Laying Down the Liturgical Law

The ninth chapter of Leviticus is etiological: it narrates the first work of the Aaronic priesthood in Israel’s first act of centralized worship involving the first instance of corporate animal sacrifice. It relates the nation’s inaugural liturgical service. But is this passage simply descriptive? In other words, is this etiology of centralized sacrificial worship simply relating the historical event, much as Exodus 14 relates Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea? Or is there more to it, something prescriptive perhaps? Indeed, as I will argue, in subtle—I daresay even manipulative—ways, Leviticus 9 both establishes the necessity for centralized worship involving animal sacrifice and mandates the need to continue the liturgy as prescribed.

The passage logically divides into three sections. In the first, vv. 1-7, Moses summons Aaron and his sons, along with the elders of Israel, and commands them to conduct a sacrificial worship service as the LORD has commanded; in the second, vv. 8-22, Aaron performs all that Moses commanded; and in the third, vv. 23-24, YHWH chiefly acts in that his glory flares up in flame and consumes the work that Moses had commanded and Aaron acted out. This threefold division is seen clearly in the NRSV’s paragraph placement, unlike other translations I consulted. For this reason, and because of its general attention to accurate translation, I refer to the NRSV throughout this paper.

The chain of events here is noteworthy. First, acting as the agent of YHWH—as he had since the episode with the burning bush—Moses commands Aaron to follow sacrificial protocol (mapped out in Leviticus 1-7), which the following phrases from the chapter’s first section show:
“[Moses] said to Aaron” (v. 2); “They brought what Moses commanded” (v. 5); “And Moses said” (v. 6); “Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Draw near to the altar and sacrifice . . . as the LORD has commanded’” (v. 7). Second, Aaron obeys Moses and, by transference, the voice of YHWH. We read that Aaron did “as the LORD commanded Moses” (v. 10); that he sacrificed the people’s offering “according to regulation” (v. 16); and that he raised “an elevation offering before the LORD, as Moses had commanded” (v. 21). Third, YHWH accepts the sacrifices Aaron makes on behalf of himself and the people, suggesting approval: “and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar” (vv. 23-4). To summarize this chain of events then, Moses commands, Aaron obeys, and YHWH approves.

Also noteworthy are the results of Aaron’s act of obedience. In the first place, atonement comes from Aaron’s offering of sacrifices according to the word of YHWH. Moses concludes his commands by saying, “Draw near to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people; and sacrifice the offering of the people, and make atonement for them; as the LORD has commanded” (v. 7, emphasis added). With respect to Aaron, the words “your sin offering and your burnt offering” are comprehensive, meaning they include all the personal sacrifices offered by Aaron (cf. vv. 8-14); similarly, “the offering of the people” is an all-encompassing term (cf. v. 15, where the term appears again, and vv.16-22, where it is defined), consisting of all the sacrifices offered by Aaron on behalf of the corporate body: the sin offering, the burnt offering, the offering of well-being, the grain offering, and the elevation offering. Collectively, in other words, all of the sacrifices that Aaron is about to make will effect atonement for himself and the people of Israel. Moses’s words “make atonement” give a summary, then, of what the sacrifices of Israel’s liturgical service accomplish.
As a corollary, since only priests could effect atonement for the Israelites, and since priests were directed to perform sacrifices only at the altar “that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (Lev. 1:5), in Leviticus centralized worship becomes suddenly necessary for the Israelites. For, as we will see below, the priesthood could perform only what was prescribed. Thus, any sacrifice offered elsewhere would be unlawful.

A second result of Aaron’s obedience is that YHWH appears in theophany. Prior to Aaron acting out his part, but after Moses has summoned Aaron and commanded him to offer sacrifices for himself and the people, we read these words: “And Moses said, ‘This is the thing that the LORD commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you’” (v. 6). Then, after Aaron has obeyed Moses’s words, we read, “Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces” (vv. 23-4). This theophany—this appearance of YHWH’s glory in flame—has come about, it seems, as a result of Aaron’s obedience. For from Moses’s statement we infer that if Aaron had not done what the LORD had commanded, then the glory of the LORD would not have appeared.

