

***The Story of Torah:
The Role of Narrative in Leviticus's Legal Discourse***

JOHN G. FERCH

Alaska Bible College
jferch@akbible.edu

For years, source critics have proposed a broad two-part structure for Leviticus, based on two independent sources that are presumed to underlie the book. This approach, coupled with a popular perception of Leviticus as nothing more than a long list of sundry Israelite laws, has caused the book's narrative unity within the broader story of the Pentateuch to be neglected. By applying narrative criticism to the often-forgotten stories in Leviticus 10 and 24, crucial literary links are revealed which suggest a three-part outline to the book, supporting a united message that presents the giving of the Law as an act of divine grace designed to prepare Yahweh's people to live in His presence.

KEYWORDS: *narrative, Leviticus, structure, Pentateuch, Law*

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the book of Leviticus seems to consist of little more than a bulleted list of do's and don'ts given to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. It must be granted, the book does consist primarily of various collections of laws, organized loosely by topic or function. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to discount the book as nothing more than a giant legal excursus in the narrative plotline of the Pentateuch. Two mysterious and puzzling stories in the book of Leviticus remind its readers that the Law was not received in a vacuum, and that legal sections of the Pentateuch cannot be interpreted apart from the historical situations in which they developed. These narrative accounts, found in Lev 10 and 24, are key structural markers within the book of Leviticus and important links in the overall plot of the Pentateuch.

Central to this argument is the idea that the book of Leviticus, and the Pentateuch as a whole, form complete units that present coherent messages. Although different sources and oral traditions may have contributed to it, the Pentateuch is the product of careful redaction by an

editor who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, brought all of these materials together and artistically arranged them for a specific purpose. It is this final form that concerns the present discussion.

The scope of this argument includes the macro-structural contributions that these stories make to the literary framework of Leviticus and the overall plot of the Pentateuch.¹ Narrowband lexical and grammatical studies of the stories themselves have already been accomplished many times over and will not be attempted here. Instead, the key question at hand is how these stories contribute to the structure, plot, and ultimately, the theology of the literature in which they are found. The passages themselves will first be introduced, with brief exegetical commentary relevant to the discussion at hand. The study will then “zoom out” to the book as a whole, analyzing these passages’ contribution to its structure and meaning. Finally, it will conclude with an examination of their role in the greater plot of the Pentateuch.

THE NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

An analysis of the overall verbal syntax of Leviticus quickly demonstrates the legitimacy of this study. The chart below illustrates the distribution of a unique Hebrew verb form, the “imperfect waw-consecutive” (or *wayyiqtol*). This form is the *de facto* marker of narrative in the Hebrew Bible, consistently used to introduce specific action on the part of a subject.² Compared to the rest of the Pentateuch, this form’s use in Leviticus is negligible, generally occurring only to introduce God’s divine speech acts in which he gives specific laws (“and God said”). Except, that is, in two instances: Lev 8–10 and 24:10–23.³

1. In his extensive literary analysis of the Old Testament, David Dorsey identifies three specific steps in studying literary structure: “(1) identifying the composition’s constituent parts . . . (2) analyzing the arrangement of those parts, and (3) considering the relationship of the composition’s structure to its meaning.” (*The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999], 16.) The study at hand is broadly organized according to these three steps, and a technical application of these principles will be explored in the footnotes when relevant.

2. See, for example, Robert B. Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 119–20; Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 192ff. Chisholm identifies three main elements of Hebrew narrative, all of which can be observed in the passages at hand: “(1) the [*wayyiqtol*] framework, (2) nonstandard constructions that deviate from or interrupt the normal pattern of the narrative framework, and (3) quotations and dialogues embedded in the narrative” (*From Exegesis to Exposition*, 119).

3. Granted, linguistic analysis is but one of several means of identifying Hebrew narrative. It suffices to say, the narrative form of these two passages has been observed in

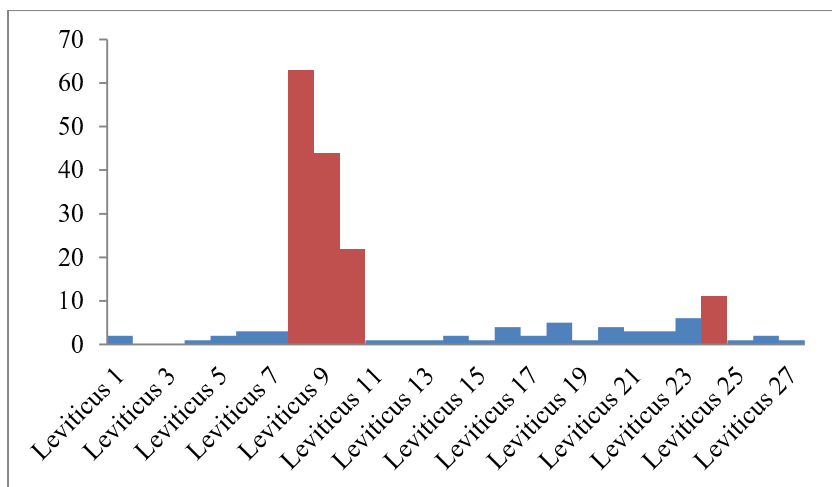


Table 1: Count of Imperfect Waw-consecutives (Westminster 4.2 Morphological Database)⁴

Leviticus 8–10: Profanation of the Sacred Space

The first instance of narrative in the book of Leviticus is also the longest, spanning chapters 8–10. This story recounts the ordination of Aaron and his sons as Israel’s priests, and more significantly, the death of his sons Nadab and Abihu upon their offering of “strange fire” to Yahweh. Much ink has been spent conjecturing as to the exact nature of their offense.⁵

several prior literary-critical studies of the Pentateuch. Most notable to the purposes at hand are the contributions of Mary Douglas (*Leviticus as Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]) and Christopher R. Smith (“The Literary Structure of Leviticus,” *JOT* 70 [1996], 17–32). The present argument is largely a response to and development of the ideas set forth in these studies, so there is little need to repeat the groundwork that they have already laid.

4. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: With Westminster Hebrew Morphology*, electronic edition (Stuttgart; Glenside: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary, 1996).

5. Jacob Milgrom provides an extensive survey of the interpretations that have historically been offered here, agreeing that most are sheer speculation with no textual basis (*Leviticus 1–16* [AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 634.) He makes a strong case that the phrase “strange fire” would more accurately be translated “unauthorized coals,” which he then proposes “can only mean that instead of deriving from the outer altar, the coals came from a source that was ‘profane’ or ‘outside,’ such as an oven” (597–8). This could well be the case, but it is certainly not the *only* possibility, since aside from the hint

Did they offer fire from a profane source? Were they drunk? Were they seeking to usurp their father Aaron? Were they offering incense to a pagan god? Were they simply irreverent in their service? Were they perhaps intentionally offering themselves as human sacrifices to sanctify the tabernacle for Yahweh? All these and more have been offered as potential explanations for this event, but particularly from a literary perspective, all seem to miss the fundamental point of the story: “The explanation of the strange fire is not available in the text, although it would have been relatively simple for the narrator to provide an explanation. The phrase ‘strange fire’ is deliberately obscure!”⁶ The author is quite intentional about what he does and does not want the readers to take away from the story. Several of these takeaway points are relevant to the present discussion.

First, although the specifics of Nadab’s and Abihu’s error are not provided, 10:1 makes the general nature quite clear: they approached Yahweh improperly. In some way not specified, they profaned the presence of Yahweh. The idea of God’s presence is emphasized three times in the two verses recounting their death: Nadab and Abihu offered לפני יהוה (“before Yahweh”), fire came from לפני יהוה, and they ultimately died לפני יהוה. The holiness of the Tabernacle, the locus of Yahweh’s presence, which has been regulated so carefully and enacted so precisely up to this point, is breached.⁷

A second key point of emphasis in 10:1 is that this breach of holiness occurred because the priests lacked specific instruction from God. The first two chapters (8–9) are emphatically detailed and systematic. They essentially recount in narrative form the initiation of the sacrificial system that has just been detailed in chapters 1–7. This, the bulk of the story, sets the stage for the jarring fate of Nadab and Abihu. Thirteen times throughout chapters 8 and 9, the narrator emphasizes that the rites were carried out “just as Yahweh had commanded,” setting a distinctive cadence to the sequence of events. “This emphasis on the ritual carried out exactly as commanded makes a strong contrast with the offense of Nadab and Abihu, who brought strange fire *which the Lord*

that they may have been for some reason “unauthorized,” the text itself is silent on the matter of the coals’ source.

6. David Penchansky, “Nadab and Abihu, Martyrs: The Dangerous God,” in *What Rough Beast?: Images Of God In The Hebrew Bible* (ed. David Penchansky; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 61.

7. Douglas, *Leviticus*, 199.

had not commanded."⁸ Indeed, the two short verses recounting the death of Nadab and Abihu, following such a lengthy detailed account of the priests' ordination, drives home one point and one point only: their actions, regardless of good or bad intentions, had not been commanded by God. In other words, "The priests are operating in a realm in which no command of God is pertinent."⁹

The final point to observe here is borne out in the ensuing dialog between Moses and Aaron. Here a tension develops, starting with Moses's proclamation of a poetic speech from Yahweh in 10:3 which justifies the death of Nadab and Abihu from the divine perspective (one way or the other, Yahweh will be sanctified), but "does not close any of the gaps in the story" in terms of the priests' error or how it could be avoided in the future.¹⁰ Aaron, the mourning father who is just as much in the dark as his sons were, cannot argue with this statement—"he cannot defend his sons, but he certainly cannot disown them: hence his only recourse must be silence."¹¹ Moses does not miss a beat, ensuring that proper cleanup is performed and that the ceremony continues unhindered. Aaron, meanwhile, receives his own word from Yahweh that focuses on the need to "make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean" (10:13). Immediately thereafter, the tension between the two brothers reaches its climax when Moses finds that Aaron and his sons had not eaten the offering as he had commanded. In Aaron's reply in 10:19, "we see Aaron actually doing the kind of thing that the sons of Aaron were to be responsible for throughout Israel's history," the thing that God has just commanded him to do, pointing out that it would not have been right in the eyes of

8. Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002), 57. Milgrom's proposal that it was not actually "strange fire" but rather "unauthorized coals" which provoked the wrath of Yahweh would intensify this point even further, since in the same verse their actions are described as both "unauthorized" and "not commanded" (cf. ESV).

