

Reading Ritual

Leviticus in Postmodern
Culture

Wesley J. Bergen



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This book is dedicated to my wife, Deborah, and my children, John and Erin. I realize that having a book about Leviticus dedicated to you is hardly a major event in your lives. Hopefully the time we have spent in music, sports, auto mechanics, reading, and everyday activities has made up for the time I have sacrificed to this project.

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 1 | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 2 | |
| Animal Sacrifice Today | 13 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| Sacrificing for the Team: Leviticus 4 and the Church of Monday Night Football | 27 |
| Chapter 4 | |
| Ritual Sacrifice in Leviticus, Africa, and North America | 44 |
| Chapter 5 | |
| Blood Sacrifice in the United States | 69 |
| Chapter 6 | |
| The Afterlife of Leviticus 1–7 in the Church | 82 |
| Chapter 7 | |
| Leviticus 7: A Commentary in Three Voices | 107 |
| Bibliography | 124 |
| Index of References | 137 |
| Index of Authors | 139 |

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1. *Beginnings*

Many centuries ago, a group of men (and possibly some women) gathered regularly at a sacred spot not too far from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. At this gathering they took a carefully chosen animal, killed it, and after cutting off the skin and certain other parts, they burned the carcass whole. Certain parts of this activity were done the same way every time.

Why? What did they think they were doing? What difference did it make to them that they did it the same way every time? Who decided what the 'right' way was? If you asked three of them to explain their actions, would you get three different answers, or three very similar answers?

Part of their answer would likely have had to do with a being they called Yahweh. What would they have understood the relationship between their actions and this Yahweh to be? How would they know what Yahweh thought of their actions? Were there also consequences for these actions within their communities? Were there consequences if these actions were not performed, or if they were performed improperly?

Most of these questions are simply unanswerable, because there is no one to ask. The text that describes this event (Lev. 1) doesn't answer most of these questions, and the ritual itself is no longer performed. It is also possible that many participants in this activity would not have had ready answers to these questions. These types of questions presume a great deal about the importance of theological formulation and abstraction. How much interest did this society have in abstraction?

The difference between the world as elaborated by the writer of Leviticus and a modern way of perceiving the world is seen by a cursory examination of Leviticus 1. When reading Leviticus 1 it is immediately clear that this is prescriptive speech, giving instructions regarding a set of *physical actions*. Only three phrases in the chapter portray mental activity. These are 'to make it acceptable to Yahweh', v. 3, 'It will be acceptable as effectual for his expiation', v. 4, and 'as a smell pleasing to Yahweh', v. 9, repeated in vv. 13 and 17.¹ All of this mental activity takes place in the mind of Yahweh. Yahweh desires humans to perform these actions, which have an effect upon the mind of Yahweh, which presumably will have an effect upon Yahweh's action, although this is never stated. Nothing

1. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

is said about the effect these actions may have upon the mind of the one presenting the offering, or the mental state required for these actions, or the belief system that must accompany these actions. Neither the narrator nor Yahweh appears to care about the mental activity of the one presenting the offering.

This way of describing an activity can be contrasted with the current descriptions of events as found in the modern media. In most cases, the first question that is asked of a person at the scene of any event is ‘How do you feel?’ Athletes are asked that question after success or failure. People are asked that at scenes of triumph and disaster. Billions of dollars are spent annually on pharmaceuticals (legal and illegal) to affect people’s mood. Yet the writer of Leviticus says nothing about the psychological state that either precedes or follows the slaughter of an animal.

Besides highlighting the difference between modern culture and that of the author of Leviticus 1, this contrast also highlights the further difficulty faced when trying mentally and verbally to deal with physical activity, especially physical activity such as ritual activity where the goal of the action is not directly related to the action itself. It would not be difficult to describe the slaughter of an animal if the purpose of the action was simply killing an animal to be eaten. But how is physical activity described when its purpose may not be reducible to words?

