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Between Law and Grace: Ritual and Ritual Studies in Recent Evangelical Thought

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1. Introduction

In 1991 Mark A. Noll published an insightful study focusing upon the relationship between evangelicals and secular scholarship. He suggested that evangelical scholars (and I take this term here to have a broad meaning, including all those who have a high concept of Scripture) have never been as active in their respective professional academic contexts as they are today.1 Interestingly, Noll implies that while NT evangelical scholars seem to be more integrated in their professional peer group, this is not the case for OT scholars.2 I think that over the past ten years, the involvement of OT scholars in their respective professional community has increased—one has only to look at the SBL annual congress OT sections and chairs as well as the regional SBL meetings.3 However, as pointed out by Noll, evangelical scholarship needs to become “meta-critical,” i.e., scholars need to look at the larger picture, incorporating the fruits of specific biblical research in a larger multi-disciplinary context, and thus become trend setters, rather than mere apologists or disconnected island-scholars.4

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2 Ibid., 188.
3 However, this seems to be the case more in the USA than in Europe. Often, European mainstream critical scholarship simply ignores technical or professional research done by evangelical scholars. Ibid., 202.
In this study I will look at the prevalence of ritual studies and connected themes in conservative evangelical scholarship between 1990–1999. This is of course a descriptive and historical task. However, based upon my historical findings, I will try to delve into the “collective psyche” (whatever that may be) of evangelical scholarship, seeking to understand the underlying patterns and, finally, indicating possible future directions for evangelical scholarship on ritual.

2. Ritual Studies in Evangelical Scholarship—Definitions and Overview

The phrase “ritual studies” as used in this paper will indicate any research, be it in OT, NT, biblical, systematic, or pastoral theology, which involves a discussion of some aspect of ritual and uses the term “ritual.” This is a broad definition seeking to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The following evangelical/conservative journals have been included in the historical review: Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS—1990–1999), Bibliotheca Sacra (BSac—1990–1999), Emmaus Journal (EJ—1991–1999), Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS—1990–1999), Trinity Journal (TJ—1990–1998), and the Westminster Theological Journal (WTJ—1990–1999). Other keywords, such as “rite(s)” or “cult,” could also have been included, but in view of space limitations and time constraints, I have restricted myself to only one keyword. The following table provides a synoptic view of the study of ritual in these journals and will utilize special siglas to indicate the importance of ritual for the perspective of the article:

☐ = ritual receives only cursory mention and does not represent a major argument  
■ = the study of ritual is important to the argument of the article/study but not the main focus  
■■ = ritual is the main focus of the article/study, sometimes including theoretical/methodological reflections

For the sake of a more graphical division, four distinct areas have been designated. The first two—OT and NT research—are self-explanatory. With systematic theology I have included the scarce reference to historical theology as well. In the case of practical theology, the more recent concern with missiology has been included. Furthermore, it should be noted that only journals published in English and originating in the USA were reviewed. There are a number of academic journals in Spanish, Portuguese, or French whose editorial policies subscribe to a theologically conservative perspective. Furthermore, British and European journals were also not taken into consideration. Neither book reviews nor dissertation abstracts were included in the study. In this digital age, full text searches are able to pinpoint the single use of a specific term, although subsequent reading confirmed that the use of the term might not always be technical. Unfortunately, AUSS is not yet available in digitally searchable format (as is the
3. Description of Evidence

All in all, out of 1043 articles reviewed, 84 (8.05%) contained in one form or another a reference to “ritual.” On first sight this does not seem to be such a bad ratio, especially in view of the fact that ritual texts/ritual studies represent only

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6 Although B. Dabrowski, “Ceramic Stand From Tell El-‘Umeiri,” JUTS 29/3 (1991): 195-203, technically deals with an object encountered in archaeological research, its time frame and context is the OT, and thus it is included in this rubric.

7 I have opted to include E. M. Curtis, “Ancient Psalms and Modern Worship,” BSac 154/615 (1997): 285-296 in the practical theology section, since it focuses mostly on lessons to be learned from the ancient text and does not represent an exegetical study.
one aspect of biblical genres or theological topics. However, when looking more closely at the content and use of the references and qualifying the usage one immediately notes a different scenario. The following table illustrates the situation in terms of quality in relation to quantity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Focus</th>
<th>4 (0.38%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important Mention</td>
<td>13 (1.24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cursory Mention</td>
<td>67 (6.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mention</td>
<td>959 (91.94%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the 1043 reviewed articles, 959 (91.94%) do not contain any reference to “ritual.” Sixty-seven articles (6.42%) mention the term, but do so in a non-technical way, often assuming concepts without introducing them. Most examples found in this group mention the term “ritual” only in a cursory way—and interestingly enough—many of these also belong to the field of NT.

