

"[Yahweh, Yahweh], the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Moses fell on his face and worshiped. Yahweh reaffirmed that He had forgiven Israel by restating the covenant terms, but He warned emphatically that the people must not make treaties with the Canaanites but must obliterate their debauched religion. If Israel compromised, she would be sucked into the seductive cults and commit spiritual adultery against her Husband. And Yahweh, "whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14).

When Moses descended this time, his face shone with the reflection of God's glory. It was so bright that people could not look at him unless he wore a veil.

Chastened by the plague, the Israelites were only too glad to contribute their wealth and their time to construct Yahweh's dwelling. When it was finished, the glory enveloped and filled the tent so that not even Moses could enter it. From then on, when the cloud lifted off the tabernacle and began to move across the desert, Israel knew it was time to pack up and move out. And when the glory halted, they made camp, set up the tent, and watched in awe as the cloud settled in. Everything—their diet, their moving and stopping, their whole lifestyle—was dictated to them as infants by the awesome Parent who hovered nearby, eager to see them grow up.

## A Generation Lost

*Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*

### Living with a King

Yahweh was now enthroned right in the midst of His subjects. But He still could not wander among them as He had in Eden; He had to confine His undiluted presence behind four layers of curtains and a screened courtyard. His holiness would scorch such polluted people if He lowered the barriers. Yahweh wanted them to be holy with Him—set apart from the world order that years of the Serpent's influence had perverted—so that He and they could enjoy each other face to face.

But their haste to lapse into religious lechery, greed, and power-lust showed they still had only the vaguest idea of the true God's character, values, and expectations. Even at their current distance, Yahweh would continually have to send plagues to satisfy the requirements of His holiness. So besides the laws that governed what we might call "secular" life, Yahweh gave Israel a detailed system of rituals to illustrate graphically what holiness meant. The message was that as citizens of Yahweh's Kingdom, they had no secular life; all of life was sacred, set apart for His service.

The main act of worship was animal sacrifice at the taber-

nacle. Daily, endless blood sacrifices had to be brought to the King to maintain His approval. Why? To modern ears this sounds like senseless waste and cruelty, but Yahweh demanded it to make a point: *Evil costs dearly*. Whenever someone offered an animal, he laid his hands on it to identify himself with it. When he watched it butchered and burnt, he knew that Yahweh was accepting its death in his place. He was the son of Adam who, like his father, repeatedly rebelled against his Lord no matter how hard he tried not to. Yahweh's holiness demanded that a price be paid for treason, and the price for treason was death. But knowing His people were incapable of living up to perfection, He graciously accepted an animal to substitute for the human. In fact, he abhorred the human sacrifice practiced by other Near Eastern peoples.

The sacrificial system was a tableau, a piece of shocking theater to teach shocking truths. Every morning and evening the priests would burn a whole, perfect animal to symbolize Israel offering herself wholly to Yahweh and to atone for (cover) unintentional sin (rebellion, lawbreaking) in general. As the animal was wholly consumed in fire, so the offerers were wholly surrendered to God. When people committed some specific unintentional sin, they offered a perfect animal as their sign of confession; it paid the price and allowed Yahweh to forgive and cleanse the defilement. When restitution could be made for the sin (such as theft or cheating), they had to repay the debt plus twenty percent and also sacrifice the animal. Finally, to express thanksgiving a person would give a "fellowship offering" (or "peace offering"). Only the fat of this animal would be burnt; the priests and offerers would feast on the rest to celebrate peace and friendship with Yahweh.

The typical procedure on a high holy day would be to sacrifice sin offerings to deal with the people's inner corruption, then whole burnt offerings to demonstrate total devotion to Yahweh, then finally fellowship offerings to express the bond between Yahweh and His children-friends. The whole thing was accompanied by offerings of grain, wine, and oil to represent gratitude for Yahweh's abundant provision.

