

Leviticus: The Religious Liberal's Very Best Friend

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Each of us has our pet peeves. One of mine is when people pull out some out-of-context reference to the past and throw it into an argument as though that ancient history is THE decisive point. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of such a line in a personal dispute! As a religion and classics major, I am particularly bothered when passages in the Bible are used in such a way, especially to advocate for some current social or political point. While I have a great respect for the Bible, I also have a healthy respect for the fact that it was written 1900 – 2600 years ago. That is the Iron Age! The Torah was written about the same time as the Iliad and the Odyssey – two other books I respect but which aren't often cited in the Editorial Pages.

I believe that religious liberals abdicate an important voice in social debate when we retreat into silence because we don't know the Bible well enough to refute out-of-context citations used to support positions contrary to our personal values or our denomination's beliefs. One example is the book Leviticus's statement against homosexuality. That is the only line anybody seems to know from that book and for good reason - because the book is the most boring one in the whole Bible. But if those same people who defend that passage were equally vigilant regarding all the other things Leviticus prohibited, not only would homosexual marriage be illegal in most US states but so would football, and barbershops, and the fashion industry, and agriculture as we conduct it today.

Some of you may be saying, "This is all well and good for a classics major but what is it to me? I know the Bible is archaic – not even the Jews have practiced most of Leviticus for 2000 years, once the Romans destroyed Jerusalem's Temple." Here is one answer: our denomination has made a public stand of welcoming gays, lesbians, and transgender people, in stark contrast to many denominations that condemn them. As a member of this denomination, or perhaps because of your individual views, shouldn't we be able to explain why we DON'T validate that ancient prohibition? Shouldn't we be able to defend our position when people say, "The Bible says it is wrong?"

To do that, let me take you back to that culture long ago and far away that wrote this book. Let's see if we can figure out why some of those practices and prohibitions existed. And for this review, I recommend the wisdom of an out-of-context reference. Do you recall the advice of Mark Felt, in his guise of Deep Throat, to Bob Woodward regarding the Watergate mystery? It was "Follow the Money." I have often found that when I don't understand some dispute in history or politics, if I try to figure out who benefits from the status quo and who benefits from the proposed change, then I can better understand why that particular battle was waged or why that particular power shift occurred. So as I talk about Leviticus, see if you find answers to who benefits from its rules and what that analysis reveals about our current disputes and rules.

Leviticus means "about or by the Levites" - one of the tribes of Israel. You still see that name today, as Levy. While most tribes had land grants on which to eke out a livelihood through agriculture or animal husbandry, etc, the Levites did not. God told Moses that the Levites would be His priests. Without land, how would they make a living? God said that the other tribes should pay a percentage of their earnings – the source of the tithing in many churches today. Any of you who have served on your congregation's stewardship campaign know how unreliable that source of income is! So the Levites wrote the Book of Leviticus which is boring because it is essentially an employment manual for Temple priests. It identifies who can be priests (unblemished Levite men over the age of 30), what they should wear, what they

should do, and, perhaps most importantly, how they should be paid, which was primarily through their roles in animal sacrifices at the Temple. Using "follow the money" logic, would you imagine that there were many or few requirements for animal sacrifices? Of course – many, many.

When I say The Temple, don't picture a stand alone building like a church or synagogue. Rather, picture a campus, with many special purpose buildings. There were purification pools, treasuries, barns, money changers, altars, and the sanctum sanctorum for the Holy of Holies. Part of it smelled like a barbecue joint and part of it looked like an abattoir. The priests controlled all the businesses conducted at the Temple. Let's say you were a faithful Jewish man who needed to perform a sacrifice to celebrate the birth of a son. You would come to the Temple, bathe in the purification pool (the ancient origin of Christian baptism) and then go to the barns to buy an unblemished animal of the type you could afford – doves, goats, sheep, cattle. Who determined whether the animal was unblemished? The priests. You didn't just bring one of your own. Who sold it to you? The priests. Then you gave the animal to other priests who slaughtered it according to provisions in Leviticus, and gave part of the animal to God (the fatty parts) part to themselves (the right thigh and breast meat) and the rest back to the faithful Jew who sacrificed it.

I've never read anything about this, but I would bet that the men of the Levite tribe were the tallest, strongest, healthiest men in Judaea, because they ate meat more often than other people. And I bet they were the wealthiest, too. Surely these factors reinforced the impression that they were the favored ones of God. Interestingly, the Levites seem to have benefited most when the people suffered most, for although there were requirements to sacrifice animals at particular times of year and for happy occasions, too, the majority of sacrifices were required when people were sinful or suffering. An analogy today might be the question, who benefits from all the fear mongering in the news today? Is it the news vendor? The advertiser? Churches, too, bulge when times are bad. So one question – the one about who benefits from the book of Leviticus is obviously those who wrote it for themselves! Duh!

A second question is when was it written, and by looking at the historical context, we can draw some conclusions about why these particular prohibitions, as opposed to other possibilities, were included. Which ones are entirely archaic and which ones cast some light on our own society today? First of all, what sort of society could afford the type of religious practices I have described? Certainly not a primitive, low density, nomadic society. This is clearly a local business, feasible only in a fairly densely populated locale, wealthy enough for the populace to support a full time married priesthood with families. That narrows it down.

