

To be or not to be  
In the presence of God: this is the  
question

Biblical Exegesis

Leviticus 26:1-8

Presented to

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to get to a clear understanding of the text in Leviticus 26:1-8. It starts with an overview about the Israelites neighbors in the Hebrew Bible and an overview of the book of Leviticus, followed by a presentation and a short commentary of the pericope. Analysis of language is presented and an introductory evaluation of assumptions in the passage. A short evaluation of the role of the pericope is made after a discussion of especial terms, followed by an interpretation of the *Sitz im Leben*, to bring a conclusive application of meaning for the Hebrew people and the church.

### 1. An Overview about Israelites Neighbors in the Hebrew Bible

First of all, here we are dealing with a society living from 1100 to 500 BCE, or approximately three thousand years ago, from the time when they first entered in Canaan, and two thousand five hundred years ago, from the time when they returned from exile. The least we can deduct of a society that far back is that the level of understanding of natural phenomena was primitive. Second, the social organization is also very rudimentary and most of the government systems were backed by divinity, deity, gods. Third, their government systems were not only autocratic, but also theocratic.

The society contemporary to the historical Hebrew Bible is made of peoples learning to build their own way to become organized.

A matter, that can not be lost of sight, discussed by Mendenhall (1954)<sup>1</sup>, is that the people of Israel, at the time these books of the Bible were being written, were not the only people. There were other peoples. It is worth to say that Egypt was a great civilization, under which the Hebrew people were gone in slavery. These peoples are very clearly described in Leviticus 18:1-5:

*“<sup>1</sup> The LORD spoke to Moses: <sup>2</sup> "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I am the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> Do not follow the practices of the land of Egypt where you used to live, or follow the practices of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You must not follow*

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<sup>1</sup> George E. Mendenhall. *Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition*. University of Michigan. The Biblical Archeologist. American School of Oriental Research (Jerusalem and Baghdad):New Haven, con, Dec. 1954, pp 50-76.

*their customs. <sup>4</sup> You are to practice My ordinance and you are to keep My statutes by following them; I am the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> Keep My statutes and ordinances; a person will live if he does them; I am the LORD”*

These other primitively organized societies were of great influences on the people of Israel, and sometimes these influences were so strong that the form of written communication had to apply some means of the common tradition for the people to understand it. It is evident in the analysis of Mendenhall<sup>2</sup> in forms of covenant. Therefore, there is a mix of culture or at least a great deal of influence of values of the surrounding culture on the other.

Further, in Leviticus 18:24-30, as a closing on a list of practices of the surrounding nations or tribes condemned by the Lord, it reads:

*“<sup>24</sup> Do not defile yourselves by any of these [practices], for the nations I am driving out before you have defiled themselves by all these things. <sup>25</sup> The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its sin, and the land will vomit out its inhabitants. <sup>26</sup> But you are to keep My statutes and ordinances. You must not commit any of these abominations—not the native or the foreigner who lives among you. <sup>27</sup> For the men who were in the land prior to you have committed all these abominations, and the land has become defiled. <sup>28</sup> If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it has vomited out the nations that were before you. <sup>29</sup> Any person who does any of these abominations must be cut off from his people. <sup>30</sup> You must keep My instruction to not do any of the detestable custom<sup>1</sup> that were practiced before you, so that you do not defile yourselves by them; I am the LORD your God.”*

The content of a culture are religious beliefs, music, dance, food, and ethics and so on. These values are of great influence and shape attitude, and attitude is the drive for behavior.

Therefore, what we see behind the text is that there are traditions in the land which are so strong that the people, who are supposed to worship JHWH alone, start using things that other traditions may have imposed somehow naturally on them.

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<sup>2</sup> Ib.id. George E. Mendenhall.

## 2. An Overview of the Book of Leviticus

To better understand the book of Leviticus is necessary to overlook its content by its most traditional division (Coogan, 2001, P. 142). It is presented in four most common parts: the Sacrifice, the Priestly consecration ceremony and its aftermath, and the Holiness Code or Holiness Collection, and an appendix. The first part (ch 1-7), the Sacrifice, consists of the basic prescriptions (1:1-6:7) and a recapitulation of elements related to the priests (6:8-7:38).

