Christian A. Eberhart / Thomas Hieke (eds.)

Writing a Commentary on Leviticus

Hermeneutics – Methodology – Themes

V&R



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IN MEMORIAM

Hermine Eberhart, January 27, 1935 – October 05, 2018

Hans-Winfried Jüngling SJ, July 12, 1938 – October 04, 2018

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Preface

This volume features presentations delivered at annual conferences of the Society of Biblical Literature. In 2014 and 2015, they were offered for the "Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement" section, which existed between 2007 and 2015; its objective was the study of the practices, interpretations, and reception history of sacrifice and cult in early Judaism, Christianity, and their larger cultural contexts (ancient Near East and Greco-Roman antiquity). This program unit offered panels under the title "Writing a Commentary on Leviticus" that were intended to provide scholars working on such commentary volumes with a forum of scholarly discussion and exchange. The panel series was proposed by Thomas Hieke, who was then working on a Leviticus commentary for the academic series *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament* (HThKAT, published by Herder in 2014). It was welcome and adopted by Christian A. Eberhart, founder and former chair of the "Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement" section. The third and final panel was housed in the "Ritual in the Biblical World" section at the annual conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2016.

The present volume makes the presentations by these scholars, and with them an important segment of the work of the "Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement" section, available to a wider academic audience. It is thus a sequel to the volumes *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (SBLRBS 68; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), edited by Christian A. Eberhart, and *Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement in Early Judaism and Christianity: Constituents and Critique* (SBLRBS 85; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), edited by Henrietta L. Wiley and Christian A. Eberhart.

We wish to thank Nicole Duran, Steve Finlan, Bill Gilders, Jason Tatlock, and Henrietta L. Wiley, the members of the steering committee of the "Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement" section, for their ongoing collaboration. They have pursued the themes of this program section with scholarly rigor and professional engagement for almost a decade. We are also grateful to Ada Taggar-Cohen and Jason Lamoreaux, the chairs of the "Ritual in the Biblical World" section, for hosting the final panel of our project, thus allowing us to complete the three-year cycle. We would also like to express our deep gratitude to all of the scholars who enthusiastically accepted our invitation. They shared their research on Leviticus first through presentations, then in writing, and finally by submitting further samples of their previously published scholarship that were considered to enrich this volume. Thus, some of the contributions are revised or translated versions of essays that were printed roughly within the last decade (Watts, "Unperformed Rituals"; Eberhart, "Sacrifice"; Meshel, "Form and Function"; Hieke, "Prohibition"; Wright, "Law and Creation"). The place of the original publication is indicated at

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the beginning of each contribution. We owe special thanks to all publishers for granting permission to reuse and update this material.

We are, moreover, very thankful to Elisabeth Hernitscheck of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Göttingen) for her continued interest in the topic of this collection of essays and the pleasant cooperation, and to the editorial board of *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (FRLANT) for adopting the present volume into their series. We also gratefully acknowledge the competent assistance of Andrea Klug (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz) who prepared the manuscript for publication and of Clint Boyd (University of Houston), Assistant to Christian A. Eberhart, who helped with the task of proof reading.

Christian A. Eberhart (Houston, USA)
Thomas Hieke (Mainz, Germany)

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Christian A. Eberhart/Thomas Hieke

Introduction

Writing a Commentary on Leviticus

Writing a commentary on a biblical book is not limited to the scholar's study and desk. Hence, several experts in the field of Hebrew Bible currently writing a larger commentary on the book of Leviticus followed the invitation of Christian A. Eberhart (University of Houston) and Thomas Hieke (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz) to meet between 2014 and 2016 at annual conferences of the Society of Biblical Literature. They shared their experiences, discussed a variety of hermeneutical and methodological approaches, probed critical questions, and presented their ideas about particular themes and issues in the third book of the Torah. The results of the three consultative panels had a significant impact on the production of the commentaries.

These discussions and insights, however, are also worth sharing with the broader scholarly community, which is what this volume does. It starts with essays reflecting on the process of writing a Leviticus commentary, including boosts and obstacles, while suggesting innovative insights on particular problems of the book. Further articles identify certain themes of Leviticus, especially sacrifices and rituals ("the cult"), the notion of unintentional and deliberate sins and purity/impurity ("the bad") and how to eliminate them, and the relationship to the sphere of God ("the holy"). The various stances taken here demonstrate three important aspects: (1) commenting on a biblical book highly depends on the perspective that a scholar takes; (2) different commentaries on the same biblical text come to different conclusions relative to their specific methodological and hermeneutical approaches; (3) it is of utmost importance to reflect on these perspectives and approaches and make them transparent. These issues are innate in the subject matter; in the end the variety of approaches bears witness to the complexity, intricacy, and richness of the biblical text. This volume, therefore, offers a fascinating inside view into the studies and onto the desks of several prolific biblical experts who share their reflections and concepts about their commentaries on Leviticus with an interested audience.

