# Leviticus 8–10 as Narrative

# John Goldingay

Over the past century, a number of categories have featured in Western reflection on narrative interpretation. In this paper, I consider how far these categories aid an understanding of Leviticus 8–10, the story of the inauguration of the priesthood, of Aaron’s offering the first sacrifices, and of his sons offering outside incense, with the subsequent need in the chapter to consider several other questions. The categories are: setting; point of view; plot; theme; character; and language.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The all-encompassing work that extends from Genesis to Kings is broadly narrative, but Leviticus stand out in being mostly direct instruction rather than narrative. The bulk of it comprises manuals about how to offer sacrifice, about how to avoid taboo and live a proper life, and about the identity of Israel and how to maintain and express that identity. It instructs Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons, and the Israelites in general about how to worship and how to live. However, its manuals have some narrative features, in their picture of the offering of sacrifice and the process for dealing with taboo,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the book incorporates two actual narratives.

The second of these, in Leviticus 24, is a brief account of an offense by a person of mixed race. It is a surprising, riveting, intriguing, disturbing, and mystifying short story. Like a piece of ‘flash fiction’ or ‘microfiction’, it engages its audience not least by raising questions but not answering them, and thus leaving the audience to think about them. It does not reveal the man’s name, so it parallels the stories in Judges about Jephthah’s daughter, Samson’s mother, and the Levite and his wife. What is important in this piece of ‘narrative theology’[[3]](#footnote-3) is not his name but his mestizo identity. He lives among the Israelites, like Rahab or Ruth or Uzziah, but he is not an Israelite. In light of his origins, would he count as a *mamzēr*, the offspring of a forbidden union who could never count as a full member of Israel?The story doesn’t reveal how his mother came to be involved with an Egyptian. Was she raped while she was in Egypt and the Egyptians were ‘afflicting‘ the Israelites (‘*ānāh* piel, the nearest that Hebrew has to a word signifying rape)? The story doesn’t indicate whether his Egyptian father is around. Given that it doesn’t give the man’s name, why does it provide the name of his mother, Shlomit, and her family and clan? Is the family still known in Israel, though he has been executed? Does the eventual provision of his mother’s name, after the account of his utterance and arrest, point to the shame he brought upon her, her family, and her clan? Would the audience or Shlomit herself sense a grievous irony in her name, which they could understand as designating her to be a woman who knew *shalom*,‘well-being’ or ‘peace’, but who actually did not know *shalom*, as her son did not? In light of what happens in the story, would the audience look askance at her being a Danite—'Well, what would you expect? We know the kind of people they are’. Or does the inclusion of her name honour her in a distinctive way, compared with those unnamed women in Judges? Does it honour her as someone who suffered, as she did? Does the information that her son ‘went out among the Israelites’ just refer to his going out from the family tent? Or, given that the verb ‘went out’ (y*āṣā’*) regularly describes Israel’s departure from Egypt, does it rather refer to his leaving Egypt with the Israelites, as a member of the ethically mixed group who accompanied them? Did he then have a choice? Had he come to acknowledge Yahweh by that time? Were there tensions between Israelites and mestizos? What did the two men fight about? What did the half-Israelite actually say? How did he vilify Yahweh’s name? And why? Against the background of these attention-grabbing but unanswerable questions, the statement about his action, that he assaulted and vilified Yahweh’s name, is in principle devastatingly clear. The story’s scandal does not lie merely in his uttering the name, even if there is room for further questions about the precise meaning of the verbs ‘assault’ and ‘vilify’ (*nāqab* or *qābab* niphal, and *qālal* piel). One fundamental implication of the story is evident: uttering Yahweh’s name in a way that vilifies it is the most frightful of offenses, even on the part of a half-Israelite.

The one substantial narrative in Leviticus, the account of Moses’s inauguration of worship in the wilderness sanctuary, manifests some features that compare with that brief one. This narrative, too, has its surprising, riveting, intriguing, disturbing, and mystifying aspects.

## Setting

Although chapters 8–10 stand out from their context in Leviticus because they are a narrative, whereas Leviticus is mostly a work of direct instruction, and although Leviticus in itself would more or less survive as a work if this narrative were not present in it, in its context in the Torah and the Former Prophets Leviticus 8–10 has a vital place. In Exodus, Yahweh commissioned the building of a sanctuary and the inauguration of its priesthood, and Moses fulfilled the first commission. Leviticus 8–10 records the fulfilment of the second, without which the narrative in the book of Numbers cannot proceed.

One insight about narrative illustrated by Leviticus 8–10, then, is that some narratives are self-contained, or at least what they give their audience is all it has. The little story in chapter 24 is one, though it links interestingly with three other stories in Numbers about something happening that seems not to be covered by directives that Moses has already been given (Num 9:8; 15:34; 27:5). Leviticus 8–10 is likewise more or less self-contained, and in a sense it could stand alone. And while Leviticus 16 refers back to it (see also Num 3:4; 26:61), otherwise Leviticus as a whole could conversely stand alone without it. On the other hand, the wider Torah narrative needs it. Part of the significance of a narrative may thus lie in its relationship to its setting in its wider narrative context.

