

# Approaching the Most Holy

## Priestly Service and the People's Obedience

<sup>ESV</sup> Leviticus 24:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

<sup>2</sup> "Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly.

<sup>3</sup> Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the LORD regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations.

<sup>4</sup> He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the LORD regularly.

<sup>5</sup> "You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf.

<sup>6</sup> And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD.

<sup>7</sup> And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD.

<sup>8</sup> Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.

<sup>9</sup> And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due."

<sup>10</sup> Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp,

<sup>11</sup> and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith [Retribution; Love of Peace], the daughter of Dibri [Promise of the LORD, Born on the Pasture], of the tribe of Dan.

<sup>12</sup> And they put him in custody, till the will of the LORD should be clear to them.

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him.

<sup>15</sup> And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin.

<sup>16</sup> Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

<sup>17</sup> "Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.

<sup>18</sup> Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life.

<sup>19</sup> If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him,

<sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.

<sup>21</sup> Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death.

<sup>22</sup> You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the LORD your God."

<sup>23</sup> So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses.

(Lev 24:1-23)

# The Holy Place

“And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in there within the veil. And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy. You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place. And you shall set the table outside the veil, and the lampstand on the south side of the tabernacle opposite the table, and you shall put the table on the north side. You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework” (Ex 26:33-36). Thus, Bible gives its first description of the tabernacle’s “Holy Place.”

Later, we will discover that an incense altar will also go here. Furthermore, this was the place that the high priest was supposed to minister before God. When he went in, he had to have his beautiful priestly robes on as well as a breastpiece of judgment over his heart which bore the names of all the tribes of Israel. There had to be little bells on the hem of the robe so that “its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he does not die” (Ex 28:34). And so on.

We could say more, but this is sufficient to ask, **why all of the specificity?** Why did it really matter how the tabernacle and the holy place were made? **Skeptics** will say that these things were just the **man-made ideas** of power-hungry priests who used this as a way of intimidating the people into believing that they had contact with a god. This in turn allowed them to control the people and take power over the nation. **God's holy word tells us** that Moses received these instructions from the LORD himself and that he carefully wrote them down, told them to the people, and had them carry out the instructions because he was himself an obedient humble servant.

But there's more to it than this. When we come to Hebrews, we learn something very important about the tabernacle and all of its furnishings. *“They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’”* (**Heb 8:5**). In other words, the reason Moses was given such detailed instructions, the reason it was so important that he carefully conveyed exactly what he was told, the reason it was vital to make the tabernacle exactly as described was because this **earthly place**

made of precious metals and lavish cloths and expensive gems was because it was literally **an earthly type of an eternal, heavenly reality**.

If they got this wrong, then they **would have been guilty** of teaching things about the invisible places that were incorrect. Conversely, because they got them right, they were being taught through types and shadows what kind of God the LORD is and because of it, how he must be approached. As was said a moment ago, this was so serious that if it wasn't done properly, the priest's very life was on the line. He could be killed by God himself for desecrating holy space.

## **The Holy Place in Leviticus**

We've been learning how **Leviticus is itself a kind of pattern of the tabernacle**, which is itself a pattern of heaven. The layout of the book is such that it copies the design of the tabernacle. Chs. 1-17 correspond to the less holy space, yet still considered clean, **Courtyard**. Chs. 18-24 correspond to **the Holy Place**, that middle area of the tabernacle precinct which is separated by **two veils**, one which goes outside to

the Courtyard to the east, the other which takes you into the inner sanctum itself and the Most Holy Place where the LORD himself sits enthroned between the cherubim on his ark-throne to the west.

Curiously, [Leviticus has only two narratives in it](#)—two stories. Everything else is law. Scholars have puzzled for centuries as to what these narratives are even doing here. The first is easier to understand than the second. After a series of chapters describing the [various sacrifices](#) of Israel, chapters 8-10 arrive to give us the story of [Aaron's consecration as priest](#) with [holy fire](#) coming down out of heaven itself to consume the burnt offerings thus giving heavenly approval of the man, his office, and the sacrifices. If you have sacrifices, you need a priest to offer them and God has to approve of him.

