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HOLINESS

*A Biblical, Historical, and
Systematic Theology*



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HOLINESS IN THE PENTATEUCH



AS THE OPENING CORPUS to the Christian canon, the Pentateuch is foundational for understanding holiness.¹ To arrive at how the rest of the Bible conceptualizes holiness, one must first go through the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch establishes the theological (and historical) framework for Scripture’s telling of the single narrative of God’s rescue of the creation, which includes a robust introduction to the biblical notion of holiness and its role in the greater salvation narrative.

So, how does the Pentateuch conceptualize holiness? This chapter demonstrates that the Pentateuch first understands holiness as “otherness.” The seventh day of the creation is holy because it is *different* from the other six days (Gen 2:3). It is distinct. Furthermore, applied to both God and people, to be “holy” means to be set apart. God is holy in that he is qualitatively different from the false gods of Israel’s neighbors, and his life is different from human life. In distinction from human life, God is eternal, immutably good, he transcends the creation, and he is sovereign. God’s people are set apart in that when they are faithful

¹Starting here and continuing to the end of the section on Genesis, I develop some of my earlier studies at <https://mattayars.com/holiness-in-genesis-otherness-and-the-image-of-god-restored/>.

to obey the commands of the Pentateuch (i.e., covenant stipulations), their entire way of life is different from that of the other peoples of the world.

In what way are God's people holy? What makes them different from the nations around them? As the Pentateuch sees it, *holy* is synonymous with the restoration of the image of God via covenant faithfulness. In short, when God's people are faithful to the covenant (i.e., holy), they resemble him; they are bearers of the divine image. The definition of *holy* as the divine image restored via covenant faithfulness flows out of a new-creation motif running through the controlling narrative of the Pentateuch (and the rest of the Bible). We will see that the fall of humanity results in God's good creation regressing back to chaos, and the need for a new creation—and particularly a new humanity—arises. In relationship to the new-creation motif, God's holy people—Israel—are the representative head of the new creation. We will further see below that the two dominant themes of the Pentateuch are: (1) people and (2) land. More particularly, Israel is the new Adam (i.e., image-bearer), and the Promised Land is the new Eden (i.e., the shared living space of God and humanity). With this new-creation motif at play in the narrative, the overarching purpose of the restoration of the image of God (i.e., holiness) is for the glory of God to fill the creation. As the new Adam multiplies, the divine image that glorifies God fills the creation. This means that when God's people are holy, they are not only set apart as they embody the divine image; God's original intent for the creation is also restored.

GENESIS

Genesis sets the tone for how the rest of the Scriptures conceptualize holiness. Genesis can be divided into two main parts: chapters 1–11 and 12–50. The first section (1–11) comprises pre-history, including the story of the origins of the cosmos, humanity, sin, and God's creation-rescue mission. The second section (12–50) is also about

origins, namely, the origins of God's chosen people, starting with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Genesis is loud and clear on three ideas that are foundational to holiness:

1. The creator is the one, true, and good God who is utterly other than the deities of ancient Israel's neighbors in both nature and act.
2. God's original purpose for the creation is to fill it with his glory through the multiplication of humanity, his image-bearing vice-regents.
3. God's rescue plan will be accomplished through Abraham and his family.

The otherness of God. Is the tragedy of human life all there is? Are conflict, suffering, betrayal, corruption, and death the beginning, middle, and end? Creation myths of the ancient Near East consistently answer "yes" to all these questions.² Furthermore, in such accounts, an unending cycle of existential and ethical brokenness characterizes the human condition and the lives of the gods. Like humans, the gods of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon are subject to fate and live by their own ethical standards. Dennis Kinlaw describes the worldview of the ancient Near East in this way:

The reality is that the divine world is a reflection of the human world, not *visa [sic] versa*. This also means that since everything came out of the same womb, there is a certain continuity in everything. . . . There is a certain continuity of both the divine realm and the human/nature realm with each other and with the primordial realm, since everything came ultimately from that primordial womb.³

In other words, non-biblical worldviews conceptualize deities after the human image and the divine existence in the likeness of the human condition. For humans and gods alike, conflict, suffering, and death—which all result from moral relativity—are all there is.

²See John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), esp. 21-85.

³Dennis F. Kinlaw and John N. Oswalt, *Lectures in Old Testament Theology* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury, 2000), 79.

Genesis 1 opposes this pagan view of the world with a resounding, "No!" Furthermore, this "no" is at the heart of holiness in the Pentateuch. Genesis announces that the creator's existence is utterly different from human existence. Unlike the gods of Israel's neighbors, God's life is not a mirror image of human life. Genesis 1 makes the unique claim that God is (1) sovereign (i.e., all-powerful), (2) one (i.e., there are not many Gods), (3) transcendent (i.e., not continuous with the created world), and (4) good. Genesis 1 proclaims that the creator is the one, true, good God. This is not only a dramatic departure from the way ancient Near Eastern peoples viewed the world (both invisible and visible); it is also the fundamental starting point for understanding reality and, more specifically, human existence.

Forming and filling the creation: The vocational image of God. The otherness of God is not the only good news of Genesis 1. Genesis 1 also announces that the tragedy of human existence is *not* what God intended. He desired for humanity—and by extension the entire creation—to share in *his* "other" life of light, order, self-giving love, joy, and peace. This is accomplished through conformity to the divine ethic. In a word, God's life, unlike the human condition, is one of *shalom*.⁴ It lacks nothing. It is whole and absent of strife. Furthermore, God created humanity in his image and with a vocation to *multiply and fill the cosmos with his shalom life*.

This vocation is highlighted in the forming and filling motif of Genesis 1. The first three days (days 1-3) of the creation are forming days, and the last three days (days 4-6) are filling days. This pattern is fleshed out in all six days of God's creating activity. God's forming and filling come to a climax on the sixth day when he creates humanity. In Genesis 1:26, God creates humanity in the divine "image" (*tselem*) and "likeness" (*demut*) and subsequently commands humanity to (1) multiply and (2) rule over the creation. As the creator's image-bearing vice-regents are faithful to their vocation, the cosmos

⁴The Hebrew word *shalom* means "perfect balance" or "peace."

will be filled with God's glory. Life, order, freedom, justice, love, and *shalom* are to reach the ends of the earth as humanity is faithful to its vocation. All of this comes together with the single purpose of glorifying God. This is the image-bearing vocation of humanity. As G. K. Beale writes, "[God's] special revelatory presence does not fill the entire earth yet, since it was his intention that this goal be achieved by his human vice-regent, whom he installed in the garden sanctuary to extend the garden boundaries of God's presence worldwide."⁵

Yes, the glory of God fills the creation (Is 6:3; Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19-20), but it is the multiplying of his image-bearers that brings the glory of God's personal presence to the creation. This God-glorifying, image-bearing vocation of humanity as described in Genesis 1 establishes the goal of holiness. The goal of holiness is special, personal revelation of the glory of God.

