

Reading and Hearing Leviticus

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The apostle Paul's instruction that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16) is, in its original reference, a description of the literature that the church today knows as the Old Testament. This, of course, includes Leviticus. In practice, however, Leviticus is generally not a major item in the church's teaching of righteousness. It is also not the object of the usual devotional literature prepared for God's people. Although certain texts receive regular attention--chapter 19, which summarizes the law, and chapter 25 on the year of jubilee--the rest of Leviticus tends to be heard in the church indirectly, if at all, through the book of Hebrews.

There are reasons for the silence of Leviticus in the church. First, its practices and rituals are strange; they are not of our world. Few people experience the smells and sounds of sacrifices; our blood and other body fluids do not play a role in our religious obligations; our dining practices are not prescribed; we do not need priests. This, coupled with a hermeneutics that teaches Christ's fulfillment of the law and its ceremonies, appears to legitimize Leviticus' silence. Second, Leviticus' ritualistic life is difficult for Christian traditions that since the Reformation are decidedly iconoclastic and antiritualistic. Julius Wellhausen and Max Weber have contributed to this notion by arguing that genuine religion and religious leadership is spontaneous and charismatic, and that ritualistic religion and institutionalized, priestly leadership reflects a deterioration in personal religion and charismatic leadership.¹ Contemporary charismatic views take the spontaneous to be spiritual, the prepared uninspiring. Third, the rituals and practices of Leviticus are not explained for the reader. Thus, in

¹ For an extensive discussion of these issues see Rodney R Hutton, *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), especially chapters 1 and 6.

an a-ritualistic culture where the capacity for understanding the depicted divine-human relationship by means of a complex vocabulary of symbols is anorexic, Leviticus' speech falls on deaf ears.

These and other reasons for the silence of Leviticus in the church merit serious response, but that would take us beyond the limits of a brief discussion. In this article, Leder proposes to begin a reading and hearing of Leviticus for the church by means of a sermon based on Leviticus 24:10-23, a text that instructs Israel to stone to death an Israelite-Egyptian who had blasphemed God's name. The sermon was prepared by Calvin Theological Seminary student David A. Vroege as part of a class assignment for an exegetical course on Leviticus.² First Vroege presents the text of his sermon in its entirety; after that Leder focuses on aspects of the sermon that provide an entrance to the reading and hearing of Leviticus.

"Crime and Punishment": A Sermon on Leviticus 24:10-23

Sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ,

After losing the two opening games in the NBA finals this year, Larry Johnson of the New York Knicks was. . . well you could say, not in the mood to talk about it. And so, when reporters hounded him with questions about his performance, he launched into a verbal tirade. The newspapers described it as uncalled for and loaded with expletives.

At times, haven't we all felt the way Larry Johnson felt? And just maybe we've reacted the same way occasionally? At the end of a long day or at the end of our rope, we just let it all out--and when it comes out the sounds ain't sweet. Some of us, when we were younger, might have had our mouths washed out when we cussed. Others of us, who still have to watch our mouths around our parents and teachers, may have to endure other punishments. We can all identify. When words are offensive, punishment follows.

And this is what Leviticus 24 is about. Leviticus as a whole strikes as a strange book--perhaps one of the strangest in the Bible. But at least something of this passage ought to resonate with us: cursing and consequences; crime and then punishment. As strange or unfamiliar as the book of Leviticus may be, this passage reminds us of some key items in God's redemptive plan. We'll touch on a few of them. But what we see at the core is that when God's name is blasphemed, the appropriate punishment must follow. And even more generally than that, whenever people sin against God's law, the Lord requires the appropriate punishment.

To get at the core message of Leviticus 24:10-23, we'll simply follow the three scenes of the text. Scene 1, verses 10-12, reports the sin; scene 2, verses 13-22,

² This article will not engage Vroege about the hermeneutics, exegesis, or homiletical strategies that inform his sermon; that would produce a different article.

relates the instruction of the Lord concerning the sin (as well as other sins); and scene 3, verse 23, describes Israel's obedient response to that instruction. Sin. Instruction. Obedience.

