

The Sanctity of Marriage

Leviticus 18:1-30

I. Introduction

- A. Chapters 18-20 are closely related, so much so that some commentators consider these chapters to be a unit.
- B. Each chapter addresses different aspects of Israelite social morality.
- C. They are marked by the repeated statement, “I am Yahweh your God,” which occurs 49x in these three chapters alone.
- D. Hertz writes that these chapters set out “the foundation principles of social morality. The first place among these is given to the institution of marriage...the cornerstone of all human society.... Any violation of the sacred character of marriage is deemed a heinous offence, calling down the punishment of Heaven both upon the offender and the society that condones the offence” (Hertz, 172).
- E. The overall thrust of chapters 17-25 concerns the separation of Israel as Yahweh’s holy nation. Their character and morality—be in in their worship, their household, their social constructs, etc., must reflect their status as a holy nation.
- F. In other words, Israel must look different from the nations.
- G. Chapter 18 is as much a text on covenant loyalty as it is a message on sexual holiness. It is loosely organized around a covenant-treaty form:
 - 1. Preamble: “I am the Lord your God” (18:2)
 - 2. Historical retrospect: “Egypt, where you have been living” (18:3)
 - 3. Basic stipulations: “Do my laws” (18:4)
 - 4. Blessing: “He will enjoy life” (18:5)
 - 5. Detailed stipulations (18:6-23)
 - 6. Curses (18:24-30)
- H. The fact that chapter 18 initiates this section on social ethics indicates not only the prevalence of sexual deviancy in ancient pagan societies like Egypt and Canaan but the propensity for all societies to deviate into sexual sin.
- I. Romans 1:18ff clarifies that once a society jettisons the true worship of God for the false worship of idolatry, they quickly degrade into sexual immorality.
- J. Leviticus 18 calls Israel to the same kind of walk that the apostles called the early church—to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do” (Eph 4:17; cf. Col 3:7; 1 Pet 4:13).

II. Exposition

A. Biblical Foundation (18:1-5)

1. “I am Yahweh your God” is a repeated refrain in chapter 18, occurring 6x (18:2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30), with three of them occurring in this introductory section.
2. The brevity of this phrase masks its richness. It phrase appears in several important contexts which provide a cohesive framework for how ancient Israel would have heard and received it.
 - a) Historical Redemption
 - (1) God first revealed the meaning of his covenant name to Israel in light of his promise to redeem Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod 6:6-7).
 - (2) Likewise, God once again reminds Israel here that they once lived in the land of Egypt (18:2).
 - (3) The phrase, then, “was a reminder of what God had done for Israel and how he had chosen to make them his people” (Wenham, 251).
 - b) Divine Holiness
 - (1) God had connected his name with his holiness (Lev 11:44).
 - (2) Thus, invoking the phrase “I am Yahweh your God” reminded the people of their responsibility to imitate God’s holiness.
 - c) Covenant Authority
 - (1) The phrase appears at the introduction of both lists of Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6), the central thrust of God’s covenant expectations for his nation.
 - (2) Similarly, its appearance here reminded Israel of their need for covenant love and loyalty toward the suzerain.
3. God’s central concern is that Israel live in absolute moral contrast to the nation from which they came (Egypt) and the nations which they are about to drive from the land (Canaanites).
 - a) All of the various sexual expressions discussed in vv. 6-23 were prevalent in ANE pagan societies.
 - b) Not all societies demonstrated these to the same degree, but as a whole, the practices listed in the chapter reflect pagan sexual customs which Israel was to avoid.
4. The way in which they accomplish this counter-cultural morality is by obeying God’s commands. *Israel must be doers of the law* (18:4-5).
 - a) Obedience expresses covenant loyalty. This is the way you demonstrate that you love God and belong to him.