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8 Others include legal texts, prophetic texts, historiographical narratives, apocalyptic literature, genealogical texts, etc.
studies, where the dichotomy between salvation by “ritual” and salvation by
faith is assumed, with most of the standard references discussing Paul’s theology

Local Church. The Structure, Ministry, and Functions of the Church,” EJ 6/1 (1997): 3-42; D. J.

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society: J. F. Macarthur, Jr., “Faith According to the Apos-
or his controversy with the so-called “Judaizers.” Very seldom is this dichotomy described in an adequate way. It is assumed and has developed a life of its own, having become some type of common supposition of NT scholars. Some examples should suffice here: Walter Russell discusses the Galatian conflict in terms of resistance to the acceptance of Jewish ritual and ethical norms—or in the final instance the Christian struggle for identity in connection with the Jewish background of the newly founded church. Herbert Bateman puzzles about possible rituals used by the Judaizers in Philippi, suggesting that their true nature is not clear. Robert Thomas hypothesizes that the Judaizing heresy in Galatia had to do with ritual circumcision. More examples could be added here.

I have classified thirteen articles (1.24%) as containing important references to ritual, but not focusing in their totality on ritual—either in its application or underlying theory. Three of these thirteen are in the practical theology/Missiology category. Wayne House discusses the function of ritual in Hinduism and Shintoism in the context of the theological question of the resurrection and reincarnation. The study focuses on how other religions (including

10 For all NT references, see table above.
11 See here, for example, W. S. Campbell, “Judaizers,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 512-516. It seems that the biblical text is not clear enough to determine whether the opposition should be considered a local characteristic or if it comprised a more universal semi-organized group.
all major world religions) have resolved the issue of death and whether reincarnation as understood by these religions is compatible with Biblical theology. House includes a very interesting quote when commenting on Shintoism that might provide an insight into the standard evangelical conservative approach to ritual:

Human soteriology [in this religious framework] is a return to original perfection and unity with the divine essence of the universe. It involves individual (ritual) effort and/or belief, toward undifferentiated Being, through the cosmic law of karma worked out in reincarnation.

House does not agree with the perspective of Shintoism. However, this “ritual effort and belief by the individual” has an off-putting effect. The second substantial discussion of ritual in this section involves a study of the importance of ritual (namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper) in the early church by David MacLeod. Actually MacLeod is more interested in proving that the specific ecclesiology practiced by the Open Brethren has a biblical basis. He only recognizes two rituals instituted by our Lord Jesus, though he argues that they have been “seriously compromised,” when comparing the biblical standard with the modern practice of child baptism and the sacramental and automatic (ex opere operato) theology of communion found in many denominations. While this is not the place to discuss the biblical concept and theology of baptism and the Lord’s supper (on which I tend to side with MacLeod), the use of the terms ritual and rite again display a negative perspective to which I will return later.

Theodore Turnau III discusses the lack of cultural, political and—most obviously—religious consensus in the context of the predominant philosophical paradigm (which in itself is a contradiction), i.e., postmodernism. The very nature of postmodern reasoning, ideology, and thought patterns questions the existence of a common set of answers, generally understood as moral values. Turnau proposes the metaphor of the “narrative” or “texts,” which, while being distinct, share some underlying center—according to him, the Christian story tradition. Specific “texts” include ritual, family tradition, TV, Hollywood— institutions we inhabit every day. Taking up the line of thought where Turnau ends, a proper understanding and consciousness of ritual can help us discover our common language again and represents an important tool for pastoral contexts.

Only one of thirteen studies containing an important reference to ritual could be found in the area of systematic/historical theology. Betty Talbert
Wettler\textsuperscript{22} studies some current influential views on secular feminist religious metaphor and argues that they are ultimately insufficient to describe the nature of God. In this context, according to Talbert-Wettler, feminists commandeered the concept of ritual in religious myth and utilized it to “re-create” their new world order.\textsuperscript{23} It is clear that ritual in this context is not compatible with conservative evangelical scholarship.

