3

Leviticus

EMBODYING HOLINESS—*LEVITICUS 1–15*

LEVITICUS MIGHT BE the one book of the Bible that most non-Jewish readers ignore unapologetically, and even on principle. I recall one of my professors at a Protestant divinity school commenting on why he did not treat it in an introductory Old Testament course: "There's nothing in there but laws." Yet there is a profound irony to the failure of Christians to take the book seriously, for it lies at the root of the most serious interpretive controversies and even permanent divides in the church. In the first century, Jewish Christians broke off from other Jews largely over the central question of dietary practice: Could Jews eat as Gentiles do without unacceptable religious compromise (Acts 11:1–18)? Even in our own century, many of the issues that divide Christians from one another—the role of women in worship, the religious legitimacy of same-sex (sexual) relations, the divorce and remarriage of clergy, wine or grape juice in the communion cup—stem at least indirectly from interpretations of the regulations in Leviticus. And a further irony—these issues, in contrast to dietary purity, receive little direct emphasis in the book. Although the two verses prohibiting male same-sex intercourse (Lev 18:22; 20:13) are frequently adduced in contemporary debates among Christians, this prohibition, taken in its context, is not stronger than the neighboring prohibition on male intercourse with menstruating women (18:19; 20:18).

Taking Leviticus Seriously

There are good reasons for Christians to take a different approach to Leviticus—not isolating and elevating a few verses but rather reckoning seriously with the thought of the book that stands literally at the center of Torah and thus at the heart of Jewish thought and religious practice. One reason is that the widespread Christian disregard for Leviticus bears at least an indirect relation to the long

history of Christian anti-Judaism. The dietary regulations in chapter 11 have been, through the centuries, among the most influential passages of Israel's Scriptures; to this day, they serve as a central marker of Jewish identity and have provided millions with a concrete means of "sanctifying" God (Lev 22:32) on a daily basis. In periods of persecution, Jews have accepted death at Gentile hands rather than violate dietary regulations such as the consumption of pork. To many or most Christians, the widespread Jewish commitment to kosher practice may seem irrational, unsophisticated, even primitive. Yet like all the instructions in the book, the dietary regulations are part of a complex symbol system, a kind of embodied language that expresses a highly developed understanding of how humans, and Israel in particular, are embedded within the vast complexity of God's creation.

Leviticus articulates an embodied and enacted spirituality, one that touches potentially on every aspect of human life, including our most common social behaviors, public or intimate, and our bodily functions, voluntary or involuntary. This, then, is a second reason to take Leviticus seriously: it stands at the heart of Torah as a hedge against a faith abstracted from physical, material, social, and economic practices. One prominent area of practice addressed is interpersonal relations. "You shall be-loving *to* your neighbor, as [one] like yourself" (19:18b), reads the most famous instruction of the book. The unusual inclusion of the preposition *to* in the verbal phrase (overlooked in the conventional translation, "Love your neighbor as yourself") suggests that love for the neighbor is a matter of action and attitude. Enacting love *to* the neighbor is the opposite of the kind of action and attitude we find prohibited in the first part of the verse—taking vengeance and harboring a grudge against "your kin" (19:18a). Another area of concrete practice treated in Leviticus concerns the proper use of arable land; the book might well be considered one of the greenest in the Bible.

From these few examples, we can see that what Leviticus sets forth is not a bare set of prescriptions and prohibitions to be followed by rote but rather a kind of enacted language about holiness—a program of symbolically laden actions developed over time by at least one tradition or religious group within Israel to express their understanding of what it is to embody holiness.[1] Languages and symbols are by nature flexible and mutable; they must be so, if they are to remain meaningful. The goal of taking Leviticus seriously is to become more fluent in the thought and language of holiness, so that we might be better equipped to practice it in our own time and communities.

Christians often draw a distinction between the "moral" and the "ceremonial" laws of Leviticus, treating only the former as binding. Yet this is a distinction that the book itself does not make, one that can be made only with a high degree of subjectivity. Rather than reading Leviticus as a book of laws, moral or ceremonial, it is better to read it poetically, with close attention to the carefully crafted

language in which the teachings are set forth, and with an eye to the core mystery to which they point. The religious life necessarily relies on symbolic language and gestures, because the central phenomena with which it reckons often defy purely rational exposition. Christians taking bread or wine as the body and blood of Christ, Jews cutting a foreskin in order to enact the covenant between God and Israel—such actions may not be irrational, but neither can they be explained through discursive logic. Leviticus is dealing with divine mystery of that magnitude. Specifically, it focuses on the mystery of how ordinary Israel (or humanity), being prone to inadvertent error and deliberate sin, might nonetheless host the radical holiness of God. Holiness is, at its fullest intensity, almost too much for ordinary human beings to bear. Reciprocally, ordinary human sinfulness is, over time, almost too much for God to bear. So how do we live in such a way as to overcome that basic incompatibility between God and ourselves? That is the problematic of holiness, as Leviticus presents it.

The problem here is especially acute because Leviticus, more than any other book of the Hebrew Scriptures, understands that YHWH is immediately present to Israel. YHWH declares the intention to "set my dwelling in the midst of you . . . and walk about in your midst" (26:11–12). This almost physical sense of divine presence stands in some contrast to Deuteronomy's more cautious representation of the central sanctuary as the place where YHWH "might choose to have *his name dwell*" (Deut 16:11; cf. 12:5, 11, etc.). The bolder language of Leviticus opens up the difficulty posed by the basic incompatibility between human and divine existence—and with that, the inescapable element of divine dangerousness. All the teachings and rituals in Leviticus are directed toward mitigating the potential for danger while at the same time honoring the radical holiness of God.

