

2015

# Writing Commentary as Ritual and as Discovery

James Watts  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

James W. Watts, "Writing Commentary as Ritual and as Discovery," in *The Genre of Biblical Commentary: Essays in Honor of John E. Hartley* (ed. William Yarchin and Timothy Finlay; Wipf & Stock, 2015), 40-53.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# The Genre of Biblical Commentary

Essays in Honor of John E. Hartley  
on the Occasion of his 75th Birthday

Edited by  
TIMOTHY D. FINLAY  
and WILLIAM YARCHIN

PICKWICK Publications • Eugene, Oregon

2015

## 2

## Writing Commentary as Ritual and as Discovery

—James W. Watts

I AM DELIGHTED TO write about commentary writing for a master commentator, John Hartley. I keep his Leviticus commentary within easy arm's reach and consult it daily as I write my own commentary on that book.<sup>1</sup> He has in this way been a stimulating and dependable conversation partner. It is exactly this kind of conversation that commentary writing and reading is all about.

Much of my life has revolved around commentary writing and editing. Writing commentaries preoccupied much of my father's research. While I was in college, I worked summers compiling bibliographies for his Isaiah commentary.<sup>2</sup> As a graduate student, I proofread those volumes and two decades later I edited his revisions of them. Once established in a teaching career myself, I joined him in editing the WBC series as Associate Old Testament Editor (1997–2011). My own research now focuses on writing the Leviticus volumes in another technical commentary series, the Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (HCOT). The first volume was published in 2013.<sup>3</sup> So writing and editing commentaries has shaped much of my intellectual experience.

1. Hartley, *Leviticus*.

2. J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33, Isaiah 34–66*.

3. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*.

I have discovered that it is a surprisingly creative experience. It leads to thinking about issues and taking positions on debates that I had never thought about before. More than that, I have occasionally written about topics and made observations that, as far as I can tell, have never been written about before—a particularly surprising experience, given that the Hebrew Bible has been the subject of intensive interpretation and commentary for more than two thousand years. People frequently think that everything that can possibly be said about the Bible has already been said, and many times over. Yet I find that writing a commentary is to embark on a voyage of discovery that can lead to surprising innovations as often as any other mode of research.

My teaching career has taken place entirely within religious studies departments in liberal arts colleges and universities (at Hastings College from 1993 to 1999, in the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University since then). Unlike the theological faculties where my father taught, my colleagues in other religious studies subjects and, especially, in other liberal arts departments, find biblical scholars' addiction to commentary writing somewhat peculiar. Commentary is not a typical genre of scholarship in these fields, except for some very specialized areas in the study of literature and law. It carries little prestige at research universities that quantify research output almost entirely on the basis of refereed journal articles and university press monographs (so I make sure that sufficient quantities of these genres appear on my c.v. too).

Intellectual and ideological concerns also lead observers outside of biblical studies, and some even within the guild, to regard commentary writing with suspicion. It seems to them to reproduce and strengthen tradition rather than emphasize innovative research. Though commentary received a brief reprieve when some philosophers reclassified all literature as simply recycling older materials,<sup>4</sup> that intellectual moment seems to have passed without fundamentally altering institutionalized assumptions about the genres of academic knowledge production. Critics within the field of biblical studies have suggested that commentary writing is fueled primarily by the religious book market rather than by research priorities.<sup>5</sup> They have

4. E.g., Barthes, "The Death of the Author," "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." He went on to declare that the death of the author also means the death of the critic, because interpretation of a text's singular meaning has become impossible. Cf. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 285.

5. Avalos, *End of Biblical Studies*, 325–37.

accused biblical scholars of colluding to support the cultural hegemony of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

These suspicions of biblical commentaries observe that commentary writing takes place within a particular constellation of religious and academic politics that creates the market for commentaries and shapes the expectations of those who write them. That such cultural constraints also shape the production of every other textual genre does not alter the peculiarity of the social forces that generate biblical commentaries.

I do not intend to counter the political claims made by these authors. I instead propose a theoretical model, based on ritual theory, that can encompass both my experience of intellectual discovery through commentary writing and their observations about the social functions of commentaries.

