

# A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

*Chapter 9 excerpts*

Consecrating a People  
Set Apart for Solidarity

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David A. Brondos



Comunidad Teológica de México    Theological Community of Mexico  
Ciudad de México                      Mexico City

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Contrary to most contemporary interpretations of the sacrificial prescriptions and imagery that we encounter throughout the Hebrew Bible, behind those prescriptions and that imagery is a concern, not for some type of need grounded in God's holy and righteous nature, but for God's people to be consecrated to a way of life that would enable them to enjoy the well-being he desired for all. What God sought was that his people be holy and purify themselves from behavior that did them harm, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs*.

## CONSECRATING A PEOPLE SET APART FOR SOLIDARITY

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the notion that the God of Israel had commanded his people to present sacrificial offerings and carry out sacrificial rites in order that he might be enabled to tolerate their sin, guilt, and impurity as he dwelled among them to bless them must be rejected as foreign to biblical thought. Nothing in the world he had created prevented or impeded him from acting in any way he desired at any time or making himself present anywhere he wished among sinful, impure, and imperfect human beings. What stood in the way of his efforts and commitment to fill the lives of his people with the good things he intended for them was not anything in him or his nature but rather their failure and refusal to practice justice, righteousness, love, and solidarity in accordance with his will.

In biblical thought, therefore, the challenge that God constantly faces is that of bringing his people to be as fully dedicated and consecrated to their wholeness and well-being as he is. It was this that he sought to accomplish by means of the sacrificial worship he had ordained in the Torah. The many different aspects of that worship were designed to contribute to that objective by reinforcing among his people certain key beliefs and practices and reminding them that he had chosen them and set them apart as his own out of love for them. At the same time, because it was important for them to put away the behaviors that undermined and destroyed their well-being, he had given them prescriptions that would lead them to examine and evaluate their conduct continuously so as to identify and correct anything that might cause them harm. Above all else, however, what he sought was that they might consecrate themselves to a way of life that would enable them not only to obtain the blessing he had pronounced on them in Abraham's day but also to serve as his instrument for blessing all of the families of the earth. In order for that to happen, it was necessary for all to be brought to look to him as a God who was like no other, fully consecrated to nothing else but the well-being of all of his creatures without exception.

### PUTTING AWAY SIN THROUGH SACRIFICE

Once it is recognized that in biblical thought the objective of Israel's God was to bring about in his people the way of life necessary for them to enjoy the well-being and wholeness he desired for all, the offering of sacrifice in general

as well as the offering of sacrifices for sin in particular must be understood as having the same objective. Rather than being designed to satisfy the demands of God's justice or holiness in order to make it possible for God to bless, forgive, and save people, the sacrificial worship prescribed in the Torah was thought to have the purpose of promoting among God's people the commitment to living in the way he had commanded for the good of all. Like all of the other commandments God had given, the commandments regarding sacrifices for sin and the prescriptions regarding purity were viewed as an expression of God's love for his people rather than being rooted in a concern for himself or the desires and needs of his holy and righteous nature. That love had led him to prescribe a series of sacrificial practices and rites aimed at keeping their commitment to obeying him firm and strong as well as restoring and renewing that commitment in them when they fell into ways of thinking and behaving that did them and others harm.

The commandments regarding sacrifices for sin and the regulations regarding purity helped accomplish that objective in several ways. Like the system of sacrificial worship in general, those commandments and regulations led the people to reflect continually on certain truths regarding God, his loving intentions for them, their identity as his people, and the manner in which they were to relate to him and one another for their own happiness and well-being. They also served as a means by which the people were regularly brought to examine and evaluate their ways of thinking and behaving so as to see if they were observing carefully all that God had commanded. If they had committed some type of injustice or wrongdoing, for their own good and that of others it was important for them to acknowledge their fault, ask for forgiveness, do what was necessary to rectify the harm they had done to the extent that this was possible, and commit themselves anew to obeying the good commandments given by God. Because these things promoted justice and well-being for all, they benefited both the persons who had acted contrary to God's will by bringing them back into conformity with God's commandments as well as those who had been harmed by their injustice or wrongdoing. At the same time, they benefited and strengthened the community as a whole by restoring healthy relationships within it. In addition, those sacrifices allowed the people to express in concrete and palpable ways their renewed commitment to living in the way that God had commanded so that they might enjoy God's blessings of life and well-being.

God's command for the people to offer up sacrifices for unintentional or inadvertent sins made it especially important for the people to pay close attention to their behavior. In order to determine whether or not they had fallen into some type of sin without realizing it, they not only had to examine themselves individually but also had to look to one another for help. In this way, the commandments regarding purification and reparation offerings also served to promote a greater sense of community and solidarity among the people. Because at times these offerings were to be presented not only by individuals but by larger groups of people and entire communities, they brought

the people to reflect on individual violations of God's commandments as well as the collective behavior of communities and the people as a whole.

The prescriptions regarding the reparation offerings also promoted the practice of justice and righteousness among the people. According to these prescriptions, those who had wrongly taken money or property from another person were not only to restore what they had taken but also to add further compensation (Lev 5:14–6:7). This practice not only served as a deterrent but also reinforced the idea that sincere repentance for wrongdoing had to take the form of doing whatever one could to undo the damage caused by that wrongdoing. People could hardly be considered to be truly repentant for the wrongs and injustices they had committed and seek God's forgiveness for those wrongs and injustices if they did not act to correct them when they had the opportunity to do so.

Sacrifices for sin were thus a means that God had graciously prescribed for his people to be strengthened in their obedience to God's commandments for their own good. By presenting an offering for sin, those who had sinned acknowledged openly their sin as well as their repentance and their renewed commitment to returning to the way of life that God had commanded. Obviously, there was a cost involved in presenting such an offering. Those who showed themselves willing to assume that cost were at the same time recognizing that they had sinned and manifesting concretely their petition for forgiveness and acceptance within the community of God's people again, as well as their intention to avoid sinning in the same way in the future. It was therefore not the offerings themselves that were thought to please God or obtain his approval and forgiveness but rather the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, the spirit of repentance, the willingness to make reparation, and the renewed commitment to God's will that those who had sinned expressed by making the effort and assuming the cost to present a sacrifice for sin.

According to the prescriptions in Leviticus, in some cases the transgression for which a purification offering was to be presented had to do with the violation of a prescription related to the sacrificial rites themselves or some regulation regarding purity rather than any type of moral wrongdoing. While it might appear that such offenses were of less importance, it must be remembered that everything related to the sacrificial worship of Israel's God contributed to the practice of justice and righteousness among the people not only directly but also indirectly by reminding them of certain truths and reinforcing certain beliefs and practices. If the prescribed rites were to convey properly the truths, ideas, and symbolic meanings associated with them, it was important to observe them in the way that God had commanded. While in some cases the precise meanings of certain aspects of these rites may not have been evident or clear to those participating in them, in those cases their faithful adherence to those rites manifested a willingness to submit obediently to what God had commanded out of faith in him even when they did not fully comprehend the reasons for which God had given certain commandments.