Scene 1 describes the sin, but if we're going to follow the story as we read it in Leviticus 24, I suppose we had better think a bit about the sinner, the perpetrator of the sin. The sinner is, well, a man who both fits in and doesn't fit in. He fits in because he is half-Israelite, and his mother's family tree is provided in verse 11 to prove it. He has a right to be there among the Israelites. But, in a way, he doesn't fit in, too. He doesn't fit in because he's half-Egyptian. And the fact that he's half-Egyptian means that, when he sins, the people of Israel are kind of at a loss. What do you do with this guy? I mean, he sinned, but do the rules apply to him? Where does his ethnic background leave him: an outsider or an insider? If you go to, say, England, is it immoral to still drive on the right side of the road? When do which rules apply to you? If you're a citizen of both God's kingdom and of America, when is it wrong to attend which movies, or to vote for which candidates, or to listen to which music?

So the sinner is a mixture: He's a gray area when it comes to loyalties and responsibilities. What about the sin? The sin, unfortunately, is all too clear; it's black and white. One writer has described how sins can be placed into two categories: sins of attack or sins of flight. Sins of flight are those in which you evade God, you flee from him and from doing what's right--think of Jonah. Sins of attack, on the other hand, are those in which you attack God or his good creation--think of greed or lust or anger. Scene 1 clearly presents us with a case of a sin of attack: blasphemy against "the Name." In fact, it's a vicious attack: the combination of the words blaspheme and curse right next to each other in verse 11 indicates that this man was ruthless with God's name; he dragged it through the mud. In ancient times even more so than today, a name was intimately connected with one's character, with one's person, with who you were. So, for this man to "diss" God's name was, in effect, to say, "God--and let everyone around me hear it--you mean nothing to me." He may have been fighting another Israelite, but the attack really fell upon God.

The Israelites, then, don't know quite what to do with this guy. He's not fully Israelite; yet he's attacked God's name and by doing so, has threatened their own sense of who they are. He's done wrong, but maybe he doesn't fit under their rules. Maybe he belongs under someone else's jurisdiction. And here, the Israelites get it exactly right. Verse 12 says they wait for the will of the Lord to be made clear to them. That's exactly it. One thing this passage shows us is that the Lord makes the rules. Rules and punishment aren't the Israelites' problems, they don't come from Moses--they're the Lord's and his only.

That's scene 1: the sinner, the sin, and a dilemma. Scene 2 brings us the instruction, God's law, what we all think about when we think of Leviticus! But this scene, verses 13-22, teaches us something about the whole of Leviticus. Notice that these laws in these verses are surrounded by a single story. It's a "law sandwich." There they are--these laws from God sandwiched between a story.

I read in one place that "these laws in verses 13-22 are an independent set of laws." The setting here in chapter 24 cries out, "NO! Not true!" These aren't independent laws. None of the laws in Leviticus are. They all arise out of real-life situations. In Leviticus, law and story shape each other, dialogue with each other, and comment on each other. They're a tandem; can't have one without the other somewhere nearby; like other meals need salt and pepper, meat and cheese, bread and wine, so a diet of Leviticus will fill you with law and narrative sandwiches. The laws in scene 2 are no "independent set"; they're intricately related to the story that surrounds it on both sides.

Verses 13-16, then, deal with blasphemy. First, take him outside the camp. In Leviticus, the camp was where the Lord's people lived and, more importantly, it was where the Lord dwelt. The Lord camped among them. And this camp needed to be kept clean--clean and holy. This is another huge part of what Leviticus is about. Consider how the Lord now gathers his people in a church and that the Holy Spirit dwells right here among us as believers, We have to keep ourselves clean.

The church is God's; it's not for us to decide what to do with it or how to keep it. When we reach out to Prospect Park³ with the Good News, we're calling people to something real, something holy. And just as we're holy now because of the Spirit's presence, so Israel's camp was holy because of God's presence there and then. Israel, in Old Testament times, was where the holiness was, that's where it was at. And what was unclean had to be dealt with, it had to go--outside the camp.