These teachings may be broadly treated as belonging to three sets of practices: offering sacrifices (Lev 1–7; 16–17), observing bodily purity (Lev 11–15; 18), and living on covenantal terms in and with the land (Lev 19–27). In all of these, the central concern is maintaining the life-giving relationship between YHWH and Israel, and repairing it when that relationship inevitably falters and threatens to collapse. This essay treats the main subjects with which the book begins, the interrelated activities of sacrifice and eating, both of which are linked inextricably with practices of purity. Covenant living with the land is the subject of the following essay.

Giving and Eating

The enactment of holiness, as Leviticus tells it, begins at the sacrificial altar. The first seven chapters outline the various sacrifices one might offer, for different occasions and according to different economic circumstances. Not everyone can

afford a cow (Lev 1:2–9), but a sheep or a goat is acceptable (1:10–13), and a pigeon or two will suffice (1:14–17). If expiation from some kind of sin is required and the person cannot afford even a pair of pigeons, then a portion of choice flour may be offered (5:11–13). Virtually all of Leviticus seems to be the work of the **Priestly** tradition, and scholars sometimes refer to this detailed section as a "priests' manual"; most readers are likely to regard it simply as a nonstarter. However, the best approach for interpreting any biblical book may well be to pause at the beginning and note the details of how it opens. It is significant that these chapters are explicitly addressed, not to the small order of priests descended from the tribe of Levi, but rather to all Israelites (1:2). Leviticus treats sacrifice as liturgy in the literal sense of that word; it is "the work of the people" in partnership with the priests, thus fulfilling the divine designation of Israel as "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6).

Sacrifice is a practice born of the need to eat, and further, of the awareness that the availability of food can never be taken for granted. Sacrifice represents the understanding that we live and eat by the grace of God—and if most of us find the notion of sacrifice puzzling and the practice repugnant, that is in large part because we take eating for granted. Food comes to most of us as a commodity, a product of the industrial food system; we do not recognize it as a gift from God. Underlying sacrifice is the notion that mutual giving is the privileged condition of Israel's life with God. The remarkable power of being able to make a gift to God is reflected in the prayer of David offered over the building materials that the people have contributed for construction of the Jerusalem temple:

> Who am I, and who is my people, that it should be in our power to offer a free-will offering like this? For everything comes from you, and from your hand have we given to you. (1 Chr 29:14)

Why Leviticus opens its exposition of embodied holiness with sacrifice became clearer to me through studying these chapters with colleagues and students at a Christian theological seminary in South Sudan. Some of them had been Christians all their lives and had never experienced animal and cereal sacrifice. Nonetheless, all of them knew in detail what had been the distinctive practices of their various tribes over the generations and centuries before Christianity succeeded African traditional religions. That knowledge was part of their oral tradition, part of their formation as members of their communities—battered and fragmented though those had been by decades of genocidal war. They understood that sacrifice functions metaphorically within Christian theology, yet they were fascinated and encouraged to discover in the Bible an appreciation for sacrifice as a way that people have traditionally drawn near to the Holy, to play upon

a biblical metaphor. (*Qorban*, a common term for sacrifice, is literally "something brought-near"; see Lev 1:2, 3; 2:1; etc.) So we spent two days on the sacrificial regulations in Leviticus, lingering over details that they recognized as important: the offering of healthy animals, the best one has; the allowance for different economic circumstances. They recognized that as Christians, they offered prayers on the various occasions when their ancestors would have offered sacrifice—in thanksgiving for the first fruits of harvest time, in atonement for the sin of an ordinary person or a priest, or the inadvertent error of the people as a whole or a ruler. In short, the Sudanese recognized the language of sacrifice and were able to make sense of it, even if they were not familiar with ancient Israel's particular "dialect." I was the only one in the room who lacked the cultural sophistication to interpret these texts.

My experience points to a principle essential for twenty-first-century biblical interpretation: North Americans and Europeans especially must learn and practice humility in the context of a church whose majority population dwells in the global south. Those of us in the minority world and the minority church are often not the best interpreters of texts that originated in a society vastly different from our modern industrialized one. An in-depth theological commentary on Leviticus has not yet emerged from the global south.[2] Yet we can learn something valuable from non-Christian voices such as that of Vandana Shiva, an ecologist, philosopher, and educator working on global practices of agriculture and food production. Writing about traditional Hindu practices of offering food as "everyday sacrifice that we have to perform," she comments:

> Giving is the condition of our very being. We do not give as an extra, we give because of our interdependence with all life. . . .
>
> We are born and live in debt to all Creation, and it becomes our duty to recognise this. The gift of food is merely a recognition of the need for constantly paying back that obligation, that responsibility. . . . Once I ensure that everyone in my sphere of influence is fed, someone in that sphere is also ensuring that I am fed.[3]

In ancient Israel, sacrifice and eating were intimately connected, because people sacrificed what they ate, and ate what they sacrificed: cattle, sheep, goats—those land animals that have cloven hoofs and chew their cud (Lev 11:1–8). Animals that are *tamei*—"ritually-unclean" or "ritually-impure"—can be neither eaten nor sacrificed. The insistence of the Priestly tradition that all slaughtered animals be brought "before YHWH" (17:3–5) underscores the connection between sacrifice and human eating. Repugnant though the notion of animal sacrifice may be to many of us, we can be certain that our meat counters would be

puzzling and even outrageous to the biblical writers, who understood that anyone who takes animal life needs to acknowledge YHWH as the sole Source of that life. The requirement that an animal be brought for slaughter to YHWH's sanctuary must have set a practical limit on meat consumption. For the vast majority of Israelites, living in small villages some distance from such a shrine, this would likely have been a rare treat, an occasion for celebration and thanksgiving, for honoring YHWH alone.

