

Holy Vows Coming Full Circle

Closing Out Leviticus the Way It Began

^{ESV} Leviticus 27:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

² "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, If anyone makes **a special vow to the LORD** involving the valuation of persons,

³ then the valuation of **a male** from twenty years old up to sixty years old shall be fifty shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

⁴ If the person is **a female**, the valuation shall be thirty shekels.

⁵ If the person is from **five years old up to twenty years old**, the valuation shall be for a male twenty shekels, and for a female ten shekels.

⁶ If the person is from **a month old up to five years old**, the valuation shall be for a male five shekels of silver, and for a female the valuation shall be three shekels of silver.

⁷ And if the person is **sixty years old or over**, then the valuation for a male shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels.

⁸ And if someone is **too poor to pay the valuation**, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him; the priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford.

⁹ "If the vow is **an animal** that may be offered as an offering to the LORD, all of it that he gives to the LORD is holy.

¹⁰ He shall not exchange it or make a substitute for it, good for bad, or bad for good; and if he does in fact substitute one animal for another, then both it and the substitute shall be holy.

¹¹ And if it is any **unclean animal** that may not be offered as an offering to the LORD, then he shall stand the animal before the priest,

¹² and the priest shall value it as either good or bad; as the priest values it, so it shall be.

¹³ But if he wishes to **redeem it**, he shall add a fifth to the valuation.

¹⁴ "When a man dedicates **his house** as a holy gift to the LORD, the priest shall value it as either good or bad; as the priest values it, so it shall stand.

¹⁵ And if the donor wishes to **redeem his house**, he shall add a fifth to the valuation price, and it shall be his.

¹⁶ "If a man dedicates to the LORD part of **the land** that is his possession, then the valuation shall be in proportion to its seed. A homer of barley seed shall be valued at fifty shekels of silver.

¹⁷ If he dedicates **his field from the year of jubilee**, the valuation shall stand,

¹⁸ but if he dedicates **his field after the jubilee**, then the priest shall calculate the price according to the years that remain until the year of jubilee, and a deduction shall be made from the valuation.

¹⁹ And if he who dedicates the field wishes to **redeem it**, then he shall add a fifth to its valuation price, and it shall remain his.

²⁰ But if he **does not wish to redeem** the field, or if he has sold the field to another man, it shall not be redeemed anymore.

²¹ But the field, when it is released in the jubilee, shall be **a holy gift to the LORD**, like a field that has been devoted. The priest shall be in possession of it.

²² If he dedicates to the LORD a field that he has bought, which is not a part of his possession,

²³ then the priest shall calculate the amount of the valuation for it up to **the year of jubilee**, and the man shall give the valuation on that day as a holy gift to the LORD.

²⁴ In the year of jubilee the field shall return to him from whom it was bought, to whom the land belongs as a possession.

²⁵ **Every valuation shall be according to the shekel of the sanctuary:** twenty gerahs shall make a shekel.

²⁶ "But **a firstborn of animals**, which as a firstborn belongs to the LORD, no man may dedicate; whether ox or sheep, it is the LORD's.

²⁷ And if it is an **unclean animal**, then he shall buy it back at the valuation, and add a fifth to it; or, if it is not redeemed, it shall be sold at the valuation.

²⁸ "But **no devoted thing** that a man devotes to the LORD, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, **shall be sold or redeemed**; every devoted thing is **most holy to the LORD**.

²⁹ No one devoted, who is to be **devoted for destruction from mankind**, shall be ransomed; he shall surely be put to death.

³⁰ "Every **tithe of the land**, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is **holy to the LORD**.

³¹ If a man wishes to redeem some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it.

³² And every **tithe of herds** and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the LORD.

³³ One shall not differentiate between good or bad, neither shall he make a substitute for it; and if he does substitute for it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy; it shall not be redeemed."

³⁴ These are the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.

(Lev 27:1-34)

Wheels and Rings

Prior to his untimely death in 2007, Dan Fogelberg's *Full Circle* album would be the last he would produce. That album also has a song of the same title. Its opening words are:

*Funny how the circle turns around
First you're up and then you're down again
Though the circle takes what it may give
Each time around it makes it live again*

These lyrics me think of another song about a wheel. “The wheels on the bus go round and round...” If you were to put a marked line on the top of a wheel and then roll it a full cycle so that the line returns to the same position, the wheel would be identical to before, but it would be in a totally different place, and that makes it new. I think this is what Fogelberg means by “each time around it makes it live again.”

