

# Back to the Family

## The Punishment for the Sexual Deviancy of Leviticus 20 and the Law of Necromancy

**ESV Leviticus 20:1** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

<sup>2</sup> "Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel

who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones.

<sup>3</sup> I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name.

<sup>4</sup> And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death,

<sup>5</sup> then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

<sup>6</sup> "If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.

<sup>7</sup> Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.

<sup>8</sup> Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you.

<sup>9</sup> For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him.

<sup>10</sup> "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

<sup>11</sup> If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

<sup>12</sup> If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them.

<sup>13</sup> If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

<sup>14</sup> If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you.

<sup>15</sup> If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal.

<sup>16</sup> If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

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

<sup>18</sup> If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual period and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people.

<sup>19</sup> You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister or of your father's sister, for that is to make naked one's relative; they shall bear their iniquity.

<sup>20</sup> If a man lies with his uncle's wife, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness; they shall bear their sin; they shall die childless.

<sup>21</sup> If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

<sup>22</sup> "You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.

<sup>23</sup> And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them.

<sup>24</sup> But 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 the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples.

<sup>25</sup> You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.

<sup>26</sup> You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

<sup>27</sup> "A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them." (Lev. 18:1-20:27 ESV)

# Christians and the Death Penalty

According to its website, The International Federation of ACATs (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture), FIACAT, is an international non-governmental human rights organization, set up in 1987, which works towards the abolition of torture and [the death penalty](#). On that site, they have a page called, “[The Christian Argument Against the Death Penalty](#),” written by Father Frédéric Nakombo, a Roman Catholic priest and the national Secretary General of their Justice and Peace Commission.

He has [two sociological](#) arguments: *the death penalty is not an effective deterrent* and *the death penalty does not seriously protect society*, and [three religious](#): *the death penalty is based on a fallible justice system*, *the death penalty does not allow the guilty person to repent*, and *the death penalty does not respect the right to life*. This latter list is consistent with the statements made by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1989 when they said, “[Where the death penalty is implemented, God’s redeeming love is violated](#)” and the World Council of

Churches 1990 statement that, “In taking away a human life, the state usurps the will of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Today we look at the second of two chapters that acts as pillars and guardians protecting the center chapter of Leviticus which deals with the moral law. Leviticus 20 is a virtual repeat of Leviticus 18. Though it does have a few things in it that 18 did not have, most of its laws are repeated from the earlier chapter. This makes for a strange thing. Why would the book do this? Why waste the precious parchment to repeat the exact same laws you said only two chapters ago?

When you compare the chapters, you see that there are three striking differences. First, it adds a law about cursing your father a mother, something that is very similar to “revering” your father in mother in chapter 19 (compare 19:3 and 20:9). Second, it adds a second law about necromancy, something we also saw in chapter 19. The strange thing about this law is that it is found both in vs. 6 and 27. Vs. 27 is strange because it seems like it is just tacked on after a much more natural conclusion to the chapter that was quite similar to the conclusion found in chapter 18.

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<sup>1</sup> Father Frédéric Nakombo, “The Christian Argument Against the Death Penalty,” *fiacat* (Jude 2019), <https://www.fiacat.org/en/about-us/a-christian-movement/2763-the-christian-argument-against-the-death-penalty>.

Finally, perhaps the most obvious difference is that Ch. 20 includes **punishments** for violating the laws, whereas Ch. 18 had no punishments at all. These punishments include **the death penalty**. Thus, I want to spend a moment thinking about this particular punishment for a crime using these liberal organizations as a sounding board.

Twin Pillars of Leviticus 18 and 20 <sup>2</sup>			
Leviticus 18 Prohibitions		Leviticus 20 Prohibitions	
6–18	Incest with near kin and in-laws, mother, father's wife, sister, son's daughter, daughter's daughter, father's wife's daughter, father's sister, mother's sister, father's brother's wife, son's wife (daughter-in-law), brother's wife, a woman and her daughter, wife's sister	2–5	Devote children to Molech
		6–8, 27	Mediums and Wizards
		9	Cursing father or mother
		10	Neighbor's wife (adultery)
		11	Father's wife
		12	Daughter-in-law
		13	Sodomy
		14	A daughter and her mother
		15–16	Bestiality
19	Menstrual uncleanness	17	Sister
20	Neighbor's wife (adultery)	18	Menstrual uncleanness
21	Devote children to Molech	19	Mother's or father's sister
22	Sodomy	20	Uncle's wife
23	Bestiality	21	Brother's wife
24–30	For all of these abominations the men of the land did, who were before you, so that the land became defiled; lest the land vomit you out, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.	22	You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out. You shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 237.

I don't want to spend the time thinking here about the sociological arguments against the death penalty. It is **the religious arguments** that catch my attention. There are five of them and they all share something in common. Can you think of what that might be?

- The death penalty is based on a fallible justice system
- The death penalty does not allow the guilty person to repent
- The death penalty does not respect the right to life
- Where the death penalty is implemented, God's redeeming love is violated
- In taking away a human life, the state usurps the will of God

They each presuppose something about God and his word, namely, that they can't be trusted.

