LEVITICUS, DECONSTRUCTION AND THE BODY[1]

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1. Introduction

1.1. Let us call deconstruction the practice of resistance to totalizing discourses, to the desire for coherence and sense, the attribution of words to a master program that unbinds, disaffiliates, as it juggles and congeals, and let us call feminism the practice of resistance to totalizing hierarchies, an attention to the disenfranchised other, the libidinal voice, face that calls the text to an encounter ever dissimulated, and the body, that discordant, wretched body, body of the text, of the rose…gurgles and whistles in the night, to the sound of dreams.

1.2. And the Bible, we mustn't forget the hoary Bible, whose sexual proclivities are surely its business, was there ever a time when its locks hung heavy with dew, outside the door of the Beloved? Yet it has its lovers, greedy for its flesh, or its penis. Oh the pathos of old men, the aged hierarchs, in the garden of Susanna.

2. Leviticus as Pornography

2.1. Last term I had the privilege of teaching a course on Leviticus, one of those courses in which I knew much less than my students. Leviticus, a constructed text if ever there was one, an imagination, imaginaire, of an ideal changeless social and sacred order, about the maintenance of the clean and proper body of man and woman, Israel and God, and a text about the transactions and processes of the body. One student wrote about Leviticus as pornography, in comparison with Ezekiel. For him, the chapters on sexual transgression homologised women with the forbidden world of idolatry (an argument rather similar to Robert Carroll's)[2]; he was interested by the absence of Ezekiel's excremental fantasy in Leviticus, except in the pornoprophetic chapter 26, and its replacement by

imagery of annihilation. I did not agree with the simple reduction of women to idolatry; the chapters spend too much of their time imagining illicit sexual behaviour (and, of course, attributing it to the demonised other, Egypt and Canaan). Imagining deviance represents desire, a desire projected outward and proscribed, but assumed to be ever-present and insidious. Look at the piling up of terms of reprobation: זמה, תועבה, תבל, חסד, נדה.[3] Why all the excitement? And what is its obverse? Is it jouissance, as Kristeva suggests in her discussion of abjection?[4] It may be terror at the loss of boundaries, interfamilial, inter-species, across genders, the loss of self. The self, like the life force, the נפש, is always leaking. The attraction and peril of the other side can be felt most insistently when the text switches subject position. For instance, in 20.18, it tells us, tautologously, that "she (the menstruant) has uncovered the source of her blood" (והיא גלתה את מקור דמיה).[5] Why evoke the subjectivity of the woman? Or her agency? Is it for the sake of the striptease, identification with the object of the gaze as a means of annulling the gaze? What is exposed, however, is not her body but her blood, turning her inside out. The gaze perhaps recoils at the sight, or revels in it - they both seem to be scrabbling to take off her clothes, and the man does lie with her. Is it a desire for the blood, the impure female blood, that escapes from its enclosure, and threatens to overwhelm, to engulf the penis? There is the curious juxtaposition of the purificatory, life-giving metaphor of "source", מקור, and blood, the contaminating waste product of reproduction. Richard Whitekettle persuasively argues that the womb in Leviticus corresponds to the waters of chaos in Genesis 1.2, which have to be contained for creation to unfold.[6] The feminine principle then seems antonymic to God. This, as we shall see, is too simple. The man at any rate seems to be in touch with, to feast upon her essence, the source of her blood; sperm and uterine blood are an explosive mixture. But he does so through her eyes, imagining his, stripping for his delectation, being turned on by his pleasure. Pleasure feasts on pleasure. Is this a masculine fantasy? Indeed. His own nakedness, self-exposure, is so carefully occluded. The male is left intact, immune from exposure.[7] But it may respond to, recognize, her own experience; at the very least it posits it, as a counterpoise to the dominant rhetoric of the book. We can imagine her exhibitionist pleasure, and his voyeurist delight, infused with that of the book, which seeks to render its fascination, its nakedness, invisible. The erasure to which they are

both consigned ("they shall be cut off from their people")[8] maintains the couple's (or text's) jouissance outside history and society, in a perhaps secretly indulged forbidden archive.

