same way, the exodus and the great cultural story of a journey from slavery in a foreign land to freedom in YHWH’s land comes to be bound up with the tangible means of fruitful existence. In many ways, the profound mixture of rest and rejoicing, celebration and solemnity that is brought together in the festival of Booths is the most profound witness to and expression of the overarching influence of the Sabbath principle on the annual festal calendar.

The Sabbath day, I have proposed, in addition to being rooted in creation theology – both in terms of its function as a regulatory and organizational boundary and its fundamental insistence on the goodness of the created world – provides an overarching theological framework within which the authors of Leviticus expressed the calendar of annual festivities. Sabbath is about an end, a

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<sup>112</sup> Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 131.

<sup>113</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 349.

<sup>114</sup> Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 93.

new beginning and a pause in between. It is serious and it is a celebration. Most importantly, however, it is a theological framework that refuses to separate the grand acts of God in history, the foundational narratives of Israelite culture, from the detail, the *realia* (to return to the language of chapter 1), of everyday life on the land. It provides a space for the community to regularly and ritualistically remember where they have come from and to what they are called.

## **Sabbath, Food & Redemption**

I have deliberately devoted the majority of this chapter to the careful consideration of details of the priestly conception of the Sabbath day and its function within Leviticus. This decision reflects a perception not simply regarding the Sabbath day's potential as a locus for fruitful ecological reflection, but also a perception regarding the relative lack of detailed attention it has received within the general horizon of Christian biblical-theological and theological-ethical reflection. Where the sabbatical tradition is engaged, by far the more popular aspect than the weekly day of rest is the set of instructions regarding the Sabbath and Jubilee years of rest and release, to which I now turn. While there may be some readers who feel this engagement long overdue within the chapter, it is my hope that the detailed work on the Sabbath day that has preceded will usefully contextualize these regulations and prescriptions within an interpretive framework that is closer to the concerns and emphases of the priestly writers than we might otherwise have been able to construct.

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall

prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food. (Lev. 25.1-7)

Leviticus chapter 25 begins with a forceful statement regarding context. As has already been noted, in Leviticus chapter 1 God calls Moses from the tent of meeting. Leviticus speaks, in other words, into a situation that is poised, awaiting the start of a new era – for renewal. Just as in the (likely) historical location the hope of a return to the land is become or becoming a reality, in the narrative location the wilderness experience is past, the tabernacle has been constructed and the land awaits. At the outset of chapter 25, however, as in three other places in the book (7.38; 26.46; 27.34), the audience is directed specifically towards the giving of the law to Moses, by YHWH, on Mount Sinai. The purpose of the subtle context shift is to reemphasise that the Sabbath is inextricably linked with the covenant.

Having established this dramatic overarching context, the focus then shifts to “when you enter the land”. The land is, from the start, to be the locus of a communal life shaped by the Sabbath. As considered in detail in chapter 1, swiftly following this grand contextualization comes the mandate for the Sabbath year – one year in every seven in which the agricultural land is to be left alone and thus allowed to observe its *šabbat šabbātōn*. Similarly to the profound interconnection of nature and culture that I suggested can be interpreted from the details of the festival of Booths, the instruction that land itself must engage in cultic rest, and that, therefore, the people must leave it alone to allow it so to do, is a fundamental

affirmation of the notion that Sabbath practice is not just something enacted by Israel because of the accidents of history, but something that relates her life to the life of the whole creation and mediates between the two.<sup>115</sup>

Although Leviticus' conception of the Sabbath year is primarily focused on the land (cf. Deut. 15.1-3, 12-15; Jer. 34.8-16),<sup>116</sup> given the proximity of these instructions to the material considered above, the careful reader is likely to be struck by the profound, yet largely implicit, inter-human aspect involved in the enactment of the stipulations. A total embargo on sowing, pruning, reaping or gathering equates to nothing less than the dismantling of the structures of agricultural labour and therefore the basis of production; but also, in the light of chapter 23, means a fundamental disruption to the annual calendar. There is nothing *wrong* with the systems of agricultural production – as long as the limitations and regulations of the Sabbath principle and the timetable of the ritual festivals are observed. However, in order for flourishing and fruitfulness to be fully realized, there is a need for Sabbath rest to be imagined on a yet more profound scale.

In the insistence that economic production as a whole must be placed on pause, a space is opened up not just for the land to rest and regenerate, but also for the economy itself to become the subject of sustained critical reflection by the whole of society, including those usually most deeply embedded in its operations. This large-scale application of the concept of Sabbath is not a judgement on labour, it is rather the means of its right orientation; and that issue of orientation is not something that can be dealt with in isolation from the realities of the life of the entirety of the created order within which Israelite society exists. The sabbath

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<sup>115</sup> N.B. as discussed in chapter 1, the Sabbath year is very unlikely to have ever been enacted or even to have been intended for that purpose – it is a ideal vision of a society that conveys profound theological, political, anthropological and ecological insight. See Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 58-63.

<sup>116</sup> See Grabbe, *Leviticus*, 94.

years deliberately disrupt the nature of the relationships between the people and the land and also those between one person and another.

It is interesting to note that, prior to the assurance regarding miraculous intervention in the sixth year to ensure a bumper harvest that will underwrite the Sabbath year (vv. 20-21), there is an explicit reference to the validity of consuming the land's 'natural' yield (vv. 6-7). With regard to this reference, Balentine asserts,

The list of the seven recipients of its bounty—"you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers ... your livestock ... the wild animals" (vv. 6-7) — indicates that none need fear diminishment by observance of the land's sabbatical year.<sup>117</sup>

To my mind, however, in merely observing that "none need fear diminishment", Balentine's interpretation stops short of some far more interesting possibilities.

