

PART FOUR
THE HOLINESS CODE
LEVITICUS 17-27

Introduction

Introduction to Part Four: the Holiness Code (17-27)

The codification of moral and ritual law contained in these chapters presumes knowledge of the earlier writings from the Priestly School contained in Leviticus chapters one to sixteen and in parts of Exodus. It presumes, supplants and revises the law code found there. As noted in the Introduction, some of it, like some of the material in Leviticus 1-16 could express customs that had a long pre-history. The text as we have it, however, is post-exilic, and those responsible for its final composition seem to have had a hand in editing the earlier chapters.

We will attempt to point out where it differs from the earlier chapters as we comment on the text. We will restrict ourselves here to some of the key developments, the main one being its understanding of holiness. In Leviticus 1-16 holiness is limited to YHWH's dwelling and to the consecrated priests who minister in it. For the Holiness Code, all the people of Israel are called to holiness, and the whole land, which belongs to YHWH, is affected by the presence in it of the Holy One, and so can be polluted by sin (see Leviticus 18:25). The implications of this will emerge as we examine the text.

The Holiness Code shows a development, too, in concern for the underprivileged (19:9-10; 23:22). To fail to share this concern is to desecrate YHWH's holiness. It includes practical legislation to prevent people falling into the poverty trap.

The Holiness Code avoids using the word *naḥalâ* (permanent possession) for the land, using instead *'aḥuzzâ* (holding). This acts as a constant reminder that the land belongs to YHWH, not Israel, and it can always be lost if Israel does not obey its Lord – a lesson underlined by the exile.

Separation (*hibdîl*) from other nations is central to the Holiness Code. God created through separation (see Genesis 1); and so it is for his new creation, Israel, which must separate itself from the nations. This separation is behind the diet laws. It does not mean, however, that Israel is not to relate to its neighbours. Though it is in Isaiah, not the Holiness Code, that we read of Israel as 'a light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6), something of this idea can be found here. The way to carry out this mission is to 'love', that is, to do good to others. This applies to other members of Israel: 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am YHWH' (Leviticus 19:18). It applies also to foreigners: 'you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God' (Leviticus 19:34).

A further key development is in the area of repentance for sin. In Leviticus 1-16 sorrow and repentance are essential for forgiveness, but so is a purification offering, whether it be a personal one or the communal one on *Yôm Kippûr*. The Holiness Code – and remember it is a code composed by priests – frees repentance, and so forgiveness, from the need of cult sacrifice.

It reaches a high point of theology when it states that YHWH is not changed by sin, but remains faithful to his promises (26:44-45).

Slaughtering for food (17:1-16)

In verses three to seven we have the first of five regulations covering the eating of animal flesh. It is in relation to the only three animals that can be sacrificed: cattle, sheep and goats (17:3).

What is new here is the explicit regulation demanding of ‘the people of Israel’ (17:1) that *every* animal slaughtered for eating *must* be brought to the sanctuary for sacrifice (17:3-4). This would be workable only in the small territory of post-exilic Judah. Deuteronomy, which insists on having only one central sanctuary (the Jerusalem temple), has to allow for slaughtering without sacrifice (see Deuteronomy 12:15ff).

The offering must be made because killing these animals is ‘bloodshed’ (17:4, see the commentary on page 187), which God will punish. Offenders will be ‘cut off from the people’ (17:4, 9; see 7:21, page 204).

‘Offering sacrifices in the open field’ (17:5) is a reference to pagan blood rites offered to the goat demons (satyrs) of the underworld (17:7) – a practice the legislators are condemning.

The sacrifices that are being prescribed are those of ‘well-being’ (17:5), because these are required when an animal is slaughtered for the purposes of obtaining its meat for eating (see 3:1-17).

Verses eight to nine is a second regulation directly forbidding sacrifice outside the sanctuary. This is directed also to ‘aliens who reside among them’ (17:8). These do not have to follow the first regulation. In other words, as non-Israelites, they may slaughter animals for food without offering sacrifice. However, if they do offer sacrifice it must be only in the sanctuary. In other words, all pagan sacrificial practices are forbidden in the ‘holy land’. Note that foreigners are permitted to enter the sanctuary to offer sacrifice.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses: ²Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them: This is what YHWH has commanded.

³If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp, ⁴and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to present it as an offering to YHWH before the tabernacle of YHWH, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people.

⁵This is in order that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they offer in the open field, that they may bring them to YHWH, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and offer them as *communion sacrifices* to YHWH.

⁶The priest shall dash the blood against the altar of YHWH at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and turn the fat into smoke as a pleasing odour to YHWH,

⁷so that they may no longer offer their sacrifices for goat-demons, to whom they prostitute themselves. This shall be a statute forever to them throughout their generations.

⁸And say to them further: Anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice,

⁹and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to sacrifice it to YHWH, shall be cut off from the people.

¹⁰If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people.

¹¹For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. ¹²Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood.

¹³And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. ¹⁴For the life of every creature—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.

¹⁵All persons, citizens or aliens, who eat what dies of itself or what has been torn by wild animals, shall wash their clothes, and bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening; then they shall be clean.

¹⁶But if they do not wash themselves or bathe their body, they shall bear their guilt.

Chapter seventeen hinges on verses ten to twelve: an absolute prohibition in the severest terms against anyone, including foreigners living in the land, eating blood. People may eat animal flesh, but they must not ‘take’ the animal’s life. After the Flood God allowed human beings to eat ‘every moving thing that lives’ (Genesis 9:3). However, a strict condition was put in place: ‘You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood’ (Genesis 9:4). Foreigners, who are not obliged to sacrifice, will have to pour the blood out into the ground. Israelites must bring the animal to the sanctuary and offer sacrifice (17:3-7).

A new element is introduced here. In the earlier section of Leviticus we were told that the purification offering (*ḥaṭṭā’t*) atones for inadvertent contamination of the sanctuary (4:31), that the reparation offering (*’āšām*) atones for inadvertent desecration (5:16), and that the burnt offering (*’ōlâ*) atones for sins of omission (14:20). Here we are told that the well-being offering (*šēlāmîm*) also atones. Killing the animal is considered murder, from which the person responsible can be ransomed (*kippēr*, ‘atoned for’) only by the blood contacting the altar.

The fourth law (17:13-14) regulates the killing of undomesticated animals or birds. Deuteronomy 14:5 lists the following animals as ones that can be eaten: ‘the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep’. These cannot be offered in sacrifice, so the blood must be poured out and buried (not poured into a trench as in the pagan rites).

The fifth law (17:15-16) insists that eating the flesh of an animal that is discovered dead requires purification by washing (as in 11:39-40). If they forget to wash they will have to offer a purification offering (see 4:27-31). If they knowingly fail to wash, they will ‘bear their guilt’ (*’awôn*); that is to say, they will have to suffer the appropriate punishment. Since there is no way of policing this law, the punishment is necessarily left to God.— the meaning of ‘cut off from the people’ (17:4, 9, 10, 14).

The solemn opening exhortation (18:1-5), with the name YHWH occurring four times, recalls the opening words of the Decalogue: 'I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt' (Exodus 20:2). The authors are stating that these commands have the same authority as the decalogue. 'Statutes' translates *ḥuqqâ*, with the connotation of something inscribed, and therefore not to be altered; 'edicts' translates *mišpaṭ*, with the connotation of a formal decision binding in law. Egypt and Canaan are descended from Ham. We are meant to recall Ham's sin in the way he reacted to 'the nakedness of his father' (Genesis 9:22). This sets the context for the chapter which deals with illicit sexual behaviour.

The claim made in verse five is not to be missed. Fulfilling God's will gives life. Ezekiel makes the same claim:

I gave them my statutes and showed them my edicts, by whose observance everyone shall live.

– Ezekiel 20:11

The overall statute is given in verse six. Having sexual relations with 'anyone near of kin' is prohibited. Verse seven makes it clear that this covers relatives on the side of one's mother as well as on the side of one's father. The commands are addressed to the males, and the underlying assumption is that it is the male head of the house whose responsibility it is to see that these statutes are observed. Obviously it is assumed that having sexual relations with one's mother, sister and daughter is prohibited. Verses eight and the following list *other* females with whom a man cannot have sexual relations.

We should remember that in the extended family situation, those listed could be living in close physical proximity. 'Your father's wife' may not be a blood relative, but she 'belongs to' your father, who has sexual relations with her (18:8).

'Sister' is mentioned in verse nine to cover half-sister, a situation that was not uncommon in a society where there was polygamy, and in which the death of a woman at childbirth frequently led to the father's remarriage.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am YHWH your God.

³You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes.

⁴My edicts you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am YHWH your God.

⁵You shall keep my statutes and my edicts. If a person does keep them, he shall live by them. I am YHWH.

⁶None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am YHWH.

⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.

⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father.

⁹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born abroad.

Incest

¹⁰You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness.

¹¹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, begotten by your father, since she is your sister.

¹²You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's flesh.

¹³You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's flesh.

¹⁴You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt.

¹⁵You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law: she is your son's wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness.

¹⁶You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness.

¹⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are your flesh; it is depravity.

¹⁸And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

It is perhaps worth noting that a man could have a marriageable grand-daughter and still be in his forties.

Verse eleven is speaking of a step-sister: not the daughter of a man's mother or father, but of a father's second (or consequent) marriage.

A father's sister (18:12) would not normally be living in the same house as the father.

Note that, while a man could not have sexual relations with his mother's sister (18:13), or with his aunt (18:14, the wife of his father's brother), there is no prohibition against a man marrying his niece.

If verse sixteen is meant to apply even after a brother's death the statute must be intended to stop the levirate marriage custom permitted by Deuteronomy 25:5-9.

The assumption in verse seventeen is that both the woman and her daughter are alive. Calling this incest 'a depravity' (zimmâ) is using shame to get compliance.

Verse eighteen assumes the possibility of having more than one wife simultaneously, but not if they are sisters. An example of the rivalry mentioned here is that between the two sisters married by Jacob, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30:1-2, 14-24).

Other forbidden sexual relations

Verse nineteen assumes 15:19-24.

Verse twenty prohibits adultery. Note that adultery does not apply to extramarital relations that a married man has with an unmarried woman. Sexual relations with a married woman offend against the rights of her husband and confuse paternity and so inheritance.

