

TWENTY-FIRST MESSAGE:
 FORBIDDEN CEREMONIES:
 Leviticus 17:1-16

Introduction

With the description of the Day of Coverings, the explanation of the fire-offerings of Israel were completed. To these explanations, Jehovah added a MESSAGE that described ceremonies that were forbidden to Israel. The present age has tried to eliminate the negative from life. Jehovah has always been wiser than humans and realizes that a person cannot be for something without being against its opposite. The ceremonies that the Israelites were forbidden to practice were as important to their spiritual development as those that they were commanded to observe. As the ceremonies commanded by Jehovah taught spiritual truths that Israel needed to understand, the ceremonies forbidden by Jehovah taught falsehoods that Israel needed to avoid. They needed to shun the false in order to embrace the true. Therefore, this negative message was extremely important to Israel’s spiritual development. Specifically, this MESSAGE forbid offering private offerings and eating blood.

This message may be outlined as follows:

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Critical Note

Interpreters of almost all schools of thought hold that Chapter 17 begins a second major section of the book of Leviticus. The critical school views this chapter as the beginning of the second major source document, which they call the “Holiness Code,” in contrast to the previous chapters, which they call the “Priestly Code.” The arguments in favor of the “Holiness Code” are largely linguistic. Reasons for rejecting this view have been given in INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS, under the heading Date and Authorship. It should be added here that the critics’ evidence is especially weak with regard to Chapter 17. The supposedly characteristic phrases of the “Holiness Code” are almost totally lacking in Chapter 17, as can be seen by a study of a list of those phrases that can be found in most critical works on the subject. On the other hand, the phrases that are supposed to be characteristic of the “Priestly Code” are obviously noticeable in chapter 17. Driver and White tried to explain the presence of those phrases in Chapter 17 by saying they are editorial additions, added long after the original writing. That explanation is an example of the sad practice of so many critics, who alter the evidence to fit their theory instead of correcting their theory to fit the evidence. The actual fact is that linguistically chapter 17 is definitely more akin to Chapters 1-16 than to Chapters 18-27.

Interpreters who accept the book of Leviticus as a work of Moses generally hold that Chapter 17 begins a second section of the book on the basis of theme. They hold that Chapters 1-16 deal with the theme “Approaching God,” while Chapters 17-27 deal with the theme “Living in Contact with God.” In other words, Chapters 1-16 deal with salvation, while Chapters 17-27 deal with living a saved life. Reasons for rejecting that view have been stated in the INTRODUCTION TO SECTION I, under the heading Significance of the Ceremonies. That section shows that all the ceremonies of Leviticus deal with living in covenant relationship with God. They illustrate experiences that are common to the life of a person or nation that belongs to God. The comments on Chapters 1-16 in this commentary also show that the ceremonies of those chapters deal, not with how to get in contact with God, but with how people who are in contact with God should live. The Book of Exodus deals with coming into covenant relationship with God, not Leviticus 1-16. Recognizing that Chapters 1-16 deal with living the covenant life completely undercuts the view that a new emphasis begins with chapter 17. Chapter 17 continues the emphasis on how the people of God should live. It simply tells through symbols what people who live that life should not do, whereas Chapters 1-16 symbolize what people who live that life should do. Thematically, as well as linguistically, chapter 17 is akin to chapters 1-16 but not to chapters 18-27.

In spite of the unusual unity among interpreters with regard to the placement of this chapter, the evidence indicates that it belongs with the materials that precede it and not with those that follow it.

CHAPTER 17

Introductory ote (17:1)

Verse 1. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying,**

This verse is an Introductory Note to a new MESSAGE from Jehovah. Moses no doubt wrote the Note as he compiled the MESSAGES that Jehovah had spoken to him from the Tabernacle. It is not a part of the MESSAGE, but is introductory to the MESSAGE. This MESSAGE was spoken to Moses alone.

A. Private offerings forbidden (17:2-9)

Verse 2. **Speak to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel, and you shall say to them, This is the word (message) that Jehovah has commanded, saying,**

This message was to be delivered to Aaron, to his sons, and to all the people of Israel. The priests were to teach it, and the people were to practice it. It applied to everyone in the nation.

