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### Modern Applicability of the Book of Leviticus for Joyful Obedience

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**Modern Applicability of the Book of Leviticus  
for Joyful Obedience**

**V o l u m e 3 – 2 0 2 3**

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**Roy E. Gane  
Andrews University**

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**Introduction**

Joy in Leviticus? Sarah, my daughter, was seven years old and our family was reading through the Bible for family worship. She enjoyed Genesis and Exodus, but in Leviticus she was soon horrified by so much killing of innocent animals at the ancient Israelite sanctuary, especially because she aspired to be an animal rights activist when she grew up. So we had to move on to another biblical book.

Years earlier, I had not seen any joy in Leviticus either. As an undergraduate theology student at Pacific Union College, I didn't bother to take an elective course on the biblical sanctuary and its ritual services because I was completely uninterested in the topic and

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repelled by the animal sacrifices. The embarrassing thing is that the teacher was my own father.

After finishing college with theology and music degrees, I went to the University of California at Berkeley to study Hebrew so that I could better understand biblical prophecies and translate Psalms with regular meter to facilitate composition of music for congregational singing of them. I was deeply disappointed to learn that the specialty of my biblical Hebrew professor, Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, was Leviticus. But I stayed in his class with the hope of transferring Hebrew skills and knowledge to the areas of my interest.

Milgrom's graduate seminar proceeded slowly and in great detail through Leviticus in the 1980s. Soon I began to see how the details of ritual activities fit together in a conceptual system that, according to the New Testament, prefigured Christ's sacrifice and his priestly ministry for us in God's temple in heaven (cf. esp. John 1:29; book of Hebrews). Leviticus dramatically illuminates aspects of God's plan for saving faulty human beings through Christ.

Thus, this Christian student enhanced his grasp of the Gospel and its power by studying Leviticus under a rabbi at one of the most

secular universities in America. God works in mysterious ways! Milgrom was a quiet and thoughtful teacher, but the unfolding of the biblical message in his seminar filled me with such enthusiastic joy that when I drove home after his class in my 1962 Ford Falcon, I pounded on the steering wheel and shouted.

Joy is usually not on the surface in Leviticus. Like gold, it takes some digging to find it, but it is there for those who wrestle with the Word as Jacob wrestled with a divine Man and declared: “I will not let you go unless you bless me”! (Gen 32:26 [Hebrew v. 27]).

The present essay addresses ways in which Leviticus applies to modern people in ways that can bring us joy as we seek to follow and obey God as our “new covenant” Lord. First, Leviticus reveals God’s eternal holy character of love. Second, Leviticus gives hope and assurance by showing in detail how God interacts with fallen human beings, especially to remedy their faults and faultiness through sacrifice. Third, enduring principles underlying instructions in Leviticus contribute to human well-being and happiness. Fourth, Leviticus promises that God will lavishly bless those who are loyal

and obedient to him and his covenant, by contrast with the curses that disloyal rebels will bring upon themselves.

### **I. God's Holy Character of Love**

Obedience is not simply to laws, but to the authorities behind them. Rules established and enforced by an exploitive and oppressive tyrant bring little or no joy, except for relief in basic survival through obedience or successful cleverness in escaping punishment for non-compliance. By contrast, it is a joy to serve and obey someone who has demonstrated unselfish loving care for his people and whose instructions are clearly for their benefit. The latter describes YHWH (personal name), the God of Israel, whose character is love, which includes both mercy and justice (cf. Exod 34:6-7). Following are some ways in which Leviticus reveals God's love, aside from additional revelations of divine love (interactions with fallen humans, principles underlying instructions, and blessings for loyal people) to be discussed in subsequent sections of this essay.

#### **Divine Communication with Faulty People**

The book of Leviticus begins by reporting, "The LORD called (verb *q-r-* ' ) Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying,

‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them...’” (1:1-2).<sup>1</sup> It is easy to pass over such introductory words, taking them for granted, but they proclaim a massive message of divine grace: The Lord takes the initiative to communicate with human beings, even though they have sinned against him. He thereby continues his response to sin that he first demonstrated when Eve and Adam sinned: “But the LORD God called (verb *q-r-*) to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen 3:9).

When another person seriously wrongs you, do you want to talk to them in person or by Skype, Facetime, or Zoom? Do you want to email or text them or send them a message through Facebook or Twitter? Forget it! We’re no longer on speaking terms! Or perhaps you just want to blast them by giving them “a piece of your mind.” But when humans violate the lovingly protective instructions of the omnipotent Creator and Sovereign of the universe, who could justifiably and instantly delete them from existence, he gently seeks to restore their relationship with him by keeping the line of communication open. Leviticus is the paramount example of divine

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<sup>1</sup> ESV here and for subsequent biblical quotations unless otherwise specified.

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grace expressed through verbal communication in that it contains more direct divine speech than any other book of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

The common designation of the Israelite tabernacle as “the tent of meeting” indicates that it was the place of interaction and communication between God and his people (Exod 29:43). The book of Leviticus begins by reporting that the Lord called to Moses from the tent of meeting (1:1). On this occasion, Moses was outside the tabernacle, unable to enter it because the Lord’s glory had filled it (Exod 40:35). But subsequently, Moses entered the tabernacle to meet with God and hear his voice (Num 7:89; cf. Exod 25:22).

God did not just come to the meeting place to issue commands and then leave; he had initiated its construction as his earthly residence among his faulty people so that he could stay as close to them as possible (Exod 25:8; cf. Lev 16:16b). It was a portable “tent”/tabernacle shrine (Exod 26) so that the Lord could move with his people when he directed them to continue their journey to the Promised Land (Num 4, 10).

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<sup>2</sup> For analysis of literary patterns in the divine speeches of Leviticus, see Wilfried Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus*, Biblical Interpretation 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

The Lord's gracious character has not changed since biblical times (cf. Mal 3:6). He does not give up on his erring children (cf. Luke 15:11-24), but keeps in touch with them, including through his sacred writings (2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Pet 1:19-21) and through his Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26; 16:7, 13-15). This ongoing, persistent parental love of God is something to celebrate!

### **Covenant Grace and Law**

The book of Leviticus situates itself within the context of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, as indicated by several factors. First, Leviticus continues the pentateuchal narrative from the book of Exodus, which recounts the establishment of God's covenant with the Israelites, his covenant instructions for them, and the construction of his covenant sanctuary residence (containing the tablets of the "testimony" to the covenant in the ark) among them (Exod 19-31, 34-40). It was at the sanctuary that God addressed Moses (Lev 1:1; 4:1; 5:14, etc.) or Aaron (10:8) or both Moses and Aaron (11:1; 13:1; 14:33; 15:1) in much of Leviticus,<sup>3</sup> and it was there that the people were to offer their sacrifices to the Lord (1:3; 3:2; 4:4, etc.; 17:3-9).

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<sup>3</sup> YHWH communicated some instructions in Leviticus to Moses on Mt. Sinai (7:38; 25:1; 26:46; 27:34).