Further, the following prescription sets a limit on slaughtering more meat than can be eaten by a person or a household:

> When you sacrifice a well-being offering to YHWH, sacrifice it so that it may be accepted on your behalf. On the day of your sacrifice it shall be eaten, and on the next, but whatever is left over to the third day shall be burned in the fire. But if indeed it is eaten on the third day, it is an offensive thing; it is not acceptable. And those who eat of it shall each bear their guilt, for he has profaned the holy thing of YHWH—and that person/consumer [literally, throat] shall be cut off from the people. (Lev 19:5–8)

This prohibition on overslaughtering reflects the same insight as the manna story (Exod 16), which also comes from the Priestly tradition: taking more than one can eat is deeply offensive to God.

To our modern mindset, overslaughtering may be offensive because it is wasteful, and meat left over for three days in a warm climate is probably dangerous to eat. But from a Priestly perspective, its unacceptability is understood in different terms, not moral or hygienic but ritual: it is "a profanation of the holy thing of YHWH" (Lev 19:8). The whole notion of ritual impurity is opaque to modern consciousness. In this case, the nature of the impropriety may be illumined by Jacob Milgrom's understanding that the great antithesis in Leviticus is between life and death.[4] On the side of life are practices that in some way enable Israel to live in imitation of God—practices that, imaginatively construed, enable Israel to embody God's own holiness. Thus, Moses is instructed to proclaim to the Israelites: "Holy you shall be, for holy am I—YHWH your God" (Lev 19:2). Practices deemed ritually pure are those associated with life. On the other side, practices deemed ritually impure are those that in some way profane God's holiness or work against its embodiment—those associated with death. In the set of practices whereby this tradition seeks to embody holiness, three-day-old meat falls on the wrong side of the life-death polarity. It can no longer be considered a holy thing, a reciprocal gift of life that links Israel to the God of life; that is why it must be burned, utterly repudiated, eliminated from the ritual site.

What Is Food About?

"Food is always about something else," observes Susan Handelman,[5] with only slight exaggeration. In most traditional societies, food is widely recognized as an essential component of our relationship with God. Ancient Israel was no exception, and Leviticus is the single most valuable biblical resource for viewing eating as an essential component of holy living. This ancient and traditional insight may possibly be more accessible to us, as we increasingly recognize that "bad food," the kind produced by the industrial practices of society, is damaging not only to the health of individuals but also to the whole ecosphere. That recognition may open the way for deeper consideration of the elaborate system of dietary regulations that is prominent in Leviticus (Lev 11:1–47), by far the most detailed explication of what it means for Israel to "enact holiness" (11:44), as YHWH is holy.

It is helpful to Western readers (at least) to realize that with the various purity regulations in Leviticus (Lev 11–18), we are outsiders reading an insider's book. Leviticus assumes a certain way of life, and it gives fairly detailed information about how to practice it. Yet this is explication without explanation; the explanation for why a particular practice is necessary is rarely more informative than "I am YHWH your God" (e.g., 11:44, 45). Nowhere is the absence of a clearly delineated rationale—despite the multiplicity of particular examples—more glaring than with the dietary regulations. We know what Israel can eat: among land animals, only those that have cloven hoofs and "bring-up" their cud (11:1–8); among sea creatures, only those that have both fins and scales (11:9–12); probably also doves and pigeons, since they were acceptable for sacrifice (1:14–17). What we are not told is why or why not.

Cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, through her examination of ritual purity in traditional societies, has greatly enhanced our understanding of the kind of thinking that underlies the biblical purity regulations. In her seminal study, *Purity and Danger*, she shows that the distinction between purity and impurity is, again, not in the first instance a matter of moral judgment; rather, it has to do with the "material circumstances of an act."[6] Douglas posits that Israel's dietary regulations reflect an attempt to observe distinctions among the different categories of creation, as Israel conceived those categories. Animals that can be eaten and sacrificed are those that can be clearly classified: "Holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform [completely] to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused."[7] In this system, if the "complete fish" has fins and scales, then catfish, with fins but no scales, are not to be eaten.

Douglas's view is more suggestive than conclusive; nonetheless, her approach has been helpful in moving the interpretive discussion away from common-sense explanations—for example, that pigs were avoided because they carried

trichinosis. In fact, there is no consistent evidence for a hygienic rationale; archaeological and even biblical evidence shows that Israel's Canaanite neighbors raised and ate swine (see Mark 5:11–13), apparently without deleterious effect.