9. Bryan D. Bibb, "Nadab and Abihu Attempt to Fill a Gap: Law and Narrative in Leviticus 10.1-7," *JSOT* 96 (2001): 88. Indeed, if Milgrom is correct, it must be noted that at this point in the narrative, the priests had received no specific instruction from Yahweh regarding the source of coals for their incense. It is not until Lev 16:12 that they are instructed specifically to obtain their coals from the altar.

10. *Ibid.*, 91.

11. Walter J. Houston, "Tragedy in the Courts of the Lord: a Socio-Literary Reading of the Death of Nadab and Abihu," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 35.

Yahweh to eat meat considering what has just befallen him.¹² Now it is Moses who is silenced, for “Aaron’s dignified and eloquent response leaves Moses without an answer in his turn . . . This resolves the tension between the two brothers.”¹³ The pivotal point in the back-and-forth conflict between Moses and Aaron is God’s instruction to Aaron in verse 13: Aaron’s God-given mandate to distinguish between holy and unholy is what allows him to successfully navigate another potential gap in the law and to resolve the conflict with Moses.

Leviticus 24:10–23: Profanation of the Sacred Name

Leviticus’s second narrative account occurs in 24:10–23. Though much shorter than the earlier story, both accounts bear many similarities, with a few important thematic distinctions. The shortness of the account should not be a cause for concern, for the book as a whole is thematically “front-loaded” and not balanced in terms of space given to each unit. Once again, the story is riddled with ambiguity, leaving the readers guessing regarding the specifics of what happened. Specifically, there is much debate regarding exactly how the blasphemer “blasphemed” (נִקְבַּח) and “cursed” (קָלַל) the “name.” Rodney Hutton identifies as many as five potential ways in which this combination of verbs can be translated.¹⁴ Again, in-depth analysis of grammar and syntax is beyond the scope of the present discussion. The point here is that, as in the case of Nadab and Abihu, this strategic ambiguity serves to draw attention to several key points that *are* specifically mentioned in the text. Specifically, four key points that are relevant to the macro-structural scope at hand stand out in the narrative fog.

First, in verse 10, attention is drawn to the fact that the blasphemer is a foreigner, “a son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man.” Greater relevance will be attached to this fact later in the discussion, but even within the narrow scope of this narrative, the significance of this point is made clear: “There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the LORD

12. John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 332. This is not to suggest that the meat itself was somehow rendered profane or unclean. Rather, it is the *actions* of Aaron and his sons that are in question. Aaron rightfully discerned that it would not be appropriate to partake in the sacred meal while in a period of mourning.

13. Houston, “Tragedy,” 36.

14. Rodney R. Hutton, “The Case of the Blasphemer Revisited,” *VT* 49 (1999): 533–4.

your God” (v. 22). One major point of this story is “to stress that the laws apply to native and foreigner equally and alike.”¹⁵

Second, in verse 11, the nature of the offense involves the profanation of the holy. Again, the specific words of the blasphemer are not revealed, but this allows the narrator to emphasize the general nature of the act rather than a specific combination of words. Regardless of whether the passage speaks to the very utterance of God’s name or simply the illegitimate use of it, commentators agree that the lowest common denominator is the profanation of God’s sacred name.¹⁶ The key point is that “The Egyptian’s vilification or profanation of the divine name is . . . an act of encroachment, besmirching the holy with a vileness of the profane.”¹⁷

Third, in verse 12, another “gap” in the Israelites’ understanding of the law is revealed. Just as Nadab and Abihu encountered a gap in their understanding of the sacrificial system, so here “Tension arises due to a lack of knowledge of what to do with the blasphemer.”¹⁸ Unlike Nadab and Abihu, however, the people do not try to resolve the tension on their own, but rather wait for clarification from Yahweh (24:12).

Finally, in verse 23, it is important to observe the recurrence of a phrase already familiar from the earlier narrative passage: “Then Moses spoke to the sons of Israel, and they brought the one who had cursed outside the camp and stoned him with stones. Thus the sons of Israel did, *just as the LORD had commanded Moses.*” Again, the narrator is careful to emphasize the exact execution of God’s command. This phrase occurs a total of thirteen times in Leviticus, eleven in the first narrative and once here. It occurs outside the narrative context only once in the entire book. Its repetition here makes a direct connection to the first narrative, clearing any doubt that the passages are to be read in parallel.

One last observation pertains to a common phrase that follows both of these narrative sections verbatim. Following each story in 11:1 and 25:1 are the words, “and God said to Moses.” Several commentators have identified this construction as a recurring structural pattern within

15. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 82.

16. Jacob Weingreen, “Case of the Blasphemer, Leviticus 24:10ff,” *VT* 22 (1972): 121. Cf. Hutton, “Case of the Blasphemer,” 540.

17. Robert Alter, *The Five Book of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 544.

18. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 82.

the book.¹⁹ This phrase is not technically part of either narrative, but rather marks the beginning of a new section of legal material. It is being pointed out here because both accounts share it in common and it bears implications regarding the structure of the book.

Each of Leviticus's narratives, then, involves the death of individuals who in some way profaned the sacred—Nadab and Abihu profaned God's sacred space and the blasphemer profaned God's sacred name. In each case, the specific nature of the act is hidden—it is not revealed what was “strange” about Nadab and Abihu's fire, nor were the specific words of the blasphemer recounted. Each case involved a “gap” in the Law—Nadab and Abihu lacked instruction from God regarding their cultic duties, just as Moses lacked instruction on what to do with the blasphemer. This “gap” reveals the need for further instruction and leads into more legal material. Finally, in each case, the phrase “just as Yahweh had commanded” is given prominence.²⁰ The discussion now turns to the reasons for these parallels and the roles these two stories play in the greater structure of Leviticus.