### WRITING AND READING COMMENTARY AS AN EXPERIENCE OF DISCOVERY

The commentary genre distinguishes itself by the fact that writers should engage every portion of the studied text, usually in sequential order. In the HCOT and WBC which included a new translation of the text, that expectation requires engaging every word of the Hebrew text, as well as many previous translations of it. As a result, the task of writing the HCOT commentary on Leviticus draws my attention to many issues that I have never thought about before, infusing this scholarly experience with an unusual degree of suspense. I never know where the next verse will lead—sometimes to observations and conclusions that few, if any, interpreters have made before.

A few examples will illustrate the kinds of innovative observations that commentary writing can generate. I refer readers to my commentary for the arguments in favor of these conclusions and leave it to them to judge their plausibility base on its exposition. The focus here will remain on why they came to mind in the first place.

One kind of observation addresses the text's rhetorical structure. Rhetorical analysis of a text's persuasive function provides important insights into its intended and actual effects, especially on those listening audiences for whom the Pentateuch (see Deut. 31:9–13) and most other ancient literature, was written. So this innovative approach that emphasizes persuasion<sup>7</sup> requires me to examine rhetorical effects at the micro level of verse

6. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic* 17–102; Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible*, 57–84; Avalos, *End of Biblical Studies*, passim.

7. Previously argued in two monographs: J. W. Watts, *Reading Law*; and J. W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*.

arrangement, sentence structure, and individual word choices. For example, the prohibition of leavened bread on the altar and the requirement of salt on offerings in Lev 2:11–13 are obvious digressions because they break the chiasmic arch that structures chap. 2, as Didier Luciani observed.<sup>8</sup> I noticed, however, that this digression has also been shaped poetically:

This passage uses repeated terms in the first clause of each verse and the end of the final verse . . . to produce a tightly unified composition that highlights the four prohibitions in the other clauses . . . The four-fold repetition of “salt” in every clause of v. 13 emphasizes this concluding verse as well as the conceptual reversal that it contains: while vv. 11–12 prohibit additives of yeast and syrup, v. 13 requires salt as an additive to all “presents.” The careful word choice and arrangement of these verses shows that this digression from the structure and contents of the rest of the chapter was nevertheless composed for maximal rhetorical impact.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly in Lev 6:8 (English 6:15), the word *אזכרתה* “its memorial portion” interrupts the usual refrain, “a soothing scent for YHWH” (cf. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9). The priestly (P) writer often varies or interrupts the refrains that structure his composition,<sup>10</sup> so other commentators have given little or no attention to the position of the word. However, attention to how the text sounds when read publicly caused me to realize that rhythm and rhyme led to this word appearing in this odd position:

The verse can be analyzed as three lines that each end on a long “a” vowel (*מנחה* “commodity” twice, then *אזכרתה* “its memorial” or, with the Masoretic accentuation, . . . *שמנה . . . מנחה* . . . *אזכרתה* “its oil . . . commodity . . . its memorial”). That leaves *ליהוה* “for YHWH” outside the three-line structure in emphatic position at the end.<sup>11</sup>

Taking into account the rhetorical setting of public readings also led me to a new explanation for the use of direct, second-person address in Lev 2:4–7. Whereas chaps. 1 and 3 couch all their provisions in the third singular

8. Luciani, *Structure littéraire du Lévitique*, 21–22.

9. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 260–61.

10. As already observed by Paran, *Priestly Style*: “The priestly writer enjoys playing with words as though they were building blocks which can be put together in a variety of patterns according to the whim of the writer” (vii). Yet this observation has rarely been taken into account by commentators who consider such irregularities as signs of editorial changes.

11. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 396.

typical of casuistic instructions, the instructions to lay people for preparing bread offerings switches to second singular because bread offerings must be baked at home. Priests cannot supervise their proper performance there, so it becomes entirely the responsibility of individual lay worshippers. The second singular pronouns drive that point home, especially in the aural experience of a public reading or recitation.<sup>12</sup>

