

# THE PLACE OF CHAPTER 24 IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

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EVEN A CASUAL READING OF THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS reveals evidence of structure in the book. The sacrifices recorded in chapters 1:1-6:7, for instance, are arranged from the most costly to the least costly. Chapters 11-15 deal with the clean and the unclean; and some have called Leviticus 17-26 the "holiness code."

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Scholars have proposed a number of possible patterns to explain the overall structure of the book. Warning has outlined the book according to "the divine speeches."<sup>1</sup> Hartley argues that Leviticus is part of a larger block of material extending from Exodus 25:1 to Numbers 10:10,<sup>2</sup> and he views the divine speeches in Leviticus as structural indicators. He divides the book into six divisions. "The divisions are logically ordered. Each one must necessarily follow the preceding one, for material in the preceding division is critical for a proper understanding of the section at hand."<sup>3</sup>

Douglas argues for a carefully structured literary work as well. "When the literary conventions of Leviticus are examined, we find an overarching structure that bears an extremely cerebral, closely argued theological statement based on a series of expanded analo-

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfried Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 37-63.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), xxx.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

gies. In this structure impurity ... is clearly subordinate to the positive view of the theistic universe against which it is balanced. The central place in the teaching is given to righteousness; impurity is the foil for displaying the meaning of righteousness. More than a literary foil, it is a statement about the nature of existence in a sacramental universe, a religious ontology."<sup>4</sup>

#### PROBLEMS WITH LEVITICUS 24

Throughout these attempts to account for structure, however, scholars have struggled to understand how Leviticus 24 relates to the material before and after it. In the late nineteenth century Kellogg noted the following:

It is not easy to determine with confidence the association of thought which occasioned the interposition of this chapter, with its somewhat disconnected contents, between chap. xxiii, on the set times of holy convocation, and chap. xxv, on the sabbatic and jubilee years, which latter would seem most naturally to have followed the former immediately, as related to the same subject of sacred times. Perhaps the best explanation of the connection with the previous chapter is that which finds it in reference to the olive oil for the lamps and the meal for the shew-bread. The feast of tabernacles, directions for which has just been given, celebrated ingathering of the harvest of the year, both of grain and fruit; and here Israel is told what is to be done with a certain portion of each.<sup>5</sup>

More recent commentators have continued to note the same problem. Hartley wonders why the topics in chapter 24 have been placed together. "It is difficult to account for the location of these instructions and laws within the context of the laws of holy living. They come between a ritual calendar (chap. 23) and the regulations for the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee (chap. 25), but this chapter has little to do with the calendric concerns save that the ritualistic practices were done on a regular basis."<sup>6</sup>

Calling Leviticus 24 "miscellaneous,"<sup>7</sup> Fox makes these observations:

<sup>4</sup> Mary Douglas, "Poetic Structure in Leviticus," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 255.

<sup>5</sup> S. H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1891), 474.

<sup>6</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus*, 396.

<sup>7</sup> *The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Everett Fox (New York: Schocken, 1995), 502 (cf. 602).

Two issues, unrelated to what has gone before, are treated here: certain ritual objects in the Dwelling (oil lamps and "showbread"), and the story of a man who insulted God and therefore had to be executed (along with further rules about capital crimes). The function of this chapter is not clear; perhaps it serves as a breather between the important sections on sacred days (23) and land tenure (25). It is possible (as Levine notes) that chapters such as this one and Num. 15 serve as a repository for various cultic laws that needed a location. There are two other places in the Torah where a brief passage on the lights in the sanctuary may originally have served to separate sections: the end of Ex. 27 and the beginning of Num. 8. If so, that function no longer is as major as it once might have been.<sup>8</sup>

Gerstenberger highlights the problem this way:

