

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

LEVITICUS 21-24

CHAPTER 21 – Holiness of the Priests

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”, was the focus of the previous two chapters, which were addressed to the entire congregation of Israel. Moses is now instructed to speak to the priests, the Sons of Aaron specifically, who were to hold a higher level of holiness, as they were designated guardians of the holy. First they are commanded not to profane God’s holy name by what they dedicated to Him. Since the offerings were required to be pure and perfect, the priests must also be without spot or blemish. V.17 “...No man ... who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God.”

We will see that the principles of holiness are in three stages: the people, the sons of Aaron (*Kohanim*), with the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) at the very summit of holiness. This follows the three stages of holiness in the Tabernacle itself, and also at Mt Sinai, where only Moses went to the summit.

We can see some parallel in the life and ministry of Jesus also. For example, we are given the impression that John was closer to the heart of Jesus than the others; it was only Peter James and John who were privileged to accompany Jesus on the Mountain (of Transfiguration); and when He spoke to the multitudes in parables, he revealed the deeper meaning to his disciples, saying: “It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

Then, in Paul’s letters to Titus and Timothy, he sets out the expected qualities of those who would oversee the church.¹ A somewhat lesser standard was required of deacons who would serve the elders.² We can see how this hierarchy was transferred into the early church, and still exists to this day in the traditional churches, and Protestant denominations to varying degrees.

Q. Discuss this in the context of our study. Do you think it is still relevant for the church?

CHAPTER 22 – Holiness of the Offerings

Chapter 22 continues the theme of separation – focusing on maintaining the holiness of the offerings. The Holy Name of the LORD must not be profaned by the uncleanness of the priests; the offerings themselves must be without defect, and no outsider shall eat the holy offerings (v.10).

Chapter 22 concludes with the words: “**You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel. I am the LORD who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD.**” (Lev. 22:32-33)

¹ Titus 1:5-9; 1 Tim. 3:2-7; 12-13

² 1 Tim. 3:8-13

Although these specific laws may seem irrelevant to NT believers³, and modern day Jews, they nevertheless have lessons for us in the way we approach the holiness of God. We can also see how some underlying principles were brought into the early church. For example:

1 Cor. 11:27 *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Each one must examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks judgment on himself...*

Matt. 5:23-25 *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*

Heb. 13:15 *Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*

Rom. 12:1 *...present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

CHAPTER 23 – The Seven Feasts of the Lord

We have seen instructions for the people, the priests and the offerings that are set apart for holiness. Now we move to times that are set apart for holiness. Although this chapter is devoted to the seven Feasts of the Lord, it begins with an acknowledgement of the weekly Sabbath as an appointed time – a time set apart. The seventh day was the first thing the Lord declared to be “holy”⁴ – in fact, it is the only time the word “holy” appears in the book of Genesis. In the Creation story, there is also hint of the appointed times to come:

Gen. 1:14 *Then God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and **let them be for signs and seasons...**”* The Hebrew word translated “seasons” is *moedim*, which is the very same word translated as “feasts” in our current chapter. It means “appointed times,” or more specifically, times to gather together. Another point of connection between the Sabbath day and the Feasts is the prevalence of the number seven: there are seven festivals; two are extended festivals, both seven days long; seven weeks are counted to Shavuot. Later we will see the Jubilee years built around the number seven also—seven being the number of completion and perfection.

We first saw mention of these *moedim* in Exodus 23:14 “Three times a year you are to celebrate a feast to Me.” All males in Israel were to go to the Tabernacle/Temple to present themselves before the LORD for these three pilgrimage Feasts (capitalized below).

Lev. 23:2 *“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts.’”*

The first thing we should notice is: “these are My Feasts”—they are appointed times God Himself designated for His people to gather together in His presence, for His purposes. The seven Feasts are:

³ For a detailed look at the various Levitical offerings see study Lev. 3-7.

⁴ Genesis 2:3

1. PASSOVER (*Pesach*) - v.5
2. Feast of Unleavened Bread – v.6-8
3. Firstfruits - v. 9-14
4. FEAST OF WEEKS (*Shavuot/Pentecost*) - v. 15-22
5. Feast of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah/Rosh Hashanah*) – v. 23-25
6. Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) – v.26-32
7. FEAST OF TABERNACLES (*Sukkot*)- v. 33-44

There are distinct parallels between Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles—Tabernacles is exactly six months after Passover; both festivals last seven days; Passover starts on the 15th of Nisan, Tabernacles on the 15th of Tishrei, the seventh month; Passover celebrates the event of liberation, Tabernacles celebrates the culmination, through faithfulness, of that liberation. Central to these feasts is Shavuot, celebrating the giving of the Torah for Jews, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for Christians, both of which have been absolutely instrumental in maintaining faithfulness and unity (although we have certainly also seen unfaithfulness and division where these elements have been disregarded).