Like the other sacrificial rites that God had prescribed in the Torah, the rites associated with the sacrifices for sin were thought to be full of symbolic meanings and to convey many important truths. Although the rite in which the offerers laid their hand on the head of an animal that they were presenting for sacrifice was prescribed for all of the different types of sacrificial offerings, when it was carried out in connection with sacrifices for sin it may have had a significance or symbolism that was tied to these sacrifices in particular. In addition to indicating that the animal was theirs, those who laid their hands on the animal may have understood themselves to be identifying in some way with its death, perhaps to symbolize that they too were putting to death their sinful self or the sins they had committed. The animal's slaughter at the hands of the offerers and the burning of part of its remains on the altar as an offering to God may similarly have symbolized some type of death to their sin or to the way of being that had led to the sin they committed, as well as a recognition of the gravity of failing to act in accordance with God's commandments and the price that one paid for that failure. The offering of the animal's blood before the symbols of God's presence as well as its disposal at the base of the altar may have represented the rededication of the life of the offerers to God as well as an acknowledgment that their life belonged to him, as did the life of all living beings. The rites with blood may even have symbolized the purification of the sanctuary from the pollution of the people's sins in the way that Jacob Milgrom proposed, even though this purification would not have been thought to be effected by sacrificial blood in a literal or physical sense. In fact, there is no reason to suppose that all of these rites meant exactly the same thing for all of the different people who participated in them or that the meanings ascribed to them remained constant over time. As symbolic acts, they could have had many different meanings for different people at different times.

What must be stressed, however, is precisely that these rites were *symbolic* in nature. Their power and impact was due, not to the manipulation or transmission of invisible substances or forces, but to the truths, ideas, and meanings that they conveyed to those who participated in them, as well as the manner in which they allowed the participants to experience and express in tangible and concrete ways different aspects of their relationships with God and one another. It was one thing for the offerers to ask God for forgiveness verbally and another to do so by means of an offering that manifested palpably and visibly the sincerity and earnestness of their petition. It was one thing to rededicate their lives to God in thoughts and words and another to do so by offering up to God a costly animal victim and watching as its blood was drained from its carcass, sprinkled toward the symbols of God's presence, and poured out at the base of the altar. It was one thing to hear or believe that one had been cleansed of one's sins and forgiven by God and another to experience the sensation of having that cleansing and forgiveness pervade throughout one's body as well as one's soul as a result of having involved

one's whole being in the sacrificial rites performed. Such rites had a profound impact on those who participated in them because of the symbolisms they communicated and the transformative power inherent in those symbolisms. It was precisely their transformative power and the impact that they had on the offerers that was thought to have led God to prescribe such rites for his people as a means to strengthening them in their commitment and dedication to all that he had commanded them out of love for them.

Of course, the sacrifices for sin served other purposes as well. Because the priests and Levites retained certain portions of the offerings presented, those offerings were means by which the people provided them with the support they needed to continue to carry out their ministry on behalf of others. The participation of the priests in the rites emphasized their role as mediators between the people and God and reinforced their authority among the people so that they might lead and guide the people in their daily life. In addition to strengthening observance of the commandments among the people in general, those rites served as a deterrent to their falling into sins that might require similar sacrifices in accordance with the law. In fact, it would be impossible to state in any exhaustive manner the meanings associated with the various rites involved and the different ways in which those rites served to bring about in the people a greater commitment to living as God's own and to renew in them the obedience necessary for them to attain the blessings that God desired to pour out on them.

### *Reconsidering Expiation, Propitiation, and Atonement*

The Hebrew verb *kipper* as well as the concepts of purification, expiation, and propitiation should be understood against the background of all of the ideas just considered. While those on whose behalf a purification offering was presented to God were said to be cleansed or purified, it must be stressed that it was not the sacrifice itself or the rites associated with it that were seen as resulting in their cleansing or purification but rather their repentance and renewed commitment to the way of life laid out in God's commandments. Just as those who presented purification offerings after they had been cleansed of skin diseases or some other type of physical impurity had to be clean or pure *before* the offering was presented on their behalf, so also those who presented sacrifices for sin had to be cleansed and purified from their sinful manner of thinking and acting before their sacrifices were offered.

It was therefore not the offering itself that cleansed or purified those on whose behalf it was presented. Rather, the offering was a means by which those who had been cleansed and purified from their sinful conduct and their disobedience to God's will were accepted as clean and pure within the community of God's people once again and were declared to be forgiven. The offerings were not thought to produce some type of salvific "effect" by means of the "mechanics" involved or their *modus operandi*. Rather, the offerings for sin constituted *a petition to God* for forgiveness, acceptance, cleansing, and

purification. And the basis upon which God was thought to grant these things was precisely what he saw in the hearts and lives of those on whose behalf those offerings were presented, namely, the intention to turn back to him in loving obedience that the offerers were expressing visibly and concretely by means of their offerings.

Because the cleansing and purification that were associated with sacrifices that were offered for actions that ran contrary to God's will for justice and righteousness did not have to do with questions of bodily purities and impurities, in a sense they were to be understood metaphorically or spiritually. What was involved was a cleansing or purification of people's hearts, minds, lives, and behavior. These things had not become polluted in a literal or physical sense. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that biblical thought is not characterized by the type of marked distinction between the physical and the spiritual that was common in Hellenistic thought. The cleansing or purification of people's hearts, minds, and souls was at the same time understood in terms of a cleansing and purification of their bodies and their entire being. It was *the whole person* that was thought to be cleansed by means of the repentance that they expressed by means of their sacrificial offering. For this reason, it was customary for those who were going to enter into the temple precincts to wash or bathe themselves. This washing and bathing represented not only an outward cleansing but a purification of one's heart and soul as well.

By means of the sacrifices for sin, therefore, those who had done something that had made them unacceptable within the community or had become physically impure in some manner manifested publicly that they had been cleansed from whatever had made them impure or unclean in order to be reincorporated into the community. This was true whether an individual's impurity or uncleanness was physical or bodily or instead involved actions or behaviors that violated what God had commanded. The willingness to present a sacrifice manifested one's acknowledgment that one had been unclean in either a physical or spiritual sense as well as one's desire to be accepted as pure and clean by others within the community once more. Before those who had become unclean in either of these senses were allowed to present their offering, it was necessary for the priest to determine whether they had in fact been purified of their uncleanness, whether in body or in soul. If the priest determined that such was the case, he gave his approval to the offering. The rite thus constituted a petition for acceptance on behalf of those who presented the offering while also signifying the acceptance of that petition on the part of the community as represented by the priest.

At the same time, the fulfillment of the rite under the priest's supervision signified God's acceptance of that petition as well. For that reason, in the prescriptions found in Leviticus it is repeatedly affirmed that when the priest has made purification for the offerers, they shall be forgiven.<sup>1</sup> This forgiveness included both that of God as well as that of the community. The basis for

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1. See Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19:22; Num 15:25-28.



this forgiveness, however, was not the rite itself but the inward and outward purification that had taken place in the offerers. Ultimately, the condition for their acceptance by God and the community was not the sacrificial offering or rite itself but that which it expressed, namely, the cleanness and purity in body and soul to which they had been restored.

