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SBL Annual Meeting 2015

Epic Law? Parallelism and Other Poetic Constructions
in the Holiness Legislation (Leviticus 17–26)

Abstract:

In a short line of striking simplicity and beauty, the prophet Micah tells us what God expects from mortals: “Only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The poetic nature of this line is beyond serious question. In comparison, the preamble to the sexual purity laws in Leviticus reads, “My rules you shall observe, and my laws you shall keep, walking by them: I am YHWH your God” (Lev 18:4). If this verse occurred in another context, readers might identify grammatical parallelism, poetic word-pairs, marked diction, and even a “what’s more” heightening literary construction. Situated in a law collection, though, few would call this verse poetic. This paper will examine the compositional style of the Holiness Legislation (HL) in Leviticus 17–26, arguing that it contains many significant examples of literary devices usually associated with poetry. Specifically, HL’s use of parallelism and sentence-level chiasmus will be discussed. Types of parallelism in HL to be explored include correlative (“You shall not insult the deaf, and before the blind you shall not put a stumbling block” [19:14a]), euphemistic (“I will set my face against the person who eats the blood, I will cut him off from among his people,” [17:10b]), explanatory (“You shall fear your God; I am YHWH” [19:32b]), and reformulating (“The nakedness of your father, that is, the nakedness of your mother, you shall not expose. She is your mother! Do not expose her nakedness” [18:7]). Other ancient Near Eastern law collections will also be discussed, showing that the compositional style of HL is unusual in its repeated use of poetic devices outside of a prologue or epilogue. Identifying a characteristic compositional style for HL can help answer whether Holiness material exists outside of Leviticus 17–26, adding another element to the criteria of vocabulary and ideology commonly used to identify Holiness additions outside of HL.