2. *Studying Ritual*

The questions above arise from an examination of Leviticus 1, and an attempt to understand the activity prescribed by the text. These are the kinds of questions that form the basis for this book. This book is a study of Leviticus 1–7, using a variety of academic tools to help the modern reader understand both the action and the language of animal sacrifice. Even more than simply understanding, I hope to create an encounter between Leviticus and the modern world, ultimately to create an encounter between Leviticus and you.

Much of this encounter will be based on the cross-cultural study of ritual. Since anthropologists have been wrestling with the study of ritual for years, it seems appropriate to consult with them regarding the questions above, and the questions of ritual in general.

The first problem encountered in this study is the question of how to define precisely what a ‘ritual’ is. Let me use two simple examples to demonstrate the issue. If I were to watch someone plant a tree, I would be inclined to say that this is not a ritual, because it is simply an action for a specific effect. But what if planting is accompanied by a traditional prayer and dance? Is it then a ritual? Why? It is still a repeated action for a specific effect, with the added action of calling on an unseen being. Why does the inclusion of an unseen being make an action into a ritual? For the person performing the dance, it is likely that the God/gods toward whom the prayer is directed is no less real than the seedling. Perhaps this person even believes that God is more real than the seedling. So we cannot distinguish ritual activity from non-ritual activity on the basis of the inclusion of deities.

What if planting the tree is for a purpose other than the growth of a new tree—what if it is for bringing blessing from the deity? In this case, the connection between the action and its intended outcome is outside the cause-and-effect rules of science. Is it then a ritual because the connection between action and result is ‘supernatural’ rather than ‘natural’? I might want to say that, since there is no material connection between planting a tree and receiving blessing, the action is ‘spiritual’ or ‘magical’. But this assumes that scientific explanations for events are more ‘true’ than spiritual ones. Yet for the person doing planting, the relationship between event and outcome might be perfectly logical within the system that she lives in (Herrenschmidt 1982: 27). So even a more specifically ‘religious’ intent does not transform something into a ritual. Let me use another example. Every day millions of Americans say the Pledge of Allegiance. Is this a ritual? It is not usually seen as one, since ritual is usually linked to religious activity. Can the definition of ‘ritual’ be expanded to ‘secular’ activity? Yet before we can ask this question, we would need to define what ‘religion’ is. Then we could decide whether American Nationalism constitutes a religion.² If it is, then saying the Pledge might be a religious activity. Yet even if American Nationalism is not a religion, might we still conclude that saying the Pledge at a specific place and time in a specific manner still constitutes a ritual.

The problem is not simply one of finding the ‘right’ definition for ‘ritual’ or ‘religion’. Definitions are cultural, part of the language of a specific group. Even within a particular language, different groups use words in different ways. The same English word can mean different things in Alabama or Wales. Moving between languages makes the situation that much more difficult. Comparing actions rather than words compounds the problem. How can I use modern American words to explain ancient Israelite actions? Can I write about modern American actions to help someone understand ancient Israelite actions?

3. *Purpose and Effect*

Another problem in the study of ritual is deciding whose explanation of a ritual to accept. Anthropologists have generally chosen to explain rituals in ways that do not agree with the understanding of the people doing the ritual. For example, Michael Aune in his discussion of the purpose of ritual limits the purpose of ritual to the noetic and affective spheres (1996a: 143). That is, he wishes to confine the study of ritual to a description of the effect of the ritual on the psychological state of the person doing the ritual.³ Fritz Staal says that in ritual results do not matter (1996: 488). Frank Gorman in his study of Leviticus says that the goal of ritual is the regulation of social order, and a means of world construction (1990: 19, 59). These explanations make sense within the worldview of the anthropologist, yet they are not the explanation for the ritual given in Leviticus. As Catherine Bell

2. The study of American Civil Religion is a significant discipline on its own. For a thorough introduction, see Jewett and Lawrence 2003.

3. Note that this is the opposite of the concerns of the writer of Leviticus.

notes, 'the notion that ritual resolves a fundamental social contradiction can be seen as a type of myth legitimating the whole apparatus of ritual studies' (1992: 37). In other words, anthropological explanations of ritual are based on a different myth than that of the culture performing the ritual. It is not a matter of moving to a description that contains no mythic elements. The idea that scientific societies have moved beyond myths is one of our central myths.