The diverse materials in Leviticus 24 ostensibly have nothing to do with the festival calendar. Some person appended them either because the scroll came to an end here, or because for some reason unknown to us he found it necessary to mention the "eternal light" in the temple and the perpetually fresh divine loaves kept there. The regular sacrifices, those not dictated by the festival ritual, are, according to Numbers 28f., not to be forgotten either. The uninterrupted light and the perpetually present bread are to be observed in addition to the holiday events themselves. This section regarding blasphemers, along with the expansion (vv. 10-23), is even further removed from the liturgical order. It deviates from its surroundings formally and stylistically as well, and might be a fortuitous insertion, prompted possibly by associations with the capital combinations of Leviticus 20 and 23:29f.<sup>9</sup>

For Gerstenberger the structure of Leviticus 24 is part of a larger problem relating to the entire book. He says the present text of Leviticus developed over a period of time. "We must rather recognize that the many successive tradents and scribes involved with the sacred texts brought together material from different origins, and in this process of transmission were no longer able to establish an exact chronological or logical order. The Pentateuchal material is often organized without any order at all."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while suggestions for an overall structure for Leviticus may not be uncommon, the structure of Leviticus 24 is problematic.

Milgrom's recent commentary recognizes the same problem.<sup>11</sup> "Lev 24 presents two nettling questions: the placement of this

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>9</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 354-55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

anomalous chapter, and the relationship between its two parts, vv. 1-9 and vv. 10-23."<sup>12</sup>

Leviticus 24 presents a problem not only in establishing its relationship to the preceding and following contexts, but also in understanding the relationship of the material within the chapter itself. Internally the chapter seems to address two quite different situations: the oil for the lampstand (vv. 1-4) and the bread for the table of showbread (vv. 5-9), both related to the ministry of the tabernacle (vv. 1-9), and then the necessity of stoning the blasphemer (vv. 10-23). "Within chaps. 17-26, chap. 24 has anomalous features."<sup>13</sup> These elements in the chapter do not seem to be closely related nor do they seem to be related to the larger context of the so-called "holiness code" of chapters 17-26.

### SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Warning has attempted to solve the internal structural problem of Leviticus 24 by examining word usage.<sup>14</sup> He observes a pattern related to Leviticus 24 based on his analysis of the author's use of **דַבַּר**. "Lev 24 ... is said to have 'anomalous features' with chaps. 17-27. With regard to the clear structuring function of the verb 'speak,' it is no more anomalous than the two preceding chapters."<sup>15</sup>

Warning also suggests that the occurrence of the word "Sabbath" helps explain why Leviticus 24 occurs where it does. "Once we have recognized the notion of the 'Sabbath' to be an important thread running through Lev 23-26 one must admit that this key-word-occurring twice in 24:5-9-may have prompted the ancient author to place this pericope here. Therefore it seems doubtful to aver that Lev 24 is 'arbitrarily dropped in between chaps 23 and 25.' On the contrary, because of the Sabbath in Lev 23 and 25-26 the present placement turns out to be the most appropriate one."<sup>16</sup>

Also, Warning suggests a chiasmic structure for the chapter "based on the alternation of the singular (B) and plural (A) of the

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2081. Milgrom refers to both Warning and Douglas and states his preference for Douglas's ring structure (ibid., 2082).

<sup>13</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus*, 396.

<sup>14</sup> Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus*, 92-98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 94.

common noun **בן** 'son.'<sup>17</sup>

These observations seem to suggest a minute and extensive artistic structure of the material in Leviticus 24. However, they do not explain the order of the two sections within the chapter or why the chapter is placed where it is. In fact Warning himself seems to recognize that a micro-analysis does not provide a sufficient rationale for the present structure of the text when he refers to Gane's observation of "the ascending order of holiness in Lev 19-24."<sup>18</sup> To simply say this is the most "appropriate" place for the material found in this chapter seems to fall short of arguing why the material is included in the first place.

