

ETHICS, MORALITY, AND HOLINESS

(Leviticus 17-27)

The final section of Leviticus contains the holiness code, which emphasizes the principle, "Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy" (e.g., 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8, etc.). This code includes laws forbidding the eating of blood (17), laws forbidding incest, homosexual union, and bestiality (18), miscellaneous laws for social life (19), laws prescribing various punishments for sin (20), laws for priests (21-22), regulations for the liturgical seasons (23, 25), and case laws regarding blasphemy and personal injury (24). It also included blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (26). Finally, the book concludes with laws about vows and offerings (27).

So, what does it mean to be holy? The fundamental idea of the word קֹדֶשׁ (= holy) is to be separated or set apart for service. It is, first of all, a divine attribute, since God himself is holy, which is to say, he is wholly other than the created order, and in particular, morally set apart from a fallen world. This, of course, introduces a problem in that if a holy God is to have fellowship with fallen humans, then they, also, must be set apart from the prevailing culture and the sinful behaviors that characterize the human race. God can hardly become less holy, since holiness is essential to his nature. Therefore, humans must become holy, or to use a more theological term, they must be "sanctified." Hence, the repeating command in Leviticus is, "Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy."

When El-Shaddai appeared to Abraham and gave to him the ritual of circumcision for a covenant sign, he expressed a rubric which was to characterize the nation of Israel for all of its history: "I will be their God," [and, by implication, they shall be my people] (Ge. 17:8). This kind of relationship between Yahweh and Israel, God and his people, comes to fruition in the exodus event in which Yahweh began consistently to speak of the Israelites as "my people" (Ex. 3:7, 10; 5:1; 7:4, 16; 8:1, etc.). It is here that Yahweh expressly declares, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7). In the exodus, Israel becomes the covenant people of God, chosen not because of numbers or excellence, but because of divine love (Dt. 4:37; 7:7-9). Moses would later explain:

Yahweh your Elohim has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his

CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLINESS CODE

The concept of holiness found in the Torah is carried over into the moral framework of life in Christ. Jesus echoes the ancient code "be holy, for I, Yahweh your God am holy" in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says, "Be perfect/complete, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect/complete" (Mt. 5:48). Indeed, this principle is implicit in Jesus' words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (Mt. 5:17), and "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments...will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:19).

Later Christian leaders took this quite seriously. Peter directly quotes the holiness mandate from Leviticus and applies it to Christians (1 Pe. 1:13-16). Paul, surely, is the foremost champion of holiness, citing the ancient command with respect to the general calling of Christians (Ro. 12:1; 15:16; 1 Co. 1:2; Ep. 5:26-27; Col. 3:12; 2 Ti. 1:9) as well as applying it to specific behaviors Christians should avoid (1 Co. 6:19; 2 Co. 6:14-18; Ep. 5:3-7; 1 Th.4:3-8).

people, his treasured possession (Dt. 7:6).

Since Israel was in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, and since God was holy, the people of Israel must also be holy. While the corporate responsibility for maintaining this unique relationship with Yahweh was largely vested in the priests and Levites, the people, also, were to limit their contact with uncleanness while living in obedience to the commandments God gave in the covenant. The stipulated sacrifices and offerings were the divine provision to atone for sin, while the various cleansing rituals were the provision to remove uncleanness (Lv. 14). In the context of preparing to enter the land of Canaan, the holiness laws will be expressed in opposition to Canaanite cultic practices (18:3-5).

CONCEPTS OF SIN AND IMPURITY

There is a difference between sin and impurity, even though both impinge on holiness. The idea of sin, which means to fall short or miss, is linked to rebellion and associated with death. It can be deliberate and defiant. It can be the unconscious result of weakness. In either case, it results in death (Ge. 2:17; Eze. 18:20; cf. Ro. 6:23). Impurity, on the other hand, is the by-product of sin resulting either in ethical impurity (idolatry, bloodshed, sexual sins, etc.) or ritual impurity (corpse contamination, scale disease, genital discharge, etc.), all associated with the forces of life and death. The primary agent for remedying sin and impurity is blood, since blood “ransoms” the sinner (substitutes for the life of the sinner) and purges impurity (Lv. 17:11; cf. He. 9:22). The basic premise behind the purity laws is that God is holy, and therefore, his people must prepare themselves to enter his presence. This is the basic principle behind the various laws concerning diet (11), childbirth (12), infectious diseases and mildew (13-14), and bodily discharge (15).