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- b) Obedience guarantees blessing and life (18:5)
 - (1) Never does obedience to these laws save from sin or bring forgiveness (Tit 3:5; Phil 3:8-11).
 - (2) Rather, the phrase “if a person does them, he shall live by them” (18:5) promises that obedience to God’s word produces progressive sanctification (cf. John 17:17).
 - (3) Within the context of the old covenant, it also promised temporal covenant blessing as well (cf. Lev 26). “The law...was designed to enable Israel to live as God’s holy nation and receive the blessings he had promised” (Ross, 342).
 - c) Within the context of NT Christianity, there is a parallel expectation of obedience on the part of believers. Those who claim to be God’s people must also be doers of the word and not just hearers (Jas 1:22).
 - d) Without obedience, confessions of faith bely false profession. True faith produces works. Or as James puts it, “faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2:26).
- B. Laws Regulating Sexual Relations within the Family (18:6-18)
- 1. This first major section of laws defines what is considered “close relatives” (18:6).
 - 2. It is, first and foremost, an elaboration on all the sexual perversions expressed by the surrounding nations.
 - 3. But it also provided critical clarification for Israel regarding whom they could marry, for they were operating under two separate but related factors:
 - a) First, they were forbidden from marrying foreigners (cf. Deut 7:3). Thus, anyone they could marry would have to be a member of the nation.
 - b) Second, land inherited by a family or clan were to remain inside the family or clan. Thus, marriages needed to occur between relatives.
 - 4. As Rooker explains, “These two restrictions made incest laws indispensable Sexual energies had to be subordinated to God’s will” (Rooker, 242).
 - 5. Twelve different incestuous relations are mentioned in vv. 7-18:
 - a) Mother (18:7)
 - b) Step-mother (18:8)
 - c) Sister or step-sister (18:9)
 - d) Grand-daughter (18:10)
 - e) Half-sister (18:11)
 - f) Aunt (18:12-14)
 - g) Daughter-in-law (18:15)

- h) Sister-in-law (18:16)
 - i) Step-daughter or step-grand-daughter (18:17)
 - j) Sister-in law as concubine (18:18)
6. Verses 6-18 concern marital relationships which would occur upon the death of a woman's husband or his divorce from his wife. Marriage during his lifetime would constitute adultery which would be covered by the laws in 18:20 as well as Exod 20:14.
 7. The technical term for "close relative" is *s^eer b^esaro*, lit., "the flesh of his flesh." The repeated use of "flesh" emphasizes the physical relatedness of the individual, i.e., "flesh and blood."
 8. The technical phrase justifying the restriction is the phrase, "to uncover one's nakedness," which is a Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse.
 - a) Nakedness once marked the intimacy of man and woman in marital union and underscored one's innocence and integrity (Gen 2:25).
 - b) However, nakedness after the fall came to represent vulnerability, exploitation, shame, and exposure.
 9. These two technical phrases—"close relative" and "uncovering one's nakedness" interact together to define incest, and many of the reasons given for prohibiting a certain incestuous relation have to do with the fact the female relatives in question are the "flesh" of their husbands (cf. 18:12, 13, 17).
 10. "With our understanding of biology, we readily see that our children are an extension of ourselves they are in a vertical blood relationship with us. But foreign to our way of thinking is the idea that a wife's nakedness is her husband's nakedness and vice versa (vv. 7, 8, 16). In other words, marriage, or more precisely marital intercourse, makes the man and wife as closely related as parents and children. In the words of Gen. 2:24, "They become one flesh." Marriage thus creates both vertical blood relationships in the form of children and horizontal 'blood' relationships between the spouses. The girl who marries into a family becomes an integral and permanent part of that family in the same way that children born into the family do. Even if her husband dies, or divorces her, she still has this horizontal 'blood' relationship with the family. In Hebrew thinking marriage made a girl not just a daughter-in-law, but a daughter of her husband's parents (Ruth 1:11; 3:1). She became a sister to her husband's brother. For this reason, if her husband dies, her brother-in-law may not marry her (v. 16). Brothers may not marry sisters (v. 9).
- C. Laws regulating sexual relations outside the family (18:19-23)
1. This new subsection concerns sexual relations which occur primarily outside the family, although instances of these perversions within a familial context certainly also applied.

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2. Five specific expressions of sexual sin are listed:
 - a) Sexual relations during a woman's menstruation (18:19)
 - (1) This was already addressed in 15:19-30).
 - (2) Its occurrence here suggests that chapter 15 concerned instances in which relations occurred during menstruation by accident. Such action resulted in uncleanness which disqualified the individual from access and service at the tabernacle (15:31; 20:18).
 - (3) Here the law most likely concerns willful disregard from the law. Such action constituted rebellion and resulted in condemnation, not simply uncleanness.
 - (4) The principle: sexual need and desire cannot supersede obedience to God.
 - b) Adultery (18:20)
 - (1) Adultery defined in the OT concerned sexual relations between a woman who was married or betrothed and a man who was not her husband (cf. Exod 20:14; Lev 20:10 Deut 22:22).
 - (2) Sexual relations with unattached women, although seen as morally impure, were not viewed with the seriousness that adultery was, and thus incurred a different consequence than death.
 - (3) The key was in the uncovering a man's nakedness through sexual relations with his flesh. It was a violent intrusion into his own body—his wife.
 - (4) "Where there is incest or adultery, we may truly say the family is murdered; what murder is to the individual, that, precisely, are crimes of this class to the family" (Kellogg, 426-7).
 - (5) The NT elevates the definition of adultery beyond the OT. Jesus identifies it with the inward lust for a woman (Matt 5:28), and the writers of the NT speak not just of sex with a married woman but all sexual immorality as equally deserving of judgment (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5).
 - c) Offering one's children to Molech (18:21)
 - (1) The placement of this prohibition within a context which deals with sexual immorality has led some scholars to conclude that this sin involved giving one's child to Molech to grow up as temple prostitutes.
 - (2) The traditional understanding that this sin involved the sacrificial slaughter of a baby as an offering to the Ammonite god Molech. If this is the case, the connection may be lexical—the use of "seed" in v. 20 and 21.
 - (3) Regardless, the practice "profaned the name" of God, being that it misrepresents God by doing that which he detests and giving him a bad reputation among the nations.