Douglas has developed still another approach to the structure of Leviticus, which has implications for the role of chapter 24 in the book.<sup>19</sup> "In rereading Leviticus we shall consciously subdue our own interest in strict linear sequence in favor of a cultivated interest in the links of each part with the whole."<sup>20</sup> She suggests that the book has a "ring structure."<sup>21</sup> "Ring composition is described for

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas, "Poetic Structure in Leviticus," 239-56.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Gutzwiller provides an interesting perspective on this question of literary structure. "Ring composition, on the other hand, is a much earlier phenomenon. Composing in a ring, or with the introverted structure ABCBA, is simply a way of organizing a unit of discourse. This unit of discourse may or may not correspond to a book in either the intellectual or the physical sense; it may be smaller or larger than a written work occupying a single roll. Ring composition in classical texts was studied throughout the nineteenth century and has been shown to be characteristic of much early Greek poetry. In the epic compositions of Homer and Hesiod, relatively small narrative units are commonly organized in a ring, while larger structures, like the Iliad as a whole, have also been analyzed on the same pattern. As a basic method of organizing thought throughout the archaic period (and before as well, one assumes) ring composition apparently helped the oral composer comprehend [the units] in a performance setting. This form of compositional structure continues to be a dominant mode of organizing discourse down through the time of Herodotus, who often forms his larger narrative units in rings with the moral lesson at the center, or pivotal point. In narrating the fall of Lydia in Book 1, for instance, he places Croesus' misinterpretation of Apollo's oracles-the king's all too human mistake-at the turning point of his ring (1.46-56).

"In the later years of the fifth century, ring composition came to be replaced with other forms of organization we tend to associate with rational or logical thinking, such as linear, chronological narrative or arrangement by type and subtype. The demise of ring composition was connected with the intellectual paradigm shift that took place under the influence of sophistic and Socratic thinkers, who replaced traditional modes of thought with an emphasis on definition and rational argument. As examples of the changed form of organization brought about by this intellectual revolution, we may point to the chronological organization of Thucydides' history by

the Greek: classics as a primitive device by which the conclusion of a speech returns to the main flow of the narrative, by giving `some verbal reminiscence of its beginning.'"<sup>22</sup>

In developing the concept of the overall ring structure of Leviticus Douglas parallels Leviticus 24 with earlier teaching on the sin offering and the guilt offering. "Chapter 24 matches with its essay on sins the chapters on sin in the exposition (4:5, 6:1-7)."<sup>23</sup> However, 24:1-9 discusses the oil necessary to keep the lampstand burning and the bread for the table of showbread. Only the second half of the chapter deals with sin. Also, while the idea of sin is found in 24:10-23 and 4:5 and 6:1-7, it is not clear that these passages are dealing with the same kind of sin. Leviticus 24:10-23 seems to be dealing with willful sin, at least in the case of the blasphemer, whereas chapter 4 is dealing with nonwillful sin. Leviticus 6:1-7 may also be focused on nonwillful sin, though not everyone agrees on this. Milgrom, for instance, suggests this pericope is dealing with willful sin that is confessed before the guilty party is discovered, thereby "converting" this willful sin into something nonwillful.<sup>24</sup> The point is simply that the parallel between chapter 24 and 4:5 and 6:1-7 is not strong.<sup>25</sup> So, although Douglas's work is certainly important in dealing with the overall structure of the book, it does not deal in adequate detail with the relationship of Leviticus 24 to the rest of the book.

#### THE PLACE OF LEVITICUS 24

Despite the general pessimism regarding the relationship of this chapter to its context, some structural considerations may help ex-

year or Aristotle's method of breaking down in outline form the subject he is discussing. Organization by rings does later reappear in artistically contrived poetry books, such as Vergil's *Eclogues*" ("Comments on Rolf Rendtorff," in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer [Sheffield: Sheffield, 1996], 38-39).

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, "Poetic Structure in Leviticus," 247.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 373.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher R. Smith argues that a major structural break occurs between verses 9 and 10 of this chapter. Leviticus 24:1-9 concludes the preceding material and 24:11-23 introduces the next section of the book. While his view is admittedly unique, it does point to the lack of apparent unity in the material in this chapter ("The Literary Structure of Leviticus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* '70 [1996]: 26).

plain why this particular material is placed in this location.<sup>26</sup> Actually Leviticus 24 fits well in the overall pattern of the book, and the internal structure of the chapter reinforces the argument of the entire book.