2.2. The insistent imagery, "uncovering nakedness" (גלה ערוה),[9] "kinship flesh" (שאר) etc. suggests a desire to perceive , along with the desire for intercourse, and a primal identification - the unity of kinship becoming the union of flesh. What is concealed? Perhaps our bare humanity/animality. The woman who draws near (תקרב) to the beast, the opposite of the sacrificial exploitation of animals, through bringing them near (קרב) to the altar.[10] Uncovering nakedness recalls the innocent nakedness of Genesis 2, and the quasi-incest of the first couple. Eden then is identified with Canaan and Egypt, the lands said to engage in forbidden practices (Lev.18.2, 27, 20.23-24). The ideal world of Leviticus then supercedes and represses the primordial one - hence its insecurity. We are close to the "feminist discourse on embodiment" as well as the polymorphous sexual imagination of the Song of Songs.

3. Leviticus and Land

3.1. Another essay, very polished, dealt with the land, the female complement or partner of God, in which he is immanent. The land is the object of care throughout the book, and the image, the foundation, of its coherence: Israel's dwelling in the land is the condition for God's indwelling and for the social and literary structure that makes it possible. It is an ideal vision of the future. Except that the future is already foreclosed. Even before arrival, we imagine exile. The book is reft with intimations of failure. From the death of Nadab and Abihu to the threat or prediction that the land will vomit you out to the culminating apocalypse, there is no doubt that the world of Leviticus will not happen. It is thus a self-negating book, one which posits a world that will never happen. Remarkably, unlike Deuteronomy, it leaves us outside the land.[11] There is no return. God remembers his covenant with the ancestors, the term "covenant" recalling the "eternal covenant of salt" (ברית מלח עולם) at the beginning (2.14).[12] And what does this mean? God hugging the ancestral ghostly phallus, that symbol of patrilineage, in its absence, and remembering the land. There is the arousal, especially given the homonymity of "remember" and "male," and the anticipation that God will insert the

spectral penis into the land, but for the moment it is waste, and this waste is apparently its Sabbath, its homeostasis, the Sabbath that is the equivalent of the now desolate holy place.[13]

3.2. The word for memory, זכר, occurs also as the "memorial portion," זִכָּרתָה, that together with the entire complement of incense, is offered up with the meal-offering in chapter 2.[14] God is aroused by the fragrance (ריח נחוח) of incense and wheat. Intertextually, the incense reminds one of the Song of Songs, and the "heap of wheat, hedged with lilies," to which the woman's belly is compared there (7.3). What is remembered, and what is its relationship with masculinity, the logos that speaks throughout the book and whose world, and land, it projects/protects? The sensuality of the book is overtly alimentary, the sacrifices are the "food" of God (Lev.22.8 etc.), but what about the other senses, and organs?[15]

4. The Blasphemer

4.1. Another student wrote about the narratives that disturb the serenity of Leviticus, namely chapters 10 (the deaths of Nadab and Abihu) and 24 (the blasphemer). I will look at the second of these. Narrative, presupposing contingency and crisis, subverts the program of Leviticus, according to which nothing ever changes. The narrative of chapter 24, so brief, so enigmatic, apparently superogatory, challenges the entire social and literary structure of the book. Two men fight: fighting encapsulates the violence that may or will destroy society. Two men fighting is a motif, an emblematic scene, throughout the Pentateuch.[16] One of them is the son of an Egyptian man and an Israelite woman; he is a typical representative of the ערב רב, the punningly designated "mixed multitude" that went up with Israel (Exod.12.38),[17] and hence of the hybridity Leviticus resolutely condemns.[18] He gives the lie to the pure and proper body of Israel. During the fight the man curses the "name"; as the student who wrote on pornography pointed out, the word for "curse," נקב, is the root of נקבה, "female," and suggests an invagination, a hollowing out, of the name of God. Desecration of the name and its derivatives, such as the priestly patrilineage in 22.9, is the most heinous of offences, the root offence, in Leviticus, and its ramifications could lead us a merry dance. If the whole book is the working out of the name, the

language, of God, as suggested for instance by the metaphoric formula ‘אנ י ה, “I am YHWH,” then the curser threatens the entire sacred and phallic order.

4.2. Nothing restores it, though God carries on as if nothing had happened. Two solutions are attempted. One is rhetorical. God is consulted, and after decreeing execution, proceeds to an apparently irrelevant trotting out of the talionic formula. Here a fantasy of dismemberment is overlaid by assertion of reciprocity. The second is the narrative account of the fate of the recreant, who is taken outside the camp and stoned, after the witnesses have laid their hands on him. The ceremonial obviously corresponds to the expulsion of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 and to the disposal of the ashes of the sin-offerings outside the camp. It is also an inversion of the sacrificial ritual, in which the donor or confessor places his hand on the animal before the divine altar. The victim is removed from the camp, the microcosm of social order, and the sacred fire at its centre; there he is crushed, bruised, smashed, rendered unrecognisable as human, by the stones which configure the earth, and, in this case, the desert.