This point is easy to see by thinking again of the sacrifice described in Leviticus 1. Leviticus claims that the purpose of sacrifice is the expiation of sin (1.4). Biblical scholars would expand this explanation to observe that the consequence of sin was abandonment by God, which ultimately led to conquest by foreign armies (Deut. 28.18-68; 2 Kgs 17.7-23).⁴ Since the modern anthropologist is unwilling to accept that Israelite sacrifice is actually and directly linked to the rise and fall of empires, they will be more likely to offer counter explanations for the purpose or effect of this ritual.

The difficulty of using modern explanations for ancient rituals is compounded by the fact that we cannot study the society in which the ritual operates. All we have is the text of the Bible as a guide to the specifics of 'Israelite society'. Further, I am not assuming that the text of Leviticus 1-7 was ever actually used as the basis for the correct forms of animal sacrifice. So when seeking to understand Leviticus, I will limit my explanations of sacrifice largely to those within the text.

Yet there is still room to distinguish between a ritual's purpose and its effect. This is true both of ancient and modern rituals. For example, a ritual by its very nature creates 'insiders' (those who perform the ritual) and 'outsiders' (those who don't).⁵ This is not the stated purpose of the rituals of Leviticus 1-7, yet remains one of their effects. We cannot dismiss the effects of ritual, even the unintended effects, but caution must be taken not to impose our social constructs on an ancient social world.

Recognizing the effects of ritual also leads to the possibility of making another form of parallel between the text's world and ours. If one of the effects of sacrifice is to create insiders and outsiders, we can then examine the ways our society creates the same effect. As I will note in Chapter 5, one way American society distinguishes itself from outsiders by its claim to 'freedom'. While saying 'freedom' is not a ritual in itself, it becomes part of the language of the insider. Formal and regular use of the term 'freedom', then, becomes a possible clue that the occasion of its use may be a ritual of American Civil Religion.⁶ Thus we can

4. Neither of these passages specifically mentions the abandonment of ritual. They do, however, state that conquest is a result of sin. If part of the purpose of these rituals is the expiation of sin, then something must have gone wrong in the system so that the ritual was rendered ineffective.

5. While Leviticus says that sacrifice can be done by anyone ('when any of you bring', Lev. 1.2), it is likely that this 'anyone' was limited to Israelite males.

6. It may also be that events can become rituals through the use of language. President George W. Bush is well known for his repeated use of limited, highly emotive language (e.g. freedom, terrorists, sacrifice). The continual use of repeated words, themes, and images suggests that many of his speeches are 'ritual' in the sense that the content of the speech is not as important to the event as

move from effect to ritual, distinguishing what a ritual is by comparing the effects of events across cultures.

4. *Defining Ritual*

In attempting to define ‘ritual’, it is tempting to say that, while it may be difficult to define, we know it when we see it.⁷ The problem here is how do we know when we’re *not* seeing it—activities that are ritual yet aren’t quite. Using a term that ‘everyone understands but no one can define’ is dangerous for a whole host of reasons. For the purposes of this study, a general understanding of ritual is important because I will be using many examples from outside the usual boundaries of ‘religious ritual’. In Chapter 2 I will argue that factory work, the fast food industry, and modern economics are ‘ritual’ activities in significant senses of the term. In Chapter 3 I will argue that viewing Monday Night Football is a religious ritual within the context of American Civil Religion. In Chapter 5 I will study sacrifice language in the context of the American military, which is certainly one of the more ritualized parts of American society. In all of these examples it is important to keep open the question of what constitutes a ritual, especially when comparing two societies as different as ours and ancient Israel’s. I will also need to keep in mind the larger problem of using our language (both common and technical language) to describe another society.

In general, I will be using the criteria for ritual proposed by Catherine Bell. Bell stays away from a specific definition of what a ritual *is*, and instead talks about how regular actions become *ritualized* (1992: 7-8). She suggests that ritualized actions have certain features in common, namely formalism, traditionalism, disciplined invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance (1997: 138-69). While not all of these features are part of every ritual, this list provides a starting point for a comparison of the various rituals this book examines.

