



LEARNING TO LOVE LEVITICUS

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“A world without soap.” That was my impression of Leviticus: an early hygiene treatise. The business about holiness was extraneous, I assumed, a convenient divine threat to guarantee that the Israelites cleaned up properly and didn’t eat creepy-crawlies. Exegetically, this reveals far more about me, my culture, and my religion (and its long history of Old Testament exegesis at the expense of the Jews) than it does about Leviticus. For to take Leviticus seriously as Scripture today is to stare into the mirror of your own bigotry, as a modern post-Enlightenment person to be sure, but equally and a good deal more disturbingly as a Christian.

Not that I knew this when I started poking around in the scholarly literature on the book. A series of minor events and discoveries had gotten me curious about it. At a public lecture in which I exhorted pastors to study Scripture beyond the lectionary, I quipped, “Read Leviticus!” and everyone laughed. Of course it’s funny; we all know there’s nothing less edifying in the whole Bible.¹ But then a friend in mission studies told me of a missionary somewhere in the world who translated Leviticus *first*, feeling it would be most useful for the people he was evangelizing; and in fact it was so useful, and solved so many of their problems, that he had a hard time interesting them in the New Testament.² There’s a “Leviticus Tattoo” parlor in Minneapolis (in obvious contravention of 19:28), and we all know how Leviticus’s injunction against homosexual acts has been either invoked or denied by partisans in that debate.³ It’s easy to dismiss nearly all of the Levitical laws by means of the “shellfish argument” (as Radner terms it; we eat shellfish now, so why not do X too?⁴); then again, this is the very same book from which Jesus draws the heart of his own ethical teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:31)—and Leviticus gives us no rubric for disentangling the ethical from the ritual.

What then to do with this puzzling book? To paraphrase Luther’s explanation of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: as Scripture, Leviticus is holy in itself, but we pray that it may become holy for us, too.

The Landscape of Leviticus

It’s not fair to dismiss all of Leviticus as utterly opaque. There is plenty that is familiar and accessible. Chapter 19, for example, alludes to nearly all of the Ten Commandments: v. 3 invokes the Fourth and Third, v. 4 the First, v. 11 the Seventh, v. 12 the Second, v. 16 the Eighth, vv. 17–18 the Fifth. Whole chapters are devoted to the detailed application of the Sixth and Tenth. The refrain sounds again and again throughout the book against oppression, injustice, deceit, and ruthlessness, thus implicitly the Ninth.

So Leviticus has some sound moral teaching. So what? It’s not like we uniquely needed Leviticus to tell us incest was wrong or that we shouldn’t put obstacles in the path of the blind. Even if we like what the book has to say, it’s next to impossible to imagine it making a claim on us distinct from that of any other book of the Bible. The specter of supercessionism looms close at hand whenever we start talking about Leviticus: it is backward, barbaric, and bloody, and our contempt for it is justified by Jesus and his anti-Sabbath agenda.

This exposes not only our lingering anti-Judaism but also an extremely constricted hermeneutic at work. We perceive Leviticus only as a set of laws that are to be observed or ignored.⁵ (Actually, there are only—by one count—forty-two direct commands in the whole book; most biblical books have three to four times as many.⁶) And even if the laws weren’t irrelevant they’d still be impossible to keep, lacking as we do any tabernacle in which to offer sacrifices.

Mary Douglas’s study *Leviticus as Literature* was the game-

changer for me, and indeed for the whole field of Leviticus studies. As an anthropologist, she operated on the assumption that Leviticus was anything but a piecemeal collection of random laws to be further picked apart. Rather, she argued, it is constituted by a profound logic of divine and human relations in which the cultic aspects of sacrifice cannot be extricated from the ethical aspects of behavior. Each exists to reinforce and open up the meaning of the other. Her work offers such extraordinary insight into an otherwise opaque corner of the canon that it is worth dealing with her ideas here at some length.

A first point is that Leviticus cannot be read through the lens of Deuteronomy without suffering severe distortion. “When Deuteronomy uses a conception of the body it is the body politic, in Leviticus the body is a cosmic symbol... [T]he Leviticus writer is theocratic and his institutions are sacred, while the Deuteronomy writer is governmental and his institutions secular.”⁷ This is why Deuteronomy is so much less alien to us: it transfers better. Leviticus inscribes its meaning through the sacrificial cult of the tabernacle, not in principles or laws that can be abstracted and applied anywhere regardless of worship and sacrifice, as Deuteronomy’s can. What we perceive as extraneous sacrificial instruction is in fact for Leviticus the necessary path of approach to true understanding of the more obviously ethical commands of the covenant.

