

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

The Perplexing Pentateuch **The Laing Lecture for 1986**

Gordon Wenham

[p.7]

The Christian reader of the Bible is, I suspect, most perplexed by the Pentateuch. These first five books of scripture present a picture of world origins quite different from modern science; their laws and moral standards conflict not only with secular morality but also sometimes with the New Testament too; and finally, to cap it all, these books are full of strange, obscure and boring descriptions of sacrifice and other ceremonial. It is all enough to make one feel that perhaps belief might be easier if we left the Pentateuch out of the Christian Bible. Yet St Paul said, 'Whatever was written in former times was written for our instruction.' (Rom 15:4).

So here I intend to look briefly at three areas in the Pentateuch that perplex us. First I shall take another look at the well-trodden discussion of the relationship between the Old Testament moral and civil law and the Christian. In particular how we deal with the apparent differences in moral standards between the Old and New Testaments and still uphold the inspiration of the Old. Second I want to make some observations about the interpretation of Genesis 1-11. I shall suggest that when we know more about the world in which it was written we shall see its purpose better. Third I shall try to explain the purpose of the ritual law and why it is so important for Christians to study it.

THE MORAL AND CIVIL LAW

The first area I want to discuss is the moral and civil law of the old Testament. This covers such broad injunctions as 'Love your neighbour as yourself' and 'Do not kill' to detailed regulations covering such issues as slavery, inheritance rights, and the punishment of crime. These raise a multitude of issues that we cannot discuss here. Is there a clear distinction between moral principle and civil law within the Old Testament? Does the Old Testament think one is saved by keeping the law? Are all rules of behaviour obsolete under the new covenant? Can one simply live by the principle of love guided by the Spirit?¹

To debate these points here would preclude discussion of the other more pressing issues I do want to address. In particular, are the ethical principles of both 'covenants the same? How do we cope with the apparent discrepancies between the testaments? With the Old Testament permitting vengeance ('an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth') and our

[p.8]

Lord demanding unlimited forgiveness? With the old covenant countenancing polygamy while the new demands monogamy? Does not even to admit such differences in standards prejudice belief in the inspiration of scripture, at least in the inspiration of the Old Testament?

Before attempting to suggest an answer to these questions it is necessary to clarify the character of the legal collections in the Old Testament. They are not comprehensive: they do not cover every possible situation. Indeed they do not discuss at all some very obvious

¹ For a discussion of these issues see B. N. Kaye and G. J. Wenham, *Law, Morality and the Bible* (Leicester, 1978).

situations and how they should be handled. Often they deal with rather unusual cases, not mentioning at all more basic cases. How a normal marriage is to be contracted is never specified, only what should be done in cases of rape or seduction. The rules about divorce are not given, only certain limitations on divorcees' freedom to remarry are mentioned.² The laws on inheritance mention some changes when a man only has daughters, but it says nothing about the usual situation where a man has sons. How the estate should be shared out between them and his widow is left unstated.³ Clearly it is anticipated that people will know what to do in these circumstances.

The selectivity of the biblical law is not unique. Indeed it is characteristic of oriental collections of law that they are selective. They do not cover every important legal topic. Often they seem to focus on relatively minor issues, eg looting at a fire, while failing to discuss the more obvious issue of arson. Extensive study of these non-biblical collections of law, which range in date from about 2100 BC down to 600 BC, has led orientalist to conclude that they are not meant to be exhaustive codes of law covering every possible topic.⁴ They are intent on focussing on certain issues, changing the earlier law at certain points or underlining certain familiar principles that may have been questioned at the time.

It seems to me that this approach to ancient law makes excellent sense when applied to the Pentateuch. This contains several collections of law from different periods. None of these collections is exhaustive—all of them presuppose a considerable body of pre-existing legal custom which is either being underlined or modified.

Take the ten commandments for example. That one should not murder, commit adultery or steal would have been accepted throughout the ancient world. What the decalogue does is to underline these universal moral principles, and incorporate them into a summary of the old covenant's most fundamental beliefs. But these old principles are also joined by new ones, most obviously the demand to worship only one God and to celebrate the Sabbath, very unusual ideas in the second millennium BC. Not only does the decalogue reaffirm old principles and formulate new ones, it also arranges them in a significant order. This is not random, but the more important commands are mentioned before the less important.⁵ The worship of God and the observance of his day

[p.9]

come before duties to one's fellow men. And among these duties honouring father and mother comes before murder and adultery. Note how respect for property comes after respect for persons and God. I think if a modern secularist were asked to rearrange the ten commandments in order of importance, he would approximately reverse them. God turns human values upside down.

