

Leviticus 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.

And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols, and my soul will abhor you.

And I will lay your cities waste, and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it.

[4 : 05] And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. Then the land shall rest.

And they shall fall when none pursues.

And they shall walk contrary to them, and their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walk contrary to them, and brought them into the land of their enemies. If then their uncircumcised heart is humbled, and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

But the land shall be abandoned by them, and enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. And they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules, and their soul abhorred my statutes.

Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly, and break my covenant with them.

[6 : 01] For I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt, in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God.

I am the Lord. These are the statutes and rules and laws that the Lord made between himself and the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai.

Leviticus chapter 26, like Deuteronomy 28 to 30, with which it shares many similarities, comes at the end of a body of ritual and legal material, and declares the divine sanctions upon Israel's obedience or disobedience.

Like various other books of scripture, this frames the material of the book in terms of principles of blessing and punishment, wisdom and folly, life and death.

We see a similar feature in books like Deuteronomy, in the first psalm, in Proverbs chapter 9, or in Matthew 5 and 23. Two paths lie before the people, and they must choose accordingly.

[7 : 02] If they obey the commandment of the Lord, they will enjoy a blessed and fruitful life in the land. If they reject his word, they will suffer disaster, and ultimately be driven from it.

If they are faithful, they will prosper, enjoy a fruitful land, be delivered from wild beasts in the land and from their enemies. Most importantly, the Lord will dwell among them and be their God.

This is the great covenant formula. I will be your God, and you shall be my people. It expresses the covenant relationship between God and his people. He delivered them so that they would be his own.

The Lord brought them out of Egypt so that they should cease to be slaves, so that they should walk at their full stature, no longer bent down under a burdensome yoke. The purpose of the Lord's commandments, then, is to retain them in the freedom for which he set them free.

The majority of the chapter is devoted to the judgments that Israel will suffer should they reject the way of the Lord. The judgments that follow steadily escalate for each failure to respond to God's correction.

[8 : 04] Each successive judgment is introduced by the formula, if you will not listen to me, or something similar, and threats of sevenfold judgment. After several iterations of judgment without faithful response, beginning with God sending things such as plagues, wild beasts, or enemies after them, God will finally come after them himself, devastating their land personally, as we see in places like verse 32.

At many points, the judgments can be seen as the direct inverse of the blessings. The choices between the land being fertile or unproductive, between God turning in favour towards his people or turning his face from them, between Israel triumphing over their enemies or being routed by them, between deliverance from wild beasts or being devoured by wild beasts, between the protection of the land from the sword or giving the land over to the sword, between security in the land or being uprooted from the land.

God will subject the people to the most serious judgment, expelling them from the land and placing them in exile and captivity to their enemies if they persist in their unfaithfulness.

They would risk being extinguished as a people, rotting away in exile. However, here a rich note of promise is introduced. When they have fallen to their lowest point, if they will confess their iniquity, humble themselves and make amends for their sin, the Lord will remember his covenant.

He will not spurn them or destroy them utterly. In their absence, the land shall be left desolate until the point when they have suffered for their sins and can be restored to it. But God will not forget his covenant.

[9 : 43] He brought them out of Egypt in the presence of the nations in order to be their God. His very covenant identity as the Lord is bound up with his commitment to his people.

And this section is parallel to Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 10. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you, and you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments that I command you today. The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground.

For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this book of the law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

[11 : 18] The land then plays a very important part in the blessings and the judgments. The land will suffer if they are unfaithful, not receiving rain. And if they persist, the land itself will frustrate their efforts in cultivating it.

If they persist yet further in unfaithfulness, the land and its creatures will start to devour them and their livestock. And if they still persist, the land will vomit them out and they will go into exile, as we see in chapter 18 and 20.

And if they are faithful, the land will become a place where they are ever more securely planted, which is deeply responsive to their labours, and ultimately a place where they will enjoy fellowship with the Lord himself.

