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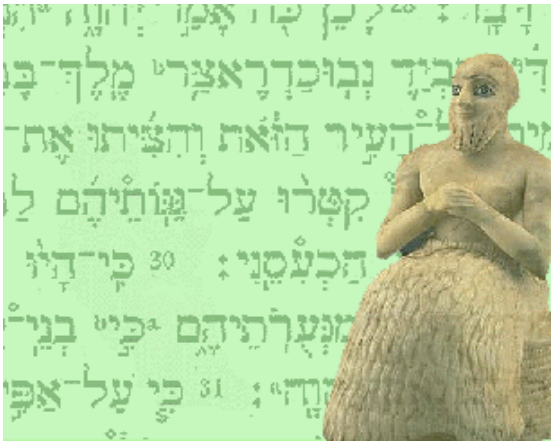

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DAVID P. WRIGHT,
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DECIPHERING A DEFINITION: THE SYNTAGMATIC STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF RITUAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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The work by Mary Douglas that has been the most influential in my own study of biblical ritual is not her book *Purity and Danger* and associated essays, as one might imagine given my long interest in biblical purity laws, but rather her little essay "Deciphering a Meal," published first in *Daedalus* in 1972 and reprinted in her collection *Implicit Meanings* in 1975.[1] This is not to gainsay the importance of her most famous work for stimulating modern conceptual anthropological analysis of the seemingly irrational requirements of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. But that detailed contribution, while it has implications for the study of broader notions of social and priestly class and sacred space and time, is limited to a rather specific problem. Her essay on meals, in contrast, even though the last half the essay comes back to address some criticisms of her analysis of the biblical dietary laws, sets out a method of ritual analysis that has application far beyond the study of culinary custom and even gets to the heart of the definition of what ritual is.[2]

While I call her study an example of ritual analysis, Douglas does not actually portray it as such. It is a method for examining the entire range of related activities within a specific cultural context or society, including activities that are not what we would call ritual. Indeed, in her focus on the phenomenon of meals, the majority of cases that she considers are in fact not ritual according to common definitions. And the features of meals that she uses for her analysis are not inherently indicative of ritual. It is no wonder then that, while she does refer to meals that are ritual events, she uses the term "ritual" only in a passing fashion.[3]

But it precisely this broad scope that makes her method ultimately pertinent to ritual analysis. It allows one to understand a given performance or custom which may be considered a case of ritual in the broad context of

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[1] Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* (Winter 1972), 61–81; it appears as chapter 16 in her *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge, 1975), 249–275. Her essay will be cited from *Implicit Meanings* below. This influenced my article "Spectrum of Priestly Impurity," Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (eds.) *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (JSOTS 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991,) 150–181 and influenced the approach to ritual in my book *Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

[2] Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 249–261.

[3] See, for example, *ibid*., 254.

social practice and to identify more clearly the strategies used that constitute a ritual performance. The approach examines the context of all related action to elucidate any particular performance within a set of phenomenologically related activities.

Douglas specifically conducts a syntagmatic analysis of meals of her London middle class background. She thus acts as both ethnographer and native informant. Her study has two aspects. The first, more rigorous and complex but less suitable for presentation in a brief essay, is the creation of a framework of analytic categories. She breaks down each event that involves ingestion into its basic elements so that it can be compared with other such events. She classifies meal units from largest to smallest (daily menu, meal, course, helping, mouthful) and identifies the specific food types that make up a meal (antipasti, meat dishes, grilled fish, melon, pudding, and so forth). This detailed classification allows her to identify patterns in the grouping of meal and food elements throughout the system. One pattern, which becomes important for her general analysis, is the presence of one main and two subordinate food items. In more elaborate meals, this pattern appears multifold, whereas a basic meal may consist of one instance of the pattern. She only samples the detailed classification of meals, recognizing that, though her analysis "advances considerably the analysis of our family eating patterns," it also "shows how long and tedious the exhaustive analysis would be, even to read. It would be more taxing to observe and record."[4]

To avoid ennui, she moves to a more general mode of analysis, and this is where her approach becomes particularly helpful for scholars of biblical ritual, especially since the Bible provides hardly enough evidence with which to ply her more exhaustive approach. We have the data that the biblical writers have chosen to record. Making sense of this often requires the nudge of creative insight. Among her chief general observations is that to understand any particular instance of a meal, one must understand the entire scope of related phenomena. She couches this observation in a criticism of the structural approach of Levi-Strauss. She says that by focusing merely on binary pairs, Strauss "affords no technique for assessing the *relative value* of the binary pairs that emerge in a local set of expressions."[5] She goes on to say:

> For analyzing the food categories used in a particular family the analysis must start with why those particular categories and not others are employed. We will discover the social boundaries which the food meanings encode by an approach which values the binary pairs according to their position in a series. Between breakfast and the last nightcap, the food of the day comes in an ordered pattern. Between

[4] *Ibid.*, 253–254.
[5] *Ibid.*, 250 (my italics).

