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Leviticus as a Book of the Church

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The Christian Church has a long tradition of commentary on the Bible. In the early church all discussion of theological topics, of moral issues, and of Christian practice took the biblical text as the starting point. The recitation of the Psalms and meditation on books from the Bible, particularly in the context of the liturgy or of private prayer, nurtured the spiritual life. For most of the church's history, theology and scriptural interpretation were one. Theology was called *sacra pagina* (the sacred page), and the task of interpreting the Bible was a spiritual enterprise. The church's faith and life were seen as continuous with the biblical narrative. Even the Reformation appeal to "sola scriptura" assumed that the Bible was the book of the church and that its interpretation was to be shaped by the church's faith.

For biblical scholars in the early and medieval periods the Bible was a living book of faith whose chief subject was the redemption of humankind. As Hugh of St. Victor wrote in the 12th century:

The subject matter of all the Divine Scriptures is the works of man's restoration. For there are two works in which all that has been done is contained. The first is the work of foundation; the second is the work of restoration. The work of foundation is that whereby those things which were not came into being. The work of restoration is that whereby those things which had been impaired were made better. Therefore, the work of foundation is the creation of the world with all its elements. The work of restoration is the Incarnation of the Word with all its sacraments, both those which have gone before from the beginning of time, and those which came after, even to the end of the world.¹

In his monumental survey of the history of Christian biblical interpretation, *Éxégèse Médiévale*, Henri DeLubac showed that

in ancient and medieval times the study of theology and study of the Bible were part of a common enterprise. In his words "theological science and interpretation of the Scripture were one."² Biblical exegesis was a theological task.

In recent years, however, biblical scholarship has become a world to itself, divorced from the church's theological and spiritual traditions. With the emergence of new historical disciplines in the 18th century and the application of these disciplines to the Scriptures, scholars began, unwittingly at first, to construct a new context in which to place the Scriptures. Up to that time the Bible was read as a book of the church that spoke of the things of Christian faith and was read within the framework of the church's life. The initial aim of historical scholarship was laudable. By studying the Scriptures in their original setting biblical scholars hoped to understand the nature of God's revelation. In time, however, historical criticism developed its own agenda independent of the church and the Bible came to be seen chiefly as a book of the ancient world. Consequently its interpretation was as a historical enterprise *tout court*.

The more the Bible was studied historically, the more it came to appear foreign to Christian faith and life. It was taken as axiomatic that the scholarly study of the Bible must exclude references to Christian teaching. The notion, for example, that the Nicene Creed might play a role in understanding the biblical conception of God appeared ludicrous. As a consequence biblical scholarship acquired a life of its own as a scholarly enterprise estranged from those who actually read the Bible in the churches (and synagogues). Today its home is the university.

The other Bible, the Bible of the church, however, lives, and one might add, people live (and die) by it. The church's interpretation is embedded in the liturgy, in the catechetical tradition, in patristic and medieval theological writings, in spiritual and devotional works, in hymns, and let us not forget in the Bible itself. The Christian interpretation of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 begins in the New Testament.

It is one thing, however, to recount the limitations of biblical scholarship in our own day, quite another to propose a way beyond the present difficulties. Within the scholarly community many of the so called "new" methods, reader response

criticism, structuralism, feminist interpretation, et al. are intended to overcome the vast chasm that has developed between traditional historical criticism and the need to apply the Scriptures to the world in which we are living. But these new methods, interesting as they may be to certain readers of the Bible, have one serious limitation. They are uninformed about and sometimes scornful of the church's exegetical traditions. I once recall speaking with someone who was interested in reader response criticism. I said that if one wished to approach the Bible in that way one might study the responses of the first readers of the Bibles, the church fathers. My comment prompted a look of incredulity.

And this leads me to the subject matter of this article. One way of recovering a theological and spiritual interpretation of the Bible is to return to the patristic commentaries and homilies on the Scriptures and to reappropriate afresh the classical Christian tradition of interpretation. This does not mean repristination, but it does suggest a way of moving forward that is rooted in tradition yet capable of adaptation in new circumstances. For "spiritual" interpretation of the Bible is the distinctively Christian way of understanding the Bible. It is not a relic from the middle ages, a pre-critical expedient to make do until the advent of historical science.

Origen of Alexandria was the first and greatest biblical scholar in the early church. He wrote massive commentaries on many books, e.g., the Gospel of John, and he preached homilies that followed the biblical text section by section.³ One of his most interesting collection of homilies is on the book of Leviticus and in this article I should like to show how Origen went about making this most difficult of books a living reality for his congregation.

