



Thomas Hieke

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Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament

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A great commentary in an impressive series! Founded by the late Erich Zenger, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament seeks to advance a modern Christian understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thomas Hieke, Catholic Professor of Old Testament at the University of Mainz, Germany, takes on the task of freshly interpreting the very nucleus of the Torah, called Leviticus in the Greek and Latin traditions (Protestants like to name it the Third Book of Moses; the Jewish title is *Wayyiqra*; all designations are programmatic). The commentator bravely tackles a manifold project: beyond the plain textual explanations (translation, textual, literary, theological analyses), he wants to sift through previous exegetical insights, develop further his own visions of the texts' messages, consider as much as possible the vast repercussions Leviticus has left in Jewish and early Christian thinking, listen to modern questions and discourses as to the vital problems raised by the Scriptures, and guide the reader to an adequate appreciation of a widely unknown biblical book that nevertheless contains basic ideas of life and faith for any religious communities (see 9–10, 42–43). The author's horizon and purpose thus are wide, and the two volumes he needs, with a total of 1,165 printed pages, seem perfectly adequate if not modest in comparison with his achievements. (In the world of Old Testament commentaries, the tendency is toward multivolume editions for important canonical books).

An opus magnum such as this needs to be organized. The main part, a section-to-section and verse-to-verse explanation, runs from page 142 to page 1135 (continuous paging of both volumes), a total of 994 pages. The rest is introductory material (5–140) and concluding statements (1137–52) plus an index (1153–65). What about the preliminaries? Table of contents, preface, list of abbreviations, extensive bibliography, and index of graphics occupy pages 5–40. The reader thus mainly has to search the front part, whereas the end of the work only houses an index of Bible quotations (1153–65). Most interesting is the introduction to the commentary (41–140). Hieke is anxious to prepare the reader for a rather arduous journey. He carefully exposes his own approaches to the text, the structure of his commentary, his motivations and evaluations in regard to thorny questions, his own theoretical guidelines and eclectic use of tradition (41–46) creating a noble transparency. We learn: “My method may be described as a joint and well-reflected study oriented to the reader while focused on the text” (44; all translations are mine). An ambitious program indeed!

The first factual part gives a structural anatomy of the book of Leviticus (47–78), its textual, literary, compositional, and liturgical conditions: this is valuable information such as we expect from any “introduction to Old Testament literature.” What follows is unusual. Hieke offers a kind of theological x-ray, an anticipated lexical grid (concepts and formulas) of the book, titled “glossary” (79–140). This “blueprinting” of the intellectual and spiritual skeleton of a treatise certainly is useful, but the reader must decide whether to digest it at the beginning or at the end of the study journey, or in between individual exegeses, when needing broader information on special catch words. The whole section hinges, preconditioned by Leviticus, on the nature and function of sacrifices and the concepts of “pure–holy” and “impure–profane.” The formulas discussed in this context (136–40) are of literary-structural relevance only. Much work has been done already on “holiness”; Hieke pursues his own lexical studies and engages intensely with recent scholarship (e.g., Christophe Nihan, Christian Frevel, Jonathan Klawan, Jacob Milgrom, Bernd Janowski [119–36]), leaving aside the traditional icons of the field such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. In any case, the text-reading part starts only now, with page 142.

The general outline of the commentary has been marked out already on pages 57–64. Hieke divides Leviticus into seven thematic parts destined to orient community and priests in determined life-situations: Lev 1–7, rules of sacrifice (“Opferbestimmungen”; 142–330); Lev 8–10, practice of sacrifice (“Die Umsetzung der Opferbestimmungen”; 331–401); Lev 11–15, purity in everyday life (“Reinheit im Alltag”; 402–556); Lev 16–17, the day of reconciliation and cultic atonement as God’s gracious gift (“Der Versöhnungstag und die kultische Versöhnung als Gottes Gnadengeschenk”; 557–642); Lev 18–20, holiness in everyday life (“Heiligkeit im Alltag”; 643–810); Lev 21–22, stipulations for priests and sacrifices to safeguard holiness (“Einzelbestimmungen für die Priester und

Opfer zum Erhalt der Heiligkeit”; 811–70); and Lev 23–26(27), living with God and one’s neighbors (“Zusammenleben mit Gott und untereinander”; 871–1135). Hieke sometimes hints at the practical purpose of the written documents within the community but mostly refrains from closer scrutiny of the actual use of this literature. Have there been performed readings of the texts in educational classes or worship situations?