Second, Leviticus repeatedly reminds the Israelites that YHWH is their God, who delivered them from Egypt (19:36; 23:43; 25:42, 55; 26:13) in order to be their God (11:45; 22:33; 25:38; 26:45), and he made a covenant with them at that time (26:45). This deliverance, motivated by divine love and grace, constituted the historical basis for Israel's covenant with the Lord (cf., e.g., Exod 19:4-6; 20:2; Deut 4:37).<sup>4</sup>

Third, rituals prescribed in Leviticus signify the divine-human covenant. The Lord commanded the Israelites to offer salt with all their sacrificial offerings, describing this ingredient as “the salt of the covenant with your God” (Lev 2:13). The “bread of the Presence” (so-called “shewbread”) on the golden table in the outer sanctum of the sanctuary, which the priest was to renew regularly every Sabbath (24:5-8a), “is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever” (v. 8b).

Fourth, the first conclusion to the book of Leviticus in chapter 26 consists of covenant blessings and curses that explicitly place

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<sup>4</sup> Compare historical prologues in ancient Near Eastern treaty formulations. For comparison between such treaties and the covenant between YHWH and Israel, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 95–109 (esp. 102 on “Historical Prologue”). For the treaty texts themselves, see Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012).

obedience to all of God's commandments within the context of his covenant with Israel (vv. 9, 15, 25; cf. vv. 44-45).<sup>5</sup>

Leviticus shows YHWH's covenant grace in chapters 1-16 through ways in which he made himself accessible to faulty human beings and remedied their sins and impurities, as represented through rituals. Then the book presents divine laws in chapters 17-27, in which God taught his people how to live in harmony with his holiness. The order in Leviticus is not law and grace, but grace and then law. This corresponds to the order in Exodus, where law is also placed within a covenant framework, based on pre-existing grace: God delivered the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 7-15) and then established his covenant (including laws as covenant stipulations) with them (Exod 19-23).<sup>6</sup>

Law-keeping could not be the means of deliverance for God's covenant people because he had already delivered them. Rather, obedience was the way in which they could continue to accept his free gift of freedom to a higher quality life of continuing freedom from

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<sup>5</sup> Compare blessings and curses in ancient Near Eastern treaty formulations, on which see Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 95-109 (see esp. 104-5 on "Curses and Blessings").

<sup>6</sup> In Exod 20:2, introducing the Ten Commandments, God reminded his people that he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Compare Gen 7-9, where God first saved Noah, his family, and many living creatures from the great Flood and then established his covenant with them. The covenant included some stipulations (9:4-6).

distress. Thus, at the conclusion to YHWH's covenant blessings for those who would be obedient, he declared, "I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect" (Lev 26:13), that is, not bearing heavy burdens imposed by Egyptian slave-masters (cf. Exod 1:11). The Lord who loved his people had liberated them so that they could keep on living as free people.

Grace and law are not really separate in Leviticus, but intermingled. It is true that the contents of Leviticus 1-16 emphasize divine grace through ritual prefigurations of Christ's sacrifice and through remedies for impurities that involve symptoms of mortality (see further below). But in chapters 1-7 and 11-16, these ritual enactments are prescribed in the literary genre of law, and the narrative of chapters 8-9 describes fulfillment of ritual laws.

Conversely, there is also a lot of grace in the laws of Leviticus 17-27, the so-called "Holiness Code."<sup>7</sup> Here is where most reminders of divine deliverance from Egypt appear in Leviticus (see above), as well as the promise to give the fertile land of Canaan to the Israelites (20:24; 25:38; cf. 18:3; 25:18-19). This is also where God's call to

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<sup>7</sup> A number of scholars regard the Holiness Code as consisting of Lev 17-26, with Lev 27 as an appendix.

“be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2) includes explicit expression of the overarching principle, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 18; quoted by Jesus in Matt 22:39 and by Paul in Rom 13:9). If emulating the Lord’s holy character involves loving others, then love must be an essential part of his character, as the Bible affirms elsewhere (e.g., 1 John 4:8, 16 - “God is love”).

Less obvious indicators of divine grace in Leviticus 17-27 are instructions to benefit God’s people in many areas of their lives (see further below). Modern people often tend to think of laws as burdensome, but God’s laws are a remarkable gift. Ancient non-Israelites suffered from fear of offending gods whose will was not adequately known to them. Thus, for example, a Mesopotamian “righteous sufferer” lamented: “I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to a god! What seems good to one’s self could be an offense to a god, What in one’s own heart seems abominable could be good to one’s god!”<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the God of Israel not only revealed His will in many instructions; he also provided for ritual remedies when

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<sup>8</sup> William W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997, 2000, 2002), 1.153: 488.

people made mistakes.<sup>9</sup> No wonder David could sing, “the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart” (Ps 19:8 [Hebrew v. 9])!

God continues to give grace and guidance for living, in that order, to his “new covenant” people. Grace comes first: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8), and “For by grace you have been saved through faith...not a result of works” (Eph 2:8-9). It is God’s gift of grace, reorienting our lives, that makes it possible for us to live in harmony with him: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (v. 10). Guidance for walking in good works comes from all Scripture (including Leviticus), which “is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Included in Scripture are the four Gospels that record the life of Christ, whose selfless sacrifice to save sinners was foreshadowed

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<sup>9</sup> On this contrast with ancient Near Eastern deities, see Roy E. Gane, “Leviticus,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:294.

in the animal sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus (cf. John 1:29; Heb 9:6-10:18). It is Christ who provides the ultimate revelation of God's love, and his example supplies the most powerful guidance and inspiration for holy living (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:5-8; Pet 2:21-23).

## **II. God's Interactions With Fallen Human Beings**

Leviticus shows a number of ways in which God interacted with his Israelite people as they cooperated with him. First, he spoke to Moses and sometimes to Aaron in order to give them instructions (see above). Second, he accepted sacrificial worship offered by his people at his sanctuary, showing his acceptance of them (e.g., Lev 1:3-4, 9; 19:5; 22:19, 21, 29),<sup>10</sup> most dramatically when "fire came out from before the Lord" and consumed the inaugural sacrifices (9:24) offered by the newly consecrated priests (vv. 8-21). Third, he implicitly and explicitly promised to receive their sincere confessions of their sins (5:5; 26:40-42).

These divine interactions with faulty human beings reveal ways in which our loving God continues relating to his people, including modern Christians. First, he keeps on communicating his

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lev 23:11 of the first sheaf of barley that a priest was to dedicate by raising (not waving) it before the Lord: "so that you may be accepted."

will to us (see above). Second, he accepts worship directed to him (Rev 5:14), that is, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb” (v. 13). This verse portrays the divine Christ as “the Lamb,” the ultimate sacrificial victim (cf. vv. 6, 9, 12; John 1:29), who has “ransomed people for God” (cf. Rev 5:9) and has “made them a kingdom and priests to our God” (v. 10; cf. Exod 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9). Third, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

When we receive the gifts of God’s interactions, we can “rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:11; cf. vv. 1-2). The following subsections focus on ways in which the Israelite ritual worship system, involving the second of the three kinds of interaction listed above, contributes to our understanding of joyful obedience in Leviticus. These subsections discuss individual sacrifices, various aspects of the ritual system, sacred times, and the transfer of sins and impurities to and from the sanctuary.