But suddenly, [seemingly out of nowhere](#), in fact in the story it is just like the fire from heaven, Aaron's two sons who were also ordained, do something stupid, walk into the Holy Place, and do not come out alive. For they are burned with the same fire that just honored Aaron. This was a fire that came out of the Most Holy Place from God himself where they died before the LORD. [The same fire that just ordained them now consumed them.](#)

The second story appears at the end of our chapter (Leviticus 24) today. It is a short story that describes the stoning of a man who was fighting with another man, lost his temper, blasphemed and cursed the Holy Name, and is stoned to death by the people of Israel. When put side-by-side like this, you can see at least one similarity in the two stories. In both of them someone is killed. Why?

This is where we have to go back to Leviticus as a pattern of the tabernacle and, specifically, where we have to understand that the Holy Place was separated by the two screens or veils. To get into it from the Courtyard, you have to go through the outer screen. To get into the Most Holy Place, you had to go through the inner veil. These two screens marked in a very important way, the progression of sacred space from clean to holy to most holy. As such, they serve as warnings that where you are about to enter is different from where you just came. Since it is increasingly holy, because it comes closer and closer to the special presence of God, you have to take those warnings very seriously. In like manner, in a book that is designed around the same tabernacle, the two narratives of the deaths of these people serve as warnings about entering the holy places with your lives. This is God's house, his residence, and if you are

going to come near to him, you have to do exactly as you are supposed to.

All of this is **background information** for being able to understand the totality of Leviticus 24. As we take a look at the chapter, I want to first put it into the context of chs. 18-24. As **John Master** has noted, chs. 18-20 deal with **holiness among the people**. 21-22 deal with **priestly holiness**. Ch. 23 gives the **holy feasts** that both the people and the priests were to participate in. Ch. 24 begins by looking at two specific duties of **the priests** as they serve God in the Holy Place and the chapter ends with this strange story about a man who has blasphemed and how **the people** are to deal with him. This creates the following chiasm:

**People's** holiness (18-20)

**Priestly** holiness (21-22)

**Holy Days for priests and people (23)**

**Priestly** service in the Holy Place (24:1-9)

**People's** holiness when someone sins (24:10-23)<sup>1</sup>

To put this another way, chapter 24 is not just tacked on to the end of this section. It is intimately related to what has

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<sup>1</sup> **John R. Master**, "The Place of Chapter 24 in the Structure of the Book of Leviticus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (Oct-Dec 2002): 415-24. [https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/Text/Articles/Master-Lev24-BS.pdf](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/03-Leviticus/Text/Articles/Master-Lev24-BS.pdf).



come before it. One thing this structure does is highlight even more the incredible feasts of chapter 23 (they form the center of this chiasm) which oriented the people in space and time to the proper worship of the God who has rescued them from slavery, is bringing them into the Promised Land, and who has wondrous things in store for their future in Christ.

As we break down the chapter itself, it begins with an [introduction](#), moves to [laws about the holy place](#), specifically concerning the [lampstand](#) (to which the feasts of ch. 23 corresponded in their own chiasm) and the [bread of the Presence](#). It then introduces this peculiar story of a case of [blasphemy](#) and the ensuing punishment.

Introduction (vs. 1)

Law about the Holy Place (2-9)

    The Lampstand (2-4)

    The Bread of the Presence (5-9)

A Case of Blasphemy (10-23)

    The Offense (10-12)

    The Judgment of God (13-22)

    Execution by the People (23)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Gordon J. Wenham](#), *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 308.

# Priestly Duties in the Holy Place

## *The Lampstand*

We begin with “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying...” (Lev 24:1). What will Christ tell Moses this time? “Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly” (2). We begin with a command to the people. They were to gather olives. The oil that would go into the Holy Place would come from their work, not the priest. This is their offering and service even though they are not priests.