To put it another way, a narrative is often answering a question, but there are varieties of questions that a narrative can be answering. Narratively, however, these chapters’ question is easy to identify. It is, When is Moses going to fulfil the other aspect of Yahweh’s commission, the inauguration of the priesthood? Narratively, it’s a long time since Yahweh gave the commission.

One may compare the nine works stretching from Genesis to Kings with the nine series of a television drama. Such dramas commonly conclude each series with some closure, but leave some ends untied, and may finish with a cliff-hanger. Series Two of the Torah drama, the book of Exodus, left the audience in some suspense over the fulfilment of that second commission. Again like a television series, Leviticus initially heightens suspense by undertaking a knight’s move in the dynamic of the wider narrative. Instead of answering the question about fulfilment, Leviticus provides us with seven chapters of instructions about offering sacrifices, which fits in terms of subject but does not answer the question.

Historical-critical study focuses on another way of identifying the question a narrative answers, another way of thinking about its setting. It focuses on the narrative’s historical or sociological setting in Israelite history, and in the case of this narrative, in the history of Israelite priesthood. How did Israel actually come to have an Aaronic priesthood? Does the Aaronic priesthood really have authority to operate? A subset of the question of historical context or setting is thus a question about ideology. Whose interests does the narrative serve?

It has been suggested that the Second Temple period saw conflict between priests who traced their line to Aaron and priests who traced their line to Zadoq, and the chapters have been taken to support the priestly claims of one or other. Here, a problem is that such hypotheses erect substantial theories on inference.[[4]](#footnote-4) Leviticus 10 has been seen both as pro-Zadoqite and as pro-Aaronide, stressing either its critique of Aaron or its eventual support of Aaron. Yet the existence of both possibilities reflects how the narrative is not sufficiently precise to make clear its support for one group rather than another. Discussion of historical setting and ideological implications in connection with this narrative is currently lively, but the debate is also frustrating because it is dependent on reading the narrative in light of hypotheses about Second Temple history that have to build on little concrete evidence.

The Hellenistic period saw conflict between leaders committed to the Torah and people of more liberal inclination, and from the Hasmonean period the Pharisees began to exercise more influence than the priests in Judea. Even if it is hard to imagine either context as the setting for the creation of the narrative in Leviticus 8–10, one can imagine the story being significant then. This points to yet another way of thinking about the narrative’s setting, by asking about the setting(s) in which the story was read as opposed to a setting in which it was composed. While Western interest in narrative interpretation develops insights going back to Aristotle, more recent is the interest in reception history. Like narrative interpretation and historical-critical interpretation, this approach developed in connection with interpretation in general and was applied subsequently to the interpretation of the Scriptures. As is the case with other approaches to interpretation, then, one has to ask whether and how it fits with the nature of the Scriptures.

I assume that the Torah reached more or less the form in which we have it during the late Babylonian or early Persian period, so that it was available for Ezra to bring it to Jerusalem, but the many slight differences between the Masoretic Text, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Septuagint suggest that it continued to develop in small ways through the rest of the Second Temple period. While some of this development reflects accidental modification, some looks intentional. It reflects conscious clarification or application of the text, designed to make it more useful and more significant in the settings in which theologian-scribes and their people live.[[5]](#footnote-5) It thus reflects and seeks to bring out the vitality of the text.[[6]](#footnote-6) To put it in terms of a New Testament expression, it reflects the narrative being *theopneustos*, God breathed, and profitable (2 Tim 3:16). Leviticus 8–10 thus had a setting in Second Temple history with its various contexts of crisis and conflict, as it was read there. And narrative interpretation can include imagining its being read in those settings.

While the direct implication of the biddings in the narrative is that the community within the story should pay attention to what is said and what is going on here, the indirect implication is that the community that subsequently listens to the Torah should pay attention to what is going on. And asking how an audience might be impacted by the story Leviticus tells might be a more feasible aim than aiming to see into the mind of its author, on which interpretation often focuses more.

Alongside reception history, one could note the development of postcolonial criticism, and any period that saw the development of Leviticus 8 – 10 was a time when Israel or Judah was a quasi-colonial entity living under the overlordship of an imperial power. Its possible freedom to serve Yahweh or the challenge to it to do was then a significant feature of the setting in which the story would be read. On the other hand, the authority of priesthood over people might itself be seen as quasi-imperial. These alternative possibilities parallel the two readings of the narrative as pro-Aaronide or pro-Zadoqite, with the disadvantage noted above, that the possibility of contrasting readings makes it difficult to place reliance on either.