King Josiah (640-609BC) put a stop to the practice of people who 'would make a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molek' (2Kings 23:10; see Jeremiah 32:35). Ezekiel gives the impression that those who acted in this way did not see themselves as compromising their faith in YHWH: 'When they had slaughtered their children for their idols, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it' (Ezekiel 23:39). This could explain the inclusion of 'I am YHWH' in verse twenty-one. The popularity of this practice was probably because it involved ancestor worship. It was its association with YHWH that made it a sacrilege, and its inclusion here may be because, like the forbidden sexual behaviour, it polluted the land and would cause God to banish them from it, as he has earlier banished the Canaanites (see 18:24-30).

Verse twenty-two forbids sexual relations between two males, calling it an 'abomination' (tô'ēbâ), a word that will recur in the final exhortation of this chapter (18:26, 27, 29, 30). It carries moral, not legal, weight, and is used to engender shame. Because of the use of this verse in the continuing debate about homosexuality, see the following page for a longer comment.

Finally, sexual relations with an animal are prohibited as a 'perversion' (tebel), because it involves a mingling of species, and a confusion of the essential order of creation.

19You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.

20You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her.

21You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molek, and so profane the name of your God: I am YHWH.

22You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

23You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.

²²You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

There is very little in the Hebrew Bible (the Older Testament) on the subject of homosexual behaviour. There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19), which accounts for our word 'sodomy'. It is a condemnation of inhospitality and of rape. There is the even worse story of the Levite (Judges 19), which also involves a condemnation of rape. Both stories demonstrate an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women. There is the proscription against cult prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18), and there is the statute here in Leviticus chapter eighteen, which we find repeated in chapter twenty:

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

– Leviticus 20:13

No context is given for these regulations in Leviticus, and there is no discussion of the issues involved. Did they experience in Babylon the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that later generations of Jews observed in the Greek world? Was that what they were condemning? Were they concerned at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete)? What was the nature of the behaviour they were condemning?

What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for the male prostitution that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists, as well as a condemnation of pederasty, certain forms of which were encouraged there. Such behaviour was unknown in the Jewish culture and later Jewish writers, including Paul, condemn it as typically Gentile. What is also clear is that there is no discussion at all of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency. The focus is on homosexual *behaviour*. Furthermore, it cannot be argued that the authors of this isolated verse envisage a situation in which two male adults as equals express their affection sexually and with mutual sensitivity. Of course, all forms of homosexual behaviour, like all forms of heterosexual behaviour, need to be assessed morally to see whether they are truly life-giving and in accordance with the command of love. This text from Leviticus, however, must be used with care, since it is not specific about the kind of behaviour envisaged.

The authors of the Holiness Code do not speak of expiation through ritual. If an individual sins in any of these ‘abominable’ ways, whether the individual be an Israelite or ‘the alien who resides among you’ (18:26), the punishment is to be ‘cut off from his people’ (18:29). God will see that his posterity does not continue, and when he dies he will not join his ancestors. If the people behave in any of these abominable ways, God will see that the land, which belongs to the Holy One, will ‘vomit them out’ (18:25). This is what happened to the Canaanites (18:27-28), and it will happen to them, too, if they do not keep God’s statutes and live lives worthy of God’s chosen people.

The loss of the northern kingdom of Israel in the late eighth century could have influenced this piece of legislation, as could the exile of Judah in Babylon.

²⁴Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves.

²⁵Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

²⁶But you shall keep my statutes and my edicts and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you

²⁷(for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled);

²⁸otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.

²⁹For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people.

³⁰So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am YHWH your God.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy.

The ‘Holiness Code’ gets its name from these opening verses of chapter nineteen. YHWH is addressing Moses, so we are to listen to the following directions for behaviour and worship as being fundamental to what it means to be a member of the people of Israel. They are derived from God’s revelation on Sinai. Furthermore, it is no accident that the only other time God introduces himself as ‘I YHWH your God’(19:2) is at the beginning of the decalogue (Exodus 20:2). The authors of the Holiness Code want the reader to take these laws as seriously as the decalogue.

This is also the only list of laws that is directed to ‘all the congregation (‘ēdâ) of the people of Israel’(19:2); another indication of its importance.

The Priestly School in its earlier writing, too, focuses on holiness. YHWH alone is ‘holy’(qādôš); which is to say that YHWH totally transcends creation, is absolutely other; there is an unbridgeable separation of God from human beings and from everything that we human beings experience. Because the all-holy God has chosen to dwell among his people, his dwelling place is a holy place, a sanctuary – not because of any inherent quality it has, but because, and only because, the Holy One dwells there. God’s holiness permeates the inner shrine and emanates out through the tent and to the altar in the courtyard. It also embraces those who alone can minister in the sanctuary – the high priest who alone can enter the inner shrine, and the priests who alone can serve at the altar.

For the authors of the Holiness Code, holiness is not limited to the sanctuary and its priests. ‘All the congregation of the people of Israel’ is called to be ‘holy’(qādôš). The separateness of God remains (God is qādôš, Israel is called to be qādôš), but Israel is called to live within the ambience of God’s radiant glory. The way to enter into this radiance of YHWH’s unique holiness is to heed YHWH’s commandments, including those listed in this chapter. We have already met this call to holiness in chapter eleven: ‘I am YHWH your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy’(Leviticus 11:44-45), a statement which reveals the editorial hand of the authors of this code. We will need trust and courage to heed and to follow the path that is laid out before us in the following verses.

The Code opens with a summary statement of the third and fourth commandments from the decalogue (Exodus 20:8-12). It begins in the way, perhaps, to highlight one of its key themes, which is that the way we behave in relation to each other is an essential requirement for worship.

When Hebrew *yārē'* is followed by a direct object, as in this text, its nuance is best expressed by the English 'revere'. When it is followed by the preposition *min*, its nuance is best captured by 'fear'. In both uses, it underlines the inferior position of the subject. In the decalogue we find the word 'honour' (*kībbēd*, Exodus 20:12), which underlines the superior position of the object and is generally concerned with how positively we are to demonstrate this 'honour'. *yārē'*, on the other hand, often stresses what we are to avoid doing.

The ending 'I am YHWH your God' sounds a warning. None of the laws contained in chapter nineteen are enforceable by human courts. Violations, however, will not go unpunished – by God.

Verse four is also a summary statement; this time of the first commandment of the decalogue (Exodus 20:2-6). It prohibits 'turning to idols'; that is, worshipping false gods and looking to them for blessing. The word translated here as 'idols' (*'elîlîm*) is found in the Torah only here and in 26:1. It is obviously a derogatory word, perhaps functioning as a diminutive (little *'elîm*), or perhaps echoing *'al* (worthless/nothing). 'Casting images', on the other hand, refers to casting images of YHWH. This command ends with the same warning as the previous one.

To understand why the third command (19:5-8) focuses on the communion sacrifice, we need to remember that this meat is 'holy' because it has been offered in sacrifice, and it is the only holy thing that a lay person can touch. The regulations covering the eating of meat from a well-being offering are repeated from 7:16-18. Added here is the reason why these instructions must be followed with meticulous care. Not to do so is to 'profane what is holy to YHWH' (19:18). Through sacrifice the meal has been drawn into the sphere of the holy, which reaches out into the home through the shared meal. God will punish anyone who treats a holy thing in an impure way.

³You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am YHWH your God.

⁴Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am YHWH your God.

⁵When you offer a communion sacrifice to YHWH, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable on your behalf. ⁶It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. ⁷If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. ⁸All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to YHWH; and any such person shall be cut off from the people.

Concern for the poor

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edge of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am YHWH your God.

YHWH's concern for the poor ('ānî) lies at the heart of revelation. His words to Moses at the burning bush begin:

I have observed the misery ('ānî) of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

– Exodus 3:7-8

The oldest extant code of Israel, therefore commands:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry ...If you lend money to my people, to the poor ('ānî) among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.

– Exodus 22:21-23,25

And this command comes immediately after a command not to sacrifice to any god other than YHWH. In the same code we read:

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

– Exodus 23:9

Apart from the frequent references in Deuteronomy, the only other text in the Torah to speak of concern for the poor is this one here in Leviticus 19:10 and its equivalent in Leviticus 23:22.

The fact that it is placed here at the head of the legislation concerning relationship between people is significant. To share in the holiness of the Holy One a person must share God's concern for the poor.

One can find similar statements of concern for the poor in other ancient cultures, but Israel is unique in showing the same concern for foreigners who dwell in the land. Lacking the support of their kin, these resident foreigners, unable to own land, are at risk of being destitute. They need the charity of the Israelite landowners.

If we are going to allow the holiness of YHWH into our lives we must not take what belongs to another, even when it is done in such a way that no one notices. This is the point of the prohibition against stealing (gānab) in verse eleven. Verse eleven also prohibits denying something we know to be true, or, conversely, affirming something as true that we know to be untrue.

That the over-arching theme is holiness is underlined in verse twelve. Calling on God's holy name to support an untruth is a profanation, a desecration (ḥillēl). No one might find out, and so we might think we can go unpunished. 'I am YHWH' reminds us that we cannot deceive God, and that violation of God's commands will be punished.

Verse thirteen speaks in general terms of exploitation and violent theft. These bite home when followed by a simple example: 'you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a hired worker until morning'. He is not in a position to insist on his rights, but the Holy One will surely hear his cry (see Exodus 3:7).

The deaf may not hear you, and the blind may not see that it was you who caused them to stumble, but YHWH hears and sees and will punish. The deaf and the blind are under YHWH's protection.

A judgment (mišpat) is to give expression to the truth. It must be 'just' (šedeq). not 'unjust' ('āwel). The following psalm is to the point:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
"How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?
Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

– Psalm 82:1-4

Verse sixteen warns against slander, which can lead to a false judgment and so perhaps to death. On the other hand, if someone else is slandering and we know it, we cannot stand by in silence when the life of another is at risk.

¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deny the truth; and you shall not lie to one another.

¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am YHWH.

¹³You shall not exploit your neighbour; you shall not commit robbery; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a hired worker until morning.

¹⁴You shall not insult the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am YHWH.

¹⁵You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand aloof beside the blood of your neighbour: I am YHWH.

Love your neighbour

¹⁷You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall reprove your fellow, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am YHWH.

This is not enunciating an abstract principle. It is stating how to respond to someone we are actually in contact with, called a ‘brother’ (‘āḥ, only here), a ‘fellow’ (‘amîṭ, also 19:11,15), a neighbour (rea’, also 19:13,16) – terms that refer to a fellow Israelite. To hate (śānē’) says more than a feeling. It is to think, decide and do evil to another. The expression ‘in your heart’ puts the focus here on the thinking and deciding. The remedy is to openly reprove the person whom we are tempted to hate. Otherwise the hatred could lead us to wrongful action.

