OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

LEVITICUS

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Chapter 1

You shall be holy unto me

If the Pentateuch is a necklace with five sparkling jewels, then Leviticus is the carnelian.
It is as red as a carnelian because of so much blood, so much that the book overflows with blood.

For in this book we hear more about that foundation of the (Israelite) world that we discussed in the closing pages of our commentary on Exodus. Here we will learn more about the basis upon which Israelite society was established by God.

The first stone of that foundation was laid with the announcement of the Ten Words of the Covenant from Mount Sinai.

The next action was the erection of the tabernacle as the palace of Israel’s King among his people at Horeb. That was what Exodus was about.

Leviticus talks about the ministry with which this people were to please their God with and around that palace, that sanctuary.

A ministry of blood.
Daily, weekly, annually.

Does not that impressive river of blood call out for the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ?
“For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, . . . . Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:24–26).

1. The place of Leviticus

No one reading through the book of Leviticus right after reading Exodus receives the impression of suddenly entering a totally different world.
The transition is almost invisible.
The last chapter of Exodus, chapter 40, was just telling us about the tabernacle, occupied by God as his home.

Now immediately following, Leviticus 1 begins by speaking about the sacrifices that would have to be brought to that newly erected sanctuary (Lev. 1–3), all the way to Leviticus 7. A rather lengthy explanation. Commentators often call Leviticus 1–7 the “sacrificial Torah.”

Next follows a narrative about the appointment of those who would have to serve in that sanctuary in the sacrificial ministry. We read about the appointment of Aaron and his four sons in Leviticus 8–10.

The next section, Leviticus 11–15, is about clean and uncleanness, and is closely related to the tabernacle. For in a camp that was stationed around the tent of Yahweh, nothing was allowed to enter that hinted of . . . death. If such a hint appeared, it must be removed. Removed from the presence of the God and the people of life.

Leviticus 16 deals with the great day of atonement.
This too was inconceivable apart from the tabernacle.
And the book continues in this line.
Everything focuses on God who wants to occupy a palace and ascend a throne in the midst of Israel. That is all well and good, but then everything surrounding it must comport with his will and command. As the sanctuary, so the people.
That is what Leviticus teaches us.
That is its special place among the first five books of the Bible. As we indicated in our earlier commentary on Genesis:

Genesis ←-------- Book I. Journey out of Egypt
Book II. Journey to Horeb ←-------- Numbers
Book III. Covenant of Horeb ←-------- Deuteronomy
Book IV. Sanctuary of Horeb ←-------- Leviticus

After becoming acquainted in Genesis with the background of the exodus, we open the Pentateuch in Exodus to learn that the same Yahweh who had led Israel out of Egypt was the one who had created heaven and earth, and had saved Abraham. Only to discover next that Leviticus begins where Exodus ended. With the sanctuary in which the King of Israel had taken up residence.

2. The time of Leviticus

After the tabernacle was constructed, Israel did not remain long at Mount Sinai, no longer than a month in fact. In that time period God had revealed to Moses what we now read in the book of Leviticus.

How do we know this?

In our commentary on Exodus we suggested a list of dates, a list we can now supplement. As the reader may recall, we call the year of the exodus Year 1.

Month 1, Day 15, Year 1 Exodus out of Egypt (Exod. 12:17; 13:4)
Month 3, Day 15, Year 1 Arrival at Horeb (Exod. 19:1)
Month 1, Day 1, Year 2 The tabernacle was erected (Exod. 40:2, 17)
Month 2, Day 1, Year 2 Census with a view to marching against the Canaanites (Num. 1:1)
Month 2, Day 20, Year 2 Departure from Horeb (Num. 10:11)

Not only will this list help us later when we read Numbers, but it can help us now already as we read Leviticus. We can see clearly that there must have been one month between the completion of the tabernacle and the census of the fighting men that preceded the departure from Horeb.

During that month God must have revealed to Moses and commissioned him with what we now have in the book of Leviticus. That fact is evident from Leviticus itself. Let’s look at a few passages.

First, Leviticus 1:1: “The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting.”

To what does “the tent of meeting” refer here? Perhaps the tent in which God occasionally talked to Moses during the intermezzo after Israel’s sin with the golden calf (see our commentary
on Exod. 32–34)? There was no reason for that. Was it then perhaps the tabernacle? There is every reason for thinking so. For that had been promised earlier. God would not only live there among Israel, but he would also speak from there to Moses That had been promised in Exodus 29:42. That could now occur. Apparently it occurred frequently. We should probably have in mind such meetings between God and Moses even when no mention is made of the tabernacle as the place of revelation (Lev. 8:1, Yahweh spoke to Moses; Lev. 11:1, Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron; Lev. 16:1, Yahweh spoke to Moses; Lev. 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1; 22:1; etc.).

Some Bible readers might perhaps think of a different place of revelation, when, for example, we read several times about “Mount Sinai” (Lev. 7:38; 25:1).

With Leviticus 7:38 we should probably see this as a notation written by the person who organized and collected the parts of Leviticus. The verse reads like this: this is the law for such and such sacrifices “which the Lord commanded Moses on Mount Sinai, on the day that he commanded the people of Israel to bring their offerings to the Lord, in the wilderness of Sinai.” It is evident that the person who later collected the various parts wanted to tell the readers that the laws that had just been narrated all dated from the time when Israel was staying at Horeb. The only question is: During which time? From the time when Moses was still receiving revelation from God on top of Mount Sinai, regarding the covenant and the construction of the tabernacle? It is not obvious that we should think that this referred to that period, for that has already been described in Exodus, in great detail. No, when Leviticus 7:38 speaks about laws that Yahweh had commanded Moses “on Mount Sinai,” we should not suppose this refers to those earlier revelations of God to Moses, but to the later ones. Not on the mountain per se, but in the tabernacle. Could we not date to what God had said to Moses in that tabernacle during Israel’s stay at Horeb as that which Leviticus 7:38 is referring to as “on Mount Sinai”? Though it is stated in more general terms, Leviticus 1:1 was more accurate: “The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting.” This is the heading over Leviticus to which all the subsequent passages are referring that we mentioned earlier. All of these conversations happened at Horeb, but after the tabernacle had been built and consecrated. Which means that these conversations happened near the end of Israel’s stay at Mount Sinai. So as we review our list of dates, we conclude that these occurred during the month between Month 1, Day 1, Year 2 and Month 2, Day 1, Year 2.

All of Leviticus, it’s entire content, was revealed during that single month.

We arrive at that conclusion with the help of the verse with which the book closes: “These are the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai” (Lev. 27:34).

Here again we encounter the words “on Mount Sinai.” We discussed them above, in connection with Leviticus 7:38, and it is our view that when they surface again at the end of the book, they do not prevent us from connecting this to the specific month when Yahweh gave Moses various commandments, speaking from the ark. The conclusion of Leviticus 27:34 is casting a backward glance toward that event.

But people are generally of the opinion that the last chapter of Leviticus does not really belong to the book, but was added to the book as an appendix.

Even so, if the actual book of Leviticus ended one chapter earlier, with Leviticus 26, its final verse closely resembles the last verse of chapter 27. In Leviticus 26:46 we read: “These are the statutes and rules and laws that the Lord made between himself and the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai.” As you can tell, this verse also has the appearance of a concluding
verse. It is speaking in general terms. It does not mention any specific laws, like particular sacrificial prescriptions, as we find in Leviticus 7:37–38. No laws about specific impurities, like we find in Leviticus 11, 13, 14, and 15. Nothing specific. The entire content of Leviticus is summarized, concerning which we are told—once more, since this was repeated earlier with other sections—that all those statutes, ordinances, and laws had been given at Horeb by God to Moses. The phrase “on Mount Sinai” should not be interpreted to mean “on the top of Mount Sinai,” but to mean “at Horeb, after God had taken up residence in the tabernacle.”

When we say that “all of Leviticus was given by God to Moses within that month,” we are not excluding the possibility that the hand of someone other than Moses had written down, arranged, annotated, and collected what had been revealed to Moses. In Deuteronomy 17:8–13 we read that Moses himself had incorporated the labor of others.

And don’t forget especially the language. Let’s assume that ancient Near Eastern life was more stable than our own, that mores and customs continued the same for centuries. Let’s also assume that in religious affairs, the language showed little development. You have only to think of our own formal ecclesiastical language. Nevertheless, it need not be the case that the language of the Israelites had remained so unaltered since the time of Moses that centuries later it could have been read with ease as a document written in the language of Moses and his contemporaries. Just like most Dutch people today would not be able to read a Dutch book from the 1500s. The Hebrew of Moses’ day would have shown considerable Egyptian influence, judging by the second half of the book of Genesis. Living for so many centuries in a strange environment would not have left the language of such a small group unaffected. Even if the majority of the Israelites had lived in isolation in Goshen, others had certainly lived among Egyptian neighbors (Exod. 3:22), had even married Egyptian husbands or wives (Gen. 41:45; Lev. 24:10), and Moses himself was raised in an Egyptian palace and instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Exod. 2:10; Acts 7:22), so that in his notes written at Horeb, he would not have used the language of the Canaanites. Thanks to the significantly enlarged understanding today of the languages of Canaan from the time surrounding Israel’s exodus and entrance, we may conclude that some terms found in the sacrificial Torah of Leviticus strongly resemble those commonly used among the Canaanites of that time. That points to a later translation, revision, alteration, or whatever one might term it. The adapting of the ancient linguistic garment in which Israel received its inheritance through Moses, to the language of their new land. For even if a shared Babylonian past had likely played a role, it appears certain that in the case of Israel in Canaan, the conquerors adopted much of the language of the vanquished.

Possibilities galore for editorial consequences.

Even though there are still all those sentences in Leviticus that speak repeatedly about Moses. Then Yahweh said to Moses . . . . Would a person write this way about himself?

For this and other reasons, we would not dare to insist that the book of Leviticus as we have it before us dates from the time of Moses. This is something that in fact is not reported to us in the book itself.

We suggest the following course of events.

Just as earlier, before the construction of the tabernacle (Exod. 24:4), Moses would have made a record of everything that God told him during that particular month. Then (exactly when, we don’t know) someone other than Moses grouped portions and documents and provided titles and summaries. Why could that not have been done by someone like Joshua or Eleazar? We can only guess about when the later linguistic revisions may have occurred.
In any case, with the view we are maintaining the conviction that the content of Leviticus came from God to Moses, so that our Savior could say about Moses, both on formal as well as material grounds, in terms of the book of Leviticus: He has written of me (John 5:46).

3. Leviticus: a fence

In the month preceding the census and preparation for marching, the book of Leviticus, at least in terms of its content, came into being at Horeb.

Leviticus was given before the march against Canaan.

Like a tank.

For God did not want his Israel to go into battle unprotected.

For we must recall that initially God had not intended that Israel would have entered the land of Canaan after forty years. Entering Canaan could have been a matter of months. But we will say more about this in connection with our commentary on the book of Numbers.

Leviticus was given with a view to Canaan. That land of Canaan against which Israel would be marching in 1.5 months. Read the warnings concerning the Canaanite wickedness in Leviticus 18:3 and 20:23. The book of Leviticus had to serve as armor against the filth of Canaan, to keep Israel what she was: the holy congregation of Yahweh. For otherwise . . . .

Now we turn the coin over.

The laws of Leviticus had a double purpose. Not only to protect Israel against Canaan, but also to preserve Israel against . . . her own God, Yahweh. This is what I mean:

If there is one word we encounter repeatedly in Leviticus, it’s the word holy. We find this word in the richest variety of contexts. It’s a word that defies definition. We repeatedly hear Yahweh say about himself that he is holy. Naturally no mortal possesses the same holiness as Israel’s God, the One who now is our God. With whom will you compare God?, Isaiah asked (40:18). Even though God was free to declare as holy whomever he chose, and whatever he chose. In Leviticus you will frequently be astonished that objects, things, like the tabernacle, are called holy. The “utensils” of the tabernacle as well. Although one thing may be more holy than another. In addition, those performing the sacrifices were holy. But this did not mean that everything was “most holy.” To say it reverently: the word holy is used with considerable variation in meaning. Finally, we would not fail to mention that in Leviticus the entire people of Israel is called holy. This is something that, with their arrival at Horeb, appeared at most to be a task laid upon Israel (Exod. 19:6): Holiness as “calling.” But in Leviticus we hear Yahweh announcing his holiness as a gift that served as the foundation for Israel’s existence, it was granted to Israel so that Israel would be holy. Both are true. The “calling” first and then the “gift.” First, you shall be holy before me. For I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations to be mine (Lev. 20:26).

What then does holy mean?

Language studies provide no useful answer to that question. The etymology of the Hebrew word qdšh is uncertain. As one commentator notes, behind the holiness of Yahweh there probably lies the notion of the awesome appearance of his majesty. The root of the Hebrew word possesses, in Babylonian Assyrian language, the meaning of “to be awesome,” as well as “to be of glorious appearance.” He is “majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (Exod. 15:11). When God reveals himself as the Holy One, he displays his power among the
nations in the deliverance of Israel (Ezek. 20:41–42). But it was especially the consuming side of God’s holiness that was described, as in Leviticus 10:1–7: when Aaron’s sons brought “strange” fire on the altar, a consuming fire came forth from Yahweh, and he said: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev. 10:3).

Holy . . . and holiness . . . of God, of people, and of objects. Leviticus supplies us with no concrete definition, but we must discover it by reading the book. Or stated better: we must seek an impression by reading and more reading.

As we read through Leviticus, we will come to see that the laws of this book were given to Moses, and to Israel, so that it might be possible for those two—God and Israel—who had been so closely related through the covenant and the tabernacle, to continue together.

Yahweh was so holy, and therefore Israel had to be just as holy.

As you might imagine, no amount of money in the world could induce us to denigrate the Torah. That lovely Torah, that Law of Yahweh for Israel, given so that people might come to know him as their faithful Covenant God.

But also to learn from the Torah how to interact with God. For in the midst of an entire world of nations wandering about in darkness and succumbing to death, Israel was permitted to be the people of life. But she was also commanded to be the people of life. Otherwise God could not dwell among his people as Yahweh, the One who is Near. This explains the massive complex of measures given to enable the continued interaction between those two. For ultimately Israel was nothing but one nation among others, whose ancestry and character were no different from those other nations. How easily Israel would slide back down to that former level from which she had been graciously delivered. That deathly level. Something that entailed the risk of destruction through the pouring out of God’s holiness against the entire nation or against individual members of the nation. This explains the manifold measures designed to rescue Israel from abandoning or even unintentionally slipping off the foundation on which she had been placed at Horeb. This explains why we find later in Numbers an important chapter about the mediating place of the tribe of Levi in Israel’s encampment. Like a guardrail between the congregation and the tabernacle. This explains why in Leviticus we find numerous “statutes and rules and laws that the Lord made between himself and the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai”—as we read once more in the closing verse of Leviticus 26:46.

We already discussed the phrase “on Mount Sinai.” Here we have italicized the word between. Should we not interpret this as referring to the fence at the foot of Sinai for the safety of people and animals when God descended on the mountain? The laws of Leviticus would form a permanent isolating railing between Yahweh and his people.

The men of Beth-shemesh later complained: “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?” (1 Sam. 6:20). And in Isaiah 33:14 the sinners heard people crying out: “Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?”

Nadab and Abihu had scarcely been consecrated as priests before they were killed in the presence of Yahweh. For God said: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev. 3:10).

At this point we must recall that the Mediator between God and people, the man Jesus Christ, was permitted by this God, whom he himself had called “holy Father” (John 17:11), to enter into the holy of holies above. And this when he had taken upon himself the entire burden of our sins. When he had stood before God as sin itself (2 Cor. 5:21). But he had died to sin once for all, and
death no longer has dominion over him (Rom. 6:9–10). Like a sponge absorbs water, like a tissue soaks up the spilled ink, and like the lightning rod attracts the fire of heaven to itself, so too he has borne God’s wrath in his suffering and death.

Anyone who has read Leviticus and been impressed with God’s awesome aversion to sin and death will catch his breath when he sees Jesus Christ, in the Gospels, ascending the path as our Substitute, the path leading him to the mount of God’s holiness. We can only stagger when we behold him with pierced hands breaking down the wall between Yahweh and the congregation, the wall that Leviticus describes for us.

He was successful.

The church today is free from the law. It was a good law. Certainly. Of course. But in many respects it was a harsh custodian.

Coming after this Advocate and Surety, we too may now appear before God without fear, along this living Way, Christ Jesus. We are fervently exhorted not to throw away our “proof of access” (Heb. 10:35). In the Paradise that will descend to earth, the church of glory will receive an access much freer than Aaron and his sons ever received in terms of the shadow of that access known as the tabernacle. As kings and priests, for the purpose of “worshiping” the Holy One, “they will behold his face.” It is the privilege of priests (Rev. 2:7; 21:2; 22:3–4).

4. The style of Leviticus

Things occur in Leviticus that would have never been permitted in our textbooks and law books today. Here are a few examples.

As we mentioned earlier, Leviticus 1–7 deals with sacrifices. In fairly broad strokes, seven chapters are devoted to that. Nowadays many people would surely think that that was rather exhaustive. Space enough, and then some, so that the author would not have needed to return later to the subject with supplemental comments. Such comments could have easily been included in those seven chapters.

But not in Leviticus.

When we find seven chapters devoted to that subject, we encounter all the way at the end, in Leviticus 22:17–25, various regulations about . . . inadmissible defects in sacrificial animals. Defects that rendered an animal unusable for slaughter at Yahweh’s sanctuary.

This was something that, according to the style of writing—of articles, brochures, books—as would be considered by some in our day as absolutely correct, would not have occurred. Sloppy, incomplete, we will have to accept the fact that the Holy Spirit did not take into consideration their style in Leviticus. If they did that, perhaps they could learn from Leviticus, also when it involved that so-called “dry material,” to put forth some effort to avoid boring their readers.

Leviticus is the kind of book about which a heartfelt Christian once honestly admitted to us that he had skipped over in family devotions. Leviticus is a wonderful book. Especially for Christians. For everywhere in this book you meet the costly suffering and genuine death, but especially the resurrection from the dead unto life, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You need not fall asleep while reading Leviticus. It does not consist of a collection of police regulations, static narratives, financial statements. Nor does it consist of a bunch of dry sermons, the kind that resembles dry minutes of a meeting instead of the lively proclamation of the words of eternal life.
Of course Leviticus does require careful attention on the part of its readers. Especially at those points where you come into contact with the unsavory aspects of the law applied to the church of Israel. People need to be careful. Anyone who had touched a dead animal at work early in the morning would be unclean for the rest of the day and was not allowed to set foot in the forecourt. And if there were a leper or a corpse in the tent, the uneasiness was great. When Leviticus talks about such things, we can understand that some people might get the impression that they were reading a manual for priests. Indeed, those priests had to give Israel significant *torah,* or instruction about God’s ways.

But Israel possessed in rich measure something that is unfortunately missing among us. Sensitivity for *symbolism!*

Thanks to that rich symbolism, Leviticus contains a lot that requires explanation, but it is on that account that makes it all the more stimulating. It is a book full of variety.

In that connection, *story* plays a very important role in Leviticus as well. Where would you find in a modern law book or manual such doctrinal teaching? And what reads more interestingly than a good story?
Part 1: The Sacrificial Torah: General principles

Chapter 2

Reconciliation through death

We have said it more than once already. The first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus are all devoted to one and the same subject, namely, the sacrifices. That much is obvious, in view of what preceded and what followed this section. We have already discussed what preceded. That Moses’ account of what God revealed to him about the required sacrificial ministry obtained a place of prominence is obvious. In this way we have a suitable coupling with the conclusion of Exodus, regarding God’s accepting of the tabernacle from Israel’s hands. That tabernacle would be the place where the sacrifices would later need to be brought.

Concerning what followed, we see that after the instruction about sacrifices in Leviticus 1–7 we find the story about the census of the priesthood in Leviticus 8–10. This would apply to various sacrifices. In fact, later in Leviticus various sacrifices would be discussed with a view to different occasions. Thanks to the placement at the beginning of the large section about the sacrifices, every reader would be able to know accurately what kinds of sacrifices were involved.

This is indeed a large section. It carries extra significance because of its introductory character. Therefore we believe it would be helpful to do what we did in connection with the tabernacle, namely, arrange our discussion in terms of a general section and a particular section. In the first section we will discuss things related to all, or at least most, of the sacrifices. Once we’ve completed that, we will be able in the next section to discuss each sacrifice separately and more briefly.

I. GENERAL SECTION

Israel knew more than one kind of sacrifice. We can surmise that by skimming over the first seven chapters of Leviticus. God talked with Moses about burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. But all those offerings had something in common, for example, they were all brought to God. Some sacrifices belonged to a distinct group and shared something special. You should understand that these matters are more general in nature, so we will discuss them as follows:

A. Reconciliation through death
B. The theory of an immortal soul (chapter 3)
C. The requirements for each sacrificial animal (chapter 4)
D. The general procedure for sacrificing an animal (chapter 5)

A. Reconciliation through death

1. The origin of the sacrifice
Nowhere in Holy Scripture do you read one word about God explicitly instituting sacrifices in earlier times. Not even at those points where we might have expected it, like Genesis 4, the first Scripture passage where we encounter the word for sacrifice (*mincha*).

True enough, we do not find there an explicit narrative about the instituting of any sacrifice. But from the silence of Scripture concerning this subject we should not deduce that such an instituting of sacrifice by God did not occur. We should certainly not conclude that sacrifice was therefore something that people invented. That would be a completely illegitimate conclusion drawn from the silence of Scripture. We would mention the following matters, which point us in an entirely different direction.

In the story about Cain and Abel, Genesis 4 talks directly above sacrifices as though they were the most familiar practices in the world, without any introductory explanation of them. We are not surprised by that when we recall that Genesis 4 did not receive its place in Holy Scripture, first of all, for us, but for Israel, for people who had grown up with sacrifices.

Furthermore, however, we notice that Israel consequently knew good and well—in Leviticus we will see this repeatedly—that sacrifices were very important to God. Therefore we have the strong sense that when reading Genesis 4, no Israelite would have thought the first people, including Cain and Abel, would have invented sacrifices from their own imagination. Certainly not. Otherwise an Israelite would have been unable to comprehend that back then already God looked upon sacrifices with approval, which is what in fact had happened, and what is narrated in Genesis 4:4. This points to the divine origin of sacrifice.

In addition, even though we admit that in Scripture we are told very little about the first human beings, we nevertheless know for certain that after the rebellion of Adam and Eve, God did not immediately break off all contact with them. Not even with Cain. The gospel of compassion and salvation arose historically in that earliest period. We know about God’s ancient prediction that one day the great enemy of the human race would be destroyed, although that victory would be achieved in no other way than at a high cost (Gen. 3:15). From where else than from that prediction can we explain the international rise of hope in the resurrection of the dead, though that hope was often defective? Surely primitive humanity had knowledge of God’s intention and desire to dwell one day in peace among the people he created. The cherubs in the tabernacle appealed to the memory of that among Israel and the nations. We will not repeat what we have written in our commentary on Exodus about the Paradise-longings of the patriarchs connected with the tabernacle. We believe that entire portions of God’s revelation concerning that high cost had been preserved among the nations, a price that ensured, come what may, that a resurrection to glory would occur, along a route of suffering and death. From where else can we explain the international sense that there was no possibility for restoring the disrupted fellowship with the offended deity apart from the shedding of blood? Would pagans have heard the apostolic gospel of Hebrews 9:22—no forgiveness without the shedding of blood—with surprise as though this were something unheard of? What nation did not know about blood sacrifices?

We believe that no one would be guilty of holding to an inappropriate fantasy if they assumed and accepted the claim that God instituted sacrifice, and this institution lay behind the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, the sacrifice of Noah after the Flood (Gen. 8:20), and the innumerable sacrifices mentioned in very ancient extra-biblical accounts. These were the kind of sacrifices that provided people an opportunity to confess their faith in God’s promise of restored fellowship with him along the route of surrendering to him the best that people could offer, for putting to death. Apparently from early on, God had permitted the symbolizing of that terrible death of a human being through the sacrifice of an animal. Primitive humanity received no
explicit permission to put an animal to death for any other purpose than sacrifice. That is clear from the post-Flood account of God permitting the slaughter of animals for consumption as well (Gen. 9:2–4).

So primitive humanity possessed both word and sacrifice. Truth and seal. Instruction and symbol.

However, we have not received as much information as we might wish concerning these two treasures. We can point to a twofold reason for this. First, the wisdom of God, who apparently determined that what Holy Scripture would tell us about this matter would be sufficient. Second, the sin of those who, with Cain, began already to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). According to Genesis, Cain immediately had many followers in this practice. Nevertheless, here as well.

The truth is so powerful. For liars, the truth is indispensable. For just as without iron there would be no rust, no lie could exist without the truth. Every lie contains an element of truth. The world religions must be explained fundamentally on the basis of their distortion of the truth, their bastardization of the tradition. Concerning specifically the constant flowing of blood that has been shed throughout the centuries among the innumerable sanctuaries of Eastern and Western hemispheres, their source and origin must be found in the tragic mangling of the Paradise gospel of salvation from the power of the great executioner of humanity, and especially of the pagans (Acts 26:18; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19), along the route of bloody struggle, all the way to death (Gen. 3:15).

For centuries humanity has undergone a terrible process of apostasy. In addition to the testimony of Scripture, we have the testimony of remarkable remnants of the original knowledge of God and of his commands among the nations. Everywhere we encounter remnants of the ruins of knowledge about creation and “a golden age,” rebellion and punishment, atonement and peace, resurrection and judgment. Even though by the time when Abraham lived, it had become very, very dark.

Nevertheless, in the pagan religious customs of that time God himself found so much that was useful that he took things over into his service from the religious sphere of Abraham’s idolatrous ancestral home. When we read in Genesis 12:7 that Abraham built an altar at Shechem, “to the Lord, who had appeared to him,” that report appears without any commentary. Apparently because for both Abraham and Israelite readers, for a long time altars and sacrifices had been the most usual phenomena ever.

Notice: for Israel as well.

Just as the fact that God established a covenant with Israel at Horeb and gave two identical tablets as a testimony of this was hardly surprising, so too Israel would not have been surprised when on the day when that covenant was established, Moses had to build an altar, on which God commanded him to present burnt offerings and peace offerings (Exod. 24). The terms for these (ʿōlōt and zēbāḥām) were not introduced or described with a word of explanation, neither for the initial participants in that ceremony nor for the subsequent (primarily Israelite) readers of the story. That was thought to be unnecessary.

In arranging the tabernacle construction, God made use of so many parallels to pagan sanctuaries with their furnishings and priestly garments, that in our commentary on Exodus, in connection with the tabernacle, we spoke of God’s “great annexation” at Horeb.

We will encounter such striking parallels as well when we discuss the sacrificial cultus that God gave to Israel through Moses.
For at Horeb, Yahweh did not want to exhaust his people by removing them entirely from their context as an Eastern people. He did not overwhelm Israel with a flood of novelties. What could be retained was retained, although it was purified, and reunited to the genuine, ancient gospel of Genesis 3–4, with its preaching of God’s hatred of Satan, sin, and death, and of his compassion toward people. Those people he was prepared to save, at any cost. Through the surrender, from his side, of the highest and most beloved gift humanly possible, surrendered to that same terrible death.

Today we would say: to the Mediator’s death.

2. Blood sacrifice was central, bloodless sacrifice was incidental

We hasten to add a correction to the preceding. We have repeatedly used the word sacrifice, by which we were continually referring to bloody sacrifice.

But not all sacrifices that Israel brought were bloody. We see that from the general term for sacrifice, the word korban.

This term was so general that it included gifts not intended at all to be laid on the altar to be burned. Korban referred, for example, to gifts of wine for the sanctuary, mentioned with respect to the princes of Numbers 7:3 and the generals in Numbers 31:50 (wagons for transporting the tabernacle and military plunder that consisted of gold armlets and bracelets, signet rings and earrings).

Korban referred as well to every gift brought to Yahweh as Israel’s Landlord, including first fruits and tithes.

Finally, korban also referred to what for us would be identified as a sacrifice, namely, a gift to be laid on the altar, to be entirely or partially consumed by fire. As the reader can see, people generally use the word korban, sacrifice, far too narrowly.

Moreover, those altar sacrifices did not always consist of an animal. In addition to bloody altar sacrifices there were bloodless altar sacrifices. People placed flour, bread, loaves, wine, oil, incense, and salt on the altar.

What then did that general word, korban, mean with reference to sacrifices?

This word korban would be most familiar to Bible readers from Mark 7:11. There we read how our Savior had criticized how the Jewish scribes had neutralized the simple Word and command of God with their complicated doctrines. Because, after all, God was more than a human being, they approved the practice of prosperous children failing to care for their needy parents by declaring their gift to be korban, set aside as a gift for God’s temple. The Hebrew word korban is translated into Greek in Mark 7 with the word donon, a word that generally means gift. It is used for a gift that one person gives another, such as the gift of the Eastern wise men to Baby Jesus (Matt. 2:11), and for the presents mentioned in Revelation 11:10. But it appears also in the combination of “gifts and sacrifices” to God (Heb. 5:1; 8:3; 9:9). This might lead people to suppose that the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew word korban was gift, present, even when referring to altar sacrifices, including bloody altar sacrifices.

In our commentary on Exodus, we saw that this is not accurate. We saw that in the word korban we are reminded of the work of the priests whom God had given to Israel, according to their own request. For actually Israel should have consisted entirely of priests. But at Horeb, God approved the substitution of separate individuals to whom had been committed the special task of coming near to God. Accordingly, they were called kerobim, the one approaching. Similarly,
their work was called *hikrieb*, causing to bring near. Both of these words, referring to *sacrifice* and *bringing sacrifice*, are used for sacrifice in general in Leviticus 1:2, and for each kind of sacrifice individually (for the burnt offering, Lev. 1:3; for the grain offering, Lev. 2:1, 4, 12; for the thank offering, Lev. 3:1, 7, 12; for the sin offering, Lev. 4:13, 14, 23; and for the guilt offering, Lev. 7:3; 14:12).

In this way, Israel was being taught, by that general term used in Scripture for sacrifice—quite apart from whether it referred to a bloody or a bloodless sacrifice—about the need for mediation between God and them. Even a grain offering—a non-bloody sacrifice—could not be placed on the altar by the hands of just any Israelite, but exclusively and only by the hands of a priest. Even though the grain offering had no atoning significance whatsoever, for example, even for that sacrifice the mediation of the priesthood was required.

The result is that everyone senses that this mediation in cases where a bloody sacrifice was being brought was absolutely indispensable. Whereas with a bloodless sacrifice no restoration of broken fellowship occurred, such restoration always occurred through the bloody sacrifice. Every bloody sacrifice was reconciling, restoring, mediating in the most fundamental and indispensable sense.

This explains why the question about the mediating character of all the sacrifices can best be answered if we pay attention to the preaching that was tied to the bloody sacrifice. For that reason we will turn to this matter in our general section. Not, of course, from a lack of appreciation for the beautiful grain offering, which we will discuss in due course. But here we think it is important to pause to look at the background as we inquire into the meaning of Israel’s sacrificial system. In that connection we must surely place the bloody sacrifice in the foreground, since most kinds of sacrifices among Israel by far involved not plant sacrifices, but animal sacrifices. The grain offerings were merely incidental, compared with the bloody sacrifices, though they too were indispensable.

3. The key to the teaching of the bloody sacrifice

We did not invent this heading. We are borrowing it, more or less, from K. C. W. F. Bähr (*Symbolik des Mosaischen Cultus* [2 volumes, 1837 and 1839]), whose work we mentioned with appreciation and followed with agreement in our commentary on Genesis. Bähr supplied this heading to a particular passage in the book of Leviticus, namely, Leviticus 17:11, which reads in the KJV: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” Bähr has written excellent things about this verse. But he has also made comments that give us pause, comments that lead us to used Bähr’s explanation of the sacrifices with great caution. We want to interact with him for the benefit of our readers, since we can learn some things from this exercise.

Just as we have done, so too Bähr took as his starting point for explaining Israel’s sacrificial ministry the bloody sacrifice. We need not say anything further about that. (We will discuss in due time the manner in which Bähr viewed the relationship between the blood sacrifices and the grain offerings.)

Virtually every Bible reader knows from youth onward that the blood of the sacrificial animals was sprinkled on the altar, by the priest, not by the one bringing the offering. The latter
could lead the animal, with his hand on the animal’s head, could slaughter the animal, skin it and cut it into pieces, but that was the extent of his task. Only the priest, who had collected the animal’s blood and sprinkled this on the altar, could place some of the animal pieces very specifically on the horns of the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt, and on certain occasions on the horns of the altar of incense in the holy place of the tabernacle. A place where the laity were not allowed to enter. In the forecourt, the one bringing the offering was not allowed to perform every task with respect to the animal. The primary sacrificial action, sprinkling the blood, was exclusively the work of the priest.

Concerning this sprinkling of blood Bähr argued emphatically that this was the central, most essential action connected with the sacrifice. Can we not read this clearly in Leviticus 17:11 (cited above)? Bähr called that verse “the key to the entire Mosaic sacrificial instruction.” And what was remarkable about that verse? That it didn’t say a word about killing the animal. It said nothing about slaughtering the sacrificial animal. It talked only about the blood of the animal, and about what was supposed to be done with that blood.

What must we conclude, according to Bähr?

That according to Scripture, it was not the death that brought reconciliation, that the means of atonement was not death, but the blood. So it was impermissible to thoughtlessly confuse and equate death and blood. This was the mistake the people made who emphasized the juridical or forensic view of sacrifice. They thought they had found in the notion of sacrifice a satisfaction vicaria to God (rendering a substitutionary satisfaction). According to them the person bringing the sacrifice symbolically placed his sin and guilt on the animal, which was then a substitute for him and bore the punishment in his place. In the course of time, this interpretation had acquired its most ardent defenders among Christians, but it contradicted Scripture. For Scripture sharply distinguished putting to death and sprinkling blood. The former could be performed by the one bringing the sacrifice, but not the latter. That was exclusively the work of the priest that Leviticus 17:11 taught with emphatic wording, that sin was covered not by the slaying and putting to death, but by blood and sprinkling. “For it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” Literally: blood covers. So you see, that was the purpose and result of the sacrifice. Not the removal of punishment, but the communication of life. For how was the sacrifice a means of reconciliation? By functioning as a means of sanctification. The blood of the sacrificial animal, symbolic of the blood of the one who was bringing the sacrifice, was put on the altar, its horns and atonement covering, and thereby came into contact with sanctuary and life. In this regard, according to Bähr, the “Mosaic system” corresponded with pagan religions. Pagan antiquity knew nothing of a process of punishment and a juridical execution in connection with the one bringing the sacrifice. As Bähr put it: a person gave life to the deity, the source of all life, with the intention of receiving his life back and entering into living fellowship with the deity; that is the heart of all religion, and of sacrifice, but not the permutatio personarum (exchange of persons) and punishment.

How did Bähr come up with this?

Unfortunately we are unable to supply an answer that is absolutely verifiable, but we do have a hunch.

The kind of notions like those Bähr defended above remind us of one of his older contemporaries, the German theologian F. Schleiermacher. He lived from 1768–1834, when the two volumes of Bähr’s work now under discussion appeared, in 1837 and 1839. Late enough to have been written under the influence of Schleiermacher. In the doctrinal system of this
dogmatician there was little attention given to the justification of sinners on the basis of Christ’s substitutionary suffering and death, but more attention given to human sanctification through contact with God. The saving work of Christ consisted, according to Schleiermacher, in Christ including us within his powerful consciousness of God and in the fellowship of his undisrupted salvation. Logically this salvation of the sinner occurred first, followed by reconciliation between God and the sinner. What was needed first was to be included in the life-communion with Christ. In that sense he was our Substitute. Justification consisted in the inclusion of a person in life-communion with Christ. Through this union with Christ, conversion was brought about. This converted individual was then justified, and received forgiveness. Christ’s voluntary surrender unto death was merely a proof of his readiness to include individuals in his life-communion.

We assume that there was affinity between Schleiermacher and Bähr. The latter would have been strongly influenced by the former. Regrettably so. For in his work on Israel’s worship according to the Torah, he constantly pointed to God’s holiness, and he never tired of pointing out to us in the Torah God’s aversion to death and his love for life. These features of his work were very helpful to us. But when we have to observe that according to Bähr, the forgiveness of sins came to expression symbolically through touch, through contact, through the fellowship of the blood that was sacrificed by the one bringing the offering and poured out by the priest, with such holy places of divine revelation as the altar, horns of the altar, and atonement covering, then we fear that Bähr’s otherwise clear insight in reading the Torah was clouded over by the teachings of Schleiermacher or something similar.

Even when he was alive, Bähr’s views were not universally accepted. In our commentary on Exodus, we saw this especially with respect to his views on the tabernacle. But what he wrote about Israel’s sacrificial ministry aroused still greater opposition.

The most famous opponent of Bähr’s explanations about Israel’s sacrifices was J. H. Kurtz (1809–1890). He was well-known as a church historian. But he earned his stripes especially in the field of Old Testament interpretation. It was not that Kurtz had no appreciation for Bähr’s work on the Torah, since he often cites him with approval. But in one respect, and a very important one at that, he did not withhold his criticism. For Bähr had trivialized the death of the sacrificial animal. He had eliminated from the Law of Moses the gospel of substitution, of the vicarious bearing of punishment and substitutionary death.

Naturally our readers would have noticed with great importance of this critique for our time as well. We are immediately drawn into this debate between Bähr and Kurtz. For we sense that this pertains to the death of Christ. Scripture is one, and the gospel is one. If according to the Old Testament, specifically, according to the Torah, there was no mention of a symbolic vicarious suffering and dying of the sacrificial animal for the one bringing the sacrifice, then according to the New Testament there would not have been a real suffering and dying of the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus Christ, for us.

In what follows, when we trace the dispute between Bähr and Kurtz with careful attention, we will do so not for entertainment, not even intellectual entertainment. We do consider the contest of minds stimulating, as we watch the well-formulated arguments of one scholar being wrestled with in the equally well-constructed arguments of another scholar. But what truly stimulates us is our own interest in the truth of the gospel as it has been taught to us from our youth: there is no peace with God except through the death of his Son.
From Kurtz we have some biographical information about Bähr. He tells us, for example, that he had expected the kind of discussion of Israel’s sacrifices as the one Bähr provided in his massive two-volume work. Or rather: he had feared such. For he had read an earlier essay by Bähr, entitled “The Teaching of the Church concerning the Death of Jesus.” From that essay it became evident that Bähr had a certain antipathy toward the “satisfaction theory of the atonement.” What Kurtz feared was that Bähr’s antipathy toward the church’s teaching of Christ’s work of substitutionary atonement would play a role in his study of the Law, especially the Law’s teaching about sacrifice. Unfortunately his fear was realized. As a result of a particular doctrinal view of the work of Christ, the otherwise so clear and penetrating insight of Bähr did not see what, according to Kurtz, every unbiased reader of the Law had to notice: a *satisfactio vicaria*, or vicarious atonement.

We mention the following points from Kurtz’s critique, though we have formulated them largely in our own words.

Bähr used Leviticus 17:11 in a completely mistaken way. It was not a problem calling this verse “the key to Moses’ teaching about sacrifice.” But the context in which this verse appears must not be lost from view. That verse does not appear in the chapters specially devoted to the sacrifices, that is, not in Leviticus 1–7. But in Leviticus 17. And what is Leviticus 17:10–16 about? What is its main subject? Not sacrifice, though that is certainly mentioned. Even though in that context God is telling the Israelites something about the altar, which is very important, namely, that on the altar he had supplied the Israelites with the blood of atonement for their souls. But even though that is important, it is nevertheless merely a reminder. A reminder brought up in service to a discussion of the main subject of Leviticus 17. Given as motivation for God’s command to the Israelites *that they should not eat any blood*. That is what Leviticus 17 is about. That the Israelites had to abstain from using blood. If you read the context, you will see this clearly.

Of course, we must always distinguish properly and take seriously the question whether one or another subject is being intentionally discussed and commented on—Kurtz says: whether a subject is broached *ex professo*, explicitly—or whether a comment is registered incidentally. Even though such an incidental comment can be very important. Especially if it serves as part of an argument. And that is the case in Leviticus 17:11, with the mention of the significance and function of the blood on Israel’s altar. Even though that reminder served to undergird a comment about an entirely different matter, namely, the prohibition to Israel against using the blood.

It is a shot in the dark, Kurtz says, for Bähr to exclaim, with his finger pointing to Leviticus 17:11, “Do you see? In this verse, the central verse about sacrifice in the Mosaic system, only blood is mentioned. Nothing else. Not the death of the animal, not the slaughter of the animal.” Kurtz responds: That is not surprising, given the subject of that part of Leviticus 17, namely, a prohibition against using the blood. This explains why Bähr’s conclusion is mistaken. That conclusion, according to Bähr, would be that with Israel’s sacrifice only the blood had any significance, but not the death and slaughter of the animal, so that it was impermissible to view the animal’s death and slaughter as the principal issues involved in sacrificing, or to view the killing of the animal as an act of punishment. For according to Bähr, it was illegitimate to view the death of the sacrificial animal as a punishment where God is functioning as a punishing judge. Because Leviticus 17:11 says nothing about death and slaughter. It speaks only about blood. Indeed, says Kurtz, but that proves nothing. Given the context of Leviticus 17:11, whose main subject is not the sacrificing, slaughtering, etc., of animals.
Of course, Kurtz made the very same observation that our readers have already made by themselves, namely, that Bähr’s entire theory rested on a piece of shrewdness. For you can logically distinguish those two features, the slaying of an animal and the shedding of its blood, but in practice they cannot be separated. When the blood of a person or of an animal is shed, that person or animal is dead. Bähr’s appeal to Hebrews 9:22, where it is established as a rule that there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, was an argument that cut no ice. We can readily admit that in connection with slaughtering an animal, the shedding of blood made the deepest impression. Through that shedding the fatal effect was brought about. This explains why Scripture emphasizes that shedding of blood so strongly. But that cannot occur apart from slaughtering and killing the sacrificial victim.

Scripture teaches with equal clarity that without death there is no forgiveness. Scripture begins focusing our attention on this indisputable truth when it tells us why death came to us in the world. On account of Adam’s transgression (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:6). The apostle Paul teaches us to see in that fact the reason for our death (Rom. 5:12–14). Our death is retribution for sin (Rom. 6:23, and from the parallel that the apostle makes between Adam and Christ, we see clearly to what transgression he credits our death. As through Adam’s disobedience, guilt and death have come upon us, so through Christ’s obedience justification (acquittal, forgiveness, Rom. 8:23) and life have come to us. With this line of argument, did not Paul lead us to view the death of Christ as a substitutionary, vicarious death? He did so with the obvious goal of supplying a proof of his preaching against the Jews who were opposing him, by appealing to the . . . Torah. For from the Torah alone we know what happened in the Garden. In fact, if Christ is indeed the Lamb of God who came to fulfill the shadows of the Law—which he was, Matthew 16:1–29, Jesus of Nazareth appeared as the Passover Lamb of fulfillment!—what then are we to think of the shadows, those symbols? Can the notion of a capital punishment, the substitutionary death, have been completely foreign?

There was something else that Kurtz conceded. Far too often people had lost sight of the fact that the sacrificial animal, strictly speaking, did not represent the one bringing the offering, the person who was sacrificing, but rather was representing Christ. Kurtz repeatedly identified this error, committed by one no less than the Old Testament commentator Carl Friedrich Keil (1807–1888). The reason this was mistaken was that the one sacrificing was not atoned for by his own blood. As though this was being symbolically portrayed. No, he was atoned for precisely by the blood of someone else. Blood that God had provided upon the altar. That is what Leviticus 17:11 is saying.

In view of Scripture, it is to the eternal glory of our Lord Jesus Christ that he was slain for us (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). For that reason it will not do to think that only his being slain, and the slaying of the sacrificial animals of the Law who foreshadowed him (Heb. 10:1), were something incidental. Our justification (that is, our acquittal, the forgiveness of our guilt) is specifically ascribed to Christ’s being delivered up. Now then, for what was he delivered up, than for death? This explains why Scripture says that our Savior “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

4. Our plan for answering the threefold question about Leviticus 17:11

It is obvious that we are not finished discussing Leviticus 17:11. We have merely begun our treatment of this very interesting passage. We will continue our discussion. Because Bähr said
some very helpful things about this passage, despite his mistaken ideas, we will follow his method in our discussion, as did Kurtz.

In connection with this passage, Bähr dealt with four questions.

1. What was the role of the blood in connection with the one bringing the sacrifice? We have already shown our readers Bähr’s answer to this question. His answer was unsatisfactory. For Bähr ascribed such a dominant role to the blood of the sacrificial animal that he retained no significance at all for the slaying and killing of the animal. But we turn now to his remaining three questions and their answers.

2. What was the function of the blood? Answer: atonement.

3. Who atoned? Answer: God. Who was atoned? Answer: Not God, but the person.


With a view to the last Hebrew word, we would mention that Bähr translated Leviticus 17:11 this way: *For the soul [nepheš] of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you all for the altar, in order to atone [lekhapper] your souls [napšōtêkem], for the blood atones through the soul [bannepheš].*

5. According to Leviticus 17:11, what did the blood of the sacrifice accomplish?

I have provided two translations of Leviticus 17:11. The first was the KJV, the second that of Bähr. We saw that Bähr placed several Hebrew words in brackets. The Hebrew word *lekhapper* he translated as *to atone*, as does the KJV. Is that correct?

The question concerning the original meaning of the Hebrew verb *kpr* is answered variously. Some understand the meaning of this word not to have been to *cover*, but to *sweep*, to *sweep away*. Several Hebrew lexica, however, present the development of the word’s meaning in precisely the reverse order: first, to sweep, and only later: to cover.

When the etymology of a word provides no solution, the only thing we can do is pay attention to the usage of the word in Holy Scripture. In that connection, the following features are striking.

a) The Hebrew verb *kpr* is used in Jeremiah 18:23 in parallel with *blot out* (Hebrew: *māhā*), but that does not yet prove identical meaning.

b) We are told about Noah that he had to cover (*kpr*) the ark inside and out (Gen. 6:14). That probably refers to putting pitch on it (as the KJV indicates: “thou shalt pitch it within and without with pitch”).

c) We are also struck by the fact that the word *kpr* frequently appears with a preposition (something that unfortunately cannot always be replicated in the translation), one that means on or upon (ʿal, as in Lev. 17:11). This usage suggests that the sacrificial blood was *laid upon* in such a way that it *covered*. This would have been the original meaning. This covering with blood, this *laying upon* with blood occurred, according to Leviticus 17:11, on the altar. Therefore, when someone replaces this original meaning of *to cover* or *to lay upon* with *to atone*, that is substantively correct, but thereby one has actually moved one step away from the beautiful, poignant verb *to cover* and the remarkable preposition *upon*.

Fortunately everyone agrees at least regarding the substantive correctness of the translation, *to atone*.
Translated literally, then, we believe Leviticus 17:11 should read: the blood *covers*. Substantively this may be replaced with: the blood *atonest*.

6. According to Leviticus 17:11, who atoned and who was atoned?

We are taking these two questions together, even though it does make a significant difference whether the person is the one who provides the atonement or the person is the one for whom the atonement is effected.

According to Leviticus 17:11, God was the one from whom the atonement proceeded. Literally: he was the one who provided for the covering with the blood. The one who was covered, or atoned for, was the person. The object of the covering or the atonement was the (souls of the) Israelites. But the Subject of that action was God. The word “I” occupies a position of emphasis in Leviticus 17:11. “I have given it for you on the altar.”

Nevertheless, this did not exclude every use of *means*.

At various times you will read that God provides the covering or atonement, or that the blood atones (here in Lev. 17:11), or that the priest atones (Lev. 5:6). But then we must recall expressions like “the hammer smashes the rock.” Everyone understands very well that it is actually the craftsman doing the smashing with the hammer. So God said to the Israelites that he himself had given them the blood for their covering (or atonement) upon the altar. So it was Yahweh who atoned, although *by means* of the blood. Whereas, when it says another time that the priest atoned, the intention was the same. The priests were but means or instruments, mediators between Yahweh and the Israelites.

It was Yahweh who covered.

He was the one who effected atonement.

The one who benefited thereby was the person. This person was the *object* of the action, and was identified grammatically as the direct object, often with the preposition *on* (ʿal; a covering was laid over or on someone), occasionally with the preposition meaning *for the sake of, on behalf of* (bēʾad, Lev. 9:7; 16:6).

The object of the atonement, then, was the person. Although occasionally it is stated more specifically: the *sin* of the person. Just as we too now and then talk of inanimate things as objects of atonement. In Leviticus 8:15, Moses performed atonement for the altar. From Leviticus 16:16 we see that the actual object of covering or atonement was not the inanimate thing, but human sins that had been committed in connection with the Holy Place, whereby it was considered to be unclean. More than once the *sins* of the people are mentioned as object of the atonement (Exod. 32:30).

But often the text simply states that the *person* is the object of atonement. That can happen by means of the personal pronoun (as in Lev. 1:4, to make atonement “for him” before the face of Yahweh; Lev. 10:17, to make atonement “for them” before the face of Yahweh; Lev. 12:7, make atonement “for her”). This happens also with the use of the word *soul* (Hebrew, nepēḥēṣ), as we see in Leviticus 17:11, where we read: to make atonement “for your [plural] souls.”

Here, then, we have the answer to the question as to from whom atonement proceeds—from God—and who benefits from the atonement: the person. Yahweh is not covered. Yahweh is not atoned. The person is covered. The person is atoned.
In answering these two closely related questions, the reader will surely have had to think of the New Testament. How clearly we are told there that it is our good heavenly Father from whom atonement for our sins has proceeded. For he was the one who gave us Christ as the Lamb. Christ is called the Lamb . . . of God (John 1:29). Through Christ God has atoned us to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). God was in Christ reconciling the world with himself (2 Cor. 5:19). The initiative for reconciliation is ascribed in the New Testament entirely to God. Not to the human person. Not even to the Mediator Jesus Christ. For no one should suppose that Christ came to turn God into a gracious God for the first time. Precisely the opposite: we owe Christ as our Savior to our good God. Christ was given. Christ was given by a Father who was already gracious. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 John 4:9).

7. Question: How did the atonement happen? Answer: Soul for soul (Hebrew, *nepheš*)

With this we have arrived at the final question. How does atonement work? We have supplied the answer to this question in passing. Atonement occurs by way of soul for soul. In Hebrew the word for *soul* is *nepheš*. We still need to say something more about that word. For we have already made a few comments about it, when we observed that the human person for whom atonement is being made can be identified in Leviticus, both with a personal pronoun (making atonement for *him*, for *them*, for *her*) and by using the word *nepheš*. So then, in the latter usage, how must we translate that Hebrew word *nepheš*? May we simply ignore it? May we view it simply as a broader expression than the personal pronouns?

