

Leviticus 9-15: Order of Worship and Misc. Laws

Introduction

We left off in Chapter 8 of Leviticus last week examining the ordination rite of Aaron and his sons as they were ordained to the priesthood. This week I have another tall order for us because I intend to get us through chapters 9-15. And it's important that we cover some of the highlights of those chapters, especially chapters 10-15, because they help us understand the central role of the Day of Atonement which is detailed in chapter 16. And you'll remember that the Day of Atonement sits, not only at the center of Leviticus, it sits at the narrative center of the Pentateuch. And that means that it takes up a central role in understanding the Pentateuch as a whole and, inasmuch as the Pentateuch is related and foundational to the rest of the Scriptures, Leviticus 16 acts as a foundation, or building stone, upon which the rest of the Bible is built.

Chapter 9: The Acceptance of the Priests and Order of Worship

Chapter 9 begins by telling us that the seven day rite of ordination for Aaron and his sons had come to an end. It was now the eighth (8th) day and Israel's new priests were ready to enter the Tabernacle to perform their duties as priests—as God's ordained servants who would mediate between Him and Israel. God commands Aaron and the people to bring animal sacrifices and grain offerings to the Tabernacle because, the text says, “today the LORD will appear to you” (v. 4). As we arrive at verse 8 of Chapter 9, we get a clear picture of the ordering of the offerings and sacrifices used in the rite: sin offerings come before burnt offerings.¹

When we move to verses 15-21 we see that that same order continues but then we get some additional information. We're told that after the burnt offering was presented, a grain offering was presented. And, finally, after the grain offering was presented, a peace/fellowship offering was presented.

[Read 9:15-21]

Moving to verses 22-24 we see that, as Israel's first worship service was coming to a close, Aaron does something that Nick and Jacob do for us each week as our worship draws to a close,

¹ We see the same ordering of sin and burnt offerings back in Chapter 5, verses 7-10. There, with the birds offered, the first one offered was offered for a sin offering and then the second was offered for a burnt offering.

Aaron blesses the people of Israel. Finally, the chapter concludes with a fulfillment of God's promise given earlier in verse 4—that He would appear to Israel on this day—when fire comes out “from before the LORD” and consumes the sacrifices on the altar.

[The reader should reference the comparative chart in the slide presentation posted on Grace's website. That chart shows a side-by-side comparison between the BCP Communion Service and a typical Levitical Worship Service.]

There are at least two things that God's fire lighting the altar meant. First, it meant that He was accepting the Tabernacle system of worship; He approved of it. Second, it meant that God was approving, in a public way, of Aaron and his sons' priesthood. Remember, the chapter opens by God bringing Aaron into His house. This is a deep sign of approval because it's a sign of adoption. Aaron and his sons are born into a new family, with a new residence, and, as we saw when we looked at some of the sacrifices over the past few weeks, Aaron and his sons were also given new food. They were allowed to eat food from Yahweh's table (i.e., His altar) that others weren't allowed to eat. So, what we're seeing in chapters 8-9 of Leviticus is an adoption and a rebirth. When one becomes a priest in Israel, one gets a new family, a divine and holy family.

This is why the little detail about the day on which all of this takes place is important. In the Bible, the number 8 represents new creation and new life. God created the world in six (6) days and rested on day 7. The next day in the sequence, the eighth (8th) day, would've been the first day of God's newly created, and very good, world...had it not been polluted by Adam's rebellion and sin.

Chapter 10: Death Pollutes God's House

In this chapter we see how God's house came to be defiled in a very serious way. God is life, it's in His nature to exist, He couldn't possibly not exist. For you Thomists out there, I'll say that there's not distinction between God's essence and His existence. The Biblical picture of God is that He's antithetical to death. Death, at least with respect to humans, was not a part of God's original and very good creation. As Paul tells us, it was through Adam—through his rebellion—that sin and death entered the world.