### **Individual Sacrifices**

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Rituals directed by God's instructions for interaction with him were acted out prayers that not only communicated; they symbolically accomplished various divine-human transactions. God's hand did not appear from the sky to take the sacrificial gifts that his people offered to him.<sup>11</sup> Rather, he accepted them on his altar to be utilized for him by burning them in the fire that he had lit (Lev 9:24) and that was continually kept burning (6:2, 5-6 [Eng. vv. 9, 12-13]) so that their smoke ascended to him as a pleasing aroma (1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, etc.), like incense.<sup>12</sup>

The Israelites knew that the fire on the altar was divine because they had seen it lit from fire that came out from before the Lord at his sanctuary (Lev 9:24a). They grasped the significance of this awesome fire that consumed the inaugural sacrifices, thereby accepting their obedience in constructing the sanctuary and worshiping him there according to his directions. Their response was

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<sup>11</sup> A sacrifice is an offering given to a deity in a ritual manner.

<sup>12</sup> The verb for burning sacrifices on the altar in Lev 1:9, etc., is *hiqtir* (Hiphil of *q-t-r*), which means, "cause to go up in smoke" (Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. [Leiden: Brill, 1994-1999], 3:1094). The noun *qetoret*, "incense," is derived from the same Hebrew root. Note that YHWH is a celestial deity who resided not only at the Israelite sanctuary, but also up in heaven (e.g., Ps 11:4), toward which sacrificial smoke arose.



a joyful shout as they fell on their faces in a gesture of humble worship (v. 24b).<sup>13</sup> Obedience resulted in joy.

The sacrifices were food for YHWH (Num 28:2; cf. *'iššeh*, “food offering” [ESV] in Lev 1:9, 13, 17, 2:2, etc.),<sup>14</sup> but he did not need them for his own sustenance (Ps 50:12-13). They were tokens of relationship analogous to table fellowship in human society, as when Abraham provided hospitality for three strangers, one of whom turned out to be the Lord (Gen 18). By following God’s instructions for worship at “the entrance of the tent of meeting” (Lev 1:3, 5; 3:2; 4:4, etc.), i.e., in the sanctuary courtyard, sincere Israelites opened their hearts and lives to a dynamic, satisfying, and secure relationship with him. Now we have a greater opportunity by receiving the sacrificed, risen, and glorified Christ, who says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

Leviticus 1-7 provide instructions for five major kinds of sacrifices that individual Israelites could offer to the Lord: burnt

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<sup>13</sup> Compare the awestruck response of the northern Israelites when YHWH’s fire consumed Elijah’s burnt offering on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 18:38-39).

<sup>14</sup> For this interpretation of *'iššeh* as a gift of food (also with NIV 2011, CEB, and NET Bible), rather than the common rendering, “offering (made) by fire” (e.g., NKJV, NRSV, NJPS, NASB 1995), see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 161-2.

offering, grain offering, well-being (so-called “peace” or “fellowship”) offering, purification (so-called “sin”) offering, and reparation (so-called “guilt”) offering. Through burnt offerings (Lev 1), Israelites could invoke God for a variety of reasons, including to receive expiation (v. 4) for sins that were outside the scope of other kinds of sacrifices (cf. expiatory burnt offerings in Job 1:5; 42:8-9). The people could render homage to the Lord as his subjects by giving him grain offerings (Hebrew *minḥah*; Lev 2; cf. 6:7-16 [Eng. 14-23]).<sup>15</sup> Through subcategories of well-being offerings, they could offer various kinds of happy expressions, such as giving thanks, fulfilling vows, or simply signifying devotion to the Lord through freewill offerings (7:11-16).<sup>16</sup> If they had sinned by violating certain kinds of divine commands, they could gain expiation leading to forgiveness through purification or reparation offerings.

The first three kinds of sacrifices—burnt, grain, and well-being offerings—were voluntary, and the last two—purification and

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<sup>15</sup> Compare non-sacrificial usage of *minḥah* for a gift to express homage (e.g., Gen 43:11, 15, 25-26).

<sup>16</sup> Allen P. Ross comments on the well-being offering, which he calls the “peace offering”: “the goal of the ritual (and the underlying theme of the teachings of Leviticus) is joy and gratitude in the presence of God. After all, the message is that the entrance of believers into the presence of God is by God’s gracious provision of a sacrifice that brings peace with him” (*Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 121).

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reparation offerings—were mandatory if people committed certain kinds of sins. Samuel E. Balentine comments on this order of sacrifices:

Given the demonstrable and chronic human need for forgiveness, one might well expect that Israel's instructions for approaching God would necessarily begin with the summons to bring expiatory gifts. In an evocative reversal of expectations, Leviticus begins with an emphasis not on sin and its required atonement but on joy and its spontaneous expression through voluntary gifts. From a priestly perspective, the God who covenants with such a frail and faulty people still hopes and expects that joy, not guilt, will be the primary motivation for the worship Israel will offer.<sup>17</sup>

The repeated rituals prescribed by Leviticus could not actually save anyone (Heb 10:1-4), but if Israelites performed them sincerely with faith, they received the benefit of Christ's future "once for all" sacrifice (Heb 9:26; cf. 7:27; 10:10). Moreover, the animal sacrifices reveal rich accomplishments of Christ's sacrifice that otherwise could be missed, just as an anatomy and physiology textbook elucidates the astounding complexity of the human body by breaking it down into simpler and more comprehensible parts. Like such a textbook, Leviticus is not nearly as beautiful as that which it explains, but its

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2002), 38.

light shows Christ's sacrifice to be far more glorious than previously understood.

Correlations with New Testament passages show that distinctive aspects of the animal sacrifices prefigured aspects of Christ and his sacrifice:<sup>18</sup>

The burnt offering was wholly burned up on the altar for God (Lev 1),<sup>19</sup> except that the hide of a herd or flock animal victim belonged to the officiating priest (7:8). Thus, Christ "offered up himself" (Heb 7:27), that is, all of himself.

The grain offering was an offering of basic food (Lev 2), pointing to Christ as the greater "bread of life" who gives eternal life (John 6:33, 35, 48-51).

The offerer of a sacrifice of well-being offering (Lev 3) was to eat the meat after the priest burned the fat on the altar for God and took his priestly portions (7:15-21, 29-36). So the offerer gained physical sustenance from the sacrifice, foreshadowing the spiritual life that people gain from Christ, their sacrifice (cf. 1 Cor 5:7),<sup>20</sup> when

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Roy Gane, *The Sanctuary and Salvation: The Practical Significance of Christ's Sacrifice and Priesthood* (Madrid, Spain: Editorial Safeliz, 2019), 62-63, 77, 84, 87-88, 94, 97, 100-101.

