



### **LEVITICUS 17 – 19 CANAANITE ABOMINATIONS; AGRICULTURAL LAWS**

After going over the biblical food and health laws, God briefly focuses on where to properly offer sacrifices to Him before going on to laws dealing with your neighbor and agriculture.

He says, "They shall no more offer their sacrifices to demons... 'Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from among his people'" (Leviticus 17:8-9).

This is an important point about bringing the sacrifices only to the tabernacle and not doing it in the high places, as the pagan Canaanites were doing. This would avoid mixing God's religion with the false ones, and also would recognize God's ordained priesthood as those authorized to carry out these sacrifices as God has prescribed.

We see why this point is so important in Israelite history when they later disobeyed God in this regard. We read in Isaiah 65:2-4: "I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good... A people who provoke Me to anger continually to My face, who *sacrifice in gardens, and burn incense on altars of bricks... who eat swine's flesh* and the broth of abominable things."

#### **The Canaanite sins**

Since the Israelites were to inherit the Promised Land populated by the Canaanites, God prohibited them from committing sins so terrible they were called "abominations." Many of these sins involved perverted sexual practices such as incest, defined as "sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry." Not only is incest a perversion, but it can cause serious genetic diseases to the offspring.

In Leviticus 18, God regulates proper sexual relationships and prohibits these among close of kin. He says, "According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God... None of you shall

approach anyone *who is near of kin to him*, to uncover his nakedness: I am the Lord" (vss. 3-6).

As *Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of" is a euphemism for sexual relations, and the chapter forbids all such incestuous connections... The forbidden degrees of relationship are father, mother, stepmother, half-sister, sister, the granddaughter born of either a son or a daughter, own sister, paternal aunt, maternal aunt, paternal uncle's wife, daughter-in-law (Mohammed claimed a special revelation to allow that!), sister-in-law, a woman and her daughter or daughter-in-law or her granddaughter, and a woman and her sister while both were alive.

"The reason for forbidding these relationships is twofold. Extensive intermarriage results in tragic abnormalities and also destroys the freedom of the family that should be able to have normal love and intimacy without sexual overtones. In a polygamous society such rules were the more necessary. And incest was common in antiquity under certain circumstances. For three generations just prior to Moses, the kings of Egypt had married their half-sisters to maintain the kingship in the royal family. The laws of incest as given in this chapter are those recognized in civilized society. Notice that marriage with first cousins is not expressly forbidden."

What happens when close of kin marry? Notice what *Contemporary Biology* says: "What are the chances that two carriers of the same lethal gene will marry? In a large community in which marriages are occurring randomly, the chance that two carriers will marry is thus quite low, about 1 in 10,000. But marriages between closely related persons, such as first cousins, greatly increase the chance that both parents will have inherited the same deleterious gene from a common grandparent. Many human societies long ago realized the genetic dangers of such inbreeding and established rules prohibiting intermarriage between closely related individuals. Hemophilia, like color blindness, is a sex-linked disease.

"The disease is characterized by excessive bleeding due to a defect in the blood-clotting mechanism and hemophiliacs are often severely handicapped because even small wounds fail to heal. The most famous family history of hemophilia

occurred among the offspring of Queen Victoria of England; the royal children married into the most reigning families of Europe. Note that both the heir apparent of the last Tsar of Russia, Alexis, and the heir apparent of the last King of Spain, Alfonso, were hemophiliacs. It is interesting to speculate on the role of the disease may have played in shaping the fate of the royal houses of Europe early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (1974, p. 425-426).

### **Homosexuality prohibited**

What were other types of the Canaanite sexual sins? It included homosexuality, defined as, “sexual intercourse between persons of the same sex.” God says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination...For whoever commits any of these abominations, the persons who commit them shall be cut off from among their people” (Lev. 18:22, 29).

*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* adds, “Homosexual acts are clearly denounced here as hateful to God. The penalty given is capital punishment. They are denounced also in Romans 1:26-27. The sin of homosexuality was well known in Canaan--witness Sodom (Gen 19:5) and Gibeah (Judg 19:22)--but it was no less wicked in God's sight. It is hard to understand how ‘gay churches,’ where homosexuality is rampant, can exist. Clearly it is possible only where people have cast off biblical authority and teaching. Bestiality is likewise a perversion punishable by death. In contrast, the gods of Ugarit, by their example, led their devotees in this sin. So wicked a perversion of the holy sexual relationship given mankind for marriage and the home shows how deeply the human race has fallen!”

Notice what historian Werner Keller says about these Canaanite practices: “On the north coast of Syrian...near the sea in 1928 a peasant who was plowing discovered...the remains of the Phoenician royal city of Ugarit...Here, at last, the long-sought information about the religion of Canaan came to light. The forms of worship which Canaan connected with fertility extended to everyday life. Under each of the houses which were excavated was found a burial vault in which the inhabitants of Ugarit buried their dead...The fertility cults did not hesitate to penetrate even the world beyond death. The feeding-funnels leave us in no doubt about that. They are decorated with the appropriate symbols.