Excursus: *The Sabbath is holy.* The first occurrence of "holy" is in Genesis 2:3: "Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." Here, it is the seventh day of creation—the Sabbath—that God blesses and sanctifies. The second half of the verse provides the rationale for God's blessing and sanctifying the Sabbath: "for in it he rested from all his work which he created." In other words, the seventh day is *distinct* (i.e., set apart) from the other six days because on this day God rested, while on the other days he was actively creating. There is a distinction here between two types of days: (1) workdays and (2) rest days. All the other days comprise life-creating activity, yet the seventh day is one of rest from that activity.

While there is a qualitative difference between the six workdays and the Sabbath, these two categories of days share something in common: both support the generation and flourishing of life. The generation and sustaining of life are central themes of Genesis 1–2. In these two chapters, God creates life and systems that enable that

⁵G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 138.

life to flourish. In Genesis 1, God first creates habitations in which life can flourish (days 1-3), then fills those habitations with inhabitants (days 4-6). He then commands those inhabitants to propagate more life (Gen 1:22, 28). God's command to the first humans to cultivate and care for the creation is integral to the theme of the generation and flourishing of life. This theme also comes through in Genesis 2 where God's creating activity comes to a climax with breathing the breath of life into Adam (Gen 2:7). The theme of life also resonates with the declaration that the tree of life was in the midst of the garden (Gen 2:9) and with Eden's rivers as the source of life flowing from the garden to generate and nourish life in its surrounding lands (Gen 2:10-14). Altogether, God's good creation as he intended it is perfect and complete when teeming with self-propagating life.⁶

It is clear how six days of work to cultivate the creation generate life, but what about the day of rest? What do life and the flourishing of life have to do with the holiness of the Sabbath, and particularly rest? The creation cycle is incomplete without rest because life cannot be properly sustained without balancing work with rest. The Sabbath protects life by guarding humanity against being absorbed in work. Henri Blocher writes:

Now what is the meaning of the Sabbath that was given to Israel? It relativizes the works of mankind, the contents of the six working days. It protects mankind from total absorption by the task of subduing the earth, it anticipates the distortion which makes work the sum and purpose of human life, and it informs mankind that he will not fulfill his humanity in his relation to the world which he is transforming but only when he raises his eyes above, in the blessed, holy hour of communion with the Creator. . . . The essence of mankind is not work!⁷

⁶This is also emphasized through the fact that death is the consequence of violating God's rules (Gen 2:17; 6:6-8, 13).

⁷Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 57.

In sum, rest is required for life to flourish, even when cultivating the creation is the primary human vocation. Being absorbed in work ultimately hinders the flourishing of life.

An obsession with work also distorts human meaning and witness to the nature of the creator. The human vocation to cultivate and have dominion over the creation is one aspect of being created in the divine image. God is the model for human life in working six days a week and resting one. The Sabbath is a reminder that humanity's identity is not entirely wrapped up in work. Just as the creator is more than the work he does, so is humanity. This day of rest, then, points to a reality about God and humanity. The consequence of the divine image-bearers failing to observe the Sabbath not only thwarts the sustaining of life, it also distorts the witness to the nature of the creator.

The risk of the tyranny of work exponentially increases because of the consequences of sin in the garden in Genesis 3. As a result of their disobedience, God pronounces a curse against Adam and Eve (Gen 3:16-19). Eve's consequence is that she will have pain in child-bearing (Gen 3:16). Adam's consequence is that he will have pain in cultivating the earth because the earth is now cursed (Gen 3:17-19). For both of them, bringing forth and sustaining life will be risky, onerous, burdensome, and painful due to their rebellion. Together as divine image-bearers, their vocation to generate and sustain life is one means by which they faithfully embody the likeness of God. In obeying the command to multiply and have dominion over the creation, they participate in the life-generating and sustaining activity of the creator. However, it is precisely at this place of faithfully fulfilling their image-bearing vocation that they are cursed. The curse means that generating and sustaining life will be much more difficult and demand much more effort. This demand heightens the risk of the tyranny of work.

Perhaps more importantly, the curse of Genesis 3 also thwarts humanity's witness to the nature of the creator. In Genesis 1-2, God

delights in his work, unlike the creator deities of the pantheons of the ancient Near East and unlike humanity laboring under the burden of the curse. It is by strife, struggle, risk, betrayal, and pain that the creation comes about in all other ancient Near Eastern creation myths. In the biblical origin story, God is utterly unchallenged in creating. God's sovereignty comes through in the formulaic declaration of, "And God said, 'Let there be X...' and it was. And it was evening, and it was morning. Day X." It is that simple. God wanted it to happen, so it did. Creation comes about as a result of his unchallenged and perfect will, and he took delight in it. It was good. No other deity forced his hand. It was just as he intended, and life flourished. Now that humanity has rebelled, however, they look more like the ancient Near Eastern gods who are burdened by work and who must struggle to keep death at bay. Humanity was supposed to delight in their work, and in doing so, to reflect the creator who delighted in his work. Now it is not so. When they rest, however, they still bear witness to the creator, who also rested.

The life-preserving function of the Sabbath is heightened, then, when mapped onto the curse in Genesis 3. The Sabbath is the day on which the curse of toil is lifted. It is the day that brings relief from the curse. While the burden of strenuously fighting back death mark all the other days, the Sabbath is marked by life and peace. Moreover, when the image-bearers make the Sabbath holy by observing it, they continue the witness that they, like God, are more than the work they do.

Egyptian slavery is the epitome of human life absorbed in work culminating in death, which is why as we move forward in the story of the Pentateuch, the Sabbath is also mapped onto the Egyptian deliverance event.⁸ Slavery in Egypt is a case study of what happens when the will of the creator is ignored. A calendar with a day of rest at its center has special meaning for a nation delivered from

⁸Interestingly, nearly half (47) of the total OT occurrences (111) of *shabbat* are in the Pentateuch. More than half (25) of the Pentateuch occurrences are in Leviticus.

generations of slave labor. Immediately following their deliverance from Egypt, God gave Israel an entirely new calendar that is centered not on work, but on rest. Redemption from a life of slavery means the reintegration of rest into the life of God's people for the flourishing of life as patterned after the creator in Genesis 1. With the Sabbath in place, the vocation to work returns to its proper place and meaning. Put another way, when Sabbath is in place, the vocational aspect of the image of God in humanity is redeemed and God's perfect creation is restored. With the image of God restored, so is the witness to God's character via humanity. This reality surrounding the sanctity of the Sabbath is a picture of what will come in the Sinai covenant.