The book of Leviticus is a collection of laws and regulations on animal and cereal sacrifices, dietary prescriptions, priestly ordination, sexual relations, purity, festivals, e.g., the Day of Atonement, the sabbatical year, and other matters having to do with the holiness of the people of God.⁴ "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.'" It presupposes the account of the giving of the Law in Exodus 20 and the building of the tabernacle. Leviticus gives direction

on how life is to be ordered in the community whose life is organized around the tent of meeting.

Among the Jews, Leviticus goes by the name *Vayikra* from its opening words, or *Torat Kohanim*, law for the priests, i.e., "priest's manual". Two midrashim exist from the classical period: *Sifra*, a Tannaitic work that takes the form of a running commentary on the book, or if one prefers, a collection of *beraitoth* ordered according to the verses of Leviticus. *Sifra* is concerned almost wholly with halakhic matters. The other is *Vayikra Rabbah*, composed, it seems, in Palestine in the fifth century.⁵ By contrast to *Sifra*, *Vayikra Rabbah* is a homiletical midrash made up of separate homilies (thirty seven in all) based on the readings in the synagogue. Though it follows the basic outline of the book, it is not a running commentary; rather it develops themes suggested by the biblical text.

Origen's homilies on Leviticus were delivered in Caesarea in Greek between 239 and 242 and are extant only in the Latin translation of Rufinus. Rufinus admits he altered Origen's homilies more than he did other works.

I made it my object to supplement what Origen spoke *ex tempore* in the lecture room of the church; for his aim there was the application of the subject for the sake of edification rather than the exposition of the text. This I have done in the case of the homilies and the short lectures on Genesis and Exodus, and especially in those on the books of Leviticus. . . .⁶

Rufinus' reasons are partly doctrinal; what Origen taught in the early third century was not considered orthodox in the late fourth century. But he also admits he was troubled by Origen's practice of "raising questions and then leaving them unanswered".

Reading Leviticus was, in Origen's words, like having to eat unpalatable food. Just as different animals need different kinds of nourishment, the lion eats meat and the cow grass, and healthy people require different food than the infirm, or adults than infants, so it is with the Word of God. When certain books of the Scripture are read they can be readily understood and embraced, for example, the book of Esther, Judith, even Tobit or the precepts in Wisdom.

If, however, the book of Leviticus is read to the same person, his spirit continually takes offense, and turns away as though it is not his proper kind of food. For whoever approaches the Scriptures

to learn to worship God, and take on himself God's injunctions concerning justice and piety, and hears commands about offering sacrifices, and prescriptions for burnt offerings, how can it not regularly happen that he shuts his ears and refuses to listen as though he was being fed unfit food. For when someone reads the gospels, or the apostle Paul, or the psalms, he receives them with joy and embraces them willingly, and rejoices because he considers them medicine for one's infirmity.⁷

Origen's strategy in preaching on Leviticus (and it must be remembered that Origen's commentary is a series of homilies) was to single out features in the text that could be applied to the life of the Christian community. At 5.14ff, "if anyone commits a breach of faith and sins unwittingly in any of the holy things of the Lord," Origen observes that the guilt offering to the Lord is a ram without blemish "valued...in shekels of silver..." Here the law allows a monetary equivalent in place of an animal sacrifice and this provides Origen an exegetical opening. He applies this law to the "offerings" in the church which are "given...for the use of the saints and the ministry of the priesthood or for the needs of the poor by devoted and religious souls." The text's discussion of "breach of faith", then, is applied to one who has taken from those in need.⁸ Origen calls this an interpretation "according to the letter".

In like manner Origen interprets the prescriptions in ch. 10:8-11 about the drinking of wine. The text reads: "And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, 'Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die; it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations.'" Origen comments: "A clear law is given both to the priests and to the chief priest that 'when they approach the altar they abstain from wine and from every drink which can make them drunk'..." From this he concludes that the "divine word intends that the priests of the Lord be sober in all things..." Further, this is not simply a law set forth in Leviticus; these prescriptions "preserve their force" and should still be observed because they have been reaffirmed by the apostle Paul (1 Timothy 5:23) and Jesus (Luke 21:34).⁹

Though Origen knew some Hebrew, his homilies are based on the Greek Text of Leviticus, not the Hebrew. This is apparent in the way he approaches peculiar or unusual features of the text. In homily one he notes that the subject of the

opening series of legislation varies: in 1:2 the text reads *anthropos*, “when any *person* (*anthropos*) brings an offering of livestock to the Lord...” Later (2:1) the text reads “when any *soul* (*psyche, nephesh*) presents a grain offering to the Lord...” Origen asks: why does the text use *anthropos* at one place and *psyche* at the other, “as if someone other than a human being (*anthropos*) could make an offering?” Origen wonders whether the distinction is important and suggests that the term *anthropos* may here refer to the whole human race.¹⁰ Origen has noted an interesting detail in the text, but he does not pursue the matter until the next homily: Perhaps this is what Rufinus meant when he said that Origen sometimes raised questions and then left them unanswered.