The second part (ch 7-16), the priestly consecration ceremony and aftermath, comprises four different sub-parts which are 1) the seven-day consecration and eight day ceremony (8-9); 2) the sin of Aaron's sons and rules for priests (10); 3) impurity laws (11-15); and 4) the Day of Atonement sanctuary purification ceremony (16).

The third part (17-26), the Holiness Code or Holiness Collection, is divided into five sections: 1) sacrificial law (17); 2) moral and ethical laws (18-20); 3) priestly and sacrificial rules (21-22); 4) holy occasions (23-25); and 5) blessings and curses (26 with the conclusion of the Holiness Collection)

The fourth part (27) is an appendix of vows and dedication.

The Pericope is within the 5<sup>th</sup> section (chapter 26) of the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the book of Leviticus.

## 3. The Pericope

Leviticus 26:1-8.

*1) You must not make for yourselves idols, so you must not set up for yourselves a carved image or a pillar, and you must not place a sculpted stone in your land to bow down before it, for I am the Lord your God. 2) You must keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary. I am the Lord. 3) If you walk in my statutes and are sure to obey my commandments, 4) I will give you your rains in their time so that the land will give its yield and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. 5) Threshing season will extend for you until the season for harvesting grapes, and the season for harvesting grapes will extend until sowing season, so you will eat your bread until you are satisfied, and you*

*will live securely in your land.6) I will grant peace in the land so that you will lie down to sleep without anyone terrifying you. I will remove harmful animals from the land, and no sword of war will pass through your land.7) You will pursue your enemies and they will fall before you by the sword.8) Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you by the sword.*

The pericope shows three stages. First, it presents a command in verses 1 and 2. This command consists of two elements, which are what the people should not do, i.e., to make a worldly replacement for God; and what they should do, i.e., to abide by the symbols that represents God's presence among the people, the Sabbaths and the Sanctuary.

In the second stage, verse 3, God establishes a possibility of choice, a condition. In case of following the statutes of the Lord and faithfully observe God's commands then God will reward those who do so. God knows that the people have made wrong choices before. The choices are to worship YHWH or to worship idols (sculpted stones and carved images listed in verse 1).

In the third stage, verses 4-8, God makes a full description of what are going to be the blessings, as rewards for following the statutes and faithfully observing God's commands. These blessings are rain at the right time, produce of the land, fruits from the trees, grape harvest until sowing time, food, security, peace to the land, nothing be frighten of, no dangerous animals, and no sword will pass through land, enemies will fall by the sword.

#### **4. Words and Variations in the Pericope**

There is a group of key words in the text that require some analysis. There is no important variation from one translation to other. However, the original meaning suffered adjustments to fit the modern languages.

In verse 1, the main words are *idols, carved image or pillar, sculpted stone, bow down before, the Lord, God*. The word meaningful for the text is idols. The other words

are types of idols, meaning that it could be in the form of carved image or pillar, and sculpted stone.

It is important to look at the meaning of the word idols. In Hebrew, the term for idol (אֱלִילִים, 'elilim), is a diminutive and means worthless, weak, powerless, nothingness. There are assumptions that the word is intended to mean worthless godlings. It appears in other passages. In the same book, it is found in chapter 19:4 *“Do not turn to idols, and you must not make for yourselves gods of cast metal. I am the Lord your God”*.

Sculpted stone has some variation in translations, but the meaning is of stone with images carved into. Some translations expand its meaning like the Italian (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana) *“pietra ornata di figure”*, that translated into English means stone decorated with picture. In this case, is different because Italian the word ornata means literally ornate, or ornamented. The word in English does not give the idea that it is carved on something, but may be painted or a kind of ornament is put on it. The same translation is made in Portuguese by the “Joao Ferreira de Almeida”, in French by the Louis Segond. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century KJV and the KJV says image of stone. Most of the others vary between image, carved and sculpted stone. However, the variation here doesn't affect the central meaning of the text because what is really important is that it is an object of cult, worship, a type of idol.

In the verse 2, the words Sabbaths, sanctuary and reverence require some consideration. The Sabbaths is an important symbol for YHWH and has a straight connection with Sanctuary. It has two meanings. First, it is that the people shall rest, because the humanity can't only work without some rest. Second, it is the day of worship, because if the people have no day free from work they may not worship God properly. The connection with the Sanctuary is that it is a place provided for worship that happens on the Sabbaths. Here the word reverence is related with the two substantives and means an act of respect and honor.

