

Levitical code of holiness: Essence of love of god and love of neighbor

Jagadish Basumatary

Department of Philosophy, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Abstract

The Book of Leviticus is the third book of the Jewish Bible and of the Old Testament. Its English name is derived from the Latin *Leviticus*, taken from Greek word *Λευιτικόν*, *Leuitikon*. The book makes specific reference to the Levites, the tribe of Aaron, from whom the Kohanim (priests) descended. The book, however, addresses all the people of Israel (1:2) though some passages address the priests specifically (6:8). God tells the Israelites and their priests how to make offerings in the Tabernacle and how to conduct themselves while camped around the holy tent sanctuary. The instructions of Leviticus emphasize ritual, legal and moral practices rather than beliefs. The primary aim of this paper is to bring out “the sense of holiness” which Israelites developed by their faithful performance of the sanctuary rituals and strict observance of legal and moral practices as has been instructed by Yahweh; and the secondary aim is to depict how such sense of holiness culminates in the love of God and love of neighbor in human society. The informations in this paper are collected from a number of secondary data.

Keywords: holiness, law, worship, sacrifice, priesthood, Israelites, Yahweh, social order, family

1. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible does not mention Lev 17-26 as law on holiness. So, many scholars are of the opinion that, this section probably once existed independently as a law code. There is no unanimity of opinion among scholars regarding the origin of this code. Some scholars argue for its exilic origin while others argue for a pre-exilic origin, probably during Josiah's time. The name ‘Holiness Code’ was given to Chapters 17-26 of Leviticus by August Klosterman in 1877 and Julius Wellhausen supported this by maintaining that Lev 17-26 occupied a unique position in the whole Priestly document. The name ‘Holiness Code’ was given to this section because of its invitation to imitate the holiness of God: “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20:26) (Kizhakkeyil, 2009) [8, 9]. According to the laws of Leviticus, that must be translated into our daily actions as imitating the actions of the all-holy God who cared for the poor, the widow, the alien, and the orphan- that is, for all the weak who need help. Leviticus treats the duties to our neighbor according to this principle (Boadt, 1990) [3]. Holiness is found in worshiping Yahweh; in conducting one's family life; in fulfilling one's obligation toward the society and in the celebration of various feasts related to nature.

2. The Laws of Holiness in Worship

For the Israelites keeping the Sabbath was the first spiritual priority (Lev 19:3b) (Rooker, 2000) [16]. Sabbath was the weekly Jewish religious holy day, the seventh day of the week, a day of rest and abstention from work (Kizhakkeyil S. a., 2008) [10]. It was a symbol of the covenant between God and Israel. Its observance was significant in Jewish life, “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day”. The spirituality of Sabbath emphasizes joy and presence of God (Organ, 1998) [14]. They were called to renew their commitment to God every week and thus grow in holiness. Thus they fulfilled the first commandment prescribed in the Decalogue; “You shall have no other gods besides me” (Ex 20:4). The worship of the

living God was exhibited through sacrifices. It was meant to remind the Israelites about their duty and obligation to worship Yahweh.

2.1 Laws of Holiness in Sacrifice

They had to worship God as prescribed in the Sinai covenant (Rooker, 2000) [16]. The main sacrificial animals, ox, sheep, and goat could only be offered in the tabernacle (Wenham, 1979) [20], a place of holiness (Sailhamer, 1992) [17]. It was a way of preventing the Israelites from offering sacrifices to the goat idols and also from offering their offspring to *Molech* (Lev 18:21), the god of the Ammonites (1kgs 11:7) (Rooker, 2000) [16]. The law dealt with the everyday life of the people to ensure that they remained holy and faithful to God (Sailhamer, 1992) [17]. The gift of life was Yahweh's greatest gift to man (Polan, 1998) [15]. Blood was used for ritual enactment of expiation because in terms of life blood accomplished expiation on the altar. The blood of an animal, bird killed for food was poured out on the ground and covered with earth. It implied presenting the life of the animal to Yahweh. Thus, God was respected as creator and sustainer of life (Gorman Jr, 1997) [6].