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew name of this kind of sacrifice is 'olah, which literally means "ascending," i.e. in this context, burned up.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor 5:7 refers to Christ as "our Passover lamb." Like the well-being offering, which belonged to the *zebah* category of sacrifices (e.g., Lev 3:1, 3, 6, etc.), from which the offerer(s) ate (cf. Gen 31:5),

they symbolically consume his “flesh” (John 6:51-58) by receiving his words (v. 63).

Purification offerings were mandatory for lesser sins that were unintentional (Lev 4) or involved withholding testimony (5:1) or that resulted from forgetfulness to undergo purification or to fulfill a vow in a timely manner (vv. 2-4). Purification offerings, often with supplementary burnt offerings, could also remedy severe physical ritual impurities (12:6-8; 14:19-20, 30-31, etc.; see further below). The blood of a purification offering was daubed on the horns (projections from the upper four corners) of the altar by the priest (4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34), by contrast with other sacrifices, in which the priest just tossed the blood around the sides of the altar (1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; 7:2). Thus, the purification offering highlighted the lifeblood, which represented the means of ransoming human life (Lev 17:11). According to the New Testament, Christ gave his life “as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45) and “we have redemption through his blood” (Eph 1:7; cf. Rom 3:25; 5:9; Heb 9:12).

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the Passover lamb was also a *zebah* (Exod 12:27) that the Israelites were to eat (vv. 4, 7-11).

The reparation offering remedied sins of sacrilege (Hebrew *ma'al*) that incurred economic debt, whether due to misappropriation of the Lord's sacred things (Lev 5:14-16) or using a false oath in YHWH's holy name to defraud another human being (6:1-7 [Hebrew 5:20-26]).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, before offering the sacrifice, the repentant sinner was required to make restitution for the economic loss to God or to the human party and to pay an additional penalty of one-fifth = 20% (5:16, 24 [Eng. 6:5]; Num 5:7). This shows that when God's people committed wrong against him or others, they were to put things right as best they could before giving him a sacrificial offering at the altar (cf. Matt 5:23-24). The sacrifice, foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice, was the means by which the sinner could receive expiation and divine forgiveness for the debt of sin (Lev 5:16, 26 [Eng. 6:7]; cf. Matt 6:12—"and forgive us our debts").

Modern Christians can find joy in Leviticus by discovering ways in which they can interact with God by following underlying principles encapsulated in the ancient animal sacrifices. We are not required to offer such sacrifices because the event that they

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<sup>21</sup> On sacrilege remedied by the reparation offering, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 345-56.

prophesied—Christ’s sacrifice—has been fulfilled (e.g., 1 Cor 5:7; Col 2:13-17; Heb 9:7-28; 10:1-14) and he has transferred his place of ministry to God’s temple in heaven (Hebrews, esp. chs. 8-9). But we can interact with God through prayer<sup>22</sup> and thereby receive the kinds of transactions that the animal sacrifices symbolized. Like the sacrifices, our prayers are of various kinds. Some are expressions of joy, like well-being offerings. Others begin with sorrow for sin and repentance, like expiatory burnt, purification, or reparation offerings, but end with praise for God’s grace because we have the assurance of forgiveness (cf. Ps 51).

### **Various Aspects of the Ritual System**

Other aspects of the ritual system show additional divine principles that are worth celebrating. Here are a few examples. First, God provided for sacrifices that poor people could afford to give, which carried the same transactional value as sacrifices of more expensive offering materials (Lev 1:14-17; 5:7-13; 12:8; 14:21-32). Thus the Lord showed that his grace is accessible to everyone (cf.

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<sup>22</sup> See Ps 141:2: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!”

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Titus 2:11) and that he does not require more than what people are able to give.

Second, Israelites who sinned unintentionally were not required to offer an expiatory sacrifice until they came to know what they had done wrong (Lev 4:13-14, 22-23, 27-28; cf. 5:2-5 after forgetting an obligation).<sup>23</sup> Again, God's requirements for obedience to his commands are reasonable.

Third, purification offerings<sup>24</sup> removed residues of major physical ritual impurities that had been caused by genital flows, skin disease, and corpses (see esp. Lev 12:6-8; 14:19, 31; 15:15, 30; Num 19),<sup>25</sup> which represented the birth-to-death cycle of the state of mortality<sup>26</sup> that results from sinful action (cf. Rom 6:23a). Impurities had to be controlled so that they did not defile objects and spaces belonging to the sacred sphere connected to the presence of YHWH, the source and sustainer of all life (cf. Gen 1-2; Job 12:10; Ps 145:15-

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<sup>23</sup> In Lev 5:17-19, a person who sins unconsciously or accidentally and subsequently realizes his/her guilt by experiencing adverse circumstances indicating divine disapproval offers a reparation offering.

<sup>24</sup> Often supplemented by burnt offerings to make what amounted to greater purification offerings (e.g., Lev 12:6, 8; 14:19, 31; 15:15, 30).

<sup>25</sup> Num 19:9 labels the red cow "a purification offering."

<sup>26</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60; cf. 31-2, 48-50, 207-8.

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16; Dan 5:23). Holiness involves life, the opposite of mortality and death.

Purification offerings prefigured Christ's sacrifice, which ultimately will result in the end of mortality for those who believe in him (John 3:16; Rom 6:23b). Already during Christ's ministry on earth, he healed people from serious sources of physical ritual impurities (e.g., Matt 8:2-3; 9:20-22; Luke 17:12-14) and raised some dead people (e.g., Luke 7:12-15; 8:49-55; John 11:43-44), pointing to a future time when death and disease will be no more.<sup>27</sup> We do not need to observe the biblical regulations regarding physical ritual impurities<sup>28</sup> now that Christ is ministering in God's heavenly temple and the divine Presence no longer resides in a sanctuary/temple on earth. But the purity rules in the Pentateuch teach us that impurity/mortality and holiness/life are incompatible and that God provides the remedy to take us from mortality to holy eternal life.

Fourth, God directed the Israelites to bring olive oil for the lamps on the lampstand in the sanctuary so that the priest could

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Thiessen has shown that Jesus did not oppose the biblical regulations regarding physical ritual impurities. Rather, he removed sources of impurity by healing people (*Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020]).

<sup>28</sup> These regulations do not include the dietary distinctions between animals that are fit ("pure") or unfit ("impure") to eat in Lev 11 and Deut 14 (Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 188).

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arrange it to burn regularly throughout each night, from evening until morning (Exod 27:20-21; Lev 24:1-4). By having his light on all night in his house, the Lord implicitly conveyed a message: “See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!” (Ps 121:4 NJPS).<sup>29</sup> This assurance also belongs to modern Christian people, who can rest assured that God continues to watch over us (cf. Matt 10:29-31; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 Pet 1:5).