Verse 3. **A man of the house of Israel who kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp or kills it outside the camp**

The word translated “kill” in this verse is the same word used in Leviticus 1:5 (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 1 under the heading And he shall kill the bull). It was almost always used to describe slaughtering animals for use in fire-offerings. The word strongly indicates that the killing in question was for ceremonial purposes. That conclusion is confirmed in verse 5, which describes the priest’s offering the blood and fat of the animal on the altar. The law of these verses, therefore, does not apply to killing an animals for food but for a fire-offering to God. The law applied whether the animal was killed inside the camp or outside the camp. Though Israel’s fire-offerings

were always killed at the altar, pagan offerings could be handled in other ways. This MESSAGE deals with unauthorized offerings, which a person, influenced by pagan ideas, might decide to handle according to his own ideas. Also, prior to Sinai Jehovah worshipers offered offerings on homemade altars that were presided over by the patriarch of the family. That practice was not longer to be followed.

Verse 4. **and does not bring it to the entrance of The Tent of Meeting to offer as a gift to Jehovah before The Tabernacle of Jehovah, blood must be charged to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.**

and does not bring it to the entrance of The Tent of Meeting to offer as a gift to Jehovah before The Tabernacle of Jehovah. When a person in Israel offered an offering to Jehovah, the animal was to be taken to The Tent of Meeting and offered in the manner already described, under the direction of an authorized priest. This provision was to prevent corruption of the offerings. It was not a new principle as far as the Sinai messages were concerned. It had been firmly emphasized in connection with descriptions that had been given earlier concerning each of the animal offerings (rededication-offerings, Lev. 1:3,5,11,15; 7:2,7 slaughter-offerings, Lev. 3:1,2,7,8,12,13; sin-offerings Lev. 4:4,14; 6:25, offense-offerings, Lev. 15,24,29,33; 6:7,25). In those descriptions, the authorized priests and The Tabernacle altar were so intimately woven into the procedures that it would have been impossible to observe them as commanded at any other place than the Tabernacle and under any other direction than the sons of Aaron. This principle, already made so abundantly clear in a positive way, is now stated in a negative way. The Israelites were not to offer their offerings anywhere except at the authorized altar in The Tabernacle. This requirement needed to be stressed because the practice of using priests to officiate over fire-offerings at The Tabernacle had its beginning at Sinai. In the previous history of Jehovah worship, the patriarch of a family officiated

over the offerings of his family, using an altar he constructed for the occasion (Gen. 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:4,18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1,3,7; Ex. 17:15; Job 1:5). That traditional practice was now forbidden for Israel.

blood must be charged to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. If a person disobeyed this command, his sin was serious enough to be equivalent to murder. “Shed blood” is an expression used in every other instance except one (Gen. 9:6) to refer to wrongfully killing of a human being (1 Chr. 22:8 is not an exception). The sin was that serious because it was a deliberate defiance of a clear and direct command of God. Anyone who committed the sin showed by his action that he was in rebellion against the covenant and did not belong to the people of Jehovah. He was to be “cut off from among his people,” which means that he was to be put to death (see comments on Lev. 7:20 in MESSAGE 7 and on Lev. 20:2 in MESSAGE 24 and in Introduction to chap. 20). Both the newness and the seriousness of this prohibition made it important that it be stressed in this message of warning.

Two names for The Tabernacle occur in this verse. The first name is “The Tent of Meeting.” It emphasizes that The Tabernacle was the place where people could meet God formally and symbolically. Therefore, it was the proper place to offer offerings that symbolized the person’s experiences with God (see comments on Leviticus 1:1 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading out of the Tent of Meeting). The second name is “The Tabernacle of Jehovah.” It emphasizes that The Tabernacle was Jehovah’s dwelling place and, therefore, the proper place to visit Him and offer offerings to Him (see comments on Lev. 8:10 in MESSAGE 10 under the heading The Tabernacle and all that was in it). The second name is here accompanied by the words “of Jehovah.” This reference is the only occurrence in Leviticus of the full term “The Tabernacle of Jehovah,” though it is also found in Numbers 16:9; 17:13; 19:13; 31:30,47. The words “of Jehovah” further emphasize that The Tabernacle was Jehovah’s dwelling place, as each Israelite had his own tabernacle in which to dwell.

It mean Jehovah lived among them, because they were His people.

Verse 5. for the purpose that the people of Israel must bring their slaughter-offerings that they were killing in the open field and bring them to Jehovah at the entrance to The Tent of Meeting to the priest and kill them as slaughter-offerings of peace-offerings to Jehovah.

