

Old Testament History, Literature, and Theology

Leviticus – Holiness, Purity Laws, and Problems

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Abstract

In Lecture 13 of Old Testament History, Literature, and Theology, Dr. Ted Hildebrandt explores the central theological theme of holiness in the Book of Leviticus and its application to all aspects of ancient Israelite life. The lecture begins with an analysis of Exodus case law regarding accidental injury to a pregnant woman, emphasizing proper biblical contextualization and intent over modern debates. Hildebrandt then unpacks the dynamics of Old Testament cultic worship, explaining how the concepts of holy, clean, and unclean govern human approach to a transcendent God, before addressing various rationales for purity and kosher dietary laws. Finally, the session examines biblical instances of violating divine holiness and addresses specific textual and scientific challenges in Leviticus.

Outline

I. Introduction and Course Logistics

A. Academic Quiz Preview

1. Announcement of Quad Break and upcoming schedule
2. Assignment overview for the Book of Joshua (24 chapters, article on war and loving neighbor, memory verses from Psalm 100 and Joshua 1:8)

B. Opening Prayer

1. Thanksgiving for God's Word and prayer for persecuted Christians in Egypt
2. Request for guidance in explaining Leviticus in a manner reflecting God's holiness

II. Exodus Case Law: Miscarriage and Intent (Exodus 21:22–25)

A. Distinguishing Law Types

1. Apodictic law: General moral commands and universal absolute principles ('Thou shalt not')
2. Case law: Conditional 'if-then' formulations prescribing specific consequences for practical scenarios

B. Examination of Exodus 21:22–25

1. Scenario: Two men fighting accidentally strike a pregnant woman, causing premature birth
2. Outcome 1: Miscarriage without serious injury to the woman requires a negotiable monetary fine set by the husband and approved by the court
3. Outcome 2: Serious injury to the woman invokes lex talionis ('life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth')

C. Hermeneutical and Ethical Application

1. Role of intent: Distinction between accidental harm (no malice aforethought) and deliberate violence
2. Contextual hermeneutics: The passage addresses civil liability and accidental harm rather than modern abortion debates

III. Introduction to Leviticus and Cultic Concepts

A. Identity and Central Theme of Leviticus

1. Core command: 'Be holy because I the LORD your God am holy'
2. Roles: Distinction between Levites (tribe of Levi, carry Tabernacle equipment) and Priests (descendants of Aaron, minister at altar and Holy of Holies)

B. Extrinsic and Intrinsic Religion

1. Modern privatization of religion versus public expression
2. Cultural paradox: Public acceptability of explicit sexuality alongside the silencing of faith in public arenas

C. The 'Cult' in Old Testament Studies

1. Definition: External symbolic actions, rituals, and liturgy reflecting internal religious posture
2. Importance of approach: Analogies of a sweaty post-workout hug and an unexpected office visit by the college president

IV. The Sacred-Secular Spectrum and Divine Holiness

A. Universal Sacredness of Life

1. Rejection of secular versus sacred dualism: All daily activities (eating, childbirth, sanitation) are sacred
2. Dr. Wilson's principle: 'Study is the highest form of worship'

B. Defining Divine Holiness (Qadosh)

1. Meaning of qadosh: 'Totally Other,' unique (sui generis), set apart, and beyond creation
2. Incomparability of Yahweh: Isaiah's rhetorical declaration ('To whom will you compare me?')

C. Holiness and Divine Immanence

1. Separateness without remoteness: High and Lofty One dwells with the contrite and lowly in spirit (Isaiah 57:15)
2. Human response: Proper fear of God as awe, terror, and obedience (illustrated by traffic stops and an airport firearm ordeal)

V. Sanctification, Holy Objects, Places, and Times

A. Holy People and Times

1. Selection of Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6)
2. Sanctifying time: The Sabbath (Shabbat) from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, followed by street celebrations (Kikar Zion)
3. Feasts of Leviticus 23 as designated holy days (holidays)

B. Holy Objects and Places

1. Anointing oil: Olive oil used to sanctify priests and kings; Hebrew Messiah ('oiled one') rendered in Greek as Christos

2. Holy incense: Fragrant aromatic compounds reserved exclusively for sacred worship
3. Holy ground and spaces: Burning bush, Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, the Temple, and the Holy of Holies (superlative 'holiest place')

VI. Violations of Divine Holiness

A. Biblical Accounts of Divine Judgment

1. Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10): Offering unauthorized fire results in immediate destruction
2. Uzzah (2 Samuel 6): Touching the Ark of the Covenant to steady it results in instant death (Perez Uzzah)
3. King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26): Unlawfully attempting to burn incense in the Temple results in immediate leprosy

B. Transmission of Holiness and Cleansing

1. Designation through touch and laying on of hands
2. Inverse purity in the Gospels: Woman with the issue of blood touches Jesus (Matthew 9); instead of defiling Him, His holiness cleanses her

VII. Cultic Mechanics and Rationales for Purity Laws

A. The Three Cultic States (Wenham's Summary Chart)

1. Three states: Unclean, Clean, Holy
2. Upward movement: Unclean to Clean via washing (water) or sacrifice (blood); Clean to Holy via sanctification (olive oil)
3. Downward movement: Holy to Unclean via profaning; Clean to Unclean via polluting

B. Rationales for Purity Laws

1. Arbitrary View: Rejected as inconsistent with God's purposeful character
2. Cultural/Cultic View: Establishing distinct Israelite ethnic markers from Canaanite practices (e.g., uncut stone altars)
3. Hygienic View: Health and sanitation benefits (Dr. McMillan's None of These Diseases), such as trichinosis avoidance and waste burial outside camp
4. 'Yuckiness' / Wholeness View (Mary Douglas): Maintaining cultural normality and wholeness to eliminate distractions during worship

VIII. Kosher Regulations and Textual Objections

A. Rules for Kosher Animals

1. Land animals: Must chew the cud AND have split hooves (beef/sheep allowed; pork excluded)
2. Aquatic creatures: Must possess fins AND scales (bass/salmon allowed; catfish/shellfish excluded)
3. Flying creatures: Excludes birds of prey and blood-eaters (turkeys/quail allowed); insects limited to hoppers (locusts/grasshoppers)

B. Three Textual and Scientific Objections

1. Rabbits chewing the cud (Leviticus 11:6): Language of appearance or translation variation (rock badger)
2. Bats categorized as birds (Leviticus 11:19): Ancient functional classification based on flight rather than modern biological taxonomy

3. Prohibitions on homosexual behavior (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13): Biblical prohibitions regarding human sexual conduct