² Eg Deut 22:13-29; 24:1-4.

³ Num 27:1-11; 26:1-12; Dent 21:15-17.

⁴ Among the more important discussions of the nature of Near Eastern legal collections are V. Korošec, 'Keilschrift Recht' in *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 1.3 (Leiden, 1964) 42-219; R. Haase, *Einführung in das Studium Keilschriftlicher Rechtsquellen* (Wiesbaden, 1965), J. Clima, H. Petschow, G. Cardascia, V. Korošec, 'Gesetze' in *Reallexicon für Assyriologie* 3. 243-97; F. R. Kraus, 'Ein zentrales Problem des altesopotamischen Rechts: Was ist der Codex Hammurabi?' *Genava* 8 (1960) 283-96; H. J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and the Ancient East* (London, 1980).

A convenient list of the parallels between biblical and oriental law is given by S. Greengus in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Supplementary Volume) 532-37.

⁵ Cf B. N. Kaye and G. J. Wenham, op cit, 29.

This method of selectively underlining and modifying recognized moral and legal principles can be observed at many other points in the biblical law. The ancient world had rules governing the treatment of dangerous bulls and what should be done when they gored someone to death. In most respects Babylonian and Hebrew rules are similar, but at two points Exodus (21:28-36) modifies earlier law. First it insists that the bull must be put to death. It is viewed as a murderer, and following the principles enunciated in Genesis 9:5 it must be put to death. Second if it kills a child, the owner of the bull is liable for the death penalty. Traditional Babylonian principles might have made the owner's child face the death penalty. But as Deuteronomy 24:16 puts it, 'The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be responsible for his own sin.' Here the old Testament is clearly enunciating a doctrine of personal responsibility. The guilt for one's action cannot be shuffled off onto another.⁶

In Leviticus 18 we have another example of how the Old Testament assumes earlier moral principle and builds on it. Everyone in the ancient world accepted that it was wrong for a man to marry his daughter. So Leviticus does not mention this most obvious case: it deals with other situations which were not so plain at least to their world, and as recent personal bills presented in the House of Lords show, not so clear in our age either. Men are prohibited from marrying sisters, aunts, and various of their in-laws. These women are seen as too closely related to one by blood, and union with them would be incestuous and is therefore banned.⁷

Another area where the Old Testament law is going beyond the principles accepted in the ancient world relates to slavery. It is noticeable how the slave laws take pride of place in the book of the covenant, ie Exodus 21-23. It is as though Israel's experience of Egyptian slavery has made her specially concerned about the plight of slaves. The laws express a concern that slaves be treated as people not things. Provision is made for them to be released from slavery if their owner maltreats them (Exod 21:26-27). Furthermore the law insists that any Hebrew slave must be released after six years (Exod 21:2). Deuteronomy goes even further in encouraging slaves to be treated humanely. On releasing a slave after the maximum six years' service the owner was told to 'furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press' (Deut 15:14). In other words

[p.10]

the slave must be given a golden handshake when he leaves. Thus although the law accepts the age-old institution of slavery, the Bible tries to humanize it and encourages their release.⁸

If we still feel uncomfortable with the way the Bible condones slavery, it may be pointed out that it has recently been introduced in Britain and hailed as a great humanitarian innovation. In ancient Israel, and even to this day in poorer countries of the world, slavery is usually the consequence of debt, debt that had been incurred as a result of personal misfortune or as the result of legal damages awarded after committing an offence. Today we usually send offenders who cannot pay their fines to prison; then they become slaves. Recently, though, in Britain it has started to dawn on us how degrading and corrupting a punishment imprisonment

⁶ See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem, 1967) 278-81; S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (VTS 18. Leiden, 1970) 79-83.

⁷ Cf G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, 1979) 248-61.

