

*Phillip Michael Garner*

...and he added no more.  
Deuteronomy 5:23e



Listen or you get  
Rules, Rules, and more Rules

## **Listen or you get Rules Rules and more Rules**

Copyright © 2021 Phillip Michael Garner. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher.

Publisher  
MikeGarner.org  
2305 Brookfield Dr. Brentwood TN 37027 -3721

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

## **Listen or you get Rule, Rules, and more Rules**

*Israel's failure to listen resulted in Levitical religion with its sacrificial system and rules. Listen or you get rules, rules, and more rules; it's either Spirit or Law, Relationship or Sacrifice, Understanding or Symbols.*

In this essay, I will offer a scriptural and interpretive lens for understanding Leviticus. If a person learns to read Leviticus with the following basics in mind that connect the reader with the life-setting, it enlivens the text. Leviticus relates the manner that a kinship tribal group developed communal ethics around the instructions of religious practice for the benefit of all, while communicating a God that cared about how they lived in the world. The ethical instruction of Israel was incorporated into their concept of holiness and how to approach a holy God. Leviticus offers theological instruction on ethical behavior and relates such behavior to the concept of holiness. The ethics of Leviticus touches on subjects such as diet, alcohol consumption, guilt felt by a person, communal responsibility to avoid contagious infections, relational behavior, sexual taboos, superstition, just to name a few.

Likewise, it is helpful to consider the reasons, or incidents, that led to the writing of the rules, laws, and commandments in Leviticus. This being said, it is my intent to place Leviticus properly within the unfolding revelation of the gospel of God. <sup>i</sup>

Christians really do not know what to do with Leviticus. For this reason, the usual way of reading is to interpret all of the symbols and rituals with allegorical interpretations taken from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Of course, a Christocentric reading is always safe and points to Jesus, so how could it possibly be challenged? However, most Christocentric readings of Leviticus are born of imaginative claims. When hearing such readings of Leviticus, it is important to consider that the power of human imagination to make associative connections is unlimited (especially when reading religious texts). We might say that allegorical readings are the best and only option for most people in order to justify studying or preaching from nearly all of Leviticus.

Scholars read Leviticus in the context of a literary-historical setting and claim through evidence of literary structure to uncover the development of the text through source documents that were compiled to form the book. Thus, the P (priestly) source and the Holiness code form the preponderance of Leviticus. Scholars also question when the book was compiled and whether (if at all) Israel ever practiced the statutes and

ordinances in the wilderness. They also read Leviticus in light of its instruction as I have presented in the first paragraph of this essay.

The problem with Leviticus is why a sacrificial form of religious practice is initiated by God when the Prophets of the Old Testament are anti-sacrificial, even the Psalter, at close reading, is an anti-sacrificial document. The prophets reject sacrifice, the temple, and it is likely that the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant can be laid on Jeremiah (Jer. 3: 15,16). The tension between the prophets and the priests is about the validity of Levitical religious practice and sacrifice in particular comes up wanting.<sup>ii</sup> It appears that sacrifice and ritual is something that people need and not something that God desires.

In order to understand why Levitical religion became a part of God's work with Israel, we must study the event(s) that led to the birth of Levitical religion. I think all readings of Leviticus must be understood through the reasons and causes for God utilizing ritual, symbol and particularly sacrifice in Leviticus.<sup>iii</sup> It is important to note that Israel's first corporate symbol for the construction of Levitical religion is the ark. The little box that Moses was commanded to make and carry the second set of stone tablets from off the mountain, is the first ark, or chest, to carry the tablets. While Moses was on the mountain, Israel's desire for a symbol is winning and in order to be like other people, to satisfy their *fetish*, a golden bull jumps out of Aaron's fire.<sup>iv</sup> Instead, they will carry the ark a box much larger than Moses' first box. The ark will encase the decalogue written on stone, Aaron's rod, and a bowl of manna. It will be adorned with a seat, cherubim and poles for carrying. The meaning of the ark and its contents was always more important than the ark and its contents.

The enclosing of the commandments in a box (ark) symbolizes the refusal of hearing and obeying the living voice of God. These two events the making of the first box or chest to contain the commandments and the construction of the golden calf are related; an ark with meaning vs. a desire for an object, an image, a symbol without meaning – the golden calf. The story of the ark's origin serves to relate the need of people for symbols. The story of the golden calf reveals Israel's desire to be like other nations rather than be the people of God.

### **The Birth of Levitical Religion**

In Deuteronomy chapter five Moses reiterates the Decalogue to a new generation on the plains of Moab. There are some significant differences in the account of Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20. Both chapters are about the giving of the Decalogue.<sup>v</sup> It is from the account in Deuteronomy that some theological innovations are introduced for the sake of readers living in a different time and struggling with theological questions. I will not be covering all of these innovations; my aim is to

focus on variances in the text of Deuteronomy five that help my reader understand the birth of Levitical religion.

In particular, I will begin with the statement in verse 22, ‘and he added no more’.

*These words the LORD spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.*

*(Deut. 5:22 NRS)*

The Decalogue is in one sense an exercise in brevity, a reduction of complexity, a simple statement of guidance given by God in a live exercise wherein people heard the voice of God in a physically audible, yet revelatory manner. Deuteronomy 5 teaches that God desired to speak to the people rather than a mediator or producing a constant flow of laws to regulate wrongdoing or sin. Theologically the bible is communicating to us that once the voice of God is rejected and people seek another to hear for them then the production of laws is essential. Once the process of writing laws begins, there is no end. Just visit the office of a lawyer or consider our lawmakers who are in the constant process of writing more laws.