## Point of View

The historical-critical version of the question about setting compares with another classic category in narrative interpretation. What is the point of view from which the story is told? The general nature of Leviticus suggests that it was composed by Israelite theologian-scribes, who were committed to Yahweh and to Israel, who thought theologically, who wanted Israel to live Yahweh’s way, and who believed that the priesthood had a key role in encouraging Israel’s commitment. They work in a way that could encourage an audience to ask questions such as, ‘Who is trying to persuade whom of what here? Who is being addressed? Who is addressing them? And why?[[7]](#footnote-7)

What does the story suggest more specifically about its point of view? It speaks in the third person, and thus presumably the narrator is not someone such as Moses or Aaron, who would likely speak as ‘I’. But we never discover who is the narrator, any more than who is the author standing behind the narrator, as we do not of the wider narrative in Genesis to Kings. The narrator speaks like someone who was there when the events happened, and who is able to relate what Moses and other people did and what Moses and Aaron said. Indeed, beyond that, the narrator speaks of what Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron. Did Yahweh speak out loud, so that someone who was there could also report his words? Did Moses and Aaron tell the narrator what Yahweh had said? Did Yahweh tell him or her what he said? Did the narrator imagine the kind of thing that Yahweh must have said? Given that the narrative does not answer these questions, readers likely answer them on the basis of their worldview, their general assumptions about the Scriptures and about God.

As one might compare Genesis to Kings with a sequence of television series, one could take the writers room, which may generate the script for a television series or movie, as a model for thinking about the origin of much of the Scriptures. Such a project likely begins with someone having an idea, and ends with this person or someone else producing the final script. In between, a group of people sit around a table and discuss the idea, pool their thoughts, discuss them, argue about them, and eventually come to some agreement about them. With Leviticus, and the Torah as a whole, the theologian-scribes in the writers room would likely be priests. Ezra gives us an idea of the kind of person who produces the final version.

To stretch the model, with the Torah the writers room likely reconvened a number of times over several centuries, and it was by such an ongoing process that the Torah reached the form in which we know it. Whereas the current trend in study of Leviticus sees the writers room as undertaking much of its creative work well into the Second Temple period, I would like to see more concrete evidence of this if I am to follow the trend. I rather picture Ezra showing up in Jerusalem with more or less the form of the Torah that we know, though perhaps not yet divided into five books. That dividing, at some subsequent point, then sharpened the suspense raised by the narrative gap between Exodus and Leviticus.

I assume that the people in the writers room who became the authors of Leviticus knew the basic story of Yahweh and Israel—they knew there had been a promise to the ancestors, an exodus, a meeting at Sinai, a settlement in Canaan, an inauguration of the monarchy, a building of the temple, a split between Judah and Ephraim, and in due course a destruction of the temple. They also had before them on the writers room table material such as the manuals about sacrifice and taboo In Leviticus 1–7 and 11–15. And they had in their heads stories that their parents had told them. For Leviticus 8–10, they then used their creative insight to imagine the kind of thing that Yahweh must have said to Moses and Aaron and the kind of thing that must have happened to inaugurate Israel’s sanctuary worship.

That’s my guess. But it is only a guess. What I am more sure about is that the work they produced commended itself to the leadership of the people of God in the Second Temple period as a portrait of the origin of Israel’s worship that could continue to shape and stimulate the community’s thinking about Yahweh and his people, and shape and stimulate their commitment. Jesus and the people who came to believe in him, and the people who wrote works that eventually comprised the New Testament, then also assumed that the Holy Spirit had been involved behind the scenes in the generation of the Tanak, and therefore that it counted as Holy Scriptures for Jewish or Gentile congregations of people who believed in Jesus.

The theologian-scribes in the writers room do have priestly sympathies, though there is little concrete indication of an actual priestly viewpoint in their work. They do not write as if they support priests over against laypeople or support the priesthood right or wrong. If their viewpoint is priestly, what specific priestly viewpoint is it? What aim does it have? It wants people to be confident that the Aaronic priesthood was put in place by Yahweh and to honour its senior priests and its regular priests. It wants the community to rejoice in the ministry that its priests can fulfil for it. It knows that priests can make mistakes. It shows no sign of thinking that the priesthood has a political position and exercises political power or should do so. It might be aware of the reality of tension between political power or prophetic conviction (Moses) and priestly power or perspective (Aaron). It implies the assumption that both community and priesthood need to regard conformity to Yahweh’s instructions as a principle not only for the priesthood’s origins but for its ongoing life.

In its telling of Aaron’s inauguration and the subsequent tension and conflict between Moses and Aaron, the question of point of view could have different intriguing implications at different points in Israel’s history, and the chapters could make for varying suggestive readings. Samuel and the opening of 1 Kings tell of crises and conflicts over the priesthood and over the position of priests such as Zadoq and Abiathar. What would people subsequently think about legitimate priesthood in the context of the inauguration of the temple? Or of Jeroboam setting up an alternative worship arrangement in Ephraim? For the succeeding period, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles give a mixed account of the priesthood’s faithfulness and unfaithfulness, paralleling that of the monarchy. What would the narrative then suggest in the contact of the Jerusalem priesthood’s apostasy as Second Kings and prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe it? In the final decades before 587 the picture in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is indeed more unequivocally negative, though it is as a member of a priestly family that Ezekiel speaks so negatively, so one must allow for his hyperbole and that of Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah. While affirming the negative assessment, Lamentations grieves over what Yahweh has allowed to happen to the priests (Lam 1:4, 19; 2:6, 20; 4:13, 16).

