

Leviticus 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Leviticus chapter 18

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister. She is your father's relative.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother. That is, you shall not approach his wife. She is your aunt. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife. You shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife. It is your brother's nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter. And you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter. To uncover her nakedness. They are relatives. It is depravity. And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbour's wife, and so make yourself unclean with her.

You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.

[2 : 26] And you shall not lie with any animal, and so make yourself unclean with it. Neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it. It is perversion. Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things.

For by all these things the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

But you shall keep my statutes and my rules, and do none of these abominations. Either the native, or the stranger who sojourns among you. For the people of the land who were before you did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean, lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.

For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them.

I am the Lord your God. Leviticus chapter 18 addresses the principle of holiness to the realm of sexual relations. This part of Leviticus is the most extensive body of such material within the Old Testament.

[3 : 39] It presents the relationships that are forbidden for various reasons, whether due to incest, adultery, sodomy, bestiality, or some other reason. And the passages bookended by statements concerning Israel's need to be distinct from the surrounding nations, in verses 1-5 and 23-30.

The sexual laws, among other things, helped to mark Israel out from the other nations that surrounded them. They needed to keep these laws if they wanted to retain their right to the land. And these laws seemed to have more general applicability beyond Israel, as the other nations before them were cast out of the land for failing to keep them. Verses 6-16 concern different forms of incest.

Verses 17-18, relations with women who are too closely related. And verses 19-23, forbidden relations with other parties. The consequences of breaking these rules would be either being cut off from the people as an individual, or being cut off from the land as a nation, the annihilation of the social existence of Israel.

The same sort of concerns about proper priestly behaviour in relation to the tabernacle that we see in the earlier chapters of Leviticus, are here seen in the context of the concern for proper sexual behaviour of the people in the land.

[4 : 55] Leviticus 18 explores what it means to have sexual union with another appropriately and inappropriately. In many ways we could see this as exploring the logic behind a man leaving his father and mother and becoming one flesh with his wife, as is described in Genesis chapter 2.

An incestuous union is a failure to leave father and mother. In incest, a family turns in upon itself. It's a failure to grow outwards. It's a turning inwards and the family consumes itself from within. Marriage has a sort of sacrificial character. It's the division of an old union of flesh and a ritual passage into a new union. A man leaving his father and mother breaks an old union, and becoming one flesh with his wife, there's a new union that's formed.

Sexual relations must navigate the reality of commonality and also otherness. So incest and homosexual relations are an inversion of sexual relations. It's a failure to relate to otherness. It's perversely sexualising the life of the family and also the solidarity of one's own sex. On the other hand, something like bestiality is sexual behaviour where no real union is possible, as the otherness is too extreme.

[6 : 08] Marrying outside of the covenant would be similar. Israel was generally endogamous. It was marrying within itself. But we see cases like Ruth, who marries into Israel from without.

She's a Moabite. The important discriminating factor in such cases is not biology and ancestry, but membership of the covenant. So it's appropriate for Boaz to marry Ruth, as Ruth has committed herself to the God of Israel.

However, to marry outside of Israel, to someone who worships foreign gods, is a violation of the covenant. While people strictly had to marry outside of their family, they were generally expected to marry within the clan or nation.

This wasn't a rule, but it was generally expected. It was the norm. Marriages to cousins weren't opposed either. However, if we look at these commandments, there are some things that stand out to us, or should stand out to us.

Perhaps one of these noteworthy features is the fact that every member of the congregation stands in the same way in relationship to them. There isn't a division on the basis of a class, nor is there some division on the basis of ethnicity.

[7 : 11] This entire body of laws is founded upon a repeated emphasis upon the Lord's sovereign claim upon his people, and upon humanity more generally, in the repeated I am the Lord statement.

It's essential that we appreciate that these commandments were not just regulations or guidelines for private sexual behaviour. They were about keeping or breaking the covenant. This chapter extends the sorts of principles that we see in association with the tabernacle and its worship, where clear boundaries needed to be maintained, and connects them with the behaviour of the body.

The sorts of restrictions and requirements that we have here are not dissimilar from the sort of logic that governs the life of the tabernacle, and we've already seen an association between the body and the tabernacle earlier on in the book of Exodus.

For instance, the law about sexual relations with a menstrual woman seems to depend upon a similar notion of trespass into a realm that you are forbidden to enter because of its generative power. In the same way as there's a taboo upon blood, because the blood is the life of the animal, so the blood of the woman represents her procreative potential, something that comes from God and should not be profaned or treated as common.