If the death penalty is based on a fallible justice system, and the death penalty was part of Israel's OT justice system, then the OT justice system can't be trusted because it is fallible. If the death penalty does not allow the guilty person to repent, yet God implemented the death penalty for Israel, then God does not allow guilty people to repent. If the death penalty does not respect the right to life, and God implemented the death penalty, then God does not respect the right to life. If, rather, God didn't do this, but Moses did,

then we can't trust the OT justice system anyway, since it is rooted in the explicit statements that these were the words of the LORD, not Moses. **If where the death penalty is implemented, God's redeeming love is violated,** but God implemented the death penalty, the God violated his own redeeming love. **If in taking away a human life, the state usurps the will of God,** yet God is the one who told the nation of Israel to carry out the death penalty, the God is usurping his own will! These people call themselves Christians, yet every one of their religious arguments against the death penalty attacks both God and his word through whom they say they know about him.

I'm not really sure why anyone would even want to call themselves a Christian when they attack both God and his word like this. What's the point? If you can't trust the Bible, let alone the One who gave it, then why bother pretending? Instead of this skeptical incredulous approach, if you are going to call yourself a Christian, it seems to me it is much better to **trust this God and his word**. If something like the death penalty rubs you the wrong way, then perhaps it behooves you to figure out how you can conform to it rather than forcing it to conform to you, which always ends up in personal disaster.

The laws of Leviticus 20 do not all contain the death penalty, but many do. What I want to do this morning is work through this chapter, trying to understand it on its own terms. As we do, we will see something of God's own apologetic for the death penalty. As we conclude, we will return to this topic and try to make sense of it in accordance with [the Sixth Commandment](#), translated poorly by the older translations as, "Thou shalt not kill."

## Leviticus 20: Structure

As we discussed with Leviticus 19, most scholars regard Leviticus 20 "as a miscellaneous collection that lacks any kind of literary presentation."<sup>3</sup> They just seem to be randomly ordered. Most of the laws were already found just a couple of chapters earlier, but now they are in a different order. Why? Upon closer inspection, it is quickly understood that these laws are organized chiastically according to the various modes of punishment.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Burnside, "Strange Flesh: Sex, Semiotics and the Construction of Deviancy in Biblical Law," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (2006): 389-90 [387-420]. [https://www.academia.edu/8195917/Strange\\_Flesh\\_Sex\\_Semiotics\\_and\\_the\\_Construction\\_of\\_Deviancy\\_in\\_Biblical\\_Law\\_Journal\\_for\\_the\\_Study\\_of\\_the\\_Old\\_Testament](https://www.academia.edu/8195917/Strange_Flesh_Sex_Semiotics_and_the_Construction_of_Deviancy_in_Biblical_Law_Journal_for_the_Study_of_the_Old_Testament).



# CHIASTIC ARRANGEMENT OF LAW IN LEVITICUS 20

## Introduction (1-2a)

A. Stone with stones (Molech; 2-5)

B. Cut off (consult mediums; 6-8)

C. Put to death (curses father/mother, adultery, father's wife, daughter-in-law; sodomy; 9-13)

D. Burned with Fire (woman and her mother; 14)

C<sup>1</sup>. Put to death (bestiality; 15-16)

B<sup>1</sup>. Cut off (sister, menstrual; 17-19) (childless: uncle's wife, brother's wife; 20-21)

## Conclusion (23-26)

A<sup>1</sup>. Stoned with stones (medium/necromancer; 27)

Since some of the laws listed together in Ch. 18 are punished differently from one another, the order of their presentation naturally differs. But we can say more. Not only is there a chiasm that flows according to the punishments, the same chiasm flows according to **who it is that is to carry out those punishments.**

A	Humankind	(v. 2)
B	YHWH	(vv. 3-6)
X	Humankind	(vv. 9-16)
B'	YHWH	(vv. 17-21)
A'	Humankind	(v. 27)

It is curious that in some of these laws, **Israel** is to carry out the punishment; in others, **Yahweh** will do it. If God were

not real or could not be trusted, what possible sense would it even make to have a law where we were to trust that God would carry out the punishment? This makes the arguments we saw above against capital punishment all the more absurd.

There is one more noteworthy feature about this chapter. It shares something in common with chapter 19 which we saw was most **probably built around the Ten Commandments**. Chapter 20 is the same. It begins with laws dealing with other gods and the other world (**Lev 20:2-8**), thereby dealing with the **First** (and perhaps Second) Commandment. It then moves to the **Fourth** Commandment with fathers and mothers (**9**). This command links everything that follows, thus giving us another look at how important the family is, just like we see in Ch. 18 (this in turn helps us understand why such harsh punishments are necessary). Finally, it moves to the **Seventh** Commandment and not committing adultery (**20:10**). This command also oversees the remaining laws as they are all linked to it as well. And, of course, with the death penalty here, we are also closely revolving around the **Sixth** Commandment and murder. Rooting these laws in objective morality helps you see their lasting relevance today.

