

Leviticus 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 17. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them, This is the thing that the Lord has commanded. If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to offer it as a gift to the Lord in front of the tabernacle of the Lord, blood guilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the Lord, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the Lord. And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore, this shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations. And you shall say to them, any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people. If any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood. Anyone also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of every creature is its blood, its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood, whoever eats it shall be cut off. And every person who eats what dies of itself, or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

Then he shall be clean. But if he does not wash them, or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity. Leviticus chapter 17 to 27 have commonly been known as the holiness code. It's seen to involve a movement out from the focus upon ritual of the first half of the book into a much more expansive ethical and moral concern with holiness. However, this understanding establishes a false breach between the concerns of the first half of the book and those of the latter half. Rather, a proper approach to ritual should inculcate a sensitivity to moral and ethical concerns. Ethics and ritual are mutually constitutive. A proper practice of ritual is confirmed in ethical practice, and true ethical concerns will come with an increased sensitivity to the importance of the ritual. While the first half of the book then focused upon the priests and centred upon the service of the tabernacle, chapter 17 addresses the broader people of Israel. Chapter 17 contains five different commands, each introduced with something like the expression, if anyone of the house of Israel. So there's the first one in verses 3 to 7, the second in verse 8 to 9, third in verses 10 to 12, fourth in verses 13 and 14, and then the fifth final one in verses 15 and 16. These commands come with warnings upon disobedience, and most include a rationale for obedience. The central command concerns the eating of blood, which should remind us of

Genesis chapter 9 verses 3 to 6, which is in the background of the commandments here. Genesis chapter 9 verses 3 to 6, every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning. From every beast I will require it, and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. For God made man in his own image. The first command of chapter 17 is that all slaughtered oxen, lambs, or goats must be offered as sacrifices to the Lord. Shedding the blood of an animal is spoken of in a way similar to the shedding of the blood of a human being, as we see in Genesis chapter 9 verse 6 and Numbers chapter 35 verse 33. You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. The person who breaks this command will be cut off from among his people. This may be a reference to being exiled, or possibly not being acknowledged by God, possibly not having offspring.

There are a number of other theories. The purpose of this command is that slaughtered oxen, lambs, and goats should be sacrificed to the Lord as peace offerings. The peace offering, certain parts of it were offered to the Lord, but the worshipper could eat most of it, and the blood would also be used in a blood rite. However, the teaching here is expanded to make clear that it is also designed to stop the alternative pagan practice that some of the Israelites were presumably engaging in, of sacrificing to goat demons in the wilderness. The association of goats with demons in the wilderness may help us better to understand the significance of Azazel in the law of the day of coverings in the previous chapter.

[5 : 43] The wilderness is associated with demons, and goat demons, we see this elsewhere in scripture. A number of commentators point to Isaiah chapter 13 verse 21 and 34 verse 14 in this connection.

The wilderness then is a realm of demons and wild animals, and the goat sent out into the wilderness is expelled from the realm of the Lord's presence into the realm of the demons and into the realm of the wild beasts. The purpose of this law in chapter 17 then seems to be designed in part to guard against a particular form of idolatry. It also extends the logic of the sacrificial system out into the more general life of the people in the camp. The second commandment in this chapter extends the principle of the first, including the sojourner. All sacrifices and ascension offerings must be offered to the Lord.

The Lord has a complete monopoly on sacrifice. And the central commandment of this chapter is the prohibition on consuming blood. Once again, this is founded upon Genesis chapter 9.

The blood taboo highlights God's ownership of all life, and also the analogy between human life and animal life. You can't eat the animal's blood. The soul is in its blood. There's a continuity between the life of animals and the life of human beings, and life belongs to God. It's not for us to dispose of in whatever way we wish. The laws of Leviticus 11 list clean and unclean animals. There were also sacrificial and non-sacrificial animals. The key sacrificial animals were the ox, the goat, and the lamb, and then there were secondary sacrificial animals in the two birds that could be offered, the turtle dove and the pigeon. Each of the ox, the goat, and the lamb had to be offered as peace offerings if they were to be eaten. However, the fourth commandment of the chapter teaches that clean but non-sacrificial animals had to have their blood poured out and covered up with earth, partly because that would prevent the blood being used for any wrong purpose. The rationale for this, again, is that the life of the animal is in the blood. Now, we can risk taking this statement in an overly literal way, worrying that scripture is teaching that the life of the animal is literally contained in the blood in some way that might be proven or disproven with modern science.

However, our science paints far too narrow a picture of the world to understand such a commandment. Life is bound up with the blood in much the same way as the person is seen in their face.

[8 : 08] It's not a literal scientific connection, it's just a very natural way of seeing the world. Finally, the person eating an animal that died by itself, or that was torn apart by animals, should wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening. It wasn't clear whether such an eater had been polluted by eating blood or not, so they had to be treated as unclean and cleanse themselves. There are later laws given in Deuteronomy chapter 12, which need to be read alongside this chapter for an understanding of concessions that were made for settled life in the land. Deuteronomy chapter 12 verses 15 following.

However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns as much as you desire according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. The unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and as of the deer. Only you shall not eat the blood, you shall pour it out on the earth like water. You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain, or of your wine, or of your oil, or the firstborn of your herd, or of your flock, or any of your vow offerings that you vow, or your freewill offerings, or the contribution that you present, but you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite who is within your towns. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all that you undertake. Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land. When the Lord your God enlarges your territory as he has promised you, and you say, I will eat meat, because you crave meat, you may eat meat whenever you desire.

If the place that the Lord your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you, then you may kill any of your herd or your flock, which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you. And you may eat within your towns whenever you desire. Just as the gazelle or the deer is eaten, so you may eat of it. The unclean and the clean alike may eat of it. Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. You shall not eat it, you shall pour it out on the earth like water. You shall not eat it, that all may go well with you and with your children after you, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings, you shall take, and you shall go to the place that the Lord will choose, and offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God. The blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the Lord your God, but the flesh you may eat. Be careful and obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. The killing of animals and the eating of meat was seen as religious within the ancient world, and in many places down to the modern day. It's a time when man is reminded of the reality of the mortality of flesh, and the mysterious commonality of all creaturely life. It reminds us of human power over the animal world, the power that man has to act almost as a God over the animal world, a great power. And it reminds us also of the source of all life, both of animal life and of human life. God didn't forbid meat-eating, but permitted it, particularly after the flood. However, meat-eating is a matter of considerable gravity. The entire sacrificial system both permitted and prescribed the killing and the eating of animals. However, the logic of the sacrificial system depended upon a recognition of both the analogy between animal life and human life, because if there were no analogy, there'd be no way that an animal could substitute for a human being. But it also highlighted the key difference between animals and human beings.

Human beings alone were made in the image of God. So although animals and their blood can symbolically substitute for mankind, their blood cannot truly deal with sin. And teaching people to take the killing and the eating of animals very seriously is one of the ways that the logic of the sacrificial system more generally is underlined. Taking life is a matter of extreme seriousness, whether it's a human being or whether it's an animal. And because of the gravity of taking life, when an Israelite puts his hand upon an animal and that animal is killed and taken up into God's presence in the ascension offering, for instance, that worshipper should recognise the weightiness of what is just taking place.

A question to consider. How might a clearer understanding of Leviticus's teaching on the slaughtering and eating of meat inform our own eating practices and our treatment of animals?