Chapter 10 of Leviticus introduces a tension into Israel's system of worship as soon as it gets started. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu end up being killed by Yahweh for offering "unauthorized fire" or "strange fire" in the Tabernacle. More than that, they end up being killed *inside of* the Tabernacle. And for reasons that will become apparent shortly, that's a very big deal. I'll read that section really quickly.

[Read 10:1-3]

Scholars can't agree about what, exactly, Nadab and Abihu did in the Tabernacle that caused God to break out against them and kill them. I think Michael Morales provides a strong case that they may have attempted to enter the Holy of Holies which, as we'll see very clearly in Leviticus 16, is strictly forbidden. Aaron alone was to enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year on a specific day and after performing very specific rites for cleansing/purification. In order to get through all of the material I want to get through today, I'll have to skip the evidence Morales provides but, if you're interested in hearing more about that, you can email me and I'll respond that way.

Going back to the tension that the deaths of Aaron's sons inserted into the narrative and practice of the Levitical system of worship, I want to point out a few things. **First**, the Tabernacle is a miniature Garden of Eden. It's a holy, sacred space—just as the Garden was—because it's God's house, it's where God dwelled. Moreover, it's *the* place of life because God, whose nature it is to live, also lives there.

And this brings me to the **second** thing I want to point out. That is, what we have with the sin of Nadab and Abihu is another fall and another entrance of sin and death into the world. It's just that this time, it's the little world of the Tabernacle that becomes defiled. Just as God gave Adam clear instructions in the Garden, commanding him not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (the Tree of Wisdom), God had given Aaron and his sons clear instructions about how to conduct themselves in the Tabernacle. We know this because, as we read through chapters 8-9, we see the phrases "as the Lord commanded Moses" or "as the Lord commanded them" repeated over and over again.

Nadab and Abihu disregarded God's clear instructions for worship and approaching Him in the Tabernacle. As they disregarded those clear instructions, they "fell" into sin which resulted

in God's judgment of death. And this meant that death had now entered the little world of the Tabernacle. Death, which is the result of sin, and the pollution it brings, had, once again, come into God's pristine Garden sanctuary. The first time that happened was with Adam. Now it happens with Adam-like figures, the priests—those who occupy the Garden sanctuary. I like the way Michael Morales summarizes all of this when he writes,

Lacking the fear of YHWH, Nadab and Abihu attempt to draw nearer to [God], perhaps even beyond the second veil, through a way not commanded. Their consequent death serves a twofold function: first, their deaths have polluted the tabernacle (the new creation / garden of Eden), in turn uncovering the need for a way to cleanse and restore the house of God and its cultus regularly; secondly, their failure underscores the boundaries—the limits—of humanity's approach to YHWH through the revealed sacrificial cultus. This twofold tension functions to contextualize the second part of Leviticus (chs. 11-16) under the drama of *how near one may approach God in his house*, along with the further question of *how God's house may be cleansed regularly from inevitable defilement*, both of which find their resolution in the Day of Atonement ceremony—and both of which also speak to the nature of the 'tent of meeting'.²

As you can see, we're building up to the Day of Atonement in Chapter 16. We're setting up the context for it which helps us see why it's so important. And just to telegraph that answer a bit—the answer to *why* the Day of Atonement is so important—I'll say this: The Day of Atonement is nothing less than the cleansing and restoration of the world! The Day of Atonement allows God's defiled "house" and "world" to be cleansed and restored to its original state with the result that Yahweh can continue to live among His people. And the significance of Yahweh living among His people is that *He's the source of life. Without Him, separated from Him, that way lies violence, chaos, and death.*

But before we get to Leviticus 16, it will be helpful for me to provide a few comments on chapters 11-15. It's there that we see that various laws regarding clean and unclean things were introduced to God's people.

² *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 152.