The key law in the chapter is the one that is basically repeated twice, though with different emphasis. “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people” (Lev 20:6). “A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death” (Lev 20:27). Why are there two laws about necromancy when there weren’t any in chapter 18? (relationship of law in 19 and 20 with law that follows), and why does the second one come at the end of the chapter rather than up where the first one appears? If we can answer those questions, we can safely say that we have come to understand Leviticus 20.

## The First (and Second?) Commandment: Molech and Necromancy

The chapter begins by letting us know that this isn’t the word of Moses, but of God. “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying...” (vs. 1). If God said it, then we have to treat the chapter as if God said it. It will not do to throw things out of it just because we might not like what it has to say.

“Say to the people of Israel, any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any

of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones” (2). First of all, the punishment. Stoning is one of the most gruesome forms of capital punishment I can think of. It is taking up of rocks, little and big, by dozens of people who encircle the criminal, and they begin pelting him—in the leg, in the back, on the face, on the head. Rock after rock after rock, with great pain, until they finally die from one injury or another. It necessitates that many people, not just one are involved. It must be public, not private. Others will be watching. This is the penalty God commands here.

What is the crime? Any Israelite or stranger who is sojourning gives any of his children to Molech. First off, it is human sacrifice. Lev 18:21 (where the Molech law came nearer the end of the list) uses the word “offer” and it means “to pass through.” We find it in Ezekiel when he says, “You cause your sons to pass through the fire” (Ezek 20:31). Jeremiah explains that they “burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings” (Jer 19:5). Kings tells us that Ahaz (2Kg 16:3), Manasseh (2Kg 21:6), and other kings to sacrificed their own children to this evil entity in the valley of Hinnom (2Kg 23:10), which is where we get the idea that Gehenna is

a place of everlasting fire.<sup>4</sup> It is named, not after a garbage dump, but after human sacrifices to Molech!

This was obviously a deeply religious ceremony. And this is what our passage says in the next verse when it says that this “makes my sanctuary unclean” and “profanes my holy name” (Lev 20:3). The sanctuary is the place of worship, the place where proper sacrifices are commanded to be performed by the priests. The Name is in the sanctuary, because this is where he chose to dwell. But human sacrifice, especially of your own children, and especially to Molech, makes the sanctuary unclean, and we saw with Nadab and Abihu how dangerous *that* could be, when God’s fire broke out and incinerated them. In this light, it is probably good to see those offering these blasphemous sacrifices as anti-priests in an anti-temple, the way you might think of a satanic temple with its upside-down crosses and pentagrams today.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Todd Bolen, “The Myth of the Burning Garbage Dump of Gehenna,” *BiblePlaces.com* (April 7, 2011). <https://blog.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/myth-of-burning-garbage-dump-of-gehenna.html>. Todd’s post is no longer online that I can find. He does have a follow-up still online: <https://www.bibleplaces.com/blog/2011/04/fires-of-gehenna-views-of-scholars/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Burnside, “The Medium and the Message: Necromancy and the Literary Context of Leviticus 20,” in *Text, Time, and Temple: Literary, Historical and Ritual Studies in Leviticus*, ed. Francis Landy, Leigh M. Trevaskis, and Bryan Bibb (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2015), 48 [41-61]. [https://www.academia.edu/11782924/The\\_Medium\\_and\\_the\\_Message\\_Necromancy\\_and\\_the\\_Literary\\_Context\\_of\\_Leviticus\\_20](https://www.academia.edu/11782924/The_Medium_and_the_Message_Necromancy_and_the_Literary_Context_of_Leviticus_20). Much of what follows on Molech and necromancy comes from this paper.

**Molech** was one of the *elohim* (gods) that Israel was tempted to worship in the land of Canaan. He was apparently the **king-god of the underworld** (*mlk* or *melek* is the Hebrew word for “king”) who was served by subordinate deities called *maliku*. Called **Malik** at Ugarit, and he was closely linked to the god **Rapi’u**, King of Eternity.” This deity is the singular form of the word **Rephaim** and both gods are found at Ashtaroth, the home of **Og the giant** (**Dt 1:4**).<sup>6</sup> Curiously, in several places in the OT, the Rephaim are the demon-shades who inhabit the terrible parts of Sheol-Hades and as such are a warning that this is not a place you want to go to (**Ps 88:10-11; Prov 2:18-19; 9:18; 21:6; Isa 14:9**).<sup>7</sup>

Why would someone want to offer their child as a sacrifice to Molech in the first place? Consider Israel’s priest who, because of his position (both as a priest and in the temple) and his sacrifices, had **direct access to God** and therefore **to the**

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<sup>6</sup> For more see **Michael S. Heiser**, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 230; **Derek Gilbert**, *Last Clash of the Titans* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2018), 48ff in the PDF.

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 32:21, 27 are interesting in this regard. “There will speak with him the gibborim [see Gen 6:4] from the midst of the underworld with his helpers. There have gone down, have lain down, the uncircumcised, slain by the sword ... And they do not lie beside the gibborim who fell in days of old who went down to the underworld with all their weapons of war and who laid their swords under their heads and whose shields lie on their bones; for terror at the gibborim lay on the land of the living.” Zimmerli’s translation. For a discussion see **Walther Zimmerli**, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 176.

power of God to bless and extend forgiveness to the people. If what is taking place here is a kind of anti-sacrifice to the underworld god of hell, then it follows that through this sacrifice, this anti-priest is seeking to attain power from Molech for some kind of evil purpose.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “the greater the sacrifice, the greater is the degree of access to the deity, and the greater is the spiritual power obtained.” And, since he is the god of the dead, the reasoning would be that one way to establish the link to Molech would be to send one’s own child, deliberately, ‘on ahead.’