There is also a mysterious “eighth day a Sabbath rest” (v.39) after the seven day Feast of Tabernacles, which is now joyously celebrated as *Simchat Torah* – a day of Rejoicing in Torah—the end and new beginning of the annual Torah reading cycle.⁵

Q. How do you see the “eighth day” fitting into the redemption plan of God?

Although the original rationale for celebrating most the Holy Days was either historical remembrance or harvest festivals (Rosh Hashanah being an exception), there was no doubt deeper significance in the mind of God when He set down these stipulations. In short, they outline the full redemption plan of God. As Colossians tells us, the festivals are “a shadow of things to come”. (Col. 2:16-17).

From Scripture we understand that the Messiah of Israel, Yeshua, was crucified at Passover, and rose from the dead on Firstfruits—leaving the command to “eat His flesh (unleavened bread) and drink His blood” (John 6:54); the Holy Spirit was poured out at Shavuot. In the overall timeline for these Feasts, the final three have not yet been fulfilled. Just as the first four were fulfilled on the specific day of the Feasts according to the Hebrew calendar, we can also anticipate the fulfilment of the final three in accordance with the Hebrew calendar. Of course much more could be said about these Festivals, which we cannot go into here.⁶

CHAPTER 24

Verses 1-9 discuss the lighting of the “continual lamp” (*ner tamid*) and the arranging of the twelve loaves of bread on the pure table which are before the LORD continually. These elements have been introduced before, in Exodus 27. Why are they mentioned again? And how might they relate to the subject of holiness?

The Menorah stands for light, wisdom, and Divine inspiration. “It has been said that the menorah is a symbol of the nation of Israel and its mission to be “a light unto the nations.” (Isaiah 42:6). The sages emphasize that light is not a violent force; Israel is to accomplish its mission by setting an example, not by using force.”⁷ This view certainly dovetails with NT teaching. Jesus said to his

⁵ Eight designates a new beginning.

⁶ There are many excellent resources online.

⁷ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-menorah>

disciples: “You are the light of the world...” And so we see, in the seven branched lampstand, the central lamp and six branches (6 being the number of man. Jesus Himself is “the light of the world...” He is “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” (John 1:9).

Likewise, the twelve loaves of bread also represent God’s people – the 12 tribes of Israel. It is the duty of the High Priest himself to oversee the lighting of the lamp and placing the bread on the table—“*Every Sabbath he shall set it in order before the LORD continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant.*”⁸ So we see depicted here the beautiful, interwoven relationship between God and His holy people.

We are also reminded that God’s people are called to be holy and set apart. Thus the introduction of the Lampstand and Table here speaks of living a life under the holiness and wisdom of the presence of God, which sets the stage for the following jarring story epitomizing how this “set-apartness” can be broken down, and the consequences that flow from this.

A fight breaks out within the camp, and a man with mixed heritage “blasphemed the name of the LORD and cursed” (v.10-23). The offender is an un-named man – the son of an illicit relationship between an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man. We are given the name and heritage of the mother, which is always an important sign. She was named Shelomis – *peaceful/perfect/ complete*; daughter of Dibri – *to speak a word/matter*; from the tribe of Dan – “judgment”.⁹

The Hebrew word used here for “blasphemed” is “*naqab*,” which means to “pierce,” “bore a hole in”; and “cursed” (*qalal*), means to make light of.

This man of mixed heritage (i.e. Jew & Gentile) “pierced” and “made light of” the name of the Lord. This brings to mind Isaiah 53:5 “He was pierced for our transgressions ...”

In Numbers 15:30 we read: “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, **blasphemes the LORD**, and that person must be cut off from his people.

Pause here to ponder/discuss the setting for the story in the light of these Hebrew insights.

The offender was put in custody, so that “the mind of the LORD might be shown to them.” Perhaps Moses was unsure whether the law applied to a person of mixed heritage. Another suggestion is that no specific law had been given for this unthinkable sin. The verdict:

14 Take outside the camp him who has cursed; then let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. 15 Then you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: “Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. 16 And whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of the LORD, he shall be put to death. ”

Community Impact

We have seen that Israel was called to be a people set apart, but here we see a man of mixed heritage in the midst of them, who crosses a boundary that must not be crossed. “Once boundaries are disrespected, a process has begun that leads, not immediately but ultimately, to civilizational

⁸ Lev. 24:3, 8.

