

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Leviticus: Ritual and Ethics

Addition to Genesis: The story of **Dinah in Genesis 34** exposes how patriarchal power silences women. Her brothers, Simeon and Levi, respond not by centering Dinah’s trauma but by reclaiming family honor through extreme violence. Jacob, meanwhile, remains largely passive, rebuking his sons for the political risk their actions pose to him.

Genesis 34:1-3, 11-12 Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the region. ²When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. ³And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. ⁴So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this girl to be my wife.”

¹¹Shechem also said to her father (Jacob) and to her brothers, “Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. ¹²Put the **marriage present and gift as high as you like**, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the young woman to be my wife.”

-We have a rape, yet the violation of Dinah and her health and safety are not the central issues. Jacob’s *household value (the bride-price)* now that Dinah is not a virgin is a concern. A daughter’s marriage transferred reproductive, economic, and social value from one male-headed household to another. The father (or brothers, if the father is passive) acted as legal negotiators. This story is emblematic of women being treated as a commodity in this patriarchal culture.

Subject: Better Bible Reading, “Leviticus: (navigating) Ritual and Ethics”

Opening Statement: **The Bible is not a rule book independent of its time.** It is a collection of texts shaped by specific historical, cultural, political, and social contexts, reflecting the assumptions, power structures, and moral struggles of the communities that produced them. Reading the Bible responsibly requires attention to its ancient world, recognizing that some laws and narratives describe how people understood God and society within their own setting rather than offering timeless prescriptions to be applied without interpretation. Contextual readings allow the text to be taken seriously without being weaponized against others and opens space to discern enduring ethical principles—such as justice, compassion, and care for the vulnerable—amid historically bound practices and norms.

I. Ritual, Sacrifice and Holiness Themes

A. **Leviticus 19:2** “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

1. This idea is often called the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26) involves: ritual purity, ethical conduct and separation from surrounding cultures

B. The Sacrificial System

1. Major sacrifices include: Burnt offering (complete devotion), Grain offering (gratitude), Peace offering (communion with God), Sin offering (atonement), Guilt offering (restitution).

2. These sacrifices, along with holy ethical and moral conduct were performed by the Levites and priests descended from Aaron and were designed to maintain relationship with God and assure their residence “in the land” (P).

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3. Purity Laws deciphered clean and unclean animals and admonitions regarding bodily discharges, skin diseases and food restrictions (Leviticus 11–15) structured daily life and ritual awareness of God’s presence.

4. The Theological center of Leviticus is The Day of Atonement.

a. Leviticus 16 describes Yom Kippur, the most sacred ritual in ancient Israel. Key features: purification of the sanctuary, sacrifice for national sin, and the scapegoat ritual.

C. Sacrifice vs Ethical Justice

1. Leviticus strongly emphasizes the sacrificial system, yet the broader Hebrew Bible often critiques reliance on sacrifice without ethical behavior.

2. Counter-testimony in the prophets.

a. Hosea 6:6 “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” Amos 5:21–24 rejects ritual worship without justice. This creates a tension between ritual piety and ethical righteousness.

II. Prophetic Ethics

A. As we engage Leviticus, Dr. Amy Jill-Levine (Author, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, Prof. NT studies, Vanderbilt Divinity) exhorts us to remember “Jesus was not the only Jew to care about these issues; his social-justice interests make him a Jew rather than distinguishing him from Judaism.” (21)

1. Prophetic calls for justice for the oppressed, care for the poor, widows, orphans, and the immigrant form a pattern of ethical concern over ritual sacrifice (Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 16:49; Daniel 4:27; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9–10; Malachi 3:5).

2. God condemns those who oppress workers, widows, orphans, and immigrants. The ethical teachings associated with Jesus—care for the poor, justice for the oppressed, critique of empty ritual—are deeply continuous with the Hebrew prophetic tradition.

a. **Leviticus 19:18** “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

b. Leviticus 19:9–10 Do not harvest fields to the edges, but leave the gleanings for the poor and the immigrant; 19:13, 35–36 – forbids unjust employment and trading practices; 19:15 – requires judicial fairness to the rich and poor; 19:14 legislates fairness to the differently abled; 19:33–34 declares the “alien” shall be “as a citizen” and you shall “love the alien as yourself.”