This leads on immediately to verse eighteen which tells us not to bear a grudge or to give expression to it by taking revenge. The remedy for this is to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. As with ‘hate’ so with ‘love’ more than feeling is involved. It is to think, decide and do good to another, just as we think, decide and do good to ourselves. As in the previous verses ‘I am YHWH’ accents the divine authority of this command, as well as reminding us of the one whose judgment we have to face if we fail to heed this command.

As chapter nineteen is structured, these verses form the climax of the ethical demands of holiness (though see 19:34). Tobit captures some of the implications of this command when he states: ‘What you hate, do not do to anyone’ (Tobit 4:15). Rabbi Hillel (died c. 10AD), when asked to give a summary of the Torah, is said to have replied: ‘That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow’ (The Babylonian Talmud, *Šabbat* 31a).

Paul quotes verse eighteen as summing up the Torah:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

– Romans 13:8-10

In this he was following Jesus, who went further by commanding love of one’s enemies:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

– Matthew 5:43-45

'Your animals' refers to cattle, sheep and goats. The statute against mixing animals and seeds, like many of the regulations, takes us into the area of symbol. God created by separating, ordering. We are commissioned to continue this and not to create confusion.

There is a second level of understanding here. The cherubim in the shrine are a mixture. The curtains in the sanctuary and the sacred vestments of the priests are made of a mixture of linen and wool. Mixture, therefore, is seen as something restricted to the divine sphere. The Israelites are being told that the fact that they cannot enter the sanctuary or be consecrated as priests does not mean that holiness is kept from them. Holiness is available to them by their living the life commanded here by God.

It is interesting to note an exception to the statute of verse nineteen that is found in Numbers 15:39. The Israelites are allowed a single blue (the most important colour) thread of wool in their linen tassels – a powerful reminder of their call to holiness.

In verses twenty to twenty-two, the authors of the Holiness Code have inserted a complex legal case. A man has sexual intercourse with a betrothed woman. They have committed adultery. Had she been a free woman both would have been put to death (see Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Had she been an unbetrothed slave, the man involved would have had to compensate the master. But, though she is betrothed, the man to whom she is betrothed has not yet paid for her freedom. She is judged, therefore, to be technically still a slave, but not fully the possession of her master. So the adulterers avoid both the death penalty and the obligation to compensate her master. What is to be done?

The case is included here because adultery is also a religious offence. In Israel and in the surrounding cultures adultery is 'the great sin against God' (Genesis 39:2). Normally a reparation offering ('āšām) was only for inadvertent sin, but in this case something has to be done and the best compromise is to require a reparation offering in order to neutralise the polluting effect of their sin which is a violation of the Sinai covenant. Their behaviour, even though it manages to escape the penalties of the legal system, must be atoned for. A holy people cannot allow it to go unchallenged or unatoned.

¹⁹You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.

²⁰If a man has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave, designated for another man but not ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, since she has not been freed;

²¹but he shall bring to the entrance of the tent of meeting a ram as a reparation offering for himself to YHWH.

²²And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of reparation offering before YHWH for his sin that he committed; and the sin he committed shall be forgiven him.

23When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, you shall *treat its foreskin with its fruit as foreskin*; three years it shall be forbidden to you, it must not be eaten. ²⁴In the fourth year all their fruit shall be *sacred*, an offering of rejoicing for YHWH. ²⁵But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that their yield may be increased for you: I am the YHWH your God.

²⁶You shall not eat *over* the blood. You shall not practice augury or *divination*.

²⁷You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.

²⁸You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am YHWH.

²⁹Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, that the land not become prostituted and full of depravity.

Verses twenty-three to twenty-five legislate for good horticultural practice. They also witness to an attempt to regulate a popular folk custom of celebrating the beginning of the grape harvest with drinking, dancing and sexual licence. The bacchanalian excesses are incompatible with a people called to share in YHWH's holiness.

For the first three years they are to pluck the closed bud (the 'foreskin') before the fruit emerges. In the fourth year the fruit is 'sacred' (qodeš) – hence the inclusion of these verses here. They can still rejoice, but in the sanctuary, offering the first mature fruits to YHWH.

The key to verses twenty-six to twenty-eight is in the words 'for the dead' (19:28). The legislators are attempting to wean the Israelites away from ancestral worship associated with Baal. These include the practice of pouring blood into a pit to attract ancestral spirits in order to consult them about the future. Sorcery (attempting to alter the future by magic) is forbidden elsewhere (Exodus 22:17). The focus here in 19:26 is on attempting to *know* the future by observation (augury) or by devising techniques (divination). The prohibition here may be general, but it may also be intended to be read in the context of 'for the dead' (that is, necromancy, see Leviticus 20:6). Similarly for trimming the side-locks, tearing out the beard, and gashing the flesh – all practices associated with mourning (see Jeremiah 16:6). It is possibly the same with tattoos (19:28).

In the ancient Near East sexual debauchery and prostitution are frequently associated with sanctuaries, especially at festivals (see 2Kings 23:7; Genesis 38:20-23; Exodus 32:5-6). However, this was as a source of income for the sanctuary (see Micah 1:7). There is no evidence in the ancient Near East of prostitution as part of a fertility cult. In verse twenty-nine a father is prohibited from using his daughter for economic gain by making her a prostitute. She has a right and duty to be holy. There is a danger that others will follow his example and 'the land become full of depravity'.

The sabbath seems to have grown in importance during the seventh century when Assyrian influence in Judah was considerable (see Zephaniah 1 and Jeremiah 17:19-27). During the Babylonian Exile, with the loss of the temple and so of the cult, the sabbath was at the centre of worship and community. Verse thirty summarises the third commandment (Exodus 20:8), and links it with the prohibition of polluting or desecrating the sanctuary.

Verse twenty-six was against augury and divination. Verse thirty-one is against sorcery (using mediums or wizards in an attempt to control and alter the future).

The old (*šêbâ*, ‘grey hair’) and the aged (*zāqēn*) cannot enforce respect. Failure to follow this command will be punished by YHWH (19:32).

In verses thirty-three to thirty-four the Holiness Code reaches one of its high points in its ethical commands. The command ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (19:18) is extended to the foreigner dwelling in the land (see 19:10; also Exodus 20:10; 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19). To support the command the people of Israel are reminded that they were foreigners once in Egypt.

The words of the prophet Amos reinforce the commands of verses thirty-five to thirty-six:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, “When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.

– Amos 4-5

The conclusion (19:36b-37) links back with 18:4-5. In this way it includes all the statutes and edicts given to Israel in chapters eighteen and nineteen by YHWH, who ‘brought you out of the land of Egypt’. They are his people and are answerable to him.

³⁰You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am YHWH.

³¹Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am YHWH your God.

³²You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am YHWH.

³³When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God.

³⁵You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity.

³⁶You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin.

I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. ³⁷You shall keep all my statutes and all my edicts, and observe them: I am YHWH.

Penalties

The following are penalties for crimes listed, for the most part, in chapter eighteen, ordered here according to the gravity of the punishment. The separation of chapter twenty from chapter eighteen highlights the central position of chapter nineteen.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

1. Penalties for Molek worship (20:2-5; see 18:21)

Anyone caught practising Molek worship is to be stoned to death by ‘the people of the land’, that is, by any unofficial, unauthorised body of Israelites. If offenders are not caught, God will ‘cut them off from the people’, that is, their posterity will cease, and when they die they will not join their ancestors.

²Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molek shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death. ³I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molek, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. ⁴And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molek, and do not put them to death, ⁵I myself will set my face against them and against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molek.

2. Penalty for Necromancy (20:6; see 19:31)

⁶If any turn to mediums and wizards, prostituting themselves to them, I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people.

3. Penalties for Sexual Violations: Introduction (20:7-9; see 18:1-5)

Just as the list of illicit sexual practices in chapter eighteen began with an opening exhortation (18:1-5), so here we have an opening exhortation echoing Leviticus 11:44

I am YHWH your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves.

⁷Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am YHWH your God.

⁸Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am YHWH; I sanctify you.

This list of penalties for sexual offences opens with the penalty of death for dishonouring one’s parents (compare Exodus 21:17). Incest is based on one’s relationship with one’s parents. There is also the implication that a breakdown in one’s relationship with one’s parents can lead to the breakdown of other familial relationships.

⁹All who *dishonour* father or mother shall be put to death; having *dishonoured* father or mother, their blood is upon them.

The final phrase ‘their blood is upon them’ means that the person who puts the offenders to death on the instruction of the court of elders does not incur blood-guilt. Those who dishonour their parents are responsible for their own death.

4. Penalties for Sexual Violations: (20:10-21; see 18:6-23)

a) death penalty (20:10-16)

¹⁰If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (18:20)

¹¹The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (18:8)

¹²If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion, their blood is upon them. (18:15)

¹³If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (18:22)

¹⁴If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you. (18:17)

¹⁵If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. (18:23)

¹⁶If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them. (18:23)

b) A punishment that God will decide (20:17-19)

'Cut off in the sight of their people', means that their posterity will come to an end and the offender will not join his ancestors when he dies.

¹⁷If 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 their people; he has uncovered his sister's nakedness, he shall be subject to punishment. (18:9, 11)

¹⁸If a man lies with a woman having her sickness and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people. (18:19)

¹⁹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister or of your father's sister, for that is to lay bare one's own flesh; they shall be subject to punishment. (18:12-13)

c) Childlessness (20:20-21)

²⁰If a man lies with his uncle's wife, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness; they shall be subject to punishment; they shall die childless. (18:14)

²¹If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless. (18:16)

‘You shall be holy to me’

Closing Exhortation (20:22-26)

22You shall keep all my statutes and all my edicts, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. 23You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them.

24But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am YHWH your God;

I have separated you from the peoples. 25You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.

26You shall be holy to me; for I YHWH am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

27A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them.

The first part of verse twenty-two echoes the opening exhortation (20:8). The second half echoes the closing exhortation to chapter eighteen (18:28). Verse twenty-three also echoes the final exhortation of chapter eighteen (18:24-25). The authors of the Torah thought that God drove out the inhabitants of Canaan to make room for his own people. The rationale is given here: their behaviour was abhorrent. Moreover, God, who is just, will do the same to Israel if the people do not live holy lives (20:22-23).

The first part of verse twenty-four picks up the theme of the Promised Land, mentioned in passing in Leviticus 14:34, but a key theme in Genesis and Exodus:

I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am YHWH.

– Exodus 6:8

Holiness is essentially about separation (20:24b). In verse twenty-five holiness is extended to the whole dietary system, supplementing chapter nineteen.