If and when their unfaithfulness gets them sent into exile, they will have to wait until the land has enjoyed the Sabbaths that are due to it. The land itself is regarded as a sort of servant of the Israelites, which should not be oppressed by harsh and unrelenting service.

In the previous chapter, we read of the Sabbath year, in Leviticus chapter 25 verses 1 to 7. The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, And speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord.

[12 : 30] For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits. But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord.

You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.

The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves, and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you, and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land.

All its yield shall be for food. Along with the Sabbath year there is also the year of Jubilee, which is also about the people's relationship with the land. In chapter 25 verses 8 to 13, You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, note the similarities with the feast of weeks, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years.

Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the day of atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land, and you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.

[13 : 44] It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you. In it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself, nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines.

For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field. In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his property. The land isn't just territory, property and resources.

It's a sort of secondary party within the relationship, a place where the people are to be planted like a tree, and to put down roots. It will be a home for them, filled with the life of fellowship with God who dwells with them in it.

But it ultimately belongs to God, and his ownership must be honoured. God has eminent domain, and they can't treat it however they wish, as if it were their private property. Land, for instance, must revert to the persons to whom God gave it in the 50th year.

The relationship between the people and the land is not a mere imposition of a dominating logic upon the land. It requires them to honour the integrity, the otherness, and the holiness of the land.

[14 : 55] They must not oppress the land. They must not devastate the land. They must not profane the land. And if they do, the land will be released from their tyranny for a time. It will vomit them out into exile, and they will be held out of the land until the land has been released from their tyranny for the period of its Sabbaths.

The Sabbath principle, connected with their own deliverance from slavery, must inform their treatment of the land, and also their enjoyment of possession of it. We should observe the Sabbath and Jubilee themes in their first victory in the land, in the defeat of Jericho, in Joshua chapter 6, verses 12 to 16.

Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord, and the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord walked on, and they blew the trumpets continually, and the armed men were walking before them, and the rear guard were walking after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually.

And the second day they marched round the city once and returned into the camp. So they did for six days. On the seventh day they rose early at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times.

It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, Shout, for the Lord has given you the city.

[16 : 18] It's the principle of seven sevens. It's also the principle of blowing the trumpet, and their gaining of the land. The land is reverting to its proper owner. It's the year of Jubilee.

It's the year of the liberation of the land from the people who have been oppressing it. But they need to remember that they can become like Jericho and the Canaanites too. If they are not careful, and if they oppress the land, they will suffer the same fate.

Where they fail to honor the principle of the Sabbath then, the great sign of their liberation, neither living in the liberty of right relationship with the Lord, nor liberating their neighbor on the land, judgment will fall upon them.

The entire life of Israel is supposed to be Sabbath-shaped, a participation in God's rest in the land, with God dwelling in their midst. It should not surprise us that Sabbath is mentioned nine times in this chapter.

God's judgment moves from a sort of eye-for-an-eye judgment to something much more devastating. Now, punishment can be inflicted through direct imposition of a punishment, or sanction, as a positive act.

[17 : 21] Or it can be inflicted through the removal of blessing or protection. And many fail to consider that God is the source of every good gift. For God to withdraw his blessing and protection is to be exposed to every ill and danger, and ultimately to suffer utter destruction itself, as we are cut off from life and health and peace.

It's to give oneself entirely over to the forces of decreation. Ultimately, the health of Israel in the land is to be found as they cling to the Lord and the giver of life.

The story of the Exodus shows what happens when a nation rebels against the Lord, the sorts of forces of decreation that come into play, and also what happens when God provides for a people.

The same hyper-naturalism that is seen in the plagues is also seen in God's provision for his people in the wilderness. And those same principles will follow them into the land.

A question to consider. Although we know that Canaan as the promised land has a unique status, are there any lessons that we can learn about the relationship with the creation that we should have from Israel's relationship to the land?

[18:33]