The volume opens with a general reflection by Thomas Hieke: He demonstrates that writing a commentary on a biblical book is a research achievement. Society usually associates "research" with other activities (expensive experiments in laboratories etc.). In search for an official definition of "research," Hieke points

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to the *Frascati Manual* of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In his essay, he argues that writing a commentary on a biblical book increases the stock of knowledge, devises new applications of available knowledge, and is novel, creative, uncertain, systematic, transferable and/or reproducible. Hence, the scholarly endeavor of commenting on a biblical book meets the OECD definition of "research."

James W. Watts, in "Unperformed Rituals in an Unread Book," highlights the unusual challenge posed to commentators by the fact that many of Leviticus's ritual instructions have not been performed for almost 2,000 years and that Christians, at least, tend not to read it at all. Since commentary is supposed to explain the meaning of the text, he asks: What is the significance of an unperformed ritual? What is the meaning of an unread text? His reflections, excerpted and expanded from the Introduction to his commentary, explore the nature of textual rhetoric, of ritual rhetoric, of theological symbolism, and of priestly interpretive authority. He concludes that Leviticus's status as scripture pushes commentators to consider the whole range of the text's uses, not just as an authoritative text but also as a performative text and as religious icon.

The paper "Commentary as Ethnography" by William K. Gilders focuses on the role played in his forthcoming commentary on Leviticus by anthropology and ritual theory, which Gilders believes to be the most important element in that work. In drawing on the work of anthropologists, he takes the risk of characterizing the commentary as a work of ethnography in which he acts as a "professional stranger" (the anthropologist M. H. Agar's designation for the ethnographer). This approach is exemplified through discussion of Leviticus 2, the basic legislation for the קרבן מנחה ("tribute offering"), in order to highlight the desire to disengage treatment of the offerings in Leviticus from the idea that "sacrifice" necessarily involves the killing of animal victims. Gilders explains how his commentary will constitute an ethnography of the ways in which Aaronide priests represent and interpret Israelite cultural practices through the medium of the texts they composed and edited. Gilders intends for the commentary to do justice to what his ancient Israelite informants tell him and to provide a cultural translation for its presumed audience of twenty-first century readers. He sets out a multi-layered interpretation of the cultural data on the basis of the theoretical models he finds most compelling and productive. Specifically, while he largely avoids offering symbolic-communicative explanations of ritual performances, Gilders explicates the indexical force of such practices in terms of Peircian semiotics. His goal is to strike a balance between providing sufficient interpretation and providing too much.

In her contribution "The Role of Second Temple Texts in a Commentary on Leviticus," Hannah K. Harrington takes a Second Temple perspective to Leviticus. She asks how the book was read by Second Temple priests and sages. She finds special value among these sources for: 1) determining the state

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of the text of Leviticus; 2) clarifying ambiguity in Leviticus; and 3) fixing the chronological development of specific Levitical traditions while bringing into relief Second Temple issues. Her contribution focuses on Ezra-Nehemiah and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Ezra-Nehemiah may have been redacted around the same time as the *textus receptus* of Leviticus and thus the data and issues of both texts are relevant to each other. The earliest witnesses to the actual text of Leviticus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, also supply important textual variants. They also disclose issues in interpretation. Harrington demonstrates how the Scrolls bring into relief ambiguity in the text of Leviticus and provide clarity for complex laws (e.g. purity regulations). Harrington urges commentators to grapple with the development of various Levitical traditions throughout the Second Temple period. With four examples, she illustrates the necessity of examining single traditions in light of Second Temple literature: a) tithing; b) holy days; c) the resident alien; and d) intermarriage.

The title "Writing on Leviticus for the HThKAT Series: Some Key Issues on Sacrificial Rituals" conveys that Thomas Hieke reflects on central problems that emerged during his work on the Leviticus commentary for the series "Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament" (HThKAT). (1) Especially the first chapters of Leviticus use a very stereotypical or standardized language. The sacrifices and the various components of the respective rituals are tagged with a certain technical language and terminology. Hence, he elaborated a glossary explaining this general vocabulary and placed it after the introduction and before the commentary proper. (2) The introductory formulas (e.g., Lev 1:1–2; 4:1; 6:1; 8:1 etc.) are theologically crucial for the way the text wants to be understood: The rituals are—according to the biblical text—not invented by humans but revealed by God. (3) The meaning of the hand-leaning rite (e.g., Lev 1:4) is still a disputed issue. The contribution and the commentary present a new solution for interpreting this necessary part of the ritual. (4) Finally, the essay discusses problems of the nomenclature of the sacrifices, especially the so-called "sin offering".

