

Leviticus 21

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

This chapter deals with the Lord's requirements for holiness and purity to the religious leadership, the priestly class. Matters of purity for the shepherds of the flock are carefully regulated especially in the realms of death and matrimony. The purpose of these commands is so that the priesthood could adequately reflect a holy God and maintain the sanctity of the Sanctuary. Representing God obligates the priest to have a special responsibility in cleanliness, ritual purity and holy living. Israel as a nation was designated to be a kingdom of priests before the Lord in Exodus 19. Considering this declaration, by God from Sinai, it would make this chapter singling out the Levitical priesthood for holiness to be somewhat superfluous as we are all called to be a holy people and a kingdom of priests. We keep this tension in our discussions of the text as it applies to us and our calling as shepherds of God's people and as it applies to those in the function of actual shepherds of our churches and communities.

Moses instructs the priests, the Cohenim, to keep themselves separated from death. God is life and His clergy are to reflect this by not being contaminated by death through contact with a corpse. Contrasted to ancient pagan cultures, the Israelite priesthood did not participate in preparing the dead for burial. Uncleanness was not always avoidable of course and the cause of uncleanness is not considered sinful. Deliberate intention to remain in an unclean state is something else! In the present day, Jewish cemeteries have special pathways for the Cohenim and Cohens cannot be present in a room with a corpse. This brought up in our discussion the contamination issue in the New Testament of the Good Samaritan. In that encounter, the cohen and the Levite have the literal text on their side here in Leviticus to avoid contamination by assisting the fallen injured man. What the story of the Good Samaritan reveals is that holiness is both physical and spiritual, with the spirit of the Torah always outweighing the letter of the Torah. Holy compassion and love of neighbour should have prompted assistance not avoidance, knowing that ritual uncleanness can be dealt with later through the mikveh.

Animals for the sacrifices had to be presented to the Lord without a blemish. Similarly, the priests themselves respected the perfection of God by being without blemish themselves. They were forbidden from marking themselves in mourning rituals, tattoos and shaving the beard. This created an outward distinction between Israelite and Canaanite priests who did these things. The reason for the commands is summarized in verse 6 where being holy is paired with profaning the Name of God. One way of profaning the Lord is to 'look like others' and not God. This is true for the people of God today. Acquiescing to modern cultural standards is neither good for your soul nor wins new souls for the kingdom. Interestingly the text encourages the people of God to participate in sanctifying the priests. God has made them holy and now the people continue to keep them holy. Partnership in the kingdom of Heaven runs throughout all Scripture. Since Creation God has dominion over the earth all the while asking Man to partner in that dominion. The reason for the need for the sanctity of the priesthood is given: that the priests should be holy because they offer the Lord's bread. Bread is the object given prominence over all the other sacrifices and offerings. It was so important that it is mentioned twice, once in verse 6 and then again in verse 8. Why? The bread offering was a symbol of the intimate relationship between God and Israel. Breaking bread together was and still is the metaphor for companionship, hospitality and close fellowship. In the absence of the Temple when no sacrifices could be performed, it was still possible to use bread as part of worship and ritual. Note that in the Gospels Jesus only references bread at Passover and makes no mention of the Passover lamb.

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High priests were also forbidden from tearing their garments, something we see the High Priest doing in the Gospels at the trial of Jesus.

Moses then gives detailed instructions on who the priests could marry. The attributes of the potential wife for a priest are quite detailed. Common priests could marry widows but not so the High Priest. Pagan temples often contained prostitutes as part of their worship services. Israelite priesthood was to have nothing to do with harlotry. Daughters of the clergy who became prostitutes suffered the death penalty, although there are no actual literary records that say that these punishments were ever enforced in practice. Rather the stiff penalty reflects the seriousness of the command. Nowhere does Leviticus say the wife of a cohen has to be Jewish. One can imagine that with Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, looking over his shoulder that he could write no other.

In our final discussions of this chapter, we asked ourselves: how do we keep our leaders today holy? Leviticus calls us to sanctify our clergy, so how? We mentioned accountability and shared leadership roles, like having people around the shepherd -- be they staff, lesser pastors or a vestry of laity -- to encourage, pray with, exhort, and in some cases discipline them. Courage is required on behalf of the laity to challenge leadership when they fail. Compassion is also required as some laity can be over-critical of their shepherds and their perceived weaknesses. We also discussed the issue of female priests and women's ordination. This is always a sensitive issue as there are many denominations that ordain women and some that passionately do not. An argument can and has been made that traditional biblical exegesis forbids authority of females over males.

This is clear from a literal reading of Paul. The Hebrew Bible does not describe any female priests in the Israelite community. Evidence of female priestesses exists in the archaeology of many pagan cultures. The New Testament does describe females as deacons and hence some traditions, including the Anglican tradition, will ordain females to the diaconate. Some streams of Protestantism, including Anglicans, also ordain women to the priesthood and bishopric. The debate can be quite lively and many people can be hurt (emotionally) through disagreement. My personal comment on this issue is actually a warning. Here is a historic truth: all churches that ordain women are the ones who ordain practising homosexuals. The traditional Catholic and Orthodox churches do not theologically ordain either women or homosexuals (although they might wink at it under the stole; it is not official doctrine and even the Pope cannot change the Magisterium). It's Protestants who historically change doctrine in response to culture both for good and for evil. History has a habit of repeating itself. Therefore when wrestling with the issue of women's ordination this should be part of the discussion so that safeguards can be in place.