By far the highest quantity of references to ritual can be found in the biblical studies section, namely three and five respectively in NT and OT studies. David MacLeod discusses the ritual of the day of atonement in Hebrews as based upon the festival as described in Lev 16.\textsuperscript{24} However, MacLeod, while referring many times to distinct ritual aspects of the festival, does not include a technical discussion of what ritual as a vessel of meaning involves. William David Spencer’s study of Heb 10:1–18 includes a similar focus and discusses OT ritual superseded by Christ’s ministry.\textsuperscript{25} He discusses the general role of sacrifice in ritual systems. Drawing connections to ancient and modern religious expressions, he distinguishes between three general religious types, namely (1) power religions,\textsuperscript{26} (2) life-style religions,\textsuperscript{27} and (3) relationship religions. While he classifies Christianity in the third category, Spencer contends that the sacrificial language of both the OT and its NT typology does speak to practitioners of both power and life-style religions. In this sense, ritual and its sub-rite of sacrifice provides a basis for a powerful apologetic of Christianity and should be understood and utilized.

David deSilva studies Rev 13 in the context of the immediate historical context for the first audience of John’s book.\textsuperscript{28} He understands the use of the term “beast” as a de-legitimizing attack on a very important social order actually representing the Christian opposition to the domineering worldview prevalent in the Roman empire. Without a specific evaluation of deSilva’s main thesis, his study is the first so far reviewed which includes a serious theoretical reflection on ritual and its function.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, he mentions legitimization as part and parcel

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{26} He writes: “Power religions are those traditional (as opposed to written scripture) faiths that seek to balance power between the human and the divine. The traditional Canaanite faiths we cited earlier would fit here, as would pre-Columbian Carib faith and African traditional religions and their new world extensions in Haitian Voudoun, Latin Santeria, Brazilian Condomble, Trinidadian Shango and Jamaican Obeah. The pagan systems that permeated Europe and produced Druidism into the neopagan revivals of Wicca and Asatru also qualify as power religions” (ibid., 195).
\textsuperscript{27} In this category fall Buddhism, Hinduism, and other eastern religions.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 190-192.
of the ritual agenda—an important point in ritual theory, which, however, has recently been challenged by theorists in the field. DeSilva bases his comments on work done by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Thus, by connecting a well-known power symbol of the Roman cultural context (the imperial cult) and by utilizing this symbol in a negative sense (the image of the beast), John practiced a veiled but powerful criticism of the present system. It is clear that deSilva’s observations tumble if one does not understand this biblical image as a reference to the Roman imperial cult. Notwithstanding this issue, it is important that this is the first study that provides even some cursory access to ritual theory.

Angel Manuel Rodriguez published in 1996 a study concerning the literary structure of Lev 16. While he does not provide an introduction to or discussion of the theory of ritual, he distinguishes three sub-rites (or elements) that together integrate a new ritual complex, including the entrance rite, the cleansing rites, and the elimination rites. Rodriguez (in my view correctly) argues for a literary and theological unity of the chapter based upon the ritual elements. While not treating the issue of the complexity and interaction of ritual action as the main focus of the article, it is an important and innovative observation—something I also pointed out in an article on the sequence and ritual action in Lev 8 that appeared in *Biblica* in the same year. Jerry Hullinger also focuses on the subject of sacrifice, albeit in Ezek 40-48. Taking as his point of departure a dispensationalist perspective on eschatology, he suggests that the OT sacrificial ritual is efficacious, while Christ’s sacrifice dealt with the internal cleansing of the conscience. Clearly, with this opinion Hullinger does not follow mainstream scholarly opinion on ritual. However, at the least, many references to ritual are included in his study, although he does not get down to its basics.

Terence Kleven in his study on 2 Sam 6 takes issue with Leonard Rost’s thesis regarding the origin of the ark narrative. While he is not particularly concerned about definitions or a theoretical discussion about ritual, he discusses

30 See here C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York-Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 193-196, who suggests that ritual is not the instrument of power structures (such as politics), but is actually the result of these power relations.
question of a possible occurrence of a ritual in the bringing of a shrine for a
coronation in this section. He suggests that the stylistic ritualistic language par-
ticular to the chapter represents a deliberate use of language to develop the dy-
namics of the narrative.

Meredith Kline studies ritual details of the Passover feast as described in
Exod 12 and connects the image of the hovering Spirit of God in Gen 1:2 with
the central term of יַיְשַׁלָּם.36 His discussion concerning the ritual is mainly com-
parative, focusing upon Egyptian material, and he does not provide a definition
and adequate reference to what is understood as ritual and its elements.