In his contribution "Sacrifice? Holy Smokes! Reflections on Cult Terminology for Understanding Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible," Christian A. Eberhart explores interpretive aspects of sacrificial rituals that are manifest in both Hebrew and Greek technical terms for sacrifices and selected ritual aspects or components. The individual profile and common implications of this terminology offer insights into perceptions of early communities, tradents, and translators of the texts, who understood sacrifices as dynamic processes of approaching God and as tokens of reverence and reconciliation. Eberhart concludes that this terminology conveys the importance of the burning rite as a ritual component; such a methodological approach allows the incorporation of both animal sacrifices and sacrifices from vegetal substances into modern scholarly theorizing. This understanding is corroborated by a brief investigation of rituals that do not count as sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible.

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Naphtali S. Meshel investigates "The Form and Function of a Biblical Blood Ritual." He scrutinizes the consensus in current exegetical research that Levitical law never requires blood to be tossed upon the upper surface of the altar. He posits that this conception has reinforced—and has been reinforced by—an understanding that YHWH is never to be offered blood. He argues that, according to several priestly texts, the blood of many sacrifices, including wellbeing, whole-burnt and reparation offerings, is to be tossed upon the upper surface of the altar. Based on these observations, the claim that the ritual indicates that YHWH, like the Israelites, refrains from the consumption of blood, is being reassessed.

In his essay "Purification Offerings and Paradoxical Pollution of the Holy," Roy E. Gane answers objections to his proposal regarding a challenging question that any serious commentator on Leviticus must face: How do physical ritual impurities (*ṭumʾôt*) and sins (*ḥaṭṭāʾôt*) pollute the sanctuary so that they must be purged from there on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:16, 19)? In his book *Cult and Character* (2005), Gane concluded that these evils affect the sanctuary through purification offerings during the course of the year, as indicated by Leviticus 6:20–21. Here blood of a most holy purification offering that spatters on a garment must be washed off in a holy place because it paradoxically carries some pollution, and a vessel in which purification offering flesh is boiled must be broken or scoured and rinsed in water for the same reason. The pollution comes from the offerer when the sacrifice removes the evil from that person. So when a priest applies some of the blood to part of the sanctuary, the sanctuary receives the pollution. Christophe Nihan has countered Gane's interpretation in part of his previously published essay titled "The Templization of Israel in Leviticus: Some Remarks on Blood Disposal and *Kipper* in Leviticus." Nihan finds the idea that purification offerings transfer pollution from offerers to the sanctuary to be problematic because ancient Near Eastern people were afraid of defiling sacred places, and he rejects the inference from Leviticus 6:20–21 that most holy purification offerings carry pollution, preferring the view that verse 20 requires the washing of priestly vestments to remove contagious holiness. In the present essay, Gane responds to these and other objections through exegetical analysis of the relevant biblical passages, reference to ancient Near Eastern texts, and clarification of his interpretation. It is especially significant that the rules in Leviticus 6:20–21 apply only to the purification offering, which removes sins (Lev 4:1–5:13) and physical impurities (e.g., 12:6–8).

Scholarship on the Priestly system of pollution and purification tends to view the diverse sources of ritual pollution as if they were located on a one-dimensional scale, from most severe to least severe—to some extent under the influence of rabbinic literature. With the title "Some New Questions in the Fundamental Science of P," Naphtali S. Meshel's second contribution to this volume offers an alternative model in which each impurity comprises several factors—including duration (how long the impurity lasts), tenacity (how difficult it is to eliminate

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the impurity), and contagion (how easily it is transmitted from one object to another). There is not always a direct correlation between the various factors, as one type of pollution may last a long time without being highly contagious, and another may be highly contagious but of relatively short duration. This alternative, multidimensional model leads to several new questions, for example: If one becomes defiled by one type of impurity, then later by another, are the waiting periods counted as overlapping periods of time or successive periods of time (does "time served" count)? Does it matter if the impurities are of the same type (e.g., contact with two different corpses) or of different types (e.g., menstruation and contact with a corpse)? While P does not explicitly address these questions, several post-Biblical sources discuss them explicitly, suggesting that a full understanding of the Priestly ritual system entails careful consideration of these scenarios—some of which are outlandish, but others quite commonplace.