When we map the Sabbath onto the human vocation of Genesis 1–2, the curse of Genesis 3, and deliverance from Egyptian slavery, we can see why the Sabbath plays a crucial role in the holiness manifesto in Leviticus.⁹ Leviticus 23:3 says, “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwelling places” (ESV). The Sabbath marks Israel as not only God's possession, but also a means of relief from the curse that is the tyranny of work that culminates in death. God's holy people live according to the model of Eden where humans faithfully bear God's likeness, work is kept in its proper place, life flourishes, and God's will for the creation is fulfilled.

In sum, the Sabbath is not merely holy because it is a day of rest distinct from other working days. Sabbath is blessed and holy (i.e., qualitatively different) because it is a linchpin for fulfilling God's will for the creation, specifically regarding the generation and flourishing of life and for humans to give a proper witness to his nature and character. When humans are absorbed in work, it leads to death, the distortion of the image of God, and a fatal departure from God's

⁹*Shabbat* (“Sabbath”) occurs thirteen times in Leviticus (Lev 16:31; 23:3, 11, 15, 16, 32; 24:8; 25:2, 4, 6).

will for his creation. When humans keep work in its proper place by leaving room to rest, it leads to life. This Sabbath day, then, is qualitatively *different* from all other days. Beginning with the sanctification of the seventh day, we can safely say that holiness is *qualitative otherness*.

The fall: Abdication, moral autonomy, idolatry, regression to chaos, and death. Genesis 2 recounts how God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and commissions them to work and keep it. He instructs them that they may freely eat from the trees in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they will die if they do (Gen 2:16-17). In the chapter immediately following, the serpent accuses God of lying to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:4) to convince them to eat the forbidden fruit. The serpent explains that the consequence of eating the forbidden fruit is not that they will die but that they will become like God. Believing the serpent's lies, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. In doing so, Adam and Eve go from innocent obedience to a state of guilty disobedience and are expelled from God's presence.

When viewed through the wide-angle lens of Genesis 1, the fall becomes much more than human disobedience needing punishment. The fall is, first and foremost, humanity's abdication of its image-bearing vocation. Rather than filling the earth with God's glory by ruling over the creation in his likeness, humanity's progenitors give themselves over to the temptation of doing things their own way at the expense of fellowship with the creator. The forbidden tree's name indicates that in disobeying God's prohibition, Adam and Eve are deciding for themselves what is good and evil. That which God has called "bad," Adam and Eve have called "good." This is moral autonomy. Moral autonomy, however, is not part of humanity's vocation. God alone has the special right and privilege of moral sovereignty and authority. When created beings decide independently from the creator what is right and wrong, ethical relativity enters the creation, and chaos and darkness reign in a world in

which people do what is right in their own eyes (Judg 21:25) precisely because the proper order and function of the creation is programmed according to God's definitions of good and evil. Because God's ethical profile is built into the ordering of the cosmos, and the creation is dependent on him for proper function and well-being, turning away from ethical behavior as defined by God results in regression back to the chaos of the watery abyss. Furthermore, breaking fellowship with the creator of life results in death.

The failure to recognize the creator as God is a failure of worship. It is an act of idolatry. Proper worship is one of the natural outcomes of holiness. Misplaced worship by way of idolatry results in the unraveling of the cosmos. The unraveling of the cosmos is what Genesis 4–11 is all about. As the story progresses after the fall, sin escalates to cosmic proportions. Evil becomes the standard. The brokenness of human life becomes, in a word, "common." Genesis 6:5-6 says, "The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled."

This is what precipitates the flood. The flood returns the creation to the state of watery chaos and darkness that was present in the *tohu wabohu* (often translated "formless and empty") of Genesis 1.¹⁰ Before God brought light, order, and life into existence, there was formlessness and emptiness. It was, as it has been translated, "desert wasteland."¹¹ In bringing life to the creation, God separated between the waters above and the waters below (Gen 1:6-8). The flood undoes this separation as "all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and

¹⁰For a thorough explanation of this phrase in its philological context see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 108-9; David T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

¹¹Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 108.

the floodgates of the heavens were opened" (Gen 7:11). In other words, sin returns to the world to this lifeless wasteland. Life cannot be sustained without absolute morality. What became common in the world was utterly different from God and his intentions for the cosmos. By God's grace, the waters recede, and the dry land emerges once again from the chaos with Noah as the representative head of the new humanity (Gen 9:1-5).

It only takes a few verses for things to go sour with humanity yet again. By wrongly consuming the vine, Noah follows in the footsteps of Adam and Eve. With Ham's sin (Gen 9:20-29), the cycle of sin starts all over again, and evil runs amuck in the post-flood creation just as it did prior to the flood. The rebellion of humanity comes to a climax in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11). The Tower of Babel symbolizes humanity's rebellious autonomy and self-sufficiency that is ultimately motivated by fear and lack of trust. In a word, the Tower of Babel is a symbol of idolatry. The people of Babel congregating in one place is the opposite of what God intended (Gen 1:28). God's vision of the human vocation was for them to spread out over the creation and for God to share that space with them. The story of the Tower of Babel tells us that humanity is opposed to God's intention for humanity and creation. God does not give up on his creation-redemption plan. God judges Babel by dividing the people and dispersing them and launches an entirely new plan to redeem creation.

The patriarchal narratives: The new Adam, election, and covenant. To get his project of filling the earth with his relational presence back on track, God will enter into a covenant with one who will become a new, faithful image-bearer, a prefiguring of the new Adam who trusts him and worships him alone. By grace, God chooses Abraham and his family as the representative head of the new humanity. God promises Abraham that blessing will come to the world through his descendants.¹² At the

¹²Gen 12:1-3; 22:18; Is 51:1-5; Lk 1:72; Acts 7:1-8; Rom 4:1-25; 9:6-8; Gal 3:7-9.

center of God's promises to Abraham are land and family. In short, God's *shalom* will return to the creation through Abraham's family.

Soon after Abraham goes out from Ur, God seals his promises to Abraham with a covenant (Gen 15). The importance of intimate fellowship between God and humanity in the creation-rescue mission is highlighted in the fact that covenant is the instrument through which God's redemption comes to the world. The Hebrew word for *covenant* (*berit*) means "agreement" or "alliance."¹³ Animal sacrifice was an essential part of covenant-making in the ancient Near East. The blood sacrifice in covenant-making is rooted in the concept of fictive kinship in ancient Near Eastern patriarchal culture.¹⁴ Covenants originally served to create conceptual family bonds between people, like marriage or adoption. The blood sacrifice symbolized that even though two parties were not of the same bloodline, they would exist together as if they were, thereby creating an imaginary shared bloodline between them. This is the most intimate of bonds. It is a symbol of two becoming one.¹⁵ It is also an act of formal oath which essentially declares, "May God do so to me if I break this covenant."

