PARALLEL GUIDE 15
Law in the Old Testament

Summary: This chapter discusses Yahweh's theophany and the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. Then it takes a close comparative look at the seven major codes of Law to be found in Hebrew scripture, highlighting the grounding of Israel's ethics in her relationship with Yahweh.

Learning Objectives

• Read Exodus 19:1-20:21, Deuteronomy 5:6-21, Exodus 34:11-26, Deuteronomy 12-26, Numbers 1-10, and Deuteronomy 27:14-26

• Give the names and approximate dates (if known) of the seven major codes of the Law

• State the Old Testament sources for the "Summary of the Law" Jesus gives in the New Testament

• Identify: sabbatical year, jubilee year, the three major feast days Israel celebrates each year, the role of the scapegoat (Azazel), Nazirites

• Recite the Aaronic blessing

• Comment on the Decalogue about the following: the reason for prohibiting images; why using the name of Yahweh is forbidden; what is meant by the prohibition against killing; what is included in the prohibition against stealing; what does "covert" include as used in its Hebrew sense?

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. State the difference between apodictic and casuistic law. What are examples of these two kinds of law that you experience in your workplace or in the marketplace?

2. Laws can become dated. Read through some of the Old Testament laws and, if you can, select some that you think no longer apply. What does that say about the meaning and use of the biblical message?

3. What does law mean to you? Does it tell you what to do (prescribe)? Does it tell you what not to do (proscribe)? Or does law, like a map, tell us the kind of world in which we live (describe)?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Recall when you first learned about the Ten Commandments. Compare that experience with this chapter's presentation. Record your thoughts and reactions in your notebook. When you come to your seminar, be prepared to talk about the role of law in your culture, biblical law, and other rules by which we live. What do these say about us and the world we inhabit?

Additional Sources

Martin Noth, Exodus, and Brevard Childs, The Book of Exodus.

Thomas D. Winton, ed., "The Law Code of Hammurabi," in Documents from Old Testament Times (New

York: Harper, 1961) pp. 27-36, offers an interesting parallel. W. J. Harrelson, “Ten Commandments” (IDB, vol. IV, pp. 569-573) provides a good summary. The article is augmented by the article in the Supplement by H. Cazelles.

We also suggest three works cited in Chapter 15: Rosemary Reuther’s The Radical Kingdom (Paulist Press, 1975), a good study of the tendency of religion to separate from the world; J. H. Hertz’s The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (Soncino Press, 1960); and Leander Keck’s The New Testament Experience of Faith (The Bethany Press, 1976).

Chapter 15
LAW IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Earlier, we followed the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt to the meeting of the people of Israel with Jethro, the priest of Midian, at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Exodus 19:1-20:21 tells of the appearance of YHWH on the mountain and the giving of the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue (“the ten words”). In Exod. 24:1-11, the covenant is sealed by means of a sacrifice, and in Exod. 31:18-34:35, the story continues with the account of the making of the golden calf, the intercession by Moses on behalf of the people, and the remaking of the covenant with the second giving of the Decalogue. In between these narrative sections lie several legal prescriptions in various groupings. They are placed there because the Law was regarded as given by God through Moses. No matter when in Israel’s history a particular code came into being, it was attributed to Moses. Later codifications of laws were not viewed as really new laws, but simply as developments of the Law which was given through him.

There are other collections of legal material in the Bible in addition to those found in Exodus. Most of the Book of Deuteronomy is law, but because of the special importance of this particular code in the history of Israel, we discuss it when we study the reign of King Josiah, who enacted the code as part of his reform movement in 621 BCE. In this chapter we read the exodus codes and various passages in other books for comparison; from these we can discuss the main features of Old Testament law. The point will not be to make you experts in the Law, but to enable you to experience something of the flavor of life in the times when the laws were conceived. In order to understand what people of another culture thought and felt, it is necessary to “get inside their skins” as much as possible. The best way to do this in the case of the people of the Old Testament is to read their Law.

Exodus 19:1-20:21
The Appearance of YHWH on Mt. Sinai

This passage begins with P’s statement dating the event which is to follow. The precise statement, that this was at the time of the new moon on the third month after the people left Egypt, may indicate that at one time Israel celebrated the giving of the Law on this date.

The account of Moses going up and down the mountain between YHWH and the people is very confused. This is partly because, once again, different traditions are woven together. The opening words of YHWH to Moses are very important. Because YHWH has out of grace carefully brought the people to this point, as an eagle might have carried her young on her wings, Israel will be God’s “treasured possession out of all peoples” (19:5). They will be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (v. 6). The idea here is that through Israel the blessing of YHWH will be mediated to all the earth. The promise which had been made to Abram —“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3)—is to be fulfilled in the priesthood of the nation of Israel. Israel is to have a priesthood within its own national structures, but above all it is to be a priest to the nations of the world. This great theme, often forgotten, is brought back into remembrance in the great work of the “Second Isaiah” (Isa. 40

ff.), in which the faithful remnant of Judah may be seen as the "Servant of YHWH" by whose suffering in exile the nations of the world will be healed. Israel is to be a holy nation. We tend to think of holiness in terms of moral uprightness or of a special degree of piety. More basically, however, a holy thing or a holy people belongs to YHWH. So they are filled by YHWH's own power or presence and must be prevented from being profaned. All the laws that we see concerning things that are "clean" and things that are "unclean" have to do with this idea of holiness. The particular rules concerning ritual actions which set the Jew off from the gentile, many of which were developed during and after the Exile, are intended to preserve the holiness of God's people, to keep them "clean" from profanation. While this may seem arrogant to us with our different ideas of holiness, it is thoroughly consistent with the concept of holiness that we find in the Old Testament. That which belongs to YHWH is his; it will not be taken for use by others, nor will it be used in ways which are not consistent with YHWH'S holiness.

We see this same notion of holiness in connection with the "holy mountain." In 19:10-25, the people are instructed to "consecrate" themselves in preparation for the coming of YHWH on the mountain. That is, they are to go through cleansing rituals for two days to rid themselves of whatever might stain their holiness before God. In spite of this purification, they are not themselves to come onto the mountain of God: "any who touch the mountain shall be put to death" (v. 12). Only Moses, who is specifically commanded to do so, can come up onto the holy mountain. Warnings concerning the perils of contacting the holy ground or coming into the holy presence of YHWH are repeated throughout this section.

In vv. 16-18, there occur two different images denoting the presence of YHWH. First is the image of a great storm (v. 16). Then (v. 18) the image shifts to that of smoke and fire with an earthquake. Part of the issue we looked at in the last chapter, concerning the true site of Mt. Sinai, hinges on how seriously we are to take the fire imagery. In itself, it suggests volcanic action. Are the two kinds of imagery, volcanic action and fierce storm (which probably come from two different literary traditions), simply variant ways of speaking of the power of the presence of YHWH, or do they reflect the physical phenomena in which at one time YHWH was seen to be present? We cannot tell.

