

Equilibrium and the Sacred Compass: The Structure of Leviticus

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Despite the highly organized features of Leviticus, interpreters have found it difficult to identify a cohesive structure to the book. One possible explanation may be that we have been deterred by presuppositions. We have generally seen the sacrificial system in terms of providing a means to care for the sin and impurity of the people. An alternative approach, however, focuses on the need to preserve and maintain sacred space. This paper builds on this concept and explores the ways that such an adjustment in our thinking suggests a new understanding of the structure and focus of Leviticus.

Key Words: Leviticus, sacred space, sacred compass, sacrifice

Extensive reading in the literature on Leviticus is not necessary to arrive at the conclusion that there is a high degree of confusion about the structure of the book. Non-evangelical scholars tend to be much more interested in P and H as individual sources and offer little attention to the canonical structure of the book. E. Gerstenberger's comments are typical:

According to contemporary literary understanding, Leviticus is not a "book" at all, but rather a fairly artificial excerpt from a larger narrative and legislative work, sewn together like a patchwork quilt from many different, individual pieces.¹

Jacob Milgrom's magisterial commentary is mostly concerned with the integration of sources H and P, but he does also deal briefly with the book as a unified whole.² He adopts with some adjustment the ring structure proposed by Mary Douglas that posits chap. 19

1. E. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 2.

2. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 1364-67.

as the center turning point.³ This structure continues by matching chaps. 18//20; 11-16//21-23; the two narratives, 10:1-4//24:10-23; 1-9//25; 26 is seen as the logical ending; and 27 as an appendix to lock with 1-9, thereby closing the ring structure.

Canonical and literary approaches shed little additional light. Given the above paragraph, one might be mildly surprised to read Childs's remark that "there is wide agreement regarding the structure of the book of Leviticus,"⁴ until one discovers that by this he means that the content can be divided into five sections. Rendtorff can say only that "Evidently [the sections] have been brought together here with the intention of depicting the whole of cultic legislation as having been given to Moses."⁵

More recently, a monograph by W. Warning used terminological criteria found in the divine speeches to identify a structure to the book. His work focused on categories such as chiasm and numerology.⁶

Evangelical commentaries are not much more helpful. It is common to identify anywhere from two to five or six sections of the book, and though one finds comments concerning the logical arrangement or the structural links, there is little attempt to offer a cohesive structural design of the book. Outlines tend to present simple content rather than design. Harrison suggests that the book appears haphazard and repetitious,⁷ and his only rebuttal to this is to identify literary structure within chapters. Noordtjij, after commenting that the book "does not in all respects constitute a systematically organized whole,"⁸ proceeds to fragment the book and scatter its contents over centuries.

It is not difficult to understand how this state of affairs came to be. While the major sections are clearly enough delineated, some of these sections, such as the story of the blasphemer in chap. 24, seemingly defy any attempt to identify a cohesive logic. Chapter 23 on the festivals is also often seen as isolated (and is currently the subject of a Berkeley dissertation⁹), and chap. 27 is almost unanimously treated as an add-on appendix. When I teach Pentateuch each year and ask

3. Mary Douglas, "Poetic Structure in Leviticus," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (ed. D. P. Wright, D. N. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 239-56; See also M. Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

4. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 182.

5. Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 145.

6. W. Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

7. R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1980) 15.

8. A. Noordtjij, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982) 8.

9. By Michael Hildenbrand.

my students to produce a one-page paper on the structural design of each book, it is Leviticus that frustrates and baffles them.

In this paper I am offering a cohesive structural design for the book (see chart on p. 304). Sometimes our failure to see the logic stems from the fact that our idea of logic and of what is important in a book is very different from an Israelite view. One of the elements of Israelite thinking that is foreign to us has recently been receiving increased attention: sacred space.

