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Review of Leviticus (ZECNT)

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Abstract

Sklar, Jay. Leviticus. Vol. 3 of Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible Series, ed. Daniel I. Block. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023.

Keywords

leviticus, old testament, law, exegesis, scripture and interpretation

Cover Page Footnote

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Sklar, Jay. *Leviticus. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old*

Testament: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible, ed. Daniel I. Block. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023. 864 pp. \$69.99.

Jay Sklar begins his commentary on Leviticus by acknowledging what many readers are already thinking: that Leviticus “tends to be the last part of the Bible anyone looks at seriously” (xvii). Very quickly, though, it becomes evident that this has not been true for him. Sklar, vice president of academics and professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, has devoted fifteen years of intentional study into a book that most are either intimidated by or find outdated in usefulness. It is clear from early pages that he deeply loves the text. His call to the reader is to see Leviticus as an invitation from God for all humanity “to live in his holy presence and to live out his holy character as his holy people” (1). He manages to gently guide the reader into this invitation by marrying his scholarship of the text with his shepherding of the reader for how it applies today.

Beginning with a sixty-five-page introduction, Sklar presents background and context regarding the biblical storyline, theological themes, structure, and cultural context necessary for truly understanding this part of God’s word. Sklar is careful to begin this introduction by rooting understanding of Leviticus in the Old Testament storyline of the Israelites being freed from slavery and ultimately in the reminder that Leviticus “belongs to a grand story in which the holy king of the universe has come to live among his sinful and impure people” (4). Once rightly placed into this storyline, Leviticus is then discussed in light of authorship, background, important theological concepts, and other expected information one might find in a commentary. Sklar does this in a way that never sacrifices the fact that the book of Leviticus was about real people in a real community. He approaches the introduction almost like a culturalist, orienting the reader to the specific cultural nuances they will need to consider in order to understand the deeper truths he will discuss in later sections of the book. Making sure to give special attention to cultural realities that modern readers today might not resonate with on their own, Sklar builds understanding of the Israelites, a people who would have found great importance in kingship (9), ritual states (22), and law (43), among other things. This approach invites his reader to consider the worldview of the Israelite community in Leviticus in order to understand the beauty and deeper meaning of the text. This attention to culture is something he weaves throughout the entire commentary as he moves on from the introduction into focused discussion on specific passages.

Like other books in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary series, the majority of the book is dedicated to a slow movement through the biblical text. The following issues are addressed for each identified passage: 1. the main idea of

the passage, 2. the literary context, 3. translation and exegetical outline, 4. structure and literary form, 5. explanation of the text, and 6. canonical and theological significance. This structure allows the commentary to serve both as a reference book and as a type of personal devotional. Issues 1-5 for each passage are rich in Hebrew language background, helpful analogies, connections to other parts of Scripture, definitions that are necessary for understanding, and visual aids in the form of charts. The simplicity of the commentary's organization makes it helpful for anyone who would want to use the book as a reference for deeper understanding. Additionally, Sklar is careful to make sure that the information necessary for understanding a part of the text is present in that specific section, either through referencing other parts of the commentary or repeating information when helpful. This means that someone could pick up this book to look at one specific passage and easily find what they need. And yet, Sklar's writing style is not redundant so a reader can just as easily move through the commentary page by page.

As readers move from issues 1-5 to issue 6 for each identified passage, they are invited into a richness that many other Leviticus commentaries lack. The canonical and theological significance sections of this Leviticus commentary are an invitation into the depths of how Leviticus connects both with broader issues of theology and life today. Sklar writes as if, after giving an academic lecture, he sits on the edge of his desk and speaks from his heart. He shepherds the reader into deep love and conviction brought on by how the theological foundations connect the text to the Gospel and heart issues believers today find themselves in. It is in this canonical and theological significance section that he bridges from the story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10 to discussions on God's justice as loving mercy and a call for spiritual leaders to take their holiness seriously (302). Later in the canonical and theological significance section connected to Leviticus 21 he continues this call with the consideration of how leaders impact those they influence (599). It is in this canonical and theological significance section that he bridges Leviticus 16 to a discussion on the importance of followers of Jesus today addressing sin and impurity in a serious way (440). Later, he continues this discussion connected to Leviticus 24 as he calls out issues of sexual immorality within the church with the simple statement: "Those who believe God dwells with them will do all they can to make sure he feels at home" (648). The culture, language, and text insights presented through issues 1-5 are the preparing of the soil that then allows the truths in the canonical and theological significance section to root down deep into the heart and life of the reader.

Ultimately, Sklar's approach to Leviticus will help the reader better understand that God's desire to dwell with His people is answered through Jesus and that the mandate to be a holy people is a call for Gospel witness. As Sklar puts it, "if the things we see in Leviticus are like an acorn, then the things we see

in Jesus are like a magnificent oak” (769). For those who have never quite been able to wrap their minds around the value of Leviticus, this just might be the commentary that proves a right understanding of Leviticus results in a widened knowledge and love for that magnificent oak of the Gospel. While it would be a valuable addition to any reference library, it might be an even better addition to that stack of devotional books on one’s bedside table.