

Leviticus 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 24. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. Outside the veil of the testimony in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the Lord regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly. He shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it, two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf, and you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the Lord. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go up with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the Lord.

Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the Lord regularly. It is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual Jew.

Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the name and cursed, and they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shalometh, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. And they put him in custody, till the will of the Lord should be clear to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who hurt him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him, the sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name shall be put to death. Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done, it shall be done to him. Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God. So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed, and stoned him with stones.

Thus the people of Israel did as the Lord commanded Moses. The presence of the material of this chapter in its current position might initially be rather puzzling, seeming out of place after the instructions concerning the festal calendar.

If we had been ordering the material of this book, we might have placed the material of this chapter after chapter 22 concerning the holy food and requirements for proper sacrifices. John Kleinig suggests that we explain its position by considering the chapter as the culmination in the treatment of holy things that began in chapter 19. The sequence of the chapters then gradually moves us towards the most holy things of all. Chapters 19 and 20 concern the holiness of the Israelites. Chapters 21 to 22 concern the holiness of the priests and sacrifices. Chapter 23 concerns holy days. And finally, chapter 24 moves from the holiness of the items of the holy place, the lamps and the table of showbread, to the most holy thing of all, the name of the Lord, who dwells in the most holy place. The directions for the construction of the table of showbread and the lampstand are first given at the end of Exodus chapter 25.

[3 : 3 0] The instructions with which the chapter begins are also found in a similar form elsewhere in Exodus chapter 27 verses 20 to 21, when the oil for the lamp was appointed in the instructions concerning the tabernacle. You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his son shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the

people of Israel. Two parties were held responsible for the maintaining of the items within the holy place. The people were responsible to provide pure oil, oil of the highest quality, and Aaron was responsible to tend to the lamp and to arrange the showbread on the table. We should observe here an analogy between the lamp and the table of showbread in the holy place, and the brazen altar and the tribute offerings in the courtyard.

Aaron must tend to the fire of the lamp and present the bread within, and Aaron's sons are responsible to ensure that the fire of the brazen altar keeps burning, and to manage the tribute offerings in the courtyard without. Aaron and his sons enjoy food privileges from the table within the house, and they enjoy food privileges from the table of the altar outside of the house. All of these parallels can be seen when we read Leviticus chapter 6 verses 12 to 18. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it, it shall not go out.

The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it, and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually, it shall not go out. And this is the law of the grain offering. The sons of Aaron shall offer it before the Lord in front of the altar, and one shall take from it a handful of the fine flour of the grain offering and its oil, and all the frankincense that is on the grain offering, and burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And the rest of it Aaron and his sons shall eat. It shall be eaten unleavened in a holy place. In the court of the tent of meeting they shall eat it. It shall not be baked with leaven.

I have given it as their portion of my food offerings. It is a thing most holy, like the sin offering and the guilt offering. Every male among the children of Aaron may eat of it, as decreed forever throughout your generations, from the Lord's food offerings. Whatever touches them shall become holy.

Considering that the bread on the table of showbread in the holy place was arranged before the Lord every Sabbath day, the bread from the preceding Sabbath would presumably have been the Sabbath portion of the priests. On the Sabbath day then, they would have enjoyed bread from the higher table of the Lord, as it were. Such passages should teach us that the primary metaphor governing sacrifice is food rather than killing and death. While the death or the slaying of the sacrificial animals was an integral part of the meaning of the sacrifices, the priests are, to pick up on language that is repeatedly used of them in Leviticus chapter 21, those who approach to offer and enjoy the privilege of eating the bread of their God. The altar is not so much a killing site, all the animals were killed before being placed on the altar, but a table, as it is referred to in Malachi chapter 1.

[6 : 40] The continual burning of the lamp was a symbol of the Lord's light-giving presence in the midst of his people. However, we might also relate this to the priests themselves, who were to be like lamps among the people. The oil for the priests' anointing is paralleled with the oil for the lamps in Exodus.