Seven Codes of Law

The story in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers depicts the entire Law as having been given at the time Moses met with YHWH on the top of the mountain. Clearly, it did not happen in quite this way. The legal material that we find through most of the rest of the Book of Exodus, and which continues throughout Leviticus and the first ten chapters of Numbers, comes from time periods which range from the Exodus, c. 1250 BCE through the return from the Babylonian exile in 538 BCE. The tradition that Moses was the great lawgiver has caused it all to be described as from him. Even though this may not be true in a literal sense, there is no reason to doubt that Moses did in fact begin the practice of seeing Israel's relationship with YHWH under the covenant as a relationship of obedience to the divine law. In spite of the additions to and occasional contradictions in "the Law" as it developed, its

basic tone is constant. It is in many ways different from the laws of the other peoples of the ancient Near East. That its central character and tone come from Moses—or, as the Old Testament would always put it, from God through Moses—there is no reason to doubt.

There are seven major bodies of law, or codes of law, in the Old Testament. These, with the names usually given to them, are as follows:

1) The Decalogue (Ten Commandments)—Exod. 20:1-17, Deut. 5:6-21; 2) The Covenant Code—Exod. 20:18-23:33; 3) The Ritual Decalogue—Exod. 34:11-26; 4) The Deuteronomic Code—Deut. 12-26; 5) The Holiness Code—Lev. 17-26; 6) The Priestly Code—Lev. 1-16, 27, and Num. 1-10; 7) The Curses Code—Deut. 27:14-26.

There is an eighth code in Ezekiel 40-48, but this one—Ezekiel's ideal for governance after Israel's return from exile—remained only and purely ideal. It was never enacted.

Please read the following passages; they comprise one entire code and parts of others for comparison:

Exod. 20-23—the Decalogue and the Covenant Code;

Lev. 17, 19, 21, 23, and 25—parts of the Holiness Code dealing with prohibitions against eating blood, with major social and moral principles, with the holiness of the priests, and with the calendar of feast days;

Lev. 3, 4:1-12, and 16—from the Priestly Code dealing with peace offerings, sin offerings, and the scapegoat;

Num. 6 and 8—more of the Priestly Code dealing with the Nazirites, the Aaronic Blessing, and the Levites.

Dating the Codes[top]

No matter what dates are assigned to the separate codes, each one contains material developed over many years. The following table gives only the approximate dates by which various codes were completed.

The Decalogue—uncertain date, probably earlier than 850 BCE

The Covenant Code—c. 750—(though some scholars think that it is the oldest portion of case law)

The Deuteronomic Code—c. 650

The Holiness Code—550

The Priestly Code—c. 450

The Ritual Decalogue—uncertain date, sometime after occupation of the land of Canaan

The "Curses Code" which we deal with when we examine the Book of Deuteronomy

The Decalogue in Exod. 20:1-17 does not seem to be a part of the narrative which begins in Exod. 19. It is virtually impossible to identify its source. Some scholars have referred to it as the E Decalogue to distinguish it from the "Ritual Decalogue" of Exod. 34:11-26, usually ascribed to J. The use of the name YHWH throughout makes it less than certain that it is from E. Presumably it is a source in its own right, the dating and authorship of which are at present unknown. At any rate, this Decalogue is a self-contained unit, and, at its close, Exod. 20:18 refers to the terrifying appearance of YHWH on the mountain.

The Covenant Code, often called "The Book of the Covenant," is usually assigned to E, though here too the use of the name YHWH is troublesome. The code is usually dated around 750 BCE, though some would push it back earlier to around 850 BCE. The Deuteronomic Code, Deut. 12-26, is dated in relation to the discovery of "the Law" in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah, in 621 BCE. Allowing some time for

it to be developed, most scholars would place its dating at around 650 BCE. The Holiness Code, Lev. 17-26, was used by the P writer in the compilation of Leviticus, but it was apparently a separate document in its own right rather than a composition by P. It is usually dated at around 550 BCE. (The Holiness Code is sometimes designated as H and treated as another distinct source within the material of the Pentateuch.) The Priestly Code, Lev. 1-16, 27, and Num. 1-10, is from the P writer and therefore dated around 450 BCE, after the return from exile. The Ritual Decalogue, Exod. 34:11-26, is presumably from J; all that can be said about its date is that it is early, but—because of its references to agricultural feasts—it must be after the settlement in the land of Canaan.

Some scholars have maintained that these codes can be dated by reference to their length—the longer the code, the later the date. This seems too arbitrary a method, and we have preferred to follow a method which looks at the content of the codes in order to discern which period of history they most nearly fit. In general, one can note that as time goes on in the life of Israel, the codes tend to become more concerned with social and moral issues and with an elaboration of cultic regulations. You have probably noticed from your reading of the biblical text that the Covenant Code's treatment of the cultic practices centering on the Sabbath and the three annual feasts is considerably shorter than that contained in the Holiness Code, some two hundred years later, and that the Priestly Code spells out in minute detail the instructions for the sacrifices which were described only briefly a hundred years earlier in the Holiness Code.

Apodictic Law and Casuistic Lawtop

Turn again to Exod. 20 and look at the way the Decalogue is worded: "You shall have no other gods before me. . . . You shall not make for yourself an idol. . . . You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God. . . ." Now turn to

21:1-14 and notice that the form of words here creates situations: "When you . . . [do such and such], if [such and such is the case] . . . , then you shall . . . ." Here cases are discussed with instructions about what to do in varying circumstances.

The first form, the short, direct commandments—with no "ifs, ands, or buts"—is called apodictic (or apodeictic, both pronounced a-paw-DIK-tik) law. The term is from a Greek word which means "spoken to," so it refers to a law spoken directly to someone. The second example is called casuistic (pronounced kazhew-ISS-tic) law because it is developed from consideration of cases. Both kinds of law are found in most legal systems. In our day, the laws enacted by legislative bodies (such as the U.S. Congress) are apodictic, while decisions made by law courts are casuistic— based on actual "cases" that have come up in the past. Casuistic laws interpret and apply the principles stated in apodictic laws. (Confusion sometimes arises because in biblical studies the two types of law are distinguished by their form, rather than their source. Any law which specifies certain penalties for particular infractions, or which specifies the circumstances under which the law is enforced, or is stated in the form "If . . . , then . . ." is considered casuistic.)

