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“Leviticus 17-18”

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With

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Leviticus 17-18

These two chapters launch that portion of Leviticus (17-26) that scholars refer to as the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code is oriented by the idea that the people of Israel bear the responsibility for holiness, a concept expressed in Lev 19:2 (“You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy”). Though rare in Leviticus and the rest of the Torah, this statement is stated repeatedly in the holiness code (e.g., Lev 17:1; 18:1; 19:2; 20:2; 22:17). In terms of chapters 17 and 18, the episode focuses on the heinousness of personal worship violations against Yahweh (ch. 17), punishable by “cutting off” (Hebrew: *karat*), and the logic behind forbidden sexual unions (ch. 18).

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 79, Leviticus 17-18. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MSH: Very good, good to hear from you again, Trey. Alright, we're back here in Leviticus, so today, we're going to cover 17 and 18. And believe it or not, there's actually a pretty good amount to cover here. We're not going to go through everything as our format is typical. We'll float through the chapter and pull out this or that I think the think people will find interesting. And there are a number of things I think people will find interesting in these two chapters. Just to situate them a little bit, Leviticus 17-26 is the section of the book that scholars refer to as the holiness code, and really, that's because these chapters 17-26 focus on the people of Israel collectively in terms of a collective or corporate responsibility to be holy. The idea is kind of expressed in Leviticus 19:2 where we read,

²“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

MSH: That phrase, speaking corporately in context, “you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” that phrase is actually really rare in the rest of Leviticus, and beyond Leviticus out in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. But here in this section 17-26, it is stated repeatedly and really emphatically in certain sections. You have it in chapter 17:1, 18:1, 19:2, 20:2, 22:17. It just gets repetition and so scholars have noticed this and based upon the content in these chapters, they have given it the name the holiness code. Now, we're going to hit the first two chapters in the “holiness code” today. Chapter 17 is going to deal with the proper forms of worship, not really directed at the priesthood per se, even though obviously the priesthood is going to be involved but really sort of emphasizing the principles of sacrifice and a few other things to the people corporately. In other words, this is your responsibility, too, whereas in Leviticus 16 was all about the high priest.

If the high priest does things correctly, God will accept the Day of Atonement ritual. Here, it's not about the high priest or even the priesthood per se. It's about everybody. Everybody has to do their part and there are some things here that He's going to track through Leviticus 17 on into 18, and on into chapter 26, that all the people collectively need to pay attention to. Chapter 18, which we'll get into, are the laws about forbidden sexual union. You have incest, adultery, homosexuality, etc., things that are referred to with the Hebrew term *toebah*, which is detestable things or something abhorrent. In the context of Leviticus, it means behaviors that are inconsistent with holiness because that's the emphasis of this whole block. So jumping into chapter 17 here, the first nine verses we might as well just give that a quick read and then jump into some comments.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them, This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. ³If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, ⁴and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD in front of the tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He

has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.

⁵This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ⁷So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

⁸“And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice ⁹and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.

MSH: So that's the first nine verses. The flavor here, in part with verse 7, is there's a concern here for stopping this idea of sacrificing to goat demons, other entities that were perceived to live out in the wilderness where the goat for Azazel was driven. The Hebrew word is *śā·î·rim*. We need to knock this off. We need to stop this. So there's this prohibitory sense in that narrow context but more broadly you can see as you read through this that there is a concern here about bringing sacrifices to the tent of meeting because that is the place where God has commanded that sacrifices be brought. You can't just do this anywhere you want. Now this passage has sort of an old problem associated with it, and that is going back to verse 3, if anyone in the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, so on so forth, and doesn't bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting and that's bad. Well, kill there is the Hebrew term *shachat*.

It is not the normal term for sacrifice, which is *zabach*. So the Hebrew verb *shachat*, which means to kill or to slaughter, can be used with one of two meanings in mind as it's used throughout the Hebrew Bible including here in Leviticus. The verb can mean to slaughter in a very general sense, and if that's what we're looking at here then the verse would describe whenever an Israelite man just went out hunting and killed an animal, even if it's just for food, then that act of slaughter or dressing the animal had to be carried out at the one legitimate location, the one legitimate altar, located at the entrance of the tent of meeting. You can say that would be kind of odd or inconvenient. You mean every time I go hunting I got to bring this thing to the altar there at the tent of meeting or else God's going to be mad? That's looking at determining its very general generic sense. The verb can also mean to sacrifice, in other words, that has a ritual tone to it.

In other words, that could be a true synonym for *zabach*, to offer a sacrifice in a ritual sense. If that's the way we read verse 3, then the sense would be that anything intended for ritual sacrifice had to be made, had to be brought and dealt with at the altar. But the general slaughter of animals for food, like just going out hunting that was okay because it's non-sacrificial. Now the reason that the discussion is sort of important is because depending on how you take it, some have said it's contradictory to Deuteronomy 12:15 and following, which I'll read for you here.