But why should an approach via sacrifice even be necessary? This leads to a second point that Douglas explains at some length: our contemporary Western culture vastly prefers analytical, causal, or instrumental modes of thought that can be universalized and abstracted—but this is not the way Leviticus thinks. Our own preference is no surprise. Abstract and analytical thought crosses cultural and temporal boundaries with greater ease, and the more global society becomes, the more we need forms of communication intelligible across

all kinds of boundary lines. But such thinking easily tends toward the positivistic and has a hard time framing *meaning*. Facts are easy to handle analytically, but meaning depends on a different form of thought, what Douglas calls the analogical. It depends on the concrete, the image, the local, and the nexus of illustrative and aesthetic relationships between objects and persons: “Each thing has its meaning only in the relations it has within a set of other things.”⁸ “The analogic system

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of thought has a more comprehensive idea of truth; what is true is so by virtue of its compliance with a microcosm of the world and of society; to be convincing, what is true must chime with justice; it looks to match microcosm with microcosm in ever-expanding series.”⁹

Once we recognize that Leviticus employs this analogical form of thought, suddenly the connections between the cultic and the ethical make sense, in fact fuse to make a meaningful whole rather than seeming to be randomly attached one to another. The image hovering over all of the book is Mount Sinai, that

utterly unique and irreducibly local spot on the planet where the Lord revealed Himself to Moses and the people of Israel. The setting of Leviticus is at the foot of Mount Sinai, about a month’s time in all between the construction of the tabernacle at the end of Exodus and the return to regular action in Numbers. Most of the book’s text is the direct speech of God to Moses, for either the priests or the whole people of Israel, speaking from the mountaintop. (If red-letter Bibles highlighted divine speech in the Old Testament, Leviticus would be mostly red. That would correspond analogically to the importance of blood in this book in a very visible way!) Sinai is mentioned by name at key points along the way (7:37, 24:25, 26:46, 27:34) and significantly is the very last word of the book.

But this is only the beginning of Sinai’s imprint on Israel’s laws and the book of Leviticus itself. Sinai is divided into three zones: the smoky lower part that Israel is camped around, the middle part that Moses may ascend, and the top part reserved for God alone. The tabernacle is arranged in exactly the same way and with corresponding meaning. The outer court or tent of meeting is where ordinary Israelites may go to perform sacrificial slaughter. A veil separates it from the holy place, where the altar is; only priests may enter this place to splash the sacrificial blood and burn the grain offerings. Finally, deepest within and behind another veil is the holy of holies. Here resides the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, and even the high priest can enter only on the Day of Atonement with appropriate offerings in hand. Mount Sinai may be in a fixed spot, far from the promised land, but the tabernacle is mobile. It is a pattern that can be reproduced as needed, making Sinai accessible to Israelites in their new home or, theoretically, anywhere—much as the Lord’s Supper makes the fixed human body of Jesus accessible to Christians anywhere and anywhen.

That’s not the end of it! The cult

of Israel is a nested construction, like Russian matryoshka dolls. Sinai is mapped onto the tabernacle, and both are mapped onto the body of the sacrificial animal. Just as the tabernacle has two veils dividing its three sections, and contains things so holy that they absolutely must not be mishandled, so does the body of the bull or heifer or goat or sheep offered up for slaughter. In their case, it's first the skin and then the covering of fat that function as the veils protecting the kidneys (the Hebrew equivalent of the "heart" or center of the living creature), and the few not-to-be-eaten organs signal the untouchable objects in the tabernacle. The laws about fat and liver lobes are neither hygienic nor remnants of a forgotten tradition: they are rather insights into the concentric creation itself, mirroring back Sinai and tabernacle right in the animal's body. "Imagine a game of building blocks in which God is the player and the object is to rearrange the dismembered body so as to model some divine construction of the universe and a teaching about life and death. In this architectural game rules about positioning, such as 'over' or 'under', are necessary for interpreting not only sacrifice, but the whole book. In a diagram, position is everything..."¹⁰ Sinai is everywhere. The law is given even in the body of an animal.