As Gerstenberger points out, while it is not precisely clear what is meant by the proverbial phrase *šabbat hā'ārets lākhem l'ākhlāh*, (rendered by the NRSV as "the sabbath of the land that you may eat"), given that the consumption of 'aftergrowth' – that is, sprouted seed left over from the previous harvest – and grapes hanging from untended vines is explicitly prohibited (v. 5), it is likely that it connotes foods not cultivated on the land.<sup>118</sup>

Milgrom, however, rejects this interpretation, interpreting verse 6 as essentially a legitimation of the gathering of the aftergrowth, in apparently direct contradiction to verse 5. Although Milgrom's point – that the emphasis is rightly interpreted as being on the fact that what is harvested is only for food and not storage or ritual offerings, and that it is only for those listed – is instructive, the context with which it occurs seems, somewhat bizarrely, to be constructed by a

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<sup>117</sup> Balentine, *Leviticus*, 194-195.

<sup>118</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 375-376.

hermeneutic which preferences practicability over and above overarching coherence.

Vv. 6-7 ostensibly contradict v. 5a, which forbids the landowner to harvest his field and vineyard ... Gerstenberger (1996) suggests that even if the aftergrowth of the field (*śādeh*) is forbidden (v. 4), the aftergrowth of the open, uncultivated land (*ʿēreš*) is permitted. His solution must be rejected. A hypothetical construct *šabbat haśśādeh* is incongruous, since the entire land is subject to the sabbatical (vv. 2, 4, 5). Besides, are the landowner, his family, and his animals to subsist for more than a year on wild berries and roots?<sup>119</sup>

To accept that the process of redaction gave rise to two utterly contradictory instructions expressed side by side, and to reject the alternative largely on the basis that the practical value of the instruction is limited, is to my mind both extremely odd and thoroughly unsatisfactory.

For Guillaume, the distinction between *śādāh* ('field') and *ʿēreš* ('land') in verse 4 provides a basis for perceiving an implicit distinction at work between agricultural yield and other produce. He also notes that, if this were the case, adherence to the stipulations would still leave several foods central to the Israelite diet and economy largely unaffected. As well as pomegranates, figs, pistachios, carob beans and honey, he notes that as long as suitable preparations were made the previous year, two of the main 'cash crops', olives and almonds, could also be harvested as usual.<sup>120</sup>

The fact that many cultures in history have derived the vast majority of their diet from exactly these kinds of sources of nutrition, or that an interpretation based on the perception of an implicit distinction between the nature of sabbatical rest for cultivated as opposed to uncultivated land seems both legitimate and

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<sup>119</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2160.

<sup>120</sup> Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 104; see also Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 9-10.



instructive, are largely beside the point. The Sabbath year is an imaginative vision of how a community might overcome specific political and social problems and avoid various pitfalls common in human society. Whilst it may, and I believe does, contain elements of practical wisdom, in broad terms it is an *idealized* aspect of a grand political and theological project that is generally regarded as being unlikely ever to have been put into practice.<sup>121</sup> In this sense (and in the context of several other of Leviticus' regulations), the idea of excluding an interpretation because it is impracticable seems misguided.

I am inclined to follow Gerstenberger's interpretation, and to read the instruction in verse 6 as a reference to the yield of uncultivated land. Such a reading, however, suggests something of a radical departure from the norm of an agricultural society's relationship to food. As many of those involved in the current resurgence of interest in 'wild food' (particularly in Britain and North America) passionately attest, foraging has a profound impact on one's relationship not only to food, but also to the natural world in general. While this impact would certainly have been less profound for an ancient Israelite farmer or rural slave than for those of us who live in a culture where the most common interactions with food involve the removal of pre-prepared produce from its packaging, there is still a fundamentally different dynamic at work in the gathering of food as compared to the raising of crops.

It is not simply a matter of *food* or *no food* (as Balentine's observation regarding 'diminishment' might imply) but of a change in the *kind* of food; moreover, there also appears to be the intriguing implication of a resultant shift in the social dynamic at work. The text is addressed to the Israelite farmer, and

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<sup>121</sup> Lowery, in particular, is thoroughly dismissive of any attempt to interpret the Sabbath year in its entirety in practical terms, Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 58-65. Cf. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 376-377. Cf. Barker, Margaret, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment*, London: T&T Clark, (2010) 184, who insists that "however difficult this may seem, the Sabbath for the land was observed". See also Fager, Jeffery, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee: Uncovering Hebrew Ethics Through the Sociology of Knowledge*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary Series 155, Sheffield: JSOT Press, (1993) 13, 34-35.

therefore the list of those who can partake of the wild food is expressed from his point of view, a perspective that fundamentally entails power dynamics – your slaves, your labourers, your livestock. Even so, it is at the same time set within a context that somewhat relativizes the dynamic. In a sense, all those mentioned have an equal claim on wild food in a way that they simply do not when it comes to cultivated food. This point is highlighted by the fact that the last group mentioned is ‘wild animals’ – not a group that would have been wedded to the agricultural system of food production in the first place, and certainly not a group whose survival would be that pressing a concern for the average farmer.

The comic image conjured up by this verse, therefore, is of all members of the society, from the elites all the way down to farm livestock, concurrently gathering wild food, alongside some bemused wild animals. This is an image that perhaps serves as a reminder of the radically egalitarian thread that runs through the entire Sabbath tradition: everybody rests on the Sabbath day – elites, slaves, aliens, working animals (cf. Exod. 23.12); everybody rests and celebrates and disciplines their desires during the holy festivals; everybody forages during the Sabbath year; and the Jubilee year enacts release for all the inhabitants of the land (Lev. 25.10).<sup>122</sup>

In the context of a significant change in the people’s relationship to food, and a shift in dynamic of the agricultural base, the pre-emptive question in verse 20 – “what shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?” – is, to some extent, reminiscent of the complaints of the wilderness dwellers in Ex. 16.<sup>123</sup> Whether or not it is based in experience, this ‘staged’ question speaks to a reality in which the people cannot imagine life beyond the standard pattern of agricultural production, which, interpreted in the light of the exodus tradition, draws parallels with those who could not imagine survival

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<sup>122</sup> For reflection on the limitations of this *all*, see below.