Hence, holy days were feast days, set apart for celebrating

Yahweh's goodness. When Israel reached Canaan and scattered, the people were supposed to gather three times a year to commemorate how He had liberated them and brought them to their land and to rejoice over their unity in Yahweh's Kingdom. Celebrating these feasts with joy was so important that better-off Israelites were supposed to finance the feasts for their servants, the poor, and even non-Israelites living nearby.

Yahweh wanted His people to enjoy living in His Kingdom. It was customary at that time for the king of a land to receive a tenth of each family's produce as a tithe, a royal tax. Two out of three years, Israel's tithe would fund the sacrificial system and the festivals. The third year's tithe would be set aside for those unable to make decent livings: widows, orphans, and poor non-Israelites.

One holy day was not a feast day. On the Day of Atonement—the Day of the Covering of Sin—the nation fasted as a sign of mourning. In addition to regular sacrifices, two goats were offered for the wickedness of the nation. One was sacrificed, its blood brought all the way into the Most Holy Place to be sprinkled on Yahweh's throne, and its body burnt outside the camp. The other was driven into the desert to symbolize that the people were driving sin from their lives. This was the only day of the year on which anyone could approach Yahweh's throne, and only the high priest could do it, bringing blood.

Thus were joy and grief intermingled in a constant rhythm in Yahweh's relationship with Israel. Evil was paid for, but the price was endless because the people never fundamentally changed. Joy was sweet in Yahweh's great mercy, but death was ever final.

### Holy and Common

We might be tempted to describe these rites as Israel's "religion," as opposed to her secular life. But the line of holy and common ran through every aspect of life, just as it ran through every heart. "You must distinguish between holy and common, between the unclean and the clean," Yahweh commanded.

Food was divided into clean and unclean; unclean foods like pork, shellfish, and most insects were forbidden possibly because they tended to be unhealthy, but more importantly because

Yahweh was teaching His children about distinctions. (Dietary laws would also help separate Israel from casually socializing with pagans.)

The blood from menstruation and childbirth made a woman temporarily unclean, just as bodily discharges or contact with a corpse made anyone unclean. A person had to wash and abstain from sacrifices and sex for periods of time to regain cleanness. Skin diseases symbolized corruption, so they made a person unclean. Even mildew in a house, representing rot and decay, made the house unclean. Bodily fluids, death, and skin diseases all represented the natural world that Yahweh wanted to distinguish from the perfect, holy, eternal, divine.

The rules of holy and common even descended to the most apparently absurd distinctions: do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together; do not weave wool and linen together for clothes!

In dividing the earthly from the holy, was Yahweh saying that the physical world was evil while the spiritual world was good? No. To understand these laws, we have to understand what Yahweh was working against. He was talking to a civilization that worshiped nature and used things like blood and corpses for earth-magic.

The Canaanites did not believe that one Person created the world and was in charge of nature and human relations. Instead, they thought that myriad *baalim* and *elohim* (lords, geniuses, spirits) governed sun, rain, harvest, animal fertility, the planets, and so on. All these "holy ones" belonged to a clan. *El*—the gods' father and the world's creator—had delegated control of the world to his sons and daughters, so although he was formally acknowledged, he received little worship. His son Baal, lord of sky and storm, was much more involved in human affairs. Humans could solicit his favor by feeding him with sacrifices and performing magical rituals.

Three goddesses, or three faces of one goddess, were also highly esteemed in Canaan. The Mother, Asherah, ruled the home; Astarte, the Lover, ruled fertility; and the Virgin, Anath, ruled war and hunting. These three are also known by pagans around the world as the virgin-mother-crone, birth-life-death,

the new-full-old moon, and other magical trinities.<sup>1</sup> (They even appear in tarot cards, modern goddess worship, and witchcraft.)

Other deities abounded: Grain, Sun, Moon, Dawn, Sunset, Sea, and Death. All were called "holy," but the word meant chiefly "other, beyond human." The gods did not act according to moral laws, nor were they interested in human goodness or justice. They supposedly could be persuaded to act for good or ill by flattery, begging, sacrifice, or magic. However, because they cared nothing for humans and had no morality, they were unpredictable and fearful. Personal intimacy and covenant love between human and god was out of the question.

