Leviticus

Lesson #13

The Life of All Flesh Is Its Blood

(Leviticus 17: 1-16)

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Review

The idea of the scapegoat has ancient roots buried deeply within the collective consciousness of the human experience: it is an archetype, explored by Sir James Frazier in volume 9 of his 12-volume anthropological study, *The Golden Bough* (1913); Joseph Campbell's seminal study of comparative mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949); and Carl Jung's classic, *Man and His Symbols* (1964). Sir James Frazier sets the stage by defining the scapegoat as *a visible and tangible vehicle used to remove the invisible and intangible evil that infests a community.* And that is what we have in Leviticus 16.

In Lesson #12 we not only examined the scapegoat as an archetype, but we also saw the scapegoat as one element in a tightly-woven, intricate web of correspondences. Examining this web through a typological Christian interpretive lens revealed Christ as: 1) our great High Priest who represents sinful humanity before a holy and righteous God; 2) our sin offering, slain to make atonement for our sins; and 3) our scapegoat who bears our sin upon himself, taking it away.

Preview

If we hover above the Tabernacle and watch its operations—the Burnt Offering, Grain Offering, Peace Offering, Sin Offering and Guilt Offering—we may well be repulsed by the oceans of blood shed by an endless stream of bulls, lambs and goats. Indeed, in Hebrews 9: 22 we read: *"According to the law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."* We might also recall the waters of the Nile River being turned to blood in Exodus 7; the meticulous attention given to menstrual blood, both normal and abnormal in Leviticus 15; and to St. Peter's statement that we are ransomed *"with the precious blood of Christ"* in 1 Peter 1: 18. Indeed, blood runs through Scripture like a crimson thread, a major motif in God's plan of redemption.

In Lesson #13 we explore the profound meaning of blood in our story.

As we enter Leviticus 17 we set foot on a new moral and theological landscape. Leviticus 17-27 comprise what scholars since the 19th century have termed the "Holiness Code." Jacob Milgrom points out that In these chapters two critical changes occur:

1) **Ritual impurity becomes moral impurity; and**

2) **The domain of the sacred expands, embracing the entire land, not just the sanctuary; and all of Israel, not just the priesthood.**

In these chapters the spiritual burden shifts from the priesthood to the individual who is called to live a life of holiness, a goal that is within his grasp.

Structurally, chapters 17-27 look like this:

Prohibition against eating blood (17)
thematic bridge between the sacrificial system (1-16) and the Holiness Code (18-27)

Frame:
- Sexual prohibitions (18)
1. Holiness (19)
- Sexual prohibitions (20)

2. Holiness precautions (21-22)
3. Holiness of time (23)
4. Holiness of God's name (24)
5. Holiness of the land (25)
6. The covenant (26)
7. The consecrations (27)