People who use modern Bible versions or translations will have noticed that, where the older translations were rather literal, they rendered the word *nepheš* with the word *soul*, whereas today that Hebrew word is often rendered with *life* or simply with personal pronouns. Here are some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>KJV</th>
<th>NIV</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ps. 11:1: say to my <em>nepheš</em></td>
<td>say ye to my soul</td>
<td>say to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps. 57:4: my <em>nepheš</em> is among lions</td>
<td>my soul is among lions</td>
<td>I am in the midst of lions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps. 124:5: the stream had gone over our <em>nepheš</em></td>
<td>the stream had gone over our soul</td>
<td>The torrent would have swept over us</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You see that in the third column, the word *soul* is entirely absent. The NIV replaces it with personal pronouns (*me, I, us*).

Should we object to that?

Well, Bible translation is such difficult work that we always advise our friends that, if possible, they should use more than one translation *simultaneously*. This works well when reading the Bible in our homes as families. Then we are able to compare translations, and we will often discover that one particular translation tries to provide smooth English (resulting is
some aspects of the original language to be lost), while another translation seeks to render the text as accurately as possible (and feels rather wooden as a result, or worse still, incomprehensible).

As far as the word *nepheš* is concerned, certainly in many cases one can render it into English by means of a personal pronoun, in effect, leaving it untranslated; but someone whose task it is to investigate exactly what was written may never forget that Israel always read that word *nepheš* and always heard it read. We made this general observation earlier. Whereas we would add specifically that there are demonstrable instances when in our English translations we would leave out the literal translation of the word *nepheš*, even though this word influences the translation in another way. Occasionally the word *nepheš* is used in Hebrew when someone wanted to say something with emphasis. In Hebrew you can say, “I call,” but you can also say, “I call with my soul,” which then means: “I call aloud.” Similarly, you can say in Hebrew, “I long for something,” but also, “I long with my soul,” which means: “I long intensely.” In such instances, the word *soul* serves just as well as the word *voice*. Neither would be rendered literally, but neither would be ignored and omitted.

Rather, that word *soul* might indeed disappear from smooth translations, though we should never forget that the Israelites though it was worth the trouble to say and write it repeatedly. In fact, at times when we might sense that it is being used like our personal pronoun, we see it being used in parallel with and as a synonym of *kabod* (the same word we encounter in connection with the tabernacle, but need to translate as *honor, weight, whole being* in Genesis 49:6, Psalm 7:5, 16:9, and other passages).

For these reasons, it is good that we focus serious attention on the meaning of the word *nepheš* in Leviticus 17:11, the Scripture passage we are discussing. We must recall that the word *nepheš* appears three times in that verse. Our attention was drawn in an interesting way to the context of Leviticus 17:11, namely, by the criticism that Kurtz provided of the view of Bähr. The scholarly man had made a serious mistake. For Bähr had completely lost sight of the fact that the main subject in Leviticus 17:10–16 was not bringing sacrifices, but the prohibition against eating blood. That’s what was in view. That was the warning in Leviticus 17. Even though that warning was motivated with a reference to Israel’s sacrificial ministry. We read immediately in verse 10: “If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people.”

Contemporary Bible translations render the verse this way, or in a similar way. That is, omitting the word *soul*. But anyone who is familiar with the KJV can see easily that the word *nepheš* appeared here in verse 10. Here is part of that verse in the KJV: “I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood.” That rendering arose from a desire to translate the word *nepheš* literally. If we were to translate the entire verse along this line, this would be the result: “And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul [nepheš] that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people.” The KJV translates the word *nepheš* as *soul*, and thereafter twice translates the pronouns referring to *soul* as masculine personal pronouns.

Modern English versions, however, no longer prefer the rendering “the soul that,” but “the person who,” or “the one who.” Should we disapprove of this?

Well, our language is a living language. This means that it undergoes change. Words and expressions that were customary earlier now sound strange. The language of the King James
Version, in which Romans 13:1 reads, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers,” is no longer the way we would say it today, and to ignore this fact is to court the risk of robbing our descendants of an understandable Bible. The ESV correctly renders this, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”

In this manner as well, the Hebrew word nepheš can be translated quite well. Hebrew itself permits this. For occasionally, when people are talking about a soul (nepheš), it is spoken of as though it were something feminine, as here in Leviticus 17:10 (the Hebrew word nepheš was feminine), but occasionally if a man was being spoken about, as in Leviticus 22:11 (if a priest buys a “soul” for money, he—namely, the one purchased—may eat of it). Such passages, where one could translate the word soul (nepheš) with person or one, are frequent in the Old Testament. So this is a somewhat different use of the word nepheš than we discussed above, where nepheš was being translated with a personal pronoun (I, me, us). We should recall here that the Israelite eye and ear read and heard the same word nepheš in all these instances. Here in Leviticus 17:10, Scripture speaks explicitly about a soul (nepheš) that ate the blood. For people today, that is something strange and weird. An eating and drinking soul! How is such a thing possible? But for those familiar with the KJV this is not strange at all. They know that this way of speaking occurred more often in Israel. The KJV of Proverbs 6:30, for example, reads: “Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry.” This way of speaking—about the soul that eats, drinks, etc.—must not have been unusual among other peoples in the ancient world, with whom we are acquainted from the poems of Homer and the writings discovered in the excavations at Ugarit.

This was our introduction to Leviticus 17:10.

Now we turn to Leviticus 17:11 itself.

After bringing up in verse 10 the subject about which God wanted to issue a prohibition—don’t use the blood!—in verse 11 we learn the reason why he prohibited this use of blood. We can surmise this already from the word for with which verse 11 begins. One could translate this as truly or verily.

Verse 11 seems to consist of three parts, which read in literal translation as follows:

1. For the soul of the flesh—in the blood is it.
2. But that have I myself to you all given upon the altar to make atonement over your souls.
3. For the blood—that atones through the soul.

Each time we have translated the word nepheš by soul. For starters that’s always best. If later you want a smoother translation, adapted to modern English, then you can consider what is preferable in each instance.

We will comment on each part of the verse.

In Part 1, we find the word flesh. The Hebrew word for this can be used in reference to people and animals (Gen. 6:17). Here as well we have something like that. In our verse, the subject is not plants. Plants have no blood. Here we are dealing with creatures that have blood. The Hebrew word for flesh has been translated as living being.

Regarding Part 2, the word I is placed emphatically. Not only is the pronoun used, which in Hebrew need not happen, but that pronoun is placed first. Why? Because God wanted to remind Israel emphatically about something that he had done earlier. We are studying Leviticus 17, but before this, in Leviticus 1–7, God had given the sacrificial Torah. Well then, in the sacrificial Torah God had arranged for the blood of the animals to be put on his altar (Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27). Part 2 of our verse here is referring back to that (just as we find later in v. 12). To that earlier
ordinance, that the blood had to be brought upon God’s altar, but may not be used as food. (We will discuss later the purpose for that blood being put on the altar.)

Finally, Part 3 is very important for our purpose of answering the question, how did atonement happen? Even though in the totality of Leviticus 17 this part occupies a somewhat modest place, anyone can see at first glance that Part 3 serves to support the argument expressed in Part 2. That argument insisted that God had intended the blood for the altar for the purpose of atonement. Well then, this is explained further in Part 3 by an explanation about the suitability of blood for that purpose, for the goal of rendering atonement. It atoned through the soul (nepheš).

After this initial reading of Leviticus 17:11, we notice the following two features, First, when we pay attention to the context, namely, a prohibition against using blood, then Part 2 of our text is the most important. For there God gives the reason for this prohibition with particular emphasis. But second, for underscoring that reason, something is said in Part 3 about the blood, something that apparently was thought to be undisputed, namely, that the blood atoned through the soul. So undisputed was this that it could be advanced as an argument. The reader understands that, given the subject under discussion—viz., how atonement was effected—we find Part 3 to be the most important part of our text. More important than Part 2, for it serves as the basis of Part 2.

How, then, shall we translate the Hebrew word nepheš in our verse? What is its meaning here?

The word appears three times, once in each part of the verse.

Our eye turns automatically to Part 2, because this part occupies such a prominent place within the entire argument. We read there that God did not want the blood of animals consumed because the blood had been intended for his altar. Upon that altar blood had to perform atonement for the souls of the Israelites. We read: “for your souls.”

Is it desirable to understand this word souls as nothing more than a broader description of the personal pronoun you or you all? If we do understand and explain it that way, is it desirable to translate it for you?

Our modest opinion is that one can advance the same positives and negatives about such an explanation and translation here as with so many other Scripture passages where translators omit the word soul (nepheš) by using a personal pronoun. In modern English the word soul is not used in its broad sense than it was used in the KJV. Modern Bible translators must see to it that the Bible is understood. That is why we said: positives and negatives. For such passages of Holy Scripture do contain not a personal pronoun, at least in the Hebrew, but the word soul (nepheš). If we want to try to understand as clearly as possible what the Israelites who wrote or read such passages would have thought, then we must remember that he repeatedly wrote or read the complete word soul (nepheš).

There is something more.

We mentioned already that the word nepheš appeared in each of the three parts of the verse. Now we ask: Is it not possible, indeed, probably, that the meanings of the word nepheš in each of these three instances would have been very close to each other in the ear of the ordinary Israelite? Let’s see once. Let’s take the notion of person or a personal pronoun (I, you, he, you all), and replace the word soul (nepheš) with one of those each time in our text. The reader should try this just for fun, in all three parts of the verse:
1. For the soul of the flesh—in the blood is it.
2. But that have I myself to you all given upon the altar to make atonement over your souls.
3. For the blood—that atones through the soul.

You will discover that it won’t work. Those pronouns don’t fit. You can’t talk about an animal like you would talk about a person and still be talking not about persons but about their flesh (Part 1). Even though a farmer might talk about his animal as he or she, he would not speak seriously to his animals with the address you all (Part 2).

Another interpretation seeks to explain the word soul (nepheš) here as life, and prefers to translate it that way: “For the life itself of the living being is in the blood; I have given it to you upon the altar in order to perform atonement for your life, for the blood effects atonement on behalf of the life.”

What should we think about this?
This translation flows smoothly. It has the advantage of translating the word nepheš with the same word three times. Moreover, it is true that people and animals have this feature in common, that they are living beings, that they possess life. But if we are to be exact, this translation is unsatisfactory, in our modest opinion, for the reason that we would cite from something J. Ridderbos has written (Schriftuurlijke Anthropologie?, 45): “Surely the intention is not that the life is restricted to the blood. Hebrew was another word for life, and although it is occasionally used synonymously with soul (Ps. 7:5), it is absolutely not identical. When we read in Genesis 2:7 about ‘the breath of life,’ the word life cannot be replaced with the word soul. Conversely, the intention of our passage [Lev. 17:11] is not rendered accurately by translating, “the life of the animal is in the blood.”

That difficult word nepheš is especially challenging as it appears in the verse we are studying. We believe that translating it with the word life comes very close to what the Israelite heard with the word nepheš. This is so especially when we recall that the background of our text is slaughter, killing, the elimination of one life on behalf of another life. Nevertheless, we think that J. Ridderbos properly rejected this translation in the words cited above.

That difficult word nepheš seems to have given modern Bible translators a few problems. They render it one way here, another way there, in order to produce a smoothly readable and easily understandable text. But if you have Bible readers reading something and thereby believing something that in fact is not there, what have you really achieved? Someone has translated our verse, Leviticus 17:11, this way: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, which I have given you for the altar in order thereon to perform atonement for your mistakes.” We have italicized the word mistakes. We don’t think that this word is substantially incorrect, especially given Leviticus 16:16, which deals with removal on the great Day of Atonement Israel’s transgression by means of sprinkling blood. Nevertheless, that notion may well have surfaced in Leviticus 16, but not here in Leviticus 17. When people nonetheless incorporate it into the translation, then they are bringing into the Scripture passage something that it does not contain. Despite the best of intentions, this is still incorrect.

Would not the best solution be to translate the word nepheš in Leviticus 17:11 all three times with the same word? Not one time with this word, another time with a different word? Why not
translate the same Hebrew word with the same English word? Would not the word soul be the best choice, as we find in the KJV? We would defend this view for the following reasons.

Since the word nepheš appears in each of the three parts of the verse, a feature that surely is not without a reason, it seems preferable to us to bring out this fact in the translation.

On account of the multiple meanings with which the word soul can be used in English even today, translating nepheš as soul has this advantage: we are in a position similar to the Israelites, who read and heard the same word nepheš in various situations.

The general word soul seems to us preferable all the more because it seems not to have been customary in the Semitic world to express ideas as though they were strictly delimited and sharply differentiated from each other. This differs from our custom as Westerners, who are inclined to do that. Rather, the Israelites preferred to work with complexities and words that are more vague in scope and broader in content, such that meanings overlapped. With translation, if you seek a particularly suitable word in our language, then one time this word will perhaps work well, and another word will work better another time, but often it will be difficult to make a sharp delineation among our choices, because both words might fit equally well. We need to remember that, based on its context, the Hebrew word nepheš can be translated as breath, vital strength, life, desire, courage, meaning, experience, hunger, thirst, longing, inner love or hatred or great joy or sorrow or rest or fear, as well as a reflexive form of address (“O my soul”), by body or corpse (Ps. 106:15: he sent leanness into their soul, KJV), by corpse (Num. 6:6, a Nazirite was not permitted to come near a dead nepheš), by person or human being (for example, in connection with a census), and by living being (Gen. 1:20–21, regarding sea animals; Gen. 1:24, land animals; Gen. 2:19; 9:10, 12, 15, animals in general; Gen. 9:16, all living creatures; Gen. 2:7, human person). From this array of meanings that we have supplied (and our list was by no means complete), the right choice must surely have been difficult. That is easy enough for a child to understand, so we can surely appreciate it when an expert might say about the word nepheš: “not able to translate accurately.” No wonder the Israelite continued to preserve, in this single word nepheš, the capacity for making various thought associations.

Finally, we consider the translation of nepheš in Leviticus 17:11 with the word soul to be the best solution (better than translating the word as life) because in this verse there is no talk of plants, but of people and animals. All of these three kinds of creatures share this feature, that they are alive, but only of the latter two do we read that God created them “as living beings.” This is not said of plants and trees. Rather, we are told that God created both people and animals as “living souls” (or “living creatures,” Gen. 1:24).

For these reasons we think that the word soul is the best translation of the Hebrew word nepheš in Leviticus 17:11. It says neither too little nor too much.

After all of these considerations we proceed now to answer our fourth question: How did atonement happen, according to Leviticus 17:11?

Now that we have been busy together discussing this Scripture verse, we should nonetheless express our surprise that Bähr claimed that Scripture nowhere speaks of an atoning death, of a substitutionary or vicarious death. Not even in Leviticus 17:11. Especially not there. But if the Bible talks anywhere about such a vicarious death, then surely that place is here.

The entire context talks about killing, putting to death, slaying. Shedding the blood of an animal, indeed, pouring it out, surely that is nothing else than slaying that animal.
Leviticus 17:11 speaks particularly about atonement through death. The one soul is delivered over to death for the other soul. We want to make some comments about both the context and the text.

In Leviticus 17 God prohibited the Israelites to consume the blood of the slaughtered animal. They would even have to carefully bleed out an animal killed in a hunt, and then allow the blood of the dead animal to flow on the ground (Lev. 17:13).

The real questions seems to us to be whether we have identified the deepest reason for this prohibition to be the danger of idolatrous drinking of blood among pagans. In Leviticus 19:26 we read:
“You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes.”

In light of the context, it seems evident that in this passage, as elsewhere in Leviticus, God wanted to keep Israel away from Canaanite superstition. Agreed.

But in Leviticus 17 God went into the subject more deeply. There he returned to his ancient institution. There he connected Israel for the first time with his command that he had given earlier. For he had permitted the first humans to slaughter an animal in order to sacrifice it to him, but not yet with the intention of eating that animal. Apparently God had wanted people to show some hesitation or difference toward the life of an animal, yes, even an animal. For we read that only later, during the time of Noah, did he permit the killing of animals for another purpose than for sacrifice. From then on, killing an animal for eating was permitted, although then as well God certainly desired that respect for a living being would not disappear among people. For that reason, the blood of such an animal that had been slaughtered for eating may not be used for human consumption (Gen. 9:4).

Respect for blood!

That requirement was very ancient already by the God who gave the prohibition in Leviticus 17.

In Leviticus 17 that prohibition was simply being renewed. Israel could freely kill an animal, whether from a herd or from the wild, in order to eat it. That was permissible. As long as there was respect for all of its blood that would need to be shed in connection with that slaughter.

But on that ancient basis, something additional was added as something new. Something that we do not read in Scripture before Leviticus. That was God’s own remembrance of the high purpose that he was pleased to give to that blood. The sacred purpose for which he wanted it to be used. Namely: as an atonement sacrifice.

It’s possible that God had in mind something very ancient. For maybe he was thinking of the time when he instituted (blood) sacrifice in the time of the first human beings. Why would not Cain and Abel have learned about the practice of sacrifice from their parents? Why would not Adam and Eve in turn have learned about sacrifice from God himself?

But undoubtedly God had in view at this point in Leviticus everything he had made known to Moses earlier about the sacrifices with which Israel was to serve him in his tabernacle. We are referring to Leviticus 1–7, the sacrificial Torah. From that section people can learn to understand how highly the life of God’s creatures is valued by God himself. So highly that he ordained blood to be the chief gift to be laid upon Israel’s altar. We will say more about that beautiful subject in a moment. But here we must definitely see very clearly how highly our God esteemed the value of blood with respect to Moses and Israel. So highly that he himself not only used it for his sacred ministry of sacrifices, but apart from that ministry he did not want people to treat blood with indifference. Not because, as is sometimes said, that blood was sacred. No, only the
blood that was incorporated into the service of God was sacred. But because such a ministry occurred with blood, God did not want people to do strange things with any and all blood. A deer shot with bow and arrow must be bled out, and its blood drained on the ground. Not just left behind thoughtlessly. Why? For that kind of attitude, God was pleased to make far too high a use of animal blood. For his altar. To serve on that altar for atonement.

So when he was talking about the exalted purpose for which he had placed blood in his service, namely, for atonement, God said something about the manner of that atonement. Something incidentally, but very instructive.

How would blood be able to atone? Answer: because the soul was in it, blood would be able to serve for atonement. Thanks to the soul that was in it (Lev. 17:11a).

When it comes down to it, the soul was being sacrificed. For the one soul (the soul of the person) the other soul (the soul of the animal) was being sacrificed. Through this, then, the covering, the atonement occurred. Through giving its blood upon God’s altar, the one soul covered and atoned for the other soul. The soul atoned (Lev. 17:11c).

But how was that possible?

Actually the answer that our text gives to this question is also very old. For earlier God had said: “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen. 9:4). Thereby it was evident then already how intimate God saw the connection to be between blood and soul. So intimate that he practically identified the two. The soul . . . was the blood.

God is talking in the same way in Leviticus 17. For we read in Leviticus 17:14b: “You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood.” Do you wonder whether blood and soul have anything to do with each other? We could even say that they were identical, one and the same. Soul = blood. But this was then a practical manner of speaking, something that occurs elsewhere (Deut. 12:23). But such a manner of speaking is an abbreviated form of speech. For upon closer inspection, soul and blood are not identical, not the same. Otherwise we would not read in Leviticus 17:11a: “For the life of the flesh [i.e., of living beings] is in the blood.” In the blood.

Here, then, is the answer to the last question.

We are not surprised in the least that Kurtz did not pass up the opportunity to point out in response to Bähr that Scripture in general, and here in particular, clearly teaches the idea of substitutionary death.

Others acted the same way, and expressed their view that the Hebrew of Leviticus 17:11c led one to think of putting up one soul as ransom for the other. The shedding of animal blood served to atone for the one sacrificing. Naturally not on account of the quantity of that blood, but because the fate of the nepheš of the animal was most closely linked to the shedding of its blood. For shedding the blood of a living being comes down to the outpouring and killing of the soul. In addition to talking about shedding blood, Scripture talks also about the soul departing, being poured out, ebbing away, as a description of death and dying (Ps. 141:8; Isa. 53:12; Lam. 2:12). That is what Leviticus 17 is about. About dying, and no matter how incidentally, about the dying of the one soul for the atoning of the other soul before God.

It was at least very strange that Bähr wanted to keep those two features so far apart. Those two cannot be separated. One can reach that conclusion only through a bias. Apart from death Leviticus 17:10–16 loses all meaning!
In connection with our answering the three questions about Leviticus 17:11, our readers would surely have thought now and then about our Savior Jesus Christ. The sacrifices of the Law were shadows that were fulfilled by his coming. Especially through his vicarious death. By him having given his soul in death in order to atone for others.

The latter prophets also predicted that would be pierced for the transgressions of others, and would ultimately pour out his soul (nepheš) in death (Isa. 53:12).

Jesus Christ even announced his death as that kind of death. He had come, as he put it, “to give his life [Greek: psychē, soul] a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

Therefore it is an issue of great importance that the genuineness of Christ’s death is established. The genuineness of his human death. Evidently with that in view, the apostle John tells us that he himself saw that a soldier pierced the Lord’s side with a spear. The one who saw it bore witness to it and his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe (John 19:35). And when the apostle Paul maintains the genuineness of the resurrection over against some Corinthian Christians, he writes that Christ arose “from the dead” (1 Cor. 15:12). He was referring to real death, the kind that he would later call falling asleep (1 Cor. 15:18).

Just as the Savior really arose from the dead, so really had he died earlier. All the emphasis with which Paul maintained the resurrection from the dead in 1 Corinthians 15 would be in vain if our Savior had not earlier really died (1 Cor. 15:13). Apart from real death there is no real resurrection. This rule applies to the Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ. To be sure, he did not lie in the grave for a long time, for years and years, and he experienced “no decay” as other dead people did (Acts 2:31; 13:35), but he was really dead. There is no doubt about that. Otherwise not only the Law and the Prophets, but also the New Testament would lose all its meaning.

Both Old and New Testaments teach the atonement of one soul by the death of the other soul.

[At this point, the content of pages 49b-161b has been extracted, as a special section dealing with the issue of the immortality of the soul.]
Chapter 4

The requirements for sacrificial animals

Generally speaking, all of Israel’s sacrificial animals had to satisfy four conditions. We will first summarize these conditions and then discuss each one in turn.

1. Israel was never permitted to appear before God bringing wild animals, but always with nothing other than tame animals. For example, not with a deer that one would have captured in the wild. No, only with an animal from one’s own flock (Lev. 1:2). We sense immediately from this first requirement the great importance of this element of the teaching concerning sacrifices: sacrifices consisted of relinquishing to God something that one owned (2 Sam. 24:24), something that one valued highly. Especially someone who loves animals would understand this feature. Animal farmers like the Israelites definitely heard this first commandment differently than we city dwellers do. We don’t want to be sentimental. The Israelites were not vegetarians. They ate meat, though not very often. Theirs was an agrarian diet. Slaughtering animals for personal use did occur, but was an exception. Moreover, who would have wanted to kill their own animal? Yet, that was required in cases of sacrificial occasions.

2. Next, the sacrificial animals were to be only clean animals. We have not yet discussed the distinction between clean and unclean animals. Only incidentally, in connection with the animals gathered into Noah’s ark (Genesis, 170–171). We discussed this more extensively in connection with Leviticus 11. When he gave the Torah, upon which he based Israelite life at Horeb, God made use of many ancient traditions and supplied them with renewed meaning. Such as with the clean animals, seen as animals of life, separated from the unclean animals representing death—the latter included many animals that ate carrion and animals with claws—that is how God had chosen Israel from among the nations that were living under the power of Satan and death (Lev. 20:24–26; Acts 10:15; 11:18; 26:18; Eph. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4), in order to be the people of the resurrection and life.

The Israelites were supposed to select their sacrificial animals to bring to God only from the clean domesticated animals and flocks. That meant they could choose them from their cattle and their flocks. The latter term referred to sheep and goats (Lev. 1:2). By way of exception birds were sacrificed as well, never anything other than doves.

3. Moreover, an ox, sheep, or goat was not to be sacrificed before it had been with its mother for at least seven days (Lev. 22:27). In various cases a sheep or goat had to be at least a year old (Lev. 9:3; 12:6), a requirement stipulated several times in regard to a calf (Lev. 9:3). The oxen that were sacrificed would not have been all that young, in view of the term used for them: not ʾēgel (calf), but par (young bull) and para (young cow).

4. Finally, the sacrificial animals had to be whole. That is to say: they could not exhibit any defects, such as blindness, for example, or a broken leg (Lev. 22:20–22).

In connection with these requirements of the Law concerning sacrificial animals, we would mention the following.

1. Tame animals

Actually the Israelite was supposed to have given himself in death, sacrificed his own person, his soul (nephēš). But of course that would not do. That was not permitted. So another nephēš
replaced his nepheš. An animal. Not an animal taken from the wild. No, for his altar God requisitioned animals that were part of people’s property, used in service to people, animals that were readily manageable and most innocent. For people were not allowed to sacrifice a human being in the place of another. So God identified among the animals those that resembled human beings most closely. There had to be the closest possible connection between the one bringing the sacrifice and the sacrificial animal itself. When in a later era, due to great distances, the sacrificial animal could be purchased in Jerusalem, this animal was purchased with money that the person rendering the sacrifice had earned by the sweat of his brow, as the fruit of his labor. Notice how Christ satisfied this first requirement of the law pertaining to sacrifices. He had become like us in everything. Thereby he could “give his life (psychē) as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). By sharing in the same way in our flesh and blood, through his death he was able to dethrone Satan and liberate us (Heb. 2:14–15).

2. Clean animals

The apostle would surely have had in view this requirement of the Law when he wrote about the precious blood of Christ who was “a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). The word Peter uses here appears also in 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Peter 3:14. In James 1:27, we read: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained [aspilos] from the world.” With what transgression could people have charged our Savior?

3. Mature animals

A sacrificial animal had to be young and strong. But not too young. Nor aged and decrepit. Mature. Compare this with the requirement that the Levites had to meet. They too had to serve during the prime of life, from twenty-five or thirty years old until fifty. Our Savior also satisfied this requirement of the Law. Several writers in the early centuries of Christianity spread reports claiming that our Savior must have been older than forty when he died, but that must have been based on misunderstanding. The Lord would have given the impression of exhaustion when the Jews said to him: You are not yet fifty years old (John 8:57). People thought that was old. But in general people adopt the view that Christ died at thirty-three years of age. At that age a man is in his prime.

4. Whole animals

We have been comparing the requirements that a sacrificial animal had to meet with those established for ministering Levites. One could compare them, however, with the requirements for fulfilling the office priest as well. Just as someone in a priestly family was prohibited from serving if he were deformed or blind or something like that, so too with an animal. A striking similarity exists, extending to the words used, between the list of physical defects that rendered a person unsuitable for serving in the office of priest, found in Leviticus 21:16–24, and the list of physical defects that disqualified an animal from being used as a sacrifice, found in Leviticus 22:17–33. Notice how completely our Savior met this requirement of wholeness. As priest and as the sacrificial Lamb. It was testified about him as lamb that he was without blemish (1 Pet. 1:19; amōmos, the same word used in Rev. 14:5 and elsewhere: in their mouth no lie was found, they are without blemish) and about him as priest, the letter of Hebrews says: We needed such a high priest: holy, without guilt or stain, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens (7:26). We may summarize both according to Hebrews 9:14, where we read that Christ offered himself unblemished (amōmos) to God through the eternal Spirit.
Chapter 5

The general procedure for sacrificing an animal

When an animal was sacrificed in Israel, it didn’t always happen in the same way. There was variation, according to the kind of sacrifice being brought.

Yet there were some stereotypical actions that occurred regularly in every sacrifice. In this chapter we will review those actions. But first a word about the way we should view them.

We will follow the helpful lead provided by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10. That passage is dealing with Christians participating in pagan sacrificial events. The Corinthians who were new Christians could not easily avoid those events. The entire life of their day was pervaded with idolatry. For that reason the apostle warns them about such participation. Was not the cup of thanksgiving a fellowship with Christ’s blood? With Christ and with his church, which was his body? Could these two things go together: belonging to Christ and his church, and having fellowship with demons? For in the end, that is what idolatrous sacrifices were. So the apostle writes: Look how it went with Israel according to the flesh. Did not those who ate those sacrifices have fellowship with the altar (1 Cor. 10:18)?

1. By means of the sacrifices, Israel was being instructed in the gospel.

In Hebrews 10:4 we read: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

We know that from memory. And we all agree with it. For we know that only the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7), and that only he is the perfect priest that has performed the things we were to do before God, and has sanctified us by the sacrifice of himself once for all (Heb. 2:17; 10:10).

But we are not fooling ourselves, are we, that in Israel nothing of that impossible task was understood? To be sure, Israel did not yet know the Christ as we do. So Israel could not yet know that only his blood took away sin. But Israel could know that the blood of bulls and goats did not itself take away sin. Israel saw that impossibility clearly.

This must have likely occurred to anyone who recalled that the above-mentioned declaration of Hebrews 10:4 (through the blood of bulls and goats no sin is taken away) and other declarations with similar content (no forgiveness apart from Jesus Christ) were made in such a straightforward manner by the apostle, written black on white and sent out to Jewish Christians, without him apparently needing to worry that the recipients of such a letter would have been angered about such a nefarious despising of what was once the hope of their fathers. It was as though these fathers would actually never have received forgiveness due to the animal blood shed by and for them. Because this animal blood took away no sin. Apparently those Hebrews had not believed this earlier, before they had become Christians.

Just as such a thing was not believed by their ancestors when they lived in the age of shadows. For ancient Israel knew far too well that they were dealing with symbols, mere figures. So that the removal of sin had not occurred through the blood itself that flowed alongside the altar, but through God and God alone. The psalmist of Psalm 51, for example, confessed his sinfulness to God and explicitly declared that God “does not delight in sacrifice” (vv. 6, 16). You should be careful not to misunderstand such expressions. They were not intended to turn the Law
of Moses upside down. In that Law God had indeed commanded the bringing of sacrifices. It was simply that people should not separate those sacrifices from God's grace, for then people would be turning them into pagan ritual. People were not to view altars and sacrifices as automatic instruments, like machines into which they put a coin and got something out in return. Instrumental worship. We encounter warnings frequently in Scripture against such sacrificial automatism (1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:22; Amos 5:25). God wanted to use the sacrifices of the Law as symbolic teaching tools for instructing Israel about sin and grace, about misery, redemption, and gratitude. That is, he wanted to teach Israel the gospel. This is what he placed before Israel's eyes through the ministry of the sacrifices. Would a Near Eastern people like Israel not have understood that, by means of tabernacle worship, a symbolic language was being spoken, just as they were supposed to have understood the symbolism of the tabernacle itself?

2. By means of the sacrifices, Israel was also being assured of the gospel.

Israel was strictly forbidden to use the sacrifices of the Law as levers whereby they thought they could put pressure on God. If I paid scrupulous attention to bringing the sacrifice according to all the stipulations, then you can't do anything to me. We cannot reject such a mentality strongly enough. It subjects God to human desires. It turns the Law into a tax code. Pure paganism.

This is not at all to deny, however, that Israel was not permitted to use the sacrifices—properly use them—as means instituted by God for convincing them, for ascertaining, for assuring earnestly, of the veracity of the gospel. We learn this from those declarations in the sacrifice laws that talk of the priest making atonement for someone, or of the blood of the animals bringing atonement. This does not contradict what we wrote above at all. These ways of speaking find their simple explanation in God's own institutions and in his faithfulness to those institutions. Thereby such institutions of the sacrificial Torah, like priests, altars, and shedding blood, served not only as portraits and figures designed to instruct Israel in the gospel, but served at the same time to assure Israel of God's veracity and good intentions. For the relationship that obtained between these two—on the one hand, priests, altars, and blood; and on the other hand, the gospel—had not been invented and prescribed by a mortal man like Moses at his initiative, but by none other than God himself. This explains why Israel was permitted to view them as pledges of God's love and grace. An Israelite who brought a sacrifice could say, recalling the line of Leviticus 17:11—nepheš for nepheš—that his sins were covered and atoned by the priest and by the blood of the sacrificial animal. That didn't have to be a brash declaration of someone who had turned God's institution into something automatic, but could be an echo of trust in God's own promise. Just as we today need not exclude God as the only One who accomplishes our redemption when we declare that baptism rescues, delivers, and saves us. That is biblical language (1 Pet. 3:21).

3. By means of the sacrifices, Israel received instruction in, and assurance about, the same gospel concerning the same redemptive benefits that we receive today.

The benefits of salvation that God has bestowed upon us in his promise of the gospel could be identified in various ways. Our readers already know from the preceding that we prefer to summarize them in terms of the following triad: (a) justification, (b) sanctification, and (c) glorification. Ancient Israel also received those threefold benefits in the gospel of the Law and received assurance of that by means of the ministry of the sacrifices. We can observe this best
when we review the various actions, one by one, that invariably occurred in connection with the sacrifices.

(a) Justification

The first three actions had to be performed by the one bringing the sacrifice.

He was required first of all to bring the sacrificial animal himself. “You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (Lev. 1:3). Why there? Because that is where Yahweh dwelt, before whose face nobody could appear except along the path of atonement. This act of bringing the animal was already a confession. From some passages (Lev. 5:5; 16:21) we see that the symbolic act of bringing the sacrificial animal with one’s own hands was occasionally accompanied with the explicit declaration of a confession of guilt. The one clarified the other. So here came the one sacrificing with his sacrificial animal, so that something would happen to that animal that he himself had deserved. For the wages of sin is death (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Rom. 6:23).

Next the one bringing the sacrifice had to place his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal (Lev. 1:4). This was the laying on of hands (called semikah by the rabbis). This too was a gesture whose meaning is clear. Thereby the one bringing the sacrifice was providing his animal as a means of atonement for his sins. In Scripture the laying on of hands occurs frequently as a symbolic gesture of transference. For example, with this gesture the Israelites transferred to the Levites their obligation that their firstborn sons should serve Yahweh in the sanctuary (Num. 8:10). By means of the laying on of hands in connection with the sacrifice, the obligation on the part of the one bringing the sacrifice to provide satisfaction for the guilt of his sin was transferred to his sacrificial animal.

In the third place we have the slaughter (the šēḥīṭat, 2 Chron. 30:17). This would have been difficult for many an Israelite. To stab the animal that he had raised and watch it convulse on the ground. This act had to occur always on the north side of the altar. This prescription would certainly have been connected with the idea of night, darkness, and death, which arose in people’s hearts at the sound of the phrase, the North.

In a later period, the prescription that each one performing a sacrifice had to slaughter his own animal was not maintained rigorously, but this slaughter was performed by the tribe of Levi, and in cases involving sacrifices on behalf of the entire people, by the priests (2 Chron. 29:24, 34), and in cases involving sacrifices for individuals, by the Levites (2 Chron. 30:16, 17; 35:6, 11; Ezek. 44:10–11). This did not involve a change in principle, however. For according to the Torah, the issue of who should slaughter the animal was somewhat incidental, because the Torah stipulated that in cases involving the sacrifice of a dove, the slaughter was performed not by the person bringing the sacrifice, but by the priest. Sacrificing a dove had to occur in this manner, because the quantity of blood would not have been sufficient for having the animal first slaughtered by someone else and then have its blood sprinkled on the altar by the priest. But it appears nonetheless from the sacrificial Torah itself that the command about slaughtering did not have to be followed stringently. Nevertheless, the original symbolic course of events would have been addressed most specifically.

From the beginning, however, the sprinkling of blood (zeriqah) was an act that belonged to the priest alone, and this remained the case. The one bringing the sacrifice was permitted to do only so much to the animal. Leading it to the sanctuary, laying his hand on its head, slaughtering the animal, cutting it up and distributing it. But it was exclusively the priest who caught the blood and sprinkled it on the altar of burnt offering, who occasionally had to apply the blood to the horns of the altar or to the horns of the altar of incense within the sanctuary, and sprinkle the
blood on the ground there. The reader knows that the laity were not permitted to set foot in that holy place. To say nothing at all about the work of the high priest in the holy of holies on the great Day of Atonement.

Everything done with the blood—sprinkling it on the altar of burnt offering, “dabbing” the blood on the horns of this altar or on the horns of the altar of incense or sprinkling it on the ground of the holy place or the holy of holies—was purely and only the work of the priests.

This invites us to pay careful attention to such an important moment in the sacrificial process. For that’s what it was. By the shedding of blood and by what happened with that blood, atonement occurred. Bringing the animal, laying one’s hands on the animal, and slaughtering the animal were significant, but not yet sufficient. The blood had to end up at the required place. This is like experiencing the sense of relief when someone indicates a willingness to pay a huge amount toward reducing our debt, but it is not yet real until that money is deposited in the right account. We must pay attention to this, and always keep in mind our Lord Jesus Christ and everything that he has done for us. Not only did he suffer, not only was he afflicted with great pain, and ultimately died. But he has ultimately brought his blood into the very presence of God (Heb. 9:12; 10:19).

We would point to three elements.

First, the sprinkling, dabbing, and smearing of blood could be performed by none other than by a priest given by God. Not just anyone could approach God as a mediator on behalf of others. Moses himself needed to learn that, when he thought he could render atonement for Israel’s sin with the golden calf (Exod. 32:30–33). “Blot me out of the book you have written.” No, it pleased God to choose only Aaron and his sons for regularly approaching him with Israel’s sacrifices (Lev. 10:3; 21:17). Only they were the approachers (qērōbîm), and only they were allowed to bring the blood (yiqrab) to the place where God wanted it.

Secondly, the priests were to cover (kippur) with that sacrificial blood the one for whom it was sacrificed, the one bringing the sacrifice.

We can see very clearly the intention of the priestly actions with the sacrificial blood—viz., covering, atoning—in connection with the establishment of the covenant at Horeb. At that time the Israelites literally received the drops of the blood of the covenant on their bodies (Exod. 24:8). The symbolism of the covering and atoning (kippur) of the Israelites who were present, as souls, as persons, was very obvious.

But later, when the tabernacle ministry was ordained, God instituted the symbolism of applying the blood to certain objects of the sanctuary instead of sprinkling it on persons themselves. These objects functioned from then on as representatives of the Israelite people, in the following way. The layperson, the ordinary Israelite, was represented by the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt, the priesthood by the altar of incense in the holy place, and the people of Israel in its entirety by the atonement covering in the holy of holies. Those were the main lines of symbolism. We have omitted some of the details. When we discuss the atonement sacrifice we will deal more extensively with them.

Thirdly, only when the two preceding prescriptions had been satisfied, would God accept the covering or atonement as valid, and people could believe that their sins were forgiven. So then, only when, first, the blood had been brought to the place required, upon the altar specified for each case (altar of burnt offering or of incense or of atonement; Lev. 17:11), and secondly, only when this blood had been brought to the assigned place by the hand of someone authorized, namely, by the hand of the priest (Lev. 1:5, 11; etc.). Let no one argue, therefore, that all blood was simply sacred, let alone, that it had atoning power. This would have been the case only if it
had been brought to the right place, and by the priest to the right place, namely, the place that represented either the individual Israelite, the priest, or the people in their entirety.

This was the path of atonement that had to be walked scrupulously in the period of the shadows, if God were to grant forgiveness: (1) Justification; (2) Reconciliation; (3) Atonement. For he was the One who atoned (Lev. 17:11).

During this discussion, who would not have had to recall the letter to the Hebrews? With its emphasis on the lawfulness of Christ’s priesthood? He did not usurp this, but was called and chosen unto this by God (Heb. 5:5). Just as the high priest in the Old Testament entered the holy of holies “not without blood,” so too Christ did not enter the heavenly sanctuary without first having given his blood on the cross, “not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:7, 12). Such formulations would have been read with intense interest by the original readers of this letter (native Jews, perhaps including converted priests, who were now without employment and income, Acts 6:7; Heb. 10:34).

(b) Sanctification

An entirely new stage dawns at this point, the stage of sanctification. The atonement had occurred (symbolically). The sinner was covered. His sins were forgiven. So then, a second benefit was proclaimed and certified to the Israelite by means of the gospel of the sacrifices. Sanctification follows justification. Portrayed and guaranteed by the burning of the slaughtered animal.

That burning did not always occur in the same manner. All the parts of some sacrificial animals were burned and not even the tiniest bit was eaten by anyone. The majority of the parts, not all, of other animals were burned, with only a portion used, and that exclusively by the priests. Finally, there were other sacrifices where the animal was cut into three pieces, with the first piece for Yahweh, which was burned; the second piece was for the priests, as an honorarium; and the last and largest piece, the remainder, was for the one sacrificing, in order to enjoy a meal with his family in the presence of God. We will return to these various kinds of sacrifices in due course. Here we want to focus attention on several details in order to show that at least something from every sacrificial animal was burned. The whole was being represented by that part, and the entire sacrificial animal was being brought to God and sanctified as representing the one making the sacrifice. For God had given that right to Israel, the right to this symbolic act of burning the sacrificial animal. Thereby he was sealing to his people the promise of sanctification.

Other interpreters have drawn other conclusions about this. For example, the view has been advocated that the burning of the sacrificial animal would have been a symbolic representation of the punishment of hell. By surrendering his animal to burning, the one bringing the sacrifice would have been confessing that actually he himself had deserved the fire of hell. But this view has forgotten to notice that the burning occurred after the atonement. In fact, this view finds no support at all in the entire sacrificial Torah. Nowhere does it speak about the punishment of the condemned. On the contrary, the sacrificial Torah informs us repeatedly that the goal of the burning was delightful, namely, that it brought a pleasant aroma before Yahweh (Gen. 8:21; Exod. 29:41; Lev. 8:21; etc.). This view would also yield the strange result in terms of the grain offering. We will discuss the grain offering separately. Here we will simply make the preliminary comment that a bloody sacrifice was never permitted to be brought except accompanied with a grain offering. Such a grain offering consisted of bread and wine, together
with incense and oil. The good works of believers were being symbolized by the bread and the wine, and the incense and oil represented the prayer and the working of the Holy Spirit, respectively. So then, if we would have to accept the view that the burning of the bloody sacrifice represented the punishment in the fires of hell, then in the burning of the ingredients of the grain offering—symbolic of the faith-works, prayer, and working of the Spirit!—we would have to see a representation of the punishment of hell as well. But who would dare claim that such glorious things were referring to condemnation of hell?

We must not go in that direction.

It is better to remember first of all that the burning of a sacrificial animal did not at all intend the destruction of that animal. This appears already from the Hebrew word that was used. In the sacrificial Torah, for example, it was stipulated that the remnants of a peace offering were not allowed to be older than two days, and they had to be burned for sure on the third day (Lev. 7:17). But when it talks about burning sacrifices on the altar, then Scripture uses one or another form of the Hebrew verb qatar; which was related to the noun qēřōret, which meant sacrificial aroma, sacrificial scent (Lev. 1:9, 13, 15; etc.). We also find many passages that talk about this latter burning, used virtually as a technical phrase, “unto a pleasing aroma before Yahweh.” Next, we must remember that the Hebrew term for that sacrifice, involving a burning that was not connected with any other sacrifice, namely, an entire consuming, where the intention and idea of burning came to clearest expression, was the word œ’lā. This means literally “abrogation.” From this we may conclude that the burning of the sacrificial animal was not intended to destroy it as though in hell, but on the contrary, to offer it up to God as a tangible and visible proof of thanks for the atonement, forgiveness, and justification that had just been received.

Meanwhile, people in Israel were directed, for this offering of their thankful hearts to God (in the offering of the sacrificial animal), just as exclusively to the ministry of the priest and the altar as with the receiving of (symbolic) justification. In that context the blood was not to be brought to the altar by anyone other than a priest. We have talked about that. Here, the meat of the sacrificial animal was also not to be placed upon the altar by anyone other than a priest. If it was to be burned on that altar so it might rise to heaven in smoke and aroma, then it was to be burned up by God’s own fire. By the fire supplied by God himself. For we will read in a moment that when Aaron was ordained as high priest and was about to enter upon his official duties, the fire on the altar was ignited by God himself and consumed the pieces of the sacrifice (Lev. 9:24; cf. 2 Chron. 7:1). Concerning this altar fire it was prescribed that people might never let it die out (Lev. 9:12–13; MT, 6:5–6). Hereby God wanted to teach Israel and us that Israel’s sanctification was also his work. Just as much as God’s gift of justification was. The sanctification of Israel’s heart and life proceeded from him. It was through his fire that Israel’s very best works had to be purified, cleansed, and sanctified, in order to please God. But having been sanctified by such a fire, they certainly were pleasing to God. Israel was being assured of that at the same time. Instructed and assured.

This purification by fire was apparently such an obvious notion among Israel that it could be alluded to without fear of misunderstanding. For example, the work of the Holy Spirit was symbolized by fire (Matt. 3:11; Acts 1:5; 2:3). As just as the fire purified the sacrifice and caused it to rise upward, so too through the Spirit of God our Savior sacrificed himself “without blemish to God” (Heb. 9:14), and believers “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). One day the very best works of believers will have to pass through the purifying fire of Christ’s judgment (like salt is purified). Then much will still need to be burned
away like wood, hay, and stubble, but we who are saved will enter into the eternal kingdom (Mark 9:49; 1 Cor. 3:11).

So, then, the fire on the altar purifies.

And it causes something to rise upward.

Through this, the instruction and assurance was given to God’s church that they, out of thanks for the forgiveness from guilt that they received (justification), may respond to God with heart and life, and this would please God. Holy Scripture does not hesitate to call the sacrifices that Israel brought to Yahweh his food. You can read this in many passages (Lev. 3:11; 21:8, 17). One must resist the temptation to see here the remnants of earlier paganism in Israel’s sacrificial worship. There is no talk here of pagan mysticism like we can read, for example, in the story of Bel and the dragon (apocryphal addition to the book of Daniel), just as the same is true about the showbread. God does not permit himself to be served by human hands because he needs this in order to exist (Ps. 50:12–13; Acts 17:25). Meat, fat, bread, etc., were called “food for Yahweh” not because of what they really were for God, but because of what they figuratively represented, pointed to, taught, and certified for Israel. With reference to Israel, God may well have employed a fixed terminology that they had heard pagans using. But for Israel, God supplied such terminology with an entirely unique and different meaning. In this respect as well, he gave Israel the right to believe not only that they repeatedly received from him atonement unto justification, but also that his reconciled people were permitted to repay him for this with the surrender of the whole person unto the service of his God (Deut. 6:5; 10:12; Matt. 22:37; Luke 10:27). This latter was taught symbolically to Israel and assured to her through the burning of the slaughtered sacrificial animal. God would have been very delighted in this burnt offering, just as we human beings are interested in our daily food. The apostle Paul would have been thinking of this symbolism when, after his precious instruction about our justification through Christ’s blood in Romans 3–5, he wrote in Romans 6: “So now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.” And when at the conclusion of that epistle he looked back once more “to the mercies of God,” he appealed to that for the admonition that the readers should put their bodies, i.e., themselves, “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). Instead of “your bodies” he could just as well have written “your souls” or “yourselves”; but he apparently wanted to make his allusion to Israel’s former ministry at the altar more evident by using the word body.

Every kind of sacrifice was a gift, or korban (Lev. 1:2).

This was the fundamental idea, for example, of that sacrifice that was brought not at all for the purpose of atonement, namely, the grain offering, about which we will speak later, but also of that sacrifice that was no longer being brought for atonement, namely, the bloody sacrifice after the slaughtering of the animal and the handling of the animal’s blood. At that point, surrendering the slaughtered animal to the fire, and the purification of it through the fire, and the ascending to heaven of its aroma, stood for the surrender to Israel’s God of the one bringing the sacrifice. We could better say: all of this guaranteed to the one bringing the sacrifice that God desired to accept him with his whole heart and all his powers to the same degree as if God desired and needed this like a person desires and needs his daily food. For God called this lechem le Yahweh, or food for Yahweh.

c. Glorification

The sacrificial ceremony was concluded with a meal.
Of course not every sacrifice ended in this kind of meal. We already mentioned that some sacrifices were entirely burned up. So there was nothing left over to eat. With other sacrifices, something could be eaten, a single portion, but exclusively by the priests. Only when the peace offering was being brought, could the ones bringing the sacrifice, i.e., the one sacrificing and his family and friends, could enjoy a meal with this food. That could occur because, as we indicated, the largest portion of the peace offering was used. You can see that Israel’s sacrificial ministry attained a climax in this peace offering meal. At that point (a) the atonement through the shedding of blood, and (b) the sanctification through burning with God’s fire had symbolically occurred, and finally, (c) Israel was being taught through the celebration of a sacrificial meal “before the face of Yahweh,” and assured of God’s promise, that they would one day share in the perfectly restored fellowship with God in Paradise.

Note well that that peace offering meal was not held by the Israelites in their own homes, but at God’s home (Lev. 3; 7:11–27). We discussed the symbolism of this tabernacle of God in the midst of Israel in our commentary on Exodus. This sanctuary proclaimed that beautiful future, about which we read in Revelation 21 and 22; about the Paradise of God that will descend one day to earth. With the visible down payment of this Paradise promise—for that can be our shorthand description of the tabernacle—the Israelites sat down to enjoy their peace offering meal. As a crowning of God’s work, that had occurred symbolically in the earlier justification through the blood and in the sanctification through the fire, Israel received the seal of the promise, the fulfillment for which the forefathers had yearned: the promise of the eternal city, whose maker and finisher is God; the promise of the future paradise-like fellowship with God. Israel received this seal in that sacrificial meal.

The symbolic, and at the same time sealing, function of this meal would have been easier for such Near Eastern people like the Israelites to grasp than for us. Earlier we noted that in the New Testament the future joy of the redeemed on the new earth is portrayed more than once as the celebration of a festive meal (Matt. 8:11; 22:1, 10, 11; Luke 14:15; Rev. 3:20). And we also noted that when the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10 about the Lord’s Supper, he recalled the fellowship with God and his altar—for according to his promise, Yahweh would meet his people at the altar (Exod. 20:24)—a joy that ancient Israel tasted as they enjoyed their sacrificial meals (1 Cor. 10:18, 21).