They were to beat the olives into oil so that a light would be kept burning. For what? “The lamp.” This refers as we see in the next verses to the lampstand with its seven lamps that went in the Holy Place. “Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the LORD regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations” (3). Twice a day the priest would make sure that the lamp had its oil and wicks and that it was properly arranged. “He shall

arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the LORD regularly” (4).

What’s interesting is that this law is repeated almost identically from **Exodus 27:20-21** with only slight variations. What would be the purpose of this? It seems to me that it is to signal that we are in fact in the Holy Place section of Leviticus, for this is where the lamp goes.<sup>3</sup> *The oil* represents the anointing of both the priest and the place, as it was put onto both when they were consecrated (**Ex 30:26-27**). Its purity represented the purity of the place and of its God (it would also burn more cleanly and not leave as much soot).

*The lamp* reflects the laws of people and priests and particularly the laws of feast days that are given to shine truth on all Israel of how they are to behave, how they are to be unblemished, and how their God has, is, and will take care of them. This is the function of light. It shines in the darkness so that people will not stumble when they take their steps. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (**Ps 119:105**).<sup>4</sup> The fact that it is to remain lit

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<sup>3</sup> See **Mary Douglas**, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 227-28.

<sup>4</sup> The lampstand itself reflects the image of a tree, particularly the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Had Adam and Eve obeyed, God’s law to them would have served as their light in the dark places. But this is really not in view in Leviticus as much as it is in Exodus and other places.

during the entire night may represent, as someone has said, that, “God forfeits none of his power, even if the sun itself ‘goes down.’ The lamp before the holy of holies extends this daylight symbolically through the darkness, signalling thus God’s unbroken life: in this sense it is an ‘eternal light.’”<sup>53</sup>

## *The Showbread*

The next law moves to **the showbread**, which was placed on the golden table across from the lampstand. “**You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD**” (**Lev 24:5-6**). Remember how I said that one of the things the priest had on him when he went into the Holy Place was a **breastpiece of judgment**? It had the **names of the tribes** written on it. Here we have that idea again. **The 12 loaves** are for the 12 tribes of Israel. They represent the people before God in the Holy Place so that he will always remember his covenant.

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<sup>3</sup> E. S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, trans. D. W. Stott. *Old Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 356. Cited in Jacob Milgrom, *A Continental Commentary: Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 289.

With the loaves, Aaron was then to “put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD” (7). These food offerings were to the LORD, as we have seen elsewhere in Leviticus, yet, “It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD’s food offerings, a perpetual due” (9). In other words, it is part of his “salary” and special privilege, as we saw back in ch. 22 with other food offerings. God wasn’t going to consume the bread. Rather, it was presented to God as a memorial in the Holy Place about his covenant love for the Tribes of Israel.

How often was this done? “Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever” (8). Both the sabbath and the food remind of us the feasts we have just read about in ch. 23. But someone asked me about the food that we also found in ch. 22 and brought up the question of David going to eat the showbread. That was not the appropriate time to mention that story, because that was not the same food. But now is the right time.

The story is found in 1 Sam 21:1-6, but is retold in the Gospels. They tell us, “One Sabbath [Jesus] was going

through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:23-28).

The point in the Gospels is about Jesus and the Sabbath. However, Jesus says that David did this “because he was hungry and in need.” And Jesus approves of this, even as Ahimelech the priest did at the time (because David and his men were not ritually unclean), even though “it was not lawful for any but the priests to eat.” How can this be? The answer is the same as the sabbath. As God made the sabbath for man, he also made bread for man. This particular bread represented the very person who was asking to it, even though it was not lawful. In other words, God cares about people more than ceremonies, about life and death more

than arranging a series of loaves just right. Those loaves pointed to real people with whom God had covenanted. This was the reason the priest's duties regarding their arrangement and replacement were so important. There was a covenant here. The ceremonies were symbolic, but symbolic of that covenant and the people whom God loved.