We come to the last chapter of Leviticus. As the last chapter, it is a conclusion to the book. Someone says about it, “It is self-evident that the proper understanding of the function of the opening and conclusion of a work is essential for the comprehension of the whole. And of all the elements that make up the structure of the work, the conclusion is perhaps the most important.”¹ Thus, we really want to understand this chapter. But there is a serious problem here. Of Leviticus 27 the *ESV Study Bible* says, “The material ... does not fit smoothly with the content of the previous Holiness Code.”² Michael Heiser adds, “Because of the nice and neat way chapter 26 ends, with chapter 27 seeming like

¹ M. Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 274, in, Wilfried Warning, “The Contribution of Terminological Patters to the Literary Structure of Leviticus,” Dissertation to Andrews University (1997): , <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1163&context=dissertations>.

² Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 255.

an odd fit after it.”³ This makes all commentators wonder what it is doing here. Was it tacked on like an out-of-place appendage by some later editor? Did God just not care much about the order he gave Moses the law and this happened to be the last thing he told him?

In a book as highly stylized as this one, the first thought is unthinkable. The second, while it could be true, does not seem to fit the pattern of the rest of the book and therefore it too makes little sense. As Mary Douglas points out, “When the literary conventions of Leviticus are examined, we find an overarching structure that bears an extremely cerebral, closely argued theological statement based on a series of expanded analogies.”⁴ We have seen how true this is. In other words, there really must be a purpose to the placement of this chapter here.

The chapter chiefly concerns making vows to the LORD, with minor themes of economics, redemption, and the year of jubilee thrown in.⁵ Trying to make some sense of why it might be placed here, Wenham, writing prior to

³ Michael S. Heiser, *Notes on Leviticus: from the Naked Bible Podcast*, BlindSpot Press, Kindle Edition.

⁴ Mary Douglas, “Poetic Structure in Leviticus,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 255.

⁵ A. J. K. Hattingh and E. E. Meyer, “‘Devoted to Destruction’. A Cause of Human Sacrifice in Leviticus 27?” *Journal for Semitics* 25/2 (2016): 639-40, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dc55/a16258a9f27544db271bfc36f05dfa0ec985.pdf>

Douglas says, “The blessings and curses (ch. 26) are in a sense God’s vows to his people, his promises as to what he will do for them in the future. It could be that this prompts consideration of how men make vows to God (ch. 27). Alternatively, men frequently make vows in times of stress, and more rarely in times of great prosperity. Ch. 26 first deals briefly with times of blessing and then at length with times of cursing. The latter is followed immediately by a section (ch. 27) which shows how vows should be honored.”⁶ Those seem like reasonable explanations of how there is some continuity of thought with the previous chapter.

Further, we’ve seen how ch. 27 parallels ch. 25 and acts as the second of two cherubim that guard the law of God (ch. 26) in the analogy of the book as the tabernacle. We are going to see that whereas ch. 25 dealt “with person-to-person obligations, the release of slaves, their return to their homes, redemption of property, remission of *secular debts*. The second side, chapter 27, deals with the same topics from the point of view of *debts to the Lord*” [emphasis mine].⁷

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 336.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 244. The quotation concludes, “God himself respects the jubilee law (Lev 27: 24) and he himself allows redemption of persons (Lev 27: 2–8), property (Lev 27: 14–15), and animals (Lev 27: 9–13). God himself, as a creditor, comes under the power of the jubilee laws. He

But there is something more than that, which if we do not see properly, will cause us to miss the fullest point of the conclusion of Leviticus. And if we do that, our understanding of the book will be greatly impoverished. Douglas has shown that there is something much larger in mind with this seemingly out of place chapter being at the end of the book. She refers to an ancient literary technique called “[ring composition](#).” Ring composition works similar to a [sonnet](#). “In a sonnet, there is the expectation that each part will contribute fully to the development of the rhyme structure, that a complex theme will be deployed, and that the ending will return to enlarge and more richly affirm the opening lines.”⁸

Take for example the opening and closing lines of the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air TV theme song turned into a sonnet (yes, someone did that).

*From western Philadelphia I hail,
Where in my youth I'd play upon the green ...
-- I survey all the land with princely mien
In fair Bel-Air, where I do lay my scene.*

proves his generosity by telling Moses the conditions under which persons, animals, or chattels which have been dedicated to his service can be redeemed. This is the grand pedimental frame over the ark of the covenant.”