4.3. Here we come to the essential ambiguity, also pointed out by this student. For God is the God of the desert as well as the God of the camp, domesticated at the heart of society. He is in the subject position of Azazel, as well as its antithesis. This is shown, for instance, by the series of dizzying puns on the word for “goat,” שע י ר: Edom, whirlwind, terror, hair, all of which are more or less associated with the theophany.[19] God is both outside as well as inside the camp, identified with chaos as well as creation. The desert symbolises non-life in the Pentateuch. The book inserts itself between and holds apart the two aspects of God, preventing their destructive conjunction. But it also anticipates the transformation of the land into the desert, its anti-Sabbath.

5. Concluding Reflections

5.1. I have engaged with these three students' interpretations, responsively, reworking them through my own reflections, so as to emphasise the polysemic, dialogic nature of all interpretation, deconstructive interpretation among others. All three fit or involve both deconstructive and feminist discourses, inevitably. Because the one cannot go without the other. I distrust any insinuation that

there is such a thing as “pure” deconstruction or “pure” feminism, a clean and proper ideological paradise. Deconstructing Leviticus means in part recovering the woman's voice in it, and whatever else it stands for. Paying attention to the marginalization, projection, and abjection of women in the text is part of the resistance to its controlling discourse, his master's voice. Deconstruction and feminism do not overlap entirely, however. Feminism, to begin with, has a particular political profile, which deconstruction might well treat as being outside its purview. The text, moreover, has complex allegiances. The world it imagines corresponds partially to the feminist program in its resistance to political hierarchies. It is a world without a king, without politics, controlling elites, or long term accumulations of capital (if one excludes the anomalous cities).[20] According to Milgrom, it is a world without slavery, at least for Israelites.[21] Yet this is part of its coherence, its sense.

5.2. Finally, what about embodiment? Leviticus lives in the minds and behaviours perhaps of its interpreters, in the voices of its performers, and it is a ghost of a book, whose true incarnation would have been in the bodies of sacrificial animals, the satisfaction of the gleaners, the life and guts of the society that would live by it. More than any other book of the Bible, perhaps, it is a discourse of the body. Yet perhaps, more than any other book, it conforms to the stereotype of male = spirit, logos, and female = body, which needs to be controlled. Nancy Jay postulates that sacrificial cults are patrilineal cults, which perpetuate thereby the myth of pure sacred male descent.[22] Leviticus is an almost perfect example of this. It is one, however, that is always breaking down. It is at this point that I no longer know where to go.

ENDNOTES

[1] Thanks are due to Skye Wylie, Piotr Bobkowski, and Robert Simpson, for the stimulus they provided for this paper, which was a contribution to a panel discussion on the "The Bible, The Body and Feminism" at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies meeting in Sherbrooke, Quebec, in June 1999. A version of the paper appeared on the CSBS Website in May, 1999, and was the basis of my informal presentation.

[2] Robert Carroll, "Desire Under the Terebinths: On Pornographic Representation in the Prophets - A Response" in Athalya Brenner (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp.275-308. Carroll argues that representations of women in the "pornographic" chapters of some of the prophets are explicitly metaphors, and no different in principle from similar representations of men, animals, and plants. It is evident that this is not the case with Leviticus. Athalya Brenner responded in "Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections" *JSOT* 70 (1996), pp.63-86. There is, however, much common ground between Brenner and Carroll.

[3] The terms appear to constitute a specialized technical vocabulary, whose precise meaning, however, remains totally obscure. זמה characterizes the relationship of a man, mother and daughter or granddaughter in 18.17 and 20.14, as well as the promiscuous priest's daughter in 19.29. Frymer-Kensky thinks that it refers to incest outside blood-kinship relations (Tikva Frymer_Kensky, "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible" *Semeia* 45 p.101 n.15, rep. in Alice Bach [ed.] *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, p.15). תועבה is used for homosexual intercourse in 18.22 and 20.13, and is a general term for

