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Milgrom, Jacob

Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary and Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

The Anchor Bible 3A-B

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"Encyclopedic," "Monumental," "*par excellence*." These commendations are samples of praise which scholars offered for the first volume of Jacob Milgrom's commentary at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Francisco in November of 1992. A year or so earlier the publisher had proclaimed the book, "The most comprehensive commentary on Leviticus now available" and the author, "the world's leading scholar on Leviticus." Such accolades will only be multiplied now that the commentary is complete. One case in point was the devotion of a Pentateuch Section at the 2001 Society of Biblical Literature meeting to the theme: "The Scholarship of Jacob Milgrom." Milgrom, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, has certainly produced an impressive work, the culmination of approximately thirty years of study!

The basic format of *Leviticus 3A* and *3B* is the same as for earlier volumes in the series. Each section contains the author's Translation, Notes, then Comments on each section. In addition, Milgrom has chosen to include, at the beginning of each volume, "The Book of Leviticus in Outline," plus his translation of the entire book of Leviticus. Each volume then contains unique material in addition to the expected sections on the text. The following is a sketch of their content:

Volume 3A has an "Introduction" (to "H" as opposed to "P" in chapters 1-16) (1319) in two parts, "Structure, Vocabulary, Extent, and Date," and "Theology." The bulk of the work is constituted by "Translation, Notes, and Comments" on chapters 17-22,

structured with a section for each chapter: 17 "The Slaughter and Consumption of Meat," 18 "Illicit Sexual Practices," 19 "Ritual and Moral Holiness," 20 "Penalties for Molek Worship, Necromancy, and Sexual Offenses," 21 "Instructions for the Priests," and 22 "Instructions for the Priests and Lay Persons."

Volume 3B has "Translation, Notes, and Comments" on chapters 23-27, also structured with a section for each chapter: 23 "The Holiday Calendar," 24 "Tabernacle Oil and Bread; the Case of Blasphemy," 25 "Jubilee, the Priestly Solution for Economic Injustice," 26 "Blessings, Curses, and the Recall of the Covenant," 27 "Consecrations and Their Redemption." This volume also has 8 Appendixes containing Milgrom's responses to scholars reactions to the first volume of the commentary (published in 1991), as well as a cumulative Bibliography for volumes 3A and 3B and cumulative Indexes for all three volumes.

The appendixes mentioned above are reflective of a consistent and refreshing quality of Milgrom's work—knowledge of, interaction with, and appreciation for the scholarship of others working in his field. Milgrom readily acknowledges his indebtedness, not only to established scholars, but also to his own students, some who contributed Comments to the work. His attitude and practice is evident in a comment at the end of a response to Adrian Schenker: "Again, I wish to express my gratitude to Adrian Schenker for his finely reasoned theses and for his trenchant critique of my views. I learn much from him. Above all, he always makes me rethink my own positions, and for that alone I am grateful" (3B, 2452).

Milgrom's commentary deserves a place of distinction among works on Leviticus for a number of reasons. The first is its comprehensiveness. The title could well have been, "All you ever wanted to know about Leviticus, and then some." A good example is Milgrom's treatment of the topic of centralization of worship (3A, 1503-14), in which he dialogues with major scholarly work on the subject, walks through a ten-step treatment of pertinent issues and questions, defends his view that H promotes multiple sanctuaries, and restates his mantras that P is pre exilic and that the bulk of H is from the 8th century.

Another example of comprehensiveness is Milgrom's use of outside sources to bring light to the meaning of the text. The list includes, along with Old and New Testaments, Hittite, Ugaritic, Egyptian, other Mesopotamian, Hindu, Qumran, and extensive Rabbinic sources. Many of these provide apparent parallels to the biblical materials while the rabbinic and post-rabbinic materials in particular provide striking insight on significance and application. Milgrom's treatment of Talion reflects well his comprehensive study, utilizing a range of extra-biblical sources (3B, 2133-40).