⁸ For further discussion see Paul, *Book of Covenant*, 47 ff and R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Rome, 1954) 135 ff.

is, so we have community service orders. People are sentenced to do x days labour for the community instead of going to prison. This is nothing but biblical slavery under a new name. Perhaps we may look forward to the day when the wisdom of other features of biblical penal policy will also be recognized in modern Britain.

What we see in these slave laws are steps being taken towards the elimination of slavery, towards a world where all men are free and equal. I suggest that there are other areas where the same process is noticeable in biblical law. For example the Old Testament principle of exact retribution of 'one eye for one eye' (Exod 21:24) is a great improvement on the unlimited vengeance of the blood feud, of Lamech who boasted he had killed a man for wounding him and of his seventy-seven fold vengeance (Gen 4:24). The rule of talion in Exodus is fair and just compared with Lamech even if it does not reach our Lord's standard of forgiveness. In some instances, then, the Old Testament is a compromise between earlier standards and the divine ideal expressed by Jesus. This is what he himself says about marriage. Permanent union was always the creator's ideal but 'for your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives' (Matt 19:9). In the new age when creation is being restored, his followers should not rest content with the compromises of the past, teaches Jesus.

Does this admission that at some points the standards insisted on in the Old Testament fall short of the divine compromise our belief in its inspiration? By no means. It rather illustrates the wisdom of the divine lawgiver who prepared his people step by step to accept his truth. If the British government had simply decreed out of the blue that every passenger in a car must wear a seat belt, it would never have been accepted. Instead, over a long period it has gradually introduced change. First it insisted on the fitting of front seat belts. Then on their wearing. Next year, we are told, rear seat belts will have to be fitted. Ultimately I suppose we shall be compelled to wear them even in the back seat of cars. I suggest we can see a similar process at work in the

[p.11]

Bible: by presenting his standards and truth in instalments, God has accommodated himself to the weakness of humanity. The rare instances where Old and New Testament differ over moral standards demonstrate divine forbearance, not lack of inspiration.

However I should stress that it is at relatively few points that we can find such differences within the Old Testament, as between Exodus and Deuteronomy, or between the law and the prophets, let alone between the Old and New Testaments. Most of the time the prophets and Jesus are just reminding their hearers of age-old principles and applying them to their situations. His summary of the law to love the Lord with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself is of course simply a combination of central texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus (Dent 6:5; Lev 19:18).

GENESIS 1-11

The next area of perplexity posed by the Pentateuch I wish to discuss is the first any reader of Scripture comes across, that is, Genesis 1-11. Embarrassed is too mild a word for the discomfort most Christians feel when reading these chapters. Certainly any believer in biblical inspiration needs courage when tackling these chapters. Theological, historical, scientific, exegetical and critical problems are enough to give anyone cold feet.

However, even in this area there have been a number of most useful recent studies. H. Blocher's *In the Beginning* (IVP, 1984) is a thorough exegetical study of Genesis 1-3, which is both well-informed, sane and conservative. Prudently he says little about the scientific issues, but his few observations are acute. The other valuable recent book is Alan Hayward's *Creation and Evolution* (SPCK, 1985). Blocher's weakness is Hayward's strength and vice versa. Hayward is a scientist who offers a lucid and incisive attack on Darwinian theories of evolution and an equally severe attack on young creationists who hold that the world was only created a few thousand years ago. Hayward himself is an ancient creationist. He accepts the great age of the universe and points to the many marvels in it that demand a purposive creator. His discussion of the biblical texts is quite weak though: for that, one is much better served by Blocher. Between them Blocher and Hayward offer a helpful approach to some of the problems posed by Genesis.

Here, though, I want to explore an area neither Blocher nor Hayward deal with, the relationship of Genesis 1-11 to ancient Near Eastern mythology. We now know a great deal about what the peoples of the ancient east believed about the early history of the world and mankind. By comparing Genesis 1-11 with these ancient stories we are able to appreciate the points Genesis is making the more clearly. It becomes apparent that Genesis is presenting a strikingly original view of

[p.12]

God, man, the world and sin. Also by looking at these old non-biblical stories, most of which date from the second millennium BC, we shall focus more clearly on the central concerns of Genesis.

