

AN EXEGESIS OF LEVITICUS 19.26-28

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By

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I. GRASPING THE TEXT IN THEIR TOWN

Leviticus is the sequel to Exodus. At the heart of Exodus is the Sinai Covenant, though it is rarely mentioned in Leviticus.¹ Leviticus explains how covenant worship should be conducted (chs. 1-17), how the covenant people should behave (18-25), and then closes with a section of blessings and curses, entirely appropriate to a covenant document (26).² The book enshrines the laws by which the religious and civil organization of the primitive theocracy in Canaan was to be regulated.³ Leviticus is given in a treaty format consisting of naming the suzerain, giving a historical prologue explaining the background of the treaty, stipulations, a document clause (covenant context), blessings and curses, and the divine witness[es].⁴

The historical situation is that God has just given His law to Israel after they had been redeemed from Egypt, not as a means for securing their redemption. God's call for Israel to be His holy people preceded the revelation of the law at Sinai, but only obedience could make holiness a living reality.⁵ Holiness is not a means of removing the people from the world but of giving them a way to relate to the world as the people of God. Given the historical narrative of Exodus and the conquest of Canaan that surround Leviticus, the holiness codes in Leviticus

¹ The Sinai Covenant is mentioned only ten times, of which eight occurrences are in chapter 26.

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 29.

³ Roland Harrison, "Leviticus," in *New International Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 593.

⁴ This format is similar to Hittite treaties and other familiar Mesopotamian nations. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 30.

⁵ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 31.

19.26-28 are instructions for righteous living.⁶ The book of Leviticus is about how the collective life of Israel is to be regulated and how God's choosing of Israel from amongst all the peoples of the world is to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."⁷

The opening prohibition is against "eating [with/over] the blood" (לֹא וְהֵאָכַל מִדַּם-צֶלֶל, *akal al haddam*; cf. Lev. 3.17; 7.27; 17-10-14; 1 Sam. 14.32-34).⁸ The preposition לֹא (*al*) in this idiom may mean "with." This injunction prohibits eating blood with anything or, specifically, with meat. In the latter case, this prohibition would virtually be equivalent to "eat blood."⁹ The objection with this interpretation for לֹא וְהֵאָכַל (*akal al*, eat with) is that the object of the preposition לֹא is usually joined with a named substance that stands as the direct object of "eat."¹⁰

Another interpretation takes לֹא to mean "over," which may be a preferred interpretation in light of the historical context.¹¹ This interpretation is held by the rabbis, giving לֹא a metaphoric sense of "eating of the flesh while the blood is still in the sprinkling bowl" –that is, before the blood has been offered to God on the altar. This interpretation is in accord with one of the basic tenets of the sacrificial system, that God must receive His portion (via the altar) before man.¹² The enforcement of this law occurs in 1 Samuel 14.32 when Saul's men are caught eating [with/over] the blood of animals sacrificed *on the ground*. Saul then improvises an altar

⁶ W. H. Bellinger, "The Book of Leviticus," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman 1998), 1032.

⁷ Jonathan Magonet, "Bible Week 2008 Leviticus Introduction," *European Judaism* 41 no. 2 (October 2008), 85.

⁸ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992), 319.

⁹ R. Laird Harris, "Leviticus" in *EBC*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 608.

¹⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 1685. Nearly every English translation renders the reading as "with [the blood]."

¹¹ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 319-320. The "over" interpretation may vary in what exactly is being commanded depending on what historical context the text is alluding to, which will be discussed.

¹² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1685.

(vv33-35) so that the slaughter of the animals will be a proper sacrifice. Leviticus 17.10-14 would provide the rationale of Saul's action: the blood of slain animals must be drained on the altar to atone for human life.¹³ However, the intrusion of priestly sacrificial procedures into Saul's story is suspect. It is unlikely that Saul had this in mind when he commanded an altar be made. If the interpretation of Leviticus 19.26a is to *not eat meat with blood still in it* than Saul commanding a stone to be brought as the altar is completely arbitrary because the context does not indicate that the death of these animals were to be sacrificial nor did Saul refer to them as sacrificial after his command to do so (though it was considered the first altar to the LORD *since* that event [v35]). The troops were hungry and slaughtered the animals *on the ground* and ate them.