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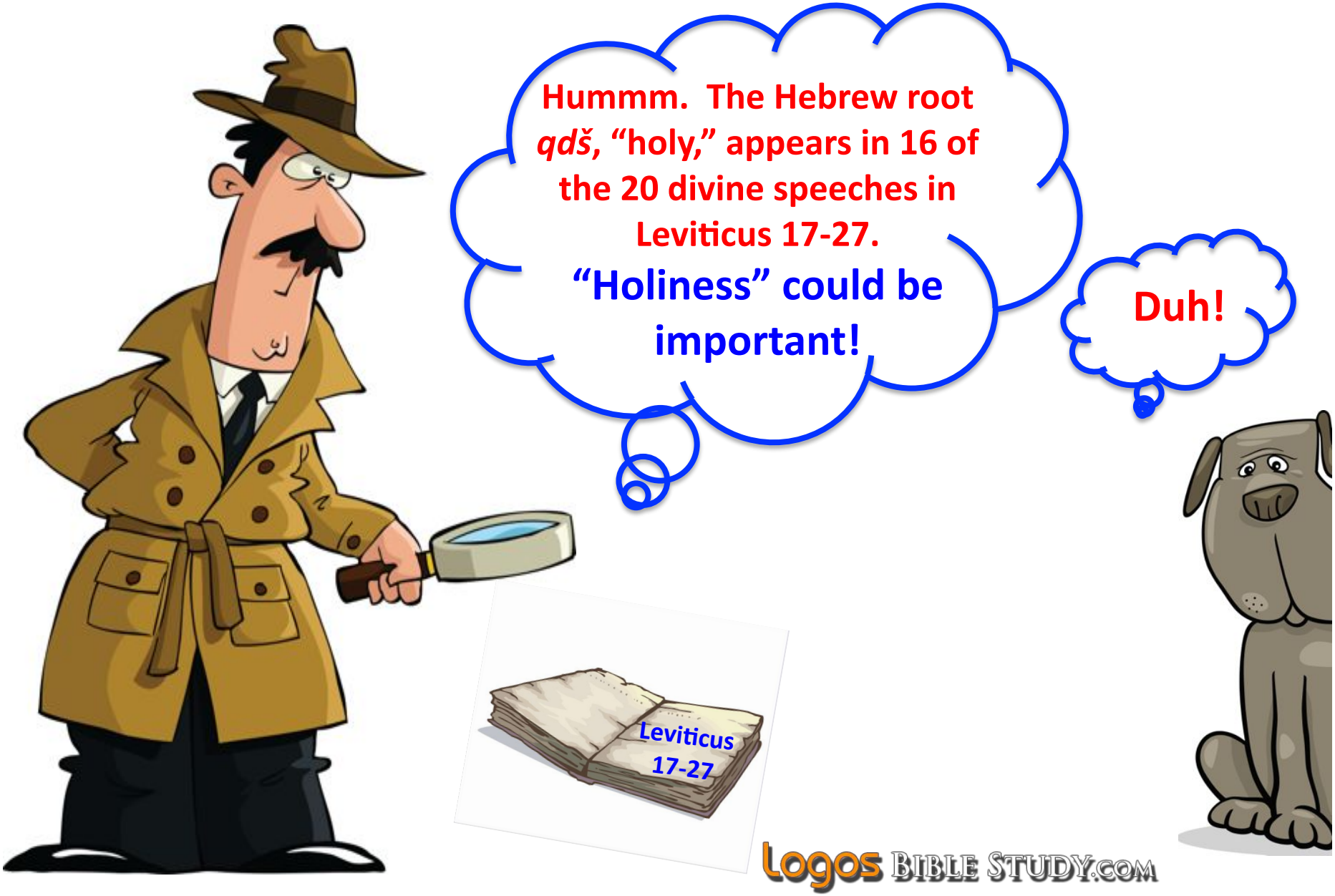
Hummm. The Hebrew root *qdš*, "holy," appears in 16 of the 20 divine speeches in Leviticus 17-27.
"Holiness" could be important!
Duh!
Leviticus 17-27
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In Leviticus 17-27 we learn a great deal about the Lord [*YHWH*] that we have not known previously:

- **The Lord is deeply protective of his land, the Promised Land;**
- **Sin pollutes not only the Tabernacle, but the land itself, and through the land, the Lord;**
- **The Lord has a deep sense of tribal justice;**
- **He does not permit his people to worship any other god;**
- **He is vexed by the misuse of his name;**
- **He keeps his word, and he will punish any violation of his laws;**
- **The Lord will keep his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, even though Israel breaks the covenant over and over. This is not due to the Lord's mercy; it is due to his *fidelity*. The various words for "mercy" appear nowhere in Leviticus 17-27.**

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In Leviticus 17-27 God is not unlike a desert tribal warlord!

Samuel Thompson. *Saladin the General*, 2013.

As the Tabernacle with its priesthood and sacrificial system is a *bridge* across which a sinful people may approach an infinitely holy God, the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-27 is a *ladder* on which Israel can climb symbolically toward God, the quintessence of holiness.

The sheer number of commands in Leviticus 17-27 appears daunting, but step-by-step, rung-by-rung Israel can transform itself spiritually from a sinful people to a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Exodus 19: 6).

As God said to Cain at the beginning of our story: *"Sin lies in wait at the door; its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it"* (Genesis 4: 7).

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Nothing illustrates better Israel's spiritual immaturity at this stage in our story than Leviticus 17, the "thematic bridge" linking the sacrificial system of 1-16 to the Holiness Code of 18-27.

Like a little child, Israel is incapable of understanding the rationale behind God's commands or the reasons for them. Consequently, God simply tells Israel what to do, not why they should do it. Only Moses is given explanations in chapter 17 (vv. 5-7, 11, 14a).