The OT establishes the significance of sacred space from its earliest pages. Students of Genesis over the last couple of decades have recognized that the creation narratives view the cosmos as a temple.¹⁰ As in temple-building accounts in the ancient Near East, seven days are set aside to proclaim the functions of the temple and install the functionaries.¹¹ At the climax, Deity comes to take up his repose (rest) in the temple. God has brought order and equilibrium to the cosmos and maintains them in the world he has created. Further distinctions in sacred space are made as Eden is identified as the place of God's presence with the garden planted adjoining it. Temples or palaces with adjoining garden/parks are well-known in the ancient Near East.¹² Gen 2:10 details how the rivers flowed from Eden (the equivalent to the Holy of Holies) to water the garden (adjoining it, equivalent to the antechamber). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cast out of the garden, lost their access to sacred space, and upset the equilibrium that God had established.

The plan of the tabernacle (and later, the temple) was designed to reestablish equilibrium in a sacred space—God's presence on earth—while retaining restricted access.¹³ The design was reminiscent of Eden with the cherub decor, the Table of the presence (provision of food as in Eden), and the menorah, which most agree represents the

10. Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World" *JR* 64 (1984) 275-98; G. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986).

11. Gudea, Baal, Solomon, Second Temple. M. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the Sitz im Leben of Genesis 1:1-2:3," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor; AOAT 212; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 501-12. See discussion of this and other accounts of temple-building connections with rest in Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House* (JSOTSup 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) appendix 5 (pp. 330-31). For Baal text, see J. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977) 6.iii.18-19 (p. 78).

12. Kathryn Gleason, "Gardens in Preclassical Times," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (ed. E. Meyers; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 2.383.

13. John Lundquist, "What Is a Temple?: A Preliminary Typology," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall* (ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 205-19.

tree of life.¹⁴ As Exodus 40 describes the glory of the Lord filling the temple, the Israelites experience what is, in effect, a return to Eden—not in the sense of full restoration, but in the sense that God's presence again takes up its residence among people, and access to God's presence, however limited, is restored.

Frank Gorman has indicated that ritual, by its nature, seeks to uphold creation by maintaining equilibrium.¹⁵ In this regard, the three most important aspects that rituals relate to are time, space, and status.¹⁶ Gorman uses these categories to delineate the important conditions under which rituals must be performed. That is, they must be performed at specified places at specified times (with specified sequences) by people of specified status.

These categories can also be used in reference to the larger issue of maintaining divine equilibrium. Sacred times must be identified, maintained by the priests, and observed by the people. Sacred space must be delineated, and its sanctity preserved. Statuses of priests and people must be regulated by specific guidelines. These guidelines enable the priests to determine who has access to sacred time and sacred space and how particular levels of status can be achieved or maintained. In this light it is intriguing that the early chapters of Genesis, in recounting God's establishment of cosmic order and equilibrium, deal with the same three aspects: Genesis 1 deals with time (days 1, 4, 7),¹⁷ Genesis 2 deals with space (the garden and Eden),¹⁸ and Genesis 3 deals with status (lost status as Adam and Eve are cast out).¹⁹

In summary then, when God created the cosmos, he brought order to it. He established equilibrium and took up his residence in its midst to maintain this equilibrium. The equilibrium consisted of organized space, established status, and ordered time. When sin entered the world, this order was jeopardized, and chaos threatened again. The sanctuary of Israel represented a small, idealized island of order in a world of threatened chaos. It was a place that preserved equilibrium for God's presence, which in turn was an anchor against disorder. Preserving sacred space provided for God's continued pres-

14. C. Meyers, "Lampstand," *ABD* 4.142; Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," 19-25.

15. Frank Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual* (JSOTSup 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 28-29.

16. *Ibid.*, 32-37, 55-59.

17. Walter Vogels, "The Cultic and Civil Calendars of the Fourth Day of Creation (Gen 1,14b)," *SJOT* 11/2 (1997) 176.

18. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," 19-25.

19. These are discussed in detail in my *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

ence. God's continued presence served to maintain equilibrium and uphold creation. The priests, through rituals, therefore were seen as having a role in upholding creation.