Chapters 11-15: Clean and Unclean, Life and Death

- Chapter 11 distinguishes between clean and unclean animals.
- Chapter 12 provides information on how a woman may be clean after childbirth.
- Chapter 13 lays out the criteria for diagnosing skin/surface diseases as unclean.
- Chapter 14 provides details for how to *cleanse* skin diseases, as well as how to cleanse a house stricken by leprosy.
- Chapter 15 provides the criteria for diagnosing and cleansing one from unclean bodily discharges.

Running just underneath this important distinction between clean and unclean things and states—e.g., the state of being unclean after childbirth—is the distinction between life and death. I couldn't explain this any better than Morales and, because of that, I'm going to quote him at length.

The contrast between life and death is at the heart of the clean/unclean laws. Understanding YHWH to be the fountain of life, the spectrum between life and death may be mapped out spatially, with life and ordered cosmos at one end, and death and chaos at the other end. The nearer one approaches YHWH, the closer one gets to life in abundance. Conversely, the further one is driven from YHWH the more deeply death and chaos are experienced.^[3] Keeping in mind how the tabernacle is an architectural mountain of God and model of the threefold cosmos, the holy of holies corresponds to the clouded summit of the mountain, the heavenly abode of God. As the place of God's Presence, the holy of holies represents the uttermost source of life. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the wilderness, which corresponds to the unruly water surrounding the mountain, underneath which lies Sheol, the realm of chaos and death.⁴

³ Consider, for example, the world before the flood. It was a place of violence and death. Eventually, God turned it back into a state of chaos by causing the chaos waters of *tehōm* to cover it in the flood.

⁴ Ibid., 157.

Morales goes on to say, “With this cultic map in place we can begin to understand the rationale for why some animals, objects and people are classified as either clean or unclean.” Citing the OT scholar Gordon Wenham, Morales notes that the categories of life and death are fundamental to Israel’s cultus and buttress even Mary Douglas’ promising proposal that “notions of wholeness and normality served as the primary distinction between clean and unclean.”⁵

Wenham, however, rightly subsumes these helpful categories under the more fundamental opposition between life and death, noting that while childbirth, menstruation and sexual intercourse would surely have been considered normal, yet they still caused uncleanness because each involved the loss of life liquids, barring people from worship until they recovered from such loss.⁶

In Wenham’s own words, “God, who is perfect life and perfect holiness, can only be approached by clean men who enjoy fullness of life themselves. The unclean are those who in some way have an aura of death about them in that they manifest less than physical wholeness.”⁷

Many of the unclean animals are associated with death in some fashion, whether in being carnivorous predators or scavengers, living in caves (tombs), or, like pigs, by being associated with underworld deities in pagan worship. Along these lines, creatures that demonstrate some abnormality within their class (like fish without scales) are considered further from the wholeness of an ordered cosmos in terms of life. Similarly, in relation to humans, certain physical defects preclude a descendant of Aaron from serving as high priest since he represents original or restored creation and ‘must be perfect as a man, if he is to be a priest’. Various conditions such as skin diseases make Israelites unclean because it brings them into the realm of death. When Miriam became leprous, Aaron prayed, ‘Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed...’ (Num. 12:12). The leper pronounced unclean, therefore, is required to go into mourning, disheveling

⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in Morales 157-158. What are the implications of this for disability theology? If the new priesthood is better than the old priesthood, in what ways is it better? Is the new priesthood inferior in terms of what it symbolizes?

his hair, rending his clothes and being exiled outside the camp of Israel (Lev. 13:45-46)—in essence such a person ‘experienced a living death’. Many of the discharges of bodily fluids (such as blood or semen), along with the womb shortly after childbirth, may be correlated with loss of life, rendering one unfit to be in the Presence of fullness of life. Because the wilderness represents chaos and death, Sheol, all that severely smacks of death is driven into the wilderness and away from the Presence of God.⁸

I think we’re finally in a place to move into Leviticus 16 and the Day of Atonement...and that’s where we’ll start next week.

⁸ Ibid., 158.