In "Constructing Contagion on Yom Kippur: The Scapegoat as *Ḥaṭṭāʾt*," Nicole J. Ruane considers how the writer of Leviticus 16 understood the two goats of the Yom Kippur rites to act together as a single *ḥaṭṭāʾt* offering (16:5). Ruane argues that although this ritual complex with the two goats is quite different from the paradigmatic *ḥaṭṭāʾt* rites in Leviticus 4–5, it nonetheless must be understood as a *ḥaṭṭāʾt* offering. Moreover, taking this designation of the two goats as a *ḥaṭṭāʾt* seriously helps to articulate the fundamental features of all *ḥaṭṭāʾt* rites, namely, the separation of the offering into two distinct parts, one of which becomes portrayed as harmful or unclean, and the elimination of that negative part.

The third essay by Thomas Hieke reflects on "Participation and Abstraction in the Yom Kippur Ritual according to Leviticus 16." Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is widely observed as a Holy Day among Jewish people all over the world. Although it goes back to the description of the ritual in Leviticus 16, the actual celebration of the day differs widely from the biblical text. A long and intensive process of abstraction took place over centuries. The issue of abstraction lies at the roots of the ritual itself; abstraction already occurred at the time when the ritual was actually carried out at the Second Temple in Jerusalem (before 70 C.E.). Yet the inner logic and concern of Yom Kippur was central for the composers of the book of Leviticus and the Torah: They placed the description within the center of the Torah. Hieke demonstrates that the central position of Leviticus 16 (the prescription for the Day of Atonement) is also justified and corroborated by content-related aspects. In Leviticus 16, *all* groups within the people of Israel participate (the High Priest, the priests, the Israelites), *all* sorts of sins and impurities are eliminated, and the ritual itself shows the *highest degree* of abstraction (a minimal amount of blood in an empty room suffices for the efficacy of the ritual). Methodologically, an exegetical commentary has to explore the inner logics of the text and to detect its semantic concepts. In this sense, Leviticus 16 represents a comprehensive reset of cultic and social relationships; the concept includes purification as well as reconciliation (or atonement), in a collective

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and individual way as well. By means of abstraction, the ritual itself turns into a metaphor, even at the time when it actually still took place in Jerusalem. Jews all over the diaspora abstained from food consumption and thus participated spiritually in the ritual of the Holy Day. These concepts constitute the basis and starting point for multiple transformations and further abstractions as well as metaphorical charging in Judaism (the liturgy in the synagogue, fasting, rest from working) and Christianity (the christological application in Rom 3:25: Christ as *hilasterion*—expiation or place of atonement, etc.).

The second paper by William K. Gilders has the title "Is There an Incense Altar in This Ritual? A Question of Ritual-Textual Interpretive Community." Taking a theoretical start from the work of Stanley Fish on the authority of interpretive communities (presented in his influential 1980 book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*), Gilders explores how interpreters determine that the ritual complex for the "Day of Atonement" set out in Leviticus 16 includes, or does not include, the application of blood to a golden incense altar inside the tent-shrine. The importance of interpretive assumptions about the incense altar and the blood rituals it receives are the focus of his paper. He investigates the activity of two significant ritual-textual interpretive communities that engage with Leviticus 16 and the ritual complex it presents: those who adopt a largely holistic and synthesizing approach to the text and those who attend to what David Carr calls the "fractures" in the textual corpus. Gilders highlights the crucial role played by Exodus 30:10 for interpretive decisions to see an incense altar and blood rites directed at that altar in Leviticus 16. His paper concludes that the answer to its titular question is: It depends on whom you ask!

Commenting on a biblical book sometimes requires the suggestion of new solutions to much disputed problems. During his work on Leviticus 18 and 20, Thomas Hieke identified "the Molech" as a *crux interpretum* and proposed a new understanding of the term *la-molech* (לַמֹּלֶךְ, 18:21 and 20:1–5). He presented the results in an article in the journal *Die Welt des Orients* and in his HThKAT commentary, all of which were written in German. Hence the essay "The Prohibition of Transferring an Offspring to 'the Molech:' No Child Sacrifice in Leviticus 18 and 20" presents the results for the first time in English and is an updated version of these publications. After a brief overview of the pertinent terminology, the article summarizes usual interpretations: *la-molech* as a term for a Canaanite deity; a term for a sacrifice; a dedication rite for children. The context of Leviticus 18 and 20, however, does not fit these interpretations. Hieke therefore argues that the phrase "you shall not give any of your offspring to pass them over to Molech" may be read as a cipher or code. He understands the consonants *l-m-l-k* as a reference to pre-exilic stamp seals in Judaea containing the words "for the king;" the Septuagint translation ἄρχοντι of Leviticus 18:21 points in the same direction. The reality behind the phrase is the priestly prohibition for the Jewish community to hand over any of their children to serve in the Persian army

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or the households of the Persian authorities. The children given as servants to foreigners were lost for the Jewish cult community. However, the priests could not express their opposition to this kind of collaboration with the Persian authorities directly without raising suspicion; hence, they used the well-known sequence of consonants *lmlk*. This interpretation fits both the context of Leviticus 18 and 20, which features family laws, and the socio-historical reality of Jewish life under Persian domination.