Other innovations arise from summarizing and evaluating current research on pieces of the text and the subjects they address. That is surprising, since summary and review seem the opposite of creative research. My experience indicates otherwise, however. Evaluating other scholars' conclusions often leads me to take innovative positions on subjects that I did not anticipate addressing at all. For example, investigating the translation of מן-התרמים או מן-בני היונה, usually translated "from turtledoves and pigeons," in Lev 1:14 led me to articles by Thomas Staubli. He argued that the use of two terms must designate two different kinds of birds, rather than the closely related turtledoves and pigeons. He found that Sumerian and Akkadian cognates of תור/תר referred to wild hens and, later, domesticated chickens.<sup>13</sup> The LXX, however, supports the meaning "turtledove," so Staubli thought that turtledoves must have replaced wild hens in the rituals of the Second Temple. I found Staubli's arguments for the meaning "hen" or "chicken" persuasive, but not his acceptance of the LXX evidence for a change of ritual practice. Examination of Greek vocabulary for domestic fowl revealed that the common word for chicken, like English "hen," can be used more generally for many small birds. The LXX translator probably found that too inexact for the distinctions being mandated by Leviticus. He may have been led to "turtledove" by thinking that the Hebrew word, תור, is onomatopoeic for the sounds that doves make.<sup>14</sup> I stand by this argument and conclusion, yet it continues to surprise me that I have published an opinion about the taxonomy of domestic fowl species, a subject otherwise never drawing my interest!

Reviewing the history of interpretation of a particular word or verse can also stimulate innovations by highlighting how historical movements have generated unconscious trends in biblical interpretation. The phrase אורים ותמים in Lev 8:8 prompted me to make this kind of observation. Because my job as a commentary writer includes translating the Hebrew text into English, I was led to wonder why we usually transliterate this phrase as "Urim and Thummim" instead of translating the words. Though there

12. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1-10*, 256.

13. Staubli, "Hühneropfer."

14. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1-10*, 220.

is some debate about the words' meanings, they are not more difficult than many other ritual terms that are routinely translated. My survey of the history of translation showed that they had actually been translated with some variant of "light and truth" into Greek, Latin, Aramaic, German and English. The Geneva Bible in 1560 first transliterated the terms instead. Its date and context led me to suspect Reformation-era polemics behind this break with translation tradition. Sure enough, in searching for references to these divinatory objects in sixteenth-century European rhetoric, I discovered that Roman Catholics used them as biblical evidence for the infallibility of the Aaronide high priest and therefore as a typological proof of the Pope's infallibility as well. Protestants reacted by interpreting the names of the objects as indicating only the moral virtue of the priests, not evidence of infallibility. Transliteration further diluted the significance of these objects in Protestant Bibles.

These polemics created a habit of transliterating the terms that has persisted for five centuries, now even in Roman Catholic Bibles (e.g., NAB, JB). I felt that it was time to shake off this polemical heritage, and so translated the terms with the words, "luminaries and paragons."<sup>15</sup> The innovation, however, lies less in the English words that I chose than in the fact that I translated the terms at all. Reviewing the history of translation led me to realize how historical polemics continue to shape the behavior of interpreters. Choosing to reject this heritage led to innovation through translation. This is why it is necessary to pay attention to the history of the Bible's reception as part and parcel of exegesis, not just as a supplementary exercise. That history shapes how we translate and interpret the "original" text, whether we are aware of its influence or not. Conscious awareness allows for more intentional, and creative, exegesis.

The history of Leviticus's cultural reception also drew my attention to major omissions by comparison to the reception of some other biblical passages. The history of Western art or drama reflects little of Leviticus, an omission calling attention to the influence of literary genres on the visual arts. Artists much prefer to draw from narratives rather than from legal and instructional materials.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Exodus, Numbers, and especially Genesis, get depicted artistically far more often than Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

In contrast to its lack of influence on art, one might expect that the ritual instructions of Leviticus would have wielded more influence over ritual performances in Jewish and Christian communities. Its offering instructions certainly did influence the rituals of Jewish temples of the later

15. J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1-10*, 457-62.

16. J. W. Watts, "Illustrating Leviticus"; and J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1-10*, 33-39.

Second Temple period, and some of its purity rules still govern the daily lives of many observant Jews. However, the ritual gap between the book's instructions and later Jewish and Christian practices involves more than just the presentation of offerings. Leviticus 8, following instructions in Exodus 29, depicts the most elaborate ordination ritual found anywhere in Jewish or Christian bibles. Yet Jewish and Christian rituals for appointing rabbis, priests and other kinds of ministers to religious offices imitate instead the much simpler ritual of laying on hands, modeled by Moses' appointment of Joshua (Deut 34:9). The fact that neither Jews nor Christians grant Aaronide priests religious authority as mandated by Leviticus (especially 10:11–12) has inhibited imitating the book's ordination ritual for priests. This omission points out how changes in religious polity from the leadership of temples to the leadership of synagogues and churches shaped the book's cultural reception as much as the more famous changes in rituals of sacrifice and purification.