It is a disputed matter whether in connection with such sacrificial meals we should view God to be functioning as the host or as a participant along with his people. Scripture itself does not consider this an issue. Our Savior once gave the promise: I will come in with him and eat with him and he with me (Rev. 3:20). But so be it; that the first notion—of God functioning as host at the peace offering meal—is not to be dismissed appears to us to follow from the fact that this meal always had to occur “before the face of Yahweh.” If we recall as well that by the preceding consuming of particular pieces of the sacrificial animal and by their being burned on the altar, the entire animal—following the principle of part for the whole—was given and brought to God, so that with the meal that followed, the person who had brought the sacrifice was enjoying nothing that still belonged to him but something that belonged to God. He was not enjoying a gift that he had given to God, but a gift God was giving to him. We will discuss something similar later, when we discuss the wave offering and the heave offering. At this point we may point to the position of the tribe of Levi. The Israelites would have understood very well that Levi received its subsistence, its food and drink, not from human hands but from the hand of Yahweh. For this was the situation: Israel was permitted to dwell in Canaan as a land that belonged and continued to belong to Yahweh. Yahweh was Israel’s Landlord. Israel’s tithes belonged to him.
He was free to give those tithes in turn to whomever he wanted. So Yahweh gave his tithes to Levi (Lev. 25:23; 27:30; Num. 18:21, 24). Yahweh was Levi’s portion. Levi did not eat from the hands of people. Moreover, we must also recall at this point the name that Scripture gives those portions of the sin-, guilt-, and peace-offerings that were designated for the priests. They were called “the bread of his God” (Lev. 21:17, 22). Therefore, we would not dare to label as unscriptural the view that at the peace offering meal, God functioned both as the donor and as the host. Rather this is very Scriptural.

But the main point is that we understand the symbolic instruction that God was giving Israel by means of the sacrificial meal. In the forecourt of his home, which as we have seen, was the shadow and down payment of the promised Paradise, God gave to his people instruction about and a guarantee of the promise of the Paradise fellowship that would be restored one day. The same redemptive benefit to which the apostle Paul pointed in his letter to the Romans, after he had written so extensively about justification and had appealed so powerfully for the manifesting of the second fruit of Christ’s redeeming work in daily life, namely, sanctification. For he concluded this way: But now, having been set free from sin, and having entered into the service of God, you have the fruit of your sanctification and its end, eternal life (Rom. 6:22).

We are going to conclude this section about general principles. With a view to what is coming, we want to tell the reader precisely what we will be discussing.

Not simply “the sacrifices.”

Presumably many will think in connection with this phrase exclusively of the bloody sacrifices that Israel had to bring before God. We have shown, however, that people often give too narrow a meaning to the term sacrifices. The possibility also exists that we ourselves have fed that inclination to this narrowness by dealing almost exclusively with the bloody sacrifice. Even though we added why we did so: because atonement was involved only with the slain sacrificial animal. For with God, atonement could occur only through blood, through death.

Therefore we are repeating the classification once more.

To the korbanim, or the gifts of Israelites to God, belonged items that were not at all intended to be burned. We mentioned the six wagons and twelve oxen that the heads of the tribes of Israel brought “before the face of Yahweh” on the occasion of the dedication of the tabernacle. These specifically were not to be burned, but used for transporting the tabernacle (Num. 7:3). Something similar could be said about those gifts that Israel had to bring later to Yahweh as their Divine Landlord, who was the real Owner of Canaan, gifts in terms of rent or lease. The firstfruits and tithes. These were not intended for the altar. God gave them in turn to the Levites and priests, for their subsistence (Num. 18).

By contrast, other korbanim (sacrifices, gifts) were indeed intended to be burned, if not entirely, then partially. This explains why they are called fire offerings (ishsheh, from esh, fire), fire offerings for Yahweh. Often this is followed with the standard expression, “with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh” (Lev. 1:9). Israel could be convinced that if their fire offerings were brought to the place and in the manner stipulated by God, that he would be pleased with them. According to his promise: there (on the altar) I will come to you and bless you (Exod. 20:24). The fire offerings would be “bread for Yahweh.” God would be happy with them. He wanted to receive them on repeated occasions (Num. 28:2). Those fire offerings would then consist either of an animal or of vegetation.
We have already said something about the *animal* fire offerings. For example, that they could consist only of clean animals. And only of tame animals. In the beginning, Israel certainly sacrificed animals to God that they themselves had raised.

When they later entered Canaan, there were also *vegetative* fire offerings, something from the people themselves. They had to smell like them, so to speak, like their work. For the grain offering could not consist of just any fruit plucked from wild nature, but oil and wine, which bore the odor of the spade and the shears in the orchard, and the picking and trampling of the harvesters. And let’s not forget the grain, offered while it was still in the ear, as a sheaf, or in the form of a meal or baked as a cake or bread, but in any case smelling of Israel’s labor, of which the grain was also a fruit.

As a fire offering, then, that was repeatedly laid on the altar, it was some of the most unique items that the Israelite, together with his wife and children, owned, namely, his own homebred animal and his own harvested fruit from the field.

We are now going to discuss these fire offerings to Yahweh.

There were of two kinds, however. Bloody and non-bloody. Animal and vegetative. But what must we do now?

Must we use this same order as we now discuss the sacrificial Torah? Then we would get something like this:

Fire offerings

1. Bloody
   1. The burnt offering (Lev. 1)
   2. The peace offering (Lev. 3)
   3. The sin offering (Lev. 4:1–5:13)
   4. The guilt offering (Lev. 5:14–6:7)

2. Non-bloody
   5. The grain offering (Lev. 2)

The reader can see from the Scripture passages in parentheses, that if we were to follow the above order scrupulously, then we would be departing from the *biblical* order. That would not be blasphemous, for sure. But for those who are looking for a reliable guide for their Bible reading, that would be less desirable. Therefore we have decided to keep to the order of Scripture for the following discussions of each distinct offering.
Part 2: The Sacrificial Torah: Specific requirements

Chapter 6

The burnt offering (Lev. 1)

Transition

We need not repeat why we think the reason is obvious why the book of Leviticus began with the sacrificial Torah.

But why in turn did the sacrificial Torah begin anew with the burnt offering as the first one in the entire series?

The answer: that too was obvious. Because in relation to the other offerings, the burnt offering occupied a fundamental position. In the most literal sense of the word. For the other offerings were always brought to the tabernacle on a burnt offering. Literally on it. On top of it. On the daily burnt offering for the congregation (Lev. 3:5; 4:10; 6:12–13). For this reason it was no surprise that this fire offering headed the list.

Exclusively male animals were used for the burnt offering. Only when doves were brought did people not need to pay attention to the gender. That would have been impossible. But otherwise only bulls, rams, and billy goats could be brought as a burnt offering. Masculine animals.

As agreed, we need say no more about the bringing of the animal, the laying on of hands, slaughtering, and cutting up of the animal. But we do need to mention that the skin of the animal used for a burnt offering was assigned to the ministering priest (Lev. 7:8). This person received at least something of the burnt offering as an honorarium (1 Cor. 9:13). For the entire burnt offering was burned up. Everything.

This is how it went.

First the animal was slaughtered and its blood sprinkled by the priest on the altar of burnt offering. Sprinkled. That would have referred to a scattering motion of the hand. The Hebrew verb used for this (זֶרְוָא) referred to the hand gesture of someone who was sowing (Isa 32:30). The priests would have had to sprinkle the blood of the animal brought as a burnt offering against the inside of the four walls of the altar of sacrifice (Lev. 1:5).

After the animal had been skinned, it was cut up into pieces. That would make it easier for the fire to penetrate. For these pieces were next laid by the priest on the wood that he had previously arranged on the (constantly smoldering) altar, and laid on the embers. Since it was a burnt offering, everything had to be burned, and to the pieces of meat were added the head, intestines, the fat, and shanks. The head, for that had been cut off with the slaughtering and thereby severed from the torso. The intestines, for those had to be washed in water to clean them of any remaining food and excrement. The fat, referring to the fat surrounding the intestines and that which had fallen out of the stomach cavity with the removal of the intestines. Finally, the shanks. Those too had to be washed first before being placed on the altar. These shanks would have referred to both hind legs. Everyone understands why these in particular needed to be washed. Not because they had come into contact with the dust of the earth, for then all four legs of the animal would have had to be washed, whereas only two are mentioned. No, rather because
it was precisely the hind legs that are defiled with excrement, which the animals release out of fright when they are slaughtered. Something similar happens when people die. What was sacrificed to God had to be free of stench and death. Clean.

What were the names used for this sacrifice?

One frequent Hebrew term was ʿōlā, from the verb ʿālā, to ascend, cause to ascend, exalt oneself. Another term was kālîl. In this second term one can hear that with this kind of offering, absolutely everything—hakkōl, Lev. 1:9—had to be burned on the altar. These two terms appear in Deuteronomy 33:10, 1 Samuel 7:9, and Psalm 51:21, where the ESV uses the phrase burnt offering, or whole burnt offering. The German uses the term Ganzopfer, but we don’t have such a word in English. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) used something like holocaust.

Would it be proper to say that the characteristic feature of the burnt offering consisted in the fact that it was an offering that was burned?

That would be proper, but not yet sufficient. For the characteristic feature of the burnt offering was not that it was burned, nor that it rose upward, for these things happened with the other fire offerings. But with those other offerings not to that extent as with the burnt offering. In its entirety. Therefore the characteristic feature of this offering is expressed most clearly by the second term: kālîl, offering that was totally consumed. For the animal given in a burnt offering was burned in its entirety and ascended in its entirety with the fumes of the fire and smoke. That total consuming did not occur with any other offering.

We must also pay attention to the motive for bringing the burnt offering. The reason why and the purpose. Let’s compare this with the other offerings.

The reason for bringing a sin offering always lay in one or another event. The reason why a peace offering was brought to God was related to something similar, mostly with thanksgiving for benefits received. But there is absolutely no clue regarding a special reason for the burnt offerings. burnt offerings were brought every day on the altar in the forecourt. Mornings and evenings (Lev. 6:8–13). For that purpose, the fire for the burnt offering had to be kept burning on the altar. Because of the morning- and evening-sacrifice, there was a constant column of smoke above the tabernacle forecourt. Stopping the daily sacrifices for the congregation was viewed as a terrible catastrophe in Daniel 8:11–13. The cleaning of ashes from the altar every morning was the work of the priest. So that the constant burnt offerings could be brought this could in turn serve in the course of the day as the basis for the other offerings of individual members of the congregation (Lev. 3:5; 6:12). Those offerings were literally placed on top.

When we take all of this into consideration, may we not conclude that the burnt offering was brought primarily because, before anything else, Israel had to begin and end each day with the faith that Yahweh alone was God? Was it for that reason that God required this ancient, internationally familiar kind of offering for himself (Gen. 8:20; 22:2; Exod. 10:25; 18:12)? Just as in the first of the Ten Words he had immediately begun with honoring him as the only God. While automatically connected to the confession of the uniqueness of God (Deut. 6:4) was the right of God to Israel’s whole heart (Deut. 6:5). This explains the command that the burnt offering was to be brought in its entirety, completely, to Yahweh. Perhaps the animals that serves as the burnt offering were cut up into pieces, but that was only to give the fire a chance to consume the material from every side. For everything—everything—including the pieces that had been separated—head, entrails, etc.—had to be burned! The stipulation that only male animals could be used for the burnt offering would be explained by the fact that male animals were usually the prettiest, largest, and strongest. God did not merely want to be the only One who received honor in Israel and who was served with the whole heart and life, but he also
wanted this to be done energetically, firmly, strongly, with commitment. This was likely expressed by the requirement that animals brought for the burnt offering had to be male. We recall the summons: “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13). Our heavenly Father surely has the right to our courageous and brave service. Not serving him with a divided heart.

If we may view the special character of the burnt offering to be closely related to the praise of God, then we can probably explain in that light the remarkable fact that on specific occasions, definitely nothing more was brought than one sin offering, but more than one burnt offering (Num 7:15–16). That was possible. For if one had asked God one time for the forgiveness of sins, and in the sacrificing of the sin offering had received the assurance of the promise of forgiveness, then naturally it would be inappropriate to do this all once again by bringing another sin offering. That was not authentic. Just as now, in our dispensation, it is not authentic and upright for someone to be sending up to God a petition for forgiveness at every turn. That would be mere routine or self-deception, if not worse. Just as it is not very genuine of someone who has thanked a person for a gift to come back fifteen minutes later to thank him again. That becomes sickly. But when a lad receives from his father a new bicycle and thanks him once, but later he can “praise” him many times by telling him various nice things about his bicycle. In the same way, our praising and exalting of God need never exceed any limits. Asking God for forgiveness, over and over again, that is a pain in the neck. But talking about God’s deeds, praising him for his miracles, for his leading in the life of Israel, of our ancestors, and of ourselves, we won’t be soon finished. Therefore the constant repetition of the burnt offerings one after the other had significance, a good purpose.

Perhaps some Bible readers are still secretly surprised that Leviticus 1 is a chapter about burnt offerings. Why not about the sin offering? Must we not always and before all else approach God with trembling on account of our sins? And look what happens—the Holy Spirit has me begin in the book of Leviticus, a book in which God’s holiness is discussed repeatedly, not with a chapter about the sin offering, but with a chapter about the burnt offering.

If someone would talk this way, we would point out that every bloody sacrifice began with slaughtering and blood letting unto (the sealing of the promise of) forgiveness of sins. The burnt offering as well, and the peace offering, too. To that extent, in this way justification (or forgiveness) was always in the foreground, also when, for example, a burnt offering was slaughtered. But you must not hereby lose sight of the foundation beneath every sacrifice, including the burnt offering. That foundation was the covenant that God had established with Abraham and his seed, plus the covenant that he had additionally established with Israel at Horeb. For that reason, nobody in Israel needed to approach God with his offerings like a foreigner as though he were a foreign God. That would have been strange. The people of Israel were related to God not like a disparate horde of orphans. The people had received the clearest proofs of his love. It had been placed upon the granite floor of God faithfulness, and had received the calling to express their thanks for this unique privilege in a holy walk of life. The first wish that God sounded forth on Horeb was: You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and you shall be a holy nation (Exod. 19:6). So then, the first sacrifice with which the sacrificial Torah of Leviticus began was the burnt offering; in other words, that sacrifice whose characteristic feature was God’s praise and Israel’s sanctification. For every sacrifice involved
some kind of burning and a rising to the sky, but no sacrifice had this to the degree that the burnt offering did.

From that, no one ate anything. Not even a priest. The burnt offering was completely burned up.

The symbolic language of this burnt offering seems to us not very hard to understand. May the portion of Scripture that treats it speak to us as well, and may it bring us to the daily petition: Unite my heart that I may fear your name. I will praise you, Yahweh, my God, with my whole heart (Ps. 86:11–12). How the prophets warned, as did our Savior, against a divided heart (1 Kings 11:4; 18:21; Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8). The only difference is the God of Israel, who is now our covenant God, we no longer call Yahweh, but: Our Father who art in heaven. So then, our heavenly Father is also unique.
Chapter 7

The grain offering (Lev. 2)

Secondly, the sacrificial Torah addresses the grain offering, and for understandable reasons. Grain offerings were always paired with the bloody sacrifice. We will say more about this later. Notice the remarkable similarity between the bloody sacrifice and the grain offering, in spite of the differences.

In the bloody sacrifice, the Israelite bringing the offering was giving his animal to God. The creature that was most like him, almost like himself. The symbolism of this was most clear when a burnt offering was being brought, because nothing would be eaten of that sacrifice, not even by the priests, but everything was burned. Everything for God. But in the non-bloody sacrifice, the worshiper gave something to God that resembled him very closely. For this was the fruit of his labor and diligence from his vineyard and field.

So this was what was going on: he was giving himself (symbolically) in the burnt offering (Lev. 1). And he was giving his labor (symbolically) in the grain offering (Lev. 2).

Nevertheless, even though these two kinds of offerings correspond so much, we must not make them identical. As Bähr did, for example, even though only in principle; but he still went too far. We want to discuss this a moment, since it can be instructive. Notice how comprehensively Bähr drew the parallels between the bloody sacrifice and the grain offering: the contents of the bloody sacrifice included (1) meat, (2) fat, and (3) blood, while that of the non-bloody sacrifice was (1) bread, (2) oil, and (3) wine.

At first glance, this view seems persuasive, since in the environs of Palestine, the single word lechem could refer to meat as well as bread. Another reason was that the second parallel between fat and oil seems to confirm that impression, since oil is also somewhat fatty. In addition, there was apparently wide similarity between (3), blood and wine, for they were both poured out. Quite a similarity! According to Bähr, this parallelism explains why the blood sacrifice could be replaced occasionally with a grain offering, as in the case of poverty (Lev. 5:11).

But Kurtz has shown that this was an ingenious discovery on Bähr’s part, just not a correct one. In his view, a more unfortunate appeal to a Scripture text was unimaginable than an appeal to Leviticus 5:11. If you take the trouble to read this verse, you could see that. For it says: “If, however, they cannot afford two doves or two young pigeons, they are to bring as an offering for their sin a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour for a sin offering. They must not put oil or incense on it, because it is a sin offering” (italics added). We recall that with the bloody sin offering, according to explicit prescription, all the fat was supposed to be placed on the altar (about which we will speak later), and we observe that with the non-bloody substitute sacrifice, it was just as explicitly commanded not to add oil to the sacrifice. So this does not at all fit Bähr’s supposed parallelism between the animal and the grain sacrifices. Moreover, it was the case that the oil did not constitute the main component of the grain offering. Nor the daily diet of Israel. One might certainly eat bread and drink wine every day, but nobody ever enjoyed a meal simply of oil. Thus with the grain offering, the oil was merely a supplement, and did not have the same status as bread and wine. It was subordinated to these. Finally, the parallel between blood and wine was more apparent than real. For the blood had been given by God to man, as covering for his soul, as an atonement for the sins of his soul (Lev. 17:11). But the wine had been given by man to
God, and had nothing to do with atonement. In addition, the wine was thought to belong to God’s food. But the notion of enjoying blood was nonsense. In that respect, the parallel was not accurate at all.

We thought it would be helpful to set out for our readers this discovery of Bähr and the critique of Kurtz. From it, we can learn that in connection with our interpretation of Holy Scripture, our duty is a solemn one, and we must not be led astray by what may appear at first glance to be an excellent approach.

Something that seals the argument is that the grain offering was a sacrifice with an entirely unique character.

That becomes evident immediately when we consider the location where the offering was brought, or rather, the locations. For whereas the bloody sacrifice was brought exclusively in the forecourt, the non-bloody sacrifice was brought to God not only in the forecourt, but also in the holy place of the tabernacle. To be sure, occasionally some of the blood from the bloody sacrifice was brought from the forecourt to the holy place, and once per year into the holy of holies, but these were exceptions. In any case, meat was never sacrificed within the holy place and within the holies of holies. This happened exclusively on the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt.

But with the non-bloody or grain offering the matter was entirely different. This was brought not only upon the altar in the forecourt, but also into the holy place, and then the components of the grain offerings in the holy place further specified with a view to the three different “altars” there. We discussed this in our commentary on Exodus, but in order to explain properly the meaning of the grain offering, it may be desirable to repeat a thing or two from that discussion.

On the altar in the forecourt, grain was sacrificed as well as wine, oil, and incense. But in connection with the holy place, a separate action, so to speak, was performed with each of these gifts for the grain offering, in that:

First, loaves were placed and wine was set on the golden table of showbread;
Second, in the lamps of the golden lampstand, oil was offered to God;
Third, incense was offered on the golden altar of incense.

We should observe that everything stipulated for the grain offering that was to be brought into the holy place was more delicate and refined. For . . .

First, unlike in the forecourt, an offering of ears of grain and of meal (yeast) was never placed on the table of showbread, but exclusively bread that had been completely baked;
Second, in the lampstand nothing but the purest olive oil was to be offered to God;
Third, on the altar of incense was brought not one kind of incense, but a mixture of four kinds of incense.

Finally, whereas the grain offering in the forecourt was probably brought daily, though not throughout the entire day, the loaves of showbread lay continually on the table in the holy place, the incense burned continually on the altar of incense, and the lamps in the lampstand burned uninterruptedly throughout the night in the sanctuary.

The grain offering was regarded highly by God. He did not at all view it as a negligible afterthought. Nor as a disguised inferior sacrifice. Rather, as we will see in a moment, it occupied a beautiful place in the forecourt, and we have seen that it was brought regularly into the holy place, though with more specialization and completeness. To the holy place was brought
the atonement sacrifice or the bloody sacrifice only in terms of the blood, and only by way of exception. In any case, never in its entirety.

Let us turn next to the name of the grain offering. In Hebrew this was called the minḥâ. Earlier we observed that this term appeared in the story of Cain and Abel, in reference to a bloody sacrifice (for that of Abel, Gen. 4:4), but that is the only time. Later, when used in connection with bringing sacrifices, it is the term of a vegetable offering. In Exodus 30:9, for example, God prescribes that neither burnt offering nor grain offering (neither ḥâlā nor minḥâ) may be placed on the golden altar of incense. When it came to specific instances where not only food but also drink was being sacrificed, the word minḥâ itself served especially to indicate the “dry” portion of the non-bloody sacrifice (for example, in Num. 6:15 and Joel 1:9).

Leviticus 2 does not discuss the drink offering at all, but deals exclusively with the grain offering, with the minḥâ in the narrowest sense of the term. We read that part of it was “an aroma pleasing to Yahweh”—you will recall that the same phrase was used about the burnt offering in Leviticus 1—and that part of it was for the priests as “a most holy part of the food offering presented to Yahweh” (Lev. 2:2–3). Here we have one more proof as to how highly the grain offering was regarded.

Since we mentioned the drink offering, we will mention the remaining features of that sacrifice.

We don’t have very much information about this drink offering. Its institution did occur at Horeb. In Exodus 29:40–41 we read of the command requiring that the morning and evening sacrifices that were to be brought daily in the forecourt had to be paired with a grain offering and a drink offering. In Exodus 30:9 we find the command that burnt offering, grain offering, and drink offering were never to be laid upon the altar of incense in the holy place. These commands were given to Moses already before the tabernacle was constructed. But once it was constructed, when God gave Moses his commands concerning the altar sacrifices, apparently he said nothing about the drink offering. At least we find no mention of it in Leviticus 2. Perhaps this can be explained in terms of the circumstances in Israel at that point. Presumably during the time when Israel was in the wilderness, God did not want to press for drink offerings. This assumption is based on Leviticus 23. This chapter deals with Israel’s festivals, and we read there that grain offerings and drink offerings had to be brought to God at those feasts (vv. 13, 18, 37). But it is striking that in his introductory comments to Moses about this, God said (note the italicized words): “When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest . . .” (Lev. 23:10). Perhaps this corresponds to what we read in Numbers 15. That is a chapter that discusses grain offerings and drink offerings not in an incidental fashion, but quite intentionally and extensively. There as well we find the following introductory words of God to Moses (again, notice the italicized words): “After you enter the land I am giving you as a home” (v. 2).

The drink offering was commanded by God already in the days of “Horeb.” What other purpose would God have had for instructing Moses to make those bowls and pitchers for the table of showbread (Ex. 25:29; 37:16; Num. 4:7)? Perhaps Israel occasionally brought drink offerings to God at Horeb. It was not impossible that Israel could have purchased the required items for that offering from the caravans they saw traveling by. Just as Israel would have had to purchase salt and incense, which would have come from Arabia. Just like some of the construction materials for the tabernacle and its accessories. But it is uncertain whether Israel had constant access to the rather significant quantity of wine required for the drink offering.
Perhaps there were periods when Israel lacked sufficient wine, and Israel may have received exemption from observing that command for the drink offering until the time when they arrived in the promised land of Canaan.

Concerning the time when the drink offering was instituted and was brought by the Israelites, we cannot speak with certainty.

The same is true concerning the manner in which the drink offering was brought. The Hebrew term for drink offering, nesek.

The question arises automatically as to upon what this offering was placed. Here as well Scripture provides no clear answer. Some think of pouring wine out on the ground, after first dabbing some on the inside of the altar of burnt offering. This was thought to be the case because the rest of the blood was poured out at the foot of the altar. But others have argued that such a view loses sight of the fact that blood and wine may not be considered as similar things. Blood was used for atonement. But not wine. To understand the meaning of wine as part of the grain offering and drink offering, we must take our starting point in Israel’s own eating and drinking. Just as the bread, so too the wine was part of Israel’s diet in Canaan. Both were the fruit of Israel’s daily labor, and given by God to his people for their subsistence. Just as bread fortifies the human heart, so wine was given to gladden the human heart (Ps. 104:15). This explains why both bread and wine could be brought to God as “grain offering” and “drink offering.” They were often mentioned in the same breath. This included wine, “that cheers gods and mortals” (Judges 9:13). Together with the bread, the wine was supposed to be placed not beneath the altar but upon the altar. For bread and wine were tied together inseparably.

The wine would have been poured out on the altar, on the burning fat and meat of the atonement sacrifice, as well as on the burning bread; then to the extent that it had not evaporated or been consumed, it would have been absorbed by the earth around the altar.

For the view claiming that the wine was not poured out beneath the altar, not even partially, but was placed upon the altar, we would point to the prohibition found in Exodus 30:9. There we read about the golden altar of incense in the holy place. The prohibition reads: “and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.” It emphatically says, “on it.” When he used this expression in connection with the golden altar of incense (viz., pouring things on it) and gave this prohibition, God was probably thinking of the customary manner of bringing wine as a drink offering and placing it on the copper altar in the forecourt. If that was the case, then according to this verse the wine would have been poured out on, and not beneath, the altar of burnt offering.

All of this pertains to the wine offering that occurred in the forecourt.

But in the holy place wine was also brought to God. We discussed this in our commentary on Exodus. What was supposed to happen with that wine? We recall that the priests were not allowed to use alcoholic drink before performing their service (Lev. 10:9). This use would then have been completely forbidden during their administering of the sacrifices. Consequently in connection with the drink offering things would not have transpired in the same way as with the grain offering. For part of the latter offering was given to the priests. But we assume that the wine from the drink offering, after having stood for a time in the cups and drink offering pitchers on the table of showbread, would have been poured out completely on the altar. The only altar used for this was the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt.

Regarding the color of the wine we find no prescription in Scripture. Some claim it was to be red, but there is no proof for that. Perhaps a mistakenly assumed parallel between the grain offering and the atonement offering may have led to this assumption.

We will return in a moment to discuss the quantities of wine that had to be brought.
This brings us to the end of our discussion of the drink offering. There was not much that we could say about it, but enough for us to see that this drink offering represented a part of the fruit of Israel’s labor before the face of God. Perhaps the drink offering was not in view in Leviticus 2. This would explain why we do not read about the drink offering what we do read concerning the grain offering, viz., that it was “an offering by fire of pleasing odor to Yahweh” (Lev. 2:2). But that does not yet prove that this description did not apply to the drink offering. The drink offering may well have come under this classification. There is reason to believe that this in fact is what happened, for in Leviticus 23:18 we read that the burnt offerings together with the accompanying grain offerings and drink offerings constituted a fire offering that was “a pleasing aroma for Yahweh.”

With regard to the grain offering we have discussed that part called the drink offering. If we set that aside, then we are left with the “dry” part of the grain offering, the grain offering in the narrow sense.

As we turn to discuss that now, we will employ a distinction between (1) the main component of the grain offering, and (2) the elements added to the grain offering.

(1) The main component of Israel’s grain offering

This consisted of Israel’s grain. Israel was an agrarian people. The main dish in their diet was surely not eating meat every day. Some Bible readers might be inclined to think that meat was central to Israel’s diet, because they read so often in Scripture about the slaughtering and sacrificing of animals. But that was related to the ministry of the sanctuary. But Israel herself did not eat meat every day. As a result, Israel’s grain offering consisted mainly of grain. Sometimes this is also called the food offering.

After virtually every bloody sacrifice, that is, the sacrifice of animals, there was a grain offering, except after a sin offering and a guilt offering. That was not surprising, because with these kinds of offerings the notion of atonement was prominent, so much so that it drew all the attention. I hope to comment on that in due time. Less explicit was the atoning character of the burnt offering and the peace offering. This feature was entirely absent from the grain offering and drink offering. With these latter two Israel was permitted to acknowledge gratitude to her God for the covenant and repeatedly receive atonement.

At Horeb and in the wilderness, it is likely that not very much occurred with regard to observing the commands for the grain offering. Israel had animals in its possession, for which they could find pasture from time to time in various oases. But Israel had no access to grain and flour, which explains the fact that God sustained his people by means of manna.

Nevertheless, at Horeb God did institute the grain offering, with which he was confirming again the promise that Israel would one day inherit the land of Canaan. Soon, within months, Israel would see acreage that was famous, among other things, for its grain harvests. For Canaan was a part of Syria, and Syria was one of the granaries of the ancient world. Unfortunately the trip from Horeb to Canaan took not months, but years. Those were years when faithful observance of the ministry that God had established at Horeb was not to be seen (Amos 5:25–27; Acts 7:42–43).

Israel was allowed to bring her grain offering to God in three ways. You can read extensively about this in Leviticus 2.

Dough was made from choice flour and oil, and this dough was baked, either as loaves in an oven or on a baking surface, or as one pastry, like a tart, in a pan. Next, either one loaf (Exod.
(29:23) or one of the parts that had been cut from it earlier was placed on the altar, after which all the rest was given to the priests (Lev. 2:5–10).

The third possibility was that one brought ears of grain as an offering. They would take fresh ears of grain, roast them, peel them, and mix the resulting grain with oil. After offering a portion of this, the remainder was given to the priests (Lev. 2:14–16).

What, then, was the significance of this grain offering?

By now the reader will have understood that the meaning did not lie in the atonement. No flour was needed for atonement, but blood was. By means of the grain offering what was being symbolized was not something that God gave to people but something that people gave to God, namely, a thankful and obedient heart and life. The grain offering symbolized the good works of faith. This will become clearer in what follows.

(2) The elements added to Israel’s grain offering

a. In the first place we would mention the oil. We have discussed this before. Oil always referred to olive oil. The place that this olive oil enjoyed in ancient Near Eastern life is hard to overestimate.

It was used, for example, for anointing the body, such as the feet (Gen. 28:18), or for tending to and healing wounds (Isa. 1:6; Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34; James 5:14), and even mixed with aromatic spices to serve as a rejuvenating cream or as a scent with which guests would be welcomed (Ps. 23:5; Luke 7:46), or also, a person would be identified as being called to an important task (1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13; 1 Kings 19:16).

But oil was used especially for preparing food (1 Kings 17:12). Cakes prepared with oil were actually called “anointed” cakes (Lev. 2:5; 7:12).

Oil served also as fuel for lamps (Matt. 25:3). The wick of such a lamp was, so to speak, anointed with oil.

So we see a threefold use of oil, which we see in the ministry of Israel connected with God’s tabernacle. Here indeed we may speak of a genuine parallel.

For first of all, not only the bodies of the priests, but also the tabernacle with the associated furnishings, was anointed with oil (Exod. 29:22; Lev. 8:10).

Next, in the forecourt the grain offerings (whether of dough or baked or ears of grain) were prepared with oil to be a pleasingly aromatic sacrifice (Lev. 2:2).

Third, the most glorious oil sacrifice occurred with the lamps of the golden lampstand that stood in the holy place (Exod. 27:20–21; 30:17).

We need not add very much to what we wrote in our commentary on Exodus about the significance of the oil. The oil served to symbolize the Holy Spirit.

b. Incense was always added to the grain offering. The reason for that was obvious. Burning incense causes a penetrating odor that we recognize from burning resins. God had a high regard for this burning of incense. A relatively small portion of the grain offering was burned on the altar (the rest was for the priests, and the loaves of showbread were entirely for the priests), but all the incense of the grain offerings, including that which was laid on the table of showbread, had to be burned (Lev. 24:7). The reason for this would have been that incense could not be consumed as food, but especially that worship belonged exclusively to God.

For incense symbolized prayer, the highest expression of worshiping God. In Psalm 141:2 prayer itself is described this way: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you.” When
Zechariah carried the incense sacrifice into the temple, we read: “And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense” (Luke 1:20). The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders of Revelation 5 fell down before the Lamb, “each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8). The prayers of the saints, according to Revelation 8:3, rise to heaven like a cloud of incense (cf. Isa. 6:3–4).

So the grain offering symbolized the good works of believers.

Incense symbolized believing prayer.

A grain offering may never omit incense.

Only through our believing prayer, our good works become acceptable before God, because in that praying we appeal to Jesus Christ, our High Priest, who mediates for us with the Father.

c. The last ingredient that must accompany every grain offering was salt. Undoubtedly God was again making use of an internationally understood concept, when at Horeb he provided his people Israel a special covenant foundation in the Torah, and prescribed *salt for the grain offering*. Along the same ancient route, from times long ago, both incense and salt were exported by Arabia (Isa. 60:6; Jer. 6:20). Israel was familiar with salt mining near the Dead Sea (Zeph. 2:9). A location in that region was called Ir-Hammelach (ʼîr-hammelāḥ), or Salt City (Josh. 15:62). There was always salt in Assyrian temples. Persian officials who tried to reproach Ezra before king Artaxerxes, demonstrated their loyalty by saying, “we eat the salt of the palace” (Ezra 4:14). The Greeks were familiar with the ceremony of eating bread with salt when making a covenant. The salt payment of Roman soldiers was called *salarium* (from *sal*, which means *salt*, which later was used for money, which explains the meaning of *soldij*, the Dutch word for *payment*). Scripture also speaks of a covenant of salt (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5), and we read in Leviticus 2 itself: “You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” (v. 13). For the Israelites, the symbolism would have resided here, seeing the common use of salt in the life of ancient peoples, especially in making covenants, treaties, and contracts. Salt would have represented fidelity. Salt would have symbolized the promise that one would refrain from infidelity and breaking one’s word. This explains why our Savior said, when speaking to his disciples about their duty in the future of denying themselves (“cutting off” hands, “plucking out” eyes, when it came to facing temptations to sin and unchastity): “For everyone will be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49). With these words he would have been alluding to the altar fire and altar salt of the Torah, both of which gave visual symbolic expression to the one bringing the offering of God’s requirement of fidelity and purity of heart. This would have made people think all the more of Leviticus 2, because in this chapter immediately preceding the command regarding salt we find the prohibition against leaven and honey (Lev. 2:11–12). We’ll say more about this in a moment. Even though this leads us to think of the direct connection in Leviticus 2 to the required uprightness and faithfulness among Israel as God’s covenant people, we would not wish to exclude the possibility that at the same time God was thinking of other properties of salt when he commanded its use with every grain offering. Perhaps the feature of the salt’s tastiness was also in view, the flavor that salt gave to the food being offered. As a result, we find in Scripture comments about empty talk being “tasteless talk” (Job 6:6; Col. 4:6). Perhaps we might recall the occasion when Elisha said: “Bring me a bowl, and put salt in it.” The servants did so, and Elisha took it to the well, threw the salt into the water, and said: “Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it” (2 Kings 2:20–22). Surely with this symbolic action that he performed with the salt, Elisha
would have been alluding to the purifying work of salt. Thereby it could be used to symbolize resisting impurity and decay. Little wonder, then, that God viewed this ingredient of the grain offering as referring to Israel’s calling to keep the covenant uprightly in all of life—the grain offering represented Israel’s labor and daily bread—a covenant with which God had honored Israel in such a regal manner at Horeb.

While every grain offering had to include salt, leaven and honey were definitely forbidden. Just before the command about the salt, we read the prohibition about leaven and honey. That sequence would not have been accidental. According to Israelite understanding, leaven and honey would have stood approximately in the same opposition to oil, incense, and salt, as flesh and Spirit are opposed in the New Testament, or the old man against the new man.

For the Israelites, the prohibition against using leaven with the grain offering would have been something automatic. They would have understood the purpose of that prohibition immediately. For them, the use of leaven had been forbidden with the exodus from Egypt. At that time they had to eat unleavened bread (Exod. 12:8; 13:7). The biblical leaven or yeast is not to be confused with the yeast that required a day or more for baking bread. When we think about how quickly in our own part of the world, during the warm summer months, food can spoil, we can readily understand how badly a portion of dough would stink in hot regions like Egypt and Palestine. And yet, such an old portion of dough that had become thoroughly sour could be useful. When it was put in with new dough, for example, the new would begin to ferment and to rise, and one could get a pastry that was far lighter and more digestible than if it had been baked without that “old” dough or leaven. So in Scripture, the term leaven did not always have an unfavorable meaning. Understandably so. For it could also serve as an image for the powerful working of good as well as evil. Recall the Lord’s parable of the woman who with a small amount of yeast was able to get a large quantity of dough to rise. She took three measures of meal, the Savior said, which was a ratio of 40 to 1. But in the same way, the Lord Jesus was saying, the world would soon be turned upside down by the simple preaching of the apostles (Matt. 13:33). This was something good.

Nevertheless, the image of leaven appears most often in Scripture with a negative connotation. In 1 Corinthians 5, for example. There the apostle alludes to the duty of the Israelites to see to it that from the 15th to the 22nd of the first month, their bread was unleavened. Leviticus 23:6–8 discusses this (the feast of unleavened bread). When there was a man in Corinth who belonged to the church of the Lord there and who had married a woman who had been the wife (or one of them?) of his own (deceased?) father, and Paul learned about this, he was so upset that he wrote: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6). This passage is almost identical to Galatians 5:9. When writing such words, the apostle Paul must surely have recalled the Law with its prohibition against leaven being used with the grain offering. Just like our Savior, when he warned his disciples for “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” He used the word “leaven” with reference to their wicked teaching and their wicked living, as well as their dangerous influence often exercised through doctrine and life by respectable religious people.

We can say the following about the honey.

As an ingredient, God would have kept honey far away from his grain offering for the same reason as leaven. For later the Israelites would have been allowed to bring the first fruits of their honey harvest to the sanctuary (though it would not be placed on the altar, but enjoyed by the priests, 2 Chron. 31:5). That was fine. Just like the first loaves coming from the grain harvest
were brought at the feast of Pentecost (which were leavened, also to be enjoyed by the priests, Lev. 23:17). That was something different (Lev. 2:12). But honey was disallowed as an ingredient of any grain offering, and as something to be placed on the altar.

In this respect, in the Torah God was pointing Israel in a direction that was entirely different than that of pagan worship practices. For Egyptians, Assyrians, and Canaanites did offer honey to their gods. So Israel would surely have understood clearly what God was intending with these measures that we find in Leviticus 2:12. Notice the command in the next verse about using salt (2:13), and notice the fact that in the preceding verse (2:11) leaven was forbidden. This was because the date-palm resin that was in view caused rapid fermentation and thus spoilage. We too would properly understand God’s intention with his prohibition of honey if we were to see in it God’s disapproval of everything that swarmed around death and decay. Honey and leaven would for that same reason have been just as unpleasant to God in the grain offering as physical defects and any remaining excrement of the animals that were offered to him as sacrifices. Because he had and has no delight in rottenness and stench, but in purity and life.

For believers in our own day, the teaching about Israel’s grain offering contains more than one lesson. These instructions teach us to know God. To know what pleases him and what he hates. And what is fitting for us with respect to him. Notice especially the contrast between the prohibition of leaven and honey, and the command for oil, incense, and salt. Israel’s grain offering—symbol of the fruit of their labor—had to be pure, the demonstration of a heart that was upright and faithful toward their God of the covenant. But this good God was also just as holy, so that even the grain offerings of the most holy were not allowed to be brought to God without oil, incense, and salt. So too in our day. For when our best works are always accompanied by faithfulness to God’s covenant, this happens because they are inseparably joined to the oil of the Spirit of Christ, who has been given to us from the Father, and with the incense of our prayer that God would look upon our very best works not as though coming directly from us, but as made sweet smelling by the perfect obedience of our Savior demonstrated long ago upon earth, and with the constant prayer with which he intercedes for us above, with the Father. For then these good works are similar to Israel’s grain offering, “an offering with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”

Having reached this point in our discussion of the grain offering, the time has come for us to keep our promise that we would discuss the quantities of wine that were offered to God in the drink offering. The quantity of flour, oil, and wine used in the grain offering and the drink offering are discussed in Numbers 15, but we wish to review them here, for the following reasons.

By whom were these quantities, the amounts of the ingredients of the grain offering and the drink offering specified?

By the one bringing the offering? In terms of his economic ability, for example? Or by his inner sense of gratitude toward God? Or by his great love toward him? Or were one or another quantity determined by the immensity of his sin? Or the depth of his penitence?

If any of these questions were to be answered affirmatively, the quantities of the ingredients of the drink offering and the grain offering would have depended on something human. On a subjective consideration.

So the answer must not be affirmative, but rather negative. Those quantities depended only on the kind of sacrificial animal that was slaughtered and sacrificed in connection with the grain
offering. For that is how it usually went. The grain offering usually followed the bloody sacrifice.

By means of this sequence, the influence of the human factor was minimized.

Should someone ask how the kind and size of the sacrificial animal was to be determined, we would quickly answer that in this respect as well, little or nothing was left to human arbitrariness. Not even in connection with the sin offering. We will come back to that, of course. But now we wish to direct the attention of Bible readers to the fact that in the sacrificial Torah, all subjectivity was excluded at least in terms of the relationship between the ingredients of the animal offerings, the grain offerings, and the drink offerings. Those relationships were specified not by people, but by God. In this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>3/10 ephah of flour</th>
<th>1/10 hin of oil</th>
<th>1/10 hin of wine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cattle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ram</td>
<td>2/10 ephah of flour</td>
<td>1/3 hin of oil</td>
<td>1/3 hin of wine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep or goat</td>
<td>1/10 ephah of flour</td>
<td>1/4 hin of oil</td>
<td>1/4 hin of wine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scholars are not entirely agreed about the size of the measurements mentioned in the list above. Presumably the content of an ephah was 22.9 liters, and of a hin, 3.83 liters.

But everyone can see one thing clearly from this list: the quantities of flour, oil, and wine increase or decrease according to the size of the animal. Everything was regulated. Even to the point of requiring that a bit more flour, oil, and wine be used with the sacrifice of the male sheep, than with a female sheep.

You will likely have noticed that our list does not include the quantities of incense and salt. We could not include those, because we read about them nowhere in the Law. We do read that they were to be added and when they were to be added, but not how much was to be added. Did the absence of any information about this tell Israel something? For example, that the Israelites were permitted to offer to God as much salt (symbol of faithfulness) and as much incense (symbol of prayer) as they wanted? We simply don’t know.

When someone in Israel went to the tabernacle and brought a grain offering to God there, he was not to imagine that his grain offering was placed on the altar in its entirety. Or virtually in its entirety. Not at all. Rather, the opposite was the case. The largest portion was not burned but went to the priests.

The incense did all end up on the altar. That was entirely burned up. Earlier we explained why this presumably occurred. Because all worship belonged to God alone. We have also indicated the assumption that the same thing happened with the wine. Finally, it could have happened that the grain offering was not brought by an ordinary member of the congregation, but by one of the priests himself. It was obvious that from such a grain offering made by a priest, no portion, let alone the largest portion, would have gone to the priests.

Otherwise, the grain offering in the narrower sense, that is, without the incense and wine, was largely for the priests. That was their honorarium. That is reported to us in the New Testament by none other than the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9 he is discussing his authority, as a preacher of the gospel, to be cared for by the church of Corinth. He writes: Don’t you know that they who perform ministry in the sanctuary, eat from the sanctuary, and they who serve at the altar receive their portion from the altar? The Lord also established the rule for those who proclaim the gospel that they were to live from the gospel (1 Cor. 9:13–14). We know that this rule was indeed given
by our Lord Jesus Christ, in such declarations as Matthew 10:10: “for the laborer deserves his food.” But the apostle Paul clothed his recollection of that teaching in a garment with a strikingly Old Testament color.

How large, then, was the grain offering that was placed on the altar?

It was never all that large. In the case of an offering of dough, for example, only a handful of dough was put on the altar, and when the grain offering consisted of cakes, then only one cake was placed on the altar. The rest was for the priests. When we review the list above, we will see that rather significant quantities of food were given to the priests.

Nevertheless, the priests were not free, on account of this abundance, to use their income from the grain offerings carelessly. They were always to remember that these were “most holy” wages. The same was true of the entire tabernacle and its furnishings (the ark, the table of showbread, etc.). That portion that the priests received from the grain offering of the members of the congregation was also called “most holy.” So they were to eat it only “in a holy place,” viz., not outside the tabernacle perimeter (Lev. 6:16).

What explains that especially exalted holiness?

The fact that earlier, a portion of this grain offering had been sacrificed to Yahweh. In this manner the entire grain offering had been devoted to him. Once again we have a rule to which the apostle Paul referred. For in Romans 11:16 he wrote: If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump.

When someone in Israel went to the tabernacle and brought a grain offering there, he saw a very small portion of his sacrifice, at least as a grain offering in the narrow sense, end up on the altar of God. But that need not have grieved him. For not only was his entire grain offering elevated to something holy by the sacrifice of that small portion. But his grain offering was not to leave the holy place, by being taken, for example, to the home and family of the priest. Moreover, the small portion that had been sacrificed earlier on his behalf by the priest as an ʾazkārā, that is, as a “memorial offering” (Lev. 2:2, 9, 16). The verb ʿākar ("to remember") that belongs to the noun ʾazkārā appears in Exodus 28 as well, where we read that the high priest had to carry on his shoulders the two stones on which were written the names of the twelve sons of Jacob (v. 12), and similarly, he had to wear on his breastplate twelve stones with these same names, when he entered the sanctuary, “before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance” (v. 29). Nehemiah also used this verb when he asked if God was willing to remember the good that he had done for Israel, for the house of his God, and for his precepts (Neh. 5:19; 13;14, 22, 31). People in Israel would pray for one another that God “would remember all your offerings” (Ps. 20:3). And we might mention from the New Testament that the angel assured Cornelius: your prayers and alms have come to God’s remembrance (Acts 10:4). We also recall that the dejected Israelites must not suppose that their good works did not continue in God’s memory. “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do” (Heb. 6:10).

By means of the grain offering and drink offering, God wanted to assure and instruct his people Israel that he took great pleasure in their keeping his covenant in their daily living and in their remembering to keep his commandments. Thinking of this, the apostle Peter urged his readers who had recently become Christians, “to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5; the term spiritual is equivalent to Christian).
Chapter 8
The peace offering (Lev. 3)

Our older readers will not recall from older Bible versions the name of this sacrifice that appears above in the title of this chapter. It does not appear in those versions. The kind of offerings that we are now going to discuss were identified in older Bible versions as “thank offerings.” But the new translations used the phrase “peace offering.” We have also chosen this latter rendering.

People came up with the older phrase (“thank offering”) on account of such Scripture passages as Psalm 50:14: “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform [šallēm] your vows to the Most High.” The Hebrew word for these sacrifices was zebah šēlāmîm, occasionally shortened to šēlāmîm (Num. 15:8; Deut. 27:7), appearing once as šelem (Amos 5:22), and elsewhere simply called zebah (Deut. 12:27; 18:3).

The word zebah meant sacrifice, and in the word šēlāmîm we have the verb to šelem, which meant to be whole, to be complete; the verb šallēm meant to make whole, to make complete, to pay. In view of these meanings, earlier translations and commentators rendered these as “thank offering.”

But another view is the translation of “peace offering” better expresses the meaning. It is more suitable for all the passages, including those where the rendering of “thank offering” would not fit well. For example, when we read that Israel prayed for deliverance while in distress, and in that context brought “burnt offerings and šēlāmîm” (Judges 20:26; 21:24; 1 Sam. 13:9), one can hardly translate that latter word (šēlāmîm) as “thank offering.” The phrase “peace offering” fits much better. For that fit the situation better. For that had been a need, even though there was nothing deficient about the good relationship between God and those who were bringing the sacrifice. Therefore the phrase “peace offerings” fits better at this point.

Moreover, everyone has heard that there the Hebrew words šelem and šālôm are related. The former was the term for a kind of sacrifice, which we are discussing here, and the latter meant “peace.” But we must remember that the word for peace (šālôm) had a much wider meaning in Israel than among us. With the word “peace” we all too often think of the situation where there is no war, but the Hebrew word shalom meant much more, namely, that everything was good. There life was lovely. That there was happiness and prosperity. That relationships were whole. Apparently the meaning of the term for the kind of sacrifice we are discussing lay in this direction as well. It communicated that things were good between Yahweh and the person bringing the sacrifice. There was a relationship of shalom. This word leads us and Bible scholars to recall the name of Solomon, the prince of peace.

Actually the phrase “peace offering” was a composite term. This term referred to an entire group of sacrifices. At least three sacrifices. We must investigate this further.

In the first place, such a peace offering could be more specifically a praise offering (Lev. 7:13, 15). When you read the Bible, you will encounter these kinds of peace offerings often. They were frequently brought out of gratitude for blessings enjoyed. Recall Psalm 116: What shall I render to Yahweh for all his benefits to me? I will pay my vows to Yahweh in the presence of all his people (vv. 12, 14).
Next, a peace offering could be more of a votive offering. Such a vow was absent with the former, the praise offering. Praise offerings were brought out of gratitude for a good harvest and at feasts (Lev. 9:18; 23:19, 37–38; Num. 29:39; Deut. 12:6; Josh. 8:31; 1 Kings 8:63). But when someone was paying a vow to God that after receiving from him this or that benefit he would render a sacrifice to him, that was a votive offering. People were not permitted to make such vows and then not honor them (Num. 30:3; Deut. 23:22). We recall Psalm 50:14: “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving [tōwdâ], and perform your vows [nēdārēkâ] to the Most High.” Here both of them are mentioned, the praise offering and the votive offering. At the same time, we see here that we should not separate the praise offerings and votive offerings like an accountant. We saw this a moment ago in Psalm 116, where they were also mentioned together.

In the third place, there was also the freewill offering. (You can find all three mentioned in Leviticus 7:11–12.) The addition of “freewill” did not mean that the first sacrifice, the praise offering, was involuntary, for no praise offering was involuntary, but the addition was related to the second offering mentioned, the votive offering. The last two offerings, the votive offering and the freewill offering (neder and nēdābâ) corresponded with each other. In Leviticus 7:16 they are mentioned in the same breath, and in distinction from the praise offering that precedes them. But there was a difference. Someone who earlier had made a vow—and he had done so voluntarily, of course—was automatically obligated to pay it later. As a result, there was nothing involuntary about the votive offering. That was not the case with the third offering, however. This explains why this offering, in contrast to the votive offering, received the special name of freewill offering. Consequently, the difference between the last two sacrifices was this, that in the case of the votive offering, one brought that sacrifice only after receiving the benefit envisioned, but in the case of a freewill offering, one brought that beforehand. Perhaps someone had asked in his prayer that God would grant this or that benefit, but instead of waiting to bring his offering when the prayer was answered, he instead brought his sacrifice right away. As if he were reinforcing his prayer.

What was the uniqueness, the special character, of all of the peace offerings? What received the emphasis in connection with the peace offerings?

Was that perhaps the atonement?