THE STRUCTURE OF LEVITICUS

Historically, emphasis on source criticism has led exegetes to understand the structure of Leviticus exclusively in light of the sources that presumably lie beneath the book's final form. Following this school of thought, Leviticus is divided into two units: the Priestly Code of chapters 1–16 and the Holiness Code of chapters 17–27.²¹ Thus, source critics observe little structural or literary overlap within these two distinct units, and the two narratives tend to be treated independently. While the priestly and holiness themes are certainly dominant in the book, and these two documents may indeed provide the basis for Leviticus as it stands today, emphasis on source criticism alone when identifying the structure of the book causes important literary markers—especially the narrative accounts in question—to be dismissed. Indeed, “To the extent

19. Christopher R. Smith, “The Literary Structure of Leviticus,” *JSOT* 70 (1996): 21; Wilfried Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 65–66.

20. In the technical terms of literary analysis provided by Dorsey, these two units exhibit at least four categories of repetition suggesting intentional parallelism: (1) sameness of genre (narrative), (2) sameness of atmosphere (somber), (3) repetition of phrase “just as Yahweh had commanded,” (4) sameness of theme (judgment for profanation of the sacred; *Literary Structure*, 32–33).

21. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 61.

that the shadow of source-criticism still lies over literary-critical inquiry, it makes the latter's paths harder to trace."²²

If the parallel accounts in Lev 8–10 and 24:10–23 are indeed structural boundary markers, they would suggest that the book should be divided into three sections of law: 1–7, 11–24:9, and 25–27. This is Mary Douglas's proposal in her literary study of Leviticus:

The explanation here proposed is that the structure of law and narrative cuts the book to the shape of the controlling paradigm. This means that the book of Leviticus itself is structured as a tripartite projection of the tabernacle, and thus also as a projection of Mount Sinai. On this reading the two stories would correspond to the two screens which, according to the instructions given in the book of Exodus, divide the desert tabernacle into three sections of unequal size.²³

Douglas's proposal seems to fit from a strictly structural perspective. She not only acknowledges the narratives' contribution, but also provides an explanation for the imbalance, or "front-loading" of material that was mentioned above. Besides this structural relationship, however, Douglas does little to explore thematic or theological connection between the narratives and the laws that surround them. She analyzes the narratives in their own right, but save the common implications of "trespass on forbidden ground," they have little to do with the legal sections that they mark.²⁴ Furthermore, she struggles to identify consistent links between the three sections of law and the corresponding three parts of the tabernacle.

Christopher Smith proposes a similar structure that also accounts for the two parallel narratives. His system, too, "depends on the simple observation that the book is of a hybrid literary genre. That is, it alternates between laws and narrative."²⁵ Interestingly, Smith attempts to argue for the presence of a third narrative section consisting of ch. 16, the merits of which will be discussed later. His proposal, then, "yields a seven-fold division: law, narrative, law, narrative, law, narrative, law."²⁶

22. Smith, "Literary Structure," 22.

23. Douglas, *Leviticus*, 195.

24. *Ibid.*, 200.

25. Smith, "Literary Structure," 22.

26. *Ibid.*

However, Smith's approach also leaves questions. First, as the earlier analysis of imperfect waw-consecutive verbs suggests, "the attempt to read chapter 16 as narrative is not very convincing."²⁷ Second, his suggestion that the final section deals with "redemption" is troublesome, in that "while Smith rightly points out that the root g'l occurs seventeen times in chapter 25 and twelve times in chapter 27, he has some difficulty in explaining chapter 26."²⁸

So both Douglas and Smith offer convincing structures for the book of Leviticus, but both leave room for further discussion. Their respective proposals are summarized in the chart below. But do the contents of each of these sections avail themselves to such a structure? To answer this question, each unit must be considered thematically and stylistically. The opening and closing sections will be examined first, followed by the center. The focus will be on the contributions of each narrative to the legal sections that surround them, in hopes of further exploring and establishing the thematic and theological implications of the proposals brought by Douglas and Smith.

Douglas	Smith
A: 1–7 <i>Law</i> The Outer Court	A: 1–7 <i>Law</i> Sacrifices
B: 8–10 <i>Narrative</i> First Veil	B: 8–10 <i>Narrative</i> Nadab & Abihu
A': 11–23 <i>Law</i> The Holy Place	C: 11–15 <i>Law</i> Cleanness
B': 24 <i>Narrative</i> Second Veil	B': 16 <i>Narrative</i> Yom Kippur
A'': 25–27 <i>Law</i> Holy of Holies	D: 17–23 <i>Law</i> Holiness
	B'': 24 <i>Narrative</i> Blasphemer
	E: 25–27 <i>Law</i> Redemption

Leviticus 1–7: The Tabernacle

Chapters 1–7 deal exclusively with instructions on offerings and sacrifices within the tabernacle. Five different offering types are described in parallel fashion in chapters 1–5, and chapters 6–7 provide

27. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, 19.