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Achieving holiness is an incremental, dynamic process that must be sustained moment-by-moment, day-by-day. Obeying God's commands are steps up the ladder; disobeying God's commands are slippages down the ladder. As one matures and progresses upward, the rationale for God's commands becomes clear.

Climbing the ladder successfully has enormous consequences, not only for the individual, but also for Israel as God's covenant people, for the greater Israel succeeds in keeping God's commands, the more sanctified God appears to be; conversely, if Israel fails in keeping God's commands, the less sanctified God appears to be. God's holiness becomes more or less visible in direct proportion to Israel's ability to climb the ladder and attain holiness.

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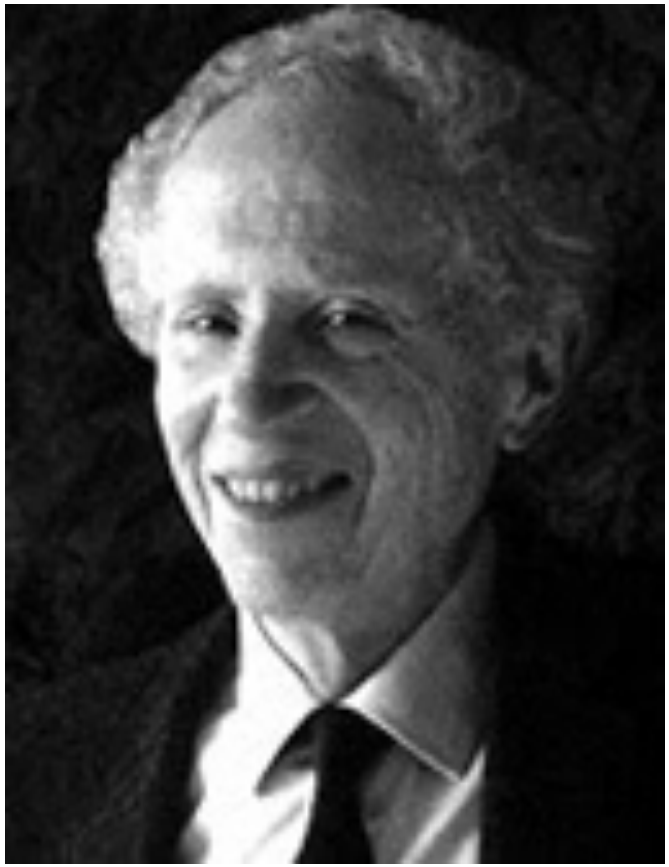

Jacob Milgrom (1923-2010)

Jacob Milgrom summarizes this dynamic quite nicely:

"[Although] the text speaks of the YHWH who sanctifies Israel, the reality is that Israel sanctifies itself through YHWH. If it obeys YHWH's commandments, its sanctification is automatic, a built-in result of the commandments. We may recall that the antithesis "holy versus impure" stands symbolically for "life versus death." Thus the self-sanctification produced by observing the commandments is life generating."

***Leviticus (Continental Commentary)*, p. 178.**

And God agrees in Deuteronomy 30: 19:

"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live."

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Leviticus 17

"The Life of All Flesh Is Its Blood"

You'll recall in the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam:

"See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food."

(Genesis 2:29-30)

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve served as God's stewards over all God had created, and all of God's creatures lived in harmony with one another, feeding on fruits and vegetables.

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Once sin entered the world in Genesis 3, however, it spread quickly like a malignant, virulent cancer until *"the Lord saw how great the wickedness of human beings was on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was always nothing but evil"* (Genesis 6: 5).

With that realization, God brought the flood to wash the board clean and give humanity a second chance.

But something had changed.

Presumably, between the fall and the flood humanity acquired a taste for killing and for blood, for when Noah and his family come off the ark, God makes a concession to their newly-developed desires . . .

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"[The] fear and dread of you shall come upon all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon all the creatures that move about on the ground and all the fishes of the sea; into your power they are delivered. Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants."

(Genesis 9: 2-3)

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No longer will all creation live in harmony. Now, the "fear and dread" of man will come upon all the animals of the earth: man will kill animals . . . and eat them!

God imposes only one restriction:

"Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat. Indeed, for your own lifeblood I will demand an accounting: from every animal I will demand it, and from a human being, each one for the blood of another, I will demand an accounting. . .."