<sup>123</sup> See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 376.

outside the provisions of the Egyptian economy. Pushing this interpretive scheme further still suggests a link between the divine response promising a miraculous sixth year yield, and the provision of manna in the desert. However, when compared to the provision of manna, depicted as a radical substance that spoke to a radical way of life, or even the intriguing notion regarding foraging proposed above, the promise of the provision of an agricultural excess seems like something of a conservative measure.

In line with the general pattern – a Sabbath day, a Sabbath-structured year, a full Sabbath year – we now come to the instructions concerning the sabbath of sabbath years, or the year of Jubilee.<sup>124</sup>

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. (Lev. 25.8-10)

As verse 10 indicates, the key concepts that inform the regulations concerning the Jubilee year are property and family, and the reversal of alienation with regard to both of them.

The most crucial aspect of the context of the jubilee is the fact that the proposed release is prescribed as taking place on *yōm hakkippurīm*, the day in the annual calendar when the High Priest enacts the purification of the sanctuary on

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<sup>124</sup> It is widely rehearsed that *yōbhēl*, 'Jubilee', is derived from the word for the ram's horn that was blown to herald its commencement (even though v. 9 uses the term *šōpār*). See e.g. Noth, *Leviticus*, 184; Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, 138; Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, 168. Guillaume, however, rejects the notion of an etymological link, claiming instead that it derives from the Akkadian *w(bl)* and denotes 'abundance'. See *HALOT*, vol. 2, 383.

behalf of the people, and the people purge themselves through the observation of the disciplines of fasting and ritual rest. The situations that are subject to the effect of the Jubilee release (*děror*) are therefore identified with the corruption that pollutes the sanctuary.<sup>125</sup> On this day, when the cleansing of corruption and the restoration of order is enacted on the high cultic and personal levels, it is instigated on the social level also. As I argued in chapter 2, the dominant perspective seems to be that the corruption of human society makes these instances of alienation – a person from their family, a family from its apportioned land – almost inevitable. What is required is a process that can, from time to time, reset the parameters and restore the proper conditions for flourishing. This restoration is the function of the Jubilee.

The foundation for the instructions regarding the return of property to the family to which it was originally assigned, is the hugely significant concept expressed in verse 23:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity for the land is mine: with me you are but aliens and tenants.

As I suggested in chapter 1, the priestly writers of Leviticus barely flirt with the concept of the land as a gift from YHWH to the people because of their central concern to uphold the inalienability of the land. The primary subject, however, is not the people but YHWH. The land cannot be sold in perpetuity, because it does not belong to the person who is selling it – the land belongs to YHWH.<sup>126</sup>

Because the land cannot be sold to permanent effect, if the land is sold, the price will vary according to the time remaining before the next time of release.

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<sup>125</sup> See Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, 168.

<sup>126</sup> N.B. Even then there seems to be a covenantal, bilateral aspect to that relationship – see chapter 1.

While this might smack of the triumph of utility value over inherent worth, it is a principle that contains radical economic as well as ecological potential.

When you make a sale to your neighbour or buy from your neighbour you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbour, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God.

The word *yānāh*, translated by ‘cheat’ in the NRSV, connotes rage, violence and oppression. Its use speaks powerfully of how economic interaction can, if unregulated, easily be a vehicle for violence and corruption. It also functions as a reminder that life in the land must be lived in the context of an alternative economic vision to the one that presided in Egypt, the land of oppression.<sup>127</sup> As Duchrow points out, in a modern context, these verses can be interpreted as an equally significant challenge to the very heart of our most powerful economic vision, the vision of the Market.

This is about land, the means of production through which families earn a living by farming. The stress is on protecting the seller. In the circumstances of a subsistence economy, he normally sells not because he wants to but because he needs to, because of a bad harvest, or high tribute payments of the like. It is in precisely such situations of need that the “supply” to the market is high, so the prices can be squeezed by those in a stronger position.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Cf. Exod. 22.21; Lev. 25.42-43 (see below).

<sup>128</sup> Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, 169.

As discussed at length above, the priestly insistence on the goodness of creation is squarely opposed to the notion that the ‘natural’ condition of the world is scarcity. Here, the authors of these verses fundamentally disrupt another key principle of neo-liberal economics – the universal applicability of the logic of supply and demand. This line of interpretation is based on the recognition, enthusiastically propounded within the Scholastic tradition,<sup>129</sup> that one of the key factors in such economic activities is the potential for the exploitation of the desperate by the comfortable, and that such exploitation always serves to increase alienation and restrict the flourishing of the community. As such, it is necessary for the principle of the inalienability of land to function as an overarching limit to economic activity.

Although the structure of the Jubilee legislation in Lev. 25 strikes many interpreters and commentators as confused and demonstrative of something of an unpolished combination of several layers of redaction and strata of diverse material, it is possible, as Milgrom argues, to interpret a coherent and revealing causal thread running through the regulations. Citing the approach in *Midrash Tanḥuma B* (*‘Yelammedenu’*),<sup>130</sup> he notes that the structure makes good sense if it is interpreted less as a series of hypothetical scenarios designed to preempt practical questions relating to the prescriptions, and more as a context of decline, envisaged as a result of a failure to abide by sabbatical principles.<sup>131</sup>

According to this interpretation, the core principles of jubilee release are expressed in three sections: verses 25-28, 35-38 and 39-43, which all concern a person described as *yāmūk*, ‘become low’.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> See Tawney, Richard H., *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, (1926) chapter 1, esp. 34-36.

