

THE ONE WHO DOES THEM SHALL

LEVITICUS 18:5 IN GALATIANS 3:12

BY JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.

The words of Galatians 3:12 seem to set up a sharp dichotomy between faith and law. Paul cites Habakkuk 2:4 in Galatians 3:11 to show that righteousness comes from faith: “But that no one is justified before God by the law is clear, because *The one who is righteous by faith shall live,*” and then he cites Leviticus 18:5 in 3:12, “Now the law is not from faith, but *The one who does them shall live by them.*” Paul is arguing here that righteousness comes on the basis of *faith* rather than on the basis of *deeds*, but is he pitting Habakkuk against Leviticus? Is it correct to say, as some have said, that Paul “is dealing not merely with a misreading of the law, but with the law itself”?¹

This view seems to suggest that the Old Testament itself reflects, at least partly, a legalistic covenant between God and his people. Such a conclusion, in my view, fails to appreciate the gracious character of the Levitical system, but the conclusion that Paul is opposing a misreading of the law is not entirely satisfactory either. The problem, I suggest, is not that the Old Testament called for legalism, nor is it that Paul’s contemporaries have all misunderstood the law, though I grant many had and thereby had fallen into legalism. The central problem with the Galatians, however, is that they do not sufficiently understand the law’s role in salvation history.

In an effort to demonstrate the salvation-historical nature of what Paul is arguing here, the first section of this article will attempt a summary of the Levitical system of the Old Testament with the hope of gaining a better understanding of the nature of the Old Covenant. With that foundation laid, we will consider the context of Galatians 3.

OLD COVENANT THEOLOGY: MAKING SENSE OF THE LEVITICAL SYSTEM

The great difficulty in understanding the Levitical sacrifices is that the ideological framework is not made explicit. The rationale behind the statements about what is clean and

unclean, holy and profane (Leviticus 10:10) has to be inferred since it is never fully explained. Thus, a composite snapshot has to be constructed from the building blocks found in the text, much as we must put together the raw data of the Bible to arrive at a biblical understanding of the Trinity. In spite of the apparent complexity, it seems that the Levitical system is really quite simple.

The regulations derive their significance from their role in sanctifying Israel so that God can dwell in the midst of the nation. At the heart of Israel’s life is the place where God dwells. At first this was the Tabernacle, then later the Temple was built. The innermost sanctum of the Tabernacle

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and then the Temple is the holy of holies. The holy of holies is the earthly point of contact with the throne room of God. God sits enthroned in heaven, and the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies is the footstool of his throne (Psalm 11:4; 99:5; 132:7–8). Anything that comes into direct contact with God must be holy, that is, set apart to God. Just as God walked in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), so He walks in the camp of Israel (Leviticus 26:12; Deuteronomy 23:14; 2 Samuel 7:6–7).² For this reason—Yahweh’s presence in the midst of the nation—the camp must be kept clean. As Leviticus 15:31 states, “And you (pl.) are to cause the sons of Israel to be consecrated from their uncleanness, that they might not die in their uncleanness by their defilement of my sanctuary which is in the midst of them.” Some things are unclean by definition, but there are two ways that clean things can become unclean: contact with death or uncleanness and transgression of the commands of God.³ Outside the camp (later the land) of Israel is the unclean realm, the

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realm of the dead. Some clean things that are made unclean must be placed outside the camp temporarily (Leviticus 13:46). A clean thing that has become unclean is cleansed through sacrifice (Leviticus 14:19–20).

The Mosaic Covenant requires perfect obedience to the law, but the law provides sacrifice for the reparation of relationship when laws are broken. In order for these sacrifices to repair the relationship with Yahweh, however, they must

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be offered from a trusting heart that is repenting of the sin and seeking Yahweh’s pleasure. The prophetic denunciation of sacrifice (Hosea 5:6; Micah 6:7) is not a rejection of the Levitical system but a rejection of perfunctory performance of the system by those whose hearts are far from Yahweh (Hosea 5:7; Micah 6:8). The prophets do not want the people to abandon the Mosaic Covenant. They want them to fulfill the external requirements of the law with a willing obedience that flows from trusting hearts. The Old Covenant, then, makes provision for sin, even sin that is intentionally committed (Leviticus 5:1). It seems that “high handed sins” are sins committed with the intention of throwing off the covenant (Numbers 15:29–31).