It's interesting, to say the least, how they were to deal with the sinner; interesting because it sounds an awful lot like a . . . sacrifice. If you read just the first few verses of the beginning of Leviticus, you'll read about how to offer a sacrifice. And one crucial element in a sacrifice was for the worshiper, not the priest, to lay his hands on the animal being slaughtered. Here in Leviticus 24, all the people who heard the sinner verbally attack the Lord are to lay their hands on his head. It's as if the guilt spreads. It's as if everyone within earshot is polluted. It's as if . . . everyone within range becomes unclean, "levitically" speaking. This is another important concept in Leviticus. And it's not as foreign to us as it might sound at first. Think of so-called evils that have a social aspect like racism or pornography or environmental waste. What about when your ears burn

³ Vrogege prepared this sermon for the congregation of Unity Christian Reformed Church, Prospect Park, NJ., the church in which he is serving as an intern during the academic year 1999-2000. In an introductory note to the assignment Vrogege writes that "Unity is located about twenty miles from New York City and is a congregation intent on connecting with its local community (under the vision 'Presenting and Advancing Good News for Prospect Park and Beyond.' I think, at this point, I would almost certainly not preach this text (Lev. 24:10-23) on its own; rather, I would preach it as part of a series on Leviticus and thus it would already have a context, i.e., as a later installment in the series. This sermon, however, does not assume a series; i.e., it could be preached 'on its own.'"

because someone waiting in the line beside you at McDonald's uses the "f" word and Christ's name every ten seconds? Don't you feel a little upset by it? Maybe you even feel a little affected by it? Especially if you've got your young children with you? Even if this doesn't make you guilty, at least it shows how sin begins to spread, how uncleanness begins to spread. And so all the Israelites with burning ears are to transfer their guilt and sin to the blasphemer so as to rid themselves and the holy camp of this uncleanness.

And so that's the Lord's will concerning the blasphemer. There's the instruction. But. . . surprise! Scene 2 doesn't end there. There's more instruction. And this instruction seems so out of place. The story is dealing with a blasphemer as scenes 1 and 3 show. Scene 2 begins with the punishment for the blasphemer. But, in verses 17-22, we get instruction for. . . another problem, it seems. It seems as if we've got an answer here, but we don't have a question!

But there are some links and there are some reasons for these instructions. First, the laws deal with killing--the killing of humans versus the killing of animals--in verses 17-18 as well as 21. The obvious here is that the punishments for these two actions are different. The punishment for killing a human is much more severe; it demands the death of the killer. Killing an animal requires death but only of another animal. Now, we must remember a couple of things here. Remember: Humans are made in the image of God. We can debate till the cows come home, what that means exactly (there are some things the Bible says about it, but that's another sermon), but from beginning to end, Scripture is clear that humans are God's image-bearers. Remember, too: who a person is is intricately intertwined with his or her name. And so, coming at it one way, we see that killing a person is an offense to God because we mirror him. Coming at it the other way, playing fast and loose with God's name, with who he is, includes attacks on his imagebearers, his walking, talking "mirrors." See how these two connect? Dealing with how to treat God's imagebearers (humans) as well as his creation (the animals) falls under the category of how to treat God's name with honor. The table of contents of "Honoring God's Name" includes at least these two chapters: "What to Do When Humans Kill Humans" and "What to Do When Humans Kill Animals." There's our reason then for why these so-called extra (or independent!) laws are also in this passage.

Now, also in the midst of these unexpected laws on killing is another law--a rather famous one. All I have to say is "an eye for an eye" and you know what I'm talking about. What we have here is the law of revenge. This is a law we're all familiar with. We didn't learn it from the Bible; this one just comes naturally for us. These days it's most frequently practiced on the streets and highways in what's become known as "road rage." At the same time, we Christians are pretty accustomed to the notion that "an eye for an eye" isn't the law to live by anymore. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tears it apart, right? "Don't resist an evil person," he reinstructs. "Instead, go the extra mile; turn the other cheek; give away your coat." On the one side, then, the "eye-for-an-eye" law is a nat-

ural--we don't have to learn it, we "just do it." If anything, our problem is having to unlearn it. On the other side, though, we resist it. We keep alive the reminder to "turn the other cheek" (usually we like to remind others, not ourselves), and we bless it with: "Jesus said so."