2.2 Priesthood as Manifestation of Holiness

It was religious leaders, and the priest who taught the people how to live a holy life. Therefore, they had special obligation to maintain certain standard of holiness. We find that the sins of Israel's religious leaders were considered more serious than that of ordinary people. They had to offer more valuable animals than the ordinary people (Wenham, 1979) [20]. The chief or high priest was a representative of God; therefore he had to be holy (Clarke, 1989) [5]. He represented all Israel by entering into the Holy of Holies, the most sacred zone of the sanctuary (Balentine, 2002) [1]. The priest had to distinguish between the sacred and the common, between the impure and the pure. They had to teach Israelites all the laws that Yahweh had imparted to them through Moses (Jacob, 2000) [7]. The

priests had to direct his action in a particular way as willed by Yahweh. The role of priest demanded wholeness and particular witness. So special rules governing marriage, deformities and uncleanness were spelled out. Sacrifices had to be done correctly and with special awareness of their sacred character (Boadt, 1990) ^[3].

2.2.1 The Laws of Inviolability for the Priesthood

The high priest had to be decent in his appearance. He could not go near the dead body; or even mourn the death of his father or mother (21:10-11) because dead bodies were considered unclean. The priest would become unclean and unworthy for service (Wenham, 1979) ^[20]. Ordinary priests were allowed to see the corpse in the case of their "nearest of kin," mother, father, son, daughter, brother and virgin sister (21:2) (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]; but had to maintain decency in appearance. Their wives had to be of good character (Wenham, 1979) ^[20] and the high priest could marry only a virgin Israelite girl from his kinsfolk (21:15) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16].

An unclean priest was not to come near nor eat the offerings made to the Lord (22:1-3). The holiness of a priest permeated his household. Therefore, offerings could be eaten by his family along with the slave or a slave born in his household (22:10-11) under a condition that they be circumcised as a sign of their membership in the covenant. Daughters of priests who married laymen could not partake in it. However a daughter who was widowed or divorced and childless, who had returned to the home of her father was allowed to eat sacred meals (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. Holiness permeated from Yahweh to his priest and from the priest to his household and to the society.

2.2.2 Wholeness as Symbol of Holiness in Priesthood

The understanding that God's holiness was perfect and complete made Israelites consider that the wholeness and integrity of the physical body was an external expression of the requirement to be holy priest (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]. The priests needed to be free from physical blemish (Lev 21:16-24). There were certain rules with regard to the qualification to priesthood. Twelve disqualifying blemishes were listed: a deformed person, a blind man; that is one eye, a flat nose, like that of an ape, anything superfluous- such as six fingers, six toes. Broken-footed or broken-handed, crooked-backed or hunched back, a dwarf (Clarke, 1989) ^[5], a discoloration of the eye, a festering sore, a skin disease, a crushed testicle (vv.18-21) (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]. Physical wholeness was considered a hallmark of divine blessings and approval. It was taken as requirement for being holy person. So, a priest had to be without any blemish.

3. The Laws of Holiness in the Social Order

Society plays important role in exhibiting the moral standard of the people. Social morality is the cornerstone of all human society (Wenham, 1979) ^[20]. Israel is called to be a holy nation. The Lord tells Moses to address the entire assembly of Israel and admonish them to be holy as God is holy (Lev 19:1-2). Holiness of God demanded that the believer showed this same quality of holiness in daily living (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. Holiness had to flow from the very fabric of the society. Therefore, family life had a great role in making the holiness

of God visible in concrete manner. Holiness in the society could be manifested and preserved in the following manner.

3.1 Holiness in Family Life

The family is the foundation of society. A nation cannot exist if the family unit is not well defined (Wenham, 1979) ^[20]. A man and woman united in marriage, together with their children form a family. Each member has to carry out their respective responsibilities and duties and it is here that holiness is exhibited in a family. The relationship within the family brings an affinity of feelings, affections and interests, arising above all from the members' respect for one another (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2206, 2012) ^[4]. Husband earns and takes care of the family. Mother looks after the household affairs. Children have to respect their parents and obey them (Lev 19:3a) because they have brought them into this world; by the gift of life, their love and their work. The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility for society to support and strengthen family and marriage (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2206, 2012) ^[4]. This is the reason why specific boundaries are defined for the family in the form of norms and regulations.

Israelite family need to respect their blood relationship by not marrying or having sexual relation between two closely related people (Lev 18:6). Holiness in family life entails refraining from illicit relations that blurred family lines and bring distrust and destruction of family. Holiness in the family exists in the love relationship between the members; and not in the illicit relationship between a man and his mother (18:7), step-mother (18:8), sister or half-sister (18:9), granddaughter (18:10), step-sister (18:11), paternal aunt (18:12), maternal aunt (18:13), paternal uncle's wife (18:14), daughter-in-law (18:15), brother's wife (18:16), step-daughter or step-granddaughter (18:17), or wife's sister (18:18) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16].

