

The Sanctity of Blood

Leviticus 17:1-16

I. Introduction

- A. Chapter 17 initiates a major section of Leviticus which some scholars refer to as the Holiness Code.
 - 1. In historical critical circles, “Holiness Code” (H) refers to a text source dating to the post-exilic period which was appended to the P (Priestly Tradition, i.e., chs. 1-16) as a means of elucidating and reinforcing the laws contained in P.
 - 2. In conservative circles, “Holiness Code” refers to the latter portion of the book of Leviticus (chs. 17-26) which deals with everyday life of Israel and the need to pursue holiness.
 - 3. Holiness is a demand repeated throughout chs. 17-24 (19:2; 20:7, 8, 26; 21:6, 8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32).
- B. Chapters 17-24 may be likened to the imperatives of the NT epistles, which flow out of the indicatives. In the case of Leviticus, the Day of Atonement provides the indicative necessary to motivate Israel to live holy to Yahweh.
- C. The major focus of chapter 17 is on demonstrating loyal to Yahweh.
 - 1. The individual Israelite is predominantly in view, as there is very little detail concerning the role of the priest.
 - 2. The chapter is a corrective for common mistakes which lay people are apt to make in the context of sacrificial worship
 - 3. The goal of the chapter is the guarantee that every Israelite express absolute loyalty to Yahweh.

II. Exposition

- A. Introductory Formula (17:1-2)
 - 1. The chapter is introduced with the common structural phrase, “The Yahweh spoke to Moses...”.
 - 2. This phrase functions as a macrosyntactical marker in the text to indicate a new section (cf. 1:1; 4:1; 5:14, 20; 6:1, 12, 17; 7:22, 28; 8:1; 10:8; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1, 33; 15:1; etc.).
 - 3. The recipients of this particular command include Aaron, his sons, and the whole nation of Israel.
 - 4. This kind of three-way designation appears only 3x in Leviticus, here and in 21:24 and 24:23, indicating that the entirety of chs. 17-24 are directed toward the general life of Israel, rather than to one particular group, as was chs. 11-15.

- B. Sacrifices could only be made at the tabernacle (17:3-9)
1. Loyalty to Yahweh is first expressed in the exclusivity of sacrifice.
 2. When an Israelite wished to sacrifice a domesticated animal (e.g., ox, lambs, goats; etc.) as an offering, he had to perform the sacrifice at the tabernacle (17:3-4).
 3. Some contend that this passage restricts the killing of all domesticated livestock, including common slaughter for food. In other words, Israelites could only eat a domestic animal
 - a) If this is the case, then any time an individual wished to eat meat, they had to present the animal as a peace offering at the tabernacle.
 - b) Only later, after the nation entered the land, was this law changed to allow for the killing of domestic animals for food without requiring it be offered as a sacrifice at the tabernacle (cf. Deut 12:15-26).
 4. Others contend that the passage speaks specifically about domestic animals which are being sacrificed—these must be brought to the tabernacle and killed.
 - a) The evidence for this view finds better support all around.
 - b) The term “slaughter” (*shahāt*) in 17:3 is a technical term for sacrificial slaughtering in cultic material and never refers to a generic act of killing in sacrificial texts.
 - c) Other technical cultic language marks the passage: “gift to Yahweh” (17:4), sacrifices (17:5, 8), burnt offerings (17:8).
 - d) This statute is made permanent in 17:7, which would contradict the idea that it was temporary and superseded by the laws in Deuteronomy 12.
 - e) The idea of “shedding blood” in 17:4 anticipates the discussion of blood as equated with the death of an animal as a means of atonement.
 - f) If all edible meat must be sacrificed, then only unblemished animals could be eaten, what could be done with the defective animals? Such details are glaringly absent.
 5. In light of these evidences, it seems best to understand this section as referring specifically the restrictions put on the slaughter of domestic animals for ritual sacrifice to Yahweh.
 6. The purpose of the restriction is expressed plainly: Israel was no longer to offer their sacrifices in the “open field” (17:5). The reason for this is two-fold:
 - a) It protected the mediatory role of the priests, whose responsibility it was to “throw the blood on the altar of Yahweh at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (17:6a).
 - b) It ensured Yahweh of his share of the peace offerings, which included the fat for a pleasing aroma to Yahweh” (17:6b).