⁹ The offender was an Israelite through his mother, but may have been ostracized by the tribe of Dan, because tribal affiliation comes through the father.

breakdown. ... The serpent is always waiting in the wings, saying to us as he said to Eve: 'What harm is there in eating one forbidden fruit?' Yet the result is paradise lost."¹⁰

When human beings lose respect for God, they eventually lose respect for authority and humanity itself. Blasphemy cannot injure God, but it can injure society. 'The goal of the Torah is to establish a nation of men who seek perfection in their relationship with one another, no less than in the relationship with God.' Everyone who was a witness must understand this and release their defilement, by taking part in the punishment.

As we have noted previously, the phrase "I am HASHEM your God" is stated 20 times in the last half of Leviticus. The people are to revere Him and this means to revere His Name, which contains His attributes. His Name is holy. God is not present in the flesh, but His people are to honour His Name as His very self. *You shall not desecrate my holy Name, rather I should be sanctified among the children of Israel. I am HASHEM who sanctifies you* (Lev. 22:32).

This brings two important scriptures into focus:

1. Ex. 20:7 "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.
2. The Lord's Prayer, where the first declaration is "...hallowed be thy Name".

Digging Deeper

All who heard him were to lay their hands on his head and take part in the stoning. Why? Previously, the only other time the people were required to lay hands on the head of something was in regard to sacrificial offerings.¹¹ The offerer would lay his hands upon the offered animal, identifying with it – more specifically, he identified his sins with the animal. Thus, when the animal was slain (by the hand of the offerer) it died for the sins of the offerer.¹²

Parallels have been noted between this incident and the Day of Atonement ritual: The blasphemer is sent outside the camp like the scapegoat, after people lean hands on him. This is very intriguing, since we are well aware of the Day of Atonement being a prophetic picture of the atoning death of Christ, who was considered a blasphemer of the worst kind.

Romans 15:3 *"... as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you (God) have fallen on me," for everything that was written in the past was to teach us..."*

Two other thoughts before we conclude this discussion:

1. It was this passage that gave rise to the custom amongst the Jewish people of never pronouncing the name of God at all, but of using the expression "Hashem" (the Name) or "Adonai" (Lord).
2. This law forms the rationale for the stoning of Stephen. (Acts 7: 54-60).

But the narrative doesn't stop there, but goes on to speak of *whoever* kills or injures a man or kills an animal— the LORD's verdict is: *"You shall have the same law for the stranger and for one from your own country; for I am the LORD your God."*

¹⁰ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, Leviticus, p.357.

¹¹ Lev. 1:4; 3:2,8,13; 4:15; 16:21.

¹² <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-law-burnt-offerings-leviticus-11-17>

A man is responsible for the life of his fellow man, for in the image of God He made man. The Torah teaches us that when we assault or kill another human being who was made in His image, we desecrate God's Name. Conversely, when we love our fellow man as ourselves, we are also honouring God.¹³ This is famously confirmed by Jesus Himself in his answer to the question: What is the greatest Commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

These laws form a context for the very well-known law of an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" in verse 20: "If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbour, as he has done, so shall it be done to him—fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth..." — perhaps the most misunderstood phrase in the Torah. This command is also found in Ex. 21:24 and Deut. 19:21. In these places it was given as a rule to regulate the decisions of judges.

"The sages make it clear that the principle of 'an eye for an eye' was never meant literally. The principle is simply that the punishment must fit the crime. It was meant restrictively, to forbid either excessive leniency or excessive harshness."¹⁴

Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', but I tell you..." (Mt.5:38-42). Was he contradicting the Law here? Not at all! Jesus finds no fault with the rule as applied to magistrates and does not take it upon himself to repeal it. But instead of confining it to magistrates, the Jews had made it a rule by which to take revenge. They considered themselves justified by this rule to inflict the same injury on others that they had received. Jesus remonstrates against this, declaring that their private conduct was to be governed by different principles.

The Torah teaches that all humans are born equal and should be treated equally by the law. This is today recognized as a major principle of law. This, and many other elements of Hebrew law provided a major source for the development of the Western legal system and democracy.

¹³ Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, p.294.

¹⁴ Sacks, *ibid*, p.355.