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The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond

Between 1991 and 2001, Jacob Milgrom published a massive three-volume commentary on Leviticus for the Anchor Bible Commentary series. With a total of 2,688 pages, this is the most comprehensive commentary on Leviticus in history and has opened up new territory in scholarship regarding this previously neglected biblical book.

Jacob Milgrom, a scholar and rabbi, was known for his passion for studying what is known as “priestly” literature, namely, biblical texts in Leviticus and other books that deal with concerns of priests. He demonstrated that such texts, which critical scholars following Julius Wellhausen had considered to be disjointed, were actually “coherent records of authentic ancient Israelite rituals and laws.”

Milgrom discovered that biblical legislation concerning sacrifices and purification forms a system that was intended to impress upon the Israelites concepts such as the difference between divine holiness and profane (non-holy) or impure categories; the effects of moral faults and physical ritual impurities on the sanctuary; the need to purge such evils from God’s sanctuary so that his Presence would not depart; and the sanctity of life.

In 1980, Roy Gane, now professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern languages in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, began his MA in biblical Hebrew language and literature at the University of California, Berkeley where Milgrom was teaching. Gane came with almost no interest in Leviticus, but Milgrom soon changed that.

Besides the fact that Milgrom knew more about Leviticus than anybody else in the world, Gane was struck by Milgrom’s fascinating teaching style, which was quite rabbinic. To prepare students for thorough verse-by-verse discussion, Milgrom had them carefully study the Hebrew text and also divided among them a comprehensive range of ancient to modern literature regarding the biblical book. These sources in various languages included ancient translations, Dead Sea Scrolls, medieval Jewish and modern commentaries, monographs and articles, as well as Ancient Near Eastern materials for comparison in the Akkadian, Sumerian, Hittite and Ugaritic languages.

During the class period, which took place in Milgrom’s home in the hills overlooking Berkeley, the 8–10 students would report their findings for each verse, with one student taking the lead for each verse and the others then adding information. Together they struggled with questions raised by the text, probing it for possible answers.

Milgrom allowed students to think. Rather than talking all the time, he gave long pauses or just sat and listened as the students debated with each other, occasionally steering the discussion by asking further questions. “And then he would pull things together and show how one passage of Scripture would interpret another passage through close reading of the text,” Gane remembers. “What was exciting about it was participating in the exploration and discovery of new things and seeing everything work together as a system.”

For Gane, these classes with Milgrom were a turning point. His fascination with the book of Leviticus led him to write his PhD dissertation on Leviticus under Milgrom, which he completed in 1992 and subsequently published as “Ritual Dynamic Structure” (Gorgias Press, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004). Since then, Gane has published “Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy” (Eisenbrauns, 2004).
2005), which includes a major critique of Milgrom’s influential theory regarding the transfer of sins and physical ritual impurities to the sanctuary and their removal from it on the Day of Atonement.

Milgrom, who enjoyed a healthy debate and appreciated thoughtful analysis of his work, even when it disagreed with him, wrote the following for the back cover of “Cult and Character”: “[Gane’s] book is a marvel of close reading and impeccable logic… [it] is the first major critique of my work, and I am immensely happy and proud that it was done by my student and that my contribution is so comprehensively acknowledged… It is a major work and will be the standard for a long time.”

Milgrom formed lasting friendships with his students. After his death at the age of 87 in June of 2010, when memorial sessions were held in his honor at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in London (July 2011) and the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco (November 2011), many of the presenters were his former students.

Gane initiated the compilation and editing of the best papers from these sessions (selected by peer review), as well as some other invited essays (also peer-reviewed), into a memorial volume in honor of Milgrom titled, “Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond.” The Society of Biblical Literature will publish the forthcoming book as part of the Resources for Biblical Study series. It is edited by Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen, an Israeli Hittitologist, with the assistance of an editorial board comprised almost entirely of Milgrom’s former students.

It was important to the editors of the Resources for Biblical Study series that the book be thematically cohesive, rather than a miscellaneous collection of essays, as is common of many volumes that honor individual scholars, including “Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom” (Eisenbrauns, 1995). Therefore, the forthcoming Milgrom memorial volume aims, as the Introduction states, “to serve as a more narrowly focused and cohesive resource for priestly and related literature.” It also includes a bibliography of Milgrom’s extensive publications, some of which were posthumous, ranging from 1994–2014. A bibliography of his earlier publications, ranging from 1955–1994, was included in “Pomegranates and Golden Bells.”

The 19 essays by scholars from around the world are centered around Milgrom’s main interests, which form the five sections or parts of the book: 1) interpretation of priestly and holiness texts, 2) composition of priestly and holiness texts, 3) literary structure of priestly and holiness texts, 4) relationships between priestly, holiness and Deuteronomic texts, and 5) extra-biblical texts relating to priestly texts.

“He was so great in this field, such a pioneer,” says Gane. This new volume addresses the question: “Now that he has passed away, where do we go from here?” “It’s not just about him,” Gane explains; “the purpose of the book is to exemplify, in several different areas in which he was interested and to which he contributed, the kinds of contributions that are now being made by other scholars in these fields, which can inspire further exploration.”

Milgrom’s love for debate, which was so often witnessed in the classroom as he watched his students interact, is also honored in this volume. The writers show considerable differences of opinion, and the introduction to the volume clearly states that the editors have made no effort to harmonize the differences. Both Gane and Taggar-Cohen recognize that critical discussion, including further critique of Milgrom’s work, is necessary for progress in understanding the biblical texts that were so dear to his heart. The essays that comprise the volume are a good indication that his legacy of thorough analysis and profound reflection continues.

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre! He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry. — Psalm 147:7-9

Outside the classroom, Rahel Schafer, assistant professor of biblical studies, can be found camping with her church youth group or climbing mountains with her family. As a child, she was encouraged in her love for nature by her parents, both professors in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. “I’ve always been interested in animals, ever since I was a kid,” she remarks. “I thought I was going to become a biologist. A biologist trained in theology.”

As an undergraduate student at Andrews University, Schafer completed a Bachelor of Science in biology. But she was also drawn to biblical studies and completed a Master of Arts in religion, majoring in Old Testament, in the Seminary. She later pursued a Master of Science in biology, writing her thesis on paleontology and taphonomy under the direction of Thomas Goodwin. Her research project on turtle fossils in the Bridger Formation of Southwest Wyoming helped hone an attention to detail that has proven important in her current research.

After her master’s, she began looking into doctoral programs in both biology and theology and was accepted into Wheaton College’s doctoral program in biblical and theological studies. She proposed to do an interdisciplinary study in biology and theology, focusing on God’s care for creation, under Daniel Block, who was also interested in the topic. “I worked on it for about two years and realized it was going to be a big topical study. It was really overwhelming going through every single instance where an animal was mentioned in the Bible,” she says.

It became clear that a general study of God’s care for creation would result in an overview of previous studies and, while Schafer is interested in the topic, her real passion is pure exegesis. During a doctoral seminar on the topic of the possiblity/impassibility of God, she wrote a paper on how God