Modern man makes assumptions about the world that are completely different from those of the second millennium BC. Consequently, when he reads Genesis, he tends to grab hold of points that were of quite peripheral interest to the author of Genesis and overlook points that are fundamental. By looking at the oriental background, we hope to escape this particular pitfall and understand Genesis as it was originally intended.

An examination of the relationship between Genesis 1-11 and earlier oriental tradition sheds much light on the background to biblical thought and highlights the distinctiveness of its message. Though Genesis shares many of the theological presuppositions of the ancient world, most of the stories found in these chapters are best read as a polemical repudiation of Near Eastern mythologies. Genesis 1-11 is a tract for the times challenging ancient assumptions about the nature of God, the world and man.⁹

Genesis 1-11, as I read it, is a commentary, often highly critical, on ideas about the natural and supernatural world current in the ancient world. Both individual stories as well as the final completed work seem to be a polemic against many of the commonly received notions about the gods and man. But the clear polemical thrust of Genesis 1-11 must not obscure the fact that at certain points biblical and extra-biblical thought are in clear agreement. Indeed, Genesis and the ancient Near East probably have more in common with each other than either has with modern secular thought.

⁹ Among modern commentaries which adopt this general approach those of U. Cassuto (Jerusalem, 1961), B. Vawter (New York, 1977) and E. Drewermann *Strukturen des Bösen* 1⁴ (Paderborn, 1982) are specially worth consulting.

Genesis 1-9 records a bare outline of world history from its creation to the flood that finds a parallel in the Atrahasis epic and even more strikingly in the Sumerian 'Eridu Genesis', two texts dating from about 1600 BC. Within this bare outline the stories of the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh (perhaps borrowed from a lost section of the Atrahasis epic) and in Genesis 6-9 are astonishingly similar.¹⁰ This is not to say that the writer of Genesis had ever heard or read the Gilgamesh epic: these ideas were just part of the intellectual furniture of that time in the Near East, just as most people today have a fair idea of Darwin's *Origin of Species* though they have never read it.

Not only does Genesis share a common outline of primeval history with its neighbours, it also concurs with contemporary culture on various other points. Both sides agreed that an invisible supernatural world existed, that a God or gods existed, were personal, could think, speak and communicate with man, indeed control human affairs. Genesis also agreed with oriental theology that man is more than material: he has a spiritual divine dimension. Atrahasis tells of man being made out of the mixture of clay and the flesh and blood of a dead

[p.13]

god.¹¹ This parallels Genesis 2:7 where the Lord creates man out of the dust of the earth and breathes into him the divine breath of life. Similarly Egyptian texts speak of man being made in the image of God (cf Gen 1:26-27).¹² Creation, as an act of separation between light and darkness, land and sea, and by the word of God, finds parallels in Near Eastern theology.¹³

However these similarities between biblical and non-biblical thinking are overshadowed by the differences. Jacobsen notes that, despite Genesis' 'probable dependency on the Mesopotamian version of origins', we must also note how decisively these materials have been transformed in the biblical account, altering radically their original meaning and import.

The 'Eridu Genesis' takes throughout... an affirmative and optimistic view of existence: it believes in progress. Things were not nearly as good to begin with as they have become since...

In the biblical account it is the other way around. Things began as perfect from God's hand and grew then steadily worse through man's sinfulness until God finally had to do away with all mankind except for the pious Noah who would beget a new and better stock.

The moral judgement here introduced, and the ensuing pessimistic viewpoint, could not be more different from the tenor of the Sumerian tale; only the assurance that such a flood will not recur is common to both.¹⁴

It is striking that Jacobsen arrives at this contrast by comparing the 'Eridu Genesis' with P, the so-called priestly source in Genesis, which is generally seen as relatively optimistic about

¹⁰ For these texts see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Text* (Oxford, 1969), T. Jacobsen, 'The Eridu Genesis' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981) 513-29; earlier translators usually referred to part of this text as the Sumerian flood story. The other texts referred to, *The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Creation Epic*, and Adapa may be found in J. B. Pritchard (ed) *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*² (Princeton, 1955) 60-103.

¹¹ Atrahasis 1:208-260.

¹² V. Nottter, *Biblischer Schöpfungsbericht and ägyptische Schöpfungsmythen* (Stuttgart, 1974) 120-23.

¹³ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (London, 1984) 25-47.

