

Leviticus 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Leviticus chapter 14. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease.

Then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field. And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean.

And after that he may come into the camp, but live outside his tent seven days. And on the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair from his head, his beard, and his eyebrows.

He shall shave off all his hair, and then he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean. And on the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish, and a grain offering of three tenths of an ephor of fine flour mixed with oil, and one ephor of oil.

And the priest who cleanses him shall set the man who is to be cleansed, and these things before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall take one of the male lambs, and offer it for a guilt offering, along with the log of oil, and wade them for a wave offering before the Lord.

[1 : 40] And he shall kill the lamb in the place where they kill the sin offering and the burnt offering, in the place of the sanctuary. For the guilt offering, like the sin offering, belongs to the priest. It is most holy.

The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.

Then the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it into the palm of his own left hand, and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before the Lord.

And some of the oil that remains in his hand, the priest shall put on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot, on top of the blood of the guilt offering.

And the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand, he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed. Then the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord. The priest shall offer the sin offering to make atonement for him who is to be cleansed from his uncleanness, and afterward he shall kill the burnt offering.

[2 : 44] And the priest shall offer the burnt offering and the grain offering on the altar. Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be clean. But if he is poor and cannot afford so much, then he shall take one male lamb for a guilt offering to be waived, to make atonement for him, and a tenth of an ephor of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, and a log of oil, also two turtle doves or two pigeons, whichever he can afford.

The one shall be a sin offering, and the other a burnt offering. And on the eighth day he shall bring them for his cleansing to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord. And the priest shall take the lamb of the guilt offering and the log of oil, and the priest shall waive them for a wave offering before the Lord.

And he shall kill the lamb of the guilt offering, and the priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.

And the priest shall pour some of the oil into the palm of his own left hand, and shall sprinkle with his right finger some of the oil that is in his left hand seven times before the Lord. And the priest

shall put some of the oil that is in his hand, on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot, in the place where the blood of the guilt offering was put.

And the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand, he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed, to make atonement for him before the Lord. And he shall offer of the turtle doves or pigeons, whichever he can afford, one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering, along with a grain offering.

[4 : 17] And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for him who is being cleansed. This is the law for him in whom is a case of leprous disease, who cannot afford the offerings for his cleansing.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a case of leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, There seems to me to be some case of disease in my house.

Then the priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the disease, lest all that is in the house be declared unclean. And afterward the priest shall go in to see the house, and he shall examine the disease.

And if the disease is in the walls of the house with greenish or reddish spots, and if it appears to be deeper than the surface, then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and shut up the house seven days.

And the priest shall come again on the seventh day and look. If the disease has spread in the walls of the house, then the priest shall command that they take out the stones in which is the disease, and throw them into an unclean place outside the city.

[5 : 24] And he shall have the inside of the house scraped all around, and the plaster that they scrape off they shall pour out in an unclean place outside the city. Then they shall take other stones and put them in the place of those stones, and he shall take other plaster and plaster the house.

If the disease breaks out again in the house, after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered it, then the priest shall go and look. And if the disease has spread in the house, it is a persistent leprous disease in the house.

It is unclean. And he shall break down the house, its stones and timber, and all the plaster of the house, and he shall carry them out of the city to an unclean place. Moreover, whoever enters the house while it is shut up shall be unclean until the evening.

And whoever sleeps in the house shall wash his clothes, and whoever eats in the house shall wash his clothes. But if the priest comes and looks, and if the disease has not spread in the house after the house was plastered, then the priest shall pronounce the house clean, for the disease is healed. And for the cleansing of the house, he shall take two small birds with cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop, and shall kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water, and shall take the cedarwood and the hyssop and the scarlet yarn, along with the live bird, and dip them in the blood of the bird that was killed, and in the fresh water, and sprinkle the house seven times.

[6 : 45] Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird, and with the fresh water, and with the live bird, and with the cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn. And he shall let the live bird go out of the city into the open country, so he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean.