Likely, more than one principle underlies the dietary regulations, including the felt need to distinguish Israel from some of the practices of their neighbors (see Lev 20:25–26). Whatever the origin may be, the dietary system is set forth in terms that show a considerable measure of theological reflection and imagination. An outstanding example is the following passage, which concludes the book's most extended treatment of the edible:

> For I am YHWH your God, and you shall enact holiness, and be holy, for I am holy, and you shall not make your selves [literally, your throats] ritually-impure with any swarming thing that crawls on the earth. For I am YHWH who brings you up from the land of Egypt to be God to you, and you shall be holy, for I am holy. This is the instruction concerning the animals and the birds and every living being that crawls in the waters and for every being swarming upon the earth, to separate the ritually-impure from the pure, and the living thing that may be eaten from the one that may not be eaten. (Lev 11:44–47)

While it is hardly an explanation, this passage—and the chapter as a whole—offers important clues to the meaning of the embodied language of the dietary regulations. Three points in particular are salient.

First, the distinctive vocabulary of the Priestly creation account is echoed throughout the passage: creatures *crawl* (cf. Gen 1:21, 26, 28, 30) and *swarm* (1:20–21) on earth and in the waters; Israel is to *separate* or *distinguish* among the creatures, as God did at creation (cf. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). Earlier in the chapter, various creatures that are not to be eaten are distinguished "according to its kind" (Lev 11:14, 15, 16, 19, 22, 29; cf. Gen 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25). A further echo of the first chapter of the Bible is the emphasis on "seed" and "sowing" (Lev 11:37–38; cf. Gen 1:11–12, 29). The proliferation of echoes suggests that Israelites' eating and also their restraint in eating should entail observing the divine order of the world, however imaginatively construed, and honoring that order by disciplining the appetites of their "throats." (The centrality of eating to human personhood may be suggested by the fact that *nefesh*, the ordinary Hebrew word for the "self," literally denotes the throat.)

Second, the fact that humans may not take their meat from every species accords with the limits set upon human consumption from the beginning of the world, starting in the garden of Eden (see Gen 2:16–17). Further, the "food chains" that God established for both humans and animals on the sixth day of creation were vegan (Gen 1:29–30); meat eating was introduced only after the flood (9:2–3), perhaps as a concession to human violence. Leviticus also echoes

Genesis in its prohibition on consuming blood (Lev 17:11–12; Gen 9:4). The several restrictions in these two books of Torah suggest that eating within limits is a fundamental way that the people Israel, and humans altogether, are to honor God.

Finally, YHWH's self-identification here draws a further connection with Israel's particular history: "I am YHWH who *brings you up* [*ʿ-l-h*] from the land of Egypt" (Lev 11:45). The phrase stands out to the Hebrew reader, because it departs from standard biblical terminology for the exodus account, which speaks of YHWH "taking Israel out [*y-ts-ʾ*]" of Egypt. The different verb used here creates a subtle echo with one of the prominent terms of the dietary regulations themselves. The only land animals Israelites may eat are those that "bring-up [*ʿ-l-h*]" cud (11:3, 4 [2x], 5, 6, 26). YHWH's unique self-description as the One who "brings-up" is the seventh and final occurrence of the verb in the chapter. The number seven is frequently a mark of wholeness or completion in biblical traditions, and so the sevenfold repetition of this key verb within the chapter suggests that the animal that "brings-up" symbolizes or embodies Israel's distinctive history with YHWH. In focusing their meat consumption solely on those animals, Israelites literally incorporate that history. In short, Leviticus understands and embodies the reality that eating is an act that is both creational and covenantal.

Among Christian biblical interpreters of Leviticus, one in particular stands out for his imaginative exploration of what food might mean in this book. Origen (c. 184–253 CE) understood that Leviticus speaks in symbolic language that must be probed with the spiritually alert imagination. One of the most prolific and insightful biblical theologians of any period, Origen produced a body of exegetical and theological work that was instrumental in teaching the church how to read Israel's Scriptures in its own distinctive ways. Although he criticized Jews for not accepting Jesus as Messiah, he was learned in rabbinic thought of his own time; he viewed Jews and Christians less as enemies than as partners of a sort, "standing against a common foe, paganism."[8] Moreover, the seriousness with which he took the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures (read in the original Hebrew) compares favorably with modern Christian neglect of or contempt for large portions of the Bible, including Leviticus.

Origen preached an extended series of homilies on Leviticus, delivered in Alexandria between 238 and 244. In these he explored the regulations on sacrifice and purity with a view to offering moral and spiritual instruction for the church. In his comments on the regulations about clean and unclean animals, he observed:

> Let us see how every person can be shown to be either clean or unclean. Every person has in himself some food which he gives to his neighbor when that person arrives. For it cannot happen that, when we approach

> each other as human beings and join in conversation, we do not either take or give some food between us. . . .
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> . . . If indeed it is good and "from the good treasure of his heart he brings forth good," he may supply pure food to his neighbor. But if he is evil and "brings forth evil" (cf. Luke 6.45), he supplies unclean food to his neighbor. For anyone who is innocent and led by the heart can be seen as a sheep, a clean animal.[9]

The details of Origen's reading are unlikely to be persuasive to us. But even if we believe that when Leviticus speaks of sheep it really does mean sheep, we might nonetheless appreciate Origen's core understanding that Leviticus is challenging us to develop our religious imaginations. Origen's allegorical reading is based on the accurate perception that Leviticus uses the ordinary and seemingly simple practice of eating as a point of entry for thinking about the complexity of human existence, within the created order and in relation to God. What we might well learn from him is to ask how the highly concrete terms in which this book speaks of embodying holiness may stimulate other religious communities in other times—our own—to do the kind of serious theological work that brings daily, embodied realities in a rigorous way into our life with God.