Some General Characteristics of Old Testament Law

The laws in the Old Testament deal with a multiplicity of subjects, and there is little distinction between what we would call secular law and religious law. For the Israelite all life was lived under God, and therefore every law which governs life must ultimately rest upon God. It is not, of course, unusual—especially in ancient cultures—for people to claim that their laws are of divine origin. Even today when we speak of laws having "sanctions"—that is, ways of being enforced—we are using a word which harks back to the idea that the power of a god lies behind the law and guarantees its enforcement. Though the Israelites borrowed much from other cultures, especially from the Canaanite, the superiority of the Old Testament law to that of other cultures of its time can be seen by looking at its general tone and the attitudes it reflects about humankind.

Ultimately, however, its difference lies in its attitude toward the god who "sanctions" the law and his relationship with the people who serve him.

The God YHWH who initiated a covenant with a people without power or status, and who demonstrated power against the gods of mighty Egypt, was not a god with whom one bargained nor one who simply upheld the customs of the people. Increasingly, as time passed and the successive codes came into being, we can see a heightening of the conviction not only that the Law issues directly from YHWH, but also that this fact is in itself the only reason required for its binding power. The highest point for the expression of this conviction is found in the Holiness Code, with its constant refrain "I am YHWH!" In the Decalogue the Hebrew is commanded to "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land. . ." (Exod. 20:12). But the Holiness Code does not normally bother to give any "practical" reason for a law; one is to do what the Law commands simply because "I am YHWH!"

The general tone and attitude of Israelite law is best discovered by looking at specifics. Compared with contemporaneous non-Israelite law codes, the death penalty is

far less stringently exacted under Israeli law. In several ancient cultures the slightest offense could result in a death sentence. Generally speaking, in Israelite law the death penalty can be required only for a violation of the sacredness of either the family or YHWH. Taking a person's life (Exod. 21:12) demands death—this is undoubtedly the original form of the law; but the casuistical interpretation limits this apparently clear-cut demand. If the killing was not intentional—if the killer "did not lie in wait" for the victim—then the killer was permitted to flee to one of the cities of refuge that were established to give protection against blood revenge. If, however, the act was premeditated, even the place of refuge did not provide protection—the killer was to be taken from the altar and killed (v. 14).

Striking one's father or mother (21:15), or cursing them (v. 17)—since a curse was assumed to carry the power to bring it about—or stealing a person (v. 16) presumably to sell him or her into slavery—these carry the death penalty. In 22:18, "sorceresses" are condemned to death, as is anyone who sacrifices to any god except YHWH (v. 20). Otherwise the sacredness of YHWH would be violated. (Apparently the statute against idolatry was unenforceable; the constant prophetic attacks against idolatry show it to have been a continuing phenomenon.) Bestiality—sexual intercourse with animals—is also punishable by death (v. 19), probably because it violates the sacredness of the image of God. (We recall from Gen. 2:20 that Adam could not find a proper "helper" among the animals.)

In comparison with other ancient Near Eastern codes, punishment in general is far less severe and brutal in Israelite law. Note that in Deuteronomy 25:3, a definite limit is set on the number of blows to be administered in a beating. Forty stripes is the upper limit, "if more lashes than these are given, your neighbor will be degraded in your sight."

In Exod. 21:23-25 and also in Lev. 24:17-20, a rule is set down for retaliation, the lex talionis (from the Latin, "law of retaliation"), usually expressed in the words of Exod. 21:24, "eye for an eye, tooth for tooth." Jesus refers to this law in the Sermon on the Mount, and he counters it by a more lofty demand: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . ." (Matt. 5:38). We are not to resist evil, that is, in the sense that we are not to seek retaliation at all. We are to resist evil itself, in the sense of breaking the cycle of evil. In Matt. 5:38 Jesus suggests that when evil is being done to us, here exemplified by being struck by another person, rather than fighting back we are even to allow the person to strike more than once. The evil of escalating physical violence may be resisted in some cases by refusing to take part in it.

In comparison with this ultimate demand of love, the lex talionis tends to strike us as cruel and barbaric. Taken literally, it does sound offensive to us to demand the eye of a person who has wilfully caused another to lose the sight of an eye. However, this law simply expresses, in the characteristically concrete terms which Hebrew requires, a basic principle of justice which sounds less offensive when expressed in such abstract forms as “let the punishment fit the crime,” or in the constitutional prohibition against “cruel and unusual” punishment. In fact, the lex talionis was an

attempt to move beyond the law of blood revenge, to restrict the legal brutality by which a whole tribe could be wiped out for an offense against one person of another tribe, and to eliminate the favoritism of earlier codes in which more powerful people received lighter sentences.

Israelite law also attempts to avoid class distinctions. As with much law, the ideal was never actually attained, but it was approximated more closely by the Israelites than by other societies of the time. When we read the provisions made for the rights of slaves, as in Exod. 21, we may well question even the ideal. It should be remembered, however, that slavery was an unquestioned institution throughout the world until very recent times. The limitations which Israelite law set on it were a considerable advance for that time.

The status of women was unquestionably low, as it was throughout the world, but again there is a marked advance in such provisions as that contained in Deut. 24:1-4, under which the right of a man simply to cast his wife aside is qualified by the demand that he give her a “bill of divorce” that allows her to marry again rather than being left destitute. The poor and the sojourner are shown remarkable consideration. In Lev. 19:9-10 the meaning of an ancient practice is utterly changed. During harvest the ancient Canaanites used to leave some of the crop standing in the corners of the field for the gods and demons of the field to eat; this practice is now interpreted to be a provision for the poor, widows, orphans, and hungry travellers. An Israelite was not to glean these areas, so that there would be food left over for those less fortunate. Deuteronomy 15:1-11, describing the “year of release,” states the ideal for the care of the poor at its highest level. Exodus 23:9 and Lev. 19:33 are but two of many places in which the rights of “sojourners” (Hebrew, the gerim) are protected. The principle behind all of these injunctions on behalf of the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners seems to be that these are the people who have no Israelite man to stand as a protector for them.

All the codes have general laws against the perversion of justice. Exodus 23:1ff. cites a number of ways in which justice might be perverted: false reports, collusion, mob action, a witness being swayed by popular opinion, even one leaning too far in favor of a poor person! The principle is summed up in Lev. 19:15—“You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great”—two opposite temptations which might pervert justice—“with justice you shall judge your neighbor.”

Insistence on equality of treatment should not be seen as stemming from some notion of democracy as we normally understand the term. Israelite law is not an attempt to set up a form of government in which people rule themselves as opposed to being ruled by a monarch. All Israel is ideally ruled by YHWH. The real basis for Israelite egalitarianism is the covenant. Every member of Israel is a member of the covenant and has equal standing under the Law which structures the covenant community. During the time of the monarchy, even the king came under the covenant law and could be judged under its terms. The amazing thing is that, because of Israel’s experience as sojourners in Egypt, even resident foreigners were considered as covered by the covenant.