<sup>130</sup> See Townsend, John T., *Midrash Tanḥuma: Translated in English with Introduction, Indices and Brief Notes, Volume II: Exodus and Leviticus*, Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing, (1997)

<sup>131</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2149-2151;

<sup>132</sup> See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 383

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned. But if there is not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (Lev. 25.25-28)

As Milgrom points out, it is likely that in this case *yāmūk* conveys an implicit prologue to the story, in which the farmer in question has to borrow in order to plant a crop. It now seems that, most likely as a result of a poor harvest, he has ‘become low’ under the burden of his debt.<sup>133</sup> Being thus reduced, the Israelite is forced to ‘sell’ a portion of his land. If this occurs, then the farmer’s land should be redeemed by his next of kin. The redeemer then pays the buyer the value of the crop for the years that remain until the next jubilee and the land passes back into his, and thus the family’s, control. Notice there is no question of the value of the land. This is because the land was never truly sold in the first place – because the permanent sale of land is not a legitimate concept. The initial transaction that took place was the sale of the lease of the land (until the Jubilee).<sup>134</sup>

If, however, no one redeems the land on the debt-stricken farmer’s behalf, and he is unable to use the capital raised by the leasing of the land to ‘prosper’ to the extent where he can redeem it himself,<sup>135</sup> then it will remain the leasehold of the person that bought it until the jubilee, when it will return to the family to which it was originally allotted.

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<sup>133</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2193; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 383; Balentine, *Leviticus* 195-196

<sup>134</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2195-2196; Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land*, 120-121; ct. Noth, *Leviticus*, 189.

<sup>135</sup> Which would presumably constitute a fairly unlikely scenario; see Daube, David, *Studies in Biblical Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1947); reprint, New York, NY: Ktav, (1969) 44.

Milgrom and Gerstenberger both assert that, in this chapter, the notion of kinship is extended and its language used to refer to the whole nation. They argue that, in the first clause of verse 25, *’āh* (‘brother’) connotes ‘fellow Israelite’ rather than a specific blood relation. By contrast, both maintain, the ‘next of kin’ in the second clause refers to a direct blood relation.<sup>136</sup> This distinction suggests that, at the same time as reinforcing a most likely pre-existing tradition concerning a clan’s obligation to protect its allotted land and establishing a limit on the amount of time for which a family can be alienated from its allotment, this injunction functions to remind the whole of Israel that if such a situation were to arise, those concerned (*’āh*) would very likely require extra support from the wider community.

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. (Leviticus 25.35-38)

In these verses an implicit instruction to the hearer regarding care for the weak among his fellow Israelites, his brethren, in a fairly general context has been transformed into a far more specific scenario. This next stage assumes the first, and that the least of the portion of the land that was sold off has remained unredeemed. Since then, the farmer has fallen into yet more difficulties, and has had to forego the entirety of his allotted land. Notice, too, that the addressee has become the creditor – “falls under your authority” (v. 35). The farmer whose downfall the text has been charting, has now become so low that he is labouring

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<sup>136</sup> Milgrom insists that *gō’ālō haqqārōb ’elāyv* (lit. ‘his closest redeemer’) in 25.25 is directly equivalent to *šē’er haqqārōb ’elāyv* in 21.2, which is clearly a blood relative.



as a tenant on his own farm. If he failed to fulfil his general duty to support a fellow Israelite in need, how will the addressee respond to being more closely associated with the downward spiral of his 'brother'?

As his landlord, the addressee of the text must lend the means for the farmer to set the land in order, and must not exact interest from him, but must enable a situation to arise whereby the fruits of his labour might service his debt.<sup>137</sup> At no point during any of this is the creditor to make money from the assistance he is obliged to offer; he must allow all the efforts of the farmer to go towards the redemption of the land.

If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound labourers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God. (Lev. 25.39-43)

Just as the second block assumed the first, Milgrom argues, this third assumes the first two.<sup>138</sup> The farmer could not survive as a tenant – could not support his family (presumably due to the failure of the creditor to fulfil the requirement to provide adequate stability for his debtor) – and so he eventually sells all he has left, himself and his children. Together they must now enter the household of, and labour for the benefit of, his creditor, relinquishing control of the usufruct of the land. The process of alienation has been complete – the farmer has lost his land and has to relinquish to the service of his debts even the freedom

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<sup>137</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 300.

<sup>138</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 301-302.

of his children. However, they are not destined to live as slaves – this is the bottom line.

Rather than slaves, in fact, the farmer and his children become hired labourers, earning a wage for their work, which keeps a glimmer of hope alive that they might be able to redeem the land before the Jubilee. They are not to be commoditized, and they must not be ruled over harshly. As Gerstenberger points out, the word *rādā* ('rule') already connotes a relationship of utter dominance, but when intensified by use of the phrase *bāpārek* ('with harshness'), what is imaged is a regime of terror.<sup>139</sup> The implication, it seems to me, is clear. It is fairly straightforward for a person, an ordinary farmer, to slide from subsistence farming on their family land, to absolute bankruptcy and slavery – unless, that is, boundaries and limits are put in place to prevent it.

Although the 'headlines' of the Jubilee – Slaves go free! Debt written off! Land returned to local family! – are clearly important and an significant extension of sabbatical logic, to my mind the aspects of the farmer's story that are not enacted are equally as important as those that are. As stated above, the key to the interpretive insight in the *Yelammedenu* is the way in which each stage is perceived as the worst possible outcome *because* of the community's failure to obey. If each Israelite knows to support a family that 'falls into difficulty' (v.25), then there should be a commitment to mutual support that would make that occurrence less likely. If it does occur, however, then there must be a redeemer. If the redeemer is forthcoming, in any of these scenarios, then the decline is halted.

As the story of the Israelite farmer demonstrates, while the Jubilee is a limit, a safety net that shields Israelites from the worst effects, it is the role of the redeemer, the *gō'el*,<sup>140</sup> that functions to prevent the need for release from arising.