Thus, when God makes a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:17-18, he binds himself to Abraham in the most intimate way possible. In this account, God promises to be faithful to Abraham and then instructs Abraham to sacrifice five animals and separate the halves of the carcasses. After Abraham does this, he falls into a deep sleep. While sleeping, Abraham has a vision of God's presence passing between the divided carcasses. In passing between the carcasses, God is sealing his promise to Abraham. His

¹³HALOT 1:157-59.

¹⁴See Sandra L. Richter, *Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 69-91.

¹⁵For a helpful discourse on metaphors for salvation in the scriptures that highlight the level of intimacy God desires with humanity, see Dennis F. Kinlaw, *Let's Start with Jesus: A New Way of Doing Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 47-70.

passing between the carcasses symbolizes that if he does not uphold his promise, he is subject to the punishment of death. He is making a familial promise to Abraham and thereby declaring his loyalty to Abraham.

The patriarchal narratives that make up the remainder of Genesis affirm God's loyalty to Abraham and Abraham's faith in God. God fulfills his promise to Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac is born (Gen 21). The testing of Abraham's faith comes to a climax in Genesis 22 when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his one and only son. This story highlights that Abraham lives by the conviction that God is God, and he is not, that God alone decides what is good and evil. Abraham, as the representative head of the new humanity, is walking in fellowship with God and worshiping God alone. This is what God intended from the beginning. What God has with Abraham is what the Garden of Eden was supposed to be about. In Abraham's relationship with God, the restoration of Eden is prefigured.

As the story continues, God's faithfulness to Abraham is affirmed as the Abrahamic promises pass on to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. In all the successes and failures of the patriarchs, God proves faithful to his promise to Abraham in the multiplication of his family and the acquisition of land.

Genesis 50:19-20 summarizes the book's central theme: God is sovereign and trustworthy. Forty-nine chapters after the creation account, Genesis reminds the reader that while it seems as if the cosmos is unraveling, the creator is the one, true God who is powerful enough to rescue the creation.

Trust is the foundation for the divine-human relationship and the basis for God's life to fill the creation through humanity. Genesis 15 gives us a clear example of justifying faith. In this story, God promises a sterile Abraham and Sarah the impossible: innumerable offspring. Abraham *believed* in God. He trusted God. He had confidence that God would make good on this promise. This faith is the basis for the restored relationship with the holy creator, and being reconciled to

the holy One is at the heart of holiness. As image-bearers, humanity was made to be in relationship. Being estranged from the creator makes them less than human. Being reconciled to God repairs the image; it restores that which is at the heart of humanness: personhood. Trust is the foundation for a reconciled relationship.

EXODUS

Genesis establishes the context for understanding who God is, what it means to be human in the creation, and God's plan to rescue the creation through Abraham's line. In Exodus, the new-creation motif that began with the patriarchs in Genesis becomes more robust as Israel—the new humanity—emerges out of the chaos of Egypt by way of the Red Sea, and the tabernacle is constructed as the microcosm of the new creation. Exodus depicts Israel as the new humanity headed toward the Promised Land, the new Eden. Land, then, is a central theme in Exodus and the remainder of the Pentateuch.

Deliverance from Egyptian slavery: The new Adam needs a new land. The good news is that Abraham's family (the representative head of the new creation) has mushroomed into a nation. The bad news is that they hardly live in the *shalom* of Eden. The ground was cursed as a result of human rebellion in Genesis 3. The theme of holy land is the promise of the reversal of that curse. God's promise of family has been fulfilled, but not the promise of land, for Abraham's descendants are enslaved in Egypt. Out of his loyalty to Abraham, God commissions Moses to bring Abraham's family out of Egypt so that they can inherit the land that God had promised (Gen 12:1-7; Ex 2:23-24). Against the backdrop of Genesis 1, Egyptian slavery exemplifies the condition of humanity under the tyrannical reign of sin and death. As is evidenced in the story of baby Moses' rescue from Pharaoh's death decree, Pharaoh, like death and the chaos of the watery abyss, will not have the final word. God can reach into human life and break the cycle.

The story of the burning bush (Ex 3) introduces the theme of God’s faithfulness to fulfill his promise of holy land. In the narrative, God appears to Moses in the burning bush, and the word “holy” appears for the first time in Exodus when God says, “Do not come near, take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). In Genesis, there was a holy day (Gen 2:3). Here, however, we have “holy ground” (*’admat-qodesh*). This “holy ground” anticipates the land that God has set apart for Abraham’s descendants. The new Adam—the holy people—needs a new, holy land to inhabit with the creator. What is unusual is that this holy ground is in the desert. As Victor Hamilton notes,

Normally, then, the wilderness is the antithesis of holiness. They go together like oil and water. The one thing that can transform common, unholy ground into extraordinary, holy ground is a theophany, a (spectacular divine manifestation). And if God can transform unholy ground by the glow of his presence, might he not also be able to transform an unholy life? What God can do with the *’ādāmā*, might he not also do with the *’ādām*?¹⁶

This land is holy because it is set apart from the cursed space of the created order as the place where God’s special presence rests. Once again, it is the place where the curse on the ground (Gen 3:17) is lifted. Moses, and later Israel, are invited into that special space.

So, why must Moses remove his shoes? One possibility is that shoes are made from animal carcasses and are therefore unclean and not permissible in God’s presence. Another option is that it was customary in ancient cultures to remove footwear when invited into a home out of respect for the host. To apply the priestly law code at this point in the narrative would be anachronistic, so it seems that the latter interpretation is the more likely. This view harmonizes with the controlling new-creation motif. Even as the new Adam,

¹⁶Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 49.

