LEVITICUS

INTRODUCTION

In the Introduction (page 24) we spoke of the key role played by the Priestly School (**P**) in the production of the Torah. This is most apparent in Leviticus where from the content, the language and the style it is apparent that the entire book is the product of that school. The word 'School' is important. We are not speaking of a document that was written at one time and by a single group of priests. There are clear signs, as we shall see, that Leviticus chapters seventeen to twenty-seven is a later work that qualifies and supplements the legislation found in the earlier chapters. Nor should we imagine the priests who composed Leviticus chapters one to sixteen as creating their text out of nothing. First of all there is the obvious fact that they were drawing on centuries of practice, especially from the cult in the Jerusalem temple, but also from the sanctuaries in the northern kingdom, such as Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

Since the priesthood was hereditary, sons would have learned from their fathers the regulations covering the cult. However, there was a significant difference between the priesthood as practised in Israel and the priesthood of other peoples in the ancient Near East, where the priesthood tended to guard its secrets jealously. In Israel the whole people was to be 'priestly'. The people needed to know what was expected of them when they came to the sanctuary to worship. Of course, in a community that was largely illiterate, the people would have been shown what to do by the priests and those who assisted in the sanctuary, but we should expect that, even more than in the surrounding cultures, regulations covering the public cult would have been stored in temple archives, and that these records would have been available to the authors of Leviticus.

Cult tends to be stable, but the way cult is carried out in a small tribal sanctuary would have to be different from what took place in the temple in Jerusalem. It is not difficult to imagine the adjustments that had to be made when David brought the ark to Jerusalem from Shiloh (2Samuel 6:2), when Solomon built the temple (1Kings 6:1), when refugees from the north poured into Jerusalem after the collapse of Samaria (see, for example, 2Kings 17:28), and when, a century later as part of his reform, King Josiah insisted on centralising the cult in the Jerusalem Temple (2Kings 23:19). Regulations that governed the behaviour of people in relation to a local and easily accessible sanctuary could not work for those who lived long distances from Jerusalem. In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* page 94 Jean Louis Ska SJ writes: 'The legislative texts and the narratives have been re-read, corrected, reinterpreted and updated several times in accordance with new situations and the need to answer new questions.' There is evidence, too, of debate between the disciples of the Deuteronomy School and the members of the Priestly School responsible for Leviticus. We will examine some of this when we come to comment on specific legislation. The upshot of all this is that we should imagine the priest-authors working not only from memory and oral tradition, but also from pieces of written material inherited from the northern sanctuaries and from the Jerusalem Temple. However, a major impulse for their work was the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple (586BC) and the experience of exile. During the long years when there was no temple and no public cult there was a real danger that much would be lost unless it were set in writing. The loss of the land and the kingship focused attention on Israel as a worshipping community. The priests wanted to ensure that when the temple was restored worship would be carried out according to the will of YHWH.

Then came the important years after the return from exile. Ska writes (page 160): 'The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community was a new situation that was a fertile ground for a revision and re-interpretation of the data of tradition.'

In Exodus and Numbers the priest authors drew on traditional stories. There are virtually no stories in Leviticus. It picks up from the end of the Book of Exodus where Moses has just completed the setting up of the tent of meeting 'in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month'(Exodus 40:17). The Book of Numbers begins a month later 'on the first day of the *second* month'(Numbers 1:1). The whole of the Book of Leviticus is located in the first month, between the building of the sanctuary, and the departure from Sinai. The priest authors put time on hold, as it were, as YHWH summons Moses and speaks the whole of Leviticus to him from the tent of meeting (see Leviticus 1:1).

This is the perfect setting for the material contained in Leviticus. Believing as they did that YHWH was present among them, guiding them, they saw the history of cult regulations as being an expression of God's will and as being implicit in the foundational revelation received by Moses. By placing these regulations here, before the Israelites leave for the Promised Land, they are able to link them with the revelation given at Sinai. The priests focus on the cult, not only because it was the area of their special ministry, but more importantly because they knew that it is Israel's communion with God that identifies them as a people, and enables them to fulfil the ethical requirements of being God's 'priestly kingdom' and 'holy nation'(Exodus 19:6).