Absolutely not. To be sure, the same actions preceded the peace offering that would have occurred with the slaughter of every sacrificial animal: leading the animal to the priest, placing the hand on its head, slaughtering the animal and retrieving its blood. As we saw earlier, all of that proclaimed the justification of the sinner. Consequently, the peace offering also spoke of atonement, to the extent that it had in common those initial actions connected with every bloody sacrifice. But the burnt offering was the same. So that did not constitute the uniqueness of the peace offering.

So too with sanctification. Later we will see that part of the peace offering was burned up, even quite a bit of it, so that according to the rule, part for the whole, the animal brought for peace offering was offered to God, namely, on the wings of the fire. But this happened with the sin offering as well (as we will see later), and happened 100% with the burnt offering (as we have already seen). So the uniqueness of the peace offering did not consist of that.

So there remains the third benefit of redemption: glorification.

The uniqueness of the peace offering was the Paradisal element that it contained. By means of the peace offering, Israel was being taught and assured regarding the promise of that beautiful future when there would be perfect peace between God and his people. The absolutely unique
character of the peace offering surfaced in the meal that was always connected with it. A meal that was offered by God as the Host to the Israelite as his guest. That did not happen with any other sacrifice. So we must pay attention especially to that feature.

When a peace offering was brought, a complete distribution of the sacrificial animal occurred. By whom? By God. The Israelite bringing the sacrifice gave the sacrificial animal to him. The one bringing the offering had to approach him (Lev. 3:1). So the distribution was guided by God. He divided the peace offering animal into three portions, this way: one portion was for himself, a second portion was for the priesthood, and the rest was given to the one bringing the offering, the Israelite himself. We will say something about each of those three portions.

1. The portion designated for Yahweh

All of the fat was for God. We understand what this meant immediately when we recall a familiar expression in Scripture like “the fat of the land,” which refers to the best products (Gen. 45:18), “the finest of wheat,” referring to the best wheat (Deut. 32:14; Ps. 81:16), and “the best of the oil and the best of the wine” (Num. 18:12). “The fat of the mighty” were the warriors of the first rank (2 Sam. 1:22; cf. Judges 3:29; Ps. 78:31; Isa. 10:6), and “the fat of the land” were the preeminent and noble (Ps. 22:29; cf. 65:12–13).

Four was the number of the pieces of fat that were burned on the altar, namely, first, the fat around the entrails; second, the fat around the heart; third, the fat around the kidney—items that every butcher is familiar with—and fourth, the fat surrounding the liver, called “the long lobe of the liver,” which was to be removed along with the kidneys (Lev. 3:3–4).

If this is accurate, perhaps with this regulation God wanted to protect his people Israel from the familiar pagan practices associated with the liver of sacrificial animals. From remote India to Rome, the liver of a sacrificial animal was used in connection with divination. In Mesopotamia this form of divination had developed into a full-blown technology, adopted by Etruscans, Greeks, and Romans. To make interpreting the liver easier, models were made out of clay or bronze. A large number of those models were discovered at the excavations in Mari. The prophet Ezekiel describes for us the king of Babylon standing before a decision. Should he embark against Rabbah of the Ammonites, and destroy him, or should he march against Jerusalem? “He looks at the liver,” we read (Ezek. 21:21).

Similar to what God had done in many respects at Horeb, by enlisting a number of the religious customs of the pagans, in what God was prescribing about the liver, or at least part of it, perhaps he was calling a stop to the inclination for divination that was very real among Eastern peoples and possibly among Israel, one that was far more relevant than we today could imagine. The best part of the entire animal, indeed, the best part of the liver, had to be burned.

Whatever the case may be, the fat belonged to God and had to be burned. We said earlier that this had to occur on, on top of, the altar (Lev. 3:5).

The emphasis that God placed on the offering that all the fat be given to him has led in this chapter of Leviticus 3 to an interesting digression. It involves the case of someone who would want to bring a sheep as a peace offering animal. With the choice of animals for their peace offerings, the Israelites enjoyed far more freedom that with their burnt offerings, for example, their choice was always limited, of course, to clean animals, such as animals from a flock. But
then it could be large livestock, like cattle, but also small livestock, like sheep and goats. For the peace offering they did not need to use only male animals as sacrificial animals, as was the case by contrast for the burnt offering, but offering female animals was permitted for the peace offering. Not only bulls, but also cows, not only bucks, but also a doe. For the peace offering it was required that the animals used had no defects (Lev. 22:22, 24), but even this requirement had an exception. At least for one kind of peace offering, the so-called freewill offering. For freewill offerings, we read this permission: “You may present a bull or a lamb that has a part too long or too short for a freewill offering” (Lev. 22:23). As we can see, in various ways, things were made easy for someone who wanted to come into the presence of Yahweh in the tabernacle to celebrate a peace offering meal. Except we do not read that people were allowed to use doves for the peace offering. But that was logical, because a dove provided far too little to eat. You couldn’t make a festive meal with doves.

   And now the interesting digression about the sheep.

   Entirely differently than our European and North American sheep, a sheep in Palestine had to have an incredibly fat tail. That could weigh as much as seven kilograms. Even today, such a fatty tail is still a delicacy among the farming populace. That a sheep in Palestine, however, back in those days would have had such a remarkably fat tail can be seen from the terracotta figurines of sheep from ancient times. The sculptors of those appeared to have enjoyed replicating especially the sheep’s fat tail.

   This explains why, in Leviticus 3, an entirely distinct section is devoted to the case where a sheep was brought as a peace offering. Three sets of instructions are given. The first involves the offering of an ox (vv. 1–5), the second, a sheep (vv. 6–11), and the third, a goat (vv. 12–15). The latter two sets would have corresponded to the extent that a sheep and a goat resemble one another anatomically. But on account of the sheep’s fatty tail, a separate set of instructions had to be given for the offering of this animal. For the fatty tail would have to be cut off rather close to the spine! So that all the fat could be sacrificed to Yahweh.

   (For the same reason, when we come to the sin offering in Leviticus 4, we will find a separate section regulating the case of bringing not a goat [vv. 27–31] but a sheep [vv. 32–35].) Always the very best was for God.

2. The portion designated for the priests

   After the fat had been offered to God, the priests of Yahweh were the next to receive their share. For they stood alongside him. That became evident in the two pieces of the sacrificial animal that were theirs. For there were two pieces, first, the breast, for the entire priesthood; and second, the shank, for the officiating priest.

   The breast belonged to the tastier parts of the ox, sheep, or goat. This was rather fatty. It was surely for this reason that precisely this piece of the peace offering animal was assigned to the priest. For the four premier fatty pieces had been sacrificed to Yahweh as the best of everything. But the next in quality had to be given to those who were allowed to approach Yahweh most intimately. And that would be the priests (Lev. 7:31).

   But the shank that we mentioned was especially for the officiating priest. As a personal honorarium for his ministry at the altar, which included sprinkling the blood, for example. This shank was the hind quarter, just as with the burnt offering, the right hind quarter (Lev. 7:32). For an understandable reason, because the right side was considered the more honorable (Gen. 48:14).
The question could be raised here whether in these regulations consideration was given perhaps to what was customary in the pagan temples all around in that day. Some scholars claim that the pagan priests always received the right hind leg. If so, then here again we have a remarkable difference between the cultus of Yahweh and that of the pagans. Perhaps with these instructions, without much change but in a manner that could be easily understood by those acquainted with such practices, because Yahweh wanted to have people sense his sovereignty in the worship he had prescribed at Horeb, he adapted much that was customary among the pagans while in some respects distancing himself in very striking ways.

We just mentioned as the two portions of the peace offering animal that were designated for the priests, first, the breast, and second, the shank (Lev. 7:30, 32).

Presumably many a Bible reader has often wondered what was being signified by this. We will try to answer that question, though we must say at the outset that on account of the absence of adequate data in Scripture, we cannot speak with complete certainty. But the following strikes us as acceptable.

The word “wave” was used as an adjective of the noun “breast,” to suggest a certain movement performed by the priest, in the direction of the tabernacle and back. This was the “wave offering” (טנהפ), or a kind of weaving, whereby the hands were moved back and forth. By means of this back-and-forth movement of the breast in the direction of the tabernacle—for we read: “before Yahweh” (Lev. 7:30)—was the recognition by the priesthood that they were not involved in a reciprocal exchange, but in receiving their rightful share from what lawfully belonged to Yahweh. They were acknowledging that they lived from the hand of God and not the hand of people. Yahweh was Levi’s inheritance. The priests received their share of the peace offering not directly from the hand of the Israelites, their brothers, but along a kind of detour. Along God’s detour. The entire animal was surrendered and carried first to God. And only then did Yahweh grant to each party their portion. To his priests first.

The “waving” was part of that detour.

Presumably the word “heave” (as in the older expression, “heave offering”) was as well. The Hebrew word of “heave” was used as well for the priests bringing the memorial offering (Lev. 2:8). This, however, was laid on the altar. But occasionally the word “heave” (טروم) was used for gifts that people gave to God without those being placed on the altar, and such a “heaving” (טروم) was also called a “waving” (טנפ) (Exod. 25:2; 35:22), from which it follows that there was no difference between the two. The intention would have been the same. Nevertheless, when the breast was involved, there was always talk of “waving,” and when the shank was involved, of “heaving.” The small difference would have consisted in this, that the moving of the wave breast occurred in the direction of the tabernacle and back, while the heaving of the thigh occurred in the direction of heaven and back. Tabernacle and heaven would both have been viewed as God’s dwelling places.

That God, then, granted from his own possession not merely something for the priesthood in general, namely, the wave breast, but granted a special gift to that priest who had performed this specific sacrificial ministry, namely, the shank, designated for the officiating priest (Lev. 7:33).

By means of the first gift, that of the breast, to all the priests, the priestly privilege was being honored in general. The breast was a precious piece of meat. Therefore it was for those who stood next to God. For the priests.

But by means of the second gift, that of the thigh, for the priest who had performed the sacrificial ministry, God wanted to honor in a special way the priestly work and effort.
3. The remainder for the one bringing the offering

The peace offering was in every respect a joyous sacrifice. It provided joy to everyone involved. To Yahweh, for whom the best was given. To his priests, for whom the next best was given. And to his people, that had enough left over for celebrating a joyous feast. A feast under the gaze of Israel’s God. In the shadow of his palace on earth. That visible proof of his favor in dwelling among Israel. And of his grand plan that one day he would bring back the joy of Paradise and enjoy it together with his redeemed humanity.

With the peace offering, heavy emphasis fell on the meal.

We mentioned earlier that the occasion for eating well was arranged as openly as possible. For example, with the choosing of the sacrificial animal for the peace offering, the details were not as specific as with other offerings.

But there was still more that was done especially to advance the success of a peace offering meal.

As you will recall, there were three kinds of peace offerings. The praise offering was the most important. For that reason, God had stipulated that the associate meal was to be eaten exclusively on the first day. That is, on the day the animal was slaughtered. Not later (Lev. 7:15; 22:29–30). But with the other two peace offerings, the votive offering and the freewill offering, the situation was different. The associated meals could be eaten on the day after the day of slaughter, a period of two days (Lev. 7:16). But not thereafter. The meat that was left over on the third day would have to be burned. Understandably so. Israel lived, both in the wilderness and in Canaan, in a warm climate, whereby the meat of slaughtered animals spoiled quickly. That was not only dangerous for those consuming it, but also detestable for God, who has an aversion to sin and all its consequences, including decay and death (Lev. 7:18). For the same reason, the meat of the peace offering meal was not to be eaten by someone who was “unclean.” Nor was this meat itself to be unclean (Lev. 7:19–20). (We will discuss this defilement in connection with Leviticus 11–15.) But further, the possibility of participating in the peace offering meal was arranged as openly as possible, in order to heighten the festive joy.

That could be seen clearly in the loaves.

At other times, every grain offering that was coupled with a bloody sacrifice had to be prepared without leaven. The reader will recall this. Nevertheless God had made one exception to that strict rule. For celebrating the peace offering meal. There the loaves could be leavened. So then, not the loaves that were placed on the altar. On Israel’s altar no leaven was ever to be sacrificed. At all. But we have also seen how small a portion of the grain offering was placed on the altar (the memorial offering). So then, one loaf of each kind of pastry that was offered to Yahweh in the peace-grain offering had to be unleavened (Lev. 7:12, 14). But all the other loaves that people prepared for the sacrificial meals could be leavened and thus the dough could rise and become tastier. This was permitted with a view to enhancing their enjoyment of the peace offering meal.

Everything pointed to the special character of the peace offering, which would become visible in the meal that was connected to it. That would surely have impacted Eastern people like the Israelites far more than us. With the grain offering we saw that whenever you had salt fellowship with someone, this signified that you stood in a covenant relationship with that person. The same was true if you had table fellowship with someone. The Egyptians did not eat
meals “with the Hebrews” (Gen. 43:32). The Jews did not eat meals with the Gentiles (Gal. 2:12). The suggestion has been made that the familiar Hebrew word for “covenant,” namely, bĕrît, would have been a cognate of the Hebrew word for “eat,” namely, barah. Then bĕrît would mean a fellowship meal. But it is also clear that bĕrît means something close to “bond of fellowship,” because the establishing of a covenant formed a circle that included both parties. The Hebrew word for “covenant” would then be related to the Assyrian word biritu, which means “fetter.”

When celebrating a peace offering meal, Israel did so based on the premise that God had made her his covenant people at Horeb. Rather: it was God himself who had placed Israel on a special foundation at Horeb, the One who had instituted in the sacrificial Torah the celebration of such a sacrificial meal, thereby obligating his people to keep his covenant. From everything taught here, we can see that the meal at which that celebrating of the covenant occurred must have been an especially joyful meal.

Not that the notion of atonement was completely foreign to the peace offering. That notion was certainly part of every bloody sacrifice. Then as now. Without the atoning blood of Christ we could not exist for one day before God. From the animal connected with the peace offering, some blood was always sprinkled on the altar in the forecourt. But nevertheless the idea of atonement was certainly not in the foreground with the peace offering (completely different than with the sin offering and the grain offering, which we will discuss later).

No, the peace offering was brought when things were good between God and his own people. When nothing was wrong. At least nothing bad. But the peace offering was brought by the Israelite when he could appear before Yahweh with a clear conscience, and say to him: I walk in my uprightness, I wash my hands in innocence, I do not consort with people who commit this or that evil. I have no delight in that. But I do delight in your service, O Yahweh. Therefore I appear at your altar. For this confession of faith, see Psalms 26, 44:17–18, and 119:176.

We can learn from that.

On account of their struggle with Rome, our ancestors saw themselves compelled to place a very heavy emphasis on the truth that absolutely nothing of ourselves can contribute to our salvation. Notice how emphatically they do this, for example, in the first section of the Heidelberg Catechism (concerning human misery). But the intention of that first section was not, of course, that in every situation, in season and out of season, we would have to lament about our sins. There must be concrete reasons for doing so, which we set before God reverently. Otherwise such lamenting becomes simply a pose, affectation, and we don’t know what to do with Psalms 26, 44, etc. No, our confession in Section 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism (that our salvation cannot proceed from us in even the tiniest way) has the purpose to prepare us immediately for Section 2, where we confess that our Savior Jesus Christ is not a partial savior, but a complete Savior. That last claim was challenged fiercely by the opponents of our forefathers!

It is appropriate now as well that we always approach God first of all with thanksgiving in our hearts for the historical fact that we are heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant. Christ commanded us to address God this way: “Our Father who art in heaven.” We may never bring this address into discredit in our subsequent prayer, and of course, also not in our conversations, our preaching, etc. We may never render this approach dubious or questionable, for that doubt is like a wave of the sea (James 1:6).

Standing and proceeding on that basis (placed by God himself under our feet, when as yet we did not know him; just like God in fact took Abraham into his covenant, Gen. 15:12, 18), we
approach God, no, not always to confess this or that sin. Israel did not do that either. Israel did not always bring only sin offerings, but once in awhile brought peace offerings. Why? If there is nothing wrong between God and us, at least, nothing sinful, then something entirely different can be going on.

For example, in Israel someone was very sick. He thought he would die any moment. Therefore he prayed: O, Yahweh, deliver my nepheš (Ps. 116:4). In our modern prayer language, that means: O, heavenly Father, let me live awhile longer, please.

Now, God had heard that Israelite’s prayer, and permitted him to walk awhile longer “in the land of the living” (Ps. 116:9). The psalmist added: “before the L ORD.” Would our heavenly Father not do well if he were to have us rise from our sickbed to enjoy life again? “For he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33). So good is our Father. After your illness is past, do not praise only your doctor—to “praise” is to say many good things about your doctor: skilled, personable, etc.—but praise especially your Father above.

At that point, the Israelite who was raised from his sickbed went to the sanctuary, and there he showed his inner gratitude for the healing given him by bringing a praise offering.

The superscription above Psalm 100 reads: “A psalm for giving thanks.”

From the Psalter we see that there were many praise songs or psalms of thanksgiving, and later these would have been sung along with the praise offerings, but also with the votive offerings and the freewill offerings. Think of Psalm 56:12–13: “I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”

Today much has changed.

Our heavenly Father no longer desires bloody sacrifices from us. Nor any meat portions accompanied with loaves of bread. Nor does he stipulate any longer the condition of “Levitical purity,” about which we must yet speak in connection with Leviticus 11–15. All of that belonged to the past, now that the Law has been fulfilled by Christ. But of course we must still call upon God in our need. Why should we not make vows to him, and “pay” them when he has helped us? In fact, even when there is no special reason for gratitude, we may regularly recall that God has in pure mercy called us out of paganism and engrafted us into ancient Israel (Rom. 11:13–24; 1 Pet. 2:10). It is fitting that we thank God for the very same redemptive benefits that Israel received in her day. We too are justified (that is, we receive the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ), and we too have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and we too may face the future with good confidence and “rejoice in hope of the glory of God,” that will be granted to us on the new earth, in Paradise (Rom. 5:2). Concerning this peace with God, now and later, the peace offering spoke to ancient Israel through the gospel of God’s tabernacle and sacrifices, especially through the constantly accompanying covenant meal. Just as with the Lord’s Supper, we today are not only assured of our having peace with God through the blood of Christ, but at the same time we look forward to the glory of the kingdom that will descend from heaven, in which pagans, such as we once were, will sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the wedding of the Lamb.

The apostle called the Hebrews who had become Christians to no longer bring to God a bloody sacrifice. Their Jewish brothers were still doing that, at the Jerusalem temple. Slavishly following the Law. For they did not understand that the Law was fulfilled by Christ, who had “suffered outside the gate” (Heb. 13:18). This explains the appeal to the Hebrews: “Through him [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15). This is referring to our conversations and our songs. May
the hope of Christians ring in those conversations. For Christians are not simply people of faith, but especially people of hope, the firm hope in the Paradisal future when one day we will open our eyes. That is where we are headed. And as a model for our singing today, the ancient psalms that Israel sang as songs of the covenant can still serve us well. But so too the beautiful poetry of Isaiah 35, together with Isaiah 9:6, Joel 4:17, and Amos 9:13, concerning the peaceable kingdom of Prince Messiah.

In this way, the divine teaching of the peace offering remains valid for us. Some people can get very excited about the continuing validity of “the Ten Commandments.” We agree. As long as—for honesty is best at this point—people do not isolate them and instead explain and apply them in principle no differently than the entire corpus of the Torah or Law of Horeb, which in its entirety remains for us the Word of God given to make us wise (2 Tim. 3:15–16). We will return to this matter when we discuss legalism and Judaizing.
The sin offering is discussed in other passages. But the passage in this chapter’s title is the primary source of our knowledge about this offering. In order that we can obtain a comprehensive understanding, we will divide it into two parts. It does consist of an indivisible unity. So we regret that in ancient times, people divided this into two chapters. The first part was Leviticus 4, the second was part of Leviticus 5. That has always been regrettable. In the Hebrew Bible it is not arranged that way. But even though we may not separate the two parts, we do have to distinguish them.

1. Leviticus 4
2. Leviticus 5:1–13

1. Leviticus 4

Before we proceed to read this chapter, we will advise our readers to underline a couple of words in that chapter. We are referring to the following:

In 4:3: the anointed priest
In 4:13: the whole congregation
In 4:22: a leader
In 4:27: anyone of the common people
This helps clarify what is being taught.

In this way we can obtain something of an overview of this rather large chapter. We learn to recognize the differing “situations” in which a sin offering was supposed to be brought. We see the contents, in terms of what kind of animal, had to be brought in the various cases of the sin offering. For our readers should keep in mind at this early point in the discussion that the sin offering was a bloody offering. Like none other. For example, it was evident from the fact that a sin offering was never coupled with a guilt offering. Burnt offerings and peace offerings, yes, but never sin offerings. Because with that offering, all attention was required for the blood.

For ease of reference, we have arranged in the table below all the information regarding the sin offering that Leviticus 4 provides. (We took the liberty of including a few details from the following chapter, Leviticus 5:1–13.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For whom</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>Where blood was placed with the finger</th>
<th>Where blood was sprinkled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(High) Priest</td>
<td>Bull</td>
<td>Horns of the altar of incense</td>
<td>In front of the veil 7x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole congregation</td>
<td>Bull</td>
<td>Horns of the altar of incense</td>
<td>In front of the veil 7x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal leader</td>
<td>Male goat</td>
<td>Horns of the altar of incense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the congregation</td>
<td>Sheep or goat</td>
<td>Horns of the altar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this brief overview, we are struck by the fact that actions were performed with the blood of the sin offering animal that did not occur with the other sacrifices—the burnt offerings and the peace offerings. The third column indicates that the blood was to be placed on the horns of the altar and of the altar of incense. Thereby our attention is drawn to the blood. With the sin offering, the blood played a role that was even more important than with the other bloody sacrifices.

We see that same emphasis on the blood of the sin offering in what we are about to narrate, which could not be included in the table above. When someone was too poor to offer for himself a sheep or a goat as his sin offering, he was allowed to offer two doves. But then the first dove in particular was being offered as a sin offering. That signified that this dove was not to be cut into pieces. That did have to occur with the second dove. That one was offered as a burnt offering, and therefore sacrificed in several pieces. But the first dove had to remain whole. For what was most important was the blood. That blood had to be sprinkled on the side of the altar. Why. “It is a sin offering” (Lev. 5:9).

If someone was extremely poor, so that he could offer only some flour, then no incense or oil was to be added to that flour. Why? Again, so that people would not forget that it was a sin offering—which could happen, for example, by thinking that it was a guilt offering. No, “for it is a sin offering” (Lev. 5:11). In fact, the stipulation that a little bit of flour was permitted only by way of rare exception helped to direct attention to the rule that sin offerings otherwise had an extremely bloody character. For exceptions prove the rule.

Let us consider the name of the offering. In Hebrew the sin offering was called ḥattāʾ. This word meant in the first place, “sin.” But then also “sacrifice for sin,” “sin offering.”

The reader will recall that the shedding of blood with other sacrifices served as a covering of sins, for atonement. But given the name of this sacrifice—it was called for short: “sin”—we can understand that the covering of and atonement for sins played a very special role with this sacrifice.

So we will discuss first the sins that were especially covered by this bloody sacrifice. What special character did these sins have?

Those sins are mentioned immediately in Leviticus 4, already in verse 2. There a general rule is instituted, that is repeated in verses 13, 22, and 27. It goes like this: “If someone sins unintentionally and do any one of the things that by the Lord’s commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, . . . .”

What does the expression “sin unintentionally” mean? Sometimes the Hebrew is translated as “sin through ignorance” (KJV). Moses declared concerning the unintentional manslayer, of whom Numbers 35:11 said that he committed his deed “without intent, that such a person had acted ‘unintentionally’” (Deut. 19:4).

Let us pause at this point.
We are taking the liberty of saying something first about the subject of the capacity for the atonement of sins according to the Law.

Sins could be committed in Israel for which there was, to put it bluntly, no atonement. For example, the man who had been involved with the wife of another man was to be put to death immediately on account of his adultery. So too, a murderer, someone who had killed another person with malicious intent, was sentenced to death. But the unintentional manslayer did not need to be put to death. The Law had instituted this rule: unintentional sins can be atoned, but intentional sins cannot. You can read about this in Number 15:22–31. The intentional sin is there called a sin “with a high hand” (v. 30).

That was the rule.

We must always read Scripture with respect, however, and therefore also with care. For example, one should not suppose that this rule (unintentional sins can be atoned, intentional sins cannot) was applied within Israel in the foolish manner employed by fanatical folk who through their extreme insistence on this or that rule, give the appearance of wanting to prove that they are still principled people. No, among Israel, people never inferred from that rule in Numbers 15 (about unintentional and intentional sins) that Israelite authorities were obligated to put to death every thief. Even though a thief would surely have committed his sin intentionally. If someone would have told the judge that he had broken in somewhere at night accidentally, or if a pickpocket would have said he had unintentionally lifted someone’s gold watch, the judge would certainly not have been satisfied with such excuses. People who steal always do so intentionally. The same is true about lying. Nevertheless, God never commanded that all liars among Israel had to be put to death immediately.

Perhaps a hotheaded Christian might find this troublesome. Was God being consistent? Was he himself not actually contradicting his own rule in Numbers 15 (unintentional sins can be atoned, but intentional sins cannot)?

God is wise.
And God is merciful.
He never wanted that rule to be applied in the hardhearted and pitiless manner of such fanatics that occasionally surface in God’s church and temporarily sweep people along with their appearance of sincerity. God wants that rule to be applied with thoughtfulness. Something that often requires a lot of wisdom. Cutting through knots is easier than untangling them. The first looks much more firm. But the one who wins souls—and thereby saves lives—is wise (Prov. 11:30).

The following cases could occur.

1. In Israel, sins could be committed for which there was absolutely no pardon. An example of this kind of sin could be found in Numbers 15. Our attention is drawn to the fact that in Numbers 15, right before the rule in question—intentional sins are worthy of death—follows the story of a man who had gathered wood on the Sabbath. Gathered. As in: picked up. In other words, he had not simply picked up a twig like someone might do when taking a walk, but he had acted as though it was a workday. And this, when God had laid claim to the seventh day when he had established the Horeb covenant, and did so already when he had regulated the manna-gathering. God had elevated that day to the position of a seal of the covenant (Exod. 16:22–30; 20:8–11; 31:13–17; 35:1–3). Nevertheless, that man had lugged wood on the Sabbath. As a result, that Sabbath violator was stoned at Yahweh’s own command (Num. 15:32–36). A characteristic passage. After giving the rule, providing the application of it in practice. This then was the kind of sin that warranted the capital punishment. There were more such sins. Earlier we
mentioned murder. In Deuteronomy 17:2–7 Moses identified idolatry as such a sin. Anyone guilty of that sin was not to be excused, even if it was one’s own husband or wife.

But people were not supposed to use the same measure of strictness in response to every other sin, even if it had been committed intentionally. We would mention again the example of stealing. Two possible situations could occur.

2. The first possibility was that such a thief had voluntarily surrendered, out of penitence, but that contrary to his plan, his sin came into the open, whether later or right away. But suppose that people had trapped such a person in his crime, even then, they were not allowed to do everything to him that they may have wanted. Indeed, if the robbery had occurred during the day and in catching him someone had hit him so hard that they killed him, then guilt would come upon the one who killed him (Exod. 22:2–3). In this way, we see that God wanted to see the life of the thief protected. Even though a thief really had been guilty of an intentional sin. He would, of course, need to pay restitution for his sin, but people were not allowed to put him to death.

3. There was yet a second possibility, namely, that the thief would be filled with remorse and bring his own sin to light. In such a case, the sin of such a person would definitely not result in capital punishment. Even though it had been committed “with upraised hand.” Intentionally, with premeditation, like it always happens with stealing. Nevertheless, in Israel such a thief was definitely not to be put to death. A thief who repented and turned himself in would be required to pay less restitution. In this respect, the Law of Yahweh breathed a spirit of mercy. We will discuss this more when we come to the guilt offering.

In this digression we have wanted simply to point out that the rule of Number 15:30 (one who commits evil with premeditation shall be put away from the people) was not to be applied among Israel in a fanatical manner. On the contrary, with wisdom and discernment people were supposed to make careful distinctions between one case or another.

After this intermezzo, we can actually explain the reason why we have preferred to divide into two parts the large Scripture passage that deals with the sin offering, Leviticus 4:1–5:13.

We did this because the first part, Leviticus 4, deals with intentional sin that was atoned. And because the second part, Leviticus 5:1–13, deals with intentional sins that were also atoned.

Everyone will admit that we need to discuss them separately. No matter how much we keep in view their inner unity. For one and the same sacrifice applied to both kinds of sins (unintentional and intentional). That was the sin offering.

So now we will first discuss the sin offering for unintentional sins.

A sin offering for an unintentional sin?

Perhaps the amazement of some readers is even greater than it already was. For they first learned that God had established the rule that intentional sins were worthy of death. Then immediately thereafter they learned that he softened that rule considerably by not requiring capital punishment for every intentional sin, but opened the way of atonement for some of them. God’s lenience thereby become evident!

But now we must observe that this same lenient God has given an entire chapter (Lev. 4) prescribing painstaking regulations about how things should go if someone had become guilty of an unintentional sin. Was that sin taken with such seriousness? Can that sin fit in with such lenience?

Yes, it can.

As long as we keep the following in mind.
We must recall, first, that Yahweh had covenanted himself to Israel with condescending grace, but he was and remained the Holy One. God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). His eyes are too pure to look on evil, and he cannot tolerate wrongdoing (Hab. 1:13). God is light and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). Just how averse to darkness (i.e., to sin) he is became evident in Paradise, when he warned our first parents about death. But in vain, with the well-known result.

Nevertheless, that holy God has continued to harbor the desire to enjoy concourse again in peace with human beings. You can see down through the ages his repeated attempts to draw near to people. Notice the friendly manner in which he spoke to Adam and Eve immediately after their rebellion. And later to their wicked son, Cain, who had been guilty of a sin that had deeply grieved God, murder. Behold God’s patience toward the pre-Flood world, with its unchastity and violence. After the Flood he graciously established a covenant with Noah as the prince over a new humanity and world. When the post-Flood world had disappointed him once again, he made a new and immense beginning with Abraham, even though he had descended from an idolater. But at that point, centuries before Horeb, God already intended to bless all the nations of the world in Abraham, and one day to enjoy in their midst a renewed Paradise fellowship.

Along God’s route to fulfilling that intention, Horeb was a beautiful staging place. With a view to the old realities that were confirmed there, and with a view to the new realities that were bestowed there.

By means of the history of Horeb, the covenant with Abraham was confirmed. Because God was remembering his covenant with Abraham, God had led the Israelites out of Egypt and had brought them to Horeb.

But there God had laid a new foundation under the (Israelite) world. But this was also granted to Israel out of divine love. This explains why later the prophets compared his relationship to Israel with betrothal and marriage. But love watches intently. Trespasses that damage that covenant basis may not be tolerated, like idolatry and worship of images (Deut. 6:14; 15:13; 16:18–17). Like abusing Yahweh’s name, which was the sin committed by the son of an Egyptian father and an Israelite mother (Lev. 24:10–23). Like violating the Sabbath day, which day was a seal upon Yahweh’s covenant at Horeb; this was the sin of the wood-gatherer (Num. 15). Like a son’s coarse disobedience to father and mother (Deut. 20), or murdering one’s neighbor, or adultery—three sins of a covenant breaking nature, sins against Yahweh’s fellow covenant members, again fellow vassals!

To this new covenant foundation, on which God had placed the Israelite nation at Horeb, the tabernacle belonged with everything that was related to it.

In that tabernacle, the holy God lived in the midst of sinful people. This explains why the tribe of Levi was provided to function like an isolation boundary zone between Yahweh and his people. This also explains why God’s commands regarding the cultus, relating to the tabernacle, served as a protective fence for Israel.

In this way, Israel received an honor from God that had been given to no other nation at that time. One single ray of light in a sea of darkness, arranged around the tent of the God of life, Israel found herself surrounded by nations that, despite all appearances to the contrary, lived in the stranglehold of Satan and in the power of sin and death.

This explains why at Horeb, Israel was forbidden to show any hint of behavior or attitude that intimated an abandonment of Yahweh’s covenant domain and a return to the pagan terrain with its uncleanness and darkness, and with its night of death. This explains the prohibition
against taking even one step across the threshold of the Law that God had put as a fence around his people. Indeed, even to touch that holy fence was prohibited for Israel. Just as for us, it is fatally dangerous to touch a high-tension electric cable.

Two things were possible.

Israel could nonetheless possibly touch that fence, even go beyond it, and do so either intentionally or unintentionally.

Of course no one would be surprised if God would have refused to tolerate a person’s intentional violation of his sacred line, the Torah. Everyone would see it as fair that God condemned the Sabbath violator to death. Or if someone in Israel intentionally withheld his tithe from God, that too would be blasphemous and just as worthy of capital punishment as the brutality that the men of Beth Shemesh demonstrated toward the ark (1 Sam. 6:20), and as the deed of Achan who stole from the loot of Jericho that belonged to Yahweh (Josh. 7:1). Anyone practicing idolatry would also have crossed the line. A person did not do such a thing except intentionally. In so doing, a person stepped across the holy command of Horeb, and placed his feet in enemy territory, in the territory of paganism and death.

For such sins, no means of atonement had been provided.

But now the other possibility.

It could also happen that an Israelite unsuspectingly and unintentionally landed on the wrong side of the life-boundary established by God at Horeb. Through thoughtlessness he had crossed over into the territory of death. That was ḥāṭāʾ, sin. In the Septuagint, this word is often translated as hamartia, from the verb hamartanō, miss the mark, miss the target. According to the Torah of Horeb, one would have sinned, but would not need to have been put to death. That is why the sin offering was prescribed. That is what Leviticus 4 is about. About such unintentional sins.

It is very possible that this may strike some as strange. They might even wish to speak of unfairness, if they dared. But what would be the reason for doing that? Without having given much consideration to the matter, would they perhaps have adopted the view that a sin that was not willed, an unintentional sin, is actually not a sin at all? But is that (Roman Catholic) view Scriptural? The apostle Paul surely did not hold such a view. Although to his embarrassment he had to admit that he had acted in ignorance when he persecuted the church of God, he continued even in his last letter to identify those former sins as sins. Using words like “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” (1 Tim. 1:12–16). Consider as well Acts 3:17 and 1 Corinthians 2:8, about Israel’s crucifying their own Messiah “in ignorance.” In those instances, Paul and all of Israel did not commit the sin against the Holy Spirit in the sense of Matthew 12:32b. They did not engage in coarse resistance against the testimony of the Spirit that had come to them in the words and deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ, in full agreement with the testimony of the Spirit through “Moses and the Prophets.” Certainly, some have observed that agreement and acknowledged it in their hearts, but despite that, did not stand on the side of Christ (John 12:42). That moved in the direction of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. A sin that would not be forgiven, the Savior said (Matt. 12:31). Of this sin, however, Paul and the many Jews to whom Peter had to direct the accusation that they had nailed Jesus the Nazarene to the cross and killed him (Acts 2:23) were not guilty. Therefore there was forgiveness for them. But it was sin nonetheless. Peter said: Repent and be converted, so that your sins may be blotted out (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Later, Ananias said to Paul in Damascus: Let your sins be washed away (Acts 22:16). Sins, committed in ignorance, to be sure, but sins nonetheless.
According to Scripture, a person can become guilty of sin without knowing it or wanting to, so that he requires atonement.

We should keep this in mind as we read Leviticus 4, concerning the sin offerings for sins committed unintentionally.

Finally, we will mention a few examples of such unintentional sins for which a sin offering had to be brought.

1. In a moment, we will read Leviticus 8–10, where we read about the two sons of Aaron, called Nadab and Abihu, who had hardly been consecrated as priests and they were suddenly killed. Just imagine that their father Aaron and their brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, would have burst out in response with loud complaining. We read that Moses joined them immediately in order to restrain them from doing that. But imagine that they had ripped their turbans and hats (symbols of life!) from their heads. That would have been a sign of grief to let their hair hang down loosely and to tear their high priestly clothes and priestly garments. As we know, this was not permitted for the priests. But what do people do when they are suddenly overcome with deep sorrow? If that response would have occurred, a sin offering would definitely have been required for them (Lev. 10:6–7).

2. When a leper was healed, he had to bring a sin offering in connection with his purification (Lev. 14:19).

3. When a Nazirite had come into contact with a corpse during the time of his vow, he had to bring a sin offering in connection with concluding his time of consecration (Num. 6:14).

4. When a woman gave birth to a child, a sin offering had to be brought in connection with her purification (Lev. 12:6).

5. When a man or woman experienced a discharge, a sin offering had to be brought in connection with their purification (Lev. 15:15, 30).

More examples could be mentioned.

But these are sufficient. Anyone who concludes, on the basis of these human examples, that “An action that I did not intend is not a sin,” will run stuck. Such a person, if he dared, would be criticizing God, who in his Law, note well, demanded a sin offering for a woman who had just given birth. Such a person would indignantly exclaim: “What in heaven’s name did that woman do wrong?” Or if such a person discovered for this “case” an “explanation” in the view that such a woman who had just delivered a baby was obligated to bring a sin offering on account of her “original sin” inherited from Adam, he would still run stuck in the case of a sin offering required from a leper who had been healed. Or in the case of a sin offering required from a Nazirite who had accidentally touched a corpse.

That is what happens when people elevate their thoughts above God’s thoughts. Also when the question involves what is sinful.

God watched over Israel like a diligent Father. He gave his Torah to be a paidagogos, a guardian, a babysitter, to protect Israel en route to the coming Christ (Gal. 3:24). Just as we would never allow our own children near an electric power line, God does not allow his people Israel to set one foot off the covenant foundation on which he had placed them at Horeb. He refused to permit them to slide away from the territory where the powers of the coming age were at work. Where Israel enjoyed his fellowship in happiness and life. The Bible reader must never forget this. For example, don’t forget this when we come later in Leviticus to chapters dealing with the purification of women who have just given birth, those with a bodily discharge, etc. Let this help you already now, as you read Leviticus 4. In fact, you will be able to pray the psalmist’s
prayer: Who can know his sins? Forgive me those sins about which I am not even aware (Ps. 19:12). Is this petition antiquated for us? We too have been delivered by God from the power of Satan and paganism, and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Acts 26:16; Col. 1:13). But we too can “come into contact,” unintentionally and unsuspectingly, with the power of the demons and of paganism, and thereby bring reproach upon God’s name, and put ourselves and our descendants at great risk. In way too numerous to mention, we can allow paganism and corruption to slip in among us once again. With serious consequences. Just as it can happen by mistake that when someone digs a grave, for example, he might be injured by an electrical cable, an instrument that supplies our home with light, warmth, and energy. Of course it would have been a mistake. But we can be fooled. When a landscaper digs around a plant with his shovel, and severs its roots, that will result in the plant’s death even though he did that ignorantly. The plant’s contact with its source of life has been broken. It has been severed from its foundation.

So too, God did not want even one finger lifted toward, let alone touch, the fence that he had placed around Israel with his Torah, or that even one foot would slip away from the force field of the gospel within which he had placed Israel during all those wondrous events that later were summarized with the shorthand expression “the foundation of the world.”

This, then, is our initial commentary on Leviticus 4, especially on the words of verse 2 that reappear time and again in that chapter: If anyone sins unintentionally in any of the Lord’s commandments . . . .

2. Leviticus 5:1–13

We can be brief here.

This Scripture passage consists of three parts, the last two of which we have already discussed. That included verses 7–10, about the case where a dove could be used for a sin offering, and verses 11–13, about the case where a little bit of flour could be given as a sin offering. So we need to deal with verses 1–6 now.

You will recall that we were just discussing those sins that were committed intentionally but for which atonement was possible. This kind of sin is the subject of this part.

Three examples of this kind of intentional sin are mentioned here.

The first is in Leviticus 5:1.

Suppose that a crime has been committed in Israel. Let’s say it was stealing. The robbery was detected, but the thief is nowhere to be found. Even though a curse was pronounced on the (as yet unknown) thief, whether by the one robbed or by the judge (Judges 17:2; Prov. 29:24). Suppose that there is one man, however, who knows about the robbery. He knows who committed the robbery. He also knows what curse has been pronounced on the guilty party. But for some reason, perhaps out of fear of revenge, he does not bring the crime to light. Naturally that person is also guilty.

The second is Leviticus 5:2–3.

Someone has become unclean by touching a human corpse or an animal corpse. Such a thing could happen without knowing it. Later the person comes to the realization that he had become unclean. Then according to the pertinent regulation, he was supposed to purify himself and in the evening of that day everything would be fine again (more about that in Lev. 11). But suppose that someone, after discovering his uncleanness, intentionally omitted the purification. For whatever reason, let’s say it was laziness. Then too, such a person would incur guilt.
The third is Leviticus 5:4.

Someone has sworn a rash oath. Of course no one does something like this mechanically. But it could happen more or less involuntarily, like when a person lacks self-control due to his temper, for example. This happened to David when he was injured very rudely by Nabal (1 Sam. 25). At a moment like this, a person does not consider the import of his words.

Suppose now that a person in one of these three situations, or in one similar, later was penitent and voluntarily confessed his sin. Then for such a person, there was forgiveness to be obtained along the path of the sin offering. It’s possible that he had incurred guilt for a sin of which he became aware only later when someone pointed it out to him. That is what the previous chapter, Leviticus 4:28, dealt with. Here, by contrast, the Law is speaking about intentionality. But through penitence and confession, the issue stands in a more favorable light.

With this we conclude our discussion of Leviticus 5:1–13. Let’s review for a moment.

We get the impression that with all three sins that were posited as examples, we encountered the same contrast as in Leviticus 4, namely, between death and life. For when the person in the first instance heard that curse in Israel, the name of Yahweh must surely have echoed in his ears. So too the name of Yahweh was involved in the third instance, with the swearing of a (rash) oath. In other words, the name of him who had rescued Israel from the Egyptian grave had promised always to be with Israel, had placed Israel on his side, had set Israel on the foundation of life in his fellowship, and therefore had commanded Israel to abstain from coming into contact with death, whether dead people or dead animals, and from pagan mourning customs. “For you are the sons of Yahweh your God” (Deut. 14:1). This background was very clearly evident in the second instance.

With great deeds and illustrious miracles, God had exalted his people at Horeb to a pedestal of living with him. Therefore he did not want anyone in Israel to violate the Torah, that sacred garden that he had placed around his people.

Not even unintentionally.

And not at all intentionally. Although when there was penitence and confession, there did remain a place for the sin offering. So that even such a person could still be restored in the exalted position of the Horeb covenant that he had despised. Even with a certain degree of intentionality.

The preceding provided us more than one opportunity to give our readers the impression of the special nature of the sins for which the sin offering was instituted in Israel. Time and again we encounter the demand of God that his people remain close to him and his Torah, and stay far away from corruption and death. For that was not suited to the covenant people of Yahweh. We will now learn still more about this as we proceed to discuss:

3. The various kinds of animals used for the sin offering; and
4. the actions relating to the blood of the sin offering.

3. The various kinds of animals used for the sin offering

If you review our earlier table, you will find three kinds of animals mentioned in the second column. We need to pay extra attention to these.

The three are bull, ram, and sheep/goat.
Perhaps you are thinking that we’ve made a double mistake. First, because the dove is mentioned there as well. Indeed. But the sacrificial dove designated for a poor person, together with the sacrificial flour for the extremely poor, was not the usual sin offering and was thus not normative for our quest to learn the nature and character of the particular sins for which the sin offering was needed.

Even so, a few readers might still be thinking that we made another mistake, since bull, ram, and sheep + goat number four, not three, animals. That is true as well. But no distinction should be made between the latter two animals. They were equal. If we were to classify them, both would belong to the category of small livestock. This included sheep and goats. So we end up with three kinds of animals: first, the bull; second, the ram; and third, the sheep or goat.

Those three animals are closely related to three possibilities that could occur and that we need to review. For ease of discussion, we will take them in reverse order.

_The first possibility._

Let’s say some member of the congregation sinned. Not a priest or a ruler, but an ordinary member of the congregation. What kind of sin offering had to be brought for such a member of the “laity”?

Ten to one, we would answer: “That would surely have depended on the seriousness of the sin that person had committed. For a little sin, a smaller animal would have been sacrificed, and for a greater sin, a larger animal.”

Wrong. The kind of animal that was to be brought for a sin offering was not determined by the seriousness of the trespass, but by the place of the person in question among Yahweh’s covenant people. This explains why for an ordinary member of the congregation the most simple normal sin offering animal was sufficient. It could be a sheep. It could also be a goat. Just as long as it was not a male sheep (a ram) and not a male goat. For the sin offering, the animal for an ordinary member of the covenant congregation had to be a female member of the herd. Everyone understood why. Because the female animal was not esteemed as highly as the male. It was only for an ordinary member of the congregation.

_The second possibility._

Let’s say that a ruler had committed a sin. In view here is a tribal head. What kind of sacrificial animal had to be sacrificed for such a ruler?

For that, a male goat was to be sacrificed. A much more respectable animal. Apparently on account of the respectable position of a tribal head in the midst of God’s covenant congregation. This explains why a male goat had to be used in this instance. We must point out that the word for “buck” or “male goat” does not have in Scripture that rather negative ring that it has for us. On the contrary, certain rulers and regents occasionally received the title “buck.” Completely different than with us. We would be insulting someone if we called him a “buck.”

There were two kinds of male goats. One had short hair, the other had long hair. The Law stipulated that male goats of the latter kind were to be used in the sin offering for the rulers. The assumption was stated that this animal with its long hair was the most suitable for that purpose. On account of its somber and miserable exterior, it was a symbolic portrait of sin and death. At the same time it was a symbol of fertility and life.

_The third possibility._

As we said, we have reversed the sequence. First a sheep or goat, then the male goat, and finally the bull. So we come to the animal with which the discussion in Leviticus 4 began. (We have seen more often that the Torah has the custom of identifying the most preeminent as the first.)
Here a sin has been committed by the (high) priest or by the entire congregation. (Note carefully, we are not dealing here with the sin offering brought on the feast days—that was always a male goat—but with special cases of sin in the congregation or by the priest.) That came down to the same thing. In both instances, guilt had been brought upon the entire people, and in both instances, a bull had to be sacrificed. The most expensive animal. A bull. The symbolic portrait of life.

(Just this brief comment. We placed the word “high” between parenthesis next to the word “priest.” In Leviticus 4:3 the phrase “the anointed priest” would have referred primarily to the high priest. But in the case of a sin offering for an ordinary priest, a bull had to be brought as well. This explains our use of parentheses.)

So much, then, for the various animals that were slaughtered for the sin offering. What a striking resemblance between our result here and that which we reached after 1. and 2. above. Here too our attention is drawn to the foundation on which God placed his people at Horeb on the day of “the foundation of the world.” With those sins for which the sin offering was instituted, God apparently considered that his covenant that had just been entered at Horeb was being affected in a very special way. For the question about which animal was to be brought in each distinct situation as a sin offering, was answered exclusively in terms of the place on the covenant foundation of holiness and life upon which God had set the person- or persons-in-question next to him at Horeb. The standard was not the person. Nor the transgression he had committed. Nor what had befallen him. The main issue was the place that God had assigned to each person in the covenant zone. The spot he had assigned in the midst of the Israelite “world” or society for each person to stand. That of the (high) priest. That of the ruler. Or that of the member of the congregation.

The teaching of the sin offering signified the deathblow for all subjectivistic piety, for all religion that put the human person at the center.

4. The actions relating to the blood of the sin offering

Our thoughts are led in the same direction by what Scripture tells us about the blood of the sin offering.

Once again we draw the reader’s attention to the earlier table, this time, to the third and fourth columns. Consider the following comments in that connection.

1. Three kinds of actions could be performed with the sacrificial blood. It could be thrown, dabbed, or sprinkled.

With all the bloody sacrifices other than the sin offering, some of the blood was thrown (Lev. 1:5; 3:2; 7:2). In the preceding, we have stated more than once that we should understand this throwing to resemble sowing. That is what the priest did with the blood of the burnt offering, peace offering, and guilt offering. Some of the blood was thrown against the sides of the altar in the forecourt.

But with the sin offering the priest dipped his finger—likely his right index finger (Lev. 14:16)—in the blood that had been collected and immediately brought some of it on the horns of either the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense offering. It could occur with the sin offering as well, that the priest would sprinkle the blood seven times with his finger (hizzâ, which some translate as splash) in the sanctuary on the floor in front of the curtain hanging in
front of the Holy of Holies. Indeed, simply to complete our description, once per year, on the
great Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sin offering on and in front of
the atonement covering in that Holy of Holies.

The reader will have noticed that the actions done with the blood of the sin offering were
entirely different than those with the blood of other sacrifices.

2. You will also have noticed that the blood of the sin offering did not always end up in the
same place. On what did this depend?

That depended on the position occupied by the person or persons for whom the sin offering
was being brought, within the covenant congregation.

If the sin offering was brought for an ordinary member of the congregation or for a tribal
leader, the blood of that offering came no further than the forecourt. At that point, some of
the blood was dabbed by the priest, brought (natan) on the horns of the altar of burnt offering in that
forecourt.

But if a sin offering was brought for the (high) priest or for the entire people, the priest went
with that blood into the holy place; he first sprinkled some of that blood seven times on the floor
“before the face of Yahweh in front of the veil” (Lev. 4:16–17), and secondly, he put some of the
blood on the horns of the altar of incense in that holy place.

We mentioned what happened on the great Day of Atonement with the blood of the sin
offering. That blood was then sprinkled on and in front of the ark in the Holy of Holies.

3. Next we want to say something about putting blood on the horns of the two altars, the altar
of burnt offering and the altar of incense.

To understand the purpose of these actions, we must begin by looking at these altars, then we
can look at the horns on these altars.

We must always recall that God gave Israel the promise that he would come to Israel via
altars. At least via the kind of altars that he himself commanded to be built unto the
remembrance of his name (Exod. 20:24–26). There would be the meeting places between him
and his people. There he would come to Israel and bless her. Such an altar would represent not
only God, but also his people, and thus the covering of Israel’s sins could occur by means of
bringing blood upon that altar. Because they represented the presence of the people involved
before the face of God, bringing the blood on the altar represented the covering and atoning
of their sins before the face of God. For the first party involved with such an altar was Israel’s God.
He had promised that they would find him there and he had instituted that there the blood would
cover the nepheš of the one bringing the offering (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 10:22).

In this way, the fact that blood was put on the altar of burnt offering, the blood of burnt
offerings, peace offerings, and guilt offerings, already constituted the preaching of the
forgiveness of sins. Constantly.

But when blood was put on the altar of burnt offering that had come from a sin offering, that
preaching was strengthened even more. How? In that the blood brought at that time was put on
the horns of the altar.