(Genesis 9: 4-5)

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As we have learned in our study of Leviticus 1-16, blood contains the life of a creature, man or animal. Consequently, blood is sacred to God, the giver of life.

And we have learned that blood plays a key role in the sacrificial system, acting as a "cleansing agent," purifying the sacred space of the Tabernacle and making atonement for sin.

In the ancient Israelite world, blood was understood not only to contain the life of a creature and was used make atonement for sin, but blood was also the primal symbol of vitality and life, juxtaposed to decay and death.

Hence, God's absolute prohibition on consuming blood.

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That makes sense.
Did you know that some people eat dogs!
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Leviticus 17 contains five laws concerning the prohibition against eating blood:

Introduction (1-2)

A **Animal must be slaughtered at the Tabernacle (3-7)**

Rationale (5-7)

B **May not sacrifice to other gods (8-9)**

C **Key prohibition (10-12)**

Rationale (11-12)

B' **Blood of killed game must be buried (13-14)**

Rationale (14)

A' **Eating animal that died requires purification (15-16)**

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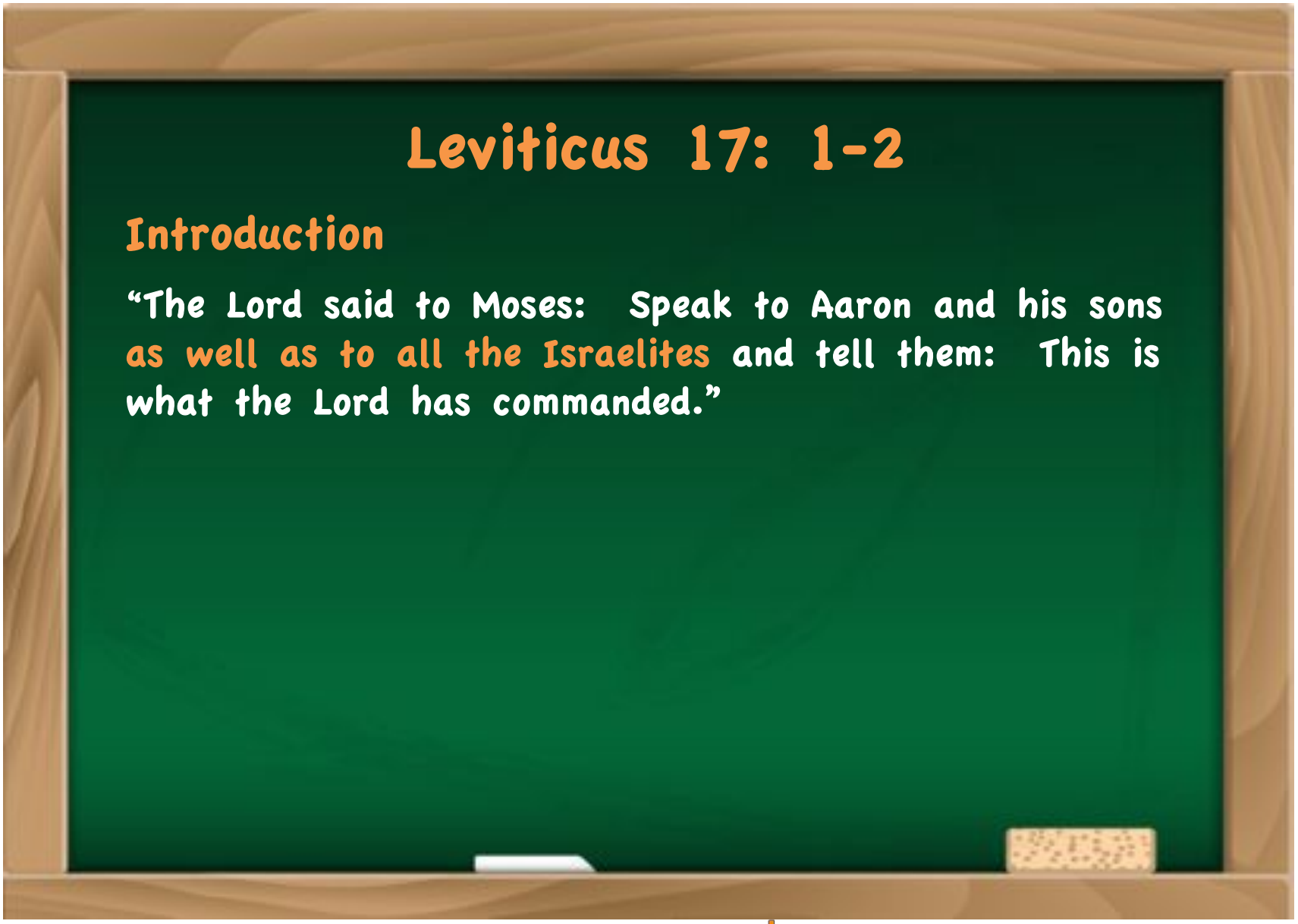
Leviticus 17: 1-2