John Hilber’s study of the worship theme in Exod 24 emphasizes the im-
portance of blood manipulation “in a solemn ceremony of ratification”38 of the
covenant. The rites contain three sub-actions which are all introduced by the
verbal form יָגוּז, “and he took,” an important marker of ritual sub-rites. His
reference to Gordon Wenham’s connection suggesting a common interpretation
of the blood manipulation rites in Lev 8 and Exod 24 as symbolizing renewed
communion seems to me—at least in the case of Lev 8—more intuitive than
exegetical.

A rare discussion of the prophetic perspective in connection with ritual can
be found in Bruce Reichenbach’s study.39 He argues that Isaiah understands
atonement in terms of a healing metaphor. He writes: “The Servant bears our
sins and heals us with his wounds. Healing understood in this way is at the very
least a symbolic ritual.”40 Reichenbach provides some comparative and modern
eamples to the type of healing ritual he envisions for Isaiah.

Only four out of 1043 articles (0.38%)—according to my evaluation—deal
with ritual in a systematic and technical way. All except one belong to the cate-
gory of OT studies—which in a sense is understandable and to be expected,
since it is the OT that contains a sizable amount of ritual textual data. Roy
Gane’s comparative study of the macrostructure of ANE Sancta purification
days41 concerns the structure of these rituals distinguishing between regular
(“daily”), festival, and special subrites, constructed into a day for purifying the
sanctuary of the respective culture. He indicates both comparable and distinct
elements and traits of these complex rituals and finishes on a historical note,
suggesting that the comparable structure actually could be used as an argument
for the antiquity of the Israelite day of atonement as described in Lev 16. Gane
does not discuss a specific underlying theory of ritual—perhaps he takes it for
granted that it would be automatically understood by his audience.

38 Ibid., 182.
40 Ibid., 558.
41 “Schedules for Deities: Macrostructure of Israelite, Babylonian, and Hittite Sancta Purifica-
tion Days,” AUSS 36/2 (1998): 231-244.
Duane Christensen writes from a very distinct perspective. His concern is the canonical process and, more specifically, the demonstration of this process in the book of Psalms. However, his contribution to ritual study—which apparently has nothing to do with the process of canonization—includes a comparative ritual from last century Indians (Iroquois), including specific rites of intensification. He concludes by comparing the canonization process of the OT (and more specifically the book of Psalms) with the structure and oral transmission of the Code of Handsome Lake. However, while looking beyond the rim of traditional biblical studies, he does not provide the necessary theoretical basis concerning ritual.

Another helpful example of the importance of ritual studies for exegesis and theology can be found in David Howard’s discussion of the recurring three-day period (1:11; 2:22; 3:2) in Josh 1–3. He provides an extensive discussion of specific ritual actions in the context of the chronological framework of these three chapters, taking as his point of departure the fact that the first three chapters of Joshua are “concerned with proper ritual and cultic concerns.” Howard’s discussion is helpful in establishing a viable chronology for these chapters, but also provides an important marker to highlight the interaction between regular exegesis and ritual studies. As with most examples seen above, Howard does not elaborate on specific theoretical aspects of ritual, but rather presupposes that we all understand the same thing when encountering this term.

The final important study was published by Peter Leithart in 1997 and studies the interaction of the Eucharist with culture. I have categorized it in the Systematic/Historical Theology section. Leithart suggests that the traditional discussion of the Eucharist in terms of what is there or represented and how it works is too limited and due to past historical contexts. Modern anthropology “has explored how rituals express, reinforce, and even constitute the values and structures of a community” and Leithart demonstrates in his presentation a good understanding of the basic works on ritual theory. Of all the reviewed publications, this is the only one dealing with the theory of ritual in an evangelical

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43 This seems to be an evangelical study of the Psalms without Gunkel, as discussed by Martin G. Klingbeil, “Off the Beaten Track: An Evangelical Reading of the Psalms without Gunkel,” presented on November 15, 2001, at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado.
45 Ibid., 545. These include covenant renovation rituals, purification/preparation rituals, Passover celebration, etc.
47 Ibid., 161.
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conservative context. However, Leithart only refers to these models and does not contribute to or advance them.