We have discussed in our commentary on Exodus (p. 166) the significance of the horns on
Israel’s altars. It was possible that such altar horns were an international phenomenon. But
wanted to annex these horns from the religious property of the nations around Israel in service to
his gospel. Just as at Horeb, at the foundation of the (Israelite) “world,” he had provided an
entirely new meaning to so many other religious items, namely, the meaning of his royal
covenant with Israel and of his nearness to this nation of his love, so too with having blood put on the horns of Israel’s altars he was again emphasizing and underscoring the promise of his presence and forgiveness. For the symbolic significance of blood on the horns of the altar would surely have meant something more for Israel’s ancient Near Eastern thinking than for ours. Perhaps the horns were part of the altar, so that the covering of those horns with blood symbolized the covering of people and their sins. God was not being covered, of course, and God was not being atoned for, but the one bringing the offering, the human being. But although the altar represented that person bringing the offering, it was still a (promised) place of meeting with God. And although as part of the altar, the horn represented the person, the one bringing the offering, it accentuated the promise of God’s presence, so that by bringing the blood specifically on such a horn, God’s promise of covering and atoning Israel’s sins was being sealed and sworn with extra force.

4. This juncture seems to afford us a suitable opportunity, as we conclude this discussion, to draw the attention of our readers to the unique and special character of the sin offering. By now, this will have become all the more clear, as we repeat the familiar triad.

   The emphases was as follows:
   The sin offering emphasized justification;
   The burnt offering emphasized sanctification; and
   The peace offering emphasized glorification.

   With no other kind of sacrifice were such obvious actions performed with the blood, and through no other single sacrifice was the declaration of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins (or justification) made as powerfully and as loudly as through the sin offering.

5. But finally, the question remains as to the meaning behind bringing the blood of the sin offering to three different locations.

   Consider the following.
   The reader will recall that there were three locations.
   (a) First, there was the altar of burnt offering. This stood in the forecourt. Upon this altar was placed the blood of the sin offering for a member of the congregation or a leader. The blood designated for this purpose went no further. For neither of the parties bringing the sacrifice of this blood was a priest. To be sure, a priestly task was assigned to all Israel, but the people themselves had declared their own inability to fulfill that task. This explains why they had received from God the “mediators” to serve them before God. So God maintained that practice.
   (b) Secondly, there was the altar of incense. This stood in the holy place. Upon this altar was placed the blood of the sin offering for the (high) priest and the entire congregation. After what was explained in (a), this is rather obvious. The holy place was the place for the priests. There they were allowed to appear, in that characteristic location their sin had to be covered. Not at the people’s altar, but at the priest’s altar. The altars symbolized and guaranteed the place of each respective party bringing the offering before God.

   But the people as a whole, when they had sinned and had to receive covering for that sin, were represented by the altar of incense. For although each individual member of the congregation and each “lay person” among Israel did not possess the priestly privilege, as a people Israel did bear a priestly character. You could contrast this with the situation among the pagans, in contrast to by far most pagans, Israel as a unit lived close to Yahweh. As his priesthood. It is possible that this was why God wanted the atonement relating to the sin of the
entire people to occur in the holy place, because he looked upon the entire people in terms of its most exalted part, namely, the Aaronic priesthood. According to the rule of the Torah, that the best was first.

And then in the situation now under discussion, namely, that of a sin offering for the (high) priest or entire nation, the blood was sprinkled seven times before the veil in the holy place. On what? That was not stated explicitly, but the place must surely have been the floor or the ground. Picture it this way: by means of the sevenfold sprinkling, a red line or corridor emerged on the ground in the holy place of the tabernacle, which pointed in the direction of the Holy of Holies that lay behind the veil. It did so with clear intention, indicated by something that was added. For this was to occur “before the face of Yahweh” (Lev. 4:6–7). Those words point especially to the ark of Yahweh. In fact, to that place the bringing of blood to the horns of the altar of incense also pointed. Then as well, it was added that the altar of incense stood “before the face of Yahweh” (Lev. 4:17–18). This was referring to the ark, which further clarifies the purpose. For actually, the blood of the sin offering in all these cases that we are now discussing—cases where sin guilt had fallen on the entire covenant people (Lev. 4:3)—had to be repeatedly sprinkled on Israel’s preeminent altar, the ark. But that did not happen every time. It happened only on the great Day of Atonement, once per year, and then actually when a sinful man approached God, functioning as a priest on behalf of others. Fine, that was allowed. As long as he had offered the required sacrifice for himself first (Heb. 7:27). Once per year. But no more than that. Otherwise Israel might have thought that the grand purpose—the restoration of Paradise fellowship between God and men—had already been achieved. But for that, another sacrifice was needed first.

This explains that strip or band of blood. It functioned like a traffic sign: Go that way! To the place of complete atonement for the people of the covenant.

For the reader will have paid close attention to the number seven, right? The blood had to be sprinkled seven times. The number seven was the number that recalled the establishing of the covenant with sacred oaths. The covenant was involved in the sin offering!

(c) Thirdly, there was the ark that stood in the Holy of Holies. On that altar the blood of a sin offering was placed at no other time than on the great Day of Atonement. We read about this in Leviticus 16. But the sprinklings that we discussed in (b) pointed fundamentally in the direction of the ark in the Holy of Holies. On the great Day of Atonement, however, that blood was sprinkled right next to the ark, even on the ark itself.

The actions performed with the blood of the sin offering have shown us again Israel’s unique privilege of being Yahweh’s covenant people. That was a great privilege, but it entailed for its possessors no lazy and sloppy living. Israel had to remember well that Yahweh could not tolerate it even when the feet of his people accidentally slipped toward the realm of paganism and death. Not to mention when this did not happen accidentally at all. Even though there was forgiveness with Israel’s good God. Not, of course, when a member of the covenant people committed the vulgarity of intentionally and knowingly walking beyond the holy parapet of the Torah with which God wanted to ensure the safety of his people, to the point of kicking against it.

We have also seen the special nature of the sins for which the sin offering was instituted. Not that we find in Scripture a complete catalogue of those sins. As far as we know, Israel never received such a catalogue. Their understanding of these particular sins was granted to Israel by God with the use of a symbolism that spoke powerfully. It was just as with marriage. Of course,
no man or woman entering marriage would present each other on their wedding day with a list of sins that would destroy their marriage. That’s not how people get married. In fact, a married man can hardly countenance the notion that his wife would slide away from the realm of their marriage covenant. Not to mention that this would happen not accidentally, but by culpable carelessness. Although forgiveness for this is certainly possible, and the concourse of the marital covenant can be continued normally. But when a wife would act as though she were not married, such misconduct would erode the foundation beneath her marriage. In the situations mentioned earlier, people were simply being directed to that foundation.

In this way, within Israel, people could sin against God to such a vulgar extent that the pedestal to which Yahweh had elevated his people Israel with the foundation of the world at Horeb would thereby be destroyed. At that point those who did that would have placed themselves outside the sphere of the covenant with Yahweh, into the sphere of paganism. Such a person would be acting as if the theocratic Torah did not apply to him. He would be acting like a pagan, identifying with paganism, behaving as though he was not consecrated to Yahweh, not Yahweh’s possession and beloved, but autonomous. Such abandonment of Yahweh and his fellowship of life rendered as guilty the idolater, the Sabbath breaker, and the murderer. The feet of such covenant members would not merely have slipped, but had actually been set on the path to the realm of death, far away from Yahweh. He would not have slid down accidentally, but would actually have walked away.

But in order that Israel would know very well that God could not tolerate this at all if their actions would merely nod in the direction of the realm of death and corruption, he surrounded Israel with a Torah filled with warnings, which we must still explain in due time. For example, when we discuss leprosy, uncleanness through death, etc. When the church of God was still a toddler, she was surrounded with loving care, but at the same time treated somewhat strictly. That is what the period of shadows was about. Christ had not yet appeared. A public display of Satan had not yet occurred, nor had he yet been pushed into retreat from pagan lands by the power of the apostolic preaching.

We now live in a time when this has happened. This explains why we now belong to that one church that has existed throughout all the centuries. The force field of the coming age had reached us, we who are former pagans. Indeed, the clock of church history is showing the lateness of the hour, such that the force field of the Spirit is again visibly shrinking. In our day the apostasy is great. And that gives us reason to fear. For even though the sacrificial Torah, and with it, the teaching of the sin offering, has been fulfilled, nevertheless it continues to preach to us as to who God is and in what ways he deals with us people. The doctrine of the gospel according to the New Testament is in a certain sense even more strict. For during this time of fulfillment, the church knows God not only as Yahweh, the One who is near, who once dwelt in the midst of Israel in a tent and who according to promise met Israel at the altars, but also as our heavenly Father, who has given us One who is no less than his own Son, and who has given us the Spirit of Christ to dwell among us and to work in our hearts and lives. This explains why the apostle writes: Or do you not know that we all who are baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death? This explains why we stand not only under the sealed assurance of the fact of living with Christ, but also under the strengthened demand of being obligated to live with him (Rom. 6:3–4). This explains why the letter to the Hebrews says:
For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:26–31).

Has the Christian church devoted appropriate attention to the teaching of the sin offering? Have Christians sufficiently considered that not only does God get angry about the insolent abandoning of the terrain of life itself, in which terrain he has placed us, but he disapproves of the smallest stumbling movement whereby we could slip away from that terrain?

What John writes about this is instructive. This apostle not only cursed the (Gnostic) members of the church who had broken outright the fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3), and had hated the brothers and departed from them (1 John 2:11, 19). These folk had sinned unto death (1 John 5:16). But John also went on, against the background of this culpably fatal desertion of Christ and his people by the Gnostics, to issue a very serious warning directed to the Christians who had remained faithful, that they themselves not go in the direction of those Gnostics. He wrote: “Little children, abide in him” (1 John 2:28); “everyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15); and “let us love one another... whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:7, 16). And for Christians among whom such sinning, such backsliding, such stumbling nonetheless did occur, he gave the comfort that if someone may have sinned once (this verb is in the Aorist tense, meaning that the sinning had occurred one time, it was a slip up), for such a sin that was not unto death, forgiveness was available with the Father, thanks to the atonement and advocacy of Christ (1 John 2:1; 5:16).

It is of concern that as the church that came from paganism, we have devoted inadequate attention to the new covenant, to the firm basis of the promise of life in Christ that God has placed under our feet along the pathway of historical acts of redemption. In saving our ancestors he also saved us from the power of paganism, darkness, and death, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13; 2 Pet. 1:11; 2:1). It would have been appropriate for us to compare these great works of God with what he did with Israel at Horeb, the more so since the New Testament often speaks using formulations borrowed from the Old Testament. Not in order to place us under the Law once again—far from it!—but to teach us God’s pedagogy. But sadly, to do that, the Old Testament, and certainly the gospel of the Law with its teaching about the name of Yahweh, the covenant of Horeb, the new foundation for Israel, consisting of commands regarding tabernacle, sacrifices, cleansings, feasts, etc., in short: the foundation of the world, was unfortunately all too unfamiliar (the phrase “foundation of the world” was regrettably identified with creation.) The teaching about the sin offering remained a closed book for many people. While in fact it is so extremely important. For with the sins related to the sin offering, what was involved was the question whether it was dealing with unforgiveable or a forgivable lack of respect for the sacred cable that God himself had tied around himself and his people Israel. No one was permitted to damage that cable. Better not even to come near to it. Better not to risk slipping off the life-foundation of Horeb.
5. The remaining actions connected with the sin offering

We need not say anything more about the actions preceding the sin offering, in connection with the animal (leading the animal, etc.), since we discussed this under “General Principles.” Nor do we need to say anything about the pouring out of the remaining blood from the sin offering “at the foot of the altar.”

We conclude with the following discussion of the fat and the meat of the sin offering.

All the fat of the sacrificial animals was designated for Yahweh. This included the fat of the animals used for the sin offering. In Leviticus 4:35 we are told very poignantly that if the animal used for the sin offering were a sheep, then the fatty tail of this animal was to be treated in the same manner as with that of the sheep used for the peace offering. Notice how scrupulously everything was regulated! The best was always set aside for Yahweh!

But what about the meat of the animal used for the sin offering?

As we’ve said more than once, there were two possibilities: (a) the sin offering could be brought for an ordinary member of the congregation or for a tribal leader, and (b) the sin offering could be brought for a (high) priest or for the entire congregation.

(a) In the first situation, the meat of the sin offering was eaten. Perhaps not by the one bringing the offering. Why not? Because though atonement for him had occurred, he was not supposed to think that this was connected to a festive meal. Are we to recall here that a sin offering was never joined with a peace offering? No bread and no cakes.

In fact, the distinction had to be kept in mind between a sin offering and the burnt offering. A burnt offering was entirely burned up on the altar. Everything except the skin, which was for the priest.

So even though the meat of the sin offering was not to be eaten by the one bringing the sacrifice, the priests were allowed to enjoy it. At least if this was a sin offering for the laity. Then the priests were allowed to eat the meat of that sacrifice. This came their way as part of the honorarium for their ministry in the sanctuary. But they were not permitted to eat this meat from the sin offering anywhere else other than in a sacred location, that is, not outside the forecourt. So they were not allowed to take it home, unlike the breast and shank of the peace offering. The latter they were allowed to take home for their wife and daughters to eat (Lev. 6:26, 29). But not any of the meat from the sin offering. That was not allowed to leave the forecourt. Moreover, in other respects they had to be careful with this meat of the sin offering, for everyone who came into contact with it would be holy. Perhaps this was referring to such a person as one who had become indentured as a servant in the sanctuary and could be redeemed only at a price. The same concern that sought to prevent any part of the most holy meat from the sin offering ending up outside the area of the sanctuary was manifested in the following stipulations about the cookware in which this meat of the sin offering was cooked. If this was earthenware, it had to be broken afterwards. (You should recall that unglazed earthen cookware retained moisture.) If it was metal, it had to be cleaned carefully. If any of the blood of the sin offering splattered on someone’s clothing, the priest had to wash it out well before the person with that garment could leave the forecourt (Lev. 6:24–30).

(b) In the second situation as well, when the animal of the sin offering was slaughtered for the (high) priest or the entire people, the priests were not allowed to eat its meat. The reason is clear. It was the same reason that the ordinary member of the congregation and the leader were not permitted to eat the meat from the sin offering. These people were not supposed to think that
they had brought a peace offering. The same applied to the priests. Even though their guilt and that of the people (for whom they functioned as substitutes) was atoned by the blood of the animal sacrifice in the sin offering, they were not supposed to think that they had brought a peace offering, to which a joyous meal was always connected. The rule was obvious: the person for whom a sin offering was brought may not eat of its meat. Consequently, all the meat of the sin offering in this second situation was burned. Not on the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt. The reason for that is clear as well: because people were not to suppose that they were involved in a peace offering. Therefore the entire animal of a sin offering—skin, head, legs, intestines, and manure—had to be burned, but not in the forecourt, but in a clean place outside the camp, the same place where the ashes of the sacrifices were deposited (Exod. 29:14; Lev. 4:11–12; 16:27).

We should not look for anything more behind this practice. We do see here that extreme care was taken to avoid any and every profaning of the sin offering. For in the case of a sin offering for a priest or for the entire people, this was most holy (qōdeš qādāšim), forbidden for any consumption (Lev. 6:25, 30).

It is so very desirable that people be thoroughly acquainted with this teaching of the sin offering, when they come to Hebrews 13:9–14. There we encounter the familiar words about Jesus, who “suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” Everyone will also recall the admonition: “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.” This Scripture passage is not always properly understood.

Perhaps the misunderstanding arises in connection with the words we just quoted, about Christ’s reproach, as if the meat of (some) of the animals used for the sin offering were burned outside the camp on account of its uncleanness. Jesus would then supposedly have been cast outside Jerusalem like an unclean sacrificial animal. Some make this argument. O how much has been made with this argument! From the preceding, however, we have seen how completely mistaken this notion is. The blood and the meat of the sin offering were very holy. So we must not go in that direction.

The original readers of the letter to the Hebrews, native Jews, would have understood better than we the author’s allusion to the teaching of the sin offering in these verses. For a twofold reason, if the assumption is correct that they, or at least some of them, were converted priests. Those people would have been thoroughly familiar with the sacrificial Torah. They would also have been thinking especially and frequently about what a good salary they had earned in the temple in former times. So let’s walk through the Scripture passage.

**Hebrews 13:9a:** Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings. It was not impossible that some of the Hebrews were so exhausted from being persecuted that they were considering going back to the synagogue, the Jewish church. There you could earn a living. There were the familiar secure practices of ancient times, they were thinking. But the author showed them that the Jewish worship had become something altogether new and foreign. The Torah, stripped of the grace of God that was given in the suffering Messiah Jesus, became a book filled with “strange teachings.” The Law of Moses emptied of God’s grace is a pagan book.

**Hebrews 13:9b:** For it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods. It is certainly not unbiblical to say that a person’s heart is strengthened by bread (Ps. 104:14–15), but it is unbiblical to think that such a thing happens exclusively by bread, by food alone (Deut. 8:3).

**Hebrews 13:9c:** Which have not benefited those devoted to them. When during and after the appearance of Christ in Jerusalem, people had to choose between the worship in the temple and believing in him, many unfortunately stayed with the “foods,” thinking surely that they were
continuing with the ancient ways, whereas this was being fulfilled, however, and rendered obsolete and antiquated (Heb. 8:13). Continuing that worship thus had no meaning any longer and brought no benefit, unlike formerly, under the Law.

Hebrews 13:10: We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. The writer is now making use of a masterful allusion to the Law, to which the Jerusalem priests even today are said to observe. They stuck with the temple and wanted no part of Jesus. Now then, says the writer to the Hebrews, ironically that is what should have been the case. That fit. For the Law prescribed that priests were not permitted to eat of the sin offering that had been slaughtered for the people as such, and the blood of which was brought into the holy place and put on the horns of the altar of incense. The writer is counting on his readers being well informed of the teaching of the sin offering. Down to the details. This explains the subsequent “refined” argumentation.

Hebrews 13:11: For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. The priests were not allowed to enjoy the sin offerings that were slaughtered for the people as such and whose blood was brought by the priests into the holy place, and on the great Day of Atonement by the high priest into the Holy of Holies. For such sin offering had to be completely burned outside the camp. So then, Jesus was just such a sin offering for the people. No wonder, then, that the Jerusalem priests today have no part in him. They do not “eat” him. Can you savor the irony?

Hebrews 13:12: So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. O how he was a genuine sin offering! He died on the cross outside the gate of Jerusalem—which had come in the place of the ancient tent camp from the wilderness period. He gave his blood—his own blood—for the people! He was a genuine “animal” sacrificed as a sin offering for the people.

Hebrews 13:13–14: Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. The allusions to the circumstances under the Law are tangible once again. To have fellowship with the Jewish worship as that was continuing to be practiced in Jerusalem could hardly go together with fellowship in Christ’s crucifixion and death, even though such would bring you reproach and persecution for the sake of Christ (Heb. 10:33; 11:26). (The reproach of Christ here is our reproach for Christ’s sake.) Be warned, however, you Hebrews! In the long run, you will increasingly find yourselves excluded from the synagogue, the Jewish church, with its economic and social benefits. But it does not have the last word. It is disappearing. Just like what happens with unstable tents. They are suddenly flattened. But soon Paradise will descend to earth, for which Abraham and the other patriarchs were already looking. The city with firm foundations. That reward is being preserved for you in heaven. The eternal inheritance (Heb. 11:10, 14).

It is understandable that some came to think that our Lord Jesus Christ was presented in Hebrews 13:12–13 as an “unclean” sin offering. They would have thought of such Scripture passages as 1 Peter 2:24 (“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree”). Nevertheless, that view was thoroughly mistaken. It opposed the teaching of the sin offering in the Law, and as we have seen, it violated the context of Hebrews 13:9–14 itself. Sin offerings were not unclean at all. They were holy to the highest degree. Including those sin offerings that were burned up outside the camp (because they had been brought for the people and its blood was therefore brought into the sanctuary, so that their meat was not allowed to be eaten by the priests, but had to be burned outside the camp in a clean place). Even the various concluding actions in
connection with the sin offering had to serve to convince the Israelites of the utmost holiness of this kind of sacrifice.

Why did the Israelites have to be directed repeatedly to that special holiness of the sin offering? So that they would be constantly reminded of the covenant that God had established with them at Horeb. Reminded of the exalted pedestal on which they had been placed with the “foundation of the world” that occurred there. So that they would be reminded of the sphere of holiness and the climate of life in which they were allowed to enjoy fellowship with Yahweh, and so that they would be warned never to forsake this foundation, because beyond it lay the uncleanness of paganism and the corruption of death.

When we later encounter various situations that required sin offerings, this scope of the teaching of the sin offering will become still more clear.
Chapter 10

The guilt offering (Lev. 5:14–6:7)

There is both similarity and dissimilarity between the sin offering and the guilt offering. Regarding the similarity, this will become clear to our readers in a moment. The guilt offering was not of the same kind as the burnt offering and peace offering. These were atonement sacrifices in general—every shedding of blood spoke of atonement—but not in particular. By contrast, the sin offering and the guilt offering was such. They were atonement sacrifices. That constituted the nature of both. Therefore our initial characterization can include them together, to say that the uniqueness of these two sacrifices came out in the fact that they emphasized the gospel of justification (or forgiveness). We will return to this below.

But first something about the dissimilarity between those latter two, the sin offering and the guilt offering. This difference was caused by the difference between the sins for which these two atonement sacrifices were brought.

We have discussed the sins for which the sin offering was brought. And we will get better acquainted with them as we read further in Leviticus (for example, about the “sins” of a woman who has just given birth, and of lepers). These were always sins involving, at least in principle, the forsaking of the life-sphere of God’s covenant with Israel.

But now something regarding the sins for which the guilt offering was brought. To clearly illuminate the difference between the sins behind the sin offering and those behind the guilt offering, we will use the following analogy borrowed from marriage.

A wife who is unfaithful to her husband and forsakes him to be involved with other men, has of course become to her husband like someone dead. That is obvious. But if a wife does something out of carelessness, something that appears to move in that direction in some sense—and only in some sense—when seen from a distance, that is far from acceptable to her husband and must of course be remedied along the route of atonement, but the foundation beneath the marriage was not destroyed. The marital relationship continues and marital life goes on.

This is analogous to the sin offering.

But in a good marriage, where such fundamental conflicts or such conflicts that could eventually lead to a fundamental separation never arise, nonetheless other things could arise that are not nearly as serious but still far from acceptable. A wife who otherwise demonstrates exemplary fidelity in keeping the marriage bond, could occasionally, without intending any wrong, without even realizing it, injure her husband’s position and usurp his rights. In such a situation, the wife would be doing her husband an injustice. It could also happen that a homemaker who in everything is faithful to her husband can conduct herself toward others with dishonor by incurring debts that she fails to pay. Such conduct injures her husband’s honor, and she is doing her husband an injustice.

This is analogous to the guilt offering.

So you can see the significant difference between the sins involved in the first situation, and those involved in the second. You can also understand that the reconciliation needed was correspondingly different.

The wrongdoing for which God instituted the guilt offering resembles the wrongdoing of the second wife. The wife who injured the covenant between her husband and herself, but who did
him an injustice. Whether directly, by wounding him, or indirectly, through her conduct toward others.

Our current Scripture passage is Leviticus 5:14–6:7. Other Scripture passages speak of the guilt offering, but nowhere as broadly as here. So this Scripture portion is our primary source for the Bible’s teaching about the guilt offering.

For the purpose of a bird’s eye view, we will need to divide this passage into two parts. Clearly it constitutes a unit. We find it very regrettable that on account of the chapter- and verse-divisions in our English Bibles, this is no longer evident. Originally it was, something you can still see from the text of the Hebrew Bible. There, Leviticus 5 ends not with verse 19, but the following seven verses belong to Leviticus 5 as well, so that this chapter has twenty-six verses in the Hebrew Bible, and the teaching of the guilt offering can be found in Leviticus 5:14–26. In the Septuagint translation in common use (Ralphs) the same is true. The reader may be asking: But how did we get that obnoxious division in this single Scripture passage, where the teaching about the guilt offering is now spread over the two chapters of Leviticus 4 and 5? The Vulgate is responsible for that, which is the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. That explains the strange division that we now have in our English translations. Nevertheless, we will be following this arrangement, since it makes things easier for our readers. But you may wish, depending on the English version of the Bible that you are using, to draw a thick line above Leviticus 5:14, or use another technique to indicate that with the words, “Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying,” a new Scripture section is beginning, one that turns to the guilt offering. Some of our English Bibles will indicate that with editorial headings.

So Leviticus 5:14–6:7 is a unit. This entire section deals with offense. In fact, this entire passage is dealing with committing offense against Yahweh.

But within this single unit we must distinguish between a first and a second section, where the first consists of Leviticus 5:14–19, which deals with unintentional offense against Yahweh, and the second consists of Leviticus 6:1–7, which deals with non-unintentional offense against Yahweh.

1. Leviticus 5:14–19: unintentional offense against Yahweh

To our regret, we must begin our discussion of this passage with a criticism. This concerns the way in which contemporary English translations render the opening verses. Leviticus 5:14–15 read this way in the NASB and the TNIV: “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘If a person acts unfaithfully and sins unintentionally against the LORD’s holy things, . . .’”

The Bible reader is faced with an unnecessary dilemma. It involves the question: How is it possible to be unintentionally unfaithful? Is that possible?

No, of course not. Every Bible reader who reads this first part about the guilt offering and surmises that unfaithfulness is never unintentional but always intentional, is correct. To speak of being “unintentionally unfaithful” is just as strange as speaking of dry water.

In Hebrew we find the word maʿal. This word can indeed mean unfaithfulness, infidelity. For example, it is used by Daniel, when he spoke about the sin of his forefathers, which had angered Yahweh so much that the Babylonian captivity resulted. “Because of the treachery [ma al] that they have committed against you” (Dan. 9:7). But although this Hebrew word can occasionally be rendered quite suitably as “unfaithfulness,” this doesn’t work in Leviticus 5:15, because something comes after the word maʿal that further restricts this evil to evil that is committed
unintentionally. Therefore in this instance, translators should have chosen a different word than “unfaithfulness” for *maʿal*. As it is, translators have confronted most of their readers with an unnecessary difficulty as they enter this rather challenging passage.

There is something else that makes it necessary, if readers are not to be confused, to clarify what we are accustomed to calling unfaithfulness. You may recall what we said earlier about the rule: There is no forgiveness for intentional sins (page ??Du221??). That rule applied as well to the evil mentioned here, to *maʿal*. For example, this was intentionally committed by king Zedekiah. This man had pledged loyalty and fidelity to Nebuchadnezzar, who had occupied his country. He had done so with an oath. He had sworn that oath before Yahweh. Nevertheless, he broke his word. God called that: unfaithfulness (*maʿal*), which he committed against me (Ezek. 17:20). For intentional *maʿal*, including breaking an oath sworn before Yahweh, there was as a rule no pardon. We see this as one more reason why translators should not have used the word “unfaithfulness” in Leviticus 5:15, because everyone would immediately relate that to intentionality, which the subsequent verses clearly exclude. In this section, we are not at all dealing with sin like that committed by king Zedekiah.

So a different translation is preferred.

We would prefer to translate the word *maʿal* in Leviticus 5:15 as “injure.” Sometimes this happens unintentionally. Mother can unintentionally bypass a child sitting at the table, and thereby “injure” the child. And as we will see, people can injure Yahweh unintentionally. That was, to be sure, a serious injury.

So we propose the following translation: “Yahweh spoke to Moses: If any commits a serious injury by sinning unintentionally against the holy things of Yahweh . . . .”

Before going further, we must say something about the expression “the holy things of Yahweh.”

This phrase is not referring to the so-called *most holy* things. We saw earlier that this latter phrase referred to the tabernacle and its furnishings—ark, table of showbread, etc.—but also the share of the food offering that was left over for the priests. We have also met the phrase when we were discussing the meat of the sin offering. The food offering and the meat of the sin offering were most holy, which explains why they were assigned exclusively to the priests. Ordinary members of the congregation had no rights with respect to these. But also no obligations that they could possibly fail to perform.

But there were also *holy things*, things that were not the *most* holy, but simply holy. We encountered an example of this. For the so-called wave breast and the shank of the peace offering were devoted to Yahweh. Those were a “holy portion for the priest” (Num. 6:20). But the priests did not need to eat them exclusively in the holy place. They could enjoy them at home, with the members of their families.

Among *the holy things for Yahweh* were also all the firstborn clean animals, and all first fruits and tithes of the land. You can read more about this in Numbers 18. It was obvious that God has assigned special rights to these. Regarding the firstborn, we recall the history of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, when the firstborn children of Egypt were killed, but those of Israel were spared. Regarding the gathering of tithes and first fruits in the land of Canaan, these would belong to Yahweh as the Landlord. Because he it was who would conquer the land. Therefore Israel would receive the use of the land, but Yahweh remained the Owner. “For the land is mine,” he said (Lev. 25:23). Because God had a right to all the income that was his as Israel’s Landlord, and could use it as he wished, he could also give it to whomever he wanted. At Horeb
already, he had assigned this to the tribe of Levi (Lev. 27:30). To the priests and Levites. So you can easily understand that withholding any of this from the priests and Levites was basically to injure the rights of Yahweh. For Israel was supposed to leave “the holy things” for Levi, though she actually brought them to Yahweh, who in turn assigned them to the servants in his sanctuary. Recall what we said earlier in connection with the wave breast and the shank of the peace offering, about the “detour”.

There you have an explanation of the holy things of Yahweh.

With this, the character of the evil for which the guilt offering was instituted will have become clearer. This evil consisted in an assault against rights, in particular, property rights. That is what we are discussing here. According to the customary manner of the Torah of always placing the preeminent first, it speaks first of all about injuring the property rights of Yahweh.

Here is an example. Let’s suppose that by accident the tenth portion of the harvest from a field was not brought to the sanctuary. Pure oversight. What had to happen?

Three things.
First, what was held back had to be given. Today, we would call that the restitution of what had been stolen.
Second, 1/5 of the stolen material was added as extra payment. Today, we would call that compensation.
So the total of restitution + compensation = 6/5 of what was stolen.
Third, a ram had to be brought as a guilt offering. Of course, this would have to be a whole or healthy ram, without any defects. But what was special is that this was an expensive animal. The priests had to pay close attention to this. Naturally the estimate about whether the ram was expensive enough was assigned to Moses. We read literally: “with the estimation by shekels of silver” (KJV). Though this estimate was originally made by Moses, later this task was given to the priests, so that “according to your estimate” became a technical phrase that meant according the estimate of the priest (Lev. 27:2–3). For what purpose was this estimate necessary? Surely to prevent the Israelites from finishing off too easily the payment of their debt. In fact, even with enlisting the priests and their estimate, the danger of corruption remained close at hand. According to 2 Kings 12:16, it had become common practice that the guilty party paid the priest the value of a choice ram and the priest was supposed to take care of the remainder. That payment had to be given in silver, in silver shekels, and holy shekels, shekels of the sanctuary (Lev. 5:15). In this connection we must recall that the shekel was not a coin like we use every day, no piece of currency, but a weight. People used pieces of gold and silver of a certain size, but those pieces still had to be weighed. People carried in their belts a scale with stones. Silver was the usual means of payment, which explains that the word for “silver” can also mean simply “money.” What was involved here was undoubtedly the officially established weight for the payments and sacrifices given for the temple, in contrast to the weights used in the market, which depended on various factors like local values, weights for buying or selling, or simple contractual agreement. It seems that we should value the holy shekel to have weighed about ten grams.

With this we are not yet finished discussing the first part of Leviticus 5:14–19, regarding the guilt offering. For it could be possible that an Israelite had not aggrieved Yahweh in an unintentional manner, but rather had aggrieved one of his neighbors. So the injured party was not Yahweh himself. That latter possibility was what the Torah began with before turning to the former possibility.
Someone in Israel could well have thought that aggrieving the neighbor simply wasn’t in view. That the only thing that mattered was that Yahweh was not aggrieved. Which practically speaking simply meant: just so the priests and Levites got their portion—the tithes, etc.—then everything was fine. But aggrieving other people, ordinary people, so what? Was not a human being far less than God?

That is exactly the kind of thinking that our passage warns of in the second half, namely, Leviticus 5:17–19: “If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the LORD’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realizes his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity. He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent for a guilt offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him for the mistake that he made unintentionally, and he shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering; he has indeed incurred guilt before the LORD.”

The key element in these verses is that no matter how unintentional the harm, and no matter that it was not committed against Yahweh, one was still guilty. Guilty before Yahweh.

The reader should observe well the difference between the first and second halves of our passage. The most important One was first. It began with unintentional harm to Yahweh, in verses 14–16. Then the passage continued with a more general section that treats committing harm in general, in verses 17–19. But even the latter form of committing harm was seen as an evil that rendered a person guilty toward God. In our humble opinion, verse 19b expresses that emphatically.

So a person was already guilty toward Yahweh if he unintentionally aggrieved his neighbor. Now then, how guilty would a person be if he did not act unintentionally, or in other words: had acted intentionally?

To that we now turn.

2. Leviticus 6:1–7: intentional offense against Yahweh

Both of these sections begin with the same introductory formula: “Yahweh spoke to Moses” (Lev. 5:14; 6:1).

From those two introductions, you can see immediately that the one Scripture unit that deals with the guilt offering (Lev. 5:14–6:7) consists of two sections. The fact that the second section begins with the same words as the first shows that in this section we are beginning an entirely new subject.

What is the content of this new section?

Is it perhaps the case that whereas the first section began with the sin of unintentional offense against Yahweh, the second section will now deal with the intentional offenses against Yahweh?

No, the second section will not deal with that. In fact, it cannot, for we learn what God thinks about members of his covenant people who committed intentional offenses against him from the story of Achan in Joshua 7. That man committed an offense against Yahweh “with a high hand,” as it says in Numbers 15:30. That man committed the sin unto death, the sin for which there is no pardon.

No, we need not expect that this second section will deal with intentional offenses against Yahweh.

What then remains?

Intentional offenses against the neighbor.
Two comments before going further.

An offense against the neighbor in Israel was viewed as an offense against Yahweh, which explains why Leviticus 6:2 begins this way: “If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against Yahweh by deceiving his neighbor . . . .” This shows that this sin against the neighbor was viewed as committed indirectly against Yahweh.

Secondly, you will recall what we said earlier about intentional sins. It simply was not the case that in Israel, for example, every thief was simply put to death, even though stealing is certainly a crime that is always committed intentionally. This was so, despite the rule: whoever sins intentionally must be put to death, a rule that was enforced only in the case of intentional sin committed directly against Yahweh (think of Achan). But it was also the case that when a robbery became known, whether immediately or later, the judges did not have the death penalty enforced against the guilty person, though they did enforce another rather severe punishment. Stolen money had to be repaid double (Exod. 22:7), stolen small livestock fourfold, and stolen cattle fivefold (Exod. 22:1). But if a thief turned himself in, a far more mild punishment was given. That is what this second section is talking about (Lev. 6:1–7).

To assist in clarity, we offer the following overview of the entire subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>maʿal against Yahweh</th>
<th>direct</th>
<th>indirect (via the neighbor)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intentional</td>
<td>(Achan)</td>
<td>(Lev. 5:14–16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>unintentional</td>
<td>(Lev. 5:17–19)</td>
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Our section provides us an interesting look at the life of the Israelites together. For that is what is in view. Intentional offenses that violate the neighbor’s rights. Actually, the word neighbor is never mentioned, but rather fellow citizen. That did not mean, of course, that people in Israel were permitted to do anything they wished to the sojourner. They were not permitted to oppress and harass the sojourner (Exod. 23:9; Lev. 19:34). But committing an offense against one’s fellow citizen was for that reason so serious, of course, because he too was a covenant partner of Yahweh. Just imagine that a powerful prince like one or another Hittite or Assyrian king was favorably disposed to establishing a covenant with two of his vassals (subordinate rulers), and that those two vassals later waged war against each other. Such a mutual conflict was not tolerated by the treaty into which the king of kings had invited his (subordinate) covenant partners.

Committing an offense against one’s own fellow citizen, the brother and fellow covenant member, was the most serious. Here again we see the custom followed in the Law of putting at the beginning what was the preeminent part. This example of committing an offense against an Israelite fellow citizen was the most poignant.

How could people commit offenses against each other?

It could happen, for example, that one Israeliite gave something of his own to another Israeliite as security. Imagine the nomadic, constantly mobile life of shepherds. How often and how long were they required to travel with their flocks away from home? On such trips, they couldn’t take everything with them, even for an animal that might become sick. Using security deposits must have been widespread among Israel, especially in regions where they walked around for months.
bring their flocks to pasture. All kinds of objects, including money, would have been left behind with others, including those who were guarding a village.

For example, one Israelite would give another a sheep as security. Or a sum of money. But when he returned to retrieve his sheep or his money, he was told: “I don’t know anything about it. What are you talking about?”

It could also happen that one Israelite simply stole outright from another. Or that one Israelite swindled another, without the other noticing it or being able to prove it. Or someone found an object that another had lost, which he failed to return but kept for himself. When the lawful owner later spotted his lost object and said, “That’s mine,” the fellow would deny emphatically that he had found it, perhaps with an oath, insisting with all his energy that it had always belonged to him.

Such difficulties can occur among people. If one says “yes” and the other says “no,” and there are not witnesses, then a resolution to a potential drawn-out conflict can occur only when the guilty party repents, when his conscience speaks up.

When something like this happened in Israel, there would be forgiveness for the (intentional) transgressor of God’s commandment. Of course he must return to his brother what he had taken. In addition, he had to pay one-fifth of the value of what he had taken as a fine. But finally he would have to bring a ram as a guilt offering to Yahweh. For although he had directly injured his brother, he had indirectly offended Yahweh, whose covenant partners both individuals were. The priest should make atonement for him in the presence of Yahweh, and forgiveness would be granted to him.

Notice how clearly we see here the evangelical (gospel-filled) character of the Torah. Naturally, it shows clear traces of correspondence with legislative collections that were enforced among the nations around ancient Israel. But what we saw in connection with the tabernacle, we see here again. The Tabernacle also showed unmistakable traces of similarity with pagan sanctuaries that existed before and during its construction. But thanks to the gospel of God that was exhibited in that tabernacle—the gospel of justification (or forgiveness), sanctification (or conversion or regeneration or the daily renewing of our lives), and glorification (or the Paradisal concourse restored between God and humanity)—this tent became something entirely different from every other contemporary or subsequent sanctuary among the pagans.

Here as well, the laws of sacrifice in the Torah were saturated with God’s compassion and patience with his ancient covenant people. We want to alert all Bible readers that they need to pay constant attention to this feature. Otherwise we turn the lovely Law of God into a gruesome pagan document. Recall how earnestly Paul warned (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20) against such a return to the legalistic Jewish and pagan attitude in connection with reading the Law.

Unfortunately in those passages in Galatians and Colossians, our Bible versions leave much to be desired with regard to clarity. For the apostle uses the Greek work stoicheia, which referred to heavenly bodies. The primary referent was Israelite worship, in which days, weeks, and months that were regulated by the orbiting times associated with sun and moon, played an important role. We will discuss this further in connection with Israel’s feasts. When God’s grace was removed from that Israelite worship, what remained was just as empty as the idolatrous worship of sun, moon, and stars, which belonged to the pagan calendar religion. In those four passages mentioned above, you could read the word “calendar” in place of “elementary principles” or “elemental spirits.” You need to be very careful not to turn the Torah into a hard-fisted rule-book. For even Paul called the Law “holy, righteous, and good” (Rom. 7:12). The
Law was lovely. By means of the Law, God wanted to lead his people Israel, with his fatherly hand that was at the same time disciplinary yet friendly, to meet the day of Christ. For this reason, the Law was lovely, because it was to be fulfilled by Israel in love (Rom. 13:10).

A wise and loving father does not punish all the sins of his children with equal strictness and severity. Therefore a guilt offering was not the same as a sin offering. The actions that occurred with the former were not all that remarkable. Even though it was an atonement sacrifice, the blood of the guilt offering, unlike with the sin offering, was not dabbed on the horns of the altar, either the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense offering, but simply sprinkled (zaraq) on the (inner) sides of the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt (Lev. 7:2). The other actions were identical to those that occurred with the peace offering (laying on of hands, burning the fat). The meat of the guilt offering was not allowed to be eaten by anyone other than the priests, and then only in the holy place, which is to say: not outside the forecourt. In this respect, the similarity with the sin offering was undeniable. The intention of this stipulation would have been correspondingly similar, namely, that Israel was not to think lightly of the sins for which the sin offering had been instituted.

The question is asked why for this sacrifice a ram was always to be slaughtered? The correct answer to that question is likely this: because in the ancient world, the sheep was preeminently used for making payment. Especially in the case of bringing tribute to kings. Similarly, the guilt offering was required when the royal legal order that God had instituted in Israel, when he exalted the people of Israel to be his covenant partner, had been violated.

Why did this usually have to be a male sheep, a ram? Probably thereby to underscore the serious character of the evil that had been committed. This was comparable to the sin offering for a leader, that could not be a female specimen of the flock, but always had to be a male.

3. Examples of intentional indirect offenses (maʿal) against Yahweh

As we said earlier, the unit of Leviticus that we are discussing here (Lev. 5:14–6:7) is the preeminent Scripture passage that deals with the guilt offering, but not the only one. There are more, and we would identify a couple of them, since they shed light on the section of Leviticus dealing with the guilt offering.

First, Numbers 5:5–10.

The situation was this: someone had treated another person indecently, had hurt them. After some time had passed, he repented of his unlawful conduct. He confessed it and wanted to make it right. But he could not, for the one he injured had died. What was supposed to happen in such a situation?

The guilty party must repay the value of the item stolen, plus one-fifth of the value, and pay it to the next of kin (gōʾ ěl) of the one who had died, whose task was to secure the claims of the deceased.

But what if there was no next of kin? Then the debt could be paid to Yahweh, and Yahweh in turn paid it to the priest—here is that familiar “detour”—to whom the person in question confessed his guilt and who would then perform a guilt offering for that person.

This small piece about the guilt offering in Numbers 5 clearly shows evidence of being a later addition, added to Leviticus 6.1–7, to what we discussed in 2. above. The purpose of this is clear. God wanted to provide a way for a penitent sinner who faced a situation where the person he swindled was no longer accessible, to nonetheless be able to live with a clean and quiet
conscience among Israel, a people who since Horeb was a nation of covenant partners under the Great King Yahweh.

Another situation is different. It is described in Leviticus 19:20–22. Someone had sexual relations with a female slave belonging to someone else. Such a thing never happened, of course, without forethought, but always intentionally. The temptation to this evil would have occurred more easily than the sin of adultery with someone’s wife, given the lower position of female slaves.

Should such a man who had sexual relations with the female slave, who belonged to another, be put to death?

Perhaps according to some fanatics, that should have happened. They would probably point to the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” But God’s Word does not point us in that direction at all. According to the Torah, that man had not committed adultery. He had not been involved with the wife of his neighbor; for that, to be sure, the death penalty was required (Lev. 20:10). Rather, the evil he had committed was viewed as a violation of his neighbor’s property rights. The female slave was his property. Therefore the one who committed this evil was first given a punishment. We do not know what that punishment consisted of, though some think it may have been some kind of corporal punishment, like a beating. But that strikes us as somewhat romanticized. We could better suppose that the punishment was monetary. This would have been stipulated by the priest, and the amount would have been paid to the owner of the female slave as compensation for damage. Then the man who had committed the crime would have been required to have the priest sacrifice a ram as a guilt offering for himself. Then the man would have received forgiveness, and would have been able to live again with a good conscience among the people of the covenant made with Yahweh. The violation of the law was covered (symbolically) before God’s face by the atoning blood of the ram.

4. Examples of unintentional direct offenses (ma’al) against Yahweh

The last situation that we just discussed fit clearly with Leviticus 6:1–7 (an intentional indirect offense against Yahweh).

We wish to mention two other situations that display the nature of Leviticus 5:14–19, especially verses 14–16 (unintentional direct offense against Yahweh).

An Israelite has come down with leprosy. But the sickness has gone away; he is healed. Later we will see, with Leviticus 13–14, all that had to be done in such a situation. Here we would observe initially nothing more than that a sheep had to be brought as a guilt offering for him (Lev. 14:12). The reason for that is not mentioned explicitly. At the same time, a sin offering had to be brought, and that would have been required with a view to his having left Israel’s life-foundation (more about this later). But because during the time of his impurity the leper had to dwell outside the camp, and at that point did not participate in the cultus in the forecourt (a service, ʿābōdā, Exod. 3:12; 12:25–26; 13:5), so that Yahweh was shortchanged by him, this guilt offering for the leper would have been brought with a view to his offense or evil (maʿal) committed directly against Yahweh, no matter how unintentional, and for this wrong, such an atonement sacrifice, namely, this guilt offering, was required.

But because this evil had been committed against Yahweh without intention, this time it was prescribed that not a ram, but a sheep, was to be brought as a guilt offering. The leper did incur guilt. For the fact that sin, and thus also leprosy, had entered the world was surely not God’s fault. But one could hardly speak of a personal, angry intention at work in this situation.
Presumably in this situation, therefore, the person could suffice with a sheep as a guilt offering, rather than a ram.

As the last example we would mention that of the Nazirite, who during the time of his vow had become unclean due to some contact with death in his surroundings. Thereby the entire preceding time of his vow had been rendered void, and he had to start all over again. Moreover, a sheep had to be brought for him as a guilt offering (Num. 6:12). The reason for that was that vows made to Yahweh had to be kept. A wrong had occurred against Yahweh. For at bottom, the cause of the interruption of the votive period, namely, death, was not to be blamed on God. Nevertheless, the factor of unintentionality was also in play. With that in view, the Nazirite was required to bring not a ram, but a sheep, as a guilt offering.

In such small details, we must observe God’s gentleness. We can see this throughout the Torah. No wonder, since it is a book filled with gospel. That is its pervasive nature. Anyone who does not see the evangelical (gospel-filled) character of the Torah, is left with a pagan document, full of annoying regulations. With the lovely Law of Moses in his hands, such a person has fallen back into our pagan past, with its honoring of “the elemental spirits.”
Chapter 11

The second section of the sacrificial Torah (Lev. 6:8–7:38)

We can be briefer here. In our preceding discussion about the different sacrifices and their distinct regulations, we have mentioned various things.

Nevertheless, you should not think that what follows next will contain nothing new. This conclusion of the sacrificial Torah is itself a distinct entity with its own character.

Actually it was the case that the entire sacrificial Torah consisted of two parts that differed in this way.

Part 1 was commanded to Moses by God with an eye to the laity. “Speak to the Israelites and say to them . . .” (Lev. 1:2).

Part 2 was given with an eye to the priests. “This is the portion of Aaron and of his sons from the LORD’s grain offerings, from the day they were presented to serve as priests of the LORD. The LORD commanded this to be given them by the people of Israel, from the day that he anointed them. It is a perpetual due throughout their generations” (Lev. 7:35–36).

In order to show a bit more fully the priestly character of this conclusion of the sacrificial Torah, we will take our readers on a brief stroll through this passage. We will use italics to indicate each distinct part of this passage.

Commands for the priests involving the daily morning and evening sacrifices (Lev. 6:8–13)

In the sacrificial Torah, the burnt offering is discussed twice, first in Leviticus 1 and the second time in this passage.

The difference was this. Leviticus 1 talked about the burnt offering that was brought voluntarily by a member of the laity, but here it speaks about the two burnt offerings that were to be brought daily for all of Israel, one in the morning and one in the evening, by the priests. For that reason, this burnt offering for the congregation was called the continual burnt offering (tāmîd). The institution of this sacrifice—a lamb that was always to be accompanied with a grain offering—was described back in Exodus (29:38–46), and again in Numbers (28:1–8).

This continual sacrifice was not voluntary, but a daily obligation. Interrupting or stopping it was something terrible (Dan. 11:31; 12:11).

You can imagine that a constant column of smoke went up from Israel’s forecourt, ascending in the form of a tower. Pointing to the blood of the lamb that atoned daily, and to the grain offering in which Israel continually offered their heart and life to Yahweh. This symbolism would speak to a Christian today. What does God require of us, now that we have received a new and better covenant, of which Jesus has become its Surety?

Daily provision for this continual burnt offering had to be the first task and the last task. The other sacrifices were permitted, in the course of the day, to be brought on, literally, above this altar of burnt offering. So this sacrifice has a fundamental place, comparable with the first of the Ten Words: “You shall have no other gods before me.” This, too, God had placed first when he gave the Ten Words at Horeb. So, too, the burnt offering had priority. Every morning it was the first sacrifice, and every evening it was the last. Hear, Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone. You shall love Yahweh, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut. 6:4–5).
We Christians have all the more reason to open and close each day with such a prayer of praise and thanks, given the unshakeable foundation of the new covenant, upon which the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has now placed us.

Each day, this prayer must be our first and last priestly work (1 Pet. 2:9–10), continually (tāmîd), which, if it were to stop, would be terrible.

**Commands for the priests concerning the grain offering (Lev. 6:14–18)**

As we just observed, the daily burnt offering was always accompanied with a grain offering. A couple of times it was even called “the evening sacrifice” (hāʾāreb minḥat, Ezra 9:4–5).

We wrote earlier about the ingredients required for the grain offering, the quantities used and the most holy character of this sacrifice. Naturally, the hint God was giving Israel in this sacrifice is all the more powerful for us, because God has granted to us the knowledge of the gospel of his Son. So we do not labor in the first place to please ourselves with this, do we? Is true, isn’t it, that Christians do not work in the first place in order to eat? But in order, with the fruit of their labor, to serve the God and Father of their Savior.

**Commands concerning the daily high priestly grain offering (Lev. 6:19–23)**

In addition to the already mentioned grain offering of the priests—of which nothing was eaten—each morning and evening yet another grain offering was to be brought, this one by the high priest. Thus, first by Aaron and later by his successors, from the day of their inauguration into office. This is what the apocryphal book Sirach would have had in view when it says: His sacrifices shall be wholly burned twice everyday continually (45:14).

This high priestly grain offering was remarkable.

Everything was perfectly regulated. Each morning and evening, the priests brought a burnt offering and a grain offering. And still it wasn’t enough. The grain offering of the high priest had to be added. For he was ultimately the only priest who represented the entire nation. The priest did as well. Their work was also not perfect.

The New Testament teaches us that the ministry of Aaron in turn found it fulfillment in the ministry of our High Priest, Jesus Christ, with his sacrifice rendered once on the cross, and with his daily intercession in heaven for us.

**Commands for the priests concerning the sin offerings (Lev. 6:24–30)**

We drew a lot from these verses earlier when we discussed the sin offering, so we need not comment any further, except for this one item. This sacrifice was like regulated in such a way that with the eating of the meat of the sin offering, the officiating priest had precedence (v. 26). Only if there was enough left over could the other priests who had not officiated eat it. But no one else, for the meat of the sin offering was most holy (v. 29).

