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Form and Genre: Translating Procedural Texts in Leviticus

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Abstract

In most translations, the form of procedural texts in Leviticus is represented in the same way as that of narrative texts, for example. Further, a sentence-by-sentence rendering results in the retaining of numerous repetitions. Both practices poorly represent the genre and function of these texts, as well as impeding their readability. The literary nature of the texts and their communicative functions may be better represented through restructuring and through use of distinctive formatting; I indicate how this might be done for Leviticus 2 and 3.

Bible translators are giving increasing attention to the importance of translating texts in view of their genre —in view of the communicative goals and resultant, characteristic features that distinguish one kind of text, such as a narrative or genealogy, from another kind of text, such as a liturgy or an individual's call for help.[1] Translating in view of genre may involve considerable restructuring of a text; it may also involve formatting a text that goes well beyond the simple distinction of prose format versus poetry format.

Passages in Leviticus may be broadly classified as belonging to the *procedural* genre since they are texts which focus on how something is done or should be done.[2] This article indicates how texts of this type might be restructured and formatted, with the goal of faithfully representing the biblical texts for contemporary audiences.

1. Formatting and genre

In tables 1 and 2, we have substituted the letter "x" for all letters in a contemporary version's translation of two different biblical texts.[3] This display helps us to consider how the format alone of a text can indicate its genre and shape our expectations about its content. In the first table, a basic distinction of genres immediately comes to mind:

Table 1. Format alone indicating differences in genre

Xxxxx xxxx xxx x xxx xxx xxxxx xx Xxxxxxxxx. Xx xxx xxxxxxxxx xxxx xxx xxx Xxxx xxxxxx xx xxx Xxxxxxx xxxxx. Xxx xxxx xxx Xxxxxxx. (Xx xxx xxxxxxxxx xxxx xxx Xxxxx xxxx Xxxxxxx xxxxxxx xxx xxxxxx Xxxxxxxx, xxx xxxxxxxxxxxxx Xxxxx, xxx xxx xxxxx-xxxxxxxxxxx Xxxx.) Xx xxx xxx xxxxx. Xxx xxxxx xxx Xxxxxxxx. Xxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxx; Xxxxxx xxx xxx.

Xxx xxxx Xxx xxxx xxxx xxx—
xxx xxxx xxxx xxx xx Xxx Xxxxx,
xxx xxxx xxxxx xxxxx Xxxx-Xxx Xxx.
xxx xxxx xx xx Xxxxx-Xxxxx Xxxxxxx.

Xxxxxxx xxx xxxxxx xx Xxxx xxxx,
xxx xxxx xx Xxxxxxxxx xxx xxx xxxxx.
Xxxxx x xxxx xxxxxxxxx xx Xxxx,
xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxxx,

[1]For a brief introduction to genre, see Wendland (2003:200–203). For a more detailed consideration, see his "Categorizing the Psalms according to genre" (2002:32–60) and his and my discussion of genre in our *Scripture frames and framing: A workbook for Bible translators* (2008).

[2]Procedural is one of the four basic genres represented in Longacre's scheme of notional types of monologue discourse (Longacre 1983:5).

[3]The first table represents the format in Eugene Peterson's (2002) rendering of the opening lines of 1 Samuel and of Psalm 1.

In the text on the left, the paragraph format suggests prose. In the text on the right, the shorter lines and their indentation pattern suggest poetry. This very basic distinction of genres can lead us to expect that the text on the right will be more singable, for example, and contain more figures of speech than the one on the left.

Table 2 contains two different versions' representation of Numbers 1:20ff. The format of the one on the left (NIV) is pretty much the same as that of the narrative text represented in the left-hand side of table 1. The one on the right (GNB), however, clearly indicates a distinctive genre, that of a list, and in turn influences the reader's basic understanding and expectations of the text.

Table 2. Two translations' formatting of Numbers 1:20ff.

NIV	GNB
Xxx xxxxxxxxxxx xx Xxxxxx, Xxxxxxx xxxxxxxxx, xxxxx xxxxxxx, xx xxxxx xxxxx, xx xxxxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx xx xxx xxxxxxx xx xxxxx, xxxxxxxxxxx, xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxxxxx xxxxx xxx xxx xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx xxxx xx xx xx xxx; xxxx xxxxxxxx xx xxx xxxxx xx Xxxxxx xxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxx xxxxxxx.	Xxx xxx xxxxxx xxxxx xxx xx xxxxx xxx xxxx xxx xxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxx xxxx xxxxxxxxxx xx xxxx xxxxxxxxx xx xxxx xxx xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx xxxx xxx xxxxx xx Xxxxxx, xxxxxx xxxxxx xxx. Xxx xxxxxx xxxx xx xxxxxxx:
Xxx xxxxxxxxxxx xx Xxxxxx, xxxxx xxxxxxx, xx xxxxx xxxxx, xx xxxxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx xx xxx xxxxxxx xx xxxxx, xxxxxxxxxxxx, xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxxxxx xxxxx xxx xxx xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxx…	Xxxxx Xxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx Xxx xxxxxx Xxxxx xxxxxx … …

Most Bible versions represent the procedural texts of Leviticus by using the same format as that used in narrative texts, as in the left column of table 1. An audience which associates this format with stories or newspaper articles, for example, can subconsciously come to the Leviticus text with expectations about style and content that will clash with what they find. These unfulfilled expectations can contribute to negative evaluations: features of good storytelling are absent and features of bad storytelling abound. But, of course, the Leviticus texts are not stories. Appropriate representation of their genre, and thus of their communicative goals, could evoke a different evaluative framework and a more positive response.