How might the community see the status of the priesthood after 587, or after 537, or after 516? Leviticus 10 reminds priests and people of the need to pay heed to the danger priests can bring on themselves through mistakes they make, and the need for them to attend to their vocation of discernment and teaching. The decades following 587 would be a time when this message was significant for people and priests, when priests might have wondered whether they would ever minister again, both before 537 and after (see Zech 3). Ezra and Nehemiah document tension and conflict between leaders who see themselves as standing for Moses and the Torah (Ezra being a priest) and priests whom these leaders see as opposed to Moses and the Torah. What might be the significance of this story in the context of conflicts between Judahites and Samaritans or between different groups in Jerusalem in subsequent times? The following decades would also challenge priests about their faithfulness and their responsibility for teaching and discernment (see Mal 1; Ezra-Nehemiah). Either side of Leviticus 8–10, the prominence of instruction in Leviticus 1–7 and 11–15, and in Leviticus as a whole, also invites the audience to take account of the way narrative may constitute implicit exhortation. To the community Leviticus 8–10 might then also say: do recognize and rejoice in the priests, but recognize that they are fallible. And to the priests it might say: do rejoice in your position but recognize the disaster you can bring on yourselves and on the community.

In the beginning of the last paragraph in the narrative, there emerges another sense in which thinking in terms of a point of view contributes to a reading of this story. Moses pressed an inquiry about the offense offering goat, but ‘there, it was burned’ (10:16). The ‘there’ is *hinnֵēh*, traditionally translated ‘behold,’ which is slightly misleading. ‘Behold’ is a verb and *hinnēh* is a particle, and ‘behold’ is an archaism, but otherwise it conveys the right impression. The narrative is encouraging the audience to look in its imagination in a certain direction. The narrative hints at the same exhortation when it relates how the people ‘saw’ how fire had come out from Yahweh (9:24): it invites the audience to look with the community in the story.[[8]](#footnote-8)

## Plot

By its nature as a narrative, Leviticus 8–10 as a whole thus invites the audience to follow its plot and imagine the events it describes. While the dramatic, quasi-narrative portrayal of the sacrifices in Leviticus 1–7 draws the audience in its imagination into the process of making a sacrifice, this actual narrative does so more directly. We take part as the community assembles, watch Moses preparing, vesting, and anointing Aaron and his sons, and watch Aaron and his sons offering the sacrifices. We wait patiently through the ordination week as Aaron and his sons stay in the sanctuary through the ordination retreat. We watch again as they offer the first sacrifices, Aaron blesses us, Yahweh’s magnificence appears, fire consumes the offering, and we join in as the people roar and fall on their faces. Then we watch with horror as Nadab and Abihu present their outside fire and are immolated, and we listen in a daze to the events and confrontations that follow.

Leviticus 8–9 is a straightforward narrative tracing a sequence of events, answering the question, ‘How did the initiation of the priesthood happen?’ in an uncontentious fashion, and coming to a satisfying conclusion. Leviticus 10 then turns the sequence into a drama when something unexpected happens that itself raises questions. Indeed, the whole of Leviticus 10 opens up questions that it only half-answers. To put it another way, Leviticus 8–9 is a story with some logic. It relates a sequence of events that follow one another intelligibly as Yahweh gives instructions and Moses and Aaron follow them. Leviticus 10 begins in a way that suggests it will continue this straightforward story, as it relates how ‘Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each got his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it’. But it then continues with a jump that seems outlandish, and it subsequently proceeds unpredictably, with some connection but without consistent logic, walking around questions more than resolving them. Whereas Leviticus 8–9 makes sense, and does so as it goes along, Leviticus 10 challenges its audience to make sense of it, which they can only do, and only partially, when they get to the end.

In its distinctive fashion, however, Leviticus 8–10 follows the shape and dynamic of the ‘classical plot’. The classical plot is characterized by economy: everything relates to the plot, and things that look irrelevant probably aren’t. The jerkiness within Leviticus 10 is then part of the whole. Leviticus 10 is characterized by intricacy, including suspense; and retrospectively it turns the simple plot of Leviticus 8–9 into something systematically complex and suspenseful. Yet it is also characterized by transparency. Within its own framework it makes sense, it is self-contained in its worldview, it works within its own world, and it wants readers to believe it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

For most of the way, then, Leviticus 8–10 answers the straightforward leftover question and gives a straightforward answer, and the audience of Series Three in the TV sequence relaxes. Or perhaps it doesn’t. After all, it has watched Series One of this drama, where Yahweh set the story of the world going and things went wrong. And it has watched Series Two, when Yahweh set Israel’s story going and things went wrong. So maybe the audience is waiting through Leviticus 8–9 for the other shoe to drop, which duly happens with the shocking statement that Aaron’s sons, who had shared in the initiation of the priesthood, ‘presented outside fire before Yahweh … and fire went out from before Yahweh and consumed them, and they died before Yahweh’.