Obedience is often a key theme with theophanies. Recall the occasion with Moses and the burning bush, already alluded to, in which Moses incited YHWH’s ire through his reluctance to obey. Again, YHWH is said to have appeared before Israel in the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was during these wilderness wanderings when Israel was chided for her disobedience and praised for her obedience, when the Law was written on stone tablets, and when the so-called Mosaic Covenant was established. Later, after Solomon had built the Temple, also known as “the house of the LORD,” in faithful obedience he moved the
ark of the covenant into the Holy of Holies, whereupon we read, “And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

Taken together, this chain of events and the results therefrom insinuate that a hedge was to be placed around the liturgy of Israel’s worship service. From the immediate context, as we have seen, Moses commanded Aaron to perform what YHWH had decreed, Aaron obeyed, and YHWH’s glory was made manifest as predicted; and thus the foreboding feeling is thrust upon the reader that if YHWH’s will had not been obeyed, he would not have made his presence known. Moreover, in the opening words of this passage we read that it was on the “eighth day” that all this took place (cf. v. 1). This is significant, for the eighth day is the first day of a new week. Just as the eighth day was the first day of the week after YHWH had ceased his work of creation, so too for the Israelites this meant the first day of a new order, when Moses would no longer be chief priest. This was YHWH’s establishment of a new, remarkable thing in Israel: the nation’s liturgical, corporate, and sacrificial worship service. It had been done as YHWH commanded and thus YHWH showed his pleasure. In order to keep YHWH’s cloud of pleasure hovering over Israel, must she not therefore continue to abide by his prescription for worship, lest she incur his wrath?

Further support for my thesis is found in the very next chapter of Leviticus, where we read of Nadab and Abihu’s plight. “Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu,” the chapter begins, “each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them” (10:1). Quite a contrast! Moses had just commanded Aaron and his sons, presumably including Nadab and Abihu, to conduct a liturgical
service according to YHWH’s commands, a service that included sacrificing animals and offering them to YHWH upon fire; and they had obeyed. The result was that YHWH was pleased. Presently they offered unholy fire before YHWH, “such as he had not commanded them.” What resulted? “And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” (Lev. 10:2). YHWH was angry (as Lev. 10:6 expresses even more clearly). Whatever else we make of Nadab and Abihu’s “unholy fire” then—what it might have been or how it differed from the fire of the previous chapters—the clear point here is that the sons of Aaron did not follow the prescriptions that YHWH had given to Israel’s consecrated and inaugurated priesthood, and he was not pleased.

Still, one may say, Leviticus 9 appears in the only section of narrative in the book (chapters 8-10), the remainder being concerned with sacrificial laws, the so-called Holiness Code, and other facets of ritual purity. Is this narrative section not simply relating a descriptive story of a week in the life of Israel’s worship? How can you be so sure of its prescriptive nature?

Fair enough. On a larger scale, Leviticus is indeed concerned with ritual purity. At its beginning, the Israelites are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, a year to the day—curiously—since they departed from the land of Egypt (cf. Exodus 40:17). The Decalogue has recently been delivered to them on stone tablets; the tabernacle has just been built. The time has come to organize the corporate worship of the God who delivered the nation and gave his law to them. It is time for Moses to pass on the priestly torch. So surfaces the purpose of Leviticus: it is a manual of sorts for the Aaronic (i.e., Levitical) priesthood.

Sacrificial laws comprise the book’s first seven chapters. Assumed here is that worship will be centralized and that animal sacrifice will be part of ritual worship; and thus the duties of the priests, among other things, will be to establish and maintain this institution of centralized
worship. Then the narrative section in question appears, relating the accounts of Moses consecrating the nation’s priests (chapter 8), the nation’s inaugural service (chapter 9), and Nadab and Abihu’s plight (chapter 10).