Likewise for the human body. Yet Leviticus has very little to say of medical interest at all. The one topic that receives detailed interest is "leprosy," but the symptoms detailed do not correspond to actual leprosy (Hansen's disease) or for that matter to any known dermatological ailment at all. The concern is again for the protective shelter around the body, like the smoke on Sinai or the veils in the tabernacle. Leviticus's "leprosy" is the disintegration of the skin to such an extent that the hidden innards of the human body become exposed and visible, both an improper viewing of what was meant always to be covered and a sign that death is winning over life, chaos over order. Healing requires

a seven-day isolation and an eighth-day anointing on the right earlobe, thumb, and big toe—exactly parallel to the anointing of the priests, as if restoration to health by the Lord were a call into divine service (cf. "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you," Luke 8:39). In Leviticus's logic, it makes sense that there is also a concern for garments and houses with signs of "leprosy": not because they are infectious, but because they are the protective covers, shelters, or veils that allow human life to happen at all.

This, in turn, makes sense of what seems to us an utterly bizarre fixation on bodily fluids. Yes, Leviticus has a great deal to say about *certain* bodily fluids. But actually it ignores most of

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them. To use language as earthy as the book itself, Leviticus couldn't care less about pee, poop, puke, snot, or spit. It's only concerned with fluids that give rise to life or indicate that life has lost out to death—semen, vaginal blood, and disintegrating skin-disease discharge. Furthermore, it is very specifically the discharge that is unclean, not the person who is inherently or wholly unclean. And uncleanness is actually pretty easy to remove. It *must* be removed, to be sure, but doing so is not an onerous burden. The standards of cleanliness (and non-smelliness) in the developed world today are probably far more demanding than anything Leviticus ever imagined. Purity laws attend to the vital forces of life and death that frame the existence of every creature, and at the same time mirror the need for careful handling

of the holy items in the tabernacle. Paul's announcement that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19) is not alien to Leviticus's worldview.

There is one more participant in these nested constructions: and that is the very text of Leviticus itself. Leviticus itself is a tour of the tabernacled Sinai. Chapters 1 to 17 deal with matters pertaining to all the people of Israel, their sacrifices and uncleannesses and reconciliations, what they may eat and how to deal with their bodies. These laws constitute a tour of the outer court of the tabernacle. In chs. 8–10, at the liminal place between the court and the holy place, Aaron and his priests are ordained and the laws that have been commanded so far can be put into effect for the first time. Significantly, the first of the mere two brief narratives in Leviticus takes place in ch. 10. It is a terrible story—two of Aaron's sons offer "unauthorized fire" and are struck down dead by God for it—but narratively it is a warning against blasphemy before entering the holier second chamber. For the reader, it is an indication that we are drawing closer to the heart of God and His covenant.

Chapters 18 to 24 take us into the holy place. Here we get the "ethical" content of the covenant (though there are still sacrificial regulations and cultic laws for priests); here also are the yearly festivals. The warning against blasphemy is repeated within this second chamber with the story of the stoning of one who took the Lord's name in vain (it is in this context that the famous *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye," is taught). Sufficiently warned, the reader can cross the final boundary into the holy of holies, chs. 25–27. "The virtual pilgrim with book in hand knows that he has arrived at this hidden place because in chapter 26 the Lord God proclaims his covenant no less than eight times (26:9, 15, 25, 42 (three times), 44, 66). Another elaborate literary construction makes chapters 25 and 27 into a massive frame for honouring chapter 26."¹¹

These three chapters speak of jubilee, redemption of the indebted, and the reciprocal terms of the covenant itself. Overall the length of each division in the book of Leviticus corresponds to the relative size of each chamber of the tabernacle and in turn to the three zones of Sinai.

Lessons from Leviticus

Leviticus is all practice and no theory. There is no explanation given for anything at all except that failure to obey will result in expulsion from the land (18:24–30). Certainly no explanation is offered for *why* a guilt offering has to be like this or a peace offering like that. It is not cause-and-effect explanations that drive Leviticus, as Douglas explains, but rather “[t]he classifications constitute the explanation.”¹² “Inside the concentric circles and between the parallelisms Leviticus writes its lessons. It is always the same, about the mightiness of God, the vulnerability of living beings, their weakness, their evil tendency to oppress each other, human predatoriness, the covenant with God, his protection in return for obedience.”¹³ Since the symbolism of the Levitical world is no longer self-evident to us, we need to unpack the lessons from their context to grasp their significance at all. (This has its own problems, but we’ll return to them in the next section.)