The table of showbread was under a metre, or around three feet in length. The bread arranged upon it might have been arranged in two piles of six loaves, or in two rows of six loaves.

In 1 Samuel chapter 21 verses 3 to 6, there is an episode concerning the showbread, when David was fleeing from King Saul, to which Christ refers in the Gospels.

There David addresses the priests, Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here. And the priest answered David, I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread, if the young men have kept themselves from women.

And David answered the priest, Truly women have been kept from us, as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy? So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away. The second half of this chapter contains a surprising and strange episode. A man who was half Israelite and half Egyptian cursed the name of the Lord, and the people brought him to Moses for judgment. Uncertain of what to do with the man, they inquired of the Lord, while holding the man in custody. The Lord's answer to their inquiry is not what we might have expected. He instructs them to put the blasphemer to death, as we might have expected, but then gives a much longer series of instructions concerning sanctions, concluding with the instruction that they have the same rule for the sojourner as for the native. There is a very similar passage in Numbers chapter 15 verses 32 to 36. While the people of Israel were in the wilderness,

they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, The man shall be put to death, all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses. Looking closer at the episode in Leviticus, there are several puzzling and interesting details that we can observe, which

[9 : 06] Rabbi David Foreman remarks upon. We have noted the Lord's lengthy response, most of which seems to be irrelevant to the people's inquiry. There is also the detail of the man's ancestry. While we are not given the man's own name, or the name of the person with whom he was fighting, we are told what tribe the man's mother came from, and the fact that he had an Egyptian father. When we have so few details, why are we given these details? Further, we have the odd wording of verse 10, which as Foreman observes, says that the man went out in the midst of the sons of Israel. There is a sort of two-way movement here, going out and going within. Further, the man's cursing of the Lord seems to have been precipitated by a fight with an Israelite man in the camp. We might wonder why the man cursed the Lord, rather than the other man with whom he was fighting. As Foreman argues, cursing the man would seem to make a lot more sense. Why bring the Lord into it? Puzzling over many of these details, Foreman gives a theory that makes sense of many of them. Why would the man's fight with an Israelite man in the camp lead him to curse the Lord? Perhaps because, in some manner, in that fight, the Lord seemed to be on the side of the Israelite man, over against the half-Israelite. Why are we given the man's ancestry, but not his name? Perhaps because his mixed ancestry was what precipitated the fight. Enjoyment of a heritage within Israel depended upon the father's line of descent. However, this half-Israelite's father was an Egyptian, not an Israelite. His mother was the Israelite. His going out in the midst of the people might refer to his attempt to find a place among the people of his mother, the tribe of Dan. Yet, rather than welcome this sojourner among them, the people of Dan fought against him. In fighting against the half-Israelite, the full Israelite presumably appealed to the Lord to back up his case, denying that the Egyptian had any grounds for inclusion among Dan, on the basis of the Lord's favour to Israel, and the fact that the man was not really an Israelite. Consequently, the half-Israelite, feeling that God himself was against him, cursed the Lord. This reading of the story helps us to make sense of a lot of the details. The fact that the ancestry of the man is mentioned, the fact that he was struggling against a full Israelite, the way that he is described as going out in the midst of the people, the reasons for which he might have cursed the Lord, the uncertainty of the people in judging him, and then finally, the way that the Lord responds. In the Lord's response, what is highlighted is equity in judgment, and the inclusion of the sojourner and the native under the same law.