the entire code of sexual malpractice and the child sacrifice associated with it in 18.26, 27, 29, and 30, suggesting homosexual intercourse is the paradigmatic infraction. תבל is used for intercourse with animals in 18.23, and with a man's daughter-in-law in 20.12; it is clearly derived from בלל, "mix", corresponding to Leviticus's general anxiety about miscegenation. The connection between intercourse with animals and with a daughter-in-law is not evident. חסד only occurs in 20.17, the prohibition against intercourse with a half-sister. The homonymity with the familiar חסד, "lovingkindness, loyalty" (etc.), is striking, and may either be a coincidence or indicate a metaphorical correlation. נדה describes a relationship with a sister-in-law in 20.21, as well as being the normal term for the state of separation of a menstruant and parturient woman. Again the metaphorical connection is unclear. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University P., 1990), pp.183-84, suggests that the association is with the childlessness consequent on the offence; this, however, begs the question. The standard commentaries are not helpful in explicating these terms. Calum M. Carmichael *Law, Legend and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18-20* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1997) detects in the terms allusions to patriarchal narratives. For instance, נדה correlates menstruation with Onan's spillage of seed in 38.9 (p.173). Carmichael is not always very consistent, however, and some of his examples seem rather strained.

[4] The complicity of abjection and jouissance and the experience of overwhelming beauty is emphasised throughout *Powers of Horror* (tr. Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia

U.P., 1982), for instance, pp.9-10, 210, as well as, using different terms, Kristeva's other work. Kristeva interprets Leviticus at length in *Powers of Horror*, pp.90-111, as a thoroughgoing abjection of the primordial mother.

[5] Another instance is 20.17, in which the half-sister sees the nakedness of her half-brother, as well as vice versa.

[6] Richard Whitekettle, "Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle: Wombs, Wellsprings, and the Primeval World," *VT* 46 (1996), pp.376-391.

[7] In contrast, in 20.17, concerning half-siblings, the gaze is mutual. The difference between the two verses emphasises that the significance of the blood is determinative in this instance.

[8] The literature on the penalty of *karet* is vast. For a summary of views, see Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary 4; Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp.405-408, and *Leviticus 1-16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp.457-460. See also Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary 3; Philadelphia and New York, 1989), pp.241-42. Jean Soler, "The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews" *New York Review of Books*, June 14th 1979, p.25 argues that Israelite community is constituted by a series of "cuts" which are the source of differentiation and hence signification.

[9] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), p.91, argues that the narratives of the Garden of Eden and Noah depict the prohibition of nakedness as a "foundational moment"" in the emergence of human culture. This might explain why the uncovering of nakedness overshadows intercourse itself in the text.

[10] In a wonderful discussion of how the poetics of Leviticus is embodied through its rhythms and primary images, Franziska Bark, 'Listen your way in with your mouth'": A Reading of Leviticus," *Judaism* 48 (1999), pp.198-208, shows how the metaphor of "drawing near" (קרב) pervades the book, suggesting an approach to God that is never quite completed. The approach to the animal would be the converse of the approach to God of the book's dominant program; and as with it, the verb suggests a process of approximation, rather than a final conjunction.

[11] Of course, this is not the conclusion of the book. Most critics regard ch.27 as an appendix. However, Mary Douglas, in her stimulating structural reading of Leviticus, "The Forbidden Animals in Leviticus" *JSOT* 59 (1993), pp.3-23, regards it as the "latch" of the book (p.11), while Christopher R. Smith, "The Literary Structure of Leviticus" *JSOT* 70 (1996), p.30, holds that it intentionally mitigates the impact of ch.26. In fact, Leviticus posits three endings: the two alternatives of ch.26 and the conclusion in ch.27. However, the commination of 26.14-46 is clearly the culmination of the main historical scheme of the book.

[12] Outside ch.26, the word ברית, "covenant," only occurs in 24.8, where it is an attribute of the shewbread.

[13] David Damrosch comments on the "rich prophetic irony" of the term in this passage (*The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987], p.292). The equivalence between the Sabbath and the sanctuary is established in 19.30 and 26.2. Israel Knohl sees this equivalence as

being of central concern to the Holiness Code (*The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], p.16).

[14] Vs.2, 9, and 16. The word also occurs in the summary of the offerings in 6.8, and in the poor person's hattat offering in 5.12, where, however, it does not include incense, since it is a sin offering. A comparable case is that of the *sotah* in Num.5.26. The word is also used to describe the shewbread in 24.7, even though they are not offered, reinforcing the linkage between chapters 2 and 24.

[15] Alice Bach devotes a chapter of her book *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997) to non-visual senses in the Hebrew Bible ("Wine, Women, and Death," pp.166-209), though she does not mention Leviticus.