Verse twenty-six picks up the introductory exhortation: ‘Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am YHWH your God’ (20:7) as well as the introduction to chapter nineteen: ‘You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy’ (19:2). YHWH has separated Israel from the other nations to be his own people. They must follow his commands to lead a holy life.

Appendix: Penalty for Sorcery (20:27)

As we learnt in verse six, someone who goes to a person who summons the spirits of the dead will be punished by God. His posterity will come to an end and he will not join his ancestors when he dies. This appendix is added to legislate for the one who practises the forbidden art, the sorcerer.

Purity required of Priests (21:1-9)

According to the Deuteronomy, the priesthood is open to all Levites (Deuteronomy 10:8, 18:1-7). Here, and throughout the writings of the Priestly School, it is limited to 'the sons of Aaron' (21:1).

The prohibitions listed here (21:2-6) concern mourning. They are written against the background of the Egyptian cult which was obsessed with death, and from an awareness that holiness and death are contrary forces and so contact between them must be managed with the utmost care. A priest may take part in the funeral rites only of his closest family (21:2-3). In these cases, it is assumed that he undergo a seven day purification process after contact with death (see Numbers 19:14,16; Ezekiel 44:26-27).

The practices noted in verse five are associated with idolatrous pagan mourning (see 19:27-28; Jeremiah 41:5). In the previous chapter we read: 'You shall be holy to me; for I YHWH am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine' (20:26). If this is true of all the people, how much more true of priests who are consecrated.

Verses seven to nine limit the women whom a priest may marry.

Verse nine puts an extra responsibility on a priest's daughter to be pure, along with the most severe punishment if she disobeys.

¹YHWH said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them:

No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, ²except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; ³likewise, his *marriageable* sister, closest to him, who has had no husband, he may defile himself for her. ⁴But he shall not defile himself among his people, and so *desecrate* himself.

⁵They shall not make bald spots upon their heads, or shave off the edges of their beards, or make any gashes in their flesh. ⁶They shall be holy to their God, and not *desecrate* the name of their God; for they offer the gifts of YHWH, the food of their God; therefore they shall be holy.

⁷They shall not marry a *promiscuous woman* or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. For they are holy to their God, ⁸and you shall treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God; they shall be holy to you, for I YHWH, I who sanctify you, am holy.

⁹When the daughter of a priest *desecrates* herself through prostitution, she *desecrates* her father; she shall be burned to death.

¹⁰The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments.

¹¹He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother. ¹²He shall not go outside the sanctuary and thus profane the sanctuary of his God; for the *setting apart* of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am YHWH.

¹³He shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. ¹⁴A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, a prostitute, these he shall not marry. He shall marry a virgin of his own kin, ¹⁵that he may not profane his offspring among his kin; for I am YHWH; I sanctify him.

¹⁶YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

¹⁷Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ²¹No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer *food gifts* to YHWH; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²²He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not *desecrate* my sanctuaries; for I am YHWH; I sanctify them.

²⁴Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

Purity required of the High Priest
(21:10-15)

No exceptions are made for the high priest as regards mourning the dead (21:10-12). He cannot even accompany the bier of his parents outside the sanctuary (see 10:7). He has been 'set apart' (*nēzer*) from other priests. The consecrating oil is poured on the bodies and the vestments of ordinary priests (see 8:30; Ezekiel 29:21). The high priest is the only one 'on whose head the anointing oil has been poured' (21:10; see 8:12).

As regards marriage, whereas an ordinary priest is not forbidden to marry a widow, the high priest is.

Physical Imperfections
(21:16-23)

Verses sixteen to twenty-four list physical blemishes that are impediments to a priest ministering. If they appear arbitrary it is because they match the physical blemishes that are impediments to an animal being used in sacrifice (see 22:22-24). If certain visible characteristics make an animal appear imperfect and so inappropriate as a sacrifice to God, how much more must the officiating priest not exhibit these imperfections.

Priestly purity is a concern for 'all the people of Israel'.

Priests in a state of impurity must not officiate or eat sacred food (22:1-9)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Direct Aaron and his sons to deal carefully with the sacred donations of the people of Israel, which they *consecrate* to me, so that they do not *desecrate* my holy name; I am YHWH. ³Say to them: If anyone among all your offspring throughout your generations comes near the sacred donations, which the people of Israel *consecrate* to YHWH, while he is in a state of uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from my presence: I am YHWH. ⁴No one of Aaron's offspring who has a leprosy disease or suffers a discharge may eat of the sacred donations until he is clean. Whoever touches anything made unclean by a corpse or a man who has had an emission of semen, ⁵and whoever touches any swarming thing by which he may be made unclean or any human being by whom he may be made unclean—whatever his uncleanness may be— ⁶the person who touches any such shall be unclean until evening and shall not eat of the sacred donations unless he has washed his body in water. ⁷When the sun sets he shall be clean; and afterward he may eat of the sacred donations, for they are his food. ⁸That which died or was torn by wild animals he shall not eat, becoming unclean by it: I am YHWH. ⁹They shall keep my charge, so that they may not incur guilt and die in the sanctuary for having *desecrate* it: I am YHWH; I sanctify them.

Severe restrictions on those permitted to eat sacred food (22:10-16)

¹⁰No lay person shall eat of the sacred donations. No *resident* hired servant of the priest shall eat of the sacred donations; ¹¹but if a priest acquires anyone by purchase, the person may eat of them; and those that are born in his house may eat of his food. ¹²If a priest's daughter marries a layman, she shall not eat of the offering of the sacred donations; ¹³but if a priest's daughter is widowed or divorced, without offspring, and returns to her father's house, as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food. No lay person shall eat of it.

¹⁴If a man eats of the sacred donation unintentionally, he shall add one-fifth of its value to it, and give the sacred donation to the priest. ¹⁵They [the priests] shall not *desecrate* the sacred donations of the people of Israel, which they offer to YHWH, ¹⁶causing them to bear *the penalty of reparation*, when they eat their sacred donations: for I am YHWH; I sanctify them.

Animals offered in sacrifice must be unblemished (22:17-25)

¹⁷YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁸Speak to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel and say to them: When anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing in Israel presents an offering, whether in payment of a vow or as a freewill offering that is offered to YHWH as a burnt offering, ¹⁹to be acceptable in your behalf it shall be a male without blemish, of the cattle or the sheep or the goats.

²⁰You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable in your behalf. ²¹When anyone offers a *communion sacrifice* to YHWH, in fulfillment of a vow or as a freewill offering, from the herd or from the flock, to be acceptable it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. ²²Anything blind, or injured, or maimed, or having a discharge or an itch or scabs—these you shall not offer to YHWH or put any of them on the altar as *food gifts* to YHWH. ²³An ox or a lamb that has a limb too long or too short you may present for a freewill offering; but it will not be accepted for a vow. ²⁴Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to YHWH; such you shall not do within your land, ²⁵nor shall you accept any such animals from a foreigner to offer as food to your God; since they are mutilated, with a blemish in them, they shall not be accepted in your behalf.

Verse twenty-five is speaking about purchasing from a foreigner (nēkār). The only foreigners who are allowed to offer sacrifices are those who are resident in the land (gēr, 22:18; see 17:8-9; Numbers 15:14, 30-31). Ezekiel explicitly prohibits foreigners from entering the sanctuary (Ezekiel 44:9 – though see Isaiah 56:7). In the second temple there was a wall beyond which they could not go (see Josephus, Antiquities 11.301; 4Maccabees 4:11).

Additional Criteria for Animals to be offered in Sacrifice (22:26-30)

²⁶YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁷When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as *food gifts* to YHWH. ²⁸But you shall not slaughter, from the herd or the flock, an animal with its young on the same day. ²⁹When you sacrifice a thanksgiving offering to YHWH, you shall sacrifice it so that it may be acceptable in your behalf. ³⁰It shall be eaten on the same day; you shall not leave any of it until morning: I am YHWH.

Final Exhortation (22:31-33)

This concluding exhortation corresponds to the concluding exhortations of 18:24-30, 19:37 and 20:22-26.

³¹Thus you shall keep my commandments and observe them: I am YHWH. ³²You shall not *desecrate* my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel: I am YHWH; I sanctify you, ³³I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am YHWH.

Having spoken of holy persons (priests) in chapter twenty-one, and holy offerings in chapter twenty-two, the text goes on to speak of ‘designated times’ (mô‘ēd) which are to be proclaimed as ‘sacred proclaimed times’ (miqrā’ qōdeš).

This introduction (23:2) applies to the spring (23:4-22) and autumn (23:23-43) festivals that follow. The terms do not normally apply to the sabbath (23:3). It falls regularly every seven days, and is independent of calculations of the lunar month. Perhaps this brief statement on the sabbath is inserted here because in exile the other festivals could not be celebrated. The sabbath took on greater significance as setting them apart from the surrounding culture. The brief reference to the sabbath echoes the following statement in Exodus:

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to YHWH.

– Exodus 35:2

Both statements rely on the third commandment of the decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11). The name ‘sabbath’ (šabbāt) is related to the verb ‘to stop’ (šābat). However, the perspective must not be missed: ceasing work is so that the day can be ‘kept holy’ (Exodus 20:8; see Isaiah 58:13). They are God’s ‘holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6), consecrated to God, who ‘rested on the seventh day’ (Exodus 20:11).

The third commandment has powerful symbolic value. Positively there is the command to work: we have the obligation and the privilege of continuing God’s creative and redeeming work. There is, however, a danger that we will get caught up in ‘pursuing our own interests’ (Isaiah 58:13). There is also the danger that the systems of authority that are basic to social organisation will appear absolute, and that those under authority will be treated as of lesser dignity than those who exercise authority.

The seventh day, therefore, stands as a symbol of our need for God and of our equality before God. This day is to be set aside so that everyone (‘you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns’, Exodus 20:10) may ‘rest’, may have the space to attend to the Holy One. We are to remember God’s resting, and so the very purpose of creation (Genesis 2:1-3), which was to have this special covenant relationship with God.

If we follow the example of God and make every seventh day one of ‘complete rest’ (šabbat šabbātôn), the sabbath will indeed be for us ‘a delight’ (Isaiah 58:13).

**¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:
²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them:
 These are the *designated times* of YHWH that you shall proclaim as *sacred times to be proclaimed, my designated times.*
³Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a sabbath of complete rest, a *sacred proclaimed time; you shall do no work: it is a sabbath to YHWH throughout your settlements.***

⁴These are the *fixed times* of YHWH, the *times when there is to be summoning to the sanctuary* which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them.

⁵In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a *paschal offering* to YHWH, ⁶and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the *pilgrimage-festival of unleavened bread* to YHWH; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread.