¹⁴ T. Jacobsen, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981) 529.

the human situation. But the biblical Genesis as it stands contains all sorts of other episodes illustrating man's sinfulness: 'the fall' (ch 3), 'Cain and Abel' (ch 4), 'the sons of God' (6:1-4), the curse of Ham (9:20-29) and the tower of Babel (11:1-9). These incidents when added to the priestly outline of world history make the situation even blacker and the contrast with the 'Eridu Genesis' even more stark. Genesis is flatly contradicting the humanistic optimism of Mesopotamia: man's situation in its view is hopeless without divine mercy.

Many of the individual episodes in Genesis 1-11 may be seen to have a distinctly polemical thrust in their own right, particularly against the religious ideas associated most closely with Mesopotamia. For example, Genesis 11:1-9, the tower of Babel story, is a satire on the claims of Babylon to be the centre of civilization and its temple tower the gate of heaven.¹⁵ Babel does not mean gate of God, but 'confusion' and 'folly'. Far from its temple's top reaching up to heaven, it is so low that God has to descend from heaven just to see it! (11:4-9).

Babylonians and Canaanites practised cult prostitution and sacred

[p.14]

marriage, a rite in which the gods were alleged to have sexual union with women. The hero Gilgamesh, for example, was the offspring of such a union.¹⁶ These rites were believed to promote the well-being of the nation by securing the fertility of the soil. Genesis 6:1-8 however looks on such customs with absolute horror: instead of promoting mankind's prosperity they prompted God to send the flood which destroyed all life, except Noah's family and the animals he brought into the ark.

Mesopotamian accounts of the flood not only provide some of the closest parallels between the Bible and oriental literature, they also paint a completely different picture of the relationship between the human and divine worlds. They tell that the flood was sent by the gods piqued at man's noisiness and overpopulation of the earth. The Babylonian 'Noah' escaped because he happened to worship a god who did not support the flood decision. Once started the flood was beyond the gods' control and they were terrified by it. In the closing scene Enlil, the most powerful god, turns up at the sacrifice and is surprised to find 'Noah' still alive. Genesis, while preserving a substantially similar story, paints a very different portrait of the actors involved. There is only one God, who is both omniscient and omnipotent. The flood is sent by his command and is totally under his control. Whereas the Mesopotamian gods destroyed mankind out of caprice and their 'Noah' just happened to be lucky enough to worship the right deity, Genesis declares that man's wickedness provoked the flood, and that Noah was saved because he was righteous, a point demonstrated by his behaviour throughout the flood. Finally, whereas after the flood the Mesopotamian deities looked for means to limit population growth, the Lord positively encouraged it. Noah, like Adam, was told, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' (Gen 9:12,7; cf 1:38).

In a similar way it seems that Genesis 1-3 takes up ideas current in the ancient world and comments on them. Genesis 1 again affirms the unity of God over against the polytheist ideas current everywhere else in the ancient Near East.¹⁷ In particular it insists that the sun, moon, stars and sea monsters, powerful deities according to pagan mythology, are merely creatures.

¹⁵ Cf. *Creation Epic* 6:50-80.

¹⁶ *Epic of Gilgamesh* 1:2,1.

¹⁷ Cf Cassuto, *Genesis 1 7-70*; G. F. Hasel, 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974) 81-102.

It is probable that Genesis 1:1 ('God created the heavens and the earth') is affirming the creation of matter over against the widely held view that it was eternal and that creation was nothing more than the ordering of pre-existing matter. Certainly Genesis gives man a very different place in the created order compared with oriental mythology. Man, according to this view, was created by the gods as an afterthought to supply the gods with food.¹⁸ Genesis 1 paints a quite contrary picture. Man is the climax of creation and instead of man providing the gods with food, God provided the plants as food for man (1:29). The same theme of the Lord's concern for man's welfare is very apparent in Genesis 2. Here he first creates man, then provides him with a garden to dwell in, animals as his companions and a wife. Finally,

[p.15]

Babylonians regarded the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th days of each month as unlucky; Genesis however declares the seventh day of every week as holy, a day of rest consecrated to God (2:1-3).