Finally, the ethical high point of the Law is expressed in Lev. 19:17-18, the second part of which Christians have come to know as the summary of the Law: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you

shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am YHWH."[top] Jesus did not make this up; he simply quoted scripture. The advance which Jesus made is in the interpretation of who one's neighbor is. In the passage in Leviticus, the neighbor seems to be equated with "your kin" and "your people"—that is, with a fellow Israelite. Yet later in the same chapter (v. 33) we read "You shall love the alien as yourself" using precisely the same phrasing as here. When in the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus extends the meaning of neighbor to include anyone in need, he is reinforcing what is already present in Leviticus.

Love should not be interpreted, in the context of this law, as sentimental. It is a concern or care for the well-being of one's neighbor—a matter of the will, not of the emotions. Concern for one's neighbor is to come above one's emotional response to him or her. (It may be helpful to know that the basic meaning of the Hebrew word for love in these verses is "be loyal to." The same vocabulary was used in ancient treaties between a conquering king and a defeated population. The king's concern was not with the people's emotions, but with the possibility that they might side militarily with any of the king's enemies. They were to "love"—to be loyal to—their conqueror alone.

Behind the whole Law lies the graciousness of YHWH. The Law is to be kept, not in order to produce a more perfect society, but as a personal response to the God of unparalleled mercy. "Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you their descendents after them out of all the peoples, as it is today" (Deut. 10:14-15). The motif of the choice by the great God of the weaker vessel, the younger son, for example, is carried over into the awareness that God's choice of Israel is not due to her merit, but solely to God's grace. Therefore, " . . . what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own wellbeing" (Deut. 10:12-13).

This last passage, in which service to YHWH "with all your heart and with all your soul" is commanded, is similar to Deut. 6:4-5. This is the great "creed" of Judaism, the Shema (pronounced she-MAH), which is the first word in the Hebrew of the passage—"hear." "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might": with all that is you. Heart, soul, and might mean the total person; they do not reflect a division of the person into three "parts" as was done in Greek thought. When Jesus said that the two greatest commandments were those which called for love of God and love of one's neighbor as oneself, he was putting together Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18 and claiming that all the rest of the "Law and the Prophets" rested upon these.

Let us now look briefly at details of the major codes.

The Decalogue

The Decalogue—or the Ten Commandments as found in Exod. 20:1-17—is apodictic law—short commandments without qualifications. In their original form these probably did not contain the elaborations which we now find in vv. 4b-6, 9-11, 12b, and 17b; they were brief, one-statement utterances similar to those in vv. 3 and 13-16.

There are varying practices as to the numbering of the Ten Commandments. The Jewish practice is to call v. 2 ("I am YHWH your God . . .") the first commandment, and to group vv. 2-6 together as the second ("You shall have no other gods. . . . You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . ."). Protestants (including Anglicans but excluding Lutherans) see either v. 3 alone or vv. 2 and 3 combined as the first commandment.

Roman Catholics and Lutherans count vv. 2-6 as the first commandment, and divide v. 17 into v. 17a (". . . not covet your neighbor's house") as the ninth and v. 17b (". . . not covet your neighbor's wife . . ."), the tenth. Since many ancient law codes begin with an introduction naming the authority by which the laws were issued, it seems reasonable to consider v. 2 as filling that function, and to begin the numbering with v. 3. (Note: the text in this passage is the more familiar one from the RSV.)

This may raise the question of whether there are indeed ten commandments but, though there exists elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern law no other such list of apodictic laws, lists of ten were a common mnemonic device. Possibly the original list was designed to be memorized, students telling off the laws on their fingers. Whatever their origin, and a number of hypotheses have been advanced, the Ten Commandments were intended to be taught, and taught widely, for they came to be the constitution for the nation of Israel, the basis of its community life. In fact, they came to be regarded as that which created the order of community out of the chaos of no community. As we look at the commandments individually, we must remember that each of the ten has special value as one of these ten.

The first four commandments, which speak of the obligations of the covenant community toward YHWH, speak of the obligations of all. The next six deal with the relations of Israelites to one another. The first group regulates the community's relationship to YHWH, and the second group sets up the framework for the internal life of the community. Note that all commandments are written in Hebrew in the imperative singular, giving a command to each "you" being addressed.

I. "You shall have no other gods before me," or literally, "before my face." The reference is probably to a cultic action: no other gods are to be worshiped by Israel. Note that this commandment does recognize the potential existence of other gods—Israel has not yet come to the radical monotheism of the prophets—but there is only one God to be worshiped by Israel, collectively and individually. Additionally, Israel was not to be concerned with proving the existence or nonexistence of other gods. Israel was to be loyal to one God. Period. This commandment points in two directions: to Israel as a collective and to each individual of the collective.

II. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." The word here translated "image" comes from the verb meaning "hew" or "carve into shape." It suggests something made by an artisan and therefore under human control. The image might take a variety of forms and even have some power, but that power is imputed to it by its maker. This is probably not simply a commandment against the worship of foreign idols, but against any kind of representation of YHWH which might lead people to believe that YHWH could be manipulated as the idols could. The short, apodictic form specifies carved images, but Israel interpreted it—probably rightly—to mean a prohibition of any kind of image at all.

Much contemporary Islamic art follows this commandment strictly, even extending it to a prohibition of human images, since humankind is in the image of God. In the eighth and ninth centuries there was a bitter debate over whether or not images were permissible in Christian worship. This "iconoclastic controversy" ("iconoclastic" meaning "image-smashing") was resolved around a distinction between a kind of reverence which was permissible for representations of God and worship which was due only to God. Of course, this missed the point of the commandment, which was not to represent God at all.

If we realize that words are expressions of intellectual images, a strict construction of this commandment results in the exclusive use of the via negativa (the "way of negation," in which one says only what God is not). This has been attempted by various forms of mysticism, but has never been adopted in pure form by any of the three religions—Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—which look on the Decalogue as authoritative. Judaism has avoided the closely reasoned and elaborately formulated theological constructions which Christianity developed. The reason for this may well lie in the fact that Judaism is concerned more with

living by the Law than with theorizing about God, and that Christianity very early in its life had to formulate its thoughts about God in opposition to pagan Hellenistic ideas. Nevertheless the Judaic practice is in keeping with the second commandment.