However, there's a bit of a misunderstanding here. What's important to notice is that in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn't completely trash the eye-for-an-eye rule. What he does trash is the prevailing practice in his day to follow that law with a rigid legalism. The law was never intended for that. It wasn't meant to be taken literally: "Oh, you poked my eye out when you went for that rebound; now I get to poke yours out." People got so legalistic about following this law that they forgot what compassion was, what mercy was, what loving your neighbor was all about. What the law was meant for in Leviticus was to teach that breaking God's law requires due and just punishment--that, whenever people sin against God's law, the Lord requires the appropriate punishment. That's the message of this law, and, not so surprisingly, that is the message of this passage. God requires the appropriate punishment. Jesus wasn't rejecting this law in Leviticus. What he was rejecting was legalistic conduct that missed the spirit of the law. God's people--Israelites, Christians--aren't supposed to live tit for tat. We live in loving service to God and to neighbor.

Notice one more thing in scene 2. It closes with the words of verse 22: "You are to have the same law for the alien and the nativeborn. I am the Lord your God." The same law for the alien as for the native. This is an echo of verse 16. Again, further evidence that these "extra" laws in verses 17-22 fit with the passage. There is one law. And it is God's law. The basis for the law is God himself. Israelite society wasn't ultimately about laws; it was about rule by a person, by God himself. The laws were grounded in a divine person and directed toward human persons. The laws are not abstract; they're not impersonal. They come from real situations (as we discovered earlier) and they're "for the people." *That's* what Leviticus is about.

So, God requires a just punishment, whether it's for blasphemy or for murder. That's scene 2. And this leads perfectly into scene 3. For here the people simply do what God wants. They're obedient. Stoning a blasphemer sounds crazy to us; it doesn't fit with our way of thinking. But the point is: Israel obeyed. As God's people, there are many things we're not necessarily called to: for example, worldly success, fame, and popularity. However, we are called to obedience, to faithfulness, to doing the Lord's will. These are the marks of a follower.

So where do we stand in all this? Where does Leviticus 24:10-23 fit in the scheme of things for us? If the message of this passage is, "whenever people sin against God's law, the Lord requires the appropriate punishment," what do we do with that in Prospect Park where we want to reach this community with the Good News? Well, the principle of that law hasn't changed, of course. Where there's crime, there has to be punishment. When Larry Johnson flew off the

handle, he had to pay \$25,000. Our sin also requires a payment. It's an Old Testament law and we're New Testament believers, but God's will never changes. God still wants sin punished. His justice requires it. But, as New Testament believers, we know and possess a great truth: It's been punished.

How does this passage fit into our lives? Well, let's see if we can't make a familiar law just a little bit more familiar. We noted how the phrase, "an eye for an eye" is so familiar that that's all I have to say and we all know what it's about in an instant. But, what about another phrase in this passage that gets at the same thing, but in a different way. . . a deeper way: "a life for a life." Come at sin from that angle: that it requires life for life; that as much as humanity has been killing itself with sin ever since the Garden of Eden, lives have to pay the price. Then consider this: Consider what Jesus did on the cross; that he gave his life. We talked about the Israelites' obedience--Jesus was obedient to death, death on a cross. We talked about how the Israelites with "burning ears" had to rid themselves of guilt, the guilt for blasphemy, and that it was done rather. . . sacrificially--Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, the perfect offering. We talked about cleanness--Jesus washes us clean in the waters of baptism. It amounts to this: God requires the appropriate punishment for the sin of blasphemy, and Jesus Christ paid it for us. He paid it for people who believe in Him.