⁷On the first day you shall have a *summoning to the sanctuary*; you shall do no *laborious work*.

⁸For seven days you shall present YHWH's *food gifts*; on the seventh day there shall be a *summoning to the sanctuary*: you shall do no *laborious work*.

Spring Festivals

Having inserted the verse on the sabbath (23:3), the authors repeat verse two to introduce the first of the 'designated times', the 'sacred proclaimed times' (23:4).

1. Paschal Offering and Unleavened Bread (23:5-8)

Though these were originally separate festivals, it is clear that by the time this text was composed they were linked. There are indications that the ancient Israelites may have celebrated 'the first month' in the autumn (perhaps in line with the resurrection of the storm god, Baal, in Canaan), by the seventh century BC it was in the spring (see Jeremiah 36:22, 2Kings 25:8, Ezekiel 40:1). Both these festivals are clearly spring festivals.

The origins of the paschal offering (*pēsah*, from the verb 'to spare') seem to go back to an ancient pastoral rite, celebrated in autumn when the flocks were moving from their summer pasture to the edges of the wilderness for winter, and again in spring, when they were returning. Israel gave this ancient rite a new meaning by linking it to the 'new spring', their beginnings as a people, when they set out on their journey from Egypt, celebrated in 'the first month' (23:5). Unusually, the sacrifice is made between sunset and the rising full moon (23:5), for the Israelites needed the blood of the lamb to protect their homes during the night when the firstborn of Egypt were struck down.

The origins of the pilgrimage festival (*ḥag*, from *ḥāgag*, 'to dance for joy') of Unleavened Bread (*maššôt*) seem to go back to an ancient agricultural spring festival celebrating the beginning of the barley harvest. It is not surprising that in time this would have coalesced with the spring pasch so that pasch was celebrated in the evening before the first day of the seven day harvest celebration (see Deuteronomy 16:1-7; Ezekiel 45:21). The festival of Unleavened Bread thus reinforced the truths about God expressed in the Exodus story (see Exodus 23:14-15; 34:18-20). At this holy time they had to refrain from work that required hard labour.

There are indications that the pilgrimage originally took place on the seventh day of the festival (as in 23:8), but when the cult was centralised it became impossible to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary for the paschal offering and then come back again a week later, so the pilgrimage was moved to the first day (as in 23:7). It is perhaps during the exile, when a pilgrimage was not possible, that the word *ḥag* lost its association with 'pilgrimage' and began to be used generally for a 'festival'.

2. The First Fruits of the Grain Harvests (23:9-22)

The first fruits are due to YHWH because it is YHWH's land (23:10). There are indications in both these texts of a complex development, from the time when farmers in different areas made offerings at the local sanctuary according to the time of harvest, to an attempt to organise a time for the offerings, and then, once the cult was centralised, to make their offering seven weeks later at the end of the harvest (Deuteronomy 16:9-12). Note that the pilgrimage mentioned in Exodus 23:16 is not mentioned here. A comparison with Numbers 28:26-31 is also instructive on the changes that took place.

The First Barley Offering (23:9-14)

⁹YHWH spoke to Moses: ¹⁰Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. ¹¹He shall raise the sheaf before YHWH, that you may find acceptance; on the day after the sabbath the priest shall raise it. ¹²On the day when you raise the sheaf, you shall offer a lamb a year old, without blemish, as a burnt offering to YHWH. ¹³And the grain offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, a *food gift* of pleasing odour to YHWH; and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. ¹⁴You shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements.

The First Wheat Offering (23:15-21)

This is called the 'Festival of Weeks' in Exodus 34:22. The 'seven weeks' (23:15), 'fifty days' (23:16 - the Greek is 'pentēkonta', hence 'pentecost') of the harvest is an anxious time. If the sirocco comes early the harvest will be ruined. This second celebration is by way of offering thanks for a successful grain harvest.

¹⁵And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. ¹⁶You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to YHWH. ¹⁷You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, baked with leaven, as first fruits to YHWH. ¹⁸You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a *food gift* to YHWH, along with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to YHWH. ¹⁹You shall also offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a *communion sacrifice*. ²⁰The priest shall raise them with the bread of the first fruits as an elevation offering before YHWH, together with the two lambs; they shall be holy to YHWH for the priest. ²¹On that same day you shall make proclamation; you shall have a *summoning to the sanctuary*; you shall do no *laborious* work. This is a statute forever in all your settlements throughout your generations.

22When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am YHWH your God.

23YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

24Speak to the people of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a rest, a *summoning to the sanctuary*, commemorated with short trumpet blasts. **25**You shall do no *laborious* work; and you shall present a *food gift* to YHWH.

26YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

27Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of *purgation*; it shall be a *sacred time to be proclaimed* for you: you shall deny yourselves and present a *food gift* to YHWH;

28and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a *purgation* day, to bring about *purgation* on your behalf before YHWH your God.

29For anyone who does not practice self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people.

30And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people. **31**You shall do no work: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements.

32It shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.

It is instructive of the understanding of the writers that, having reminded people that the land belongs to YHWH and that they are to remember this by offering the first fruits of the grain harvests to God, they go on to remind them that the poor, too, belong to God, and that holiness requires of them that they care for those who do not have the means to care for themselves. Verse twenty-two is copied from 19:9-10.

Autumn Festivals

1. The first day of the seventh month (23:23-25)

Every new moon was accompanied by the blast of the trumpet (see Numbers 10:10), but the seventh month is to the other months as the seventh day is to the other days. It is set apart for YHWH. Scholars are divided as to whether it was a New Year celebration. The 'rest' (*šabbātôn*) is a less stringent one than that required on the sabbath. The trumpet blasts are short and urgent, like those that alert people to prepare to defend themselves against attack. They are an urgent call on YHWH for the needed autumn rains. The 'burnt offerings' are described in Numbers 29:1-6.

2. The Day of Purgation (23:26-32)

This picks up from Leviticus 16 (see also Numbers 29:7-11), and highlights the penalties for violation (not in Leviticus 16). The focus is on the purgation of the person, and on the need for 'self-denial' (verses 27, 29, 32), which included fasting, but also repentance.

Though this rite is celebrated on the 'tenth day' (23:27), stopping work and fasting begin on the 'ninth day at evening' (23:32). The expression 'from evening to evening' (23:32) is necessary to make it clear that the fast can be broken at sunset on the tenth day.

3. The Festival of Booths (23:33-36)

The harvesting is complete. The people are awaiting the rains and the time for sowing. This creates the perfect circumstances for a seven-day pilgrimage to the sanctuary. The name of the pilgrimage festival (*hag*), 'Booths' (*sukkôt*), in all likelihood comes from the fact that the huge influx of pilgrims to Jerusalem required the setting up temporary dwellings to accommodate them for a stay of seven days.

4. The Eighth Day (23:36)

The 'eighth day' is a celebration in its own right, timed to come at the end of the seven day pilgrimage festival. It is a day for a 'solemn assembly', and for the sacrifices that are common to all the autumn festivals, summed up here in the expression 'food gifts' (23:16). It is a day of special celebration, and especially prayer for rain. Zechariah 14:16-17 is relevant here, as is the following from Joel:

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in YHWH your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.

– Joel 2:23

Psalm 118 is a liturgical psalm composed for this very day.

John chapter seven recounts a scene in which Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the 'festival of Booths' (John 7:2). The whole chapter reflects themes of this festival. Of special significance is the reference to 'the last day of the festival, the great day' (John 7:37). As the people are praying for rain Jesus cries out:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'

– John 7:37-38

See the following page for a description from the Mishna of the celebrations of this 'great day'.

The summary conclusion (23:37-38) covers the whole of chapter twenty-three and echoes the introduction (23:4).

³³YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ³⁴Speak to the people of Israel, saying: **On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the pilgrimage-festival of booths to YHWH.** ³⁵The first day shall be a *summoning to the sanctuary*; you shall do no laborious work. ³⁶Seven days you shall present *food gifts* to YHWH;

on the eighth day you shall observe a *summoning to the sanctuary* and present a *food gift* to YHWH; it is a solemn assembly; you shall do no laborious work.

³⁷These are the *designated times* of YHWH, which you shall proclaim as *times of summoning to the sanctuary*, for presenting *food gifts* to YHWH – burnt offerings and cereal offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day – ³⁸apart from the sabbath offerings of YHWH, and apart from your gifts, and apart from all your votive offerings, and apart from all your freewill offerings, which you give to YHWH.

³⁹Now, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the *pilgrimage*-festival of YHWH, lasting seven days; rest on the first day, and rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰On the first day you shall take the *boughs* of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before YHWH your God for seven days. ⁴¹You shall celebrate it as a *pilgrimage*-festival to YHWH seven days in the year; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations. ⁴²You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God. ⁴⁴Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the *designated times* of YHWH.

The position and content of 23:9-43 point to it being a later addition. As noted on the previous page, the festival of booths is a post-harvest festival. In verse thirty-nine, this text picks up the old name for the feast: ‘the festival of ingathering’ (Exodus 23:16; 34:22). Rabbi Jacob Milgrom (page 2046) quotes the following from the Mishna (Sukkot 5:1-4):

Anyone who had not witnessed the rejoicing at the Libation Water-Well had never seen rejoicing in his life. At the close of the first Holyday of the Festival of Booths they went down to the Court of the Women where they had made an important rearrangement ... golden candlesticks ... set alight; and there was no courtyard in Jerusalem that was not lit up with the light of the Libation Water-Well ceremony.

Pious men and women of good deeds used to dance before them with burning torches in their hands and sang before them songs and praises. [Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel danced with eight flaming torches, and not one of them fell to the ground. Now he would prostrate himself, he would put his finger on the ground, bow low, kiss the ground, and forthwith straighten up (Tosephta Sukkot 4:4)].

And the Levites used to stand on the fifteen steps leading down from the Court of the Israelites to the Women’s Court, corresponding to the Fifteen Songs of Ascent in the Psalms. They stood with musical instruments: harps and lyres, and cymbals, and trumpets and other instruments of music without number; and sing hymns.

And two priests stood in the Upper Gate which led down from the Israelites’ Court to the Court of the Women with two trumpets in their hands. At cock-crow they sounded a prolonged blast, and a quavering note, and a prolonged blast. When they reached the Forecourt, they blew a prolonged blast, and a quavering note, and a prolonged blast. They kept up prolonged blasts and proceeded till they reached the gate that led out to the east. When they arrived at the gate that led to the east they turned their faces to the west and said: ‘Our ancestors when they were in this place turned “with their backs unto the Temple and their faces towards the east, and they prostrated themselves eastwards towards the sun” (Ezekiel 8:16), but as for us, our eyes are turned to the Eternal.’