Let’s start with animals. It’s hard to get past the very idea of animal sacrifice, even among people who without a second thought consume supermarket meat from factory-farmed, chronically ill cows. Levitical sacrifice is an order of magnitude more humane than that. A very few domesticated animals are permitted to be sacrificed, which means that they alone are permitted to be eaten. A handful of wild animals caught by hunting can also be eaten if their blood is spilled out on the earth in a parallel form of sacrifice (17:13–14). The overwhelming majority of critters is off-limits.

Our hygiene-driven reading of Leviticus leads us to believe that the

other animals are forbidden because they’re unhealthy, though there is not the slightest indication in Leviticus that this is the reason why. (Four kinds of insects *are* edible: not exactly what we would instinctively call healthy.) The zoological catalogue of things not to eat is long indeed, but in another act of mirroring it calls to mind the opening chapter of Genesis, an inescapable reminder that God is the creator of all animal life. Douglas points out that the word usually translated as “abominable” or “detestable” in Leviticus (*tame* in Hebrew) is not the same as the one used in Deuteronomy, does not in fact suggest detestability, and is used almost exclusively by Leviticus in the entire Old Testament, as if Leviticus coined a new term for the express purpose of avoiding intimations of abomination. The force of the term is that human beings are to shun these creatures, not that there is something inherently disgusting about the animals in themselves.¹⁴ If anything, the laws of *tame* protect the animal creation from human predation, not the human creation from illness.

More to the point, it is only by special dispensation that humans are allowed to eat even cows or goats or sheep. To eat meat is to shed blood. In Levitical logic, it is murder (17:3–4). All animal killing therefore has to be religious, a sacrifice performed at or brought to the tabernacle, because all animals are the Lord’s. “[T]he people of Israel never eat meat except in God’s company, in his house and with his blessing.”¹⁵ Bloodshed is never taken lightly, even of a herd animal destined for that fate from birth. That is why blood is not allowed to be eaten by anyone under any circumstances, not even by the non-Israelites among them. This is so deeply a part of Israelite faith in the Lord as creator and sustainer that the prohibition against eating blood was included in the letter to the Gentile Christians in Acts 15. Circumcision itself could be waived, but not the blood taboo.

A final observation about animals leads into the next point: only unblem-

ished, clean animals can be offered in sacrifice. In other words, it is the clean, set-apart, and perfect that die for the sake of all the unclean animals, and for sinful humanity as well.¹⁶ Radner writes, “The ‘distinction between the unclean and the clean’ (Leviticus 11:47) is therefore a distinction made for *offering*, that is, for love, as it touches the whole world’s realm.”¹⁷ Cleanliness or perfection does not function like privilege: it is actually a death sentence.

A system that requires shed blood in order to atone for sin takes sin with utmost seriousness. By contrast, our culture has gotten to the point where the only thing that can really be considered wrong is deliberate malice or violence. Leviticus considers this not nearly profound enough to grasp the severity and extremity of the human situation. Sin done in ignorance can be just as devastating as sin done with knowledge, and in any event ignorance is no excuse.¹⁸ Thus offerings are commanded for the sake of reconciliation even after inadvertent sin.

Going a step even further than that, Leviticus also condemns passivity. If you *could have* intervened in a situation and didn’t, you are held accountable.¹⁹ You are your neighbor’s keeper! That is why Leviticus commands the people of Israel to take in the poor and make them a part of their lives. There is no buying off your obligation with a handful of change. The laws of redemption of indebted relatives prohibit treating them as slaves or charging them interest. Leviticus is not content for the people of Israel to abstain from sin: they must also proactively seek and serve the good of the neighbors and kin and sojourners among them.

This is why the jubilee belongs to the “holy of holies” portion of the book, at the innermost heart of God’s faithful love. Individual sins can be expiated by sacrifice at the tabernacle; communal sins can be expiated by the priest on the Day of Atonement; but even these cannot prevent the accumulation of familial and social destruction due to want and hard-

ship. So the weekly Sabbath pattern expands to make a larger concentric circle around the years, promising release and rest, “mercifully reordering creation’s dislocating forces.”²⁰ Just as the tabernacle makes Sinai permanently available, so the jubilee makes the Exodus permanently available. The return of family property at the end of forty-nine years prevents any long-term destitution and in equal measure any long-term astronomical wealth. A built-in reset guarantees social and economic equality, or at least drastically narrows the gap between the haves and have-nots. The

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by-now habitual revolutions and social unrest of human history caused by drastic wealth inequality would never come to pass if we lived by Levitical standards. Of course, there’s no evidence that the Israelites did, either—but then look how things turned out for them.

