



THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS WHAT ARE THIS BOOK'S IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S (POLITICAL) THINKING

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1. (Political) Thinking today

To begin, I would like to ask: can you understand how someone can think that a war will bring peace? Do you understand the thinking that is behind the decision to deliver weapons to regions where that region's own people will then fight against human beings with those same weapons? Not to mention the question of principal where the thinking behind the production and trade with weapons is concerned ... Do you understand how it is possible to have qualified German people train the military and the police of countries that are officially branded as terrorist or dictatorial?

While I was working on this lecture, there were daily samples of the inconsistency of politics, of its cowardice and its conformism – or to put it into a coined word, its “unthinking”. Every day I tried to find examples that would testify to recognizable thinking in politics, and I constantly had to change my approach because there was one disaster after the other ...

Therefore, right from the start my conclusion: I don't know whether any thinking is done in politics ..., although I certainly trust that Angela Merkel has the gift of being able to think. I even consider her to be really intelligent and shrewd. And nevertheless I can't say anything about her political thinking, not to mention her colleagues' thinking.

I can only talk about what I observe. I can only try to think myself. And in my thinking, to arrive in the here and now. And that will certainly be political, because I am a totally political person.

To discover whether the Book of Leviticus can have or even has implications for today's political thinking, we first have to clarify some issues, most of which are hermeneutical.

I emphasize that I first want to clarify whether we can assume that there are implications for today's political thinking in the biblical Book of Leviticus. For me, in setting me this task for my talk, this was taken too much for granted. And anticipating what I shall say, I begin with an essential thesis:

“There might be implications for today's political thinking in the Book of Leviticus, but there don't have to be. Leviticus shares in the lot of all biblical books (and of all other religious holy scriptures) in the modern secular State: it does not possess legislative power. And that is good.”

1.1 Thinking

First of all: I would briefly sum up thinking as the ability to converse with oneself. That can be our minimal definition. All the rest of what thinking can be touches on the cosmos of universal mental history. Do animals think? – to touch on just one new and controversially discussed issue. Does thinking assume language? Are images enough? Images are enough for dreaming. I remain with the definition: Thinking is conversation with oneself.

Thinking describes the world, appropriates it, reflects on it and changes it. Thinking is more than mental activity; thinking forms mental space; ultimately thinking forms the world and life. Thinking becomes matter. In every case. That is why thinking can be and can become political. And depending on how the concept of the political is understood, all thinking is political. Certainly according to those on the Left.

According to this definition of thinking, the Book of Leviticus is a book of thinking, for (except for the few narrative passages) it is essentially compiled as a dialogical work and is extremely appropriate for internal “discussion” already in the process of reading. It is a book that teaches; it is teaching, education. It gives order to the world, and it does so in a conversation. The subject speaking is GOD – Adonai. When the text changes its place from teaching / educating to my internal world, GOD – Adonai also changes places. Precisely when the internal conversation maintains the strength to contradict or to resist, it can also be understood as conscience (that is what Hannah Arendt did). In particular, as long as the alienation that comes about through the nature of the conversation with GOD – Adonai is upheld, the conscience can maintain its liberty (another question that also greatly preoccupied Hannah Arendt; think only of her observations on Eichmann, whose conscience was totally corrupted by what he assumed to be Hitler’s will). That does not give any guarantee. But in any case – according to some thinkers in moral theology – when the internal dialogue of thinking does not only occur with myself but comes into contact with a “divine” person opposite, there is an option for freedom. (Pope Benedict, the former Cardinal Ratzinger, very decisively emphasizes this aspect and speaks strongly in favour of a return to forming the conscience in a way that is marked by “religion” [if such a thing is at all possible and can be achieved through education?]).

In any case, we can definitely assume that Leviticus was compiled essentially because of the conviction that education to righteousness and justice, both established by GOD – Adonai, is possible. Otherwise the existence of Leviticus would be a farce or pure irony. And we can also definitely assume that the divine subject, who is the guarantor of the proclaimed rules, ensures the unchangeableness and persistence of the laws.

In this function, right until today the name of God is cited above all in civil religious contexts, for example when swearing an oath in court or before parliament. However, in this context today’s dubious nature of this construction also becomes apparent (when taking their oath in the Bundestag, Joschka Fischer and Gerhard Schröder both abstained from referring to God). Psychologically, setting God up as the “superego” has fallen into disrepute. But in other connections (cf. Ratzinger), the possible need for a bond between the human person and an authority external to humanity is again finding favour.

1.2 Today

In his novel, *Ein unauffälliger Mann* [An inconspicuous Man] (Munich 2007), Charles Chadwick wrote:

“From the little I know about religion, an outstanding part of it is people buttering up to someone out of fear.”

Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Robert Misik and others: alongside the diagnosis that some people like to reach concerning the awakening of religious search movements (at least that is what the German bishops are perceiving) there is a sturdy, intelligent and polemical argument with the religious. And that is not surprising. On the one hand, criticizing the phenomenon of religion really is the thing to do (and criticism of religion is as old as humanity); and on the other hand, at the beginning of the 21st century, making use of religion as a tool is far more advanced than the political thinkers after World War II (Hanna Arendt and Karl Jaspers, to name just two of them) could ever have imagined. And at the latest, after the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 with the votes of the White Christians, the decisive and severe question had to be asked: what exactly is religion? And the conclusion, “opium for the people”, is nothing new!