Deuteronomy five clearly teaches us that there is a problem with God speaking from heaven to humanity. In the text, God has spoken to Israel (humanity) and they have not died. Yet, they fear they will, and God confirms their fear; he will consume them if he continues to speak to them. God does not desire to destroy them so he must give them something to aid them until God’s revelation of self can speak to them, not from heaven, but from flesh. God is living, God’s intimate presence is nearness that is given of God’s love and will. Creatures rejecting God when God has chosen to be near is a physically threatening encounter. This is so because God is alive, God’s presence is real, and resistance is self-destructive when God is near. It is for this reason that Moses becomes a mediator for the people and God’s voice that walked in the Garden is relationship lost east of Eden. A living relationship is replaced with religious functions that serve to limit humanity’s violence. The New Testament will affirm that God is *easily grieved*, meaning God is sensitive to our condition, our potential to resist the power of God’s presence, so God withdraws from us.

It seems that there is something lacking in the revealing of God that was given to the children of Israel from the mountain. Regardless of God’s effort to speak to Israel, they are unable to hear. God cries out in verse 29 with a phrase unappreciated by English readers.

*29 If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!*

*(Deut. 5:29 NRS)*

The *if only* in verse 29 is the translation of a Hebrew idiom that is used to express deep seated emotion or pathos from the depths of the soul. In the book of Job, it becomes a motif for developing speeches around its use. The presence of the idiom here in Deuteronomy is the only time that it is used by God in all of scripture.<sup>vi</sup>

The use of this idiom in a God speech is linguistically and theologically significant and should be considered with some attention. The pathos of God is expressed by use of the idiom and God's desire is that he could speak with his people in their hearing and his voice would not be rejected. The rejection of God's voice coincides with the rejection of obedience to the Decalogue in all its simplicity. So, they cannot endure his voice or his commands. As a result, Moses will be called aside to produce a system of laws taught via a religious system of ritual sacrifice and symbols.

*31 But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess."*

*(Deut. 5:31 NRS)*

God was finished giving laws with the Decalogue, (he added no more) however due to the people's rejection of the voice from heaven they will be given a mediator to instruct them with Levitical religion. Moses is called aside to hear the *additions* to the law. Remember God wanted a living relationship where God's voice was heard, God did not want more laws. According to Deuteronomy it is the prophets that mediate the voice of God and Priests minister to Yahweh in ritual practices and sacrifices.

*18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.*

*(Deut. 18:18 NRS)*

In Christ, God has spoken with greater clarity and impact upon existence through his voice revealed in the message of the cross than through the revelation on the mountain to Moses. God has embraced humanity into God's self in the Lord Jesus. God speaks from flesh and can be understood. God's spirit has openness to humanity through the *work* of God accomplished in the life and death of Jesus and God's death upon a cross

(of course death cannot hold the ineffable one). God has made room in God's self for humanity; we are become the children of God through faith. Jesus said that his sheep hear his voice. When we are in Christ the voice of God speaks to us, in our soul, we are disciples of listening.

The old covenant was lacking, it needed more, and it would require more of God, God would have to give more of God's self, of God's spirit, to his needy humanity. So, God cut a new covenant in his own flesh and abolished all forms of sacrifice. God has exposed our sin and made the victim innocent and he speaks on all our behalf for we are all victims of sin.

The need of humanity for God to embrace them into his self, his Spirit, is the story of God's self-revelation which is recorded in the book we call scripture. Leviticus is instructive for our tendency for symbol, ritual, sacrifice, and substituting meaning for an object. Allegorical readings of Leviticus are devotional exercises in associative thinking and lack depth as instruction that develops a person's theological understanding of God, world and humanity. Leviticus is valuable for ethical instruction and relating ethical living to holiness. Levitical religion is the result of humanity's failure to hear, of humanity's need for sacrifice and ritual; it is not reflective of God's desire. God's first desire is that we would hear his voice and obey.<sup>vii</sup>

*6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

*(Hosea 6:6 NRS)*

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:*

*(John 10:27)*

---

<sup>i</sup> My teacher John Hartley wrote an excellent commentary in the WBC series on Leviticus. I recommend his work and am ever thankful that I was blessed to sit under his instruction.

<sup>ii</sup> Micah 6:6-8 is one of the most beloved anti-sacrificial expressions of prophetic critique on the absurdity of thinking sacrifice had any power to change the heart or to please God.

<sup>iii</sup> For an anthropological and literary study on the etiology of ritual sacrifice as a human phenomenon I suggest reading the writings of Rene Girard; particularly his book 'Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World'.

<sup>iv</sup> To read about the golden calf as fetish see, The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile by Yechezkel Kaufmann, Moshe Greenberg

<sup>v</sup> Suggested reading on Deuteronomy. Time and Place in Deuteronomy by J.G. McConville and J.G. Millar. The Death of Moses; A Theological Reading by Dennis T. Olson. Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation by Bernard M. Levinson.

<sup>vi</sup> The idiom in this form is found in the following verses: Exo. 16:3; Deut. 5:29; Deut. 28:67; 2Sam. 19:1; Job 6:8, 11:5, 13:5, 14:4, 14:13, 19:23, 23:3, 31:31; Psalms 14:7, 53:7, 55:7, Isaiah 41:2, Jeremiah 8:23.

<sup>vii</sup> Anti-sacrificial passages include: Deuteronomy 5: 22; Deuteronomy 5: 28-33; Psalm 50: 7-15; Psalm 82: 1-8; Amos 5:21-27; Micah 6: 6-8; Hosea 2: 14 – 18; Hosea 6: 6; Jeremiah 6: 20; Jeremiah 7: 21-23; Jeremiah 11: 1-8; Isaiah 1: 9-17; Isaiah 43: 22-25; Matthew 9:13; Matthew 12:7.