3. So, as Amy-Jill Levine argues, Jesus’ social justice teaching does not distinguish him from Judaism—it places him firmly within it.

B. Redressing Decide (the theological claim alleging the collective Jewish people were responsible for the death of Jesus).

1. Vatican II – *Nostra Aetate*, “All Jews” were not responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

2. John’s gospel uses the phrase “**the Jews**” more than any other gospel (around 70 times). Historically this wording contributed to the accusation that the Jewish people collectively rejected or killed Jesus. Many scholars argue that in these contexts “**hoi Ioudaioi**” likely refers to: Judean authorities, temple leadership, certain Pharisaic groups or religious officials in Jerusalem, not all Jewish people.

III. Internal Tensions, Competing Emphases and Counter-testimony.

A. Many scholars note Leviticus contains internal tensions, competing emphases, and passages that function as counter-testimony to one another. These reveal different theological priorities and shifting social visions within the text. Biblical scholars often describe this phenomenon using the language of multiple voices (multi-vocal or polyphonic) within Scripture.

1. Ritual vs ethical religion; separation vs inclusion; liberation vs social hierarchy; punishment vs reconciliation are several tensions making Leviticus theologically complex rather than internally uniform.

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2. Traditional belief attributes the Torah to Moses, but modern scholarship often connects Leviticus to the Documentary Hypothesis. Many scholars see it as Priestly material (**P**) written or edited during or after the Babylonian Exile.

3. What part does (**P**) play in the commands toward holiness and separation from “others” (Leviticus was written by the Priestly scribal community who had been in exile in Babylon)?

IV. Critical Issues (The World BEHIND The Text)

A. Leviticus 18:22 “a man should not lie with a male **as with a woman**,” and **20:13** “If a man lies with a male **as with a woman**, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death;” are commonly cited as “clobber passages” against our Queer siblings. Let’s get behind the text.

1. In **ANE** patriarchy (Mesopotamia, Canaan, Egypt) “free” adult males (hierarchical social elites) were expected to be sexually dominant (or “tops”). Women, slaves, and youths were expected to be sexually passive (or “bottoms”). The key moral question was not *who you desired* but who held social power. This Levitical prohibition relates to violations of social hierarchy, not modern ideas of sexual identity.

a. The key phrase is “**as with a woman.**” In ancient cultural terms, this means treating a male as sexually subordinate, feminizing a free male or collapsing the gendered power structure.

b. What is actually being prohibited is NOT “men loving men,” but a free male being placed in a feminized role or violating patriarchal hierarchy and privilege.

c. These verses are shaped by the patriarchal honor culture of the ancient Near East, where free adult men were expected to be sexually dominant and women, slaves, and youths were considered sexually passive, making the prohibition a defense of gender hierarchy rather than a condemnation of consensual same-gender relationships.

d. Welcome **Lilith** as a challenge to patriarchy. Most famously preserved in the Alphabet of Ben Sira (medieval), Lilith was the first woman created alongside Adam. Lilith refuses to lie beneath Adam during sex instead insisting on sexual equality and arguing they were both created from the same earth. When Adam insists on dominance, Lilith refuses submission and leaves Eden.

e. This same hierarchical logic appears elsewhere in the ancient world: slave vs master, male vs female, elite vs non-elite. So, in essence the condemnation regarding a man lying with a man as with a woman is not a prohibition toward same gender loving relationships – it is a slight to women that a man – in all his patriarchal, hierarchical dominance – is never to be treated as a lowly woman.

f. Leviticus 12 states a woman giving birth to a son is unclean 7 days + 33 days purification (40 total). If she gives birth to a daughter she is 14 days unclean + 66 days purification (80 total). Leviticus 15:19–30 states a woman in menstruation is ritually unclean for seven days.

V. The Big Theological Tension (The World OF The Text)

A. The Sacred Ideal vs The Historical Reality

1. Leviticus regulates slavery rather than abolishing it. Intertextual study raises similar questions with Philemon where these texts seem to moderate injustice while preserving hierarchy.

2. Liberation vs Regulation of Slavery.

a. Leviticus contains visions of liberation and of acceptance of slavery. The Liberation ideal (Leviticus 25:10 - Jubilee) “You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land.” This meant the debt slaves among Israelites were to be released. Yet, there is a regulation of permanent slavery (Leviticus 25:44–46) which permits permanent slavery of foreigners.