III. "You shall not take the name of YHWH your God in vain." Behind this commandment is something similar to that behind the second: the name participates in the power of the person to whom it belongs, misusing it—for purposes of casting spells and curses, for example—is forbidden. This does not imply a prohibition against swearing oaths by the name of God; YHWH swears by his own name in the Old Testament, since there is nothing higher by which to swear. Jesus' instruction not to swear at all, in Matt. 5:33-37, is not an elaboration of this commandment, but an exhortation that one's word should be good enough by itself without calling on some higher authority to sanction it. The commandment does prohibit manipulating God (by God's name) to serve one's own (particularly one's own evil) interests. Note that such manipulation would take place particularly in relationship to another, since God's name would be used in contracts and treaties and the like. The first four commandments, though they have primarily to do with the relation of the community to YHWH, also have implications within the community itself.

IV. "Remember the sabbath, to keep it holy." What was originally intended by the phrase "to keep it holy" is not entirely clear though it most likely has to do with setting the day apart, "keeping it" in a way different from all other days. The instructions in vv. 8-11 are almost certainly later additions to make certain that the entire household was included. The Sabbath was to come to occupy a place of inestimable importance in the life of the Jewish people. J. H. Hertz describes it as follows:

Religious worship and religious instruction—the renewal of man's spiritual life in God—form an essential part of Sabbath observance. We, therefore, sanctify the Sabbath by a special Sabbath liturgy, by statutory Lessons from the Torah and the Prophets, and by attention to discourse and instruction by religious teachers. The Sabbath has thus proved the great educator of Israel in the highest education of all; namely the laws governing human conduct. The effect of these Sabbath prayers and Synagogue homilies upon the Jewish people has been incalculable. Leopold Zunz . . . has shown that almost the whole of Israel's inner history since the close of Bible times can be traced in following the development of these Sabbath discourses on the Torah. Sabbath worship is still the chief bond which unites Jews into a religious Brotherhood. (Pentateuch and Haftorahs, p. 297)

V. "Honor your father and your mother." Here is the singular "you." The commandment almost certainly refers to parents as heads of the family. Traditionally, parents have been instruments of God's love; therefore they are to be next to God in the child's respect. Note that it is respect or honor that is commanded here. If the commandment is particularly directed not to children but to adults with aged parents, as some scholars think, that means a great deal besides financial support: it has to do with prizing the parents (cf. Prov. 4:8, where the same Hebrew word is used), with taking their counsel, and hearing their teaching (Prov. 1:8), among other things. It is also suggestive that one possible literal translation of the verb is "make heavy." Might this have meant that [grown] children were to continue to feed their parents even after the latter could no longer contribute economically to the family unit? Note that this commandment includes a result clause: "that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you." If your children see you care for your parents, then, when you are old, they will have learned how to care for you—and your life will be enhanced and extended.

VI. "You shall not kill." How convenient it would be if the Hebrew verb used here had only one, specialized meaning. In many contexts, the word would lend itself to the translation: "You shall not commit murder." At the very least, what we have is a civil provision concerned with protecting human life—particularly from premeditated intent to do harm. The commandment does not forbid the slaying of animals, nor unambiguously forbid capital punishment, suicide, or killing enemies in war. This has led some theologians

to argue that it cannot be used to oppose nuclear war, for example. If we take a literalist view, that is certainly true; but if we understand the Decalogue to be the bare basic rules

necessary for the preservation of a society, we must ask not only what sort of killing must have been forbidden to preserve the Hebrew society of the ninth century BCE, but also what sort of killing must be forbidden to preserve our more global society today. Certainly it can be argued that nuclear war might fall into that category.

VII. “You shall not commit adultery.” Adultery is sexual intercourse with a married person not one’s own spouse. It is not the same as “fornication,” which is any illicit sexual act. The inviolability of the family was held very high. Indeed, the protection of a society such as the Hebrews’ was grounded in protection of the family unit. We see this not only in this commandment but in the fifth and in the elaborations of the tenth and the fourth. Harrelson (IDB, vol. IV, p. 571) understands adultery further as an act of defiance against God, insofar as God made humankind male and female. In marriage the two become one. Adultery then constitutes a denial of that unity of relationship between a man and a woman affirmed by YHWH. But it is also possible to argue that adultery was seen primarily as a violation of a man’s property. (Interestingly, the Old Testament nowhere mandates monogamy. Many of the leading men, from patriarchs through kings, “became one” with more than one woman. This seems to strengthen the argument of seeing adultery primarily as a crime of property.) The stricture seems only to have applied to a married woman—there was no word for the relationship between an unfaithful husband and an unmarried woman. Since a woman did represent property (see the tenth commandment), adultery was the violation of a husband’s right to sole sexual possession of his wife and his assurance that the children from the marriage union were his. The matter of legitimacy was an important one, for peace within a community can be maintained only with great difficulty if there are disputes as to who are the legitimate heirs of property. Since betrothal was practically the equivalent of marriage in Israelite thought, the time span of possible adultery is increased over what we might expect. Intercourse with a female slave betrothed to another was not a capital offense (Lev. 19:20-22).

VIII. “You shall not steal.” This probably did not refer to stealing someone’s possessions (that is included in the tenth commandment), but to stealing a person, presumably a free fellow Israelite, to be sold into slavery. Exodus 21:16 certainly interprets it in this way. As Martin Noth explains in his commentary, the commandment “probably . . . has in mind the loss of freedom, particularly of free Israelites; it is forbidden to enslave free Israelites by force whether it be for one’s own use or to sell to another” (Exodus, p. 166). Brevard Childs agrees that this may have been the original intent of the eighth commandment, but he finds it “very clear that the present form of the commandment reflects a different emphasis” (The Book of Exodus, p. 423). Moreover Childs believes that the present (shortened) form of the commandment (that is, without explicit object) has “had the effect of expanding the scope of the prohibition beyond its initial concrete object” (p. 424).

IX. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” There is great concern shown in many places in the Old Testament for the preservation of the means of carrying out justice. This required, among other things, that no guilt

should be imputed to a person unless there were witnesses to substantiate the charges. Therefore it was important that witnesses be trustworthy or the whole structure of justice would collapse. Exodus 23:1-3 expands and interprets this ninth commandment. There the witness is enjoined not to accept a bribe, nor to be pushed into perjury by the pressure of public opinion. Witnesses are not to allow their feelings to affect the truth of their testimony, no more in favor of the poor—however much they might be in need—than of the

rich—however much they might pay. Justice "in the gate"—the entrance to the town where judicial proceedings were held—was to become a major concern of the prophets (cf., e.g., Amos 5:10-15). Here false witness is understood not only as damaging the person against whom evidence is given, but also the wholeness of the covenant community. Moreover, it stands as a lie before YHWH, the ultimate lawgiver and judge. The Israelites also knew that lies may be conveyed by silence. Thus, the commandment against bearing "false" witness includes both the active lie and the passive refusal to give evidence which could acquit someone.