> Monday and Sunday, the food of the week is patterned again. Then there is the sequence of holidays, birthdays, and weddings.[6]

From this she observes:

> In other words, the binary or other contrasts must be seen in their syntagmatic relations. The chain which links them together gives each element some of its meaning.[7]

The key element for me here is not so much what she says about structural or sociological analysis, but that the analysis of a particular performance must occur in connection with the full array of similar phenomena.

As she goes on to examine meals themselves, she notes that patterns in simple meals, a breakfast for example, may be replicated and multiplied in more complex meals, such as a Sunday afternoon or holiday meal. This is the pattern that I mentioned earlier, the presence of one primary and two subsidiary food items. Of the repeated patterns, she says:

> The smallest, meanest meal metonymically[8] figures the structure of the grandest, and each unit of the grand meal figures again the whole meal—or the meanest meal. The perspective created by these repetitive analogies invests the individual meal with additional meaning.[9]

Part of her concern here is the phenomenology of meals, to explain why some things that purport to be meals are not in fact *meals*. She gives the example of soup and pudding together. One might fill up on these items—i.e., obtain some practical nutritional benefit—but it is not a "meal" by social definition or expectation or by the patterning exposed by syntagmatic analysis. This observation actually relates to another question in ritual analysis, that of infelicitous ritual, as explored by Ronald Grimes, and which I will discuss later on. Douglas's syntagmatic analysis, which looks for patterns of structural repetition, may help clarify why some ritual acts do not work well.

What Douglas says about repeated structure may be construed in a more general sense, as a need to search for intercontextual meaning between the grandest and meanest examples of phenomena of a particular type in whatever way the evidence allows or in connection with whatever specific methodology an analyst may use. When viewed broadly in this way, Douglas's method of analysis ties into the definition of and approach to ritual proposed by Catherine Bell. For this recent theorist, there is no hard and fast demarcation between ritual and non-ritual. Rather, ritual acts are related to their non-ritual congeners and feature strategies that mark them as ritual. Because of this relationship between ritual and non-ritual acts, Bell prefers to speak of *ritualization* rather than ritual. She defines this as:

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[6] *Ibid.*, 250–251

[7] *Ibid.*, 251.

[8] Or synecdochically.

[9] Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 257.

> a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.[10]

This definition, like Douglas's syntagmatic approach, places side-by-side performances belonging to the same general phenomenology (e.g., meals) and implies that to understand the one it is necessary to understand the other and even a range of similar activities in a specific cultural context or society studied.

Bell herself refers to meals to exemplify her definition of ritualization. She apparently is not thinking of Douglas's essay, to tell from the lack of reference to it in her notes. But she nonetheless like Douglas places ritual and non-ritual versions of the same phenomenon in dialogue with each other:

> ...distinctions between eating a regular meal and participating in the Christian eucharistic meal are redundantly drawn in every aspect of the ritualized meal, from the type of larger family gathering around the table to the distinctive periodicity of the meal and the insufficiency of the food for physical nourishment. It is important to note that the features of formality, fixity, and repetition are not intrinsic to this ritualization or to ritual in general. Theoretically, ritualization of the meal could employ a different set of strategies to differentiate it from conventional eating, such as holding the meal only once in a person's lifetime or with too much food for normal nourishment. The choice of strategies would depend in part on which ones could most effectively render the meal symbolically dominant to its conventional counterparts. The choice would also depend on the particular 'work' the ritualized acts aimed to accomplish in a situation. Given this analysis, ritualization could involve the exact repetition of a centuries-old tradition or deliberately radical innovation and improvisation, as in certain forms of liturgical experimentation or performance art.[11]

Though they have different theoretical motivations and have different analytic purposes, Bell's and Douglas's approaches thus go hand in hand in pointing to the necessity of viewing ritual as part of a larger context of similar practice including non-ritual practice. The new definition of ritualization as found in Bell's work expands what might be included under the umbrella of ritual, since there are various strategies of ritualization and