The commentator takes the reader on a guided tour through the seven wonderlands of Leviticus following lightly a proven pattern of exegetical procedure. Consider the first section, “Rules of Sacrifice” (Lev 1–7), as an example. The expert guide, with much introductory information in the background, gives an initial overview of human efforts to establish communication with the divine by bringing offerings, and he again includes an exposition of Leviticus (142–46). The genre of the texts, of course, remains an enigma. They “are no longer pure and clean ritual scripts but constitute, embedded as they are in a larger narrative context and structured by graded addressing and transmission formulas, the overall story of a promulgation of cultic prescriptions, that is, a ‘narrativized ritual’” (145; the term *narrativized ritual* taken from B. D. Bibb, *Ritual Words*, 2007). The real cultic proceedings are hidden in the past, but we may assume that the ritual instructions at hand correspond more or less to Leviticus’s contemporary sacrificial practices (145–46). But why was ritual put into narration, asks the attentive reader-tourist. For literary purposes alone? Or was there a performative, even liturgical recitation intended?

The general introduction to the first thematic section (142–46) is unique in this commentary. The next rubric, however, is common to all the units and subunits dealing with a concrete passage of Leviticus: “Kontext und Komposition” of the passage in question (singular is only the italicized superscription here versus bold faced ones in the rest of the two books). Hieke divides the sacrificial block Lev 1–7 into its proper parts: 1:1–3:17 (“offerings”); 4:1–5:26 (“atonement and remission”); 6:1–7:38 (“orientations for sacrifices”). The first two subsections contain three respectively two specifically named brands of offerings, which, in consequence, are treated separately (148–293). Here we are now, with our commentator guide, to view the first specimen of real text, prefixed by a special bibliography (every single one of the twenty-eight subunits carries first of all such a learned thesaurus; the most extensive ones are those of Lev 18 and 25). In this case we start with Lev 1, the “burnt offering” (holocaust). The sequence of interpretative steps thereafter is the same in all the twenty-eight exegetical sections: The author-guide gives a fresh translation into German and takes up, in fine print and minute detail, textual and translational issues. Then he analyzes carefully formal, literary, and functional features (quite helpful are catchwords in the outer margin) and proceeds to a verse-by-verse interpretation that aims at exposing the full meaning of every expression in its nearer and wider contexts. Meticulous word and phrase studies, observations as to discourses and structures, intertextual references, factual and (rarely) historical information, and

reconstructed actions (e.g., rituals) are brought to our attention. All this occurs in a pleasant discussion of that which is known, debated, and surmised about the specific text. The last step is an outlook on the text's afterlife, that is, its perusal and effects in Jewish and Christian traditions. Hieke constantly presents his own findings in a continuous debate with other scholars and his imagined readers. His marked stations of the exegetical journey are "Text" (plus annotations), "Analyse," "Auslegung" (highlighted by verse numbers in the inner margins), and "Rezeption und Bedeutung." The English equivalents are: Text, analysis, exposition, and reception and significance.

Our guide takes pride in showing and explaining as much as possible all the important perspectives of and on the texts. They are with us, enshrined in a Hebrew book (scroll), and it is our challenge and labor to make them speak to us in our more recent environments and models of thinking. Thomas Hieke is an excellent guide to this rather unknown book of the Torah, due to his competence in linguistics, pedagogy, ancient history, and theology. His guided tour through twenty-seven chapters of Leviticus ends with a relatively short look at the book's theological heritage (1137–52). At this final point of the guided tour, a good number of questions (inherent naturally in the preceding interpretations) may arise. Does the revelation of YHWH, mediated through Moses and Aaron at Mount Sinai, reach into the global twenty-first century CE? How do we evaluate the priests' claim that Moses's promulgations were and are the eternal and unchangeable will of God for cult and life? Since the temple of Jerusalem temporarily was out of function, as the priests knew full well, the divine ordinances became partially outmoded already during their time. Synagogue life and customs in a way superseded temple services. Is "nearness of death," "the sphere of death," the fundamental danger of impurity? What was the relation of laity and priests in Leviticus, taking into account that Aaron was clearly subordinated to Moses (sacrifice versus obedience to torah), Levites and priests took over congregational functions, and a new class of learned scribes came into being (cf. Ezra)?