According to this understanding of the sacrifices for sin, the basic idea expressed by means of the rites involved was that of becoming acceptable once again after something had happened to render one *unacceptable* in some way. Obviously, the practice of sin and injustice made one unacceptable, independently of whether it was intentional or not, because sin and injustice undermine and destroy human well-being. However, some type of malady or physical impurity could also render one unacceptable within the community, especially when that impurity might affect the members of the community or do them harm. Those who had contracted some type of skin disease that was contagious needed to be isolated from others for their sake, while a woman who had given birth had to be isolated from others for her own sake, so that her body might heal after the trauma it had endured. In these cases, it was not acceptable for certain persons to be in contact with others, not because those persons had done anything wrong, but simply because such contact might be harmful in some way to them or to others.

No matter what had happened to make a person unacceptable, therefore, something had to be done in order to make that person acceptable once again. If some type of wrongdoing or injustice had been committed, those who had committed it were required to acknowledge it, do whatever they could to make it right—especially by making reparation if possible—and commit themselves to avoiding such behavior in the future so as to live in ways that would permit them and others to enjoy the well-being that God desired for all. However, for the good of the community of which they formed part, they were to do these things not simply in their heart but *publicly*, so as to manifest to the other members of the community their repentance and their renewed commitment to living in conformity with God's commandments. They did so by offering a sacrifice and carrying out the prescribed rites at the sanctuary in the sight of others *after* they had taken all of the steps necessary to be cleansed of the impurity or uncleanness that had resulted from their sin in a figurative or metaphorical sense. In the same way, when they had contracted some type of physical impurity, after they had become cleansed by allowing a natural or physical process of cleansing to take place on its own or by taking steps to cleanse themselves actively in the way that the law prescribed, they then offered a sacrifice of expiation so that they might be accepted within the community once more. Strictly speaking, however, it was not the sacrificial offering or the rite itself that was thought to cleanse them or render them acceptable, but that which had taken place *prior* to the offering and rite and which was subsequently expressed by means of the offering and rite.

When properly understood, the terminology of expiation can be regarded as reflecting accurately the biblical understanding of the process of purification through sacrificial offerings and rites, as long as the idea that those offerings and rites in themselves made atonement or amends for sin is avoided. In a sense, of course, those who made expiation for their sins were making amends or reparation for their sins and transgressions in that they were putting them in the past and doing what was necessary to set things right and restore their relationships with God and others within the community of which they formed part. If the language of atonement is understood in this sense, it may be considered to reflect faithfully biblical thought as well. It is important to stress, however, that what set things right was not the offering itself or the sacrificial rites performed but the willingness of those who had sinned or transgressed to acknowledge their sin or transgression and divorce themselves from it, as well as their promise to avoid sinning or transgressing in the same manner in the future and their commitment to submit obediently once more to God's commandments.

For this reason, it would be a mistake to understand the sacrifices for sin in terms of the payment of some type of penalty or ransom for the sins that had been committed. What set things right was not the sacrificial offering itself but the renewed spirit of obedience to God's will of which it was an expression. What interested God was that justice and wholeness be restored in the community and not simply that some penalty be inflicted on those who had sinned or that some ransom payment be made by them or on their behalf. That objective could be accomplished only by means of the renewed spirit of obedience of which the sacrifices for sin were to serve as a visible and concrete expression. When that spirit was manifested by means of a sacrifice for sin, the sacrifice might be said to make expiation or perhaps even atone for sin, yet strictly speaking this was not true of the sacrifice itself but only of the spirit with which it was offered. What made the offerers pure and clean in God's sight was not the sacrificial offering or rite but the fact that they had purified themselves and their lives from the uncleanness that had been a threat to their own well-being and that of others within the community. Furthermore, this purification and cleansing was not something that they offered God in order to expiate or atone for their sins, since it was not intended to compensate or make up for the sin they had committed. Because it was the community that concerned God rather than his own justice or holiness, the purification and cleansing of the offerers was something that he desired and demanded *not for his own sake but for theirs and for that of the community as a whole*. The same was true of the offering for sin that was to symbolize that purification and cleansing and serve as a means by which the offerers manifested that it had truly taken place.

Ultimately, then, what expiated sin was the repentance and renewed commitment to obedience on the part of those who offered sacrifices for sin. The same must be said with regard to the concept of propitiation. Strictly speaking, what propitiated God or appeased his wrath was not the sacrificial

offering or rite itself but the spirit of repentance and renewed obedience of which it was to serve as a visible and tangible expression. Of course, this spirit was manifested not only by means of the offering but also in the form of the spoken or unspoken prayer that accompanied it. It was this idea that led those who composed the Septuagint to use the verbs *exilaskesthai* and *hilaskesthai* to translate the Hebrew *kipper* and led St. Jerome to translate this term with the Latin verbs *orare*, *rogare*, *propitiare*, and *expiare* in the Vulgate, since these terms communicate the idea of presenting prayers and petitions to God seeking his favor and forgiveness. In this regard, it is significant to note that when Josephus summarizes in his own words the prayer that Solomon presented to God on the occasion of the dedication of the temple, he attributes to Solomon the idea that it is the prayer or voice of the offerers that propitiates God rather than their sacrificial offerings per se: “For with what else is it more appropriate for us to put away your wrath when you are angry and displeased and be restored to your favor than by the voice that we have from the air and that we know ascends through the air again?” (*Ant.* 8.112). What put away God’s wrath was the prayer that was articulated by means of a sacrificial offering and together with it, as long as that prayer was sincere and heartfelt.

It is also important to stress that sacrifices for sin were not intended to address the problem of *guilt* in relation to God in the manner that this has traditionally been understood. According to the pagan conceptions of justice that we have considered in Chapter 4, the obstacle that prevented human beings from enjoying the favor of the gods was guilt, and the manner in which this obstacle was removed was by means of its punishment. To understand sacrifices for sin in that manner would involve claiming that the God of Israel acted in the same way and for the same reasons that the pagan gods of the nations did, demanding that those who had disobeyed him offer him a sacrifice as a penalty or payment for having angered or offended him. When those who had offered up a sacrifice for sin were forgiven, they were not thought to be declared free of guilt or “not guilty.” In reality, they *were* guilty of having acted contrary to God’s will, and nothing could change this, yet what interested God was not assigning or addressing guilt but rather seeing people cleansed of their sinful behaviors. The basis upon which people sought to be declared and accepted as clean and pure by God was not the sacrifice for sin that they had presented but the cleansing and purification of their hearts, minds, souls, and bodies of which their sacrifice was to be an expression. Similarly, the purpose of sacrifices for sin was not to make it possible for God to tolerate the people’s sinfulness or declare them clean in a forensic sense but rather to bring and enable them to be cleansed and purified from the sinful behavior that God refused to tolerate for their own good out of love for them.

Biblical scholars have often debated the question of whether all sacrifices were thought to make expiation and obtain the forgiveness of sins. In the prescriptions found in the Pentateuch, the only sacrifices that are said to be presented in response to sinful actions and to require that a confession of sin

or guilt be made prior to their presentation are the offerings for sin. In Lev 1:4 and 9:7, however, burnt offerings are also said to make expiation. According to Lev 16:10, the same was true of the rite with the goat for Azazel, even though the goat was not sacrificed to God.