In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses is a sign of spiritual communion. Spouses have to be faithful to each other. They are to grow in their communion through fidelity to their marriage and mutual self-giving (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2206, 2012) ^[4]. Adultery is marital infidelity and a failure in commitment to spiritual union; this is why it is prohibited in (Lev 18:20). Human sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. It is a means by which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts proper to spouses (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2206, 2012) ^[4]. So, the Israelite could enter into sexual relationship only in marriage specified as between man and woman and not with beast (18:23) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. The duties of the parents are to educate their children with regard to the holiness in family life by their exemplary life.

3.2 Holiness of the Person and Society

The human person needs to live in society in order to develop in accordance with his nature. Through the exchange of ideas with others, mutual service and dialogue with each other man develops his potential. Love of neighbor is inseparable from love for God (Lev 19:18) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. Society ought to promote the exercise of virtue, not obstruct it. The dignity of human person was to be respected and upheld in Israel through promotion of neighborly love and care (19:13-14) by not spreading slander about others nor by putting a neighbor's

life in jeopardy (19:16). Charity implied love and care of neighbors, especially toward the disadvantaged and handicapped (19:14). Israel was given the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. It could be fulfilled in concrete manner by allowing the poor and needy to gather the gleanings of the harvest (19:9-10). By this the poor were able to live in dignity and saved from embarrassment. This meant that a greedy and covetousness person could not be a holy (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]. Inter-personal relationship was emphasized very much.

For the Israelites society, land gave them not only food; but it also gave them the unique identity of being the people of God. Yahweh was the master of the land and they were tenants (Lev 25: 23-24). They could maintain the right of redeeming the land even when it was sold. This was to prevent oppression and slavery in Israelite society (Lev25: 44-46) (Gorman Jr, 1997) ^[6]. Love of neighbor (19:18) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16] implied that no one man should oppress a fellow man in the name of slavery. They possessed equal dignity and right because they were servants of Yahweh. When there was equality of rights and social justice; the Israelite society would exhibit the holiness envisaged by Yahweh. When people in a society show concern, love, help towards each other in difficult time; then holiness is concretely manifested in that society.

4. Holiness of Year and Season

Israelites considered time as something holy because all the social and family activities took place within the time frame of a day, week and year. It pertained to their daily life activity and hence was marked by holiness. For them time in the form of seasons, feasts and events related to it manifested the holiness of Yahweh. For them, these were created by God in order to help and contribute in their growth to holiness in life. They gave them religious significance with communal coloring. Even the intervention of God in redeeming them from slavery in Egypt took place within the time frame of their historical life. The sacred occasions were fixed by Yahweh, therefore they had obligation to proclaim them at the appropriate time (Jacob, 2000) ^[7]. All their festivals and celebrations were marked by remembrance and gratitude towards God.

4.1 Sabbath (*Shabat*)

Sabbath is interpreted as the perfect example of the Torah in Holiness Code (Lev. 26:33-43) (Menezes, 2005) ^[12]. Through this weekly celebration of Sabbath Israelites were reminded of God’s love and help in delivering them from slavery in Egypt and making them covenant people (Organ, 1998) ^[14]. They had to accept God as their creator by respecting his divine will for them and for creation at large (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]. God is the creator of time. The word “Sabbath” meant “to cease,” “to stop,” and so to stop working, to rest from work. In Gen 2:3 we have; “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.” God rested from work that day and sanctified it (Organ, 1998) ^[14]. The people were called every week to free themselves from their busy life, remember God and set apart a day to worship him (Tenney, 1989) ^[18]. It was in relation to Yahweh that Sabbath was made holy. There by, Israelites were called to re-enact God’s compassion by respecting the parents; showing compassion to the poor; helping the neighbor or the alien in need (Organ, 1998) ^[14]. God commanded Moses, “Speak to the whole Israelites and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, am

holy. Reverence your mother father and keep my Sabbaths. I the Lord am your God” (Lev 19:2-3) (Organ, 1998) ^[14].

4.1.1 Sabbath Year – A Sabbath for the Land

Sabbath was celebrated every week by the Israelites. It influenced every aspect connected to their life. Land was one of the important aspects where the principle of weekly Sabbath was extended (Lev 25:1-7) and this permeated to the entire household. Every seventh year “the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord” (Balentine, 2002) ^[1], by resting from labor and allowing sons and daughters, slaves and resident aliens, and even beasts to rest. Observance of the Sabbath year was meant to remind the people that they had to be totally dependent of God both for their deliverance and their ongoing care. The sabbatical year was a call to the Israelites to alleviate the plight of the poor and give them a new start (Wenham, 1979) ^[20]. They had responsibility toward all who were victims of social injustice (Bergant, 1999) ^[2]. When there is justice in society there is holiness. This social justice is concretely realized in the society during the celebration of the Jubilee Year.