Arguably, tension is essential to a narrative. Something has to happen that needs resolving, as one can see in the little narrative about the mestizo.[[10]](#footnote-10) Whereas the medieval chapter division makes Leviticus 10 a new start (cf. the ‘Now’ in NRSV and NJPS), the chapter begins with a straightforward *waw-*consecutive, and MT has no petuḥah or setumah to suggest a new section. LXX, Vg, and NIV thus carry straight on. In substance, however, there is indeed a move from the wonder of Leviticus 8–9 to the solemnity of Leviticus 10. It turns out that ‘the appearance of the LORD to his people at the climax of the regular service [9:23–24] was ambiguous and equivocal’, which with hindsight was perhaps also not surprising given that ‘the holy God was a consuming fire’ (Exod 24:7) and thus ‘his presence was potentially lethal’.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, subsequently Leviticus 10 ‘reestablishes the theme of compliance with divine instructions as it progresses,’ and in the end the calling into question is only a ‘momentary reversal’ from Leviticus 8–9.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To ask about a narrative’s plot is not to make an assumption about whether it is more factual or more fictional. God inspired factual stories in the Scriptures, and stories that are based on fact but are imaginatively elaborated, and fictional stories. An historical narratives use the techniques of fiction.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, ‘there is no textual property, syntactical or semantic that will identify a text as a work of fiction’. The question is the nature of the author’s intention.[[14]](#footnote-14) The boundaries between these categories are fuzzy and it’s usually hard to tell which category any given story belongs to.

I assume that the carefully-told and eyebrow-raising story in Leviticus 8–10 is like the Genesis creation story, a narrative that issued from a writer’s divinely-inspired imagination, or like one of Jesus’s parables, stories that emerges from his. Paradoxically, to call the story fiction is then not to imply that it makes no factual statements. A fictional story such as Genesis 1 makes important factual, historical declarations—God actually did bring the world into being, the world he brought into being was good, he designed humanity to it look after it, and so on. Leviticus 8–10 likewise makes important factual declarations—God actually did appoint the Aaronic priesthood, God did relate to his people through their ministry, God really was present to his people in the sanctuary, the priesthood did go wrong. The theologian-scribes who composed Genesis and Leviticus described these realities in concrete ways that would bring them home to people. Though like any comment on the factuality or otherwise of narratives in the Torah, it is impossible to prove or disprove this assumption.

## Theme

A narrative may have a theme, perhaps more than one. It may put into words the complexity of some aspect of truth that cannot be expressed in straightforward analytic formulations. The juxtaposition of contrasting narratives can thus do justice to the ambiguous and equivocal. Genesis 1 and 2 does so with the systematic or serendipitous nature of God’s activity in creation, Exodus 4–14 with the relationship of divine sovereignty and human decision-making, Exodus 32–34 with the relationship of Yahweh’s grace and severity. And Leviticus 8–10 does so with the obligation to conform to God’s commands and the freedom to treat them with some flexibility.

The chapters are full of occurrences of the verb ‘command‘, which occurs twenty times, and suggests authority, urgency, and importance.[[15]](#footnote-15) There is no comparable density of occurrences anywhere in the Tanak. Most occurrences in this story note that things happened ‘as Yahweh commanded’. The comment’s frequency makes one also notice how some reports of things happening are not followed by ‘as Yahweh commanded’, yet this need not seem to be a problem (e.g., 9:1–4). Sometimes people decide for themselves what to do and that is fine; an implication might be that people listening to the story need not be obsessional about doing exactly as Yahweh commanded. Sometimes things happen, there is no ‘as Yahweh commanded’, and it leads to controversy, but the controversy is resolved; this might fit with there being differences between the five books of the Torah (and between Leviticus and Ezekiel, and Amos, and Jesus). Yahweh himself thus issues different commands at different times, implying that there can be different ways of his giving expression to ultimate principles. He gives precise instructions to Moses about the ordination, and the story keeps affirming that Moses did ‘as Yahweh commanded,‘ yet in detail Moses’s actions vary from the instructions (see 9:8–21), and the details of the offerings do not correspond to the general instructions for offerings in Leviticus 1–7. But in Leviticus 10, something happens ‘as he did not command’, the only occasion when the verb is negatived, and it leads to catastrophe. This was an action going against what he commanded.

The chapters thus open up in changing and deepening fashion the way Yahweh sometimes gives instructions for simple obedience, but sometimes gives instructions that are more like guidelines than orders. Decision-makers in the community then have to handle the possible implications of Yahweh’s commands in discussion and argument with one another.[[16]](#footnote-16) The main part of Leviticus 10 implies that the representatives of priesthood and theology need to be in that conversation with one another, as the people of God work out how to implement Yahweh’s truth. The contrast between 10:1–5 and 10:16–20 leaves an audience with a tricky reality or a pair of tricky realities that they have to live with. Doing as Yahweh says can be a matter of life and death. Yet Leviticus 8–9 has already shown that Moses, Aaron, and Yahweh are not legalistic, in that Moses and Aaron do not do exactly as Yahweh says, and Yahweh is not troubled. Nadab and Abihu do not get away with doing something that Yahweh had not commanded. Aaron gets away with it. Deal with it. Or rather, think about it carefully. If the audience looks at Nadab and Abihu’s non-compliance (‘outside fire‘) it suggests overstepping priestly freedom. Moses’s and Aaron’s non-compliance did not contradict the principles of the Torah. Nadab’s and Abihu’s did.