In order to address that question, it must be remembered that in biblical thought all who approach God by means of their prayers and offerings are sinful and imperfect. For that reason, it is necessary for them to acknowledge their sin and to ask him for forgiveness at the same time that they ask him to accept and grant their petitions in spite of their sinfulness and unworthiness. Of course, because what mattered to God was not their guilt for the sins they had committed but their transformation and their cleansing from the sinful behavior that did them and others harm, as they approached him with their prayers and offerings they not only sought his forgiveness but also asked that he cleanse and purify their hearts, minds, and lives.

In this sense, then, every sacrificial offering was intended to be expiatory. This was not because the offerings presented obtained God's favor, grace, or mercy by satisfying the demands of his righteousness and holiness, however, since by definition his favor, grace, and mercy were a free and unconditional gift given to all people. Whether God granted one's petition or rejected it, he was acting in love, since he was doing what he had determined to be in one's best interest and that of others as well. The reason that all sacrificial offerings were intended to be expiatory is that they were to be a means by which the offerers became cleansed of their sinfulness. What was to cleanse and purify them, however, was not the offering itself but the spirit in which they were to present it as well as their petition to God for him to do what was necessary in their life to enable them to put away their sinfulness and grow in their obedience to his will for their own good.

It is also important to stress once more that nothing prevented God from forgiving people their sins even when they did not offer up sacrifices for sin. All that was necessary to obtain God's forgiveness was to acknowledge and repent of one's sins, commit oneself once more to obeying his good commandments, and ask him for the strength, knowledge, and guidance necessary to live in accordance with his will. Out of love for his people, however, God had commanded that they offer him sacrifices for sin because he desired that the cleansing of the hearts and minds of his people be as profound and thoroughgoing as possible when they had fallen into sinful and destructive behavior. For reasons we have mentioned in the previous two chapters, the rites that God had prescribed contributed to that goal by means of the effect they had, not on God, but on those who participated in them.

For that very reason, it was regarded as important and as necessary for those who had fallen into certain forms of sinful behavior to offer up sacrifices for sin in the way that God had prescribed if they were able to do so. To fail to present an offering when the law commanded it was to act contrary to what God had ordained for the good of all. By definition, those who had

sinned could hardly manifest their renewed commitment to obeying all that God had commanded if they failed or refused to offer up the sacrifices that were included among his commandments. The same was true if they did not follow all of the procedures that he had prescribed when they presented their sacrifices. If it was said that the offering of sacrifices for sin or the shedding of blood was necessary to obtain God's forgiveness, therefore, this would have been understood in the sense just affirmed. While it would not be accurate to affirm that God was thought to have commanded such sacrifices or the shedding of sacrificial blood because these things were necessary for the demands of his holy and righteous nature to be satisfied, the fact that God had commanded that his people offer him those sacrifices and carry out the rites with sacrificial blood in the way that he had prescribed when it was possible for them to do so did make it necessary for his people to obey his command if they wished to obtain his forgiveness and acceptance once more.

### *The Cleansing of Yom Kippur*

In general terms, the rites prescribed for *Yom Kippur* were thought to fulfill the same purpose as the sacrifices for sin that were offered when people had violated some commandment of the Torah. By setting apart an entire day to examine their behavior over the previous year, acknowledge their wrongdoing, ask God for forgiveness, and participate in rites that symbolized their repentance and contrition as well as their cleansing from all of the sins that they had committed, that cleansing became a reality in the lives of the people. While they focused on the past as they reflected on their conduct and acknowledged their failure to fulfill God's good intentions for them, they did so with the future in mind, since the primary purpose was not to rid themselves of guilt but to commit themselves to putting their wrongdoing behind them in order to return more fully to the way of life that God commanded of all for their own good.

According to the prescriptions found in Leviticus 16, before carrying out any rites on behalf of others, the high priest was to make expiation for his own sins and those of his household (vv. 6-14). The idea seems to be that before the high priest intercedes for others by means of the sacrifice for sins that he is to present, he must first ask God to forgive and cleanse him from his own sins. The high priest can hardly serve as God's instrument to bring his people to acknowledge their sin and commit themselves to turning away from it if he does not first do so himself. Nor can he represent the people before God imploring his forgiveness for the people's sins with sincerity and dedication if he is not truly repentant for his own sin and wrongdoing. The priority of the high priest's offering on his own behalf no doubt had to do as well with his responsibility as the one designated by God to guide and instruct his people in the path that he had laid out for them. The purification offering that he presented for himself and his household was to symbolize the same things mentioned above in relation to the purification offerings in general, namely, his own repentance, his

that which is offered to God in itself, but the renewed commitment to living in accordance with God's will for the good of all. This renewed commitment can be manifested in many different ways and through many different means: by offering to God the blood of a victim that one has dedicated to him, by means of the half shekel, or by presenting him with some other type of material gift, such as flour, gold, jewelry, oil, or incense. Strictly speaking, however, in all of these cases what expiates sin is the offering of oneself to God of which those gifts are a concrete and palpable expression. If one can also expiate sins by putting away idolatry and injustice, fasting, honoring one's parents, assisting the needy, humbling oneself, glorifying God, embracing the truth, and practicing kindness, faithfulness, mercy, and righteousness, it is precisely because all of these things are means by which one purifies oneself from sin by offering up to God all that one is and has in order to do his will. It is this that truly interests God and obtains his forgiveness, acceptance, and blessing. These things do not therefore *substitute* for sacrifice but are simply other ways in which people might express the same dedication to God and his will that they did by means of their sacrificial offerings.

There is a sense, however, in which it can be said that sacrificial blood was thought to be necessary to make expiation for sins. God's desire to bring people to examine their behavior, acknowledge their sin, and turn away from that sin had led him to command that they present him with sacrifices for sin, since those sacrifices served as a means by which he sought to accomplish those objectives. Furthermore, due to the symbolisms involved, he had prescribed that the blood of the animal victims offered up in those rites be presented to him on the altar. Because God had commanded these things in order to promote the practice of justice and righteousness among his people, it was necessary for them to obey him by offering up sacrifices for sin when their actions called for it and by presenting to him the blood of the animals sacrificed in the way he had prescribed. Because of God's command, therefore, it was necessary for those whose sinful behavior placed them under the obligation to present him with a sacrifice for sin to do so, provided they had the means, and for the rites to be carried out in the way that God had prescribed. Only in that way could those rites fulfill the purpose for which God had given them.

The notion that blood made expiation for sins, then, should be understood in the sense that its presentation to God served as a means by which the people were to express their repentance for their sins and their earnest intention to put away those sins and return to a life of obedience. Because of its association with life, blood could be considered more precious than anything else that existed in the world, in which case there was nothing more fitting or valuable that human beings could offer to God. Due to its profound significance for human life and the many rich symbolisms that it conveyed, it was especially suited for the uses that the Mosaic law assigned to it in the sacrificial rites. What interested God was that his people offer up their lives to him

for their own good and that they turn away from everything that destroyed their lives and those of others. It was this that he desired rather than sacrificial blood *per se*. If God had commanded that blood be used in certain ways in the sacrificial rites he had prescribed for his people, it was due not to any type of power or effect that the blood had on him, but rather due to the power and effect that its use in the rites had on the people themselves by virtue of the symbolic meanings it conveyed and the deep impression that it caused on those who observed what was done with it when those rites were performed.