There is an immense wealth of insight and engagement, spirit and thought packed into this massive commentary. The best way to give an impression of this fact is to choose some Leviticus topics that have been discussed in recent years.

Lev 18: Homosexuality

Homosexuality is a hotly debated issue in many Christian churches and in some secular societies. The biblical problem remounts in a high degree to Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (but only male homosexuality is addressed there). Hieke has a reasonable way of dealing with today's expectations that we no longer condemn but accept this type of love, called an "abomination" in Leviticus. He recognizes three rather rational reasons for that strong

aversion against homoeroticism: a necessity to ward off foreign customs (cf. Lev 18:3), the wish to create progeny, and fear of disturbing family relations. Quoting Adrian Schenker, our guide declares the problem defunct: the “historical condition having disappeared, the prohibition itself has lost its *raison d’être*” (690). Then he adds his own position: “A strict application of the Leviticus prescriptions is not indicated. ... But sexual activities that may threaten or disrupt genuine human relations and family structures ... are contradictory to life and thus have been outlawed. In this sense also today reasonable self-limitations of sexual behavior are opportune” (690). It certainly is a great achievement when commentators of the Bible reflect on the actual consequences of ancient ordinances. But some doubts may be voiced: Have there been deeper reasons in antiquity for outlawing homosexuality than the alleged ones? What about the magical-mystical dimensions of ancient taboos (cf. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966)? Has the disruptive power of sexuality simply evaporated? What would be the restrictions on sexuality today?

Lev 11–15: Impurities

Questions of “purity and impurity,” intimately connected with the conceptions of “holy and profane,” are of vital importance in Leviticus. The commentary’s third main section is dedicated to the relevant texts (Lev 11–15; Hieke is eager to include Num 19 and Lev 21:1–4, pollution with corpses, into the thematic horizon [404]). How can we understand the radical avoidance of certain “polluting” beings or events in a world created “good” and “very good” (Gen 1–2:4) by YHWH? (cf. 423: “There is no contradiction to Gen 1 ... because [Lev 11] does not refer to animals by themselves ... but only to human grabbing into the animal world”). What is the ultimate concern in dividing reality into incompatible realms? Most important, are we able to grasp the innermost sentiments of the ancient thinkers? Hieke is inclined to see a common denominator behind all impurity specifications. He annotates all along contagious contacts with carrion and corpses (see, e.g., 424–28, 819–23) as endangering life. Of course, our splendid guide is aware of much mythological thinking no longer fully present in our minds (e.g., 457; perhaps there is a subconscious awareness? Cf. Christoph Türcke, *Philosophie des Traumes*, 2008). Still, he explores the possibilities of rationalized argumentation, and laudably so. Along this vein he cutely suggests an explanation of the verdict over all “swarming creatures” (Lev 11:43–44). After reporting their double condemnation, that of being “abominable” and “impure,” “the epitome of disdain” (430), he muses over the reasons of such a predicament: “Possibly the notions of creeping and crawling and concomitant typical disappearance in holes, cracks and crevices bears connotations with the netherworld, the reign of death, so that such vermin is connoted with Sheol and its powers” (430). A nice but hardly sustainable idea.

Likewise, for Hieke the discharge of fluids (blood, semen) from the genitals “is a sign for the lack of procreation, the absence of new life,” thus “conjuring the realm of death” (542; cf. 424–28, 745, 819–21). The ancient horrors of an unholy antiworld seem unfathomable and escape even equation with death. Is it thinkable that the dichotomy of worlds was alien to ancient Hebrew tradition and was imported only by Zoroastrian beliefs?