The "eat over" interpretation may not refer to the sacrificial system but to Canaanite pagan practices, which the Israelites were to avoid.¹⁴ In the worship of chthonic deities, the animal was sacrificed on the ground, rather than on an altar or stone, and the blood drained into a deep trench dug out near the place of sacrifice and was allowed to soak in before the meat from that sacrificial animal was eaten.¹⁵ This interpretation of Leviticus 19.26a is most likely what Saul was referring to and may also be connected to the purpose for the prohibition found in 26b.

Magic and divination practices were categorically condemned in the Old Testament (Deut. 18.10; 2 Kgs. 17.17; 21.6; 2 Chr. 33.6; Is. 2.6; 57.3; Jer. 27.9). The Israelites had access to information about future events only if God chose to reveal this information to them. Thus

¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1685.

¹⁴ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC 3A (Nashville: Boardman & Holman, 2000), 261. No known English translations render the preposition *על* to mean "over." All known translations read "with."

¹⁵ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 320.

revelation is diametrically opposed to divination.¹⁶ There are many references and interpretations that are possible for divination. One possibility is the discerning of the future by interpreting signs and premonitions such as the movement of animals, smoke, rising from a censor, or the shape or movement of metals. Joseph used a goblet for divination (Gen. 44.2, 5, 15). Another suggestion is that the term for divination is related to עָנָן (“cloud”), if that is correct than the future was determined by reading the movements of clouds.¹⁷

It is unlikely that this passage is referring to clouds or divination the same way Joseph used it. It is more likely to refer back to the blood rite in the earlier half of the verse. This blood rite was to draw the spirits to the surface and to enhance their power of foretelling. Since the following prohibitions concern some type of divination involving the use of blood, this interpretation (“over the blood”) has great weight.¹⁸ Jacob Milgrom cites Ramban stating:

They [pagans] would pour the blood [of the cattle] and let it gather into a pit. Demons would gather there, according to their opinion, and eat their tables to tell them future events... and the people (1 Sam. 14.33) would inquire of demons or of witchcraft to know their way and what to do. They would eat *over* the blood in order to perform this craft. Therefore, Scripture states, “[Saul] said ‘you have acted heretically’” (or “sinned against the LORD, 1 Sam. 14.33 NASB), that is, the LORD is wrought for you this day this great salvation, but you inquire of no gods. “This is heresy!”¹⁹

Thus, the expression “eating over blood” may signify a form of divination, namely, chthonic worship involving the consultation of ancestral spirits, as developed with ancient Near Eastern parallels, especially from the Grecian sphere. This interpretation should be preferred in light of

¹⁶ Rooker, *Leviticus*, 261. The English translations of 26b range in semantics. The NASB reads, “divination or soothsaying,” the NLT reads, “fortune-telling or witchcraft” and the ESV reads, “omens or tell fortunes” (all of which are generally the same).

¹⁷ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 320. Young’s Literal Translation renders prohibition against divination as “Ye do not enchant, nor observe clouds.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1685-1686.

the historical context and theme of Leviticus (to be holy because God is holy and to be distinct from the other nations) as well as the flow of idea from 26a to 26b.

The ancient world was burdened by this sorcery and divination, which had absolutely no place in the life of a nation dedicated to obey the one and only true God. He made His will known directly to His people through revelation to Moses and others, and indirectly by means of the Urim and Thummin (Ex. 28.30; Lev. 8.8). No other means by which God's will might be ascertained was provided, but in any event the righteous man lived by his faith (Hab. 2.4).²⁰

Hair is a sign of a person's vital force and beauty. The manner of dressing one's hair has strong cultural and religious overtones. Among some peoples, shaving or trimming the hair in a certain style may be a symbol of office; in other situations it is a sign of mourning (Lev. 21.5; Deut 14.1; Jer. 16.6; Ezek. 44.20; Amos 8.10). Therefore, regulations regarding the cutting of one's hair are germane to the holiness code as prescribed in Leviticus 19.27.²¹

The verb *naqap* means "to go round" and its use in verse 27 it means to "cut around." The nominal form *tequpa*, then, logically, denotes "cycle, circle." The following ("side-growth of your heads" (NASB), *pe at ro sekem*) tonsure is defined by the rabbis as "equalizing the sides in back of the ear with the forehead"—that is, forming a perfect circle.²²

The commandment given here is directed against certain treatment of the hair. It is important to note that offerings of hair were presented both in the Astarte-Tammuz religion of Syria and among various Arabian tribes. The unceasing growth of hair was thought to result from the presence of a mysterious vital force within it, and it was thus considered an effective

²⁰ Roland Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 201.

