LEVITICUS: AFTER EXODUS AND BEFORE NUMBERS

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In discussion of the five “books of Moses,” it is often observed that the outer two are more different from the others than the inner three. Genesis is a very extended prologue relating to the time before Moses; and Deuteronomy is very much to itself. It is true that Deuteronomy, like the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, is dominated by Moses. However, this fifth book is almost completely innocent of the priestly interests which are already manifest at the very beginning of Genesis and occasionally throughout that “book,” and which are prevalent in Exodus-Numbers. The consensus of scholarship on the Pentateuch, or at least the books Genesis-Numbers, has attributed much of their material to a “Priestly School.”

However complicated the drafting and supplementation of the contents of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers is supposed to be, it is held that it was accomplished by the same priestly authors and/or editors who had operated over the whole sweep of the material. And yet, at the end of a paper on “Leviticus at the Heart of the Pentateuch,” I found myself sketching a proposal that these “books” had been conceived not together but serially, that each of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers might have been separately conceived, each starting afresh, not just in narrative location, but also in whole conception, from where the preceding one had left off.

There is a good deal of scholarly interest in defining what יסוד or “book” meant in the “biblical” world. How much did that term imply of completeness and consistency? Did it merely describe what was written on a single manuscript or document? The successor traditions have sent out divergent signals. Calling the material “the five

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fifths of the Torah" focuses on the whole rather than the parts. Talking of "the five books of Moses" may suggest that each of the units has integrity in itself. It is clear that the names of the Pentateuchal books familiar in Christian tradition and derived from the Greek Bible are thematic: Exodus reports the departure from Egypt, Leviticus contains priestly or levitical teaching, and much of the content of Numbers is bracketed by two numberings of the people of Israel. It is often said by contrast that the Jewish names for these Torah "fifths" are simply their opening words (in four cases) or, in the case of "In the wilderness," a distinctive element from within the opening sentence of Num 1:1. And yet the manifest thematic appropriateness of "In the beginning" (Genesis), "In the wilderness" (Numbers), and "These are the words" (Deuteronomy), suggests we are dealing with more than happenstance and invites readers to inspect the thematic implications of "These are the names" (Exodus) and "And he called" (Leviticus).

The Torah or Pentateuch as a whole has often been described as a torso, a body lacking a head: Moses does not reach the land promised to Abraham; and settlement under his leadership is only tantalizingly embarked on, east of the Jordan. Exodus reports Israel's paradigmatic deliverance, the key commands from the holy mountain, the discussion of the divine presence (to which Milgrom so rightly attaches prominence) and the provision of an alternative, humanly constructed focus for the divine glory. Of course Exodus tells only a part of the whole story of deliverance and settlement with which we are now familiar. And yet, as understood above, Exodus is far less vulnerable than the Pentateuch itself to the charge that it is little more than a torso often directed at the Pentateuch "as a whole," Exodus can be plausibly claimed as more complete in itself than the whole Torah: it reports a people led from slavery in Egypt to free worship of their deity at a mountain of his choice, then through a first rebellion at the mountain to the fashioning there of a divinely appointed shrine. It may be sensible to consider it as complete in itself, and not another (smaller) torso without a head.

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3 D. J. A. Clines addresses this point directly with the proposal that the theme "is the partial fulfilment—which implies also the partial non-fulfilment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs" (The Theme of the Pentateuch [JSOTS Sup 10; Sheffield: JSOT, 1978] 29).

4 Even if his presentation of the whole "Hexateuch" as a vast palistrophe with Exodus 33 at its center is somewhat forced.