Fifth, the priest was to place twelve large loaves of bread, one for each Israelite tribe, in two piles of six loaves each before YHWH on the golden table in the sanctuary (Lev 24:5-6). He was to put frankincense as a “memorial portion” on each pile (v. 7). The priest was to place new bread on the table every Sabbath day, and it was an eternal covenant between the Israelites and YHWH (v. 8). Then the priests were to eat the old bread (v. 9), presumably after burning the

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. the fact that the cups on the lampstand in the sanctuary were shaped like almond blossoms (Exod 25:33-34; 37:19-20). The Hebrew word for “almond tree” or “almond nuts” is *šaqed*, from the root *š-q-d*, of which the Qal verb means “watch, be wakeful.” The almond tree is the “watching one” because it “is the first of the trees to come into blossom at the end of January or at the beginning of February” (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4:1638). This explains God’s object lesson to Jeremiah: an almond branch signifying that the Lord is watching over his word to perform it (Jer 1:11-12). Thus, the shapes of almond blossoms on the sanctuary lampstand implicitly reinforced the idea of God’s watchfulness.

frankincense.<sup>30</sup> Other ancient Near Eastern peoples fed their gods twice per day,<sup>31</sup> but Israel's deity received his bread only once per week, and then he gave it to his priests to eat. Thus, the "bread of the Presence" (cf. Exod 25:30; 35:13, etc.) in the Israelite sanctuary was a token acknowledgment of God's regular provision for his covenant people as their Creator. They appropriately gave it to him every Sabbath day, which commemorated Creation (cf. Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11; 31:17). This ritual emphasized that God not only created human beings; he continues to sustain the lives of his creatures (Job 12:10; Ps 145:15-16; Dan 5:23), including us.<sup>32</sup>

### Sacred Times

Leviticus 23 presents a calendar of sacred times. Sabbath rest is the first of these (v. 3). Its position here is in accordance with its biblical role as the foundation of all sacred time. The requirement to rest on the seventh day of every week<sup>33</sup> is based on God's example

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<sup>30</sup> In other contexts, a memorial portion ('*azkarah*) was burned (Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12; 6:8 [Eng. v. 15]; Num 5:26).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 343-4; A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 188-9.

<sup>32</sup> Roy Gane, "Bread of the Presence' and Creator-in-Residence," *Vetus Testamentum* 42:179-203.

<sup>33</sup> Lev 23:3 calls the seventh-day Sabbath a *miqra' qodeš*, which ESV and other English versions (e.g., NKJV, NRSV, NASB 1995) mistranslate as "a holy convocation" (cf. NET Bible: "a holy

when he rested at the end of the first week after completing the Creation of our world, satisfied with the very good things that he had made (Gen 1:31-2:3; cf. Exod 20:11; 31:17). This cyclical holy time is unchangeable because it is based on a historical event that occurred at that time. It has never been a temporary ritual “type” of a later and greater reality<sup>34</sup> because it was established before the Fall into sin, before there was even a need for such temporary types to foreshadow future salvific events.

As affirmed by Leviticus, the Sabbath benefits all who acknowledge that God is the Creator, as Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). By claiming to be the lord of the Sabbath (v. 28), Christ asserted that he is the Creator (cf. John 1:3; Heb 1:2). Just as God instituted the Sabbath by his example, Jesus reaffirmed

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assembly”), implying that the Israelites were required to go to the sanctuary to worship at that time, as we go to church. But Israelite males were required to regularly travel to the sanctuary only for the three pilgrim festivals: Unleavened Bread, Weeks/Harvest, and Booths/Ingathering (Exod 23:14-17; 34:18, 22-24). The expression *miqra' qodes'*, which also applies to annual (including non-pilgrim) festival days in Lev 23 (see esp. v. 4), means “a proclamation of holiness” (see vv. 2, 4, where these days are to be proclaimed [verb from the same root *q-r-*]), i.e., “a sacred occasion” (so NJPS; cf. CEB: “a holy occasion”).

<sup>34</sup> Such as the “Sabbath rest” experience of believers that they enjoy every day of the week (Heb 4:1-11), which already was available to people in Old Testament times (Hebrews citing Ps 95:7-11) while they were keeping the weekly Sabbath, indicating that the seventh-day Sabbath was not a type to be superseded by the broader experience of “rest.” In the Greek of Col 2:16-17, it is not basic rest on the weekly Sabbath that is a “shadow [i.e., type] of the things that are to come” (words in brackets supplied), but sacral eating and drinking on the Sabbath, as well as on new moons and annual festivals (e.g., Lev 7:15-16; Deut 12:6-7), accompanying sacrifices on those days (e.g., Num 28-29; 2 Chr 8:13; Ezek 45:17; see Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 357-8; Jônatas Ferreira, “Exegeting Phrase-Level Parataxis as a Grammatical Unit: Colossians 2:16 as a Test Case,” paper presented Feb. 8, 2020 at the Midwest Region Society of Biblical Literature, St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana).

and reformed it by his example (e.g., Luke 4:16).<sup>35</sup> It would not have made sense for him to invest so much in reforming the Sabbath, especially by bringing joy to sufferers by healing them on that day,<sup>36</sup> thereby incurring the lethal anger of legalists (Matt 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:2-18; 9:1-16), if he intended to subsequently take God's gift of this sacred rest day away from Christians.

The fact that God calls people to acknowledge his creative work by the easy requirement to enjoy pleasant and rejuvenating rest correlates with Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30). Obeying the command to rest on the Sabbath accepts freedom from slavery to work, including working to obtain salvation, that God gives through his creative and redemptive work for us (see Deut 5:15, where deliverance is the motivation for keeping the Sabbath). This is the opposite of legalism.

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<sup>35</sup> Also, after Jesus said "It is finished" and died (John 19:30), he remained in the tomb on the Sabbath (cf. Luke 23:53-56) before his resurrection on the first day of the week (24:1-7), after which he traveled on this first day as on a normal weekday (e.g., vv. 13-31). Thus, Jesus rested on the Sabbath after he completed his life and sacrificial death to provide re-creation, just as God rested on the Sabbath after finishing the initial Creation (Gen 2:2-3).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 175, regarding Jesus healing on the Sabbath: "the deeds Jesus performs actually increase joy. He does not merely visit the sick; rather, he heals and restores them, making them whole again. He has moved them from the realm of death to the realm of life."