A recurring theme has been order out of chaos. “Ritual impurity imposes God’s order on his creation.”²¹ This is not so hard for us to imagine even in our own day and age. Things fall apart; rot is the rule of the day; maintaining ourselves in good health and our infrastructure in working order takes

daily effort. Scientifically speaking, everything is moving toward entropy. Levitical law wrests it back into order and meaning. It carves out a habitable space for ourselves in a very big and mostly empty universe, not exactly teeming with life. Impurity and sacrifice laws constantly draw human beings—knocked down by their sin, others’ sin, disease, and the ordinary degradations of bodily life—back into the orbit of God’s lifegiving order. Perhaps it is the oppressive burden of excessive order in our modern societies that obscures this from our sight (think of all the paperwork it takes to stay in good legal standing these days), but it is a mistake to regard Levitical law as inherently unbearable.

The distinction of order from chaos in Leviticus intersects with the distinctions that constitute creation itself (Genesis 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). Distinction makes space for an abundance of life and enables the possibility of love, as Christians have long confessed in the doctrine of the Trinity.²² Distinction is not exclusion. We are profoundly programmed to think that it is, always—and with good reason, as most of our human-founded distinctions are indeed exclusionary in intention and effect. Race, for example, is an artificial distinction founded on political and economic exigency, of which Leviticus shows no knowledge or interest.

But the fact that distinction does not function this way within Leviticus can be seen again and again. Sojourners are subject to much of the same law as the Israelites, always to their benefit: “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (19:34). The same cleansing is commanded for male and female discharge (ch. 15) and the same atoning sacrifice for male and female babies (12:6).²³ Slaves of priests can eat the holy food right along with the priests. Laws about blemishes (whether of sacrificial animals or priests) are not

about the specimens’ own worthiness; instead they confront the human tendency to retain the best for ourselves and pawn off the imperfect on God. Blemished members of priestly families are still allowed to eat of the holy and most holy foodstuffs.

The point is this: the distinctions in Leviticus are not intended as social distinctions of stratification and privilege. They are analogical and aesthetic. “I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (20:24b–25a, 26). The ritual activity of Israel’s religion enacts the same distinctions on which creation itself is founded: separating light from darkness, water from earth, humans from other animals, female bodies from male bodies.²⁴

Can such distinctions be exploited? Of course. The prophets had a lot to say about that. But sin itself is the exploitation of God’s creation and does not invalidate creation as such. Milgrom points out that mixing is not utterly forbidden: rather, it is the domain of the holy. The priests’ clothing is made of mixed fibers, the cherubim on the ark are chimeras.²⁵ Israel’s task is to maintain the distinctions that are the fabric of creation and to reject the distinctions that are imposed by sin. God reserves to Himself the right to cross boundaries and authorize mixing. That right comes to powerful fruition in the incarnation of the Son and the ingrafting of the Gentiles by the Spirit.²⁶

Leviticus for the Church

The foregoing effort to make Leviticus intelligible to twenty-first-century Christians of the West by discerning the meaning behind the practice could very easily backfire. Given both our preference for the abstract and our cultural distance from ancient Israel, it

would be all too easy to extract the lessons from Leviticus and then discard the book altogether, an empty husk or old wineskin of no further use to us. That is still not receiving this book in its particularity as holy Scripture.²⁷

At this point it would not be inappropriate to feel a little sympathy for the Pharisees of the Gospels and Acts. Why were the stakes so high when Jesus plucked grain or healed on the Sabbath, or when the Jewish apostles decided to suspend circumcision and the other legal requirements of the Torah for Gentile Christians? It wasn't simply a matter of exclusionary cultural or ethnic protectiveness, as we so often read these stories. The issue was much more serious than that: how would the new Christians—the new Israel—even recognize the God of Israel as the source of this new gospel of Jesus Christ, when all the old ways of mapping His relationship to the earth, the body, and the worshipping space were vanishing fast? I wonder if the Pharisees already sniffed Marcionism on the wind.