Though there were other things he was to do in the Holy Place, through these **two examples**—his duties with the lamp and the showbread—God is showing the priests how this place is special. He is coming near to the LORD who is just on the other side of the second veil. God sees all that he is doing and what he is doing is representing the people before God. And since what he is doing is also in some way a reflection of heavenly temple realities, he is to take this business with the utmost seriousness.

Finally, recall the chiastic parallel in chs. 21-22 which were about the priest and the need for absolute physical purity. He could not enter the Holy Place unless he was absolutely ritually clean. Now we have his **actions having to correspond** to the person that God is representing through him—the Lord Jesus Christ who ministers before the Father day and night in heaven as our High Priest. The priest's obedient duties are to be a mirror reflection of his person so

that he might **reflect Christ back to the people** as his job is teaching them.

## The People's Duty to Be Holy

### *A Man Blasphemes the Name*

At this point, **the chapter turns to the people**. It does so in a most unexpected way. It tells a strange story of a **half-breed man** who has **a fight** with a full-blooded Israelite. “Now an Israelite woman’s son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman’s son and a man of Israel fought in the camp” (**Lev 24:10**).

**Why might this story begin like this?** Some think that what is at issue here is that **a foreigner** is in mind and therefore this is a law that is focusing on them.<sup>6</sup> However, it is well established from at least the second century to the present time that rabbinic law dictates that while the descendant of a gentile mother and a Jewish father is considered *a gentile*, if it is reversed and he has a Jewish

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<sup>6</sup> See Keil and Delitzsch or Martin Noth in **Chelcent Fuad**, “The Curious Case of the Blasphemer: Ambiguity as Literary Device in Leviticus 24:10-23,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 41 (2019): 55.



mother and gentile father, he is considered *a Jew*.<sup>7</sup> So it isn't so much that he is a foreigner or a half-breed, but that Jews and Gentiles are represented in this person. This law is for everyone.

But I think there is more here. We can look again at this idea that we are in the *section that corresponds to the Holy Place*. Those who come in here must be completely ritually clean. But here we have a half-breed. Yes, God accepted them into the nation, as a “*mixed multitude*” left Egypt with the Israelites (*Ex 12:38*). But these people were *not allowed to serve in the tabernacle*. Now, it isn't that this passage is somehow talking about serving in the Holy Place of the physical tabernacle (the man obviously isn't a priest either). Rather, it is signaling that something is already *amiss* in terms of holiness among the people. In terms of the analogy that you must be ritually holy and clean when you enter the holy place, we are seeing the opposite of what we saw in the previous section where this is precisely what the priests were.

Next it tells us *what happened*. As they fought in the camp (they were allowed in the camp as it was not considered “holy”), “*The Israelite woman's son blasphemed*

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<sup>7</sup> *Fuad*, 55.

the Name, and cursed” (11a). The word for “curse” (*qalal*) means “trifle, despise, dishonor, make contemptible.” The word for blaspheming (*naqab*)<sup>8</sup> has the same stem as “to bore a hole,” or “to pierce,” and thus by extension to “name insultingly”<sup>9</sup> in a kind of verbal parallel to piercing or boring a hole. In other words, it is a piercing or boring at the Name of God.

But what is the Name of God? I usually capitalize it, because the Name is most specifically the Second Person of the Trinity. “Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with *his* anger, and in thick rising smoke; *his* lips are full of fury, and *his* tongue is like a devouring fire” (Isa 30:27). In fact, he is the Person sitting between the cherubim in the Most Holy Place, the exact representation and perfect image of the Father in heaven. And so this man, in cursing and blaspheming, is making a direct attack on the Triune God of Israel. Probably his Egyptian heritage had something to do with it, as they worshiped so many gods other than Yahweh.