A more interesting passage where the Greek text forms the basis for Origen’s interpretation is Leviticus 14 on the cleansing of the leper. 14:1 reads “This shall be the law of the law on the day of his cleansing (*b’yom tahorato*)”. LXX translates this with an aorist passive, and Origen takes the phrase to mean completed action. Later in the same chapter the text in Greek reads: “he [the one who is to be cleansed] will be clean” [in Hebrew, “he will pronounce him clean” (*taharo*)]. Origen asks: if the leper was already cleansed why does the text say “he will be clean”? He comes up with an ingenious explanation: the text is speaking about progress in purification, i.e., growth in holiness. In support of this interpretation he notes other places where the same feature is present (14:7–9). This leads Origen to conclude that purification of the leper (a particular malady with a particular remedy) can serve as a model for the life of faith. For just as the rite of purification of the leper is divided into several stages, so also “turning away from a life of sin” is divided into three stages: first comes absolution of one’s sins through an offering; in the second stage the soul turns to God; and finally the fruits of piety become evident in good works.¹¹

As these examples illustrate, Origen considered his first task as homilist to understand what was written (or read) in the biblical text and to render it intelligible by examining its grammatical and logical structure, its expressions and terms, by noting unusual formulations and distinctive features, in short by putting questions to the text. This is a technique he learned from Greek commentators on classical texts.¹² In contrast to

commentators on Homer or Hesiod, however, Origen was asking such questions for the first time, and on a book that was quite foreign and strange.¹³

Origen's analysis of terms, grammatical features, structure and images is designed to discover meaning in the text. For Origen meaning is understood primarily as edification and instruction, or simply, applying the text to the lives of his hearers. "It would not have been necessary to read these things [he is speaking here about the burning of the 'fatty parts' of the animal, Leviticus 7:30] unless they provided some edification to the hearers."¹⁴ It cannot be overstressed that Origen is expounding a text that was *read* in the churches. At one point, explaining why he does not deal with every detail in the text, he says: "Since indeed our purpose is briefly to apply to the hearers those things which have been read and there is insufficient time to discuss each individual detail in full, let us employ a shortened exposition."¹⁵

Once Origen goes beyond the discussion of grammatical and linguistic details, or matters of fact, the technique he uses most often to elicit "meaning" from the text is word association. For example, Leviticus 6:8 (LXX; Heb 6:15) describes the cereal offering. "And one shall take from it a handful of the fine flour of the cereal offering with its oil and all the frankincense which is on the cereal offering, and burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a pleasing odor to the Lord." Origen observes: "The Apostle Paul briefly explained this passage when he said to the Philippians, 'I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a *fragrant offering*, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God'" (Philippians 4:18). Paul here shows "that mercy toward the poor pours oil on the sacrifice of God, but the ministry which is rendered to the saints adds the sweetness of incense."¹⁶

Another example: "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit." Origen asks: if "rain" is given as a reward for those who keep the commandments, how is this same rain given to those who do not keep the commandments and the "whole world profits by the common rains given by God".¹⁷ This leads him to ask whether the term "rain" can have another sense than water from the heavens,

for in this passage it refers to something that is given only to those who walk in God's statutes and observe the divine law, that is, it designates something given "only to the saints".

With this as a clue he proceeds to examine the use of the term "rain" in the Scriptures and discovers that it is sometimes used in a metaphorical sense. Moses, for example, said, "May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew" (Deuteronomy 31:1-2). In this passage "rain" is a metaphor for the words of Moses, and hence of the Word of God, and Origen uses this text to respond to critics who claimed that his exegesis ignored the plain sense of Scripture. Referring to the passage from Deuteronomy he asks:

Are these my words? Do I do violence to the meaning of the sacred law? Was it not Moses who called what he said 'rain'?.. Listen diligently, hearer, lest you think we do violence to the divine Scripture, when teaching the church, we say that water or rainstorms or other things which seem to be spoken about physical things are to be understood spiritually.¹⁸

With this defence he proceeds to follow out the use of rain as a metaphor for the word of God in Scripture. When the prophets speak, he says, they "bring a rainstorm upon the face of the earth" (recalling Ezekiel 34:26).