In verse 3, the words statutes, commandments, have similar meanings. In fact, even though they carry similar meaning sometimes these words appear in the same texts with other words like covenant, laws and rules, and the difference may be in terms of

enforcement and a hierarchy of legal words, where covenant is the treaty that involves commands, laws, statutes and rules.

In verse 4, the words rains, time, fruit are in sequence in terms of phenomena. In the right time the rains fall and the trees will give their fruit. The conjunction that is related to the word “that” in Hebrew [ו (vav, “and”)] is meant to have resulting force.

In verse 5, the group of words grapes, season and satisfied, grapes is related to the vintage season. The passage has the conjunction “so” that is also translated from the conjunction [ו (vav, “and”)] that takes a resulting force. The word satisfaction is to mean “to the full”.

A very clarifying commentary about the verse 5 is made by the JFB Commentary, which says that:

*"The barley harvest in Judea was about the middle of April; the wheat harvest about six weeks after, or in the beginning of June. After the harvest came the vintage, and fruit gathering towards the latter end of July. Moses led the Hebrews to believe that, provided they were faithful to God, there would be no idle time between the harvest and vintage, so great would be the increase. This promise would be very animating to a people who had come from a country where, for three months, they were pent up without being able to walk abroad because the fields were under water."*

In verse 6, the words peace, terrifying, animals, sword of war are interconnected in terms of action and results. Wild Animals terrify people, but the same action brings peace. Again the Hebrew conjunction [ו (vav, “and”)] appear with the meaning of resulting force. The words “to sleep” have been supplied in the translation for clarity. The word in Hebrew for “harmful animal,” singular, is taken here as a collective plural, what almost all English versions do. For the Hebrew “no sword”; the words “of war” are supplied in the translation to indicate what the metaphor of the sword represents.

In verse 7, the expression “by the sword” is a variation from Hebrew “to the sword.”

## 5. Basic Introductory Assumptions of the Pericope

Leviticus is the third book of the Pentateuch, concerned with the worship of God at the Sanctuary. The name refers to priest as it was the function of the tribe of Levi.

The literary form of the book of Leviticus is historical in genre, mostly legal text, within its narrative prose. Most of the text is on covenant, laws, statutes, commandments and rules.

The Scholars assume that the authorship of the writings of Leviticus is not from a single hand. It comprises two parts which are the “Priestly Torah” and material from the “Holiness School”. It is assumed that this school supplements the Priestly Torah, which may have existed before the dates it was edited.

Most of the scholars assume that the specific dates of the writings are disputed but, the “Holiness Code” is accepted to have been produced by the end of the exile, around 538 BCE. The Priestly Torah is assumed to have existed before and was edited by the Holiness School in the early exile that started around 586 BCE.

The people aimed by the writings, the audience with whom the author intends to communicate, if we assume that its completion happens by 538 BCE, is the people of Israel living by the moment they were returning from exile. If the dates, as it is disputed, are not around the time of the return from exile, the purpose and the motivation of the writings are the same.

They were always living under the influence of surrounding nations, as it was at the time of the people crossed the Jordan River to enter the land Canaan, led by Joshua, after the 40 years wandering in the desert, where they had contacts with other peoples, after living for a long time under the Egyptian culture; at the exile where they lived under the Babylonian culture; and then they return to Canaan after more than 40 years in exile. For all the cases, the people were living in a land of different cultural environment. A lot of costume, attitude, behavior, values, including religious practices and worship are elements of the cultural environment these people were submitted to, and, most probably, assimilating a lot of them.

It is important to consider some aspects of this audience. First, the people kept their religious principles for an amazing long period of time, hardly and sometimes being strongly punished for breaking there religious principles.

Second, these people were submitted to at least four different social environments: Egypt, where they were taken from, under the leadership of Moses; the surrounding neighbors in the desert; Canaan, where they entered led by Joshua; the exilic period in Babylon; and, finally, returning from exile to Canaan.

Third, this audience is now reentering the land after being exposed to the Babylonian life style.

This is the history that shaped the mind of these people. Even though they still kept the promises and covenant, certainly a lot of misbehavior and misconduct may have been usual in that society.

This is the background on these people, what may suggest the reason and the purpose that motivated the edition of the writings of Leviticus.