“Gruesome and ferocious are Astarte and Anath, goddesses of fertility and of war...Anath is the sister and wife of Baal, the god of storms and rain. His symbol is a bull's head. Baal fertilizes the cattle in the meadows with rain to make them fat. He is also concerned about their propagation. The goddesses of fertility were worshipped principally on hills and knots. There, their votaries erected for them Asherim, set out ‘sacred pillars’, trees, under which the [fertility] rites were practices, as the Bible repeatedly points out.

“It is only since the results of scientific investigation into Canaanite gods and Phoenician religions have come to light that we can properly gauge the intensity of the moral struggle that the people of Israel had to face...Without its stern moral law, without its faith in one God, without the commanding figures of its prophets, Israel would never have been able to survive this struggle with the Baals, with the religions of the fertility goddesses, with the Asherim and the high places” (pp. 286-289).”

In addition to these abominations was perhaps the worse pagan practice of all—the offering up of their children to Molech. God says, “And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech” (Lev. 18:21). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* notes, “The rabbinic writes (and the Greek historian Diodorus) described Molech as a bronze statue, human in form but with an ox's head, hollow within and heated from below. Children were placed inside it and immolated while drums drowned out their cries” (Vol. 3, page 401).

In Leviticus 19, God now focuses on the positive aspects of His commandments: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). God says this principle starts with honoring your parents and the Sabbath: “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father; and keep My Sabbaths” (19:3). Parents are therefore expected by God to teach the Sabbath to their children.

Another way to love your neighbor is to share your blessings. In an agricultural society, this meant not gleaning all of your crops. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest...and you shall not glean your vine, nor shall you gather every grape” (19:10-11). This was an effective ‘welfare’ system to

provide the poor with food—but notice, they still had to glean it, meaning they had to work for it.

God then says you shall not steal or cheat from others, nor their wages: “You shall not *cheat* your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.” (vs. 13). They needed it to eat that day.

Loving your neighbor includes not demeaning, ridiculing or taking advantage of him. “You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God” (vs. 14).

When you judge your neighbor, you shall be fair to him. “You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty” (vs. 15).

God also prohibits being a talebearer or a murmurer (vs. 16), defined in the dictionary as “one that spreads gossip (i.e. habitually revealing personal or sensational facts to indispose others) or rumors (spreading an unconfirmed report).

Another way of loving our neighbor, God says, is “not to hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (vss. 17-18). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* adds, “This significant verse shows that the OT law did not concern itself only with outward obedience. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount was not giving a new spiritual meaning to the law as is often supposed. It already had the spiritual meaning. He was protesting against the Pharisaic interpretation of the law that limited it to externals.”

Loving one’s neighbor also includes taking care of and not spoiling the environment. God gives some agricultural laws that will avoid going against nature and incurring economic loss.

He says, “You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you” (19:19). These agricultural principles still apply today. Interbreeding of livestock produces an inferior and many times, a sterile stock. There are more than 40 types of cattle in the world and cattle breeders seek the best by maintaining the purity of the stock. That is why a pedigree in livestock is so important.

The same applies to seeds, since intermingling often produces sterile seeds. But scientists are

always experimenting with species that can be crossed without producing damaging mutations. Much improvement has been produced in this way, but still, the seeds are of the same species and not of other types of seeds.

The principle behind not mixing fabrics is still binding today. There are two basic kinds of natural fibers for clothing—one comes from plants, such as linen and cotton—and the other comes from animals, such as wool and silk. Since these two types are so different in strength, texture, and washability, they should not be mixed. However, clothing made from a combination of plant cellulose, such as cotton and linen, is fine since they are quite similar. A mixture of animal fibers (wool, mohair, silk, etc.) are also acceptable. Synthetic materials such as nylon, Dacron, polyester and rayon have similar characteristics as natural fibers and can be combined with other fibers that are similar. It is the *mixture* of fibers with *contrasting* qualities that this biblical principle is concerned.

Another agricultural law God gives concerns new fruit trees. “When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat its increase” (19:23-25).

“The wisdom of this law,” says *The Explanatory Bible Commentary*, “is very striking. Every gardener will teach us not to let fruit trees bear in their earliest years, but to pluck off the blossoms--and for this reason, that they will thus thrive the better, and bear more abundantly afterwards. The very expression, ‘to regard them as uncircumcised’ suggests the propriety of pinching them off, not *cutting* them off, because it is generally the hand, and not a knife, that is employed in this operation.”

Thus we see the wisdom of God’s commands, all for our benefit and that of society.