I therefore want to say clearly: the Today about which I am supposed to talk in connection with the Book of Leviticus is – among the enlightened – profoundly critical of religion if not even hostile towards religion.

And just as much can be said in favour of the criticism of religion as against it. And it remains an insoluble dilemma that GOD cannot be proven and that faith is precisely “believing something to be true”. Period – full stop. And the fact that religions are taken to counsel and called upon in connection with values and obligations, doesn’t improve matters ... For this purpose, it is quite easy to turn them into tools, and the German pope is an intelligent man and makes the connection between religion and values meaningful and convincing, but ultimately not any truer ...

Sam Harris says:

“We don’t need religion for the good. Do we need bad reasons to be good? After all, there are plenty of good reasons to be good.” (TAZ, March 13, 2008, p. X)

My conclusion to these observations about political thinking, about thinking and the today, is that we have to be honest enough to admit without any beautification:

1.3 Conclusions

We are religious people. My faith is based on the assumption that GOD is. For my thinking, my internal conversation with myself, GOD is essential. And nevertheless, something remains. Doubt remains. A lot of what is binding is missing if I enter into life this honestly.

Here in our group, with the conditions outlined here, it should first of all be conceded: we would wish that Leviticus had an influence on today’s political thinking. For we would agree on this much: we give biblical books space in our thinking; they help us to interpret the world and they bring order to our world. For us, biblical books are not nonsense right from the start. But – and we must also hold onto this – they are not equally binding for us. The degree to which they bind each and every one of us depends on our decision or on how we have been formed.

I as a Protestant come from a tradition that in any case considered Leviticus to be almost “superfluous” ... I want to break with that tradition. But I do want to keep the freedom to choose the degree to which biblical books are binding. I am a confessing supporter of the secular State. Also

as a pastor and theologian from East Germany, I welcome the fact that neither the Bible nor any other religious books are legally binding in this country. I am grateful for the Enlightenment and the salutary separation of Church and State (speaking for our country). As a practicing Christian, I experience daily how un-salutary religious dogmatism can be. And it seems as if religions are fundamentally prone to dogmatism and the abuse of power. I welcome everything that checks this deformation. I consider Protestantism originally to have been a movement to check religious mania and dogmatism. However today, when faced with the derailments in the Reform Churches all over the world, I have more and more doubts as to this fundamental assumption of mine ... since it is the so-called evangelical or Lutheran "Pentecostal churches" that are making things crazy ... But now I'm again beginning another topic ...

If we agree that we value biblical books and wish they had at least a little influence on today's thinking (without attaining legal force), we belong to a small group, perhaps almost to a tight circle. But that's just the way it is.

And if we agree on that much, then we strive to carry what is important to us and what convinces us into the world of life, of daily life, of our private lives and also of the political.

Now it is time to look closely at what is written there and at whether and how we want to or should or perhaps should carry it into life.

2. The Book of Leviticus

For our work here during the Bible Week, you have chosen five chapters. I don't know why you decided on them. To begin with, I'm not going to go along with this limitation, but rather will look at the book in a more inclusive way and at the same time, in even shorter excerpts.

2.1 A Book for Israel (e.g. Lev 25:25 and many more)

Leviticus is a book of rules for Israel. Its purpose is the sanctification of the people and the confirmation of God's right of ownership of Israel. Its validity for other peoples is therefore totally questionable. That makes reading it and working on it – for me as a Christian – delicate, especially if work on it goes beyond a literary interest and has to do with the validity of its set of rules for other people or even religions. I mean that as a question that I would like to discuss with you. Without knowing your answer(s), I'm just going to start now and to look for what I consider to be politically relevant and to gather together what I would like to carry into political thinking today with influence and strength.

2.2 Misdemeanours are possible. Misdemeanours are the rule (Lev 4; 5; 7 and many more)

The whole book is based on the culpability of all human beings and on the fact that all human beings are culpable. There is / are no exception/s. Said even more clearly, there is no immunity, neither among the priestly personnel nor among the powerful nor among those who are politically active, neither among the poor nor among the rich, nor among foreigners who are guests ... I like that. That is an insight that I sorely miss today (a key word: compensatory payments to managers who have driven companies and people to their ruin).

Without partiality, those who have become guilty must pay compensation. And in estimating the amount to be paid, the material situation of the guilty person is taken into consideration (e.g. Lev 5:7). What is definite is the fact that there are no exceptions. I like that.

Nor is there any debt for which there is no compensation. That is also a teaching from Leviticus. Insight or acceptance of others' judgments is part of the compensation, as is clarification between people and clarification before and with GOD (Lev 16:29-31).

2.3 Ownership is only for a time

All rules having to do with property are based on the brevity of having. They see ownership as temporary and on loan. That is noticeable in the rules about robbery and irresponsible dealings (Lev 5:21ff.), but it can also be recognized behind the Sabbath year and the Jubilee year (Lev 25:23 and many more). I like that. That is an insight that I sorely miss today.