²¹ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 320.

²² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1689.

means for influencing the will of the deity.²³ Shaving the head and the beard was also a mourning rite practiced by the Moabites.²⁴ There is a similar prohibition in Deuteronomy 14.1 that begins with “You are the sons of the LORD your God” (NASB). The contrast is thereby struck between the prohibition against the worship of the dead and the worship of Israel’s God.²⁵ The prohibition may, of course, be an ideal: an attempt to get Israelites to abandon mourning practices that they shared with other peoples. What is clear is that Israel’s special relationship to God as His children and as a holy people and treasured possession must be marked by behavior different from that of other peoples.²⁶

Verse 27 transitions into another similar prohibition involving cutting and tattooing (*ketovet ka’aka*) oneself (v28). The gashing of oneself was a Baal-cult rite demonstrated in Ugaritic texts (*KTU* 2.5; 6.11-12). A much later surviving practice in the same geographic area as Ugarit was reported by Lucian (*De Dea Syria* 50): The Galli priests and their devotees gashed their arms (cf. Jer. 47.5). Lacerating the body, however, is more often recorded as a rite of mourning (Deut. 14.16; Jer. 16.6; 41.5; 54.5; 48.37).²⁷ Laceration as a mourning rite seems to have been universal in the ancient Near East. It is attested as early as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (VIII, 11, 21 [ANET 88a]). Herodotus reports that at the bier of his king a Scythian “shops off a piece of his ear, crops his hair close, makes a cut all around his arm, lacerates his forehead and his nose and thrusts an arrow through his left hand.” Homer offers evidence of similar rites

²³ A. Nooradzÿ, *Leviticus*, BSC (Grand Rapids: 1982), 204.

²⁴ Isaiah gives allusion to baldness not only prevailing as a mourning rite, but could even claim divine approval (cf. Is. 3.24; 22.12; Amos 8.10). The priests, however, as Leviticus 21.5 avers, and as Ezekiel 44.20 confirms, are forbidden to shave any part of the head. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1690.

²⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1690.

²⁶ Walter J. Houston, “Leviticus” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds. James Dunn and John Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 160.

²⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1692.

(*Iliad* 2.700; 11.293; 19.284).²⁸ Brian Schmidt gives possible reason for laceration rites during mourning by stating that

“self-mutilation might be more appropriately viewed as an attempt to assuage the envy which the dead possesses for the living by inflicting suffering on oneself or as a desperate attempt to disguise oneself from ghosts on the haunt by making one unrecognizable... Thus, self-mutilation as mourning so blurred the worlds of life and dead in the tightly constricted and distinct worlds mapped out in the [priestly legislations] that they were singled out for censorship.”²⁹

The act of tattooing and cutting were also associated with the worship of certain gods. According to 3 Maccabees 2.21, an ivy leaf served as the mark for the adherents of the god Dionysus. The custom was no doubt explicitly forbidden in the present verses because at that time it still remained a strong Canaanite character.³⁰ In Egypt, captives were branded with the name of a god or Pharaoh; the former captives belonged to the priesthood, and the latter to the state. Thus, devotees of a god would also be branded with its name. This clearly is the interpretation of both Philo (*Laws* 1.58) and the rabbis (*t. Mak.* 4.15). Lucian, again, reports that stigmata of the god were branded on the heads and necks of its adherents (*De Dea Syria* 59).³¹ God closes the series of commands with the paramount statement, “I am the LORD your God,” which qualifies the commands. By qualifying His identity as *their* God, Israel should abandon the practices of pagan nations to false gods and be holy like *their* God because God is holy.

II. MEASURING THE WIDTH OF THE RIVER

The laws proscribed in Leviticus 19.26-28 and the adherences of those particular laws are only for the Sinai (Mosaic) covenant. It is true that in the New Testament it is hard to find covenant terminology and structures, but that does not mean that the principles of the Old

²⁸ Ibid., 1693.

²⁹ Brian Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 287, 290.

³⁰ Nooradzÿ, *Leviticus*, 205.

³¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1694.