¹⁵“However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, **[MSH: Now right there, there’s this permission to go out and hunt and eat meat within any of your towns. It doesn’t have to be according to this central location, the tabernacle.]** as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you. The unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and as of the deer. ¹⁶Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it out on the earth like water. ¹⁷You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain or of your wine or of your oil,

MSH: So right here in Deuteronomy 12, it sounds like there's permission given for just a broad hunting context whereas if you're looking at Leviticus 17 you're not so sure. Scholars have pointed this out. Is there a contradiction between verses 3 and 4 of Leviticus 17 because it's just all described as *shachat*, to kill, is that a sacrifice or is it something broader, and whereas Deuteronomy 12 is a little more clear. So is there a contradiction here? Now it looks like scholars are just making a mountain out of a molehill here. I can see that because it's clear in sacrificial texts of the Torah, of the Pentateuch, that *shachat* in context where we're sure that there's sacrificing going on, *shachat* never has the general sense of slaughtering non-ritually. That raised the question, what about other texts?

What about contexts where you don't have this immediate sort of feel to them? I think what we have here is that since *shachat* is used both ways depending on the different contexts just broadly of the Torah. Sometimes there's clearly a ritual sense going on, sometimes there's not. Since *shachat* can be used both ways, it is fair I think and I'm not alone here, to interpret Leviticus 17 in light of Deuteronomy 12, that there's no disagreement here because it specifies in verse 3, ox, lamb, goat in the camp kills outside the camp. If it's intended for sacrifice, then you need to bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting. But if it's not intended for sacrifice, and it doesn't wind up being a sacrifice, then you're okay if it's just a general killing for food like Deuteronomy 12 allows.

So I just want you to be aware that there's this issue because this is one of those things that sort of shows up classically in these, look at all these errors in the Bible kind of thing. It doesn't have to be viewed that way because *shachat* has this elasticity. Sometimes it refers to ritual killing, other times it doesn't. Now let's just say though for the sake of the discussion here that somebody violates this legitimately, like they do kill something outside the camp and they say well, I was just hunting but then they wind up bringing it for a sacrifice. Then there's a clear violation of what they're supposed to do and the penalty's pretty severe. In verse 4 it says, “bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.”

Now blood guilt, this idea used elsewhere in the Pentateuch, is actually used for homicide elsewhere, killing an innocent human being. It's a dramatic term. Some scholars would say it's like hyperbole just to make the point that this is something really bad, really severe. It's a dramatic way of putting it. I think that's the case here but what I want to focus on is the penalty, this cutting off from among his people. The term there in Hebrew is *karath*, the verbal lemma anyway, and where this term is used, it is basically used to describe a divine penalty, in other words, something God is going to do in response to what has happened,

something God has ordained or is actually sort of left to God to carry out. Now there's a problem here, too, so what is cutting off the people actually mean and if God is sort of the behind the scenes actor in a lot of passages, how do we understand this?

Now a lot of modern scholars would look at *karath* and define it as either excommunication, in other words, the person is driven away from the communities. So the effect is look, we're cutting you off from the whole community and we're going to let God deal with you. Live or die, that's up to God. You're just out of the community, goodbye. Some, though, would say well, maybe it's the death penalty, in other words, God authorizes other people to put this person to death, so either excommunication or the death penalty sort of situation. It really sort of depends in many cases on the passage but that creates the problem of well, it might be clear in one place but what about where there's ambiguity? How should we parse this? This is a very general reference here in Leviticus. A lot of Leviticus scholars, people like Milgram and Levine, they kind of lean away from *karath* being an immediate death penalty carried out by people.

A lot of them follow the rabbis in this, those who would take is viewpoint out that look, all the offenses where *karath* is prescribed, coincidentally they would say not coincidentally, are deliberate sins against God and not fellow humans. And so in the priestly literature like Leviticus here and other places, sins against God, the ideas are punishable by God and not necessarily by man. So it follows that *karath* is something that is left up to God to decide so that argues in favor of excommunication, sort of leaving this person's destiny up to God. Milgram actually lists these in his commentary. There are 19 cases of *karath* in the Torah and he has them submitted under some categories. I'll just briefly go through these. There is violations of sacred time or calendar, things like neglecting the Passover (Numbers 9:13), eating leaven during a particular festival (Exodus 12), working on the Sabbath (Exodus 31), working on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 23). That's one category. Another categories is mishandling a sacred substance, either blood or part of the sacrifice, typically that was to be given over to God. So consuming blood (Leviticus 17:10).

That's going to be condemned with *karath*, eating parts of the sacrifice that you shouldn't (Leviticus 7), that's *karath*, eating a sacrifice while you're impure (Leviticus 7), *karath*. You get the impression these are offenses or violations that in some way transgress the worship of God and what is God's and how God wants to be worshiped, and so therefore, the logic is that the penalty is up to God and so *karath* would be drive that person out of the community. They're never going to be allowed back. You have the same thing in the third category, purification rituals. Another category Milgram lists is illicit worship, for instance, the worship of Molech or other forms of idolatry, the punishment is *karath*, consulting the dead, necromancy, *karath*. Those are both Leviticus 20.

The one odd one, the 19th instance that Milgram lists, we find kind of interesting because we're going to get into this in Leviticus 18, is illicit sexual relationships. Now you say well, why does that belong with all these others? All these other ones, it's very clear that what you're doing is violating the way God wants to be worshiped, the rules that he's given or maybe stealing some offering from him that belongs to God. There's some sort of personal violation between the offender and God himself. Why in the world would some of these sexual relationships be listed, specifically Leviticus 18, we'll get into them in a moment, there are described and then the punishment, cut that person off, the *karath* is actually given. My impression, I'll say this now and then we'll pick it up when we get to Leviticus 18. I think it's

possible that the reason these sorts of things are listed among these other worship ritual oriented things is because certain sexual activities and prohibitions, certain sexual acts were thought to, and it actually said to “pollute the land,” and since the land actually belongs to God, those are interpreted as offenses directly against God.