The ultimate power of disposal over all property is with GOD. That too is a barrier to all greed and lack of moderation that is worth thinking about. The rules regarding possessing always include those who have no possessions and those who have been cheated as well as the foreigners with a right to hospitality (cf. Lev 19:10).

The claim in Leviticus that all land ultimately belongs to GOD – Adonai and therefore cannot be sold (Lev 25:23) is particularly striking and dangerous to the mechanism of capitalism. As every child learns with Monopoly, land property – and in particular Park Avenue – is the condition for entry into value and well-being in the societies marked by the West. Through GOD's ultimate ownership of land, Monopoly becomes impossible.

Socio-historically we can assume that this ruling in particular was due to a worsening in the social situation precisely because of entirely different conditions in the laws concerning land ownership in Israel. The law that GOD owns the land was set up in order to give a different structural view of things in a situation where poverty was spreading at an alarming rate through loss of land among the families of small landowners (in particular Amos). Historically, this law presumably never really und ultimately had any force in civil law. The claim that something else is also possible, gives the prophets a powerful basis for their criticism of society, and to those who are convinced that "another world is possible" a vision, a "how", an idea of the radical change in conditions. Thanks be to GOD (cf. the campaign for the year of remission).

2.4 There is variety in the world

All the rules for distinguishing between the profane and the holy, between pure and impure (Lev 10) can first of all be read as discoveries of difference and then as means of protecting the differences (uniformity is excluded. How nice!), so ultimately as a great praise of variety.

The consequences on what can be eaten and touched only make clear that not everything is always available. The holy protects the holy from the grasp of greed and desire. I'll say something on the rules of human impurity later, when I will return to the esteem I'm expressing here.

2.5 Priestly function as medical function

The examination of sacrificial animals (Lev 7 and many more), taking them apart, the examination of human illnesses (in particular of the skin), the assessment and attention to the purity of animals, human beings and objects (Lev 13) – all these rules can be read as medical rules. They assume great competence in communication and they teach care.

I want to emphasize the protective nature of the rules above all concerning issues of female purity and impurity. The impurity during the week after giving birth (Lev 12), for example, for centuries successfully protected women from being burdened too soon with work and exploitation. (Keeping this time of care has even been taken up in the Christian rite of baptism: the new mother was not expected to go to church until the end of the week after giving birth.) At the end of that week, the community of women in solidarity with the woman who had just given birth also ended, since the household tasks that had been split up among the other women because of the impurity could again be done by the woman concerned.

2.6 All laws ultimately serve to protect the vulnerable

That can be said almost on principle about the nature of the Torah (Frank Crüsemann always emphasizes this): the neighbour is protected. I want to extend this to the protection of all who are vulnerable. The value of the individual life becomes particularly evident in the assessment of damage in the law of talions (“an eye for an eye”; Lev 24:17-22) (particularly clear in Lev 19, the extensive and intensified version of the Decalogue).

The shaping of the Jubilee year (which is probably due to the same historical development as what was said about GOD’s ownership of the land, and which consequently also remains a fictional regulation) clearly shows insight into the vulnerable and points out the need for healing, which is best preserved from wear and tear through lack of loving care and attention when it is institutionalized. During the Jubilee year, everything again becomes whole. It is no coincidence if that sounds like the old magic spell spoken by people comforting the small child who had hurt him- or herself and that worked small miracles: blowing on the wound they would say: By the time you get married, everything will be healed again.

A good future, a rule for one year of special care, give life strength and “greater hope” (Ilse Aichinger) in the present moment.

2.7 Holiness is possible

The greatest positive demand in Leviticus is that it is possible for Israel to be holy (Lev 19:2ff.; Lev 20:7; Lev 22 and more). Said more simply, that could mean: it is possible for Israel to be good, to prove to be a “*mensch*”. That is what is expected of the people. In this way, the foundation for all activity ultimately becomes a positive image of the human being. That looks profoundly suspicious and strange to Christianity. But I am totally enthusiastic about it. I am convinced that people find their way to what is good only because of this “demand for the good” (I learned this from the Taizé Brothers). Israel’s sanctification makes GOD’s holiness earthly. The world becomes transparent for GOD’s brightness. The world is made warm by GOD’s love. The serfdom of the children of Israel (Lev 25:55) turns the earth into a dwelling place for GOD’s children. How nice.

2.8 Doing and not doing have consequences (Lev 26:14-45)

The greatest danger comes from Protestantism, presumably because of its teaching on justification that can be misunderstood. The lunacy of “GOD’s preceding grace” has had destructive consequences for human beings and for creation. That is well known. Leviticus on the other hand impresses upon us: Doing and not doing have consequences. And that is the way it should be.

Even if in the end everything will be entrusted to GOD’s grace. But that is not the business of human beings. But precisely of GOD’s – Adonai’s. And it’s good that way.

Thank you very much. So let us appeal to the conscience of politicians:

“You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them. I am Adonai, GOD – for – you.” (Lev 18:3-4)

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff