

The Book of Leviticus: Content Survey

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Leviticus is often a book which is overlooked in Christian Bible studies or is something which is read very rapidly in an effort to read the entire Bible. A hasty dismissal of Leviticus by Christians is unfortunate because the sacrificial system of Leviticus points us to the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The New Testament description of Jesus as our propitiation (1 John 2:2) should be understood in light of the Old Testament sacrifices.

The book of Leviticus teaches Christians about a life of holiness. The book teaches Christians to confess, “I mean to live for Christ come what may.” When we are saved, the rebellious attitude of, “I will have my way!” is replaced with the soft, submissive attitude that says, “I want your way above all else.”¹

I. Laws of the Offerings – Leviticus 1:1 - 7:38

In Leviticus 1 – 7, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament is set forth. The sacrifices we are about to study are fulfilled in the atonement of Jesus Christ. Three are called “sweet savor” offerings because they emphasize the worthiness of the sacrifice. Two are called “non-sweet savor” because they emphasize the awfulness of sin. The five offerings are:

1. Burnt Offering
2. Grain Offering
3. Peace Offering / Fellowship Offering
4. Sin Offering
5. Trespass Offering / Guilt Offering / Restitution Offering

¹ John Oswalt, “Holiness: The Goal of Human Life,” Paper Delivered Tuesday, November 15, 2022 at the 74th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Denver, CO. Personal notes.

The first three offerings are voluntary, while the final two are compulsory. Leviticus 1 – 7 teaches about the sacrifices and Leviticus 8 – 9 given instructions for the priests; taken as a whole, Leviticus 1 – 9 is a manual of sacrifice (Perhaps with chapters 16 and 17 as well).

A. Burnt Offering (1:3 – 17; 6: 8 – 13)

1. Description

Leviticus 1:2 – 3: “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd of the flock. If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD.

The burnt offering is presented first because it was apparently the oldest type of offering. (See Abel’s offering in Genesis 4:6.) The burnt offering was offered because of our sin nature in general. Each human is born with a natural tendency to rebel against God. (Genesis 3; Romans 1:18 ff). It is sin and the ensuing broken relationship with God which sin entails that is the root of all other human problems.

The Hebrew word translated as “offering” in Leviticus 1:2 is קָרְבָּן (*qorban*). The word translated “brings” is also translated as “presents”. Both the words for “offering” and “brings/presents” come from the same Hebrew root— קָרַב. The noun *qorban* is derived from the verb “to bring near.” Wolf makes the application: “When sacrifices were offered, man came near to God, with the hope that the sacrifice would be accepted and sin atoned for.”²

² Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991), 197.

Leviticus 1:4: He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.

The offerer pressed his hand heavily upon the head of the animal (the Hebrew literally says “to lean upon”), thus identifying himself with the victim to be slain.³ Leviticus 1:5 says the offerer himself slit the animal’s throat. Remember, Romans 6: 23 teaches us “the wages of sin is death.” Therefore the sinner had to die, either in person or in the person of his substitute. The burnt offering clearly pre-figures the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

Key Word Study: Atonement

“To make atonement” translates the Hebrew word כָּפַר (*kipper*). An older interpretation of this word was based on the Arabic word *kappara*, which means “to cover.” Therefore, *kipper* was understood to mean “to cover” or “to make a covering.” On this reasoning, most people assumed the idea of atonement here in Leviticus 1: 4 means “covering sin.” Furthermore, the opinion is often given that the OT sacrifices only covered sin for a short time until the actual atonement by Jesus Christ occurred.

Apparently the interpretation of *kipper* as “to cover” is no longer accepted by most scholars. R. Laird Harris rejects the “to cover” interpretation and says, “This theology may still be held by some, but the meaning “cover” for this verb is very questionable. It is derived from a similar Arabic root that need not be related to the Hebrew.”⁴ As best as I can discern, the scholars now reject the relevance of the Arabic term for the Hebrew term.

³ *The Believer’s Study Bible*, 145.

⁴ R. Laird Harris, *Leviticus*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 1990), 538.

The precise meaning of *kipper* is debated. Despite the frequent appearance of כִּפֵּר, its etymology and meaning are uncertain. Gordon J. Wenham says, “One possible derivation is from the Akkadian verb *kuppuru*, “to cleanse” or “wipe.” This fits those contexts where the altar or the sanctuary is the direct object of the verb and the action involved smearing the altar with blood (Leviticus 16:33).”⁵

Another opinion says כִּפֵּר / *kipper* may be derived from the Hebrew word *kōpher*, meaning “ransom price.” Elsewhere in scripture, a *kōpher* is the money a man condemned to death can pay to escape the death penalty (Exodus 21:30; Proverbs 6:35). Wenham says, “Kipper, “to make atonement,” could then be literally translated, “to pay a ransom (for one’s life).”⁶ Harris favors this view and contends it is better Hebrew grammar to derive this verb from the noun of the same letters meaning “a ransom” (see Numbers 35: 31; Isaiah 43: 3). Harris argues, “The verb [כִּפֵּר] derived from this noun is used only in the Piel stem, which is another reason to consider it as a denominative verb; it therefore means “to give a ransom” or “atone by substitution.”⁷

I suspect this last view is correct. “Through the animal’s death and the subsequent rituals men are ransomed from the death that their sin and uncleanness merit.”⁸ The OT atonement only prefigured Christ’s work yet to come. Hebrews 10: 4 makes this clear and says, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

2. Aspects of the Burnt Offering

Sweet Aroma

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Leviticus*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Will. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 28.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 28.

⁷ Harris, *Leviticus*, 538

⁸ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 28.

Leviticus 1:9 (NASB): Its entrails, however, and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer up in smoke all of on the altar for a burnt offering, an offering by fire of a **soothing aroma** to the LORD.

The word translated “soothing” in Leviticus 1:9 of the NASB is also translated “sweet aroma” or “an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” This idea of a “pleasing aroma” is first mentioned in Genesis 8:21 when Noah sacrificed to God after the Flood. The term may imply the sacrifices address the anger of God. Again, it is called “sweet savor” offerings because they emphasize the worthiness of the sacrifice. Perhaps the phrase means the Lord accepted the gift. If you have never smelled burning flesh, then let me tell you – it stinks! The altar of fragrant incense (Leviticus 4:7) may have served the purpose of covering the smell of burning flesh.

The LXX translates “sweet aroma” with the Greek phrase *osme euodias*. This same phrase is used to describe the sacrifice of Christ (Ephesians 5:2) and Christian giving (Philippians 4:18).

Ephesians 5:2: And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a **fragrant aroma**.

Philippians 4:18: But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a **fragrant aroma**, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

Voluntary

The burnt offering was voluntary and not mandatory.

3. Application

The purpose of this offering is to make atonement for sin in general. Because the entire offering was consumed by the fire, the burnt offering

also symbolizes complete dedication and consecration to God; hence it is also called the “whole burnt offering.” So, it also symbolized the worshipper’s devotion and commitment to the LORD.

B. Grain Offering (2:1 -16, 6:14 – 18)

1. Description of the Grain Offering

Leviticus 2:1: When anyone presents a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour, and he shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it.

The grain offering (מִנְחָה [*minkhah*]; here קֶרֶבַן מִנְחָה, [*qorbban minkhah*], “an offering of a grain offering”) is the only Levitical offering that was not a blood offering, except the sin offering for the extremely poor, where an offering of fine flour without oil or frankincense could be substituted (Leviticus 5:11 – 13).

The “memorial portion” (’*azkharah*) was the part of the grain offering that was burnt on the altar (see the previous clause), as opposed to the remainder, which was normally consumed by the priests (See the full regulations in Leviticus 6:14ff). It was probably intended to call to mind (i.e., memorialize) before the Lord the reason for the presentation of the particular offering.⁹

Notice that the *oil* is poured on the offering. I believe the oil is a “type” of the Holy Spirit, and the sweetness of the oil represents the sweetness of holiness that flows from the Holy Spirit. Jonathan Edwards discussed the work of the Holy Spirit at length and the way the Holy Spirit is pictured in the sweet oil, saying:

Holiness, which is as it were the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature, is as much the proper nature of the Holy Spirit, as heat is the nature of fire, or sweetness was the nature of that holy anointing oil, which was the principal type of the Holy Ghost in the Mosaic dispensation; yea, I may rather say that holiness is as much the proper nature of the Holy Ghost, as sweetness was the nature of the sweet odor of that ointment.¹⁰

⁹ NET Bible translator notes. <https://net.bible.org/#!bible/Leviticus+2>. (Accessed July 17, 2013).

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, John E. Smith, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 201.

Edwards goes on to suggest that this “sweetness” of holiness soon pervades the life of the genuinely converted so that the soul becomes a partaker of God’s beauty.

2. Aspects of the Grain Offering

Sweet Aroma

Voluntary

3. Application

The grain offering accompanied all the burnt offerings; it signified one’s homage and thanksgiving to God.

The absence of leaven in the offering pictures the sinlessness of Jesus Christ.

Salt was added to the grain offering. Wolf says salt was added “probably because salt prevents the spoiling of food and symbolizes the lasting nature of the covenant.”¹¹

C. Peace Offering (3:1 – 17; 7:11 – 20)

1. Description of the Peace Offering

Leviticus 3:1 (NASB): Now if his offering is a sacrifice of peace offerings, if he is going to offer out to the herd, whether male or female, he shall offer it without defect before the LORD.

Wolf calls this third offering the “Fellowship Offering” as does the HCS. Wolf asserts that that the word for “peace offering” comes from *shalom*, the word *shalom* also denotes wholeness and well-being. The emphasis in this offering is primarily on the communion and fellowship of the offerer and his family with the priests and the Lord.

2. Aspects

Sweet Aroma

¹¹ Wolf, *The Pentateuch*, 201

Voluntary

3. Application

The *peace offering sacrifice* primarily enacted and practiced communion between God and man (and between the people of God). This was illustrated by the fact that the fat parts of the animal were consumed on the altar of the Lord but the meat was consumed by the worshipers in a meal before God. This is the only kind of offering in which common worshipers partook of the meat of the animal.¹² Wolf says, “The fellowship [peace] offering was an expression of praise to God for his goodness and answered prayer.”¹³

Notice that the burnt offering precedes the fellowship offering. This conveys the importance of atonement as the basis for fellowship with God.

This offering foreshadows the peace we can have with God through Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:20).

D. Sin Offering (4:1 – 5:13; 6:4 – 30)

Before we discuss the last two offerings, if you get a bit confused don’t become too frustrated with yourself! The Sin offering and the trespass offering are very similar. In fact, Leviticus 7:7a says, “The guilt [trespass] offering is like the sin offering, there is one law for them.” So these two are very similar, thus some confusion may ensue. R. Laird Harris describes the difference between the two offerings when he says, “The difference between the sin offering and the guilt offering was in the nature of the sin. The former was for what might be called general sin; the latter for sins that injured other people or detracted from the sacred worship.”¹⁴

1. Description of the Sin Offering

Leviticus 4:1 – 4: Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them, 3 if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer

¹² NET Bible translator notes. <https://net.bible.org/#!bible/Leviticus+3>.

¹³ Wolf, *The Pentateuch*, 201.

¹⁴ R. Laird Harris, *Leviticus*, 547.

to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed. 4 He shall bring the bull to the doorway of the tent of meeting before the Lord, and he shall lay his hand on the head of the bull and slay the bull before the Lord.

a. “Unintentional”

The term translated “unintentionally” by the NASB is vital for understanding the sin offering. English translations of “unintentionally” (בְּשִׁגְגָה - *bishgagah*: literally, “in going astray; in making an error”) vary greatly, but almost all suggest that this term refers to sins that were committed by mistake or done not knowing that the particular act was sinful. Here are some other English translations of the term:

CEV	“accidentally”
ESV	“unintentionally”
HCS	“unintentionally”
KJV	“through ignorance”
NET Bible	“by straying”
NIV	“unintentionally”
NLT	“unintentionally”

Numbers 15:27 – 31 helps us understand what the Hebrew term means here and contrasts someone who sins “unintentionally” with someone who sins “with a high hand.”

Numbers 15:27 – 31:27 ‘Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. 28 The priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. 29 You shall have one law for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. 30 But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. 31 Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has

broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him.’

The Hebrew term for “defiantly” in Numbers 15:30 is בַּיַּד רָמָה (*bÿyad ramah*), which means literally “with a high hand.” The *NET Bible* explains the sin this way: “The expression means that someone would do something with deliberate defiance, with arrogance in spite of what the Lord said. It is as if the sinner was about to attack God, or at least lifting his hand against God.”¹⁵

All this said, the term translated “unintentional” should not be taken to mean there was no sacrifice available for sins that were “intentional,” since most of our sins are in fact quite intentional! Perhaps the idea is “to err,” or “to go astray.” Yet, the Pentateuch does seem to acknowledge a real difference between sins committed when we “go astray” as opposed to sinning in bold defiance – “with a high hand.”

b. Omission

Numbers 5:1 – 4: Wenham comments on these verses and says, “The common factor in these sins is that someone knows he ought to do something, but then forgets about it, *it slips his memory.*”¹⁶

c. Four groups of people

Specific instructions concerning the sin offering are given for four separate groups of people:

A Priest 4:3 – 12

The Whole Community 4:13 – 21

A Leader 4:22 – 26

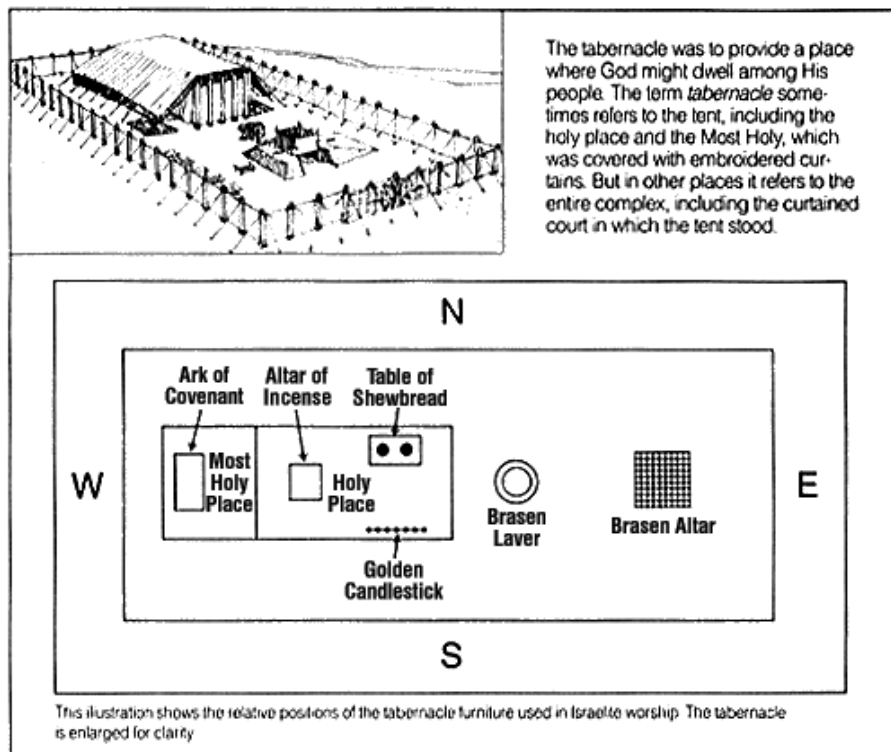
A Layperson / Common Person 4:27 – 35

¹⁵ *NET Bible* translator notes. <https://net.bible.org/#!/bible/Numbers+15:26>. (Accessed July 18, 2013).

¹⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 93.

The specific instructions concerning the sin offering varied according to the progressive degree of responsibility. For sins committed by the High Priest or the whole community, the priest had to “dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of it seven times before the LORD in front of the veil that separated the holy place from the most holy place (holy of holies). A careful reading of the differences in the ritual for the first two groups as opposed to the last two groups reveals an important spiritual principle about leadership: The underlying principle is that although all sin is contaminating, the sins of leadership (priest, king) and the congregation have greater impact than the individual transgressor. Again, in the cases of sins committed by the priest or the whole congregation, the blood was sprinkled closer to the holy of holies, thus symbolizing that these sins have greater impact. The more profound the impact of the sins, the farther into the tent the blood was applied, that is, closer to the presence of the Lord as symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant.¹⁷ The following diagram will orient you to where these different parts of the rituals took place:

The Plan of the Tabernacle



2. Aspects of the Sin Offering

¹⁷ My thoughts in this paragraph are influenced by Kenneth Matthews and Tiberius Rata, “Study Notes on Leviticus,” in *The Holman Christian Standard Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), 174.

Non-Sweet Aroma

Compulsory

3. Application

The purpose of the sin offering sacrifices was to atone for sins committed unknowingly, especially where no restitution was possible. The sin offering was of no avail in cases of defiant rebellion against God.

The fact that the sins of the priest required more ritual and sprinkling points to the fact that the sins of spiritual leaders have greater impact. As responsibility goes up, rights go down! Consider well the way you carry yourself as a Christian leader for if you go astray, you will lead others astray as well, thus the broader consequences of your sin. Be careful how you live and remember that the priests wore an engraving with the words “holy to the Lord.” Ministry is *not about you!* It is about the glory of God and his Son Jesus Christ.

When the sin offering was for the high priest or the congregation, the remainder of the bull was to be burned outside the camp. When a regular leader or a layperson sinned, the priest could eat the remainder of the meat. Harris makes a good point of application: “There is a practical point here. No one was himself to profit by giving the giving of a sin offering. If the priest gave it, he would not eat of it. If an ordinary Israelite gave it, the priest could eat it, but not the worshiper. The result was that a sin offering would be presented for conscience’s sake alone.”¹⁸

Notice also, that in the case of the priest and the congregation, the fatty portions were to be burned on the altar of burnt offering, but remainder of the bull was to be burned outside the camp. In Christ’s case too, the emphasis was on his blood shed for many and he too was “cast out” and was crucified outside the city.

Hebrews 13:11 – 13: For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest *as an offering* for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

¹⁸ Harris, *Leviticus*, 549.

E. Trespass Offering / Guilt Offering / Restitution Offering (5:14 – 6:7; 7:1 – 7)

Leviticus 5:15 – 16: “If a person acts unfaithfully and sins unintentionally against the LORD’S holy things, then he shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD: a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation in silver by shekels, in *terms of* the shekel of the sanctuary, for a guilt offering. He shall make restitution for that which he has sinned against the holy thing, and shall add to it a fifth part of it and give it to the priest. The priest shall then make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and it will be forgiven him.

1. Description of the Trespass Offering

The Hebrew name for the Trespass offering is *'asham*, and it is also called the “restitution offering” by some commentators because of the emphasis on making restitution for sins. For many people, the terms “sin” and “trespass” are synonyms, so the difference between the fourth and fifth offerings can be a bit confusing. The difference in function between the fourth and fifth offerings is that the *'asham* was to be brought when the sin committed required some type of compensation.¹⁹ The idea is that one had defrauded God or another person. So the emphasis in this offering is for sins committed when restitution is possible. The trespass offering required without exception a male sheep plus restitution plus a twenty percent fine.

2. Aspects of the Trespass Offering

Non-Sweet Aroma

Compulsory

¹⁹ E. Ray Clendenen and David K. Stabnow, *HCSB: Navigating the Horizons in Bible Translation* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012), 107.

3. Application

The trespass offering vividly shows that a sin against our fellow man is ultimately a sin against God. The trespass offering foreshadows the fact that Christ is also our trespass offering. The Suffering Servant, our Lord Jesus Christ, was the ultimate trespass offering. Because of sin against the Lord and their neighbors, people have a debt to God, but Jesus Christ has made the ransom payment.

Mark 10:45: For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Guilt in the Biblical sense is not just a feeling but a condition. There may be known transgressions that bring feelings of guilt, but there is also the condition of guilt before God, caused by sins or known or unknown.

Sometimes a hardened sinner has few feelings of guilt when he is the most guilty. Any sinner must bear the guilt of his transgression.²⁰

F. The Importance of the Blood

The various Levitical offerings point to the violent death of the animal sacrificed. In this way, the Levitical offerings are the contextual background for the reference to forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus in the NT. For example, 1 John 1:7 says, “But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” The reference to the “blood of Jesus” points to a violent, sacrificial death.

I want to jump ahead and make reference to something found in Leviticus 17 in a section about forbidden sacrifices. Leviticus 17:11 gives some insight into why the blood sacrifices are so vital in the Old Testament and in the sacrifice of Christ Himself in the New Testament.

²⁰ Harris, *Leviticus*, 551.

Leviticus 17:11 (HCS): For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement.

John R.W. Stott makes three important points of application based on Leviticus 17:11.

1. The blood is the symbol of life.

As a reminder, God told Noah not to eat meat with the lifeblood still in it (Genesis 9:4). The emphasis is on bloodshed, “the symbol of life ended, usually by violent means.”²¹

2. Blood makes atonement.

Notice the repetition of the word “life” in Leviticus 17:11. The “life” of the creature is in its blood. It is this blood that makes atonement for our “lives.” One life is sacrificed for another. Stott comments, “What makes atonement on the altar is the shedding of substitutionary lifeblood.”²² This is clearly teaching vicarious atonement: Life was given for life, the life of the sacrifice in place of the life of the offerer.

3. Blood was given by God for this atoning purpose.

Notice that Leviticus 17:11 says appointed blood for the purpose of atonement. Stott says, “So we are to think of the sacrificial system as God-given, not man-made, and of the individual sacrifices not as a human device to placate God but as a means of atonement provided by God himself.”²³

²¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 138.

²² Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 138.

²³ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 138.

Liberal theology is afraid of the “blood language” in Scripture, seeing such references as primitive and coarse – far too antiquated for modern minds. But the blood atonement of Christ is central to the Scripture. I pray the blood never leaves the pulpit of my students.

G. New Testament Fulfillment

Four fundamental principles of redemption are illustrated forcefully in the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament.

1. The Principle of Human sinfulness. Our review of these five sacrifices forcefully presents the human problem of sin. Our sins destroy fellowship with God and with our fellowman. Furthermore, though we may claim ignorance or lack of malice in our sinful choices, we are still guilty and need forgiveness! There is always a cost to sin. Much like compounding interest on a balloon note, the second and third order effects of our sin reverberate in our lives and the lives of others for extended periods of time.
2. The Principle of Identification: The offerer pressed his hand heavily upon the head of the animal, thus identifying himself with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ through personal faith, which is perfectly pictured in the ordinance of baptism (see Romans 6:3 – 11).
3. The Principle of Substitution. The innocent animal was reckoned sinful, suffered and died instead of the sinner. The animal sacrifices clearly foreshadow the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners (2Cor. 5:21). In the ritual of the sin offering, the perfect animal without blemish which was to be sacrificed was first symbolically constituted a representative for the sinner by the sinner himself laying his own hand on the animal’s head and so identifying it with him and him with it (see Leviticus 4:4, 24, 29, 33). Then, the animal was killed as a substitute for the one making the offering, with the blood being sprinkled “before the

LORD” (Leviticus 4:6).²⁴ The idea of Substitution is also seen in Ephesians 5:2 which says Christ “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering.” This is a clear reference to the “sweet savor” aspect of the offerings.

4. The Principle of Propitiation. The offering of the blood was the tangible and visible evidence that a life had been offered up. In like manner, the blood of Jesus satisfies the holiness of God and allows sinful man to be reckoned righteous in God’s sight. (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:22).

The Good News is that Jesus has completely fulfilled the law and He Himself was our perfect sacrifice. His atonement has provided us forgiveness. Church Father Athanasius stressed the Son is co-eternal with the Father and, as such, was Himself uncreated. The Son took on flesh for our redemption that He might offer Himself as a sacrifice for us. Athanasius said Christ “offered upon the Cross a faithful sacrifice, one which is abiding and perpetual, and not merely transient and passing away. There was a necessity for a daily repetition of the sacrifices of the Law; a succession of sins was to be followed by a succession of atonements. But Christ’s sacrifice of Himself being made once for all, made all things perfect, and is become faithful, since it remains forever.”²⁵

II. Laws of the Priesthood – Leviticus 8:1 – 10:20

Leviticus 8 – 10 tell us how the priesthood was established and when the first sacrifices were offered. Also, Leviticus 8 shows that Exodus and Leviticus are part of a unified whole. The consecration of the priests in Leviticus 8 is a fulfillment of the commands in Exodus 29.

A. Consecration of the Priests 8:1 – 10:20

The Pentateuch clearly teaches that the priests were to be direct descendants of Aaron.

²⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1973, reprint 2018), 186.

²⁵ . Athanasius, *The Orations of Saint Athanasius Against the Arians*, The Ancient and Modern Library of Theological Literature (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden, & Welsh, 1889), 93, II.9.

Leviticus 8:2 – 3: “Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments and the anointing oil and the bull of the sin offering, and the two rams and the basket of unleavened bread,³ and assemble all the congregation at the doorway of the tent of meeting.”

Leviticus 8:6: Then Moses had Aaron and his sons come near and washed them with water.

Leviticus 8:23: Moses slaughtered *it* and took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.

Wolf has a good comment: “The threefold application of blood symbolized the priests’ need to listen closely to God’s command, to do their work faithfully, and to walk in God’s ways.”²⁶ Dillmann says, “The priest must have consecrated ears ever to listen to God’s holy voice; consecrated hands at all times to do holy deeds; and consecrated feet to walk evermore in holy ways.”²⁷

B. Dedication of the Tabernacle 9:1 – 24

Leviticus 9:23 – 24: Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. 24 Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw *it*, they shouted and fell on their faces.

The word for “glory” Leviticus 9:23 is *kavod*; in this context it denotes the visible, supernatural manifestation of God’s presence. The fire of God fell to give heavenly confirmation and acceptance of the sacrificial service an Aaron and his sons.

C. Warning About Immoral Priests 10:1 – 10:20

Leviticus 10:1 – 2: Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them.

²⁶ Wolf, *The Pentateuch*, 207. Wolf wrongly cites Leviticus 8:22; he means 8:23.

²⁷ A. Dillman, *Exodus and Leviticus* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1880), 465; cited in Wenham, *Leviticus*, 143, n. 11.

And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Almost as soon as the priestly work begins, and two of Aaron's sons are killed by God for offering "strange fire." The Hebrew expression translated "strange fire" אֵשׁ זָרָה (*esh zarah*) seems difficult to grasp and the varying English translations reflect the interpretive difficulties:

CEV "burning incense...when they were not supposed to"

ESV "unauthorized fire"

HCSB "unauthorized fire"

KJV "strange fire"

NASB "strange fire"

NLT "wrong kind of fire"

We simply do not know what their "strange fire" was. Incense was produced by mixing aromatic spices together, which were then vaporized by putting them in a censer containing glowing lumps of charcoal ("fire").²⁸ The coals for the fire were supposed to come from the altar, but did they get them from somewhere else? Did they do it at the wrong time? We simply do not know. What is clear is that somehow they violated *a direct command from God*. Wenham says, "The whole narrative from 8:1 has led us to expect God's ministers to obey the law promptly and exactly. Suddenly we meet Aaron's sons doing something that had not been commanded."²⁹ Though the minimal details provided in the passage prevents us from being dogmatic, in my opinion the interpretation that seems most consistent with God's harsh and immediate judgment on the priests is that

²⁸ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 155.

²⁹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 155.

they perhaps introduced elements of pagan religious ritual into the worship of God in the tabernacle.³⁰

Leviticus 10:3: Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the LORD spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.’” So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.

Wenham says, “Moses’ words may be loosely paraphrased, “the closer a man is to God, the more attention he must pay to the holiness and glory of God.” The unspoken implication is that the sons of the high priest ought to have known better than to act so presumptuously.”³¹

The rash and impious actions of Nadab and Abihu serve as a warning to New Testament pastors. People in positions of leadership are held to a higher level of accountability. Nadab and Abihu’s actions were particularly egregious because they were priests, religious leaders to whom others looked for guidance. Their disrespectful act of worship could be copied by other less well-informed people, seriously damaging fellowship with God. Likewise, others look to the pastor as an example of how one should live as a Christian. If the pastor engages in an act, then the assumption is that it is morally permissible for everyone else. Writing in 1894, Edward T. Hiscox said, “The position [of pastor] commands high regard, for the minister is looked upon not only as a teacher, but as an example. He is, therefore, accepted as the one who is to illustrate, by his private walk and public deportment, the doctrines and morals which he inculcates from the pulpit.”³²

D. New Testament Fulfillment

The Priesthood of Ancient Israel foreshadowed the priesthood of Christ.

³⁰ Scott Rae agrees. See *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 33.

³¹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 157.

³² Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, The Baptist Distinctives Series, Number 18 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer Inc., 1894, reprint 2006), 277.

Hebrews 2:17: Therefore, He [Jesus] had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Ministry is a serious matter and should not be taken lightly. We are not permitted to go about ministry in any way we please, flittering about between ideas and trends that catch our fancy with regard to the origin of these ideas. There are many examples of “strange fire” on the altar in United States religion:

Strange Fire: Rosemary Radford-Ruether’s is a leading feminist theologian and continues to self-identify as a Roman Catholic while advocating goddess worship. Her comments are illustrative:

An ecological-feminist theology of nature must rethink the whole Western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being and chain of command. This theology must question the hierarchy of human over non-human nature as a relationship of ontological and moral valueThe God/ess who is the primal Matrix, the ground of being-new being, is neither stifling immanence not rootless transcendence. Spirit and matter are not dichotomized but are the inside and outside of the same thing.³³

Strange Fire: Chris Glaser claims to be a Presbyterian. He started a ministry called the “Lazarus Project,” because, he claims, just as Jesus called Lazarus out a “closet-like” tomb, so Jesus calls homosexuals out of the closet. He also advocates panentheism as his worldview.

Strange Fire: The entire prosperity gospel has its ideological origins in the New Thought movement of the late 1800s, a movement which denied several key doctrines such as the sinfulness of man and the Trinity.

Strange Fire: When pop psychology replaces the cross as the focus of our preaching, we have strange fire on the altar. I was actually in a service once where the preacher tried to lead the congregation in a group exercise in Gestalt therapy. God help us.

³³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 85.

Strange Fire: When young preachers use vulgar terms and profanity in the pulpit in an effort to be “hip” and “relevant,” we have got some strange fire on the altar.

Strange Fire: When churches become more concerned about the appearance of the band and the style of clothes worn by the worship team than preaching the death, burial and resurrection of Christ we have strange fire on the altar.

Be very careful and use great discretion concerning who you adopt as a role-model or an influence in ministry lest you be guilty of *putting strange fire on the altar!*

III. Laws of Purification – Leviticus 11:1 – 15:33

Leviticus basically divides all of life into the categories of either “holy” or “common.” Those things deemed to be “common” were further subdivided into the categories of “clean” or “unclean.” Hill and Walton say, “Clean things might become holy through sanctification or unclean through pollution. Unclean things could be cleansed and then consecrated or sanctified to be made holy.”³⁴ So here are important categories:

Holy vs. Common

Clean vs. Unclean

A. Does God Value Boys Above Girls?

Leviticus 12:1 – 5: Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2”Speak to the sons of Israel, saying:

‘When a woman gives birth and bears a male *child*, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. 3On the eighth day the flesh of the foreskin shall be circumcised. 4Then she shall remain in the blood of *her* purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed. 5But if she bears a female *child*, then she shall be unclean for two

³⁴ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 132.

weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall remain in the blood of *her* purification for sixty-six days.

Leviticus 12:1 – 5 teaches that if a woman gives birth to a boy, the mother is ceremonially unclean for forty days. But if a woman gives birth to a girl, she is ceremonially unclean for eighty days. So, the length of the time of uncleanness for girls is double that of boys. Some feminists point to this passage and say, “Aha! The Bible des say boys are better than girls! If a woman gives birth to a girl, she is considered unclean for twice as long! This all goes back to blaming Eve for all the sin in the world!” So, how do we respond?

First, the theological purpose of the purification rituals after childbirth is probably to emphasize that all babies – boys and girls – are born with sin nature. With that said, the text simply does not tell us why the period of uncleanness for a mother with a newborn girl is twice that a mother with a newborn boy. Here are several possibilities:

The time of isolation for both a boy and girl was a good thing. Viral infections account for the majority of fevers in children. The most common site of infection is the upper respiratory tract, followed by the gastrointestinal and lower respiratory tracts.³⁵ Occasionally, fever heralds a serious illness. The younger the child, the greater the likelihood of bacteremia, or the presence of bacteria in the bloodstream. A short period of isolation after childbirth may have helped prevent illness among small children in an era when infant mortality was very high.

The rite of circumcision for a boy may be related to a shortened period of uncleanness. Circumcision of males was instituted by God in the family of Abraham. Perhaps there is some sense in which the act of faith by a Father and Mother to have a young boy circumcised addresses the problem of uncleanness.

For both a boy and girl, there was a further period of isolation after offerings had been made (33 days for a boy; 66 days for a girl). Harris suggests that

³⁵ Alexander K.C. Leung and W. Lane M. Robson, “Fever in Childhood, Part 1: Diagnosis and Management,” *Canadian Family Physician* 38 (August 1992): 1834.

the journey to the temple was delayed for girls (at day 14, not day 7 as for boys) because girls are usually smaller at birth. More girls are born than boys, but in some third world countries the mortality rate is sometimes higher for girls than for boys. Harris says, “To allow a longer time to let a baby girl grow and get established would be a good thing!”³⁶

In that culture, some men may have valued boys more than girls. Even today, in many cultures girls are less desired than boys. Harris says, “Thoughtless husbands might have taken better care of baby boys and their mothers; so a longer time at home might have been a positive help for a mother with a baby girl.”³⁷

With all of these suggestions, the truth is we don’t know for certain why the period of isolation is longer for girls than boys. But be certain, whatever the reason, the text does not say it is because girls have a bigger sin problem than boys! As a father of two daughters, I suspect it may be the other way around!

These rituals from Leviticus 12 are mentioned in the New Testament in relation to the birth of Jesus:

Luke 2:22 – 24: 22And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “EVERY *firstborn* MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD”), 24and to offer a sacrifice according to what said in the Law of the Lord, “A PAIR OF TURLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.”

B. Leprosy Leviticus 13

Leviticus 13:1 – 2: Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 2 “When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of **leprosy** on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.”

Leviticus 13 gives an extended discussion about the uncleanness associated with Leprosy. The Hebrew word translated “leprosy” by the NASB is **תַּשַּׁרְאֵת**(*tsara’at*). There is a great deal of debate about what the term *tsara’at* actually means.

³⁶ Harris, *Leviticus*, 574.

³⁷ Harris, *Leviticus*, 574.

Probably, it is not limited to the disease known today as Hansen's disease. The LXX translated *tsara'at* as *lepra*, thus leading to the English translation "leprosy." Archeological evidence from Egypt reveals no evidence of people suffering from leprosy (Hansen's disease) before the fifth century A.D. The disease was rare in Palestine in Christian times. Also, the symptoms of leprosy do not correspond to the description of the complaints in Leviticus. More likely, the Hebrew term here refers to a scaly skin disease of some sort. Several different skin diseases have been suggested:

Psoriasis: Psoriasis is a common skin condition that causes skin redness and irritation. Most people with psoriasis have thick, red skin with flaky, silver-white patches called scales. Psoriasis is not contagious, but may be hereditary.

Urticaria: (Hives) Hives are raised, often itchy, red welts on the surface of the skin. They are usually an allergic reaction to food or medicine.

Favus: Favus is a contagious fungal infection of the scalp; occurs mainly in Africa and the Middle East.

Leukoderma: Leukoderma is an acquired condition with localized loss of pigmentation of the skin. It is also known as *Vitiligo*. Syphilitic leukoderma is an indistinct coarsely mottled hypopigmentation, usually on the sides of the neck, in late secondary syphilis.

Leprosy: Leprosy is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*. It is not very contagious and it has a long incubation period (time before symptoms appear), which makes it hard to know where or when someone caught the disease. Children are more likely than adults to get the disease.

When Leprosy did appear in Palestine several centuries after Leviticus was written, the disease most certainly was considered to fall under the directions given in Leviticus 13.

I do not want you to miss this amazing part of Jesus Christ's ministry. In the OT, anyone who came in contact with one of these skin diseases was considered unclean. Yet when Jesus touched lepers, Jesus made the lepers clean! (Mark 1:40 – 41). Sin could not contaminate Jesus. Also, note that 2 Corinthians 5:21 says he became *sin* for us; Jesus *did not become a sinner* for us.

C. Menstruation

Leviticus 15:19 – 33

The onset of menstruation is called *menarche*; in our culture, it usually occurs anywhere between ages 10 – 16, with age 13 being common. The first menstruation usually occurs without recent ovulation (anovular). As young girls first begin menstruation, their period may occur quite irregularly and it may take about two years for regular ovulation to occur.³⁸

IV. Laws for the Day of Atonement – Leviticus 16:1 – 34

The most important day of the year was the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur*. On this day the high priest entered the Holy of Holies (most sacred place) and sprinkled blood on the Ark of the Covenant. I think Allen P. Ross gives an excellent summary of the Day of Atonement:

God, by his grace, provided his people with a great Day of Atonement. Once a year, at the end of the year, all their sins and defilements were taken care of and they could start anew. And so in the fullness of time, God, by his grace, sent his Son to be the propitiation once and for all.³⁹

This was the holiest day of the year and remains so in modern Judaism.

The Bible actually calls it *yôm hakkippūrîm*, “the day of atonements.” But the traditional “Day of Atonement” is not unworkable.

The blood of the sacrificial animal was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies by the high priest to make atonement for himself and for the people.

The sins of the people were placed on a scapegoat that was taken out into the wilderness to die, signifying the complete removal of sin and defilement from the people.⁴⁰

³⁸ Hiralal Konar, *DC Dutta's Textbook of Gynecology*, 7th ed. (New Dehli: Japee Brothers Medical Publishers, 2016), 39.

³⁹ Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 313.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

One of my favorite stories in sports revolves around the Day of Atonement. The opening game of the 1965 World Series fell on October 6, 1965, which was Yom Kippur. Sandy Koufax was a member of the Los Angeles Dodgers and the best pitcher in baseball. The Dodgers were playing the Minnesota Twins and Koufax was scheduled to be the opening pitcher for the Dodgers, but he refused to pitch on Yom Kippur. Don Drysdale started in his place, a game the Dodgers lost. But Koufax went on to pitch a shutout in the deciding game 7 and was named the World Series MVP.

A. The Bull for the Sin Offering

Leviticus 16:6: Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household.

Leviticus 16:11: “Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself.”

We learned about the sin offering earlier. The point here on the Day of Atonement was that before Aaron could intercede for other people, he had to make atonement for himself. Since Jesus was sinless, this aspect of the Day of Atonement has no parallel in the life of Christ.

B. The Cloud of Incense

Leviticus 16:12 – 13: “He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring *it* inside the veil. He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the *ark of the testimony*, otherwise he will die.

The incense created such a cloud that the Ark of the Covenant was somewhat obscured. The room was filled with smoke.

C. The Two Goats

Leviticus 16:5 – 8: He shall take from the congregation of the sons of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering. Then Aaron shall offer the bull for the sin offering which is for himself, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household. He shall take two goats and present them before

the LORD at the doorway of the tent of meeting. Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat.

Leviticus 16:21 – 22: Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to the all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send *it* away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who *stands* in readiness. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

Ross says, “Aaron laid both hands on the goat in order to ensure the transference of sin to the goat. He then confessed all the wickedness and rebellion of Israel – all their sins. And these sins were placed on the goat to bear them away into the wilderness.”⁴¹ The ritual of the Scapegoat is the theological idea Isaiah has in mind in Isaiah 53:6 when he says of the Suffering Servant: “The LORD has laid on him the iniquities of us all.”

1. Propitiation

The slain goat (see Leviticus 16:15), represents Christ dying for the sins of man. He satisfies the wrath of God – propitiation.

1 John 2:2: And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.

2. Expiation

The scapegoat or “goat of removal” depicts Jesus bearing our sins away – expiation.

Hebrews 9:26: Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

3. Azazel

There is a great deal of debate about a particular Hebrew word used in reference to the “scapegoat”: The Hebrew word translated “scapegoat” is אֲזָזֵל (*‘aza’zel*).

⁴¹ Ross, *Holiness to the LORD*, 320 – 321.

The word occurs only four times in the OT, all of the occurrences in this chapter; vv.8, 10 [2 times], and 26). Its meaning is much debated. [Wolf skips over this point.] The LXX translated it as “the one carrying away evil” from which we got the English term “scapegoat.” In Tyndale’s 1530 translation, he apparently referred to the goat as the “(e)scape goat.” So, as best as I can discern, “scapegoat” is a shortened form of “escape goat.”

Major English translations use various terms to translate the word:

ESV	Azazel
HCS	Azazel
KJV	Scapegoat
NASB	Scapegoat
NIV	Scapegoat
NLT	wilderness of Azazel
NCV	goat that removes sin

Here are the three major schools of thought about *Azazel*:

Option 1: Azazel is A Goat Demon

Some claim *Azazel* is the name of a demon that lived in the wilderness. The claim among these interpreters is *not* that the goat was sacrificed to a demon, but that the sins were being sent back to their author. Some legends identified *Azazel* as the leader of fallen angels. However, some liberals will claim there is an appeasement of the demonic going on here. As you might imagine various advocates of the documentary hypothesis see also sorts of primitive sources creeping into the text. Remember, for liberals, Israel evolved from primitive animism to ethical monotheism. The problem with this position is that in the very next chapter, Leviticus 17:7 says Israel should not sacrifice to demons!

Option 2: “A Rough and Difficult Place”

Some rabbis suggested *Azazel* means “a rough and difficult place” and that it represented the goat’s destination. The NLT reflects this opinion.

Option 3: Scapegoat

A much simpler view concerning the scapegoat, and the one I affirm, is the approach taken by the KJV and the NASB, and HCSB. The first part of the word *Azazel* is derived from the Hebrew word 'ez, ("goat"; i.e., the word for "goats" in v. 5) and the second part is derived from the Hebrew word 'azal, ("to go away"), thus the meaning "the goat that departs" or scapegoat." This makes more sense in context to me because the purpose of the goat is to picture that sins are taken away.

V. Laws Concerning Holiness – Leviticus 17:1 – 22:33

Liberal authors go to great pains to criticize the ethical standards articulated in Leviticus 17 – 27. One of the more common tactics is to argue that Leviticus was only concerned with ethics as they affect the male head of household. William Countryman reflects this view when he says, "As with the Torah generally, the purity code [Leviticus] placed the adult male at the center of the human picture and was interested in other beings only as they impinged on him."⁴² Nothing could be further from the truth. While the Bible does emphasize the importance of the husband to be the spiritual leader in the home, to so that God was concerned with other people only in a tertiary way overlooks multiple texts directed at securing and protecting women and children.

Leviticus 19:18 says, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as your self. I am the LORD." Leviticus 19:18 provides for us one of the two defining principles for ethics from the teaching of Jesus Christ:

Matthew 22:37 – 40 (NASB): ³⁷ And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' ³⁸ This is the great and [o]foremost commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment of all, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:4 - 5 (Matthew 22:37 – 38). He then joined the *Shema* with

⁴² William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 28.

Leviticus 19:18 – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These two verses summarize the two tables of the Mosaic Law: Commandments 1 – 4 address our relationship with God and commandments 5 – 10 address our relationships with others. Baptist pastor and theologian Andrew Fuller (1754 – 1815) said:

The eternal standard of right and wrong is the moral law, summed up in *love to God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to our neighbor as ourselves*. This law is *holy, just and good*: holy, as requiring perfect conformity to God; just, as being founded in the strictest equity; and good, as being equally adapted to promote the happiness of the creature and the glory of the Creator.⁴³

A. Separation from Sin

Leviticus 18:1 – 4: Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. You are to perform my judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God.’”

The children of Israel were to mimic neither the practices of Egypt from whence they had just left nor the practices of Canaan where they were going. God’s people are not to conform to his world (Romans 12:1 -2). Discussions of separation from sin can become legalistic, but this fear should not keep Christians from saying, “There are some things I simply will not and some places I simply will not go.”

B. The Wickedness of Incest Leviticus 18:6 – 18

1. The Over-arching principle prohibiting incest

⁴³ Andrew Fuller, *The Calvinist and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared as to Their Moral Tendencies*, in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 2, Joseph Belcher, ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 137. Italics in original.

Leviticus 18:6 (NASB): None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:6 states the overarching principle against incest which explained in further detail in the following verses. The phrase “blood relative” is literally “flesh of his flesh.” The phrase “to uncover nakedness” clearly means sexual intercourse. The HCS gives the right idea of Leviticus 18:6 and says, “You are not to come near any close relative for sexual intercourse; I am Yahweh.” Leviticus 18:6 prohibits both marriage to a close relative as well as sexual abuse of a child within the family.

2. How do we explain Abraham and Sarah?

Leviticus 18 clearly teaches that incest is a sin. Yet, Abraham was married to his half-sister, Sarah (Genesis 20:12), a relationship clearly excluded by Leviticus 18:9. Similar questions emerge from earliest human history since Adam and Eve’s sons would have necessarily had to marry their sisters. There are no easy answers, but here are some possibilities.

The first option is to say Abraham and Sarah violated God’s rules, but God blessed them in spite of their sin.

A second option is to acknowledge the ban on incest occurs later in the Pentateuchal narrative. Heimbach stresses that the ban on incest did not exist prior to Mount Sinai and comments: “God issued [the ban on incest] first to Moses at Sinai; the prohibition did not exist before that. The sons of Adam and Eve married their sisters. Of course there was at that time no other option (Genesis 4:17, 26), but there was nothing wrong about it either. It was exactly what God intended, and that sort of practice continued for generations.”⁴⁴ Thus, he argues marriage between close relatives was not prohibited prior to Mount Sinai. One must note that even if marriage between brothers and sisters was allowed prior to Sinai, *abuse of children within a family was never acceptable.*

⁴⁴ Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 191.

3. Specific Prohibitions

Several incestuous relationships are mentioned in Leviticus 18, but the most obvious case of incest – a father with his own daughter – is not specifically mentioned. This is because the general prohibition in Leviticus 18:6 clearly prohibits this form of evil sin. Based on Leviticus 18:6, the original audience knew a father should not sleep with his daughter. Leviticus 18:7 - 18 goes further and makes it clear that there are other occasions which are also incestuous and forbidden for God's people. In Leviticus 18:6 – 18, sexual intercourse is forbidden between people who are consanguineous to the first and second degree.⁴⁵

Leviticus 18:7 – Sex with one's mother is prohibited.

Leviticus 18:8 – Sex with one's stepmother is prohibited.

Leviticus 18:9 – Sex with a between a full brother and sister as well as a half-brother and half-sister is prohibited.

Leviticus 18:10 – Sex with a grandchild is prohibited.

Leviticus 18:11 – Sex between a stepbrother and stepsister is forbidden. Remember, a stepbrother or a stepsister is one's stepfather's son or daughter or stepmother's son or daughter by a previous marriage.

Leviticus 18:12 – Sex with your father's aunt is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:13 – Sex with your mother's aunt is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:14 – Sex with an aunt by marriage is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:15 – Sex with one's daughter-in-law is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:16 – Sex with one's sister-in-law is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:17a – Sex with a stepdaughter is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:17b – Sex with a step-granddaughter is forbidden.

Leviticus 18:18 – Marrying two sisters at the same time is forbidden.

⁴⁵ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 254. "Consanguineous" means "having the same ancestry or descent; related by blood."

The list does not specifically prohibit homosexual incest because homosexual incest is forbidden by the over-arching command against any homosexual activity whatsoever in Leviticus 18:22. There is never any occasion when homosexual contact is moral.

While Leviticus 18:6 prohibits sex or marriage with the wife of one's brother, Deuteronomy 25:5ff makes one exception to this rule in the situation of Levirate marriage.

The Apostle Paul has Leviticus 18 in his mind when he condemns the Corinthian Church for allowing an incestuous relationship between a stepson and his stepmother to go on within the fellowship.

4. The Tragedy of Incest

Incest is a horrible sin that ruins families and scars children for life. Too often, victims of incest never tell anyone they were sexually abused by a close family member. Most incest victims still bear the burden of their secret alone, considering it too disgraceful to reveal to anyone.⁴⁶ In our culture, the vast majority of incest abusers are older brothers, uncles, stepfathers, or fathers. The vast majority of victims are younger sisters, stepsisters, nieces, stepdaughters, or daughters. At the same time, homosexual incest is not completely uncommon. Feminist authors Hermann and Hirschman rightly capture the abuse of power by a parent in incest when they say:

The relationship between father and daughter, adult male and female child, is one of the most unequal relationships imaginable. It is no accident that incest occurs most often precisely in the relationship where the female is most powerless. The actual sexual encounter may be brutal or tender, painful or pleasurable; but it is always, inevitably, destructive to the child. The father, in effect, forces the daughter to pay with her body for affection and care which should be freely given. In so doing, he destroys the protective bond between parent and child and initiates his daughter into prostitution. This is the reality of incest from the point of view of the victim.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Judith L. Herman and Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), viii.

⁴⁷ Herman and Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 4.

God desires for a family to be a loving, tender, and safe place for children. Incest steals this safe place from a child and turns home into the most dangerous place.

It is some interest to note one the first specific forms of incest condemned in Leviticus 18 after the general prohibition in 18:6 is a brother with a sister. Today, one of the most common forms of incest is an older step-brother who assaults a younger step-sister. Our culture's endless cycle of living together, marriage, divorce, and remarriage has tragic collateral damage in the lives of young children.

Leviticus 18:9: The nakedness of your sister, *either* your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born outside, their nakedness you shall not uncover.

We live in a day of blended families. Many times, boys and girls with different fathers and mothers are thrown together and expected to act like a "normal family." In these environments, one of the great silent sins in our country today is the incestuous relationships and sexual assaults that occur between an older "step-brother" and a younger "step-sister" in blended families. If you are going to perform a wedding which will result in a blended family, you should alert them to this danger. People may get offended, but it is better that they be offended than a child get injured. Remember, most sexual assaults of children are perpetrated by people already known to the child, often near family members. As a final note, Leviticus 18 makes clear that faithfulness to the fifth commandment does not entail submitting to vile behavior. Abused children need to know that "honoring your father and mother" does not mean they must endure abuse.

5. Points for pastoral care:

Incest is a grievous sin which is far too common.

Children are often afraid to tell anyone that they have been the victim of illicit advances from a family member. They think they will be punished or that no one will believe them. Children *rarely ever lie* about incest.

A medical examination is necessary to confirm sexual activity. The exam can also determine if the child has contracted an STI from the abuser.

Always report child abuse to authorities. Remember, pastoral confidentiality no longer entails when “you are trying to hurt someone, someone is trying to hurt you, or you are trying to hurt yourself.”

If parent shows pornography to a child, this is a form of incest.

Some very disturbed families invite children to observe the parents having sex. This too is a form of incest.

C. The Sanctity of Innocent Human Life

Leviticus 18:21: You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.

The precise identification of the Molech worship condemned in Leviticus 18:21 is a hotly debated issue. Students are sometimes confused because the same word can variously be translated as “Molech,” “Molek,” “Moloch,” “Milcom,” or “Milkom.” The most common opinion is that Molech was a pagan Canaanite deity whose worship was connected to a cult of the dead involving divination and to some extent child sacrifice.⁴⁸ Evidence indicates that children were incinerated as part of worship to this god, though it is not clear if they were killed first.⁴⁹ In *Paradise Lost*, Milton vividly described the horror of Molech worship:

First Moloch, horrid king besmeared with blood
Of human sacrifice, and parents' tears,
Though for the noise of drums and timbrels loud
Their children's cries unheard, that passed through the fire

⁴⁸ E. Ray Clendenen, “Religious Background of the Old Testament,” *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, Dockery, Matthews, Sloan, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 298.

⁴⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus in New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 259.

To his grim idol.⁵⁰

The point of Leviticus 18:21 is that killing children to satiate a pagan god was condemned.

Note that both in Leviticus, infanticide is irrevocably tied to a pagan worldview. Is pagan child-sacrifice analogous in any way to modern abortion? Allan Moseley argues that it is. First, Moseley points out that both pagan child sacrifice and modern abortion have to do with the intentional killing of children. Second, child sacrifice in ancient paganism was related to the worship of fertility gods or goddesses. The goal of the worship was to ensure the prosperity of the worshipper. In a similar way, many children are aborted today for financial reasons related to material prosperity.⁵¹ The forthright Biblical injunctions against infanticide support the inference that a Biblical ethic will be opposed to abortion.⁵² Koop and Schaeffer affirmed that ancient infanticide was somewhat analogous to abortion because, “People who destroy their own children and others’, so that they can maintain their life-styles, are also sacrificing to the gods - the gods of materialistic world-view and practice, and the god of the “self” as the egotistic center and measure of all things.”⁵³

Beyond the Ancient Near East, child sacrifice is a practice which occurs on pagan religions around the world. For example, in 2018, archeologists in Peru discovered the single, largest act of ritual child sacrifice found to date. A burial site named Huanchaquito-Las Lamas holds the remains of over 140 children between the ages of eight and twelve years old. Strangely, the bodies of around two hundred baby llamas were also found at the site. The killings occurred prior to 1500 in the pre-Columbian Chimú civilization. As best as the archeologists can

⁵⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *Milton: Complete Poetical Works*, Harris Francis Fletcher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941), 163 - 164,

⁵¹ Allan Moseley, *Thinking Against the Grain* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 230-231.

⁵² Horn and Hill, “Abortion,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., 16.

⁵³ Koop and Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, 347.

determine, massive flooding prompted parents to sacrifice their children in an attempt to pacify pagan gods.⁵⁴

A resurgent paganism is at the heart of at least some pro-abortion arguments. Ginette Paris is one example of someone who grounds pro-abortion arguments in a pagan worldview. In *The Sacrament of Abortion* she argues that women should abandon a Christian worldview and worship Artemis instead. In fact, she considers abortion a sacrifice to Artemis. She brazenly states, “Our culture needs new rituals as well as new laws to restore to abortion its sacred dimension....What if my religious beliefs are pagan?”⁵⁵

In 2013, a group calling itself the Satanic Temple established itself in Texas and claims abortion is a sacred rite. Members of the temple are philosophically atheists, believing in neither God nor the devil. For them, Satan is a symbol of opposition to authority, especially Biblical authority. Among their seven tenets of belief, the third says, “One’s body is inviolable, subject to one’s own will alone.”⁵⁶ Their abortion ritual involves the woman looking at herself in the mirror, and reciting a “rhythmic affirmation” asserting her autonomy and her decision.⁵⁷ While this atheistic group has chosen the name “Satan” to be intentionally provocative, it is quite striking that an atheistic group calling itself the Satanic Temple has argued that abortion is a sacred rite. Molech is back.

D. Care for the Poor

Leviticus 19:9 – 10 (NASB): ⁹‘Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Nor shall you glean your

⁵⁴ “Chimú Child Sacrifice: An Appeal to the Heavens,” *National Geographic History* 4.4 (September / October 2018): 4 – 5.

⁵⁵ Ginette Paris, *The Sacrament of Abortion* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1992).

⁵⁶ “There are Seven Fundamental Tenets,” [The Satanic Temple - About us/](#).

⁵⁷ Joseph Laycock, “Satanic Temple’s ‘Satanic Abortion Ritual’ May Challenge States’ Anti-Abortion Laws,” *Religion Dispatches* August 8, 2020, [Satanic Temple’s ‘Satanic Abortion Ritual’ May Challenge States’ Anti-Abortion Laws | Religion Dispatches](#).

vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.

Care for the poor is closely related to the sanctity of innocent human life since the poor are often in a vulnerable position.

Part of the harvest was to be left behind so poor people could come behind the harvesters and glean the land. This is what Ruth was doing when she went to Boaz's field (When Boaz saw her and said, "Uh huh, who is this?!"). Notice the poor people had to *work to get their food – it wasn't just given to them*. The poor had to extend effort to meet their own needs. Everyone has to work and being poor is not excuse not to work. Modern government programs which give money to people who do nothing in return seem to violate the spirit of the Old Testament practice.

E. Homosexuality

Key Teaching: Homosexual Acts Are Prohibited

In context, the Levitical prohibitions of homosexual acts in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both occur in The Holiness Code of Leviticus 17 – 27.⁵⁸ Two phrases dominate Leviticus 17 – 27. The phrases "I am the LORD who makes you holy" or "You shall be holy, for I the LORD am holy" or variants thereof are found ten times in Leviticus 17 – 27 (19:1; 20:8, 26; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:2, 9, 16, 32). A second more common phrase occurring over thirty times in Leviticus 17 – 27 is "I am the LORD" or "I am the LORD your God." Taken together, these phrases emphasize the manner in which Israel was to distinguish itself from surrounding pagan neighbors ("You shall be holy, for I the LORD am holy"). The ethical obligations of Leviticus are

⁵⁸ The Documentary Hypothesis asserts the Holiness Code is a sub-set of the "P" (Priestly) source and often identifies Leviticus 17 – 27 as "H", a source within the source "P." Dr. Branch rejects the Documentary Hypothesis.

rooted in the holiness of God and His authority, sovereignty, and proprietorship.⁵⁹

1. The Hebrew Text

Hebrew Text of Leviticus 18:22:

וְאֶת־זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכַּבִּי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה הוּא׃

Various English Translations of Leviticus 18:22:

ESV: “You shall not lie with a male as a woman; it is an abomination.”

NASB: “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.”

NIV: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.”

NKJV: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.”

The Hebrew text is clear and says a man should not lie with man in the way that he lies with a woman. A sexual context for the lying with a man is clearly implied. The Hebrew text uses the word *bK'v.mi*, which can mean “place of lying” or “couch.” The same word is also used in Genesis 49:4 to criticize the sexual immorality of Reuben and in Proverbs 7:17 describing the alluring invitation of an adulteress. The word is used in the context of a wholesome relationship in Song of Songs 3:1. There is no doubt that Leviticus 18:22 is a prohibition and the act that is prohibited in male, homosexual intercourse.

Leviticus 18:22 describes homosexual intercourse as *to'ebah*, translated as *abomination*. The word is used five times in Leviticus 18 (vv.

⁵⁹ R. Laird Harris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 592. Harris strongly insists that liberal arguments for seeing the Holiness Code as an independent source are vastly overstated.

22, 26, 27, 29, 30) and in 20:13. The word occurs in Deuteronomy 17 times, in Proverbs 21 times, and in Ezekiel 43 times. According to Walter Kaiser, the root from which *to'ebah* comes means "to hate" or "to abhor." Kaiser adds that the "practice itself, not the person, is despised or hated."⁶⁰

Wenham says, "An abomination is literally something detestable and hated by God."⁶¹ (Abomination is βδελυγμα in LXX.)

2. Explanation

The first half of Leviticus (1 – 16) records regulations primarily related to public worship. A distinct shift in emphasis begins in chapter seventeen and the ensuing regulations (Leviticus 17 – 26) address individual morality and religious expression. After addressing individual religious practices in chapter seventeen, chapter eighteen begins to set out the fundamentals of Israelite morality and specifically defines which sexual unions are compatible with worship of the one true God.⁶² In the midst of the sexual-ethical imperatives of chapter eighteen, the Israelites are reminded seven times (18:3 (2x); 18:24; 18:26; 18:27; 18:29, 18:30) not to imitate the practices of the surrounding nations which worship false gods. This call to separation is emphasized even further by the phrases "I am the LORD your God" or "I am the LORD" six times (18:2; 18:4; 18:5; 18:6; 18:21; 18:30). Wenham captures the relationship between worship of the one true God and sexual morality inherent in Leviticus eighteen when he says, "Israel's sexual morality is here portrayed as something that marks it off from its neighbors as the Lord's special people."⁶³ As a component of a distinctive sexual morality, God explicitly and categorically prohibits homosexual behavior.

⁶⁰ Walter Kaiser, *Leviticus*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1127.

⁶¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 259.

⁶² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 250.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

3. Leviticus 20:13

Homosexual Acts Are Prohibited

Leviticus 20:13: “If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their blood guiltiness is upon them.”

Leviticus 20:13 repeats the command of Leviticus 18:22, but Leviticus 20:13 states it slightly differently, stressing “both of them have committed a detestable act.” In this way, two points of application become clear. First, both partners in a homosexual act are equally guilty. Secondly, the fact both participants are mentioned clearly means this is consensual intercourse, and not – as some homosexual revisionists want to claim – only a matter of sexual assault. Leviticus 20:13 adds the death penalty for this offense under the Old Covenant. Harris points out, “Notice that the legal format is apodictic in chapter 18 and casuistic here [Leviticus 20:13].”⁶⁴ Heimbach strongly argues that the concluding phrase of Leviticus 20:13 – “Their bloodguiltiness is upon them” – declares there is no excuse for homosexual behavior based on the idea that one is born with a proclivity to commit homosexual acts. Heimbach says, “This is a very strong statement, and because the speaker is God himself, he is quite literally saying, “No one can ever excuse homosexual behavior by claiming that I made them in some way that excuses same-sex relationships.” No matter what scientists or social engineers ever think or say, God has already denied that claim.”⁶⁵

The Death Penalty was part of the civil code specific for ancient Israel. The civil penalties are no longer in force under the new covenant though the moral absolutes remain. When Christians oppose civic approval of same-sex marriages, we are not in turn also advocating the death penalty for homosexual behavior.

One should also note that New Testament authors quote frequently from the Holiness code of Leviticus and assume its guidelines are still applicable:

Romans 13:9: The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment

⁶⁴ Harris, *Leviticus*, 612.

⁶⁵ Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 187.

there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18] (NIV)

1 Peter 1:15 – 16: But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." [Leviticus 19:2] (NIV)

NT references to Leviticus means it is unwise to have a cavalier dismissal of moral teachings from Leviticus because we are now "under the New Testament."

F. Adultery

Leviticus 18:20 (HCS): You are not to have sexual intercourse with your neighbor's wife, defiling yourself with her.

The phrase translated "have sexual intercourse with" (HCS) is literally "*to give your emission of semen to*" in Hebrew.

Leviticus 18:29 – 30 (NASB): For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do *so* shall be cut off from among their people. Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the LORD your God.

Along with the people guilty of various forms of sexual immorality included in Leviticus 18, adulterers are to be "cut off." The phrase "cut off" apparently means they are excluded from the community of worship.

Leviticus 20:10 (HCS): If a man commits adultery with a married woman—if he commits adultery with his neighbor's wife—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 (HCS): ²² "If a man is discovered having sexual relations with another man's wife, both the man who had sex with the woman and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel. ²³ If there is a young woman who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man encounters her in the city and has sex with her, ²⁴ you must take the two of them out to the gate of that city and stone them to death—the young woman because she did not cry out in the city and

the man because he has violated his neighbor's fiancée. You must purge the evil from you.

In both passages, the perpetrators are caught *in flagrante delicto* (a Latin phrase meaning "while the crime is blazing").

Leviticus 20:10 commands the death penalty for a married woman who commits adultery.

Leviticus 20:10 commands the death penalty for a man who commits adultery with a married woman.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a married woman who commits adultery should be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a man who commits adultery with another man's wife must be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a betrothed woman who has sex with another man has committed adultery and must be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a man that has sex with a woman betrothed to another man must be stoned to death.

There is no record of anyone actually being put to death for adultery in the Old Testament. This may be because the OT law called for two witnesses in capital cases:

Deuteronomy 17:6 (HCS): The one condemned to die is to be executed on the testimony of two or three witnesses. No one is to be executed on the testimony of a single witness.

G. Tattoos?

When discussing a Christian evaluation of the practice of tattooing, Leviticus 19:28 becomes a focal point since it seems at first glance to be a clear prohibition of tattooing. In order to understand the force of Leviticus 19:28, it is important to read it in context with the previous verses:

Leviticus 19:26-28: You shall not eat anything with the blood, nor shall you practice divination or soothsaying. You shall not shave around the sides of your head, nor shall you disfigure the edges of your beard. [verse 28] **You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD.** (NKJV)

Leviticus 19:28: Do not cut your bodies for the dead or **put tattoo marks** on yourselves. I am the LORD. (NIV)

1. In context of Leviticus as a Whole

This prohibition against tattoos occurs in Leviticus 17 – 26, known as the “holiness code.” These chapters include a series of commands intended to serve as a guide to differentiate Israel from its pagan neighbors. Within these commands, God’s people are told not to tattoo themselves.