Israel is a foreigner in God's presence, meaning that they do not yet know God personally, and that personal relationship, once again, is at the heart of holiness as the restoration of the divine image. As the story continues, it becomes evident that Moses does not know God, although he knows of God. Moses says, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Ex 3:13). God goes on to reveal the divine name: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex 3:14). Once again, Moses and YHWH—like Israel and YHWH—are not acquainted. YHWH will make Israel his own and invite them to live in his land as guests. More specifically, their indwelling will depend on their covenant faithfulness. They are not entitled to this land. This land is where YHWH, and none other, reigns. Moses removes his shoes as the first guest invited into God's holy habitation on earth.¹⁷

The unusual divine name attests to God's holiness.¹⁸ While there is no shortage of conjecture over the meaning of the phrase "I AM WHO I AM" (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*), Sarna is correct that "either it expresses the quality of absolute Being, the eternal, unchanging, dynamic presence, or it means, 'He causes to be.'"¹⁹ In other words, God is *utterly different* from everything in the creation. He does not change, he is eternal, he is not restricted by time and space, and he is in no way dependent on created things or beings.²⁰

Israel must first be delivered from Egyptian slavery to get to the holy land. God loosens Pharaoh's grip on Abraham's family through

¹⁷The practice of entering God's presence barefoot is upheld later in the priesthood where the only part of the priest's body that is to be uncovered when entering the tabernacle is the feet.

¹⁸For more on the theology of the placement of the divine name see Sandra Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 318 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

¹⁹Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Pentateuch Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 17-18.

²⁰For a more detailed discourse on the theology of the divine name, see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 1: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 332-43.

plagues. In the plagues that lead up to the climactic Red Sea crossing, we hear echoes of the creation account from Genesis 1. As the plagues wreak havoc on Egypt, God demonstrates his sovereignty, oneness, and transcendence once again by making a mockery of the false gods of the Egyptian pantheon. It all comes to a climax with the division of the Red Sea. Israel emerges out of the Red Sea just as light, life, and order emerge from the watery chaos of Genesis 1, just as Adam emerged from the dust, just as Noah came out of the ark, Abraham came out of Ur, Isaac out of Sarah, and baby Moses out of the Nile River. This is a re-creation event. Israel is the new Adam. Immediately after God subdues the chaos in Genesis 1, he makes a covenant with Adam and Eve, his image-bearing vice-regents (Gen 1:28). Likewise, after the Israelites come out of the Red Sea as the new humanity, God makes a covenant with them (Ex 24:3-8). God is making Israel his family of priests who share in his likeness.

The Mosaic law and the profile of the image of God. The new-creation motif continues in the giving of the Mosaic law at Sinai and the building of the tabernacle. God frames the covenant law code within this motif. He says, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6). God is pointing out that

1. Israel is to be different from the nations as he is different from deities of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon (i.e., "a holy nation"); and
2. their covenant faithfulness will serve as testimony to his existence by embodying the moral character of God (i.e., "a kingdom of priests"). If the world wishes to have a part in YHWH, it must have a part in Abraham.

God gives Moses the covenant stipulations in the Ten Commandments at Sinai (Ex 20). Then Moses conducts the blood covenant ceremony between God and Israel (Ex 24). In creating the covenant between God and Israel, Moses dashes blood on the altar and the

Israelites. This is reminiscent of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. As Israel becomes God's people, they are mandated to look like him. This is nothing short of the image of God restored through covenant faithfulness. This is holiness. The people of Israel are to conform to the ethics of the one, true God in their love of God and each other.

The profile of God's image is encoded in the covenant stipulations. His character is revealed in the quality of life he demands of his people. God prohibits adultery because he is faithful. He prohibits murder because he loves life and honors his image in humanity. God prohibits false testimony because he is honest and true. God commands the Israelites to leave behind a portion of the harvest for the poor and treat foreigners well because he is compassionate. Each of the 613 commands of the Pentateuch underscores an attribute of God that he shares with his image-bearers. Behaviors, thoughts, desires, and attitudes that conflict with God's character result in a regression toward chaos. When people lie, cheat, steal, and murder, the cosmic order breaks down because such behavior violates the character built into the ordering of the cosmos. However, when God's people obey his commands, they embody his image in the creation, and he is glorified. Their faithful obedience to his ethical code out of a heart posture of pure love and fellowship is an act of worship. They obey, like Abraham, because they trust him. Where there is a lack of obedience, there is a lack of trust and worship.

The Hebrew word that best summarizes God's holiness regarding ethics is *hesed*. The various English translations for this unique Hebrew word include: "steadfast love" (ESV, NRSV) and "kindness" (ESV, NIV). More specifically, in *hesed* is the sense of deep, steadfast loyalty that characterizes familial bonds.²¹ It is loyalty that is driven by intimate love. Grace is a critical concept that plays a part in this kind of love. Family members are not bound to one another because

²¹HALOT 1:336.

of material benefit (i.e., something earned) but out of affection and devotion. This word is first used in the Bible to describe Abraham's servant's affection and faithfulness to Abraham when Abraham commissioned him to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:12). Even though Abraham's servant is not Abraham's blood relative, his affection for Abraham is as if they were blood relatives. Abraham's servant is faithful to Abraham just as family members are faithful to one another regardless of personal gain or changing life circumstances. This *hesed* describes God's posture toward humanity and is the blueprint behind the profile of the image of God codified in the law.

As Israel is to be like God in his *hesed*, their way of life as prescribed by the law makes them utterly different from their neighbors. Israel is to be different not simply for the sake of being different but for bringing life and order—and subsequently God's glory—to the creation. Israel's call to holiness serves to restore God's original intent to the creation. When Israel is faithful to the covenant, the nations can see who the people of God are. Consequently, God calls Israel to be different from its pagan neighbors as God is from the pagan deities.²² In fulfilling their image-bearing vocation, Israel is to embody the character of God, who is categorically different from the pagan gods and their human worshipers. Israel is called out of the chaos and darkness of the broken world of human rebellion and moral relativity (typified in Egypt) to live in the Promised Land, where moral absolutes reign under the leadership of the one, true God. With holiness, proper worship of the one, true God is restored. Christopher Wright says,

In Old Testament terms, being holy did not mean that the Israelites were to be a specially *religious* nation. At heart, the word "holy" . . . means *different or distinctive*. Something or someone is holy when they get set apart for a distinct purpose in relation to God and then are kept separate for that purpose. For Israel, it meant being different by reflecting the very different God that YHWH revealed himself to

²²See Ps 115.

be, compared with other gods. Israel was to be as different from other nations as YHWH was different from other gods.²³

The tabernacle: A microcosm of the new creation. As a part of the covenant stipulations, God instructs Israel to build a tabernacle (*mishkan*) so that he can fill it with his presence and glory (Ex 26–31). Here we have the Genesis 1 forming and filling motif once again. The tabernacle is constructed as God’s special place of residence, just as creation was intended to be in Genesis 1. The tabernacle (and its later articulation, the temple) is a microcosm of the creation which was the original tabernacle (Ps 78:69), and it is to be a holy place where God can dwell among humanity in his glory.²⁴ *Holy*, which has appeared only six times between Genesis 1 and Exodus 24, occurs nearly fifty times in Exodus 25–40. This demonstrates a direct connection between God’s holiness and his presence, as these chapters are singularly focused on the construction of the tabernacle. Most of the holiness language in these chapters refers to the “holy place” within the tabernacle.²⁵ God’s presence is holy and being in that presence demands holiness. If “holy,” in at least one sense, means “set apart,” then God—the holy One of Israel—cannot mix with that which is unholy. God is holy, so the world that has been profaned by sin would be utterly consumed in his holy presence. How will unholy people get into God’s holy presence? More to the point of holiness, how can an unholy people be reconciled to share in God’s life-giving, holy presence that is made manifest in the tabernacle? Leviticus answers that very question.