⁸ [Douglas](#), *Pomegranates*, 247.

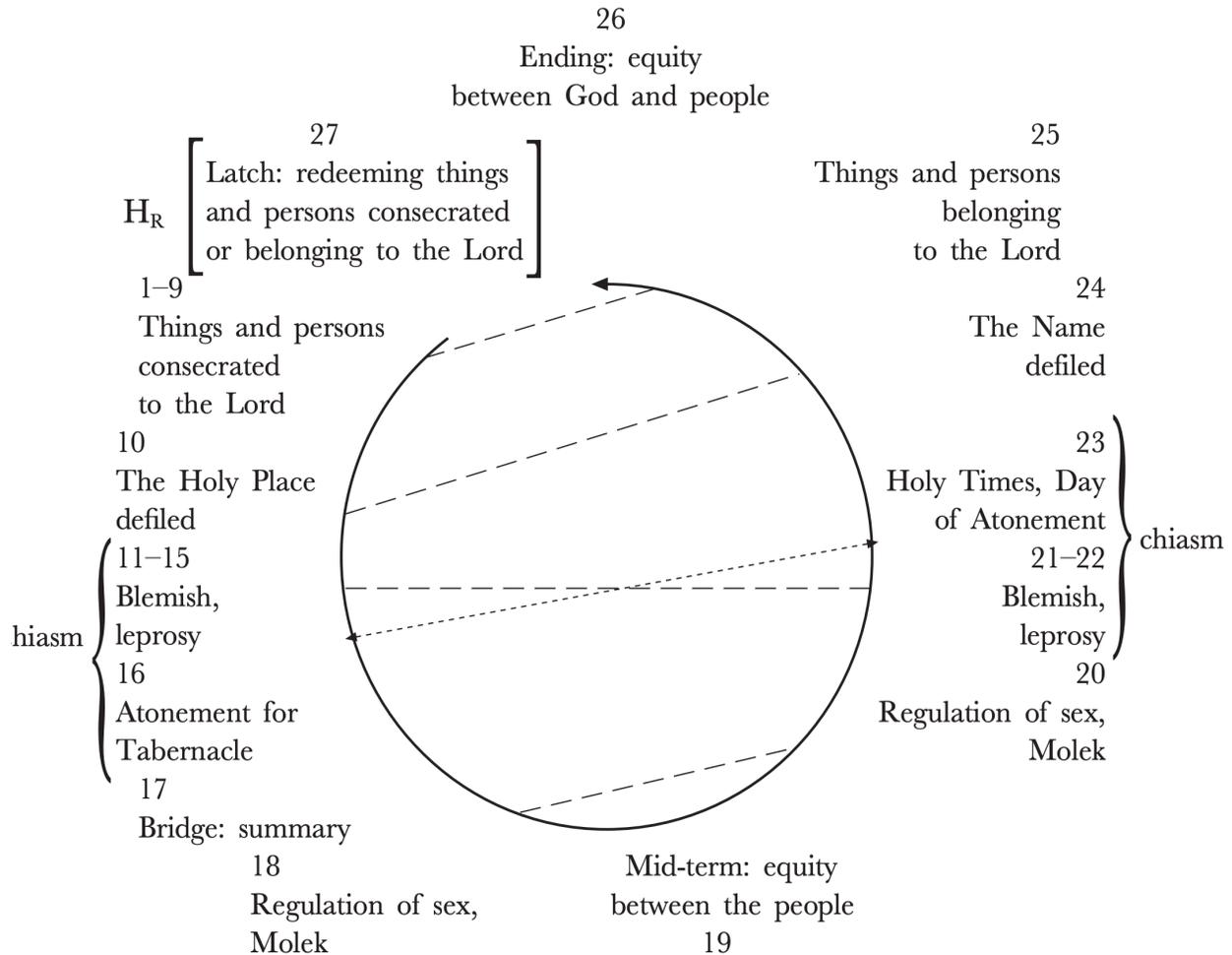
I do have a point to this. Notice how **the beginning starts with a town**, Philadelphia **where he was from** and **the end also has a town**, Bel-Air, **where he now lives**. In the middle of the sonnet, you get the fuller story. But the ending has returned to the theme of the beginning, but while advancing it. It's like the wheel.