4.1.2 Jubilee Year

Jubilee year was the year that followed “seven weeks of years.” It began with the Day of Atonement, the tenth day of the seventh month. When people were oppressed and burdened with debts there could be no happiness and joy in the society. The celebration of Jubilee year marked the advent of deliverance. It was proclaimed by the blowing of the ram’s horn, signifying liberty throughout the land (Balentine, 2002) ^[1]. During Jubilee Year, property that was sold or lost was redeemed; debts were forgiven; slaves were set free; the land was allowed to lie fallow (Lev 25:8-55). When money was left in the hands of few people there could be no equality in the society. Division and disharmony would be created. The redemption of land, the forgiveness of debts and the manumission of slaves were all meant to redistribute financial resources and prevent the permanent debtor class. Thus the concentration of the nation’s wealth in the hands of few people was prevented. The land lying fallow was related to the requirement of Sabbath rest (Bergant, 1999) ^[2]. The jubilee promoted family unity (Wenham, 1979) ^[20]. Every Israelite had an inalienable right to his family land. If he lost them due to debt; jubilee restored it.

4.1.3 New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*)

Israel learned from their experiences that their entire life and its success depended on the presence of God. They were called in symbolic manner to break camp and be alert to do the will of God by responding to his call. It was commemorated with a loud blast of the trumpet (23:23-25) on the first day of the seventh month. Later on this came to be associated with the *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year’s Day). The blast of the trumpet was a “reminder” (v.24 “a day of remembrance) to Israel of God’s care and provision. It also reminded God of His divine commitment to Israel (Balentine, 2002) ^[1].

4.2 Passover and Unleavened Bread (*Pesah and Mazzoth*)

The feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (23:4-6) were combined in course of time, for the Passover lamb was to be eaten with unleavened bread (Maluf, 1998) ^[11]. Passover is derived from sacrificial victim *Pesah*. The death angel’s

“passing over” Israelites’ home signified God’s compassion in protecting his people (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. Yahweh is the master of life and death. It was a part of Israel’s life experience which reminded them the act of divine intervention in liberating their ancestors from the slavery of Egypt. The assurance of Yahweh was ever-present to his people, even at the hopeless situation of their history (Maluf, 1998) ^[11]. The feast of Passover or Unleavened Bread is hallmark of Israel’s identity as people specially loved by God, whose powerful saving action brought it to existence and nurtured it with faithfulness throughout its difficulties (Maluf, 1998) ^[11].

4.2.1 First Sheaf (*Omer*)

The Israelites saw the hand of God in the fruit of their labor. They expressed their gratefulness to God through various feasts and ceremonies. Sheaf was a “first fruits” ceremony. They made public acknowledgement that: a) the land belonged to God (Lev 20:24) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]; b) the harvest was fruit of his abundant blessings; c) the right of Yahweh to the harvest, before any portion of the new grain was consumed (23:9-11) (Vall, 1998) ^[19]. The first bundle of cut stalks of barley was “waved” before Yahweh at the Jerusalem Temple by one of the priests. The presentation of the “first fruits” was an expression of gratitude and an acknowledgement of total dependence upon Yahweh (Vall, 1998) ^[19].

4.3 Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (*Shavuot*)

Yahweh was the source of livelihood for the Israelites because the land belonged to him. The entire harvest activity of the procedure of reaping, threshing, leavening and baking was consecrated to Yahweh. They offered sacrifices to represent a total dedication through holocaust; purification of the sanctuary from sin through sin offering; and gratefulness for well-being through peace offering (23:16b-18) (Vall, 1998) ^[19]. Here, grain was presented in a processed form and the ritual of “waving” two loaves of wheat bread before Yahweh was performed (23:17). The feasts of Sheaf and Weeks are correlated.

The Israelites had to love their neighbor and help the poor and needy. For this purpose they did not reap the entire field but set aside a portion for the poor and the alien to glean (23:22) (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. Israel participated in the holiness of Yahweh’s bountiful generosity and compassion for the poor. This was how the Israelites preserved the dignity of the poor people by allowing them to labor for their grain (Vall, 1998) ^[19].