The commandment to avoid the consumption of blood, regard it as holy, and return it to God by pouring it out at the base of the altar or on the ground promoted the people's well-being in other ways as well. It led them to regard life as sacred and taught them that the shedding of blood was acceptable only under certain circumstances. It also reminded them that all life belonged to God and therefore that all life was to be dedicated to him as the sovereign creator of all that exists. To dedicate life to God, however, was not understood in terms of satisfying God's own needs and desires but seeking the well-being and wholeness of all of his creatures as well as everything in his creation as a whole. God's commandment regarding the use of blood therefore promoted the well-being of all by leading his people to care for all living beings and show them kindness. Even when it was necessary for human beings to take life in order to feed themselves or satisfy other needs, this was to be done in a humane manner that avoided unnecessary suffering as much as possible.

### A HOLINESS TO BE EMBRACED

According to the most common interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures and the biblical prescriptions regarding sacrifices for sin that we have considered in Chapter 8, both God's justice and God's holiness were thought to constitute the primary obstacle to human salvation, wholeness, and well-being. Supposedly, God's strict justice and his perfect righteousness made it necessary for him to demand that the sins committed by human beings receive the punishment due to them. At the same time, his perfect holiness made it impossible for him to tolerate anything or anyone that was impure or unclean. If he was to forgive, save, and bless human beings, therefore, it was necessary for him to ensure that the demands of his justice were satisfied and that the impurity generated by human sin was kept out of his presence at his sanctuary. It was for these reasons that he had commanded that his people offer him sacrifices for sin. Those sacrifices made it possible for the obstacle presented by his perfect justice and holiness to be overcome.

As we have seen in Chapter 4 of this study, the idea that justice is satisfied merely by ensuring that wrongdoing receives the punishment due to it must be considered contrary to biblical thought. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, justice can be said to exist only when there is wholeness and well-being for all. If this is what God's justice seeks, then rather than constituting an *obstacle* to human salvation, his justice is the means by which that salvation is brought

about. Only by pursuing justice in the sense of doing everything possible to ensure that human beings and his creation as a whole are able to enjoy the well-being he desires for them can he make that salvation a reality. Yet because that well-being and salvation cannot be brought about unless human beings are committed to justice and righteousness in the same way that he is, God must not only demand the same commitment of human beings but must also provide them with the guidance, instruction, and correction that they need to make that commitment theirs. In biblical thought, it was for this purpose that he had given his people Israel the commandments of the Torah, including the commandments to offer him sacrifice and to present sacrifices for sin when they fell into behaviors that undermined and destroyed their well-being rather than promoting it.

In order to understand the manner in which the biblical texts conceive of God's holiness, these same ideas must be taken as a starting point. If the concept central to the biblical understanding of holiness is that of being set apart and distinct from what is common or profane, and if the defining characteristic of the God of the Hebrew Bible is his unbending commitment to justice, wholeness, and well-being for all, then his holiness must be defined primarily in terms of this commitment above all else. What makes the God of the biblical texts holy is that he is fully and unreservedly committed to seeking the well-being and wholeness of all without exception and will not let anything stand in the way of his efforts to enable that objective to be achieved.

According to this understanding of God's holiness, it is essentially synonymous with his love. At the same time, however, the language of holiness stresses certain aspects of that love, in particular its uncompromising and demanding nature. In biblical thought, God's holiness is his intractable, obdurate, and resolute commitment to the well-being of all. To refer to God as holy is to affirm that he will not compromise, desist, or relent in his pursuit of that objective and will not tolerate anyone else compromising, desisting, or relenting in their pursuit of that objective either. What God's holiness demands is that human beings be as fully and resolutely committed to their own well-being as he is and that they be just as persistent, tenacious, and unwavering as he is in their efforts to make that well-being a reality for all without exception. For that reason, rather than constituting an *obstacle* or *impediment* to human salvation, God's holiness is a *means* to that objective. Instead of constituting something that human beings should fear, avoid, or attempt to keep their distance from, God's holiness is something that they should embrace and desire above all else. Rather than standing against them and threatening them, God's holiness seeks to bless them and therefore stands entirely in their favor.

Throughout the biblical texts, God's holiness is also closely associated with his sovereignty, power, and glory. Numerous passages describe God as holy in the sense that he is the sovereign creator and Lord of everything that exists and manifests his might by working wonders that are magnificent and



awe-inspiring.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, many passages relate God's holiness to his acts of redemption and salvation, which also display his might, power, and sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Precisely because God's holiness seeks to redeem and save, the biblical texts also associate it with his love, justice, and faithfulness as well as his special concern for the poor, needy, and downtrodden.<sup>15</sup> It is all of these things that set God far above human beings and make him so radically distinct from them. While human beings are undoubtedly to react to God's holiness with admiration, respect, and even fear, they are also called to rejoice in that holiness because it is something that seeks to do them good rather than harm.<sup>16</sup> When they contemplate God's glory and greatness as the one who is sovereign over all that exists, they may be overwhelmed and moved to keep silent or even tremble in awe, yet this is not because he is capricious, vengeful, or wrathful but because he is so exceedingly good and wonderful in every way.<sup>17</sup>

In biblical thought, therefore, the affirmation that God is not only committed to justice, wholeness, and well-being for all but is also highly exalted in power and might above all people and all things is *good* news to be received with joy and celebration. When God's people praise and glorify him for his holiness, they do so not out of compulsion or fear of retribution and punishment but gladly and spontaneously, because that holiness is synonymous not only with his steadfast love and commitment to their well-being but also the power and might he possesses to achieve that objective, no matter what obstacles may stand in his way. To say that God is holy is to say that he will stop at nothing to accomplish his loving purposes and that no power or force in the world can dissuade or deter him in his attempts to bring those purposes to pass.

At the same time and for the same reasons, however, for those who are opposed to God's loving purposes and willingly stand in the way of his commitment to well-being and wholeness for all, God's holiness does indeed constitute a threat and a motive for fear and trembling. In many passages from the Hebrew Bible, God's holiness is presented as something that may in fact do people harm. In Josh 24:19-20, for example, after the Israelites have promised to forsake all other gods and serve the God of Israel alone, Joshua's awareness that they have shown themselves time and again to be a rebellious people who forsake the God of Israel for other gods leads him to tell them: "You will not be able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you

13. See, for example, Exod 15:11; Ps 77:13-14; Isa 40:25-26; 47:10; Jer 25:30; Hab 3:2-4.

14. See, for example, Ps 111:9; Isa 41:14; 43:14-17; 45:11-12; 47:4; 48:17; 54:5.

15. See, for example, Ps 22:3-6; 68:5; 71:22; 102:18-22; Isa 5:16; 63:15-16.

16. See, for example, 1 Sam 2:1-2; 1 Chr 16:9-12; Ps 103:1-5; 105:3-5; 138:2; 145:21; Isa 12:6; 29:19.

17. See, for example, 1 Chr 16:29-31; Ps 5:7; 96:9-13; 99:1-5; Isa 55:5; 56:6-7; 60:9; Hab 2:20; Zech 2:13.

harm and consume you, after he has done you good.” Because of his holiness, God refuses to be mocked, reviled, questioned, or treated with pride and haughtiness.<sup>18</sup> That holiness leads him to take action against those who call evil good and good evil and who exalt themselves in his presence (Isa 5:18-21; Jer 50:29-32). It also leads him to strike out in anger against those who persistently reject and despise him and refuse to put away their unjust and oppressive treatment of others.<sup>19</sup> Because he is sovereign and holy, he may burn and devour like a flame all that stands in opposition to him and at times destroy both body and soul (Ps 11:4-6; Isa 10:16-18; Mic 1:2-4). Those who insist on walking contrary to his will and conspire against him, therefore, should indeed tremble before his holiness: “But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread” (Isa 8:11-13; cf. Joel 2:1-2; Hab 3:2-6).