I have chosen examples of innovations in the interpretation of details, rather than from my commentary's wider thematic and historical arguments, because commentaries are infamous for their focus on details. Yet precisely by focusing on details, I repeatedly surprised myself by reaching innovative conclusions. In my experience, it is a focus on details informed by reflections on theories and methods that produces the most creative and critical thinking.

## WRITING AND READING COMMENTARY AS RITUAL

How should we account for experiences of discovery in writing and, hopefully, reading commentaries? David J. A. Clines recounted his early experience of commentary writing as a "quest for truth" that changed over time into the experience of directing a symphony of voices representing readers of all times and places. He observed that readers of such a commentary

can find and read what they want, and be perpetually tempted to read more than they thought they wanted, wander down avenues they didn't realize existed, waste time (i.e. enjoy themselves) with the text rather than efficiently pinpoint the answer to the question with which they had logged on.<sup>17</sup>

Clines' experience as a reader and writer of commentaries sounds very much like that of readers of the Bible itself. Though many Bible readers start with one question seeking one answer, reading scriptures frequently leads to

17. Clines, "Future of Commentary," 18–19, 23.

wandering through the text and making discoveries. Narrative criticism has theorized this experience of becoming immersed in "the world of the Bible" where the text generates questions to the reader rather than vice versa.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, commentary reading and writing extends and reproduces the ritual experience of scripture reading, or "Bible study."

Commentary supports the Bible's religious and cultural influence, as cultural critics have maintained. However, identifying commentary as a form of ritual allows for more nuanced analysis of this influence. Rituals have been analyzed by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, as well as scholars of religion, throughout the twentieth century, and in the past few decades, ritual studies has developed into a recognized and influential field in its own right. Its resources can be deployed to understand the form and function of biblical commentaries, as well as the cultural role of biblical studies in general.

Although theorists debate the definition and function of ritual, they agree on its ability to focus the attention of individuals and, especially, groups of people. Rituals draw and maintain attention. Rituals mark times and spaces as extraordinary by requiring attention to very ordinary activities, such as walking, eating, and breathing.<sup>19</sup> They frequently require regular repetition. Instead of entering a room in whatever way is most practical, a procession requires attention to the timing, speed and sequence by which a group of people enter a room. Instead of eating a meal based on taste and etiquette only, ritual meals also require attention to the preparation and nature of the food and the sequence in which it gets eaten. Instead of letting the autonomous nervous system regulate one's breathing, many meditation rituals require attention to each inhalation and exhalation. Ritual calendars encourage repetition of particular rituals at set times during the day, week, or year. Though rituals often use such extraordinary attention to ordinary behavior to emphasize ideals or doctrines, some rituals serve primarily to pay attention to particular people (graduations, funerals), or to a nation (oaths of office, pledges of allegiance), or to a deity, or to a text.

Writing biblical commentaries fits easily within this description of ritual as extraordinary attention to ordinary activities. The normal activity of reading gets ritualized by commentary's focus on textual details and

18. Riceour, *The Conflicts of Interpretation*.

19. Smith observed that "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts" (*To Take Place*, 109; similarly Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 74, 92; for a broader survey of "ritual-like" activities, see Bell, *Ritual*, 138–69).

on debates over interpretive method, as well as by regular repetition in the form of writing and publishing ever more commentaries.