That's the Good News that we bring to Prospect Park. Leviticus might have been the last place you expected to see it, but there it is: Good News. In this passage we learned about crime and punishment; the Christian understands that, in Jesus, the relation between these two is good news; "Good News for Prospect Park and beyond."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Reading Leviticus Through the Sermon

The exegesis brought into the sermon deals with problems typical of Leviticus: the mixture of narrative and instruction, the juxtaposition of an instruction that appears to be out of place, an unfamiliar vocabulary, a sin that appears quaint for postmoderns, and a terrible punishment for this "quaint" sin. Vroege does not ignore these phenomena, nor does he treat them as obstacles to be overcome by a sophisticated approach to the text. Rather, he allows the unique configuration and phenomena of the text to contribute to an illuminating hearing of its message for God's people today.

Vroege's sermon also provides us with the following entries into the reading and hearing of Leviticus: the mixture of narrative and instruction, the distinction of holiness and the Israelite-Egyptian's blasphemy, and the terrible task of cleansing the camp.

Narrative and Instruction

Vroege does not separate the instruction (Lev. 24:13-22) concerning blasphemy from the narrative that surrounds it (vv. 10-12 and 23) ; and for good rea-

sons. The instructions make no sense without the narrative: What is the reason for the death sentence? Why go to God in this case? Did Israel obey the instruction? Nor, for that matter, is the narrative complete without the instructions: What is the consequence for blasphemy? Who will execute the punishment, and how? The narrative relates an event; the instruction gives shape to that event. In its combination of narrative and instruction, Leviticus 24:10-23 mimics the larger book of which it is a part: Leviticus is a narrative intersected by divine instruction.

From the perspective of the Pentateuch this seems obvious: Leviticus forms part of the narrative that tells of Israel's antecedents that go back to Abraham and before, of its salvation from Egypt, and its journey from Egypt through the desert to the plains of Moab opposite Jericho. Closer examination of Leviticus itself shows that it continues the narrative with which Exodus ends. After the glory cloud fills the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 40:34-35), the narrative continues in Leviticus 1:1: "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said: . . ."⁴ The speeches of Leviticus, then, are part of the narrative event of Sinai that begins in Exodus 19; they give shape to that event as do the instructions of Exodus 20-23 (covenant laws) and Exodus 25-31 (tabernacle building instructions). The crucial difference is that in Leviticus God no longer speaks from the top of Mt. Sinai, but from tabernacle in the midst of the camp of Israel's daily living. The narrative has moved on God has moved: He has become "incarnate" in his people's midst. The consuming fire Israel saw if from afar (Ex. 24:17) is now very near (cf. Heb. 12:28-29). Thus, the entire Leviticus narrative must now be read in terms of the last narrative event related in Exodus: God's indwelling of the tabernacle.⁵

The God who turned obstinate Egypt upside down with his presence, and who would have destroyed stiff-necked Israel were it not for Moses' intercession, now resides in Israel's midst. And that makes all the difference for reading and hearing Leviticus, for Leviticus answers the question: How can God's people survive his blazing glory? The answer: It lets all the generations of Israel hear, through Moses, the divine instructions that will keep it holy and clean in his presence, whether in the desert (Num. 5:3), in the land (Num. 35:34), or beyond (Luke 9:35).

⁴The syntax of Ex. 40:36-38 defines these verses as an aside that looks ahead to Israel's travels from Mt. Sinai. The narrative does not describe these travels until Num. 9-10. Thus, all of Leviticus takes place at Mt. Sinai, and after the divine indwelling of the tabernacle. See footnote 5 on the strategy of sequential reading.

⁵James W. Watts ("Public Readings and Pentateuchal Law," *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 [1995]: 543) argues that "laws were intended to be heard in the context of other laws and narratives surrounding them. . . . Unlike law, narrative invites, almost enforces, a strategy of sequential reading, of starting at the beginning and reading the text in order to the end. The placement of law within narrative conforms (at least in part) the reading of law to the conventions of narrative.