Viewed out of context, these passages appear to present a vindictive, unforgiving, proud, and domineering God who simply wishes to impose his will on human beings by force and threatens to crush or destroy any who dare to oppose him. Such is especially the case if these passages are read on the basis of the idea that God’s concern is for himself. If he is angry and jealous and demands to be obeyed *for his own sake*, then he is hardly a good and loving God. When viewed in context and in the light of the other passages that allude to God’s holiness just considered above, however, these passages convey a very different idea. They present a God who is uncompromising and unrelenting in his love and commitment to human beings. In that case, if he refuses to be mocked, reviled, questioned, challenged, resisted, and disobeyed, it is *not for his own sake but for the sake of the human beings he loves*. For their own good, he will not allow those who have promised to serve him alone to follow other gods, practice injustice, or stand up to him in a spirit of pride and arrogance. On the contrary, he will take action against them in decisive manner, using all of his power and might, precisely because he will not let anything or anyone stand in the way of his efforts to bring people to practice the same justice, righteousness, mercy, and compassion that he does as the sovereign Lord and creator of all. Nor will he tolerate any kind of opposition or resistance to his will, which demands of human beings the same type of unconditional love that characterizes him and will settle for nothing less.

There is no denying, however, that this poses a problem for human beings. Even if they wish to be as firmly committed to their own well-being as God is and share fully God’s concern for justice and wholeness for all, their inherent sinfulness and the limitations that their nature places on them will not allow them to attain the same level of commitment and concern for these things that characterizes God. If God refuses to tolerate sin, injustice, apathy, selfishness, and destructive behavior, then no human being can ever be acceptable to him

18. See, for example, 2 Kgs 19:22; Isa 37:23; 45:9-11; Ezek 39:7.

19. See, for example, Isa 1:4; 5:24; 30:9-14; 31:1-12; Jer 25:30-31; Ezek 43:7-8.

because all people inevitably fall into these things and no one can avoid them. In that case, to some extent all must come under his wrath and judgment.

This, then, is the dilemma. If God truly loves human beings and desires their well-being, he must demand perfection of them. To accept anything less than perfection would be unloving, since it would involve ignoring or overlooking behavior that does them harm and regarding even a minimal amount of that behavior as acceptable. Harmful and destructive behavior is *never* acceptable under any circumstance, and if God is committed to human well-being he must always reject and condemn such behavior and do everything possible to eradicate it. At the same time, however, because human beings cannot avoid falling into such behavior, if God did not tolerate and accept it to some extent, he would have no choice but to destroy human beings altogether. Obviously, he cannot save human beings and seek their well-being and wholeness if he destroys them. In a sense, then, he must accept their sinful and destructive behavior at the same time that he *refuses* to accept it. He must tolerate that behavior at the same time that he *refuses* to tolerate it. He must demand that they be perfect in their practice of justice, righteousness, and solidarity while at the same time accepting their lack of perfection and their failure to practice these things as they should and must in order to attain the well-being and wholeness he desires for all.

It is for this reason that God's holiness is both a source of rejoicing and celebration for his people as well as a motive for fear and trembling. That holiness leads God to be fully and resolutely committed to doing whatever is necessary to bring about their well-being and wholeness and to make use of all of his sovereign power and might in pursuit of that end. In that regard, his holiness is an expression of his steadfast love for his people and should fill them with joy and a deep desire to praise and glorify him for being holy, as the Psalmists often do. Yet because God's holiness also demands that his people avoid any type of behavior that undermines and destroys their well-being and does them harm, it is a motive for fear and trembling at the same time, precisely because it is impossible for sinful human beings to fulfill that demand perfectly. This results in situations such as that described in Isaiah 6, where after seeing God sitting on a throne attended by seraphim who chant: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory," the prophet exclaims: "Woe is me! I am doomed, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (vv. 1-5). After one of the seraphim touches the prophet's lips with a hot coal, he tells him that his iniquity is taken away and his sin is purged (vv. 6-7).

This passage is often read on the basis of the assumption that God's justice and holiness demand that sin be punished and that sinners be consumed, destroyed, or cast far from his presence. Many read back into it the idea that God's holiness is dangerous for human beings as well. Such interpretations tend to set God's justice and holiness in opposition to his goodness and his

love for human beings. On the basis of what we have seen above, however, this passage can and should instead be read in the sense that God's demand that those who enter into his presence be clean and pure is rooted not in a concern for God himself but rather in his concern for the human beings he loves. In that case, God refuses to tolerate any type of impurity or sinfulness in the thoughts and actions of human beings such as the prophet Isaiah and the people among whom he lives *not for his own sake but for theirs*, since his steadfast love for them and his uncompromising commitment to their well-being prevent him from accepting ways of thinking and behaving that do them harm.

As the passage indicates, however, in the end God *does* accept the prophet in spite of his uncleanness and impurity while at the same time acting to purify him by means of the seraph's touch. When God asks: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?," the prophet responds: "Here am I; send me!" (Isa 6:8). While God then indicates to the prophet his intention to execute judgments on the sinful people and entrusts to him the task of preparing the people to receive those judgments, he ends by referring to a "holy seed" that will be left as a remnant (6:9-13). The idea in the passage is not that God wishes to destroy the people or inflict punishments on them in retribution for their sins, therefore, but that he intends to purify them through judgments so that those who remain will be holy and can thus constitute the basis for a new beginning.

While this passage from Isaiah alludes to the incompatibility and conflict between God's holiness and the impurity, sin, and iniquity of human beings, it also points to the manner in which that incompatibility and conflict are resolved. By means of the seraph, God both forgives and purifies the prophet. He announces his intention to purify the people through judgment as well. These two ideas must not be divorced from one another. As we have seen previously, if God wishes to accomplish his purposes among human beings, he cannot simply forgive and overlook their sinfulness, since that alone would not bring about in them the change of life necessary for them to attain the well-being he desires for them. He must also cleanse and purify them of their sinfulness and the destructive ways of thinking and behaving that make that well-being impossible. This means that rather than giving up on his demand that they abandon the ways of thinking and living that do them harm, he must persist adamantly in that demand if his loving objectives are to be accomplished in them. At the same time, he must do everything in his power to enable them to fulfill that demand by purifying their hearts and lives and enabling them to be brought into conformity with his will.