We can therefore conclude that Genesis and Exodus are attuned to issues of equilibrium and sacred space and that the Israelites would have seen an understanding and appreciation of sacred space as a major component of their theology.²⁰ This element figures prominently in the building and dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8) and was prominent in prophetic thinking (Isaiah 66; Ezekiel). When God's presence left the temple (Ezekiel 10) and it was destroyed, sacred space was absent for 70 years until the temple was rebuilt and the sacred compass reestablished. This situation extended until the first century CE in the temple that Herod built, and the presence of God in the midst of his people continued to be a significant theological issue.

In contrast, it is fair to say that sacred space has not been a central plank in the theological platform of Christianity. There is, of course, good reason for this. A generation before the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, a remarkable event took place. At the moment when Jesus died, the Gospels report that the veil was torn in two (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). We do not often enough recognize the significance of this because we have so little understanding of sacred space. The tearing of the veil indicated the end of restricted access to God. Heb 10:20 clarifies the new situation further because it uses the imagery of Christ's flesh as the veil that gives us access. Through the blood of Christ we are able to enter the Holy Place. Paul works out some of the ramifications of this in Eph 2:11-22 as he explains that the Gentiles were excluded from God's presence (that is, outside the camp) but are now brought near. Access that had been denied was now available, since the barrier or wall was broken down (v. 14). Through him we all have access (v. 18), and built together we become a holy temple (v. 21) and a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (v. 22). Paul further develops this issue in 1 Corinthians, where he identifies the corporate Church as God's temple (3:16-17) and each individual Christian as a temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19). Christ came as our peace (Eph 2:14-16; similar to equilibrium).

Peter proclaims that we are a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9). Since this is true, the Church has taken its place in the long tradition of upholding creation. Eden is restored in us because God's presence has taken up his dwelling in his people. We have been given access to the fruit of the tree of life and have been granted eternal life; the

20. See M. Greenberg's assessment of the purpose of Exodus, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969) 16-17.

function of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil has taken root in us as the indwelling Spirit leads us to make godly choices. We are the heirs to the Garden of Eden. Our sacred status has been permanently set because we are in Christ and Christ is in us. This significant change in status has resulted in a situation in which we no longer understand the dynamics of the Israelite theology concerning sacred space. The status issue has become, in one sense, the only issue, and it absorbs most of our theological attention.

With these issues on the table, we are now in a position to come to Leviticus. Given the Christian preoccupation with our status, it is not unexpected that we have typically come to Leviticus with a status orientation. We think of the sacrificial system in soteriological terms, addressing one's status with regard to sin. In recent decades, the careful studies of Milgrom, Levine, Brichto, Kiuchi, and others have helped us to understand the sacrificial system, especially the sin and guilt offerings (preferably, Purification offering and Reparation offering), primarily as means of preserving the sanctity of sacred space and only secondarily the status of the individual. Since the direct object of the verb *kipper* is typically one of the sancta, it is not the person who is the focus of the ritual but sacred space. The individuals are beneficiaries of the ritual in that their status is restored because of the cleansing that has taken place on their behalf. This has helped us to understand what the book of Hebrews had told us all along: that the sacrificial system was not intended as a means of taking away sins from individuals. Instead, it provided a way to decontaminate a sanctuary tarnished by individual and corporate sin and, in so doing, preserve equilibrium in God's presence. Without a sanctuary to preserve, a sacrificial system such as the one presented in Leviticus is superfluous. In NT theology the Church is construed individually and corporately as the sanctuary in which Christ dwells, and his people have thereby become the object of the *kipper* that his blood performs. But this concept does not exist in the OT.

Our emphasis on soteriology has unfortunately resulted in a narcissistic twist to our theology. We are so grateful for what God has done for us that we easily come to believe that our faith is about us. Thus, David Wells observes:

The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.²¹

21. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993) 183.