That this narrative section is both descriptive and prescriptive is seen in its relationship to what has just preceded.iii Even a cursory reading shows that the first seven chapters of Leviticus discuss burnt offerings, sin offerings, grain offerings, and offerings of well-being; and which offering is required for what sin. Chapters eight through ten then give a certain concreteness to the abstract nature of these laws, demonstrating both the sacredness of worship through consecrated administrators and what happens when worship is done correctly, in chapter nine; and incorrectly, in chapter ten. The narrative section, then, is not analogous to some sort of commercial interrupting a television show, completely unrelated to the show’s storyline unless by some unusual coincidence; rather, it serves to illustrate the sacrificial laws set out in the first portion of the book. So, yes, Leviticus 8-10 is a descriptive narrative; but it is also prescriptive in that it tells the priesthood what to do tacitly, showing concretely what will happen when YHWH’s sacrificial liturgy is followed and when it is not.

But this prescription is manipulative, akin to propaganda; for, as modern scholarship argues, Leviticus was likely written during the days of the First Temple in Jerusalem (with the possible exception of its “final redactional touches”), yet after Israel’s exile in the eighth century BCE.iv This means that, rather than offering an eyewitness account or a well-researched, factual history of the beginnings of liturgical worship in Israel, the book’s authors and redactors had an agenda: to promote—even to coerce—centralization of worship and a specific liturgy. To these authors and redactors, losing a national sense of ritual purity was very likely what had led to YHWH’s judgment and (northern) Israel’s exile in the first place; did Judah want to tempt the
same fate? With Leviticus then, like a mother frightening a young child with stories of monsters just to keep him away from the closet, so its writers hoped to manipulate the Jews into adhering to a specific method of worship. It appears to have worked, incidentally, for post-exilic Jews certainly possessed a strong sense of national identity around their cult of YHWH.⁷

At any rate, we have returned to our point of departure. Leviticus 9 is a narrative passage relating the nation of Israel’s inaugural liturgical service. It is therefore descriptive. But, as we have seen, it is also prescriptive in the same sense that the rest of Leviticus is prescriptive: it outlines the proper liturgy for Israel, involving priest-effected atonement, animal sacrifice, and YHWH’s favor. Nevertheless, we should be loath to see Leviticus 9 as prescriptive for us as Christians today, lest we conclude that we might jeopardize God’s favor in dotting an extra Eucharistic i or forgetting to cross a liturgical t. This is a slippery slope towards the conclusion that God has left the Church, down which some have unfortunately fallen.⁶ On the other hand, Leviticus 9 is part of God’s authoritative word—the writings unto which we submit ourselves as Christians. In this sense we can approach Leviticus 9 in anticipation of gleaning something for our churches’ liturgical services today. Indeed, woven into corporate liturgical services is something sacred, even mysterious; within them we are called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices; and upon them God shows his favor.
Endnotes:


2 Cf. Milgrom, 571, 592-5.


6 See, for instance, James Jordan, *Theses on Worship: Notes Toward the Reformation of Worship* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1998), 81-95; and *The Liturgy Trap: the Bible Versus Mere Tradition in Worship* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1998). In the former, Mr. Jordan derives a five-step liturgy from Leviticus 9, which he calls “covenant renewal” worship. In the latter he espouses covenant renewal worship as the right way to do liturgy. Further, in the introduction to *Trap*, he states that, “during times of liturgical reawakening, there are those who go ‘all the way’ to Rome, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Anglo-Catholicism. I regard this as going ‘too far,’ for reasons that it is the purpose of these essays to explain” (pp. 5-6). It turns out that by “too far” he means traditions added to liturgy over time, like bowing towards the altar or placing too much credence in papal authority, saints, or apostolic succession; and this is doing what God has not commanded, similar to Nadab and Abihu offering fire that YHWH did not command. At the book’s conclusion he cinches his knot of judgment: “But brethren, it is something else altogether to know and understand the Reformed and Biblical [sic] faith, and then to throw it overboard by embracing [liturgical] error. To whom much is given, much is required. Sins of ignorance are one thing; high-handed sins are another. A call to help deliver people from relative darkness is one thing, but embracing the darkness is quite another” (p. 75). Unfortunately, Mr. Jordan is just one of many examples of Christian teachers and leaders who have trodden this path of Levitical prescription.