Verse 5 presents obedience to the law as a means to enter into life, not as a matter of earning obedience, as if by our good works we could merit salvation or something of that kind. Rather, it's a matter of enjoying the reality of life in fellowship with God as you abide in his commandments.

[8 : 36] To keep these commandments is to enjoy fellowship with God. Verse 6 is a key claim. No one should come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness. These are key terms that are used throughout the passage.

Come near, own flesh and uncover nakedness. Own flesh refers not just to one's own body, but to close relatives as well. The common expression the nakedness of is also important for understanding the verses that follow.

The nakedness of the father, for instance, is the mother's nakedness. It's a nakedness that isn't just exposing her, but also exposing him, as it is a nakedness to which he should have exclusive access.

She is holy to him, set apart for him. One of the things that this chapter underlines in the way that it treats such sexual sins is that sexuality is not private.

Sexual union and familial union means that people belong to each other and that relations with one person can violate another person. This is the logic of the sinfulness of adultery, for instance.

[9 : 35] It isn't just a matter of consent and non-consent. The body has a natural significance that isn't just given to it by consent or its lack, or by choice and what we choose to ascribe to the actions that we engage in sexually.

The attention to sexual relations and the body in this chapter seems strange to us, as we live in a society that regards sex as casual. However, Scripture presents sexual relations as matters not just of ethical importance, but as connected with holiness.

Paul, for instance, can teach that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, so it must be treated with the appropriate honour and care. It's not just actions outside of the body that matter, it's the body itself that has a value and a meaning and a significance and a holiness.

Leviticus 18 doesn't present us with a comprehensive treatment of sexual morality. It focuses particularly upon male behaviour, for instance. It also focuses especially upon those women who would be within the same household as a man, protecting women in such a position from predatory patriarchs.

It is also focused particularly upon unions and divisions, concerns that tend to be most central in a system that's focused upon being set apart or holy. Another interesting feature of this body of material is that it addresses previous practices within the history of Israel.

[10 : 56] You should not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, in the same way as Rachel was taken as a rival wife to Leah. That is ruled out. It's casting a judgement back upon the previous story.

We also tend to think of sexual relations as actions outside of the body. They can take whatever meaning we ascribe to them. They're governed by principles of consent and the like. But Leviticus presents a vision of the body where the body itself is a tabernacle-like thing, a realm of presence and a realm of meeting, a realm of covering and a realm of holiness, a realm of mystery and of all, a realm of union and a realm of boundaries.

In our body, something of the reality of transcendence is at work, and a society that fails to honour the sort of transcendence and meaningfulness of the body violates the land that it dwells in.

It's an interesting connection. Our bodies are bound up with each other. Our bodies connect us to other bodies through sexual union or procreation. And Leviticus is very concerned that this is not violated.

Persons who do so will be cut off from their people, a consequence that's fitting to the sin. Our bodies bind us into a reality beyond themselves. They bind us into the reality of procreation that is mysteriously at work in them.

[12 : 15] In our bodies, the reality of our being male or female, a reality that exceeds us and that we share with others, and which summons us to a horizontal transcendence of relating to the otherness of the other sex, either men or women, is also at work.

Furthermore, our bodies bind us into the union of the bonds of flesh constitutive of the family. My body, like your body, is literally an extension of the union of our parents' bodies, the physical union that they had in sexual relations that is worked out in our bodies.

Our bodies are not our private plaything. Our bodies are connected to the meaning of their bodies. Likewise, our bodies are bound up with the bodies of our siblings. And all these bonds and unions must be honoured and protected and not violated or transgressed.

The connection between the appropriate treatment of the body and the relationship of the people with the land is suggestive here. The body could perhaps be seen as the land of the soul. It has its own life and patterns that must be honoured, things like the menstrual cycle.

It has its own givenness and places its own claims upon us, in the same way as the land limits us and roots us and grounds us, so our bodies ground us in relationships to other people.

[13 : 30] They ground us in the reality of a particular sex. They ground us in the reality of a bond of bodies connected to our families. When the soul instrumentalises the body, it dishonours the body's integrity.

And the holiness of the body is connected to an apprehension of the holiness of the land. Profaning the body would also lead to a profaning of the land. A question to consider.

Read Romans chapter 1 verses 18 to 32 and 1 Corinthians chapters 5 and 6. How does the teaching of Leviticus 18 shed light on Paul's teaching in these chapters?