After the reminder regarding the Sabbath, Leviticus 23 provides instructions for several annual sacred occasions. The first and last of these—Passover with the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the spring (vv. 5-8) and the Festival of Booths in the autumn (vv. 34-36, 39-43)—commemorated stages of God’s historical deliverance of Israel. At that time, he brought his people out of Egypt (so Passover and Unleavened Bread; cf. Exod 12-13), provided for them in the wilderness, and took them to the Promised Land of Canaan (so Booths; see Lev 23:40, 42-43). Unlike the historical event behind the weekly Sabbath, which involved the entire world, the events behind the Israelite annual festivals directly related only to the chosen covenant people.<sup>37</sup>

Jesus transformed the Passover service into a new Christian celebration of the “new covenant” that is ratified by means of his blood (Matt 26:26-29; 1 Cor 11:23-26). This celebration is variously known as the “Lord’s Supper,” “Communion,” or the “Eucharist.”

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<sup>37</sup> Following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, Jewish people have continued to keep adapted forms of the festivals, but nobody can keep them in the biblical way because it is impossible to perform the sacrifices that were integral to the festival requirements (Lev 23 and esp. Num 28-29).

The historical event behind this service has a worldwide rather than national scope: accomplishment of God's means of our deliverance from "the domain of darkness...to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13), that is, salvation from cruel Satan and sin, rather than from the human pharaoh and slavery in Egypt.

Several of the Israelite sacred occasions celebrated agricultural harvests that were possible because of God's ongoing creative activity. At the beginning of the barley harvest in the spring, at the time of the Festival of Unleavened bread, the people were to bring to the priest a sheaf from the first of the barley that was gathered. He was to raise (not wave) it in a gesture of dedication to the Lord as a "firstfruits" offering (Lev 23:10-12, 15).<sup>38</sup> According to 1 Corinthians 15:20, the firstfruits offering of grain that sustains mortal life typified the resurrected Christ as the firstfruits of many who will be raised from the dead to eternal life when Christ comes again (cf. vv. 21-26).

Fifty days after the raised barley sheaf offering was the Festival of Weeks, otherwise known as Pentecost (Lev 23:15-17). On this day, which celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest, the

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<sup>38</sup> On lifting/raising, rather than waving, as the motion denoted by the verb *henip* (Hiphil of *n-w-p*, as in Lev 23:11-12) and the noun *tenupah*, from the same root (as in v. 15), see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 469-70.

Israelites were to present to the Lord two loaves of leavened bread made from the newly harvested wheat as a firstfruits offering (vv. 17, 20). After Christ ascended to heaven (Acts 1), it was on the day of Pentecost that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brought an initial great “harvest” of people into the Christian movement (Acts 2; see esp. v. 41).<sup>39</sup> Thus, provision for physical life at the wheat harvest pointed forward to provision for spiritual life through God’s Spirit, who continues to transform lives (Titus 3:4-7; cf. John 3:5-8) and to “seal” believers for God, meaning that they belong to him (Eph 1:13-14).

The last of the Israelite annual sacred occasions was the Festival of Booths in the seventh month of the year, in the autumn, when various crops had been harvested (Lev 23:33-36, 39-43). This was the climax of thanksgiving to God for his agricultural bounty, so the priests offered more sacrifices (mainly burnt offerings) on behalf of all Israel than at any other time (Num 29:13-34). Leviticus explicitly calls for this to be a time of rejoicing: “And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and

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<sup>39</sup> For the metaphor of “harvest” referring to conversions, see Jesus’ words in John 4:35: “the fields are white for harvest.”



boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days” (Lev 23:40). It appears that the fruit and branches of trees would celebrate God’s gift of the fertile land of Canaan (cf. Deut 8:7-10).<sup>40</sup> During the festival, the Israelites were to dwell in makeshift shelters/booths in order to re-live the experience of those whom God had led through the wilderness, who stayed in such temporary shelters (vv. 42-43). Christians are not required to dwell in booths, but we will rejoice in God’s presence in the ultimate Promised Land of the new earth, where we will enjoy the fruit of the most splendid tree of all: the tree of life (Rev 21-22).<sup>41</sup>

The autumn festivals of the seventh month (Tishri) were introduced by “a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets” on the first day of the seventh month (Lev 23:24).<sup>42</sup> The Hebrew word translated “proclaimed with blast of trumpets” is *teru’ah*. Elsewhere, this term denotes a joyful shout, such as acclamation of YHWH as king (Num 23:21) or expressing jubilation when the ark of the

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<sup>40</sup> Baruch A. Levine comments: “This greenery symbolizes the abundance of water and oases and the beauty of the Land of Israel” (*Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 163).

<sup>41</sup> Ross observes that the Festival of Booths (which he calls the “Feast of Tabernacles”) “became a picture of the great ingathering and rejoicing at the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, his peaceful and prosperous reign at the end of the age” (*Holiness to the Lord*, 438).

<sup>42</sup> Later this day became the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) that begins the civil year, although months of the religious year continue to be counted from the first month of Nisan in the spring (Exod 12:2).

covenant was moved to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:15). In other contexts, a *teru'ah* is a horn or trumpet blast that could serve as a signal for the Israelites to break camp and begin their journey (Num 10:5-6), go to war against their enemies (v. 9), or begin the Jubilee year of release (Lev 25:9).

The function of *teru'ah* that seems to best fit the context of the first day of the seventh month is joyful (re-)acclamation of YHWH as the king of Israel, this time most likely by trumpets (although trumpets are not specified in Lev 23:24), rather than shouting.<sup>43</sup> The Lord's sovereignty and beneficent reign over his people continues for Christians and is a major cause for celebration in the book of Revelation: "Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever'" (11:15; cf. vv. 16-18; 19:6).

Ten days later on the Day of Atonement, the Lord judged between his loyal and disloyal people (see below), similarly to the

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<sup>43</sup> According to Num 10:10, a different kind of trumpet blast (verb *t-q-*) would serve as a reminder of the Israelites before God on festival days and at the beginnings of months. However, *teru'ah* blasts on a horn would announce the beginning of the Jubilee year on the tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9). Cf. trumpet blasts (*t-q-*) to proclaim that an individual had begun to reign as king (1 Kgs 1:34, 39; 2 Kgs 9:13).

way in which newly enthroned human kings ensured the safety of their reigns and their people by judging their subjects (e.g., 1 Kgs 2). The next section of this essay further discusses the Day of Atonement.

### **Transfer of Sins and Impurities to and from the Sanctuary**

The Day of Atonement was the most solemn and awesome day of the Israelite religious year, and what it teaches about God's plan for saving people provides a major reason for profound joy.<sup>44</sup> First, only on this day did YHWH permit a human being—the high priest—to approach his immediate presence in the most holy apartment of his sanctuary (Lev 16:2-17). This is a harbinger of future restoration when all who are saved will be able to live in God's presence (Rev 21:3, 22-23; 22:3-5).

Second, special purification offerings on this day symbolically removed physical ritual impurities, unforgiveable sins of rebellion (*peša'*), and forgiveable sins from the sanctuary (Lev 16:16).<sup>45</sup> This

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<sup>44</sup> Rabbinic tradition recorded in the *Mishnah* speaks of happiness and celebration on the Day of Atonement: *Ta'anit* 4:8 describes Jerusalemite maidens dancing in vineyards on this day, when men could choose them as their wives (cf. Judg 21:19-21), and according to *Yoma* 7:4, the high priest would have a party for his friends at his house after he safely came forth from his close encounter with the Lord in the sanctuary.

