

Roles and Relations in Biblical Law: A Study of Participant Tracking, Semantic Roles, and Social Networks in Leviticus 17-26

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1. INTRODUCTION: LAW AS LITERATURE—LITERATURE AS SOCIAL NETWORK

For most contemporary readers of Leviticus, the terse language, the strange treatment of impurities, the bloody sacrifices, and the harsh executions appear odd if not directly offensive. The poetic and prophetic portions of the Hebrew Bible may seem more appealing, perhaps more ‘inspired’. Many scholars have the same impression of Leviticus and the other priestly sections of the Pentateuch (e.g., Exod. 25–40; Numbers). To mention but one classical example, Julius Wellhausen (1927; originally published 1883) regarded the priestly literature as a decay away from the heartfelt and authentic prophetic experiences of the early prophets of the Hebrew Bible. By contrast, in the later, priestly literature, the cult was merely “a pedagogic instrument for discipline.”¹ Within the last three or four decades, however, new readings of priestly law and cult have emerged. Narrative, rhetorical, and anthropological studies of the book have uncovered a richness and rationality within the priestly worldview. It has been shown that Leviticus, far from being an arbitrary collection of

¹ “in der mosaischen Theokratie ist der Kultus zu einem pädagogischen Zuchtmittel geworden” (Wellhausen 1927, 423). For a recent, critical evaluation of the Wellhausenian ‘axiom’ of P as a decay from the “lively Deuteronomic religion,” see Weinfeld (2004).

primitive laws, is in fact a literary composition in its own right that reflects a system of thought and values.²

Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to conceptualise the world view of Leviticus. For one thing, this world view is hardly ever explicated in the book itself. World views and values are often implicit and unconscious, and the priestly literature of the Hebrew Bible offers no exception in this regard. Motivational clauses are occasionally used with the laws, but most of them are never explained. The only recurring elements in any law are the *people* spoken to or referred to and the *actions* prescribed or prohibited. People and events are thus the most generic building blocks of the laws. Or, put differently, at the heart of the laws is a concern for people and their actions. It is a striking feature of the laws of Leviticus that they are often not general but situational, that is, they refer to specific people in specific situations. For example, the command “Every one of you shall fear his mother and his father” (Lev. 19.3) is not a general prescription of fear or reverence but specifically concerns how the intended audience of the law were supposed to treat their parents—not the other way round, as far as this law is concerned. The law is neither motivated nor reasoned, so how much can actually be deduced from it? Probably not that much. However, the mother and father of Lev. 19.3 are mentioned elsewhere in the law text, as are the audience (‘you’), and they appear in a variety of relationships and interactions. Accordingly, it is possible to map the people and their interactions and begin scrutinising the roles of each

² I shall return to this development within Biblical scholarship (see chapter 2, §2.0).

person within the resulting network of people in interaction. The position of each person in the network reflects his or her status, power, and social capital. And since ethics is about the exercise of power, a mapping like the one imagined here opens the way for scrutinising the ethics of the text. This kind of analysis is known as social network analysis (SNA), and it is the purpose of this book to investigate the social network of Lev. 17–26, also known as the Holiness Code (H),³ and survey the potential of this approach for analysing the ethics and values of an ancient law text.

The kind of social network analysis envisioned in this study represents a novelty within Biblical Studies, and it is far from the traditional source- and redaction-critical approaches that dominated the field for more than a century. Nevertheless, SNA is not completely unrelated to other approaches to Biblical law. Recent decades' narrative, rhetorical, and social readings of Biblical law form the backdrop of this study, with a common focus on making sense of the extant text. In the context of these approaches, SNA offers yet another strategy for reading the text, by paying special attention to participants and events. So, in chapter 2, I shall present the place of social network analysis among traditional and recent approaches to Biblical law. Within this context, the theoretical underpinnings of SNA will be presented and related to the study of ancient law texts. Chapter 2 will also relate the present

³ When I use the label 'Holiness Code', I do not use it to refer to a documentary source or a redactional layer, but simply as a convenient designation for the extant text of Lev. 17–26. The scholarly debate on the origins of H will be summarised in chapter 2, §1.0.