The verse explains the reason for stressing the command that Jehovah’s fire-offerings were to be offered at The Tent of Meeting. The command was a change from previous practices. Previously each family’s patriarch had officiated over fire-offerings on altars constructed in the open field. In the future, they were to be officiated over by specially appointed priests at a specially designed altar at The Tent of Meeting. This explanation of the purpose for the command makes it plain that the killing mentioned in verse 3 did not refer to killing animals for any purpose but only for the purpose of making an offering to Jehovah. The offering specifically mentioned in this verse is the slaughter-offering of peace-offerings (see comments on Lev. 3:1-17 in MESSAGE 1 and on Lev. 7:11-21 in MESSAGE 7). This verse uses both a shortened form of the name of that offering, “slaughter-offerings,” and the full name of that offering, “slaughter-offerings of peace-offerings” (see comments on Lev. 3:1 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading a slaughter-offering of peace-offerings). The reason the slaughter-offering is particularly mentioned is that that offering was by far the most common offering practiced by Jehovah worshipers before Sinai. However, the prohibition did not apply only to slaughter-offerings but to all animal fire-offerings, as is made plain by the use of the general words “offer” and “offering” in verse 4.

Verse 6. And the priest shall splash the blood on the altar of Jehovah at the entrance of The Tent of Meeting, and he shall roast the fat as a soothing fragrance to Jehovah.

In the future, the offerings were to be presided over by the authorized priests. The blood was to be splashed on the altar that stood at the entrance to The Tent of Meeting, and the fat was to be roasted as a soothing fragrance to Jehovah (see comments

on Lev. 1:9 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading a soothing fragrance to Jehovah). All of these expressions specified offering fire-offerings at The Tabernacle only.

Verse 7. **And they must not kill their slaughter-offerings to satyrs behind whom they have been committing fornication. This shall be to them a statute for an age throughout their generations.**

And they must not kill their slaughter-offerings to satyrs. Slaughter-offerings are specifically mentioned in this verse for the reason cited in verse 5, but the prohibition clearly applied to all animal fire-offerings. The word translated “satyrs” is the same word translated “goats” in Lev. 4:23,24; 9:3,15; 10:16; 16:5,7,8,9,10,15,18,20,21,22, 26,27; 23:19. It is based on a root meaning “to be hairy.” In this verse, the word most likely refers to “satyrs,” which were imaginary creatures honored in pagan fertility cults. Satyrs were pictured with a human body, while the calves of their legs were those of a goat. Satyrs were supposed to have been insatiable sexually and were symbols of fertility. They represented everything that was abominable and forbidden in the worship of Jehovah.¹

behind whom they have been committing fornication. These words show that the Israelites had been participating in loathsome forms of paganism in the past. It seems that some form of slaughter-offering had been a part of the worship of sex and fertility, in which legends about satyrs played a prominent role. Possibly the reference to “committing fornication” in this verse should be understood literally, because sexual acts were carried out as “religious” ceremonies in fertility

¹ English versions use considerable variety in translating this word. KJV uses “devils”; ASV and RSV, “he-goats”; CEV, HCSB, and CEV, “goat-demons”; GNB and NASB, “goat demons”; LITV and JB, “goats”; and BBE, “evil spirits.” The word also seems to have the same meaning in Isaiah 13:21 and in Isaiah 34:14. In those verses, English versions also use considerable variety in their translations: KJV and RV use “satyrs”; ASV, “wild goats”; CEV “demons”; MSG “night hags.” Other versions translate the word in two different ways in the two verses. LITV and JB use “he-goats” and “shaggy goats”; NASB, “shaggy goats” and “hairy goats”; CJB, “evil spirits” and “billy-goat”; GNB “evil spirits and “demons”; NASB, “evil spirits” and “wild goats.”

cults. “Behind whom” might also be intended to be literal, since anal intercourse was a common feature of those abominable cults. However, “committing fornication” and “committing adultery” are also used in the Scripture to refer to spiritual prostitution with other nations. When Israel made treaties with pagan nations, Jehovah called Israel’s commitment to other nations as committing adultery with them (Isa. 23:17; Jer. 3:1; Eze. 16:26,28; 23:30,43; Nah. 3:4) and with other gods (Ex. 34:15,16; Lev. 20:5; Deut. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:27,33; Eze. 16:15). Therefore, spiritual unfaithfulness to Jehovah may be the meaning in this verse. Either way, the command that in the future slaughter-offerings were to be offered only at The Tent of Meeting was a means of preventing a return to the abominable practices associated with legends about satyrs.

This shall be to them a statute for an age throughout their generations. These expressions are the same as those found in Lev. 3:17. They mean that these prohibitions were commandments to be practiced in future generations of Israelites into the indefinite future. They were not given strictly “forever,” leaving an opening for Jehovah to cancel the practice of offering fire-offerings and to introduce a new and better way, which He did in Jesus (see comments on Lev. 3:17 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading [Here is] a statute, for an age, and through your generations).