That principle is mentioned near the beginning of the Lord's response in verse 16, the sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death, and then also at the end, in verse 22, you shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God. Foreman notes that in addition to the story of the man picking up sticks on the Sabbath, there is another instance in the book of Numbers where Moses and the people put a case before the Lord that they do not feel able to adjudicate. This is the case of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers chapter 27. We could note that there are similar issues at play in both of these cases. In the case of Zelophehad's daughters, they are concerned that their enjoyment of a patrimony within the land is going to be forfeited because their father had no sons, and the half-Egyptian seems to be completely excluded from Israel because he does not have an Israelite father, only an Israelite mother. In both cases, enjoyment of inheritance through the line of the mother is somehow at stake. While the Lord does not say here that the man should have been given an inheritance among the people of Dan, considering the case of Zelophehad's daughters, it seems reasonable to believe that he could have presented a case for himself. Of course, rather than appealing to the Lord, he considered the Lord his adversary and cursed the Lord.

Had he appealed to the Lord like Zelophehad's daughters rather than cursing the Lord, he might even have enjoyed an inheritance among Israel. Whether or not this is the case, he should have received equitable and generous and hospitable treatment as a sojourner among them.

While in response to his cursing of the Lord, the Lord underlines the equitable treatment with which the sojourner should be treated, the equitable treatment concerns punishment, not blessing.

However, if the man had appealed to the Lord rather than cursing him, the teaching of the Lord concerning the equity with which sojourners should be treated might have been pushed in a different direction. We see in Exodus chapter 23 verse 9 for instance, In a very thought-provoking reading of the passage, Foreman argues that we should read the episodes of Judges chapters 17 and 18 in terms of the events described here. Micah is unwittingly cursed by his mother for taking the 1,100 pieces of silver. She tries to retract her curse by declaring a blessing over him instead. She uses some of the money to construct idolatrous images. Micah then places those images within his house in a shrine. Later, a Levite of the tribe of Judah comes on the scene and Micah shows hospitality to him, taking him into his household. Foreman suggests that the man might have been half Levite, half Judahite, and perhaps the fact that he was wandering north was because he was excluded from his people on account of his mixed tribal ancestry. In Judges chapter 18, we find that the tribe of Dan did not find a place among their brethren. As they were not able to find a secure place within the land, they went north to try and find some easier land to possess. [14:23] They ended up taking the Levite and Micah's household gods with them and established an idolatrous shrine in their new territory, essentially cursing the name of the Lord. At the very end of the narrative, we discover the ancestry of the Levite. The Levite was a son of Gershom, the son of Moses.

Foreman suggests that we need to put all of the pieces together, and to recognise that within the story of Micah, the household gods, the Levite, and the tribe of Dan, many of the elements of the story at the end of Leviticus chapter 24 are resurfacing. In that chapter, it seems most likely that it was the tribe of Dan that excluded the half-Israelite with an Egyptian father. Now, however, Dan finds itself excluded among the tribes of Israel, not being able to secure a place within the land. Their response to the situation is not dissimilar to the man that they once excluded. They end up rebelliously seeking their own territory and essentially cursing the name of the Lord by establishing an idolatrous shrine. The Levite, the descendant of Moses, finds himself in a similar position to that which his grandfather was once in, as a stranger in a strange land. He is a sojourner who, like his grandfather, has shown hospitality. Moses was welcomed by Jethro and became as a member of his family, and something similar happens to the Levite in chapter 17 of Judges. All of this should raise troubling questions about how the people of the Lord treat sojourners, and the way in which their inhospitality can provoke people to curse God himself. On the other hand, it raises questions about the ways that those who are at the receiving end of inhospitality leap to cursing or rejecting God, rather than actually appealing to him. Far from being straightforward and clear-cut, then, the narrative at the end of Leviticus chapter 24 causes us to reflect upon the ways in which the inhospitality of Israel, and even Moses himself, might provoke the man to his sin. The Lord's teaching about equity and sanctions is surprising in the context. We might expect that there would be two different laws, one for natives and one for sojourners, but they both come under the same law. The other aspect of this is seen in part in the next chapter, where the Lord ensures that the sojourner and the stranger have a positive place and enjoy hospitality among his people. They should not, as the half-Israelite of this chapter seems to have been, be excluded and mistreated. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which our inhospitality to others might lead them to curse or reject the Lord?