Genesis 2-3 lacks good oriental parallels, though the 'Eridu Genesis' apparently told of an era when men went naked and enjoyed peace with other men and the animals. However this was viewed not as an idyllic age but as a miserable poverty-struck existence from which the goddess Nintur rescued mankind. The closest comparison that can be made is with the Adapa myth.¹⁹ Adapa, (note the similarity of his name with Adam) was the first of the seven wise men of Mesopotamia. One day, Adapa was summoned to heaven and there offered the bread and water of life, but declined, having been previously warned by his personal god to reject such an offer. If we read the fall story in the light of this parallel Genesis could be saying that the first man, far from demonstrating his wisdom by obeying God, showed his sinfulness by doing what had been forbidden. Certainly Genesis 2-3 puts early man's exploits in a very negative light when compared with the 'Eridu Genesis' version.

The ancient oriental background to Genesis 1-11 shows it to be concerned with rather different issues from those that tend to preoccupy modern readers. It is affirming the unity of God in the face of polytheism, his justice rather than his caprice, his power as opposed to his impotence, his concern for mankind rather than his exploitation. And whereas Mesopotamia clung to the wisdom of primeval man, Genesis records his sinful disobedience. Because as Christians we tend to assume these points in our theology, we often fail to recognize the striking originality of Genesis 1-11's message and concentrate on subsidiary points which may well be of less moment. But an examination of the wider context of Genesis 1-11 within the book itself and the structure of these chapters does, I believe, emphasize the centrality of these themes in the opening chapters.

THE RITUAL LAW

The third and final area of perplexity I want to look at is the ritual law, all those regulations relating to worship, the offering of sacrifice, food laws, and the quaint ceremonies to do with family life. About half the Pentateuch is given over to the ritual law, running from Exodus 25 right through Leviticus to the end of Numbers. Most readers find it very boring and quite unintelligible. If they can picture the rites and ceremonies being described, they are most

¹⁸ Atrahasis 1. 190-91; *Epic of Creation* 6. 35-37.

¹⁹ See *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 101-3. For discussion see G. Buccellati, 'Adapa, Genesis and the Notion of Faith', *Ugaritforschungen* 5 (1973) 61-66; N. E. Andreasen, 'Adam and Adapa: Two Anthropological Characters', *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981) 179-94.

perplexed as to what significance should be attached to these rituals. Somehow they feel that St Paul's remarks about the Old Testament ('whatever was written... was written for our instruction') do not really apply to this part of the Old Testament. It neither instructs, encourages nor gives hope.

However I believe this modern gut rejection of ritual is quite

[p.16]

misguided. It is in fact one of the most instructive and relevant parts of the Bible. I want to ask three questions about the ritual law. First why is there so much of it? Second how should it be interpreted? How do we discover what these peculiar rites mean? Third what do we learn from a study of Old Testament ritual?

First why is ritual so important that it occupies about half the law? Social anthropologists have alerted biblical scholars to the importance of ritual. For them the key to a society's deepest values is its ritual system. Writing in 1954 Monica Wilson said, 'Rituals reveal values at their deepest level... men express in ritual what moves them most.' It reveals 'the values of the group. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human society.'²⁰

Let me explain what she means. We resort to ritual when we want to express our most fundamental feelings. Consider the rituals used in greeting people in our society—a nod, a handshake, a kiss, or a hug. One gesture is appropriate when the milkman calls for his money, another for your aunt, yet another for your wife. We express our relationships to other people through these ritualized greetings. Indeed the more moved we are emotionally, the more ritual we employ. Think of baptisms, weddings and funerals. On such occasions people dress up to look their best. The giving of flowers, and the consumption of food and drink is conspicuous. That we have rituals on some occasions, eg a 21st birthday party or 70th birthday party, indicates that we regard reaching 21 or 70 as significant milestones, but few people would want to make such a splash on say their 22nd or 71st birthdays. 'Men express in ritual what moves them most.'