Much of this book will focus on the last of Bell’s features, performance. It is by now commonplace to note that much of ritual study has traditionally been focused on the ‘meaning’ of ritual, giving priority to the verbal over the physical. Recently ritual theory has attempted to find ways to speak about movement, about action, as having its own effect. As Tom Driver notes, rituals are ‘more like washing machines than like books’ (1991: 93). Bell notes that it is the modern scholar who makes the dichotomy thought/action, not the one performing the ritual (1996: 23).

Ronald Grimes has long noted the difficulty inherent in studying ritual.⁸ In his *Beginnings of Ritual Studies*, he notes the problem of having ritual described or analyzed by an outside interpreter/observer (1982: 2). His solution is to suggest

the psychological effect of the speech. His task is to ‘say the right words for the occasion’, rather than convey information. Thus a speech by George W. Bush may be more of a ritual than a speech by another president.

7. The same problem applies when attempting to define ‘religion’. See Braun 2000.

8. See also Laeuchli 1992: 36; Staal 1996: 487.

that someone studying ritual should develop skills in the construction of ritual—skills of movement and response, rather than skills of transforming action into thought (p. 15). He also suggests that one should *map* ritual, rather than analyze it (pp. 19-30).

Grimes' list of aspects of ritual in need of mapping also helps clarify the difficulty faced when studying Leviticus 1–7. His list includes ritual objects, time, sound and language, identity, action (1982: 23-30). Yet we can map few of these for the rituals in Leviticus 1–7, because most of the information is missing. What kind of object was used to kill the animal? How much time did each part of the sacrifice take? What words or music accompanied the actions? Was there song-and-response, spoken liturgy, were texts read, or were the humans silent throughout? Who is this 'any of you' the text talks about (Lev. 1.2; 5.1; 6.1, etc.)—could it be anyone, or did the writer presume the head of the household? Comparing Grimes' list to our text, it is easy to see that a full description of the ritual is not a possibility. If so, what is left to accomplish?

The work of Bell, Grimes and others makes it clear that any attempt to understand the ritual apart from participation in the ritual is a fundamental misunderstanding of ritual as it is perceived by those who do participate. Observation is not the same as action. Movement is not reducible to language. Even if it were, describing ancient Israel's actions in our language involves the translation of an entire culture.

This would seem to make understanding fundamentally impossible, since the ritual prescribed in Leviticus 1 is no longer performed, and even if we were to replicate it, our modern perception of it would be significantly different from an ancient perception of the same activity. Yet while we must dismiss any notion of a complete understanding of Leviticus 1–7 and the rituals described therein, there is another way of understanding. Perhaps the most fundamental way of understanding something new is to link it with another thing that we already understand. Or, in the case of ritual, to link it to another action we already engage in. So long as we are comparing action to action, we can imagine the experience of an ancient ritual.

5. Building Bridges

I do not think, however, that we have reason to be overly optimistic in this regard. Often the gulf between ancient experience and modern experience is underappreciated. People who read Leviticus 1–7 too easily bring their own responses to the text, especially in the visceral reactions to killing, flaying, and manipulating blood.⁹ There is no way to know how various people in ancient Israelite society felt about killing an animal. This becomes clearer when keeping in mind the illusion in the phrase 'ancient Israelite society', as if all people in all times of Israel's history would have reacted in similar ways. Any claim to understand all of these possible physical and mental responses is overstated.

9. Philip Budd in his commentary on Leviticus says that sacrifice is a response to ambivalence and alienation that arises from ploughing and killing (1996: 34).

Yet even here, there are possible bridges that can aid a study of ancient ritual. Part of the purpose of this study is to help us understand (or even experience) how much we don't understand, and why we don't understand it. Part of my task is to help you visualize the nature of the gulf that separates you from ancient tribal societies, from animal sacrifice, from blood manipulation. This aspect of ritual, too, can be mapped.

a. *Textuality*

There are two more observations regarding ritual that might better allow us to enter the world of Leviticus 1–7. The first is the recognition that Leviticus 1 is not a ritual. It is a text. And while it is a text about a ritual, this is not the same thing. In fact, texts about rituals likely arise from and certainly highlight the absence of a ritual. Why would you need a text about a ritual if you had the ritual? There is nothing in Leviticus 1 that could not be learned from simple observation, except for the three comments about Yahweh's attitude. The text is a sign of the absence of ritual (see Gerstenberger 1996: 12).