2. Tattoos and the Command “not to shave”

Leviticus 19:27 says, “You shall not shave around the sides of your head, nor shall you disfigure the edges of your beard.” Some people argue that Christians who quote Leviticus 19:28 as a prohibition against tattooing are inconsistent in their application of Scripture since those who oppose tattooing also usually believe that being clean shaven is a good thing. The logic of people who deny the relevance of Leviticus 19:28 for modern debates about tattoos flows something like this: “Leviticus 19:28 says don’t get a tattoo, but Leviticus 19:27 also says we shouldn’t shave. Therefore it is inconsistent for someone who shaves to oppose the practice of tattooing.”

Are Christians who advocate the moral permissibility of tattoos right when they say that Leviticus 19:28 is no more culturally relevant than an antiquated command against shaving? Advocates of what we might call the “culturally limited” interpretation of Leviticus 19:27 – 28 have a flawed reasoning because they fail to understand the exact prohibition of Leviticus 19:27. Leviticus 19:27 is not a prohibition of appropriate grooming. The prohibition of Leviticus 19:27 should be understood in the context of the reference to pagan veneration of the dead mentioned in Leviticus 19:28. In the Ancient Near East, hair was sometimes used in magic and rites associated with the death of the pagan god Osiris. Furthermore, locks of hair were also placed on corpses or tombs as late as the Islamic period. Bailey summarizes the way pagan practices intersected with Leviticus 19:27 and says, “The present prohibition [Leviticus 19:27], then,

concerns cults in which dead ancestors were worshipped and consulted for oracles.”⁶⁶ Thus while this prohibition about “shaving” may sound odd, in context it makes sense: God’s people were not supposed to mimic the mourning rites of pagans.

3. “Cutting Your Flesh”

Leviticus 19:28 actually contains two commands:

- A. Do not make cuttings in your flesh for the dead.
- B. Do not put tattoo marks on your body.

A rough and literal translation of the Hebrew for the first prohibition is, “And slash for the soul you shall not give.” The Hebrew word translated “soul” is **נֶפֶשׁ** (*nephesh*) and is usually translated as “soul, person, or life.” However, **נֶפֶשׁ** can sometimes refer to a “dead person” (cf. Lev 21:1, 5; 22:5).⁶⁷ Thus, modern English translations rightly translate the first prohibition as a reference to the “dead”. Ritual gashing of the flesh related to veneration of Baal is attested in Ugaritic texts and is also recorded in 1 Kings 18:28.

4. Tattooing

Leviticus 19:28b says, “You shall not make any...tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD.” (NKJV) The Hebrew word for tattoo is **טָטַעַ**. John Harley says the exact meaning of the word is unknown, but it could refer either to making tattoos on the body or to painting the body.⁶⁸ Others suggest the Hebrew text, which reads roughly as “writing of imprint,” clearly implies tattooing.⁶⁹ All English translations understand some sort of mutilation, tattooing, or painting of the flesh to be implied in the prohibition. The following list shows how different English versions understand the prohibition.

ESV: You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves.

⁶⁶ Lloyd R. Bailey, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Leviticus – Numbers* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), 235. Students should note that Bailey adheres to the Documentary Hypothesis while Dr. Branch does not.

⁶⁷ *The Net Bible*, translator notes. <https://net.bible.org/#!bible/Leviticus+19:23> . (Accessed July 18, 2013).

⁶⁸ John E. Harley, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 4, *Leviticus* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 323.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 s.v., “Tattoo” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 739.

- HCS: You are not to make gashes on your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves.
- KJV: Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you.
- NASB: You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves.
- NIV: Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves.
- NLT: Do not cut your bodies for the dead, and do not mark your skin with tattoos.

While the practice condemned in Leviticus 19:28 may not have been exactly the same as modern tattooing, it was an externally visible modification of the skin via writing, imprint or coloring. In this way, the practice being prohibited is analogous to the contemporary practice of tattooing.

The prohibition of tattooing was primarily related to its association with pagan practices. Bailey says, “In the ancient Near East, devotees of various gods would sometimes place a tattoo on their palm or forehead in the shape of the sacred sign of their particular deity (e.g., eight-pointed star for the goddess Ishtar [Venus].”⁷⁰ Abstinence from tattooing was one sign that God’s people were differentiating themselves from the pagan environment in which they were immersed. Likewise, Christians today are surrounded by a pagan and secular subculture. One way to differentiate ourselves from our surrounding culture is to abstain from getting a tattoo.

With the idea of separation in mind, I find myself in some disagreement with R. Laird Harris (1911 – 2008), a conservative Presbyterian Old Testament Scholar. Commenting on Leviticus 18:27 – 28, Harris said, “There was nothing morally wrong with cutting the hair or the beard or with tattooing. But these practices then, and also now in some places, were parts of the heathen ritual.”⁷¹ While Harris is mostly right here, I believe he over-simplifies the issue of getting a tattoo by

⁷⁰ Bailey, *Leviticus – Numbers*, 236.

⁷¹ R. Laird Harris, *Leviticus*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 608. Harris and I will differ somewhat on the morality of tattooing.

failing to distinguish between the issue of getting a haircut versus getting a tattoo. In almost every society, getting a haircut is considered proper grooming and raises no moral debate.⁷² More specifically, in Christian tradition I know of no orthodox Christian group that has moral concerns about proper grooming. However, *most* evangelical and doctrinally orthodox Christian groups *have in fact* pointed to Leviticus 18:27 – 28 as a reason to be cautious about getting a tattoo.

5. If you get a tattoo, what Kind of Message Are You Sending?

An important question for a Christian to ask before getting a tattoo is this: “What message will my tattoo send to people who meet me every day? What will this tattoo say about me?” Here are some negative messages often associated with tattoos.

Message 1: I want to express my Christian faith. Many people have Bible verses, crosses, or other Christian symbols tattooed on their body as a symbol of being a Christ-follower.

Message 2: Defacing the Human Body is OK

A tattoo is a way of defacing the human body. The most elemental message a Christian sends to the world when a Christian gets a tattoo is this: “I think it is a good idea to place ink permanently in the human body.” Commenting on Leviticus 19:28, John Harlley says, “The body is a marvelous creation of God. Its wholeness represents the beauty and perfection of holiness. Thus the body is to be kept whole.”⁷³

Message 3: Sexual Promiscuity

I do not mean to imply that everyone who gets a tattoo is sexually promiscuous, but for many people there is in fact a connection between tattoos and sexual promiscuity. The professional journal *Psychological Reports* published a study in 2005 titled “College Students, Tattoos, and Sexual Activity.” Data gathered from a convenience sample of 450 college students indicated that tattooed respondents were substantively and significantly more likely to be sexually active than non-tattooed college students.⁷⁴

⁷² Yes, I know God told Samson not to cut his hair.

⁷³ Harlley, *Leviticus*, 322.

⁷⁴ Jerome R. Koch, Alden E. Roberts, Myrna L. Armstrong, and Donna C. Owen, “College Students, Tattoos, and Sexual Activity,” *Psychological Reports* 97.3 (December 2005): 887 – 890.

Message 4: Poor Self Image

Some contend that having a tattoo increase one's self esteem or self-image. Yet, a study published in the *Journal of College Counseling* indicated that individuals with body modifications (piercings or tattoos) reported more symptoms of depression and trait anxiety than individuals without body modifications.⁷⁵

Message 5: I am open to other "High Risk" behaviors

The practice of tattooing has traditionally been associated with other high risk behaviors. For example, tattoos and body piercings have been associated with increased rates of drug and alcohol use, unprotected sexual activity, criminal behavior, violence, and suicide.

Message 6: I might be a gang member

Tattoos are often used as a way of identifying one's self in a gang. In this way, tattoos are often used to intimidate other people.

Message 7: I got really drunk in Panama City Beach when I was 22

Admit it: Lots of "tattoo events" are associated with high levels of alcohol consumption.

I fully realize that many Christian young people who get a tattoo have no intention of joining a gang or trying to tell people that more promiscuity is good. It is not uncommon for people to have tattoos of Bible verses or religious symbols. The fact is tattoos do send a message to many people that you are open to adventurous behavior regardless of whether you intend your personal tattoo to do so or not.

⁷⁵ Jonathan W. Roberti and Eric a. Storch, "Psychosocial Adjustment of Students With Tattoos and Piercings," *Journal of College Counseling* 8.1 (Spring 2005): 14 – 19.

When I am asked about tattoos, most people want to know if I think it is a “sin” to get a tattoo. In some cases, it is definitely a sin to get a tattoo. In other cases, it may not be a “sin,” but it is imprudent. So, I think a better question is this: “Is it prudent to get a tattoo?” The obvious answer is: “No, it is not prudent to get a tattoo.” Why? Because once you get a tattoo, you have *got it or scars from its removal for life*. The permanent nature of a tattoo is what makes getting a tattoo far more imprudent than wearing inappropriate attire. If a Christian wears inappropriate attire, they can change in a matter of minutes. There is no option to reverse a tattoo in the same way.

Many times, young people who get tattoos are gullible and make a decision with permanent consequences for their own body based on the rush of emotion surrounding a desire to do something new and different.

Gordon Wenham comments on Leviticus 19:28 and its modern application for Christians and says, “The external appearance of people should reflect their internal status as the chosen and holy people of God (Deut. 14:1 – 2). Paul uses a similar line of argument in 1 Cor. 6. The body of the believer belongs to Christ, therefore “glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).”⁷⁶

Getting a tattoo is a particularly bad idea for someone who wants to be a leader in God’s church. Whether you like it or not, many Christians associate tattoos with the problems and concerns I have listed above. Youth ministers in particular should be aware that many Christian parents desperately want a youth pastor who reinforces conservative values; most Christian parents do not want a youth pastor who raises more moral concerns and in-home arguments.

“But Dr. Branch, getting a tattoo makes me seem more relevant and puts me in touch with the culture!” My response is three-fold: First, while a tattoo may in fact make it easier for you to reach *some person* in the world, there are many *people* in the world who consider the practice at least unwise and at the worst rebellious. Second, I have never had someone with a tattoo tell me they couldn’t

⁷⁶ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 272.

respect me or the Lord I represent because I don't have a tattoo. On the other hand, some people will think less of a Christian who does get a tattoo. Third, we are not supposed to look like the world!

H. Prostitution Forbidden

Leviticus 19:29 – 30 (HCS): “Do not debase your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will be prostituted and filled with depravity. You must keep My Sabbaths and revere My sanctuary; I am Yahweh.

Human trafficking is intricately linked to sexual commerce and sexual exploitation. The vast majority of human trafficking in the United States is related to sexual exploitation.

Force or coercion entails a person's reasonable belief that he or she has no viable alternative but to perform the work or sex act, whether this is objectively true or not.

An estimated 600,000 – 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders annually. 80% of the victims are female and 50% are minors.⁷⁷

In 2004, an estimated 14,500 – 17,500 people were illegally trafficked into the United States.