Milgrom's work is also to be commended because it is built upon a close reading of the text itself. This characteristic is very important since many of us face a great temptation to read over the text or to read into the text because its subject matter is quite foreign and difficult. Although this quality could be pointed to on most any page (the textual work is the heart of the commentary), a pertinent example may be found in Milgrom's treatment of the concept of *imitatio dei*. He suggests that the idea was that "Israel should strive to imitate God, but, on the other hand, it should be fully aware of the unbridgeable gap between them." This truth, he notes, was clarified by the Masoretes in

their pointing of the word "holy." When it referred to God, it was written *plene*, but when it referred to Israel, it was defective: "The Masoretes continually and meticulously distinguish between divine and human (Israelite, priestly, Naziritic) holiness when the two are compared, allowing 'full' holiness (*plene*) to be attributed only to God" (3A, 1605-06). Another example is Milgrom's fine distinction between the verbs "to fear," and "to honor" in treating 19:3 (3A, 1608-09).

Milgrom earlier stated that "Theology is what Leviticus is all about" (3, 42). Although the current volumes do not contain the extent of theological observation that one might want, they do reflect Milgrom's earlier conviction. A salient illustration is his comment on the Jubilee in a section he subtitled, "A Rallying Cry for Today's Oppressed." In the comment, he reported on his participation in a symposium of the Jubilee sponsored by the World Council of Churches in 1996. In that symposium, poverty-stricken Third World nations issued demands to creditor nations calling for economic relief. Milgrom's observations include, "The jubilee prescribing remission of debts, restoration of land, sabbath rest for land and people, and release from economic servitude corresponds to all four demands Thus the jubilee laws, *mutatis mutandis*, offer a realistic blueprint for bridging the economic gap between the have and have-not nations, which otherwise portends political uprisings that can engulf the entire world" (3B, 2270-71; see also the introductory section "Theology" in 3A, 1368-1443, for a more general treatment of the theology of H, reflecting stress on H and its theoretical interplay with other sources).

While the second and third volumes of *Leviticus* are remarkable accomplishments, they also have bothersome aspects, some relatively minor and some quite significant. The more significant issues include the fact that Milgrom clearly falls into the source-critical camp when it comes to methodology. For scholars less enamored with such an approach, and their numbers have increased over the decade since publication of the first volume of *Leviticus*, they will have much to overlook. For example, the typical tendency of circular reasoning in applying the methodology is evident. In his treatment of 19:20-22, Milgrom states that the chapter does not deal with case or casuistic law. Since, however, v. 20 does contain such law, it of course cannot be an original part of the chapter (from the H source), but must be from another source. It is judged to have all the "quintessential hallmarks of P" and so has been imported into this context by H for specific reasons explained by Milgrom (3A, 1665). Granted, Milgrom's reasoning is intriguing and sophisticated, but an interpreter without his presuppositions regarding H or P would not necessarily be convinced.

Milgrom's views on the different sources also lead him to make statements that will seem to more conservative readers to be strange and in some cases quite offensive. For example, in discussing the positions of P, H, and D on centralization and nonsacrificial slaughter, Milgrom concludes that "only H imposes an absolute ban on nonsacrificial slaughter, a far-reaching and unrealistic demand that probably always remained a dead letter" (3A, 1514). In addition, in one instance, Milgrom, in discussing the ancient problem of ancestor worship, depicts the biblical writers as basically doing the best they could given the circumstances, making them no different than a post-biblical

writer like Maimonides: "The chances are, however, that the biblical writers, though fully aware of the popular interpretation of the food offerings to the dead, put a different face on it by regarding them as acts of veneration. What choice had they, considering that any attempt to ban them would have been totally ignored by the populace? . . . The pure YHWHists, represented by H and D, could do no more than mask this practice with an interpretation compatible with their theology, . . ." (3A, 1776). While one can appreciate Milgrom's recognition that development and growth in the legal collections is an unavoidable reality resulting in apparent tension in the text, one also could wish that he could find a way to deal honestly with the issues without conclusions that call into question the legitimacy of the text or the integrity of its authors/editors.