LEVITICUS

Leviticus continues the story of the exodus by taking a deeper dive on the divine-human relationship. Leviticus answers the question of

²³Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 123, emphasis original.

²⁴For an in-depth description of the tabernacle as a microcosm of the cosmos, see Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 29–80.

²⁵Ex 26:33, 34; 28:29, 35, 36, 43; 29:30.

how all-holy YHWH can share an earthly residence with Israel—a sinful people living in a sinful world. In short, Leviticus explains how God can sanctify people and places. The priesthood and the sacrificial system, which Leviticus unpacks in painstaking detail, is the answer. As such, Leviticus can be divided into at least two main parts: chapters 1–10 (the way to the holy One) and chapters 11–27 (the way to holiness).²⁶

An object lesson in holiness: The priesthood and sacrificial system. In a way, the priesthood and sacrificial system can be viewed as an elaborate object lesson on holiness and sin.²⁷ This object lesson makes several things clear:

1. God is perfectly pure; in him there is no deficiency, defect, dishonesty, corruption, or death; he is morally perfect and purely life.
2. People are utterly sinful; sin is pervasive in that it touches every human and every aspect of human life.
3. Sin is organic and contagious; it never remains localized; it always spreads to infect the whole.
4. Sin always leads to death; it does not stop until it has taken the life of its host.
5. God’s presence does not tolerate sin. God’s purity and holiness obliterates sin when it comes in contact with it; it is dangerous for sinful people to be in God’s holy presence.
6. Even though sin is serious and powerful, God can sanctify the impure.
7. God expects his people to be holy as he is holy.

The holiness code that is laid out in Leviticus, then, details a partial antidote for the powerful disease of sin. It explains the mechanics of temple rituals and regulations as the means for alleviating the sin problem to enable sinful people to share in God’s holy life and thereby restore God’s original purposes for the creation (i.e.,

²⁶Norman Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 66.

²⁷Cf. Gal 3:24.

divine-human cohabitation). Considering these characteristics of sin, Israel's call to holiness in Leviticus encompasses every aspect of their social, religious, and familial lives and leaves no room for tolerance for the deadly disease that sin is.

Leviticus not only explains the mechanics for temple rituals; it also explains the rationale behind Israel's call to holiness. The rationale is wrapped up in the recurring phrase "be holy for I am holy." This phrase serves as the preamble to the details of the holiness code (cf. Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2, 24; 20:7, 26; 21:6, 8; 23:20) and is best interpreted as "be holy *because* I am holy." The repetition of the phrase in Leviticus is a reminder that Israel is to relentlessly embody God's character and to pursue pathways to connect to their holy God and maintain relationship with him. They are to be different from their neighbors as YHWH is different from the deities of the ancient Near East. They are to embody the *image of God* as was always intended for humanity. Furthermore, the repetition of the phrase means that God's holiness demands purity. In his holiness, it would be contradictory to his character to tolerate corruption of any sort. As is evident through the sacrificial system, a part of his holiness is his mercy and grace which makes provision for sanctification in lieu of annihilation.

Often paired with the command to be holy is the phrase, "I am the LORD your God." This phrase—which also introduced the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2; cf. Deut 5:6)—evokes the memory of Israel's miraculous redemption from Egyptian slavery in tandem with the call to holiness. This means that Israel is not called to mindlessly imitate YHWH, but to imitate their covenant God *out of a sense of gratitude, love, and devotion to their deliverer*; they are to reciprocate his *hesed*. As Wenham states, "Under the covenant the people of God were expected to keep the law, not merely as a formal duty but as a loving response to God's grace in redemption."²⁸

²⁸Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 251.

Leviticus 19 provides numerous concrete examples of how the command to “be holy as I the Lord God am holy” applies in everyday life. These commands correspond to various attributes of the character of God. Human holiness as it reflects God’s holiness as described there includes the following:

Table 1.1. Human behaviors in Leviticus that correspond to God’s attributes.

Human behavior	Attribute of God’s character
Honor your parents (19:3)	Respects persons
Keep the sabbath (19:3)	Loyal, faithful
Don’t make idols (19:4)	Loyal, faithful
Leave some of the harvest for the marginalized (19:9-10)	Compassionate, generous
Don’t steal (19:11a)	Honest
Don’t lie (19:11b)	Honest
Don’t swear by my name falsely (19:12)	Honest
Don’t oppress or rob neighbors (19:13)	Just
Don’t curse the deaf or cause the blind to stumble (19:14)	Just
Don’t hate your brother in your heart (19:17)	Loving

The holy life as described in this chapter comes to a climax in verse 18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

The holiness of God and the need for atonement. According to Leviticus, there are degrees of holiness (and cleanliness) and likewise varying degrees of consequence for a lack of holiness. More specifically, there are three zones of proximity to God’s presence, each being further from the previous: (1) holy (2) clean, and (3) unclean. The rationale for this is that because God is morally perfect, his presence in a fallen world has conditions and consequences. Leviticus 10 recounts the story of God killing two of Aaron’s sons because they offer unauthorized fire in the temple.²⁹ This story illustrates that God’s holiness is dangerous and not to be violated. This

²⁹Cf. 2 Sam 6:6-11.

point is further underlined in the stipulation for the high priest to be adorned with bells and pomegranates when entering the holy of holies “so that he will not die” (Ex 28:31-35).

The operative notion here is that God’s moral perfection and divine power are inextricably linked. When fallen human beings with imperfections and moral deficiencies encounter an infinitely moral and pure being, there is an overwhelming sense of terror.³⁰ Beyond teaching the seriousness of sin, this aspect of God’s holiness is why atonement via the sacrificial system is needed. It is also why the priests, who are regularly near the presence of God, must take special care in carrying out their service in the temple.

