

The Ritual Law

After the exile Judah's kings were not restored and instead the high priests became her most influential leaders. Life after the exile was governed by priestly Law, which was collected and regularised.

The characteristics of the priestly strand in the "Torah," the first five books of the Old Testament, include a concentration on order, structure and minute detail. These we have seen already in passages like Numbers 3 and 7 and the description of the tabernacle, the tent of worship in the desert.

The collection of the ritual Law was the result of a long process. Many of the rituals described go back to the earliest period of Israel's history, although they have been constantly revised and updated. Sometimes, the meanings behind them are taken for granted and must be inferred from other passages in the Old Testament. Some, like the correct use of Urim and Thummim, appear to have been lost over time and then reinvented by the priestly compilers.

**Day 296. Psalm 119:1-16;
Leviticus 1 - 3; 6:8-23; 7:11-end**

The Ritual of Sacrifice

Psalm 119:1-16

The blessedness of obedience to God's Law. The writer meditates on the Law so as to have it in his heart and keep it.

Leviticus 1; 6:8-13

These opening chapters of Leviticus contain the regulations for a variety of different kinds of sacrifice, which may be brought by the worshipper on different occasions. These laws include only the rituals to be followed for different categories of sacrifice. They do not say anything about the meaning of sacrifice or the difference between the various sacrifices. For this, we have to pick up hints from elsewhere in the Old Testament and the root meanings of the words themselves.

First is the law for the "whole burnt offering" or "slaughter sacrifice". Like all sacrifices, the animal offered had to be perfect (1:3,10). No animal with a blemish was fit to be offered as a sacrifice. Before killing it, the worshipper laid hands on the animal's head so that it would be "accepted" to "make atonement". This ritual created the relationship between God and the worshipper in which the animal was accepted from him. Except for the sacrifice of birds, the worshipper actually presented and killed the animal, while the priest dealt with the rituals of the altar. The blood sprinkled on the altar signified the life of the animal, which belonged to God.

The hide, which was removed (1:6), was the priest's portion. 6:8-13 add the regulations on how the priests were to deal with the ashes.

Leviticus 2; 6:14-23

The Hebrew word for the grain offering is "minhah", which originally meant the tribute given to an overlord. Possibly, the grain offering was originally the farmer's tribute, while the whole offering was the herdsman's tribute. Again, only the best flour was presented (2:1,4,7), along with oil and incense to be used in the "memorial" or "token" portion (2:2,9,16). Once

presented, the grain offering was holy and so might only be eaten by the priests.

Yeast was forbidden in these offerings (2:4-5,11) but salt was compulsory (2:13). To "share salt" was to eat in fellowship, so including salt with the sacrifice emphasised the covenant relationship with God.

Leviticus 3; 7:11-end

The fellowship offering, also translated as "peace offering" or "offering of well-being" is literally a "sacrifice of shalom". It was perhaps the earliest form of sacrifice. When a family slaughtered an animal such as an ox they had to eat it soon, since it would not keep, so they invited their neighbours to share the feast. And since blood was taboo and belonged to God, all slaughter was a sacred occasion. Thus, the sacrifice would be a joyful community event establishing shalom. Early forms of it can be found in 1 Samuel 9:11-13,19-24; 14:31-35 and 16:2-5.

The "shalom" sacrifice was divided between the worshippers, the priests and the Lord. The fat, kidneys and liver were the Lord's (3:3-5,9-11,14-16). The breast and the right thigh, after being presented to the Lord, were eaten by the priest (7:28-36). The remainder could be eaten by the worshippers but only in the two days following the sacrifice (7:16-17) and only if they were in a state of ritual cleanness (7:19-21).

**Day 297. Psalm 119:17-40;
Leviticus 4:1 - 6:7; 6:24 - 7:10**

Sin Offerings and Guilt Offerings

Psalm 119:17-40

Love and respect for the Law sustains the writer even in times of grief and when suffering injustice.