They result in defiling something God owns permanently because there's no system of atonement for the land when it's defiled. The Old Testament, we mentioned this way way way back when we were introducing Leviticus that some forms of impurity are ritual. Others are more serious. The ritual ones have a cure. You do this for a certain number of days and you wait, then you're going to be pure again. You bring a sacrifice and you're all taken care of. But there are other violations that went beyond ritual impurity. There were moral impurities and they had no solution except for God to essentially wipe the slate clean and start over. And that's actually what you see described in Leviticus 23 where God says hey, if you do all these terrible things and you pollute the land and so on so forth, then I'm going to cast you out. I'm going to kick you out of the land. I'm going to exile you.

You're going to die in somebody else's country and I'm essentially going to wipe the land clean of you and then it will sit fallow for a while and that's the cure, a complete reset by God. And so since a lot of these things are in that category in some of these other chapters, I think that's the logic here, that some of these sexual relationships were viewed as so defiling of the land itself and the land belongs to God and that's why they're listed here among all these other offenses that are sort of personally against Yahweh himself. But we'll return to Leviticus 18 in a moment. SO let's go back to *karath*. How do we parse this? How do we understand it? In addition, this is going to sound either weird or kind of interesting. In addition to this, is it excommunication or death penalty, I think you can make a good argument that it is excommunication because they're lots of places where *karath* is described that don't wind up involving a death penalty being executed and *karath* is still used. It's an uneven list, let's just be honest but there are enough of them that seems to be going too far if you just say it's a death penalty sort of on the spot.

It may just be that they are kicked out and we let God deal with them. So I think there's something to that but along with that, you have some other factors going on here because in some passages where *karath* is referred to, you actually get two other ideas, either one or two, either one or both, in the passage that are kind of interesting. One is what scholars would call extirpation, that is, the offender's line, his bloodline is terminated. In other words, he may not himself be put to death but there's some sort of cursing language where God will cause his ancestry, his descendants, his name to just die out. I'm going to give you a couple of these in a second here. So, not only is the person put out of the community but essentially you leave God to deal with him, and the way God deals with him is you're not going to have an ancestry. Your name is going to end and that to an ancient person was a serious thing because that's how you're remembered.

They tied that up with sort of the afterlife thinking, and that brings us to the second part of this. Not only is their extirpation where the offender's bloodline is terminated but there are a couple passages that actually imply denial of afterlife with that person's own family members that have died and gone on before. So there's a loss of ancestry in the sense of my own descendants, and not only that but God is saying, I'm going to cut you off in the afterlife from those who have gone before you, those loved ones. You will never be reunited with them. God

forbids reunion with the extended family. Now let me just give you a few examples here. You have in Psalm 109:13 we read as follows.

May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation!

MSH: Now in the context to this, who's the person doing this bad stuff? Well, there's a whole list of things in Psalm 109, bad things that lead to may his posterity *karath*, be cut off. It's the same word used in Leviticus. And so scholars have looked at this passage and thought okay, *karath*, well maybe that's part of the punishment back in Leviticus where you drive a person away and they're left destitute or God will deal with them harshly. And so that person's bloodline is going to be cut off and the second part of Psalm 109, may his name be blotted out in the second generation, basically you're just consigned to be forgotten is kind of the extended significance of *karath* there if we look at Psalm 109:13 and factor that into what's going on in Leviticus. There's another one. In Ruth 4:10, we get this reading.

Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.

MSH: So this is Boaz, the climax of the story where he redeems Ruth. Now the point is that it was part of the role of the levir in levirate marriages, in this case Boaz, to perpetuate the line and the name of the deceased husband. So if that's part of the worldview thinking, that if you don't have descendants that that is going to result in you essentially being forgotten forever and that is defined or articulated with the term *karath*. Then again maybe this is a concept we can look back in Leviticus and where *karath* is mentioned again for these 19 things here in Leviticus, maybe that is part of what *karath* meant back in Leviticus when God is talking about ,you shall cut this person off from his people or something like that. Third one, and this one's really sort of the same kind of thing, Malachi 2:12 says,

May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!

MSH: Now there's a specific crime going back into Malachi 12, the profaning of the covenant, committing abominations and some of these abominations in Malachi 2:11, *toebah*, they're the same thing listed in Leviticus chapter 17 and other places in Leviticus. It's the same term, detestable things. So this is actually more of a direct link back to Leviticus because now we also have *toebah* in Malachi 2:11-12 that talks about descendants being cut off, someone's lineage being cut off. Of course, we can factor in these other verses that ultimately what that means is that you're going to be forgotten forever. Let me show you one more. Leviticus 20:2-3, this is kind of an interesting or curious passage. Let's just go back to verse 1.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives

any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. ³ I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name.

MSH: Now you would read that and you'd think just on the surface that's obviously the death penalty, and it is. But why after God says put that person to death, God also says I'm going to cut that man off from among his people? You say it all means the same thing. It's just repeating the same thought. Well maybe, but what it also could mean in light of the Old Testament language about when people are dying, they say things like I'm going to go be with my fathers. I'm going to go be with my descendants, people. It's this idea that I'm going to die now but I'll be united, reunited with my loved ones who've gone on before me, that sort of idea. So you could read Leviticus 20 as actually involving both.