<sup>45</sup> *Peša'* sins only appear here and in v. 21 (also on the Day of Atonement) in all of pentateuchal ritual law. There is no evidence that those who committed such sins could gain forgiveness for them through sacrificial expiation, although these sins had to be removed from the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. The sins that could be expiated by sacrifices, prerequisite to forgiveness, were *ḥaṭṭa't* sins (e.g. Lev 4-5; also indicated by the verb from the root *h-t-'*).

purgation of God's house, representing his authority and reputation, signified his purity and vindicated his justice after he had forgiven guilty but repentant and loyal people throughout the year (4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13) and when he condemned those who were disloyal (e.g., 7:20-21, 25, 27; 20:3; 23:29-30; Num 15:30-31).

It is remarkable that YHWH allowed his sanctuary, the place that represented him on earth, to be vulnerable and affected by human faultiness and faults through purification offerings that removed residues of major physical ritual impurities and of minor sins.<sup>46</sup> When God forgave sins throughout the year, he bore judicial responsibility because a judge should acquit/vindicate those who are innocent and condemn the guilty (Deut 25:1; 1 Kgs 8:32—of YHWH), not forgive the guilty.

The Day of Atonement rituals signified that the Lord was just when he had forgiven repentant sinners who accepted the sacrificial remedies that he had provided, which prefigured Christ's sacrifice. Because God was vindicated in having forgiven them, they were

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<sup>46</sup> Blood of a purification offering that spattered on a garment at the time of slaughter had to be washed off because it carried residual defilement that had come from the offerer (Lev 6:20 [Eng. v. 27]). So when the officiating priest daubed blood from the same animal on the horns of the altar (4:25, 30, 34), the sanctuary also received residual defilement from the offerer (cf. Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005], 167-81, 276).

secondarily vindicated as morally pure when they demonstrated their ongoing repentance and loyalty by practicing self-denial (fasting, etc.) and abstaining from work on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31).

This day of judgment for the Israelites did not bring up their sins in the sense that their earlier forgiveness was nullified or irrelevant so that they had to be forgiven all over again.<sup>47</sup> Rather, it provided removal/purgation<sup>48</sup> beyond forgiveness, reaffirming the forgiveness that God had already given them throughout the year and setting their assurance in concrete.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the Day of Atonement rituals dramatically demonstrated the future reality that, as a result of Christ's sacrifice, God is just when he justifies "the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:24-26).<sup>50</sup>

A third element of the Day of Atonement was the banishment of a live goat belonging to a personality called "Azazel," as distinguished from YHWH, who owned a goat that was sacrificed to

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<sup>47</sup> Against two millennia of misconception since the time of the *Temple Scroll* 26:9-10, which wrongly (importing from Lev 4:20-21) states that the special purification offering goat of the non-priestly community on the Day of Atonement provides forgiveness for the people. But there is no mention of forgiveness in any biblical Day of Atonement text (Lev 16; 23:26-32; 25:9; Num 29:7-11).

<sup>48</sup> Verb *kipper*, Piel of *k-p-r*, commonly translated "make atonement"; e.g., NKJV, NRSV, NASB 1995, ESV, NET Bible, but NJPS renders the verb "purge" in Lev 16:16. William Gilders interprets the basic meaning of *kipper* as "effect removal" (*Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004], 29).

<sup>49</sup> See Gane, *Cult and Character*, 274-84.

<sup>50</sup> Compare the vindication of God in Dan 7-8 through an eschatological judgment that parallels the justifying of his sanctuary.

him as a purification offering. After the ritual purgation of the sanctuary that provided for the moral purification of the Israelites (Lev 16:20, 30 and see above), the nonsacrificial live goat carried the moral faults of the Israelites away from their camp into the wilderness to Azazel (Lev 16:8, 10, 20-22). This elimination ritual commanded by YHWH dumped the moral toxic waste of the Israelites in Azazel's territory, indicating that Azazel was YHWH's archenemy and the source of the Israelites' sins. Therefore, it seems clear that he is a demon, namely Satan. He does not bear the sins of the Israelites as their substitute, as Christ does. Rather, he is responsible for his own part in their sins because he is the originator of sin, the deceiver/tempter (Gen 3; Matt 4:1-10; Rev 12:9), and the malicious false witness who accuses God's people even after they are forgiven (v. 10; cf. Deut 19:16-21 regarding punishment of a false witness).<sup>51</sup> The live goat ritual on the Day of Atonement teaches that Satan's destructive and oppressive career will end with his isolation, pending his destruction, so God's loyal people will forever enjoy freedom from his temptations and plots against them (Rev 20:1-3, 10).

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<sup>51</sup> Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 288-91, 295-7.

### **III. Ongoing Principles Contribute to Well-Being and Happiness**

The Lord generously gave to his Israelite people the gift of his wisdom through instructions that exemplified sensible relational principles to guide many aspects of their lives for their good (Deut 10:13). By following these principles concerning relationships between God and humans, between humans and other humans, and between humans and other creatures and created things, they could enjoy a peaceful, prosperous, and happy society that would be a model to the nations around them, drawing others to their God (e.g., Deut 4:5-8).<sup>52</sup>

Instructions in Leviticus 17-27 concern topics such as the following:

1. Religion, including worship practices (Lev 17:1-9; 19:5-8; 22:17-30; 24:1-9),<sup>53</sup> sacred times (19:3, 30; 23:1-44), treatment of God's holy name (19:12; 22:32; 24:15-16), dedication of gifts to God (27:1-33), priestly lifestyle and service (21:1-22:16), and prohibitions of idolatry, occult, and pagan mourning customs (18:21; 19:4, 26b-28,

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 48-74.

<sup>53</sup> The laws in Lev 22:27-28 show respect for animal life.

31; 20:1-6, 27).<sup>54</sup> Observing these instructions concerning worship and respect for God was essential for preserving and enhancing the Israelites' relationship with him. True versus false worship is a major theme in the rest of the Old Testament (e.g., Judg 2:11-3:7; 1 Kgs 11:4-13; 12:26-13:5). Although New Testament Christianity no longer has elite human priestly mediators to perform ritual worship,<sup>55</sup> worship that follows God's principles is a basic indicator of loyalty to him (Rev 13-14).

2. Diet, including respect for the lives of animals that are eaten by draining out their blood at the time of slaughter (Lev 17:10-14; 19:26a; cf. Gen 9:4; Lev 3, 17; Acts 15:20, 29—for Gentile Christians), regulation of eating meat of animals that are not slaughtered by humans (17:15-16—ritual purification required; but prohibited for eating in Exod 22:30 [Eng. v. 31]; Deut 14:21),<sup>56</sup> and maintaining personal holiness to the Lord by not eating animals that

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<sup>54</sup> See also prohibitions regarding mixtures of breeding cattle, sowing crops, and materials for cloth (Lev 19:19; cf. Deut 22:9-11), which kept these mixtures associated with the holy domain of God from diminishing the uniqueness of the sanctuary by existing outside it (Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017], 342-4).