Notes

1. It is unlikely that the traditions of Leviticus ever represented "popular religion" in Israel, as they depart at points from what seems to have been common practice. For example, the proscription on mating animals "in two kinds" (Lev 19:19) would preclude the breeding of mules.
2. A first step in this direction is the useful one-volume *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).
3. Vandana Shiva, "Gift of Food," *Resurgence Magazine*, January 11, 2004, http://www.countercurrents.org/en-shiva110105.htm.
4. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 12–13 et passim.
5. Susan Handelman, "Leket Israel and Parashat Pinhas: Hungry for Love?" *The Leket Israel Parashat HaShavua Project*, July 12, 2014, http://www.susanhandelman.com/uploads/2/4/8/0/24803043/parashat_pinhas___leket_israel.pdf.
6. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 11.
7. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 53.
8. Gary Wayne Barkley, introduction to *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 12.
9. Origen, Homily 7, in *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, 145, 147.

AT-ONEMENT WITH YHWH AND WITH LAND—*LEVITICUS 16–27*

THE GOAL OF Leviticus is that Israel should live out its Sinai-based vocation to be a "holy people" (Exod 19:6). Its many ritual prescriptions and regulations for ordering daily living, punctuated with just one narrative (Lev 8–10), are a social imaginary, a highly concrete way of conceiving how Israel might organize itself as a community capable of hosting in its midst the radical holiness of God. From the perspective of this book, God's immediate presence to Israel is a daily reality, not just in the wilderness but for all time: "I will go about in the midst of you . . ." (26:12). Living with YHWH in its midst is both opportunity and threat. This is the condition of Israel's own holiness, yet it is a highly volatile condition that can turn, suddenly or gradually, in the direction of disaster. The core problem with which this book contends is the potential incompatibility between God and Israel, the incommensurability between divine holiness and Israel's own capacity to overcome human frailty—be it unwitting error, deliberate sin, or the tendency toward death that is ever-present in our bodies—and enter fully into the holy life of God.

The early chapters of the book focus on approaching or imitating YHWH through giving and eating: ritual sacrifice and observance of dietary regulations that are conceived as divinely mandated yet voluntarily practiced. In the second part of the book, the focus is on two other (and related) aspects of how Israel reckons with the immediacy of divine presence: first, through the ritual of atonement performed annually by the high priest at the sanctuary, and second, through the daily practice of living on and with arable land in ways that are respectful of YHWH, human community, and the land itself. From the "deep green" perspective of Leviticus, land is an active participant in covenantal living.

Blood and Covenant

The inescapable volatility of the relationship between YHWH and Israel is the reason for the atonement ritual that Aaron first performs on the tenth day of the seventh month. It is established as an "eternal law" (Lev 16:29, 31) that each year on that date, the high priest shall perform a rite of purgation at the sanctuary, to make Israel "ritually-pure from all [their] sins, before YHWH" (16:30). Jacob Milgrom offers a graphic analogy for how Leviticus conceives of human sin and its effect on the sanctuary, as something like a physical substance, an invisible airborne miasma that gravitates toward the sanctuary and pollutes it. Although sinners themselves may escape detection and punishment, the sanctuary, which "abides with them in the midst of their impurities" (16:16), inevitably registers the effects—potentially, until a point of no return: "If the pollution levels continue to rise, the end is inexorable. God abandons the sanctuary and leaves the people to their doom."[1] Our contemporary understanding of pollution as presenting mortal danger is helpful here. Ritual (im)purity is not simply a form of metaphysical fastidiousness, and the annual symbolic cleansing of the sanctuary is not a matter of substituting symbolic cleanliness for genuine godliness. Rather, impurity both moral and ritual represents heedlessness about what the near presence of God requires of human beings. The tabernacle (*mishkan*) is the place where God chooses to move into the "neighborhood" (the root meaning of *sh-k-n*), so to speak, and even perhaps "be seen in the cloud over the ark-cover" (16:2). Just as a vital river may become a repository for pollutants from "impure" industrial neighbors, thus endangering everyone in the neighborhood, so the sin-ridden tabernacle or temple may become unsound, unhealthful for humans and inhospitable to divine presence. Hence the need for "atonement" (the word literally means being "at-one" with God), thorough annual purgation "for the sanctuary of the Holy and for the tent of meeting and for the altar" (16:33), the ritual that enables Israel's life-giving (18:5) relationship with YHWH to endure.

The line between life and death is bright but fine, and the elaborate account of the ritual has a tone of extreme wariness, beginning with the ominous note that YHWH's instructions for the cleansing are given "after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had come close before YHWH" (16:1). The newly ordained priests Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire "that went forth from before YHWH" after they had approached with "alien fire, which he had not commanded them [to do]" (10:1–2). No one is immune from danger in the high-voltage zone of the sanctuary; even the high priest, whose sole function is to mediate the incompatibility between YHWH and humanity, takes no chances. Aaron is to enter the inner sanctum alone, bathed and clothed in "holy garments" (16:4) of a very particular kind. He enters, equipped with a smoke machine, a metal pan filled with coals and incense, "and the cloud of incense shall cover the

slab that is over the [ark of the] pact, so he will not die" (16:13). YHWH's presence in the holy of holies is real, albeit metaphysical; it rests between the two cherubim, upon the gold slab that covers the ark.[2] The prophet Isaiah envisions the seraphim in the heavenly throne room covering their faces in YHWH's presence (Isa 6:2); similarly, the last thing the high priest should do is *see* the One before whom he stands when he enters to sprinkle the sanctum—the covering of the ark, the tent of meeting, and the altar—with "ritual cleanser," animal blood.[3] The cleansing property of blood is not self-evident, especially in a book that considers menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth (along with other bloody emissions) unclean and in need of ritual purification (Lev 12:1–8; 15:19–30). In the social and ritual imagination represented in Leviticus, blood seems to function as an especially bright component of the fine line between life and death.