One way in which the narrative explores the tension between the obligation to conform to Yahweh’s commands and the freedom to treat them with some flexibility lies in setting out the events in Leviticus 10 as a palistrophe, with an abcb’a’ structure:

10:1–5: Two of Aaron’s sons offer incense before Yahweh as Yahweh had not commanded, and fire from Yahweh consumes them. Aaron does nothing. Moses takes action, having their bodies taken out. The offering that goes against what Yahweh had commanded brings ‘a tragic aftermath‘ to Leviticus 8–9.[[17]](#footnote-17)

10:6–7: Moses gives biddings to Aaron and his other sons concerning what they are now to do: they are not to mourn the two brothers and not to leave the sanctuary. They do as Moses commanded.

10:8–11: At the chapter’s highpoint, Yahweh speaks to Aaron for the only time in the chapters, bids Aaron and his other sons to be wary of drink, and defines their ongoing role in discernment and teaching.

10:12–15: Moses gives Aaron’s remaining sons further instructions, about the rest of the cereal offering (cf. 9:17) and about the breast and thigh of the shared sacrifice, which vary slightly from Yahweh’s previous instructions.

10:16–20: Moses enquires about further actions that have gone against what Yahweh had commanded, in connection with the offense offering goat (9:15). He is disturbed that it has been burned rather than eaten and he rebukes the sons, but Aaron gives an explanation defending them, which Moses accepts. The narrative ends happily.

The shocking nature or the brothers’ action in 10:1–5 and the shocking nature of what follows suggests a second theme in this narrative. Sometimes Yahweh acts in ways that seem tough and may seem hard to explain. ‘The report is so brief that it has prompted a wide range of reading-between-the-lines theories’ about its significance.[[18]](#footnote-18) Whenever the chapter had its origin, it gives priests and people things to think about, then and later, and in this connection one might see its formulation, if not ‘*deliberately* *obscure*,‘[[19]](#footnote-19) at least providentially obscure. It invites the audience to face the fact that Yahweh sometimes causes or allows catastrophes that might reflect priestly mistakes but might seem out of proportion as acts of chastisement. The priests have to deal with such events in light of what they know from the Torah, and to work out what to think and what Yahweh may expect when the Torah does not cover questions that arise (which takes us back to the story of the mestizo).

The refrain about the way Yahweh has commanded Moses, running through Leviticus 8–9, eventually links in troubling fashion with the theme that runs through Leviticus 10, ‘the problem of knowing how to comply with divine instructions.[[20]](#footnote-20) ‘The story of Nadab and Abihu does not just have gaps. It is about gaps and how we deal with them.‘[[21]](#footnote-21) It does not imply that people need be anxious about the vulnerability or unreliability of the entire worship system, but they do need to accept the fact that people make mistakes and that catastrophes happen. Yet in the end ‘ritual functions… to allow for the negotiation of conflict.… The rituals do not resolve conflict as much as defer resolution of conflict in order to preserve the functioning social network.‘[[22]](#footnote-22) And actually, one might see this as the resolution of conflict, if it enables people to live together.

## 5. Characters

In narrative interpretation, it is customary to consider the characters in the story. In Leviticus 8–10, the characters are Yahweh, Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Itamar, and the community as a whole. And in a story, one can ask about the characters’ thinking, motivation, and aims, and about what they know and what power they have that will make it possible for them to pursue those aims.[[23]](#footnote-23) Asking these questions highlights further the difference between Leviticus 8–9 and Leviticus 10. Humanly speaking, in Leviticus 8–9 Moses is manifestly in charge. Yahweh makes clear what he is to do, and Moses has no difficulty in doing it. At the beginning of Leviticus 10, Moses loses control of the narrative, though he quickly shows himself capable of regaining control. Then he loses it again, in two senses. At the centre of Leviticus 10, Yahweh speaks to Aaron, for that only time, about the role and power he has. And at the end of the chapter Moses discovers that Aaron’s other sons have been explicitly ignoring their instructions, and engages in a confrontation with Aaron about this that leads into his recognizing that he himself might have been wrong in finding fault with them.

We learn little directly about the persons, thinking, or motivation of the characters in the narrative. It depicts Yahweh as someone who sets forth descriptions of himself, issues commands, issues prohibitions, and appears. At one point, Moses gets angry, with Eleazar and Itamar for not dealing with the flesh of the sacrifice in the correct way, Aaron present Moses with the rationale for what happened, and then the action was ‘good in his eyes’ (10:16–20). The entire story in Leviticus 8–10 finishes here. To a modern reader it is remarkable that this is the one point at which the narrative tells its audience what someone was thinking or feeling, though it compares intriguingly with 2 Samuel 11, where the opposite expression closes the chapter: ‘the thing that David had done was bad in Yahweh’s eyes’. In particular, the narrative does not tell us why Nadab and Abihu made their illegitimate incense offering, nor does it tell us how Moses or Aaron reacted to it—or rather, it tells us what Moses says by way of Yahweh’s comment, and it tells us that Aaron ‘was still‘ or ‘was silent‘ (10:3), if that is what *wayyidōm* means. But what does his stillness or silence signify?

