

Leviticus Bible Study #23

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

Leviticus 20:6-9

6 “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people. 7 Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. 8 Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you. 9 For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him.

Introduction

Leviticus, as with the rest of the Scriptural witness, presumes upon the reality of magic. Of course, the Biblical authors are quick to tell us that this is a *bad* thing; though mankind has the capacity to engage in conjuration, whoever would belong to the true God must not engage in the practice. This is a real capacity, as nowhere does Moses claim that the occultists of his age were faking it. God does not ban “smoke and mirrors” or sleight of hand, instead making real practices with real spirits verboten.

Not only does God ban any sort of witchcraft, He distinguishes between the various practices of the day. It is not just that magic is real, but it has different categories of distinction and method. Having already condemned fortune telling and omen reading,¹ Moses relates the commands against mediumship, necromancy, and cursing one's parents, demonstrating that all such actions are not only consequential but a deep departure from the faith. To go after a medium or necromancer is spiritual harlotry, while cursing one's parents makes the offender as guilty as if he had murdered them. These topics must be a subject of special inquiry if they are so repugnant to God as to merit swift and immediate punishment.

Mediums

The term for a medium is אֹבִיב,²³ which despite the few letters has a broad range of connotations. If the letter *vav* (ו) was absent, it would be the same as אב,⁴ which means “father.”⁵ Strictly speaking, אֹבִיב means something along the lines of *ghost*, with the implications that one is speaking to a ghost or other spiritual entity. The text is not translated as “if a person turns to ghosts” though, as in that era such communications were done through a human intermediary, or medium. This is why, when King Saul inquires about the witch of Endor, he is written of as seeking an אֹבִיב who also has an אֹבִיב – the same word is used both for the woman and the spirits she calls up.⁶ Here we see the connection in words: אֹבִיב meaning “ghost” is written so similarly to אב as “father” because the dead are the *fathers* of the living, but heretofore deceased. Then, as now, there was a real curiosity as to the state of the dead, and especially for loved ones that have passed on.

So the Israelite is commanded not to contact ghosts or those who call them up. This raises the question as to whether ghosts are real. Of course, the Scriptures *do* teach us that every human being has

1 Leviticus 19:26

2 Transliterated “Ob,” Strong's #178

3 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/178.htm>

4 Transliterated “Ab,” Strong's #1

5 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1.htm>

6 1 Samuel 28:7-8

a soul, that spiritual part of them which resides after death in either Heaven or hades. But does the Word teach that there are wandering spirits of the dead here on earth, who may “haunt” various places? No answer is given definitively, and even Christ's reference to the phenomenon could be interpreted broadly; when He eats fish to prove that he is not a “spirit,” this does not establish whether ghosts are “real” in the sense we think of.⁷ That is beside the point though, as the *warning* is the main message. Seeking contact with the dead is strictly considered “whoring” in our reading, meaning that it comprises the same spiritual adultery as worship of false gods. Though mediumship is a reliable means for speaking with spirits, there is no guarantee that one is speaking to a dead relative rather than a demon. Even if one could contact the spirit of a departed human being, this is still a grave sin, for God has sole prerogative in the veil between worlds.

Necromancers

The term translated as “necromancer” is יִדְּעֵנִי.⁸⁹ Its origin is from the word יָדַע,¹⁰¹¹ which means “to know.” Whereas a medium is one who calls up spirits for the sake of communication, the necromancer's specialty is in knowing and communicating with the spirits for other ends. They are called “knowers” after this fashion not because they know *facts* concerning the spirits, but because they engage in familiar relationship with them. While Moses complains of certain Israelites worshiping goat demons, the necromancers of old were the figures people would go to for communicating with them.

A Canaanite pagan would go to a medium to discuss things with a dead person, but he would go to a necromancer to get a *favor* or *knowledge*. The necromancer functions in a fashion similar to that of a prophet, claiming to have an intimate familiarity with a deity, ghost, or power source. A prototypical example of this would be Balaam, son of Beor, despite his communications with the true God. Though a prophet by talent, Balaam was a necromancer by trade, as he sold his abilities to the highest bidder for cursing different targets peoples.¹²

It is already wicked to approach a spirit other than the true God for any sort of favor. Yet it is an even greater affront to God that one would approach one of these necromancers for *knowledge*. Isaiah pours contempt on their “revelations” and “teaching” as being a mere chirping or muttering; those who go to them instead of the Word of God, the prophet says, have nothing but darkness in their future.¹³ To get “knowledge” from a necromancer is to look for divine revelation in sources other than that which God has allotted to the people, thus demonstrating a betrayal of the faith one is bound to have.

Curses

The term translated “curse” is קָלַל,¹⁴¹⁵ which has a primary meaning of making something lighter in weight. This is to say, the one who treats their parents with contempt is guilty of refusing to treat one's father and mother with the honor (or *weight*) due to them. But then to curse them with a *true* curse, one which has the supernatural effect of harming them, is a far graver offense. There, the קָלַל concept of making light means abatement of the victim, winnowing away at their well-being. God comments that it was this sort of curse which Balak wanted Balaam to inflict upon Israel as a whole.¹⁶

7 Luke 24:36-43

8 Transliterated “yiddeoni,” Strong's #3049

9 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3049.htm>

10 Transliterated “yada,” Strong's #3045

11 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3045.htm>

12 Numbers 22

13 Isaiah 8:16-22

14 Transliterated “Qalal,” Strong's #7043

15 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7043.htm>

16 Joshua 24:9

Though the word can be used in a wide range, here it is a specific imprecation with long-term effects on the persons targeted, experiencing constant calamity until they are undone.

The means by which people would curse others is not detailed in Scripture. This is likely for the sake of those who would get too curious, but there is also a matter of propriety. Being born in Egypt and having been exposed to the dealings of the royal court, Moses knew all too well what supernatural curses looked like. He was well acquainted with execration texts like that written against the Asiatic Princes in the Middle Kingdom era:¹⁷

*Every evil word, every evil speech, every evil slander, every evil thought,
every evil plot, every evil fight, every evil quarrel, every evil plan, every
evil thing, all evil dreams, and all evil slumber.*¹⁸

As words like these were rhythmically chanted, eventually the one performing the execration would break a statuette, urn or familiar objects, and then they would expect such a wave of calamity to afflict their target until they were dead. Though the Near East had many other means of cursing, Moses does not provide the example he was familiar with, likely because of its singular concentration on hatred of the victim.

Conclusion

Like consulting mediums and necromancers, one who engages in execration reveals a total lack of faith in God. Harming another through supernatural means is proof positive that the one cursing does not trust in God to establish justice in the land, restore something stolen, or mend bitterness. Furthermore, *all three* of these practices violate the principle of *Shalom*, for their means and ends are directed at the curse which never should have been; deteriorating a human being until they are undone, consulting a dead person, or asking favors or knowledge from spirits are things that were not present in Eden, which had no entropy nor ignorance nor death! And so, they are counted as grave offenses, equal in weight to those who were making offerings to Molech as referred to in the previous passage.

¹⁷ Approximately 2200-1700 B.C.

¹⁸ As detailed in James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East* anthology, Princeton University Press, 2001. Page 323