Testament have disappeared. There is a difference, yet parallel, in the New Testament's teaching of grace and the Old Testament's law.³² The Hebrew language barrier increases difficulty in the interpretation of the text.

The literal practices still occur today such as tattoos, eating meat that still has blood (though not necessarily *over* blood), brandings, and some Orthodox Jews continue to grow out the hair on their temples and trim their beards. In ancient times, branding was used to mark runaway slaves after recapture, and to mark animals. It is still practiced today with animals. Judaism itself, in its own way, had specifically instituted the marking of Jewish bondservant if they decide to stay beyond their term, not by branding, but by piercing the ear (Ex. 21.6).³³

III. CROSSING THE PRINCIPLIZING BRIDGE

There are three principles to be extracted from this text. God commands the prohibition of divination, which is a practice of neighboring pagan nations (Lev. 19.26). God calls His people to live by faith and to not seek after other methods to discern His will; the righteous man should live by faith. There is a subtle and smooth flow of idea from verse 26 to 27. Verse 27 prohibits practices of pagan nations that are an attempt to influence the will of the deity. The transition to the second principle is from living by faith to being submissive to the will of God. The pagan practice of hair offerings was an attempt to put man's will over the divine. God uses this command as a principle to be submissive to Him. Verse 28 is a principle that summarizes the previous two. The tattooing and cutting were pagan mourning rites and an association to pagan gods. Coming from Egypt and going into Canaan, where in both places tattooing and cutting were practiced, God commands distinction from such practices. The last principle is that

³² Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 33.

³³ Gilad K. Gevaryahu, "Ketovet Ka'Aka (Leviticus 19.28): Tattooing or Branding?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 1 (Jan.-Mar. 2010), 15.

the people of God will not be marked by tattooing or cutting, but by their faith and obedience to Him (complementary to the previous two verses).

IV. CANONICAL CORRELATION

There are several occurrences and references to these laws throughout the Old Testament with particular respects to historical references that are key to interpreting the text.³⁴ Saul enforced the law in Leviticus 19.26a, the command to not eat over the blood (1 Sam. 14). Ironically, after Saul enforces the prohibition of eating over the blood he sought after a medium, a divined woman, to inquire of her (1 Sam. 28). Leviticus 21.5 prohibits the shaving the entire head. Leviticus 19.27a prohibits the removal of only the side locks, while Leviticus 21.5 prohibits making bald patches in any part of the head. There is an important distinction to be made in that chapter 19 is a prohibition for the laity whereas chapter 21 is a prohibition for the priesthood. The prohibition against *ketovet ka'aka*, which appears in Leviticus 19.28, is a *hapax legomenon*, that is, it is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible only once.³⁵

V. APPLICATION

Sarah is a Christian at a state university. She feels like she has a negative influence around her at all times. The temptation for her to give in to the pressure is so overwhelming and she thinks that things would be much easier if she were to practice what everyone else did and give in. Sarah certainly doubts why God has placed her in the circumstances she is in and she wants to be back home to her parents where she would not have to face such challenges.

³⁴ References to the blood: Lev. 3.17; 7.27; 17-10-14; 1 Sam. 14.32-34. References to divination: Gen. 44.5, 15; Lev. 19.31; 20.6; Num. 22.7; 23.23; Deut. 18.10; 2 Kgs. 17.17; 21.6; 2 Chr. 33.6; Is. 2.6; 57.3; Jer. 27.9. References to mourning rites: Deut. 14.16; Is. 3.24; 22.12; Jer. 16.6; 41.5; 547.5; 48.37; Amos 8.10. There are no references to this passage in the New Testament.

³⁵ The same phrase *ketovet ka'aka* is used when God marks Cain (Gen. 4.15) but was not prohibited there; rather, it was an act by God. Gevaryahu, "Tattooing or Branding," 14.

Despite the adversity Sarah perseveres. She knows that, though the challenges are not appealing or pleasant, she knows that God has His reasons and so she walks in faith and in obedience to the special purposes that God has set for her. Sarah should not have to succumb to the pressures and behavior of the secular crowd because she would be seen as just one of them. She knows that she must be distinct in her behavior and mentality so Sarah demonstrates herself as a Christian by walking in faith and by being obedient to God's will for her life. Sarah did well in not trying to take control over her life on her terms. She would have been disobedient by putting her will and desires over God's will, which is behavior that is not the mark of a Christian.

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