Before attempting to pinpoint more specifically some of the probable causes for the present (sad) state of ritual studies in conservative scholarship, I would like to include a short note on two important books published recently by two major conservative publishers. In 1997 Zondervan published in five volumes the comprehensive *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* While keeping with traditional theological word books of the OT and following an alphabetic order of word entries, it also provides a helpful section of ten introductory articles to OT exegesis. However, among all the useful introductory chapters, no chapter talks about OT religion or more specifically ritual. Historiography, theology, textual criticism, literary analysis, narrative criticism, linguistics and others are well represented, but no reference can be found to the deciphering of ritual texts. Two years later, Baker Book House published the very useful *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches.* Of the sixteen essays included, two would lend themselves to a section dealing with ritual in the OT context. However neither Gordon Wenham’s chapter on the Pentateuch nor Bill Arnold’s study on religion in ancient Israel discuss any significant aspect of ritual studies. These brief references should by no means suggest that these volumes are somewhat less important or deficient. But as has already been seen in the review of the published journal material, they reflect the focus of OT evangelical scholarship.

4. Evaluation

How is it possible that in evangelical publications ritual studies play either no role or a very limited role? In 1998 I wrote in the introduction to my dissertation, published by Edwin Mellen Press:

Ritual studies are booming! In the wake of renewed interest in the religious history of Israel, the sub-discipline of ritual studies is constituting an important part of the investigation into the religious ideas and practices of ancient cultures. This trend can also be observed outside the realm of OT and ANE studies and suggests a new urgency in attempts to understand man’s religious conscience and behavior.

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51 It must be stated, however, that Arnold does mention the important ritual texts from Emar, albeit in very cursory manner (ibid., 417).
Clearly I was mistaken, and I publicly recant—or better, rephrase this statement. “Ritual studies are booming—but only in mainstream scholarship!” While evangelical scholarship has kept up to date and is contributing generously in most other major areas of biblical research, ritual studies seem to have gotten small change. Major contributions in this field come from Jewish scholars (although not exclusively), but are seldom published in evangelical publications. A good example is the work of Daniel Fleming of New York University. While we share similar interests in our research, we also share a meaningful friendship and compatible perspectives concerning Scripture. Fleming could be included in the broad definition of theologically conservative scholars with a high regard for Scripture—however, all his numerous publications on ritual have appeared outside the evangelical community. In the Adventist community I see only three OT scholars working on ritual, one being Roy Gane from Andrews University (who studied under Jacob Milgrom at the University of California); Angel Rodriguez, who has, however, focused upon other areas of theological


54 Immediately the works of Baruch A. Levine and Jacob Milgrom come to mind. Other important contributors include Menahem Haran and Moshe Greenberg.

In the following paragraphs I will present five possible reasons why ritual studies is the neglected stepchild of 21st century conservative scholarship. Most of these explanations can be reached by a careful reading of the mindset of evangelical scholars in the context of postmodernism, as visible in the research thrust, methodologies, and theological presuppositions.

1. In 1981, Gordon McConville observed that legislation on ritual is often “quietly and piously consigned to oblivion.” This was—in his opinion—and still is—mainly due to the perceived “barbaric” nature of some of these rites and the underlying evolutionary theological concept of development from primitive religion to some type of higher religion not needing the spilling of blood or any other rituals to achieve reconciliation. Somehow, evangelicalism got caught in between law and grace, focusing upon the latter at the expense of the former. Evangelicals claim a strong heritage of early Protestantism, and it might just be this Protestant bias against biblical ritual which is coming to the surface. Interestingly, Julius Wellhausen—a committed Protestant—co-developed the now (in)famous Neue Dokumentenhypothese in order to synthesize a religious system of Israelite religion that was acceptable to Protestant theology and that was clearly pointed against Judaism and its accompanying legalism. I do not intend to resolve the tension between law and grace, but rather describe historical realities. Actually, this observation can already be found in an essay by Greg Chirichigno in 1981 in JETS. Perhaps the time has come to discard inherited...
paradigms and return to the concept so aptly expressed by the apostle Paul in 2 Tim 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

2. Relevance is in vogue these days. Worship needs to be “relevant.” Meditation and Scripture reading,60 preaching and mission need to be relevant.62 So, when discussing ritual texts from a far-removed time period, the issue of relevance is often raised. Frequently, the explicit “non-human” nature of cultic/ritual texts makes them difficult to penetrate, since they can be classified either as prescriptive or descriptive ritual texts.63 The technical term “descriptive ritual text” as a sub-genre of ritual texts was first introduced in 1965 by Baruch Levine and has counterparts in other ANE literature.64 The often technical and repetitive language challenges both the biblical scholar and the lay reader. But does not the mere fact of their inclusion in the canon of both OT and NT indicate their importance?