Church history has given ample evidence of the validity of the Pharisees' fears. Once the tide had turned decisively in favor of a Gentile rather than Jewish church, Jewish practices were not only sidelined but actively denounced. The church's practices of all kinds, liturgical and structural and festival—which notably have almost no basis in the New Testament as religious law, unlike those of the Old Testament—came to be seen as superior, systematically displacing the “flawed”

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practices of Israel. Baptism replaced circumcision, communion replaced Passover, Christian priests replaced Jewish priests, our Pentecost replaced their Pentecost—and in each case the

replacement was better. The deadlock between the Pharisees' perspective and the Christians' is deadly: either the Old Testament law and ritual is to be kept in total, or it is to be rejected in total. Speaking of Leviticus as provisional pedagogy—that is, training a people in obedience by means of deliberately meaningless laws to be dropped once they've grown up enough—is not much better, and dispensationalist to boot. That Lutherans have participated all too willingly in this denigration of the “law” is too obvious to need further demonstration here.

The best guide I have found to a Christian reading of Leviticus for the church is Ephraim Radner's commentary. The hermeneutic he adopts is a “figural” one. The first assumption is that the holy Scripture we are given is in fact holy and is in fact the one we are intended to have; we are not free to shrug parts of it aside because they are opaque or awkward. Second, the figural reading takes seriously the notion that Scripture illuminates itself, each part shedding light on the other, none read in isolation from the other. This is of particular importance because it allows the details to be important, whereas the more typical hermeneutic aims for generalities, summaries, overarching themes and principles. Matters as specific as the rules about hair or the genealogy of the blasphemer become meaningful and relevant to the wider biblical story.²⁸ (And unlike an allegorical reading, the details retain their own concrete reality instead of being mere ciphers for the “real” meaning behind them.) Finally, the figural reading is a christological one, and one that flows in both directions. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are illuminated and interpreted by Leviticus, just as Leviticus's meaning is more fully grasped when read in the light of Christ. Radner concludes that Leviticus “is for the Christian a lens rather than the object of vision itself.”²⁹

Thus Jesus Christ is the center of Leviticus as much as he is of the Gos-

pels. It is not a matter of progressive displacement of the former by the latter but of both stories, both Testaments, being honed and concentrated in the one incarnate Son of God.

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Christ is both Israel and the church, and if that is the case, then the church cannot understand itself as apart from or superior to Israel. Israel for its part undergoes the ingrafting that allows for new ways of mapping the God of Mount Sinai and Mount Calvary onto the earth and its creatures, onto human bodies and religious practices.

Leviticus then stands as a permanent witness to what might be forgotten in the translation process through the nations. Its stubborn placement as part of the canon of holy Scripture means that even we who have long since left ritual sacrifice behind are forced to come to terms with this truth: sacrifice is the way to ethics, because life is costly. Life costs life. God gives blood to be the very life within us, but He also gives it to be the means of atonement when life has cost too much. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Leviticus 17:11). Blood is shed when we eat meat, blood is shed when we give birth, and blood is shed when our sins are forgiven on the cross. Hebrews represents a Christianity that still remembers this: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (9:22). Even if we are no longer commanded to shed new blood for the sake of forgiveness, that is only because divine blood was once truly, physically shed.

Perhaps above all what Leviticus has to teach us today is that the body is the real thing. Even when we preach the resurrection of the body over the immortality of the soul (as so many in our culture still imagine eternal life), we usually forget that it really means these very bodies we have here: bodies that sweat and ooze and produce other fluids, that eat and bleed and reproduce, that sprout hair and contract diseases and can commit acts of terrible violence, that are profoundly affected by the amount of money we do or do not have. For all the indiscretions of our public and entertainment culture, we are oddly delicate when it comes to discussing such realities of creaturely life. But Leviticus would have us know that the very task of life is coming to terms with being a creature, with all the attendant limitations and vulnerabilities.

The non-perspicacity of Leviticus reveals to us the non-perspicacity of our own lives. The fact that part of the canon of holy Scripture can be so alien to us says much about the way we live, about the shelters we build—not to create life but to hide its realities from us—and about our ongoing disdain for the body as the real site of God’s dwelling place. We will never truly believe in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ until Leviticus once again becomes holy for us.

sage intelligible to peoples that observe purity laws and practice animal sacrifice. See, for example, Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 131, citing the recommendation of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first mother-tongue translator of the Scriptures into an African language, to translate Leviticus into African languages next after the Gospels and Psalms.