First, it appears helpful to recognize chapters 25 and 26 as an independent structural unit. The expression "Mount Sinai" and the reference to revelation given to Moses are found in both Leviticus 25:1 and 26:46,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that these two verses may form an inclusio. In other words this inclusio may suggest that these two chapters are a unit independent of the preceding material. Warning argues for the unity of these two chapters based on the term "the land of Egypt."<sup>28</sup> This is not to say there is no thematic connection between chapters 25 and 26 and the surrounding material, but it does suggest that a thematic connection of chapter 24 may be found in relationship to its preceding context.

Chapters 18-23 are united in that they deal with the kind of people Yahweh wants to worship Him and the actual process of worshipping Him through celebrating the annual feasts. Chapters 18-20 deal with the people, and chapters 21-22 deal with the priests. The regulations mentioned in these chapters stipulate how the people and the priests were to conduct themselves as examples of holiness. Leviticus 23 discusses how the people and priests were to worship the Lord in the annual feasts. These feasts are related to the sabbath, as indicated in 23:3. The relationship of Leviticus 24 to this material is the point at issue.

As Douglas's approach has shown, a ring structure might somehow explain, when viewed from a linear perspective, what at first appears to be an anomalous situation in the text. She argues for the integrity of chapters 18-20 with an ABA' structure. "Leviticus signals its turning point by packing it on either side with two parallel chapters, so that the turning has a structure of ABA'. Chapter 18 is very similar to chap. 20; the main difference is that

<sup>26</sup> Smith has suggested this is the third narrative section of the book (24:10-23). "The narratives indicate or illustrate the organizing concerns of the major divisions they demarcate" (ibid., 24). "This desire to account for the exile actually motivates the selection of the short narrative (24:10-23) that introduces this last group of law chapters" (ibid., 25). Smith does not directly connect the two sections of Leviticus 24. Furthermore he acknowledges his unique approach to the structure of the text. "It is necessary to acknowledge that my analysis here is apparently unique in proposing a thematic break distinguishing the materials on either side of Lev. 24:10--23 and especially in uniting those that follow it" (ibid., 26).

<sup>27</sup> This expression also occurs in 7:38 and 27:34.

<sup>28</sup> Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus*, 98-99.

the order is reversed. Chapter 18 plunges straight into the topic of sexual regulation and goes on to Molech, while chap. 20 starts with warnings against Molech worship and goes on to sexual regulation. In between the pair of paralleled chapters stands a major statement about the meaning of righteousness."<sup>29</sup>

It seems even more obvious that chapters 21-22 are a unit since they deal with the holiness of the priesthood and of the high priest in particular. These five chapters (18-22) together, then, discuss the holiness of the people and the priests, thus covering the holiness of all those encompassed within the nation as God constituted it.

A key to unlocking the structure of this section may lie in observing how Leviticus 24 relates to the pattern seen in chapters 18-22.<sup>30</sup> Leviticus 24:1-9 discusses two separate but related topics. While verse 1 mentions the necessity for the people to provide the appropriate oil, the emphasis is on the priests who were responsible to keep the lamps burning continually before the Lord. Keeping the lamps burning is mentioned three times in these verses. This function is an integral part of the priestly ministry, setting them apart from the common people.

The second section (vv. 5-9) discusses the priests' responsibility to place the showbread before the Lord each week and mentions that, when the bread was replaced by the priests, the week-old bread was to be eaten only by the priests and in a holy place. Again, this privilege was not available to the common people, thus marking off the special role given to the priests by the Lord. Therefore the regulations for the lamps and the showbread are related to the priestly ministry and not to the common people. Leviticus 24:1-9 thus parallels chapters 21-22 in the suggested ring structure of Leviticus 18-24<sup>31</sup> since both these sections deal directly with priestly responsibility.

The fact that 24:10-23 deals with how the people were to re-

<sup>29</sup> Douglas, "Poetic Structure in Leviticus," 250-51.