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<sup>139</sup> N.B. the *rādā* 'dominion' of verse 43 is related to the *rādah* 'have dominion' of Gen. 1.28.

<sup>140</sup> For detail on the role of the *gō'el* see Hubbard Jr, Robert L., 'The Go'el in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1, (1991) 3-19; Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 121-123.

The *gō'ēl* puts themselves between someone who has been 'made low' and the worst of what might lie ahead. The actions of the *gō'ēl* make regeneration possible. Their actions open up a space wherein the person is no longer entirely at the mercy of their circumstance. The *gō'ēl* is the one that frees them from the incessant grind of debt. In short, the *gō'ēl* is the vehicle for their Sabbath.

The absolutely critical thing to notice, therefore, is the strong parallel that exists between the people and the land. The land is sold (vv.14, 25), but it is also not sold. It cannot be fully sold because it does not belong to the seller, but to YHWH (v.23). Thus, at the Jubilee, it returns to those to whom YHWH appointed it. In a similar way, these people are become servants (v.40), but they are not servants. They cannot be servants to their creditor because they are already servants of YHWH (v.42). Hence, when the Jubilee comes, they must be released from their bondage to debt. The alienation is never absolute. Israelite land is never lost forever. Debt will never make an Israelite a slave.

The bottom line is that an Israelite cannot live in accordance with the law, in obedience to the covenant, in line with the stipulations and guiding principles of the Sabbath, and treat his brother as a slave. To do so, is to return to Egypt without leaving the land (although, as we have seen, if the Sabbath is ignored, then that too will eventually happen). It is also to deny Israel, the people who were created by being called out from Egypt, and to deny YHWH, the God who heard the people crying when they were made low, and called them out and taught them to stand up. In other words, as Milgrom asserts, YHWH is Israel's *gō'ēl*.<sup>141</sup>

Here, then, we can see how the twin themes of the chapter, the Sabbath rest of the land and the Jubilee release of slaves and property, are intertwined. Human corruption not only pollutes the land (chapter 1) and pollutes the

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<sup>141</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2188-2191.

sanctuary (chapter 2), but it also pollutes human society and its interactions as exchanges. If left unregulated, debt will cause destitution. However, as Israel's redeemer, the one who made their rest from hardship, their Sabbath possible, YHWH instructs the people not only to have concern for and not to cheat or harshly rule their fellow Israelites, who are their kin, but to redeem each other, to enable each other to Sabbath.<sup>142</sup>

The Jubilee, therefore, is a natural extension of the logic of Sabbath, because of the way that, like the Sabbath day, it opens up a space for Israel to partake in the work of God. In the same way that the Sabbath teaches Israel to rest as God had rested – with Sabbath rest's active, creative connotations as well those deriving from its being a boundary marker and a limit – the Jubilee teaches the people to redeem each other in the way that YHWH redeemed them from Egypt.<sup>143</sup> God made the Sabbath holy, but it is the people that sanctify the Jubilee through their participation in the act of reordering (re-creating) the world.<sup>144</sup>

However, Jubilee is about both the release of slaves, and the release of land.

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. (Lev. 25.23-24)

While this redemption (*g<sup>e</sup>'ōlāh*) clearly refers to the process of buying back land in the specific way discussed in the verses that follow, it is surely also possible to interpret it in a wider sense. The sabbatical tradition is grounded in a theology of creation that sees the work of ordering, separating and sanctifying as the means to the regeneration, flourishing and fruitfulness of both human society and the

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<sup>142</sup> For links with the Great Kinsman theme, especially in Second Isaiah, see McKenzie, John, *A Theology of the Old Testament*, New York, NY: Doubleday, (1974) 236-239; Hubbard, 'The Go'el in Ancient Israel', 11-12.

<sup>143</sup> See Hubbard, 'The Go'el in Ancient Israel', 11.

<sup>144</sup> See Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 105-106.

whole earth. The people must regularly rest in order that labour not overwhelm them and squeeze out all other concerns, becoming an end instead of a means. Struggling people must be regularly redeemed so that debt does not make them so low that they become destitute. By the same token, the land must rest so that it does not grow weary and so that it does not itself become made low under the weight of intensive or exploitative use. However, the land must also be redeemed, in order that it does not become concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and to ensure that its fruits do not remain unevenly distributed for long periods (cf. Isa. 5.8).<sup>145</sup>

The priestly writers perceive that monopolized land holdings and latifundia, large discrepancies in terms of access to wealth, and widespread debt-slavery, no more serve the common good than would the unregulated pollution of the land or sanctuary. In this sense, the regulations concerning land redemption can be interpreted as reinforcing the notion that runs throughout the sabbath tradition that there is a fundamental connection between the way humans treat each other and the way they treat the earth – in other words, that social justice is intimately related to, and in fact an aspect of, ecological concern.

## Conclusions

Like this thesis as a whole, this chapter is founded on the premise that just as persistent ecological degradation does not come from nowhere, the locus of a response to its proliferation cannot simply be confined to a marginal arena, described as 'ecology'. All interactions have an ecological aspect, because all interactions occur within, and are mediated by, material reality.

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<sup>145</sup> See Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 105-106; Davies, 'Land: Its Rights and Privileges', 360-361.

I began with the context of capitalism's contempt for limits, and argued that the doctrine of the necessity of incessant growth is one of the key underlying factors behind systemic ecological abuse. Not only is the doctrine of unrestricted growth logically and physically incompatible with a world of limited resources of space, fuel, food and water, but it also creates and feeds from a conception of natural limits as boundaries that must be circumvented and transcended. Economics, I therefore contend, is one of the key contexts that must be engaged by ecological critique.

As a theological tradition primarily grounded in a concept of creation as the establishment of order through separation and limitation, and expressed through the limitation of labour, the shaping of the calendar and the regulation of agricultural and economic activity, I proposed that the priestly conception of sabbath could provide fruitful grounds for eco-theological reflection.