d) Homosexuality (18:22)

- (1) Homosexuality is described using the term “abomination,” which means that which is detestable, loathed, abhorrent, and offensive. It comes from a root meaning “to hate” or “abhor,” and constitute action which God hates and finds offensive.
- (2) Such sin was a common practice in ANE pagan cultures, and is reflected as early as the time of Abraham and Lot (Gen 19).
- (3) Homosexuality was chiefly represented in the many fertility cults of pagan religion, and practiced by male prostitutes at the various pagan temples.
- (4) It is condemned throughout the Bible, and constitutes one of the chief ways in which sexual perversion takes root in a society (Rom 1:27).
- (5) Even the phrase “lies with a man as one lies with a woman” underscores Paul’s words regarding homosexuality as “exchanging natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” (Rom 1:27).

e) Bestiality (18:23)

- (1) Bestiality is described as a “perversion,” or that which is a contamination or confusion.
- (2) Specifically, it reflects a blurring of the God-ordained boundaries between man and animals.
- (3) Following Paul’s description of the moral disintegration of society, once people reject the Creator-creature distinction, not only will they turn to idolatry (Rom 1:21-23), but will practice unnatural sexual relations (Rom 1:26-27).

D. Restatement of Biblical Foundation (18:24-30)

1. This last section of the chapter restates the assertions that introduce the chapter, but adds some important details regarding the practices of the nations which Israel is to avoid.
2. Once again, the theme of the chapter is emphasized that Israel’s sexual life is to be distinct from the world.
3. The nations that lived in the land prior to Israel’s conquest were guilty of all the sins detailed in this chapter.
4. For this reason, God was “driving out” the nations from the land (18:25). They had polluted the land so that it had become unclean.
5. God had told Abraham in Gen 15:16 that Israel would come back to the promised land from slavery in Egypt only after the iniquity of the Amorites was complete.
6. This iniquity reaches back all the way to the cursed line of Ham, whose own moral abandonment when seeing his father Noah’s nakedness resulted in the cursing of his

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line (Gen 9:18ff). The Canaanite nations that inhabited the promised land lived out their ancestor's moral abasement until God judged them during the Israelite conquest.

7. Part of this judgment is described as the land, personified here as if it were a person, vomiting out its inhabitants, an action which underscores the revulsion of these sexual practices.
8. But the point which God is driving home here is that Israel must be careful not to follow after the deviancies of these nations, lest they suffer the same fate and the land vomit them out as well.
9. The punishment for violating these laws was capital punishment: "the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people" (18:29). This judgment is expanded and delineated in chapter 20.
10. The chapter ends with a final statement of divine authority: "I am Yahweh your God." It serves as a fitting enveloping statement underscoring God's sovereignty over Israel and his expectation for absolute loyalty in sexual life.

III. Leviticus 18 and the Christian

Several principles emerge from the laws concerning sexual sin in Leviticus 18 which inform the NT Christian.

- A. God's people express their faith in Christ through their obedience to Him.
 1. Obedience proceeds from salvation, not the other way around.
 2. Nevertheless, the expectation is that believers grow through ongoing sanctification.
 3. A key area of sanctification is abstinence from sexual immorality (1 Thess 4:3-4), and the person who rejects this "does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit" (4:8).
- B. God created sex and has exclusive authority over its proper expression
 1. God designed the body for sexual purity, not for sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:13).
 2. God's lordship over us requires that we recognize his lordship over our bodies. We don't own our bodies.
- C. One of the key ways that God's people distinguish themselves from the world is through their sexual purity (Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-14; 1 Pet 4:3). This is because sexual immorality is one of the chief expressions of man's depravity (cf. Rom 1:18ff).
- D. The sanctity of the family must be honored and protected by God's people.