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<sup>8</sup> There are two words for blasphemy here. This is the word in vs. 16. The one in vs. 11 is *qabab*. Along with the word *elohim* (vs. 15b), these two words have led some to think that there are two different laws (one directed at other deities, one directed at the Name of God). For a defense that there is really only one law here see Bernon P. Lee, “Leviticus 24:15b-16: A Crux Revisited,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16:2 (2006): 345-49. [https://www.academia.edu/32102668/Leviticus\\_24\\_15b-16\\_A\\_Crux\\_Revisited](https://www.academia.edu/32102668/Leviticus_24_15b-16_A_Crux_Revisited).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 206-07. Unless otherwise noted, my discussion of this is found in pp. 206-211.

So, they bring him to Moses (11b). It is at this point that we get a **parenthetical insertion**. “His mother’s name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan” (11c). It is interesting that we are not told his father’s name, the name of the man he fought with, or, most importantly, his own name. But we get his mother and his maternal grandfather’s names along with their tribe. Again, it is through the mother that the man would be considered a Jew or Gentile. She is clearly Jewish. Still, this is strange and, seemingly, very important. So, just as we did with Nadab and Abihu, we need to look into them.

The woman’s name can mean “**peace, the daughter of my word**,” and some have suggested that this contrasts with the act of transgression in which the blasphemer is engaged.<sup>10</sup> However, the name can also mean “**retribution**.” Consider further that her father’s name suggests a **lawsuit**. Finally, they are from the tribe of Dan which means “**judgment**” or “judge.” Those are all related ideas. Is it relevant?

At this point, bringing him before Moses becomes important. “**They put him in custody, till the will of the**

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<sup>10</sup> Leigh M. Trevaskis, “The Purpose of Leviticus 24 within its Literary Context,” *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009): 295-312.

LORD should be clear to them” (12). This “will” of God refers to his divine will regarding the man’s punishment. So we have custody, a kind of court-date, and a punishment that will be meted out. Sounds a lot like those names!

At this point, our famous break that begins all the chapters of the book as well as often divides sections within it returns. “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying...” (13). So, the man is brought before Moses and Moses goes before the very Name who has just been blasphemed. Remember, Moses used to speak with God as a man speaks to a man face to face (Num 12:8). So the Angel of the LORD tells him, “Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him” (14). Curiously, the word translated as “stone” means “to hurl or pelt.” In this case, they are pelting with stones, hence, stoning.

Verse 13 begins Leviticus’ section break within the chapter, even though we more naturally put the break at vs. 10. But when you look closely at vv. 13-23, these verses form another chiasm.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See T. M. Willis, “Blasphemy, Talion, and Chiasmus: The Marriage of Form and Content in Lev 24,13-23,” *Biblica* 90 (2009) 69.

- A. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
- B. Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him.
- C. And speak to the people of Israel, saying,
- D. Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.
- E. Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.
- F. Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life.
- G. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him,
- H. fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth;
- G1. whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.
- F1. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good,
- E1. and whoever kills a person shall be put to death.
- D1. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the LORD your God.
- C1. So Moses spoke to the people of Israel,
- B1. and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones.
- A1. Thus the people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses.

The center of the chiasm is the famous *lex talionis*—“an eye for an eye.” People have long struggled to make sense of what this is doing here, especially when *it hardly seems like an eye for an eye that a man who curses God is stoned with stones*. Where is the equal retribution of justice in that?

On one level, there seems to be a kind of word-play going on here. The man who has *hurled insults* at the Name of God will die by having *stones hurled* at him. Putting all this together, Mary Douglas suggests that if you were an Israelite listening to the story in Hebrew, this is how you would have heard it, “Once there was a man (with no name), son of Retribution, grandson of Lawsuit, from the house of Judgment, and he pelted insults at the Name ... and the Lord said “He shall die, he pelted my Name, he shall be pelted to death.”<sup>12</sup> Here then we can answer why we are not told the man’s name. It just isn’t relevant to the story. Instead, through his lineage we understand that he represents both Jews and foreigners in the land (in other words, everyone whom the laws have been discussing in chs. 18-20) and we get a word-play that helps us understand the severity of the case at hand.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas, 207.