Because he is sovereign over all, however, God alone can determine when it is best to forgive and overlook the sinful behavior of human beings and when it is best to purify them through judgments and chastisements. Whether he does one or the other, in biblical thought he is acting in love. Once again, this situation leads human beings to react to his holiness, justice, and righteousness both with joy and celebration as well as with fear. On the one hand, they

will rejoice when God forgives and accepts them in spite of their sinfulness and disobedience to his will. On the other, however, they know that they are in constant need of cleansing and transformation through discipline and chastisements, and that at times this process can be painful and difficult for them. This knowledge generates fear in them, even though at the same time they are grateful to God for his efforts and commitment to purifying them of the sinful and destructive behavior that does them harm. Although they fear his judgments and chastisements, therefore, they submit to them gladly and willingly since they know that in his love and sovereignty he is doing what he considers to be best for them.

In this regard, it is important to stress that those who truly know the God of Israel and are convinced of his unconditional and uncompromising love for them desire the same things for themselves that he desires for them. Like him, they wish to be perfect and blameless in their justice, righteousness, and love. Out of love for themselves and a concern for their own well-being, they find their sinful and destructive behaviors and attitudes just as detestable and intolerable as God does. Like him, they refuse to accept, overlook, or ignore their own imperfection and impurity and for that reason insist on doing everything in their power to overcome and eradicate their practice of sin and injustice. Yet at the same time, like God himself, they have no choice but to accept and tolerate their imperfection to a great extent, since in this life they can never attain the perfection that God desires for them and that they desire for themselves. Most importantly, however, they constantly ask God not only for forgiveness but also for the cleansing necessary to leave behind the ways of thinking and acting that do them harm so as to be brought into conformity with God's will in the way that the author of Psalm 51 does. After acknowledging his sins and transgressions and imploring God's mercy and forgiveness, the Psalmist continues:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit (vv. 2, 6-7, 10-12).

These observations must be kept in mind when considering God's command for his people to be holy as he is holy.<sup>20</sup> Because God's holiness has traditionally been understood as standing in opposition to his love, among many interpreters it is common to see this command as a threat or warning. In biblical thought, however, it is an expression of God's love. In effect, God is demanding that his people consecrate themselves fully to the same thing to which he is fully consecrated, namely, their well-being and wholeness. This involves being committed to the way of life he has laid out for them for their

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20. See Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; Num 15:40.

own good by means of the instruction and commandments he has given them. If they truly love and care for themselves in the way that God does, they will value holiness and strive for it with all their being in the same way that they pursue justice and righteousness, since out of a concern for their own well-being they will want nothing more than to be perfectly holy, just, and righteous in their thinking and conduct. If holiness involves an unconditional and uncompromising commitment to that well-being and a rejection of anything that undermines it or stands in opposition to it, they will see God's demand for them to be holy as an expression of his immense love and concern for them rather than any type of oppressive threat or harsh imposition. Out of love for themselves and others, they will also regard any type of apathy, indifference, or failure to strive for what is good, right, just, and holy as something that is unacceptable.

For the same reasons, they will understand God's command for them to sanctify him and his name in the same manner. Rather than viewing that command as selfish or oppressive on God's part, they will regard it as an expression of his steadfast love for them. They *rejoice* that God is holy because they understand his holiness in terms of his unwavering and unshakable commitment to their well-being and wholeness. They also want to sanctify him both in the sense of conforming their lives to the holiness of God that seeks nothing but what is best for them and in the sense of making known to others that he is holy and is to be regarded as such for the good of all. Just as God reacts in anger when people belittle, mock, or reject him or call into question his holiness—not for *his* sake but for *theirs*—, so also those who live as his people defend God's goodness and holiness with the same passion and vigor, precisely because his goodness and holiness are synonymous with his commitment to the well-being of all people everywhere. Only if people are convinced that God is holy will they look to him for help, deliverance, healing, and salvation.

### *Setting Apart a People for Justice*

In biblical thought, God's holiness makes him different from all other gods. None of the gods of the nations can be considered holy, not only because those gods are not sovereign over all people and things as their creator like the God of Israel is, but also because unlike him they are not dedicated above all else to the objective of making it possible for human beings everywhere to enjoy wholeness and well-being. It is for this reason that the biblical texts associate God's holiness with his jealousy and his demand that his people have no other gods. Only the God of Israel can bring about the well-being of all precisely because of his sovereignty as well as his unconditional and uncompromising commitment to that objective.

It is therefore God's love and concern for human beings that leads him to seek and demand that people regard him and his name as holy. He wishes all people to know and be convinced that he is holy and thus is greatly pleased when he is proclaimed and acclaimed as such, since this will allow him to be

active among them in the way he desires in order to accomplish his loving purposes in the world. The prophet Ezekiel especially speaks of God's desire to be sanctified or regarded as holy in the eyes of the nations: "I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD" (Ezek 38:23; cf. 20:40-41; 28:25). God's desire that all people come to know him leads him to become angry when the people who are called and known by his name live and act in ways that place his holiness in doubt. For that reason, he is so anxious to defend his holiness: "My holy name I will make known among my people Israel, and I will not let my holy name be profaned any more; and the nations will know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel" (39:7). While God wants all people to know that his holiness will not allow him to tolerate sin, evil, injustice, and oppression, he also wishes to make it clear that the reason why he refuses to tolerate these things is that they destroy the well-being and wholeness that he desires for all due to his love for them.

In biblical thought, God's election of Israel as his chosen people and his establishment of the covenant with them is the means by which he seeks for all people to come to know him as holy. This involves sanctifying Israel in the sense of setting Israel apart as a holy people consecrated to him. Immediately after bringing the Israelites to Sinai, God tells them through Moses: "Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). The idea that God has chosen them to be a holy people and that for that reason they belong to him is stressed throughout the biblical texts, but especially in the Pentateuch: "You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev 20:26; cf. Deut 14:2; 26:18-19; 28:9). The affirmation that God sanctifies the people should be understood in the same way (Exod 31:13; Lev 22:9). However, this sanctification, consecration, or setting apart involves not only choosing Israel to be special but also bringing his people to live in a manner that distinguishes them from all other people. God will be sanctified and regarded as holy only when the people who are called by his name are sanctified and behave in ways that reflect his holiness.

What is to distinguish Israel from the other nations is not merely that they serve the one true God, therefore, but that they manifest to all the holiness of that God by being fully committed to what is good, right, just, and loving in the same way that he is. While God desires and demands that Israel serve him alone and reject all other gods, he does so not for *his* sake but for the sake of Israel and the other nations as well, since only by abandoning gods who promote injustice, violence, and oppression and dedicating themselves to a holy God whose sovereign love seeks their well-being above all else can people be saved and made whole. The affirmation that the people of Israel are to be a "kingdom of priests" or "priestly kingdom" points to a special role for

Israel among the nations, namely, that of mediating the knowledge and love of God to other peoples and serving as a means by which those peoples will be brought to worship God and consecrate their lives to him for their own good. This can happen, however, only if his people Israel sanctify him by living in accordance with what is good, just, loving, and right.