Formatting is one tool for appropriately representing a genre. Restructuring is another, especially useful for texts such as those in Leviticus. This must be done before formatting decisions can be finalized. We will now consider how Leviticus 2 might be restructured, before indicating how it might be formatted differently than in most versions.

2. Restructuring in view of communicative goals

The restructuring of Leviticus 2 assumes that, as a procedural text, it had the important communicative goals of being precise and clear with regard to how to do the sacrifices in question. The primary communicative goal is informative, as opposed to other genres where the focus might be on entertaining, convincing, or requesting, for instance. It is also assumed that the structures of the text are in service of the communicative goals.[4] Thus, for example, the many repetitions in Leviticus 2 serve a quite different communicative goal than do certain sets of repetitions in a psalm or a narrative text inviting various levels of interpretation.

It is unlikely that the repetition of "cereal offering" in Leviticus 2 (fifteen times in fifteen verses) communicated anguish and desperation to the text's early audiences as did the similarly dense repetition of "How long?" in the first lines of Psalm 13. "What is left of the cereal offering shall be for Aaron and his

[4]These assumptions are supported by Milgrom's references to various repetitions in this chapter as serving to "state unequivocally" (1991:187) how the offering should be distributed, to underline as "so important" a practice that distinguishes the one prescribed here from pagan practice (188), and to remind priests that they should "carefully" inspect the cereal offerings (188).

sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings by fire to YHWH" (Lev. 2:3, 10) probably did not carry the ecstatic ring of "Praise YHWH" repeated in the first verse of Psalm 146. The presence or absence of an object following the verb "fear" in Jonah 1 (vv. 5, 10, 16) is of much greater thematic significance than the presence or absence of "a pleasing odor" with "an offering by fire" in Leviticus 2 (vv.2, 9, 11, 16).

Jonah 1	*Leviticus 2*
The mariners feared	an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to YHWH
The men feared a great fear	an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to YHWH
The men feared a great fear of YHWH	an offering by fire to YHWH … a pleasing odor
	an offering by fire to YHWH

In Jonah, the (lack of an) object of the verb contributes to the theme of a foreign people's growth in response to Jonah's god and to a key irony in the story: while religious-insider Jonah increasingly distances himself from God (or at least tries to do so), religious outsiders become increasingly close. In Leviticus 2, the separation of "offering by fire" and "pleasing odor" in the third occurrence can be explained on stylistic grounds and the lack of "a pleasing odor to YHWH" in the last instance has no evident thematic significance; it has been well established in the first part of the text and need not be repeated in the last part.

Assuming that informational clarity and precision was a primary goal of the producers of Leviticus 2, translators may want to represent the text in a way that will help contemporary audiences to appreciate the text's clarity and precision. In some languages, this may involve significant reduction of the repetition in the text, which will in turn necessitate restructuring.

3. Analysis preceding restructuring

Reducing repetition in a text such as Leviticus 2 and restructuring it does *not* mean summarizing it and omitting information. More positively stated: a faithful restructuring of a text in view of its genre will represent the information, ideas, and images of the text to the same degree as, perhaps more than, in more traditional translation approaches.

To assure that the text is accurately represented, a sentence-by-sentence chart is useful, perhaps essential. Repeated or highly similar phrases may be color-coded to identify repetitions that can be reduced in the translation. Indentations and connecting lines may be used to indicate the logical relationships of sentences and paragraphs. The following paragraph indicates the extent of the repetitions found throughout Leviticus 2, repetitions that in a chart of the text could be highlighted by a marker of the same color:

> 1. When any one brings a cereal offering as an offering to YHWH, his offering…he shall bring it … 3 …the cereal offering… 4 When you bring a cereal offering…as an offering… 5 If your offering is a cereal offering… 6 …it is a cereal offering. 7 If your offering is a cereal offering… 8 You shall bring the cereal offering…to YHWH… 9 …the cereal offering… offerings… 11 …cereal offering… 13 …your cereal offerings …your cereal offering … your offerings you shall offer salt… 14 …a cereal offering …cereal offering… 15 it is a cereal offering…
>
> 1 …fine flour …oil upon it …frankincense on it, 2 …fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense … 4 fine flour mixed with oil, or…spread with oil. 5 fine flour…mixed with oil 6…pour oil on it 7 …fine flour with oil.
>
> 3 What is left of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons, a most holy part of the offerings by fire to YHWH.
> 10 What is left of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons, a most holy part of the offerings by fire to YHWH.