<sup>55</sup> It only has the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9) and Christ's priesthood (Heb 7-10).

<sup>56</sup> Apparently God temporarily permitted the Israelites to eat animals that died in other ways than slaughter by humans (Lev 17:15-16) only while the people were living in the wilderness, where sources of food other than manna (Exod 16) were limited.



are “unclean,” i.e., unfit to eat, according to God (20:25-6; cf. Lev 11; Deut 14).<sup>57</sup>

3. Sexual practices (Lev 18:6-20, 22-23; 19:20-22, 29; 20:10-21). God required his holy people to be sexually pure for the well-being of their society, showing a major difference between them and the Egyptians and Canaanites. The Lord’s principles for morally and relationally healthy sexuality apply to New Testament Christians, whose lives and society are to be in harmony with God in order to rightly reflect him in the world (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1-13; Eph 5:3, 5).

4. Treatment of people, including parents (Lev 19:3; 20:9; cf. Exod 20:12 in the Decalogue), with protection, care, and respect for poor, socially weak, and elderly persons (Lev 19:9-10, 13-14, 32-34; 25:35-55), and honesty, justice, and love for others and respect for their lives and bodies (19:11, 15-18, 33-36; 24:17, 19-22). These ethical principles that contribute to a happy society benefit Christians no less than the ancient Israelites (e.g., Rom 13:8-10; Gal 2:10; Eph 4:25-28; 6:1-3; Jas 1:27).

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<sup>57</sup> On the dietary regulations and their applicability to Christians, see Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 350-58.

5. The land, including treatment of it by allowing it to rest during fallow years (Lev 25:1-7, 11-12, 20-22), treatment of its fruit trees (19:23-25; cf. Deut 20:19), and maintenance of control of ancestral agricultural parcels of land by families and restoration of such control to original land-owners at the Jubilee (50th) year (Lev 25:8-10, 13-17, 23-34). Preservation of the fertile Promised Land and keeping it equitably divided among Israelite families made it possible for each family to make an independent living through farming. If hard times forced a family to sell the use of their property, they would automatically, and no doubt joyfully, regain control of their land in the Jubilee year so that they could have a fresh start. Whether or not the Israelites actually implemented the Jubilee on a regular basis,<sup>58</sup> it was intended to “reset” the allocations of land that were established during the time of Joshua (Josh 13-19). Christians do not benefit from such a release of land today because we lack the baseline of an original distribution of ancestral land. However, we look forward to enjoying the much greater restoration of our entire earth when God will make “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), the dominion

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<sup>58</sup> On evidence for observance of the Jubilee year in Preexilic Judah, see Comment F. on Lev 25 by Lisbeth S. Fried and David N. Freedman in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2257-70.

of which will be restored to all saved children of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 1:26, 28; Dan 7:18, 22, 27; Rev 5:10; 22:5).

6. Jubilee release of persons who had sold themselves into servitude to survive during hard times (Lev 25:39-41, 47, 54). Their freedom alone would cause rejoicing, and additionally, at the same time, they would regain their own land on which to live independently (see above).

YHWH gave these instructions to his covenant people because he had separated them from other peoples so that they would be holy and would belong to him in a special way (Lev 20:24b, 26). Compare Exodus 19:5-6, where the Lord promises the Israelites: “if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Now this promise is also for Christians: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

#### **IV. Covenant Blessings and Curses**

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Leviticus 26 presents conditional covenant blessings for those who obey YHWH's commands (vv. 3-13) and conditional curses for those who disregard and rebel against them (vv. 14-39). The radical contrast between the blessings and curses (cf. Deut 28) is intended to persuade God's people to take their choices seriously because the options lead in opposite directions. Moses summarized the consequences: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse" (Deut 30:19; cf. v. 15; Isa 1:19-20).

The covenant blessings in Leviticus 26 are wonderful, including agricultural fertility resulting in plenty of food, peace and safety, military victories, and continuing freedom, with God's presence among his people in the land that he has given to them. Loyal Israelites could enjoy prosperous, comfortable, and happy lives.

God cannot bless people who rebel against him, especially when they have voluntarily entered a covenant with him (see Exod 24), or he would send the wrong message that his principles do not matter. The covenant curses for disloyal disobedience in Leviticus 26 are horrific, including defeat, famine, pestilence, cannibalism, destruction, and exile. These inspire anything but joy. However, they

are only conditional and serve a positive purpose by warning people to avoid them, and by highlighting the attractiveness of the blessings that the Lord wants to lavish on his chosen people.

It would be unloving for God to omit his statements of curses and just let people suffer bad results without having advance warning. It would also be unloving for God to allow people to start going in a self-destructive direction without allowing them to suffer initial negative results to wake them up. Thus, the Lord affirms in Revelation 3:19 for Christians: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline” (cf. Heb 12:5-11).

Strong evidence that divine discipline is intended to serve a redemptive purpose comes at the end of Leviticus 26, where the Lord promises restoration even for exiled rebels if they humble themselves, repent, and confess the wrongs that they have committed (vv. 40-45). God wants to save, rather than to destroy, if people will allow him to save them.

The New Testament affirms, continues, and expands the message of Leviticus. The Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet

3:9). He brings us from curse to blessing through Christ's sacrifice: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal 3:13-14). God also promises us a land of ultimate well-being and eternal happiness, where he will dwell among his people (Rev 21-22).

### **Conclusion**

Joy in Leviticus? This is most obvious in thanksgiving offerings (Lev 7:12-15), rejoicing at the festival of Booths (23:40), liberty for servants and release of their ancestral land at the Jubilee year (Lev 25), and covenant blessings for obedience (Lev 26). Elsewhere, joy from obedience is not so obvious, but implied.

Now I find joy everywhere in Leviticus because I see Jesus Christ throughout this book at the heart of the Torah/Pentateuch. Joy in freedom from condemnation (Rom 8:1) and peace with God (5:1) through Christ's sacrifice, as illustrated by Leviticus, naturally results in joyful eagerness to serve him as my covenant Lord and to loyally

follow his instructions. In fact, the freedom that brings joy is obedience to God:

Modern people tend to view obedience to someone else or to a law, even God's law, as a burden. It is much easier to relate to the concept of freedom, as in Jesus's statement "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). But in context, this true freedom from Jesus is liberation from being a "slave to sin" as one who practices sin (v. 34), which "is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Lawlessness is breaking God's law, for which one needs his forgiveness (Rom. 4:7–8; Heb. 10:17–18). Therefore the freedom that Christ offers is obedience to God's law. Jesus's freedom and obedience are one!<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 399.