The law continues by explaining two more things. Not only are the people to stone the anti-priest committing this abomination, but God “will set his face against that man and will cut him off from among his people” (Lev 20:3). This refers to the man’s family and future lineage. God will not tolerate this kind of sickness long in the land. He will ensure that it will not go on unchecked forever. This ought to show you the truly wicked nature of sinning like this against him. And it certainly should show you that what is in mind here is one of the highest examples one could give of violating the First Commandment.

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<sup>8</sup> The fascinating and disturbing discussion is in Burnside, “Medium and the Message,” pp. 50ff.

Second, it discusses a temptation for the people to “close their eyes” to what this man is doing (4-5). If the people look away and pretend that this is not taking place, when they see it with their own eyes (for it is a public event after all), and they “do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.” Jonathan Burnside explains a possible motive for looking away.

If the background of Lev 20.2-4 is an attempt to acquire powers associated with the underworld, then it is perfectly understandable why members of the community would not want to challenge, and execute, such a person. They may be afraid of the supernatural power he wields as a consequence of the ritual (e.g., the ability to utter effective curses). After all, sacrificing one’s own child sends a powerful signal. The person who is willing to sacrifice his own child will stop at nothing. He will not think twice about indicting a similar measure of harm on those who oppose him.<sup>9</sup>

It is one thing for a Canaanite to do this, though even they didn’t get away with it forever. It is another for someone

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<sup>9</sup> Burnside, “Medium,” 51.



who calls himself a follower of the LORD, of Christ. If it is the latter, the LORD will set his face against those who turn away and pretend nothing is happening.

Why would he do this? The answer is, because this is a “whoring” after Molech. “Whoring” is a word for sexual union, prostitution. It is prostitution with another god, a violation of the First Commandment, and the main reason Israel went into captivity. It also happens that this provides a smooth transition to the first appearance of the law against necromancy in this chapter.

“If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people. Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you” (Lev 20:6-8). In the previous chapter we saw something similar. “Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:31). The difference is that now we get the punishment. If someone turns to a medium or necromancer, God will cut him off from among his people.

There are **two verbal links** to the previous law with Molech here. **First**, God will **cut them off**. This is what he said he would do to the one who turns away and pretends the human sacrificing is not taking place. **Second**, it is likewise called a “**whoring**.” These links lead one commentator to speculate that part of the powers the anti-priest would be gaining in his evil sacrifice would be necromantic powers, or powers to summon spirits of the dead.<sup>10</sup> This is something still known to be true in remote parts of the world to this day.

Whoring implies a kind of **spiritual union taking place**. Perhaps with the sacrifice, the union is that the living human crosses over to the place of the dead which propitiates the god to them cross over in some way here to provide power. This crossing over would be a kind of unlawful union, since power is transferred to the priest offering the sacrifice. In the case of necromancy, it is even more intimate. The spirit of a dead creature is somehow conjured and even “housed” in the body of the necromancer, when there is possession that takes place. This “housing” of an evil spirit is **taking idolatry to the next level**. If idolatry is essentially the housing of a spirit or god through incantation into stone or wood or

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<sup>10</sup> **Burnside**, 52.

metal, this is housing in living flesh. Do you see the danger? Do you see the abomination of this? I'll come back to it a little more when we come to the last verse of the chapter.

## The Fifth Commandment: Cursing Parents

For now, I want to move on with the laws. The next law we come to is the **Fifth Commandment**. “For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him” (9). The Fifth tells you to *honor* your mother and father. This one tells you not to *curse* them. Scholars have long been puzzled over why this law is here, and furthermore, the severity of its punishment seems brutally harsh. Can we make any sense of this?

Like the necromancy law in the previous verse, this is the only other law that is not found in Chapter 18. However, like the necromancy law from chapter 19, there is a parallel to this law in chapter 19. “Every one of you shall *revere* his mother and his father” (Lev 19:3). Furthermore, just as not cursing father and mother follows the necromancy law, we find that the necromancy law in Ch. 19

is followed by, “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man” (Lev 19:32).

<b>Necromancy and Families:</b>	
<b>Ch. 19</b>	<b>Ch. 20</b>
<p><b>RISING UP FROM THE GROUND</b></p> <p><sup>31</sup> "Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.</p>	<p><b>CUT OFF</b></p> <p><sup>6</sup> "If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.</p>
<p><b>RISING UP OF THE YOUNG</b></p> <p><sup>32</sup> "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.</p>	<p><b>PUT TO DEATH</b></p> <p><sup>9</sup> For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him.</p>
<b>HONOR PARENTS, INCLUDING DEAD ONES.</b>	

This is interesting and there seems to be a logic to it. With necromancy, you are causing a spirit to “rise up” from the ground. In the next law, you must “rise up” to honor the aged. Could there also be a relationship between necromancy and cursing your parents in chapter 20?