This gets even more interesting when you compare this with what happened to **Nadab and Abihu**. Recall the key verses, “**And fire** came out from before the LORD and **consumed** the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put **fire** in it and laid incense on it and offered **unauthorized fire** before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And **fire** came out from before the LORD and **consumed** them, and they died before the LORD” (**Lev 9:24-10:2**). And thus, we have in the only two stories in the entire book, people dying according to what they had done in sin. In the first, **burners are burnt**. In the second, the **curser is cursed** or **the pelter is pelted**.

In these ways, the law of perfect justice and retribution, no more, no less is in fact being carried out. This is how these two stories act as the two screens in the Holy Place. They are warning markers that must be taken very seriously as one approaches ever increasing spaces of holiness. Since the Leviticus is written to the people of God and not just the priests, its pattern after the tabernacle and these two screens act as warnings to them and not merely the priests who would

have been the only one's allowed to go through the actual tabernacle screens into the Holy and Most Holy places.

Therefore, let's return to [the parallel of this section in our chiasm](#)—chs. 18-20. Recall again that these chapters are the heart of the book. They give [the moral law](#) to the people of Israel concerning sexual purity (18, 20) as well as elaborating on the other Ten Commandments in ch. 19. The children of God were to [behave in such a way](#) that they reflected to God, one another, and anyone who might come into contact with them, their obedient faith in Christ. In this way, they would be different from all other peoples on earth who had been given over to dark ruling entities that did not care about the LORD or neighbor the way God does.

Those three chapters came to a conclusion by repeating the same laws about sexual sins that they began with. The difference was that the new chapter gave the [punishments that belonged to them](#)—capital punishment, being cut off from Israel, or being burnt with fire. Here then, in the chiasm parallel, we have God reinforcing this with an entire section devoted to the *lex talionis*—and eye for an eye. Yes, indeed, the people are in fact being warned about how they are to live their lives wherever they live their lives, when the Holy God has drawn so near to their camp.



There are a few more connections to these chapters in the verses surrounding the “eye for an eye” (**Lev 24:20a**). In vs. **15** we learn that **the man who sins bears his own sin**. This isn’t punishment for someone else’s sin, like we are seeing in the radical communist movement of Black Lives Matter and its overarching ideology of critical race theory where people 150 years later have to “make retribution” for slavery. That is anti-justice, bizarro-justice, the justice of godless lovers of self rather than neighbor. True justice has a man bearing the consequences of *his own* sin, individually, not corporately.

The parallel in vs. **22** is that this is **the same rule for the sojourner or the native**. There is not one set of justice rules that apply to one group of people and a completely different set that applies to another, as we also see in things like critical race theory where all whites are automatically guilty of racism simply by the color of their skin while all minorities (so long as they affirm this radical creed) cannot by definition ever commit an act of bigotry or racism. This is not high elites living by one set of ethical standards where they can get away with literally any crime they want against their nation or against little children, while other people must pay often for things they didn’t even do. Look to God’s word for justice and fairness and you will see a truly glorious

light that dispels all satanic forms of anti-justice by exposing them to the hypocrisy and double-standards that they are.

**Vs. 16** explains that it is **the congregation that is supposed to stone him**. Furthermore, they are **not to choose favorites** by only stoning the sojourner but not the native. Blasphemy is a tremendously evil sin in God's eyes. I'll have more to say about both the sin of blasphemy and the congregation having to throw the stones in a little while. For now, it is enough to note that this is the **same directive that we find in ch. 20** where the people have to throw the stones at those whose sexual crimes deserved death (cf. **Lev 20:2**).