X. "You shall not covet." The Hebrew word which is translated "covet" means more than its English equivalent. To "covet" was not simply to desire something that did not belong to you, but to attempt to acquire it by illegal means or subterfuge. It may have been "alright" to desire something—in the emotions only—but not to desire with the intention of stealing. The expansion of the commandment in v. 17b is intended to make the commandment apply to all possible possessions. As we have noted, a wife is here considered property and put in the same category as slaves and cattle.

These short, general laws set the outer guideposts which mark the boundaries of behavior for the covenanted community. The lengthier codes attempt to apply these laws to society under different conditions.

We do not look in detail at the Ritual Decalogue in Exod. 34:11-26. The ten commands which make it a "decalogue" are found in the following verses: 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26a, 26b. Some of them have parallels among the ten commandments—the people are admonished again to have no other god before YHWH; to make no "molten gods," no images; to rest on the seventh day. Most of the commandments of the Ritual Decalogue are cultic, concerned with separating the people of Israel from their pagan neighbors in the land and establishing a calendar of cultic festivals. For the former, see especially vv. 15ff. and 26b. There, the last commandment, about boiling a kid in its mother's milk, apparently refers to a Canaanite practice; the intent is to dissociate Israelite cultic worship from that of the Canaanites. The calendar (vv. 18-24) contains the laws concerning three annual feasts: the feast of unleavened bread, an agricultural festival that came to be associated with the Passover—although the Passover is also mentioned in v. 25, as if it were a different feast; the feast of weeks; and the feast of ingathering, which has been associated with Succoth or the feast of the booths. The latter two are agricultural festivals as well. The concern may well be to differentiate these, too, from the numerous agricultural feasts of the Canaanites.

Exodus 20:22-23:33
The Covenant Code

You have read through this code, and you will have recognized that many of the matters which we have discussed under the general heading of Israelite law are expressed here. We do not, therefore, examine it point by point but make a few general remarks.

Note that 20:24-25 specify a simple altar, either of earth or of uncut stone. This must be a very old reference to a time before the establishment of fixed sanctuaries, a time of nomadic conditions.

Notice also the extensive use of casuistic law—attempts to set specific punishments for a wide range of possible cases. Some of the terms, such as the distinction between killing a slave outright and injuring him so that it takes some time for him or her to die (21:20-21), or the way in which a man's pregnant wife is treated as his possession, may offend us. The intent is to arbitrate disputes in such a way as to prevent the stronger from taking advantage of the weaker, or to protect victims from being left without recourse when they have suffered damages.

The portions of the code that we have not discussed at any great length are those dealing with cultic

practices. Exodus 22:29-31 and 23:10-19 deal with this part of the life of the community. In 22:29-30, the command to offer from the harvest and the wine press, and to "give" to God the firstborn, is an expression of the belief that all life and all benefits of life are from YHWH. The fertility cults of the Canaanites are countered, as they are in the P creation story, with the assertion that it is YHWH who provides the crops, indeed life itself. Whether or not there was ever a time when the firstborn son was sacrificed to YHWH is impossible to say. Other codes provide for the "redemption," that is, the buying back, of one's son, but this one does not. (We noted this uncertainty about child sacrifice in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac.) Verse 31, which prohibits eating "flesh torn by beasts in the field," does so on the grounds that it would defile (cultically pollute), and Israelites are "consecrated" or set apart as holy to YHWH. This is like the commandments in other codes which spell out numerous ways in which such pollution can occur.

Exodus 23:10-11 establishes the sabbatical year. Every seventh year, the fields are to lie fallow. It is not clear from this how the poor and the wild beasts will be able to eat, but other codes make clear the idea that the land itself will produce edible plants which would not be owned by the owners of the land. It is doubtful that this commandment could ever be totally enforced, unless it was on the basis of staggered years, with only a portion of the land left fallow in any one year. It does not seem possible that a whole populace could be supported by whatever food the untended land would produce by itself. At any rate, this commandment should not be interpreted as simply an agricultural policy of soil conservation, nor as just provision for the poor; it reflects the idea that the land belongs to YHWH and must be returned to him. This idea is made more explicit in the establishment of the jubilee year every 50 years (Lev. 25).

Verses 12-13 establish the Sabbath day although the word "Sabbath" does not occur.

Verse 13 prohibits the worship of other gods. Israel would later proclaim that YHWH is the only God. In the New Testament Paul says, "we know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one. . . .'" We should not, however, assume such a radical monotheistic faith at the early stage of Israelite development during which this code was formulated. Other gods were assumed to exist for other nations, but YHWH alone was to be worshiped by Israel. This kind of belief is called henotheism—while there is only one God for the nation, it does not necessarily mean that only one God exists.

Verses 14-17 set up the liturgical calendar for the year, with the three feasts: unleavened bread; harvest, also called the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, since it came fifty days after unleavened bread (in about June); and ingathering, also called tabernacles or booths. These feasts occur in all the codes, but note that here Passover is not mentioned at all. It is joined directly to unleavened bread, and the two are celebrated almost as one feast.

Verse 18a, prohibiting the offering of leavened bread with the blood of the sacrifice, is difficult to understand. It may somehow be related to the fact that leaven (yeast) is regarded as life, as is blood, but why the two symbols should not be mixed we do not know. Verse 18b, prohibiting keeping the fat of the offering until the morning, probably means that the consecrated food of the sacrifice would be defiled if it remained past the holy day.

Verse 19a, the offering of the first fruits of the ground, is, as was the similar injunction in 22:29, a recognition that all food comes from YHWH. Verse 19b, as noted earlier, prohibits a Canaanite practice.

The Holiness Code

Let us now look at the Holiness Code, which dates from about two hundred years after the Covenant Code. We see how greatly expanded casuistic law has become and how much more attention is given to the details of the cultic rules.

Leviticus 17-26

Leviticus 17 describes any slaughter of any animal as a sacred act. Remember that in Genesis human beings were first forbidden to take any life at all, since life is sacred to God. Only after the Flood was man given permission to eat meat, but even then the blood was not to be eaten, for the blood is the life (Gen. 9:4). Whenever anyone slaughters an animal for food, it is to be done as a peace offering, an offering which continues and strengthens the bond between YHWH and Israel. (This differs from a sin offering or a guilt offering, each of which attempts to restore that bond when it has been severed.) The blood is to be sprinkled on the altar and on the door of the "tent of meeting," and the fat burnt as an offering to YHWH. This regulation assumes the presence of priests and sanctuaries throughout the land, wherever the people lived. (In the reform which was conducted under King Josiah, all sacrificial acts were ordered to be carried out in the central shrine; this was an attempt to control the cultus by taking it away from the "high places," sanctuaries which were often originally Canaanite holy places and in which Baal worship continued to contami- nate the worship of YHWH. The Deuteronomic Code, therefore, had to secularize the slaughtering of animals for food, denying that such acts were sacred, sacrificial

actions, since it was impossible for people to travel from all over the kingdom to the central shrine every time they wanted to slaughter an animal.) The tone of holiness is set in Lev. 18. Israel is not to follow the practices of Egypt or of Canaan—it is to follow the statutes and ordinances of YHWH. Why? Because "I am YHWH!" (18:5) The people are holy to YHWH, and this is sufficient reason or motivation for keeping the Law. Leviticus 19:2 states it categorically: "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy."

