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# Matthew S. Goldstone
# *The Dangerous Duty of Rebuke: Leviticus 19:17 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation*
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In his revised and expanded NYU dissertation, Matthew Goldstone traces the ways in which the Levitical command to rebuke (Lev 19:17) was variously understood by Jews and Christians in antiquity. The monograph includes an introduction, three main parts which are subdivided into eight chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and three indices.

Goldstone begins with an introduction to a few key elements involved in the act of rebuke. He then prepares the reader for the wide range of interpretations of the verse by drawing on William Empson's and Robert Alter's works that highlight the values of literary ambiguity and tensions along with their concomitant hermeneutical challenges (pp. 2-3). Since ancient Jewish interpreters viewed Lev 19:17 as a scriptural mandate, they were compelled to try and work out just how they should—if they could at all—rebuke one another in a way that at once fulfilled the will of God and preserved goodwill among the community's members. As Goldstone situates Lev 19:17 in its literary context, he details the ambiguity and tension generated by the three clauses, namely, 19:17a ("You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart"), 19:17b ("Reprove your kinsman"), and 19:17c ("but incur no guilt because of him"). While the ambiguity might be artful, those who were concerned with its application—real or imagined—found themselves in a quandary. The rest of the book sets out to elucidate how subsequent interpreters grappled with Lev 19:17.

In part 1 (chapters 1-3) Goldstone surveys a number of Second Temple Jewish sources. Using James Kugel's famous distinction between moral and judicial dimensions of rebuke, Goldstone catalogs how diverging interpretations of Lev 19:17 often emerge depending on whether one read this verse in light of the following

verse (Lev 19:18) or the preceding verse (Lev 19:16). He examines the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS, 4Q477, and the Damascus Document) and the Gospels (Matt 5, Luke 6) in chapters 1 and 2 and shows how the authors of each differently conceptualize the relationship between rebuke (Lev 19:17) and love (Lev 19:18). Whereas the Scrolls posit love as the "proper motivation for rebuke," the Gospels pit love and rebuke against each other on the assumption that true love obviates the need for reproof (p. 64).

He discusses Jewish wisdom traditions in chapter 3. These authors all read Lev 19:17 in tandem with the prohibition of malicious speech (Lev 19:16). The view in Proverbs is that only the wise are worth rebuking. It also calls into question the value of reproof because of the "danger of excess speech and particularly slander" (pp. 68-69). Ben Sira exhibits a more positive attitude toward reproof and extends the obligation to include the foolish, albeit with a caution against breaking the silence too quickly. The author of the Testament of Gad maintains that what distinguishes rebuke from slander is not the kind of action but the person to whom the act is directed. Truth-telling is proper rebuke only when the offended party directly addresses the offender; otherwise, it slides into the treacherous territory of "misdirected reproof, a form of slander (p. 83).

He moves in part 2 (chapters 4-6) to tannaitic literature which evidences rabbinic anxieties about the adverse effects of rebuke. The principle conclusion here is that by and large the early rabbis were not in favor of rebuke because of its potential for destabilizing interpersonal relationships. He first analyzes *Sifra* and *Sifre Devarim* respectively in chapters 4-5. Instead of fleshing out the procedural details of rebuke, rabbis in both texts question the possibility of enacting rebuke in the first place. The anonymous / unattributed portion of *Sifra* insists on the importance of rebuke but expends as much energy warning against its excess (i.e., reproof to the point of embarrassing the rebuked, which would put the rebuker in the wrong). The attributed portion further stresses the unrealizable duty of rebuke (pp. 103-06). In the same vein *Sifre Devarim* marginalizes rebuke by dwelling on its interpersonal ramifications and draws on the struggle of the master rebuker, Moses: if even Moses struggled to fulfill the demands of Lev 19:17, what hope is there for everyone else (p. 135)?

In part 3 (chapters 6-8) Goldstone, considering how later Christians and Jews responded to the command to rebuke, is interested in cautiously probing a "shared cultural space" between Sassanian rabbis and Christian monks. He introduces Christian monastic tradition in chapter 6, specifically the Egyptian desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. Some monks were wholly committed to the practice of rebuke, except they shifted the object of rebuke from others to the self. Rather than externalize their anger and publicly correct others, they preferred to chastise themselves into silence, which was for them a mark of true humility (pp. 160-63). In seeking self-perfection this way, these monks effectively sidelined the obligation to rebuke others (p. 168).

He turns to the Babylonian Talmud in chapter 7 and to *Tanḥuma Yelammedenu* literature (a midrashic text from the postclassical period) in chapter 8, which in this case reworks an earlier talmudic passage. Unlike *Sifra*, which presents the view

that rebuke is important but unfeasible, rabbis in the Talmud assert that rebuke is perfectly possible but undesirable because humble self-restraint trumps rebuke. Goldstone suggests that this Jewish inward turn during this period—the juxtaposition of inward humility and outward reproof—is best understood against the backdrop of early Christian monasticism. Conversely, *Tanḥuma* endorses the practice of rebuke by downplaying its dangers and re-positioning its crucial importance, even highlighting the sin of refraining from rebuke (p. 215). Here, Goldstone culls evidence from Qur'anic sources that seem to mirror Jewish practice (pp. 232-35).

In his conclusion he summarizes the main thrust of his thesis and considers various social factors that affected attitudes toward rebuke. Then he revisits the Greco-Roman idea of *parrhesia* (a form of truth-telling), which he registers in the introduction, and maps his foregoing observations onto the wider developments in the Greco-Roman world.

Overall, this is a solid scholarly work that showcases shifting attitudes toward the duty of rebuke in Jewish and Christian antiquity. Goldstone brings together a nice array of early traditions, and the broadly comparative perspective is welcome. Further, the book is mostly free of technical language and remains highly readable throughout.

One is struck, however, by some unevenness in the analysis. For instance, while Goldstone names a few socio-historical factors that pushed for (or resulted from) particular interpretations of Lev 19:17 in later chapters, hardly any attention is paid to this dimension in Part 1. Moreover, the book points out fascinating instances of cross-fertilization, especially between early Islamic and rabbinic traditions, but the broader historical implications are (understandably) scarcely worked out. Lastly, although Goldstone pays careful attention to various manuscripts and attendant text-critical issues, it is not always clear why certain texts or eras were chosen and others excluded (i.e., were these the only ones available or the most representative?). None of these takes away from book's insights, but they do call for a pause in places.

Given the need for and the difficulty of truth-telling not just in antiquity but also today, Goldstone takes the reader on a delightful tour of just how some ancients who took rebuke as a serious ethical duty navigated the space between its promises and perils.