**Vv. 17 and 18** move into the heart of the eye for an eye doctrine that we find in places like **Exodus 21:24; Deut 19:21, and Matt 5:38**. It speaks of human life (“**whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death**”) and animal life (“**Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life**”). Other places in the law elaborate, such as **Genesis 9:6**, “**Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image,**” or **Exodus 21:28-36** which speaks about certain animal laws where a man could even be put to death for not taking care of a known problem animal.

Finally, on either side of the specific “eye for eye” statement, we are reminded about **how we are to care about our neighbor**. **Vs. 19** reminds us of the heart of chapter 19 where we are to **love our neighbor as ourselves (19:18)**. In this, the tie-ins back to the corresponding chapters about the people and their morality are brought to a great climax here at the end of Leviticus 24.

The chapter ends with Moses speaking to the people of Israel, the people bringing the man out of the camp and stoning him with stones. And in this way, not only Moses, but “**the people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses**” (**23**). This is the diametrical opposite of Nadab and Abihu who would not obey the LORD. Apparently, the lesson is finally being learned, just in time for our arrival into the Most Holy Place in chs. **25-27**.

## **Application?**

**How are we to think about these things today?** I want to first ask the question about the severity of the punishment. Can we possibly hope to make sense of capital punishment with stoning for someone simply speaking blasphemous words about God? The answer is, **there is nothing “simple”**

about blasphemy, nor is it something light or to be joked about. This is not a case of “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

In the law of **Genesis 9:6** that I mentioned above, “murder is presented as a crime not only against another human being but also against [God] since humans are created in the image of [God]. In other words, murder is seen as an attack on [God him]self.”<sup>13</sup> Recall here our Lord’s own words in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (**Matt 5:21-22**). The Lord Jesus is here equating murder with hatred in one’s heart which comes out in the form of hateful words to your own brother (cf. **Leviticus 19:17**, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart”). Yes, the outward crimes and punishments and consequences are worse in some ways if you murder someone. But words work just as deeply to wound and harm and murder people in their realm as knives and guns do in

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<sup>13</sup> Fuad, 66.

the physical realm. There has been **incalculable murderous damage done to people through the hateful words** of their own brothers.

Let's take this discussion now to blasphemy. We have seen the **blasphemy is a pelting of God with words** that is analogous to him being pelted with stones. In other words, it is a verbal form of attempted murder against God. But we have now seen that to God, it is the same root that causes a physical murder or an assassination through words. Hatred. This is why the punishment fits the crime. It is no small thing to blaspheme the living God. I mean, in **Jude** we learn that the archangel Michael, when contending with the devil about the body of Moses, “**did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’**” (**Jude 9**). If Satan can be blasphemed, and Jude says that the sign of truly reprobate people is that they “**blaspheme the glorious ones**” [i.e. the Watchers or heavenly sons of God; **vs. 8**], thus blaspheming things “**that they do not understand**” (**10**) ... If Jude takes that kind of blasphemy that seriously, how much more the only eternal, uncreated, holy God?

Indeed, do you remember when Jesus was on trial and the high priest put the Lord under oath and asked him, “**Are**

you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” (Mark 14:61)? Jesus responded by saying that he was Daniel’s Second Power in Heaven, by identifying himself with the “son of man” who “rides the clouds of heaven” (62; cf. Dan 7:13), something only Yahweh himself does in the OT (Deut 33:26; Psalm 68:33; 104:3; Isa 19:1). The Jews knew full well that this son of man was Yahweh himself, or, at least they knew that there were rabbis teaching this.<sup>14</sup> But many Jews, including the high priest himself at the trial wanted nothing to do with Jewish Binitarianism. Caiaphas said, ““What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death” (Mark 14:63-64).

Thus, they finally pinned upon Jesus what they thought was his great crime. He was claiming to be God and making himself equal with God. For this he had to be put to death. The only slight problem is that Jesus *was* God and Jesus *is* God. And he proved it through his resurrection from the dead which he predicted many times ahead of time and which he performed by his own power. Only God could do that.