This is the law for any case of leprous disease, for an itch, for leprous disease in a garment or in a house, and for a swelling or an eruption or a spot, to show when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the law for leprous disease. The laws concerning leprousy, which began in Leviticus chapter 13, continue in chapter 14. Here, however, Moses alone is addressed, rather than Moses and Aaron together.

Leprosy, as we have seen, is a breaking out of the flesh. The person struck with leprousy has corpse-like qualities. In several cases in scripture, leprousy is seen as a particular judgment of the Lord, particularly upon someone who has transgressed, by trespassing upon something that is holy, or committing some other form of sacrilege.

Miriam is struck with leprousy in Numbers chapter 12 for speaking against Moses, the Lord's servant. In 2 Chronicles chapter 26, King Uzziah is struck with leprousy for his sacrilegious action in the temple.

[7 : 59] Gehazi is struck with leprosy in 2 Kings chapter 5 for seeking to take some of Naaman's treasure and lying to Elisha. When Aaron described Miriam after she had been struck with leprosy in Numbers chapter 12, he compared her to the corpse of a stillborn infant.

The corpse-like quality of the person who has been struck by leprosy is particularly important to notice. This is something that comes out in the parallels between the laws in this chapter and the law concerning the ritual of the red heifer and the water of cleansing in Numbers chapter 19.

In verses 2 to 12 of that chapter we read, This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded. Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come.

And you shall give it to Eliezer the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him. And Eliezer the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times.

And the heifer shall be burned in his sight, its skin, its flesh, and its blood with its dung shall be burned. And the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer.

[9 : 08] Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. But the priest shall be unclean until evening. The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water, and bathe his body in water, and shall be unclean until evening.

And a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place. And they shall be kept for the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel.

It is a sin offering. And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening. And this shall be a perpetual statute for the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them.

Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day, and on the seventh day, and so be clean.

But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day, and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. The law concerning the red heifer involves cedarwood, and hyssop, and scarlet yarn, all joined with the red heifer in the fire.

[10 : 10] In the law for the cleansing of the man with leprosy, there is also cedarwood, and scarlet yarn, and hyssop, and these are all joined together, being dipped in the bloodied water with the live bird. The importance of cleansing on the seventh day for the man who is corpse defiled also recalls the process of cleansing for the man with leprosy here.

Leprosy, then, can be better understood when we relate it to corpse defilement. If you were afflicted with leprosy, you yourself became like a living corpse. This was not merely a physical condition. On account of leprosy, a person could also be cut off from the camp, being limited in the sorts of social activities that they could participate in. The cleansing of the leper, of course, was not the healing of the leper.

It was rather the means by which the leper could be declared clean and reintegrated into the life of the worshipping community that he had been separated from. The ritual for the cleansing of the leper has a number of elements that, besides reminding us of the ritual of Numbers chapter 19, might recall the story of the Exodus.

In Joshua chapter 2, the scarlet cord in Rahab's window serves a similar purpose to the blood on the doorpost and the lintel in the original Passover. Besides Numbers chapter 19, the law of the red heifer, and this chapter, the only other reference to hyssop in the Pentateuch is found in Exodus chapter 12, verse 22.

[11 : 27] Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.

In that context, the Israelites were shut up within their houses until the morning came. In this case, the leper is shut outside of the camp until his purification is complete.

The similarity of the ritual involving the dipping, the hyssop and the blood should be quite apparent to us and the presence of cedar wood here would remind us of the importance of the lintels and the doorposts.

So what exactly is taking place? Rabbi David Foreman has helpfully suggested that we see this as a sort of Passover in miniature occurring for the person who's being cleansed of his leper's uncleanness.

The nation was first born in the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. They were locked up within their houses, celebrating the Passover with blood on the doorposts and the lintels, while the Egyptians received the stroke of the Lord, the great plague of the death of the firstborn.

[12:26] After that great final plague, they would go through those bloody doors, go through the passage through the Red Sea and be born as a new nation. The story of the Exodus, of course, is filled with these themes of birth.

Israel is the Lord's firstborn and the law concerning the firstborn is placed bang in the middle of the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. The firstborn who opens the womb helps to explain what's taking place in the Exodus.