A Federally funded task force investigated 2,515 suspected cases of human trafficking in the US between January 2008 and June 2010. 8 out of 10 of these cases of human trafficking were suspected for sex trafficking. 1 out of 10 of these cases were classified as labor trafficking.

The majority of victims in FBI human trafficking cases are women and young girls from Central American and Asian countries. They are primarily forced into the commercial sex industry and domestic servitude. Men and boys are typically victimized in the migrant farming, restaurant, and other service-related industries. However, there are an increasing

⁷⁷ The United States Department of State, “The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking,” <http://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/38901.pdf>. (Accessed July 8, 2013).

number of young males being forced into the commercial sex industry as well.

VI. Laws Concerning the Feasts – Leviticus 23

The Jewish Calendar has *two new years!* This may sound confusing, but here's how it works:

New Year 1: Rosh Hashanah in October or thereabouts. This is when the new calendar year begins.

New Year 2: Begins on Nisan 1 in March or April. This is when the *spiritual cycle of feasts* begins again, thus a second new year.

Try to think of it this way: Here in the U.S., we have “the New School Year” and companies have a new “fiscal year.” These rarely line up with the official beginning of the new calendar year.

One of the oldest archeological finds with Hebrew inscriptions is the “Gezer Calendar,” which shows an agricultural year beginning with the autumn harvests. It was discovered at Gezer in 1908. It is a small, limestone tablet inscribed in old Phoenician script. The tablet is typically dated circa 1000 – 900 BC. The Gezer Calendar is often called the oldest/earliest Hebrew inscription.

The Seven Jewish Feasts in Order are:

1. Passover
2. Unleavened Bread
3. Firstfruits
4. Feast of Weeks / Pentecost / *Shavu'ot*
5. Trumpets / *Rosh Hashanah*
6. Day of Atonement / *Yom Kippur*
7. Tabernacles / Booths / *Sukkot or Succoth*

I'm going to be honest: I have a hard time discerning how these first three fit together as far as dates go. As best as I can discern here is how they worked.

Passover:	14 th of Nisan
Unleavened Bread:	15 th – 21 st of Nisan
Firstfruits:	First “Sunday” (our term) after the Sabbath of Passover / Fast of Unleavened Bread Week.

All of this becomes a big deal when trying to discern the details of the final days of Jesus before his crucifixion, especially when determining the day of the week on which he was crucified.

A. Passover / *Pesach* 14 Nisan

Leviticus 23:5: In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight is the LORD'S Passover.

The Passover commemorated Israel's deliverance from the slavery of Egypt, and as such it prefigured deliverance by Christ from the bondage of sin. At Passover, the people would slay and eat a lamb, together with bitter herbs, and bread without yeast.

1 Corinthians 5:7: Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

B. Unleavened Bread

Leviticus 23:5 – 8: ⁵In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight is the LORD'S Passover. ⁶Then on the fifteenth day of the same month there is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. ⁷On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work. ⁸But for seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any laborious work.”

The Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorated the hardships of Israel's hurried flight from Egypt (Exodus 12:39). It was celebrated from the 15th through the 21st days of the first month.

C. Firstfruits – Leviticus 23:9 - 14

The third feast in the Hebrew calendar was the feast of Firstfruits.

Leviticus 23:9 - 10 (HCS): ⁹Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.

Firstfruits served to dedicate and celebrate the barley harvest.

Firstfruits fell on the day after the Sabbath of Passover week. Jesus was resurrected from the dead on the Feast of Firstfruits!

1 Corinthians 15:20: But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

Allen Ross summarizes the Feast of Firstfruits and says, “During the time in which people were not allowed to eat leavened bread [Feast of Unleavened Bread], roasted grain, or garden fruit, they were instructed to celebrate the beginning of the harvest by presenting the first sheaf to the LORD amid the ritual of the burnt, meal, and drink offerings.”⁷⁸

D. Feast of Weeks / Pentecost / *Shavu'ot* Leviticus 23:15 – 22

Leviticus 23:15 – 17 (HCS): You are to count seven complete weeks starting from the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the presentation offering. You are to count 50 days until the day after the seventh Sabbath and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD. Bring two loaves of bread from your settlements as a presentation offering, each of them made from four quarts of fine flour, baked with yeast, as firstfruits to the LORD.

⁷⁸ Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 416.

Summary: The Feast of Weeks / Pentecost fell on the day after the seventh Sabbath after the feast of Firstfruits. It served to dedicate the first fruits of the wheat harvest. This means it was on a “first day” of the week. Of course, in Acts 2 the Holy Spirit descends on the infant church on the Day of Pentecost. This is another reason Christians began to worship on the First Day of the week. The Feast of Weeks was given the name “Pentecost” in the LXX because of the 50 days mentioned in Leviticus 23.

In Jewish tradition, Pentecost eventually also became associated with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai since this chronologically followed the first Passover in Exodus.

1. Pentecost in Other Passages of the Pentateuch

Pentecost is also mentioned in Exodus 23:16a: “Also [observe] the Festival of Harvest with the firstfruits of your produce from what you sow in the field.”

Pentecost is also mentioned in Exodus 34:22, “Observe the Festival of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the [agricultural] year.”

Pentecost is mentioned in Numbers 28:26, “On the day of firstfruits, you are to hold a sacred assembly when you present an offering of new grain to the LORD at your [Festival of] Weeks; you are not to do any daily work.”

Deuteronomy 16:9 – 12 also discusses Pentecost.

2. Connection with the Feast of Firstfruits.

It is important to see the connection between Pentecost and the preceding feast, the Feast of Firstfruits. At Firstfruits, an “unprocessed” sheaf of grain was presented to the LORD at the start of the harvest season. At Pentecost, two loafs of bread – the product of harvest – were presented to the LORD as a sign of thanksgiving.

3. What day did Pentecost begin?

There are basically four main views concerning the exact day of the year on which Pentecost would begin. I’m only giving you my opinion: The word *Sabbath* in Leviticus 23:15 refers to the seventh day of the Jewish week. So, counting the fifty

days mentioned in Leviticus 23:16 begins on the first Sunday after Passover. In my view, Pentecost would thus fall on a Sunday.⁷⁹

4. The New Testament and Pentecost

Of course, the Holy Spirit descended on the early church in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost.

The first three feasts – Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits – all foreshadowed the redemptive work of the Messiah. Pentecost was the natural extension of Christ’s work. Ross says, “Just as the firstfruits were eventually turned into loaves of bread, Christ’s death and resurrection produced the body of Christ – believers who were gathered into the church on this day of Pentecost.”⁸⁰

Also, in Jewish tradition Pentecost had become associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai under the old covenant. Just as God gave the law to Israel, *on the day of Pentecost* He now gave the Holy Spirit to unite the body of Christ. This is important because OT prophecies about the *new covenant* teach that God will write His law on the hearts of believers (Jeremiah 31:31 – 34; Ezekiel 36:24 – 32).

At Pentecost, two loaves of bread made with leaven were presented to the LORD as sacrifices. In a similar way, the believers – imperfect in many ways – were presented to the LORD on the day of Pentecost.

E. Trumpets / *Rosh Hashanah*

As noted above, the Jewish Calendar has two New Years. Trumpets were blown at the beginning of each month (Numbers 10:10), but the seventh month (Tishri) was special because the Day of Atonement fell during Tishri. In the New Testament, the blowing of a trumpet is associated with the return of the Lord.

1Thessalonians 4:16: For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

F. Day of Atonement / *Yom Kippur*

⁷⁹ I’m summarizing from Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD*, 422.

⁸⁰ Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD*, 424.

Leviticus 23:26 - 32

I have an extended discussion earlier in my notes. This was the only fast day among the holy convocations.

G. Tabernacles / Booths / *Sukkot* or *Succoth*

The Feast of Tabernacles (or “Ingathering”) commemorated God’s deliverance and protection during the wilderness wanderings and also celebrated the completion of all harvests.

Leviticus 23:40 (NASB): Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.

The Feast of Tabernacles is the only feast in which the Israelites are commanded to rejoice before the Lord.

Don’t miss the spiritual application of the Feasts to the Christian life:

Spring feasts – Passover/ Firstfruits/ Unleavened Bread: These feasts point to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as to our salvation. But when we are saved, we are not called directly home to be with Jesus! We keep living in this world.

Middle Feast – Feast of Weeks: This feast points to the in-dwelling power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to live for Jesus today.

Fall feasts – Rosh Hashanah/ Yom Kippur/ Tabernacles: These feasts point to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fact that we are only living in this temporary earth tabernacle! Someday, we shall have a new body. Access to God is made possible because Jesus has torn the veil in two.

Note on Hanukkah: The eight-day Jewish celebration known as Hanukkah or Chanukah commemorates the rededication during the second century B.C. of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, where according to legend Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in the Maccabean Revolt. Hanukkah, which means "dedication" in Hebrew,

begins on the 25th of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar and usually falls in November or December. Often called the Festival of Lights, the holiday is celebrated with the lighting of the menorah, traditional foods, games and gifts.

According to the Talmud, one of Judaism's most central texts, Judah Maccabee and the other Jews who took part in the rededication of the Second Temple witnessed what they believed to be a miracle. Even though there was only enough untainted olive oil to keep the menorah's candles burning for a single day, the flames continued flickering for eight nights, leaving them time to find a fresh supply. This wondrous event inspired the Jewish sages to proclaim a yearly eight-day festival. (The first Book of the Maccabees tells another version of the story, describing an eight-day celebration that followed the rededication but making no reference to the miracle of the oil.) With this background in mind, the Hanukkah Menorah is unique in that it has eight branches plus one raised main light.

Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Old Testament since the events occurred after the OT was completed. John 10:22 – 23 mentions Jesus being in the Jerusalem temple during Hanukkah.

VII. Conclusion of Leviticus

A. Care of the Tabernacle 24:1 – 24:9

Remember, Leviticus does not mention the temple.

B. Sin of Blasphemy / Compensation 24:10 – 23

Leviticus 24:10 – 12 (NASB): ¹⁰ Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the sons of Israel; and the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel struggled with each other in the camp. ¹¹ The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name

and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. (Now his mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.)¹² They put him in custody so that the command of the LORD might be made clear to them.

Verse 11 says the son cursed "the Name." This is a reference to God's covenant name YHWH.

C. The Sabbath Years and the Year of Jubilee 25:1 – 55

2 Chronicles 36:20 – 21: Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept Sabbath until seventy years were complete.

D. Blessings and Curses 26:1 – 46

The last two chapters of Leviticus reinforce the covenantal context of the Levitical legislation. The basic purpose of the Book of Leviticus is outlined in chapter 26, including the recitation of the covenant blessings and curses.⁸¹ Among many mistakes of the Prosperity Gospel, a major one is applying the promises associated specifically to ancient Israel to modern day Christians.

E. Appendix: Laws Concerning Vows 27:1 – 34

Last updated June 21, 2021

⁸¹ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 131.