But Monica Wilson claims that ritual does not merely express personal individual feelings, but group values. That is, the rituals we perform in Britain reflect the values British society in general holds important. For example when the age of majority was reduced from 21 to 18, the 18th birthday became much more important and often people celebrate this instead of the 21st today. Why do we hold degree ceremonies but rarely O- or A-level ceremonies? Because a degree is supposed to be of more value than one of these other qualifications. Why do we make a big splash at weddings but make divorces as quiet as possible? What does it tell us about British attitudes that Good Friday is no longer strictly observed as a real holiday, but that New Year's Day is? According to the anthropologists rituals express the deepest and most fundamental values of society, not the individual convictions of the people in society. In tribal and traditional societies, individual conviction and social values usually go hand in hand. In ours they often differ. English Roman Catholics celebrate Guy Fawkes Day despite its Protestant message, and atheists feel compelled to celebrate Christmas because society says they must. A study of the rituals of British society is therefore a key to our deepest and most fundamental values. So too, a

²⁰ M. Wilson, *American Anthropologist* 56 (1954) 241 quoted by V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London, 1969) 6.

[p.17]

study of the numerous Old Testament ritual texts ought to unlock the fundamentals of biblical theology.

But by and large they have been neglected for more than a century. Books on Old Testament religion and theology devote very little space to discussing the meaning of the sacrifices and other rites described in the Pentateuch, while commentaries on Leviticus tend to be the Cinderella of their series. Biblical scholarship has, like much popular thinking, been influenced by the romantic notion that spontaneity is authenticity, that formality and ritual represents sham or hypocrisy. This attitude of mind has deterred people from studying the ritual law, which is hard enough to penetrate even without the discouragement of being told it is unimportant. Anthropologists have rightly told us the error of our ways: ritual is indeed of central importance in the Old Testament. However that does not solve the difficulty of interpretation: it simply makes the task more important.

How can we understand these rituals of the Old Testament then? Occasionally it is relatively easy. Deuteronomy 25 tells what must be done to the man who refuses to marry his widowed sister-in-law. In front of the elders of the city she pulls off his shoe and spits in his face, and says, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' The rite is one of public humiliation, and the interpretation of the different gestures is fairly clear. But in this instance we are fortunate in that the text includes sufficient explanation of what was done and why. But with the sacrifices, the rites of ordination, and even the day of atonement ceremonies the problems of interpretation are often baffling. The rites are usually carefully described, but we are left with very few clues as to what was said during them or why they should be performed in a particular way. Four different types of animal sacrifice are mentioned, yet on first inspection there seem but trivial differences in procedure and the reason for using one type of animal rather than another is opaque.

The reason for this obscurity is not far to seek. Evidently the meaning of these rites was so obvious that it was unnecessary to spell it out in words. We know why people give flowers at weddings, or funerals, or to the queen or Princess Diana when they go on walkabout. It does not need explaining. Similarly it is not necessary to explain why we have fireworks and bonfires on November 5th, unless you have foreigners present or children who do not know the story of Guy Fawkes. So too in ancient Israel. It was understood by everyone what the burnt offering symbolized, why the priest could eat of the flesh of the sin-offering and guilt-offering but not of the burnt-offering. It was plain to the worshippers of ancient Israel why sometimes the sacrificial blood was poured out at the foot of the altar, why at others it was smeared on the horns of the altar, and at others sprinkled before the veil of the holy of holies. But these points mystify us. We are tempted to

[p.18]

guess wildly just to find a point in it all. The only way to arrive at a definitive interpretation of these acts would be to resurrect an ancient Israelite priest and ask him. But unfortunately we cannot. Instead we must make do with hypothesis built on careful and thorough exegesis. We must compare each sacrifice very carefully with other sacrifices to discover, if we can, what is special to each one and on what occasions one sacrifice is used rather than another. The

occasional phrase of explanation 'to make atonement', 'as a soothing aroma' must be carefully noted and every possible interpretation explored.

There are a few works, ancient and modern, that proceed in this way and I believe some insights are emerging.²¹ For example it is clear that the opposition between life and death is fundamental to the whole ritual law. God is the source of perfect life, so that everything brought near to God, whether sacrificial animal or priest must be physically unblemished. Death is the great evil, and everything suggesting it, from corpses to bloody discharges, to skin disease, makes people unclean and therefore unfit to worship God. Another central theme is the election of Israel: that the Lord has made an exclusive covenant with Israel explains the choice of animals for sacrifice and why some animals are unclean and therefore not to be eaten by Israelites. Finally in sacrifice it appears that the worshipper identifies himself with the animal he offers. What he does to the animal, he does symbolically to himself. The death of the animal portrays the death of himself. In the animal's death he dies for his sin. In the animal's immolation on the altar his surrender of himself to God is portrayed.