This is the God to whom Israel turned in Leviticus 24:10-23 to solve the problem of blasphemy by the Israelite-Egyptian, as Vroege points out. This is the God whose presence in Israel's midst will not allow his name to be blasphemed by anyone. It is this narrative that now gets uniquely informed by an instruction concerning the alien (24:16) that, as Vroege argues, fits with the passage and is not out of place. And so, the Israelite-Egyptian dies for his sin, as did Nadab and Abihu (10:1-2), for "among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (10:3).

The pentateuchal narrative contextualizes the divine speeches of Leviticus. It lets the reader know who speaks (a compassionate and jealous God), to whom he speaks (a stiff-necked and undeserving people), and describes the history of the relationship between the two (salvation and grace upon grace). Reading Leviticus independently from this account, as a mere collection of instructions, not only robs the instructions of their narrative rationale but also obscures the grace and justice of the God who speaks to his own as he leads them on their pilgrimage to the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Life in God's Presence: The Distinction of Holiness

Leviticus assumes a clear separation between the covenant people and the rest of the nations. This teaching has its roots in God's acts going back to Abraham, whom God separated from the nations, even from his own family (Gen. 12:1). From that point on, Abraham and his descendants were called to live separate, holy lives (Gen. 17:1). At Sinai, God redefined this separation from the nations when he revealed that Israel, by maintaining his instructions, would be his "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Leviticus teaches Israel how to be this holy nation by instructions in being distinct or separate (The key word is to *separate* or to *distinguish* [Hebrew: *bdl* / *hbyl*):

You must *distinguish* between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses. (Lev. 10:10-11, my emphasis)
 You must *distinguish* between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten. (Lev. 11:47, my emphasis).

But I said to you, "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God, who has I set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a *distinction* between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground--those which I have *set apart* as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have *set you apart* from the nations to be my own. (Lev. 20:24-26, my emphasis)

Leviticus 20 shows that the distinctions by which Israel would live parallel the distinction that God made between it and the nations. These distinctions God impresses upon Israel's daily life: They will shape its sacrifices (Lev. 1-7); involve its diet, diseases, birth, and bodily functions (Lev. 11-15); regulate its work in the fields (Lev. 19, 25); define its sexual relationships (Lev. 18, 20); and layout the requirements for its priests (Lev. 8-10; 21-22). Nothing escapes God's instructions, not what Israel puts into its mouth (Lev. 11) nor what comes out of it (cf. Mark 7:14-23), as we see with the Israelite-Egyptian's blasphemy of God's name. And it did not matter that he was not a "regular" Israelite, as Vroege says. He got no special treatment. Even though the sinner was a mixture, his sin was not. And so Israel receives God's instruction to deal with this "strange mixture" and learns that the "extra" law about aliens in Leviticus 24:16 not only fits the narrative context, but also, as Vroege argues, that it is part of the one law that rules life in the presence of the lawgiver himself.

Blasphemy of God's name is a terrible problem for the Israelite-Egyptian because he, with the rest of Israel, is subject to all the distinctions God placed upon the people who live in his presence. The distinctions God has given Israel protect it in God's inescapable presence. So, for example, after instructing Israel in how to deal with the uncleanness of the bodily discharges of men and women, God tells Moses: "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my *dwelling place*, which is among them" (Lev. 15:31, my emphasis). Later on he instructs Moses: "I will set my face against that man and I will cut him off from his people; for by giving his children to Molech, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name" (20:3, my emphasis).

Sin, uncleanness, unholiness, however defined for Israel in the levitical instruction, is not primarily an offense against a neighbor because it causes personal, social, or environmental brokenness. Uncleanness offends God; it defiles his dwelling place and it mocks Israel's status as a distinct people. Thus, even as Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden for having defiled the place where God walked, so now God's people, when they defile God's presence, suffer the consequences. That is why the Israelite-Egyptian blasphemer was taken outside the camp (Lev. 24:14). Levitical instruction seeks to keep the children of the covenant from repeating the sin of Adam and Eve by teaching them what makes them different from the nations, and why (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). Life in God's presence has consequences, especially if we forget the distinction of holiness.