In his essay "Law and Creation in the Priestly-Holiness Writings of the Pentateuch," David P. Wright argues that a chief goal of the Priestly-Holiness (PH) corpus of the Pentateuch is to explain Yahweh's election of Israel and associated obligations of cultic practice. Wright looks specifically at PH's portrayal of the development of various cultic practices and phenomena (sacrifice, use of the divine name, the calendar, purity and holiness practices, the divine glory [*kavod*]), as well as PH's portrayal of the genealogical evolution of Israel and its use of creation language in narrative. The PH corpus tells a story in which the culmination of creation, as described in Gen 1:1–2:4, is the establishment of the nation Israel with accompanying obligations of cultic service. This set the stage for then describing how the nation acquired its land.

Some texts in Leviticus and in many other biblical books explicitly support genocide, indiscriminate capital punishment, patriarchy, and slavery. In "Drawing Lines: A Suggestion for Addressing the Moral Problem of Reproducing Immoral Biblical Texts in Commentaries and Bibles," James W. Watts observes that these verses pose a moral challenge for commentators and Bible publishers because they conflict with the legal and ethical teachings of Jewish and Christian traditions, and also with the laws of modern nations. By publishing Bibles and commentaries that reproduce these texts, translators and commentators continue to promulgate a document that claims divine endorsement for immoral and illegal behavior. Though long-standing traditions of *halakhah*, preaching, canon law and commentary have restrained the social force of these texts, the iconic status of biblical texts has often overridden interpretive traditions. These restraints have become easier to ignore as revolutions in printing and, now, digitization have made biblical texts ever more accessible. Anyone can cite a verse of Leviticus with the accurate preamble, "the Bible says," and can do so to justify harming other people. Interpretations of biblical texts, their social contexts, and their reception history remain essential to countering malevolent uses of the Bible, but they are not enough. Watts suggests that commentaries and mass-market Bible translations should strike through immoral normative texts to indicate typographically that Jewish and Christian traditions have long-standing objections to reading them as representing the divine will.

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Thomas Hieke

Writing a Commentary as a Research Achievement

1 Introduction[1]

Writing a commentary on a book of the Old or New Testament is generally met with a certain amount of respect, especially, if the *magnum opus* is quite substantial. Nevertheless, one quickly encounters some difficulties if the author of such a commentary considers his work to be "research." This term is usually associated with other activities, undertaken in the field of natural or life sciences, carried out in laboratories, involving expensive equipment and high effort experiments. Society unfailingly acknowledges that these activities are highly relevant and important. An indicator for that esteem are the high sums of money that state and society invest in these research activities. Quite naturally, the public applies to them the term "research" without hesitation. What "research" means in the first place is however very rarely reflected upon. The following considerations will present a possible definition of "research," and then explore three aspects in which the project of writing a biblical commentary meets this very definition.

2 The Definition of "Research" According to the *Frascati Manual* of the OECD

Since 1963, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has framed internationally acknowledged standards for "research and experimental development statistics" (R&D) in the so called *Frascati Manual*.[2] The Manual is named after the place of the first meeting in Villa Falconieri in Frascati in 1963. It was meant to create the basis for a common language of "research and experimental development" and its outcomes. Therefore, it is instructive how the *Frascati Manual* in its current edition of 2015 defines "research." The Manual uses the acronym "R&D" for "research and experimental development." The short definition in article 1.32 on page 28 reads:

1 I would like to thank Franziska Rauh for the English translation of this contribution.

2 OECD (2015), *Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development, The Measurement of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Activities*, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en.

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> R&D comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge—including knowledge of humankind, culture and society—and to devise new applications of available knowledge.

The list of criteria for calling an activity "research" is of further interest. Article 1.33 states:

> A set of common features identifies R&D activities that aim to achieve either specific or general objectives, even if these are carried out by different performers. For an activity to be an R&D activity, it must satisfy five core criteria. The activity must be: novel, creative, uncertain, systematic, transferable and/or reproducible.

Strikingly, this definition is much broader than the common notion of "research." Is it possible to demonstrate that writing a commentary on a biblical book meets the criteria of this definition?

