

Leviticus 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 27. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, If the person is from a month old up to five years old, the valuation shall be for a male five shekels of silver, and for a female the valuation shall be three shekels of silver. And if the person is sixty years old or over, then the valuation for a male shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels. And if someone is too poor to pay the valuation, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him. The priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford. If the vow is an animal that may be offered as an offering to the Lord, all of it that he gives to the Lord is holy. He shall not exchange it or make a substitute for it, good for bad or bad for good. And if he does in fact substitute one animal for another, then both it and the substitute shall be holy. And if it is any unclean animal that may not be offered as an offering to the Lord, then he shall stand the animal before the priest, and the priest shall value it as either good or bad. As the priest values it, so it shall be. But if he wishes to redeem it, he shall add a fifth to the valuation. When a man dedicates his house as a holy gift to the Lord, the priest shall value it as either good or bad. As the priest values it, so it shall stand. And if the donor wishes to redeem his house, he shall add a fifth to the valuation price, and it shall be his. If a man dedicates to the Lord part of the land that is his possession, then the valuation shall be in proportion to its seed. A homer or barley seed shall be valued at fifty shekels of silver. If he dedicates his field from the year of jubilee, the valuation shall stand. But if he dedicates his field after the jubilee, then the priest shall calculate the price according to the years that remain until the year of jubilee, and a deduction shall be made from the valuation. And if he who dedicates the field wishes to redeem it, then he shall add a fifth to its valuation price, and it shall remain his. But if he does not wish to redeem the field, or if he has sold the field to another man, it shall not be redeemed any more.

But the field, when it is released in the jubilee, shall be a holy gift to the Lord. Like a field that has been devoted, the priest shall be in possession of it. If he dedicates to the Lord a field that he has bought, which is not a part of his possession, then the priest shall calculate the amount of the valuation for it up to the year of jubilee, and the man shall give the valuation on that day as a holy gift to the Lord. In the year of jubilee the field shall return to him from whom it was bought, to whom the land belongs as a possession. Every valuation shall be according to the shekel of the sanctuary. Twenty geras shall make a shekel. But a firstborn of animals, which as a firstborn belongs to the Lord, no man may dedicate, whether ox or sheep, it is the Lord's. And if it is an unclean animal, then he shall buy it back at the valuation, and add a fifth to it, or, if it is not redeemed, it shall be sold at the valuation. But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed.

Every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord. No one devoted who is to be devoted for destruction from mankind shall be ransomed. He shall surely be put to death. Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord. If a man wishes to redeem some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it. And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the Lord.

One shall not differentiate between good or bad, neither shall he make a substitute for it. And if he does substitute for it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy. It shall not be redeemed.

These are the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. Leviticus chapter 27 is a surprising end to the book. The blessings and curses of chapter 26 might have been a far more natural place to conclude. Reading chapter 27, it can seem a bit tagged on.

[4 : 24] However, if it is tagged on, we might wonder why it has been appended to the end of the book, rather than added somewhere within it. The chapter concerns vows and votive offerings. Israelites might make such vows in times of crisis, declaring their intention to dedicate some person or some part of their property to the Lord. We might, for instance, think about Hannah.

In 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 11 we read, And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant her son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

Taking such vows was a very solemn thing to do. In Acts chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives for lying to the Lord concerning vowed property. In Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 21 to 23, we have the following warning.

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

In the book of Judges chapter 12 verses 30 to 31, we read of the rash vow of Jephthah. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. Within Leviticus chapter 27, provision is made for the redemption or buying back of certain things that have been dedicated to the Lord, yet such buying back is not permitted in all of cases. The first vow mentioned here is the vowing of persons. We might think, for instance, of Hannah's vow of her son, or the way in which someone in the midst of a crisis might vow themselves or some member of their family to the service of the Lord's house were they delivered. The valuations listed here seem to be on the basis of people's suitability for manual labour. Consequently, males of working age are valued much more highly than anyone else. The value given for the elderly, for children, and for women is much lower. Redeeming such a person might cost the equivalent of four years of typical wages, so such buying back could not be easily done. As we see in verse 8, provision was made for people who are too poor to pay such valuations. The next case that is dealt with is the vowing of animals. Animals that could be sacrificed were holy to the Lord and could not be substituted for. If the vower wanted to substitute for the vowed animal, both the animal and the substitute animal would be holy to the Lord.