A ring composition (round like a wheel) in classical Greek literature was “a **primitive device by which the conclusion of a speech returns to the main flow of the narrative, by giving ‘some verbal reminiscence of its beginning’**” and these became “a **powerful means of securing both the unity and intensity in narrative.**”⁹ Recall the beginning of the book. “**The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying...**” (**Lev 1:1**). This is **the sanctuary**. Furthermore, the laws it unfolds for the next many chapters must all be carried out at the sanctuary. The last couple of chapters of the book have taken us away from the sanctuary by giving us laws that deal with land outside of it. But in ch. 27, we return to it. Therefore, someone has said, “**as the book begins with laws dealing with the sanctuary it is appropriate that it should close with a similar topic.**”¹⁰

⁹ Douglas, *Pomegranates*, 247-48.

¹⁰ Hertz, 306, cited in Wenham, 336 n.1.

Leviticus in a Ring¹¹



We can be more specific. Chapter 27 “is like the ring’s latch; it interlocks with the closing theme ... the disposal of the holy things of the Lord, which started with the meats reserved for the priests at a sacrifice in 2:3 and goes on through 2:10, 6:29, 7:6-10, 8:31-36, and 10:12-20. When we get to the end, the proportions of the themes fall into

¹¹ Jacob Milgrom, “H_R in Leviticus and Elsewhere in the Torah,” *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 93, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kukler (Boston: Brill, 2003): 27. This is his modification of the same graph found in Douglas, *Pomegranates*, 253.

place and we see how important in Leviticus are *the holy things* that have been consecrated, or the things *that belong to the Lord*. It started with the consecrated cereals and meat of sacrifice and went on to blood, the priests, dedicated animals and the land in the chapter on Jubilee. The Lord is the owner, and his things may not be alienated to other uses” [emphasis mine].¹²

Let’s look now at an *outline of the chapter*. It has a *one verse introduction* and *one verse conclusion*. In the middle, we have *three basic units*. The first deals with vows made to God involving people and animals. The second deals with dedicating a house or land. The third is miscellaneous laws about vows.

- 1 Introduction**
- 2–13 Vows Involving People and Animals**
 - 2–8 Vows of persons
 - 9–10 Vows involving clean animal
 - 11–13 Vows involving unclean animals
- 14–24 Dedication of Houses and Land**
 - 14–15 Houses
 - 16–24 Land
- 25–33 Miscellaneous Regulations about Vows**
 - 25 Standard of payment
 - 26–27 Treatment of first-born
 - 28–29 The ban
 - 30–33 Tithes
- 34 Conclusion**¹³

¹² Douglas, *Pomegranates*, 250-51.

¹³ Wenham, 336–337.

Central to it is all **the role of the priest**. In the first 15 verses, the priest has to make a judgment about the value of a thing. In the last 20 or so verses, no priestly judgment is required.¹⁴

XXII (27) Consecrations and their Redemption

27:1–8	27:9–13	27:14–15	[requiring priestly judgment]
27:16–25	27:26–29	27:30–34	[not requiring priestly judgment]

Perhaps you can see now how **this really seems like a strange way to end the book**. And yet, when we realize that this connects us back to the beginning, it will actually reinforce the main theme of Leviticus in a rather profound way. We'll come to that in due time.

Leviticus 27

Vows Involving People and Animals

The chapter begins in the usual fashion. “**The LORD spoke to Moses, saying...**” (**Lev 27:1**). This is the **37th and last time** we will see the LORD speaking in this, the most red-lettered of all books in the Scripture. But what do I mean by red-letter? Bible's sometimes put the **words of the**

¹⁴ The little graph is in **Moshe Kline**, “The Literary Structure of Leviticus,” *The Biblical Historian* 2/3 (2006): 17 [1-28].

Lord Jesus in red-letters. Remember how the targum always translates this? “**The Word of the LORD spoke to Moses...**” The Word ... spoke? Yes, because in the beginning was the Word and the Word is Christ.

He wants Moses to talk now to the people of Israel and say to them, “**If anyone makes a special vow to the LORD involving the valuations of persons...**” (2). This seems quite strange to modern ears, but it actually happens on a regular basis in the Bible. Recall Samuel’s mother **Hannah** who cried out, “**O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head**” (1Sa 1:11). Samuel was born and was raised by Eli in the sanctuary. **Absalom** took a vow and said, “**If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the LORD**” (2Sa 15:8). Remember **Jephthah**? He said, “**Whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering**” (Jdg 11:31; cf. **Jacob in Gen 28:20; Israel in Num 21:2; Jonah in Jon 2:9**).