Canaan's climate was erratic, so religion's chief goal was to influence the divine forces of nature to give sunshine, rain, and fertility in desirable times and amounts. The primary method was "sympathetic magic." That is, the Canaanites acted out rituals that they wanted the deities to imitate. For instance, men performed sex acts with women holy to Baal so that Baal would water the earth. Rites with menstrual blood tapped Astarte's fertility for the land. The blood of sacrificed animals was eaten or sprinkled on the earth because blood carried the power of life. People would even put their babies into ovens shaped like the mouths of the god Molech and watch as the screaming infants burned to death. Substances that symbolized the great forces of life and death—blood, semen, corpses, etc.—were mainstays of religious magic.

Hence, Yahweh made these substances "unclean" ritually so that Israel would blanch at such magic. Fertility, sex, and food were all good, but Yahweh alone ruled nature and He could not be manipulated by magic. Israel needed to learn to distinguish between Creator and created, and between humble petition to a loving Parent and attempts to control life. So Yahweh banned all activities associated with tapping into the god-forces or natural energies of the earth or the cosmos.

Besides sympathetic magic, Yahweh also forbade what is now called "channeling." Israelites must not consult spirits, whether those of dead people or discarnate beings. They could not seek His or any other god's will, nor peer into the future, by interpreting leaves, fire, birds, rain, clouds, or anything else. Incantations

were forbidden. Why? First, because the spirits were not the helpful informants they pretended to be. They were really servants of the Snake, luring those lusting for wealth, sex, power, knowledge, or sensation into deception, bondage, and death. The price for their information was too high, and Yahweh knew it. And second, any knowledge, prosperity, or power that Israel needed, Yahweh was happy to provide. To seek those things elsewhere was to say to their Dad, "We don't need You, we don't want You, we don't trust You, we don't love You." It was to repeat Adam and Eve's insult, attempting to take by force what Yahweh would give by grace.

Israel would not need channelers because she would have Yahweh's written word and His living spokespersons, His prophets. These men and women were called by Yahweh and gifted to see the truth in events and the mind of God because of their intimate relationship with Him. If Israel needed to know the future, Yahweh would tell the prophets and they would tell the people. If Israel needed to know God's will these spokespersons would tell them that, too. (Moses wrote down everything Yahweh told him, the priests interpreted those writings, and the prophets spoke God's current will to each generation.) Israel could tell a true prophet from a false one because a true one would speak nothing that contradicted what Yahweh had already told Moses or what actually happened in the world.

With a Holy God in their midst, holiness touched every aspect of these people's lives. But with the advantages of having a God next door went the drawbacks of having even the textile composition of one's clothes turned into an object lesson. The book of Leviticus (the holiness manual of the tribe of Levi) underscores the message with these refrains:

Be holy because I, [Yahweh] your God, am holy. . . . I am [Yahweh] your God.

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NOTE

1. Concepts of the triple goddess overlapped in the Middle East, so exact beliefs about each goddess varied from city to city.

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## March to the Promised Land

Numbers, Deuteronomy

### Yahweh Musters His Army

Yahweh gave most of this legislation while Israel remained camped at the base of Mount Sinai. For eleven months Sinai was a tent city, as populous as many ancient capitals, while craftsmen constructed Yahweh's tabernacle, the priests learned their duties, and Moses wrote down the King's instructions.

At the end of that time, Yahweh ordered Moses to take a military census of all men over twenty years old. The 600,000 troops were organized in divisions according to their clans and tribes. The tribe of Levi was set aside to assist the priests in caring for the tabernacle and its furnishings (mending, cleaning, polishing) and cleaning up the unimaginable mess of slaughtering and burning several large animals each day.<sup>1</sup> The tribe of Joseph was divided in two according to his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to bring the total tribal military divisions back to twelve.

Yahweh dictated the order in which the tribes would trek through the desert and how they would camp. On a march, the Levites led carrying the ark, God's throne. In camp, the tribes were arranged in a square surrounding the tabernacle in the center. In this manner Israel would march to Canaan like the