These, then, seem to be some of the key ideas emerging from a study of the ritual law. They are, as anthropologists led us to expect, fundamental principles of biblical theology, well-attested in many different parts of the Old Testament. However the task of unravelling the significance of the ritual law has only just begun. How far we are from reaching a consensus in this area may be seen if we compare the works of Milgrom and Janowski, the most eminent American and German scholars in this field.²² At many points their interpretations of sacrifice are diametrically opposed, a clear indicator that there is still a great deal of work to be done here.

And Christians should be especially anxious that the significance of sacrifice and other biblical rituals should be clarified, for, because they are so fundamental to Old Testament, they are also fundamental to New Testament theology. The New Testament writers thought in largely Old Testament categories. In particular, Christ's death is interpreted in terms of Old Testament sacrifice, not just in the epistle to the Hebrews but in many other places. Jesus described himself as 'giving his life as a ransom for many'. John the Baptist called him 'the lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world'. According to Paul we are justified by Christ's blood; according to John we are cleansed by it. In all these ways

[p.19]

the New Testament is taking up basic categories of thought borrowed from the Old Testament and applying them to the saving event in the New Testament, the death of Christ. Can anything, therefore, be more vital to a Christocentric biblical theology than understanding the Old Testament sacrificial law?

²¹ Among nineteenth-century writers C. F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archeology* (Edinburgh, 1887) is worth consulting. But J. H. Kurtz, *Sacrificial Worship of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1863, reprinted Klock & Klock, 1980) is more rigorous exegetically and trustworthy in his conclusions. My own commentaries on *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, 1979) and *Numbers* (Leicester, 1981) attempt to probe some of the issues, and may be consulted for further reading.

²² See J. Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology I* (Berkeley, 1970); *Cult and Conscience* (Leiden, 1976); *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden, 1983); B. Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen* (Neukirchen, 1982). For a very thorough and incisive review of Milgrom and Janowski and a convincing discussion of the sin offering and day of atonement ceremonies, see now N. Kiuchi, *The Meaning and the Function of the Hattat Offering* (CNAA PhD Thesis: 1986).

But not only is the Old Testament ritual law central to theological understanding of scripture; I also want to suggest it is a model of modern communication technique. For a long time Christians have imagined that communication between God and man is essentially verbal, merely a matter of words. God speaks to man through the prophets or through the Bible: man replies in prayer. We view communication with God as a sort of two-way radio. But God does not restrict himself to words, he uses ritual such as sacraments: ritual is more like colour TV than radio. Ideas are made visible. God's promises are made visible in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. In return the Christian expresses this faith by submitting to the water of baptism or receiving the bread and the wine. To liken ritual to colour TV really underestimates its power, though. We simply watch TV: in ritual we are actively engaged. Ritual is like acting—acting on a stage suspended between heaven and earth with divine and human spectators watching.

Educational psychologists tell us that we remember 10% of what we hear, 30% of what we see but 70% of what we do. Modern preachers put most of their effort into teaching by hearing, though 90% of what they say will be forgotten. Moses put his main effort into teaching through ritual, a wise move if he wanted the people to remember such fundamental truths, for ritual is a kind of doing and therefore sticks in the mind much better than words. There is an up-to-dateness about the Old Testament use of ritual that astonishes me. To sacrifice a teddy bear makes a lively children's talk, and the subsequent sermon an important lesson for their parents. My students thoroughly enjoy acting out the rituals of the widowed sister-in-law and the suspected adulteress! But I believe we should go further: not simply act out the ceremonies of the Old Covenant, but in our post-literate age devise dramatic rites that teach the fundamental truths of the new covenant as effectively as the Pentateuch teaches those of the old. This will require imagination and sensitivity, but I think would be worth the effort.

To conclude, the Pentateuch is undoubtedly a most perplexing part of scripture. Its moral law, its teaching about world origins, and its ritual law all pose tricky questions for the twentieth-century Christian. However I hope you are persuaded that they are all areas that are worth puzzling over. The more I have studied it, the more I have been convinced that 'All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.' I hope you will find the same.

© 1987 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