Why would someone do this? They are usually offered up **in times of great duress** or in the face of **immanent death**. A person will promise God something if they are delivered. Sometimes, people will do it when **a great blessing** has occurred. Scripture takes these very seriously. Ecclesiastes says, “**When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow**” (**Ecc 5:4**).

What is happening in these early verses is that **the thing being vowed is a person**. This person would then go into service to God. They would become his. Now, God already had a whole tribe dedicated to him. These are the **Levites**, whom he took in place of the **firstborn** (**Num 3:12**). Nevertheless, a person could be employed into the service of God, though they were not permitted to participate in priestly duties. This is why, for example, we find Hannah and other women serving at the entrance of the tabernacle (**1Sa 2:22**) or Anna praying daily at the temple when Jesus is born (**Luke 2:37**). They had made vows to serve the LORD.

The law unfolds a series of potential “**offerings**” if we might call them that. The first is a **male between 20-60** (**3**). The second is a **female** (**4**). Third is a person **between 5-20** (**5**). Next is someone **a month old to 5** (**6**). Then comes

someone who is **over 60** (7). Finally, you have the **poor** (8). Why would the poor be a category?

It is because each of these groups have **a monetary value placed on them**. The value decreases in each case until you get to those over 60. So, if you are a male between 20-50, your value is **fifty shekels** of silver. This is a LOT of money. The average wage of a worker in biblical times was about one shekel a month.¹⁵ Now you can see why the poor are brought into it.

Females are worth **20 shekels** less. Young children and teenagers are worth still less, with a male being valued at **20** and a female at **10**. Still less is an infant or toddler, with a male being **5** and a female **3**. However, if you are over 60, then the male's worth is **15** and the female is worth **10**.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Valuation in shekels</i>
male	20–60 years	50
female	20–60 years	30
male	5–20 years	20
female	5–20 years	10
male	1 mo.–5 years	5
female	1 mo.–5 years	3
male	60+ years	15
female	60+ years	10 ¹⁶

¹⁵ **Wenham**, 338.

¹⁶ **Roy Gane**, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 465.

A question might arise here. **How could God put a value on a person?** This sounds like slavery!

Even today we speak of “**the worth of a person.**” If I asked, “How much is Jeff Bezos *worth*,” you would know that I’m not talking about a slave, but the richest man in the world at something like \$190 billion right now. Why is he worth so much? Not because he has some ontological intrinsic value that is, well, \$190 billion more than any of us. In other words, this isn’t a statement about a human dignity. As Roy Gane points out, like a Forbes estimate of someone’s net-worth, where we are talking about what a person **has as a result of what they have done or received**, so also in Leviticus. “**These prices reflected what persons *did* rather than what they *were*.**”¹⁷ Specifically, this “**has to do with the benefit that the sanctuary will receive if the vowed person belongs to it as a servant.**”¹⁸ Why? Because they are being employed in the service of God.

So **what does this valuation do?** Well, if you **wanted out of your vow**, you would have to pay the temple for your release. To a skeptic, this might sound like a “get rich scheme” of money-grubbing priests. Enter “the poor.” Remember, these are Yahweh’s words, not some priest. “**If**

¹⁷ Ibid., 469.

¹⁸ Ibid., 467.

someone is too poor to pay the valuation, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him; the priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford” (Lev 27:8). In other words, God forbids extortion. It is to be a fair compensation rooted in love of your brother, as we’ve just seen in the heart of God’s law in chs. 26 and 19.

I think the purpose of all this is to make an Israelite **think twice before they make a rash vow**. In even the least expensive case, the price is still three months wages for a normal person. In others, it is over four years wages! As we will see later, this will apply to other vows where there is a tax of 20% if in order to get out of it.

There is a reason why Jesus said, “**Let your yes be yes and your no be no**” (Matt 5:33-37; a theme we find carried on throughout the NT, see 2Co 1:17-20; James 5:12). People don’t know what they are talking about when they think that Jesus is condemning making vows or taking oaths when he says this. He isn’t condemning it. We find him and the Apostles taking oaths and vows. Rather, he is trying to get the people to understand **the seriousness of making a vow to the LORD**. Think about it. If you are in deep trouble and you make a vow for God to save you, and then

he does, and you do not come through with your end of the deal, you mock God to his face.