3 "Systematic, transferable and/or reproducible"—Method-driven and Intersubjective

Writing a commentary on a biblical text is not an adventurous expedition, where you trust your luck and sail off. One does not simply start reading and present some agreeable findings afterwards, associatively grasped, and imaginatively ordered. Nor is writing a commentary intended to bend the text commented on into the shape of any institution's doctrine or mission, not even that of a church or Christian community.

Writing a commentary in accordance with the standards of present-day academic theology is "systematic" as well as "transferable and/or reproducible." As a matter of course, "systematic" does not refer in any way to a dominance of 'Systematic Theology,' but to the core value of scientific work: the application of approved and established, but also innovative methods still to be validated, and the reflection upon these methods' mode of operation.

Writing a commentary on a biblical text demands a clear matrix of methodical textual analysis and an author's reflection upon it. Thus, 'commenting' does not mean 'writing down what comes to your mind,' but 'adopting a thought-out and transparent approach (methodology)' and 'presenting the outcomes.' In an exegetical article on a single verse, a small paragraph (pericope), or a specific subject, the application of the methods can be demonstrated step by step, so that conclusions are reached in an argumentative way. In the course of commenting, this part of the working process runs in the background and is explicitly not included in the commentary. Owing to manageability, space is naturally limited, with the result that the commentary displays the outcomes of proceeding methodically in the end, but not the full argument behind them. Hence, commentaries are often flanked by various single studies on related issues, which show the method-

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ical way towards and the argumentative basis of the outcomes presented in the commentary.[3]

The commentary per se already is a 'publication,' and the flanking single studies support the intersubjective transparency of its findings. Insofar, this procedure meets another core requirement of scientific nature: intersubjectivity. The commentary is intended to not only make the biblical text comprehensible to others; it is also supposed to be plausible in its own line of reasoning. It does not draw its authority from an external institution in such a way that a church authority, e.g. a bishop, or a professor of theology as an unchallenged expert, decrees, as it were, how to understand a certain verse of the Bible. Instead, the commentary is a reading suggestion, developed from scientific methods and criteria, and presented for discussion via publication. As a rule, a scientific discourse precedes the publication. This discourse works on two levels: On the one hand, an author writing a commentary does not only apply a skillful selection of methods, but also considers the suggestions of earlier secondary literature and consequently deals with the reading suggestions of previous researchers. On the other hand, the author presents partial results and puts them up to discussion in the written form of individual publications or the oral form of talks ('papers') at conferences. All these intersubjective processes find their way into the commentary.

Another feature of a method-driven approach is that its methods are "transferable" on various objects of research and the outcomes are "reproducible." A method of textual analysis that cannot be applied to more than one text is none—hence, it is possible (and common practice) that the method applied by one person in commenting on one biblical text is applied in the same way by another person to another text. If new results are achieved this way, the method starts proving itself. The reproducibility of a commentary is verified if someone applies the given method (usually set forth in the foreword or an individual publication) to the same biblical text—and reaches similar, if not the same insights that are presented in the commentary. That is how research results are confirmed. This does not mean in turn that no research was done if this process does not lead to success. But it highlights that the method or its application needs to be improved in some way or another—which is not unusual, but even productive in terms of research.

4 "Creative, novel, uncertain"—Relating Data Reasonably

"Research," the *Frascati Manual* of the OECD continues, is "creative," "novel," "uncertain." Again, these criteria are applicable to commenting on biblical texts. The "uncertainty" of research obviously does not refer to the operation of nuclear

3 The essays gathered in this collection demonstrate this procedure vividly.

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research reactors or microbiological laboratories—hopefully, high safety standards apply to these facilities. Rather, "uncertainty" means that, at the beginning of a research process, the outcomes are not certain yet. If somebody comments on a biblical passage and, before his/her first reading of the text, already knows what the result in the commentary will be, then his/her work is unscientific and boring. This is what happens in a bad sermon on a Sunday: After a few sentences, the sermon repeats the same old statements and well-known, hollow phrases every time, regardless of the previous scripture readings. By contrast, whoever comments on a biblical text must be creative and innovative—instead of summing up what was said so far. However, it is not necessary either to desperately state something completely different, just to make one's own work stand out against the mainstream of secondary literature.