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- c) It prevented sacrificing to demons, since the reason the Israelites were sacrificing in the open fields was because they were “sacrificing their sacrifices to goat demons” (17:7).
- (1) The term translated “goat demons” (*s^e 'irim*) is problematic. Usually it means simply “goat.”
 - (2) But it appears in 2 Chronicles 11:15 and 2 Kings 23:8 to refer to two instances of apostasy involving the worship of goat idols.
 - (3) It also appears in Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14 referring to wild goats which live in the wilderness.
 - (4) These other occurrences support the concept of goat demons which were said to dwell in the wilderness and perhaps were connected with the fertility deities of the Canaanite religion.
 - (5) In any case, the Israelites were apparently offering sacrifices to these idols, a clear violation of the 1st commandment (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7).
 - (6) Their idolatry is described as “whoring,” language metaphorically used throughout the OT to describe Israelite apostasy (Exod 34:15-16; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33; Isa 57:3; Jer 2:20; 3:1; 5:7; Ezek 6:9; 16:15, 16, 17; 20:30; 23:3, 19).
 - (7) The term emphasizes Israel’s unfaithfulness Yahweh through their alternative sacrifices in the fields.
7. These instructions applied not only to native Israelites but also to foreigners/sojourners who were living in the land (17:8).
8. The penalty for breaking these laws were severe:
- a) “Bloodguilt” is “imputed” to the individual who violates the command. This emphasis anticipates the fact that to “shed blood” (17:4) involves the intentional taking of a life for the purpose of making atonement (cf. 17:11, 14).
 - b) Twice the text indicates the violator will be “cut off from his people.”
 - (1) Most likely this indicates a premature death met by God personally. This would produce a sense of dread on the perpetrator, since the death could come at any time.
 - (2) Some take this phrase to indicate the execution of the individual by means of capital punishment. This may be involved, but because the phrase is often connected to actions which may be done in secret, this is not probable.
 - (3) Others interpret the phrase to mean excommunication from the covenant community. However, once again, secret sins would not be applicable, making this suggestion less likely.
 - (4) Finally, some see in this an indication of eternal judgment, since death is often referred to in the OT with the phrase “to sleep with one’s fathers” (1 Kgs

2:10; 11:21, 43; 14:20, 31; 15:8, 24; 16:6; etc.). In this view, then, being “cut off from [one’s] people” indicates a separation from the rest one would hope to have with the ancestors after death. However, since the phrase “he slept with his fathers” is used of notorious individuals such as Ahab (1 Kgs 22:40), it’s probably best to see this phrase as a simple euphemism for death.

C. Blood could only be used in sacrifice (17:10-16)

1. Loyalty to Yahweh is expressed secondly through the exclusive use of blood for atonement.
2. Three scenarios are presented which clarify the sanctity of blood:
 - a) Scenario 1: Blood could not be consumed (17:10-12)
 - (1) Native Israelites and foreigners/sojourners alike were expressly forbidden from consuming blood (17:10, 12)
 - (2) The penalty for violating this command was severe: “I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people” (17:10b).
 - (3) The reason for prohibiting the consumption of blood was theological:
 - (a) “Blood” (*dam*) is closely associated with “life” (*nephesh*).
 - (i) This lexical connection is found also in other Semitic languages such as Ugaritic and Akkadian.
 - (ii) “Blood” occurs 362x in the OT, and 203x it refers to violent death, which indicates that the shedding of blood involved the ending of life.
 - (iii) The OT connection between blood and life doesn’t involve blood flowing through the veins. It involves the loss of life when blood is shed.
 - (b) Blood is the divinely ordained means of atonement (17:11)
 - (i) “The shedding of blood on the altar makes atonement, since the blood of the innocent victim was given for the life of the one who has sinned” (Rooker, 236).
 - (ii) “In the Old Testament, atonement for human sin was obtained by the death of an acceptable substitute, rather than by its life, and this emphasis, which is basic to the Old Covenant.... The sacrificial blood is associated with the death of the Savior (Heb 9:14) and the author of Hebrews makes it plain that the blood is associated with death rather than life (12:24). It seems evident, therefore, that sacrifices were efficacious through the death of the victim, and that blood indicated life given up in death, not life set free” (Harrison, “Blood,” *ZPEB*, 1:627).