Leviticus 4:1 - 5:13; 6:24-end

The sin offering was required when anyone taking part in a ritual got part of it wrong making it ineffective and transgressing the laws of holiness. If the priest sinned in this way he would also bring guilt on the people on whose behalf he was performing the ritual (4:3). For this reason the offering for the priest and for the whole community was the same, a perfect young bull (4:3,14). It was killed at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, as near to the Lord's presence as the elders could go (4:4,14). If it was the priest who had sinned, he laid his hands on the bull's head, if the community, the elders laid their hands on its head and whoever was guilty killed the bull (4:4,15). The blood of the bull, smeared on the horns of the altar, restored the holiness of the altar. The portion to be burned on the altar was the same as that for the fellowship offering and this re-established the relationship with God which had been impaired by the sin (4:20). The rest of the body was not needed and so was disposed of (4:11-12,21).

Other members of the community who sinned unintentionally brought proportionately less costly sacrifices, a male goat for a leader (4:22-23), a female goat or lamb for an ordinary member of the community (4:27-28,32), two doves and two pigeons for the poor (5:7) and a small amount of flour for the very poor (5:11). The animals were killed at the north side of the altar (4:24; see 1:11). After pouring out the blood and burning the Lord's portion, the rest of the carcass belonged to the priest, as did the grain offering (5:13; 7:7).

Four other cases where the sin offering was required have been inserted into the regulations for sin offerings. They were all cases of unwitting failure or carelessness (5:1-6).

Leviticus 5:14 - 6:7; 7:1-10

The guilt offering might be called a "compensation offering". It was used in cases where a ritual failure has defrauded the priest of something he should have had (5:14-16). Here, the worshipper had to confess and make restitution as well as presenting the sacrifice. The offering belonged to the priest just as the sin offering did (7:7). As an offering for sin, it became "most holy" (6:25; 7:6).

Added to the law for the guilt offering are further cases when it might be used. The first is a case of unintentional sin like those in 5:1-6, but this time a sin of commission rather than omission (5:17). The list of wrongs in 6:1-4 goes further in the direction of deliberate sin. Normally, there was no remedy for high-handed or deliberate sin in the sacrificial system (Numbers 15:30-31). But here two cases of deliberate deception afterwards discovered or repented of where restitution is required were also made the subject of a guilt offering. Several of the psalms deal with confession for sin (Psalm 51:1-12) and acknowledge the need to wait on God with a penitent and expectant heart (Psalm 130). Hosea urged the sinful Israelites to "take words" with which to confess their sins (Hosea 14:1-2). Only after a real change of heart and the acceptance of the penitent's plea could sacrifice again be made (Psalm 51:16-19).

Day 298. Psalm 119:41-56; Numbers 15:1-31; 28 - 29

The Regular Sacrifices

Psalm 119:41-56

For the psalmist, the Torah is a promise of hope, a law, a command, a precept, a decree, a statute and a word: a revelation of God's character, his demands and his promise.

Numbers 15:1-31

Along with every animal sacrifice there was to be a grain-offering and a drink-offering. The amount of the grain-offering and the drink-offering was proportionate to the size of the animal: for a bull three tenths of an ephah and half a hin, for a ram two tenths of an ephah and a third of a hin, for a lamb one tenth of an ephah and a quarter of a hin. An ephah was an exact measure equal to 22 litres and a hin was one sixth of an ephah, so the offerings were a considerable amount.

This part of the law recognises the rights and obligations of foreigners who have settled in Israel (15:13-16). At other periods, including the time of Jesus, strangers were not allowed to sacrifice at all.

The first cake made from each threshing of grain was to be presented to the Lord (15:17-21). It would have been eaten by the priests.

The laws for the offerings for unintentional sin are probably an earlier version of those in Leviticus 4. For intentional sin there was no offering (15:30-31)

Numbers 28 - 29

A table of regular offerings, prescribing the sacrifices to be made on each of the festival and fast days listed in Leviticus 23.

The "continual burnt offering" of a lamb sacrificed twice daily (28:3-8) was the basis of the whole sacrificial system, a continual sign of the presence of God (Exodus 29:38-end). The "morning sacrifice" and the "evening sacrifice" regulated the day for pious Israelites (see 1 Kings 18:29; Psalm 141:2; Ezra 9:4-5; Daniel 9:21). All the other sacrifices were to be made in addition to

this, each with their grain and drink offerings in proportion to the size of the animal.

