

## Lecture 12: P and Priestly Religion.

*Reading:* Leviticus 11 (pure and impure animals);  
Leviticus 15 (impurity of sexual discharges);  
Leviticus 16 (cleansing the sanctuary; Day of Atonement);  
Leviticus 19 (Holiness code);  
Leviticus 23 (sacred calendar);  
Numbers 19 (Red Cow);  
Kugel 284-289.

### Topics:

- Consider:
- Is priestly religion “a religion of law”?
- Can you make sense of priestly religion and its rituals?
- Can you make sense of the juxtapositions and transitions in Leviticus 19?

### Points of debate among MBS:

- How much narrative did P contain?
- Date of P: pre-exilic or exilic?
- P and H;
- Relationship of P to R.

P narrative material scattered throughout Gen-Numbers; legal material concentrated in second half of Exodus, Leviticus (entire), and Numbers.

Legal material has five themes:

1. The Tabernacle
2. Sacrifices
3. The Priesthood
4. Purity and Impurity
5. Holiness

1. The **Tabernacle** (Heb *mishkan* = dwelling place, where God dwells) or **Tent** or **Tent of Meeting**: central sanctuary.

- Temples in the ANE are regularly the “house” of the deity (Kugel) with a throne and/or footstool (in this case the ark of the covenant upon which were the *cherubim*)
- God’s presence in the Tabernacle represented by cloud/fire (Exodus 40:34-38)
- Tension between the universality of God and localization in a building evident in D/Dtr in 1 Kings 8:27 (But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built); P does not acknowledge that tension.
- Solomon’s temple is Phoenician; tabernacle may have analogue in ANE tent shrines (Kugel).
- not clear if the tabernacle was real or imagined (Kugel);

- ♦ D does not mention the tabernacle; striking that the narrator of Samuel-Kings does not explain clearly what happened to this Tabernacle.
- ♦ If it is priestly fantasy, perhaps its function is to offset the reality that the Jerusalem Temple was a royal foundation and always under the thumb of the king.
- ♦ striking that P does not contain a commandment to the children of Israel to build a temple when they reach the promised land.

## 2. Sacrifices:

- What happens at the central shrine? Mostly animal sacrifices, that is, the slaughter, roasting and eating of cattle (ox/cow), sheep and goats, and birds; no fish, no wild animals, no “impure” animals;
- Various kinds of sacrifices are in response to various situations and have various effects (Lev 1-7).
  - ♦ distinction between communal sacrifices (e.g. Leviticus 23, sacred calendar) and individual sacrifices (e.g. thanksgiving sacrifices, sin offerings).
  - ♦ The most frequent sacrifice was the *tamid* (continual sacrifice, offered every morning and afternoon). This was God’s food (Numbers 28:2 My offering, the food for my offerings by fire, my pleasing odor, you shall take care to offer to me at its appointed time; cf. Genesis 8:21); otherwise P gives little information on what the sacrificial system is supposed to mean.
  - ♦ Much debate in anthropological literature about the meaning of animal sacrifices; common view is *substitution* (I slaughter the animal so that the deity should not slaughter me). Cf. covenant between the sections (Gen 15), Passover (Exodus 12).
- The religious dimension of all this eludes us completely; no prayer, near silence prevails.
- Lev 17: any slaughter of cattle, sheep, and goats is to take place at the tabernacle; that is, all slaughter is sacred slaughter, and all slaughter belongs on the altar.
  - ♦ This is a centralization of the cult, but seems thoroughly impractical; contrast D.

**3. Priesthood:** in the Tabernacle only the priests of the tribe of Levi (Aaron and his sons) officiate; other Levites (members of other clans from the same tribe) pack and unpack the Tabernacle but otherwise do not officiate.

- priests officiate, Levites assist.
- MBS: much uncertainty and debate over the origins of this two-tiered system, indeed how the Levites became a landless hieratic tribe.
  - ♦ Gen 49 (Levites are landless but no mention of their priestly function) vs. Deut. 33:8-11 (Levites instruct and serve as priests).
  - ♦ Texts like Numbers 16 (revolt of Korah) and Exodus 32 (Golden calf incident) suggest that there was real rivalry between Aaronides and non-Aaronide Levites.
  - ♦ D regularly refers to “the priests the Levites,” apparently blending the two.
- Priesthood and Levite-hood descend through the male line; a caste.
- Like the sacrificial victims, priests are to be blemish-free (Lev 21).

**4. Purity and impurity:** The sacred must be protected from impurity; no one may not enter the sacred sanctuary or partake of sacred foods when in a state of impurity.

- Sources of Impurity: human corpse (Numbers 19); (dead) impure animals (Lev 11); childbirth (Lev 12); sexual discharges (Lev 15); skin maladies (Lev 13-14).
- Removal of impurity can be effected by different means: wait until sunset; wait seven days; wash clothes/bathe the body; be sprinkled with the waters of the red heifer (Numbers 19).
- This impurity (sometimes called “levitical impurity” or “ritual impurity”) has nothing to do with sin; these impurities are *inevitable* and *transient*; as long as one does not enter upon the sacred in an impure state, the impurity does not imperil the relationship of God to the people of Israel.
  - ♦ But some passages metaphorically associate the removal of impurity with the removal of sin.
  - ♦ Leviticus 16: annual “wiping clean” of the central sanctuary from impurity which is here understood to be like contagion or pollution. This cultic cleansing at some point becomes “Day of Atonement” (Lev 16:30 For on this day atonement [ lit. wiping clean] shall be made for you, to cleanse [lit. to purify] you; from all your sins you shall be clean [lit. pure] before the Lord.
    - ★ An annual “cleansing the central shrine of accumulated impurity” has become an annual “cleansing the people of Israel from their sins.”
- Contrast Leviticus 18: violation of prohibited sexual unions will impurify the land and cause God to throw you out. These impurities are not inevitable (they are the product of sin) and their effects can be permanent; the impurity does imperil the relationship of God with the people of Israel.
  - ♦ Called by MBS: danger impurities.

**5. Holiness:** In addition to the language of purity P also speaks of “holiness.” The holy is where God is (“I am holy,” Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26); the tabernacle is “holy” (Exodus 25:8); the holy must be protected from contact with impurity.

- MBS: P (at least the first half of Leviticus) originally an internal priestly document; its “publication” (incorporation into the Torah, a public book) implicitly makes the point that holiness is to be cultivated not just by the priesthood but by all Israel. This idea becomes explicit in “the Holiness code,” most spectacularly Lev 19.
- P (Lev 19:1) has the command “be holy” (aspirational); in Deuteronomy (14:2) the Israelites are holy (essential) (see JSB note on Deut 26:9).