No doubt, one of Milgrom's most controversial views is his interpretation of the laws regarding homosexuality. In short, he asserts that these laws were binding only in Israel and nowhere else meaning that they cannot be applied legitimately on any universal scale, the laws applied in Israel only to limited male-male relationships within the family, and lesbianism is not prohibited at all. His position is based primarily on the idea that the issue underlying these laws is Israel's obsession with "increasing its birth rate without endangering harmonious relations within the extended family." Since homosexual activity "spills seed," i. e., life is lost, then it betrays the creation command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

As usual, Milgrom's argument is insightful, here in terms of making the connection between homosexuality and procreation, but the position begs questions and also suggests that modern political correctness may be as much a concern as anything else. In the first place, if one accepts the premise that these particular laws applied only to Israel in the holy land, could not one make the same argument about any and every law originally given to Israel? Would it be right, for example, for Milgrom to suggest that the laws of Jubilee have any relevance for modern nations, as noted above? Second, is it logical, on the one hand, to note that a major concern of the laws was the "spilling of seed," then assert that male-male relationships outside of certain family circles was acceptable? Would not seed still be spilled, and life lost? Last, although there is more to Milgrom's position, could not one suggest that his position on lesbianism is an argument from silence, which is mitigated by the fact the culture of the laws was male-dominated? (See 3A, 1749-50, 1786-90)

Notation of some more minor concerns about these volumes is in order as well. One would expect some typographical errors in such massive works, but one in the Preface, repeated verbatim in 3A and 3B (xii), and the misspelling of Israel! (3A, 1542) were surprising. A couple of puzzling matters fall into the editorial domain, each reflected in all three volumes. One is pagination from the first volume to the second. The first ends at page 1163 while the second begins with 1265 (numbering the title page). Apparently about 100 pages have been added inadvertently to the count(?). A second matter is chapter and verse headings at the tops of pages. In the first volume, the first two sections (133-640) contain no chapter and verse indicators at the tops of the pages while the third section (pages 643-1084) does, although these are quite broad, e. g., 11:1-47. This factor proved a real hindrance when I tried to move from chapter to chapter for

comparison or when I attempted to go back to a particular chapter and/or verse for review. In the second volume (3A), this problem was eliminated with specific notes given at the top of all right-side pages, e. g., Translation 18:1-30; Notes 18:2b-5; Comment 19:1-37, however in the third volume (3B), while the first two types of notations were maintained, the specific text references for the Comments were not given. Makes one wonder if a plan existed.

The last issue is at least three-pronged and the components are interrelated: readability, size, and cost. First, such a work as *Leviticus* will be a challenge to read, if for no other reason, because it is routinely detailed and often quite technical. But I think the material is made more difficult by extensive use of transliteration. I assume that the reasoning behind it is that those who don't know Hebrew can read it, but how many people who don't know Hebrew have any real facility in transliteration? Perhaps many more than I think, but it is a real hindrance for me. I would prefer use of the Hebrew text. Those who don't read it could read around it just as I expect most people do the transliteration. Of course, in an earlier era, setting and printing the Hebrew text was time and cost prohibitive, but improved technology should have eliminated this problem.

The next issue is the size of the commentary. It is certainly monumental and comprehensive, and so, huge. But did it have to be so huge? I think not. Although I would not want the editorial job for lots of reasons, including strong reservations about the idea of telling Jacob Milgrom what he should or shouldn't do, the work could have been more exacting. One case in point is that the volumes contain significant repetition, some of which could have been eliminated. Examples from 3A are 1433-39, cf. 1425-26; 1532, cf. 1526; 1542, cf. 1536. In addition, the treatment of a phrase from 19:27 extends from page 1689 to page 1692. The information is interesting, but is it all necessary? Perhaps not, particularly given the overall size of the work. The last matter is that of cost. As the work stands, it is a 3-volume, \$150.00, plus tax, set. Quite an order for the average student as well as for most everyone else. Such a price suggests the question, why three volumes (the only other 3-volume sets are Psalms, which one might expect due to its bulk, and Ezekiel)? The first volume was 1163 pages priced at \$50.00. The second volume (3A) was published in 2000, the third (3B) in 2001, indicating that all the copy apparently was available in a relatively short time frame, making possible the publication as one volume. If the second and third volumes had been published as one volume (1448 pages), then we would have had a 2-volume set for *only* \$100.00 or \$110.00, plus tax.

In the final analysis, notwithstanding my concerns and quibbles, *Leviticus* is a resource no serious student will want to be without. Just start a savings plan and get it! Those who do so will discover invaluable insight into difficult biblical material which, unfortunately, will remain hidden to the majority of Bible readers.