**Commands for the priests concerning the guilt offerings (Lev. 7:1–10)**

In connection with this section, we will make only two comments.

1. Here again we see very clearly that we must always read sacred Scripture appropriately. For in verse 7 we read: “The guilt offering is like the sin offering; there is the same ritual for them.” A person given to fanaticism would easily infer too much here, as though no difference existed between the guilt offering and the sin offering. But if you reflect on this, you will understand that this stipulation was related merely to the final destination of the meat of the guilt offering and the meat of the sin offering. Both of these kinds of sacrificial meat belonged
exclusively to the priests. The meat of the guilt offering was specifically for the officiating priest first of all. God is not served without compensation for his servants.

For that reason, verse 8 immediately adds the stipulation that *the skin of the burnt offering* (which, as you recall, was completely burned up) was also for the priest who had performed the service.

Parenthetically, we never read about the skins of the animals that were slaughtered in connection with the other sacrifices—peace offering, sin offering, and guilt offering. Presumably with few exceptions those skins always went to the officiating priest. But the fact that in this instance alone, something is said about the skin of the animal used for the burnt offering, is to be explained from the reality that the burnt offerings had to be burned up entirely, and no one, absolutely no one, received anything to eat from it. So absolute was the rule that God was not served without compensation for the officiant, so that at least the *skin* of the animal used for the burnt offering had to be given to the priest. It was understood that this went to the officiating priest. For we would bring great sadness to our good God if we were to suppose that he was stingy and tight-fisted. God never permitted people to serve him without compensation. Proof? His command in connection with the skin of the animals used for the burnt offering.

2. Next, we can also see here that already in the days of the Israelite church, the Holy Spirit did not enjoy tiring people out with a monotone system. One might better describe this section of instructions as rambling from one subject to another. For in verse 7, the designation of the meat from the guilt offerings and the sin offerings is discussed. Next, in verse 8, God immediately added the stipulation about the skin of the burnt offering animals. To this, in verse 9, yet another regulation was added regarding the grain offering. Actually, this was a twofold regulation. First, that every grain offering that was baked (regardless of how they were baked) would be designated for the officiating priest (v. 9); and second, that every other grain offering could be used by the rest of the priests (v. 10).

There you see that even though this passage began by talking about the guilt offering, several regulations about the sin offering, burnt offering, and grain offering were simply joined to it.

Those who suffer from the disease of systematititis will shudder at this. Or allow themselves to be healed and become somewhat more moderate.

*Commands for the priests concerning the peace offerings (Lev. 7:11–21)*

We will tell the reader in advance that in the conclusion of the sacrificial Torah, the peace offering is discussed twice. The first time here, and the second time in Leviticus 7:28–34. What is the difference between these discussions?

The first one is directed to the priesthood and says: “Care for my people.” The second one is directed to the people and says: “Care for my priests.”

So here we have the first passage, dealing especially with the priests. Those servants had to pay special attention to issues like this: what kind of peace offering was being brought (praise offering, etc.); the age of the meat used in this or that kind of peace offering; and the like. The priests were supposed to pay very scrupulous attention to this technical side of the peace offerings. For even though the meal associated with the peace offering was allowed to be ever so joyful for Israel, eaten right under Yahweh’s eyes, it had to be done in a sacred manner, so that, for example, no rotting meat was consumed. For stench and decay were incompatible with God, and with the people of life. (Later we will be discussing how, on account of uncleanness, people could be prevented from participating in such a meal connected with the peace offering [Lev. 7:19–20].)
Commands (for the priests to see to it) that the Israelites would not use any fat or blood (Lev. 7:22–27)

Suddenly this passage includes a word that Yahweh spoke to Moses with a view to the Israelites (vv. 22–23). Nevertheless, it was obvious that this received a place here in the “priestly” conclusion of the sacrificial Torah because the priests were the individuals appointed to oversee the proper course of events in connection with the sacrifices. That this was inserted specifically at this point would be related to the fact that the peace offerings had just been discussed. These were the only sacrifices of which a portion was used by non-priests.

We may point Bible readers to the fact that this passage must be understood in connection with the time to which it applied. Otherwise they might infer from the words: “You shall eat no fat of ox or sheep or goat,” that Israel was never or rarely permitted to enjoy the fat of these animals. But in addition to the fact that there were other clean animals (deer, gazelle), this prohibition given with respect to the animals mentioned was an absolute prohibition only for a time, namely, during the wilderness travels. In connection with Leviticus 17, we will see what God wanted to prevent by means of this prohibition, namely, that here or there among the people an animal (suitable for sacrificing) would be slaughtered and used in connection with pagan sexual abominations. Therefore at Horeb God stipulated that all slaughtering of animals was to occur in the forecourt of the tabernacle, under the watchful eye of his priests, as peace offerings, from which, as you know, the fat was to be brought before God on the altar.

As will become clear in due course from Leviticus 17, this drastic measure was adopted with a view to the special circumstances in the days of Israel’s stay at Horeb and in the wilderness. The intention was, as we indicated, to clamp down radically on any and every impulse toward (idolatrous) abominations. Remember where Israel came from. From Egypt! And where Israel was headed. To Canaan! With a view to that danger, God was now speaking so absolutely. Absolutely no fat (Lev. 7:23, 25). But later a change was made to this regulation by Moses (Deut. 12). At that point it was the night before Israel would receive her joyful inheritance, when Israel would settle in the land of promise and spread out therein. Then Israel would not be dwelling so close to the tabernacle as during her wilderness travels. So the regulation given here, and the one given in Leviticus 17:1–7, were suspended at that point. Not, of course, the prohibition against pagan sexual abominations, which continued in force, but the command that people would perform every slaughter for consumption in the forecourt of the tabernacle. Later that was impossible to implement. Naturally, people were then allowed to keep the fat of such an (ordinary) slaughtered animal for themselves, and enjoy it themselves.

Meanwhile at Horeb two other prohibitions were given that later were not suspended by Moses. That is what we’ll be discussing in the remainder of our passage.

1. Verse 24. The fat of animals that died on their own, or were killed by other animals, Israel was not permitted to eat either now or in the future. This was stated throughout, in the interests of clarity. For the Israelites knew from many different regulations that her God had an aversion against his people coming into any contact with death. We will come back to this in connection with Leviticus 11–15 (regarding contact with uncleanness and death).

2. Verses 26–27. Any and all use of blood was and continued to be forbidden. After everything we have said about Leviticus 17:11, and in view of what we will be saying about Leviticus 17, we need to go into great detail here. Behind this prohibition lay Yahweh’s intention
to remind his people of their noble position as a holy nation, a people of life. For blood signified
death. And death was incompatible with a people who possess such rich promises.

By means of this prohibition, God perhaps wanted simultaneously to keep his people from
the superstitious drinking of blood that occurred among the pagans. They seemed to think that
through this practice, they came into closer fellowship with their gods. With the Dionysian orgies
it happened that those who believed in ecstasy would take an animal that supposedly incarnated
the deity and tear it open and eat it raw. The devil surely knows how to deceive our human race
with the most ridiculous follies. Those practices seemed to have swirled around Israel. In
Leviticus 19, where God warned Israel against other Canaanite abominations, he gave this
prohibition: “You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice augury or
witchcraft” (v. 26; notice the sequence of blood and pagan superstition).

Nevertheless, the history of these two remaining prohibitions in our passage continued into
the New Testament time.

By means of the shedding of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the shadows of the Law
were fulfilled. The animal blood had fulfilled its instructional, symbolic task. The dominion of
the commands concerning unclean animals, etc., had also ended. God said: Rise, Peter, kill and
eat (Acts 10:13). Gradually the light broke through, and Christians realized that the Law
possessed only a shadow of the future benefits. Gradually. (We will return to the epistle to the
Hebrews.) Among some of them, this insight was never achieved. These were the so-called
Judaists (Judaizers), intense Christians from among the Jews, who continued holding to the letter
of the Law with a semblance of legitimacy. But in reality, Paul says, they were instruments of
Satan (Eph. 6:12; 1 Thess. 2:18), in terms of their attempt to turn the Christian church into a
Jewish church and to bring Christians who came from the Gentiles under the yoke of the Law of
Moses (read in a Pharisaic, i.e., pagan manner). Fortunately, the apostles did not yield an inch to
these ruthless quasi-brothers, so that we who are Christians of pagan origin may now stand in the
freedom of the cross of the Lord. (We will return to this issue of Judaizing later.)

But the apostles gathered together for the purpose of deliberating the issue of the place of
converted Gentiles in the church of Christ (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:12), and at the recommendation of
James, who was the leader in Jerusalem and was deeply involved with that ostensible seriousness
of the Judaistic fanatics, they decided that these Gentile Christians should abstain from four
things: (1) from things polluted by idols; (2) from fornication; (3) from whatever has been
strangled; and (4) from blood (Acts 15:20). Of course, these four points were not related to such
wicked sins as idolatry and sexual immorality in general. The Gentiles would have understood
immediately what was wrong with these. But these four points involved special difficulties in the
transition period of that time. Perhaps we could speak of boundary situations. By this is meant
that Gentile Christians would have related to their fellow Christians of Jewish blood, first, by not
offending them through the use of meat that came from pagan temple festival halls; second, by
entering marriages involving the degrees of kinship forbidden in Leviticus 19; third, by using
animals that had not been suitably bled out at the time of slaughter, but who died on their own or
were strangled in a snare or drowned; and fourth, by using the blood of an animal in ways
similar to what we see today in certain dishes that are widely prepared and enjoyed, for
example, blood sausage. Today there is nothing wrong with that. But in the early days of the
New Testament church, a time of transition, it was wise for the apostles to facilitate fellowship
between Gentile and Jewish Christians, by earnestly implored the former group of Christians to
abstain from things that were very offensive to the latter group of Christians. This gentle wisdom
aimed at facilitating the living together of two so entirely different groups, as Christians in one place, the apostles confessed to having received from the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). For he is a Spirit of peace (Rom. 15:17).

We know that the Gentile Christians honored these friendly requests coming from Jerusalem. When, for example, people sought to extract from the woman martyr, Biblias of Lyon, a confession about certain shameful acts committed by Christians amongst one another—incest and eating children—she cried out: “How could such people eat children, since they are not even permitted to taste the blood even of irrational animals? (Eusebius, Church History, V.1.25–26). (You should also read, however, the appeal of Guido de Bres in his “Baston” to the provisional character of these Jerusalem decisions, in order thereby to oppose the legitimacy of subsequent ecclesiastical regulations under which believers in his day were groaning.)

Commands for all Israel concerning the portion of the peace offerings assigned to the priests (Lev. 7:23–34)

In this passage, the Israelites heard the drumbeat of: Care for my priests!

The reader knows what we have said about the three “portions” of the peace offering. The first was for Yahweh. The second was for the priests. The third was for the people. That last one is not discussed in this passage. The first one is, which involved the fat that belonged to Yahweh alone. And the second portion, which actually was also designated for Yahweh, but was given by him—along the familiar “detour”—to the priests. This passage is talking most extensively about that portion. Care for my priests!

Paul appealed to this divine care for Israel’s priests, in terms of the right for those proclaiming the gospel “should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:13–14). Here again we see that the offerings preached the gospel! Unfortunately, Israel did not always faithfully observe God’s command in this passage (Judges 17:7; 1 Sam. 2:36).

Nor did the later Christian church. Witness, for example, the struggle of many a minister to “keep his head above water,” although that could have involved significant personal culpability as well.

Conclusion of the second section of the sacrificial Torah (Lev. 7:35–36)

We read this: “This is the portion of Aaron and of his sons from the LORD’s food offerings, from the day they were presented to serve as priests of the LORD. The LORD commanded this to be given them by the people of Israel, from the day that he anointed them. It is a perpetual due throughout their generations.”

As you can see, these verses relate to the immediately preceding, to what in the last large section of the sacrificial Torah, the second main section, was laid especially upon the priests’ heart.

Postscript in connection with the entire sacrificial Torah (Lev. 7:37–38)

The concluding postscript, however, places one more finishing touch to the entire sacrificial Torah. It consists of a summary of all the kinds of sacrifices that we have been discussing. Burnt offering, grain offering, etc. Therefore you might suppose you could easily skip over these verses. But when you read them carefully, you are struck by the appearance of the name of one kind of sacrifice that we’ve not yet encountered in Leviticus, namely, the name “ordination offering.” The KJV renders this as “the consecrations,” and referred to installing someone as priest. We will return to this in the next chapter. Among the Israelites this name was apparently
so common that people talked of consecrating the altar (Ezek. 43:26). Such a consecration offering had not yet been mentioned in the sacrificial Torah, though it had been mentioned in Exodus 28–29, when it spoke of the future installation of Aaron and his sons. But here in Leviticus, that is still coming, in Leviticus 8–10. Nonetheless, the person who collected and arranged the various components of the sacrificial Torah wanted, in this final postscript that he appended, to point all Israel to the right of the priests to their share of the sacrifices that they had coming to them from the day of their installation.

This, then, is how the beautiful sacrificial Torah ends. The first main section of Leviticus, an important component of the foundation on which God had established the Israelite “world” at Horeb, permeated with his grace and love. Therefore, it is fulfilled properly by reciprocal love, that is to gives one’s heart, indeed, one’s very self. The godly in Israel confessed this, as we see in Psalm 40: “Sacrifice [= peace offering] and offering you do not desire [rather stout faith-language, meaning: you are not satisfied with that], but you have given me an open ear [LXX: you have prepared my body, i.e., every part of me]. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book [of the Torah] it is written of me.” Not only imposing figures like David understood that the sacrificial Torah demanded their heart, but simple church members knew this as well, evidenced from their singing this worship song of Psalm 40:1–10. “I delight to do your will, O my God; your Law [Hebrew, torah] is in my heart (v. 8). No wonder, however, that when the author of the letter to the Hebrews was describing how Christ had come to fulfill the Law, put these words, according to the above-mentioned Septuagint translation, specifically on the lips of our Savior. For people did not, and do not, understand the Torah, including the sacrificial Torah, unless they are led by one and the same Holy Spirit who had directed Christ entirely, and in every detail, who is now called the Spirit of Christ (1 Pet. 1:11).
In the chapters of Leviticus now up for discussion, Leviticus 8–10, we have the report of the installation of Aaron as high priest and of his four sons as priests. They would be permitted to be the “approachers” to God on behalf of Israel.

Their installation would have occurred not long after the construction and dedication of the tabernacle. At the close of Exodus, we read that Yahweh entered into his sanctuary. But he had not yet prescribed the ministry of sacrifices in and around that sanctuary. He probably set that out for the first time to Moses when in that tabernacle. Leviticus 1–7 is the report of that, the sacrificial Torah. Our book opens with that. If you have read that section, you will be able to follow more easily the course of events in connection with the installation of Aaron and his sons.

But now those two components, this sanctuary and the “personnel” that would be performing the cultus in connection with this sanctuary had to be publicly connected together.

We read about that in Leviticus 8–10, the second large section of our book.

At the same time, along with the consecration of the tabernacle and its accessories, Aaron and his sons are also consecrated.

In a manner that is clearly a symbolic form of speaking, the sanctuary and cultic personnel are publicly connected to each other. Everything according to God’s detailed prescription that we can find in Exodus 29. In Exodus 30:22–23 we find the recipe for the anointing oil of consecration that was to be used for this occasion. It had to consist of olive oil mixed with myrrh, cinnamon, cane, and cassia. These four ingredients probably pointed to the ministry of the priests in connection with the sanctuary of Yahweh on behalf of the twelve (3 x 4) tribes. The oil would have “spoken” of the promise to equip, and the incense would have pointed to the blessing that the worship conducted by this consecrated cultic personnel in this anointed sanctuary would be pleasing to God. What a place! Later, Hebrews 7:11 says that the Torah or Teaching of Israel rested upon this priesthood. And recall how Aaron and Christ are repeatedly compared in Hebrews 5 and 7:1–10:18. For this is what we need to state at the outset: in Leviticus 8–10, Aaron is the main figure. Pay close attention to him. Then you will sense the growing tension in these three chapters.

The main themes in this section of Scripture could be identified with the following familiar words:

1. Leviticus 8: Installation (our chapter 12)
2. Leviticus 9: Inauguration (our chapter 13)
3. Leviticus 10: Deposition (our chapter 14)

We turn first, then, to the “installation” of Aaron and his four sons (Lev. 8).

We can read in Exodus about the mandate to install Aaron and his four sons as priests. It was given to Moses. “Then bring near to you [singular] your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar” (Exod. 28:1). Well, with a palpable throw-back to that mandate, the
narrative in Leviticus begins describing the fulfillment of this mandate: “Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take Aaron and his sons with him, the vestments, the anointing oil, the bull of sin offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble the whole congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting’” (Lev. 8:1–3).

How scrupulously that mandate was fulfilled!

Moses functioned temporarily as priest. This explains why he later receives the honorarium belonging to him for that service, namely, the wave breast of the ram of consecration (Exod. 29:26; Lev. 8:29). The rule, “God is never served without compensating his servants,” is implemented even here.

Moreover, the “installation” did not occur secretly. Every appearance of the priesthood being a family club is completely avoided. Moses had to call together “the entire assembly” in the forecourt (Lev. 8:3). Please do not interpret this “democratically.” Just as with other occasions, only Israel’s elders would have been summoned (Lev. 9:1), but to an official meeting all were summoned so that all Israel would know that Aaron and his sons had not appointed themselves as high priest and priests. They had been chosen by God for this. So later everyone would need to be silent. But we know that unfortunately, this did not happen. These who were God’s anointed very soon encountered opposition from a quarter where nobody would have expected it. From his own sons.

At this point, we will draw the attention of Bible readers to the following five-step process leading up to the installation.

**Step 1: Washing with water (Lev. 8:5–6)**

This washing naturally possessed a symbolic character. For washing occurs in daily life to remove the dirt from the body. But this washing of Aaron and his sons, seen in the light of so many washings that the book of Leviticus will be mentioning, would have proclaimed very loudly the demand of complete forsaking of everything that tended toward uncleanness, decay, and death, since they could not for one moment be combined with the service of Yahweh in his sanctuary. We’ll say more about these washings later.

**Step 2: Robing Aaron (Lev. 8:7–9)**

Aaron was first robed with that beautiful and significant high priestly ornamentation we discussed extensively in our commentary on Exodus.

The Bible reader should pay close attention to the fact that not all five men received their priestly garments at the same time. Consequently, we must assume that Aaron’s sons were also washed later—we can hardly assume that they would have had to stand all that time naked—even though the reports of the washing of all five were combined into one report in verse 6. That was substantially correct. But with emphasis we are told first of the robing of Aaron. In verses 7–9 we read about him (singular), not them.

God’s intention with this robing was obvious. Hereby Aaron received from the outset the visible and tangible assurance, both with respect to himself and to his surroundings, of his calling and election to the high priesthood. This was unique.

**Step 3: Anointing the tabernacle and Aaron (Lev. 8:10–12)**
This was the sequence. First the tabernacle was anointed, then Aaron was anointed. Yes, Aaron, that man who was so gifted, was but a servant. Christ himself is called God’s Servant.

But both tabernacle and high priest were anointed with the same oil. Thereby those two entities were being publicly connected. In contrast to Israel’s elders. Identified and connected as worker and workplace that would henceforth belong together.

You must not ascribe any magical significance to this anointing and consecrating of the tabernacle and of Aaron. The oil was no tool of magic. It was not needed in order for the tabernacle to become a divine sanctuary, for it had been accepted by God as such already (Exod. 40). Nor was it necessary for Aaron to be anointed as a way of elevating him to some kind of supra-earthly, semi-divine status. No, the anointing served merely to help make observable to the senses, to make visible and understandable God’s requisition. This man would have to serve God in this tent. Pay attention to the sprinkling of the anointing oil seven times on the altar. Seven was the number of the covenant. This man would be permitted to approach God here as a representative of the covenant people of Israel. You could see that on this day. And smell it!

This anointing of Aaron occurred at an entirely different time and in an entirely different manner than that of his sons, something we’ll discuss in a moment. First, it occurs immediately after his robing with the high priestly garment. That of his sons occurred some time later, after they had received their priestly garments. Secondly, the oil of anointing was suffused on Aaron’s head, one of our most preeminent body parts. Suffused. Not simply covered or sprinkled, but suffused. Hereby, not only is the promise given to Aaron, together with assurance of his being equipped in a special way for his task by God’s Spirit, but with respect to his surroundings he is also being guaranteed the highest place among God’s priests. Are not the readers here being prepared already, for when the oldest two sons of Aaron did not respect this special privilege of their father, and were punished severely for that? Aaron was the priest. The high priest.

Step 4: Robing Aaron’s sons (Lev. 8:13)

In our commentary on Exodus we discussed the manufacture and meaning of the garments of the priests. We would point out once more that you need not assume that the four sons of Aaron had to stand in the forecourt naked during the rather lengthy time after their washing until they received the priestly garments. Apparently they were washed later, though this was reported to us in verse 6 at the same time we are told of their father’s washing. Next, their robing occurred after that of their father, and their anointing followed much later. All of this had the wise intention of drawing the attention of both Israel’s elders as witnesses and the four ordinary priests themselves to the entirely unique character of Aaron’s office. Only he was called to the high priesthood. The four ordinary priests received in their elegant official garments a divine certificate of their calling. But no matter how exalted it was, it was not as exalted as the election of Aaron. As though to underscore this great difference one more time, they were not anointed at this time. Something altogether different came next.

Step 5: Covenant making (Lev. 8:14–36)

Once again we are using the word covenant. But now we do not have in mind with that word the covenant that God established with Abraham, nor the covenant of Horeb made with all Israel. The covenant we are now talking about was established by God with Aaron and his sons.
It is true that the word covenant does not appear in these three chapters of Leviticus that we are now discussing. But it does occur in Numbers 18:19, Deuteronomy 33:9, Nehemiah 13:29, Jeremiah 33:21, Malachi 2:4, and the apocryphal book, Sirach 45:15. Even though from the course of events described here, we can clearly see that God entered a covenant with Aaron and his sons. This will become plain when we pay attention to the following five moments.

**Moment 1 (Lev. 8:14–17)**

The first three moments of covenant establishment are very closely connected with the slaughtering of one of the three animals that were just mentioned, namely, a bull and two rams.

First the bull was slaughtered. For it was a sin offering for the priests. Aaron and his sons were not yet priests, but they would soon become priests.

First they placed their hands on the head of the bull, after which “someone” slaughtered the animal. That term “someone” probably refers to those bringing the sacrifice, namely, Aaron and his sons.

But then Moses became involved as priest, whose name is explicitly mentioned. With his finger he dabbed some of the blood of the sin offering on the horns of the altar. Of which altar? Certainly not of the altar of incense, since the sacrifice Torah prescribed this to be used in the situation of a sin offering for the (high) priest, but of the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt, as was supposed to occur when a sin offering was brought for ordinary members of the congregation. Aaron and his sons were not yet priests with full rights and with full duties. We read only later that Moses entered the holy place. Not yet at this point. And not with this blood.

Why was that blood of the sin offering placed on the altar? Because the altar was the meeting place for God with his people that he had promised, and the altar represented his people before his face. The purifying of the altar symbolized and guaranteed the atonement, the covering, of the sins of Aaron and his sons. Why was the blood of the sin offering placed on the horns of the altar? To ratify God’s promise to cover the sins of the soon-to-be-installed priests.

Next the rest of the blood was poured out alongside the altar, and the fat of the animal sacrificed as a sin offering was burned on the altar. Everything was to go according to the rules in the sacrificial Torah that are by now sufficiently familiar to us.

Nothing of the meat of this sin offering animal was eaten by anyone. Perhaps because Aaron and his sons were viewed as priests in some sense. We recall that in the situation of a sin offering for priests, nothing of the sacrificial meat was permitted to be eaten. Or perhaps because Aaron and his sons were viewed in some sense as “laity,” as members of the congregation, whereas Moses, who only on this occasion functioned as priest in loco, was not viewed by God as eligible to eat the meat of the sin offering. Perhaps that’s going too far.

In any case, everything pertaining to the sin offering, except the blood and the fat, was burned outside the cap.

**Moment 2 (Lev. 8:18–21)**

Next, one of two rams was slaughtered to serve as a burnt offering. Once again, according to the rule that applied to this kind of sacrifice. Earlier we became acquainted with the unique preaching of the burnt offering. The sin offering spoke of the promise of the forgiveness of sins, whereas the burnt offering spoke of the promise of sanctification and complete surrender to God and acceptance by God.
The other ram was then sacrificed, as a “ram of ordination” or “ram of consecration.” (The NASB has a footnote indicating the literal meaning of the word as “ram of filling”; to “fill someone’s hands” meant to appoint someone as priest.)

What was the nature of this third sacrifice?

With a view to the special occasion (installing a priest), it was called a sacrifice of filling or of consecration, but in terms of its nature, it was really a peace offering. You will recall that only a peace offering was followed by a related meal. That is what happened with this sacrifice. We will return to this in a moment. First we need to point to two facts.

1. After the usual actions had been performed with this ram (laying on of hands, etc.), Moses took some of its blood and placed it on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear, on his right thumb, and on the big toes of his right foot. He then did the same with Aaron’s sons.

The significance of this was obvious.

The right side would have been seen as a person’s most important side. By placing blood on the ear, the assurance is being given that God would use the priest’s ear for knowing his Torah and teaching it to his people. By dabbing the right thumb and the big toe of the right foot, the calling is being emphasized of occupying the appointed position with conduct and behavior that would be exemplary to the flock. For in all covenants there are contained two parts. A promise and a demand.

God did not think it necessary that Aaron and his sons be covered entirely with the sacrificial blood. They were not sprinkled with this blood, nor was it poured out over them, as reportedly happened with the Greek mystery religions. Just as Christians of a later time, who lived in northern climates, understood that because of unfavorable climate conditions, baptism did not have to be administered by means of immersion, but they could suffice with sprinkling water on a person’s head. We need to pay attention, however, to the fact that stipulating those particular body parts of Aaron and his sons—ear lobe, thumb, big toe—would have had special significance. The ear was needed to learn to know God’s will, while hand and feet were needed for doing God’s will.

2. Next, the hands of Aaron and his sons were literally “filled.” By whom? You might reply, “By Moses.” But Moses would have been acting only by divine mandate.

With what did God fill their hands? With portions of the “sacrifice of filling”—as this particular peace offering was called—and with portions of the grain offering that went along with it, which otherwise no mortal human was permitted to touch with so much as his finger, and which otherwise was always supposed to be placed directly on the altar and burned. With these portions of the sacrifice, which otherwise had to be reserved for God alone, they were permitted to hold in their hands. Note well. Not the familiar portions of the peace offering, that were given to the priests as gifts (wave breast and hind quarter). Nor with the remainder that was allowed to be used by the person himself who had brought the sacrifice, enjoyed in the company of his family as the joyful sacrificial meal. No, rather, those five men were permitted to hold in their hands God’s private portion. After which, naturally, this was burned up. But this was nonetheless a highly important moment. At that point, those men were being publicly identified in a very explicit way as priests of God. They, and only they, were deemed worthy to stand before God’s face with filled hands—and note with what they were filled!—and to be active before the face of God with the unique portion belonging to God. That fact proclaimed the very close connection of
these men to the ministry of Yahweh. And clearly it was being portrayed clearly to these men themselves how this exalted privilege obligated them to an impeccable obedience to their divine Sovereign!

Moment 4 (Lev. 8:30)

Now follows, however, the actual inclusion of Aaron and his sons in the special covenant we mentioned.

To understand properly the various details, you need to recall what happened with the establishment of the Horeb covenant (Exod. 24). Not that we want to identify the Aaronic covenant and the Sinai covenant. But they are similar. So then, when God established a covenant at Horeb with all Israel, first the altar was sprinkled with one half of the blood. This represented the atonement of the twelve tribes with God. The altar with its twelve stones represented the twelve tribes. The nation. For no one can approach God unless his sins had first been covered. But then the other half of the blood was sprinkled upon the people. For what purpose? This time not for the purpose of atonement, for that had already occurred on the altar, but for the purpose of consecrating the nation. At that point the nation was acceptable before God as a covenant partner. Moses said at that point: Behold the blood of the covenant that Yahweh is making with you (Exod. 24:8).

We should recall this now in connection with the covenant God is making with Aaron and his sons.

In this context, what is sprinkled is not just blood, but blood together with oil. Both of these ingredients would have been mixed together beforehand.

Earlier in connection with the making of the Horeb covenant with all Israel, sprinkling with oil did not occur. The nation had been consecrated as covenant partner. This explains the sprinkling with blood (Exod. 24:8). But Israel was not being called to a special office. This explains why there was no sprinkling with oil. But Aaron and his sons were sprinkled with both blood and oil. First, with blood, about which it is stated explicitly: “the blood that was on the altar” (namely, that had been thrown against on the sides of the altar [Lev. 8:24]). That blood had been put there beforehand for atonement. Now it was being applied for consecration. Secondly, with oil, whereby assurance is given of equipping these men for their priestly covenantal task.

With this mixture of blood and oil the clothes of the five men, and in them, all subsequent office-bearers, was sprinkled. So that in this way, the sons of Aaron received the anointing that God’s commandments extended to them as well (Exod. 40:15). To them as well. But the first anointing that we discussed—see the third moment—they did not receive. They had been included by God in the covenant of the priests, but not as high priest.

Moment 5 (Lev. 8:31–32)

We have already directed attention to the fact that the third sacrifice brought on this occasion was called a sacrifice of consecration or of “filling,” but that its nature and kind was that of a genuine peace offering. We see this now from the three familiar “portions.” The first was for Yahweh, the fat (v. 28). The second portion consisted, as the reader knows, of the wave breast—designated for the officiating priest, on this occasion, Moses (v. 29)—and the hind quarter. The latter part was actually designated for the priesthood, but because this did not yet exist, this time
the hind quarter was burned, together with the fat and the cakes, which together with the meat, were waved (vv. 25–28).

At that point, there was yet a third portion of the peace offering, consisting of all the remainder designated for the one(s) bringing the sacrifice. In this case, for Aaron and his sons. Indeed, these men ate the remaining meat of the peace offering. Entirely according to the rule that would soon become quite customary.

Nevertheless, there was something very special connected with this peace offering meal. Otherwise it would have been permissible that besides the one bringing the offering, others could share the meal. But on this occasion that was not allowed (Exod. 29:32–33). This time as well, for increasing the joy of the peace offering, the cakes used with the meat were unleavened (that is, without yeast, unraised). Nothing was permitted to be left over for the next day, but all the excess meat and bread had to be burned. But otherwise it was through and through a peace offering, just like the one offered at the establishment of the Sinai covenant with all Israel (Exodus, pp. 123–25).

At the close of Leviticus 8 (vv. 33–36) we are told that the above-mentioned ceremonies lasted for seven days. Each day all over again. Thereby strong emphasis was being placed on the covenantal character (seven times) and the difficult nature of the task of Aaron and his sons, namely, of approaching God on behalf of others. They couldn’t do that even for themselves. Therefore, in connection with this chapter dealing with the installation of the Old Testament priesthood, we automatically think of our Savior. He was able to remove with his suffering and bloodshed the great chasm that lay behind all the washings, purifications, etc., because he was a high priest: holy, without guilt or stain, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens (Heb. 7:26). But for that reason Hebrews also says that as Surety, High Priest, and Mediator, Jesus has become a better covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:15).
Chapter 13

The “inauguration” of Aaron and his four sons (Lev. 9)

In this chapter, we are told that not only the high priest Aaron entered his office, but his sons had also begun to perform some priestly work already. But far and away the heaviest emphasis falls on the former, Aaron’s entrance into his office. In this chapter you see Aaron becoming more prominent, until he is entirely the main person functioning in the sanctuary.

Initially Moses was that person. For example, it was Moses who communicated the commands found in Exodus 29, commands given to him on the mountain by Yahweh, regarding Aaron’s anointing and entrance into office. Already during that conversation with Moses, God had given the mandate that when he entered into his office, Aaron would later need to bring sacrifices for himself and his sons (Lev. 9:1, 2, 7), and only then for the nation (9:3–4, 7). Moses was permitted to pass along the promise that after the required sacrifices had been brought by Aaron (with the cooperation of his sons), a revelation of God’s glory would occur (Lev. 9:4, 6). Of course that would then signify a public approval of God on Aaron’s entrance into office. For Aaron’s “inauguration” did not happen in secret, but in a public assembly of the church, understood as being represented by her elders (Lev. 9:1, 5).

The sequence would be this. Aaron would render a sacrifice first for himself and then for the people (v. 7), as we read in most of our English translations. First there he “made atonement for you and for the people,” and then: “bring the offering of the people.” So in our English versions, the people appear in both actions, in both parts of verse 7.

But the Septuagint puts it differently. In verse 7a, it reads: “make atonement for you and for your house,” and only in verse 7b: “then you shall perform the sacrifices for the people and make atonement for them.”

This fits much better.

It is possible that the Septuagint was following an ancient Hebrew manuscript that provided its reading. First: “for you and for your house.” And only then: “for the people.” Perhaps this was the original Hebrew reading, but a later copyist inserted the word “people” from verse 7b into verse 7a. That was written too soon. Much too soon.

If this is accurate, then the Septuagint has preserved the oldest and best reading of verse 7, indicating that Aaron sacrificed first for himself and his house, and only then for the people.

In any case, this is the substantive sequence in the verses now under consideration.

1. The sacrifices of Aaron for himself (vv. 8–14);
2. The sacrifices of Aaron for the people (vv. 15–21).

1. Aaron’s sacrifices for himself (Lev. 9:8–14)

That’s what it says. These were Aaron’s sacrifices.

The sons of Aaron were certainly allowed to assist their father. They were certainly allowed to handle the sacrificial blood. But the leadership remained with Aaron and we read explicitly that the sin offering was a sacrifice for him (v. 8). Surely we think here of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, who did not tire of reminding his (Jewish) readers: first the high priest in Jerusalem had to render sacrifice “for himself” (Heb. 5:3; 7:27; 9:7). For the Law appointed as
high priests men who were filled with weakness (Heb. 7:28). Nevertheless the relationship between Aaron’s work and that of his sons does not escape us. He was the leader. He rendered the sacrifice.

These sacrifices that Aaron had to bring for himself were two in number. First, a sin offering, and second, a burnt offering. We know the significance of these. The sin offering preached atonement with God, and the burnt offering gave assurance that the complete surrender to God of the person who was rendering the sacrifice was accepted.

It is striking that with Aaron’s entrance into office, God did not require a bull, although this was the animal designated for the high priestly sin offering, but only a calf. This reduced requirement was perhaps related to the rule of a male goat, rather than a bull, as a sin offering in connection with festival occasions (Lev. 16:5; 23:19; Num. 28:15, 22; etc.), but could also be explained on the basis of God’s gentleness and accommodation (cf. the meager guilt offerings in the case of leprosy and the like). For Aaron was not yet high priest in full service. Nor did he yet have a full year of official ministry behind him, as he did later on the great Day of Atonement. For that occasion, a larger animal was required. A bull. Now only a calf.

That Aaron was not yet fully functioning as high priest can be seen as well from the fact that some of the blood of this first sin offering that Aaron himself sacrificed was not dabbed on the horns of the altar of incense, in the holy place, but on the horns of the altar of burnt offering in the forecourt. Later Aaron would enter the sanctuary for the first time (Lev. 9:23).

2. Aaron’s sacrifices for the people (Lev. 9:15–21)

Here we are dealing with those people rendering sacrifices concerning which all of Scripture, all the way to Hebrews 7:27, speaks in the second place: “First for his own sins and then for those of the people.” Naturally these last words refer especially to the sin offering that Aaron brought.

He brought four sacrifices altogether for the people, namely, the sin offering, the burnt offering, the grain offerings, and the peace offering. We have discussed the significance of these sacrifices sufficiently enough that here we may limit ourselves to a few comments about the first and the fourth, the sin offering and the peace offering.

1. On this day, no bull was slaughtered as sin offering for the congregation, but only a male goat. Here again we may see God’s accommodation. On this occasion there was no sin offering being sacrificed for the people with a view to a concretely identifiable sin. Therefore God was satisfied with a smaller sacrifice. Perhaps we may learn from this that God does not take pleasure in creating within us human beings a greater sense of guilt than is real, and in any case, that when we confess our sins we must not be guilty of putting on a banal parade of generalities.

2. Concerning the twofold peace offering, a cow and a ram, naturally the first “portion” of the animal, namely, all of the pieces of fat, were to be burned on the altar. Next the second part was waved, and the portion went to the priesthood. The wave breast and the hind quarter. The third portion, the remainder, would have been given to the elders, as representatives of the people, for celebrating the peace offering meal. We don’t read of that explicitly. But what else would have been done with this third portion? This was, after all, a peace offering for the people. This is also about how things went with the making of the Sinai covenant (see Exod. 24:11). But the narrator paid no attention to this detail, something we can explain from the familiarity with the rules for the peace offering that he assumed were known by his hearers and readers, together
with the fact that he was in a bit of a hurry. For now we encounter the high point of the day. His narrative now becomes very exciting.

3. Aaron’s first blessing of the people (Lev. 9:22)

Verse 22a reads: “Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them.” The Hebrew does not emphasize the word “then”: in fact, it’s not in the Hebrew text. We read simply: “And Aaron lifted up his hands.” So you should not overestimate the significance of this moment, since there was absolutely no magical power that streamed out over the people from his uplifted priestly hands. The hands uplifted to bestow blessing would from that time on be an integral part of the priestly task (Num. 6:22, 27; Deut. 10:8). But it was only a symbolic gesture, though a very meaningful one. For the first time, at least, it occurred in the region of the altar of burnt offering, after the sacrifice. Hereby God would have wanted to provide the people once again the assurance that Israel’s sacrifices would be acceptable to him (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; etc.), and as the people walked the path of sacrificing, they could count on enjoying a good life with God. We infer this latter idea from the words that comprise the high priestly blessing, found in Number 6:24–26: “The LORD bless you and keep you [i.e., protect you, O Israel, singular]; the LORD make his face to shine upon you [a petitioner at the feet of a lord could be happy if he saw friendly eyes looking his way] and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you [the opposite of turning his face away in anger] and give you peace.” For the rich significance of the Hebrew word for “peace” (shalom) see our earlier discussion. To know what the words had in view in asking God to visit his people with blessing and not with curse, you could read chapters like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–29, and in the light of these chapters, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Later Israel often suffered various catastrophes on account of forsaking the covenant. Then she was clearly not enjoying shalom, or peace.

On this day Aaron was allowed to “place” upon Israel “the name” of Yahweh. From now on that would be priestly work (Num. 6:27). With this expression we should not think primarily of a magical action. Nor should we suppose that on the day when Aaron and his sons accepted the priesthood, Israel for the first time was embraced in the protective fellowship of Yahweh. (Concerning the significance of the word “name,” see our commentary on Exodus, pp. 46–47). Israel had already been embraced in that fellowship. This priestly blessing could serve to confirm and to certify for the Israelite church God’s promises, particularly for fellowship and mighty protection.

If we may not overestimate the blessing of Israel by Aaron and his sons which was assigned to them by God, we today have even less reason to do so with respect to the custom that had arisen in the church after Christ and his apostles, with ordained leaders lifting their hands and declaring words of blessing upon a group of gathered Christians on various occasions. There exists absolutely no mandate from God for doing this. The only obligatory symbolic actions that remain for us as an apostolic church in the New Testament era are those of baptizing and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. There is no other. Lifting up the hands at the beginning and at the end of our congregational worship services by ordained leaders is a humanly invented symbolic action with an Old Testament aftertaste.

4. Aaron’s first entrance into the holy place (Lev. 9:23a)
“And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people.”

Although entering the holy place was later permitted for the ordinary priests, on this day Moses took along with him into the holy place no one but Aaron. For both of these men would not have gone any further than the holy place. Entering the most holy place was permitted only on the great Day of Atonement. In fact, the holy place was far enough. If an ordinary Israelite or a Levite would have entered there, he would probably not have been carried out alive. But after a period of time, Moses and Aaron came out of the tabernacle unharmed. “When they came out they blessed the people.”

With the word bless, which can have a variety of meanings, something else is being identified here than in the immediately preceding, referring to Aaron’s first official blessing. Aaron performed that blessing at that time in his capacity as high priest. But this time he did not, for we read that both men (“they”) blessed the people, and Moses was not a high priest. Not even a priest, actually. Therefore with this blessing we should probably think of a joyful greeting of the people. Was that not to be expected? For the high priest of Israel had just accepted his office in the forecourt. But would God now accept this man in his sanctuary? The answer to that question Moses was, as it were, going to retrieve by taking Aaron along with him as he entered the holy place.

Did the men stay there long? Did they pray to Yahweh there? Did they fall down before the inner curtain? We do not know. We do know that Moses and Aaron came back out and joyfully greeted the people. Now visible proof was being given to one and all of the fact that Aaron’s ministry was accepted by God and that thanks to this ministry, the Israelites were safe and would be able to dwell in their camp, even though such a holy God as Yahweh had built for himself a dwelling in their midst. And if before this, some anxiety existed in the hearts of Israelites on the basis of Aaron’s hardly unimpeachable past (golden calf), then such anxiety was here being graciously removed. He came out unharmed with his brother Moses. For Aaron did not become a high priest because there was something in or about him that made him more acceptable before God than another person. It was not for that reason that he was acceptable, now and later, in the ministry of atonement with God on Israel’s behalf. It was Yahweh who had sovereignly called and chosen him to stand before him as Israel’s high priest.

5. The appearance of God’s glory (Lev. 9:23b-24a)

Next we read: “And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar” (v. 23b-24a).

Here we see happening what Moses had promised from the outset. Yahweh would make his kabôd (glory) visible.

We discussed this kabôd of Yahweh in our commentary on Exodus (pp. 184–85, 306). Readers will recall that when Yahweh had accepted the tabernacle as a gift from the hands of Israel, his kabôd filled it (Exod. 40:35). So powerfully that Moses could not initially enter the sanctuary. Later he could (Lev. 1:1). Had the kabôd of Yahweh meanwhile retreated to the most holy place? You could infer this from the instructions for Aaron on the great Day of Atonement: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.’” (Lev. 16:2).

What happened there?
Did a universally visible appearance of God’s glory occur on the day of Aaron’s entrance into office, like we read, for example, in Exodus 16:10, consisting in a special light phenomenon? Did a second phenomenon occurred as well, with fire proceeding “from before Yahweh” (i.e., from the most holy place), whereby what lay on the altar was consumed? Or were these not two distinct phenomena, but one single event, so that we could better translate verse 23b: “And the glory of Yahweh appeared to all the people; namely, fire from before Yahweh and this consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar”?

The latter explanation seems to us to be the simplest.

Literally we read that fire “ate up” what was on the altar. Clear proof of God’s acceptance. The parts of the sacrifice had already been burned. But with the sudden accompanying fire, they were consumed far more quickly than normal.

The assembly of elders (representing the entire people) leaves us with no doubt as to whether the divine language being spoke to everyone in what happened was understood. With joy, they fell down to the ground, in the most respectful manner, prone, with foreheads pressing the ground. As though before a king. Now the Israelites had a high priest who could intervene for them in the things that involved their relationship with God.

In this way the promise was now fulfilled that God had given earlier to Moses on the mountain during the very first conversation about the sanctuary he was to build, from which he would sanctify Israel through his glory. “I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God” (Exod. 29:44–46).

That was what God was busy doing.

That was the goal of God’s establishing a covenant at Horeb, first with Israel in its entirely, and now with the house of Aaron in particular. Taking an important step in the direction of the goal he had set ever since the Garden of Eden: restored concourse between God and people in the Paradise of the new earth! (See our commentary on Exodus, pp. 181–82.)
Chapter 14

The “deposition” of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10)

In the two chapters dealing with the installation and inauguration of Aaron and his sons, we have read that Moses was constantly functioning according to the instruction that God had given him earlier on the mountain. During this conversation God had also told Moses something that he had not mentioned earlier, but only later, as a result of a sudden terrible event.

Parenthetically, something like this happened more frequently. For example, only later did Moses narrate, shortly before his death, that God had received with immediate approval the request of the Israelites at Horeb, on the day of the proclamation of the Ten Words, that if possible God would no longer speak directly to them but through Moses (Deut. 5:28).

In this way, during his conversation with Moses about the future sanctuary, with its ministry of atonement and its priesthood, God had also made the comment at one point about these priests, that he desired exemplary conduct from them. God had said at that time:

“Among those who are near me I will be sanctified,
and before all the people I will be glorified.”

As you can see, we have placed the verse (Lev. 10:3) in two lines. But in both lines we have something that more often happens in Hebrew poetry, namely, a repetition of an idea. That idea is this: at Horeb God had made a covenant with Israel. But it would be good to have to recall the exalted glory with which it was connected. Israel would have to learn that from her priests, Those men were to give Israel Torah, instruction (Lev. 10:11). But then the conduct of those men—who in addition had been designated through a special covenant to approach God on Israel’s behalf—would naturally have to be consistent with that instruction. That is the first rule of every sound pedagogy. Children retain what their parents do far better than what they say.

On this day, together with the events that conclude the time when Aaron and his sons entered in office, Moses brought forth the divine declaration of Leviticus 10:3. In connection with the sin and punishment of Nadab and Abihu. These had barely occurred when Moses said: “This is what Yahweh told me.” And then Moses supplied God’s declaration, surely on account of its deeply impressive content, formulated in poetic form:

“Especially from my priests I demand respect for my holiness,
So that my people may bow down before my exalted majesty.”

Leviticus 10 consists of three parts. We will explain the middle part first, and then discuss the first and third parts.

1. Part 2 (Lev. 10:8–11)

Anyone reading Leviticus 10 will notice immediately that this middle segment looks like it was added later. In that practical manner that we find more often in the Torah, entirely differently than our lawbooks. Sometimes a stipulation is explicitly connected to one or another event, and other times it seems only implicitly related.
In this part it was prohibited for the priests to use wine or strong drink while they were working. The reason was appended to the stipulation. Through the use of alcohol they could lose control of their capacities momentarily, and the people might think that tabernacle worship need not be taken all that seriously. Whereas it belonged to their task to imprint upon Israel that Yahweh would tolerate no confusion in connection with the sacred and the profane, the clean and the unclean.

Why is room given to this material at this point?
Probably because the last-mentioned subject (the distinction between clean and unclean) would immediately follow this section (in Lev. 11). So this functions as a kind of introduction to that chapter.

But was it done perhaps also because people supposed that the sin of Nadab and Abihu consisted in entering God’s sanctuary under the influence of strong drink? But nothing is reported about that.

In fact, we must point out that in addition to the first part (vv. 1–7), which does indeed report the sin and punishment of Nadab and Abihu, our chapter also contains a third part (vv. 12–20), which says nothing at all about any assault against the sanctuary by Aaron and his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. On the contrary.

If we removed for a moment the inserted portion of verses 8–11, we would have left a story consisting of two parts, each with the same subject. Both issue a warning: priests, be careful in the presence of a holy God!

With this, the theme of the middle part corresponds entirely, and as a result it seems obvious that we keep it in this spot, after the story about the sin of Nadab and Abihu.

2. Part 1 (Lev. 10:1–7)

So we do not believe that Nadab and Abihu were punished so severely by God because they were guilty of misusing alcohol. But one can be overcome with other things beside drink. Would not Nadab and Abihu have become drunk with ambition?

For into what sin had they allowed themselves to be tempted? We read that they brought “strange fire” before Yahweh (Lev. 10:1; Num. 3:4). Each of them took a censor, scooped up fire in it, put incense on it, and with this they had entered the sanctuary.

Where did they get that fire? Perhaps from the place in the forecourt where the sacrificial meat was cooked? In that case the expression “strange fire” could be explained easily. For then what was involved was simply a mistaken ritual. Nevertheless, this assumption seems to us rather unlikely. With the self-directed activity of Nadab and Abihu, something that was definitely in play here, it seems far more likely that they took the fire from the altar of burnt offering. This had been designated for the high priest, as we see from Leviticus 16:12, the chapter dealing with the great Day of Atonement. They took holy fire, but this became “strange fire” because such taking of that fire was “unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1). First of all, it was not a great Day of Atonement. That appeared clearly from the less stringent requirement for the sin offering for Aaron and the people (Lev. 9, a calf and a male goat for each). And in the second place, they were not high priests, but ordinary priests whose task on this day was merely to assist their father. Not to replace him. And in the third place, why would God have punished a ritual impropriety so severely? Later another ritual impropriety would occur, with Eleazar and Thamar, that was not punished so severely.
You will recall how, with Leviticus 8–9, we repeatedly pointed out that with the “installation” and “inauguration” the role of leader was explicitly assigned to Aaron. Yahweh was showing clearly that the high priestly office was given to Aaron. Nevertheless, for this unique distinction given to their father, Nadab and Abihu presumably lacked sufficient respect. Were they also not experienced men? Were they presumably men approximately fifty years in age? On the day when the Horeb covenant was established, were they not deemed worthy, together with their uncle, Moses, and their father, Aaron, and the seventy elders of Israel, to see a glorious theophany of Israel’s God and to share in the sacrificial meal? Had they not emerged from there unharmed (Exod. 24:9–11)?

The phrase “strange fire” would not mean a fire different than the fire of the altar of burnt offering, but fire to which on this particular day they should not have extended their hands. Not yet. For this reason alone, their activity did not please God.

Moreover, the expression “before Yahweh” in verse 1 indicates that the brothers went on purpose into the tabernacle. Think about it. The sanctuary. Into which their father, Aaron, had just been allowed by Moses as God’s substitute, to go in and come out, to which event God had attached his intense approval by sending fire out of this very sanctuary, fire that “ate up” the sacrificial portions on the altar. Hereby a very exceptional position was very obviously being given to Aaron. Every humble heart would have recognized this immediately. But the eyes of Nadab and Abihu were apparently clouded with arrogance and could not see clearly. With a familiar result, they had sinned with fire, so they were killed with fire. In this context, let’s remember that a priest’s daughter in Israel, who had profaned her father by committing immorality, also had to be burned with fire (Lev. 21:9). And in the instance of yet another serious offense—when someone took a woman and her daughter—the punishment was also death by fire (Lev. 20:14).

Did Nadab and Abihu actually reach the holy place with their incense, and were they killed there? We doubt it. In verse 2, we do read that they died “before Yahweh,” but this phrase could also be referring to the forecourt. Later, when both brothers were slain through fire that proceeded from “before Yahweh” (literally the same expression as in 9:24), which in this case means from the most holy place, they were dragged away by two men who were not priests and thus were not authorized to enter the holy place. They were Mishael and Elzaphan, nephews of Aaron, who also belonged to the tribe of Levi, but were not priests. In fact, the Levites had yet to receive their special position in connection with the sanctuary.