In other words, God is so offended at the child sacrificed to Molech that he says, not only is this guy, whoever does this, not only are they going to be put to death sort of on the spot but I am going to divorce him from his departed ancestors that he probably hopes he would be reunited with in the afterlife. Forget that. He is just gone. So he's even denied any sort of afterlife hope or wish so it transcends committing an offense worthy of death in this life to now you're even barred from any sort of afterlife hope. It sort of ups the ante in Leviticus 20. So this text you might have two things going on, death plus the *karath* awaits this criminal act that does this particular crime in offering a child to Molech. These are passages that scholars look at to try to figure out what *karath* might entail.

So I think the fairest thing you can say is that it might have a death penalty connotation in certain passages but in others it's not that specific and it might actually involve being driven out of the community so you're left for God to deal with. And even worse than that, it might even be a sort of an afterlife prohibition because of what you've done. So *karath* is a really serious thing and all of these offenses were sort of like personal crimes against God himself, even the sexual deviancy stuff because that was thought to pollute the land. That was interpreted as an offense personally to God because God owns the land. You've ruined it now and it's God's property. That's the thinking process that would go on through that. Now in verses 10 to 12, we'll go back to Leviticus 17 here. These verses describe the either proper or improper handling of sacrificial blood. It also includes a prohibition against consuming blood so this is where we get this notion of he says,

¹⁰ "If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. ¹¹ 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.

¹² Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.

MSH: So this is sort of a big deal. Consuming blood in effect is stealing it from God because the blood was supposed to be put out on the altar, splashed on the altar, and this is denoting that, just like the sacrificial portions of the animal that went on the altar and were burned and all that, that was God's part. Well, so was the blood. So if you consumed any of this, you were eating from God's plate, so to speak. You were stealing from God, and if this was viewed as a personal violation, a *karath* offense, that you would be put out of the community or perhaps even worse, depending what God decides to do with you. In fact in these verses, I don't know if you picked up on it but God says very directly, I shall cut off. In other words, here we go again with this idea that this person has done something bad and we're going to let God personally deal with this person.

You'll notice in this passage, verses 10 to 12, it doesn't say that person gets put to death and then I'm going to cut him off from his ancestors. It doesn't say that like it did in Leviticus 20. Here, what you have going is that we have an offender and God says I will take care of this guy. I will cut him off. I will do whatever needs to be done. The penalty is left to God, that idea, just like we talked about a few minutes ago with *karath*. That's a big part of what that term meant for the ancient Israelite. Now about this line about the life of the flesh is in the blood, this gets repeated in verse 14. You have similar statements elsewhere in the Torah, Deuteronomy 12:23 says, 'The blood is the life you must not consume the life with the flesh.' Just put yourself in an ancient Israelite shoes.

These verses are not saying there's anything mystical about blood, like they knew blood science. They knew about hemoglobin and genetics and all this sort of stuff that you can detect with dna analysis. It's not saying that at all. Look at what's being said. You have a body and for your body to be alive, it needs blood. So somehow in their understanding and obviously we would agree with this, even in our modern scientific context. If your body loses enough blood, you are going to die. They could experience that. They could see that. They could see the effect of losing blood leading to death. So in that sense, there's something about the blood in their own ancient worldview, there's something about this liquid that flows in our bodies. It's not like sweat. It's not like spit. It's not like semen.

There's something different about this substance that we have to have this in our bodies or else we are going to die. So the conception was that there's life here. This is what keeps your body alive. It's what gives it life, keeps your body alive. This is the fluid God has given you for this purpose. So blood represents life and therefore in a sacrificial system, it can protect a human who violates God's laws or violates sacred space by means of substitutively purging that person from their impurity, from the violation. So I have a little quote from Levine here. He says,

“Basic to the theory of sacrifice in ancient Israel as in many other ancient societies was the notion of substitution. The sacrifice substituted for an individual human life or for the lives of the members of the community in situations where God could have exacted the life of the offender or anyone else for that matter. Indeed, all who stood in God's immediate presence risked becoming the object of divine wrath.”

MSH: And we've seen this before in other things we've looked at in Leviticus. So what sacrifice meant conceptually was that God will accept the blood of another life, in this case an animal, on

behalf of the blood that he could exact from you. It's in lieu of your life that God will accept this other life. So I think this is just an important observation. I'm not going to spend too much time on it but if any of you out there who is listening to this have done any reading on sort of how modern scholarship, even within evangelicalism, and views the atonement of Christ, it amazes me how so many scholars and people try to rid the theology of atonement from substitution, substitutionary atonement has somehow become offensive in our culture, probably because it involves blood. And so we have different views of the atonement. There's the ransom theory. There's a good guy theory, good life theory.

I'm not saying that the atonement doesn't include some of these other aspects. What I am saying is that you do not understand atonement, and no Israelite would've thought about atonement the way you're thinking about it, if you divorce substitution from it. That is intrinsic to the whole idea and as these blood sacrifices are in some way typological of what Jesus did. If you're stripping out the principle of substitutionary atonement totally from the atonement picture, you're not understanding it the way in ancient Israelite would've understood it because that would've been the first thing that an ancient Israelite thought of with the concept of purging someone from their impurity.

