

Leviticus Bible Study #19

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 17:1-16

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them, This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. **3** If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, **4** and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD in front of the tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. **5** This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD. **6** And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. **7** So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

8 “And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice **9** and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.

10 “If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. **11** For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. **12** Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.

13 “Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. **14** For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. **15** And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. **16** But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity.”

Introduction

The priesthood of ancient Israel was a vocation reserved for the Aaronic line alone. After the golden calf incident, Levi was the loyal tribe and was thus ordained for service.¹² What was and should have been a universal priesthood, with Aaron being first among equals, became a sort of caste system wherein Aaron reigned as the religious authority over men. With the seventeenth chapter though it becomes clear that some of the Israelites were ignorant of this change or actively rejected it. Here then, our Lord more strongly states that the people are not permitted to perform their own sacrifices, nor to treat their usual dietary practices as something sanctified by the man killing the animals. To violate the new system and act as a non-Levitical priest was to merit death or exile.

Though Leviticus is not chiefly a narrative document, it is evident here that this chapter is a

¹ Exodus 32:25-29

² Though we discussed this matter at the beginning of this series, it bears repeating in the context of the chapter.

moment of *case law*, wherein a dispute between parties or a discovery of injurious behavior leads to the establishment of new rules. Before Moses was instructed to write these laws, there must have been an informal movement among the people to engage in unauthorized sacrifices. Though it started innocently enough, the men who were engaging in this activity became heinous in both their intentions and in their activity. Perhaps there would have been a softer declaration if they were just imitating Aaron's sacrificial practices, but they were instead engaging in ritual drinking of blood while sacrificing to demons. However this state of affairs came about, it is sufficient to say that our Lord intends here to put a stop to it, reinforcing His established order while tamping down on the chaos that erupted.

Vs.1-9

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them, This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. 3 If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, 4 and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD in front of the tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. 5 This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD. 6 And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. 7 So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

8 “And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice 9 and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.

The verboten activity is not about private slaughter for eating meat in their homes. Later on, even further clarification will be made on the matter, establishing that an Israelite may kill and eat his own animals as much as he likes, though he is still prohibited from drinking blood. Though the first four verses suggest that merely slaughtering animals privately is a great offense, the eighth verse makes the context more explicit. Perhaps there was a brief period in which *all* butchering was to be done at the entrance of the tent of meeting so as to stop the unauthorized sacrifices, but by the time Moses writes Deuteronomy private slaughter is once more permitted.³

God mentioned peace offerings especially in the fifth verse. The social movement for lay sacrifices was most likely started with good intentions. We can imagine one man butchering a goat to feed his extended family, and out of piety he prays over the roasting food with thanksgiving. Then someone notes that his actions are similar to the peace offerings conducted by the priests, and concludes that *every* meal is a form of peace offering, thus rendering all men capable of making such sacrifices. If it had stayed there, then the people would have received clarification regarding prayers being different from sacrificial pronouncements. Unfortunately, it spiraled.

Eventually “goat demons” were being worshiped. The word “demon” is not in the Hebrew, which is simply the word for “he-goat.”⁴⁵ Yet it is obvious from the context that they turned to worshiping some form of goat-spirit, as sacrificing an animal to an animal would make no sense contextually. Though it is not stated directly in this passage, there does appear to have been a deep confusion on the Israelite's part regarding Azazel in the previous chapter. The people heard that a scapegoat was taken to the wilderness, bearing all of their sins; concluding that the goat must have gone *somewhere* and to *someone*, they began to make offerings to an invented goat-deity. With relief over their sins being off of their shoulders, they neglected the First Commandment by making peace

3 Deuteronomy 12:13-16

4 שַׁעִיר, transliterated “sayir,” Strong's #8163

5 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8163.htm>

offerings to whatever was taking the scapegoat. What likely began as confusion over peace offerings became a rebellion against the institutional priesthood established after the golden calf incident.

Later on in Israel's history the goat and the calf became symbols of a schismatic religion established by Jeroboam, the first king of Northern Israel. After having split off from the Davidic dynasty in Judah, he utilized these incidents, placing goat idols and golden calves in the temples he built while permitting anyone to become a priest.⁶ The reader might find such open blasphemy to be absurd, especially in the face of a literate population who had read or heard about this incident in the Law. But Jeroboam was able to institute his “reforms” successfully by casting the Levites out before they could protest it.⁷ Appealing to the more populist sentiment among the people allowed the lowest common denominator to prevail against faithfulness to the Word, as was the case in this chapter of Leviticus.

Vs.10-16

10 “If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. **11** For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. **12** Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.

13 “Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. **14** For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. **15** And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. **16** But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity.”

The prohibition on eating or drinking blood was a universal law that went back to the Noahic Covenant.⁸ That it had to be re-stated here is a sign that the heretical spiral the Israelites engaged in was nothing short of catastrophic. Seeing the priests pour blood out at the altar, the people engaged in unauthorized sacrifices began to *drink* the blood of their butchery thinking that they would reap some spiritual benefit. Indeed there is value to blood, as the Lord states, for it is the life of the creature being poured out. If the scapegoat gave its life going off in the wilderness, then the life of the animal must be precious enough to consume, they would conclude. Our Lord corrects the misunderstanding by firmly asserting the single use of blood: to atone for sins.

With this correction, we see our Lord institute a new practice for slaughter as well. Reinforcing the prohibition on consuming blood, He commands that all slaughter include a period of draining and burying the animal's fluids. If a man eats something that had already died previously, his scavenging is acceptable *in extremis*, but he is rendered unclean by the possibility that there may have still been blood in the food he ate. This way, by forbidding blood entirely, the Lord prevents even the appearance of this breakout of paganism in the future. Later on, this sort of “fencing” around the core precepts of the Law would become a practice of the pharisees, who would form rabbinic traditions and laws to keep the people from violating other precepts. Though they have a precedent from Leviticus 17, naturally they end up going too far, such that by their traditions they placed burdens that no man could truly carry, especially when they contradicted each other or the Law itself.⁹ Thus they showed error in imitating how God protected the observance of His Law.

6 1 Kings 12:25-33

7 2 Chronicles 11:13-17

8 Genesis 9:6

9 Mark 7:1-13