I want you to think about something here. I said **the end reminds us of the beginning**. The root word “**holy**” is present two times in Leviticus 1-3. Those chapters dealt with various sacrifices. You were to understand there as you entered the book through its courtyard metaphor, that all of these sacrifices were necessary because God is holy, and you are entering his domain. From there on out, holiness has been probably the biggest theme in the book. Now, the root word for holy appears almost twenty-five times in Lev 27!¹⁹ Ah, now we start to see why this idea of a ring is so important. This chapter is really emphasizing the fundamental premise of the entire book in quite a unique way.

The first time we can see this in English (“sanctuary” in **vs. 3** has this root) is **vs. 9**. The focus shifts to **animals**. “**If the vow is an animal that may be offered as an offering to the LORD, all of it that he gives to the LORD is *holy*.**” A person would often vow an animal to become a sacrifice, such as when David bought the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite and built an altar in order to stop a plague (**2Sa 24:18-25**).

¹⁹ This point is emphasized in Warning, 65-66.

But again, this is serious business, because once offered, the animal becomes holy and we have seen throughout Leviticus that the holy and profane cannot dwell together. Thus, the law continues that “he shall not exchange it or make a substitute for it, good for bad, or bad for good; and if he does in fact substitute one animal for another, then both it and the substitute shall be holy” (10). In other words, you aren’t getting it back. Why would someone do that? Perhaps they did not feel the original animal was good enough for God.

Sometimes you might vow an unclean animal (11). This could not serve as an offering but could be used in various places for something like work. If this were the case, the priest was to stand before the animal and value it as either good or bad and place a value on it (12). Why a value? In case the person wanted it back (“if he wishes to redeem it”). If this were the case, he would pay a 20% tax on top of the valuation (13). This number ties back to chapter 5 where the same penalty applied to sacrilege (5:16). Hence, another latch on the ring. Sacrilege does not take seriously the holy. That is what must happen with God’s people and this is reinforced in this tax. Take your vows to God seriously. For he is holy, and your word must be true.

Dedication of Houses and Land

The topic shifts from living things to **property**. You could dedicate part of your land to the LORD (16). Because ancestral land could not be permanently sold, the law will bring the Jubilee back into the discussion, as part of its pairing with ch. 25. The value of the land is “**in proportion to its seed.**” We saw this in that earlier chapter that this means you value the land according to how many years there are left until **jubilee**, hence the next verse “**If he dedicates his field from the year of jubilee, the valuation shall stand, but if he dedicates his field after the jubilee, then the priest shall calculate the price according to the years that remain until the year of jubilee, and a deduction shall be made from the valuation**” (17-18).

In this law, the man dedicating the land is the original owner. If he wants it back, he **adds a fifth** to the valuation (19). If he does not want it back, the new “owner,” that is the sanctuary, cannot lease or sell it out again (20). Why? Because **it becomes holy**. It is holy because it is dedicated to the LORD. It belongs to God’s things. But this does something unusual. If he does not redeem his land, then at

the jubilee, the property, even if it is ancestral land, belongs to the sanctuary forever. It is God's and the priest will be in possession of it (21).

A second law deals with the dedication of land that you have bought and was not originally ancestral land (22). Perhaps this is a house and property in a city or something. The priest calculates the valuation and the man gives the valuation on that day as a holy gift to the LORD (23). He has to do this because the land cannot be held as collateral since it will revert to the original owner at the jubilee (24).

Miscellaneous Regulations about Vows

Vs. 25 takes us to the last section of Leviticus. It begins with a statement about the need for a standard monetary unit—the shekel of the sanctuary. God hates false weights and measures because they rip people off.

Next we deal with firstborn animals. Clean firstlings already belong to the LORD, because all the firstborn is his (Ex 13:2; 34:19; 3:13; etc.). Therefore, you could not dedicate it (26). What about a firstborn unclean animal (27)? It did not belong to the LORD and it could be bought back at its valuation plus 20%. But, if it was not wanted, the

temple was not allowed to make a profit off of it and they could only sell it as the valuation price.