I'm in trouble. I am in heap big trouble because I violated sacred space and God could demand my life but God has said I won't do that if you bring a substitute life in your place, this list of animals or whatever. That is intrinsic to the whole idea. It's not the only thing that atonement is about but it is certainly an important part. And for "modern thinkers", people who are just offended by the idea trying to redefine the atonement in terms of trying to define substitution out of the concept, that is foreign to biblical thinking. It just is. No Israelite would've ever looked at the way you're looking at it if that's where you're at. Verses 13 to 15, one thing here that's kind of interesting, I'll just read it to you.

¹³“Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. ¹⁴For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. ¹⁵And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. ¹⁶But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity.”

MSH: In other words, this is going to put you a state of uncleanness. Pretty clear, but there's this odd phrase here about even if you're out and you're hunting or whatever, and you kill an animal and it's okay if it's not a sacrifice, to kill it for food, whatever, you have to drain the blood. The blood of the animal is supposed to be poured out on the earth, just pour it out on the ground, verse 13, and then cover the blood with dirt. Cover the blood with earth. Commentators have looked at this and thought why? What's up with that? Now there are a number of theories. Milgram lists a couple and he tells you which ones he thinks are crazy, which ones he thinks are worth thinking about, and there's two that he lists that I'm going to give you because I don't think they're mutually exclusive.

I think they both sort of work together and they make sense. One idea is that you cover the blood of this animal you've killed out on the field with dirt so that conceptually the blood would be returned to God. So in other words, God allowed you the life of this animal because you need food and that sort of thing. So God gave this creature life so that you could someday kill it and eat it to sustain your own life and part of you recognizing that is pouring blood out on the ground, dressing it and drain the blood then covering it with dirt so it goes back to God. This is sort of honorific act to honor this animal and God giving it to you. I think there's something there. That makes sense conceptually in the way they looked at things and the way Genesis describes things about things being for the sustenance of human life and whatnot, and that makes sense. It's workable, sort of a commemorative act there to help remind you of this is why you even have food. Life is from God.

It comes from the ground, the dust of the ground kind of thing and the earth yielded these things for you at God's behest. This is the way God designed things, so now you cover it with dirt and I don't consume it. it goes back to God. The second idea is that so that the blood would never be used in ritual, divinatory rites, what scholars would call cathonic rights. Cathonic is a term that refers to dealing with earth substances for divinatory purposes. So we don't want the blood to be used for any sort of ritual divinatory acts so you cover it with dirt. In other words, you pollute the blood so it can't be used in divination. You make a dirty. It's not "pure". I think that idea's worthy of consideration, too, because if anyone in ancient culture, either in Israel or somebody else who's out there in some other place where they happen to be hunting to discourage this blood being used or given to or given back to a foreign deity. To discourage that, we cover it with dirt. And I think there's something to that. I don't think these ideas are mutually exclusive.

The ban on using blood in ritual or divinatory acts implies that blood, because blood is life and because only YAHWEH, the God of Israel is the life giver and no other deity can legitimately claim to be the life giver, blood, which is life, should only go back to God, should only go back to its maker, either in sacrifice, you splash the blood on the altar, if here in this context we cover it with dirt so that no other deity can receive it and it can be used for the contact of or worship of any other deity. So I think that is a coherent way to look at what seems to be sort of an odd command here. They believe in an animate supernatural world that intersects with our world and so this is something because it's given by the life giver. It has life. It's valuable. It should be given back only to the maker and no one else, no other deity. It actually becomes sort of a worship, a thing to honor God by doing this. I think that's why it's here in Leviticus.

Let's jump into Leviticus 18 for a little bit. Leviticus 18, if you've ever read this, this is not going to surprise you but this is the most complete collection of sexual laws, prohibited sexual relationships within the Torah. There are a lot of them in there. We're not going to parse every one of them because frankly, a lot of them are pretty self-explanatory. But I think some of the logic here needs to be pointed out. Why do you have forbidden sexual relationships at all? There are a couple of reasons. One was it had the effect of sort of delimiting or building the boundaries of what was conceived of as the immediate family, the family unit, versus the extended family, people that would sort of become part of your family through marriage. Well, that was different than family members that were close relatives, in other words, your own kids, that kind of thing, the one's that you brought into being and so on so forth.

So these laws have the effect of defining what the immediate family, what constituted the immediate family, that is, sexual relationships are forbidden within the immediate family members or among immediate family members outside the husband, the man, and his wife or wives. And it's part of the logic, you can't take someone else's wife. You don't commit adultery. You don't take someone else's wife and make them your own because you're violating a family, an immediate family boundary there. Now outside the man and his wife or wives and their children, outside of those sorts of boundaries, you could marry within the extended family members, what the Old Testament patriarchal culture would refer to as the *mishpachah*, the clan. In fact, those marriages were actually encouraged because they magnified or grew the extended family and they created more immediate families within the context of the greater clan. So sexual laws have a way of defining which group is which and what are the boundaries between the groups, that sort of thing. So Levine says here for instance,

“The immediate family was formed by a man who married one or more wives, thereby initiating the process of procreation. This conception of the family explains why the regulations governing sexual behavior were addressed to the male as the head of the family rather than somebody else because the male had sort of more immediate control over the situation in respecting these boundaries.”