As a people formed by God, the people of Israel judged that everything essential to their life was inspired by God. Their ethical and cultural life, and in a special way their cult, was their way of responding to God's choice. Their fidelity in these matters was their side of the covenant they had with God. It was their way of welcoming the blessings God wanted for them. Infidelity, on the other hand, could only cut them off from God's blessing and lead to their undermining as a people. The destruction of the temple was proof of that. By living pure lives in accordance with God's will as it had been revealed to their ancestors, they wanted to avoid repeating the sins of their forebears. We are talking of a living tradition which required a constant listening to a living and present God. The priest authors, therefore, were careful to preserve whatever material was available to them. They wanted to show that there was continuity in the legislation, that they were not creating something new, but were being faithful to ancient practices.

A Sense of the Sacred

It is nearly two thousand years since there has been a temple in Jerusalem. During all that time it has been impossible to carry out the regulations contained in Leviticus. The text, however, is not of interest only to the antiquarian historian, for it still has much to say about the holiness of God, which is its key theme. The setting is very different from that in which we find ourselves, and so the ways of respecting the sacred will remain unfamiliar. Our hope is to be able to understand the text in its own setting, and then to translate its key themes into our own time.

The setting as we find it in Leviticus focuses very much on the priests, for it was their responsibility to see that God's dwelling was not contaminated. The strictest regulations concerned the tent itself, the 'Most Holy Place' where they believed God dwelt among them, and which only the high priest could enter. But there were also strict regulations governing 'the holy place', the adjacent sanctuary which the priests were able to enter, as well as the courtyard in which stood the altar for sacrifice. To ensure against contaminating any part of the tabernacle, rituals of purification are prescribed.

Some of these rituals have parallels in the surrounding cultures. Their purpose, however, is very different. The Israelite priests are not trying to manipulate God or to ward off the influence of evil spirits. They are not indulging in magic actions or incantations. They are, of course, influenced by their culture, but their sacrifices and purification regulations, are their attempt to respect the holiness of God and, through participating in the symbolic world of cult, to remember the kind of life they are called to live and the mission to the world entrusted to them by God. The cult was a constant reminder that, thanks to the Presence of God among them, and to the extent that they obeyed God's will, the forces of evil, of impurity and death would be overcome by the power of life issuing from the divine presence. The priests understood that it was failure to respect the cult that caused YHWH to abandon the temple, which led to its destruction and the exile. They were determined to see that this did not happen again.

Reading Leviticus as a Christian

As disciples of Jesus, how do we read Leviticus, or indeed other texts that govern worship and behaviour? This becomes an even more important question when we remember that Jesus was crucified by people who considered that he was unfaithful to the requirements of the law and therefore unfaithful to the covenant with God. Jesus felt free, for example, to reach out in love to people even on the sabbath. We will not find anything to forbid this in the following texts, but such was the understanding of the sabbath rest among Jesus' contemporaries that they 'started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath'(John 5:16). They killed Stephen for what they saw as his failure to live by God's commands: 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place [the Temple] and the law'(Acts 7:13). They opposed Paul for the same reasons. So how as Christians are we to consider the legal codes of the Older Testament, including the regulations here in Leviticus?

Paul, the faithful Jew and the committed disciple of Jesus can help us here. As already noted in the Introduction (see page 5), Paul came to see that it is God's will revealed in Jesus for people to come to God as they are, and not to think that they must be like someone else to be loved. Every race is a chosen race. God has no favourites. The love of God, revealed when God revealed his own Son, embraces everyone. Jesus, as a Jew, called his brother and sister Jews to be faithful to the covenant which they had with God, a covenant of love, open to the world. It was this Spirit that Paul caught. Paul wants to show that to read the scriptures in the Spirit who inspired them, is to read them in the Spirit of Jesus.