4.4 Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)

Holiness meant free from sin and impurities. Israel as a nation was aware of its sinfulness. The Day of Atonement was an important yearly ritual which brought forgiveness of all sin, cleansed the sanctuary of all defilement and restored full union between God and the community of Israel. It was the only day of the year when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, the *adytum* (16:2) (Polan, 1998) ^[15]. God’s presence was the mercy seat; which was the spring of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Hebrew word for “mercy seat” is *kapporet*, the source of the name of the feast, *Yom Kippur*. It means “to ransom, to purify and to rescue.” By God’s mercy the people are ransomed from death brought on by their sinfulness. The divine action would purify them of uncleanness caused by sinful deeds (Polan, 1998) ^[15]. The Day of Atonement was the

climax of sacrifice and worship. The whole community of Israel was again united to God through abstinence and prayer from morning until night (Rooker, 2000) ^[16]. The Jewish sages considered the Day of Atonement as the supreme festival and the greatest day of the year (Kizhakkeyil, 2009) ^[8, 9].

4.5 Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*)

The Tabernacle was the place of holiest of holies because of Yahweh’s living presence. Therefore, the festival of Booths or Tabernacles or Ingathering required pilgrimage to Jerusalem (where the Lord had chosen to dwell) (Nash, 1998) ^[13]. During this feast they remembered their experiences of living in ‘booths’ during their wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan (vv.42-43). They re-enacted by making booths with leaves or straw and by eating and sleeping there during the feast days (Kizhakkeyil, 2009) ^[8, 9]. It was through this feast that they made an act of faith and a participation in God’s holiness. This was done by resting freely and fearlessly on the first and last days of the feast; thus expressing trust in God as their sustainer and protector. They firmly believed that their relationship with God would bring whatever was necessary for life: good harvest, a secure land, healthy children (Nash, 1998) ^[13].

5. Conclusion

In the book of Leviticus, Holiness could be summed up in two terms: **i)** Love in relation to God and **ii)** Love in relation to man. All the instructions on religious worship, family, social life, sacrifices and feasts days are in relation to God and man. Israel was therefore; instructed to practice holiness as well as cleanliness in their day to-day-life by removing defilement and impurity caused by sins through various types of sacrifices. The instruction to love one’s neighbor as oneself made the book of Leviticus (Lev. 19:18, 34), relevant even today. The Israelites had to be distinct from the world particularly in the area of their sexual behavior (Lev 18:24-30). If Israelites become like the pagan nations, performing sexual perversions, the land would vomit them out of the land. In other words, Israel would go into exile (18:25); which showed an interdependence of the people and the land. God dwelt with them in the Tabernacle; so they were warned about the danger of defiling the tabernacle. The holiness of the tabernacle extended to the Promised Land, where God’s presence would abide. Leviticus 26:3-46 stated that if Israel was to obey the Lord they would be blessed with: the gift of rain and good harvests (4-5), the gift of peace (6-10), the gift of God’s presence (11-13). If they disobeyed they would be cursed with: drought and poor harvests (18-20), wild animals (21-22), war (23-26), war and exile (27-39). However, God would remember his covenant with the patriarchs (vv.42-45) and restore them to the land of promise and prosperity.

6. References

1. Balentine SE. Leviticus Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002.
2. Bergant, D. Jubilee: The Year of the Lord. The Bible Today. 1999, 344.
3. Boadt, L. The Pentateuch. In D. Senior, the Catholic Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 53.
4. Catechism of the Catholic Church 2206. New Delhi: Theological Publications in India, 2012.

5. Clarke A. Clarke's Commentary Genesis to Deuteronomy. Nashville: Abingdon. 1989, 1.
6. Gorman Jr FH. Divine Presence and Community: A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus. Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1997.
7. Jacob M. The Anchor Bible Leviticus 23-27, Vol. 3. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
8. Kizhakkeyil. The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2009.
9. Kizhakkeyil S. The Pentateuch. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2009.
10. Kizhakkeyil SA. A Guid to Biblical Studies. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2008.
11. Maluf L. The Passover Festival in the Book of Leviticus. The Bible Today. 1998, 20.
12. Menezes RD. The Cultural Context of Old Testament. Bangalore: T. Publications, 2005.
13. Nash KS. The Feast of Booths. The Bible Today. 1998; 36(1):30.
14. Organ B. The Sabbath in Leviticus. The Bible Today. 1998, 15.
15. Polan GJ. The Rituals of Leviticus 16 and 23. The Bible Today. 1998, 8.
16. Rooker MF. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000.
17. Sailhamer JH. The Pentateuch as Narrative. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1992.
18. Tenney JD. Sabbath. In NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible. Michigan: Grand Rapids. 1989, 514.
19. Vall G. The Feast of Weeks. The Bible Today. 1998; 36(1):26.
20. Wenham GJ. The Book of Leviticus. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1979.