28. *Ibid.*

additional instruction specifically to the priests facilitating each sacrifice. Of the 40 occurrences of the word קָרְבַּן (offering) in Leviticus, 32 occur in these first seven chapters. The section concludes with an unmistakable summary statement in 7:37–38:

This is the law of the burnt offering, the grain offering and the sin offering and the guilt offering and the ordination offering and the sacrifice of peace offerings, which the LORD commanded Moses at Mount Sinai in the day that He commanded the sons of Israel to present their offerings to the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai. (NASB)

The first unit of Leviticus, then, deals with the execution of the sacrificial system in the newly constructed tabernacle.²⁹ In this context, the story of the priests' ordination and the death of Nadab and Abihu provides natural closure to the laws that have just been given. Yahweh's commands in 1–7 set the stage for the enacting of those commands in 8–9. As was observed above, the specific sacrificial details are enacted “just as Yahweh had commanded” up until the death of Nadab and Abihu, which reveals the need for further instruction from Yahweh.

Leviticus 25–27: The Land

The final section, consisting of chapters 25–27, is more difficult to nail down. One problem in suggesting a unity to this section is the thematic similarity between chapter 23 (which deals with annual festivals) and chapter 25 (which deals with the year of Jubilee). These occur on either side of the proposed structural marker, making it more difficult to argue for such a break. However, Smith observes that the festivals in chapter 23 are lexically linked to the holiness theme that began in chapter 17 (discussed below), while chapter 25, dealing with the year of Jubilee, is “not defined by explicit holiness terminology.”³⁰ Instead, chapters 25, 26, and 27 seem to be intentionally set apart as new sets of instructions received on Mt. Sinai, as emphasized three separate times at the beginning (27:1), middle (26:46), and end (27:34) of the section.³¹

29. Thus, the following categories of structural markers can be observed in this section: (1) concluding formula, (2) sameness of topic (use of the Tabernacle), (3) sameness of literary form (law), (4) keyword קָרְבַּן (“offering”) (Dorsey, *Literary Structure* 23–24).

30. Smith, “Literary Structure,” 28.

31. Notably, the only other time Sinai is specifically mentioned in the book is in 7:38, in the concluding statement of the first section.

Further lexical evidence is an inclusio formed by “The structuring of the common noun ‘son’ in both Lev 24 . . . and in chap. 27.”³² Weighed along with the occurrence of narrative in chapter 24, these lexical arguments make a convincing case for a 25–27 as an independent unit.

Having made these observations, Smith goes on to suggest that this unit should be understood in terms of redemption, noting the frequent occurrence of the root גאל (“redeem”) in chapters 25 and 27.³³ As noted earlier, however, he has difficulty explaining the complete absence of this term in chapter 26. Douglas, too, needs to stretch her paradigm a bit to make this last section fit. Rather than a direct correlation to the Holy of Holies itself, she focuses on the blessings and curses of chapter 26 and proposes that the theme of this section is “what is contained in the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies” (i.e., the book of the covenant).³⁴ While the covenant theme is heavy in chapter 26, it is not so evident in 25 and 27. Moreover, the departure from the spatial metaphor creates an inconsistency in her structure.

The present study suggests that rather than “redemption” or “covenant,” this last section ought to be understood in terms of “land.” To arrive at this conclusion, it is necessary to expand the lexical analysis of this section to the level of semantic domain. A word-frequency analysis quickly reveals that three of the most important words in this section are ארץ (“land,” 46x), שדה (“field,” 19x), and אֲחֻזָּה (“property,” 18x). All three of these pertain to physical space in the Promised Land (אֲחֻזָּה bearing the idea of “real estate” in this context). The chart below demonstrates the occurrences of these three terms in chapters 25–27 compared to the rest of the book. This last section of the book is concerned with proper use of the Promised Land (of which redemption and covenant are important subcategories).³⁵

32. Warning, *Literary Artistry*, 98.

33. Smith, “Literary Structure,” 29.

34. Douglas, *Leviticus*, 196.

35. To use Dorsey’s framework, this distinct unit is demonstrated through the use of the following markers: (1) introductory formula (“The LORD spoke to Moses,” 25:1), (2) concluding formula (“These are the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai,” 27:34), (3) sameness of theme (the land), and (4) sameness of genre (law) (*Literary Structure*, 22–24).