Thus, the statement in Leviticus 18:5, “You (pl.) shall keep my statutes and my judgments, which he will do them, the man, and live by them; I am Yahweh,” is conceptually equivalent to the many statements in Leviticus that something is to be done “so that you will not die” (Leviticus 8:35; 10:6–7,9; 15:31; 16:2,13; 22:9). The idea is that since Yahweh is in the midst of the people, that which comes into contact with him must be clean. Yahweh’s holiness cannot come into contact with what is not clean. If that happens, people die. The life and death in view here has greater significance than

merely physical life and death, though it certainly includes that. A disregard for the holy presence of Yahweh has consequences that extend beyond physical death.⁴

In order for the Old Covenant to be kept, the requirements of the law had to be observed by *faith*. Mere external adherence to these requirements would not satisfy what was required. In order for the covenant to be kept, individual Israelites had to believe something that they could not see, namely, that Yahweh really did inhabit the Tabernacle and later the Temple. They had to fear what they had been told about His holiness. And they had to trust that when they approached Him as He had directed them, they would not be slain like Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1–2). More broadly, they had to believe what Yahweh had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and ultimately, to the serpent—that a seed of the woman would crush his head (Genesis 3:15). If an Israelite failed to trust these promises and did not believe that Yahweh was holy and among the people, there would be no motivation to keep the law. If the law was to be kept, it had to be kept by faith.

THE SALVATION-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Coming to Galatians 3 with this perspective on the Old Covenant, we see that the issue in Galatians 3:11–12 is not that the Old Testament presented a legalistic way of gaining salvation but that the period in salvation history in which the Levitical system was operative has ended. Now that the period in salvation history in which God was approached according to the Mosaic covenant is over, “no sacrifice

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remains for sin” (Hebrews 10:26). This is why Paul writes that “the law has become our guardian for Messiah, that we might be justified by faith; but when faith comes, we are no longer under the guardian” (Galatians 3:24–25). The faith in view here is explicitly faith in Jesus (Galatians 2:16).

Paul has explained in Galatians 3:15–18 that the law came 430 years after the promise made to Abraham and to his seed, the Messiah (3:16). That law was a guardian for the people until the seed of Abraham, the Messiah, came. Now that the Messiah has come, the law has served its salvation-historical purpose. Paul indicates this by means of several statements regarding the temporary nature of the law in relationship to the dawning of the New Covenant, which he refers to as the coming of “faith.” In Galatians 3:17 he describes “the law which has come 430 years later”; in 3:19 he says that the law was added “until the seed should come”; in 3:23 he writes of being under the law “before faith came... until the coming faith to be revealed”; and concludes in 3:25 that the law is no longer in effect “now that faith has come.”

Since the law has now served its salvation-historical purpose, and since the death of Jesus has put an end to sacrifice, the sacrifices of the Old Covenant system are no longer effective in repairing breaches in the covenant with

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Yahweh. Thus, anyone who seeks to approach God by means of the Old Covenant in this new period in salvation history must keep the Old Covenant law perfectly (Galatians 5:3).

Those who are seeking to compel the Galatians to keep Mosaic regulations do not live up to this standard (6:12–13); indeed, no one is able to live up to this standard. This is why Paul says that to seek to live by the standard of the Old Covenant now that Christ has come is to be cut off from him (5:4). By contrast, all who believe in Jesus are united to him by faith, and through their union with him they are the seed of Abraham (3:26–28).

CONCLUSION

In its Old Testament context Leviticus 18:5 is a statement that the one who keeps the requirements of the Mosaic covenant *by faith* will not be slain by the holiness of Yahweh in the midst of the people. Observing the covenant by faith guarantees acceptance before Yahweh, now and in the age to come. To be sure, Leviticus 18:5 does not explicitly say that the covenant is to be kept *by faith*, but the statement

that *The one who does the law will live* must be believed if it is to have its intended motivational force. Similarly, the promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience in Leviticus 26 must be *believed* if they are to have any meaning.

The words of Galatians 3:12, “Now the law is not from faith, but *The one who does them shall live by them*,” are not setting up a dichotomy between an Old Testament system based on works and a New Testament system based on faith. “Faith” in the first half of Galatians 3:12 points to the new period in salvation history that has begun “now that faith has come” (3:25). The reference to the “faith” that has come appears to be a shorthand way of referring to the fuller statement in 2:16, “We have believed in Messiah Jesus, in order that we might be justified by faith in Messiah Jesus and not by works of law.” Some of Paul’s contemporaries misunderstood the Mosaic Covenant and thought that it was a legalistic system, but I do not think that Paul affirms their reading of the Old Testament by quoting Leviticus 18:5 in the second half of Galatians 3:12.

“Before faith came” Leviticus 18:5 meant that the one who *by faith* kept the Mosaic Covenant would live. Now that “faith has come,” the Mosaic covenant is no longer in force, it has served its salvation-historical purpose, with the result that anyone who seeks to live by it must keep all of its regulations flawlessly since its sacrifices are now abolished. Thus, the statement in Leviticus 18:5 as it is used in Galatians 3:12 is equivalent to Galatians 5:3—the one who submits to the Mosaic covenant in this new period of salvation history “is obligated to do the whole law.” Paul does not impute legalism to Moses. ■

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1 Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (NSBT 9; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 105. This view is cited approvingly by Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 67, n.75.

2 Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story” in R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumara, eds., *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 400–401.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 20–21.

4 Jacob Milgrom suggests that the references to a person being “cut off from his people” (Leviticus 7:27) might mean that “he is not permitted to rejoin his ancestors in the afterlife” [*Leviticus, A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 66, 73].