

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

Submitted by **Jonathan David Morgan** to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology in September 2010

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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.

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