The fact that the biblical rite of atonement is a blood ritual marks the absolute distinction between what Leviticus describes and the Day of Atonement in postbiblical Judaism, Yom Kippur. Although it is observed on the tenth day of the seventh month, Yom Kippur is a day of fasting, confession of sin, and prayer *only*; blood sacrifice is completely foreign to the theology and practice of rabbinic Judaism. By contrast, Christians affirm the reality and central importance of blood atonement—however mystifying that concept may be to most—through the lens of the Letter to the Hebrews, in which the crucified and risen Jesus assumes the role once performed by the high priest at the sanctuary and performs it to perfection. In short, both Jews and Christians have worked deep changes on the notion of atonement for sin as conceived in Leviticus; there are no living practitioners of the ritual represented here. Nonetheless, Leviticus's understanding of blood atonement is part of a long trajectory of reflection on covenant that starts in Genesis and runs through both Testaments, with ongoing importance for Christian theology.

Before we even get to Leviticus, the history of covenant has been told with frequent reference to blood, starting with the "eternal covenant" with Noah (Gen 9:16), which includes a prohibition on eating animal blood (9:4). Shortly thereafter, God cuts another "eternal covenant" in the circumcised flesh of Abraham and his household (17:13); blood is implied, though not specifically mentioned. Sheep's blood marks the lintels of Israelite homes on the night of the Passover (Exod 12:21–27), when Israel is taken out of Egypt. The most direct connection between covenant and blood is made at Sinai, just after Moses has read to the people "the scroll of the covenant" and they have answered, "All that YHWH has spoken we will do." Moses then seals the bond with "*the blood of the covenant*," sacrificial blood thrown on the altar and the people (Exod 24:7–8). It seems likely that that memorable phrase, echoed later by Zechariah (Zech 9:11), stands behind the evangelist Matthew's account of Jesus's words at the Last Supper: "This

is *my blood of the covenant*, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). The connection between Jesus's blood and the forgiveness of sins in this Gospel should unsettle the common understanding of the cry from the Jerusalem crowd: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). Christian readers have far too often taken that as an assumption of guilt by the Jews, but Matthew, whose own imagination was deeply shaped by Israel's Scriptures, probably intended something else altogether: a call for the renewal of God's covenant with Israel.[4]

Within Leviticus, we gain more insight into the way in which blood marks the line between life and death from the regulations on animal slaughter, which follow immediately upon the description of the purging of the sanctuary. All animals must be brought to the entrance of the sanctuary as an offering; anyone who slaughters an ox or sheep or goat elsewhere is treated as a criminal:

> Blood-guilt shall be reckoned to that man; blood he has shed, and that man shall be cut off from the body of his people. (Lev 17:4)

The prohibition on secular slaughtering points to the impossibility of drawing a clear line of separation between ritual and moral prescriptions in Leviticus. It places a firm restriction on meat consumption and affirms the inestimable value of animal life. This prohibition is followed by another, on eating blood (cf. Gen 9:4). Leviticus rarely explains the theological thinking underlying its prescriptions, but here the rationale is stated in the strongest possible terms:

> If there is anyone at all from the house of Israel or one of the aliens residing in their midst who eats any blood, then I shall set my face against that person/throat/life [*nefesh*] and cut "him" off from among his people. For the life [*nefesh*] of the flesh is in the blood. And I myself have given it to you on the altar, to effect purgation [or: atone] for your lives. For the blood, as life, effects purgation! (Lev 17:10–11)

The blood of ritual slaughter requires any and every Israelite to acknowledge YHWH as the Source of all life, animal and human. Thus, the handling of animal blood by the high priest once a year, or by any priest presiding at a "routine" slaughter and sacrifice, serves as another link in the chain connecting blood and covenant, which stretches from Noah to Abraham to Moses and the people on Sinai. That chain has been extended down the centuries, by Zechariah, Matthew, and especially by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who, like them, explicitly quotes Moses's words at Sinai—"This is *the blood of the covenant* that God commanded for you" (Heb 9:20; cf. 10:29)—and then develops that concept in light of the detailed blood ritual in Leviticus. Jesus is

at once a high priest serving in "the real tabernacle" erected by God in heaven (8:2), the arbitrator of a "new" and "better covenant" (8:6; 9:15; 12:24), and the sacrificial body (see 13:11–13) whose "sprinkled blood" is more eloquent even than the blood of Abel (12:24). Therefore, it is through him that worshipers may offer continual sacrifices of praise, good works, and generosity (13:15–16). Hebrews sums up its unique statement of covenantal and sacrificial theology with this bloody benediction:

> May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of the eternal covenant—our Lord Jesus—make you complete [or: perfect you] in everything good in order to do his will. (Heb 13:20–21)

Among numerous New Testament references to the saving effects of Jesus's blood, there is one more that especially reflects the language and atonement theology of Leviticus: John's vision of the great multitude whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:9–14). The people have experienced the cleansing power of that ancient ritual detergent, which overcomes the fundamental incompatibility between divine presence and human fallibility. In the earthly sanctuary, error and sin accumulated to their highest degree of intensity, until purgation for Israel was effected by the annual blood rite. Going beyond that vision of Leviticus, John sees a crowd summoned out of all "tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9), now rendered fit to worship God "day and night in his temple" (7:15). The central problematic of Leviticus, the fundamental incompatibility between divine presence and human sin, is at last fully overcome. The people stand in the high-voltage zone "before the throne and before the Lamb" (7:9), and yet, as announced by "one of the elders" (7:13), God "will dwell with them"—literally, "tabernacle over them" (7:15). Thus, the author testifies that the purpose for which the wilderness tabernacle was constructed and the Jerusalem temple was maintained and regularly purged has been achieved.