We will shortly see that the laws that follow are all placed in a sequence of movement that begin **outside the family**, move to the **closest family relationship**, and then in

increasing steps, take you farther and farther away from the ideal as the sins get more and more sexually perverted. *This is actually a key to understanding why necromancy appears at the end of the chapter, by the way.* In the case of necromancy and mediums, as we saw last time, many scholars root the Hebrew word second word in the term “**father**” (*ob = ab*, father), meaning that at least one of the things they might have been doing was trying to **contact their dead ancestors**, their dead “fathers and mothers.” And so, the necromancy law contains in it a deep disrespect and dishonoring of your *dead* (distant) parents, while the law that follows shows a deep disrespect and dishonoring of your *living* (immediate) parents. In this way, both laws are related to the family, as is the law with Molech and all the sexual laws that follow.

Why does it talk about **cursing**? This might also be related to the previous law. It seems to me that someone who is conjuring spirits may have a cursed spirit. They may be using the spirit to curse others. And so on. Cursing one’s parents is to enter into the spiritual realm, the realm of blessing and curses, and put upon their head something like a death wish or some other kind of lesser disaster. At its heart, this is the most fundamental thing anyone could do to **destroy the family unit**, which we’ve seen is the most

foundational of all institutions to a society. Heiser says it well, “These are perceived as efforts to destroy the family, and when you destroy the family, you destroy the whole society ... the Israelite did this knowing full well that the result would destroy the family unit and encourage other families to destroy the family unit. [This is] seen as attacking Israel’s very existence as a people and culture. In other words, he was trying to undo Israel.”<sup>11</sup> The law is not talking about getting angry and saying something like, “I hate you,” although that is terrible. It is literally talking about calling down curses on one’s parents. For it, the punishment is death.

## **The Seventh Commandment: Adultery and So Much More...**

The father and mother command grounds all the laws that come after it, because as we will see, they all have to do with the family (just as they did in Ch. 18). But the next law changes positions from the previous list where it was basically at the end of the family deviancy laws to now the first of them. It also happens to be the [Seventh](#)

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<sup>11</sup> [Michael S. Heiser](#), Notes on Leviticus 20:9.

**Commandment.** “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev 20:10).

You might recall that the **center of all of Leviticus** was the strange law of a man sleeping with a slave girl who was owned by someone else. In that law, **forgiveness** was extended through **atonement**. However, we are now entering into a whole series of laws where the punishment is the death penalty. Adultery, or “**the great sin**” (Gen 20:19) heads that list. Why?

First, adultery is **a direct attack at the ideal marriage relationship**: a man and a woman covenanted together in spiritual union. That spiritual union creates one flesh (Gen 2:24; 1Co 6:16). To unite yourself with a woman not your wife is to bring someone else into that one-flesh union, in a spiritual sense. Someone not family is now instantly brought into a bond they should not be in. Curiously, what breaks this union? **Death**. “For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress”

(Rom 7:2-3).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, to commit adultery is to attack the heart of the family unit that God has created to be the foundational institution that will allow man to carry out dominion on the earth.

When we carefully study the laws that follow, another answer appears. Adultery is a sexual sin that takes place **outside of the family**.<sup>13</sup> This is contrasted with the next law which takes place **inside the family**. “If a man lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (Lev 20:11). As we saw previously, so also here, uncovering your father’s nakedness means sleeping with your mother or step-mother. This is what **Ham** was doing in Noah’s tent and it is the reason God cursed his son Canaan.

Binary opposites continue throughout the remaining laws. Outside the family/inside the family is followed by this law with a **father** (vs. 11) being contrasted next with a law about a **son**. “If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have

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<sup>12</sup> Divorce also breaks the union in some kind of spiritual sense, for the covenant is itself spiritual. However, it is not the same as death, and it was given to the innocent party in a marriage as a gracious kindness on God’s part because of the sins of the other party (Matt 19:8). **Joe Sprinkle**, “Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:4 (1997): 534. [529-550]

<sup>13</sup> On this whole section, see **Burnside**, 56ff.



committed perversion; their blood is upon them” (12). The man here is the father who is sleeping with his son’s wife.

This sleeping with the son’s wife is a case of heterosexual sexual sin. It is contrasted with the next law which is homosexual sin. “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (13). This sin against homosexuality falls right in the middle of common sexual sins. The context is not some kind of religious homosexual act as many today are trying to make it out to be (though it would obviously include that). These are all sexual sins that tear apart the family. It is forbidden and punished by death, as the rest in the list are.

This sin can also be looked at as a sin that is not between married people. This contrasts with the next law which is a deep perversion of marriage. Or, another opposite is that it is a sexual sin with two people whereas the next concerns three people. Or again, it was not your relative, but now it is your relative. All of these are contrasted with the next law, “If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is a depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you” (14). Polygamy as an institution is nowhere forbidden in the OT, though it is also

never considered a good or ideal thing either. This law forbids a certain kind of polygamy which is a deep perversion—taking a mother and daughter to both be your wife. I'll talk about the punishment here a bit later.