Yellow highlightingHoliness does not mean moral uprightness or piety, though these characteristics flow from being holy to YHWH, the righteous God. Holiness means being set apart from the rest of the world. Actions, therefore, which would contaminate a person or a holy thing are forbidden. Leviticus 18 lists various sexual practices which profane a person: incest, intercourse during a woman's menstrual period, adultery, male homosexual contact, and sexual contact with animals. These are forbidden, not because they are harmful to society, nor because they are "unnatural acts"—these are not issues here. The command is "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves" (18:24-25). The concern is that Israel be radically distinct (holy) from the Canaanites, giving this code the appearance of coming from a time in which Yahwism was being corrupted by Canaanite influences.

We have drawn attention to Lev. 19:18—"love your neighbor as yourself." This entire chapter, with its lofty concern for the poor, for justice, and for the sojourner, is motivated by the idea of holiness. The command in vv. 9-10, that something of the crops be left for the poor and the sojourner, sanctifies a long-standing Canaanite practice by transferring its meaning from appeasing the gods and the demons to a concern for those for whom YHWH cares. The people of YHWH are generally to eschew all Canaanite practices, however, for they are set apart from that world in particular. Eating blood, practicing witchcraft, marking the hair, beard, or body after the custom of the Canaanites—all would result in making Israelites indistinguishable from the pagans (vv. 26-28).

Leviticus 21-22 describes the holiness of the priests. Their upkeep is provided by giving them certain parts of each sacrifice. They are not only to avoid the kinds of contamination that must be avoided by every Israelite, but also to keep their domain—the sanctuaries and the sacred things in them—separate from the people themselves (22:3). So separated as a group which is especially holy to YHWH, the priests are to act as a kind of "buffer zone" between the Holy God and the people. The holiness of YHWH carries with it the awesome power of the divine which cannot be endured by humankind. To approach too near to God's holiness would

destroy one, unless one's whole life were set apart for this sacred function.

Leviticus 23 describes the liturgical calendar. As in the Covenant Code in Exodus, three great festivals are commanded annually in addition to the Sabbath every seventh day. In this code Passover is once again joined to the feast of unleavened bread (23:5-6). The feast of harvest (weeks or Pentecost) is described in vv. 9-21.

The practice of "waving" the offerings was apparently a movement of the offering toward the altar and back again to the priest—an acting out of a sharing of the food between YHWH and his people. Verses 23-25 describe a period of several days in which different cultic acts are put together. First, in the seventh month (around September-October) the first day is to be announced with a blast of a trumpet or ram's horn. In the old calendar before the Exile, the new year began in the spring, so Passover and unleavened bread were in the "first" month; under a newer calendar, influenced by Babylonian usage, the year came to begin in the fall. So the blowing of the trumpet at the first new moon in the fall marked the beginning of the new year. The tenth day of that month was (and is) the day of atonement (Yom Kippur). The Holiness Code, and even more the Priestly Code, show increasing concern with the problem of restoring a right relationship between Israel and YHWH. This concern does not indicate a repudiation of the earlier confidence shown in the exodus narrative and assumed in the Covenant Code, that YHWH has called Israel in spite of her unworthiness, but it does show an increased awareness of the awesome holiness of YHWH. The countless (even unavoidable) acts which transgressed this holiness evidently made the people feel an increasing need to atone (become reconciled) before God.

The feast of booths (tabernacles) followed on the fifteenth day of the new year. This had been and remained a fall harvest festival, but the huts or platforms which harvesters used have here become symbols commemorating the Exodus: "You shall live in booths for seven days. . . that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (23:42-43). The power of the Exodus as a central symbol in Israel's life is once again demonstrated. Even as the Israelites take over feasts drawn from Canaanite agricultural rites, they relate these to the event of the Exodus. Not only that, but their own earlier pattern of three festivals, which the Covenant Code presents, is retained by combining Passover and the feast of unleavened bread and by assimilating the new year's trumpet feast and the day of atonement into the feast of booths.

The sabbatical years and the jubilee years mentioned in the Covenant Code are more fully developed in Lev. 25. This reflects once again the notion that all the land belongs to YHWH and that therefore it cannot be held forever by anyone.

Leviticus 1-16, 27

Numbers 1-10 The Priestly Code

Only a few comments are necessary to point up differences between this and the other codes. In general, we can note that in the Priestly Code matters which were referred to only by title in the earlier codes are spelled out in great detail; we can also see P's concern to assert the importance of Aaron as the rightful source of legitimate priesthood and the related concern to make clear the position of the Levites. Because the Priestly Code was edited into the version we now have during and after the Exile (when there was no temple) we see another reason for its great detail. Priests could no longer be trained by apprenticeship; thus detailed instructions would enable new priests to be trained once Israel had a temple again.

First, notice the extensive detail given in Lev. 3-4 for the performance of the peace offering and the sin offering sacrifices. Other sacrifices are also described in much

detail, but these two serve to give a picture of typical sacrifices. The amount of detail given is understandable when we realize that P is trying to provide for the restitution of temple worship in Jerusalem after the Exile. The rite must be purified of any foreign elements which may have crept into it while the Jewish leaders were in captivity in Babylon, and, in order to prevent further offenses against YHWH which might call for still more punishment, the rites must be done absolutely correctly! Concern that sin might cause another judgment such as the Exile motivated the Priestly circle to make certain that no sin, not even unknown ones, could come between the people and YHWH. In addition to sins that were intentionally committed and for which restitution as well as sacrifices must be made, sins which were unwittingly committed—usually involving ritual pollution or other cultic offenses—also had to be made right by sin offerings. Beyond this, even the sins of which a person was completely unaware could result in judgment. How could one know that a sin offering was required, if one did not know that a sin had been committed? Arguing from effect to cause, it was assumed that if a person suffered ill fortune or ill health, this was a punishment for sin, known or unknown. The Book of Job takes this assumption as its major target of criticism. Moreover, when the sacrificial cultus is used to deal with sins for which no change of heart or of action is possible, the sacrificial system tends to become mechanical and automatic—a feature which was often criticized by the prophets, by Jesus, and by many Christian reformers when the same tendency was perceived in Christian worship.