On the sabbath, two lambs were to be offered in addition to the daily sacrifice (28:9-10), and each new moon 2 bulls, 1 ram and 7 lambs with a goat as a sin offering (28:11-15).

The new moon sacrifice acted as the basis for the festival sacrifices. The Passover took place on a single day with a family meal in the evening (Exodus 12:12-28). The following day was a sabbath, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A new moon sacrifice was to be made each day of the feast (28:19-24) and the last day, seven days after the first, was another sabbath (28:25). On the day of first fruits at the Feast of Weeks a new moon offering was made (28:26-end).

The Feast of Trumpets (now the Jewish New Year) and the Day of Atonement are fast days. The sacrifice for these was the same as that for the new moon except that there was only one bull instead of two (29:2,8).

The Feast of Tabernacles was the most elaborate of all, with twice the number of rams and lambs as on a new moon and the number of bulls decreasing each day from 12 to 7, making 70 bulls in all. An eighth day was added to the feast as a solemn sabbath and its offering was the same as for the Day of Atonement (29:35-38).

Day 299. Psalm 119:57-72; Leviticus 16; Numbers 8:5-end; Numbers 19

Rituals of Purification

Psalm 119:57-72

The writer recalls times of affliction (119:67,71) which led him to pay closer attention to God's way.

Leviticus 16

This is an account of the ancient rite for the cleansing of the place of worship and the people. It was written up after the exile when the significance of some of its details had already been forgotten. It was attached to the Day of Atonement, which came into prominence after the exile.

No one was to enter the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence, except the high priest and then only once a year on this, the most solemn of days. To enter God's presence at any other time and in any other way was death (16:2). The garments the high priest wore (16:4) were much simpler than his ordinary garments, which he put on only after the special rituals were completed (16:24). First he offered a bull for his own sin, according to the ritual described in 4:3-12. The bull's blood, sprinkled on the atonement cover behind the curtain, cleansed the Holy of Holies from the sins of the priests (16:11-14). The "atonement cover" or "mercy seat" thought of here is the one described in Exodus 25:17-22, made of solid gold with two kneeling cherubim at either end. This covered the "Testimony" which was inside the ark and served as the Lord's throne.

The blood of the goat sacrificed for the people cleansed the Holy of Holies and the rest of the tent in the same way (16:15-16). The bull's blood and the goat's blood was then used to cleanse the altar (16:18-19). "Making atonement" meant restoring the relationship with God which allowed it to be used effectively in sacrifice.

Then came the ritual of the scapegoat. First the goat received the people's sins and then it was sent away into the wilderness (16:20-22). The nation was then free from unwitting sins and could continue to worship God in holiness. 16:8,10 and 26 designate the goat as being "for Azazel". Even the

later editors of the chapter did not know what this meant! From its root meaning as a hard or rocky place, some have thought the goat was led to the edge of a precipice and sent over it.

Numbers 8:5-end

This passage has been inserted after the description of the offerings made at the consecration of the tabernacle (7:1 - 8:4). The Levites became a special class of people set apart for the service of the Temple. This late passage sees them as taken in place of the first-born whom the Lord spared on the night of the Passover (8:16-18). The offering for their consecration was a bull like that of the priests' sin offering (8:8).

Numbers 19

Another very ancient ritual, this time for cleansing those who became unclean through contact with a dead body. Red was a colour often associated with cleansing rites of this time. The red heifer was to be ceremonially killed but outside the camp and then burned but not as a sacrifice and not by the priest, but only under his direction (19:3-5). The ashes were to be kept for mixing with clean water, which was sprinkled on anyone who became unclean through contact with the dead and on any dwelling where someone dies on the third and the seventh day of their uncleanness (19:17-19).

Day 300. Psalm 119:73-96; Leviticus 11, 12, 15

Ritual Holiness

Psalm 119:73-96

Even for someone enduring hard times and persecution, the Law is a source of hope. Disease and ritual uncleanness might have been a reason for the isolation the psalmist is feeling in verses 84-87.