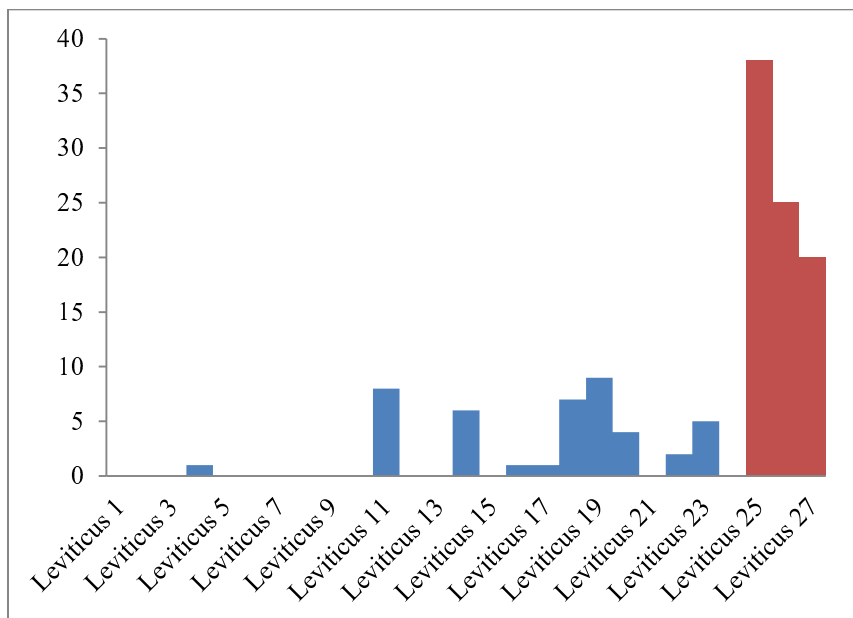


Table 2. Combined Occurrences: אהוזא, שדה, ארץ (*Westminster 4.2 Morphological Database*)

Seeing that the focus of the present discussion is on the narrative account that introduces the section, a detailed explication of this theme is not possible here. However, a brief survey is quite appropriate and necessary to the argument. Chapter 25, as already mentioned, emphasizes the seven-year Sabbath rest cycle and the year of Jubilee. Unlike the sacred festivals in chapter 23, the primary focus here is not rest for the people, but rest for the land. The land must be used according to the proper regulations if it is to bear fruit for the people. Similarly, chapter 26 emphasizes not general blessings and curses for covenant obedience, but blessings and curses specifically as they pertain to the land and to living therein. Finally, chapter 27 mandates specific procedures for giving back to Yahweh of the fruit of the land. Fittingly, the entire section concludes with the assertion that “all the tithes of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD’S; it is holy to the LORD” (27:30).

This is indeed the central theme of the section: The land does not belong to Israel, but to Yahweh, and it must be used appropriately. Thus the narrative account of the foreigner who blasphemed becomes quite relevant. It sets the important precedent that foreigners and Israelites are equally accountable to the law, because as is stipulated in 25:23, the

Israelites themselves are “aliens and sojourners” in the land that belongs to Yahweh. Thus Mann observes, “Ever since Abraham and Sarah, the Israelites have been resident aliens, with only a burial plot to call their own. Now in a startling reformulation of the Pentateuchal theme, the text insists that Israel’s status will always be that of an alien!”³⁶ Leviticus 24 asks the question, “Should foreigners and aliens be given special exemption from the law?” to which chapters 25–27 answer, “No, for the Promised Land belongs to Yahweh and you yourselves are foreigners and aliens.” Foreigners and Israelites are bound alike to the law, for “if there is ‘one law for the sojourner and for the native,’ then the penalty of exile may indeed be enforced even on those who might otherwise have a special tie to the soil.”³⁷

Leviticus 11–23: Cleanliness & Holiness

So the first section of Leviticus deals with proper use of the Tabernacle, and the last section deals with proper use of the Promised Land. What remains to be examined is the midsection, consisting of chapters 11–23, bookended as it is by the two narratives. This section begins just after Nadab’s and Abihu’s death, and it is important to recall a few key points that were made in the discussion of that narrative. Their death demonstrated that the commands given in Lev 1–7 were not sufficient to ensure smooth operation of the Tabernacle system. As was observed above, they encountered a “gap” in their understanding of the cult. It was not the fault of Yahweh, for He is holy regardless of human actions (10:3). Rather, human ignorance revealed the need for further explication of Law. Thus the stage is set for chapters 11–23, which provide this necessary clarification:

[T]he laws following this story are attempts by Moses to fill in the gaps that still plague their understanding of how to stand before ‘the holy’. . . . In the face of ambiguity and fear of the unknown, Moses establishes a law code that provides security and protection from the dreadful presence of Yahweh.³⁸

36. Thomas W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 123.

37. Smith, “Literary Structure,” 25.

38. Bibb “Nadab and Abihu,” 93.

Indeed, the dominating themes of this section are cleanliness and holiness. These are developed as the two key elements of living in Yahweh's presence. They echo a second point that was emphasized in the Nadab and Abihu narrative, namely, the priestly responsibility to "make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean" (10:10). As Sailhamer observes, "The narrative of Aaron's decision [regarding the eating of the offering], then, provides a fitting introduction to the purity laws which follow in the next chapter."³⁹ This is no mere parenthesis in the narrative, but rather provides the controlling thematic and structural paradigm for the entire unit that follows.

A thematic analysis of chapters 11–23 reveals that they seem to be divided precisely along these lines: 11–15 deal with ritual cleanliness, and 17–23 concern moral holiness. Commentators have examined these parallel themes quite extensively, and this work does not need to be duplicated here.⁴⁰ As noted earlier, source critics have long recognized this split as the foundation for a two-part structure of the book. The proposal here, however, is that these two sections are merely subsections of the same structural unit within Leviticus.

Leviticus 16: The Day of Atonement

Of special importance to the interplay between law and narrative is chapter 16, which deals with the Day of Atonement. This is the section that Smith proposes as a third narrative within the book of Leviticus.⁴¹ At first glance, it is difficult to understand what Smith sees as narrative in this passage. There are a mere four waw-consecutive imperfect verbs in the chapter, and they do not reveal any sort of special narrative succession. Grammatically and syntactically, the chapter matches the other legal chapters in Leviticus. However, in his analysis, he does raise a very intriguing point: "we observe that chs. 8–10; 16 and 24.10–23 relate to one another self-consciously. That is, they allude to one another,

39. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 332.