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(iii) Thus, the only divinely ordained use of blood was for sacrifice to Yahweh. It was sacrosanct as the only means by which atonement can be made.

(iv) Rooker calls 17:11 “one of the clearest texts in the Bible describing the idea of expiation through substitution. God accepts the blood of the animal, which is the life of the animal, in place of human blood and human life” (Rooker, 237).

b) Scenario 2: Wild game must be drained of blood (17:13-14)

- (1) There were many types of animals, including quadrupeds and birds, that were considered clean for eating.
- (2) These “wild game” animals could be hunted for food, but the blood must be drained out completely and covered with dirt (17:13).
- (3) The reason given is a reiteration of 17:11—“for the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life.” The covering of the blood with dirt would perhaps protect it from further defilement.
- (4) Thus, the prohibition against consuming blood was not restricted to domestic animals used for sacrifices. All blood was sacrosanct. It could never be consumed, even if the animal was not acceptable for ritual sacrifice.
- (5) The punishment for eating blood was to be “cut off from [one’s] people” (17:14b).

c) Scenario 3: Animal carcasses imparts uncleanness (17:15-16)

- (1) Animals which died of natural causes or were killed by other animals would not have been properly drained of blood. Its meat would almost certainly contain coagulated blood (17:15a).
- (2) Consuming such meat imparted uncleanness, and was to be avoided.
- (3) If an individual, whether native Israelite or foreigner/sojourner, consumed such meat, they had to wash their clothes and bathe in water and remain unclean until evening (17:15b).
- (4) Disregarding these ritual purifications would result in judgment (17:16).
- (5) The fact that eating from a carcass is not outright prohibited indicates that there may be situations in which this might be expected or even necessary. Nonetheless, the individual needed to recognize that such an action made them unclean and pursue the necessary purification procedures before engaging in corporate worship (cf. Lev 11).

III. Leviticus 17 and the NT

The overarching principle of chapter 17 is that believers owe God their exclusive allegiance.

A. We must be careful not to enter into idolatry

1. In both OT and NT times, idolatry was especially linked with pagan practices.
2. But the NT makes it clear that even greed is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5)
3. Jesus told his disciples, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt 6:4; cf. Luke 16:13).
4. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14).
 - a) Paul references the Israelite’s participation in the temple sacrifices: “Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:18-21).
 - b) As worshippers of God, we must be careful in what we participate and engage.
 - c) If we offer our services, our resources, or our energies to the things of the world, we are engaging in a system that is controlled by Satan.
 - d) Likewise, if we participate in common spiritual enterprises with unbelievers we unequally yoke ourselves with unbelievers with whom we share no spiritual fellowship. “What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (2 Cor 10:16).
 - e) This type of discussion has serious implications for the myriad of contemporary cultural issues facing believers today. When a photographer or a cake baker is asked to participate in the celebration of a same-sex wedding, he or she must think carefully about what his participation means and whether or not it would constitute affirmation and participation in the “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1).
5. John also warns his readers to “guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).
 - a) In the context of 1 John, the Christological heresy espoused by the false teachers of his day constituted a wrong view of the person of Christ.
 - b) John’s warning is to guard oneself from any view of Christ that denies the truth about who he is. Any false view of Christ constitutes idolatry—a false Christ.
 - c) Thus, our allegiance to God involves not only what we do, but what we believe. Our theology can lead us as much into idolatry as our everyday activities.

B. We must approach God only through the means he has provided.

1. God ordained in the OT that the only way to approach him was through the one tabernacle, through the one priesthood, and through atonement on the one altar.