Lev 13–14: Disease, Diagnostics, Rehabilitation

Leviticus 13–14 constitute the most extensive treatise of dermatological (human and architectural!) ills in the Old Testament (see 465–521). The disease (psoriasis?) was often considered a “blow” of the Lord, a direct “punishment for a sacrilege” (492). Priests are meticulously to investigate the slightest changes of skin or house walls in order to come to their verdict of pure or impure. With congenial precision Hieke portrays the priestly proceedings and diagnostic facets. Diagnosis and rehabilitation in Leviticus do have cultic importance only; no healing rites are intended or offered. I like to point out three peculiarities of his commenting: repelling skin illness, in spite of being widely considered a “blow of God,” for Hieke is connected strongly to the sphere of death (500, 521; cf. above). The ancient Near Eastern background or parallelism of concepts of sickness, diagnostics of ills, treatment by experts, cultic impurity, cleansing of sins, praying for delivery, and so on are constantly on the mind of our commentator. Thus here and in many other places he refers to the vast ancient Near Eastern literature concerned with diagnosis and healing (492; see also Nils P. Heeßel, *Babylonisch-assyrische Diagnostik*, 2000; further references to ancient Near Eastern general affinities: 79–80, 171, 209, 217–18, 658, 757–58, 823, 993, 1010, etc.). This kind of consciousness of the Old Testament being culturally and religiously embedded in its historical environment is another great asset of the commentary. It certainly does not preclude characteristic developments of individual religions. Also, on the reception side of the Leviticus texts, many rabbinic discussions are taken into account. Given this outreach into pre- and post-Israelite religious and cultic demeanor, it is lamentable that there are no relevant indices at the end of the work. One more point: ancient attitudes to disease, purity, and cleansing certainly seem strange to the modern reader (520). Does today’s exegesis need to include a brief correlation of modern and ancient medical, psychic, and spiritual practices in order to foster understanding? Perhaps the historically different mentalities converge in comparisons of skin disease once and AIDS now. Of course, pharmaceutical and technical means, as well as causal explications of disease, still are worlds apart.

Lev 19; 25: Love Your Neighbor; Strive for Justice

Many Western visitors of Leviticus will consider chapters 19 and 25 the very peaks of ethical thinking and orientation. After so much toiling with cult and ritual, Protestants

especially want a real strong moral instruction, and they may even accept the submission of their concepts under the overarching title of “holy life” (cf. Lev 19:2). How does Hieke fulfill his responsibilities to the visitors of the priestly teachings (697–769)? He starts out full of admiration: “Leviticus 19 in several respects is a unique chapter. ... Cultic and ethical concerns are inseparably interwoven” (702). “The call for holiness [19: 2] serves as a headline dominating formally and in terms of content everything that follows” (703). The intricate mixture of motifs and the manifold intertextual references then are made visible by charts and tables (705–8). Hieke concords with Christophe Nihan (*Priestly Torah*, 2006, 466): “Lev 19 stands as a remarkable case of inner-biblical exegesis; that is, it takes up several earlier laws regarded as exemplary in order to build a compendium of sorts illustrating the requirements of a holy life” (708). Hieke goes even further into the matter of liturgical performance: Lev 19 was possibly a sort of catechism, “a communal instruction being read out by a leader of the congregation” (709). Next our good guide plows through the chapter (710–60) in a pleasant and appealing discourse, dialoguing with modern Christian interpreters as well as ancient Jewish ones over concepts and messages, structures and rituals found in the text and eventually listening to the needs and challenges of our own time. He brings to bear his splendid scholarship and profound exegetical and literary knowledge, weighing possible answers to countless questions. The reader invariably feels drawn into the process of searching and finding significance in those ancient instructions. In the case of Lev 19, all begins with the stipulation “You shall be holy, for I, YHWH, your God, am holy” (19:2). “Against the concept of such *imitatio Dei* one could object that it mingles too much divine and human attributions. Is it imaginable at all to share God’s holiness? ... *Imitatio Dei*, then, does not mean to live on earth like God himself; it does suggest to present and realize God’s quality of holiness (especially extant in justice and righteousness) within our human context” (711). Small wonder that the drive of Hieke’s explanatory journey is toward the commandments “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; 728–36) and “You shall love the alien as yourself” (Lev 19:34; 755–56), with many succinct observations on all the contextual commandments and exhortations. This “love” is not a romantic emotion but, opposed to hatred, deep-felt trust and empathy with the other one, and as such the basic force of all human relationships and social groupings. Jews and Christians (perhaps also Muslims?) consider “neighborly love” the sum total or the inner nucleus of God’s will (cf. 728, 734–36). The Leviticus command is quoted in the New Testament nine times (highest rate of any Old Testament sentence [767]) and the author of the Letter of James seems to have studied intensely Lev 19:12–18 (768–69). “The commandment to love one’s neighbor, which really encompasses all human beings, basically and theoretically also includes the enemy” (768).