Within the portions of Leviticus that describe the numerous regulations and stipulations regarding observance of the sabbath day, the annual holy days, the sabbath year and the year of jubilee, I have traced out the notion that a society that is unable to regularly rest, risks becoming captive to the power its own labour, distorting its identity and losing focus on the ends to which its work is merely a means. In a similar vein, the prescriptions concerning the jubilee year reflect a conception of debt as a chief mechanism for alienation: both the alienation of people from each other, and of people from the earth on which they unavoidably depend.

In the insistence that, despite the effects of the corruption to which it is currently subject, the created order is, in essence, a place of plenty and fruitfulness, we encounter a vision fundamentally at odds with the assumption that the 'natural condition' is scarcity. In the notion that the sabbath-oriented

ordering of life speaks to what John V. Taylor calls a “theology of enough”,<sup>146</sup> or a recent Church of England report denotes “a feast of contentment and ‘enoughness’”,<sup>147</sup> we also find the negation of a another key assumption of contemporary economics – that human appetite is (and should be) limitless. Furthermore, the stipulations of the year of jubilee insist that the people are not to cheat one another, or to benefit from the desperation and destitution of others, but rather to support the ‘brother’ who is weighted down under a burden of debt.

These regulations speak powerfully to the contemporary notion that all markets should be unregulated and that the laws of supply and demand must be allowed free and indifferent reign. The priestly vision holds that there are some things that are too important, too sacred to a society that they should become an opportunity for profit; that one ‘brother’ should not benefit from another’s misfortune; and that a community’s livelihood, and potential for flourishing, are all inextricably linked to each member’s ability to share in the factors and fruits of production.

While there is much to commend Leviticus’ conception of sabbath to a contemporary reflection on eco-theology and ecological ethics, perhaps the most important aspect of the text to propose as inspiration for such a purpose is the one that is the hardest to read.<sup>148</sup>

As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a

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<sup>146</sup> Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 40ff.

<sup>147</sup> Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God’s Planet: A Christian Vision for a Sustainable Future*, London: Church House Publishing, (2005) 28.

<sup>148</sup> A similar argument can be made with regard to the fact that clearly the texts addresses only Israelite men and speaks (almost entirely) with regard to Israelite men. Although this is no less significant a critique (in fact in many ways it is more so), it demands analysis reaching beyond the plausible scope and focus of this thesis.

possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness. (Lev. 25.44-46)

The message of these verses is devastatingly clear. Israelites are not property, not to be treated as slaves, not for buying or selling, are not to be terrorized, and cannot be held to a debt or relieved of their land for more than fifty years. However, as for others, outsiders – well, with regard to them, that’s all fair game. It’s acceptable to buy them from elsewhere, or to take ones that have been born in your land, of immigrant parents. These ones will not know *děror* from debt or from alienation from their family. These ones you can terrorize.

It is interesting to note how many interpreters draw freely on the jubilee legislation and wax lyrical about its egalitarian ethic, without ever attending to this shocking passage. Even some commentators prevaricate about, tiptoe around, or even ignore it.<sup>149</sup> It is all well and good to emphasize that in the context of the ancient world any curtailment of slavery is a hugely significant step, but to my mind, the grisly details of these verses cannot and must not be passed over or diluted down. I simply do not think it is sufficient, or even acceptable, to claim, as Milgrom does, that the pericope Lev. 25.39-43 “virtually abolishes the institution of slavery”,<sup>150</sup> or, as Lowery does, that it “lays the moral foundation for the universal abolition of slavery”.<sup>151</sup>

As Gerstenberger points out, the most bizarre thing about these verses is that they seem blatantly and utterly to contradict the principle set out in Lev. 19.33-34,<sup>152</sup> which appears to propose the dissolution of social distinctions

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<sup>149</sup> Disappointingly, Balentine, *Leviticus*, Grabbe, *Leviticus*, Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land* and Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism* all serve as examples.

<sup>150</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 304.

<sup>151</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 70.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Exod. 12.43-49; Lev. 17.12-16; 18.26; 22.18-20; 24.16.



between the Israelite and the resident alien (*g<sup>e</sup>r*).<sup>153</sup> What to my mind is more significant, however, is the way in which it also appears to short-circuit the logic of verse 23 of chapter 25. If the people are specifically called to relate to YHWH as aliens and tenants (*g<sup>e</sup>rīm v<sup>e</sup>tōšābīm*), then how can these measures distinguish in the way they do on the basis that they do? How can a division be made between ‘you’ and ‘those who have been born in *your* land’, when the land belongs to YHWH? In the context of discerning an ecologically progressive ethic of limitation, perhaps here we have reached one of the limits of limits. Gerstenberger asks,

How can a contradiction this obvious be explained? Is this a concession to large property owners who own slaves, owners who on the basis of vv. 35-38 must take financial losses? ... Whatever the case, the subsection concerning the (anti-) slavery law betrays a questionable sort of group-egoistical thinking, and shows just how ambivalent people can be even when they are speaking in the name of the one God who in reality is the creator and father of all human beings.<sup>154</sup>

However we respond to the ecological imperatives that confront our societies, whatever texts, rituals, traditions and experiences we draw on for strength, inspiration and correction, we must recognize that we will face opposition if we are to be as radical as we need to. What is more, this opposition will likely come from those who resist our perception of the world, those who once claimed that they shared it, and – most likely – ourselves also.

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<sup>153</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 390.

<sup>154</sup> Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 390-391.