Leviticus 11

Exactly why some animals were regarded as clean and some as unclean is lost in the mists of time. It may have had something to do with the shedding of blood, a distinction being made between carnivores and herbivores. The unclean birds, although they are difficult to identify exactly, seem to be all birds of prey or carrion eaters. Another reason may have been avoiding animals which had a place in pagan cults. The justifications given here, such as animals which both chew the cud and part the hoof or sea creatures with both fins and scales being clean (11:3,9) have almost certainly been introduced later to tidy the system up and give it a form of coherence.

Some unclean animals are also regarded as "detestable" (11:10,13,20). In other words, there is something nasty about them. But insects which both hop and fly may be eaten (11:20-22). John the Baptist was said to eat locusts (Mark 1:6).

Anyone who touched the dead body of an animal was himself unclean for the day and must wash his clothes (11:39-40). The ritual for restoring cleanness is given in Numbers 19.

At the end of the chapter, the editor includes a solemn passage repeating the demand for holiness as the main reason for avoiding unclean animals (11:43-45). By the period following the exile, when the original reason for these taboos had been lost, this had become the main reason for maintaining them.

Leviticus 12

A woman who had a period or gave birth was unclean. There was no moral content in this; it had to do solely with the emission of blood. The

uncleanness lasted twice as long for a girl as for a boy (12:4-5). Uncleanness after childbirth required a sacrifice to end it, either a lamb, a dove and a pigeon or two pigeons and two doves (12:6-8). After the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph presented the sacrifice allowed for the poor (Luke 2:22-24).

Leviticus 15

"Bodily discharge" in 15:1 is a euphemism for a discharge from the genital organs. It is venereal disease which is the subject of the strict regulations in 15:1-15. The emission of semen in sexual intercourse made both the man and the woman unclean for the day (15:16-18). A woman's period made her unclean for seven days (15:20-23) and the uncleanness was communicated to any man who had sex with her during that time (15:24).

A woman who discharged blood outside her period was also unclean. The state of uncleanness severely restricted contact with others and would make life very difficult if it went on for a long time. This was the position of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak in Luke 8:43-48. By pushing up to him in the crowd and deliberately touching him, she risked severe censure from anyone who realised what she was doing. But instead of transferring uncleanness to Jesus, he transferred wholeness to her.

Day 301. Psalm 119:97-120; Leviticus 13 - 14

Skin Diseases and Mildew

Psalm 119:97-120

The Law is the best of teachers and preserves the one who follows it from danger.

Leviticus 13 - 14

These chapters deal with a variety of different skin-diseases, but not leprosy. "Leprosy" arose from the older English translations, which were inaccurate. At that time, true leprosy was incurable. Some of the diseases here are contagious, some not. It was the ritual uncleanness that was contagious and the reason for isolating the sufferer.

The priest's duty was to distinguish between the clean and the unclean and to teach people the difference (10:10-11). The sufferer or suspected sufferer did not visit the priest as a doctor but to find out whether he was still able to worship or not. After examining him, the priest made a public pronouncement, either, "He is clean" or "It is infectious" (13:3,6,8 etc.).

The sufferer had to give notice to the whole community to keep away from him (13:45-46) but these regulations made him an abhorred outcast. When a man with a dreaded skin disease came to Jesus to ask for healing, he was in genuine doubt about whether Jesus would want anything to do with him (Mark 1:40). But instead of making Jesus unclean, his touch made the sufferer whole.

If a sufferer thought he had recovered, he had to go to the priest again to be readmitted to the worshipping community. This was the reason for Jesus' instructions to those who were cured (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14). The ritual for cleansing involved the ritual properties of cedarwood, scarlet thread and hyssop, as in the case of the water of uncleanness (14:4; Numbers 19:6). The thread was used to bind the hyssop to the stick to make a sprinkler. The blood of the dead bird took the ritual impurity, which was then sprinkled on to the live bird and ceremonially sent away (14:5-7). Just as there were quarantine procedures for checking whether the disease was genuine (13:4-5,21,26,31-33,50,54) there was also a quarantine procedure for bringing the sufferer back into the community (14:8-9). Only when it was certain that he

was cleansed did he bring the sacrifices (14:10), a guilt offering, a sin offering and a burnt offering. As well as the usual grain offering, he also had to bring a pint of oil (14:12). Apart from the little used in the ritual (14:15-18) the rest belonged to the priest.