We see this clearly when we note Jacob Milgrom's use of later rabbinic interpretation to clarify our understanding of Leviticus in his groundbreaking commentary (1991: 137, *passim*). The rabbis wrote in the aftermath of the destruction of the second temple, and thus their writings are a response to the absence of these rituals. So it would not be surprising for the rabbis to highlight the interior motivation (guilt) rather than the exterior action (bringing offering) of the one performing the ritual, given that the exterior action is no longer performed. This is the use Milgrom makes of them, in corroborating his own preference for the interior.

Further, insofar as the text becomes part of sacred space and time, the reading of the text becomes part of a ritual. Thus, the ritual 'reading Leviticus' becomes a substitute for the ritual 'animal sacrifice'. While this ritual in its ancient setting is not immediately available for our study, it certainly resembles our own activity in many ways that an animal sacrifice does not. While the ritual performed as a result in Leviticus is not available for our study, the ritual performance of reading Leviticus is.

Leviticus as a text can be read by anyone with access and ability. Currently this includes much of the human race. The sacrifice ritual prescribed in Leviticus can be undertaken by anyone with an animal to kill, and access to an Israelite priest and the Tent of Meeting. Currently this includes no one, and may have included no one at the time that Leviticus was written. Yet this text continues to be read. Often it is read within a ritual context. Sometimes it is read by groups as part of a larger religious ritual; sometimes it is read by individuals as part of their own religious practice. In significant ways, both of these groups 'experience' the sacrifice.

The reading of the text as a ritual is even hinted at in the text itself. In Lev. 1.1, God speaks to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, and commands him to speak the forthcoming words to the people of Israel. Thus the text obliquely commands its own reading. Readers are given the opportunity to stand in the place of Moses while speaking these words to the people.

Thus, the textualization of the ritual is balanced by the ritualization of the text. The command by God to Moses (to speak these words) is fulfilled even while no animals are killed. The movement from animal sacrifice to reading of texts involves some loss and some gain, as all change does. So there is no loss of ritual, only its transformation.

b. *Imaginative Performance*

There is another sense in which the text of Leviticus 1–7 can be thought of as a performance. The text was not written in order to be a sign of absence of ritual. It was more likely written to allow a form of participation in the ritual by those unable actually to participate.¹⁰ Let's call this form of participation *imaginative performance*.

There are two kinds of imaginative performances available to the reader of Leviticus. The first is done by persons who are able to imagine that they are doing ritual, and so 'perform' the action of the ritual in their heads/hearts. They are then allowed to participate imaginatively in the sights, smells, and reactions as if they themselves were conducting the ritual, and thus participate also in the reaction to Yahweh's pleasure.

The other kind of imaginative performance is to imagine oneself as part of the audience, for presumably the pleasure of Yahweh extends to those who observe the ritual even as the ritual is being performed by another. This allows readers to include themselves within Yahweh's favor without needing to presume that imaginative rituals are equivalent to real ones. Since Yahweh's favor extended, presumably, to the original audience of the ritual, then it is only a small leap to believe that Yahweh's favor also might extend to the modern audience of an ancient ritual. Thus, a modern reader is able to participate as audience in an ancient ritual, which is in many ways similar to the form of participation which was the only option available to much of ancient Israel.