Research in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) areas is typically based on the collection of billions of data via sophisticated methods of measurement and corresponding technical equipment—and relating them rationally. Insight grows if the amount of data increases or if an innovative idea emerges to interpret these data: New models or theories come to the fore and in turn prove themselves, if they are in the same way able to explain fresh data collected afterwards—if not, the theory must be improved. At this point, commenting on biblical texts starts from a slightly different position, as the database of the object of research seems to have remained the same for thousands of years, at least at first glance. But on closer inspection, a different picture emerges: Indeed, the object of research is not only the stock of the Hebrew and Greek texts which have become biblical, and which are called the Old and New Testament from a Christian point of view. Rather, it includes the texts' environment, which archaeological and historical studies on the Ancient Near East, Ancient Egypt, and the Graeco-Roman world try to illuminate. In addition, scholars have to consider a huge variety of texts from the area in which the biblical texts emerged. Here as well, an abundance of data waits to be analyzed, which occasionally grows. A much-referenced example is the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The writings found in 1947 and subsequent years cast new light on the body of texts of the Bible and its cultural environment, which one naturally has to take into account when commenting on the biblical books as contemporaries of these texts. Researchers still have not fully caught up with these findings. Furthermore, it is well known that many museums and collections house an abundance of text material from the Ancient Near East, Egypt, and the Graeco-Roman world that has not been edited yet. Theoretically, this material could bring to light insights that are able to broaden, or even punctually change the present view on the history of Israel and the culture that shaped the biblical texts.

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5 "Increase the stock of knowledge, devise new applications of available knowledge"—New Insights and Applications

The above already shows that many possibilities remain for scientific research on the Bible and its environment "to increase the stock of knowledge." But "knowledge" does not only include the stock of "facts," because "knowledge" is more than an assemblage of verified facts. "Knowing" includes the ability to relate various facts or data, to connect them and thus create new realizations and applications. All of this happens when a biblical text is commented on. In this process, the uniqueness of the subject has to be considered: Even as an ancient text, the Bible is not dead matter, the constituents and structure of which could be reasoned out once and for all after a certain time of research. Nor must the research of a biblical text confine itself to probable assertions concerning its origin and the intentions of the historical authors. A text is no fossil or mountain crystal, even if biblical stories might sometimes appear as old or as beautiful and shimmering. A text provides various potential meanings that only emerge in an active reading process. Whoever reads a text already interprets the data stored in it and creates a new complex of meaning influenced by the time and the circumstances of the recipient. This influence can be of a negative kind, if, say, the historical and cultural environment of the readers, for example our current modern context, fundamentally differs from the circumstances at the time of the text's origin. This is why the reading process as a process of 'making sense' in the reception of a text is subject to various changing parameters, whereas the underlying text is more or less a constant. What is generally true for all texts is particularly important for biblical texts. The Bible is an extraordinary subject in several ways: In the whole history of its reception, people reading it refer to this ancient text as to a message that is to be of concern for them here and now. These readers of the Bible gather in institutions like church and synagogue communities, or they might be individuals who read the Bible as a matter of faith or for other reasons, e.g. in ways of artistic engagement. At least two religions (Judaism and Christianity) regard the Bible (in different manifestations) a holy and normative text. The Bible was and is considered not only a historical document, but also a text of an immediate concern that has to be dealt with (even if this means refusing it).

Commenting on a biblical text must reckon with these parameters, the constant and the changing ones. Therefore, this activity is never finished, but has to be tackled time and time again. New bridges have to be built constantly to reach the developing society, culture and religion anew, in order to unlock the potential of meaning of the biblical text to a changing readership. This is even more important if communities of believers in Judaism and Christianity adhere to the conviction that these texts are not only their religious, but also their cultural and ethical basis. If one does not accompany the reading process of these basic texts by a

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method-driven, reflective, intersubjective, and therefore scientific process, then the floodgates are open to ideological abuse and political instrumentalization of these texts and their religious authority. The history of Christianity provides many pertinent examples, while the present time witnesses analogous developments in terms of Christian fundamentalism abusing the Bible for (in fact) political aims or Islamism ideologizing the Quran for a military agenda.

Hence, commenting on biblical texts also meets the requirement "to devise new applications of available knowledge:" It shows how a present-day faith community can gain valuable impetus for its religious life and for the shaping of society and culture out of the old, holy texts—without falling into backward-looking ideologization.

6 Conclusion

Writing a commentary on a biblical text is, according to modern academic standards as manifest in the OECD definitions, a "research activity." This statement is valid at least in principle—the ongoing endeavor of research can differ, which is true not only for religious studies and has more to do with general human limitations. With reference to the definitions provided above, I shall now formulate as a thesis what a commentary on a biblical text ought to be and often is in terms of a research activity:

> Commenting on a biblical text is a creative and systematic, therefore method-driven and intersubjectively comprehensible undertaking that is intended to increase the stock of knowledge about the research object "biblical text," its historical and cultural environment, as well as its impact and current possibilities of understanding. On this basis, it results in innovative suggestions of reading and interpreting these texts and proposes new perspectives of how they shape today's life in religion and society.