Three contrasting implications emerge from the way the narrative speaks about its characters. The first is that characters are not very important in this narrative, as they are not in the Scriptures as whole—human characters, anyway. In the Scriptures, Yahweh is the character who counts, and otherwise, plot is more important than character. Indeed, it has been suggested that the focus on character in narrative interpretation derives from the nature of the Victorian novel, and that character doesn’t really exist.[[24]](#footnote-24)

A second is that, in the classic formulation, the narrative is more inclined to show than to tell. It is more like a movie than a novel. It commonly relates someone’s actions and leaves the audience to work out their motivation. This is another aspect of the paradoxical way in which narratives can function as inspired and useful. The audience is invited to draw the appropriate implications from (for instance) the way people did as Yahweh commanded, but not quite, with the possibility that having to work this out for themselves will make it more likely that they take note of what they realize. The problem is that an audience can draw many implications from texts that do not make their implications explicit. This is a difficulty that lies behind ideological interpretations of texts.

A third is that sometimes the actions of characters are simply mysterious. A consequence is again that audiences and scholars can multiply interpretations of aspects of a narrative. The downside is that this issues in the proliferation of short notes in academic journals. The upside is again that it can make an audience wonder and think and learn things about itself and about God. In Leviticus 24, interpretation has to settle for the allusiveness implied by the list of questions about the mixed-race young man that the list might generate, and with the discussion that such allusiveness can foster, without its requiring that we think we have answers to the questions. In this connection, once more, the Scriptures show themselves capable of being profitable. Their openness, the equivocal and nebulous nature of a narrative, is one feature of it that can make this possible.

## 6. Language

In an appreciation of the novelist Martin Amis, written after a memorial service for Amis at St Martin in the Fields in London, Tom Gatti suggested that what we truly value in a writer of fiction is not its plot or characters but its language, its words.[[25]](#footnote-25) Gatti emphasizes the pleasure of language, and perhaps this applies to Leviticus 8–10, specifically to the pleasing nature of the palistrophe in chapter 10. I see it as applying to the pleasing nature of the verse in the Tanak, of which there is more in Leviticus than translations recognize (see especially Lev 26). But I focus here on the broader implications of his point than the way that language can cause pleasure. In suggesting that language is *the* aspect of narrative that we appreciate, Gatti speaks hyperbolically, though his comment may apply to some narrative writers and/or some readers (whereas I had thought that the reason why I myself have not appreciated Amis was that he focused on theme more than character or plot, I myself am a ‘word child,‘[[26]](#footnote-26) and I must go back and check out his use of words). ‘“The writers we love subtly get under our skin and shift our consciousness”’, Gatti quotes Ian McEwan as saying at St Martin’s. ‘“They bend the flow of daily thought and speech.” They do this not with their “views” or “theories” but with their facility for language’. Gatti continues to speak hyperbolically; we might think in terms of ‘not only … but also’ rather than ‘not … but’.

Gatti’s comment applies to Leviticus 8–10, because Leviticus is a work of rhetoric.[[27]](#footnote-27) It speaks out of passion and enthusiasm, and it aims to share its passion and enthusiasm with its audience, as it has Yahweh encouraging Moses to share it with the congregation at Sinai: ‘”The entire community—assemble it at the Meeting Tent entrance area.” Moses did as Yahweh commanded him. The community assembled at the Meeting Tent entrance area, and Moses said to the community, “This is the thing that Yahweh commanded to do‘’’ (Lev 8:3–5).

Occasionally Leviticus generates memorable phrases, like Amis or like a prophet. One comes at a key moment in Leviticus 8–10 (significantly, it is a poetic line):

In the people near me I will show myself sacred,

and to the face of the entire people I will show myself magnificent. (10:3)

There then follows that enigmatic, elusive phrase, ‘Aaron was still’ (10:3). And subsequently, a rhetorical question by Aaron almost closes the narrative: ‘If today they have presented their offense offering and their burnt sacrifice before Yahweh, and things such as these have happened to me, and I ate the offense offering today, it would have been good in Yahweh’s eyes?’ (10:19).

The narrative is careful and effective in its use of words. The events in Leviticus 10 make for quite some contrast with Leviticus 8–9, but the chapters manifest many verbal links that both enhance the links between them and also enhance the contrast:

Get (8:2), get (9:2), they got (10:1)

Fire went out from before from Yahweh (9:24; 10:2)

This is the thing that (8:5), this is the thing that (9:6), that is what (10:3)

Brought forward (8:6), came forward/come forward (9:5, 7, 8), come forward/came forward (10:4, 5)

From the Meeting Tent entrance area you will not go out … so that you do not die/lest you die (8:33, 35; 10:7)

Offense offering’ (8:14), offense offering (9:8), no offense offering and thus death (10:1–3)

Eat at the Meeting Tent entrance area (8:31), offer the shared sacrifice (9:4, 18, 22), eat in a sacred place (10:12–13)