3. There is a distinct bias in NT studies against ritual. Ritual is viewed as “dead,” “legalistic,” and connected to a type of Judaism that was always confronting the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, a dichotomy between OT law/ritual and NT grace/freedom is postulated—a dichotomy not


necessarily reflecting Scriptural realities. New Testament ritual exists and includes more than merely baptism and communion. In order to understand the structure and message of NT texts, one needs to grasp their often ritual focus. A good example of the importance of this issue has been presented by the different publications of K. C. Hanson.

4. Another reason—based upon internal OT presuppositions—for the devaluation of ritual studies in evangelical scholarship might be the prophetic critique of ritual. However, prophetic critique did not represent a discontinuation of the earlier legal and cultic traditions, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in recent scholarship. Perhaps the news about this changed paradigm has not yet reached conservative scholarship?

5. Finally, one major issue connected rather with worldview than specific exegetical presuppositions should not go unnoticed. Most of us are children of modernism—although we love and accept the biblical model of revelation/inspiration of Scripture. However, modernism’s emphasis upon the concrete, countable, and visible does not provide a fertile ground for studying and understanding rituals which functioned in a pre-modern society, with its distinct values, such as community, hierarchy, faith, order, tradition, etc. In other words, it is difficult for us, having been brought up in a culture where we want to count and reason before we believe and feel, to delve into ritual, which—adding to its problematic nature—is only present in written form and cannot be observed and belongs to a cultural stream far removed from present...
experience. While this does not preclude fruitful interaction with modern ritual studies of Scripture, it makes it much more difficult. Having lived in Africa and in South America, I find it enlightening to see how simple, often “under-educated” lay members handle and understand ritual texts from the OT that would only cause some raised eyebrows and the quick flick to turn over the page in a modern Western church context.

5. Future Strategies and Challenges

Taking into consideration some of the possible reasons for the paucity of ritual studies in evangelical thought, I would like to offer the following strategies and challenges.

1. Ritual studies must become part and parcel of our religious education. This first point has to do with introductory courses in religion or theology. Usually we include historical books (and thus historiography), the Pentateuch (with a brief introduction to legal texts), and prophetic writings. Sometimes an introduction to apocalyptic writings is included as well. However, never have I seen a seminary or university religion department course entitled “Introduction to Ritual in Biblical Studies.” Perhaps this is the time to refocus and reflect in our curriculum what is present (in quite substantial amounts) in the text itself.

2. Evangelical scholars need to rise to the challenge of interacting in multidisciplinary research work. In the past, anthropology and sociology (or any other non-religious discipline working with ritual) has had negative press in conservative circles—often justifiably so, since it was often used to re-write history in the context of overarching theories. The exodus/conquest discussion is a good example for this tendency. However, when we understand the tools that anthropology or sociology provide without necessarily accepting their philosophical presuppositions, we might just be able to make more sense of biblical ritual texts.

3. In the western world we live in an environment that is ritually poor. Forms are not important, tradition is challenged, and symbolic action is for those who do not have the backbone to be go-getters. However, I believe that the contemporary Church (and I do not mean denomination) needs to rediscover ritual as a means of communication, conservation, and innovation. The days and weeks after September 11 were full of gestures and symbolic acts (for example, flying the flag) and these filled an important emotional and communicative void. As a contemporary Christian community/church, we also need these rallying
points and must rediscover the importance of biblical symbolic acts, rites, or more complex rituals and their contemporary application.

4. We need more undergraduate (and not necessarily postgraduate) textbooks dealing with ritual in the Bible. Most religious textbooks concentrate on ritual in existing cultures and are based upon anthropological fieldwork. However, biblical ritual studies are a somewhat different kettle of fish, since they are focusing upon physical observation and not on textual observation.

5. While presently the field of biblical ritual studies is dominated by historical-critical research or social-science research, there is a need for scholars with a high regard for Scripture to delve into this field and interact with these scholars, leading to a rediscovery of essential elements of worship and adoration in our contemporary context.

6. Ritual is a means of discovering, enacting, and reflecting about faith and present reality. Actually, ritual is highly theological, since it gives us a good idea about what is important and what is not. It is my conviction that understanding ritual better will help us write a more authentic theology of the Old Testament—a point indicated recently by Walter Brueggemann.

In conclusion, a lot of work lies ahead. If we are to understand and appreciate ritual and ritual texts in their OT context, we need to expose ourselves and our students to them. We need to rediscover their ability to cross cultural and linguistic barriers. We need to discover what artists and multi-media specialists have already known for ages: an image (and with this I would include the “image of a performed ritual”) speaks more than a thousand words.

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