Only when he comes to the day of atonement could Origen draw on explicit parallels between the New Testament and Leviticus, namely those found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, particularly chapters 8-10. Commenting on Leviticus 16 Origen says that in writing to the Hebrews Paul [considered to be the author of Hebrews in antiquity] showed "how the sacrifices should be understood" when he said, "Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Hebrews 9:24; he also cites Hebrews 7:27). Then he observes,

If someone would examine the entire letter to the Hebrews and especially the place where he compares the priest of the law with the priest of the promise, about whom it was written "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," he will discover how this entire passage of the apostle shows that those things written in the law were copies and types of living and true things.¹⁹

However, since many of the topics discussed in Leviticus do not appear in the Epistle to the Hebrews and Leviticus includes many other laws besides those applying to the Day of

Atonement, Hebrews had only limited usefulness for the detailed points of law in Leviticus. The link to other parts of the Scriptures is made chiefly on the basis of word associations. Of course behind this lies the principle, learned from the Greeks, that “Homer interprets Homer”, where the Scriptures (Septuagint and New Testament) are taken as a whole. The associations are made “rhetorically”, to use Origen’s term, not by reference to subject matter, context, or idea. In this Origen uses an exegetical technique he learned from Paul (and Philo) and which was practised by the rabbis in his own time. Examples from Paul are his interpretation of the rock at Horeb (Exodus 17:6) in 1 Corinthians 10:1–5 or “seed” (Genesis 12:7) in Galatians 3:16 or “word” (Deuteronomy 30:14) in Romans 10:1–5.²⁰

At the time Origen lived, the institutions presupposed by the book of Leviticus, the tent of meeting (which became the temple), the priesthood, animal sacrifices, no longer existed. Which is to say that Jewish expositors in the third century no less than Christians could not interpret Leviticus in light of such institutions. For the Jews this meant that Leviticus could not be read simply as a handbook for priests or a guide to the ordering of the community’s life because there were no priests, no sacrifices, no temple. Perhaps this is one reason why *Sifra* was written, as it were, in the optative mood. Even so, in places the interpreter relates the text to institutions that were part of Jewish life when the commentary was written, e.g., the Beth Din, but which have no place in the world of Leviticus.²¹ Neither Jewish nor Christian interpreters could apply the text to the present life of the community without adjustments and adaptations to the changed circumstances in which the book was read.

No doubt this is one of the reasons why *Sifra* was complemented by *Vayikra Rabbah*. *Vayikra Rabbah* ignores the laws on sacrifices and burnt offerings and prescriptions for priests. “The reason for this absence...”, writes David Stern,

is not the intrinsic insusceptibility of this halakhic material to midrash. To the contrary: the tannaitic midrash on Leviticus, *Sifra*, deals mainly with these laws. Rather, the reason that these laws are not mentioned in VR is simply because in the fifth century in the common era, nearly four hundred years after the Temple had been destroyed and the sacrifices had ceased to be offered, after the

aborted attempt to rebuild the Temple under Julian (and when the redactor and his audience probably suspected that the Temple was not likely to be rebuilt in the imminent future), the laws of the Temple cult had little practical import.²²

In *Vayikra Rabbah* one finds on occasion a strategy that is not dissimilar to that pursued by Origen. In the discussion of Leviticus 5:14 on “breach of faith”, or “false oath”, the homilist discusses the general moral problem of giving a “false oath”.²³ Chapter 12 of *Vayikra Rabbah* (on the prohibition against priests drinking wine in Leviticus 10) is a rambling homily on the evils of drunkenness. The sons of Aaron “died for no other reason than they drank wine”, and this is why the Scripture says “Do not drink wine”.²⁴ Paradoxically, because Christians had a priesthood they were able to take this text with greater “literalness” than the Jews.

In other places the *darshan* (interpreter) will seize on a word in the text and use it, with the help of other biblical texts, to make a point that, on the surface at least, appears tangential to the text before him. At Leviticus 7:11–12²⁵ the *darshan* (interpreter) fastens on the word “thanksgiving” (*todah*) which first suggests Psalm 51:23 “sacrifice of thanksgiving” and then Achan who “sacrificed his evil inclination (*yezirah*) by a confession (*todah*)”. At 8:1–4 where “anointing oil” suggests Psalm 45:8, “has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions”, which text forms the basis for the first part of the homily.²⁶ In Homily 31 (Emor) on Leviticus 24:2, “Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly”, Bar Kappara “began”²⁷ his exposition with a verse from the Psalms: “You light my lamp” (Psalm 18:28), and comments: “The Holy One blessed be he said to this man, ‘Your lamp is in my hand and my lamp is in your hand,’ as it is written ‘the lamp of the Lord is the spirit of man’ (Proverbs 20:27).” From this Bar Kappara draws the conclusion: “The holy one blessed be he said: ‘If you light my lamp then I will light your lamp.’” This, he explains is what is meant by “Command the children of Israel to bring...pure oil...that a light may be kept burning regularly.” With the text from the Psalms as a starting point the homily then explores other uses of “light” in the Scripture, for example, Job 25:3, “Is there any number to his armies? Upon whom does his light not arise? This means that God

gives light “to things above and to things below and to all who come into the world”, nevertheless God “desires the light of Israel”. For this reason it is written “Command the children of Israel...”²⁸