Introduction

"The Lord said to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons as well as to all the Israelites and tell them: This is what the Lord has commanded."



Notice the phrase "as well as to all the Israelites."

- In contrast to the preceding chapters, God tells Moses to address not only Aaron and his sons, but the entire Israelite community.
- This signals a shift from the exclusivity of the priesthood in chapters 1-16 to a demand for holiness among ALL the people in chapters 17-27.
- This marks the beginning of the "Holiness Code."

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Leviticus 17: 3-4

Animal Must be Slaughtered at the Tabernacle

"Any Israelite who slaughters an ox or a sheep or a goat, whether in the camp or outside of it, without first bringing it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord in front of the Lord's tabernacle, shall be judged guilty of bloodshed—that individual has shed blood, and shall be cut off from the people."

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- The requirement to offer the blood on the altar applies only to the Israelites, not to resident aliens. They are bound by the command in Genesis 9: 4 to drain the blood, but since they are not required to worship Israel's God, they do not need to bring the blood to the altar.

- This law prohibits ALL non-sacrificial slaughter. Meat meant for the table must begin its journey as a sacrifice at the altar.

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- The phrase "the entrance of the tent of meeting" applies exclusively to the fellowship offering, the meal shared with God (Leviticus 3: 2, 8, and 13). All other sacrifices take place "before the Lord" (1: 5, 11; 4: 15), another indication that this entire chapter is about procuring meat for the household.

- "Guilty of bloodshed" [or "bloodguilt"] is murder, the same as the premeditated killing of a person. In Leviticus, ALL life is sacred, not just human life.

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Leviticus 17: 5-7

Rationale

"This is so that such sacrifices as they used to offer in the open field the Israelites shall henceforth bring to the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting, to the priest, and sacrifice them there as communion sacrifices to the Lord. The priest will splash the blood on the altar of the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for an odor pleasing to the Lord. No longer shall they offer their sacrifices to the demons with whom they prostituted themselves. This shall be an everlasting statute for them and their descendants."

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- This is the first of three explanatory asides to Moses (5-7; 11-12; and 14).
- The assumption here is that the Israelites offered sacrifices to a variety of chthonic deities, various gods of the field. That shall no longer be done.
- Once again it is clear that this sacrifice is a fellowship offering, meant to be shared with God, his portion consumed on the altar and the rest eaten at the home's table.
- The ban on non-sacrificial slaughter is meant to be permanent.

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Leviticus 17: 8-9

May Not Sacrifice to Other Gods

"Tell them, therefore: Anyone, whether of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice without bringing it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, shall be cut off from the people."

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- "Tell them therefore" is slightly off in our *Catholic Study Bible* translation. The sense is "Say to them further" or "To them you shall say." Verses 5-7 have been an aside to Moses, information not given to the Israelites. The phrase "Say to them further" instructs Moses to resume speaking to the Israelites.