By saying that commentary “ritualizes” scripture, I do not mean to disparage commentary writing or reading in any way, though many will hear the claim as pejorative. Ritual frequently gets disparaged as “just ritual” or “empty ritual,” and as “ritualistic” behavior in implicit or explicit contrast with religious practices that are authentic, heartfelt, and moral. These negative associations with the word “ritual” are deeply rooted in Western culture which deploys them polemically to distinguish true beliefs from superstitious falsehoods. The distinction has been used regularly by Christians to disparage the religious practices of pagans, Jews, and heretics, by Protestants to attack Catholics, and by modern rationalists to attack all forms of religious practice and belief.<sup>20</sup> Attacks on ritualism have been a favorite tactic for undermining religious authorities of all kinds.<sup>21</sup>

Against this prejudice which is deeply ingrained in both Christian and secular culture, theorists of ritual observe that all human societies make use of rituals, and in a wide variety of ways. Rituals play vital roles in marking changes in status within families (weddings, funerals), within religious communities (bar/bat mitzvahs, baptisms, confirmations, ordinations), and within nations (inaugurations, oaths of office). They serve to demarcate publicly those who affirm a particular community’s religious identity (Passover seders, communion meals) or national identity (pledges of allegiance, national holidays).<sup>22</sup> Rituals unite individuals and communities but can also be used to fuel conflicts. Ritualization therefore should be understood as basic human behavior. By saying that commentary writing and reading ritualizes scripture, I am categorizing commentaries as the products of a fundamental human activity.

Many different religions ritualize sacred texts. Comparative study of religious communities provides insight into the distinctive effects of ritualizing scriptures in three different dimensions.<sup>23</sup> Commentary ritualizes the interpretation of scripture, as does translation, preaching, and devotional study. Ritualizing a text’s *semantic dimension* in these ways enhances claims to the authority of both text and interpreters. It provides a basis, the biblical

20. See Búc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 251.

21. J. W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 154–61.

22. On ritual as publicly “indexing” people’s relationship to a “canonical” order, see Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 53–58, 105–6, 122.

23. See J. W. Watts, “Three Dimensions.” On the performative dimension, see also Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*; and Yoo, “Public Scripture Reading Rituals.” On the iconic dimension, see also Parmenter, “The Iconic Book”; Parmenter, “The Bible as Icon”; and Larson, “Imperialized Sites of Memory.”

text, for adjudicating disputes about religious doctrine and practice. Ritualizing interpretation leads to the emergence of expert interpreters (clergy and scholars), who specialize in making and weighing exegetical arguments. The more communities ascribe authority to their scriptures, the more they look to expert interpreters to address the challenges and disputes facing the community.<sup>24</sup>

That does not mean, however, that scholars always succeed in directing scripture-based communities. Texts can be ritualized in two other dimensions, their performative and iconic dimensions. Ritualization in all three dimensions distinguishes scriptures from other kinds of texts (such as literary classics, legal codes and theatrical scripts that are only ritualized regularly in one or two dimensions).

Ritualizing the *performative dimension* through reading, recitation, and memorization, as well as through the visual and theatrical arts, inspires audiences and performers to label the scriptures themselves as inspired. But such performances often exceed the bounds of expert interpretation and scholars have difficulty controlling the products of artistic creativity, such as films like *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and *Noah* (2014).

The *iconic dimension* gets ritualized by decorating the scriptural text, keeping it in special bindings, boxes, rooms or buildings, carrying it as an amulet, and manipulating it in various public and private ceremonies. Ritualizing the iconic dimension conveys legitimacy to the scripture, to the tradition that it represents, and to the community or individual that possesses it. Though scholars frequently ridicule the use of amulets and expensive decorations, they rarely have sufficient authority to challenge powerful or wealthy people who manipulate scriptures to legitimize their social status by taking oaths of office, by commissioning elaborate copies of scriptures, or by collecting and displaying rare books and manuscripts.

Commentary, as one of many ways for ritualizing scripture, conveys authority to its author and makes that authority available to its readers. Commentary also takes its place within an unending debate about the proper interpretation of scripture. It does so as part of the system by which religious communities adjudicate conflicts on the basis of scripture and delegate the debates to a relatively small circle of experts. The fact that interpretive debates often continue without end shows that religious communities rarely need the experts to reach consensus. Instead, the mere act of relegating the debate to experts frees the rest of the community from its divisive consequences. Of course, the frequency of schisms among scripture-based

24. J. W. Watts, “Ancient Iconic Texts.”

communities shows that this strategy does not always succeed. Nevertheless, delegating conflict to expert exegetes remains the favored means of resolution in religious congregations and also in modern secular democracies, which provide give judges the power to enforce decisions made on the basis of arguments from expert lawyers. It is not accidental, therefore, that legal scholarship is the other academic discipline that favors the writing of commentaries.