In chapter 18:1-6 we see a pre-exilic care of God, when the people had not yet possessed the land, exhorting them not to submit themselves to the rules of the natives of the land, but abide by the Lord's statutes, the Lord's rules because it grants life.

*<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. <sup>4</sup> You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.*

What is hidden here is that while the people have been alien in Egypt, they assimilated much of the Egyptian culture that has its positive and negative sides. They are about to enter another foreign land. The instructions are for them to avoid being influenced and reshaped by the local culture.

The culture of the land can change the mind of the people and they may give in to the local practices. Turkey is a great recent example of what can happen in terms of

cultural influence. Like the Israelites in the 1100-586 BCE, they dominated the Middle East in recent times. At the end of the Turkish domination, they brought home the religion, Islam, and the alphabet. They became a Muslim country, speaking a Turkish language written in Arabic alphabet.

We could compare, in some ways, to the case of immigrants who come to the United States. Their second generation does not hold more than 30% of the culture of origin.

It is interesting to observe that God used to be frequently reinforcing the commandments. The purpose was, by refreshing the memory of the people, to remind them to obey the rules and, therefore, not to give in to the culture and the gods of the land.

The two most important symbols of Israel that accompanied the people and had a key role in their unity are the Sabbath and the Sanctuary. By constantly being reminded of God by the presence of these symbols in their lives, they would not be tempted to bow down before the gods of the land and of the neighbors. In this regard, the verses 1 and 2 are the essence of the pericope, because it points to what represents the competing sacred elements. First, the idols represent the worthless gods, to what they would not honor or pay respect (reverence); and, second, the Sabbaths and the Sanctuary, representing YHWH, to whom they must respect, honor and worship, He whom these symbols represent.

One of the practices God teaches his people to do is to be constantly aware of His words, for they contain His commandments. In Joshua 1:8 it reads: *“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful”*. This is the word of God instructing him after ordering him to lead the people to enter and possess the land.

Later in the land, as he is about to complete his career as the first leader of the people of Israel in Canaan, he makes a statement of reinforcement of the previous command by saying in chapter 24:15:

*“But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the*

*gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

It sounds as a profound statement of faith.

## **6. The Role of the Periscope**

The role of the periscope in the book of Leviticus is to give a conclusion on the legal exposition and narrative of the legal codes, more specifically related to the chapters 17-25. The verses 1-2, even though sounding thematically independent of the economic laws that come before them, and the blessings and curses described in sequence can be interpreted as a warning to the people of the highest purpose of the whole law and statutes, which is to make the people understand that there is no other divinity, other deity, other god, but YHWH. This conclusion, according to the annotation of Coogan (2001, P. 180) is in the general format of the blessings and curses found in the Near Eastern treaties, and these treaties were, in the human political world, a model for describing the treaty or covenant relationship between God and his people. And the Hebrew word for treaty is "berit", and is employed both for secular political treaties and covenants, this one understood as theologized political treaties.

## **7. Important Persons, Objects, Institutions, and Theological Terms**

In the form of communication that is developed in the passage there are two elements: the active agent, God, and the passive agent, the people. This shows the form of traditional treaties found in that period. These treaties had signers: from one side is the one who makes the rules and on the other side the one supposed to obey the rules. The rules describe the behavior to be adopted, and there would be rewards or blessings. To the wrong behavior would be applied punishments or curses (there are interpretations which assume that curses doesn't mean necessarily punishment but the lack of blessings). This lack of blessings could be compared with some kind of agreements practiced in the modern days, like an employment agreement, where the blessings or monetary rewards will not happen if the required action of the employee is not fulfilled.

The pericope presents a list of elements. First, there are the elements the people would use to replace God in their beliefs, which are idols, represented by carved images or pillars, sculpted stones. Second, there are the elements of action which are to bow down before and show reverence, which could be to the idols, images and stones or to God. Third, there are the sacred elements which are the Lord God, Sabbaths, the sanctuary, statutes and commandments. Fourth, there are the elements of blessings or rewards which are the rains, fruit, grapes, being satisfied, and peace. Fifth, there are the temporal elements time and season. And finally, there are the elements which are related to punishments for disobedience and to blessings or rewards for obedience, which are terrifying animals, sword of war and enemies. These last, may be understood that if they are against the people they are punishments and reversely they are of blessings.