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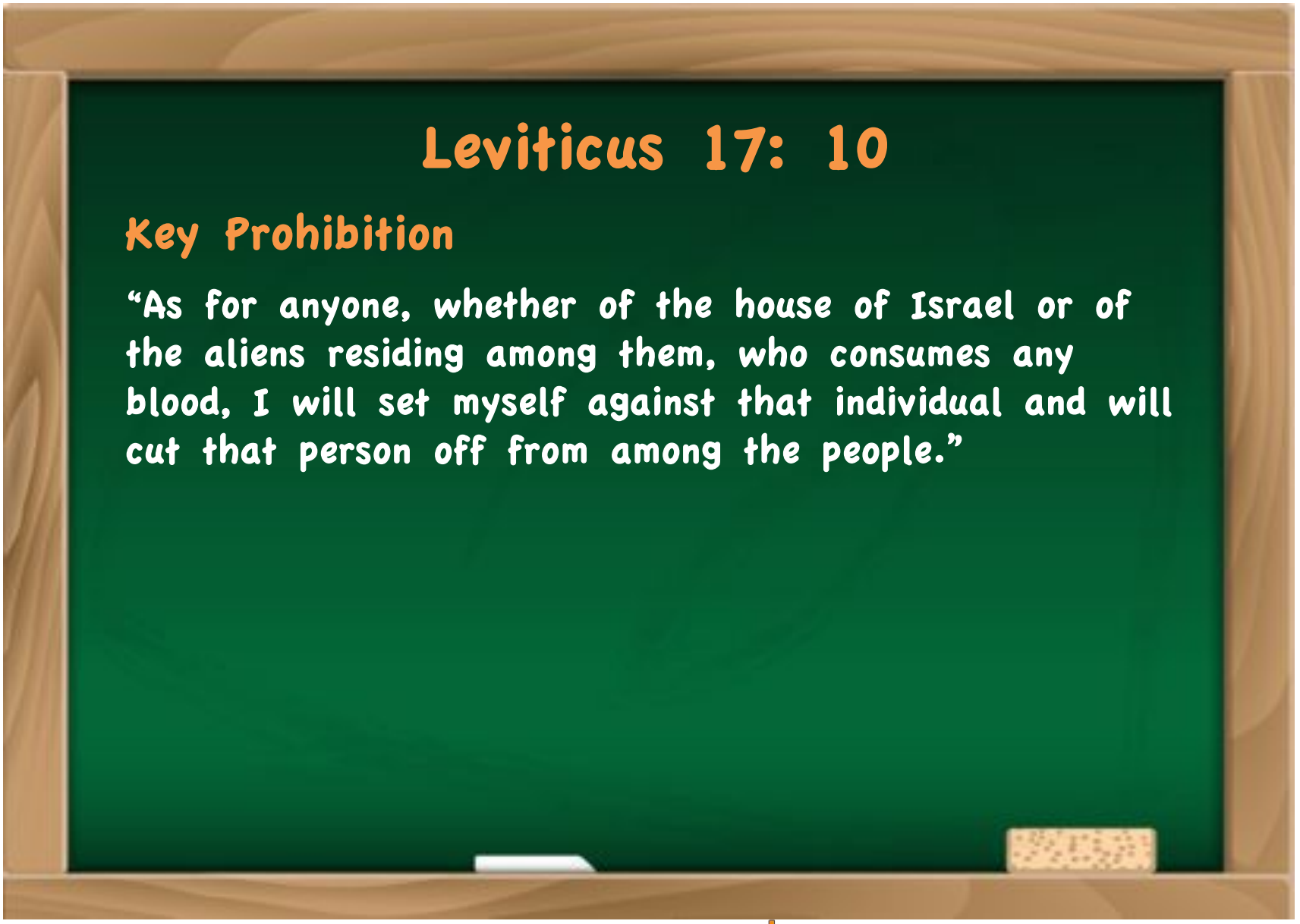
Leviticus 17: 10

Key Prohibition

"As for anyone, whether of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing among them, who consumes any blood, I will set myself against that individual and will cut that person off from among the people."



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- As Jacob Milgrom points out, both animals and people have a *nefeš*, or a "soul." *Nefeš* refers to the life essence of humans and animals, distinct from their bodies; the *nefeš* departs out of the body when it dies.
- The nefeš was thought to reside in the blood.

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Leviticus 17: 11-12

Rationale

"[S]ince the life of the flesh is in the blood . . . I have given it to you to make atonement on the altar for yourselves, because it is the blood as life that makes atonement. That is why I have told the Israelites: No one among you, not even a resident alien, may consume blood."

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- Neither the Israelite nor the resident alien may consume blood, but the resident alien does not need to present the blood at the altar; since he does not worship Israel's God, he may simply drain the blood and bury it.
- Reading verse 11 as applying solely to an Israelite complements and completes the law of vv. 3-5. It explains why an Israelite must offer ALL meat as a sacrifice, for the sacrifice makes atonement for his spilling the blood of the animal.