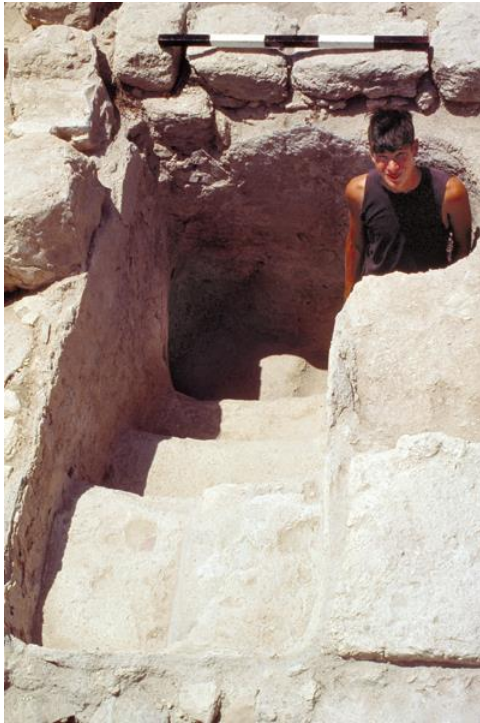
In addition to blood sacrifice, there also is ritual purification, which involves ablutions with water.

These regulations began at Sinai (Ex. 19:10, 14) and would later be incorporated into the rules governing the tabernacle. God is a consuming fire, and he must not be approached casually. Indeed, a full vision of God would result in death, which is why communications with God had to be mediated. Ritual purification involves washing with water, a symbolic cleansing of those things associated with mortality, which is to say, natural death and reproduction (11:25, 28, 40; 13:6, 34; 14:8-9, 47; 15:4-11, 13, 19-27). The act of purification makes one fit for fellowship with God, who is immortal and not subject to death or reproduction. Such laws restricted from the sanctuary those ritually unclean through food, childbirth, and infectious disease or contamination (15:31).

WATER ABLUTIONS AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

There is a direct link between the water ablutions in the Torah and Christian baptism. The requirement in the Torah was to wash one's clothes and bathe as the remedy for impurity. In time, the Jews began to practice ritual immersion in a mikveh—a sort of baptismal pool—to fulfill these requirements. John the Baptist's baptisms were for the forgiveness of sins in preparation for the coming of the Christ (Mk. 1:4). Jesus' final words to his disciples were that they should go throughout the world, baptizing their converts (Mt. 28:19; cf. Mk. 16:16). Christian baptism, as such, was directed toward the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of one's conscience (Ac. 2:38; 22:16; He. 10:22), what Paul later will call a “washing of rebirth” (Tit. 3:5).

Unlike the repeated water rituals of the Torah, however, Christian baptism was performed only once (Ep. 4:5). It served as an initiation into the Christian community, an outward symbol of an inward reality (1 Pe. 3:21).



A 1st century mikveh excavated in Sepphoris, Galilee, about four miles from Nazareth: Leviticus requires ablution in “living water” (15:13), which probably means “running water” or water from a natural spring. The early Christians followed suit, using this same terminology of “living water” for baptism (Didache 7).

contact with the sacred (22:3).

Specific Laws (17-20)

Sacrificial blood was to be offered only at the sanctuary. All animals killed for consumption must be properly bled, for blood must not be eaten, since it represents the life force (17). The Israelites were to abstain from a wide variety of sexual practices that were common among the Canaanites (18:24-28), including sex with close relatives, sex with anyone to whom one was not married, same-sex union, bestiality, and the like. These various

Impurity could be contracted in one of two ways, either firsthand (from an internal source, such as, genital discharge or scale disease) or secondhand (from an external source, either ritual contamination, carcass or corpse contamination, or physical contact with any person or object that was unclean). Purification of persons consisted of two primary elements, ablutions with water and waiting a period of either one or seven days. Objects could be purified by ablution and waiting until evening (wood, cloth, hide), but some objects required more vigorous ablutions while waiting until evening (gold, silver, bronze, copper objects). Some objects, once impure, could not be purified at all but must be destroyed (earthenware, carcasses, moldy cloth). For more serious purification, burning was sometimes required. What is especially significant is that ritual impurity did not in itself include any punishments for becoming impure unless a person should bring his/her impurity into contact with the sanctuary. Rather, impurity temporarily restricted a person (or object) from coming into

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

Most Christians think of the command about loving one’s neighbor as oneself as coming from Christ, and indeed it does (Mt. 5:43; 22:36-40). Those familiar with the ancient liturgy of the church hear it repeated from Sunday to Sunday. However, it comes as a bit of surprise to some that this commandment is embedded in the holiness code of Leviticus in the midst of a series of commandments about social life (Lv. 19:18).