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2. Likewise, in the NT the only way a person may approach him is through Jesus Christ, who opened up the way to God by entering the heavenly tabernacle, representing his people as high priest, and offering his blood for atonement for sin.
 3. Any attempt to approach God by alternative means is a gross violation of our exclusive allegiance, for it represents our rejection of his authority, his wisdom, and his grace.
 4. Legalism, ritualism, spiritualism, isolationism, etc., all constitute a refusal to approach God as he has designed. Not only is this futile, but spiritually treacherous.
 5. “Today there are people who declare that they go to find God on a golf course. Others like to quote the poem: ‘One is nearer to God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.’ No, says the New Testament. God’s own choice of ‘place’ is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Knight, *Leviticus*, 102).
- C. This means recognizing and rejoicing in the supremely precious blood of Jesus Christ
1. Blood was the only ordained means by which atonement could be made, for it represented the giving of a life as a substitute for the worshipper.
 2. Similarly, the NT reaffirms that only through blood can atonement occur. “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22).
 3. Since we are saved by the “precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:19), we must treat the blood (i.e., the death) of Christ with the same respect demanded by the OT saints with regard to the blood of animals—it is precious because it represents the only means available for atonement.
 4. An important theological shift takes place concerning the sanctity of blood as we transition from the OT to the NT.
 5. “In the Old Testament the people were prohibited from eating or drinking the blood—it was for atonement. But in the New Testament, with the coming of the Christ, we find believers being instructed to ‘drink’ his blood (John 6:53-54). After all, it is for atonement. By doing so, his life, voluntarily laid down for us, is transferred to us” (Ross, 337).
 6. This is why the Lord’s Supper is the supreme symbol of our fellowship and participation in Christ. When we take the elements of communion, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).
 7. The Corinthian church had defiled the sanctity of the Lord’s Table by treating it as a common meal (1 Cor 11:20-22). They had lost the meaning of the observance and disregarded what it symbolized.
 8. This is why Paul warns, “Whoever, therefore, eat the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27).

9. In fact, apparently many were sick and some had died because of this (1 Cor 11:30), a consequence curiously reminiscent of being “cut off from [one’s] people” in Leviticus 17.
- D. Is the Levitical prohibition against consuming blood still operative under the New Covenant?
1. This prohibition was, interestingly enough, one of the few OT rituals still observed by the early church.
 2. The Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 intended to approach the question as to whether Gentile converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised and observe the OT law.
 3. The council concluded that Gentiles were not to be burdened with the OT law.
 4. Nevertheless, they were instructed to “abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled” (Acts 15:20).
 5. “Things polluted by idols” refers to food that had been prepared in association with pagan cultic practices, while “what has been strangled” refers to meat which was slaughtered in such a way that did not allow for the complete draining of blood.
 6. Because of this edict, some groups of Christians continued to abstain from consuming blood as late as the 3rd century.
 7. However, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14 that food offered to idols was allowable for consumption, as long as it was not consumed in a temple or would cause Jewish believers or new converts to stumble by offending their conscience.
 8. This would suggest that Paul’s view regarding the Levitical law on consuming blood would fall under the same allowances.
 9. This seems to be the intent of the Jerusalem Council as well. They were intended to limit unnecessary offense to Jewish believers as more and more Gentile converts were entering the church.
 10. We must view all food as a gift which is to be received with thankfulness.
 11. Legalism with regard to food was one of the many things Paul warned against: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:1-5).
 12. Once again, as NT Christians, we cannot operate as if nothing has changed. The reason Paul allowed for the eating of meat offered to idols was because of what Christ had done.

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13. Wenham writes, “In the teaching of Christ the identification of life with blood is reaffirmed. It may be that the Pauline view of the blood prohibition has its roots in our Lord’s teaching, for in it the Levitical identification of blood with life is at once reaffirmed and transfigured. According to Leviticus ‘the blood is the life,’ and therefore must not be drunk. Those who ignore this rule will be cut off. According to our Lord it is his blood that gives eternal life, and those who wish to enjoy it must drink his blood. ‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day’ (John 6:54). Each time the Lord’s supper is administered, the worshipper is reminded through Christ’s words, ‘This is my blood,’ that it is only through his Savior’s death upon the cross that he enjoys eternal life” (Wenham, 247-8).