A logical outline of the text may be constructed as follows (verse numbers providing the information are in parentheses):

1) Topic: Instructions for presenting a grain offering to YHWH (1–16)
2) Ingredients:
    a) Obligatory for all:
        i) fine flour (1, 2, 4, 5, 7)

ii) oil (1, 2, 4, 5–7, 15, 16)
iii) salt (13)
iv) no yeast (4, 5, 11)

b) Obligatory for 3ai and 3b:
i) frankincense (1–2, 15–16)

3) Preparations:
a) Options:
i) Raw (1–3)
ii) Baked in an oven (4)
iii) Fried on a griddle (crumble after frying and pour on oil) (5–6)
iv) Fried in a pan (7)

b) Mandatory if the offering is from the first grain of your harvest: Parch it. (14)

4) Present to: the priests, Aaron's descendants (2, 8, 16)

5) Priest's use:
a) A handful will be completely burned on the altar, making a pleasing odor for Yahweh. (2, 9, 16)
b) The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons, remaining part of the offering set apart for YHWH (3,10)

6) Special notes:
a) No leaven or honey is to be burnt as an offering for YHWH. They may be presented to Yahweh, but not as part of an offering to be burnt on the altar. (11–12)
b) The salt represents your covenant with God. (13)

This outline should represent all information and instructions contained in the chapter. Translation helps need to be consulted, of course. Some might think, for example, that the first verses provide a general instruction about the offering and that it would always be cooked in one of the ways listed in verses 4-16. *A handbook on Leviticus* and other commentaries indicate, however, that verses 1–3 refer to the offering of uncooked grain while the following verses refer to the offering of cooked grain.

4. A translation

Based on the above analysis, the text may be translated as follows, restructuring and using a format distinctive of the procedural genre:

2 Instructions for presenting a grain offering to Yahweh

Essential ingredients: your best flour, oil, frankincense and salt; no yeast!

Permitted preparations:
Baked
Fried on a griddle (crumble after frying and pour on oil)
Boiled in a pan
If the offering is from the first grain of your harvest: Parch it.

Present to: the priests, descendants of Aaron.

Priest's use:
1) A handful will be completely burned on the altar, making a pleasing odor for Yahweh.
2) The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons, remaining part of the offering set apart for Yahweh.

Notes:
1) No leaven or honey is to be burnt as an offering for Yahweh. They may be presented to Yahweh, but not as part of an offering to be burnt on the altar.
2) The salt represents your covenant with God.

If this translation seems too radical a departure from traditional approaches, a more conservative format could be used, while still being easier to read and understand than most translations:

2 Instructions for presenting a grain offering to Yahweh

For all grain offerings, you will use your best flour, prepared with oil and salt. You must never use yeast for a grain offering! (No leaven or honey is to be burnt as an offering for Yahweh. They may be presented to Yahweh, but not as part of an offering to be burnt on the altar. The salt represents your covenant with God.)

You may present the offering uncooked, baked, fried on a griddle (crumbling it afterward and pouring on more oil) or in a pan. If the offering is from the first grain of your harvest, parch it. If uncooked or parched, the offering will be presented with frankincense.

You will present the offering to the priests, the descendants of Aaron. They will: 1) Completely burn a handful of the offering on the altar, making a pleasing odor for Yahweh; 2) Keep the rest of the grain offering, which will still be part of the offering set apart for Yahweh.

5. Try it!

In a workshop, several teams of translators were presented the above analysis and translation of Leviticus 2 and then asked to do their own analysis and translation of Leviticus 3. The large majority produced within four hours a good first draft, which went more or less like the following:

3 Instructions for a sacrifice of well-being

The sacrifice of well-being is a food offering burnt on the altar to make a pleasing odor for Yahweh. Whether a bull or cow, ram or ewe, buck or nanny goat, this sacrifice made in Yahweh's presence must be without blemish. Here is how it shall be made:

At the entrance of the tent of meeting, you will lay your hand on the head while it is killed.
Then, the priests, Aaron's descendants, will dash the blood against all sides of the altar.
Next, you offer:

the animal's fat covering and next to the entrails and on the kidneys;
the two kidneys;
the appendage of the liver, removed with the kidneys.
(If a sheep is offered, include the tail, removed close to the backbone.)

Then Aaron's sons shall turn these into smoke on the altar, along with the burnt offering that is on the wood on the fire.

All fat is Yahweh's! This is an unchangeable rule, for all generations, wherever you live. You yourselves must not eat any fat or any blood!

A consensus was that this kind of translation would be easier for their audiences to read and understand. An important question was how open their audience would be to a translation of this sort, since it does not look like other Bible translations they have seen. Two suggestions were given in this regard. The easiest thing to do would be to write an explanation of this approach in the introduction to the book, for instance. The more demanding solution—and probably the most effective—would be to work with representatives of the audience to help them understand why new translations may differ from older ones, in this respect and others.

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