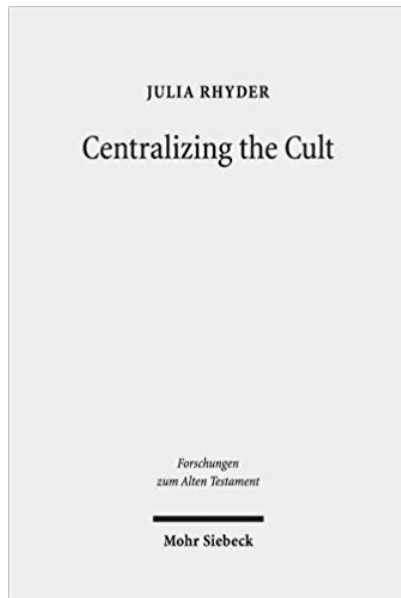


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Julia Rhyder

***Centralizing the Cult: The Holiness Legislation in
Leviticus 17–26***

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Do not let the title deceive you. Though this book might first appear to be a study of a fairly obscure area, *Centralizing the Cult* represents a major new perspective on pentateuchal studies. It intervenes by way of a strategic topic (cultic centralization), producing a new synthesis of diverse perspectives that has important implications for the history of Israelite religion, cultic institutions, and the formation of the Pentateuch.

Published in 2019 as a revised version of a dissertation (directed by Christophe Nihan) that was defended in 2018, the book preserves some of the trappings of its original genre, for example, overlapping summaries of material, occasional extended digressions on topics of tertiary relevance, and copious coverage of prior scholarship. Nevertheless, this is not all bad. The summaries provide a helpful preview and résumé of a complicated argument. Most importantly, the coverage of scholarship is superbly done and much needed in a time when few control (as Rhyder does) a full range of Israeli, European, and North American scholarship pertinent to the topic. The breadth and quality of Rhyder's discussion of prior scholarship is especially apparent across the first three chapters, which provide the conceptual structure and rationale for a study of (P and) H and centralization (ch. 1), present her own synthesis of the best scholarship on H as a late Priestly stratum (ch. 2), and judiciously evaluate how prior scholars have treated the Priestly source and Holiness expansion of it in relation to cult centralization (ch. 3).

As the book precedes through treatment of P's own vision of centralization (ch. 4) and H's distinctive expansion of P's perspective (chs. 5–7), it soon becomes evident that this Australian and Swiss-educated scholar occupies an interesting place amidst the diverse schools of contemporary pentateuchal scholarship. Her approach to H is thoroughly informed by Israel Knohl's and others' arguments that the Holiness materials in Lev 17–26 represent a compositional stratum of relatively late Priestly material, not an earlier Holiness Code presupposed by P. Nevertheless, Rhyder (as do Nihan and others) corrects Knohl's strange analysis of Lev 26 and its relation to Num 28–29. Moreover, she also convincingly identifies modest amounts of material outside Lev 17–26 as “H-like” additions rather than following Knohl (among others) in using sparse lexical data to assign massive amounts of material outside Lev 17–26 to a Holiness school. Meanwhile, Rhyder connects repeatedly to work by Baruch Schwartz and others in the broader neo-documentarian school, arguing along with them that P and H represent a largely P-internal set of discourses on cultic centralization. Neither P nor H specifically interprets earlier D texts about centralization, and they are not mere outgrowths of D's centralizing perspective. That said, Rhyder also contrasts with the neo-documentarian approach in extensively inquiring about the historical setting and social pragmatics of P and then H, placing them in the Persian period and considering analogous dynamics in other Second Temple “nonbiblical” Jewish texts.

Space does not allow a detailed summary of Rhyder's argumentation. A main innovation of her approach is reconceptualizing the character of cultic centralization, especially as imaged in these likely postmonarchal literary materials. Past scholarship, especially in the wake of de Wette and Wellhausen, has been focused on Deuteronomistic forms of cultic centralization, where the emphasis is on ensuring that Israel worships in one, and only one, geographical *place*. Rhyder argues that P and then H, though cognizant of most of Deuteronomy and other Deuteronomistic narratives, do not build their picture of cultic centralization on a Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic foundation. Instead, these successive Priestly strata develop a more comprehensive and multifaceted picture of cultic centralization. This starts with P's development, in the wake of the dissolution of the monarchy, of a multifaceted discourse on cultic centralization focused on its vision of a central (but geographically unspecified) cultic space, unified originary priesthood (the Aaronides), and standardized regulations for cultic rituals. H's centralizing discourse builds on this largely center-oriented vision but intensifies it with periphery-oriented regulations that govern animal killing away from the sanctuary (ch. 5), time (ch. 6), and (through a more expansive concept of holiness) more mundane aspects of the life of individuals away from the cult (ch. 7).

No specialist will agree with everything in this wide-ranging study, but few will fail to be stimulated by its diverse observations and discussions. In building her argument, Rhyder deftly draws on a far more diverse set of theoretical resources than a typical historically oriented pentateuchal study, depending particularly on Foucault (discourse), Gramsci (hegemony), and Lefebvre (sociology of space). Work by these and others help Rhyder interpret P and H not just as reflections of historical developments but as imaginative interventions in the postmonarchic world of returnee Judeans.

Where the monarchy was naturally oriented around a monarchical political apparatus, P places an imagined (movable) cultic space at Israel's center. Where the monarchy revolved around the king, P and H develop a picture of Israel headed by a high priest and broader Aaronide priesthood. This begins with P's focus on the hegemony of the Aaronide priesthood and structures of holiness related to the wilderness tabernacle. Then H—occasionally creatively building on non-P legal materials—expands this (imagined) control outward, reconceiving holiness as also pertaining to the separateness, cohesion, and behavior of the broader people of Israel outside the (central) sanctuary.

Rhyder places both P and H's interventions in the early Persian period, based largely on a set of criteria that I found rather slender (61–63). At the same time, Rhyder follows Diebner (1991), Römer (2004), and others in noting a striking lack of specificity in both P and H about Jerusalem being the proper place for this centralized cult, and she also synthesizes recent scholarship that stresses the way the Pentateuch as a whole, including P and H's centralizing discourses, was claimed by personnel at both the Jerusalem (Judean) and Gerizim (Samaritan) sanctuaries. Building on this, it seems to me that a dating of P and H in the sixth century *prior* to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple would better explain the way these (P and H) texts build a set of centralizing discourses that are unspecific enough (despite some Judean bias; see 163–66, 174–75) to be claimed by Priestly literati in both Jerusalem and Gerizim. To be sure, Rhyder argues that at least some such discourses may have been designed to reinforce Jerusalem's claim to be an Israelite center over against the more dominant political-economic center of Ramat Raḥel (176). She may be right.

Either way, it should be noted that this book is one of a wave of important recent studies of the Pentateuch. Much pentateuchal scholarship over the last decades has been characterized by divides between scholars (like me) who helped inaugurate a departure from past documentary models for pentateuchal formation, Neo-documentarian scholars who advocated a return to documentary models in revised form, and scholars maintaining some form of older documentary models. Rhyder's book is part of an exciting group of recent and soon-to-appear publications by a new generation. These figures seem less characterized by the group divides of their teachers, and this gives them an opening to chart new paths less characterized by this or that approach. Where some have spoken of a "crisis in pentateuchal scholarship" in recent decades, perhaps Rhyder's and others' fine books represent the beginning of something like a golden age in study of the Pentateuch.