MSH: Now let's talk a little bit about a couple of these things. I'm not going to read the whole chapter. You could do that about uncovering the nakedness of xyz. There's a whole listing of these. Let's talk about a couple. Let's talk about incest. Now Levine I think has a nice handy way of parsing this and describing this. So I'm going to quote him again and then sort of just branch off from this. Levine writes,

“Two principles govern the definition of incest in the code of chapter 18 and through the rest of the Torah. **[MSH: Let me just stop here. You get this question all the time. Isn't marrying like your second cousin, isn't that incest? it might be incest by our cultural boundaries but within a patriarchal culture of the Old Testament, these chapters describe what is the immediate family and what is not. So back to Levine here]** There's two principles that govern what is incest and what isn't within the Torah. Number one, *sheer*, that's the Hebrew term for flesh relations in Levine's parlance here, *sheer*, which sometimes is known as blood relations, and number two, *ervah*, which is the word for nakedness. **[MSH: This is a euphemism for sexuality and continuing with Levine,]** the nuclear family was founded on six *sheer* relatives, mother, father, son, daughter, brother, and sister. That was the immediate family. We learned this indirectly from the Code of Purity governing the Israelite priesthood. According to Leviticus 21:2-3 an ordinary priest usually forbidden to violate himself through contact with a corpse, was nevertheless permitted to attend the burial of any one of the six relatives. The *sheer* relationship is extended in 18:12-13 from Leviticus 21 to include the sister of one's father or mother. The *sheer* relatives are in a different category from the

members of the family related by affinity, those who become a man's relatives by marriage. The basic principle regulating sexual union with affinity relatives is conveyed by the term *ervah*, nakedness. The only exception is levirate marriage which according to Deuteronomy 25:5-10 is something you do if you have a situation where a woman's husband has died and there's no one to take their place. The concern was to keep the man's name alive and his descendants, his heritage, his property, and all that stuff. So the levirate system was there to take care that. Levine says that's really the only exception here."

MSH: So to summarize what Levine is saying, *sheer* relationships, mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, and then non-*sheer* relationships, and the prohibition against having sexual relationships with those that are near to you is expressed with phrases like uncovering someone's nakedness. That's just the idiomatic way of expressing it. But there's a certain logic to both groups. Now two notes here that I think are really worth pointing out because I think listeners will find it interesting.

If you look at the language here in Leviticus 18 where you have the phrase 'uncovering the nakedness of' all over the place through the chapter, if you look at the instances where the passage talks about uncovering the nakedness of one's father or uncovering the nakedness of one's uncle, that would mean having sex with your father's wife or your uncle's wife, in other words, it's beyond voyeurism. This is the idiomatic expression of to have sexual relationships with your mom, your father's wife or your uncle's wife. If you take that, now think about the term uncovering the nakedness, that idiomatic expression, that verb there uncovering. if you go to Leviticus 20, here's what you read.

¹⁷ "If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity.

MSH: Now you see what that verse does. That verse equates seeing someone's nakedness and uncovering someone's nakedness. They're synonymous idiomatic expressions in that passage. You say who cares? Why point this out? Well, I would suggest that you take this back to Genesis 9, the sin of Ham, Noah. Ham commits this heinous crime but Ham isn't the one punished. Canaan is. His son is punished. And people have wondered for generations what in the world is going on with that? How does this make any sense? Now I could post an article to this on the blog and now since I brought it up, I'll do that. But I would suggest to you that you read this article. I think it presents a compelling case that what Ham does is not just merely looking at his father's naked body, at Noah's naked body.

It's also not having incestual sex with Noah, in other words, homosexual incest with his father, violating his father that way. But he sees the nakedness of his father and what that means in Leviticus language is that he has maternal incestual relationships. He has sex with his mom. And the recent Canaan is punished is because Canaan is the product of that union. That might kind of blow your minds right now but that's why I'll post the article. It's quite compelling. It

explains the logic of what not only Ham does, why Canaan is cursed. Instead of Ham, Canaan is cursed because when Ham does this, when you take the leader's wife or wives, think of David, think of Absalom.

When you do this, you are asserting that you are now taking control of the tribe. You are taking control of what belongs to the patriarch. You are usurping that position for your own. So this was a move on the part of Ham to take control of the family after the flood, to take control away from Noah so he violates his mother. He takes his dad's wife, his woman, and says I am the leader now. He tells his brothers and the brothers, so that they can distance themselves from the whole thing, they go in and they even go backward, they go in and they cover their father's nakedness. In other words, they cover their mom to make it clear that they have no participation. They oppose what's going on here. And then when Noah discovers what has happened, he curses not Ham.

He curses Canaan. Basically, he's cutting off with the curse Ham's line, that Ham would have thought I'm building my own dynasty here. This is my child by my mom's womb. Noah curses it and says we're going to put a stop to that right now. So read the article but I wanted to mention it here because the language here in Leviticus 18 along with Leviticus 20 contributes I think to understanding what's going on in Genesis 9. That was a bit of a rabbit trail but I think it's interesting. Second thing to bring up here is why in Leviticus 18, let's go down to verse 19,

19 "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. 20 And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her. 21 You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. 22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. 23 And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion.