Oil for the Lamp (24:1-4)

We have just been told of the responsibility of the people of Israel to maintain the cultic calendar. Now they are being told that it is their responsibility to provide the oil for lighting the lamp in the sanctuary and the bread for the table.

The directions regarding the oil (24:1-4) apply the command found in Exodus 27:20-21. The lamp stand (*menōrâ*, 24:4) belongs to the inner shrine though it stands just outside ‘the curtain of the covenant’ (*‘ēdâ*), that is, the curtain behind which in the inner sanctum is the ark which contains the decalogue: the ‘witness’ to the covenant.

Scholars are agreed that the seven-branched candlestick, with the multiple lamps to which verse four refers, was a later development, and that originally the candlestick supported a single flame.

Bread for the Table (24:5-9)

The table stands with the incense altar and the candlestick in the outer shrine. It is second only to the ark in importance. In the cult of all Israel’s neighbours food was offered for the consumption of the god. Vestiges of this could account for the ‘Bread of Presence’ (Exodus 25:30; 35:13; 39:36), but the meaning here is very different. There are twelve loaves (24:5), representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The bread is displayed before YHWH as a ‘commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant (*berît*) forever’ (24:8).

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. ³Aaron shall set it up in the tent of meeting, outside the curtain of the covenant, to burn from evening to morning before YHWH regularly; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. ⁴He shall set up the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before YHWH regularly.

⁵You shall take choice flour, and bake twelve loaves of it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. ⁶You shall place them in two stacks, six in a stack, on the table of pure gold. ⁷You shall put pure frankincense with each stack, to be a token offering for the bread, as a *food gift* to YHWH.

⁸Every sabbath day Aaron shall set them in order before YHWH regularly as a commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant forever. ⁹They shall be for Aaron and his descendants, who shall eat them in a holy place, for they are most holy portions for him from the *food gift* to YHWH, a perpetual due.

¹⁰A man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian came out among the people of Israel; and the Israelite woman's son and a certain Israelite began fighting in the camp.

¹¹The Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name in a curse. And they brought him to Moses—now his mother's name was Shelomith, daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan— ¹²and they put him in custody, until the decision of YHWH should be made clear to them.

¹³YHWH said to Moses, saying: ¹⁴Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him.

¹⁵And speak to the people of Israel, saying: Anyone who curses God shall bear *his punishment*.

¹⁶One who pronounces the name of YHWH shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer.

Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death.

The only other narrative in Leviticus is the account of the defilement of the holy place by Nadab and Abihu (10:1-11). It is balanced here by an account of a person defiling the holy name. These two narratives remind us that there is a connection between law and narrative, in that law arises out of actual situations.

Leviticus has already stated that inadvertent desecration of the holy place can be expiated by sacrifice (5:14-19), whereas conscious desecration is to be punished by death (10:1-4). We also know that inadvertent desecration of the holy name can be expiated by sacrifice (5:20-26). This text completes the picture: conscious desecration of the holy name must be punished by death.

The man concerned is considered an Israelite because of his mother. However, he cannot inherit land (see Numbers 2:2; 26:55). His father is not mentioned. Either he stayed behind in Egypt, or he was part of the 'mixed multitude' (Exodus 12:38) that left Egypt with the Israelites. It is the fact of his mixed race that causes Moses to seek an answer from YHWH.

The names Shelomith and Dibri add interest to the story. That Dan is mentioned is a slur against the most northern of the tribes. Is it because when Jeroboam led the northern tribes to break away from Judah, he set up one of his golden calves in the sanctuary at Dan (1 Kings 12:29)?

The man's crime is to curse God, using the holy Name (haššem, 24:11). Those who heard his curse were polluted by it, so YHWH's decision is that they take the blasphemer outside the camp, lay both hands on his head to transfer the pollution back to him, and stone him to death. The placing of both hands on his head reminds us of the high priest pressing both hands down on the head of the scapegoat, for the same reason (16:21).

Two laws are attached to this narrative. The first: 'Anyone who curses God shall bear his punishment' (24:15), assumes the cursing is in private and so is undetected, and it leaves the punishment to God. The second: 'One who (also) pronounces the name of YHWH shall be put to death' (24:16) is the case covered in this narrative. It is made clear that this applies not only to Israelites but to foreigners who live in the land (gēr), so obviously to the half-Israelite in the narrative.

Further pieces of legislation are incorporated here. They are based on the principle that punishment should be the equivalent of the harm caused: ‘the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered’(24:20). This principle, found in other ancient Near Eastern codes, sets a limit on retaliation, thus providing some protection against the tyranny of the powerful.

The first piece of legislation is that ‘Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death’(24:17, repeated in 24:21).

The second piece of legislation is that “Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it”(24:18, repeated in 24:21).

The centre-piece of this additional legislation concerns injury inflicted by one person on another (24:19-20). Here, the authors are reworking a text laid down in the ancient tribal law quoted in Exodus:

You shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

– Exodus 21:23-25

The opening words, ‘life for life’, are applied in putting to death someone who commits murder (24:17, 21). Leviticus quotes these words before it moves on to speak of causing injury (24:18).

It is hard to know how the equivalent punishments mentioned in Leviticus 24:20 or in Exodus 21:24-25, could have been put into effect strictly in the courts. They probably remained at the level of legal theory. It is likely that some form of compensation was demanded rather than a literal ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’.

As applied to divine punishment, the words carry a powerful message that God is just, and that crime will certainly not go unpunished by God.

¹⁷Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death.

¹⁸Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life.

¹⁹Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: ²⁰fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

²¹One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death.

²²You shall have one *edict* for the alien and for the citizen: for I am YHWH your God.

²³Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel; and they took the blasphemer outside the camp, and stoned him to death. The people of Israel did as YHWH had commanded Moses.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying:

²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath to YHWH.

³Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield;

⁴but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for YHWH:

you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

⁶You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you;

⁷for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

The instructions contained in Leviticus are given to Moses ‘from the tent of meeting’(1:1). Here we are reminded that we are still at Mount Sinai.

Sabbatical Year (25:2-7)

Verse two speaks of ‘the land’(’eres), a word that recurs twenty times in this chapter. First of all we are reminded that the land belongs to YHWH, hence the people must do with it as he says. We are accustomed to hearing about God observing a sabbath (Exodus 20:11), and the people (23:3). Here it is the land that is to ‘observe a sabbath (šabbāt) to YHWH’(25:3) – something that will affect everyone living on it. Every seventh year (agricultural year, beginning in autumn) the land must be returned to its condition on the sabbath of creation (Genesis 2:3).

This text draws on Exodus 23:10-11

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

The Exodus text comes from the oldest code in the Bible. It witnesses to the people’s knowledge of the needs of the land, and also to their awareness of God as one who hears the cry of the poor.

The Leviticus text goes further in requiring that no work at all is to be done on the land. As with the sabbath itself (23:3) and the Day of Purgation (23:32), every seventh year is to be one of ‘complete rest’(25:4). The priests who composed this law were enunciating a principle, but must have lost touch with the needs of the farming community. It is hard to imagine such an absolute prohibition being followed. Perhaps the original legislation applied to grain farming. When Israel branched out into viticulture, the vines would have needed some attention during the sabbatical year.

In any case, verses six and seven modify the general principle enunciated in verses four and five, by allowing the landowner and those of his household to use as food whatever the land yields while it is lying fallow during the sabbatical year.

It is worth recording also that there is no evidence that the sabbatical year was observed in pre-exilic Israel. For the post-exilic period see Nehemiah 10:31; 1Maccabees 6:49,53.

Jubilee Year (25:8-22)

The idea of the Jubilee year is that every fifty years land would be restored to its owners who, because of their failure to repay a debt, have had to hand over to another the use of the land and the fruit of its use. The Jubilee legislation is based on the idea that the land belongs to YHWH, and that those to whom YHWH has given it cannot alienate it to another. No one can take advantage of another's poverty to increase their ownership of land. They can benefit from it for a while, but every fifty years it must be restored and all debts cancelled.

YHWH's ownership of the land is reinforced by the word translated 'property' ('*aḥuzzâ*, 25:10). They have 'seized' ('*āḥaz*) the land according to God's instructions, but it is not for anyone a 'guaranteed possession' (*naḥ^alâ*), because it belongs to YHWH and is given on condition of loyalty. Israel is like a resident alien in YHWH's land (see 25:23).

The idea is to 'release' (25:10) people from getting caught up in a downward spiral of poverty, as well as put a limit on greed. However, the fact that no sanctions are mentioned for failure to observe the Jubilee, and that there is no evidence that it was ever actually observed 'throughout all your land' (25:10), gives rise to the question whether it ever went beyond the stage of being a 'utopian' idea. Besides, who is going to give a loan to someone in need in the years just before the debt is going to be cancelled?

It is envisaged as a holy year (25:12), but not a sabbatical year. Following straight after a sabbatical year the command not to work the land (25:11-12), besides being unrelated to the main purpose of the Jubilee, would mean stopping farming for two years in a row.

The law decrees that, having just completed the seventh sabbatical year, after the ten days of repentance which climax with the Day of Purgation, the 'horn' (*šôpar*) is sounded to proclaim the beginning of Jubilee (*yôbêl*, 'ram', 25:10). Like the sabbatical year, the Jubilee follows the agricultural year, and so begins in autumn. The 'you' in verse eight refers to Israelites (foreigners could not 'possess' land by a perpetual title).

⁸You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years.

⁹Then you shall have the horn sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of purgation—you shall have the horn sounded throughout all your land.

¹⁰And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim *release* throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your kinship group.

¹¹That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines.

¹²For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

¹³In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

¹⁴When you make a sale to your neighbour or buy from your neighbour, you shall not cheat one another. ¹⁵When you buy from your neighbour, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. ¹⁶If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. ¹⁷You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am YHWH your God.

¹⁸You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my *edicts*, so that you may live on the land securely. ¹⁹The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. ²⁰Should you ask, What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop? ²¹I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. ²²When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.

²³The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

²⁴Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

The words ‘buy’ and ‘sell’ here are not to be understood as acquiring ownership. The legislators are trying to ensure that a fair price is paid for taking over the use and the fruit of the use of the property.

Verses eighteen to twenty-two show that the legislators of the Jubilee realise the resistance they will receive. One wonders how many would have been persuaded by their encouragement to trust YHWH to give them such an abundant harvest in the ‘sixth year’ that it will tide them over ‘for three years’ till the next harvest in the ‘ninth year’.

