

**Light on Leviticus**  
By David W. Baker\*

Though it is not the most popular of Old Testament books among the reading public, Leviticus has engendered a veritable tsunami of commentaries and related studies in recent years. Riding the crest, or possibly even driving the wave, have been the works of Jacob Milgrom, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on the book is without peer, and I doubt if they will ever be duplicated.<sup>1</sup> Arguably the leading living expert on biblical ritual and cult, Milgrom provides an exhaustive analysis of every verse and word in the book. He is especially helpful in his discussions of parallel biblical passages of import (there is a 76-page index of OT passages cited, with ½ page of NT citations), and also he makes available ancient Near Eastern comparative material (sources in Aramaic, Hittite, Greek, Ugaritic, Punic, Egyptian, Persian, and Latin, as well as those from Mesopotamia). He brings some of this material in through the work of some of his own students, several having become recognized authorities in their own right, who have contributed sections of the discussion.

Useful for many readers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, will be his insights derived from rabbinical sources, since the rabbis provide some of the earliest commentary. While no-one will agree with every interpretation, he judiciously presents alternative views so the evidence can be weighed by the reader. Use of Hebrew would be an advantage to the reader, but much can be gained even by those who are unskilled in it. No serious student of the Pentateuch can be without the set, which should also be in every theological library.

A distillation of Milgrom's massive erudition has just been made available in his commentary from Fortress.<sup>2</sup> It is a masterful crystallization of the vast amount of material into a scope manageable for the common reader. Just as one example, the 358 pages dedicated to the sacrificial section of Leviticus 1-7 in his 3-volume work have here been reduced to 55. He does this by dealing only with selected themes and texts, rather than touching every aspect. This single volume is an excellent place to begin, and provides a good entrée into not only the book of Leviticus, but also into the fuller work of Milgrom.

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Another full-scale commentary, by John W. Kleinig, comes from a Christian perspective.<sup>3</sup> Kleinig is a Lutheran pastor and professor in Australia. The series to which the volume belongs seeks to reflect "an evangelical orientation, a steadfast Christological perspective, and eschatological view toward the ultimate good of Christ's bride, and a concern that the wedding feast of the King's Son may be filled with all manner of guests (Mt 22:1-14)" (xiii). The author's stated audiences include those missionaries and teachers presenting God's word among animists (who experience an entry into God's word through such ritual texts in ways not found in other literary genres), postmodern youth who encounter society's continuing pollutants in various forms, and all believers who worship and encounter God through liturgy.

Kleinig, in addition to providing very useful commentary, has several elements which aid in making the volume user-friendly. He has 26 figures and diagrams which visually present elements of the text in ways which can elucidate them in ways simple words find difficult to do. He also uses a series of 15 icons in the margins of the commentary to identify such themes as trinity, baptism, worship, and justification. These are helpful guideposts for students working their way into the often foreign terrain of Leviticus. They indicate that it is not so strange after all, but is inhabited by ancestors of theological and practical friends which have already become familiar through study of the New Testament. (As a practical benefit, the icons also leave room along the page margins to make personal notes while reading.)

The commentary proper consists of the author's translation, followed by technical textual notes which assume knowledge of Hebrew. The following commentary does not presuppose this in its discussion of each passage's context, structure, and content, which includes considerable theological discussion. The latter includes quite regularly a section on Christ's fulfillment of the theological aspect under discussion. Kleinig also spends considerable time analyzing ritual aspects of the text, a valuable exercise since that is a major concern of the book as a whole.

The volume will be especially useful for preachers and teachers. It should be in any theological library, including most church libraries.

Preachers and teachers will also find much use in a volume by Allan Ross which, as the subtitle indicates, is not a full-blown commentary but rather an expositional guide.<sup>4</sup> Ross is Old Testament professor at Beeson Divinity School in Alabama. The discussion of each passage begins with a brief introduction, a summary of its theological ideas, a synthesis consisting of a passage summary and outline, and a suggested order for exposition, where comments are made on the passage itself as well as other relevant biblical, and

extra-biblical, material. He concludes each section with a 1-sentence statement of its main point as well as suggestions as to what needs to be highlighted in its exposition, including useful ties into the New Testament. Each section concludes with a brief bibliography. I feel that preachers must grapple with the meat of a text in order to come to their own understanding of it, a view shared by Ross. He has supplied a distillation of his own such grappling which should prove an especially valuable resource for busy preachers and teachers, though it must not replace the text itself. All theological libraries, including those of preachers, should include this volume, though it must be supplemented by fuller commentaries.

