Comment: Leviticus

It's true: a bright young woman, an Oxford graduate in English Literature, putting together a radio programme on interpreting Scripture, stopped me as I held forth about exegesis and asked where it came in the Bible. Genesis Exodus: you can see why 'Exegesis' might have come somewhere among these less readable books.

Leviticus, for example: unread by Catholic Christians, occasionally cited in a sermon, perhaps, as a prime example of the dreary rubbish from which the Church has liberated us. Burnt sacrifices, sin offerings, clean and unclean meat, detection and cleansing of skin diseases, bodily emissions, and so on. The scapegoat, more familiar in Victorian times in Holman Hunt's much reproduced picture. The condemnation of certain sexual practices, the only chapter that has sunk deep roots in Catholic morality. Otherwise, the kind of thing that gives the Bible a bad name.

Now, in her wonderful new reading (*Leviticus as Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1999; £25.00 hardback) Mary Douglas, the distinguished anthropologist, reclaims Leviticus as a 'literary masterpiece', with a 'mystical structure', which embodies a deep sense of God's justice and compassion.

Until she thought of looking up Leviticus in connection with dietary rules she found during her fieldwork in Africa (see her classic article 'Animals in Lele religious symbolism', 1957), Mary Douglas 'had never read the Bible, either at school [Sacred Heart, Roehampton] or at university or subsequently'. Further reflection led to *Purity and Danger* (1966), which prompted Cornelius Ernst to invite her to give the St Thomas's Day lecture at Blackfriars, Oxford ('The contempt of ritual', *New Blackfriars* , 1968): a memorable occasion not least for her refusal (as a theorist of boundaries) to countenance the Prior's proposal to dispense the *clausura* so that she might dine in the silence of the refectory with the friars (she ate off a tray in the parlour instead).

With *In the Wilderness: the Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), the product of her Gifford Lectures in the University of Edinburgh in 1989, Mary Douglas has already shown how effectively an imaginative social-anthropological approach can stir interest in a text that is widely neglected and at best suffers from stereotyped interpretation. In this new study, generously registering her indebtedness to a whole range of scholars, Jacob Milgrom above all, she argues that Leviticus needs to be read in line with Psalm 145: 8–9: 'The Lord is good to all living creatures'. Indeed,

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'Leviticus reveals itself as a modern religion, legislating for justice between persons and persons, between God and his people, and between people and animals'.

The reason we find Leviticus hard to read, so Mary Douglas argues, is that, far from being a string of ritual and moral prescriptions, to be read in linear fashion, it is a magico-religious and mytho-poetic composition designed to draw us into a sacred space. This text, she argues, recalls — re-enacts — the encounter with the Lord in the three forms of animal sacrifice, tabernacle and Mount Sinai, thus ritually and (we might almost say) sacramentally refounding the holy community. The text, so to speak, unfolds a structure of correspondences that aligns the smoking carcass with the incense-thick sanctuary, and both with the smoke-topped mountain from which God spoke. The first chapters of Leviticus call into existence a sacred world at three levels, with the ark of the Covenant and the mountain of the Law transposed on to the dismembered body of the sacrificial animal.

Far from making certain animals abominable, the dietary laws in Leviticus (as opposed to Deuteronomy) reflect a reverence for animals and the sanctity of animal life that Mary Douglas compares with Jainism — the Indian religion which requires its followers to avoid even crushing a living insect. The anathemas against certain sexual offences, she argues, less innovatively of course, refer entirely to cultic rites involving sexual congress with animals and sacred prostitution; in particular, they have no bearing on homosexuality as understood today.

For centuries, as Mary Douglas notes, Christians have been taught that their God is loving and merciful unlike the God of the Old Testament. The God of Leviticus, in particular, is supposed to be obsessed with impurity: impure bodies, unclean foods and sexual deviancies. What she suggests, on the contrary, is that, in the triple cosmography of mountain, tabernacle and body, a sacred space is repeatedly established in which God's care for every living thing is celebrated, and, in particular, the fruitfulness in animal creation. In the laws against eating and touching their dead bodies, it is God's love for his animal creation that is displayed. Not arid legalism and obsessive purity, then, but fertility and abundance of life, are the marks of Leviticus in this challenging and attractive new reading.

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