40. Ibid. See also Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) and Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus* (NAC 3a; Nashville: Broadman, 2000). Notable to the literary approach that is of interest here, Dorsey observes the distribution of these themes and uses this passage to illustrate the use of keywords as structural markers (*Literary Structure*, 24).

41. Smith, "Literary Structure," 25.

thereby signaling their common purpose in the book.”⁴² He goes on to note the specific link in 16:1 back to the death of Nadab and Abihu. Then again, in 16:29, the chapter links forward to the Egyptian blasphemer in the statement, “This shall be a permanent statute for you . . . whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you.” The prominence of this theme in the second narrative has already been noted. Finally, going beyond Smith’s observations, it is notable that Lev 16:34 employs the exact same phrase that was used twelve times in the two narratives, “just as Yahweh had commanded.” This thirteenth occurrence is the only case in which the phrase is used outside the narrative context.

In addition to these links to the narratives, chapter 16 also makes links to the first and last units of the book (1–7 and 25–27). The sacrifices in the Tabernacle, stipulated in 16:2–19, are clear throwbacks to the first section in which the instructions for those sacrifices are given in detail. Smith suggests that the “seemingly premature and dislocated instruction” regarding the Sabbath in 16:29–34 is a parallel link forward that “anticipates the discussion at the end of the book of the relationship between the people and the land,” since the theme of Sabbath rest is resumed and applied to the land itself in chapter 25.⁴³ The second goat, which in 16:22 is taken to “a solitary land” (אַרְצֵי) and released “in the wilderness” may be another such link.

Interestingly, Smith makes no syntax-related arguments for why this chapter should be considered narrative—his argument is purely from structure. Thus, while his conclusions regarding genre are suspect, his structural points are quite valid textually. The proposal here is that rather than understanding chapter 16 as narrative like Smith suggests, this chapter should be understood as a distinct unit of law that stands apart from the surrounding material on cleanliness and holiness, binding the entire book together.

In this light, a refinement to the structures suggested by Douglas and Smith can be proposed. Since chapter 16 is law, not narrative, Douglas’s spatial paradigm is not undermined. However, this observation enables a progression from Smith’s tight parallelism (law-narrative-law-narrative-law-narrative-law) to a more nuanced structure of chiasm:

A: Tabernacle (Law, 1–7)

B: *Profanation of Sacred Space* (Narrative, 8–10)

C: Clean & Unclean (Law, 11–15)

42. *Ibid.*, 23.

43. *Ibid.*, 25.

D: Day of Atonement (Law, 16)

C': Holy & Profane (Law, 17–24:9)

B': *Profanation of Sacred Name* (Narrative, 24:10–23)

A': Land (Law, 25–27)

Following this structure, Leviticus is bounded spatially by sacred areas: the Tabernacle and the Land.⁴⁴ Following Douglas's paradigm, the connection between the Land and the Holy of Holies in 25–27 reminds the people that just as there were special stipulations for entering the Holy of Holies, so there were special stipulations for dwelling in the land. The book is essentially a legal argument for the people of Israel on how to live and operate within these sacred bounds without suffering the fate of Nadab, Abihu, and the Egyptian blasphemer. Indeed, "Levitical laws are represented as the words of Yahweh uttered within a narrative context, and thus further express the character of the God who is rendered by that narrative."⁴⁵ In other words, the narratives raise the question, "How can an unclean people live in the presence of a holy God?"⁴⁶ The legal sections answer this question, the pinnacle being the Day of Atonement. On this day, one goat is sacrificed in the *Tabernacle* and a second is taken out into the *Land*, so that "atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (16:30).

THE PLOTLINE OF THE PENTATEUCH

Having established the role of the narratives within the book of Leviticus, the focus now expands to their function in the overall plotline of the Pentateuch. The first five books of the Bible do indeed form a literary whole, and it is likely that their present form "reflects a custom of writing large works on multiple scrolls."⁴⁷ Sailhamer goes on to propose, "Leviticus is a continuation of Exodus. We should not, in fact,

44. To summarize the observations already made regarding these two sections using Dorsey's methodology, they exhibit the following categories of intentional linking: (1) sameness of genre (law), (2) sameness of theme (use of sacred space), (3) sameness of beginnings (Yahweh speaking to Moses), and (4) near-verbatim repetition (7:37–38 and 27:34) (*Literary Structure*, 32–33).

45. Mann, *Torah*, 116.

46. "Uncleanliness" in this sense extending to their very moral fiber, and not simply ritual impurity.

47. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 2.

think of it as a new book.”⁴⁸ While the argument has demonstrated thus far that there exists a certain literary unity within the book of Leviticus, continuity with the greater Pentateuch is woven into this very structure. This continuity will be observed first as it applies to the immediately surrounding context of Exodus and Numbers, then expand from there to the rest of the Pentateuch.

On a narrow level, Leviticus acts as a bridge between Exodus and Numbers. Some may, at this point, question the legitimacy of a self-contained chiasmic structure within Leviticus itself, observing that the book is only part of this much longer narrative unit. David Dorsey, for example, offers a very detailed literary outline of the Pentateuch in which the book of Leviticus is woven quite thoroughly into the surrounding material.⁴⁹ Even so, the literary unity of Leviticus can be demonstrated as a subset of this larger framework. Smith argues that this larger pericope can be divided into three smaller units, one of which comprises the entire book of Leviticus: “In the second half of Exodus . . . the tabernacle is first set up, while in the first half of Numbers preparations are made to take it down. Leviticus, in between, discloses the constitutive precepts God gave from the tabernacle from where it first stood.”⁵⁰ The narratives in Leviticus play an important role not only in structuring these laws, but also in moving the action forward, reminding the readers that they are essentially reading a story, not a law book.