<sup>30</sup> In dealing with macro chiasms Wayne Brouwer's discussion (based on Blomberg) is helpful (*The Literary Development of John 13-17: A Chiastic Reading* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000], 38-45). The nine criteria for establishing the existence of a macro chiasm appear to be met.

<sup>31</sup> If this suggested ring structure for these chapters is valid, then a good argument can be made for the central importance of the annual cycle of feasts dealt with in Leviticus 23. This annual cycle of feasts would remind Israel of the Lord's past, present, and future provisions for His people. This theological perspective would provide the theological "motivation" for a desire for holiness on the part of the entire nation, including both people and priests.

spond to sin (the opposite of holiness) is supported by the absence of any mention of priestly involvement in discerning the Lord's will in dealing with blasphemers. It is difficult to determine how significant this might be, since Deuteronomy 17:8-13 points to the important role of the priests in judicial proceeding. Perhaps the priests are not mentioned in Leviticus 24:10-23 because of the reference to Moses. Only after his death would the priests function in adjudicating particularly difficult cases. Nevertheless this portion of Scripture does not mention priestly involvement, even though priests figure prominently in the opening verses of the chapter. Verses 10-23, dealing with sin related to the people and the necessity for an appropriate response, parallel chapters 18-20, which also deal with the people.

Based on this analysis and the concept of a ring structure, chapter 24 is an essential part of Leviticus 18-24. The two major sections of chapter 24, dealing first with the priests (vv. 1-9) and then with the people (vv. 10-23), provide the textual material to form a ring structure with chapters 17-23. This material is textually necessary in order to create the intended structure. Furthermore this deliberate structure is theologically significant.

These observations lead to the suggestion that chapters 18-24 follow an ABCB'A' pattern. Both A sections (chaps. 18-20 and 24:10-23) focus on the people; both B sections (chaps. 21-22 and 24:1-9) focus on the priests, and section C (Lev. 23) discusses the annual feasts celebrated by both the people and the priests.

As is often the case, a ring structure may be found within other ring structures, pointing to the carefully crafted literary structure of a book. Such structure gives special significance to Leviticus 23. If that chapter is the focus of this ring, what is its role in the argument and how does it point to the overall argument of the book? In a section of the book dealing with holiness for the entire nation (chaps. 18-24), the teaching of Leviticus 23 has great significance. An understanding of the message of Leviticus 23 in the larger chiastic structure suggested above does provide a reason this material was included in the book and at this particular location.

## SOME IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRUCTURE

This article has sought to show how Leviticus 24, often viewed as unrelated to its context, is actually directly related to its context and provides essential data through the structure it supports. If the central section of a chiastic or ring structure is the author's intended point of emphasis, it is important to note the theological significance of Leviticus 23 for the theme of holiness which is being

developed in these chapters. A clear understanding of Yahweh's provision for His people (chap. 23) becomes the theological foundation and motivation for holiness.

Identifying this ring structure therefore has significant theological implications. Seeing Leviticus 23 at the center of this "holiness" ring structure provides the theological focus for the exhortation to holiness on the part of the people and the priests. The pilgrimage feasts celebrated what the Lord had done in the past (Passover and Unleavened Bread), what He was doing for the nation in the present (First Fruits and Pentecost), and what He would do in the future (Trumpets, Atonement, and Feast of Booths). They reminded the people of God's provisions for them, thus encouraging them to be obedient and thankful to Him. The blessings of God as a motivation for obeying His commands follow the pattern begun in Genesis, where God's loving acts preceded His divine commands. This same pattern finds expression in the structure of suzerainty treaties, in which the reiteration of kingly blessings precedes kingly commands.

Viewed in the light of these structural considerations, Leviticus 24 is not anomalous or anachronistic. Its presence gives a theological focus to the holiness code, indicating that Yahweh's care for His covenant people provides the appropriate teaching and motivation for godly living. God's calls to holiness come from a loving Lord who in every circumstance has sought, is seeking, and will always seek what is best for His people.

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