The legislation on the Jubilee is God’s way of ensuring that his land is ‘not sold in perpetuity’(25:23). The land is YHWH’s and so the Israelites who ‘are but aliens and tenants’ should treat the land as belonging to the Holy One. Hence the insistence on justice (25:14-17). Injustice pollutes the land. YHWH will be forced to expel them, as he formerly was forced to expel the Canaanites (8:24-30).

Verses twenty-three and twenty-four set down the basic principle for the rest of chapter twenty-five. Having presented the Jubilee, in which God acts as the redeemer (gō’ēl, Genesis 48:16; Exodus 6:6, 15:13), the text now goes on to legislate for what is to happen in the normal running of the land, in between Jubilees.

Here the overriding principle is that land must remain within the kinship group. If a person for whatever reason loses his property, his next of kin must carry out his obligations as a ‘redeemer’(gō’ēl), and is obliged to ‘provide for the redemption (ge’ullâ) of the land’(25:24). The rest of the chapter gives detailed legislation covering a number of different situations.

Case 1 (25:25-28)

The first situation is straightforward. If an Israelite has to 'sell' some property to repay a debt, his next of kin is to purchase it so that it stays within the kinship group. If this does not work out, the Israelite has to do his best to buy it back. If he cannot, then the fall-back position is that he will get it back at the Jubilee (in which case YHWH is the 'redeemer'). Though it is not explicitly stated, the presumption is that if the next of kin purchases it, he has use of it till the man in debt pays him back, or till the Jubilee.

Supplement on the Sale of Houses
(25:29-31)

Houses in a walled city are not covered by the laws governing land. Their sale is considered a private business deal. The house does not have to stay in the kinship group. The one who sells the house is given a year during which, if he can and so desires, he is able to buy the house back. After a year it belongs to the purchaser and is not affected by Jubilee. Outside a walled city, houses are considered part of the land and come under the Jubilee legislation.

Supplement on Levite Houses
(25:32-34)

This is the only mention of Levites in Leviticus. Their situation is unique in that they do not own farmland. Their house in one of the cities set aside for them (see Joshua 21) is their only property, and so in law is the equivalent of land for other Israelites. It is covered by all the laws about redemption, including Jubilee. The legislator thought it necessary to stress to the redeemer (of necessity a Levite) that Levite houses are not like other houses. He must sell it back to its owner, or return it to him at Jubilee. The open pasture land surrounding a Levite city cannot be sold (25:34).

²⁵If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.

²⁶If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, ²⁷the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned. ²⁸But if there is not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned.

²⁹If anyone sells a dwelling house in a walled city, it may be redeemed until a year has elapsed since its sale; the right of redemption shall be one year. ³⁰If it is not redeemed before a full year has elapsed, a house that is in a walled city shall pass in perpetuity to the purchaser, throughout the generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee. ³¹But houses in villages that have no walls around them shall be classed as open country; they may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee.

³²As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites shall forever have the right of redemption of the houses in the cities belonging to them. ³³Whoever of the Levites redeems (must know that) houses sold in a city belonging to them shall be released in the jubilee; because the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. ³⁴But the open land around their cities may not be sold; for that is their possession for all time.

³⁵If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. ³⁶Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. ³⁷You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit.

³⁸I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.

³⁹If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they *are sold* to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. ⁴⁰They shall remain with you as hired or bound labourers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. ⁴¹Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. ⁴²For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. ⁴³You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God.

⁴⁴As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. ⁴⁵You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. ⁴⁶You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness.

Case 2 (25:35-37)

This is addressed to the creditor in a situation where, through falling into debt, a person has lost control of his land. The only way he can pay off the debt is to work for the creditor, by continuing to work his farm, now as a tenant farmer, in an attempt to pay off the debt from the produce. The creditor is instructed not to demand interest on the debt (compare Exodus 22:25).

Slavery (25:38-55)

The solemn beginning (25:38), repeated 25:42, and again at the conclusion (25:55) reminds the people that YHWH redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Enslavement of Israelites must never be allowed. Since this was not enforceable in the courts and there is no penalty for those who do not comply, the authority of God is appealed to. This might indicate that non-compliance was common.

Slavery, using either captured foreigners or locals who failed to repay debts, was widespread in the ancient Near East. Hence the need to insist on this principle here. Even when an Israelite cannot manage to pay his debt by working as a tenant farmer (Case 2 above), the creditor may use him as a hired worker, but he may not treat him as a slave (25:39-43). He can own his work but not his person, and not beyond the Jubilee (25:40). At the Jubilee the children, too, are free to go with their father (25:41) – a change in legislation from that found in Exodus 21:4.

They are allowed to have, and treat as their own property, non-Israelite slaves (25:44-46), but they must not treat them harshly (25:46).

Israelites enslaved to foreigners must be redeemed (25:47-55)

The land cannot be alienated because it belongs to YHWH. It must be kept within the kinship group. The same principle applies to the people. The Israelites are God's holy people. They cannot become the possession of another Israelite (25:39-43). They certainly cannot become the possession of a non-Israelite, and so must be redeemed (25:48). If this fails, God will redeem them at the Jubilee (25:54). This legislation is not the same as that given in Exodus 21:2-11 or Deuteronomy 15:12-18 – a further instance of how legislation adapted to changing circumstances and possibilities.

⁴⁷If resident aliens among you prosper, and if any of your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien, or to a branch of the alien's family, ⁴⁸after they have sold themselves they shall have the right of redemption; one of their brothers may redeem them, ⁴⁹or their uncle or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper they may redeem themselves.

⁵⁰They shall compute with the purchaser the total from the year when they sold themselves to the alien until the jubilee year; the price of the sale shall be applied to the number of years: the time they were with the owner shall be rated as the time of a hired labourer. ⁵¹If many years remain, they shall pay for their redemption in proportion to the purchase price; ⁵²and if few years remain until the jubilee year, they shall compute thus: according to the years involved they shall make payment for their redemption.

⁵³As a labourer hired by the year they shall be under the alien's authority, who shall not, however, rule with harshness over them in your sight. ⁵⁴And if they have not been redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children with them shall go free in the jubilee year.

⁵⁵For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God.

I am YHWH your God

¹You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to worship at them; for I am YHWH your God.

Before stating the wonderful blessings that will come to Israel if the people live the holy life they are called and graced to live, and the terrible consequences that will come upon them if they fail, the authors offer a brief summary of the essential commands that directly affect their relationship with God. These are the first (Exodus 20:3-6) and third (Exodus 20:8-11) commandments of the decalogue, chosen because they are directed at the people as a whole. The second commandment (20:7), against using YHWH's name in vain, is more likely to be broken by individuals than by the people as a whole.

Most scholars agree that the Holiness Code, at least in its final form, was composed in light of the experience of exile in Babylon. It is no coincidence that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel point to idolatry as the key reason for the exile. Verse one echoes Leviticus 19:

Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am YHWH your God.

– Leviticus 19:4

'Figured stones' (26:1) seems to be referring to a pavement with figures on it on which a person would prostrate himself in worship. The ancient tribal code also prohibits 'pillars' (Exodus 23:24). In Canaan, they represent the consort of the high god, El.

²You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am YHWH.

It has already been noted that the sabbath took on extra significance during the exile when the public cult could not be carried out. Like the previous verse, this, too, echoes Leviticus 19:

You shall keep my sabbaths: I am YHWH your God.

– Leviticus 19:3

The linking of sacred time and sacred space echoes the same earlier chapter:

You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am YHWH.

– Leviticus 19:30

The ‘statutes’ (ḥuqqâ) and ‘commandments’ (mišwôt) cover the whole of the Holiness Code. YHWH promises five blessings that will come to Israel if the people faithfully observe what he has commanded them.

Firstly (26:4-5), they will have plenty to eat and drink. This echoes the prophet Amos:

The time is surely coming, says YHWH, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.

– Amos 9:13

Secondly (26:6), there will be peace within its borders. They will be threatened neither by wild animals (lions and bears existed in Canaan), nor enemy armies. Thirdly (26:7-8), outside the land they will be victorious over their enemies. Fourthly (26:9-10), they will experience the promise given to mankind in the beginning (Genesis 1:28; 9:1,7), and frequently repeated to the patriarchs. God promised Abraham:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

– Genesis 17:6-7

Fifthly, the greatest of all the blessings (26:11-13) is that YHWH will be present among them and walk with them as he did in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). We are meant to recall YHWH’s words to Moses:

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am YHWH your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.

– Exodus 6:7

‘I shall not vomit you out’ (gā‘al) casts a shadow over the blessings, and prepares us for 26:30.

³If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully,

⁴I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ⁵Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.

⁶And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.

⁷You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. ⁸Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.

⁹I will look with favour upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you. ¹⁰You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.

¹¹I will place my Presence in your midst, and I shall not vomit you out. ¹²And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.

¹³I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

The Price of Disobedience

Five disastrous consequences if they fail to obey (26:14-39).

We cannot break the covenant with God without suffering the consequences.

¹⁴But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, ¹⁵if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my *edicts*, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant,

1. Illness and the country overrun by enemies (26:16-17; contrast 26:6)

¹⁶I in turn will do this to you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. ¹⁷I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down by your enemies; your foes shall rule over you, and you shall flee though no one pursues you.

2. Drought (26:18-20; contrast 26:4-5)

¹⁸And if in spite of this you will not obey me, I will continue to punish you sevenfold for your sins. ¹⁹I will break your proud glory, and I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper. ²⁰Your strength shall be spent to no purpose: your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

3. Attacks by wild animals (26:21-22; contrast 26:6)

²¹If you continue hostile to me, and will not obey me, I will continue to plague you sevenfold for your sins. ²²I will let loose wild animals against you, and they shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock; they shall make you few in number, and your roads shall be deserted.

4. War, pestilence and famine (26:23-26; contrast 26:7-10)

²³If in spite of these punishments you have not turned back to me, but continue hostile to me, ²⁴then I too will continue hostile to you: I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins. ²⁵I will bring the sword against you, executing vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands. ²⁶When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven, and they shall dole out your bread by weight; and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied.

5. Chaos, devastation of the land, and exile for the people (26:27-39; contrast 26:11-13)

²⁷But if, despite this, you disobey me, and continue hostile to me, ²⁸I will continue hostile to you in fury; I in turn will *discipline* you myself sevenfold for your sins.

YHWH's hostile response to their hostility increases in fury (*hēmâ*), but it is described in terms of 'discipline' (*yāsar*). He wants them to learn to obey.

They will be so desperate for food that they will have recourse to cannibalism (compare 2Kings 6:28-29; Jeremiah 19:9; Lamentations 2:20; 4:10; Deuteronomy 28:54-57).