### **8. *Sitz im Leben***

Three important aspects shall be considered here concerning the passage, in terms of *Sitz im Leben*. First, it had an important meaning for those who were re-editing these rules. The moment of the return from exile was of much concern with the history of the people, in regard to the consequences of their misbehavior, the disobedience to the statutes and commandments of the Lord. The leaders needed an instrument of reinforcement of the laws, statutes and commandments as means of political control. In the obedience to the word of the Lord was based the stability of the nation.

Second, the original audience failed, disobeyed the laws and commandments of the Lord and was taken to exile.

Third, at this time the people needed to be informed, made sure of the laws and commandments, because in obeying was the key of their stability in this post-exilic community.

There is no other god, but YHWH. That is what is deducted from the translation in the context of the whole chapter 26 of Leviticus, on the worship ruling principles established in the previous chapters. The writer, among many smaller and different divisions of the book by interrelated subject, traces a strong line between the end of the

first 25 chapters and the beginning of the 26. After all those arguments about sacrifice for sin, for fellowship and many other socially related rules of sacrifice, he stops and recall the most important commandment: THERE IS NO OTHER BUT ME. It is useless to have any idol (sculpted stone, image, pillar, or whatever). By doing so, the people are confessing that they do not trust fully in JHWH.

Exodus 20:3-4 says “*Do not have other gods besides Me. Do not make an idol for yourselves, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth*”. It reminds the studied text. The difference is the description of some idols in Leviticus. Mathew Henry attribute to law a commitment to love – divine (to God) and human (to neighbor) – clearly forwarding the subject further ahead to the preaching of Jesus, saying that

*“The first four of the ten commandments, commonly called the FIRST table, tell our duty to God. It was fit that those should be put first, because man had a Maker to love, before he had a neighbor to love. It cannot be expected that he should be true to his brother, who is false to his God. The first commandment concerns the object of worship, JEHOVAH, and him only. The worship of creatures is here forbidden. Whatever comes short of perfect love, gratitude, reverence, or worship, breaks this commandment”*.<sup>3</sup>

I Am the Lord your God. A clear message that cuts through millenniums is that YHWH is the only God, the Lord God of all nations, for there is no other. In Leviticus there is an almost endless list of sins ruled by the Holiness Code, but the worse sin happens to be the sin of idolatry, which becomes the closing, the conclusion of all the ruling presented in the Book. It is because the meaning of idolatry is not just that the people are dealing with forbidden things, but because it is a replacement of God, it means faith. If one starts believing that something else can act in some ways, lets say super natural deeds; it means that it is taking the place of God in the life of the person.

This was God’s concern about his people among pagan nations, or living amid peoples of other gods, because their cultural values, that include worship, may influence the life of His people. Therefore, it is necessary to be tough in the enforcement of the greater command. Be aware of this: THERE IS NO OTHER GOD BUT ME. If you apply

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible is available in the Public Domain.

this to your life, by not building idols to you, blessings will be permanent. However, if your worship goes to something else, blessings will not happen.

## Conclusion

The Holiness Code establishes a lot of rules of sacrifice for holiness. The basic purification is the sacrifice of blood. Because the punishment for sin is death, whenever there was sin, blood had to be shed to mean a life was taken for that sin. God declares in Leviticus 17:11; *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.”* A curious exchange took place when the animal’s innocent life was transferred to the people, and the people’s impure lives were transferred to the animal. This is known as the *“exchanged life”* principle. This was necessary because of God’s justice and sense of righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

Is in this condition that Jesus comes and is offered in sacrifice, fulfilling this *“exchange life”* principle. The condition is to believe in this sacrifice, otherwise the people will be directing their faith to something else and that is idolatry.

And above all remains the great commandment: there is no other god, but YHWH.

In the life of the Hebrew people the commandment meant survival of the nation. That is what the author is engaged in transmitting to the people.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the number of idols that press the people to replace God in their lives is countless. To avoid the influence of the gods of the land, the people’s got to exercise their faith day and night as the Lord commanded Joshua *“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful”*. (Joshua 1:8). Doing this, at the end they can make the same statement of faith Joshua did: *But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*"

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<sup>4</sup> Jack C. Sofield Sofield Science Services Seymour, Tennessee [jcs\\_sss@msn.com](mailto:jcs_sss@msn.com). Old Testament Salvation. Public domain.

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