It is the unified witness of both Testaments that the history of the covenant and God's saving works can be traced in blood—from Noah's ark resting on the mountaintops of Ararat, to Abraham's tent, to the foot of Mount Sinai, to the wilderness tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple, to the upper room and Golgotha, and finally to the heavenly throne room. In each of these places, blood stands not for death but for life, life with God. Sacrifice in every form is an attempt to offer to God a gift of perfect creaturely life, "unblemished" (Lev 1:3, 10). Therefore, blood may serve as an enduring symbol of the covenant that binds human life to God.

Living with the Land

Closely related to ritual sacrifice and eating is one more element of the theology of Leviticus: the profound connection between humans and land—specifically, arable land, the proximate source of all plant and animal life. Leviticus views land as a complex material reality fraught with religious and spiritual significance. Most obviously, land was the means of subsistence for nearly every Israelite and thus could also be seen, as it is here, as a mirror of human existence, an extended sanctuary, and a partner in covenant and agent of covenant justice.

The notion of land as a mirror of human existence is suggested especially by several verses in chapter 19. This whole chapter appears to have been crafted with particular care to highlight crucial ethical and ritual prescriptions that epitomize the holiness instruction of the book (see 19:1–2). At several points, the text draws surprising, even poetic analogies between human bodies, male and female, and the land. For instance:

> When you harvest the harvest of your land, do not completely harvest the *edge-growth* [*pe'ah*] of your field, and the gleaning of your harvest do not glean. . . . For the poor and the sojourner you shall leave them; I am YHWH your God. (Lev 19:9–10)
>
> You shall not round off the *edge-growth* [*pe'ah*][5] of your head, and do not spoil the *edge-growth* of your beard. (19:27)

Every time the farmer feels the rough edges of his face or views the part of the field he has intentionally not reaped, he may be reminded of the peculiar mystery of their shared existence, their interdependency and common dependence on the grace of God. The echo between the two verses points also to the inherent connection between ritualistic practices and those that are ethically motivated; the style of the farmer's hair and beard expresses a commitment to tending his field charitably, for the good of the most vulnerable within the community.

A second allusion to the resemblance between the farmer and the field is the prescription that newly planted trees are to be treated as "uncircumcised" for three years:

> When you come into the land and plant any kind of food-tree, you shall leave uncircumcised its "foreskin," its fruit. For three years it shall be to you uncircumcised; it is not to be eaten. (Lev 19:23)

Perhaps the odd (to us) image of an uncircumcised foreskin may be suggested by the closed bud.[6] However that may be, the ancient writer's sensibility is not far

removed from that of contemporary poet Wendell Berry, who expresses a similar kind of associative thinking:

Sowing the seed,
my hand is one with the earth.
Wanting the seed to grow,
my mind is one with the light.
Hoeing the crop,
my hands are one with the rain.
Having cared for the plants,
my mind is one with the air.
Hungry and trusting,
my mind is one with the earth.
Eating the fruit,
my body is one with the earth.[7]

The analogical imagination of Leviticus also touches on one of the most distressing social and economic concerns of virtually every society, from ancient times to our own: the prostitution of the young women in impoverished families. Here it is the farmer's daughter whose fate is paralleled by that of the land:

> Do not profane your daughter by putting her to prostitution, so the land may not go to prostitution, and the land be filled with evil-devices. (Lev 19:29)

The poverty generated by an exploitative economy often forces rural landowners to sell land to those who will use it for short-term gain, with no thought for long-term care. Likewise, and often in the same desperate families, young girls are sold into a sex trafficking industry located primarily in cities.[8] In both ways, "the land is filled with evil-devices."

More intensely and graphically than anywhere else in Torah, the jubilee ordinance in Leviticus 25 focuses attention on the struggle of farmers in an agrarian economy controlled by the crown, in which smallholders are marginalized and often pushed off their land and into debt slavery:

> You shall sanctify the fiftieth year, a [full] year, and proclaim a release in the land for all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, and you shall go back, each to his land-holding, and each one to his family, you shall go back. (Lev 25:10)

The problem of debt slavery was evidently widespread in ancient Israel, since all the legal codes in the Bible treat it (cf. Exod 21:1–11; Deut 15:1–18). Leviticus's solution to it is visionary but not utopian, remote from real economic possibilities. Although there is no firm evidence that the jubilee was practiced in Israel, the ideal of jubilee has persisted over centuries. In our own time, it challenges people of faith to repudiate and change exploitative social and economic structures in which we are complicit.