Grammatically, the construction in the Hebrew Bible is important. Usually, the verb אָהַב (= to love) takes a direct object (such as Jacob loved Rachel, cf. Ge. 29:18). In the Levitical command, however, the verb has an indirect object with the preposition “to” וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ (= And you shall [do] love to your neighbor...), and this is a relatively rare construction. It is the same as the commandment in Lv. 19:34, which says concerning the alien that you should “[do] love to him as yourself.” This, in turn, suggests that “love” is loving action, that is, what is beneficial or helpful. As such, this commandment is not telling the listeners to feel something, but rather, to do something, the same as you would do something beneficial in your own interest.

WHAT IS DETESTABLE

The word תּוֹעֵבָה, which is used in the Holiness Code to describe various sexual deviations (20:22, 26-30), refers to what is detestable (or “abominable” in older translations). In other contexts, it describes things like idolatry (Dt. 7:25-26; 17:2-7; 27:15), child sacrifice (Dt. 12:31), religious syncretism (Dt. 13:12-16), the occult arts (Dt. 18:9-13), dishonesty (Dt. 25:13-16), and other expressions of pride, lying, murder, and perjury (Pro. 6:16-19). It carries both a cultic application with respect to Canaanite practices and a moral application with respect to God’s moral character.

commandments are derived from the decalogue, either implicitly or explicitly (19), and they concern social responsibility and justice. Indeed, it is within these laws that one finds the commandment made famous by Jesus that the second most important of all was to love one’s neighbor as oneself (19:18b). The laws fall into two broad categories, absolute (apodictic laws, 18-19) and conditional (case laws, 20). Case laws are a familiar feature in virtually all other ancient Near Eastern law codes, the most well-known likely being the Code of Hammurabi (18th century BC). Absolute laws, on the other hand, are rare in the ancient Near East, yet in the Torah, they are the more important of the two kinds.

Rules for Priests (21-22)

Priests, who represent the people to God, must take the lead in holiness, and a variety of cultic stipulations are given with regard to their behavior and lifestyle, especially respecting marriage, contact with the dead, disfigurement, and the offering of sacrifices. Just as

animals offered to God must be without defect, the priests who officiated at the offerings must also be without defect.

The Periodic and Annual Festivals (23-25)

Religious festivals were occasions for the Israelites to appear at the central sanctuary to express their thanks for successful harvests and to celebrate Yahweh’s mighty acts of redemption in behalf of the nation. The three annual travel festivals described in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:18-26) were Passover/Unleavened Bread (spring first-fruits), Weeks (barley and wheat harvests), and Booths (fall ingathering). To these were added special days which made up a calendar of seven annual feasts: Passover (1 day), Unleavened Bread (7 days), First-fruits (1 day), Weeks (1 day), Trumpets (1 day), Yom Kippur (1 day), and Booths (7 days). In addition, there was to be a sabbatical year every 7th year as well as a jubilee every 50th year.

The Blessings and Curses (26)

A constituent part of ancient suzerainty treaties were the blessings and curses that attended obedience or violation of the covenant stipulations. Leviticus contains a version of these blessings and curses, and later, Deuteronomy will contain an even more elaborate version (Dt. 27-28). Covenant faithfulness would be rewarded by the blessings of prosperity and peace. Covenant failure would result in an escalating series of disciplinary disasters. If disciplinary measures were ignored and there was not a reversal of hostile behavior, the final curse would be exile (26:33).

Redemption of Vows (27)

The Book of Leviticus closes with a section on redeeming vows (solemn promises to do or not to do some action). Notable among these laws are monetary payments in order to release persons or property from a difficult vow as well as conditions whereby one could not be released from a vow. Some if not many of these laws about vows would affect the life of Israelites in much later times.