Verse 8-9. **8 And you shall say to them, A man of the house of Israel or of the sojourners who sojourns among you who offers a rededication-offering or a slaughter-offering**

9 And does not bring it to the entrance of The Tent of Meeting to slaughter it to Jehovah, that man shall be cut off from his people.

The prohibition against offering offerings away from The Tabernacle applied to those of the house of Israel and also to “sojourners who sojourn among you.” Sojourners were people from other nations who had accepted the covenant with Jehovah and who had been accepted by the Israelites as one of them (see comments on Rev. 16:29b in MESSAGE 20 under the heading [including] the native and the sojourner who sojourns among you). Since sojourners, like the Israelites, were commanded to offer their offerings

at The Tent of Meeting, it is obvious that these people had accepted Jehovah as their God and the covenant Jehovah had offered at Sinai. People of other nations were welcome to participate in the offerings at The Tabernacle provided they accepted the covenant as the Israelites did. This provision is in line with the strong emphasis of the Book of Exodus that becoming a worshiper of Jehovah was not a matter of blood line but rather a matter of accepting the covenant through faith and obedience. But, a person who deliberately forsook the covenant by committing actions forbidden in this MESSAGE showed that he had rejected the covenant, was in defiance of Jehovah, and was not truly one of Jehovah's people. He was to be "cut off from among his people," which meant he was to be executed (see comments on Lev. 7:20 in MESSAGE 7, on Lev. 20:2 in MESSAGE 24, and comments in the Introduction to MESSAGE 24). The death penalty was to be applied whether the offender was a blood descendant of Israel (Jacob) or whether he was of another lineage but had become one of them by allegedly accepting the covenant and being circumcised.

B. Eating of blood forbidden (17:10-16)

Verses 10-16. **10 And a man of the house of Israel or of the sojourners who sojourn among them who eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people.**

11 For the life of the body is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar as a covering for your souls; for the blood by reason of the life covers over [you].

12 For that reason I have said to the sons of Israel, A person among you must not eat blood, and a sojourner who sojourns among you must not eat blood.

13 And a man of the sons of Israel and of the sojourners who sojourn among them who takes in hunting a living animal or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out even its blood and cover it with dust,

14 For the life of every meat [is] its blood during its life. Therefore, I have said to the people of Israel, The blood of every meat, you must not eat, for the life of every meat is its blood. All those eating it must be cut off."

15 And every person who eats [an animal] that dies naturally or that is torn [by another animal], whether he is a native or a sojourner, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening. Then he shall be clean.

16 And if he does not wash [his clothes] or bathe his body, then he shall bear his iniquity.

This passage is a complete prohibition against eating blood of any kind under any circumstances. This commandment also was not new to the messages at Sinai. It had been commanded and the purpose and meaning of the commandment had been explained in Lev. 7:26-27 (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 8). The prohibition is enlarged and elaborated on in this passage. The following points are added here: (1) The prohibition applied to Israelites by blood and to sojourners among them (vs. 10,12,13,15). (2) If a person failed to obey this command, God would "cut him off from among his people" (v. 10). That penalty had already been prescribed in Leviticus 7:20. It meant to put him to death (see comments on Lev. 7:20 in MESSAGE 7). This command is repeated in verse 14 of this chapter, but verse 10 says that Jehovah would "cut him off from among his people." That statement means that, if the Israelites did not execute the offender, Jehovah would bring about his death (see comments on Lev. 20:2-5 in MESSAGE 24). The offending person had rejected the covenant, was not truly one of Jehovah's people, and could not be allowed to live among them. (3) Blood from an animal that was slaughtered for a regular meal was to be disposed of by spilling it on the ground and covering it with dust (v. 13). The Israelites and their sojourners were not only forbidden to eat blood of animals that were offered on the altar. They also were not to eat blood from any animal, even one killed while hunting in the field. The command not to eat fat or blood at any time had been given first in connection with instructions concerning slaughter-offerings. In doing so, it implied that every meal was a kind of slaughter-offering, which the family shared with Jehovah (see comments on Lev. 3:17 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading You must not eat any fat or any blood). It is likely, therefore, that spilling the blood on the ground was to be considered to be analogous to dashing the blood of a true slaughter-offering on the sides of the altar. Thus, spilling the blood on