This law can also be looked at as intercourse between humans. This is contrasted then with the next law which is about bestiality. “If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal” (15).

This law can also be looked at as a man taking a beast. This is contrasted with the next law's opposite—a woman taking a beast. “If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (16).

God says bestiality deserves the death penalty, as do these other laws. But it is followed by five laws that are punished less severely and not by men, but by God (remember the chiasm). The first is a man taking his half-sister (17). It is called a “disgrace” and they are to be “cut off” in the sight of the people. The verb “cut off” is generally taken to refer to God meting out punishment.

Next is a man lying with a woman during her menstrual period. It says, “he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood” (18). This refers to the

monthly flow of blood which is what makes a woman able to bear children. If this happens, they are both “cut off.”

Next is a law dealing with your biological aunt (19). This is followed by what seems to be your non-biological aunt (20). They will die childless. Finally, a man takes his sister-in-law, which is called “impurity” (21). They will also die childless, which means that the punishment is in God’s hands.

The chapter ends with a very similar warning and conclusion as chapter 18. Israel is to keep all God’s statutes and rules and do them, lest the land vomit them out (22). They must not walk in the customs of the nations that he is driving out before them, because they did all these things, and therefore the LORD detested them (23). We actually learn about this back in Genesis when God tells Abraham that he cannot take the land yet, because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16). It had to reach a terminating point, a point of no return. This happens to all nations, in my understanding of history. They disintegrate from within. Then they are destroyed from without and within. And it all starts when the family unit is attacked. Destroy this and all other laws (such as we saw in ch. 19) become impossible to obey. For God’s curse has come down

on that people. We are seeing this being carried out in living color before our eyes in America as we speak.

Therefore, God's people (and today this means the church) must not be like the nations who practice these sexual deviancies. He has separated us (**Lev 20:24**) from the peoples. Therefore, we shall be holy and separate (**26**), following our holy God who has made us clean (**25**).

The strange thing is that **the chapter does not end here**. It ends in **vs. 27**. “A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them.” It is clear that this does not belong to Ch. 21, because that chapter begins with the same heading as most do, “**And the LORD said to Moses**.”<sup>14</sup> So why is this law dangling at the end of the chapter after the natural conclusion has ended? The answer will show the root cause of the destruction of the family and give what I believe is a good segue into understanding the death penalty.

## **Necromancy, Adultery, Family, and Capital Punishment**

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<sup>14</sup> Note the connections to this law and what will come soon in 21, per Burnside, Mediums, next sermon.

He has already given a law about necromancy. “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.” In that law, God punished the person who turned to a medium or necromancer. This law is different. It refers to **the medium or necromancer themselves**. In this way, it parallels the person who is offering the child in the fires of sacrifice to Molech. In both cases, the people stone them with stones.

But we can rephrase this latter law. “A man or a woman in whom is an *‘ob* or a *yidde-oni* [a familiar or knowing spirit].” In other words, **the person is possessed**. This is, to put it bluntly, **demon possession in the OT**. This way of phrasing it is much better, because it provides the reasoning that this law is at the end. Recall that the last sin where the people were to put someone to death was bestiality. That sin ended a list of six contrasting pairings:

- #1 Outside family/inside family
- #2 Father/son
- #3 Heterosexual/homosexual
- #4 Nonmarriage/marriage
- #5 Three humans/One human, one animal
- #6 Man initiates/woman initiates

What we have with this final law is a seventh opposite:

#7 Intercourse with live, physical creature/intercourse with spirit of the dead.

Verse	Verse content	# 1	# 2	# 3	# 4	# 5	# 6	# 7
20.10	'If a man <i>commits adultery</i> with another <i>man's</i> wife, if he <i>commits adultery</i> with his neighbour's wife . . .'	Outside family (non-kin)	—	♂♀	No marriage	♂♀	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.11	'The man who <i>lies</i> with his <i>father's</i> wife . . .'	Inside family (kin)	Father	♂♀	No marriage	♂♀	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.12	'If a man <i>lies</i> with his <i>daughter-in-law</i> . . .'		Son	♂♀	No marriage	♂♀	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.13	'If a man <i>lies</i> with a <i>male</i> as with a woman . . .'			♂♂	No marriage	♂♂	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.14	'If a man <i>takes</i> a <i>wife and her mother</i> also . . .'				Marriage	♂♀♀	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.15	'If a man <i>lies</i> with a <i>beast</i> . . .'					♂	♂ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.16	'If a woman <i>approaches</i> any <i>beast</i> and lies with it . . .'						♀ Initiates	Live, physical creature
20.27 [Close of chapter]	'Any man or woman <i>in whom</i> is an ' <i>ôb</i> or a <i>yidd'ôni</i> . . .'							Spirit of the dead

Table 1: Binary oppositions regarding forms of intercourse in Lev. 20.10-16, 27 (extended version of table found in Burnside 2006: 414)