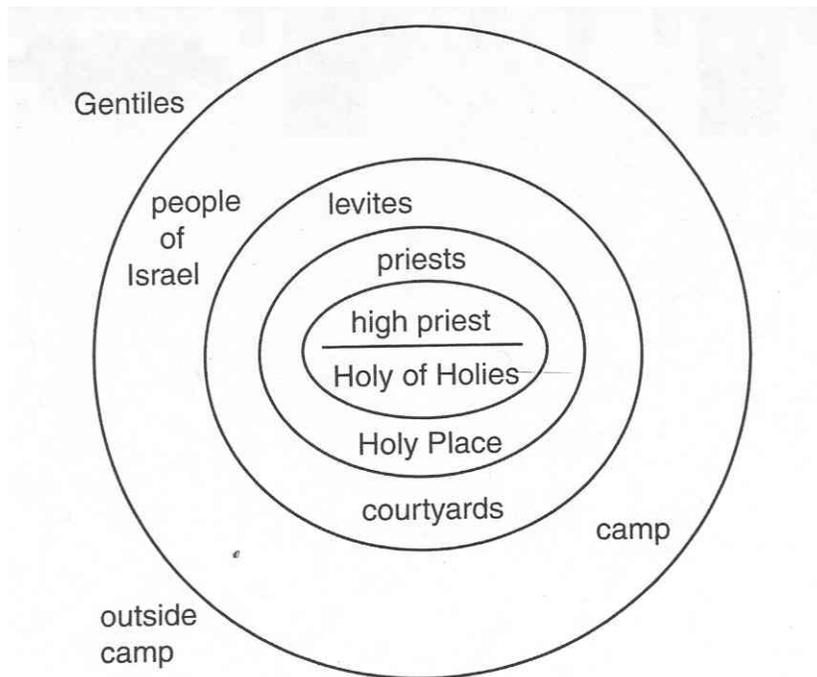
This kind of Christianity is a "me" religion: God loves *me*; Christ died for *me*; Jesus saved *me*; heaven is prepared for *me*. These are all true, of course, but they do not comprise the sum total of our faith. In the end, our Christianity is all about God. Herein then lies the core of the problem. We have been confused about Leviticus because we wanted to think that ritual was all about people dealing with sin, when all along it was about God and the equilibrium of sacred space. It treats people somewhat secondarily—they have to be kept pure if the sanctity of God's presence is to be maintained and if they are going to have access to it. But God's presence is the main thing.

Sacred space can be understood by using a model of concentric circles. In the center circle is the most holy area, the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence. The next concentric circle defines the area that is limited to priestly access. In Israelite sanctuaries this area was the antechamber and, at least eventually, the area between the altar and the portico. Leviticus treats these two areas as one in light of the fact that they are limited to priestly access. The third circle is the courtyard where people of determined status (that is, a particular level of purity) were allowed access for particular purposes (sacrifices at the altar). The fourth circle is represented in the Pentateuch as the "camp of Israel," which is clearly distinguished from the area "outside the camp." Those who had contracted impurity were driven out of the camp. Once Israel was in the land, it is possible that the "camp of Israel" was defined as the area within a settlement of some sort, while "outside the camp" would have been defined as out in the desolate, unsettled areas, but the text does not address this specifically (another indication that Leviticus should be viewed as a product of the wilderness period). This series of concentric circles of holiness has been referred to in recent literature as the "sacred compass" (see diagram, p. 298). If we adopt an emphasis on the equilibrium of sacred space and the model of the sacred compass for our analysis of Leviticus, we will discover that the design of the structure becomes more transparent.

The proposal set forth in this paper suggests that Leviticus deals with issues of equilibrium zone by zone as it speaks of space, status and time, and the qualifications and procedures associated with each. Chapters 1-23 concern equilibrium relative to deity, and chaps. 24-27 concern equilibrium relative to Israel.