Understanding commentary as a ritual of textual interpretation helps explain the experience of discovery in writing and reading commentaries. Just as physical rituals draw attention to realities otherwise ignored (breathing, eating, social indexing of processions, etc.), so the interpretive ritual of writing a commentary draws attention to otherwise ignored features of biblical texts. Each of the examples I described above can be understood from this perspective. (1) The requirement to analyze the literary structure of every passage and every word choice, together with a rhetorical approach, led me to recognize patterns of word repetition, rhyme and refrain variation previously unmentioned in the commentary literature. (2) The requirement to pay attention to the history of translation led to uncovering the impact of sectarian polemics on modern translation practices, with the result that I translated “luminaries and paragons” instead of transliterating as “Urim and Thummim.” That same focus led to discovering the impact of Greek vocabulary on translation and interpretation and therefore translating “chickens” instead of “turtledoves.” (3) The requirement to pay attention to the history of interpretation led to observing omissions that show the impact of literary genres on the visual arts, and also the impact of changing Jewish and Christian politics on the occlusion of Leviticus’s charter to Aaronide priests. In each case, it was the ritual requirement that commentaries pay attention to every detail of a text, and the requirement of the HCOT series that I pay particular attention to translation and the history of interpretation, that set conditions which stimulated my creative insights into Leviticus.

It remains for other interpreters to decide whether my innovations are persuasive or not. My point here is that the commentary ritualizes scripture by drawing attention to every aspect of the text and giving weight to Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation. These characteristics of traditional scriptural interpretation continue to direct modern critical interpretation, as Avelos and others have observed. They also stimulate innovative research on the text and its religious traditions, quite in contrast to the stereotype of religious rituals as conservative and stultifying.

Ritual theories provide explanations for this dynamic interaction of tradition and innovation. In fact, comparative study has shown that rituals’ reputation for invariance is matched by their actual tendency towards

constant change and innovation.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, commentaries’ reputation for preserving and repeating tradition obscures their frequent innovations. Therefore, analyzing commentary writing and reading as a form of ritualizing the semantic dimension of a scripture provides a step forward in understanding how religious and academic communities use scriptures both to conserve a tradition and to adapt it to new circumstances.

## COMMENTARY AND SCRIPTURE

Labelling commentary as ritual, specifically as a ritualized genre of text, leads to the observation that commentary not only contributes to the Bible’s status as a scripture, it depends on that status as well. Ritualizing the Bible in its iconic, performative and semantic dimensions first gave it scriptural status and is what has maintained it over the millennia.<sup>26</sup> Biblical commentaries ritualize its semantic dimension and so play a role in maintaining the Bible’s scriptural status. As William Graham observed, “Scripture cannot exist without constant interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> The sheer scale, scope, and history of scholarship on the Bible depict its subject as worthy of such expense and attention.

Interpretive scholarship, however, is hardly the only engine supporting the Bible’s prestige. These scriptures also gain their prestige and cultural influence from their ritualization in iconic and performative, as well as semantic, dimensions by Jewish and Christian communities across two millennia and now by 2.5 billion adherents worldwide. Hence, in contrast to literary scholarship that can plausibly be credited or blamed for generating the continuing prestige of certain novelists and poets, biblical scholarship plays at most a supporting role in the Bible’s ritual publicity engine. Nevertheless, this cultural context means that critical commentary should pay attention, first of all, to the biblical text’s status as a scripture and to the moral consequences of its influence in contemporary societies.

Leviticus is an especially interesting book upon which to comment as a scripture. Although a few verses get cited repeatedly as moral guidelines in contemporary debates (e.g., 18:22; 19:18), neither Jews nor Christians

25. Ronald Grimes noted that ritual criticism, and criticism by ritual, is as persistent and ubiquitous as ritual itself, and closely related to ritual innovation: “The contradiction between complaining about and revising rites, on the one hand, and treating them as a sacrosanct preserve, on the other, is blatant and persistent” (*Ritual Criticism*, 17).