3. Douglas observes: “[H]omosexual acts are set at the same level of gravity as adultery. A community which is determined to live by the law would take them equally seriously, and no one who would tolerate an adulterer in the community would be able consistently to persecute a homosexual.” Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239. This is a fair rebuke to those who would see homosexuality as categorically worse than (heterosexual) adultery; on the other hand, the point seems to be more often made to justify homosexual relations on the part of those who have no real objection to non-marital sex.

4. Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brazos: Grand Rapids, 2008), 18.

5. On this topic Radner remarks, “The question of binding/no longer binding is perhaps, then, not resolved consistently or definitively for Christians, the ultimacy of whose following of Christ is rarely achieved and is, in any case, constantly waxing and waning in its proximity to the Lord,” 218. He also suggests that the church is free to decide—collectively, not individually or congregationally—how it might observe the Levitical festivals in a christocentric fashion, in part as an act of penitence to relearn the Jewish meanings of Jesus after two millennia of slander and maltreatment.

6. Douglas, 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 14. She remarks elsewhere: “...Leviticus is ritualist, sacrificial, formal; Deuteronomy is rationalist, humanist, anti-ritualist... Deuteronomy distances God, he does not abide in the tabernacle, only his Name and the glory of it are present, whereas Leviticus and Numbers believe God to be present, close to his people at all times, and meeting them in the tent of meeting,” 89. She tips her hand here: “Leviticus is analogical thinking, highly classified, intellectually subtle, theologically all-encompassing. Deuteronomy is rational thinking, emotional, politically sophisticated, theologically superficial,” 174.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.

9. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. *Ibid.*, 241.

12. *Ibid.*, 37.

13. *Ibid.*, 88.

14. *Ibid.*, 137, 166.

15. *Ibid.*, 149.

16. Radner, 110.

17. *Ibid.*, 108.

18. “So the unwitting sin is a description of the world’s sin—invasive, infecting, growing with almost organic inevitability... [T]houghtlessness has raised itself into the towering form of horror...” Cf. Luke 23:34, Acts 3:15. *Ibid.*, 63.

19. Milgrom notes that this is without parallel in ancient or modern jurisprudence. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2004), 217.

20. Radner, 268.

21. Douglas, 151.

22. Radner discusses this extensively throughout his commentary; for example 72, 108ff.

23. Douglas suggests that the double period of cleansing after childbirth for a girl was due to a belief that the girl herself was bleeding like her mother, so the forty days for each were stacked up on each other for a total of eighty, 180–1.

24. It is worth noting that Leviticus, like the canon of Scripture at large, is not at all interested in gender, that is, particular constructions within a culture of what men and women are respectively good at and good for. It is only interested in their bodies insofar as those bodies are capable of creating new life. See also Radner, 131.

25. Milgrom, 237.

26. “The laws of mixing are Pentecostal in their gathering of tongues; they are also Gogathic in their cost.” Radner, 215.

27. This is the curious outcome of Milgrom’s otherwise devoted effort to render Leviticus meaningful for his fellow contemporary Jews. “[P]roperly unpacked, Leviticus reveals a series of values that can help us resolve the vexing moral and social issues confronting humanity in our time,” 4. “[B]ehind the seemingly arcane rituals lies a system of meaning that we can draw into our own modern lives,” 18. “[W]e can take instruction even as we question their ultimate decisions,” 193. Leviticus as such and its details cease to matter; it’s the principles hidden within the book that are of use.

28. See Radner’s powerful reflections on the blasphemer as *mamzer* (“mixed-race bastard”) and its christological import, 260–2.

29. *Ibid.*, 298.

Notes

1. For which reason there are only two opportunities to hear Leviticus in the Revised Common Lectionary: Epiphany 7 and Proper 25, both in Year A. Both readings come from ch. 19, vv. 1–2, 9–18 or vv. 1–2, 15–18 respectively, giving us the famous “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” and some moral teaching while entirely evading any of the ritual or legal aspects of the book.

2. Unfortunately I can’t remember anymore who told me this, or where it was, but subsequent inquiry reveals that Leviticus has been very useful in making the Christian mes-