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[10] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74. For continued discussion, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

[11] *Ibid*., 90–91. Bell does not cite Douglas's essay at this point in her study (see pp. 151–152).

different degrees to which these are manifested. In terms of meals in the context of the Bible, when we look for ritual meals, we not only have to look at sacrifice, where portions burned on the altar are Yahweh's food and where priests and lay offerers eat portions of the sacrifice.[12] We must look at other and, yes, secular meals for features of ritualization. Let us examine one such meal scene in biblical narrative that one may not think to consider when examining biblical sacrifice: the feast that Joseph holds with his brothers upon their second return to Egypt, when they bring their brother Benjamin, described in Genesis 43.

When the brothers arrive and Joseph sees Benjamin, he immediately plans a feast and orders his steward to bring the men into the house and slaughter an animal (v. 16). This command may be seen as the initial ritualized feature of the feast. It is a performative speech act that marks the inauguration of the proceedings.[13] It is further definable as ritual action in its connection with the whole of the feast that follows and in setting out the how the brothers are to first relate to the context of the feast.

Following Joseph's command, the steward takes the brothers to Joseph's house (vv. 17, 24), and Simeon, who stayed as surety in Egypt, is brought to join them (v. 23). This, too, is a ritualized act since it puts the brothers in the physical space where the feast will take place.[14] It is comparable to inviting guests through the front door into one's home for a dinner party. Bell's analysis helps us understand how this operates as ritual. For her, ritual does not simply symbolize or reflect social relationships, but is a means of creating them. In fact, she resists the dichotomy that an analysis of ritual as symbol creates. A dualism where meaning exists separately from the performance is theoretically problematic. For her, therefore, ritual's meaning lies primarily in what it does, i.e., establishing power relationships between participants. In Joseph's feast, the introduction of the brothers into the house is the beginning of formulating a new relationship with them.

Preparations continue with the hospitality custom of allowing the invited guests to wash their feet (cf. 18:1–15; 19:1–14; 24:31–54). Though this has a practical purpose and is not religious in nature, it is still a ritualized act in that it is a benefit bestowed by a host on his guests and constructs a relationship between the parties. It is the context of deployed relationships that helps define this as ritual, as opposed, for example, to a non-ritual case of cleaning like the everyday brushing of one's teeth.

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[12] For a recent basic theoretical consideration of sacrifice, see D. P. Wright, "The Study of Ritual in the Hebrew Bible," Frederick E. Greenpahn (ed.) *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship* (Jewish Studies in the Twenty-First Century; New York: New York University Press, 2008), 120–138.

[13] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975[1st ed. 1962]); John R. Searle, "What Is A Speech Act?," Max Black (ed.) *Philosophy in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 221–239.

[14] For space in ritual, see, for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Pres, 1987).

Brushing the teeth would be a ritualized act if a host were to provide a dinner-party guest with a toothbrush to be used in connection with the event.

After the brothers wash, and Joseph arrives, they present to him the gifts that they brought and they prostrate themselves (v. 26). Not only does obeisance ritualize the gift giving, gift giving itself is a ritualized act. What they expect to get from Joseph is hardly equivalent to the gift, which is described as "some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds" (v. 11; NJPS). The gift is a sign of the brothers' submission to Joseph. It conveys something about their intent in this negotiation. It is the thought that counts here.

The feast overall entails ritual infelicity. This is where something in the performance is not quite right or proceeds amiss.[15] In the case before us, one element of infelicity is the cloud of deceit under which Joseph operates. The brothers do not know with whom they are dealing. Of course, from Joseph's point of view, things do proceed according to plan. Another type of infelicity occurs in the gift-giving scene. One expects Joseph to acknowledge receipt of the gift. But he pays no attention to his brothers' gifts, instead questioning them about to family issues. He first asks after his father. The brothers say that he is fine and bow again. It is as if they are waiting for him to recognize the gift and have to make the gesture of presentation a second time. Convention dictates a certain development in the interaction between the two parties, but Joseph goes off script. It is not that ritual cannot deviate from cultural norm or prescription. To view ritual as rigid and necessarily unchanging is to disregard the fact that ritual does change and evolve. It is precisely in designed or ad hoc variations that ritual is able to chart personal relationships ways different from what currently exist. In our story, Joseph can be viewed as deviating from custom in order to achieve his particular social goal.