The sacrificial system: Already, but not yet. At this point in the biblical narrative, there is an “already, but not yet” aspect to God’s cohabitation with Israel. While the tabernacle and Israel represent the restoration of Eden, this representative head of the new creation is still located within the time and space of the fallen cosmos. Israel, as the new humanity, is called to live a life that is holy, pure, and set apart from the world that is pervaded by sin. Israel’s holiness, however, is exposed to the contagious profane of the fallen world. It is inevitable that they will come in contact with the unclean. One of the purposes of the sacrificial system and atonement is to make provision for this. Atonement is how Israel maintains eligibility to be in God’s holy presence. The sacrificial system and atonement are undergirded by the expectation that God’s people be *perfect* as he is perfect.

The sacrificial system also provides a means for resolving the ongoing sin-guilt problem of Israel. Inherited from Adam is the proclivity to turn inward, to not trust God, to worship the creation rather than the creator. Israel’s ongoing sin problem is not limited to behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, and desires but extends to their very nature. Through the sacrificial system, God, out of grace, provides a means for those who have committed sin to love and worship

³⁰Cf. Is 6:1-7.

him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength to dwell in his presence. Oswalt writes:

Notice very carefully that the sacrifices are not for those who unintentionally sin and later think better of it. Neither are they for those who want to enter into a relationship with God. No, the sacrificial system is for those who are already in a relationship with God, those who are committed to living a life like his, and who are enjoying a sense of his presence with him.³¹

This means that the sacrificial system is *instrumental*. It serves the greater aim of divine-human fellowship, which puts God's intentions for the creation back on track. Through the sacrificial system God can manifest his heavenly reign on earth once again, and Eden can be restored.

Holiness, judgment, and atonement. But how does the sacrificial system mend the relationship between humanity and God? What is the rationale behind vicarious suffering and penal substitution that is at the heart of the sacrificial system? Inseparable from God's "otherness" is his justice. As already noted, God created the cosmos in a way that it is governed by moral principles. It follows that when the principles are broken there are consequences. This is required for order to be maintained. Thomas Oden writes,

The just God does not casually say at one moment to humanity: "when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17), only at the next moment to set aside the penalty after the transgression. *The holiness of God required a penalty for sin*, just as promised, otherwise there would be no way to count on the moral reliability of God's word. Lacking penalty for sin, the moral order is jeopardized.³²

For the relationship to be restored between God and humanity, there must be acknowledgment and rectification of guilt. God does not forgive people because they ask forgiveness; he forgives

³¹John N. Oswalt, *Called to Be Holy: A Biblical Perspective* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury, 1999), 29.

³²Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 350, emphasis original.

because a sacrifice has been made on their behalf. To forgive without penalty would be a violation of his character. In sum, “God demonstrates his holiness in judging sin.”³³ As is detailed in Leviticus, the blood of the sacrifice purifies as the sacrificial animal takes the place of the worshiper in paying the consequence or punishment for sin that is demanded by the holiness of God (i.e., substitutionary atonement). As the sacrifice is put forth in the place of the worshiper, the worshiper is cleansed of his sin-guilt (i.e., expiation). As the worshiper is cleansed by the substitution, the wrath of God is appeased (i.e., propitiation), and *shalom* between God and people is restored. Expiation and propitiation together are what constitute “atonement” (*kippur*).³⁴

But in what sense does atonement cleanse? Atonement is the provision that is made for the impure to share life with the pure by way of “covering,” “removing,” or “blotting out” the contaminate. Why is it that the shedding of blood blots out sin? Once again, it has everything to do with the nature of sin. Informed by Genesis 3, sin can be generally defined as the refusal to live according to God’s plans and purposes. Rebellion against God means breaking fellowship with the Life-Giver, and, therefore, separation from God, who is life itself. Death is the natural result of being separated from God as the giver of life. Atonement is the reversal of this consequence. Blood sacrifice is what is required to restore fellowship with God because blood is symbolic of life (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11; Deut 12:23). Only life—symbolized in blood—can blot out death.

The notion of atonement is best illustrated in the ritual practice and observance of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). James L. Mays accurately describes the Day of Atonement as “the climax and crown of Israel’s theology of sanctification.”³⁵ The Day of Atonement was the

³³Wenham, *Leviticus*, 22.

³⁴Is 52:13–53:12; Rom 3:23–26; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:10, 13; Col 2:13–15; 1 Pet 2:24; 3:18.

³⁵James L. Mays, *The Book of Leviticus; the Book of Numbers*, Layman’s Bible Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), 52.

mechanism through which God offered provision to cleanse Israel from all its sin and defilements. Allen P. Ross writes, "The revelation of the removal of sin and defilement is also clearly presented here in the scapegoat. All the sins of the people were confessed and transferred to the victim, which was then led outside the camp. All sin was completely removed by this substitute."³⁶ The scapegoat carrying the people's sin to the wilderness is symbolic of sin being sent to the place of the curse, the place of death.

The blood of the sacrifice sprinkled on the ark of the covenant is also significant. Inside the ark are the Ten Commandments, which summarize the covenant stipulations. The meaning of blood sprinkled on the ark of the covenant has two prongs. On the first prong is the acknowledgment of worshippers that they have violated the covenant and that the consequence for covenant violation is death. On the second prong, the blood sacrifice satisfies the requirement of death due to their rebellion against God. As the ark symbolizes the place of God's presence with his people, this ritual demonstrates that this restored fellowship is only possible with the blotting out of sin-guilt from God's people (expiation), and the satisfaction of the covenantal stipulations and the wrath of God (propitiation). The animal sacrifice is a substitute for God's people in satisfying the consequence of rebellion against God, which is death.

So, with atonement, *life blots out death*. Life symbolized in blood accounts for death by covering it and making it possible to restore fellowship with God. Furthermore, the ultimate outcome of fellowship restored between God and his image-bearers is that God's plans and purposes for creation are restored.

Nevertheless, where does the oneness (i.e., unmixed nature) of God come into play in the broader schematic of atonement? God is pure life and there is no death in him. Should death come into his presence, it is consumed because life "purges" death. A worshiper

³⁶Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 314.

who is a mixture of death and life that enters God's pure-life presence will be consumed. Death, however, is purged from a worshiper whose sin has been covered with life blood. The covering of sin-guilt with blood, then, restores the creation to God's overall purposes for life and the flourishing of life through the eradication of the contamination that is death.

While atonement comes through God's prescribed ritual, it is not magical or mechanical. The prophets abhor such a thought (Is 1:10-15). In the pagan view, where all things are at least potentially continuous with one another, an appropriate ritual seals the continuity of the worshiper with the sacrifice. Thus, what is done to the sacrifice is done to the worshiper, thereby achieving the desired result of the worshiper escaping the god's ire. Here the attitude of the worshiper is of no consequence. In the Bible, the sacrifice is understood to accomplish nothing in itself. Rather it symbolizes the changed relationship between YHWH and the worshiper in which YHWH extends gracious forgiveness, and the worshiper signals his or her acceptance of that grace through repentance, faith, and complete devotion. The giving of the sacrifice symbolizes that spiritual reality. If it does not, the sacrifice is not only worthless but counterproductive.