YHWH will destroy the sanctuaries where they worship false gods and will vomit them out (gā'al; 26:30; see 26:11).

The cities will be laid waste, the sanctuaries where they carry out the cult to YHWH will be emptied, and their enemies will be appalled at the level of destruction throughout the land. Verse thirty-two may witness to the populating of Israel with other displaced people by the Assyrian conquerors.

Verses thirty-four to thirty-five are in parenthesis, linking the exile to the people's failure to observe the sabbatical year commanded in 25:2-7.

Verses thirty-six to thirty-nine describe life in exile. Verse thirty-nine recalls the following:

I will the iniquity of the parents
upon the children and the chil-
dren's children, to the third and the
fourth generation.

– Exodus 34:7

Sin has effects that cannot be pretended away, and these effects are passed on from generation to generation. If the 'ancestors' fail to repent, and fail to purge away the pollution that has made it impossible for YHWH and his people to dwell together in peace, their children will have to set things right. We are reminded of the words of Jeremiah (34:18).

You show steadfast love to the
thousandth generation, but repay
the guilt of parents into the laps of
their children after them.

Ezekiel challenges this idea (18:33).

29You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.

30I will destroy your *cult sites* and cut down your incense *stands*; I will heap your carcasses on the carcasses of your idols. I will vomit you out.

31I will lay your cities waste, will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing odours.

32I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it.

33And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste.

34Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. 35As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.

36And as for those of you who survive, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; the sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall though no one pursues. 37They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though no one pursues; and you shall have no power to stand against your enemies. 38You shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall devour you. 39And those of you who survive shall languish in the land of your enemies because of their iniquities; also they shall languish because of the iniquities of their ancestors.

YHWH is faithful to the Covenant

⁴⁰But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, in that they committed *sacrilege* against me and, moreover, that they continued hostile to me – ⁴¹so that I, in turn, continued hostile to them and *dispersed* them in the land of their enemies;

if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they *accept their punishment in full*, ⁴²then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

⁴³For the land shall be deserted by them, and enjoy its sabbath years by lying desolate without them, while they shall *accept their punishment in full*, because they dared to spurn my *edicts*, and they abhorred my statutes.

⁴⁴Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or *vomit them out* so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am YHWH their God; ⁴⁵but I will remember in their favour the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God: I am YHWH.

⁴⁶These are the statutes and *edicts* and laws that YHWH established between himself and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai through Moses.

This beautiful conclusion to chapters twenty-five and twenty-six holds out the possibility of their being restored to divine favour. Of course, they must acknowledge their sin, and bear its consequences, and they must repent, for without a radical change of heart (their uncircumcised heart must be humbled, 26:41), they cannot enjoy the blessings of communion with YHWH. This is true, but a more radical truth is expressed here, and it is this truth that is the ground for constant hope: their sin has not changed YHWH, who remains faithful to his side of the covenant.

The exile, like the Flood, was a purging of a world sinking in sin. The turning point in the Flood narrative came with ‘God remembered Noah’(Genesis 8:1). He promised also to remember the covenant that he had made to every living thing (Genesis 9:15-16). The turning point in Egypt came when

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

– Exodus 2:24 (see 6:5)

God assures them that he will once again ‘remember’(26:42) his commitment to Jacob (Genesis 35:9-15), which was a repetition of the commitment made to Isaac (Genesis 26:24), and to Abraham (Genesis 17:7-8).

After the parenthesis concerning the sabbatical year (26:43; compare 26:34-35), God promises that he will not break his covenant with them (26:44). Having reminded them of the covenant he made with the patriarchs, a promise of blessing and land, he promises to remember the Sinai covenant (26:45), a promise of presence among them, his treasured possession, priestly kingdom and holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). This promise is echoed in Isaiah 40:2; 49:17-23.

The summary conclusion (26:46) picks up the opening introduction of 25:1, and covers the whole of the legislation of Mount Sinai, from Exodus 20, and including the whole of Leviticus.

Vows made to the sanctuary

1. Vowing the value-equivalent of a person (27:1-8)

The situation is that someone, for whatever reason, has made a vow to give the sanctuary a gift, and has explicitly expressed this offer in terms of a person (my wife, my child etc). From the beginning it is known that what is being promised is the equivalent value, and here the legislation sets the value by the 'sanctuary shekel', as distinct from the merchant shekel, which varied with the market (Genesis 23:16), or the royal shekel, determined by the royal court (2Samuel 14:26).

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When a person makes an explicit vow to YHWH concerning the *value*-equivalent for a human being, ³the *value*-equivalent for a male shall be: from twenty to sixty years of age the *value*-equivalent shall be fifty shekels of silver by the sanctuary shekel. ⁴If the person is a female, the *value*-equivalent is thirty shekels. ⁵If the age is from five to twenty years of age, the *value*-equivalent is twenty shekels for a male and ten shekels for a female. ⁶If the age is from one month to five years, the *value*-equivalent for a male is five shekels of silver, and for a female the *value*-equivalent is three shekels of silver. ⁷And if the person is sixty years old or over, then the *value*-equivalent for a male is fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels. ⁸If any cannot afford the *value*-equivalent, they shall be brought before the priest and the priest shall assess them; the priest shall assess them according to what each one making a vow can afford.

2. Vowing an animal that can be sacrificed (27:9-10)

The person who made the vow may exchange the animal by offering an animal of a different species, or substitute another animal of the same species, but the animal must be of an equivalent value, and the vowed animal has to be offered in sacrifice (and, if substituted, presumably taken home and eaten); it is 'holy'. The prophet Malachi's complaint (1:13-14) is relevant:

You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says YHWH. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.

⁹If it concerns an animal that may be brought as an offering to YHWH, any such that may be given to YHWH shall be holy. ¹⁰Another shall not be exchanged or substituted for it, either good for bad or bad for good; and if one animal is substituted for another, both that one and its substitute shall be holy.

3. Vowing an animal that cannot be sacrificed (27:11-13)

¹¹If it concerns any unclean animal that may not be brought as an offering to YHWH, the animal shall be presented before the priest. ¹²The priest shall assess it: whether good or bad, according to the assessment of the priest, so it shall be. ¹³But if it is to be redeemed, one-fifth must be added to the assessment.

Consecration of Houses and Fields

Consecration is restricted to inanimate things and takes effect immediately. To 'consecrate' (yaqdîš) is to transfer something into the realm of the holy. The following legislation presumes the legislation concerning the Jubilee (25:8-55).

1. Consecrating a house (27:14-15)

¹⁴If a person consecrates a house to YHWH, the priest shall assess it: whether good or bad, as the priest assesses it, so it shall stand. ¹⁵And if the one who consecrates the house wishes to redeem it, one-fifth shall be added to its assessed value, and it shall revert to the original owner.

2. Consecrating inherited land (27:16-21)

The key point here is that inherited land cannot be alienated. If someone else controls it or has the rights to the use and the fruit of the use of the land, it must revert to the owner at Jubilee. In case the person who consecrated it to the sanctuary wishes to redeem it, the following legislation lays down the value-equivalent.

¹⁶If a person consecrates to YHWH any inherited landholding, its assessment shall be in accordance with its seed requirements: fifty shekels of silver to a homer of barley seed. ¹⁷If the person consecrates the field as of the year of jubilee, that assessment shall stand; ¹⁸but if the field is consecrated after the jubilee, the priest shall compute the price for it according to the years that remain until the year of jubilee, and the assessment shall be reduced. ¹⁹And if the one who consecrates the field wishes to redeem it, then one-fifth shall be added to its assessed value, and it shall revert to the original owner;

The following verses make an exception. If a person consecrates his inherited field to the sanctuary and sells it he forfeits his right to get it back at Jubilee. The person to whom he sold it will benefit from its use till the Jubilee, at which time it will go to the sanctuary as a 'devoted field' (hērem), not back to its original owner. Priests are not *allotted* land, but they may receive it when it is consecrated.

²⁰but if the field is not redeemed, or if it has been sold to someone else, it shall no longer be redeemable. ²¹But when the field is released in the jubilee, it shall be holy to YHWH as a devoted field; it becomes the priest's holding.

3. Consecrating purchased land (27:22-24)

The point here is that the one who consecrates it does not own it, but has rights only to its use. He can consecrate the fruit of the use of the land to the sanctuary or pay the equivalent.

²²If someone consecrates to YHWH a field that has been purchased, which is not a part of the inherited landholding, ²³the priest shall compute for it the proportionate assessment up to the year of jubilee, and the assessment shall be paid as of that day, a sacred donation to YHWH. ²⁴In the year of jubilee the field shall return to the one from whom it was bought, whose holding the land is. ²⁵All assessments shall be by the sanctuary shekel: twenty gerahs shall make a shekel.

First born Animals (27:26-27)

Comparison with Exodus 13:12-15 (which requires that the first born animal is to be entirely consumed in a burnt offering), Numbers 18:15-18 (which legislates that the meat goes to the priests), and Deuteronomy 15:19-23 (which states that the meat goes to the owner), indicates historical development in this legislation. The following focuses on the fact that the animal belongs to YHWH and so cannot be consecrated as though it belonged to a human owner. If it is of an animal that cannot be offered in sacrifice, the priests can sell it according to the following valuation.

²⁶A firstling of animals, however, which as a firstling belongs to YHWH, cannot be consecrated by anyone; whether ox or sheep, it is YHWH'S. ²⁷If it is an unclean animal, it shall be ransomed at its assessment, with one-fifth added; if it is not redeemed, it shall be sold at its assessment.

Possessions completely handed over to God (27:28)

The war-ḥērem was instituted to discourage wars of aggression. If the booty of war could not be retained but had to be destroyed, what is to be gained by such a war? By analogy an owner was able to completely hand over anything he owned (non-Israelite slaves, animals or inherited land) to permanent sanctuary ownership. It could not be sold or redeemed.

²⁸Nothing that a person owns that has been *completely handed over* for YHWH, be it human or animal, or inherited landholding, may be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to YHWH.

Persons completely handed over to God by a court (27:29)

²⁹No human beings who have been *completely handed over* can be ransomed; they shall be put to death.

Tithes (27:30-33)

³⁰All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are YHWH'S; they are holy to YHWH. ³¹If persons wish to redeem any of their tithes, they must add one-fifth to them. ³²All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to YHWH. ³³Let no one inquire whether it is good or bad, or make substitution for it; if one makes substitution for it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy and cannot be redeemed.

Conclusion to Appendix (Leviticus 27) and Leviticus

³⁴These are the commandments that YHWH gave to Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.