Next, Nadab and Abihu, clothed in their beautiful priestly robes, were dragged out of the forecourt to a place outside the camp. Apparently to be buried there.

Pay close attention to the next part of the story.

Moses anxiously saw to it that nothing performed in connection with the required burial and grieving was performed by Aaron and his two surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. This father with his two sons were not allowed to demonstrate any signs of bereavement, for example, by uncovering their heads. Not only was it prohibited for Israel’s high priest ever to engage in grieving (Lev. 21), but it was naturally obvious that his sons as well, the priests, surely might not defile the tabernacle through improper grieving. For they functioned as mediators between God and Israel. From now on, that would be their position. So what would become of the people on this day if the holiness of Yahweh, who had already been offended so seriously by Nadab and Abihu, would have been assaulted once more by sounds of mourning and tearing of clothes in his
own sanctuary? In that case, the full wrath of God could have burst forth upon everyone, Moses said. And he knew all too well, every since the incident with the golden calf, how scrupulously Yahweh was to be feared. Moreover, God had told him earlier that one day he would expect exemplary conduct from his priests, with a view to all the people. This explains why on this occasion, Moses recited that divine warning in poetic form, as we mentioned earlier. Something like this:

“Especially from my priests I demand respect for my holiness,
So that my people may bow down before my exalted majesty.”

Pay close attention to the fact that Nadab and Abihu immediately on the same day when for the first time they might function as priests they were fired from their ministry (Lev. 10:19; cf. “today”). This was something that we can still experience today. “Inauguration” and “deposition” on the same day. From this we learn to know Yahweh as our heavenly Father as well, to know him as a God toward whom not everything is simply permitted. What a deep respect for our Savior that we obtain through an episode like this, our Savior who has perfectly fulfilled “the righteous requirement of Torah” (Rom. 8:4), so that we may approach the throne of grace with confidence (Heb. 4:16). For him the rule was also intensely operative: In those who draw near to me I will be sanctified.

“And Aaron held his peace.”
You should not ask what must have been going through the heart of the old man. How beautifully the day had begun! But how foolish did his two sons behave! As though they had not received enough honor, they grasped for more. Nevertheless those two men were Aaron’s own flesh and blood. Who would not have wept at losing such precious security?

“And Aaron held his peace.”
In fact, he would have had to acknowledge the guilt of his sons on this account, because as we might appropriately suppose, Moses would have spoken with his brother Aaron and his sons often enough, during the months preceding the construction of the tabernacle, about everything that God had revealed to him on the mountain with respect to the tabernacle and the ministry of the sacrifices and priests. So Aaron would have understood very well what kind of impertinence his two oldest sons had become liable for committing. Just as they themselves must have understood this as well. Just as Aaron had earlier discerned from Moses that an Israelite high priest was never allowed to grieve. Although Moses nonetheless immediately reminded him of that, just to be sure. For these reasons we believe that Aaron’s silence here is mentioned as a glimpse of his obedience. He had placed God’s calling above the appeal of his own flesh and blood.

3. Part 3 (Lev. 10:12–20)

The middle part, however, applies very well not only with the first part, but also with the last part of our chapter. There we are told about what happened after the inauguration. It constitutes a beautiful page in the life-book of the severely tested, but humbly obedient, high priest, Aaron.

For a brief moment, our attention is drawn to Moses.
Was it perhaps the case, as a result of the general dismay occasioned by the sudden death of Nadab and Abihu, that Moses sensed more strongly still his responsibility for the proper course of events during the rest of the day? In particular, no second transgression of God’s command must occur on the part of the priesthood. Therefore it would have been the case that Moses would have exercised very scrupulous control over everything. And what did he suddenly discover? That there was already something wrong.

As the reader knows, on the day of Aaron’s inauguration into office, four animals had been sacrificed for the people. We discussed this briefly, and we need to add to that the following:

With those four sacrifices, Aaron and both of his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, were not yet finished with everything. Let’s follow their steps.

1. There were finished with the burnt offering. For that was always “entirely burned up.”

2. But not with the grain offering, that this time as well was coupled with the burnt offering. The required portion of that sacrifice, the askarah, was also burned on the altar of burnt offering. But the remainder had yet to reach its appointed destination. They were to be eaten by the priests and that “in a holy place,” that is, not outside the forecourt. For the grain offering was “most holy,” as we have seen.

3. The matter of the peace offering was also not yet fully completed. The priestly portion of that offering, the wave breast and hind quarter, still needed to be used. As the reader knows, this priestly portion of the peace offering was holy, so that it had to be eaten in a holy place, but it was not most holy, so at least in ordinary circumstances the forecourt could be left and this portion could be used by all the members of the priestly families.

All of this still had to happen. And it could happen as well. But now in connection with the fourth sacrifice, Moses thought he discovered that a culpable omission had occurred.

4. According to him, something had gone wrong with the sin offering. This was in reference to the sin offering that was brought for the congregation, not for the priests themselves. The priests were never allowed to eat the meat of such sin offerings, because the blood of such a sin offering was always brought beforehand into the holy place (to the horns of the altar of incense). But in this case, this had not (yet) happened with the blood of this sin offering for the congregation.

At the conclusion of everything, Aaron had just set foot in the holy place, led there by Moses, and thus the meat of this sin offering might indeed be eaten by the priests. With respect to God, this “may” naturally turned into “must.” Otherwise people would through ingratitude have offended that good God, who dealt with his servants so gently.

As a result, this was the last point, in terms of which Moses launched an investigation. He look around, he searched and searched, but nowhere was the meat of the animal used for the sin offering to be found. The reader will recall that this time the animal was a male goat. Nowhere was the meat of the male goat used for the sin offering to be found. Until Moses learned upon investigation that people had burned the animal. But according to Moses, that was in complete contradiction of the rule instituted by God. For the meat of those animals used for the sin offering, no blood from which could be brought in the holy place and dabbed on the horns of the altar of incense, was not supposed to be burned, but might (= must) be eaten by the priests.
Moses became angry about that. Something that we should not blame this gentle but certainly passionate man all too severely for doing. He would have been afraid of a new catastrophe. For this reason he talked intensely with his nephews, Eleazar and Ithamar, about this. But these men had not acted without the knowledge of their father. Therefore it was Aaron who provided the answer to his angry brother Moses. Did Moses himself perhaps understand that Eleazar and Ithamar had burned the goat of the sin offering in consultation with their father, but had he wanted to spare his brother any more intense pain on this particular day?

What did Aaron answer?

The man who in connection with the sudden death of his two sons had obediently held his peace, because he was aware that with the high priest of such holy God as Yahweh, and certainly in his own sanctuary, no grief and lament for the dead was appropriate, this very same man now spoke. And that for the same reason for his earlier silence, with a view to the holiness of Yahweh.

This is what he said. Surely today a sin offering (with a burnt offering) was first brought for Eleazar and Ithamar themselves. For this reason they would have been allowed to eat the meat of the sin offering. But what then overcame me and my house on account of such a great disobedience in my family? In a certain sense, did not that sin and that punishment touch upon us as well? Was Israel’s priesthood consequently on this day of sin and death within her own midst worthy to eat of this meat, that was most holy and spoke of atonement and life for Israel with Yahweh? Would we have been truly pleasing to God if we had held strictly and scrupulously to the letter of the prescribed rule and, despite what God had testified today, nonetheless had eaten of this meat from the sin offering?

When Moses heard his brother Aaron talking in this respectful manner about Yahweh and about what his eyes beheld, it was his turn to keep his peace. This time it had been his eye that was somewhat clouded. Through great zeal for the letter of the Law, he had for one moment had a less clear view of the intention of the Spirit of the Law than his bereaved brother. For the facts show us that God did not disapprove, but approved the conduct of Aaron and his sons, something that, viewed by fanatics on closer inspection as a (self-conscious) violation of God’s own prescription, would be strongly condemned. For there they were standing, Aaron and his two surviving sons, alive and all.

Even in the Old Testament, God did not want rote obedience from his servants. Legalism, slavish service was displeasing to him at Horeb already. There, in fact, his Torah testified to that. For that Torah was by its nature not a burdensome straightjacket, but spiritual, lovely, and mild. Nothing less than the gospel as given to us today. Behind both of those stands the same Spirit of Christ. This Spirit teaches us as well: Do not be overly righteous (Eccl. 7:16). Already at Horeb, God showed that his sacrificial Torah was nothing like a code book, nothing like a program schedule.

The episode of Nadab and Abihu made a deep impression among Israel, dying as they did “before the face of God,” and “they had no children” (Num. 3:4; 26:61; 1 Chron. 24:2). We could use the heading, “I will be sanctified in those who draw near to me.” Recall the destruction of Shiloh and Jerusalem itself, and remember through what perfect obedience our Savior himself had to be sanctified toward God on our behalf (John 17:19).

We used to hear a lot about persons in the Old Testament being “types” of Christ, and we used to employ that language ourselves, but at present we no longer prefer that language. For where is the limit? Why, for example, could such ancestors of the Lord like David and Solomon
be types of Christ, but not someone like Jonathan, who thought so much more highly of his neighbor David than of himself, that he gave David his robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt, and bowed humbly beneath God’s sovereign decision that David would be king instead of his father Saul and Jonathan himself (1 Sam. 18:4; 20:13)? If ever a person resembled Christ, it was Jonathan (Phil. 2:3, 5). Why could only men be types of Christ, but not women like Deborah, Hannah, and Mary? For that reason, we could better say with Peter, that such believers spoke and acted as they did because they were being led by the Spirit of Christ (1 Pet. 1:11). For no one has had that eternal Spirit work in him as did our Savior, who presented himself to God as an unblemished sacrifice (Heb. 9:14).

To that Spirit, however, whose will was sufficiently know to them from Moses’ instruction, Nadab and Abihu were not submissive. Perhaps they supposed that God would be very appreciative if they, with who knows what kind of exalted display, went into the holy place to bring him incense. After all, they too were priests and soon they would be allowed, indeed, required to enter that holy place repeatedly. And after all, Nadab was Aaron’s oldest son, the one who would succeed his father one day. But their religiosity was disobedience, fleshly rather than spiritual. For there is also fleshly piety, with which God is not at all pleased (Prov. 28:9, prayers; Isa. 1:13, sacrifices; Col. 2:23, fasts “for the indulgence of the flesh”).

But on this day, father Aaron, the one they all too confidently bypassed, was living from the Spirit of Christ, as we see from his obedient silence, and his humble bowing under the blows of God that descended upon his “house” on this day, and especially from his deep respect for the holiness of God, whereby he understood better than Moses did that situations could arise with respect to a command of God where one must not be all too righteous.

We must distinguish sharply.

The conduct of Nadab and Abihu, viewed on the surface, showed some similarity to that of their father Aaron and their brothers Eleazar and Ithamar. In both instances, people were holding scrupulously to the letter of the Law. But on further inspection, the first was condemned by God and punished as self-made piety. But ultimately God could not withhold his approval from the second. For the letter kills (makes dead), but the Spirit makes alive (2 Cor. 3:6).

It is so highly desirable that we as Bible readers are well informed about the task and place of the priests in the Old Testament. This will assist us in reading the New Testament, books, for example, like the Gospels and the epistle to the Hebrews. Not to mention the book of Revelation. One Reformed exegete (Dr. Cornelis van der Waal) entitled his dissertation on this last book of the Bible, “Old Testament Priestly Motifs in the Apocalypse.” Later we ourselves will need to say something about the significance of the Horeb covenant and the Aaronic priesthood for the context of Hebrews and our own day.
The next unit that we will be examining is Leviticus 11–15. These chapters have likely scared away many a Bible reader because of their formidable length. We have in mind, for example, Leviticus 13–14, concerning leprosy afflicting people and infecting houses.

Leviticus 12 is rather brief, only eight verses. But this little chapter, concerning the uncleanness of a birth mother, strikes us as strange today. In fact, Leviticus 15, concerning bodily emissions of males and females, also strikes us as a bit strange.

Indeed, this unit’s first chapter already, with its talk about clean and unclean animals (Lev. 11)—what are we supposed to do with this? We don’t really understand very well what all of this meant at the time for Israel, not to mention what it means for us today.

Come along, dear reader. Let us comfort you.

A person need not know everything. There are even today particular books that you and I may never get around to reading. For example, literature in various professional fields. Well, here we are dealing with something like that.

1. A manual for priests as they instruct Israel

We hardly need to be ashamed by the fact that these five chapters hit us somewhat strangely. In ancient times that was certainly the case as well for many a proselyte, someone from among the Gentiles who became a Jew. Although such a person had become quite familiar in his own context that resembled in some sense the life patterns explained in these chapters. For here again we encounter that remarkable phenomenon that we identified in our commentary on Exodus (pp. 299–304), “The Great Annexation.” Israel had many things in common with the Gentiles, although at Horeb God supplied those things with an entirely different meaning, at the foundation of the (Israelite) world.

Well then, this “differentness,” this new feature of the divine patterns, the priests had to teach Israel on behalf of Yahweh. We find a summary of a large part of that instruction here.

In the preceding section of Leviticus, we have been somewhat prepared for this. In the chapter about the sudden death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10), we find the regulation that during their exercise of official duties, priests were not permitted to use alcohol. Why not? “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (Lev. 10:10–11).

The italicized word, teach, is the same Hebrew word that we find here in this section of Leviticus, in 14:57. After first speaking about various thing in connection with leprosy, the postscript reads: “This is the law [torah, instruction, teaching, lesson] for any case of leprous disease . . . to show when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the law [torah, instruction] for leprous disease” (Lev. 14:54–57).
We meet that phrase *to instruct* twice. Israel’s priests were especially supposed to function in an *instructional* capacity (Deut. 27:14; 33:10; 2 Chron. 15:3; Mal. 2:6–7). Permit us to point out at the same time, that in these chapters the name of Aaron appears in the inscriptions. Otherwise we read merely: “Yahweh said to Moses.” But here more than once we find: “Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron” (Lev. 11:1; 13:1; 14:33; 15:1). Why? Apparently because in his capacity as head of the priests, Aaron would get to deal especially with the issues mentioned here. Indeed, when this part of Leviticus is concluded, God directs his words to all the priests. “Thus you [plural, you priests, whose ordinary priests was discussed in the preceding] shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev. 15:31). For an unclean person was not permitted to approach the sanctuary. He was not permitted to participate in a meal associated with the p/o (Lev. 7:20–21; cf. 1 Sam. 20:26). In some cases of uncleanness it was not even permitted to remain within the camp (Lev. 13:46; 14:3; Num. 5:1–4).

Everyone understands: such things had to be taught. Everyone also understands that such rules could yield some problems in complicated situations. In those instances, the priests had to be able to point the way. Israel did not find these things as strange as we do. The distinction between clean and unclean animals, for example, did not sound altogether new in the days of Horeb. The nations around Israel knew something like this as well. Recall what we wrote in this connection in the commentary on Genesis about the time of Noah.

2. The separated ones

In these chapters, when we encounter the words “clean” and “unclean,” people should not automatically give these words an all-too-modern content. For example, here the word “clean” does not mean the same thing as our modern medical term “sterile.” It doesn’t even mean what is particularly important to our Dutch homemakers: proper, tidy, neat. Nor when reading Leviticus 11–15 should we understand the word “unclean” as a synonym of dirty or messy or unhygienic.

In addition, we need to be careful of the notion instinctively associated with God being not at all attracted by the messiness of Israel’s military camp. That would not fit with the prescription of Moses: “You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you” (Deut. 23:12–14).

Israel’s health did indeed play a role in the Law. For example, God sternly threatened Israel with the removal of health as a curse! But when he granted Israel “shalom,” peace, then they would not be visited with those terrible epidemics for which tropical lands are famous (see our commentary on Exodus 15:26, “I am Yahweh, your Healer”).

To that degree, observing God’s Torah, including Leviticus 11–15, was surely connected to Israel’s health. Indirectly.

But not directly.

In our time, this viewpoint is being advanced in response to our writing. Regarding the laws of Leviticus 11–15, M. van Damme has written this: “What dominates these laws is the advancement of health.” We believe, however, that this does not correctly characterize God’s
intention with Leviticus 11–15. We definitely do not agree that with such regulations—for example, that Israel was not to eat any unclean animals like pigs, and that no leper was permitted to approach the tabernacle—we are dealing with measures whose principal purpose was Israel’s health. First, because in those chapters we read nothing directly reported about such a purpose. But in addition, because then we would face the question why God no longer forbids eating pork now? Was he more careful with the Israelites than with Christians? But what then about Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11 (which reminds us that in Christ, Greeks and Jews, barbarians and Scythians, are equal before God)? And why didn’t God provide more care for the health of the Israelites by supplying, in addition to a list of animals, also a list of plants and fruits whose use would have been prohibited because they were equally harmful to health? For how many poisonous plants and fruits were there? As far as leprosy was concerned, why was it only the leper who was not allowed to approach God’s sanctuary, and why not someone suffering from one or another disease? Why was a person considered unclean who had an emission from his or her sexual organ, but not a person who had just urinated or defecated, nor even someone with a festering wound or with tuberculosis, whose saliva would have been just as dangerous for his surroundings? Why were not everyone with an infectious disease banned from the camp, but only lepers?

We hold a different view.

We believe that the commandments of Leviticus 11–15 form a part of that entire complex of symbols with which God wanted to instruct the Israelite church and firmly assure her of covenant fellowship with him, within which she had been incorporated. A fellowship with him, Yahweh, that abhorred paganism and death.

For that purpose God employed, for example, the custom found among other nations, of making a distinction between clean and unclean animals. Perhaps this custom went back to the days of Noah (Gen. 7:2). What God had intended back then, in Noah’s day, with that distinction, we no longer know with certainty. But the significance that he gave to this distinction in Moses’ day we do know. For he himself said to the Israelites, at Horeb, albeit through Moses: I am Yahweh, your God, who has separated you from the other nations. Therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean beast, and between clean and unclean birds, so that you do not make yourselves detestable by beasts and birds and everything that creeps on the earth, that I have forbidden to you by declaring it unclean. Be holy unto me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations, so that you would belong to me (Lev. 20:24–26).

Did not God hereby declare his intention when he mandated Israel to pay attention to the difference between clean and unclean animals? Did he himself not hereby testify that he was doing that in order thereby to remind them of the covenant that he had established with them at Horeb? With them and with no other nation?

Was a special reminder (of the covenant) like this something that was so strange? Had not God already given Abraham such a reminder with circumcision? Had not the Israelites, as Abraham’s descendants, received a covenant sign in that very circumcision? Woe to those who neglected that sign, for example, by participating in the Passover meal without having been circumcised (Exod. 12:43–49). Already through circumcision, God had assured Abraham and his descendants: You are my separated ones.
In addition to that covenant of God with Abraham there came next the covenant of Horeb. God wanted once again to remind Israel of this covenant by means of signs. Quite a number of signs, including the Sabbath (Exod. 31:17), about which we’ll say more later.

But also by means of clothing and food.

By means of clothing. The Israelites were supposed to guard against intermingling with pagans. Therefore they were not to wear clothes made out of two kinds of material, for example, wool and cotton (Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:8). Rather, on the corners of their garments they were to wear a tassel (or knob or button) in which a dark blue thread had been woven, in order thereby to think about the commandments of Yahweh who had adopted them as his people (Num. 15:37–41; Deut. 22:9–12; see our commentary on Exodus).

So then, Israel was reminded of the Horeb covenant by means of some of her food as well. God made use of her food to remind Israel of her apartheid, of her being set apart from the pagans. He said that himself (Lev. 20:24–26).

The laws concerning the leprosy of persons and houses had a similar significance, as we will see.

At this juncture, we need to point out clearly that the Horeb covenant is antiquated. Obsolete (Heb. 8:13). Today we enjoy eating pork, at least if the doctor does not prescribe against it for health reasons. We would not be fazed at all by people who want to continue to depend on the religion of food laws (“whose god is their belly,” Paul would say, Rom. 16:18; Phil. 3:19).

Today we also wear with confidence a shirt made of mixed materials. Without a tassel containing a dark blue thread. For we no longer stand under the Law. Therefore we expressed earlier (in our commentary on Exodus, pp. 93–94), and repeat that here, our sorrow about the fact that some Christians have adopted the custom of reading the Ten Words of the Sinai covenant in their Sunday worship gatherings. (Such a custom easily carries with it the apparent authority of a divine prescription.) For in this way the notion is automatically fueled that the church of Christ continues even now to live under the Horeb covenant. But according to the New Testament, that definitely may not happen! That would be to “remember earthly things” (John 3:12; Phil. 3:19–20; Col. 3:1–2; Gal. 4:24–26).

The spirit of Judaizing, rabbinism, casuistry, and lawyerism is certainly not at all related to the Old Testament. Paul despised that spirit as a satanic impulse that lay behind his jealous Jewish family, his “flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12; 1 Thess. 2:14–15, 18). That spirit wanted to turn the Christian church into a Jewish church, and presumably contributed to the martyrdom of both Paul and Peter. That spirit has slain the gospel in the Law. We must speak more extensively about this later.

3. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation

God’s intention with the laws of Leviticus 11–15 was definitely not merely negative. Just as today it is not enough when Christians are simply against this and against that. The sexually immoral person mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 had to be banned from the church, but the apostle was not forbidding every contact with people who were guilty of sexual immorality. A Christian who happened to be a baker would not have hesitated to bring bread to a brothel owner. Otherwise “you would need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10). But Christians must always deal with one another and with unbelievers in such a way that the love of Christ for sinners becomes visible, as it were. By means of solicitude toward those in distress, by means of doing
good to the poor, caring for the sick, comforting the bereaved, Christians in the early centuries probably achieved more than by means of direct gospel preaching. “Go to the Christians. They will help you!” That has won many a heart for Christ, and sanctified many a life.

Israel also had not only the duty of abstaining from pagan abominations and impurities, but was supposed to be a particularly holy people. Israel had barely arrived at Horeb, when God expressed the desire that they would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). So then, God reminded them of that positive calling in various ways, including through the laws about clean and unclean. To mention but one thing, it is striking that what was supposed to happen with the re-inclusion into the community of Israel of a leper who had been healed showed so many similarities to the ceremonies accompanying the consecration of the priests. For with a healed leper as well, the right ear lobe, the right hand, and the right big toe were dabbed with blood and oil (Lev. 14:14, 17).

By means of the laws of Leviticus 11–15, Israel was continually taught about and reminded of the foundation on which Yahweh had placed his people at Horeb, and of the path she was to walk. Beneath the entire Israelite world, God had laid the covenant with him, Yahweh, the God of redemption, and he had set her feet on the path of life leading to the future Paradise, toward which not only the hope of the fathers looked (Heb. 11:15), but also the tabernacle and its sacrificial ministry with their symbolic preaching powerfully pointed.

A holy people. A people made up of those who carried along the promise of eternal life.

4. Exodus 19:6 is virtually identical to 1 Peter 2:9

When at their wedding, two lovers exchange rings, that does not create a new relationship, but serves as a visible and tangible pledge to remind each other continually of an already existing covenant.

This is also why God gave his Israelite church the laws of Leviticus 11–15, with the intention of reminding her of the foundation on which he had placed her in connection with the establishment of the covenant that is narrated for us in Exodus 19–24. To be sure, this Sinai covenant is now fulfilled and obsolete, but the reminders of it in the Law and the description of it in the historical narratives of the Prophets are nonetheless still instructive for us. Because through them, we come to know God better, he who was known to Israel as Yahweh and is known now to us as our God and Father in Christ. From these, we learn how God wanted to protect his little child, Israel, with his Law, against the deadly dangers of the surrounding paganism. We should see in this Law especially not an irritating anchor, but a paternal embrace of his people, though with a rather firm hand, an embrace of a people who were en route to the day of Christ’s coming. By these means he reminded Israel, in various ways, of her calling to be a holy nation of priests.

Basically God deals with us today similarly, even though with a view to our instruction regarding the new covenant, of which Jesus has become the Surety, he now uses the preaching of the apostles (preserved in the New Testament) and he assures us today of that better covenant only through our baptism and our Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Col. 2:11; Heb. 7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 10:29; 13:20). For today we may belong to adult Israel (Gal. 4), with whom God no longer has the covenant of Horeb, but nonetheless the same covenant that he established with Abraham (Gal. 3:8, 14, 29). The Sinai covenant is obsolete (Heb. 8:13).
Nevertheless, all who are called to provide nurture and instruction can still learn about God, who nurtured Israel as well. For example, that we must be reminded daily of that covenant of God with Abraham that is now also for us. Hold on to it! Every day in our families God must be thanked for saving us by means of the historically verifiable leading of his Holy Spirit out of the power of Satan. This happened in connection with our pagan ancestors (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13–14). We are liberated pagans. This explains why the devil always wants to rob us of our freedom, as he did the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and others who became Christians. In Paul’s day he made use not only of the absolutely inveterate Jews, but also some jealous Jews who had become Christians, who could not tolerate Paul (so they thought) simply setting aside the Law. But the apostle saw through them. He did not stare himself blind at his envious kinfolk, his “flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12), but understood that Satan was at work behind them, who wanted his prey back, in order to put them in bondage again. For Satan’s tactic is to keep people stupid. Keep them in the dark. But our tactic must be: Daily thanking God in our homes for our liberation, and calling on him for help against Satan, who is constantly busy seeking to rob Christians of the true light and knowledge. Behind people he is active (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:12; 1 Thess. 2:15, 18). In order to rob us of our freedom in Christ. Of our liberation. Of our redemption. Of our life one day on the new earth.

For we are a liberated people. Just as much as Israel was liberated from Egypt, so we have been freed from the power of the demons and of paganism. That is so absolutely true, that the apostle Peter came close one time to writing almost the same words that God had spoken to the Israelites when they arrived at Horeb, words that Peter wrote to Christians in Asia Minor, people who formerly had been pagans. He wrote to them: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). Compare this with Exodus 19:5–6: “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.”

We Christians are a liberated people.

But Satan has succeeded far too often in making us forget this so easily. So much so that someone who reminded us of this redemption was criticized as a superficial person, like Paul was among the Judaizing Christians. We Christians have often preferred to surrender to the folly of that married woman who hoped and hoped that she might one day find grace in the eyes of her husband, so that he would then . . . go ahead and marry her (see our commentary on Exodus, p. 11). The poor soul!

If only we had listened to the Law.

Not in order to place ourselves under the Law once again. Not that. But to learn from the Law the good method of nurture and instruction.

In a myriad of ways God impressed upon his people that they were a redeemed people. Not that they would become a redeemed people, but that they were a redeemed people. And had to remain redeemed. By means of things like those discussed in Leviticus 11–15 (certain foods, leprosy, etc.).

Practically speaking, that means: daily.

Just as we must pray daily for protection against the Evil One, so that we do not neglect our salvation that God has bestowed upon us in his well-meant promises of the gospel. For Christians who would neglect their salvation would be sinning even worse than Israelites who “set aside the Law of Moses,” because we would be despising the blood of the covenant of Christ through which we have been sanctified, and would be angering the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:28–29).
We too must constantly stir up each other especially to continue in God’s grace (Acts 13:43). We need not make a big show of coming to God, as various revival preachers would want us to do, for God has come to us long ago when his Spirit immersed our pagan ancestors, by means of the messengers of the gospel, in the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26). At that time we too were adopted into God’s fellowship, a fellowship of promises of justification, sanctification, and glorification. But just as God used various rather strict measures like Sabbath, clothing, food, etc., to remind his Israelite church daily, since she was still a child (Hos. 11:1), of his historic acts of redemption, in order to keep Israel close to him and to preserve Israel’s life in Canaan, preserving her for eternal life with Christ in the promised Paradise, so we Christians, too, even though the strict measures suitable to the church’s childhood have now become obsolete (together with the Sinaitic covenant), must not overestimate ourselves, but continually remind one another of our ancestry, and in so doing, of the historic acts of redemption performed by him who has called us out of darkness (of Satan and of paganism) to his marvelous light (Eph. 5:8; 6:12; Col. 1:12–13; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24), maintaining the way of life unto the praise of Christ, “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:5–6). Otherwise on the day of judgment, it will be more tolerable for pagans like those of Tyre and Sidon than for apostate Christians who “no longer did their duty.”
Chapter 16

Torah instruction with regard to eating clean and unclean animals (Lev. 11)

Palestine has also been discovered by modern tourists. No wonder. It has a pleasant climate, though there is variety. In general it is sunny. Hardly any rain falls from May through September. December, January, and February are known as rainy months there. Nevertheless in the Negeb (the “South” of Ps. 126:4) it is wonderful, and there is rainfall at Eilat (the biblical Elath, on the gulf of Elath or Aqabah, a tributary of the Red Sea, where Ezion-Geber was situated, the harbor for the fleet of king Solomon). The region with the greatest rainfall is Upper Galilee, while the Negeb has the least rainfall. In Jerusalem and environs, the annual rainfall is higher even than in London or Paris.

This information is readily available from any tourist service. Such information packets will tell you as well about the flora and fauna of Palestine. Let’s review some of this contemporary material by way of introducing Leviticus 11.

(a) Mammals

Of the mammals, the predatory animals are the most numerous. Jackals are very common, especially in cultivated regions; the hyena is found mostly in the Negeb. Less numerous are the wild cats, lynx, foxes, spotted weasels, and mongooses (something like our polecats). Especially rare are the otter, the leopard, and the wolf (only in winter in Galilee). Mountain goats live in the region of the Dead Sea (in the wilderness of Judah). Porcupines are numerous, especially on Mount Carmel. In the Wadi Aravah you will find gazelles and wild camels. There are also eagles, rabbits, wild boars and beavers (in the Jordan region), gerbils, and the smallest known mammal: water shrews.

(b) Birds

Thanks to reforestation many birds have returned that, for centuries, had not appeared in this region. In this regard, among the countries of the Near East, Israel is the richest in bird species (about 400). It lies on the route of migratory birds. In addition to many kinds of predatory birds (especially vultures), there are storks, doves, partridges, quail, swallows, and other songbirds. Waterfowl like wild ducks, geese, and swans are found chiefly in the sea of Tiberias and Lake Hula, the non-dredged portion of which has been declared a nature preserve. Pelicans and cranes are also found here.

With respect to birds, we think it would be natural to mention trees in this context. For many centuries, Palestine has undergone terrible deforestation. But in 1948 people began a program of systematic planting of trees. In biblical times, the most prevalent trees were the cedars and oak forests, which have disappeared, with a few remaining stands preserved in the mountains of Lebanon. Inland, however, you will find various kinds of palm trees and pine trees, the maple, the cypress, the carob, the tamarisk, and the acacia, which appears everywhere in the wadis of the Negeb.

(c) Reptiles

Reptiles are prevalent especially in desert regions, including about three dozen kinds of snakes, some of which are poisonous, like the adder; in addition, there are lizards, geckos,
chameleons, and turtles. Amphibians, like frogs, toads, and salamanders are also present, wherever there is fresh water. You can find them even in the barren desert region at the oasis of En Gedi along the Dead Sea.

(d) Insects
In Palestine, insects are innumerable. Scorpions often lodge beneath stones.

(e) Fish
The freshwater lakes in the Jordan River region have a thriving fish population, and among the many kinds, you will find several that are unique to the region. In the lake of Tiberias you find the St. Peter’s fish (Galilean Tilapia) and the catfish (Clarias Lazera). The Mediterranean Sea is rich with fish, as is the Gulf of Aqabah. Although this gulf lies almost too far north for growing coral, it nonetheless has beautiful coral reefs. The assortment of colorful fish and other underwater creatures (like turtles) belong to the tropical marine fauna and are similar to the varieties found in the Indian Ocean. Because of its high salt content, the Dead Sea contains very few forms of life.

After this introductory section for Leviticus 11, we need to make a confession regarding our title for this chapter, namely, that on closer inspection, it was correct. Many modern English versions use this heading, but it is incomplete. Leviticus 11 deals not only with clean and unclean animals. Moreover, it does not deal exclusively with what is or is not permissible to eat. We could almost say: “Fortunately not.” This delight with a mistake will come in handy for us in terms of the scope of this chapter. When we read through it, we see that it consists of six or seven sections.

1. Leviticus 11:1–8. This section deals with the clean four-footed animals. They are not listed, at least not here. Later Moses did list them (see Deut. 14:4–5). He listed Israel’s domestic animals first—ox, sheep, goat—and went on to mention deer, gazelles, etc., animals that lived in the wild. But here in Leviticus 11:1–3 such a list is not found, but only the general rule that the Israelites were permitted to eat only those animals that had cloven hooves and also chewed their cud. Those two characteristics had to appear simultaneously and obviously. That is explained further in verses 4–8.

   There was, for example, the camel, which did chew the cud and had cloven hooves, but only partially cloven, namely, on the top, but not on the bottom. The camel walked on the calloused soles of both of its toes, on a kind of ball or pad. For that reason, Israel was not permitted to eat the meat of camels. For similar reasons, the dassie and the hare were unclean animals for Israel. For they did chew their cud, at least in appearance. They made a movement with their mouth that closely resembled the movement of cud-chewing cows and sheep, which explains why in everyday language—the language used in Scripture, rather than the language of scientific zoology—people called them ruminants. Nevertheless, they were not permitted as food because they were not real ruminants. Just as the camel did not have a real cloven hoof. The characteristics had to be obvious.

   That the pig did not meet the established rule is immediately understandable. For this animal did have cloven hooves, obviously enough, but it was not a ruminant. The two characteristics had to appear simultaneously. Obviously and simultaneously.

   That the pig did not meet the established rule is immediately understandable. For this animal did have cloven hooves, obviously enough, but it was not a ruminant. The two characteristics had to appear simultaneously. Obviously and simultaneously.
2. Leviticus 11:9–12. Next, the fish are mentioned. Water creatures that had both fins and scales, would be clean, but all the rest would be unclean and were not to be eaten. In the Old Testament we rarely read about catching fish (Hab. 1). But in the New Testament we read often about that. The practice could well have occurred among the Israelites, from ancient times. In any case, the Israelites in Egypt loved to eat fish (Num. 11:5).

3. Leviticus 11:13–19. This section deals with birds, or rather, unclean birds, which are the only ones mentioned. But of course the intention was thereby to declare the other birds clean and permissible for eating by the Israelites. When Moses talked about this later, he began this way: you may eat every clean bird (Deut. 14:11). But he did not supply any specifications for the clean birds as he had for the four-legged animals. From the rest of Scripture we know very little about the birds that Israel was accustomed to eating. For example, we do not know in which century the Israelites living in Canaan began to hunt grouse. Perhaps they became familiar with these birds in Egypt. Everyone will recall the rooster crowing in the night when Peter denied our Savior. But in the Old Testament, chickens and hens are not ever mentioned. This does not prove, of course, that Israel was unfamiliar with them. A seal has been discovered in Palestine, showing the fanciful image of a hen in an attack posture, dating probably from around 600 B.C., the time just before the Babylonian captivity. Among the domestic animals that the Israelites had from early on was the dove. This bird was mentioned frequently in the sacrifice Torah. This was the only bird that was allowed to be sacrificed. Later people could buy them at the temple. The fatted birds eaten at Solomon’s table, and therefore grown in Israel, were fattened geese, according to one interpreter, or fowl, according to another, or cuckoos, according to someone else. The latter is hardly credible.

4. Leviticus 11:20–23. These verses speak about smaller animals, the kind we often call vermin or insects. For this the Israelites used the word šereš, referring in general to small insects that swarmed and crawled. But three kinds of insects are described.

   First, insects in the water; second, insects on land, which flew; and third, insects on land that did not fly, but crept.

   Naturally, the category of animals now in view did not belong to the first kind, which swarmed in the water. Those were mentioned earlier, in connection with the water creatures. But it was obvious that here the second kind would be mentioned, the insects that fly, since the birds had just been mentioned. So the connection was obvious. (We would conclude that the swimming insects of v. 10 and the flying insects of v. 20 are completed with the creeping insects of v. 41.)

   So Leviticus 11:20–23 is dealing with the flying insects. Concerning this creature we are told, almost repetitiously, that it “goes on all fours,” an expression that should be taken at face value and not be forced. Because there are no insects that walk on four legs. True enough, but this is a rather popular way of describing everything that moves horizontally. In view here are all winged insects, like flies, mosquitoes, and beetles. They were not to be eaten by Israelites. An exception to this were four kinds of the specifically identified locusts. In this connection one would think automatically of John the Baptist, whose food consisted of locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). Still today, grasshoppers that are roasted or boiled or dried belong to the diet of poor people. People pluck off from the dried locust its head, wings, and legs, and grind the body with a stone or hand mill. This “flour” is mixed with ordinary flour and used for baking bread. The bread would have had a somewhat bitter taste. For that reason people either added honey to it or ate honey along with it.
5. Leviticus 11:24–40. Which animals are in view here?
Well, be careful, this passage is not just about animals. It deals with objects as well. And people.
Therefore we need to distinguish various smaller units in the rather large section. But those units are dealing with this single subject: defilement through death. Let’s keep that in mind. (We had this section of Leviticus 11 in view when we wrote earlier than our chapter title—about eating clean and unclean animals—strictly speaking was not accurate.)

Leviticus 11:24–40 consists of Units A, B, and C.

A. Leviticus 11:24–28: defilement through unclean large animals that have died
1. Leviticus 11:24–25: Introduction
   (a) V. 24. And by these (i.e., the following) dead animals you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening.
   (b) V. 25. But whoever carries any part of their carcass, for example, to move it out of the way, shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening.
2. Leviticus 11:26–28: which unclean dead animals defile a person
   (a) V. 26. Animals that do not both clearly and simultaneously possess the two features of clean animals (see vv. 4–8, camels and pigs).
   (b) V. 27. Dead animals that walked on feet, like a cat and a dog, would automatically defile a person.

B. Leviticus 11:29–38: defilement through unclean small animals that have died
1. Leviticus 11:29–31: which animals
   A list of various animals that often hide in or around houses or sheds: mole, mouse, toad, lizard, hedgehog, snail, and chameleon. A stern warning not to become defiled with any of these—implied: if they are dead.
2. Leviticus 11:32–38: cases that can occur
   (a) V. 32. Such a dead animal could fall into one or another wooden piece of equipment (bowl or bucket), or onto a garment or skin or sack. Or any implement used for work. Then that thing must be washed and would be unclean until evening.
   (b) V. 33. If a dead animal fell in an earthen vessel, like a pot, then that pot had to be destroyed.
   (c) V. 34. If a dead animal came into contact with any food or drink, that would be unclean. At least if that food was not dry, but wet. By means of water, uncleanness can penetrate inside everywhere.
   (d) V. 35. If a carcass fell against an oven or stove, usually made of clay, it should thus easily be broken up. Perhaps we should think of a small hearth with two round holes on top, over which two pots could be placed. This hearth would have been made of clay, and could be broken up easily.
   (e) V. 36. If the dead animal fell into a spring or cistern, a receptacle for water, then that spring and cistern did not have to be considered perpetually unclean. A spring always had flowing water, and a cistern could be refilled with rain again. The one who had fetched the dead animal from the water would be unclean (and would have to follow the regulations in v. 24).
   (f) V. 37. When a dead animal fell or lay in seed grain that was to be sown, which was dry, the seed remained clean. As long as such seed had not been moistened with water, the
uncleanness cannot penetrate it. As seed for sowing, it is not food for human consumption. The ground in which it is sown absorbed the uncleanness.

(g) V. 38. But when the carcass came into contact with seed that had been moistened (in order to use it), this seed would be unclean

C. Leviticus 11:39–40: defilement through clean livestock that died on its own
1. V. 39. When a clean animal, such as a sheep or deer, died on its own, one became unclean through touching that carcass.
2. V. 40. Anyone who ate from such a carcass or who moved it aside, would have to wash his clothes.

That a person would become defiled simply by touching the carcass of a clean or unclean animal is taught in Leviticus 11. But not that in such cases a person needed to wash. Nevertheless, on the basis of comparison with Leviticus 15:7 and 17:15, such an act was likely.

6. Leviticus 11:41–43. In this last section, we read for the third time about insects. Earlier we observed that there were three kinds: swimming, flying, and creeping insects. The last kind are in view here. Insects that live in and on the ground. It could be that they moved on their belly (worms and snakes) or walked on four legs (beetles, ticks, etc.) or that they crept along on more legs (centipedes). This kind of creature was also supposed to be detestable among Israel. The term “insect” was almost synonymous with “detestable,” perhaps because of similar sounding Hebrew words.

7. Leviticus 11:44–47
We have here a double conclusion.
(a) Leviticus 11:44–45. The first conclusion is directly connected with the preceding verses, where we read about various insects that creep on or in the ground (like worms and such). With this in view, God commanded Israel to remember always that she was his people, the people of Yahweh, who was holy and who had taken Israel out of Egypt. Was God perhaps alluding to a certain correspondence between the Egyptian house of bondage, indeed, the Egyptian grave, and these eerie (creepy) insects?
(b) Leviticus 11:46–47. The second conclusion is related to the entire chapter, to all preceding six sections. In each of them there was mention of eating. These concluding verses contain the command that Israel was to distinguish between clean and unclean animals, and in so doing, between animals that may and may not be eaten. Naturally, this postscript provides a very abbreviated overview. It does not intend to be complete. For example, it says nothing regarding defilement through contact with this or that. Nor about defilement through defiled objects. We would have liked to have read about this here. But apparently Israel did need that. What explains the sizeable difference?

Earlier we indicated that the ancient Eastern peoples had more feeling for symbolism than we do, and that with various commandments of the Law, God could make use of shared Eastern institutions. We have also mentioned that the distinction between clean and unclean animals given at Horeb would not have given Israel the impression of being an unheard of novelty. The religions of the surrounding nations were also familiar with something like this, Israel would likely have inherited knowledge of this along with the story of the Flood that came down from earlier generations (Gen. 7:2). Even though we don’t know exactly which animals were clean
and unclean for Noah. But we do know that the Noahic distinction between clean and unclean that functioned in the time before the Flood did not yet have any significance with regard to eating. For using meat was permitted for the first time after the Flood (Gen. 9:3). The distinction indicated there was probably related to the suitability of various animals for sacrifice.

At that time the situation resembled the situation with circumcision. This too was not a complete novelty in Abraham’s time, but was annexed by God and used with a completely new and unique meaning. In this way, God apparently gave a new significance and a new mandate to the ancient distinction between clean and unclean animals, namely, to function for Israel as a means of visual instruction. To warn Israel about everything out there, beyond the intimate presence of Yahweh. Out there was the darkness of paganism. Out there was death.

That is what Leviticus 11 preaches.

_Beware of death!

And if we may look ahead for a moment to our discussion of the following chapters, that is in fact the sermon of all of Leviticus 11–15.

This can easily be shown from Leviticus 11. If we have understood this chapter properly, then we observe that God prohibited Israel from eating precisely all those animals whose existence and manner of living were closely connected with decay, dissolution, rottenness—in short, animals who were at home in the realm of death. But with every other group of animals, even when not eating them but simply touching them was forbidden, it was clear that God’s warning was constantly being sounded against death. Just look at this.

1. The meat of animals that clearly and simultaneously chewed the cud and had cloven hooves was not forbidden. For these animals were not carnivores. They didn’t eat carrion. They didn’t tear apart their prey, but ate vegetation. Their hooves were not like the claws of predatory animals that used those as terrible instruments of killing. These were forbidden. Along with every animal that might not have been a predator, but nonetheless displayed something—like not chewing the cud, or not clearly cloven hooves—that moved in that direction.

2. For that reason, Israel could continue eating fish, as they had done to their heart’s content in Egypt. But water creatures that were not real fish would have been prohibited. Like insects, swimming insects, without fins and scales. Like paling.

3. Therefore Israel was also prohibited from eating the meat of predatory birds and birds that ate carrion. But birds that did not eat other living and dead animals, or carcasses, could be clean and were allowed to be eaten.

4. Therefore Israel was also not permitted to eat various flying insects. Except certain locusts, which ate vegetation. But we know that wherever meat lies rotting and stinking, insects are swarming around the stench. Those would be prohibited for Israel.

5. For the same reasons, Israel was forbidden to eat not only (a) the meat of unclean large animals, but if they were dead, touching them would have brought defilement. And (b) Israel was explicitly warned about unclean animals that were dead, because people could easily be defiled by the carcasses of moles, mice, lizards, etc., in a shed, workshop, and garden. Indeed (c) Israel was supposed to remember that defilement accompanied clean livestock that had died on its own.

6. Therefore Israel certainly had to watch out for contact with various insects, vermin, that lived in garbage and in manure and in places where carcasses could be found. For even though these animals were alive, the grave was their home. So even though these lived, they were unclean insects!
7. Finally, with this last category, God was recalling Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. Even though they were at the same time referring back to other prohibitions. Watch out for death. That does not fit your identity. Because it does not fit mine. I am Yahweh, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be a God unto you. Be holy, for I am holy.

Is this the proper interpretation of Leviticus 11?

Yes, it is, as we learn from a man no less than Moses, from what he said about these things when he spoke about the name of Yahweh (in connection with the Third of the Ten Words), found in Deuteronomy 14:1–21a. When you read this part of Moses’ preaching in Deuteronomy, remember that the name Yahweh formed the brief compendium for Israel of the story of her deliverance from Egypt, and that God was at the same time guaranteeing his future assistance to Israel. The name Yahweh signified, in view of the past, “Savior of life,” and at the same time, in view of the future, “The One Nearby.”

In Deuteronomy 14, Moses was pressing upon the hearts of the Israelites two particular realities in connection with the name of Yahweh. He was making a connection, first, with what Yahweh had done in the past, and secondly, with what Yahweh wanted to be for Israel in the future.

In the first place, Moses reminded the Israelites that they were children of Yahweh. God had made them such. By means of his redemptive deeds. Thereby God had shown that he was seeking Israel’s life and happiness. So then, such a privileged people were now supposed to grieve like the pagans. At the death of a loved one, they were permitted to sorrow, but theirs was not to be pagan sorrow. Not like those who had no hope. For originally the expectation that all the dead would rise again was shared by everybody. All of Adam’s children naturally knew about God’s good intentions with our human race. Intentions that extended beyond death and the grave. But over the course of time, this inheritance was sadly mutilated. Into something unrecognizable. The fantasies of the Egyptian ka—something like an invisible twin of a human being—of the Brahman reincarnation of souls, the Buddhist nirvana, and the late-Greek immortal soul, are proof both of the original richness (of tradition handed down from the Paradise gospel) and of the later poverty (due to pervasive, often erudite, ignorance). This explains that terrible despair among pagans when the dead came to be separated from them. As though that death had the final word. But Israel could know better, not only from time immemorial, but now for sure after “Egypt.” Otherwise God could have allowed them to perish in Egypt. But for this reason, since he had brought them from death to life, brought them out of Egypt, God definitely did not want to see any pagan grieving rituals among Israel. Like a wealthy man who married a poor woman would not wish to see his wife going about clothed like a slutty beggar. In the same way, God would not tolerate his people of life wearing a garment of pagan despair in the face of death.

But what Moses went on to say to Israel in Deuteronomy 14 in connection with the name of Yahweh was related more to God’s promise that he as the Nearby One would live among Israel in a sanctuary. That is why he had delivered them (Exod. 29:46; for God was “en route” to Paradise). But then Israel would need to conduct herself in a way suited to her exalted companion. So they had to learn to bring to mind God’s ancient mandate to engage in the life and death battle against Satan and his party (see our commentary on Genesis, p. 123). Perhaps that ancient mandate had been virtually forgotten among the human race, possible even among Israel, after their long stay in that pagan environment, but God wanted to accustom Israel
gradually to that fight once again. He wanted to see Israel one day living in constant opposition against Satan’s entire realm.

May this goal become far more familiar and well-known to us today, we who live after Christ’s duel with the devil.

By means of his constant warnings about death in the book of Leviticus, God portrayed that fight for ancient Israel. For the true nature of that death was no longer seen within paganism, namely, death as Satan’s companion (Heb. 2:14), under which paganism has always crept around in fright. Death was Satan’s domain, for pagans (Acts 26:18). But Israel, who had been placed afresh and powerfully on the side of Yahweh, the God of life, would need to learn to view and perceive death as something unsuited to Israel.

To give but one example. Even when a clean animal had died in Israel—not slaughtered, but died on its own—the carcass of such an (originally clean) animal was supposed to be extremely unclean for Israel, and people were never allowed to eat its meat. People could give it to the dogs, as they were traveling through the wilderness (Exod. 22:30), and later in Canaan, people could give such meat as a gift to the ger, the “sojourner,” i.e., the foreigner who had come to live in Israel, or they could sell it to the nokri, the foreigner who was staying temporarily, perhaps for business reasons, among the Israelites (Deut. 14:21). For such pagans were aligned with the devil and with death. But Israel was the people of Yahweh, who despised sin, death, and the demons.

Today we may know that it was God’s intention back then already to put an end once and for all to the dominion over pagans—including our own ancestors—on the part of the great murderer-from-the-beginning, by means of the coming and the sacrifice of his beloved Son (Eph. 1:4; 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:9).

That is how we may understand the Law today.

Just as the intention of an architect regarding the placement of the foundation for a building is able to be known only when this building has been constructed on that foundation and is visible to everyone, so too God’s intention with the Law of Moses is fully evident only now, thanks to its fulfillment through the sacrifice, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we read Leviticus 11, or when we come later to Deuteronomy 14:3–21a, then we must pay attention to the unique place that “Horeb” occupies in the history of redemption.

We have seen God at work earlier on earth combatting death. Already in Paradise. And when he took pity on Noah. And when he saved Abraham. And also when he led Israel out of Egypt.

But at Horeb he gave to Moses for Israel his Torah (Instruction, Knowledge, Law) as teaching regarding the redemption of life that would come like never before.

So expansive. Laying such a wide-reaching claim on various things in the life of the Israelites. For example, on animals with which they would come into contact, whether as part of their diet, or not. For they already had to avoid some animals that were not dead but were as alive as ever. Not because they despised creation, such “pests” as worms and rats had also received from God their particular place and task in the creation. The Israelites would have seen and understood that. But God gave to those beasts the function of letters in the Law, whereby Israel had to learn not only who she was, namely, a people whom God had claimed for himself and to whom he had given a priestly calling (Exod. 19:6; Lev. 20:25–26)—which explains why the duty of purity applied even more strictly to the priests and the high priest (Lev. 21 and 22)—but also who God was. God hated the world of death, sin, Satan, paganism. God, who planned one day to open up for all nations a path to life. Just as we may know today, because the gospel of Christ’s resurrection has been shared with pagans.
This explains why the church of the New Testament was protected so fiercely by all the apostles, but especially by the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul protected against Judaizing Christianity. “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance [literally: the body] belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16–17). Compared to the instruction that God gives us today by means of the gospel of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, the instruction about God’s hatred of sin, the devil, and death by means of the Law virtually disappears into nothing, just like the light of a candle, no matter how highly we value such light in the night’s darkness, nevertheless pales to nothing when we throw open the curtains of our bedroom and the full light of day streams in.