[6 : 55] Presumably the animal that he sought to substitute for in this instance would be used as a peace offering. The fact that redemption is not allowed for here differs from the law of the reparation offering in Leviticus chapter 5 verse 15. 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. For the reparation offering, either the animal or its monetary equivalent was permitted. However, in the case of the vows mentioned in chapter 27, the animal itself had been vowed and could not be redeemed. Unclean animals could also be vowed. Such animals presumably went to the service of the Levites, so a man might vow his donkey and give it over to the Levites, or redeem it for its valuation plus 20%. Houses and land could also be dedicated. They could also, like the animals, be redeemed for an additional 20% of the valuation price. The dedication of land was complicated by virtue of the Jubilee laws. The value of land was assessed by its productive capacity until the year of Jubilee. Once again, if someone wanted to redeem it, they had to add 20%.

Verses 20 to 21 deal with a special case. As Jacob Milgram notes, what seems to have occurred in this instance is that an Israelite had already sold their property until the Jubilee, and then they consecrate the field that they had sold. Since the use of the property until the year of Jubilee does not actually belong to them, but belongs to the person to whom they sold it earlier, what they are really giving over to the sanctuary is not the use of the land until the Jubilee, which they had given to the other party for money, but rather the right of reclaiming the land at the time of Jubilee. From that point onwards, the land belongs to the sanctuary. Verses 22 to 24 deal with a case where a person dedicates his right to the use of a field until the year of Jubilee, the field not being his own, but the possession of someone else. At the time of the Jubilee, that field shall return to its original owner. In Exodus chapter 13 verses 1 and 2 and then 11 to 13 we read, The Lord said to Moses, Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both a man and a beast, is mine. And then, When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb.

All the firstborn of your animals that are male shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it, you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. Because the firstborn already belonged to the Lord, they could not ordinarily be dedicated to him. In the case of a child like Samuel, Samuel was presumably redeemed and then dedicated. Verses 28 to 29 deal with cases of the ban.

This was perhaps the strongest form of vow of all, placing persons under a death sentence. As Gordon Wenham writes, It seems unlikely that ordinary Israelites could pronounce such vows. Only the recognized leaders had authority to declare a death sentence.

We see an instance of such a vow in Numbers chapter 21 verse 2. And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.

[10:03] We see an interesting case in Joshua chapter 9. The Gibeonites, as part of the people of the land, were under the ban and had to be destroyed. However, because of the people's rash oath of protection, they were preserved. Yet how could such persons be preserved if they were truly under the ban? Milgram suggests that becoming lifelong sanctuary servants was a way in which a lesser but acceptable form of harem was imposed. Putting all of the pieces together, he writes, In sum, the harem imposed voluntarily by the owner on his property, whether it is his slaves, animals or tenured fields, transfers it to perpetual sanctuary ownership, where it may be neither sold nor redeemed because of its most sacred status. But persons who are declared harem by some outside body, presumably an authorized court, must be put to death. So then there are two possible scenarios for a prescribed person. Either they are consigned to sanctuary ownership or they suffer the death penalty. This helps us to recognize the possibility that Jephthah's daughter was not in fact killed, but was rather dedicated to the sanctuary for the rest of her life and could not marry.

Gordon Wenham draws attention to Genesis chapter 28 verses 20 to 22. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.

And this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you. Israel's practice of the tithe then could be seen as a continuation of the vow of their forefather Jacob, and laws concerning the paying and the redeeming of tithes ends this chapter and the book. Chapter 27 ends with a similar statement as we find at the end of chapter 7 and chapter 26. Different statements summing up subsections of commandments that the Lord gave to Moses at Mount Sinai. As we conclude the book, we should return once again to the question of why it ends with this particular chapter. Emmanuel Shalev observes a sort of symmetry in the book. The beginning section of the book in chapters 1 to 7 deal with the offerings of the priests within the tabernacle. The end of the book concerns the vows of the people to the Lord. There is a sort of parallel here. The offerings of the tabernacle and the vows of the people are similar. However, whereas one is focused upon the sanctuary of the tabernacle, the other is practiced more generally within the land, not focused upon the tabernacle to the same extent. The first half of the book, leading up to the laws concerning the Day of Atonement, is focused very much upon the sanctuary and life that narrowly orbits around that context.

However, the second half of the book has the larger land in view. This, Shalev argues, shows that we are dealing with a sort of microcosm and macrocosm. What takes place in the context of the tabernacle needs to be played out within the larger stage of the land. The Lord dwells in the tabernacle in the tent that the people have erected for him, and the people dwell in the Lord's land that he has established them within.

Communion between God and man must be worked out in both realms. This symmetry between the realm of the sanctuary and the realm of the land, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, needs to be preserved for the holiness of the people. The principle of offerings and worship that we see at the beginning of the book in the context of the tabernacle also needs to be played out in the context of the wider land, in the vows and other offerings that the people give to the Lord. The tabernacle at the heart of the camp and later at the heart of the nation establishes a fundamental pattern into which the rest of life needs to be drawn. The people must be holy because the Lord their God is holy. A question to consider, what might this chapter and its place within the book more generally teach us about the theological importance of giving to the Lord and to his service?