A kind of intercourse with a dead spirit is a powerful way to complete a chapter dealing with sexual sins, especially when that list seems to move in ever increasing levels of depravity away from the norm. Yet, I don't think it is common to think of demon possession this way. This is why the "in whom" language is so important. This is the language

of **penetration**. In the physical world, this is done through sex. The spiritual world calls this idolatry, and yet idolatry is always likened to adultery in the Scripture. Hence, I would argue that having other gods before the LORD and idol-worship (true idol worship) is a form of spiritual penetration that has its physical counterpart in sex. As someone says, “The appropriation of the ancestor spirit may not simply be intellectual. Indeed, the ‘coming into’ the living body of the necromancer by the spirit of the dead ancestor may be associated with an ecstatic experience of some kind, which may even be orgasmic. The spirit ‘penetrates’ the necromancer, and it ‘knows’ him or her.”<sup>15</sup> This results in impurity and uncleanness and blurring of spaces and destruction of holiness and all the other things Leviticus is about—especially when it is those who call themselves Christians who participate in it.

I’m not convinced that a true Christian cannot be possessed, though I realize this is not well received in Evangelicalism today.<sup>16</sup> The idea seems to be that the Holy Spirit cannot dwell in the place where unclean spirits dwell seems to be behind it. “**We are the temple of the Holy Spirit,**”

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<sup>15</sup> Burnside, *Mediums*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> An interesting paper in favor of it is Tony Butler, “A Study on Deliverance,” [fountainofgrace.us/index.php?page=spiritual-warfare](http://fountainofgrace.us/index.php?page=spiritual-warfare).

is the declaration of proof. And yet, people don't stop to think that this is precisely what happens when unclean fallen creatures go into heaven, as happened for instance in Job 1-2, to the temple of God, where surely the Holy Spirit dwells. Whatever the case, we can be sure that it was God's corporate chosen people who are in mind here. He isn't talking about Gentiles far off in Europe.

## Return to the Death Penalty

With this law as the conclusion of the chapter, we now have laws beginning and ending (not to mention the middle) with capital punishment, it leads me to [finish where I began](#). So many people have a problem with capital punishment. We've seen that many arguments from the Scripture are lacking any kind of ability to take God's word seriously on this matter. But I think a big problem here comes from [misunderstanding the Sixth Commandment](#).

Technically speaking, the Sixth Commandment says, "[You shall not ratsach](#)." "Kill" is much too general a word for a good translation here. We know this because among many other places in the Scripture, God is actually commanding killing in Leviticus 20. Just how dumb would



God and Moses and all the scribes and people have to be to not see this blatant and repeated contradiction with the commandment?

A better term is “murder,” because murder involves some sort of premeditated intent to kill, whereas killing someone might be completely accidental (the OT itself understands this point which is why God created cities of refuge where an accidental killer won’t be put to death). I prefer translating it as, “You shall not take life unlawfully.” This shows that there are lawful ways to take a life, as Leviticus 20 demonstrates.

Once you realize that *that* God the Sixth Commandment is not violated by the death penalty, you have to try to understand the reason why God instituted it. One of the arguments we saw earlier said that the death penalty does not respect the right to life. Unfortunately, what this argument fails to see is that God himself says that **the right to life is not an absolute right**. This is just a man-made argument that quite frankly calls God a liar on this point as well.

Instead, the Scripture tells us that there are **certain things that a person can do to themselves that cause them to forfeit their own right to live** (and sometimes, it causes them to

forfeit the rights of others that they involve, though each person is put to death for their own willful sin). Such cases include first degree murder, kidnapping, certain kinds of sabbath violations, as well as the many things we see here including child sacrifice, adultery, many kinds of incest, bestiality, homosexuality, and the like.

But on what basis would God command this? Our text provides some answers. First, we've seen how [all of these sins involve the family](#) and we've seen in particular how most of them deal with [sexual sins](#). These sexual sins create a union that is only destroyed by death. And these sins also destroy or kill the family. Thus, in order to purge the spiritual devastation that continues to manifest itself in our realm, the offending party(parties) are to be put to death, lest the entire land itself become corrupted. People don't believe land can become corrupted, because they can't see it with their eyes. But look around this world and tell me that the rise in sexual immorality in our nation hasn't led to far more culturally devastating and ruinous violations of God's law. It's like in a movie where someone shows mercy to a terrible killer and lets them go, and later his own family is murdered by that very man. The consequences have far reaching implications upon others when not carried out.

Second, there is a repeated phrase, “his blood is upon him” (9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 27). This phrase demonstrates that when one of God’s people violates God’s law in the OT, they do it deliberately and thus lose their own right to live. They do it to themselves. Their blood is on their own head. They have no one to blame but themselves. They are responsible. Nothing and no one made them do what they did.

That leads me to think about the kinds of capital punishment mentioned here, stoning, which we have already talked about, and the rare “burning with fire” (14). This punishment is found only one time and the reason seems to be that of all the sins in this list of sexual sins, it is the only one that was done brazenly, openly, and publicly. A man took both a woman and her mother in marriage. This had to have been seen and known by the entire community, because marriage is not a private rite. This demonstrates the heinousness of the sin and becomes a perfect example of what I’m talking about. And as fire is the element God uses to purge, fire becomes the only appropriate punishment for such a great, public crime.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Jonathan Burnside, “Strange Flesh: Sex, Semiotics and the Construction of Deviancy in Biblical Law,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (2006): 413 [387-420].