Next is a rather curious law about “*devoted things*” (*charam*). The word here is used sometimes of things “**devoted to destruction**,” which is “the ban,” where Israel was supposed to utterly destroy it (the same root word **is found in Mt. Hermon**). “**To designate something as *herem* may mean either that it is to be destroyed completely or that it is to be reserved exclusively for specific purposes associated with the sanctuary.**”²⁰ Once a thing is so devoted, positively or negatively, you could not sell it or redeem it (**28**). Because it is “**most holy to the LORD.**” There’s our word again, and the focus of *most* holy comes right near the end of the book. No one devoted, who is to be devoted for destruction from mankind (such as the evil giant clans of Canaan), can be ransomed; rather they must be put to death (**29**).

The next law deals with *the tithe*, which like the firstborn belongs to God (**30**). Specifically, this is the tithe of the land, be it **seed** or **fruit**. A man might for some reason wish to redeem his tithe, but if he did, he had to **add a fifth** to it (**31**). Though the tithe fits with the overall theme of dedication and vows, it is really the seed and fruit that catches my attention.

²⁰ **Baruch A. Levine**, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 198.

For we have seen these earlier on in the book. Specifically, we saw **grain offerings and wine offerings**. More returning to the beginning.

The last part of this law takes us to the tithe of **herds and flocks**. “**Every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman’s staff, shall be holy to the LORD**” (32). The shepherd is not to cheat God (or himself). Whichever animal is the tenth, that one is dedicated, whether it is “good or bad.” He must make no substitutions (33).

Again, this takes us back to the beginning where we have **all those sacrifices** of all those animals being explained and where we learn about clean and unclean. Thus, we are in fact closing out the book the way it began. The sonnet is coming to an end. The ring is being latched. Our trip through the tabernacle is coming to a close. We have come full circle.

Make It Live Again

When we first arrived at Leviticus 1, we were told that God would begin to speak to Moses from the tent of meeting. Importantly, it was “from” the tent; Moses was not allowed inside of it. The LORD Jesus would have more red-letter words in Leviticus than in any book of the Bible, albeit he is in his preincarnate form as the Angel of the LORD.

What he wanted to tell us took us on a [trip through the sanctuary](#). Why? Because it is through the things in this book that people can be right with God and have a way into his presence. [For seventeen chapters](#) we were told all about the [courtyard sacrifices](#) ([chs. 1-7](#)) which were necessary to make atonement for both moral and ceremonial impurity so that God might dwell with men. These typified the various sacrificial acts of Christ the Spotless Lamb who would come to make them obsolete and we would be able to dwell in his direct presence. He warned us through the [ordination of the priesthood](#) at the washing basin and the subsequent deaths of Nadab and Abihu ([chs. 8-10](#)) that if you are to move any closer to God, beware, for he is holy. These typified Christ our Great High Priest perfectly making intercession for us. Daily and national life required holiness and purity and so he explained laws that taught Israel to make distinctions between the [clean and the unclean](#) ([chs. 11-15](#)). These culminated in the [Day of Atonement](#) ([ch. 16](#)) where God would, in his grace, ritually cleanse all of Israel for things they had unintentionally done against him and, if they had faith and repentance, had done deliberately too. Here too we learned that Christ has made atonement once-for-all, and

that in his **blood** (**ch. 17**), by faith alone, unclean people are made wholly clean in God's sight.

We were then **ushered into the Holy Places** (**chs. 18-24**). First, we were given laws about **sexual purity** (**chs. 18, 20**). Temple prostitution was an ancient practice that demonstrated the opposite holiness in the sacred spaces that God demands of his people everywhere. These laws guarded the central chapter of the book (**ch. 19**), where we learned to **love our neighbor as ourselves**, the very heart of God's moral law. The people must be holy. Priestly laws (**chs. 21-22**) taught us the absolute need for a priest to be **physically and morally pure** and as such further typified the Great High Priest to come who would minister in the greater Holy Places of heaven. The **liturgical calendar** (**23**) taught us to orient all of our time properly, around the worship of the Triune God, and we saw that Christ's coming and the descent of the Holy Spirit brought their shadowy types to the fullness of light. The **priestly service and people's obedience** to God reached its crescendo in the **second warning passage** (**ch. 24**) which served, like the screen to the Most Holy Place, as the cautionary tale to beware when coming into the immediate presence of the Holy One of Israel.