the ground was a symbol of the surrendered life of the person doing the slaughtering. (4) A person eating meat from a clean animal that had died a natural death or that had been killed by another animal was to become unclean, just as if he had touched or eaten an unclean creature (v. 15). Such an animal was unclean because the blood had not been drained from it. It became a symbol for sin, just as unclean creatures symbolized sin (see comments on Lev. 11:39-40 in MESSAGE 14). (5) If a person became unclean in this manner, he was to cleanse himself in the regular manner: by washing himself and his clothing, and by waiting until the evening. The cleansing of a person made unclean in this manner had already been described in Leviticus 11:39-40, but that passage mentioned only washing the clothes of the unclean person. This verse confirms that washing the person's body was implied in Leviticus 11:39-40. It strengthens the conclusion drawn in comments on Leviticus 11:25 that washing the body was required in all

cases of cleansing from contact with an unclean person or object, even though at times the washing of the body is not specifically mentioned (see comments on Lev. 11:25,28,39-40 in MESSAGE 14 and on Lev. 14:46-47 in MESSAGE 18). (6) If a person refused to cleanse himself, he would "bear his iniquity" (v. 16), which means the weight of his guilt would weigh down on him and he would have to receive the appropriate punishment (see comments on Lev. 5:1 in MESSAGE 2). Requiring punishment of the person who refused to cleanse himself is a new feature of the clean-unclean ceremonies. Nothing had been mentioned in MESSAGES 14-19 (Lev. 11-15) concerning the consequences of refusing to practice the cleansing ceremonies. This passage makes it clear that such a person was guilty of disobedience and was eligible for punishment. The punishment was to be determined by the judge who handled the guilty person's trial.

Application

Just as the Israelites were to worship Jehovah only and then only in the way He commanded, Christians are expected to worship Jesus only and only according to the teachings of His word. When we give our lives to Christ, no room remains in our lives to worship any other god. We belong to Christ only. If we give our lives or devotion to any other person or object, we reveal we are not really devoted to Jesus and are not really His people. That statement is true whether the person or object we put ahead of Jesus is another god, our wife or husband, our children, our job, our house, our car, our money, our investments, or our possessions. When we put any of those persons or objects ahead of Jesus, we have become apostate and we must face the consequences of our action. On the other hand, if we truly give our full allegiance to Christ, all of our life becomes holy to God. Every act of every day is a part of our surrender and service to Christ. He expects us to obey His commands every moment of our lives. We will sometimes fail, but our failure will be due to weakness, not to resentment or rebellion. If we sorrowfully confess our failure, Jesus will forgive, cleanse, and restore us. After we are restored, we should make every effort not to fail again.

Devotion to God includes giving the highest respect to all life, especially human life. Not eating blood is a way to showing our respect for God's marvelous creation of life. The command not to eat blood did not begin at Sinai. It was clearly stated to Noah in Genesis 9:4 when God first gave people permission to eat animal meat. It was applied to Christians in the decisions of the Jerusalem Conference, which is described in Acts 15:28-29. Those verses declare that applying this prohibition to Christians was a decision of the Holy Spirit, not simply the opinion of those who participated in the Conference. The prohibition against eating blood should not be interpreted simply as Jewish legalism. The prohibition was incorporated into Jewish law for Israelites and for proselyte believers, but it was in place before the law and is still in place after the law. Believers today should be careful not to eat blood or meat from which the blood has not been drained in order to show our profound respect for the marvel of life. Life is a mystery still is not understood today, even after all the attempts of people through the years to explain it. It is a creation of God that exceeds the understanding of all people even until today. People who treat life lightly or who disparage its importance, especially human life, show

disrespect for God and for His marvelous creation of life. God will not overlook their punishment. Neither will he overlook punishment for the person who shows his disrespect for life by eating blood.

The prohibition in the law against eating fat is another matter. That prohibition is not mentioned in this MESSAGE, but it was commanded to Israel in Leviticus 3:17 and in Leviticus 7:23-25. That prohibition began at Sinai. It was not commanded before the law, and it is not commanded in any Scripture revealed after the law. Not eating fat was a practice related to offerings fire-offerings, a practice that has been abolished. Since the fire-offerings are no longer required, avoiding eating fat is also no longer required. However, the lesson taught by reserving the fat for God is valid today. The fat was the best part of the meat, and only God deserved the best. Today He deserves the best part of everything we are and own. He is our Creator, our Savior, our Lord. He deserves the best of everything. He should be placed first in our lives, above every other loyalty. If we put Him first, our other responsibilities will not be neglected. In fact, He will help us fulfill those other responsibilities more fully than we could if we placed our first emphasis on them. Putting God first does not bring us any hardship. It makes everything else in our lives go better, because they then fill their rightful place in relationship to Him. We are no longer required to show that respect by not eating fat, but the respect itself is more important now than ever.