[16] The motif occurs in Ex.2.13, 21.22, and Deut.25.11-12, as well as our incident. The three legal cases have strong structural connections: in each case, the fight is correlated with a relationship with a woman, with aborted, miscegenated or violated generation or generative organs, and with bodily mutilation. The theory that the sacrificial system displaces the violence inherent in society is primarily associated with René Girard (e.g. *Violence and the Sacred* [Baltimore: John Hopkins U.P, 1977]). Girard's thesis is clearly over-generalized; it cannot, for instance, account for vegetable sacrifices. Nonetheless, violence is one of the destructive forces whose presence can be detected throughout the book, e.g. in the prohibition of vengeance in 19.18, and of standing by the "blood of your neighbour" in 19.16.

[17] The ערב רב can always be relied upon to blamed for any mischance to befall the Israelites. See Num.11.4, where the word used is אספסף. Levine, *Leviticus*, p.166, holds

that the blasphemer is further tarnished by his Danite ancestry, since the Danites are associated with apostacy; Erhard S. Gerstenberger maintains a judicious neutrality on the significance of the mother's lineage (*Leviticus* [tr. Douglas Scott; OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996], p.361).

[18] The theory that the purity system of Leviticus was motivated by a fear of category confusion was most persuasively promoted by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: RKP, 1966), and has been the subject of much refinement and critique since, not least by Mary Douglas herself. In her most recent work, such as "The Forbidden Animals of Leviticus," she has adopted a much more moralistic hypothesis.

[19] In Deut.33.2 and Jud.5.4, YHWH comes from Seir; Hab.3.3 also represents him as emerging from the lands of the south (Teman and Paran). Associations with the whirlwind are also frequent cf. II Kings 2.1, 11, Ps.148.8, Job.38.1, 40.6. There are no representations of divine hair before Daniel 7.9, but untrimmed hair is one of the conditions for the maintenance of the sanctity of the Nazirite (Num.6.5). Nazirites, who constitute an occasional, non-hereditary sacred order outside the sanctuary are symmetrically opposed to the high priest, whose hair must not be allowed to become dishevelled (Lev.10.6, 21.10).

[20] Norman Gottwald, "The Biblical Jubilee: In Whose Interests?" in Hans Ucko (ed.) *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), pp.36-38 has recently argued that the legislation of Lev.25 served the interests of the Jerusalem priestly elite. Gottwald presupposes that all literature and legislation is reducible to class interests. Contrary points of view are presented by Knohl, who holds that the Holiness Code is the priestly response to the ethical challenge of the eighth-century prophets (*The*

Sanctuary of Silence, pp.199-224) and Robert Kugler, "Holiness, Purity, the Body and Society: The Evidence for Theological Conflict in Leviticus" *JSOT* 76 (1997), pp.3-27, who argues that the Holiness Code is a lay composition which does not especially serve the interests of priests. See also Bernard Harrison, "The Strangeness of Leviticus" *Judaism* 48 (1999), pp.208-228, who contrasts the community-oriented ethics of Leviticus with the individualistic morality of the Enlightenment, itself a version of the Pauline stress on individual salvation, and argues that this difference is one of the bases for post-Enlightenment anti-semitism. Susan Shapiro, in her response to Harrison's and Bark's papers, aligns this approach to Levinas's concept of "ethical proximity" ("Leviticus: Drawing Near the Other," *Judaism* 48 [1999], pp.228-233).

[21] "The Land Redeemer and the Jubilee" in Astrid B. Beck (ed.) *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David N. Freedman in celebration of his seventieth birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), p.69. Of course, non-Israelites may still be enslaved (25.44-46). See also "Leviticus 25 and Some Postulates of the Jubilee" in *The Jubilee Challenge*, p. 30. Adrian Schenker, "The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves: The Road from Exodus to Leviticus" *JSOT* 78 (1998), pp. 23-41, argues that the legislation supplements that in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and reflects a situation in which Israelites were disadvantaged in relation to their foreign occupiers.

[22] *Throughout Your Generations Forever: sacrifice, religion, and paternity* (Chicago: Chicago U.P.1992). Curiously, Jay's discussion of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible focusses entirely on the patriarchal narratives. For an interesting critique of Jay, see Ivan Strensky, "Between Theory and Speciality: Sacrifice in the 90s" *RSR* 22 (1996), pp. 13-17.