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James W. Watts

Unperformed Rituals in an Unread Book

I was invited to address the Sacrifice, Cult and Atonement Section of the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Diego in 2014 on a panel about "Writing a Commentary on Leviticus: Reflections on Methodology and Sacrificial Rituals." Just the year before, I had published the first volume of my HCOT commentary on Leviticus.[1] The panel organizers asked me (1) to outline my distinct methodology or approach in writing the commentary and (2) to reflect on sacrificial rituals in the book of Leviticus. My paper reproduced parts of the Introduction to my commentary. It appears below with only slight supplementations by kind permission of Peeters Publishers.

1 My Approach to Writing a Commentary on Leviticus

My commentary begins with two questions that have haunted me since I began writing it: What is the significance of an unperformed ritual? What is the meaning of an unread text?

The most basic purpose of commentary is to explain the meaning of a text and the significance of its contents. One of the purposes of the HCOT commentary series is also to describe the history of the text's interpretation, that is, its meaning over time. In a commentary on the book of Leviticus, however, these three goals frequently lead in different directions.

Synagogues since antiquity have read the entire Torah through over the course of one year, or sometimes three years. The sounds of the words of Leviticus and the images they evoke have played a central role in Jewish ritual. In traditional Jewish education, children first learn to read Hebrew by reading Leviticus. The offerings mandated by Leviticus, however, have fallen into abeyance since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE. For the ancient rabbis and their successors, studying Torah along with prayer and acts of charity took the place of offerings that are no longer possible. In Jewish synagogues, the instructions for offerings get read, but do not get performed as written.[2]

1 J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

2 See the summary in Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 75–7, 80–2. For more details and examples, see G. Bodendorfer, "Der Horizont einer Exegese des Buches Levitikus in den rabbinischen Midraschim," in H.-J. Fabry/H.-W. Jüngling (ed.), *Levitikus als Buch* (Berlin: Philo, 1999) 343–71;

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Christians, by contrast, do not read Leviticus very often, if at all. Churches do not usually include verses from Leviticus in the lectionary readings for public worship, except to read portions of chap. 19 as preface to the love commandment in 19:18 and to ground some major holy days in the festival calendar of chap. 23.[3] They especially avoid the rules for offerings, having inveighed since antiquity against any practice of animal "sacrifice." One frequently hears of attempts to read the Bible through that foundered on the book of Leviticus, or skipped it altogether. Yet key terms and ideas from the book, such as sacrifice, atonement, sin, guilt, priesthood, purity, holiness, love of neighbor, and Jubilee have played central roles in Christian theology and practice from antiquity to the present.[4]

Leviticus is also scripture for a third religious tradition. Samaritan ritual practices and polity differ in crucial respects from those of Jews and Christians.[5] The most famous difference is that Samaritans still perform the Passover sacrifice annually as the rules in Exodus 12 prescribe, though not the temple offerings of Leviticus 1–7. Unlike Jews and Christians, Samaritans continue to be led by a hereditary high priest claiming descent from Aaron, just as Leviticus, Exodus and Numbers mandate.

Despite these differences, all three religious traditions that revere Leviticus as scripture prohibit people from performing many of its ritual instructions. That has stimulated attempts to interpret their meaning in non-literal ways using midrash, typology, allegory, theology, and ideological critique.

I think that biblical commentary should focus on explaining a book's meaning as scripture, because it is its status as scripture that generates most of the interest in commentary in the first place. Now theological interpretation is the approach that most Christian commentators take for addressing questions of scripture.[6]

H. K. Harrington, "The Rabbinic Reception of Leviticus," in R. Rendtorff/R. Kugler (ed.), *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (VTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 383–402; Z. J. Braiterman, "Martin Buber and the Art of Ritual," in M. Zankl (ed.), *New Perspectives on Martin Buber* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 111–24.

3 See F. Just, "Lectionary Statistics" on the Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* (2009), online at http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm (accessed 12/21/2015).

4 See the summary in Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 77–80, 83–6. For more details and examples, see E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 208–22, 279–81; A. Firey, "The Letter of the Law: Carolingian Exegetes and the Old Testament," in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 204–24.

5 For Samaritan beliefs and practices, see R. T. Anderson/T. Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 117–34; for early Samaritan history, see G. N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6 Most influential in recent decades has been the canonical approach of B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979). M. Douglas abandoned her anthropological methods to adopt a theological approach also, in *Leviticus as Literature*

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