The narratives in Leviticus contain key links to other narratives within this context. Alter observes that in the case of the Egyptian blasphemer who was struggling with the Israelite, the “verb of violent altercation is the same one used for the two Hebrew men whom the young Moses rebukes (Exodus 2:13).”⁵¹ Though it is not necessary to follow the conjecture of Mittwoch, who suggests that the Egyptian in Leviticus is the son of the man Moses killed in Exodus, his exploration of the parallels does suggest that “there is . . . a connection between the two stories.”⁵² Perhaps Moses has learned his lesson, and takes the matter up with God this time rather than killing the Egyptian on his own accord!

Other links may bear greater theological significance. Many see a connection between the Golden Calf and the death of Nadab and

48. *Ibid.*, 323.

49. Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 77–80.

50. Smith, “Literary Structure,” 18–19.

51. Alter, *Moses*, 650.

52. H. Mittwoch, “Story of the Blasphemer Seen in a Wider Context,” *VT* 15 (1965): 387.

Abihu. Indeed, this is the first account of failure on the Israelites' behalf since that event:

The events in this story occur during the highest moment for the cult, the best chance that they will ever have for getting things just right. They have Moses present for careful instruction. The people are all looking on with anticipation and wonder, not wandering off to follow the other gods with their pagan rituals. The golden calf incident is like the fading memory of a bad dream, and they have the highest hopes of making a clean start. Nadab and Abihu, however, step right into the consuming fire of Yahweh, sending Moses' carefully laid plans into a tailspin.⁵³

Some argue that Nadab and Abihu's death was not their fault at all, but rather divine judgment on Aaron for his involvement in that earlier event.⁵⁴ (Most would likely disagree with this level of speculation, but this extreme example does illustrate the connection between the events.)

This sequence of failure goes hand-in-hand with the second narrative of Leviticus, which recounts yet another failure. This story, however, does not look backward to the Golden Calf, but rather forward to a very similar event in Num 15. There an Israelite man is caught gathering wood on the Sabbath and, after inquiring of Yahweh, the people are commanded to stone him. Commentators who do not realize the significance of this connection puzzle over the strange ambiguity of the Exodus event, wondering, among other things, "why it was necessary to seek divine direction in this case."⁵⁵ It seems that this sequence of events is used intentionally to emphasize narrative continuity with Leviticus.

Freedman gives much weight to this particular narrative sequence in the overall plot of the Pentateuch:

In both Leviticus 24 and [Numbers 15], a violation of one of the Ten Commandments is recorded and the man responsible is arrested pending sentencing and the imposition of the appropriate punishment. In both cases, the determination of the

53. Bibb, "Nadab and Abihu," 84.

54. Douglas, *Leviticus*, 202; Houston, "Tragedy," 37; David Damrosch, "Leviticus," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Belknap, 1987), 71.

55. Jacob Weingreen, "Case of the Woodgatherer: Numbers 15:32-36," *VT* 16 (1966): 361.

penalty (death by stoning by the whole assembly) is made by Yahweh through direct communication with Moses. The action is taken to supplement the Decalogue itself, which lists the injunctions but does not specify the punishment. And the severity of the penalty serves to emphasize the centrality of these terms of the covenant. Anything less than the removal of the offender would implicate the whole community in the offense and ultimately lead to the abrogation of the compact and the dissolution of the nation.⁵⁶

When these two narratives are read in conjunction with the Golden Calf incident, the first four commandments of the Decalogue have already been broken by Num 15! The moral trajectory is not a positive one.

Here the entire Pentateuch comes into view. From the first sin in Gen 3 to Moses's bleak prophecy of failure and exile in Deut 32, the Pentateuch is the story of human failure to live up to God's standards. The narratives of Leviticus play directly into this theme, reminding the readers again and again that they are innately unclean and unholy, unworthy of the presence of Yahweh. In this way, these narratives set the precedent for the eventual exile that already looms so darkly in Deut 32.⁵⁷

Thankfully, this is not the complete story. Accompanying the theme of human failure is that of divine grace and mercy, beginning with the promise of deliverance in Gen 3:15 and ending with Moses's hopeful picture of Yahweh as "the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to your help" in Deut 33:26. The narratives of Leviticus speak to this theme as well, for they each introduce laws that are bent on the hope of restored fellowship with Yahweh in His Tabernacle and in His Land: "Taken together, the two narratives bring into view the two major ways of approaching God that Israel has been given: ritual act and spoken word."⁵⁸ Within the narrative context of failure, then, the laws become specific examples of divine grace, as Yahweh continually provides solutions to usher His beloved people back into His presence. As early as Leviticus it is beginning to become clear that the people will not be able to keep the covenant. But it is also clear that God's grace would somehow find a way.

56. David Noel Freedman, *The Nine Commandments: Uncovering the Hidden Pattern of Crime and Punishment in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 66.

57. Ibid.

58. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 192.