Faced with a text that did not readily yield an application to the present community, the rabbis, like Origen, sought its meanings in words, phrases, images that could be related to other parts of the scripture. Again David Stern:

The solution was to shift the entire burden of meaning away from its context, away from the substance of the revelation God addressed to Moses at the Tent of meeting—the sacrificial laws in all their details—and to place it instead upon the event of revelation and, in particular, the style of its language...²⁹

For the Jew, Leviticus was part of the weekly Torah reading, hence it had a place at the center of Jewish life. For Christians the chief weekly reading of the Scripture was a passage from the Gospels, but they also read from other parts of the New Testament (e.g., Acts during Easter), and from the LXX. Of the books in the Septuagint they favored Genesis, Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Wisdom literature. Yet, because Christian thinkers in the century had turned back Marcion’s challenge (a debate that was still going on in Origen’s day), they looked upon all of the LXX as authoritative, which included Leviticus. Hence Leviticus was read in the churches, but, according to Origen, without question and with little understanding. Hence the chief task of a Christian preacher on Leviticus was, paradoxically, to ensure that the book continued to be read and this could only be done by making it intelligible and applicable to the lives of Christians. Its language, its images, as well as its ideas, had to find a place within Christian practice and belief.

Notes

- ¹ Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951) 3.
- ² Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale* (Paris: 1959) 1:59.
- ³ For English translation of what remains of his commentary on John, see Ronald E. Heine, *Origen. Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989); for his homilies on Genesis and Exodus, see Ronald E. Heine, *Origen. Homilies*

- on *Genesis and Exodus* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981).
- 4 For current interpretation of Leviticus see the recent commentary by Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: 1991).
- 5 Text of *Sifra* edited by I. H. Weiss (Vienna: 1862); more recent, but incomplete, edition by Louis Finkelstein (New York: 1989). English version by Jacob Neusner, *Sifra. An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: 1988). Text of *Vayikra Rabbah*, ed. Mordecai Margulies (Jerusalem: 1972). English translation (of earlier text) by J. Israelstam and Judah J. Slotki (London: 1939).
- 6 Hom. 27.1.
- 7 Hom. 27.1.
- 8 Hom. 3.6.2-3.
- 9 Hom. 7.1.
- 10 Hom. 1.2.
- 11 Hom. 8.11. In *Vayikra Rabbah* leprosy is seen as a punishment for evil and this allows the *darshan* (interpreter) to discourse on different types of moral transgressions, e.g., lying tongue, shedding innocent blood, bearing false witness, et al. (16.1ff.). Origen develops a similar exegesis; drawing on the mention of six different kinds of leprosy (based on Leviticus 13:2; 12; 18-19; 24; 29; 42), he discusses six different kinds of sins or "blemishes of the soul" (*maculae animae*). (Hom. Lev. 8.5; 26).
- 12 For discussion of the techniques of the grammarians see J. David Cassel, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Science of the Grammarians: A Study in the Setting, Purpose, and Emphasis of Cyril's Commentary on Isaiah," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1992, especially pp. 126-162.
- 13 Another example of his care in noting peculiar features of the text: He noticed that the description of the high priest's clothing in Leviticus 8:7-9 was not precisely the same as that in Exodus 28:2. An extra garment, a leather apron, is included (Hom. Lev. 6.6; 292).
- 14 Hom. 5.12.
- 15 Hom. 8.5.
- 16 Hom. 4.9; see also Hom. Lev. 5.4; 224.
- 17 Hom. 16.2.
- 18 Hom. 16.2.
- 19 Hom. 9.2.
- 20 On Romans 10:1-5 see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: 1989) 154-192.
- 21 Weiss 15b at Lev. 4:2.
- 22 David Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter I," in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: 1986) 105-126.

- 23 Vay. rab. 6.3.
24 Vay. rab. 12.5.
25 Vay. rab. 9.1.
26 Vay. rab. 10.1.
27 On the significance of the "beginning", the petihta see Stern, 107ff. and J. Heinemann, "The Proem in Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971) 100-122.
28 Vay. rab. 31.6.
29 Stern, 119.