Imaginative performance allows Leviticus 1–7 to be analyzed from a number of perspectives. For example, we might subject it to feminist analysis. Scholars have long noted that blood sacrifice is a male realm (Jay 1985: 283; Beers 1992: 12). In Leviticus, the presumed actor in the ancient ritual is male. Although women are not explicitly excluded, it is likely that imaginative performance as audience was the only form of participation allowed to most women. Thus, the modern reader who participates imaginatively, who is allowed to participate only as audience, may be said to participate as woman.¹¹

Another type of feminist analysis might note the ongoing effects of this ritual in the actions and language of later cultures. In our society, 'sacrifice' is still a major category for women as they give up their own desires and ambitions for the sake of others. The male violence of sacrifice is also an active part of the world for other women as they become the victim of male violence. As I suggest

10. Again, see Gerstenberger 1996: 12. Whether or not it was written for this purpose, this became its primary purpose once it reached the diaspora community

11. Judith Wegner notes that women are excluded from coming into the 'presence of Yahweh' (2003: 454). In the absence of a temple, this is also true for the modern reader.

in Chapter 5, both the language and blood of sacrifice are still very present in the lives of men and women today.

Another form of feminist analysis might take more seriously the textuality of Leviticus. Nancy Jay in her study of blood sacrifice notes that women are not entitled to an opinion about meaning of action (1992: 11). The movement from action to language is one that is controlled by people who claim the authority to make that movement. This is likely to have been true in general, was certainly true in the case of the textualization of Leviticus, and remains true in our experience of male scholarship explaining Leviticus to both male and female readers.

Imaginative performance is also subject to class analysis. The ideal actor in the ritual is arguably also a wealthy person. While three offerings are described in Leviticus 1 (livestock, bird, and grain), and no formal distinction is made between them in terms of status, the phrase about expiation is not applied to the birds or the grain offering. This allows for the possibility that the ancient actor who brings either birds or grain does so in order to be able to participate imaginatively in the sacrifice of livestock (Lev. 5.7 and 12.8 consider the bird and grain offerings a substitute allowable for economic reasons). This is especially clear when we factor in the possible reaction of the human audience, given the performative aspect of ritual. Likely the audience reacts differently to the sacrifice of a large animal as opposed to the sacrifice of grain. Thus, the modern reader who participates imaginatively also participates as one of the poor, one who is unable to bring an offering of livestock before Yahweh.

6. *General Contents*

The studies that follow are a loosely connected series of chapters focusing on various aspects of Leviticus 1–7. Rather than make one specific extended discussion in this book, each chapter stands alone. Each chapter highlights one particular connection between our world and the world of Leviticus 1–7. The exception to this is the final chapter, which brings together the various studies into a sustained reading of Leviticus 7.

The various readings in this book are meant as a compliment to more traditional studies of Leviticus. While this book bears little resemblance to a traditional commentary, it would not be possible but for the careful analysis and socio-religious background provided by other readers. To suggest an analogy, the ground has been prepared by centuries of careful tending. I have planted some new seeds, and the chapters following are the results.

The chapters that follow are also rooted in another place (to stretch the analogy somewhat). Each of them is rooted in North American culture. The second chapter is about meat processing in Canada and the United States. The third chapter is about the Church of Monday Night Football, an American sporting event that may or may not have parallels in other societies. I will allow readers from other parts of the world to make their own judgments as to whether they have parallel rituals.

Even the chapter on Africa is rooted in North America. While it begins as a study of how Leviticus 1–7 is used and understood in Africa, the purpose of the overview is to help North American readers understand why it is they don't understand Leviticus 1–7. It is precisely in the African acceptance of Leviticus 1–7 that our own rejection is made clearer.

Parts of this study also highlight Leviticus 1–7 as a text. This may be the most significant tension underlying the book. On the one hand, I wish to take seriously the action involved in sacrifice. I do this by noting parallel actions in North American society, even though these actions are not 'theologized' in any manner similar to Leviticus. On the other hand, I want to read Leviticus as a text, as a series of words, concepts, and ideas that leak out into the world and have effects well beyond the performance of the actions prescribed.

For example, the purpose claimed by Leviticus 1–7 is to prescribe certain animal sacrifices that are to take place in the Tent of Meeting by the people of Israel. Yet the language of Leviticus 1–7 is applied to the death of Jesus of Nazareth, and the ideas of Leviticus 1–7 are twisted to form part of the language that is used to explain the current war in Iraq. These connections are ritual connections, in so far as both Jesus' death and war can be understood as ritual action. The connections are certainly performative, since in all of these examples the human action goes well beyond thought or speech. Yet the connection is finally largely discursive. The death of Jesus as an act bears little resemblance to any of the offerings described in Leviticus, and one looks in vain for references to armored vehicles in Leviticus. It is the ideas, however twisted and misappropriated, that connect ancient sacrifice to modern warfare or modern theology.

