

Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, A Continental Commentary, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. xx + 388pp. \$30.00. Cloth.

Rabbi Jacob Milgrom is emeritus professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to this relatively brief commentary on Leviticus, he has written a three volume commentary on Leviticus in the Anchor Bible Series that is over 2,700 pages long! For the most part, the short commentary under review here foregoes the extensive interaction with OT scholarship and the technical discussion of Hebrew words and syntax that can be found in the Anchor Bible volumes. In this shorter commentary the author presents discussions of “selected themes” and “selected texts,” such that while he does not necessarily comment on every verse he nevertheless presents a full-orbed treatment of the text. One of the strengths of this presentation is that it provides ready access to Milgrom’s very informed conclusions.

In the preface Milgrom relates telling evidence regarding the place of Leviticus in both the synagogue and the church, the book not being studied much either place. He recounts a dismayed reaction from a Christian administrator when he indicated his intention to teach Leviticus, and observes that “in Israel today, Leviticus is not in the school curriculum. Even in advanced schools of Torah studies, the yeshivot, Leviticus is not studied in its entirety, but only a verse here, a verse there” (xii).

The “Introduction” to the commentary poses an interesting question. Milgrom asks, “Can Critical Scholarship Believe in the Mosaic Origins of the Torah?” (1). The ensuing discussion answers this question only indirectly, but it is a clear “No.” Milgrom sees two competing ideologies at work in Leviticus, “P” and “H”: “The compilers of the Torah were theologically pluralistic. They were willing to include variant traditions into the master text that became our Bible The text itself does not make a truth claim among the traditions, nor does it try to reconcile them blithely” (5).

Milgrom eloquently observes, “Ritual is the poetry of religion that leads us to a moment of transcendence” (1). Explaining the function of the sacrificial system, he notes that “Humans can drive God out of the sanctuary by polluting it with their moral and ritual sins” (9). This rightly draws attention to the relationship between the need for a clean and holy place in which God can dwell among the people, and the way that sin and uncleanness threatens the safety of the people in the presence of a holy God.

There are places where Milgrom goes beyond the text in an attempt to explain the logic of what the text does say. In an effort to wrestle with the “high-handed” sin of Numbers 15:30–31, the suggestion is put forward that repentance and confession “reduces intentional sin to an inadvertence, which is then eligible for sacrificial expiation” (46, cf. 49, 58, 72–73, etc.). Another interesting suggestion is that the references to a person being “cut off from his people” (e.g., Lev 7:27) might mean that “he is not permitted to rejoin his ancestors in the afterlife” (66, 73).

Milgrom’s ideology and context are reflected in his concern to note that “With P, therefore, we can detect the earliest groupings toward an ecological position” (13), and his claim that Israel’s priests would be concerned with the “growing physical pollution of the earth” today (33). He

gently defends animal sacrifice against the anticipated protestations of modern animal rights advocates (18), and he explains “that the sacrifices cover the gamut of the psychological, emotional, and religious needs of the people” (20). The text, by contrast, draws attention mainly to the human’s need for atonement before a holy God. Ideology again surfaces when Milgrom poses the question, “Does the Bible Prohibit Homosexuality?” (196). He answers, “Of course it does . . . , but the prohibition is severely limited. First, it is addressed only to Israel, not to other nations. Second, compliance with this law is a condition for residing in the Holy Land, but is irrelevant outside it Third, it is limited to men; lesbianism is not prohibited. Thus it is incorrect to apply this prohibition on a universal scale” (196, cf. 197, 206–8). An extensive rebuttal of this position by Robert Gagnon, interacting with the argument in the Anchor Bible volumes, is available online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoMilgrom.pdf>.

If one is looking for a helpful commentary on Leviticus to aid one’s study of the text, I would recommend the recent volume by Mark Rooker in the NAC series. Gordon Wenham’s NICOT volume remains useful as well.

James M. Hamilton Jr.
SWBTS Houston