

Leviticus 24

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

Following a discussion on the festal calendar of the Lord, which is annual in nature, Moses is commanded to maintain a perpetual light burning regularly inside the Tabernacle, which is a daily requirement. Perhaps this serves to remind the Israelites of the daily worship activities of the Tabernacle and not only the yearly feasts. Daily worship guards against Christmas/Easter Christianity. The oil for the menorah was of pure clean olives made for the pure gold lamp stand, which has become one of the iconic enduring images of the Jewish people. God commands Aaron to maintain the light from evening to morning. God did not want the Tabernacle to be left in darkness. Why? What was the light for? The only people who would make use of the light would be Aaron, his descendants and perhaps a few chosen priests who assist in the Sanctuary. If the light was solely of practical value so priests could see what they were doing, then surely they would bring their own light into the Tabernacle as required. In our discussion, we noted that according to oral tradition, the Temple had windows that effectively took the light inside to the outside. God is light and light has strong biblical and theological themes. The first thing called into existence was light. Israel was called to be a light to the nations. There is an element of participation here too. God does not dwell in darkness, He initiates the fire on the altar first, He calls light into being, and He requests that we maintain the light, share and spread the light.

Food offerings to local deities were commonplace in antiquity. This practise is still followed in Asian and animistic cultures. Similarly, Israel was required to present food to God. The Torah describes multiple types of food offerings for the Lord, many times accompanied by the phrase ‘a pleasing aroma to the Lord’. Here in Leviticus, we get the details of the continual food offering called the ‘Bread of the Presence’. God doesn’t actually eat, as we understand the concept of eating. The priests actually eat the bread at the end of the week. Incense is added to the bread and thus the sense of smell is added to the sense of taste in this activity of worship. If we think about it, God can see, He can hear, He can smell and so perhaps He can also taste in a manner in which we currently cannot fathom. Food fellowship is an important concept in the Bible. There is a future banquet waiting for us in heaven. The Almighty Himself will be present, yet even there He will not ‘eat’ as we will. Perhaps it is the nature of the eating, its participatory nature, that is: it’s something we do together that is important and desired by the Lord. Jesus says of the Last Supper, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you’ (Luke 22:15). Like the perpetual light, the bread of the presence was also to be continual, this signifies the desire of God to have an unbroken relationship with His people. The majority of Israelites would never actually see the Bread of the Presence, nor its preparation or its setting before the Lord. All they would know is that it is there and has been placed there on their behalf. Believing without seeing, which as Jesus will remind us in John 20:29, is the best of beliefs: ‘Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe’.

The regulations and laws for holiness are now interrupted by a short narrative, which is uncommon in Leviticus. The narrative identifies the punishment for blasphemy and gives some background to the historical roots for the extreme caution in Judaism in the use of the sacred

Leviticus 24

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

Name to this day. The text mentions the guilty man's genealogy as Israelite-Egyptian. He was part of the mixed multitude that went out of Egypt with Israel (Exod 12:38). His mother, Shelomit, is from the tribe of Dan, although the man himself is tribeless and bears no name. Somehow an altercation ensues with another nameless Israelite and the Egyptian invokes the Name of God in a curse. How he knows the Name is not explained. In a fascinating, even if unlikely, oral tradition, Rashi says the blasphemer is the son of the Egyptian whom Moses slew in the beginning of Exodus and that Moses killed the Egyptian using the Name of God. This exegesis follows the Jewish pattern of beginnings and endings occurring in the same place and the same way. Leviticus notes he is Egyptian, so the commentators look back in the text for another encounter that involves Israelites quarrelling and an Egyptian and find one in the story of Moses and the Egyptian. There is also a comment on the mother's name, Shelomit daughter of Divri. Divri is from the verb 'to speak'. Jewish exegetes say she was a gossi, and could not control her tongue, and this flaw was imparted to her son. Hence this incident can be the source of many sermons on the dreaded power of the tongue for the rabbis.

The man is seized, as they know he has done wrong, taking the Name of God in vain is the third commandment from Mount Sinai. But no penalty is provided in the previous prohibitions in Exodus. And the one who is blaspheming is not a full-fledged Israelite. So one conundrum is the question of how the Torah relates to non-Israelites? How do they discern the will of the Lord? One option would have been the Urim and Thummim that are placed on Aaron as a communication device to God. The heavenly judgment falls on the death penalty and the man is removed and stoned by the community. The community enacts the punishment; it is not relegated to law enforcers. Having put someone to death, Leviticus immediately restates a judicial principle found earlier in Exodus 21:23-25, life for a life, eye for an eye, etc. Here in Leviticus monetary equivalent was substituted for the life of an animal. The sages of Israel note that the injunction eye for an eye, hand for a hand, etc. was not actually practised. Instead, the monetary substitution was extended from animals to fellow human beings. Human nature is often far too lenient or far too severe when it comes to crime and punishment. Here the Lord sets an appropriate limit to punishment. Note though, when it comes to the Name of God, the punishment remains the death penalty. Verse 22 answers the conundrum of how the Torah applies to non-Israelites, and the answer is to the full extent. The same Law applies to all peoples equally. God does not give the Israelite an unfair advantage over a foreigner in terms of the Law, and vice versa.

Leviticus now returns to the concept of holy time as the next chapter details the Shmitah and the Jubilee and its relationship to the Land.