Homes infected with mildew could be repaired in the first instance (14:41-42) but if the mildew persisted the house was to be torn down (14:43-45). Protection of the community was more important than the rights of the individual property owner.

The sacrifices for cleansing a house were the same as those for cleansing a sufferer (14:48-53).

Day 302. Psalm 119:121-end; Numbers 5:1 - 6:21; Numbers 30; Numbers 15:32-end

The Severity of the Law

Psalm 119:121-end

The Law is a way of life and the psalmist longs to obey it (119:127-129,167-168). It makes him aware of his failings and he asks for God's mercy and help to live in spite of them (119:132,149,176). He grieves at the evil he sees around him (119:136) and asks for God's help against those who, because they ignore the Law, make his life painful or difficult (119:121-122,134,153-159,161). The Law is true (119:160), stands fast (119:152) and gives light (119:130).

Numbers 5

5:1-4 insists on all with an irregular discharge living outside the camp as well as those suffering from skin disease (Leviticus 13:45-46). 5:5-10 adds to Leviticus 6:1-6 the rule that when the person concerned has died and has no family the restitution with a guilt offering is to be made to the priest.

5:11-end is the only case of an ordeal in Old Testament law. Its purpose is to allay the "spirit of jealousy" which can cause so much damage in marriage. The "spirit" was used to refer to the ruling attitude of a person. In this case, the man suspects his wife of carrying another man's child and cannot rid himself of the suspicion. If the woman had indeed been unfaithful the result of the ordeal should have been that she miscarried (5:21-22). If she did not miscarry, she had proved to her husband that the child was his and his jealousy unfounded.

Numbers 6:1-21

A Nazirite vow was an especially stringent vow, requiring the person who made it to abstain from wine and fermented drink, not to cut their hair and to remain ritually clean at all times. At the end of the period of the vow, a sacrifice had to be made to be released from it (6:13-17). This was standard in the case of all vows (see Acts 21:22-24). In addition, the Nazirite had to cut his hair, which he had dedicated to the Lord and so had become holy (6:18). Paul himself made Nazirite vows, even when engaged in missionary work (Acts 18:18).

If the person accidentally became unclean during the period of the vow, he had to make restitution to the Lord for the time lost by means of a guilt offering and start the vow again (6:9-12).

Both Samson and Samuel were dedicated as Nazirites from birth (Judges 13:3-5; 1 Samuel 1:11), but Samson progressively broke the terms of his vow, drinking wine, touching the carcass of a lion and finally allowing his hair to be cut. It was not the long hair which gave him his exceptional strength, but the Lord. When he lost his dedicated hair, the Lord deserted him (Judges 16:19-20).

Numbers 30

Like the word of God itself (Isaiah 55:10-11) but not so powerful, words spoken in God's presence have a power and a life of their own (30:2). They cannot idly be taken back (Leviticus 5:4-5; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Ecclesiastes 5:4-6). On the other hand, if a young woman or a married woman made a vow, her father or husband was responsible for seeing that it was kept and he would have to pay the considerable cost of the sacrifice which closed the period of the vow. This chapter offered him an opportunity to repudiate the vow so long as he did so on first hearing of it and not when it later became an embarrassment. A man could not be released from a vow, even a rash one.

Numbers 15:32-end

The story of the sabbath breaker is an example of the deliberate sin for which there is no sacrificial remedy (15:30-31). His punishment was an exemplary one, emphasising the severity of the Law. The whole assembly had to be involved; no one could opt out. To live under God's law is to live between life and death: life to keep it, death to break it. This passage explains why the Pharisees were so horrified when Jesus broke the Sabbath. He had come to bring a new law, the law of love.

Tassels on the fringe of their best clothes served as a continual reminder to Israel of the Law under which they lived.