Cleansing the Camp: A Priestly People

General impressions notwithstanding, Leviticus is not a book by priests for priests alone; it is priestly instruction for a priestly people. From the opening instructions about the burnt offerings to the last chapter about redeeming what belongs to the Lord, the ordinary Israelite is taught how to live in God's presence. There are things only the priests are allowed to do: sprinkle sacrificial

blood on the sides of the altar, place the sacrifice on the altar, or declare someone clean or unclean. Nevertheless, the Israelite must place his hand on, and himself slaughter, the victim at the time of the burnt offering (Lev. 1:4-5), and the person who has been affected by uncleanness has the responsibility to present himself to the priest for the declaration of uncleanness and cleanness (Lev. 13). Thus the priestly people and its priestly leadership together live out the Lord's instructions. The priests teach Israel the Word of the Lord (10:10-11) by which all Israel, including the priests themselves (21-22), will live clean and holy lives in the presence of God. Whatever defiles the presence of God must be dealt with accordingly. Israel does so willingly because of its declared submission to the covenant Lord (Ex. 19:8; 24:3, 7), as we see in Leviticus 24:10-23.

God's instructions concerning the blasphemy of the Israelite-Egyptian included the terrible task of cleansing the camp, a cleansing that involved the people themselves: *those who heard* the blasphemy are to place their hands on the offender's head, and *all* the assembly must participate in the sentence of stoning. At this point in his sermon, Vroege reminds the congregation of the burnt offering instructions in Leviticus 1 and the responsibility of the individual Israelite to acknowledge his guilt. This is not the priest's burden. In Leviticus 24, however, "it's as if everyone within earshot is polluted. It's as if . . . everyone within range becomes unclean," says Vroege. Thus the narrative ending of the text reminds all readers and hearers: "Then Moses spoke to the Israelites, and they took the blasphemer outside the camp and stoned him. The Israelites did as the LORD commanded Moses" (Lev. 24:23). Similar inclusion in the guilt of sin and the responsibility of the community to maintain the camp clean in God's presence is related in the case of those who give their children to Molech, when God declares that "if the people of the community close their eyes when that man gives one of his children to Molech and fail to put him to death, I will set my face against that man" (20:4-5).

Leviticus articulates the gritty cost of the priestly people's personal and communal discipline. Distinguished from the nations, this holy nation will not let the nations define its identity or public activities (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-12). Rather, it accepts the priestly calling that all God's people are responsible to work out their holiness with fear and trembling for it is the God in their midst who will work in them both "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13).

Conclusion

Although Leviticus is a strange book, it is not unpreachable. Nor is it beyond the reach of God's people if we read it in its narrative context and if we keep in mind the importance of God's separation of his people from the nations and their stated commitment to live out the priestly instruction heard through God's chosen servant. There are many other issues that need to be addressed: the strangeness of the rituals and symbols, the reasons for separating certain animals for Israel's menu as well as other distinctions and the prohibition of

certain mixtures (Lev. 15:32; 19:19). Good commentaries can take us further.⁶ Commentaries will also help us understand what Richard Lisher calls a "linguistic base camp," the biblical vocabulary that defines a worldview and identifies God's separate people in the world to keep it sheltered from the free market of ideological pluralism. With such an awareness of our linguistic base camp we need not be creative or sophisticated; it will not be necessary to reread Leviticus in the light of our own experiences or feelings, for "our effectiveness as preachers depends not on the originality of our rhetorical choices but our conformity to the language that has been given us."⁷

⁶The best commentary for work in the church is still Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), This is so because Wenham is not only careful to let Leviticus itself speak, he also links it with the New Testament throughout: This is not the case in the otherwise useful commentaries by John E. Hartley (*Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word Books 1992]). Frank H. Gorman Jr. (*Divine Presence and Community* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997]), or E. Gerstenberger (*Leviticus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1996]).

⁷Richard Lisher, "The Interrupted Sermon," *Interpretation* 50 (1996), 171-72.

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