Up to the 800s BCE, southern Israel (called Judaea) WAS populated by semi-nomadic shepherds. The land was hilly, rocky, dry, poorly irrigated and not well suited to agriculture – which is what allows populations to settle and grow because they could store wheat and seeds for thousands of people but not meat. In that century, Jerusalem – the largest town - was a 10 – 15 acre hilltop town, about the size of a high school campus. It was insignificant enough that it needed no defensive walls. (There is no archeological substantiation for a huge Temple of Solomon or a wealthy independent nation under his rule earlier). Northern Israel (called Israel) was very different. It was flatter, closer to the trade routes, and uniquely suited to olive orchards and vineyards, which surrounding wealthy nations couldn't grow. So with these valuable export crops, Israel grew very wealthy and cosmopolitan. Archeological records show three sophisticated hilltop cities, such as Megiddo and Samaria, receipts for long distance trade, artifacts of various religions together with evidence of Judaism, and art and architectural details imported from Egypt and Assyria. Israel was Chicago to Judaea's Montana.

Of these two nations, united only in worship of Yahweh, which one was obviously of greater interest to surrounding nations? Israel. It was invaded in 722 BCE after it refused to pay some increasingly onerous tariffs to Syria. The conquerors destroyed two of the cities, took over the third as their regional headquarters, kidnapped skillful artisans and shipped them off to their cities, but kept the source of the wealth – the agricultural infrastructure – intact. What do you imagine the other Israelites did – the ones who saw the hill towns burning and heard horror stories from those who escaped? They fled. They couldn't flee north or east toward the invaders. Some perhaps fled west toward the narrow nations hugging the Mediterranean but thousands fled south, and the first city south of the border was Jerusalem.

Within one generation, Jerusalem ballooned from 10 – 15 acres to 100 – 150 acres, surrounded by a defensive wall it had neither needed nor had the technology to build before. The low lands were suddenly populated by hundreds of little villages or hamlets, planting new seeds and deploying new forms of irrigation and other technologies. Imagine the impact on the original population! Houston felt the impact of Hurricane Katrina evacuees on schools, crime, and housing. Fiesta Markets even started selling new foods. That influx accounted for only 250,000 people into an existing population of 4 million. Similarly, many Americans are in an uproar about illegal immigrants taking jobs, speaking Spanish, behaving differently. In Jerusalem, 2700 years ago, the prior majority population was now only 10% of the city, surrounded by people who said they worshipped the same god but did so differently, and who wore different clothes, ate different food, interacted with foreigners and worshipped other gods along with Yahweh. Human nature hasn't changed so much that we can't imagine how they responded. It was likely in this state of ferment that the Levites wrote their book (another theory is that it was written later, after the Jews returned from a 50 year exile in Babylonia) to assert what it means to be Jewish and to reassert the eroding role of the priests.

In this light, don't a lot of the rules and prohibitions we read make sense? "Don't trim beards, don't wear clothes made of two fabrics, don't touch pigs, don't eat shellfish." Want to guess who did these things? Probably people from the north, who had access to more cultures, seeds, fabrics, agriculture, and the Mediterranean Sea. I have no idea why bird blood was the recommended cure for a moldy house – not all things are suddenly clear – but many are.

Let's look at the sexual prohibitions. Let's say you were a member of a small, minority population that didn't proselytize, that did discourage marriage with foreigners, and that required a number of practices, such as circumcision, that discouraged conversion? How do you grow your group? Babies. Lots of babies. Viewed in this light, don't many of the sexual rules make sense? Of course ancient Jews allowed polygamy, because men can have so many babies during the time one woman is pregnant. Similarly it makes sense that they encouraged men to marry the widows of their brothers – why waste a good womb (as well as the dowry)? In this context, I can understand the prohibitions against masturbation and male homosexuality, can't you? What was the duty of every good Jewish man? To procreate! Interestingly, there is nothing in the Bible against female homosexuality. I don't know if this is because women weren't important, or because the ancient texts were written by men who didn't know what went on in the women's tents, or because a woman's sexual relations with other women do not impede pregnancy (as long as she has a husband, too).

Considered in this light, I can understand the point of view of current religious groups and individuals who regard the purpose of sex to be procreation, as being against homosexuality and masturbation. There is an internally consistent logic. What I can't understand is people who regard homosexuality as wrong but who use birth control themselves, or support the rights of adults who chose not to have

children. For those people to select that one prohibition out of the Bible, out of context, is to be obstinate.

In conclusion, let's apply this "follow the money" logic to our own time. What rules and prohibitions have you noticed when we feel that our status quo is threatened by the onslaught of foreign or novel ideas, practices or people? How much of Leviticus's psychology remains trenchant in our recent history? Some of you remember all the women who went to work in "men's" jobs during WWII, only to be cast out when the soldiers returned home, in favor of radio shows, and then TV programs which characterized the women in feminine, subservient wifely roles. Others recall black and white fountains and hospitals and schools when population groups grew large enough to cause some to desire segregation, whereas in less densely populated areas, such as "wild west" this was not the case. I remember teaching in a city school where the smart African-American girls were chided as "acting white" by the racial peers, threatened by their apparently upward mobile educational skills. We've seen how different eras have treated immigration quotas and requirements, despite the fact that so many of our ancestors arrived through Ellis Island and Galveston. There are rally calls today for "English only" and walls along the Rio Grande. Who benefits by these rules: Those who feel that they benefited "in the good old days" and who perceive their role threatened by potential changes. Who benefits from the changes: those who anticipate, with enlightened self-interest, advantages to them with the sweep of incoming change. Every campaigning politician knows that.

I hope that this discussion of Leviticus has transformed it, in your view, from the most boring book in the Bible to your very best friend. It is a resource because familiarity with it enables you to support a position of our denomination, to understand why some strange and archaic practices can be understood centuries and millennia later, and to perceive ways in which human nature hasn't changed that much, after all.