The text addresses its hearers first as the displaced: "You shall go back." It then shifts, addressing the relatively prosperous members of the community, who are called to exercise responsibility toward kinfolk sinking in a destructive economy:

> When your kinsman gets so low with you that he sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve a slave's service. Like a hired person, like a tenant he shall be with you; until the jubilee year he shall work with you. And [then] he shall go forth from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his family, and to his ancestral holding he shall go back. For they are my slaves [or: serfs], whom I brought out from the land of Egypt. They shall not be sold in a slave-sale. (Lev 25:39–42)

"My *slaves*"—the Hebrew term (*eved*) denotes a worker whose service is not voluntary, although not necessarily oppressive. The central idea that informs all of Leviticus is that the land Israel and its inhabitants are wholly at YHWH's disposal: "The land is mine; . . . you are alien residents with me," declares YHWH (25:23). Therefore, arable land cannot be sold off like a commodity; it can only be transferred via a long-term lease. The status of Israelites is not that of property owners but slaves that YHWH has bought off Pharaoh. Paradoxically, it is their "enslaved" status that makes it illegitimate for any Israelite to oppress another "with crushing-labor" (25:43, 46, 53). That rare word conveys the bitter memory of Egyptian servitude (Exod 1:13–14), which must not be reproduced. From a canonical perspective, this jubilee vision complements the (presumably earlier) slave law in Exodus, which limited enslavement of an individual to six years. Leviticus speaks to the need of an extended family with its mandate that within fifty years—no more than two generations—alienated farmland must be restored to the original holders; there is to be no permanent underclass of landless Israelites.

Yet this jubilee legislation also confronts us with the fact that even here, the Bible is not "perfect," for there is a glaring gap in its regard for the vulnerable. Non-Israelites can be bought as permanent chattel slaves:

> And you may make them a legacy to your children after you, to inherit as a possession; you may enslave them forever. But as for your kinfolk,

> the Israelites, each person with respect to their kin—you shall not impose upon him crushing labor! (Lev 25:46)

That part of our religious heritage was put to shameful use by American Christians of earlier centuries, who took it as a warrant—in some cases, a mandate—to be slaveholders.[9] It is a bitter and tragic irony that this verse should have been upheld as part of the so-called moral law of Leviticus (as distinct from its ceremonial prescriptions) that Christians chose to view themselves as obligated to obey. Too slowly and at great cost of human life, Christians and Jews over centuries have recognized the need to repudiate this particular prescription in the spirit of the larger vision of human value and dignity in which it is embedded. Leviticus itself expresses that larger vision with the charge that the non-Israelite sojourner should be "just like the native-born among you . . . and you shall enact-love toward him, as [one] like yourself, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (19:34). Again, the memory of Egypt clarifies what Israel must be: a community engaged in active love toward the Israelite neighbor (19:18) and likewise the alien, the one who at first might seem essentially different from ourselves.

The conviction expressed throughout, that YHWH really is present, "walking about" in Israel's midst (26:12), means that the land itself is an extended sanctuary.[10] It is sanctified space, where divine blessing is manifested as astonishing fruitfulness for soil and humans, provided that Israel lives by YHWH's precepts (26:3–12). Such obedience is the only means for overcoming the deep incompatibility between holy YHWH and humanity—"so my throat [or: being] does not expel you" (26:11), according to one vivid expression of meta-physical divine intolerance. But if, conversely, Israel should feel revulsion at God's precepts (26:15), then the land itself will vomit them out, as it once vomited out the Canaanites (18:28). In this book of embodied spirituality, even religious rejection—by the people, by YHWH, by the land—is experienced as a bodily act, however poetically conceived.

From the image of the land vomiting out those who reject YHWH's covenant, it is evident that Leviticus sees land not as a thing, pure and simple. Rather, land is a creature capable of response to YHWH, even a covenant partner, and in this it is more reliable than Israel. The land keeps Sabbath, the perpetual sign of covenant partnership between God and Israel (Exod 31:13–17)—and it is able to do so fully only when at last disobedient Israel goes into exile and no longer impedes proper observance (Lev 26:34). The rich religious imagination, even the mystical sensibility expressed here, suggests that covenant is more than a two-way relationship between God and one line of Abraham's descendants. A broader view of covenant comes to the fore especially in YHWH's promise looking to the far side of exile, to a time when a chastened Israel will at last take responsibility for its sins and be humbled (26:40–41). Then, YHWH declares:

> I shall remember my Jacob-covenant, and yes, my Isaac-covenant, and yes, my Abraham-covenant I shall remember—and the land I shall remember. (Lev 26:42)

In a unique formulation, YHWH remembers the ancestral line in reverse order, moving backward in time from Jacob to Isaac to Abraham . . . to the land. It is a revelatory promise, one that enables us to see the land as the original ancestor, the first covenant partner of God. Before Abraham was, the land is (cf. John 8:58).

Notes

1. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 32.
2. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1031.
3. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 31.
4. On Matthew's understanding of discipleship as reflecting his reading of Israel's Scriptures, see Ellen F. Davis, *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 207–40.
5. For the translation "edge-growth" in 19:27, see Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, vol. 1 of *The Schocken Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 605.
6. See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 629.
7. Wendell Berry, "Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer," in *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), 130. Copyright © 2013 by Wendell Berry, from *The Mad Farmer Poems*. Reprinted by permission of Counterpoint.
8. For a recent report on sex trafficking in the United States, including rural trafficking, see the extensive report of the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2013), 361–62.
9. See Shaindy Rudoff, *Scripturally Enslaved: Bible Politics, Slavery, and the American Renaissance* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 24–33.
10. On the land as an extended sanctuary, see Norman Habel, *The Land Is Mine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 100–101.