

Leviticus 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 April 2022

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[0 : 00] Leviticus chapter 22. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons so that they abstain from the holy things of the people of Israel, which they dedicate to me, so that they do not profane my holy name. I am the Lord. Say to them, If any one of all your offspring throughout your generations approaches the holy things that the people of Israel dedicate to the Lord, while he has an uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from my presence. I am the Lord. None of the offspring of Aaron who has a leprous disease or a discharge may eat of the holy things until he is clean. Whoever touches anything that is unclean through contact with the dead, or a man who has an omission of semen, and whoever touches a swarming thing by which he may be made unclean, or a person from whom he may take uncleanness, whatever his uncleanness may be, the person who touches such a thing shall be unclean until the evening, and shall not eat of the holy things unless he has bathed his body in water. When the sun goes down he shall be clean, and afterward he may eat of the holy things, because they are his food. He shall not eat what dies of itself or is torn by beasts, and so make himself unclean by it. I am the Lord. They shall therefore keep my charge, lest they bear sin for it and die thereby, when they profane it. I am the

Lord who sanctifies them. A layperson shall not eat of a holy thing. No foreign guest of the priest or hired worker shall eat of a holy thing. But if a priest buys a slave as his property for money, the slave may eat of it, and anyone born in his house may eat of his food. If a priest's daughter marries a layman, she shall not eat of the contribution of the holy things. But if a priest's daughter is widowed or divorced, and has no child and returns to her father's house, as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food, yet no layperson shall eat of it. And if anyone eats of a holy thing unintentionally, he shall add the fifth of its value to it, and give the holy thing to the priest.

They shall not profane the holy things of the people of Israel, which they contribute to the Lord, and so cause them to bear iniquity and guilt by eating their holy things. For I am the Lord who sanctifies them. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel, and say to them, When any one of the house of Israel or of the sojourners in Israel presents a burnt offering as his offering, for any of their vows or freewill offerings that they offer to the Lord. If it is to be accepted for you, it shall be a male without blemish, of the bulls or the sheep or the goats. You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable for you.

And when anyone offers a sacrifice of peace offerings to the Lord to fulfil a vow, or as a freewill offering from the herd or from the flock, to be accepted it must be perfect. There shall be no blemish in it. 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 freewill 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. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, When an ox or sheep or goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as a food offering to the Lord. But you shall not kill an ox or a sheep and her young in one day. And when you sacrifice a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord, you shall sacrifice it so that you may be accepted. It shall be eaten on the same day. You shall leave none of it until morning. I am the Lord. So you shall keep my commandments and do them. I am the Lord. And you shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.

[4 : 01] Leviticus chapters 21 and 22 should be read in many respects as a pair. Together they deal with the integrity of holy persons and holy things. Chapter 21 focused on maintaining the

cleanness of the priests by avoiding contracting uncleanness through corpse defilement, involvement in practices surrounding the dead, and marriage with women who were not adequately set apart. Chapter 22 focuses on how the sacrifices and sacrificial portions belonging to the priests were to be handled. At the conclusion of the preceding chapter, we saw that priests who were not able to officiate at the altar on account of some form of defect were nonetheless permitted to participate in the portions belonging to the priests. Women in priestly families could also participate in much of the priestly food. Close parallels can be observed between the two chapters, not least between the laws of physical integrity for the priests and the laws of physical integrity for sacrificial animals. The laws of this chapter are frequently punctuated by references to the Lord's own holiness. The priests must be holy because the Lord is holy, and he has set them apart for his service. Priests are guardians of that which is holy, and so in addition to enjoying special privileges in participating in holy things, they have a special responsibility to guard the holy things. Those who serve in holy things are in a position of grave potential danger.

They could become overly familiar with the holy things of God and end up profaning them. They could also, on account of their enjoyment of spiritual authority, come to despise the people to whom the Lord charged them to minister. For instance, to fail to treat the sacrifices of the people with respect, and even to act in a predatory manner towards the people. On several occasions in scripture, the Lord declares judgment upon an unfaithful priesthood, which has failed in this area. Perhaps one of the most notable examples is in 1 Samuel chapter 2, verses 12 to 17. Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot.

All that the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw. And if the man said to him, Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish, he would say, No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force. Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the Lord with contempt. Hophni and Phinehas, through their practices, were quite happy to deprive the Lord of his portion of his people's sacrifices, obstructing the people's enjoyment of fellowship with God, and the Lord's enjoyment of fellowship with his people. Despising the sacrifices of the Israelites, in the case of Hophni and Phinehas, went hand in hand with the despising of the people. They took up parts of the sacrifice that were forbidden to them, and they also took of the people in ways that were forbidden of them. They lay with the women serving at the entrance of the tabernacle, as we see in chapter 2 verse 22, presumably in a way that involved the same exploitation of power and authority as in their unlawful taking of the people's sacrifices.

[7 : 23] On account of the sins of Eli and his sons, the Lord judged the house of Eli severely. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 28 to 33, I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel.

Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and honour your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest part of every offering of my people Israel? Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares, I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever.

But now the Lord declares, Far be it from me, for those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.

Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house for ever. The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out, to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. Verse 3 presents the general rule that needs to be observed. No one of the priests who is unclean should approach the holy things that the people of Israel had dedicated to the Lord. The uncleanness in view includes leprous disease or a bodily discharge, but also the second-hand forms of uncleanness through corpse defilement, contraction of uncleanness from someone defiled with a bodily omission, or from contact with an unclean animal.

Priests would routinely become defiled in these sorts of ways. Such cases of defilement were not a big problem. The person would be unclean until evening, and then after washing he could participate in holy things once again. For inadvertent sins in these sorts of areas there were provisions made in the sacrificial system. For instance, we might think about some of the sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus chapter 5. However, in most of these cases, no sacrifice would be necessary. It would just be a matter of waiting until evening, and washing your body in water. The priests should not merely take care about their own behaviour around the holy things. They had been appointed as guardians within the Lord's house more generally, and so they bore an especial responsibility to ensure that the things of the Lord were not desecrated. Verses 10 to 16 give a list of people who were proper and improper participants in the holy things. If someone inadvertently ate of the holy things, verse 14 provides instruction in how such a situation could be rectified. The reparation offering prescribed in Leviticus chapter 5 verses 14 to 16 would also apply in such a case. The Lord spoke to Moses saying,

[9 : 59] If anyone commits a breach of faith and sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of the Lord, he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation a ram without blemish out of the flock, valued in silver shekels according to the shekel of the sanctuary for a guilt offering.

He shall also make restitution for what he has done amiss in the holy thing, and shall add a fifth to it and give it to the priest. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and he shall be forgiven. Verses 15 and 16 give warnings about profaning the holy things of Israel. If the priest desecrated the sacrifices of the people, the people's sacrifices would be frustrated. The bearing of sin that was supposed to occur in the sacrificial offering fails, and the sin comes back upon the offerer's head. Ensuring that the offerings were properly offered then was a very solemn responsibility. At the end of chapter 21 there are instructions concerning the physical integrity required of those who approach the altar of the Lord to serve.

At the end of chapter 22 there are similar requirements for the sacrifices that are brought near. Beirut Levine has shown that these correspond almost one to one between the two accounts. The priest is like a sacrificial animal, and the sacrificial animals are like priests.

The purpose of all of these commandments is to uphold the holiness of the Lord's name, so that it not be profaned, and that the things of the Lord not be desecrated. The behaviour of the priests, and their guarding of the holy things, is one of the chief ways that they teach the reverence of the Lord to the people.

A question to consider, what might be some new covenant analogies to the behaviour required of the priests in this chapter?