The first sequence in the divine equilibrium section covers chaps. 1-17 as it establishes qualifications and procedures pertinent to maintaining equilibrium in sacred space. Within this sequence, the first section is, of course, the discussion of sacrifices in chaps. 1-7. Each sacrifice is treated in terms of the materials and procedures that will render it acceptable. These sacrifices either constitute gifts to

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God (for example, the fellowship offering) or serve to purify the sancta. As such they pertain to the holiest central zone (from ark to altar), which they maintain. The sacrifices in the gift category must meet certain qualifications in order to accomplish their purpose and be acceptable by the standards of that central zone without upsetting the equilibrium. The sacrifices in the purification category seek to obliterate the elements that threaten the sanctity and equilibrium. Through the middle of chap. 6 the text prescribes the procedures for the offerings. From the middle of chap. 6 through the end of chap. 8 the text prescribes the proper disposition of the offerings. By discussing the disposition, the text has already begun its movement away from the central zone, for the disposition requires either disposal of what is left or the consumption of whatever is available for the human parties to eat.

With chaps. 8-10, the installation of the priests provides for the maintenance of the second zone, the enclosure area (courtyard). These chapters talk about the qualifications and procedures for the priests.

Chapters 11-15 concern purity in the camp, the third zone. These chapters talk about the various ways that Israelites can become unclean, and what procedures are necessary to resolve their unclean-

ness. These procedures regulate the camp zone so that an appropriate level of purity is maintained, and they are used to determine who may be in the camp and who needs to go outside the camp. This is essential to preserve sanctity, which is required to maintain equilibrium, which is associated with the camp's proximity to God's presence.

Once each of the concentric zones of the sacred compass has been addressed, chap. 16 offers a description of the annual ritual that was designed to reset the equilibrium of the entire sacred compass. The rituals of the day were intended to disinfect sacred space from whatever desecration had occurred that had not been cared for by specific rituals throughout the year. The ritual prescribed for Yom Kippur features the high priest's moving into the center of the sacred zone, bringing the accumulated impurities out, and finally sending them outside the camp.

Finally, chap. 17 deals with behavior outside the camp. As chap. 16 moved from the center zone to the outside of the camp, chap. 17 moves from outside the camp to the center zone. If an Israelite fails to bring his offering into the sacred compass, or if a hunted animal is involved and it is impossible to bring it to the sacred compass, purity must still be maintained by appropriate treatment of the blood. The first sequence, chaps. 1-17, then can be seen to move through the sacred compass zone by zone, addressing required procedures and guidelines for maintenance of sanctity for each zone. In this way equilibrium can be preserved. The emphasis is more on sacred space than on personal relationship with God.

The second sequence of the divine equilibrium section of the book covers chaps. 18-22. This is the first part of the section that is normally referred to as the "Holiness Code." This sequence discusses the issues of disqualification, and it moves from the outer zone (the camp) to the center. This section is concerned with status. The equilibrium of sacred space is jeopardized when the status of individuals is compromised by their behavior. What would disqualify someone from being considered a member in good standing in the camp of Israel? Chapters 18 and 20 deal with "detestable practices" (mostly sexual offenses) that would cause someone to be cut off from the people (18:29) or put to death (20:9). Chapter 19 continues to treat unacceptable behavior in the camp, though the nature of the disqualification is not specified.

From the beginning of chap. 21 to 22:16, the text concerns behavior that will disqualify the priest from the courtyard zone. These regulations include marriage practices, personal hygiene, physical defects, causes of uncleanness, and disposition of the food from offerings. The remainder of chap. 22 describes conditions that will disqualify an animal from being used for sacrifices, and therefore

returns again to the central zone. The second sequence (chaps. 18-22) therefore moves through the sacred zones as the first sequence had done, but in reverse order—from the outside in. Whereas the first sequence dealt with behavior and procedures that were enacted to keep the space holy, this sequence dealt with behavior that would render a person's status unacceptable for the respective zones of the compass and thereby jeopardize the desired equilibrium.

Chapter 23 addresses the third category of equilibrium—the category concerned with time. Maintaining the sacred times of the calendar contributed just as much to order and equilibrium as maintaining sacred space. Sacred time is not therefore a subcategory of sacred space but is a component of equilibrium alongside sacred space. This chapter brings a conclusion to the three elements connected with equilibrium relative to deity (sacred space, sacred status, and sacred time).