A few words should be said about the dietary rules we find in Leviticus 11. It is difficult for us to appreciate how important for Judaism these food laws were—and for many, still are. This has to do with the matter of "clean," and "unclean," which refers not to sanitary cleanliness but to religious purity before God. Whatever is "unclean" contaminates or defiles a person and thereby hampers the relation to God. Uncleanness is also contagious; it can even be transmitted indirectly by a dish which has contained unclean food. Obviously, food laws had to be worked out carefully. For Jews, "maintaining the laws of purity was also an important way of preserving national identity." As Leander Keck points out, "Christianized Jews took it for granted that believing in Jesus did not cancel the obligation to observe these laws" (The New Testament Experience of Faith, p. 43), but others in the early church understood Jesus' words (Mark. 7:15) to mean that the food laws of the Old Testament no longer mattered at all. If nothing defiles a person as it enters his or her mouth, it cannot matter what one eats. As Mark 7:19 has it, "Thus he declared all foods clean." In fact, Jesus is almost certainly speaking here not of dietary laws but of the Pharisaic requirement to wash hands before eating. Nevertheless, these dietary laws became a matter of contention in the early church. They have also led to difficulties between Christians and Jews, so that eventually, in an attempt to break down barriers, founders of Reformed Judaism were led to rethink the question of dietary observance.

The description of the cultic observance of the day of atonement also needs some comment. Two goats are mentioned in Lev. 16, one of which is to be sacrificed to YHWH and the other set loose to run into the wilderness. Casting lots determines

which goat has been selected by YHWH for which purpose. The sacrificial goat is a sin-offering for the people. The other goat, through the laying-on of the hands of the priest, bears all the sins of the people and carries them out into the desert so that they may no longer exist in Israel! Azazel (pronounced ah-ZAH-zale), to whom the goat bearing the sins of the people is sent, is probably an ancient desert demon, though much later Jewish tradition understood him as a fallen angel. The live goat sent off to Azazel is the scapegoat. (This is a word often used today to refer to someone who is "sacrificed" in the place of the guilty person, someone who suffers the penalty which would rightly fall on someone else; this is, in a sense, a misappropriation of the term, since the scapegoat was the one that was not sacrificed, though it is true it does bear the sins of others.)

Numbers 6 describes the rules for a Nazirite. The name comes from the Hebrew nazir, which means "separate"; therefore a Nazirite is a person who is set apart from the rest of society, a man or woman taking special vows, rather like a monk or nun. The Nazirite movement was a protest against the corruption of Israelite life by the influence of the Canaanite cults. The Nazirite abstained from alcohol—even from grapes in any form—and from anything that might bring ritual pollution, even those things for which cleansing acts had been provided. As the story of Samson in the Book of Judges shows, the hair was not cut or shaved while the Nazirite's vows were being observed; indeed, cutting the hair was a sign that some polluting event had taken place which had broken the vow.

Such practice did not end with the time of Samson. The Old Testament apocrypha (I Maccabees 3:49), dealing with the period around 168-166 BCE, refers to Nazirites. In Luke 1:15, the song with which the angel announces to Zechariah that he will beget a son—John the Baptist—may be alluding to the Nazirite vow. Acts 18:18 and 21:24-26 have Paul taking the vow for a period of seven days. Thus the Nazirite practices continued at least until early Christian times. Indeed, the motivation for this group, namely the conviction that society at large has broken faith with its basic underlying principles, has operated in most cultures with similar results: the monastic movement in Christianity and the Buddha within Hinduism are two examples. Rosemary Reuther's book The Radical Kingdom is an excellent and illuminating study of some of these movements.

Numbers 6:24-26 is the "Aaronic Blessing," which is often used in Christian worship though usually with an ending, such as "this day and forevermore," added. It was probably used in the temple worship, and, like every blessing in the Old Testament, was assumed to accomplish the blessing in a material as well as a "spiritual" sense.

Numbers 8 describes the "setting apart" of the Levites and defines their duties. The Levites—and Moses and Aaron were, according to tradition, from the tribe of Levi—were the local priests, scattered throughout the tribes of Israel. When sacrificial worship later became centralized in one national shrine, the temple priests already at the central shrine did not want all the rural priests flocking in and taking a large share of the temple proceeds, which were the equivalent of a salary for the priesthood. So these "levitical" priests of the countryside became a secondary, aux-

iliary group of temple assistants. Thus, in the parable of the good Samaritan, when both a priest and a Levite pass by on the other side, the whole of the temple cultus is represented; finally the Law is left to a ritually unclean Samaritan to fulfill. From this broad survey of Old Testament law, certain points emerge. Although the law became very complex, its clear function always was to provide a structure for the life of the nation, to provide protection to the people against the destruction their sin would inevitably bring about before the holiness of YHWH, and to provide a maximum degree of justice for all the people.

The prophets denounce many of the misuses of the cult; they insist that YHWH demands righteousness, not sacrifices. Still, they should not be seen as opposing the sacrificial system and the priests as such. It will be because the people do not obey the law and do not carry out the cult as the Law demands, but rather go through its external actions only, that the prophets will pronounce YHWH's judgment. Prophet versus priest, or law versus grace—neither is a true conflict. The Law must be seen as given by grace, and the prophets as calling for a more strict observance of the true spirit of the cult.

Jesus says that he did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it: "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Paul frequently appears to be rejecting the Law (Romans 3:20, 7:6), but the context of his writings shows that it is largely a mistaken use of it that he condemns. Finally, obedience to the Law does not make one worthy of God's grace. Nothing can do that, and all attempts at it are doomed in advance to frustration.

End of Chapter

>

Bargaining with Godback

But Abram did, for Sodom and Gomorrah.

>

Israeli law[back]

sic. I believe they revived the death penalty specially for Adolf Eichmann. But I'm being silly - no doubt the point is valid for Israelite law.

>

Sacrifices to any other god except YHWHback

Reminds you a bit of Islam, doesn't it?

>

Iconoclasmback

Iconoclasm began as a reaction to Islam. Muslims were everywhere gaining territory from Christians, and they didn't represent the human form in their art. So the thought was - maybe they're on to something.

>

Care between children and parentsback

As we say, "Be nice to your children. They'll pick your nursing home."

>

Adultery/fornicationback

So is fornication OK?

>

Become one withback

C.S. Lewis suggests (in the *Screwtape Letters*, if I remember) that ***any*** act of sexual congress sets up an eternal relationship between the two people involved. Let's hope he's wrong.

>

Holiness - radical differenceback

We could discuss this.

>

So separated[back]

As opposed to what was done by early but not later Christians.

>

Not sentimental[back]

Does this remind you of 1 Corinthians 13? I think we lost some clarity in the contemporary translations which change "charity" into "love."

>

Questionalbe morals, but... back

Oh please!

>