## Conclusions

At the outset of this thesis I introduced the notion of Leviticus as an *alien* text. Not only an alien text, however, but also a text that has been marginalized within the history of biblical scholarship partly on the basis of the conception that it is both an *alienated* and an *alienating* text. Moreover, in Lev. 25.23, I highlighted a text that instructs the people that the nature of their most fundamental, identity defining relationship – the covenantal relationship with YHWH – means that they must be *aliens* with respect to the land in which they live. In the light of the contemporary hegemony of Western, late-capitalist culture, and the alienation – people from the natural world, people from people, people from the means of production – that it entails, these biblical and interpretive horizons of alienation, I argued, can become a locus of meaning from which to offer ecological reflections on, and interpretation of, Leviticus.

Drawing on Williams Davies' lament concerning Christian interpretation's tendency to allow doctrinal concerns to eclipse all others and thus its lack of engagement with locatedness and specificity (*realia*), I highlighted a further context of *alienation* within the core of the tradition of Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. I explored this notion of alienation by highlighting specific tendencies in the tradition of Christian interpretation to conceive of land as a merely narrative space or Historical arena (utilizing *Historical* and *History* to represent overwhelming concern for the charting of the progression of time through and away from a strange location and towards a more familiar one).

Proposing it as a way of opening up space for reflection on more ecologically fruitful conceptions of the natural world, I engaged the notion that the people have to conceive of themselves as *aliens* and tenants in the land, in order to grasp the true nature of their relationship with God, and the interconnection between that relationship and their relationship to the land.

I highlighted the fact that the land is envisaged in several key texts in Leviticus as not a passive backdrop – the stage on which God’s actions in History play out – but rather an actor; and more than that, a co-member of a three-way covenantal relationship that binds God, the people and the land. This notion of the land as an active character that has a relationship with YHWH – and specifically a relationship that is both independent of and older than the one between YHWH and Israel – is profound in the context of an ecological interpretation. The conception that through ritual impurity and disobedience of the law the people can pollute the land and fundamentally disrupt its relationship with God, is grounds for a radical critique of the notion that faith in God has little or nothing to do with how we respond to and treat the natural world, or that covenanting and worship are solely human activities.<sup>1</sup>

Confronted, therefore, with the challenge of doing interpretation in a way that is open to both strangeness and *realia*, we encounter a conception of the land as a puking, whoring, covenant partner that observes its own independent, cultically bounded, relationship with God. Much like the grounding of the sabbath tradition in the patterns of the initial creation itself, this priestly notion that the land is ritually obedient to God is of obvious ideological significance.

While I have tried to present interpretations of texts that take ideological-critical concerns seriously, I have been determined to prevent my reading being forced into cynicism or antipathy by them. The priestly writers were clearly writing to bolster and legitimate their claims to power and influence – likely in the context of a religious vacuum following (or possibly in anticipation of) the return from exile. They did conceive of anthropology and society in terms that are irredeemably hierarchical, patriarchal and essentialist (in terms of gender,

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<sup>1</sup> The ecological potential of an engagement with the concept of ‘creation’s praise’, in scripture and the Christian tradition, is explored in detail in the recent work of Dominic Coad; e.g. see Coad, Dominic, ‘Creation’s Praise of God: A Proposal for a Theology of the Non-Human Creation’, *Theology*, vol. 12, No. 867, (2009) 181-189.

sexuality, physical 'wholeness' and so on), but I have not interpreted these aspects in terms of a corrupt political and ideological vision that necessitates utter resistance, but have moderated cynicism in light of the all-encapsulating, rigorous and attentive nature of the priestly vision. Among other things, Leviticus is, I maintain, a genuine, serious and thoughtful attempt to engage with everything from the grand problems of anomie, alienation and culture death to the regulation of the body, within a single, complex theological and ritualistic scheme.

On the basis of an examination of the complex rites and rituals that make up the Israelite sacrificial system, I proposed that the common assumption that animal sacrifice is grounded in the logic of human priority over and domination of nature is a crude, stereotypical and unsatisfactory context within which to interpret. Ritual killing, I proposed, can be seen to constitute a response to the inescapable reality of the anthropogenic corruption of the world, manifest in the priestly worldview as cultic pollution. If ignored, Leviticus suggests, such pollution will lead to the fundamental disruption of the relationship between the people and the land; a notion that functions as a backwards projected interpretation of the religious, economic, socio-political and ecological<sup>2</sup> disaster that was the exile.

Examining the internal (eco)logic of the various sacrificial rites, I focused on the conception of the 'sin offering' as both a crucial aspect of the Levitical scheme, and a significant theological touchstone within the Christian tradition. In (reservedly) adopting Milgrom's thesis that sacrificial rites were held to cleanse sin, but not that of the individual, but the sancta – the holy vessels and spaces at the heart of the community – I attempted to demonstrate the contextual and ritualistic significance of the anthropogenic nature of sin. Humans pollute the

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<sup>2</sup> I use ecological here in a more specific sense than usual, referring to the notion of ecology as concerned with the relation of natural things one to another (see Introduction).

sanctuary and therefore it must be cleansed for the sake of the wellbeing of the whole land – the common good. However, humans cannot achieve this cleansing on their own, but must rely on a non-human member of the community – a creature from a species effected by, but not responsible for sin and thus capable of crossing the boundary between the profane and the sacred – to enact the cleansing and nullifying the threat.

Stereotypical assumptions concerning the humble, perhaps insignificant status of non-human animals within the sacrificial context are therefore challenged by the notion of sacrificed animals as cultically empowered and ritually effective. Animals slaughtered as sacrifices are therefore conceived as active participants in, rather than passive victims of, the temple system. Crucial emphasis was also placed on the role of sacrifices that do not require slaughter and therefore posit a spectrum of ritual activity in which non-human animals partake. In a similar way to the conception of the land as a cultic observer, this conception of animals naturally functions to reinforce the political and ideological influence of the priestly class – “we’re all in this together”. However, it also speaks powerfully to a vision of reality in which all life is turned toward God in terms of worship, but also in terms of the work of regeneration and restoration of a fractured creation.

