

## Holy, Holy, Holy

### Antony Billington

The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for whoever obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD...”’ The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.”’ Leviticus 18:1-5 and 19:1-2

The life of the people of God is to reflect God’s own character. ‘Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’

The sheer range of regulations in Leviticus reminds us that the holiness in view touches all areas of life, not just the ‘religious’ ones; that holiness does not entail removal from the world, but presupposes daily living in the world, as part of the rhythm of the week, of the months, of the cycle of the seasons; that holiness is not the preserve of the privileged few, but for all God’s people; that holiness is not a privatised experience, but is bound up with living and working in community.

Nor is holiness about floating free in some ethereal existence untouched by the messiness of life, but is earthed, quite literally sometimes, on the ground, in everyday life: in working crops, maintaining soil, buying and selling goods; in looking after parents, observing sabbath rests, providing for the poor; in how one works, what one eats, who one sleeps with – consciously countering cultural norms in the process, living in the world but not living like the world.

And all carried out as an integral part of our worship of a holy God.

Lest we reduce this to an abstract system of laws, ‘I am the LORD your God’ reminds Israel that redemption comes before regulations, relationship before rules. The law is bound up with a commitment to serve their covenant Lord, to be a distinctive people, and to order their lives with each other appropriately. And all of this for the greater end of fulfilling God’s promises to Abraham and their calling to be a priestly kingdom, for the sake of the world.

And lest we despair that they will never be able to manage it, Leviticus assumes the reality and consequences of sin and makes provision for restoration through sacrifice.

Of course, the new covenant necessarily changes the dynamics and the specifics; but the vocation to be a people set apart for God remains (1 Peter 1:13-16; 2:9-10), and with it the call to do things differently from those around us. As we do so, we can expect that the laws will still shape our moral vision, because they arise out of God’s holy character, and express his mind for his people as they live in the face of the world for the sake of the world.

#### For further reflection and action:

1. Read through the so-called ‘Holiness Code’ (Leviticus 18-20) and make a summary of the laws contained in it. Perhaps make a note of any surprises, and reflect on them further or in conversation with others.
2. What are some of the implications of the Old Testament law for a biblical worldview? Perhaps think personally about the implications for your own family life, business partnerships, leisure time, etc.
3. How would you respond to someone who claimed that the laws in Leviticus are so buried in the culture of the time that they should be seen of little or no value for today?
4. Follow up the echoes of Leviticus in 1 Peter 1:13-16 and 2:9-10. How does Peter ‘translate’ holiness for the Christians to whom he writes

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