MSH: Now here's the question. Why is homosexuality not grouped with the preceding list of sexual relations that were prohibited? Why is it instead grouped with the abominations of child sacrifice and bestiality, because they just seem so much worse than the stuff that has preceded? Why is homosexuality grouped in that bunch? Well, a little bit of background here, I'm not going to go off too far off on a lecture on homosexuality and ancient attitudes toward it. Other cultures, and Israel is an exception here across the board, but other cultures allowed homosexual sex. In other words, it wasn't severely punished even though it was generally looked down upon.

It really depends on the context because a man for instance could rape another man to degrade them, to bring them into submission or to establish, like with the Greek pederasty system, to establish sort of an order of authority and submission with their younger male charges that they were training to be warriors, that kind of thing. You all had this done to you until you sort of grew up and now you were the aggressor. You were the one that was going to teach, to what sounds to Meyer like a very perverse way of teaching. You're going to teach submission, male authority, the pecking order so to speak in this culture through this act. I'm just using the Greeks for an example.

This didn't happen across the board in ancient cultures but that's sort of a handy example. That sort of activity was not looked down upon in certain cultures because it was just part of this is how you teach authority. You humble these other young boys, these young men and this is part of their training to be warriors, so that wasn't something you'd punish. It was one of the contexts that in ancient cultures that allowed this. Now Israel never allows for the homosexual act in any of these contexts at all, so Israel's kind of unique in this regard and commentators are very familiar with this. Homosexual sex, though, was looked poorly upon. It was derided when in the cases of the male who was in the submissive role, in other words, the male who was penetrated or violated and not so much the penetrator because that was the aggressor. He was establishing power.

So males were just generally not supposed to play the submissive role of women. And so when you had that situation then broadly speaking in ancient culture, homosexuality was looked down upon in that setting. So it could be looked down on some setting and not looked down on in others. It just depended on the context. Now lesbianism never really gets the same attention, especially in the Ancient Near East, it never gets much attention at all. And I think, and this is just me talking. I'm going to explain this in a moment. I think it's likely because, this is going to sound really odd, because no children were "lost or killed". You say what the heck are you talking about? What in the world's going on with that, children killed through homosexuality? That doesn't make any sense at all. That's just terrible to say. Well, we're not speaking literally and we're not speaking the language of the way a modern person would think about sex. Just hold that thought. I'll get to it in a moment what I mean by that. I want to have a quote here from Milgram that I think helps and then we'll return to some of my own personal thoughts about why homosexuality gets gets lumped in with these other offenses. But Milgram says,

“The difference between biblical legislation and other near eastern laws must not be overlooked. The Bible allows for no exceptions. All acts of sodomy are prohibited, whether performed by rich or poor, high or low status citizen or alien.” **[MSH: So these cultural allowances that you're going to see in other parts of the ancient world, they did not apply in ancient Israel. Back to Milgram, he says,]** Many theories have been propounded to provide a rationale for this prohibition. One must surely exist since this absolute ban on homosexual intercourse is unique not only in the Bible but as shown in Olyon's study to the entire ancient near eastern classical world. Israel's the exception. To be sure, a rationale is given with staccato emphasis. The pollution of the land in the concluding exhortation in these chapters in Leviticus, but that does not explain the individual prohibitions in the list.

MSH: Dropping down a little bit in the quotation here, some of the explanations that have been offered, the connection with idolatry, maybe that's the reason. Milgram also includes the blurring of boundaries between the genders. Maybe that's an explanation. Wasting of male seed, semen, maybe that's an explanation. The mixing of semen with other defiling liquids in homosexual intercourse on the grounds that they don't share sort of the same properties or one represents life and excrement would represent death, maybe that's going on in the ancient mind.

Maybe that's the reason for a total prohibition. He just goes through a number of these options and then he says this.

“The common denominator of all the prohibitions I submit is that they involve the emission of semen for the purpose of copulation resulting in either incest and illicit progeny or, as in this case, lack of progeny, homosexual relationships, or the destruction of progeny in the case of Molech worship. In a word, the theme is procreation. This rationale fully complements and presupposes the laws of Leviticus 15:16-18. Semen emission per se is not forbidden. It just defiles ritually, but purificatory rites can follow. But in certain cases of sexual congress, it is strictly forbidden and severe consequences must follow”

MSH: Now here's why, with that as a backdrop and what I've said earlier, here's why I think, this is just me talking now, why I think homosexuality, instead of being listed in the forefront of Leviticus 18, gets lumped in with offering your children to Molech and bestiality and that sort of thing. I think that the logic of the rationale is this. Homosexuality and bestiality were A) contrary to creation order, that is, you're copulating with someone or something else where procreation could not be the result, in other words, it couldn't produce children so therefore it's contrary to creation order. And B) killing children was also contrary to procreation. So what I'm getting at here is the pre-scientific idea that the child was resident in the man, in their semen, the seed, the child was deposited by the man into the womb of a woman and there it would grow and it would grow in the life and then it would be born. It's procreation.

That is impossible in homosexuality, and so homosexuality gets viewed as causing the loss of life because you're having semen emitted that cannot produce life. It is prohibited from producing life because the view is that the man is depositing a child in the woman's womb so it can grow and if that sexual act is in a context of copulation where that child cannot, I hate to use the planting metaphor, take root and grow, these are ancient concepts, they are essentially killing it because the end of that child is going to be death because it's not in the womb of a woman. You can't have it in the womb of an animal or inside another man. That is the inherent logic to this wholesale prohibition.