Another explanation is given at the end, besides the land vomiting you out. Israel is to **make a distinction between clean and unclean**. **Vs. 25** seems rather out of place in the conclusion, because it talks about separating clean and unclean beasts and birds, and crawling things. Why mention this in such a list? Because God is teaching people that the **capital offenses are necessary in order to maintain the clean and unclean distinctions so vital in Israel's OT theocracy**. Those don't go away just because people pretend they don't exist.

Perhaps you sense a kind of “**out**” for the death penalty here, given that we are in the new covenant. I hope you can see that some of these reasons are not covenant-specific. It is always true that a person's blood is on his own head when he violates such laws. And the land is what it is, whether Jesus came or not. There are certain eternal truths that God has set into his creation that keep mankind from going too far. The fall of ever great civilization in history is Exhibit A in this regard.

But there is a final reason for the penalty that I would like to add, which kind of tacks on to this point about clean

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[https://www.academia.edu/8195917/Strange\\_Flesh\\_Sex\\_Semiotics\\_and\\_the\\_Construction\\_of\\_Deviancy\\_in\\_Biblical\\_Law\\_Journal\\_for\\_the\\_Study\\_of\\_the\\_Old\\_Testament](https://www.academia.edu/8195917/Strange_Flesh_Sex_Semiotics_and_the_Construction_of_Deviancy_in_Biblical_Law_Journal_for_the_Study_of_the_Old_Testament).

and unclean, something Jesus did away with in his death. Death is necessary for the purging of the sanctuary and the profaning of God's Name. Here, I'd like to conclude by having you think about God's grace in Christ (perhaps this is hinted at in that law with the slave girl from Chapter 19).<sup>18</sup>

The fact is, in one sense, all sin necessitates the death penalty, which is why we all die (Rom 5:12ff). But there are two kinds of death. One is physical and the other is spiritual. In God's grace, he punished the only person who never committed a sin—Jesus Christ. This Jesus died as the punishment you deserve. He did this that if you would turn to him in faith and believe in his grace alone, that his atoning, sacrificial death would bring forgiveness for your sins against him, and through this forgiveness, you might have everlasting life, so that even if you die in the flesh, your

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<sup>18</sup> Sproul has an interesting article in capital punishment where he points out that while God commands the death penalty for many things, he does not necessarily necessitate that it be carried out, except in the case of premeditated murder. All other crimes, even if they are stated as being punishable with the death penalty, do not necessarily require the death penalty. This is not an anti-capital punishment argument, but it is one that demonstrates that not all cases are the same. He writes, "Aside from capital murder, it seems death was the maximum sentence when it was prescribed in the law, not necessarily the required one. Judges were to weigh the circumstances of each offense and consider the offender's hard-heartedness before wisely apply the standards of the Mosaic law." (R. C. Sproul, "Capital Crimes and Punishment," *Tabletalk Magazine*, October 2012: *The Church and Israel* [Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 2012], 51. Available at Ligonier Ministries, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/capital-crimes-and-punishment/>.) He cites the example of the death penalty for sabbath breaking (Ex 31:14) and how the people still asked the LORD what to do. If they had to put him to death, this would have been unnecessary.

eternal soul will not perish forever in the fires of hell that we have seen symbolized even in some of these sins today.

In other words, through Christ, God is offering to anyone who would believe the news, the stay of execution of the death penalty. More than this, he is offering to come into them and make this his bride, showing in this the goodness of spiritual marriage done rightly. None of this talks about [people still being punished for their sins in a physical way on earth](#). Another of those arguments said that the death penalty leaves no room for a guilty person to repent. Nonsense. Plenty of people have been put to death who deserved it, but they repented and received eternal life from the Lord Jesus before it happened. Don't listen to the lies of those who hate God's word. But do listen to the Word calling you this moment to repent of your own sins, which all deserve the death penalty. Hear and come to life. When you do, then you will understand why God is so serious about sins in Levitical 20, sins that deal with the central institution of human life, sins that deal with the horrors of crossing over and becoming unholy and unclean, sins that were so serious the Son of God had to be put to death for people to receive forgiveness.

Table 1. *Responsibility for punishment*

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Offence</i>	<i>Punisher</i>
20.2	Molech-worship	Humankind
20.3	Molech-worship	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.4-5	Turning a blind eye	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.6	Mediums and wizards	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.9	Cursing parents	Humankind
20.10	Adultery	Humankind
20.11	Relations with father's wife	Humankind
20.12	Relations with daughter-in-law	Humankind
20.13	Male homosexuality	Humankind
20.14	Relations with wife and mother	Humankind
20.15	Bestiality (man)	Humankind
20.16	Bestiality (woman)	Humankind
20.17	Relations with sister	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.18	Menstruant	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.19	Relations with mother's sister/father's sister	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.20	Relations with uncle's wife	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.21	Relations with brother's wife	Y <sup>H</sup> W <sup>H</sup>
20.27	Mediums and wizards	Humankind