Lev 25 for its part (975–1046) reinforces the ideas of human dignity and freedom, aiming at liberation from economic exploitation. “The chapter is an example for all efforts ... to model everyday life in righteousness and well-being according to the will of God who desires freedom and autonomy for human beings” (1038). The agrarian soil needs rest (990–98), and distortions of capitalistic economy (impoverishment among small farmers) need to be addressed by the YHWH faith community. “The goal and conceptual background of the Jubilee is freedom and consequently economic autonomy of each individual Israelite” (1002). Insolvent farmers who had entered debt slavery had to be rescued by an intricate system of family solidarity, their own labor, and liberation decrees (1007–38). The Jubilee may have been more utopian than realistic in ancient times, but its vision of an alternative economic system has been alive until our own times. “Today’s actions receive an important impulse in that humanity is challenged not to stay idle when certain parts of populations or even whole nations glide slowly or rapidly into misery; we must strive for a fundamental change in the global economic system” (1045). In contrast to the wide acceptance of strangers in Lev 19, however, in 25:35–38, 44–46 shadows of discrimination reappear (1030–32).

Lev 16: Atonement

In a seven-part-structure of the book, the fourth section (Lev 16–17) appears to be the “conceptual and theological center of Leviticus and therefore of the whole Torah” (559). In spite of the archaic appearance of Azazel and blood rites, the topic “atonement” is highly important also in present-day affairs, as Hieke insinuates by using the terms “endlagern” (dispose of permanently [of atomic refuse]) and “entsorgen” (put away dangerous waste) on page 590, and referring to the French scholar René Girard (589), who dedicated much energy to the investigation of scapegoat rites and the overcoming of violence in our times. Hieke carefully analyzes the origins and growth of atonement rituals aiming at the annual purification of the central sanctuary (Lev 16:11–19; 580–87) and the scapegoat rite (Lev 16:20–22; 587–91) for the cleansing of the people. It is fascinating to learn, for example, that rabbinic interpretation—on the basis of Lev 19:21: confession of all sins, and possibly before the background of extensive penitential prayers such as Ezra 9; Neh 9; Ps 106—added liturgical prayers to the Feast of Yom Kippur, until today a or the highlight of seasonal feasting. Hieke, to be sure, points out ancient Near Eastern roots of atonement concepts, but he insists (as in several other instances along his commenting journey) on Hebrew idiosyncrasies: “Such analogies demonstrate many more significant differences than correspondences” (590).

To finalize the rewarding excursion: Hieke’s new interpretation of a relatively unknown book of Hebrew Scriptures opens up the breadth and depth of liturgical and ethical thinking and teaching of the postexilic Jewish community. The ancient texts do transport

important human problems (and tentative, contextual solutions) that are still virulent today. They stimulate us to shoulder growing modern impasses in all fields of life. Creative criticism of old patterns of thinking and responsible attention to longings, anxieties, and values of humanity today may be included in exegetical work. Hieke's is a most valuable tool in this continuing effort to understand and realize Scripture. A great commentary in a great series!