Last, the sacrificial system, along with the purity laws, communicates the severity of sin. For starters, sin always leads to death. This is why death is required to regain access to the presence of God. Sin, intentional or not, is fatal and to be avoided at all costs. Sin is also contagious and pervasive. We see this is the requirement for cleansing and purity laws. For example, lepers are required to be quarantined (Num 5:2). Sin has no place among God's people. Because of the pervasive nature of sin, Israel's devotion must be wholehearted. If God requires an absence of sin, then he in turn requires an undivided heart.

NUMBERS

Numbers continues the story of God fulfilling his promises of land to Abraham. As the people of Israel make their way across the wilderness

to inherit the gift of land, God's holy presence goes with them. During the journey, two primary dynamics related to holiness are revealed: (1) Israel has a stubborn heart, and (2) Israel is the chosen nation through whom God will rescue the world. Israel's stubbornness foreshadows the unending cycle of disobedience in the rest of the story of the Old Testament, and this cycle flags up the problem of the sinful condition that the law of Moses is unable to resolve.

Israel as a blessing to the nations affirms once again the missional aspect of the image of God restored in humanity with the goal to witness to and glorify the one, true God. God decided that his creation-redemption project would unfold in the world *through Abraham*. Abraham was to be the conduit through whom the nations would receive blessing (Gen 12:3). This point is affirmed in Numbers 22–24 in the stories of Balaam. In short, Balaam, a pagan prophet, is instructed by king Balak to pronounce a curse against Israel. In his instructions, Balak uses language that recalls Genesis 12. He says, "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that *whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed*" (Num 22:6, emphasis added). As Balaam sets off to do as instructed by his king, God sends an angel to stop him from pronouncing the curse. In place of the curse, Balaam pronounces an oracle in favor of Israel (Num 23:7-10). Once again, this story illustrates that Israel is the chosen people through whom God's redemptive work will manifest in the world for all nations.

Interestingly, another message of Numbers is that, regardless of Israel's special status among other nations before God, their faithfulness to the covenant is still required for the success of God's redemption plan. Election, in other words, is not license for lawlessness. As the Israelites wander through the wilderness and fail to uphold the law, they are still cursed. Israel's repeated stubbornness anticipates its downward spiral of rebellion as recounted in the historical books and the Prophets and as predicted in Deuteronomy.

Before moving to Deuteronomy, however, Aaron's priestly blessing (Num 6:22-27) also illuminates thinking about holiness in Numbers. The priestly blessing reads, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." The blessing emphasizes the Lord's face. This is *relationship* language. Being in the presence of God is the same as being "before his face" (*liphne*). What God is saying is that Israel, as his chosen and blessed people, lives in reconciled relationship with him, and that very relationship is founded on the grace of the holy One of Israel. Furthermore, the fruit of that reconciled relationship is peace restored and the fullness of human life as God always intended it.

DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy brings the Pentateuch to a close with Moses' retelling of the law to the new generation of Israelites as they are poised to inherit the Promised Land. Moses not only reminds Israel of the covenant stipulations but also encourages them to be faithful to the covenant so that they will experience God's blessing. A lack of faithfulness, Moses says, will result in God's curse on them and their expulsion from God's presence.

The prohibition of idolatry as well as the missional nature of holiness via covenant faithfulness is wrapped up in the so-called Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, which says, "Hear [*shema*], O Israel, the LORD our God the LORD is one." This verse captures in a single statement the core theological value undergirding holiness as it has been understood from the very beginning of the narrative in Genesis. God's people are set apart from their neighbors as they embody the truth that God is one, sovereign, and transcendent.

In the ancient codices from which the original Hebrew Old Testament is translated, the last letter of the first word (*shema*) and the last consonant of the last word (*ehad*) of Deuteronomy 6:4 are enlarged. Those Hebrew letters are *'ayin* and *dalet*. When read together,

these two consonants create the Hebrew word meaning “testimony,” or “witness” (*ed*). What does this mean? It means that adherence to the law *testifies* to the nature of the one, true God through conformity to God’s ethical standard as set forth in the law code. When the prescribed behavior and heart posture described in the law code are applied, God’s moral standard for humanity as the ordained authority over the creation becomes visible to the world. Israel, in other words, is the window through which the world can see what the creator God is really like. Israel is God’s representative on earth. They are his image-bearers. They are the true Adam, as this was the goal for all of humanity through the gift of the image of God in the garden. This is the frame for understanding the phrase “walk in obedience to him . . .” that recurs throughout Deuteronomy.³⁷ Through complete obedience to the covenant stipulations, Israel conforms to the image of God as God always intended for humanity.³⁸

The Shema is immediately followed by this: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5). The repetition of the word “all” (*kol*) before “heart,” “soul,” and “strength” captures the Shema’s emphasis on *complete devotion*. Because YHWH alone is God, there is no room for divided hearts. Exclusive worship of the faithful, loving creator who is transcendent yet immanent demands steadfast loyalty. The hearts—or “will”—of his followers should not be split between YHWH and Baal, nor should their souls or strength. The call to holiness is a call to undivided devotion.

Deuteronomy is an appropriate conclusion to the Pentateuch as the new-creation motif comes through once again. Deuteronomy echoes Genesis 1–2 when God placed humanity in the garden. Just as God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden to work and keep it, Israel stands on the banks of the Jordan River

³⁷Deut 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; 11:12; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16.

³⁸Certainly, this does not intend to exclude other readings of the image of God, including substantive, relational, functional, and royal interpretations.

ready to inherit Canaan as the new Eden to work and keep. If they heed his commission to work and keep the garden, they will keep fellowship with God. If they rebel against him, they will be expelled from his presence and die. This resonates strongly with God's commands about not eating of the tree and the curse of expulsion for infidelity in the form of idolatry. In fact, God predicts Israel's infidelity. In Deuteronomy 31:16-18, God says to Moses,

You are going to rest with your ancestors, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, "Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?" And I will certainly hide my face in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.

The historical books and the Prophets tell the story of the fulfillment of this prediction. As the story unfolds, the cycle of sin and rebellion continues in various forms and with very little exception. Moses' prediction clues us in to what the historical books and the Prophets will fully disclose and that is that the problem of sin is not merely a matter of "dos" and "don'ts," but a problem with the diseased nature of humanity. Thankfully, the historical books and the Prophets not only reveal this problem that the Mosaic law is unable to resolve but also reveal God's solution: a *new* covenant.

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