So what you have here is homosexuality is looked upon negatively for two reasons in the Torah. It's contrary to creation order because creation, the sexual act, is ultimately designed for procreation. And that's not to say that you're never supposed to have sex or biblical people thought you couldn't have sex for pleasure. There is the Song of Solomon. There is Paul's talk in 1 Corinthians 7 about orienting sexual behavior with pleasure in the context of marriage. We get that. We're going back here to the ultimate purpose of copulation and that was producing children. And so if you're doing it in a context where you can't produce children, that is contrary to creation order and secondly, it ends up, in the case of bestiality and homosexuality, it ends up terminating the life of the child that was thought to be deposited in the womb. It's like killing. It's like murder.

That's why it gets grouped where it groups. Now I also think this is why lesbian relationships get no attention because in a lesbian relationship, you don't have the loss of life because there's no semen involved. So that is something that just wasn't a concern. Now Paul later on is going to talk about lesbian relationships but here in the Old Testament in the context

of delineating what the immediate family is, what the extended family is, and why you have an immediate family, and why you shouldn't have sexual relations within the immediate family. The immediate family is to create children with your wife and nobody else. Extended family, that's something different.

You can marry into the clan. All that stuff is about procreation and copulation, so it has nothing to do with lesbian relationships because it's just not a question. Semen is not in the picture, so I think that's why lesbian relationships in the Torah just don't get any attention at all. Later on, Paul, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. In those two elements are the biblical rationale behind condemning homosexuality. Now in today's scientific context, the second one doesn't work because we know that children, whole persons, are not in the male, in the sperm. We know that. We know where babies come from. We know what genetics is all about. We know all this.

The second part of the rationale goes by the wayside. It doesn't work. The first one, though, is still intact and that is, this is contrary to creation order and that is actually the basis of what Paul says in Romans 1. Paul doesn't talk about or link this with killing and kids dying. He doesn't do any of that. What Paul's tracking on in that chapter and what becomes the theological rationale in the New Testament for opposing homosexuality, also to be consistent with the Old Testament, but at the core of it, Paul's argument, and he includes both types of homosexual relationship, which is significant. He includes men with men, women with women, doing that which is unnatural. His argument is that doing this is contrary creation order. You're not exercising this gift of God for the reason that God wanted you to have it, the reason why he gave it to you. So this is contrary to God's design.

That is at the heart of the New Testament thinking about homosexuality whereas in the Old Testament, this other aspect becomes a little more clear even though it's odd to us and it really results from a pre-scientific conception of where babies come from, but that's why it was viewed as such a heinous thing just across the board because it terminated life and it belongs with other things that prevent life or take life. That's the rationale in the Old Testament. Now to wrap up here, both of those are sort of, well, one was a rabbit trail. The other one was more germane to the Leviticus 18. But to wrap up here, just a couple things that you can think about, how they relate to us and just to sort of recap for interest.

I hope you noticed in Leviticus 17 you had a severe punishment for violating rules of sacred space. These sorts of violations of how you worship God were viewed as very serious to the point of having this *karath* idea attached to the violation. Now it's natural for us to see God as more tolerant today, but I think, at the very least, we could take a hint about examining what it is we do in worship. Maybe we can give it more of a God focus and not a worshiper focus, because a lot of what happens in church, I'm not saying this is intentional or this is sinister in any way. I think it just happens. A lot of what happens in church is really focused on the experience of the worshiper even though the goal is to worship God. I think that's still there.

That's still, at least in many churches, that would be the motivation. But the way things are conducted really focus on the experience of the worshiper as opposed to the object of worship. We judge good worship by whether we are bored or not. That's really foreign to a biblical mindset. It wasn't about either being entertained or even having your senses excited or however you want to put that. It was really about doing things to show God that we assign importance to him and not ourselves, that we're thinking about what he wants from us and not what we hope to get out of the sermon and that sort of thing. So I think we can at least take that

hint from what's going on in Leviticus here. Secondly, since we are sacred space, and we've talked about this concept before, since we are sacred space, the juxtaposition of these two chapters, think about it, sacred space rules and then you have sexual boundary rules, I think the juxtaposition of those two concepts is worth noting.

This is part of the logic why Paul talks about, he links fornication with sinning against your own body because you're the temple. This is the language from 1 Thessalonians 4, language of 1 Corinthians 3 and 6. There's something going on in Paul's head as to why he links the space and I think the juxtaposition here in Leviticus 17-18 are part of what's floating around in his head. And thirdly, sexual prohibitions should not be viewed as arbitrary. They had a logic to them that was pro life and pro family. Sex wasn't exclusively focused on personal pleasure or personal convenience. The pleasure part is going to go without saying and that's not prohibited within the boundaries of the biblical family, biblical morality.

That's not divorced from the picture but the ultimate focus was on producing life and producing family. So I think in our culture, what's basically sort of a sex crazed culture, we tend to view any prohibition on any pleasure we can experience as totally mean and arbitrary, and, of course, people beat up the Bible for this. It wasn't. These passages are not written so that space is devoted to being mean. They're written to reinforce a worldview that elevated the production of and care for human life. I think that's just an important take away from these two chapters.