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The Israelites were the only people in the ancient world who codified this sensitivity to animal life, converting a strongly-held ethical belief into religious law.

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That must be why hunting has never been popular among Jews. 73% of Israelis support a complete ban on hunting in Israel; while fewer than 2,500 Israelis have hunting licenses!
I like to chase rabbits! Never caught one, though.
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Leviticus 17: 13-14

Blood of Killed Game Must Be Buried

"Anyone hunting, whether of the Israelites or of the aliens residing among them, who catches an animal or a bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

Rationale

[S]ince the life of all flesh is its blood, I have told the Israelites: You shall not consume the blood of any flesh. Since the life of all flesh is its blood, anyone who consumes it shall be cut off."

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- Once Israel's economy shifted from pastoral to agricultural, hunting shifted from a necessity to a sport, one in which relatively few participated.
- The fact that v. 13 says "may be eaten" indicates that the hunting is meant to put meat on the table.
- All the blood must be drained, but it is only the Israelite who must bring it to the altar; the resident alien may simply bury it. The Israelite is held to a much higher moral standard than the resident alien.

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Once the sanctuary is centralized in Jerusalem, the laws in Leviticus 17 change dramatically, allowing the Israelite to slaughter an animal anywhere and eat it at home, the same as the resident alien.

This is the position in Judaism to this very day.

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Leviticus 17: 15-16

Eating an Animal that Died Requires Purification.

"Everyone, whether a native or an alien, who eats of an animal that died of itself or was killed by a wild beast, shall wash his garments, bathe in water, and be unclean until evening, and then become clean. If one does not wash his garments and bathe, that person shall bear the penalty."

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- A layperson is not forbidden from touching a human corpse; only a priest is. It follows, then, that touching an animal corpse is not forbidden to a lay person. If he does touch a corpse or eat it, however, he becomes "unclean" until evening, and he must undergo purification by bathing.

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Leviticus 17 is *absolute* in its prohibition against ingesting blood, for blood contains the *nefeš*, the "life," of a creature.

The Hebrew Scriptures are so uncompromising on this point that the very idea of consuming blood was abhorrent to a Jew, and it still is today.