While Yahweh does not bid Moses to pass on his teaching to the Israelites in Leviticus 8–10 as he does in the manuals about sacrifice and about taboo, in 8:3 he does bid him assemble the community, and a feature of that bidding, quoted above, is the word order: ‘The entire community—assemble it at the Meeting Tent entrance area’. While standard Hebrew word order is usually assumed to be verb, subject, object, this bidding illustrates how the Tanak varies word order much more frequently than English translations reflect, often so as to make a point. That applies to the word order in Yahweh’s actual saying in 10:3, quoted above, where English translations vary over whether or not they reflect it. In the introductory bidding in 8:3, the word order puts the emphasis on ‘the entire community’. It might even be saying to the audience that listens to this narrative, ‘This means you.’ The narrative’s audience overhears biddings given to a community with which it identifies, and allowing people to overhear can be a powerful means of communication.[[28]](#footnote-28) Or the audience overhears biddings given to the priests, but the writers also have in mind that broader audience, as they make clear in their references to Moses making Yahweh’s words known to Israel as a whole.

Something similar applies to the narrative order in Leviticus 8. As is commonly the case in the Tanak and elsewhere, the chapter’s story line is not entirely chronological. For the sake of communication, dramatic ordering can override chronological ordering. The announcement of Aaron’s sons’ presentation in 8:6 anticipates the same announcement in 8:13, and it seems likely that the announcement of the sons’ washing in 8:6 is also anticipatory. Further, chronologically 8:6–9 and 12–13 would run more smoothly without the description of the sanctuary anointings and sprinklings in 8:10–11. If these happened first, the basin (8:11) would then be available as a source of water for the washing. The narrative’s unfolding in dramatic rather than chronological order gives prominence to the actual ordinations, and particularly Aaron’s.

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Categories such as setting, point of view, plot, theme, characters, and language thus all feature in the story in Leviticus 8–10, and such categories are worth bearing in mind as we seek to discern what the inspired scriptural narrative communicates, and what it does.

1. A paper written for the Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Study Group in July, 2024, but frustrated by covid. It is a spinoff from a commentary on Leviticus that I hope will come out in 2025. Translations are my own. I dedicate it to the memory of Alan Millard, who died just before the meeting. He encouraged me as a young scholar, and I acted alongside him as secretary of the Old Testament Group of which he was chair. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Liane M. Feldman, *The Story of Sacrifice: Ritual and Narrative in the Priestly Source*, FAT 141 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Hieke, *Levitikus*, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 2:959. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alice Hunt, *Missing Priests: The Zadokites in Tradition and History*,LHBOTS452 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 144, comments that ‘the paucity of biblical evidence makes it nearly impossible to draw credible conclusions about Zadokites or a Zadokite priesthood’; cf. Lester L. Grabbe, ‘Were the Pre-Maccabean High Priests “Zadokites,”’ in J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson, ed., *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines*, JSOTSup 373 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 205–15; Esaias E. Meyer, “Getting Bad Publicity and Staying in Power: Leviticus 10 and Possible Priestly Power Struggles,’ *HTS* 69/1 (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thus in 10:1, LXX has ‘which the Lord had not commanded them’, and in 10:15, for וּלְבׇנֶיךׇ, which might imply only ‘for your sons’, LXX has ‘for your sons and for your daughters’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Hindy Najman, ‘The Vitality of Scripture Within and Beyond the “Canon”’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 43 (2012): 497–518 (515–18); and cf. John Goldingay, *Joshua*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Historical Books (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 42–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007*)*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. My analysis in this paragraph was stimulated by N. J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 3–16, 61–78, with his reflections on E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), and behind him on Aristotle, *Poetics.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Sherwood, *Leviticus*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2003), 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 107, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Hayden White, e.g., ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, and ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 1–25, 26–57; also David P. Wright, ‘Ritual Theory, Ritual Texts, and the Priestly-Holiness Writings of the Pentateuch’, in Saul M. Olyan, ed., *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect*, Resources for Biblical Study 71 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 195–216 (198). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John R. Searle, ‘The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse’, *New* *Literary* *History* 6 (1974–75): 319–332 (325); cf. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979),116. See further John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994),67–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Richard Ira Sugarman*, Levinas and the Torah: A Phenomenological Approach* (Albany: SUNY, 2019), 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Feldman, *Story of Sacrifice*, 67–108. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 595. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 84. Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Leviticum* (London: R. Milbourne, 1631), 180–209, already has an extensive survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999),61. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. James W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2010,505. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bryan D. Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus*, LHBOTS 480 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bibb, *Ritual Words*, 111, 112. See also Bibb, ‘Nadab and Abihu Attempt to Fill a Gap: Law and Narrative in Leviticus 10.1–7,’ *JSOT* 96 (2001): 83–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Lowe, *Classical Plot*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Alexandra Schwartz, ‘“I Don’t Think Character Exists Anymore”: A Conversation with Rachel Cusk,’ *The New Yorker* November 18, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ‘Martin Amis and the Pursuit of Pleasure’, *The New Statesman*,14–20 June 2024, 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I refer to Iris Murdoch, *A Word Child* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), though I use the expression in a different way from Murdoch. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric*, and his commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)