The relationship between sacrificial killing and sanctified eating is something that has the potential to radically confront and convict the contemporary Western reader. I live in a culture where the majority of people relate to food as a packaged, purchased and often imported commodity. The reality of the ecological crisis seriously calls food security into question. However, the re-conception of food as a living thing, as the harvested fruit of the earth – perhaps even as a sacrifice – promises more than just the basis for a sustainable food economy based on a mass return to small-scale cultivation, it also enables a spiritual reconnection with the means by which we sustain

ourselves. From the notion of food as a sacred thing flows also the potential for rich reflections on the saying of grace round the kitchen table, the sharing of the eucharist at the altar rail, participation in the disciplines of the church calendar and several other areas of the Christian life that can speak meaningfully into the context of the contemporary ecological crisis.

The overarching emphasis on the function of limits and boundaries is one of the aspects that ties together my interpretation of the broad vision of the world presented in Leviticus. I traced its influence from its grounding in the priestly conception of creation as separation and distinction, through the notion that sacrificial slaughter functions as a limit to both violence and consumption and to the concept of sabbath as an overarching boundary. The sabbath day limits the control that labour can have on the individual – from the high priest to the working animal. Sabbath is a space not for passive disengagement from *realia*, but for reflection on what persists, what has true meaning and purpose, and therefore for reengagement with the world, in the context of a vision for its widespread flourishing.

The sabbath year reorients and reinforces the vital working relationship between the people and the land. In the insistence that the land must also rest from the work of producing food and other resources, we can perceive a profound affirmation of the indivisibility of the needs and desires of humans and the rest of the ecosystem. Intensive labour that enslaves the worker, the farm animal and the land itself falls outside of the boundary of what is acceptable, but also of what is necessary. YHWH's land is not a barren place – it is not Azazel's wilderness. Food can be grown, crops raised and people fed and clothed by the means of hard but modest labour. Just as sacrificial activity seems to emphasize the humility and fragility of human community both in terms of its debt to and reliance on the rest of creation, so the sabbath tradition reminds the people that without the land, without food, they die. This is, of course, no less true now than

then. Pushing the boundaries of the natural systems that regulate the eco-system and maintain life in the name of technological progress and economic growth, is not even in our own interests let alone the common good, as understood as that of the whole community of creation.

Destructive patterns of relating to the earth are therefore always fundamentally linked to destructive patterns within human society – ecological justice is social justice and *vice versa*. The regulations concerning the year of Jubilee fundamentally point to this reality. By guaranteeing against the permanent alienation of the land from the families to whom it was apportioned to work and live from, the priestly vision speaks to the connection between alienation from family land and the agricultural means of production and the pollution and overworking of the land. The Jubilee release acts as a safety net to reset and reorder society every fifty years, but the role of the redeemer, who buys his kinsman's debt, intends to prevent such situations from arising.

Not only is this conception of the redeemer as the one who secures something from the threat of slavery a fruitful locus for and corrective to reflection on notions of salvation that tend to be highly spiritualized and alienated from *realia*, but it also speaks powerfully to the crippling power of debt. Debt makes a person bend low rather than stand upright. It corrodes dignity, fuels poverty and, therein, destructive patterns of living, and damages lives and whole communities. Debt, and the slavery to which it invariably leads, fundamentally changes the structure of a society and spawns many types of injustice.

One of the most pressing concerns for Christian communities should be the response to this scriptural witness to a vision of a society insulated from the worst effects of debt, slavery and alienation. In a world where small farms are being constantly swallowed up by larger, expanding ones and the majority of us continue to be alienated from the most fundamental resources of our society, we

must do the work of thinking through together how we can witness to an alternative reality – one based on the bounty of creation, the boundedness of right living, the sanctity of eating, working and resting and the radically intertwined nature of all things. This work must be rigorous and also obedient - critical of the witness of the scriptures and yet humbled by it. Especially in the context of the West, recently exposed (to the apparent surprise of many) as utterly in the grip of the markets, the church community must reengage with the problem of debt. Reflections on Leviticus' conception of debt as a major threat to a just and sustainable society, can be seen to reinforce the (eco)logic that underpins the prayer of Christ, who asked "forgive us our debts (*opheilēmata*) as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6.12). The populations of many countries have recently experienced the thrill of forgiving the debts of the banks that run their economies, but far fewer people are having their debts forgiven. This forgiveness *is* the forgiveness of the gospel. It is salvation.

In the reflections that I have offered in this thesis I have tried to demonstrate my understanding that engaging with the real is not so much about attempting to enter and experience of the world of the text, as it is about perceiving that within the text which has the potential to reveal and meaningfully engage the *realia* of our world. This, I propose, is how a text can be both profoundly idealistic and thoroughly concerned with lived experience – strange and yet profoundly real.

There is always more work to be done. I outlined the scope of this thesis in the Introduction and in so doing gestured towards further work that could extend, expand and complement the work done here. In terms of biblical interpretation there are a number of texts that stand in the shadows cast by others. The discipline of attending to a single canonical text, or some other type of fundamentally limited unit of material, promotes attention to the strange as opposed to attraction to the familiar. It also promotes depth as opposed to



breadth of analysis, which in turn reiterates the need for a community of interpretation.

However, as I have implied in the reflections on praxis laid out above, not all the work is scriptural. The hermeneutic circle never closes – we must go on interpreting texts, traditions, experiences; and each in the light of all and to the enrichment of the whole. The church is a fundamentally located conception of community – our critical reflections, our worship, our praxis need all interpret each other. This is the most important future work. As I mentioned at the beginning, the ecological crisis gives the church, the academy and the whole of society reason to reflect on the resources we have to draw on in the face of disaster, and cause to probe, reflect on, weep at and gather round those resources in order to assist us in the work of remaking our communities to be sustainable and viable places for generations to come to inhabit.

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