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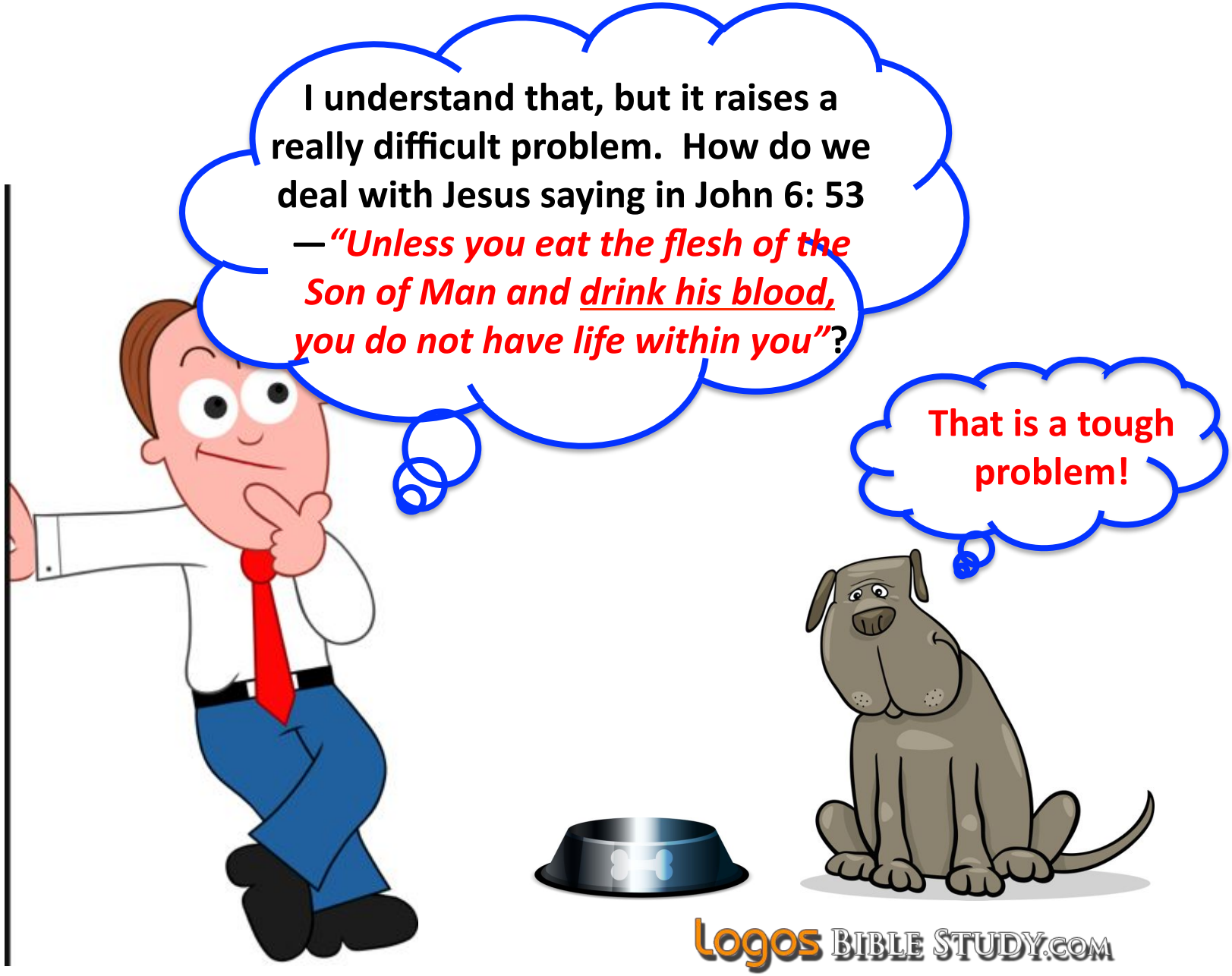
I understand that, but it raises a really difficult problem. How do we deal with Jesus saying in John 6: 53 —"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you"?
That is a tough problem!
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Let's look at Jesus saying this within its full context in John 6. Jesus is in the midst of a heated debate with the religious leaders, and he says:

"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us [his] ***flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and***

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drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.

These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

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Let's parse Jesus' words carefully:

- **Jesus draws an analogy between God providing the manna in the wilderness in Exodus 16 ("bread from heaven") and himself, the *genuine* "bread from heaven" in John 6.**
- **In the wilderness, the manna sustained and nurtured the Israelites daily during their 40-year pilgrimage from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.**
- **In the same way the genuine "bread from heaven," *the body and blood of Christ*, nurtures us daily during our pilgrimage of life, from being born in slavery to sin to attaining the freedom of eternal life in heaven.**

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- **Jesus does not present his body and blood as metaphor or simile, but as *true*. [*"My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink."*] The Greek word translated "true" is ἀληθινός [*al-ay-thee-nos'*], meaning real, authentic or genuine; it is a statement connecting a visible fact to its underlying reality. To read Jesus' words otherwise is an exercise in rhetorical tautology.**
- **The reaction of Jesus' audience supports such a literal reading:**

"Then many of his disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'" (6: 60)

The Greek word "hard" is σκληρός [*sklay-ros'*], meaning rough, offensive or scandalous.

As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him." (6: 66).

Given Leviticus 17, I can certainly understand the reaction of Jesus' audience. What he says is fundamentally at odds with Leviticus 17 and with 1,500 years of religious and cultural tradition.
Yikes! Even his Apostles were ready to get up and leave!
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I think Dr. Creasy makes too much of this blood business! Blood, blood, blood— it's everywhere!
You can't make too much of the blood, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness!" (Hebrews 9: 22)
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Questions for discussion and thought

1. What is the "bridge" connecting the sacrificial system with the holiness code in Leviticus?
2. Why does God prohibit consuming blood?
3. Are there any exceptions in the Hebrew Scriptures to the prohibition on consuming blood?
4. An Israelite must slaughter an animal at the Tabernacle and offer its blood on the altar; only then may it become food for the table at home; a resident alien may slaughter an animal anywhere, drain its blood and bury it, after which he may eat the meat at home. Why the difference between Israelites and resident aliens?
5. When Jesus said *"unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you,"* how did his audience react . . . and why?

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