The law and the promise are not in opposition. The law, however, has an inherent and basic limitation: it cannot give life and so it cannot 'justify' – it cannot put us in a right relationship with God. It is true that the scripture states that people will live if they keep the law: 'You shall keep my statutes and my edicts; by doing so one shall live'(Leviticus 18:5; see Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 32:47). The law, however, cannot give us the ability to keep it. It shows us what is wrong. It passes judgment on us when we fail to observe it. This is good in that it makes sin appear to be what it really is, and so through the law we can come to realise our need and cry out for redemption. Paul invites his readers to recognise in Christ the answer to that cry, and not to let the law stop them from inheriting the promise 'given to those who believe'(Galatians 3:22; compare Romans 11:32).

The place of the Jewish law in divine providence is an important theme in Paul's letter to the Galatians. The main difference between his teaching there and in his later Letter to the Romans is that in Galatians he was facing the problem of a community that was being pressured to convert (or convert back) to Judaism. This forced Paul into highlighting the limitations of the law, as well as into stressing that to convert to Judaism would be to reject Christ. In Rome the problem was rather that Gentile Christians were failing to appreciate Judaism and their debt to it. Paul is concerned there to point out the positive qualities of the law, while still stating its limitations. The following references are to his Letter to the Romans.

The law expresses the righteous requirements of God (1:32; 2:26; 8:4; see also 2:14,18). It is a gift from God (9:4); it is 'holy and just and good'(7:12); it is 'spiritual'(7:14). Its purpose is to name sin, and so to make clear people's need to change their behaviour and to seek for God's mercy (3:20; 5:20; 7:7). However, it cannot and does not break the power of sin (3:9). It does not justify people in God's sight (3:20). It is not the vehicle for the promise (4:13). It promises life (7:10), but, because it cannot break the dominion of sin (7:7-12), it does not give life (8:3). The law is upheld by Christ (3:31), to whom it looks forward (3:21), and who enables it to achieve its goal (10:4). The obedience which is asked of people by the law is now possible in the Christian community, for 'love is the fulfilling of the law'(13:10).

The gospel is that we belong to Christ. He has broken the dominion of sin. He has redeemed us from its slavery and has become our new lord. We can now live to God. Our total obedience now is to his Spirit dwelling in us: 'You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God … we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit' (7:4,6). The law has been transcended by God who has now revealed his righteousness in Christ, and given the gift which he promised to Abraham, the gift of the life of his Spirit – the Spirit of Christ.

We can approach these laws of the Older Testament, aware of their limitations, but with the same respect that the authors of the Torah had for them, a respect shared by Jesus and by Paul, and by all who share the faith of Abraham. Changed circumstances mean that we are not being asked to follow each instruction to the letter. But we are being asked to share in the respect for the holy that they convey.

We are being asked to listen to them attentively, confident that in doing so with a humble heart we will learn important things about our God and about how God wants us to respond to him to find life and enjoy divine communion.

This brings us back to the subject of inspiration developed in the Introduction. We can believe that these texts are inspired without thinking that they remain forever an absolute expression of God's unchanging will. The authors of the Torah knew that, as is clear from their including inconsistent directions in their text.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. For Leviticus my main guide has been Rabbi Jacob Milgrom whose three volume (2,714 page) commentary is published in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1991, 2000, 2001).

Leviticus is a handbook for ethical prescriptions, cultic rituals, and religious festivals. It is important that we read these laws as expressions of practices that have come down through the tradition, a tradition which they understood to be guided by their God, YHWH. The priest authors saw these laws as expressing ways in which their ancestors, and they themselves, have solved various problems that have emerged in the community, as well as ways of organising personal and communal life in ways that are consistent with their religious insights. In the final analysis, Leviticus is about YHWH, their faithful God (see especially Leviticus 26:44-45). It is for us to listen attentively as the various religious observances, legal practices and cultic institutions central to the community life of Israel are presented as revealed and commanded by God through Moses from the tent.