Next Joseph recognizes Benjamin (43:27–28) and cites a short blessing over him: "May God show you favor, my son" (אלהים יחנך בני; 43:29b)—again a ritualized act. It may be that the lack of acknowledging the gifts is the fault of Joseph's emotions rather than a strategy to play with his brothers, because Joseph is immediately overcome and runs out of the room. In terms of literary technique, the story uses ritual infelicity to create a climax in the story.

But the feast eventually continues. Joseph returns when he is composed and declares: "Set out the meal!" (שימו לחם; 43:31). This command complements the initial declaration that begins the larger feast performance (in v. 16) and signals a new stage in the feast. The seating of the feast reflects national and familial relationships. "Egyptian" Joseph must sit separate from the Hebrews, since mixing is an abomination

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[15] See Ronald Grimes, "Infelicitous Performances and Ritual Criticism," in his book *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 191–209. See Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 108–118 and passim.

(כי תועבה הוא למצרים; v. 32). As for the brothers, Joseph arranges them in their birth order (v. 33).[16] This is a surprise to the brothers—how could the Egyptian official know this detail about their family? Ritual here is used to create mystery and fear. As a final mapping of relationships, he gives Benjamin a greater portion of food. This brother is the youngest, and his place at the table reflects this, but he is honored with the greatest portion.[17]

The feast ends well, as indicated by the statement "and they (the brothers) drank and got drunk with him" (וישתו וישכרו עמו; v. 34). Drinking *to excess* is the type of behavior that marks a ritual event as opposed to eating for the sake of nourishment. The ritual succeeded overall in doing socially what it intended, at least for Joseph the host and for the narrator. The relationship of the brothers to him was defined and in particular the relationship of Benjamin to Joseph and the rest of his brothers.

If we had time and space, we could study the whole range of feast passages in the Hebrew Bible and engage in a comparative and syntagmatic analysis, as Douglas does. We could use this analysis to throw light on form and meaning of the meal system in biblical Israel generally. We could also use this approach to elucidate particular instances of feasting anywhere in the continuum of examples. As noted earlier, this type of analysis would be helpful for the study of sacrifice, one category of biblical feasting. Certain common phenomenological features are visible between Joseph's feast and sacrifice. These include ablutions preparatory for feasting; a specified space for feasting, in particular the house of the overlord; giving a gift to the overlord; a blessing from the overlord (through intermediaries); space assignments for eating within the larger ritual space or house, including where the deity, priests, and lay people are; portions served or due certain people; and enjoying oneself even to satiety. A study of secular feasts in connection with sacrifice also shows up ritual motifs that are not immediately apparent in biblical sacrifice, at least in Pentateuchal prescriptions, and points to things we might expect to find in sacrifice. In the Joseph story, for example, the brothers engage in obeisance. We could examine other texts, such as the Psalms, for evidence of this act in connection with sacrifice. Moreover, the actual feasting by humans in Pentateuchal prescriptions is almost an incidental feature of sacrifice. But Joseph's feast makes us think that this is much more important than the prescriptions of Leviticus, for example, indicate. It makes the prescriptions in Leviticus look more like instructions in a cookbook for food preparation of the meal on Thanksgiving. They tell us how to prepare the turkey and other items and perhaps even how to present them on the plate and table, but they say little about how the occasion is celebrated by participants and

[16] On the importance of seating arrangements in ritual, see Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 75–84, 131–141.

[17] On how portions (amount or quality) are indicative of social rank, see Lincoln, *Discourse*, 81–84. Note also the passages on priestly prebends and divine portions (e.g., Leviticus 1–7) and in Elkanah's and Hannah's sacrifice (1 Sam 1:5). See also Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 7.

how the different participants interact, specifically what we would like to know about if we are interested in true sociological analysis. Other feasts in the Bible may open the door to intuiting the human dynamics of sacrifice.

Douglas's approach can be applied to ritual phenomena distinct from meals. These include things like gift-giving, bargaining, beseeching, assembly, protest, naming and designation, cursing and blessing, promises and oaths, birth, coming of age, marriage, funeral and mourning activities, healing, memorial making, courting, and love-making, to sample a wide range of phenomena. In each case, all related activities—ritualized and non-ritualized, religious and secular—must be studied together to elucidate the counterparts in the spectrum and to generate analytic questions.