

Appendix: Vows and Promises

Leviticus 27:1-34

I. Introduction

- A. The position of this chapter in Leviticus is admittedly puzzling, considering how fitting it would have been to conclude the book with the blessings and curses of chapter 26.
1. In general, liberal commentators assume that its position reveals the relative age of the material—it was written considerably later than the rest of the material and as such was added on later to the holiness code of chs. 17-26.
 2. The traditional conservative explanation is also chronological, except for the assumption of Mosaic authorship—the laws concerning vows were the last to be given at Sinai and therefore were placed at the end of the book.
 3. Wenham argues for a thematic explanation: “It could be an association of ideas. The blessings and curses (ch. 26) are in a sense God’s vows to his people, his promises as to what he will do for them in the future. It could be that this prompts consideration of how men make vows to God (ch. 27). Alternatively, men frequently made vows in times of stress, and more rarely in times of great prosperity, Ch. 26 first deals briefly with times of blessing and then at length with times of cursing. The latter is followed immediately by a section (ch. 27) which shows how vows should be honored” (Wenham, 336).
 4. Ross suggests that the content of ch. 27 is sufficiently different that it is intentionally set apart from the rest of the book as an epilogue of sorts to chs. 1-7 which discuss gifts and offerings. “There is a nice balance between Lev. 1-7, which gives regulations for the people’s offerings, and Lev. 27, which gives regulations for the people’s voluntary vows and offerings. The chapter therefore stands alone as a final section to the book” (Ross, 487).
- B. This chapter deals with vows which were above and beyond the normal sacrifices described in chs. 1-7. It is accompanied by other parallel passages which fill out these laws with additional details (cf. Num 30:1-16; Deut 23:21-23).
1. Vows were personal, never obligatory, and as such it was not a sin to refrain from making a vow. However, once made, the individual was obliged to keep his vow (Deut 23:21-23).
 2. On certain occasions, however, vows could be substituted, usually based on the value of the offering plus an additional 20%.
 3. In this way, vows formed an important means for funding the tabernacle complex.
 4. Vows were made on a variety of occasions, but sprung particularly from times of thanksgiving (1 Sam 1:28; Pss 50:14; 61:9; 65:1; 66:13; 116:14; Jon 2:9) or distress (Gen 28:20-22; Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-40; 2 Sam 15:7-8).
- “Facing death, even hardened atheists are known to pray. Throughout human history, when men have found themselves in dire straits they have prayed for deliverance and

made vows to God, promising to do something for God if he rescued them.... Vows were made in the heat of the moment. In retrospect, when the crisis is over, they may well seem foolish and unnecessary, and the person who made the vow may be tempted to forget it or only fulfill it partially.... It may well be part of the purpose of this chapter to discourage rash swearing by fixing a relatively high price for the discharge of the vows, and penalizing those who change their minds" (Wenham, 337).

II. Exposition

A. Vows for Personal Service to God (27:1-8)

1. Perhaps the most basic form a vow was to dedicate oneself to the service of Yahweh.
2. Personal service was basically a form of vowed slavery (with the exception that tabernacle service was restricted to Levites).
3. A person could dedicate themselves, or another individual.
4. Examples of personal dedication:
 - a) Hannah (1 Sam 1:11)
 - b) Absalom (2 Sam 15:8)
 - c) The psalmist (Ps 116:14-18)
5. If the individual who made the vow wished to be free of his obligation, or wished to free the person whom he vowed, a redemption price was required.
6. The redemption price was based upon the standard market price for a slave.
7. A male required a higher redemption price than a female. This didn't reflect the overall worth of the individual as much as the equitability of the individual's ability. Male slaves would undoubtedly perform more heavy labor than female slaves. Thus, their labor was costlier and thus the redemption price was greater.
8. The prices listed in the text are extremely high, and few could afford to pay them, making the redemption laws an effective deterrent against making foolish vows.

B. Vows of Possessions to God (27:9-25)

1. Animals (27:9-13)
 - a) Animals sacrifices were often used when making a vow (Lev 7:216; 22:18ff; Deut 12:11, 17; Ps 50:14; 56:12; 66:13; etc.).
 - b) If the individual changed his mind, the animal could be redeemed under certain conditions:
 - (1) A ceremonially-clean animal fit for sacrifice could not be substituted for a different animal. If this was attempted, both animals became holy and belonged to the sanctuary.

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(2) An unclean animal, however, could be redeemed, with the redemption price set by evaluation by a judge, who would value it and add 20% to the price.

2. Property (28:14-25)

- a) Houses and fields could be offered in a vow as well.
- b) To redeem a house, the structure was appraised by a priest with an addition 20% incurred.
- c) The value of a field was determined by the amount of seed that could be sown or the amount of crops that could be harvested. The price was then prorated based on the proximity of the next Jubilee Year, plus an additional 20%.
- d) However, if the field was not redeemed by the next Jubilee Year, then it became holy and went to the priests.