In addition to sanctifying the people of Israel as a whole, God is said to sanctify particular groups and individuals within Israel. These include especially the priests and Levites and on occasion the prophets he has chosen to speak on his behalf.<sup>21</sup> All of these groups and individuals play a vital role in leading the people to live as holy by dedicating themselves to God and his will. God also declares the land he has given Israel to be holy and sanctifies or consecrates the sanctuary dedicated to him as well as the objects it contains (Exod 29:43-44; 2 Chr 7:16, 20). His purpose is that the people who live on that land and worship him in that sanctuary be holy, consecrating themselves and all that he provides for them to his service so that his goodness, justice, love, and mercy may be manifested to all.

The commandments God gives to his people regarding clean and unclean foods in Leviticus 11 must be understood against the background of these ideas. The biblical texts do not explain why some foods are to be regarded as unclean. What those texts do make clear, however, is that the observance of a diet that was distinct from that of other people served to set Israel apart as holy. At the end of Leviticus 11, after God has finished defining through Moses the foods that are to be considered clean and unclean, he adds: "For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. . . . For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy" (vv. 44-45). These words relate the prescriptions regarding clean and unclean foods to the idea that Israel is to be holy in the sense that the people are to be separate and distinct from other peoples.

Like the practice of circumcision, however, the prescriptions regarding foods that were clean and unclean would not only identify Israel as a special people but would also serve as a constant reminder regarding what was truly to make them distinct from other peoples, namely, the practice of justice and righteousness. Just as the sign of circumcision reminded the people that God had chosen them to live in righteousness like their forefather Abraham so as to have the "circumcision of the heart" of which Moses had spoken (Deut 10:16; 30:6), so also the consumption of foods that were to be regarded as clean and the avoidance of foods that were unclean might be thought to promote purity of heart and life as well as the rejection of thoughts, words, and behaviors that were impure and unclean. These were the things that were truly to distinguish Israel from other peoples.

While the idea that the prescriptions of Leviticus 11 have the purpose of promoting righteous living among the people of Israel by keeping them distinct from people of other nations is never stated explicitly in the biblical

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21. See Exod 13:2; 29:1, 21; 30:30; 40:9-13; Lev 21:8; Num 3:13; 8:17; 16:9; Jer 1:5.



texts, it does appear in the Letter of Aristeas, a Jewish work that was probably composed in the second century BCE. There, referring to Moses as “the legislator,” the author writes:

In his wisdom the legislator, in a comprehensive survey of each particular part, and being endowed by God for the knowledge of universal truths, surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other people in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul, preserved from false beliefs, and worshiping the only God omnipotent over all creation. . . . So, to prevent our being perverted by contact with others or by mixing with bad influences, he hedged us in on all sides with strict observances connected with meat and drink and touch and hearing and sight, after the manner of the Law. In general everything is similarly constituted in regard to natural reasoning, being governed by one supreme power, and in each particular everything has a profound reason for it, both the things from which we abstain in use and those of which we partake. . . . The fact is that everything has been solemnly set in order for unblemished investigation and amendment of life for the sake of righteousness. . . . [God] has thereby indicated that it is the solemn binding duty of those for whom the legislation has been established to practice righteousness and not to lord it over anyone in reliance upon their own strength, nor to deprive him of anything, but to govern their lives righteously. . . . The symbolism conveyed by these things compels us to make a distinction in the performance of all our acts, with righteousness as our aim. . . . I have therefore given a brief résumé of these matters, indicating further to you that all the regulations have been made with righteousness in mind, and that no ordinances have been made in Scripture without purpose or fancifully, but to the intent that through the whole of our lives we may also practice justice to all [hu]mankind in all our acts, remembering the all-sovereign God (Let. Aris. 139, 142-44, 147, 151, 168).

Here it is clear that the author of this text regards the prescriptions regarding purity and impurity as promoting the practice of justice and righteousness among God’s people by reinforcing their identity as a people set apart for God. The symbolisms associated with these distinctions thus reminded the people that they too were to be clean and pure in their conduct in a metaphorical sense by doing what is good and right.

A couple of centuries later, Philo of Alexandria similarly writes that God did not give the people “full liberty” with regard to food and drink “but bridled them with ordinances most conducive to self-restraint and humanity and what is chief of all, piety” (*Spec. Laws* 4.97). According to Philo, the reason why God prohibited the people from eating pork and the aquatic species of animals that do not have scales is that these foods are the most delicious. This prohibition thus teaches the people to practice self-control and to avoid gluttony and extravagance (*Spec. Laws* 4.100-101). In this way, God instills greater virtue in his people. By prohibiting them from eating of those animals that are carnivorous and obtain their food by attacking other animals or human beings and devouring their flesh, God also teaches his people that it is not acceptable for them to retaliate against those who do them harm or

act out of anger in relation to others (*Spec. Laws* 4.103-5). Philo offers similar reasons for God's prohibition against eating the flesh of other animals that the law declares impure, often resorting to allegory in order to do so (*Spec. Laws* 4.106-18). The prohibition against eating the fat and the command to offer it instead to God serve the same purpose (*Spec. Laws* 4.124-25). While these interpretations of the biblical prescriptions regarding clean and unclean foods may have been unique to Philo, what is important is that he sees those prescriptions as having the same general purpose as that which is ascribed to them in the Letter of Aristeas, namely, teaching the people certain truths and instilling in them a pious and righteous way of life.

It is quite likely that other Jews in antiquity would have understood the purpose of the regulations regarding food in the same manner. If so, they would have believed that God had commanded that his people eat only what he had designated as pure or clean in order to promote among them a commitment to what was good, just, and right. Eating only of certain foods would contribute to such a commitment, as would the observance of purity in other contexts. The need for the people to make sure that they were physically pure as they drew near to the symbols of God's presence in the sanctuary, for example, would stress to them the idea that they were to be pure of heart as well. By carrying out rites of purification before approaching God at his sanctuary, they were showing respect not only for the signs and symbols of his presence but also for his will in their lives. The observance of the regulations regarding purity promoted greater love and respect for God and therefore furthered the practice of justice, righteousness, and solidarity with others, since these things were inseparable from one another.

In some passages from the Hebrew Bible, the idea that God sanctifies his people appears in conjunction with the affirmation that his people are to sanctify themselves as well. When God commands that the people observe as holy the Sabbath or day of rest, he also has Moses tell them: "I, the LORD, sanctify you" (Exod 31:13). As we have seen above, this sanctification involved separating the people out from the other nations to be his (Lev 20:26). At the same time, however, God commands the people to sanctify themselves in the same way that he has sanctified them: "Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. Keep my statutes and observe them: I am the LORD; I sanctify you" (Lev 20:7-8). "You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the Israelites: I am the LORD; I sanctify you" (Lev 22:32). The idea in passages such as these is that God has sanctified the people in terms of setting them apart from other peoples, though he may be said to sanctify them in the sense of acting among them to enable them to be holy by living in justice and righteousness as well. For that reason, they are to sanctify and consecrate themselves in the same way that God does by regarding themselves as distinct from other peoples. Once more, however, what is to distinguish them from other peoples is their commitment to living in accordance with what is good, right,