work to previous attempts at analysing the people of H. Whereas most previous research on the participants of H has been aimed towards understanding the ‘real’, historical persons and towards dating the text or layers of the text, the social network characterisation of the participants proposed here is restricted to the text itself. While the participants may certainly refer to historical persons, I am primarily interested in how the participants are characterised by the author of the text and what role they play in the implied social community of the text. How, and to what extent, the implied social community refers to a historical setting is a secondary question in this respect and not addressed in this book. More interesting are the methodological challenges of creating a social network model of an ancient law text like H, and the remainder of this book is dedicated towards this goal. Chapters 3–6 address the fundamental methodological questions in turn, before chapter 7 presents the social network of H and fleshes out its implications.

Basically, a (social) network consists of nodes connected by edges. The resulting network forms a graph to be explored and analysed statistically for the purpose of deriving the properties of the network at large as well as the structural roles of the nodes. In previous applications of SNA to literature, it has been common to treat participants as the nodes and interactions as edges. Most commonly, participants and interactions have been tagged manually. While a similar procedure could be carried out for H, it would be problematic for several reasons. For one thing, H contains 4,092 individual linguistic references which need to be connected and linked to the textual participants in order to retrieve

the nodes for the network analysis (Talstra 2018b). This task is known as participant tracking or participant resolution and is a complicated task, since BH—like any other natural language—has its own conventions with respect to participant references. Thus, a detailed study of the participant references and their linking to textual participants will be presented in chapter 3.

Secondly, the participants are connected by interactions, grammatically realised as predicates, e.g., speak, sanctify, kill, etc. H contains 936 predicates, corresponding to 181 different verbs. In SNA, edges are normally conceptualised as one particular form of connection, in order to reduce the complexity of the network to binary connections (e.g., who speaks to whom, or who is married to whom). In the SNA of H, all types of interactions are included, in order to be able to construe the role of a participant in light of all its interactions. Chapter 4 addresses the question of how one can compare two types of events. How should a speech interaction between two participants be interpreted *vis-à-vis* a cultic, economic, or emotional transaction between two other participants? The starting point of this inquiry is the linguistic theory of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), which offers a framework for deriving semantic roles from the lexical aspect of verbs, also known as *Aktionsart*. In particular, two verbal features will be argued to be critical for quantifying events, namely, dynamicity and causation. Each of these will be explored in depth in order to identify correlations with the morphology and syntax of Biblical Hebrew: dynamicity in chapter 5, and causation in chapter 6. Finally, a hierarchy of semantic roles

collects the insights yielded in chapters 4–6 and concludes the chapter.

Chapter 7 combines the efforts of chapters 4–6 to create a social network model of H. The social network will be explored using a variety of statistical measures in order to understand the structure of the community at large. In fact, two networks will be discussed and correlated: 1) an ordinary social network modeling participant tracking data and semantic roles (agency), and 2) a so-called control network that takes into account the roles of the participants with respect to their place in the syntactic structure of the text. The last section of the chapter zooms in on a selection of participants to demonstrate the method and to consider their roles in light of the network and their concrete interactions with other participants. Finally, it will be discussed how the social network relates to and sheds further light upon the ethical and theological values embodied in the text.

Chapter 8 concludes the book with an overall summary and a detailed evaluation of each of the methods applied, including participant tracking, event structure analysis, and social network analysis. Finally, new trajectories for research emerging from this study will be outlined.

The research carried out relies on the ETCBC database of the Hebrew Bible, formerly known as the WIVU database. The ETCBC database contains the Hebrew text of the scholarly edition of the HB, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, published by the German Bible Society. The text is richly augmented with linguistic features, most importantly, full morphological parsing of all constituents, part-of-speech tagging, phrase type and function, and

clause type and function. A representation of the ETCBC database is publicly accessible as the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia Amstelodamensis* (BHSA; Roorda et al. 2019). The BHSA is available with Text-Fabric (Roorda et al. 2020), a Python package for processing ancient corpora, including, at the time of writing, the Hebrew Bible, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Quran, transcriptions of Neo-Aramaic recordings, and archives of cuneiform tablets, among others. All datasets and programming scripts referred to throughout this book are available online (<https://github.com/ch-jensen/Roles-and-Relations>).