Most writers on the structure of Leviticus, if they did not struggle with chap. 23, begin to struggle now as they seek to understand what cohesiveness binds chaps. 24-27 to the rest of the book. It is clear that this is a distinct section of the book and that it possesses an inner cohesiveness because, like the preceding sections, it moves intentionally through the zones. Chapter 24:1-9 starts in the central zone; 24:10-22 deals with the camp; and 25 takes its starting point with land outside the camp.

I have identified the distinction between 1-23 and 24-27 as the difference between God's equilibrium and Israel's equilibrium. In 1-23 the issue was maintaining the equilibrium so that God's presence would remain in their midst. The priests maintained sacred space throughout the zones, they maintained close controls over the status of individuals in the various zones, and they maintained equilibrium of God's presence by close observance of the religious calendar. These all had to do with the equilibrium associated with and necessary for God's presence.

In 24-27 the book's attention turns to equilibrium in Israelite society, though, as noted above, it has not lost its connection to the sacred compass. Lev 24:1-9 speaks of Israel's duties in the central zone. The people maintain equilibrium by performing their sacred duties in sacred space. The oil, bread, and incense had nothing to do with sanctity and purity, but they were important sacred duties. In 24:10-22 the text moves to the camp zone (v. 10) and moves from the issue of space to the issue of status. Israel's equilibrium is going to be maintained by community laws that show no tolerance to those who disregard God (blasphemers) and by upholding the dignity of human life (love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself), thus the *lex talionis*. Chapter 25 deals with the issue of time by delineating the

Sabbatical Year law and the Year of Jubilee. Both of these are premised on preserving equilibrium by being cognizant of the passage of time and managing activities related to it. Observance serves to maintain equilibrium in Israelite society in contrast to the festivals, which maintained the equilibrium of God's sanctuary in chap. 23.

The blessings and curses of chap. 26 delineate God's ability and willingness either to establish an equilibrium for Israel or to disrupt its equilibrium. This chapter serves a purpose similar to that of chap. 16—that is, it encompasses all of the zones and issues (cf. vv. 1-2) and in so doing addresses the total equilibrium picture. Here, focused on Israel, it does so by means of covenant curses and blessings that coincide with a treaty-style relationship.

Finally, chap. 27 can be understood as being parallel to chap. 17. Chapter 17 addressed the question of which slaughtered animals had to be brought to the sanctuary and which did not. It specified how the blood was to be handled to preserve equilibrium. This dealt mostly with situations that originated outside the camp but at times required movement through the zones to the sanctuary itself. In chap. 27 the topic is vows. As in 17, the situation concerns movement of objects through the zones. When something is dedicated to the Lord, its location shifts from the camp zone, for instance, to the enclosure zone. Just as the handling of the blood was the significant issue for maintaining the equilibrium in 17, the setting of valuations (or substitutions of other sorts) is the significant issue in 27. In both, the question is: what belongs to the Lord? Equilibrium in the sacred compass is maintained when everything is in the zone in which it belongs.

The test of a design such as the outline in this article (aside from the logical issue of whether it fits the data) is the question: would the author have been aware of categories such as "sacred compass" and the time/space/status triad? In response to this question, I would first of all contend that Israel was very aware of the idea that there was a need for increasing levels of holiness and purity each time one moved closer to the place of God's presence. This awareness is expressed in a number of ways, the most obvious being the limited access to each of the zones. The fact that they may have not spoken of a sacred compass or have been inclined to distinguish space, time, and status explicitly as the three most important elements does not negate the centrality of these issues in their thinking. In our attempts to systematize their thinking, our task is somewhat similar to a Wycliffe translator who goes into a nonliterate culture in order to write a grammar of its language. The systemization of its grammar will not represent the way that the speakers would have described their language, and verb paradigms would not represent their categories. At the same time, the grammar would accurately describe their

