

Leviticus – Part 2

Day of Atonement (Lev. 16)

The focus on sin, impurity, and sacrifice in the first half of Leviticus culminates in chapter 16 with instructions for a special ritual known as “the day of atonement.” This ritual took place in the central room of the temple where, according to these priestly texts, God lived. The high priests were required to enter the innermost sanctuary and initiate a ritual cleansing process, which included changing into designated clothing, lighting incense, and sprinkling animal blood throughout the space.

Although sprinkling blood was considered an important part of the cleansing process, the use of blood in this ritual wasn’t only about cleaning. It was also understood as a means to associate different things within the ritual. If one put blood on themselves and on the altar, for example, both the individual and the altar would become connected. In the ancient world, blood represented life and life belonged to the deity. Blood, therefore, belonged to the deity too.

The ‘Scapegoat’

Most sacrifices described in Leviticus are designated for unintentional sins. *Intentional* sins, however, were too significant to be cleaned by blood. In order to cleanse the community’s intentional sins, the priest would ritually place their sins onto a goat’s head and release it into the wilderness. The goat, they believed, was being sent to a non-Israelite divine being called Azazel in a wild domain beyond God’s control.

It’s important to realize that this ritual was about cleaning up the divine space more than it was about redeeming individual sinners. The goal was primarily to keep the temple clean for God. The ancient ritual of atonement is different in this way from later Jewish traditions of atonement like Yom Kippur. While the priest in Leviticus did *everything*, individuals are expected to do the work of atonement today. Now it is up to the community to say “I’m sorry” to God.

Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26)

The second half of Leviticus reveals a different worldview in which “impurity” and “holiness” take on a slightly new meaning. It seems that the previous ritual laws are used to introduce moral concerns about how people ought to treat one another. The remainder of the book contains laws and instructions for human behavior and communal living.

The biggest controversy of Leviticus appears in 18:22, which contains the commandment typically translated “you shall not lie with a male.” This single line in Leviticus has led to an immense amount of anti-LGBTQ violence and hate throughout history and it remains a source of trauma for many today. There is nothing else anywhere in the Hebrew Bible that condemns same-sex relations.

Interpretation of this passage is challenging and strongly contested. Many scholars have argued that Leviticus 18:22 is not explicitly about homosexuality. Some suggest instead that the Hebrew is ambiguous and/or that the law’s central concern is “loss of seed”; not same-sex love between men (note that there is no mention of sexual relationships among women whatsoever).

The unequivocal framing of this law may still be impossible to resolve. In the simplest sense, an abomination is something that God “wants no part of.” It is a more emphatic way of condemning an action than simply labeling it as “bad.” With the exception of property violations, almost every law in the Holiness Code is punishable by death. The fact that Leviticus 20:13 later lists the death penalty for 18:22 further complicates the ethical issues this text forces modern readers to confront.

As interpreters, we must constantly ask ourselves how to grapple with the fact that problematic and harmful texts exist in the Bible. It is important to recognize that, just because the Bible says something is wrong, *it doesn’t mean it is necessarily wrong*. Not only is the Bible full of contradictions, but taking every single law at face value will also leave you with many requirements you might not want to follow (consider Leviticus 19:32, 19:19, 25:23, and many, many more).

The ‘Golden Rule’

In the Christian Testament, Jesus refers to Leviticus 19:9-18, saying that the most important law is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In its original context, this law may have had a slightly different meaning than the one implied later by Jesus. What exactly did “neighbor” mean to the writers of Leviticus? Most likely, ancient Israelites understood this phrase to refer to one’s kinsmen or fellow Israelites.

Regardless of whether this law was *intended* to apply humanity-wide, readers have still interpreted the law in many different ways throughout history. These texts have been reinterpreted over and over again since their inception, and they are still being reinterpreted now. The most consistent biblical tradition has been that of rethinking, recontextualizing, and reinterpreting the Bible as the world continues to change. This is a long-standing tradition that readers are invited to continue to participate in today.