The Interpretation series from John Knox Press also has the preacher and teacher in mind, but it is closer in form to a commentary than an expositional guide like that of Ross. Leviticus is covered by Samuel Balentine, formerly professor of Old Testament at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.<sup>5</sup> He provides useful reflection in his introduction of the function of ritual texts, leading us not only to reflect on theology but also to enact it. He also provides a lengthy and useful reflection of worship in relation to Leviticus as part of his introduction to the book. For each passage, Balentine briefly exegetes the text, and then provides some theological reflection. Here he at times brings out New Testament application.

While this volume brings out some useful and interesting points, it pales in such a review as this since it is placed alongside other works which are so much fuller as regards interpretation and exposition. While it should be in every serious theological library, this work will probably not be the first work on Leviticus which should be consulted.

Two other recent commentaries cover Leviticus with several others of the pentateuchal books, so giving it much shorter shrift. Glen Martin's volume looks at Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers together.<sup>6</sup> The author is a Southern Baptist pastor in California, and the volume, as well as the series to which it belongs, is directed toward the lay reader. At less than 100 pages on Leviticus (along with 158 on Exodus and 125 on Numbers), there is only a very cursory look at the text. After a 4-page introduction, in which there is no reference to any secondary literature, the author divides the text into sections for study.

As an example of the format, Martin starts with the unit of Leviticus 1-7. Beginning with a quote (interestingly enough from Harry Emerson Fosdick, another Baptist but one having little in common with the author of this volume), he presents the section in a "nutshell" of 3 sentences, a one page introduction, and then comments on smaller sections. This begins with a one sentence main idea and supporting ideas from each smaller textual unit, with one or two

paragraph discussions of each of these units. In the conclusion he uses an illustrative story, a set of principles and another of applications. A life application is followed by a prayer, a section of 6 'deeper discoveries', where some aspects receive a bit fuller treatment, a teaching outline, and issues for discussion. Still there is no mention of any secondary literature or of any alternative suggestions as regards interpretation. The volume could serve as a resource in personal Bible study, but needs supplementation from a fuller treatment.

Stephen Sherwood, a Catholic priest teaching at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, also covers three books in his work.<sup>7</sup> They are Leviticus, Number, and Deuteronomy. Following the parameters of the series in which he writes, he undertakes a literary analysis of the texts, analyzing their narrative art more than their historical or cultural environments, which are purposefully omitted. He does provide useful insights into the text. For Leviticus, he spends several pages pointing out NT allusions to the book, discusses its language, plot, structure, and characterization as well as symbolism and imagery before beginning his textual notes. The latter are generally very brief, from a sentence to a paragraph on a verse of longer section, and use a fair amount of transliterated Hebrew. The discussion of each book concludes with a bibliography.

The volume is helpful in the areas which it sets out to address, but is inadequate as a commentary. It therefore needs supplementation by some of the other material discussed here, but also provides a helpful supplement to them, and as such should be in every serious theological library.

The final book reviewed seems by its title to be of a different character than the rest as a technical study of the Septuagint.<sup>8</sup> It joins similar works which the author has produced on each of the books in the Pentateuch, to which Wevers occasionally refers in place of discussing some element of the Leviticus text. The material itself is laid out like a commentary, with a verse-by-verse discussion of content and variations between the Hebrew and Greek texts, and the implications of these variations. While at least rudimentary access to the two languages is necessary in order to recognize the forms under discussion, the material is helpful even for non-experts. The volume closes with an appendix of proposed changes in the LXX, a discussion of the Greek and Hebrew terms for sacrifice, and indexes of Greek words, Hebrew words, grammatical and textual items, and a general index.

Though the volume might appear esoteric due to its title, it will repay study by those seriously interested in not only the text, but also the

understanding, of Leviticus. As such, it needs to be in every serious theological library.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16; Leviticus 17–22, Leviticus 23–27*, The Anchor Bible 3, 3A, 3B. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 2000, 2001. 2714 pp., \$60, vol. 1; \$50, vol. 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentary. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004. xx + 388 pp., cloth, \$30.00.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary. St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003. xlv + 610 pp., cloth, \$42.99.

<sup>4</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002. 496 pp., cloth, \$34.99.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999. xv + 220 pp., cloth, \$24.95.

<sup>6</sup> Glen S. Martin, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, Holman Old Testament Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002. xi + 387 pp, cloth, \$19.99.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002. xviii + 306 pp, cloth, \$39.95.

<sup>8</sup> John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Leviticus*, Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997. xxxix + 519 pp., cloth, \$49.95.