26. For the claim that ritualizing all three dimensions was fundamental to the Pentateuch’s elevation as the first Jewish scripture, as Torah, see J. W. Watts, “Ritualizing Israel’s Iconic Texts.”

27. Graham, “Winged Words,” 39.



follow its explicit instructions about offerings and about many other matters. So how does it function as scripture? Commentators who address the book's scriptural role usually take a theological approach to doing so. In my experience, rhetoric, ritual studies, and comparative scriptures studies provide broader avenues for understanding both the text and its cultural history as a scripture. In any case, the text's scriptural status in two different religious traditions cannot be ignored without misconceiving the social forces that support the enterprise of commentary itself.

The meanings of Leviticus have been broadcast by the sounds of its words and the sight of the books and scrolls that contain it as much as by semantic interpretation of its contents, which have themselves been manifested in ritual and legal performances as well as in sermons and commentaries. Out of all this emerges the phenomenon of scripture, of which Leviticus is an integral part.<sup>28</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Avalos, Hector. *The End of Biblical Studies*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." Translated by S. Heath. In *Image—Music—Text*, 142–48. New York: Hill & Wang, 1977.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Berlinerblau, Jacques. *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Búc, Philippe. *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Clines, David J. A. "Esther and the Future of Commentary." In *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, edited by Leonard Greenspoon and Sidnie White Crawford, 17–30. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Graham, William A. *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- . "Winged Words: Scriptures and Classics as Iconic Texts." *Postscripts* 6 (2010) 7–22. Reprinted in *Iconic Books and Texts*, edited by James W. Watts, 33–46. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.
- Grimes, Ronald L. *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990.
- Hartley, John E. *Leviticus*. WBC. Waco, TX: Word, 1992.

- Larson, Jason T. "The Gospels as Imperialized Sites of Memory in Late Antiquity Christianity." *Postscripts* 6 (2010) 291–307. Reprinted in *Iconic Books and Texts*, edited by James W. Watts, 373–88. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.
- Luciani, Didier. *Sainteté et pardon*. Vol 1, *Structure littéraire du Lévitique*. BETL 185. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005.
- Paran, Meir. *Forms of the Priestly Style in the Pentateuch: Patterns, Linguistic Usages, Syntactic Structures* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989.
- Parmenter, Dorina Miller. "The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals." *Postscripts* 2 (2006) 160–89. Reprinted in *Iconic Books and Texts*, edited by James W. Watts, 63–92. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.
- . "The Bible as Icon: Myths of the Divine Origins of Scripture." In *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, edited by Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias, 298–310. Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity 13. London: T & T Clark, 2009.
- Rappaport, Roy. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Conflicts of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Translated by W. Domingo et al. Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1974.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Staubli, Thomas. "Hühneropfer im Alten Israel: Zum Verständnis von Lev 1,14 im Kontext der antiken Kulturgeschichte." In *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense 2006: The Book of Leviticus and Numbers*, edited by Thomas Römer, 355–69. BETL 215. Leuven: Peeters, 2008.
- Watts, James W. *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch*. Biblical Seminar 59. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.
- . "The Three Dimensions of Scriptures." *Postscripts* 2 (2006) 135–59. Repr. in *Iconic Books and Texts*, edited by James W. Watts, 135–59. London: Equinox, 2013.
- . *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- . "Ancient Iconic Texts and Scholarly Expertise." *Postscripts* 6 (2010) 331–44. Reprinted in *Iconic Books and Texts*, edited by James W. Watts, 407–18. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.
- . "Illustrating Leviticus: Art, Ritual and Politics." *BibRec* 2 (2013) 3–15.
- . *Leviticus 1–10*. HCOT. Leuven: Peeters, 2013.
- Watts, John D. W. *Isaiah 1–33*. WBC. Waco, TX: Word, 1984.
- . *Isaiah 34–66*. WBC. Waco, TX: Word, 1985.
- Yoo, Yohan. "Public Scripture Reading Rituals in Early Korean Protestantism: A Comparative Perspective." *Postscripts* 2 (2006) 226–40.

28. Watts, *Leviticus* 1–10, 2–3.