

# Leviticus 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Leviticus chapter 21. And the Lord said to Moses, Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, or his virgin sister, who is near to him because she has no husband. For her he may make himself unclean. He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people, and so profane himself. They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord's food offerings, the bread of their God. Therefore they shall be holy. They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. You shall sanctify him, for he offers the bread of your God.

He shall be holy to you, for I, the Lord who sanctify you, am holy. And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father, she shall be burned with fire.

The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes. He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God. For the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him. I am the Lord.

And he shall take a wife in her virginity, a widow or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute. These he shall not marry. But he shall take as a wife a virgin of his own people, that he may not profane his offspring among his people. For I am the Lord who sanctifies him.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot, or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight, or an itching disease, or scabs, or crushed testicles.

[ 2 : 1 9 ] No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's food offerings. Since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries.

For I am the Lord who sanctifies them. So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons, and to all the people of Israel. Leviticus chapters 21 and 22 are a pair of chapters dealing with holy things and holy persons, their criteria for holiness, and the way in which their integrity can be preserved. In chapter 21 we begin with instructions concerning the regular priests in verses 1 to 9, and then in verses 10 to 15 concerning the high priest. The concluding verses of the chapter present the necessity of bodily integrity for acting priests. As we will see, many of the commandments here are also applied to Israelites in general, or at least similar but lesser commandments are. However, it was a matter of particular importance that the priests, and especially the high priest, should retain their purity and holiness. They are acting on behalf of the whole nation, and if they are impure, they jeopardise the nation's status more generally.

The commandments, first for the priests and then for the high priest, begin with treating situations of death and corpse defilement, and then proceed to give criteria by which fitting wives could be determined. The laws concerning uncleanness for the dead fit into the more general body of commandments concerning corpse defilement, but also target practices associated with cults of the

dead that would have been practised in surrounding cultures. As I have already noted, many of the laws here would have applied not merely to the priests, but also to Israelites more generally. We see this in places like Deuteronomy chapter 14 verses 1 and 2.

You are the sons of the Lord your God. You shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

[ 4 : 25 ] This passage in Deuteronomy chapter 14 is given in the context of an exposition of the third commandment. Israel bears the name of the Lord, and the people like the priests are holy to the Lord, and must not be a people marked out by the marks of death. God is the Lord and giver of life, and he does not want his people to become a people associated with death. Similar laws are also found a few chapters earlier in Leviticus chapter 19 verses 27 and 28. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves. I am the Lord. As Israel is a holy people, they need to be set apart from death and its defilement. We should consider the laws addressing corpse defilement in places like Numbers chapter 19 verses 11 to 13. 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. Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord. And that person shall be cut off from Israel, because the water for impurity was not thrown on him. He shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him. The priests are forbidden to make themselves unclean for the dead among their people, but exceptions are made for their closest blood relatives – mother, father, son, daughter, brother, or virgin sister. The surprising exception to this list, of course, is the wife, and verse 4 says he shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people and so profane himself. The interpretation of this verse has long been challenging, on account of its unusual wording and grammar, not merely because it seems to make what is a very surprising statement. The most likely reading of the verse does seem to present the wife as excluded from the class of persons for which the priest could legitimately make himself unclean. Laws for separation from the dead are even more pronounced in the case of the high priest.

He cannot make himself unclean by going into dead bodies, even for his father or mother. This separation from death is important because the high priest's holiness was part of the means by which he was able to serve and to ensure that the sins of the people were dealt with. A severely unclean high priest might precipitate a minor crisis. Moses warned Aaron and his sons concerning inappropriate mourning in Leviticus chapter 10 verses 6 to 7, after the Lord had killed Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu in judgment. And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithema his sons, Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation. But let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the Lord has kindled. And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. And they did according to the word of Moses. A priest or high priest mourning in the holy place would bring the wrath of the Lord upon the whole of the people, because they were representing the entire nation. The Aaronic priesthood was all male, but the women in their households participated in some of their holy status, and could eat of certain parts of their husband's or father's food, which was given as a contribution to the priests. This would not include the purification offering, for instance, which was to be eaten by the priestly males to bear the sin of the people. The women of the priestly houses could not do this. The priestly women were subject to higher judgments upon unfaithfulness, and there were higher criteria for a fitting wife for the high priest. The high priest was expected to marry a virgin of his own people, and a priestly daughter who committed harlotry was not stoned to death like a woman of a lay family, but was to be burned. We see an example of this in the harlot in Revelation chapter 17 verse 16. She is condemned to be burned. That is one of many details within that passage, giving support to the identification of the harlot with unfaithful Jerusalem, an apostate priestly daughter. In addition to keeping the priests separate from the defiling cult of death and association with the uncleanness of death, these laws concerning marriage ensured the holiness of the seed of the priests. The final section of the chapter, in verses 16 to 24, addressed the need for physical integrity for the acting priests. Priests who were disabled or blemished were permitted to participate in the holy food that

was given to the priests, but they could not serve in the holy place or at the altar. We should observe the very close parallels between the laws concerning the physical integrity of the priests and the laws concerning the physical integrity of animals in the chapter that follows, paired with this one. In verses 22 to 25 of that chapter we read,

Animals blind or disabled or mutilated or having a discharge or an itch or scabs, you shall not offer to the Lord or give them to the Lord as a food offering on the altar. You may present a bull or a lamb that has a part too long or too short for a free will offering, but for a vow offering it cannot be accepted.

Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the Lord. You shall not do it within your land. Neither shall you offer as the bread of your God any such animals gotten from a foreigner. Since there is a blemish in them because of their mutilation, they will not be accepted for you. The importance of those approaching the presence of God being without blemish is best understood in terms of the analogy between physical integrity and moral integrity. Of course, physical integrity is not proof of moral integrity. Far from it, but it does serve as a powerful symbol of it.

A question to consider. How might the analogy between the priests and the sacrifices that are brought near to the presence of God help us better to understand part of the meaning of both priesthood and sacrifice?

[10:16] .!!