Thinking back to the comparison that Aaron makes in the case of Miriam, the person who's afflicted with leprosy is like a stillborn Israelite, a person who has not fully participated in that event of national birth.

Consequently, in the ritual for cleansing the leper, there is a sort of Passover in miniature performed for such a person. The familiar elements associated with the Passover are brought back in and now as they are reincorporated into the community of Israel, they are made beneficiaries of that salvation once again.

At the Passover, Egypt's firstborn received the stroke or plague of death while Israel was born as the firstborn of the Lord. One nation, as it were, was rendered stillborn, whereas the other was born into new life.

[13:34] And there is a similar division between the birds in this case. One of the birds is killed in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. The water, we might recognise, has been turned to blood and the live bird dipped in that blood is set loose.

We might think about the way that the Red Sea became the grave for the pursuing Egyptians, whereas it was the means of release for the Israelites. Following the Passover, Israel had to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days and after the leper was first cleansed, he had to wait outside of his tent for seven days.

That period both began and ended with washing his clothes and shaving off all of his hair and bathing himself in water. If purging out leaven is the way that you cut off a principle of growth as it plays out in food, shaving all of one's hair is a way that that can be done for the human person. To be fully incorporated into the life of Israel's worshipping community once again, the man to be cleansed of leprosy needed to offer a reparation sacrifice. This suggests, as we have seen in other ways, the possibility that there is some association between leprosy and the suspicion of the trespass against the Lord in desecrating holy things.

We should also note the similarities between the ritual prescribed here and that prescribed for the Nazarite who had become corpse defiled in Numbers chapter 6 verses 9 to 12. And if any man dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing.

[14:58] On the seventh day he shall shave it. On the eighth day he shall bring two turtle doves or two pigeons to the priest to the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering and make atonement for him because he sinned by reason of the dead body.

And he shall consecrate his head that same day and separate himself to the Lord for the days of his separation and bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering. But the previous period shall be void because his separation was defiled.

We should also recognize in the placing of blood on extremities of the cleansed person's body a similarity with the ordination rite for the priests. In Leviticus chapter 8 verses 22 and 23 Then he presented the other ram the ram of ordination and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram and he killed it and Moses took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.

The cleansed leper also has oil applied to those same parts. The body of the priest was being consecrated for divine service. The body of the cleansed leper needs to be re-consecrated as a member of the people after being defiled on account of its corpse-like quality.

As in the case of the laws concerning childbirth provision is made for those who cannot afford the more expensive offering. The rest of the chapter gives laws for leprous houses. Besides persons garments and houses could also be infected with leprosy.

[16 : 23] This probably suggests that we're talking about a number of conditions that are related in their appearance but different in their underlying causes. The corruption of houses probably involves a sort of mould or fungus.

As in the case of the inspection of the leprous person in the previous chapter the inspection typically involved a number of stages. After an initial examination there was a further examination on the seventh day.

If the disease spread then the stones and mortar in which the leprosy had spread were unclean and needed to be removed and destroyed outside of the camp. Such a house could defile people who dwelt in it or things that were kept in it.

If after the initial removal of the stones it was found to be infected again the house was condemned to be destroyed. However if the disease was not found to have spread in any way the house was to be cleansed with a very similar ritual to that used for the cleansed leper.

We should here consider the great similarities of this ritual not merely to the events of the Passover but also to the ritual of the day of atonement which appears in a couple of chapters time. In Leviticus chapter 16 verses 8 to 10 we read A cleansing ritual involving the sprinkling of blood and the division of two paired animals one being set free into the wilderness and the other being killed should help us to see a connection between the law of the day of atonement and the law for the cleansing of houses with leprosy.

[18 : 00] What happens to the tabernacle also happens to the houses of individual Israelites. This helps us to see something of an extension of principles of holiness. The holiness of the camp at its very heart in the tabernacle itself has some sort of analogy in every house of the Israelites.

The ritual for the cleansing of the leprous house is a sort of miniature day of atonement for the individual Israelite just as the cleansing of the leper is a miniature Passover for that Israelite.

A question to consider how might we see in Jesus' cleansing of the temple in the gospels some sort of connection to the cleansing of leprous houses?