The [final three chapters](#) move us into the direct presence of God himself. [Ch. 25](#) is like the first angel on the ark of the covenant, guarding the contents of box through the glorious grace of the [jubilee](#) as told from our point of view. [Ch. 26](#) moved us to another statement of the [moral law](#), for this is what lay hidden inside the golden footstool upon which Christ himself rested his feet as he sat enthroned. This law was a representation to all the people both of what he is like and how he expects them to be. Finally, [ch. 27](#) is like the second cherub on the lid. It closes out our book by paralleling themes of the jubilee but from God's perspective through our vows made to him.

Through the laws on vows, we have [returned to the beginning](#) in various ways. We've returned to the [images of the sacrifices](#) and the payments necessary when debt is owed to God. We've seen the [seriousness](#) in which making a vow to God is to be taken, for in taking a vow, you are making a deal with the Holy One of Israel to serve in his presence. But we still need to see clearly [the goodness](#) of this chapter and why it is that it should end this book.

Perhaps [the Psalmist can begin to get us there](#). He sings, [“I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his](#)

saints. O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people” (Ps 116:14-18). The psalmist strikes that balance between knowing that God is utterly holy and thus worthy to be obeyed, that his holiness makes such obedience mandatory and necessary, but that this is something he can do joyfully and happily because God has blessed him through redemption and forgiveness in Christ.

The point of these vows is not to focus on what if you want out of them. No, there is a penalty for that! That penalty, in teaching you the seriousness of making such a vow is but **the lesser of two points**; the other being that you made this vow to God because you know that there is **nothing better than to serve in his courts**. Serving God in a vow is not a terrible thing like you might think of if you made it to save your skin. It is a blessing as people understood when they wanted to give thanks in this way. That’s how we are to think of it. “**A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness**” (Ps 84:10).

This is a benefit God gave not only to the priests of Israel, but to the nation of priests. **Men, women, boys, girls, children, elderly, rich, and poor**, all could make vows to him and draw near to him and serve him with their lives. Why? Because he is the Living God who answers prayer, forgives sinners, and his worship is the reason why we were created. But more than that, he has provided a way, through this book, for unclean people to approach him and not die. We know this by looking at the first verse of the next book: Numbers. No longer “from” the tent of meeting, with Moses outside, it changes. “**The LORD spoke to Moses ... in the tent of meeting**” (**Num 1:1**). It has worked!

But this blessing belonged to his people. And in the new covenant temple, it still does. I do pray that you know this God for who he is. I pray that your eyes will be opened to both his righteousness, holiness, and justice as well as his kindness, mercy, and grace as seen through Leviticus. All of this is **found by looking to the Son** of God who spoke these very words to Moses. He is our Great High Priest who died that you might have eternal life. The time of reformation, where all of these types are fulfilled (Heb 9:10) is here. Look to him and never stop. Pray to him and confess before God and men that he is your Prophet, Priest, and King. Trust in

him and acknowledge him in all your ways and he will make your paths straight.

Andrew Bonar ends his wonderful commentary on Leviticus by telling us,

The whole of this concluding chapter has been leading us to the idea of giving to the Lord all we have. It has been making us familiar with the idea, and by example inculcating the practice of like devotedness. God should be all in all to us; he is אֱלֹהֵי-שַׁדַּי [El Shaddai], “God all-sufficient.” Let us part even with common, lawful comforts, and try [test] if He alone be not better than all. Like the child with the stalk of grapes, who picked one grape after another from the cluster, and held it out to her father, till, as affection waxed warm and self-faded, she gaily flung the whole into her father’s bosom, and smiled in his face with triumphant delight; so let us do, until, loosening from every comfort, and independent of the help of broken cisterns, we can say, “I am not my own! Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth whom I desire besides. Thou art to me, as thou wert to David at the gates of death, ‘All my salvation and all my desire.’” After so much love on God’s part to us, displayed in rich variety of type and shadow, shall we count any sacrifice hard?²¹

²¹ Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, Expository and Practical* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 505–506.

I pray that the next time you read through this amazing book, understanding its themes and structure, its types and shadows, its beginning and ending that comes full circle will, as Fogelberg sang about the circle, make it live again and again and again for you. For in doing so, you will know life and peace, forgiveness and joy because of all that Christ has done to fulfill them in the new covenant.

Now, the Holy God has come, and his Word has been heard and understood. Perhaps the best thing then to leave you with comes from our Lord in **Leviticus 19:2**. It's not a command. It is a statement of fact. After so much grace in Christ fulfilling these things and bringing you to life, you are able to hear a new the powerful words that make it all live again. **“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”**

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