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<sup>14</sup> See Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 34-36.

Since this is true, he was put to death unjustly. Yet, it was God's **preordained decision** that this would happen (**Acts 2:23; 4:27-28**). And why? Peter tells you it was to prove to the entire world that this man could not be held hostage by death (**Acts 2:24**). He said this during the very first Christian sermon, and it cut the people to the heart, because he was telling them that they all had a role in Christ's death.

But the Spirit of God was working that day and they asked him **what must they do (vs. 37)**? He told them, **"Repent and be baptized everyone one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"** (**38**). This is the only possible rational reaction to what I'm telling you now. If you do not, then you are really committing a kind of blasphemy yourself by telling God that his Son Jesus is not God and that you owe him no allegiance whatsoever. And we've seen today the consequences that this deserves.

But **Jesus died so that you might have forgiveness of this sin** and all of your other sins as well. This is an act of **grace** on his part; you do not earn this. It is simply given because that's who God is in Christ.

This grace is displayed in another way in our Lord's life in something that touches upon our story. Recall that when

the blasphemer was to be stoned that it was the entire congregation that was to do it. This was true also of other sins that received stoning. Into this, we find a story in John's Gospel of a [woman caught in the act of adultery](#) ([John 8:1-11](#)).

The story makes it clear that the whole thing was a setup in order to trap Jesus so that they could find some charge against him to bring him to a trial (6). Somehow, miraculously, a group of Pharisees just-so-happen to find a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery (3). Clearly, she was set up.

They said to Jesus, “[In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?](#)” (5). If Jesus were to have said go ahead, he would have been guilty of violating Roman law which would not permit it; if he had said you must not do it, he would have been guilty of denying Mosaic law, which is even worse.

Knowing their hearts, the Lord said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (7). Then he bent down and wrote on the ground (8). Perhaps he wrote the Ten Commandments. Perhaps he wrote [Jeremiah 17:13](#) LXX, “[All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be](#)



recorded on the ground.” Maybe it was **Deut 17:7**, “The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” Whatever the case, the effect was to disperse the mob. “When they heard it, they went away one by one” (9). Jesus was then left alone with the woman.

He said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” (10-11).

This is **God’s grace to a woman who deserved death**, which was extended only in part because he knew the hypocrisy of the men involved in this plot. The other part was that Jesus was gracious and the Giver of the Law did not have to exert justice if he wanted to show grace. This is what God does for each of us in Christ and so there is no better moment to turn to him in faith and repent of your sins.

But our story in Leviticus still stands. **This man was not extended grace**. God does not have to show grace, does he? If he did, then it would not be grace at all. Grace is unmerited. Justice is earned. **This man earned the justice of**

the death penalty for his hate-filled spewing forth of blasphemies and curses against the Holy God.

God did not show grace to that man in order that it might be a warning to all of God's people. When they enter into the Holy Place to perform services to him, they must realize who they are coming near, for this is an eternal, heavenly reality. That Jesus who was so kind to that woman is the same Jesus who commanded Moses to put this man to death. The only difference is that in the woman's case he had now become a human being. But if it is the same Person, this means that you have to take seriously the holiness that the man releasing this woman from her guilt has. This is God and though he is merciful today, the day is coming when he will judge the living and the dead.

If you have trusted in him, then you have become his priest and you now serve in the new covenant temple of Christ's body—the church. Your body has also become a temple of the Holy Spirit and thus, the warning is clear. You can do so because Hebrews tells you, “It was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these” (Heb 9:23). Praise God for the sacrifice of his Only Begotten. As you carry out your sacrifices of

praise and offer up your prayers of incense and walk forth in the priestly ministry of giving the gospel, do so remembering that you are treading, always, upon Holy Ground, ground that he has so graciously allowed you to draw near through the blood of Jesus Christ.

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