7. Tensions

At the core, two tensions propel this book. The first is the tension between the question 'What do rituals do?', and the question 'What do texts do?'. These questions are not separable in a study of Leviticus, since Leviticus is a text prescribing and influencing action. The questions are not separable in a text which continues to have an effect on the world, even though the actions that result from an encounter with the text are not those prescribed by the text.

The other tension that propels this book is an internal one for me. I have been increasingly drawn to popular culture as a place to find the parallels that help me understand Leviticus. In that sense, this is not a particularly 'religious' study. While Chapter 4 is about Christian readings of Leviticus, they are readings taken from Africa. It is precisely their difference from North American religious activity that makes them useful for me. Only Chapter 6 significantly takes into account the effects of Leviticus in the church, and even there the focus is often upon the effects that the church's ideas have upon the actions of society around them. All of this may lead to the impression that this is a secular reading of a religious text, one that does not take seriously the religious nature of Leviticus.

Yet this is the most religious book I can write about Leviticus. I am an ordained minister in the Mennonite Church, and write and speak as a committed Christian. In many ways this study is a more deliberately Christian analysis of

Leviticus than most others I have read. One thing I am trying to accomplish by using popular culture in this study is to stress that sacrifice was part of pop culture in its day. The distinction that Leviticus makes between clean and unclean, between holy and not-holy, is not the same as our distinction between sacred and secular. This latter distinction does not exist in the text of Leviticus. So, to limit a study of Leviticus to ideas and actions in the sphere that we call 'sacred' is unhelpful. We will only understand Leviticus as Christians when we see the 'religion' of the 'secular' society around us. The best North American parallel to what Leviticus is trying to speak about is not the church, but American Civil Religion. Since it is this Religion that also sets the parameters for the influence of 'religions' in American society (see Marvin and Ingle 1999: 9-11), any serious study of Leviticus must take it seriously. Leviticus wishes to be part of the 'Declaration of Independence' of Israelite peoplehood, and we continue to read it as part of its 'Bible'.¹²

In this sense, this study is both a study of Leviticus from the perspective of the church and pop culture, and a study of the church and pop culture from the perspective of Leviticus. I live in a culture which generally considers animal sacrifice to be a barbaric practice, yet feels proud of the continued human sacrifice practiced in the military (see Chapter 5). Who are the barbarians here? In the church we are often proud that Jesus death proclaims the end of cruel animal sacrifice, yet both our theology and our hands are dripping in the blood of our victims (see Chapter 6). The Jews stopped sacrificing animals two thousand years ago, yet we are still in the process of halting our sacrifice of the Jews.

8. *Conclusion*

As should be obvious by now, this study also ignores the traditional academic boundaries between various disciplines. My general area of expertise is Old Testament narrative. In this study I venture into legal studies, ritual theory, New Testament, early church history, systematic theology, African studies, and pop culture. I recognize that this is a risky venture. I hope it proves to be a fruitful one.

It has also been a study of self-discovery. As a Mennonite, I grew up in a tradition that considered the phrase 'empty ritual' to be redundant. As a fellow scholar noted, Mennonites don't do ritual, they just do the same thing over and over in the same way. So the study of ritual texts is hardly a natural place for a Mennonite scholar. Yet this hindrance was not without advantages.

One advantage this background has is that I began with few presuppositions about how rituals 'should' work, or how they 'are' done. Another advantage is that Mennonites are often more communities of orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy, so I find it easy to understand the relationship between 'religion' and everyday experience. Many of my Mennonite friends understand implicitly the

12. Within the bounds of American Civil Religion, only the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are officially 'true'. All other truth claims, whether secular or religious, are 'true' within the realms assigned to them by American Civil Religion. Thus, the Bible can have 'religious' truth, but does not dictate foreign or economic policy. See Marvin and Ingle 1999: 9, 28.