C. Qualifications on Vows (27:26-33)

While most personal or property vows could be cancelled through the payment of a redemption price, there were certain qualifications to these laws.

1. The Firstborn (27:26-27)

- a) Since all firstborn animals already belonged to God (cf. Exod 13:2), they were prohibited from being dedicated to God.
- b) To do so would involve giving something to God that he already owned!
- c) Only unclean animals could be redeemed.

2. The Ban (27:28-29)

- a) The term “devoted” is *herem*, which means to ban from personal possession. Such things could be people or objects, and they could be devoted to God either for his service or for destruction (cf. Exod 22:20; Num 21:2; Deut 7:2; Josh 6:17-19; 1 Sam 15ff).
- b) In either case, to devote something to God was to make a permanent and irreversible vow.
- c) Likewise, if a person or object had been devoted to God by some other means (e.g., through war), then it could not be redeemed.

3. The Tithe (27:30-33)

- a) Tithing is related to the word “tenth” and describes a kind of formal tax legislated in the Mosaic law.
- b) Tithing, however, is not inherently Mosaic—it appears throughout the early patriarchal period (Gen 14:20; 28:20-22).
- c) Thus, Lev 27 represents a systemization of a pre-existing practice.
- d) There were three types of tithes legislated in the Mosaic law:

- (1) Sacred meal w/ a Levite (Deut 14:22-27)
 - (2) Tithe to the poor every 3 years (Deut 14:28-29)
 - (3) General tithe (Lev 27)
- e) The general tithe could be taken from the produce of the land or from the herd or flock.
 - f) A tithe of produce from the land was redeemable by paying its value plus 20%
 - g) A tithe of livestock was not redeemable, and any attempt to manipulate the tithe by differentiating animals based on quality was prohibited. If an individual tried to substitute an animal, both were forfeited.

D. Epilogue (27:34)

1. The final verse of Leviticus notes the historical significance of the final chapter.
2. With the end of the legislation of vows and promises, the divine revelation of Mosaic statutes concluded at Sinai.
3. Wenham asserts the thematic significance of this closing chapter:

“On first reading it seems a strange point at which to end. But the theme of vowing is in fact closely related to the principal concerns of the whole book. Men who dedicate themselves to God become as it were God’s slaves, holy to the Lord. Some men, the priests, can indeed serve God in the sanctuary. Chs. 8-10 tell of the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. Chs. 21-22 expound the qualities looked for in priests, qualities which symbolize the perfection and holiness of God. Those not of priestly stock can still serve God, indeed they must be holy for God is holy (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). This theme runs through chs. 11-20; the elect people of God must visibly embody the character of God. In their choice of food, in sickness and in health, in their family life, in their honest and upright dealings, and in their love of neighbor, they show the world what God is like.... Thus the chapter in effect recapitulates and reminds us of the great themes that have engaged our attention in the rest of the book. Lewv. 27 points out that holiness is more than a matter of divine call and correct ritual. Its attainment requires the total consecration of a man’s life to God’s service. It involves giving yourself, your family, and all your possessions to God” (Wenham, 342-3).

III. Leviticus 27 and the NT Believer

- A. The custom of vowing is an assumed practice in the background of the NT (Matt 23:23; Acts 18:18; 21:23. Like all things, the practice had become abused in an effort to avoid other obligations (Matt 15:3-9; Mark 7:9-13).
- B. The theme of holiness seeps into the principals of the chapter
 1. Holiness calls for fulfilling what one has promised—faithfulness to one’s word
 2. Holiness calls for wisdom in making vows appropriately

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- C. Obviously, God graciously allowed individuals who had foolishly vowed something they could not afford to pay an opportunity to rescind their promise. However, it came at a steep price.
- D. Thus, even the OT provides warnings about rash vows: “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not repay” (Eccl 5:4-5).
- E. Jesus’ own words echo the preacher’s (Matt 5:33-37). It was better not to make a vow than to make one that was difficult to keep, or to make one with a built-in cancellation policy (e.g., swearing by the temple vs. the gold of the temple).
- F. Likewise, when it comes to promises made to others, the Scripture calls us to be humble: “My child, if you have put up security for your neighbor, have given your pledge to a stranger, if you are snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into the hand of your neighbor: go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbor. Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber; save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the fowler” (Prov 6:1-5).
- G. Promises were never to be used as an outward sign of spirituality. Just as legalists use the external law to hide internal evil, vows can be used to avoid fulfilling the purpose of the law (loving and taking care of those in need).
- H. As Christians we make many vows:
 - 1. Baptismal vows
 - 2. Marriage vows
 - 3. Giving vows
 - 4. Ordination vows
- I. Ross states the point well: “The Bible reminds people that what they promise to God they must do. Believers must keep their word and show to the world that truth and faithfulness can be found in the household of faith, for the faithfulness of the Lord’s word is often seen in the words of his people” (Ross, 495).