The Law of Leviticus 11 also belongs to the past.

By removing its applicability to us, however, God did not subordinate us to Israel. As though he would hand us over to unclean animals, or even to death.

It is not God’s fault that in the Middle Ages, our ancestors were repeatedly afflicted with epidemics because they raised pigs in such an unhygienic manner that the rats could thrive so well among them, and in the cities as well. In the late Middle Ages, in Rhenen the pigs of the residents walked freely through the city, as was customary. If the Jews of that time suffered less from epidemics because they did not raise pigs, then this does prove that our ancestors lived unhygienically, but not that in Leviticus 11 God was providing teaching about diet and health, not even that the dominating idea was the advancement of health, even though there were underlying motives that affected other dimensions of life. Without wanting to argue the opposite position, namely, that Israel’s health was not important to God, we believe that the Law of Leviticus 11 was not first of all a sanitary or medicinal or dietary regulation, but bore a gospel symbolizing character, because it had the focus of instructing and assuring the Israelites that their God was Yahweh, who despised sin and death among his people and was en route to giving to the world eternal life in his Son, Jesus Christ. The primary part of that great work has been accomplished today. For God performed this work in stages. But when that Christ returns one day, then that work will have reached the point when “shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:54).

Truly, Leviticus 11 is a very beautiful resurrection chapter!

Having heard the preaching of later prophets—back to the Law and the Testimony!—we need have no illusions about Israel’s observance of the Law of Leviticus 11, though there were some who remained faithful (Ezek. 4:14). As punishment, Ephraim would have to “eat unclean food in Assyria” (Hos. 9:3; cf. Amos 7:17b). This was a fate that Daniel escaped through his humble request (Dan. 1:8–9).

In a later time, however, the remarkable phenomenon occurred that the Jews observed the regulations of Leviticus 11 with a kind of fanaticism. We have in view not only the days of the Maccabees, when many chose martyrdom rather than to defile themselves by eating pork. Hereby they were simply demonstrating obedience to the divine commandment still applicable at that time. Even though the story about these events that we read in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 (about the refusal of an old man and seven brothers to eat pork) makes a somewhat strange impression. Nevertheless, when our Savior came to earth, he was surrounded by a people who no longer understood God’s wonderful gospel intention with the Law, but who instead were sighing under the Law as under a yoke that was hard, and under a burden that was heavy (Matt. 11:30).
Whereas in reality God’s commandments are never heavy (1 John 5:3). And whereas the teachers of those people were not even observing the a-b-c’s of that Law. Read the angry words of our Savior spoken to the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Mark 7:8; Luke 11:46). And these people from their side were no less raging against Christ, who dared to assault their ancestral doctrine (Mark 7:5, 9; Acts 6:13; 7:53–54). They were so blinded that they had identified their doctrine with God’s teaching. Paul had also been such a “heartfelt zealot” (Gal. 1:14), even a persecutor of the church (1 Tim. 1:13). The Pharisees understood nothing more of the evangelical meaning of the ceremonial law. That had been given as the gospel of shadows, which looked forward to being fulfilled; thus, it was the preaching of grace; they, however, had turned it into an eternal precept and thereby had destroyed not only its provisional character, but also its grace-content; their notion was that this law no longer pointed to the deliverances that God would accomplish, but to the works that they themselves had accomplished.

We have discussed this before, namely, that this un-evangelical commitment to the Law slipped into the Christian church as well. Some Christian Jews, when they accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, did not lay aside their garments of Jewish pride and conceit, but demanded that converted Gentiles should still observe the entire Law of Moses. They do not say that the shadows of the Horeb covenant and the Law were fulfilled by Christ, and the time was past when the gospel of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life was given only to Israel and beyond, among the Gentiles, darkness and death dominated. It was indeed a massive change. The Law was, after all, God’s own Word. Were people allowed to set it aside just like that? Even Peter had difficulty seeing this, and when he did see it, to keep on seeing it. Regarding the former, we read in the story of Peter’s vision of the sheets that held—note well!—creeping animals! The insects about which the Law spoke. And regarding the difficulty that Peter apparently had sometime later in continuing to see the fulfillment of the Law and the completely altered relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, you can read in Galatians 2:11–21. From there we can learn that we must not yield to the spirit of a certain kind of Christianity that wants to bind us still today to a requirement of the Horeb covenant like the Sabbath and various other religious days. No more than Paul yielded to his brothers Peter and Barnabas. For even in Antioch, these highly gifted men acted for a moment, out of fear of men, as though the Law of Leviticus 11—separation between Israel, the people of life, and the Gentiles, children of death—had remained valid. But Paul rebuked them openly and honestly. He had to. For otherwise “Christ would have died in vain” (Gal. 2:21).
Chapter 1

Torah instruction with regard to the uncleanness after childbirth (Lev. 12)

When we read Leviticus 12, let us remember that by means of many symbols, God wanted to instruct and assure his ancient covenant people of the gospel of the old covenant. If we don’t keep this in mind, this short chapter will present us with a very difficult riddle.

For here we encounter regulations pertaining to childbirth in Israel, to a woman who had given birth to a baby, just like our mothers gave birth to us. Was this a crime in those days? A crime so serious that in Israel they had to be punished for this with seven days of total isolation and thirty-three days of partial isolation? (And twice these amounts if they gave birth to a girl: fourteen days of total isolation, and sixty-six days of partial isolation.) Was this a crime so serious that a sin offering had to be brought for it?

Who would believe such a thing?

That would not fit very well with the high esteem that God commanded us to have for marriage. Or if people sometimes suppose that it was the sexual intercourse of husband and wife that was being punished, then it must be stated that according to God’s Word, sexual intercourse is not at all sinful, otherwise God would not have commanded it in particular situations (Exod. 21:10), but if it was legitimate, then it would have been egregiously unfair to punish the wife for such a sin and not the initiator, the one who begat the child, the husband.

We should not go in that direction with Leviticus 12. Moreover, let us be reminded once more that we may not deduce from a person’s obligation to bring a sin offering that he or she had become guilty of one or another misdeed. We learned differently in connection with the teaching about the sin offering.

In order to understand Leviticus 12 correctly, we need to pay careful attention to two things. First, to the location of this chapter, and secondly, the special content of this chapter.

Regarding the location of Leviticus 12, it is preceded by Leviticus 11 and followed by Leviticus 13–14.

We have not yet discussed Leviticus 13–14, but at this point we can say that both of these chapters deal with leprosy, and that God held up leprosy to Israel as a symbolic death. Let us mention only one thing by way of preliminary comment. When Mariam and Aaron rebelled against Moses, and Miriam was punished with leprosy, Aaron said to Moses: “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother’s womb” (Num. 12:12). Later we will see that for this reason lepers had to be excluded from Israel’s military camp, because Israel had received the promise of being the people of life, whereas leprosy was a mirror of death.

So this is what the next chapters will be discussing.

Regarding Leviticus 11, immediately preceding our present chapter, we can be very brief. In Leviticus 11 we read not only about the difference between clean and unclean animals, but also specifically about dead animals. By means of the Torah or instruction of Leviticus 11, God reminded the Israelites that they had received from him the privilege of his living among them in the tabernacle. For that reason they had to beware of any contact with the kind of animals that had anything to do with death. Not only if such animals were dead, but also if it was the kind of
animal for whose nature death and decay were its element. Leviticus 11 preached the message: Beware of death!

So then, is it not likely that here, in a chapter located within this context, we would find teaching about the gospel of life and a warning about death?

This assumption is confirmed by the content of Leviticus 12. That content involves two matters: 1. The uncleanness of a woman following childbirth; and 2. The sacrifices required for a woman following childbirth.

1. The uncleanness of a woman following childbirth

If the baby was a boy, this uncleanness lasted forty days. But during that time, the degree of uncleanness was not always the same. This time was divided into two parts.

(a) The first period of uncleanness lasted seven days. “As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean,” says verse 2. It was assumed that Israelite readers would know the purpose behind this. We have not yet discussed this. This was referring to the flow of blood experienced by a menstruating woman or girl. This is discussed further in Leviticus 15:19–24. There we learn that the uncleanness resulting from the monthly blood flow lasted seven days, and that anyone who came into contact with such a menstruating woman or girl was also unclean, though for only one day. Moreover, in due course we will see that Leviticus 15 is dealing with no other matters than what is more or less related to the procreation of the human race. Matters, thus, that involve preeminently life and death.

(b) The second period of uncleanness lasted thirty-three days. During this time, the uncleanness no longer as severe as during the preceding time, but it was still forbidden for the new mother to be involved with anything holy, such as appearing in the sanctuary and participating in a sacrifice meal. That was permitted only when the forty days were ended. When she had given birth to a girl, that was permitted only after a total of eighty days.

These numbers—forty days for a boy, and eighty days for a girl—will perhaps appear rather puzzling to our Bible readers. In reality, however, those numbers supply us with precisely the help we want for explaining Leviticus 12.

Let’s take first the number seven. We must take note how often this number appears in the purity laws. In Leviticus 12 as well, we encounter this covenant number. Here as well, it has obvious symbolic—i.e., metaphorical, instructional, homiletical—significance. Witness the reference in verse 2 to Leviticus 15:19, concerning menstruation. For in connection with menstruation, the number seven has no medical relevance, as everyone understands. For one can hardly claim that menstruation lasts seven days every time. Usually it lasts only three or four days at most.

This symbolic import of the number seven seems clear to us from the doubling of the two periods of uncleanness (first seven, then thirty-three, a total of forty days) when the mother had given birth to a girl.

We’ll comment first on that doubling.

This feature as well had no other purpose than a symbolic one. Naturally, it had no medical purpose. Nobody today would argue what people used to claim, that a mother who had just given birth to a girl would have had a bloody flow that lasted longer than that following the birth of a boy. That is pure fantasy. The extending of the time of uncleanness in connection with the birth
of a girl can be explained simply from the fact that the female gender is weaker (1 Pet. 3:7). And that is very important in Leviticus, where we are repeatedly placed before the contrast between death and life. Because the weak one must be seen as more vulnerable to death. And because even the newborn baby girl can already be viewed as a human being who later would be subjected to the regularity of the female flowing of blood and its uncleanness. This is expressed here by raising the numbers seven and thirty-three, in fact, by doubling both of them.

Why was the number seven doubled?
For similar reasons.
Because it was apparently God’s intention to increase the days of the second period of uncleanness in such a way that the number forty would not be lost but be preserved.

For according to Holy Scripture, the number forty also has a unique significance. We find it frequently in the Torah in places that have somewhat of a somber tone, a serious, oppressive tone. See, for example, Genesis 7:4 (forty days and forty nights of rain on the earth), Exodus 24:18 and 34:28 (Moses on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, when “he neither ate bread nor drank water”), Numbers 14:33 (Israel’s forty-year wandering in the wilderness), and Deuteronomy 25:3 (forty blows before the judge).

Now in order to reach the number forty as the sum of both periods of uncleanness for a mother who gave birth to a boy, the first period lasted seven days and the second period lasted thirty-three days. What then happened with the birth of a girl? God wanted to express this by increasing the number. But in such a way that both the symbolic meaning of the number seven and that of the number forty would be preserved.

So then, he simply commanded the doubling of both periods.
The first period of uncleanness totaled 2 x 7 days, or 14 days.
The second period of uncleanness totaled 2 x 33 days, or 66 days.
14 + 66 = 80 days
In this way, both the number seven and the number forty were preserved. For 80 = 2 x 40.
In this way, attention remained focused on the weakness of the female gender and on the strengthened contrast between life and death.

Comment: Another explanation prefers the understanding that the periods of uncleanness in the case of the birth of a boy were shorter because after seven days the baby boy was to be circumcised. But we read nowhere in Scripture that circumcision possessed atoning power, not for the child or his mother (see Genesis, 230–233).

2. The sacrifices for a woman following childbirth

That atoning power God tied (symbolically) to the two sacrifices that had to be brought by the mother who had given birth to the sanctuary after the entire period of her uncleanness had ended, thus, after forty or eighty days. The required sacrifices were “a [male] lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering” (v. 6). The priest would sacrifice these in the presence of Yahweh and make atonement for her. Then she would be purified from her flow of blood (v. 7).

We believe that we have said enough about the two kinds of sacrifices mentioned here: the burnt offering and the sin offering, as well as about the sequence in the case of a woman who has given birth. The main focus here is on the sin offering given for the woman who has given birth. For that sacrifice, more than any other, spoke of atonement.

Atonement. For some evil that this woman had committed?
Anyone who has read our discussion about the teaching connected with the sin offering knows that it was not always legitimate to conclude from a persons’ bringing a sin offering that the person on whose behalf this occurred must have committed a crime. For example, take a leper who had been healed. Such a person was definitely not permitted to return to Israelite society unless he had brought a sin offering. But it was nevertheless clear that such a person did not bring that sin offering on account of committing a crime. Sickness is not the same as sin, after all. So it was also not the case that after childbirth, a woman was obligated to bring a sin offering because she had done something evil. Some kind of “sin of commission.”

But then for what purpose was atonement necessary?

Some who understand very well that such atonement was not needed for a “sin of commission” on the part of the woman who had given birth, reply that this was required in terms of “inborn sin” or “original sin.”

One Reformed commentator (W. H. Gispen) writes about Leviticus 12 that the sin offering spoke of the covering of sin, something of which became public in connection with the birth and its outcome. (In this connection, reference is made to Psalm 51:5: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” This Bible verse is used as proof of the depravity of human nature, which, according to Belgic Confession, article 15, is original sin.)

The German commentator Bähr also seems to go in this direction, for he writes that the sin offerings and the guilt offerings in connection with the purifications point in the direction of sin and guilt, not specifically, however, to an independently identifiable transgression, but to the general corruption by “sin.”

But, with all due respect, we cannot agree with this. Please understand.

We do believe that the first disobedience of Adam was also committed by all his descendants, so that they are all born as being worthy of death, doomed to commit sin. (Something that indeed happens, unless God’s Spirit teaches us through his Word to believe, so that through this faith we are regenerated, as we learn from Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3, and Belgic Confession, articles 22–24.) The apostle teaches us this in Romans 5, and we see it with our own eyes. For some babies die a few days or hours after birth. Indeed, some enter the world stillborn. Nevertheless, because it must remain fixed for us that God never, ever commits injustice, and because we also know that babies commit no personal sin while in their mother’s wombs (Rom. 9:11), we must see the cause of the death of these little ones in their participation in Adam’s first transgression.

So we do believe that all people are born as children of wrath. This is something we see confirmed in those who do not die in infancy but reach the “years of discretion.” When these children, who have been born already as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant, do not accept the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this faith then does not regenerate them to live a God-pleasing life, the wrath of God abides on them and they continue to dwell in “original sin,” inclined toward all evil and incapable of any good.

All of this is true.

But should this be applied to Leviticus 12?

We do not think so.

We must not speak here about the little babies and the capacities with which they are born, for Leviticus 12 is not talking about them. We are dealing here not with the uncleanness of our human race in general, nor with that of babies in particular, but with the (symbolic) uncleanness of mothers who give birth.
Let’s pause for a moment.

We can hear someone saying: “But what about the story of the presentation of our Savior in the temple, then, in Luke 2:22–29? Does it not begin with the words: ‘And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses’? The word their is plural, isn’t it? Well then, that word must have had in view both mother and child.”

Let’s see.

Indeed, a literalist could claim that a purification sacrifice was brought for our Savior when he was forty days old. For it does say “their” purification. But anyone who reads Holy Scripture in terms of its entire context will not say such a strange thing about our Savior. And by comparing one passage with another, such a person will discover the proper explanation.

First, as far as we know, nowhere in the Law or in the Prophets do we find that a newborn baby was unclean in the sense of all contact between the child and something holy would have been completely impermissible. The baby was not unclean in a cultic sense. The mother who had just given birth was unclean in a cultic sense (Lev. 12:4).

In addition, in Leviticus 12 we read explicitly that the purification sacrifice was for the mother. Not for the child. “He [viz., the priest] shall offer it [viz., the sin offering] before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood” (v. 7).

We would place Luke 2 alongside this. What is being told us there? First: the release of Baby Jesus (vv. 22b-23). For the Lord was Mary’s firstborn son. Such a boy had to be “ransomed” (Exod. 13:2; Num. 18:15). Second: the purification of Mary (v. 24). Luke wanted to tell us about those two things in verses 22b-24.

But how does Luke introduce the story about those two things (regarding Baby Jesus and his mother Mary) for us? By means of the following sentence in verse 22a: “And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses.” Does not everyone see that in that introductory sentence, Luke was giving us a summary? That at this point, with the word purification he was including what he would go on to report about both the mother and the Baby? That is obvious. For obligations lay upon both the Lord Jesus and his mother, with respect to one and the same Law of Moses.

The First One had to be redeemed as the firstborn, the second person had to be purified as the mother who had given birth. So then, at that point Luke was summarizing those two things in the introductory clause, using the single word purification. Apparently he thought that this word could be used with a wide range of meaning. But according to the preference of people who suffer from the disease of literalism, he should of course have written expansively: And when the time came when according to the Law of Moses, Baby Jesus was to be redeemed and Mary was to be purified.” But Luke abbreviated this by using the single word purification to indicate two very different obligations, both of which flowed forth from the one Law. He preferred to leave it to the goodwill of the Bible reader. Like he does later, when without much commentary he writes that for Mary, not a lamb plus a dove were slaughtered, but two doves. He figured on people having the goodwill to recall the exception granted in Leviticus 12:8: “And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.” We are being told in a delicate way that the male lamb required for the burnt offering was replaced for Mary with a dove on account of her poverty. That makes for a sacrifice of two doves.
So Leviticus 12 is dealing with the uncleanness of the mother, the woman who has given birth. Granted that it is not dealing with her medical impurity, but with her (symbolic) impurity according to the Law.

Why did such a woman who had given birth have to be considered unclean, according to the Law? For what reason?

Answer: her flow of blood.

We read that when the priest had performed the sacrifice for her and made atonement for her, she would be clean “from the flow of her blood” (v. 7).

That flow of blood was the “sin” that had to be atoned. For that, the priest had to bring the sacrifice and that was what he had to atone (cover).

Meanwhile we must of course keep in mind here that this “flow of blood” was of a particular nature. Not the kind of blood flowing that happens when someone injures himself seriously with a knife or some other object and lost so much blood that he was in danger of dying. That kind of flow of blood prevented no one from entering the sanctuary.

But rather the kind of flow that we will discuss in connection with Leviticus 15, connected more or less with sexual relations. Our present chapter points us to that. In verse 2. With those words: “as at the time of her menstruation.” That was referring, as we’ve already said, to the uncleanness of menstruation mentioned in Leviticus 15:19–24. We will see later that the stipulations found in all of Leviticus 15 involve human procreation. Such an occasion involved human life in a preeminent way.

Let us look, finally, at the sacrifice of atonement that had to be brought for the woman following childbirth. We recall in that connection what was said earlier about the teaching of the sin offering. By means of the sin offering, God was urgently appealing to his people Israel: Know where you stand. On the foundation of redemption and life. Don’t move one hair’s breadth from that foundation, in the direction of death.

Is not the lesson of Leviticus 12 obvious for us?

The lesson for us Christians, still?

No, when it comes to Leviticus 12, we must not start talking about “original sin.” In connection with Leviticus 12 we must talk about the covenant. Something that God has today as well with us and our children, though it is no longer the Sinai covenant. With us things are far better, but thereby also far more serious. God’s Spirit has flooded us with the great historical Word-bath of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in that flood of promises he has sanctified us with the blood of his Son and placed us on his foundation, where the power of the coming age are at work (Eph. 5:26; Heb. 6:5; 10:29).

Today the church of the new dispensation are being warned seriously by means of chapters like Leviticus 11 and 12 not to trample upon the blood of Christ and not to despise the Spirit of Christ by falling back into self-righteous religion, paganism, and service to the devil. It will be that much worse for the church than for someone who in ancient times set aside the Law of Moses, says Hebrews 10:28–31. Just as genuine love cannot bear for one moment if one’s beloved shows any inclination of taking one step in the direction of a fatal danger, so too chapters 11–15 teach us today, as we read them in the light of the New Testament, that we must oversee ourselves and each other, so that no one departs from the living God, nor even move toward the outer edge of the life-world in which the Spirit of Christ has placed us. For on the other side of that boundary lies death and eternal destruction.
And to see before our very eyes today how many fall away, people who bear on their foreheads the sign of God’s (new) covenant. To see that they are not turning their backs any longer on a tent, a tabernacle, or a wilderness camp, symbols of life, but are turning their backs on Christ, who became Life in his own person and who is the Fountain of Life, acknowledged by God and crowned as King over the citadel of Zion, his church.

To such Christians, who were redeemed in their ancestors from paganism but have returned again to that paganism and to death, indeed, to hell and to the devil himself, to such Christians the statement of the apostle Peter applies: “What the true proverb says has happened to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire’” (2 Pet. 2:22).

Let us oversee each other and warn each other, when someone is running the risk of forgetting his nobility. Just as God warned Israel about that through the Law about the woman after childbirth. But through many other means as well! Read what follows.
Chapter 18

Torah instruction with regard to the uncleanness of leprosy (Lev. 13–14)

Now come those two chapters that have probably frightened many people because of their length. And perhaps also because of their content, that struck some as totally incomprehensible. Or at least of very little use to God’s church today. Whereas in reality these are genuinely evangelical, gospel-filled chapters. Full of instruction for Israel, and thus also for us, regarding this truth: that God’s greatest desire and love is for our life. Something he revealed most clearly when he sent his beloved Son who became Life for us in his very person (John 1:4). But anyone who is outside of God and his Christ is with the devil and with his assistant, namely, the prince of this world, death (John 12:31; 14:30–31; 16:11; Heb. 2:14).

We will address the following questions:
1. What must we understand by leprosy in the Bible?
2. What are the subjects discussed in Leviticus 13–14?
3. What is the outline of Leviticus 13:1–46?
4. What happened in connection with the purification of lepers, according to Leviticus 14:1–32?

1. **What must we understand by leprosy in the Bible?**

Leprosy!

From the time we were young, we learned to shudder at the sound of that word. For leprosy was—so we thought—the name of a terrible disease. Pictures of people suffering from this repulsive disease showed that. These poor wretches came down with growths on their foreheads, deformed nose and ears. It also happened that during the patient’s lifetime, one or another body part would die and fall off. On account of the infectiousness of their disease, such people were strictly isolated. Taken away from parents, from spouse and children. We sympathized with these “lepers” and thought of such sick people when we heard the Bible stories about Miriam, Naaman, and king Uzziah, and all those other times when we encountered the word *leprosy* in Scripture.

Until on a given day we read about a physician who argued that with this understanding of leprosy, our interpretation of the biblical stories involving this disease were completely wrong. This physician could be called an expert. For years he was involved with the “leper colony” that was established in 1907 on the northern coast of Java, and more than any other health worker, he became acquainted with the pain of those suffering leprosy. But what was the primary nature of that pain, according to him? It consisted of their terrible loneliness. In the aversion and disgust they encountered everywhere. Remarkably they encountered this precisely where people would have expected the opposite, namely, where *Christianity* had taken root. For along with Christianity came the idea that lepers had to be avoided and excluded. Isolated from society. How did people reach that conclusion? Apparently that was the continuing result of the laws about leprosy found in Leviticus 13–14. Whereas, according to the physician we mentioned, that infectiousness of the leper was not that serious. According to him, that infectiousness was no greater than that of the diseases suffered by others who were not at all forcibly banned from society.
That was news to us. And as usually happens when someone surrenders his commitment to an age-old misunderstanding, so here as well, when that physician was contradicted by another doctor. The bottom line is that the Jews used the term *leprosy* in a broad sense to include other skin diseases as well.

According to a number of medical experts, throughout the course of time a tremendous confusion had arisen concerning various diseases, and nowadays those poor folk suffering from leprosy have become the victims of a ghastly misunderstanding. This has led to everyone thinking that they need to avoid and shun such patients, as they used to do in Israel with the so-called “lepers.” But in fact, there is no basis for this, not only from a medical viewpoint. As one physician has stated, people talk far too much about the infectiousness of the leper. We do not know the manner of contracting the disease and the chances of infection are very slim for most people. But there is also no basis from a historical viewpoint, and we can identify the historical route of this misunderstanding as follows.

1. The biblical term is *ṣārāʿ at*. It appears elsewhere in Scripture, but nowhere are the phenomena of *ṣārāʿ at* discussed as extensively as in Leviticus 13–14. It is clear that in these chapters, *ṣārāʿ at* refers to a skin disease manifesting itself in tumors or spots on the skin that are often white and occasionally reddish-white in color, the essential feature of which is that they lie beneath the surface of the skin, and the hair above the infected spot is white. The spots have the tendency to expand quickly or to shrink quickly. In earlier cases, something appeared on the skin that people used to describe as “wild flesh” (*michjat basaar chaj??*). These ulcerations could heal, after which the whiteness could spread over the entire body, so that the priest found that the *ṣārāʿ at* had covered the entire body, but then the person afflicted with *ṣārāʿ at* is clean.

2. In terms of medical thought and knowledge today, the entire description of the disease in Leviticus 13 is somewhat unclear, but there is certainly no single point of agreement other than perhaps the white coloring of the skin. One scholar has argued that *ṣārāʿ at* should be seen as identical to what is called *vitiligo* (a condition in which pigment is lost from areas of the skin, causing whitish patches). The white color in particular is an argument for his position, especially the hair turning white, the quick spread, and especially the fact that from the description of *ṣārāʿ at* you get the impression that it was not the kind of disease that led to death or deformity, but a sickness or plague that, due to its characteristic alterations of the skin, must have been very shocking, especially to the non-expert. And in agreement with the rabbis of the Mishnah, some prefer to translate Leviticus 13:10 not as “raw flesh,” but “healthy skin.” The healthy skin that according to Leviticus developed into the whitened leprous spot, are those islands of pigmented skin that we see, in connection with the spreading vitiligo spots, that arise when the spots multiply and the healthy skin shows up in smaller spots among the larger white blotches. The translation of the words that are rendered as *swelling*, *rash*, and *light spot*, is doubtful.

If the disease referred to in Leviticus, which today is named after the one who discovered the bacterium causing it, and called Hansen’s disease, it would be puzzling why nothing is mentioned about the insensitivity of the spots and of the extremities, which is one of the characteristics of leprosy, to say nothing about the serious swelling of the face, the hoarse voice, deformities—all of these symptoms that immediately catch the eye of someone less accustomed or expert. When people respond by arguing that Leviticus is dealing only with the beginning symptoms, then it needs to be pointed out that in verses 9–17 it does speak about chronic leprosy.

3. When the men who translated the Septuagint faced the task of translating the Hebrew word *ṣārāʿ at*, they simply used the word *lepra*. That word was sufficiently neutral. In those times, the
word *lepra* did not refer to Hansen’s disease, but Hippocrates used it to refer to a scaly condition that was quite curable. Hansen’s disease would have existed back then (though people have never found anything like *lepra* in the ancient mummies), but it was not called *lepra*, but *elephantiasis Graecorum*. The *lepra* of that time belonged to that large group of skin conditions that included scabies, impetigo, psoriasis, and the like (terms for scabs and rashes).

4. The Vulgate, which was the Bible of the West, adopted the word *lepra*. That occurred around A.D. 400. Only later, around 700 and the time of the crusades, did leper homes come into existence. Anyone who was accepted into one of these homes was thought to be privileged. For he had the same disease, so people thought generally, as Lazarus, who was featured in one of Jesus’ parables; such a person was thought to be already cleansed by God, so that later his soul would have an easier time in the hereafter. This explains why these patients were called “God’s beloved sick ones,” and also “lepers,” terms that arose as corruptions of the French *mal de Ladre*, i.e., disease or sickness of Lazarus. Because many people wanted such a privilege and eventually far too many candidates sought entrance into the leper houses, the government issued certificates that people had to carry on their persons if they wanted to be given the full rights of a leper. What is remarkable is that in the era of the Reformation, the ambition for obtaining a proper and holy place in a leper house quickly disappeared.

5. In the previous century people learned to distinguish more accurately among the different diseases that formerly had been classified as *lepra*, or leprous-like and similar sicknesses with lacerations, like syphilis, scurvy, and psoriasis. Finally, Hansen’s disease was discovered, and received its proper classification. Today it is also called *lepra*, but it is now clear that medically speaking, it won’t do to identify that disease with the leprosy discussed in the Bible and with the Lazarus-disease of the Middle Ages. Otherwise those who suffered such diseases, the lepers, would remain victims of a silly misunderstanding. Because then they are “shunned like a leper.” When in reality, biblical leprosy was not the same as what is meant by *lepra* or Hansen’s disease, not even belonging to a complex category that included this disease.

Support for this conclusion comes not only from medical authorities, but also from linguistic experts. The recognized Hebrew expert, the Zürich professor L. Koehler, provides his understanding in his well-known Hebrew lexicon, where he explains the Hebrew word *šārāʿ at* to mean “skin disease” (Hautkrankheit), and notes parenthetically: “not leprosy, which was curable, Lev. 13.” That is clear language. But in one of his other works (*Der Hebräische Mensch*, 1953), Koehler discussed more extensively what we should understand the biblical term *šārāʿ at* to mean. After observing that the Hebrew word *šārāʿ at* means “blow,” he writes: “The meaning of this translation is obviously that God has struck the sick person and was thereby punishing a sin.” Next Koehler pointed to the various lepers healed by our Lord Jesus in the New Testament. He translated this Greek word as “leprous” (Aussätzige), and continues: “The disease described in Lev. 13 was definitely not what we call leprosy, but a skin disease (vitiligo), about which we know that it can be healed by means of a severe psychological shock—which in this case means that those who by means of their disease or the results thereof by means of their exclusion from the community, suddenly came into contact with the holiness of Jesus, could be healed at the very moment of such an encounter. Therefore when it comes to the New Testament, we should not speak of leprosy and lepers, but of skin diseases and skin ailments; the same goes for the Old Testament, for Lev. 13 and for Naaman, the Syrian (2 Kings 5). What we today call *lepra* and identify with the term leprosy is something completely different. At one time this *lepra* was widespread in our country, but today, except for a few remaining areas, like Norway and France,
it has almost entirely disappeared, while in the East and in Africa there are thousands who continue to die from it. For to this day, there is no cure for leprosy, except in its earliest stages. People can either avoid those afflicted with it—which is unchristian—or care for them, but they cannot be cured.”

If there is one result from becoming acquainted with the literature we have mentioned that deals with leprosy as the Bible discusses it, then that result is this, that we no longer believe as we once did that the word śārāʿat refers to those poor people, portrayed in all kinds of creepy pictures, who suffered from Hansen’s disease. Rather, it refers simply to “vitiligo and related diseases.” This means that the urgent plea from medical experts that the term leprosy not be applied to Hansen’s disease, strikes us as eminently worthwhile and able to be followed without much difficulty. For them, it is first of all a matter of terminology. They have done their best to retire the word leprosy from usage in connection with hospitals, institutions, colonies, etc. And medical terminology will gradually seep down into common usage, with the result that the word leprosy, that is so familiar to Bible translators and Bible readers, will come to mean nothing other than “vitiligo and related diseases.” In point of fact, the biblical leprosy was nothing other than that.

We would observe the following.

From more than one account it appears that the Scriptural leprosy can come and go. That is probably what both terms are referring to that we read in Leviticus 13:2 and 47: negaʿ śārāʿat, or “case of leprosy.” The phrase literally means “blow” in both instances. One Reformed commentator (W. H. Gispen) notes that the meaning of each word in that phrase is not in the first place lepra, or leprosy, but points to the circumstance of being struck, in this instance, by Yahweh. Notice how suddenly various people in the Bible come down with leprosy: Moses (Exod. 4:6), Miriam (Num. 12:10), Gehazi (2 Kings 5:27). Notice the relatively brief time (either seven or fourteen days) during which the priest had to render a decision about whether or not leprosy had been removed. The tempo of Hansen’s disease, by contrast, is gradual and slow, something required a far longer period of observation.

In addition, concerning biblical leprosy we read not only that some are healed from it in a miraculous way, but also that by its nature this sickness was not incurable. The entire ceremony for declaring someone clean, which we read about in Leviticus 14, proceeded on the assumption that healing occurred and the one healed would return to society after the purification was verified. Perhaps we have an example of such an ordinary, non-miraculous cure in the following two reports. First, the mother of Jeroboam, who was called Zeruah, which means Leper. Perhaps that woman was healed of śārāʿat and owed her nickname to that (1 Kings 11:26; according to Koehler, this was a name in which this disease was “wished away” for a child). Perhaps a second example of such healing and such a nickname was Simon the Leper, in whose home our Savior was anointed by Mary shortly before his death (Matt. 26:6; John 12:3), although we naturally admit the possibility that the man was healed miraculously by the Savior. But we should think, in connection with the leproi, or lepers in the New Testament, of the same disease that in the Old Testament was called śārāʿat, appears from the command of our Savior to such a healed lepros: “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them” (Mark 1:44; cf. Luke 4:27).

In addition, we are struck by the fact that in connection with leprosy, Scripture talks so often about the color white. Now according to medical experts, white hair and white skin are definitely not characteristics of Hansen’s disease, though they are just as definitely characteristics of
biblical leprosy, as we can see from Leviticus 13. It is also noteworthy that of all three persons who were suddenly afflicted with šarāʿat—Moses, Miriam, and Gehazi—we are told that they were “as leprous as snow” (kaššāleg, Exod. 4:6), which of course here cannot refer to the color of purity, as in Psalm 51:7 and Isaiah 1:18, but the color of impurity, namely, the color of death. This is thoroughly confirmed by the exclamation of Aaron when his sister Miriam was suddenly struck with šarāʿat. He compared her to a stillborn child. You know how colorless such a stillborn child can be.

Moreover, we recall that the lepers in Israel were obligated to appear in public just like people were in deep sorrow, first, with torn clothing, second, with bare head, and thus with loosely hanging hair—in Israel all the men had long hair—and third, with the face covered to the mustache or the upper lip. All three of those were grieving customs that were very familiar (Gen. 37:34; Lev. 10:6; Ezek. 24:17, 22).

Lepers were not allowed to mourn for the death of someone else, but over their own death. They were supposed to declare their own death publicly. For it was not enough that their fellow human beings were repulsed from them on account of their creepy white corpse-like color, but they were also supposed to be warned by means of the loud cry: “Unclean! Unclean!” (Lev. 13:45).

Finally, lepers were obligated to live outside the camp and to remain there until they were cured and declared clean by the priest. We can read about this isolation of lepers from the camp in Numbers 5. We will study this later. First, in Numbers 1–4, the army of the Israelites is characterized as an “army of life.” Then comes Numbers 5, telling us of the command that outside this “army of life” would have to dwell “everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead” (Num. 5:2). Hereby lepers were being identified as those who were symbolically dead.

On the basis of these facts, we believe that in the Bible, leprosy referred to a skin disease of the kind that gave its victim a nasty necrotic color.

What we read further on in Leviticus 13–14, about leprosy on clothing, on leather or on something made of leather, and on houses, fits excellently with this view.

For these chapters discuss, in addition to leprosy on people, also leprosy on things, on objects. Two kinds of leprosy. But both of them were related, of course, as we might expect. The Hebrew words that identify them are literally the same. And the location of the passages where each is discussed also tells us something. These are being discussed in Leviticus, specifically, in the section about clean and unclean (Lev. 11–15), and right next to each other (Lev. 13–14).

So that leprosy in houses, to begin with that, appears to have been nothing else than so-called dry rot. This appeared especially in old houses that had been restored in an amateurish fashion. In damp air, mycelium flakes would form on the wood (mycelium is the term for what arises with and develops from rot, based on the Latin word mucere, to be musty or moldy, starting out as white, later gray, eventually with yellow and violet flakes). In addition to ruining houses, such mold can destroy books, carpet, straw plaiting, etc. When new spores emerge, these are yellow or yellowish red, rust colored. The term sometimes used, wall fungus, is a bit misleading, since the wall is not growing food. Removing house mold is particularly difficult. Its “strands” can be very long and its “spores” widespread. People knew early on in the construction world that the wagons with which the materials were infected with mold were taken away, along with the tools and the clothing of the workers in order to be cleaned carefully, to prevent the spread of the mold spores. Modern means of removing mold include using creosote.
We are given the impression that just as ṣārāʿat or leprosy in people left those who were afflicted with it with a gruesome necrotic color, so too its appearance in houses infected with ṣārāʿat, as mentioned in Leviticus 14:32–53, due to their being covered with the white, or grayish white, and rust colors of the mold, would have left a gloomy impression on those who saw it.

The same impression would arise at the sight of clothing and leather infected with ṣārāʿat. Notice carefully that the Law was not at all referring to the clothing or leather objects that were infected by people or patients suffering from ṣārāʿat. Scripture nowhere mentions that. Rather, when Leviticus 13:47–59 talks about leprosy in clothing or leather or leather objects, what is apparently being referred to are particular kinds of mildew known in Palestine. This would spread to objects and penetrate skin so deeply that it could not be removed simply by a few washings. In the ancient East, that phenomenon would have been a real burden, in a society where people enjoyed wealth, not only in terms of fields and livestock, but also in terms of clothing and garments.

2. What are the subjects discussed in Leviticus 13–14?

From the preceding, our readers will have surmised that the one subject being discussed in both of these chapters is ṣārāʿat, or leprosy. But that discussion is conducted in a way that we might outline as follows:

(a) Leviticus 13:1–46: leprosy in people
(b) Leviticus 13:47–59: leprosy in clothing and leather (animal skin)
(c) Leviticus 14:1–32: the cleansing of a leper
(d) Leviticus 14:33–53: leprosy in houses
(e) Leviticus 14:54–57: summarizing postscript

If readers would like a piece of advice, they might consider distinguishing these five sections in their Bibles with a pencil. That will give them an immediate overview of these interesting, but somewhat long chapters. Perhaps you would like to write the subject in the margin.

Obviously we cannot discuss these sections of Scripture individually. We will limit our attention to the first and third.

3. What is the outline of Leviticus 13:1–46?

This Scripture passage deals with leprosy in people. We have already discussed several features of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, perhaps Bible readers would appreciate it if we took a moment to display the parts that make up this passage. There are eight of them.

1. Leviticus 13:2–8: introduction, describing the course of events in a case of leprosy.

   v. 2
   A spot appears

   v. 3
   Obvious leprosy

   vv. 4–5
   No leprosy observed.
Observed. Unclean

Isolation for seven days

v. 6

No leprosy evident
The spot is non-leprous
Clean

vv. 7–8

Leprosy has appeared
Unclean

2. Leviticus 13:9–17. Now follow the special cases. First, the case of long-term leprosy.

v. 9

To the priest

vv. 10–11

Leprosy verified.
Unclean.

vv. 12–13

Leprosy observed over the entire body
Leucoderma (vitiligo)
Clean

vv. 14–15

“Healthy skin” observed throughout
No leucoderma.
Unclean

vv. 16–17

The spots of “healthy skin” disappear, patient is entirely white.
Leucoderma. Clean.

As you can see, we have translated the phrase in verses 14–16 that the ESV renders as “raw flesh” with the phrase “healthy skin” (see our earlier discussion). The order here is not the same as with the first part, though it is the same in the following parts. Regularly an examination was made according to the same rule, and then the diagnosis is made as to whether or not leprosy was present.

5. Leviticus 13:29–37: the case of impetigo or scalding, clearly involving what is called favus or tinea capitis.
8. Leviticus 13:45–46: finally, here we find a prescription about how the leper must be clothed, what he must cry out when he sees someone approaching, and where he must live by himself.

When in this way we provide an outline overview of this Scripture passage, then it won’t be difficult to understand what we are reading.

4. What happened in connection with the purification of lepers (Lev. 14:1–32)?

We used the word diagnosis just now. That is a genuinely medical term, and we may have generated the misunderstanding that Israel’s priests had received a hygienic or medical task from God. As though perhaps God had given Israel these priests to be their doctors.

If that were true, then we want to remove that misunderstanding quickly. Israel’s priests definitely had no medical mandate. They were not commissioned to care for the sick. Not even particularly for lepers. We read nowhere in these chapters about any medicine or curative applications. No, Israel’s priests were far rather called to be teachers, they gave Torah, instruction, and the disease of leprosy—to be understood as biblical leprosy, whitish skin—was
chosen by God to serve as a pedagogical tool, namely, hereby to remind the Israelites about the foundation beneath their feet ever since “Horeb.” God had made them a people of life, in contrast to the pagans, over whom the devil and death reigned. In various ways, he wanted to remind them of that, including by means of leprosy. Even though at that time, there were other diseases, though some of them have disappeared today. But none of them was seen by God as suited to be a symbol of death. No other disease was mentioned in the same breath as death (Num. 12:12; cf. 2 Kings 5:7). Notice as well the prescribed mourning clothing to be worn by lepers, clothing that testified of their own death even though they were not really dead. Notice also the widespread agreement between the means of cleansing in connection with a leper being declared clean, and those means required when someone had become unclean through contact with a corpse (Lev. 14:6; Num. 19:6; cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn). Notice as well the number seven, which would later reappear more than once, a number with symbolic significance. Notice as well that among the sacrifices that were brought in connection with the cleansing of a leper, there was no thank offering, no thank offering for healing received (for this, see the teaching connected with the thank offering). Not one word is said about healing. Certainly about the leper’s cleansing—from his symbolic death—and his readmission into the community of fellow Israelites and the sanctuary of Yahweh. Later in the New Testament, we are almost always told, with regard to the lepers whom our Savior encountered, that they were cleansed. Not healed, but cleansed. (In Luke 17:15 we read that a leper was healed, but . . . that involved a Samaritan!).

You may recall that when we discussed Leviticus 12, we were not satisfied with the claim that the Israelite mother who had just given birth was to be viewed as a figure and demonstration of so-called original sin, the depravity of our entire human race, but that in the ceremonies prescribed in that chapter, we heard the repeated preaching of God whereby Israel was reminded of his Horeb covenant, his life-foundation, and life-domain, and was warned never to forsake this arena of life, because beyond it, death and paganism reigned.

So too here, let no one say that by means of leprosy, God wanted to make Israel understand that because of sin all people are unclean before him. Such that leprosy functioned as a metaphor of the consequences, the blemish, of sin. Or that by nature all of us are lepers from head to toe, as we once heard from the pulpit when we were young. That last claim is mistaken on two counts, for someone who was a leper from head to toe was declared clean (Lev. 13:13). Rather, Leviticus 13–14 contain (as does Lev. 11–12) a warning against death. In addition, leprosy was not simply a metaphor of “human misery,” particularly of his depravity and original sin. But by means of his Torah regarding leprosy, God wanted to preach to Israel that there was life in the covenant with him, but outside that covenant there was paganism and death. Thanks to the light of the New Testament, which calls death “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and a powerful instrument of the devil (Heb. 2:14), in whose bonds the Gentiles lie ensnared (Acts 26:18; Eph. 2:2), we now know that with the Torah of Leviticus 11–15, God wanted to preserve his people Israel from Satan and his corruption.

The cleansing of a leper occurred in two stages.

As stated, a leper was not only excluded from the fellowship of household, family, and nation, but also from Yahweh’s sanctuary. For that reason, the ceremony of his readmission occurred in two stages.

(a) Leviticus 14:2–9 deals with the readmission of the (former) leper into the fellowship of God’s people.
(b) Leviticus 14:10–31 deals with the readmission of the (former) leper into the fellowship of God’s sanctuary.

(a) Readmission into fellowship with God’s people (Lev. 14:2–9)

We get the impression that biblical leprosy occurred rather frequently. “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha” (Luke 4:27). In Numbers 5:2, lepers are grouped together with “everyone who has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead.” Notice how ordinary and everyday such occurrences were. But we also get the impression that biblical leprosy was cured more often than people suppose. If these healings had occurred only by way of rare exception, such general Torah instruction would not have been provided.

But returning once more to live among the people was something that did not happen automatically.

The ceremony of being declared clean was apparently conducted outside the camp, for the priest had to go to the one who was cured, “go out of the camp.”

Next, the declaration of cleansing—we almost wrote: “his declaration of life”—occurred in a way that was symbolic from start to finish. The Bible reader must beware of thinking that the slaughtering of one of the two birds that we see playing a role in the cleansing ceremony was part of a sacrifice ceremony. The notion has been defended that the ceremony involving the birds, recorded in Leviticus 14 (about the leper) belonged on the same level as that of the two male animals in Leviticus 16 (about the great Day of Atonement). But that is entirely mistaken. For the ceremony involving the two birds that were slaughtered (Lev. 14) did not involve the slaughter of the birds for sacrifice. For then it would have been prescribed that this bird was to be a dove, since the dove was the only bird that we see identified in the Torah as a sacrificial bird. Moreover, the blood of that (one, slaughtered) bird was not splashed on the side of the altar. The blood of this animal was mixed with water, something that never ever occurred with the blood of any sacrifice.

No, in this first stage we read nothing at all about sacrificing. That happens only later, in the second stage.

But if someone should ask: why then was that bird slaughtered?, the answer must be: only because blood was needed to serve as a symbol of life.

For all the elements that comprised the ceremony of declaring a leper to be clean spoke of life, and only of life. As we see from the following.

In the first place, the prescription said that the birds had to be “living” birds. Of course that did not mean only that they could not be dead birds, but the intention was that they needed to be alert, energetic, lively.

Next, one of the two birds was slaughtered above an earthen pot containing living water. Presumably it therefore had to be an earthen pot because after using it, the pot would be smashed. But what living water referred to, everyone knows. Not dead water. Not standing water. But streaming and flowing water, scooped from the stream or fountain. In that “living” water therefore was dripping the blood of the “living”—that is: lively—bird.

Now, the ingredients that had to be added to this mixture of water and blood. There were three: (1) cedarwood, (2) scarlet yarn, and (3) hyssop.

(1) Even someone who has never seen a cedar tree would surely recognize the scent of cedar wood. In our modern day, cigar factories often use the penetrating cedar smell for aromatizing
their cigar boxes and cupboards. But in antiquity, the cedar was no less well-known because of the durability of its wood. People would rub corpses with cedar oil to prevent decay. The Israelites would therefore not have been surprised that in connection with the ceremony for declaring a healed leper clean, God would have wanted to see them use cedar wood as a symbol of life.

What kind of cedar wood would have been used by Israel during their travel through the wilderness?

In a very interesting book about plants in the Bible, we read that, as we come across mention in Leviticus 14 of cedar trees, we are supposed to think of the well-known cedars of Lebanon, one needs to remember that this kind of cedar was a perpetual evergreen, held in high esteem in antiquity not only because it was so beautiful and lived so long, but also because of its many uses and aromatic smell. But because the cedarwood mentioned in Leviticus 14:4 and Number 19:6 are mentioned in a particular context, namely, ceremonies of cleansing, and are referring to events in the time of the wandering in the wilderness, we are not to think of the cedars of Lebanon. Rather, it is probably referring to the small desert shrub sabina phoenicia, the Phoenician juniper that grows in the Sinai peninsula. The wood of that shrub is also aromatic, and when people burned this wood along with dead animals, the incense smell would drive out the distasteful smell of carcasses. This last observation is something worth noting!

2. Next we mentioned scarlet yarn.

In Scripture the phrase is šēnī tōwlaʿat. The color here was probably light red or rose, the color of blood. But since one could not suffice simply with a color, but needed something, an object, of such color, what is meant here is that in the mixture of water and bird blood, to a piece or pieces of cedarwood, some wool or woolen yarn of light red color would be added. But we do not read here of any cloth, whether of wool or of another substance. Therefore it seems best to us to follow the lead of W. H. Gispen to translate šēnī tōwlaʿat as crimson. This is the color of deep red or purple. The literal meaning of šēnī tōwlaʿat is red paint (šēnī) from the worm or louse (tōwlaʿat). Thus, people added to the mixture of blood and water first some aromatic cedarwood, and then a bright red colored material. Clearly this latter ingredient spoke the language symbolic of life.

3. And then the hyssop. We read in the literature that nowadays people generally agree that the plant in question must have been Syrian oregano (origanum maru), of the species Labiaten. Both the oregano flowers and plants are covered with woolly bristles; thereby they retain moisture and can be used as kind of brush or broom, which fits with Exodus 12:22 (“take a bunch of hyssop”), Psalm 51:7, and Hebrews 9:19. Oregano grows in every country around the Mediterranean Sea. It is aromatic and since antiquity has been used for seasoning food and for medicinal purposes.

There you have the mixture.

With this mixture, the leper being cleansed was sprinkled seven times. We’ve already discussed the symbolic significance of the number seven (Exodus, pp. 198–99) and the action of sprinkling (not splashing).

But there was one bird left. This was not killed, but after the sprinkling of the cured leper, the live bird was dipped into the mixture of water, blood, cedarwood, and scarlet, and then released. The bird flew away happily back to its nest. In the same way, the leper now declared clean could return to his family and to the holy people of God.

But not all at once.
Before returning to the camp, he had to wash his clothes and take a bath. All of his hair had to be shaved, something that reminds us somewhat of what the Levites had to undergo with their consecration to the ministry of the sanctuary (Num. 8:7), but reminds us more of the fact that it was with the hair that the leprosy was initially detected (Lev. 13:3, 20). Then the person who was declared clean was allowed to go back into the camp, but he was not to enter his own tent. That lasted seven days. Why could he not enter his own tent? Probably because in connection with returning to his own tent, he would face all kinds of possibilities for defilement (for example, through intercourse, Lev. 15:18), whereby one became unclean until evening, so that the period of seven days would have lost its symbolic length. For someone who was unclean was not allowed to go near the sanctuary. And that is precisely where the person cured of leprosy was to appear at the end of those seven days.

(b) Readmission into the fellowship of God’s sanctuary (Lev. 14:10–31)

Now began the stage of sacrifice.

After the end of the seven days, all the hair was once again shaved from the leper, including his head, his beard, his eyebrows, and after he had once again washed his clothes and bathed, on the eighth day he had to appear at the tabernacle with the following sacrifices.

1. First, a one-year old female sheep had to be brought as a guilt offering, together with a log of oil. We discussed this earlier, in connection with the guilt offering. At that time, we stated our assumption that in this case, a person could suffice with a sheep as a guilt offering, because during his absence, the leper was deficient in regard to the services of Yahweh at the sanctuary, but he had nonetheless remained obligated to perform them. This explains why a female sheep was to be offered. A log of oil was one of the smallest quantities. People think that it was one-twelfth of a hin (see ???, p. 202) and thus about ½ of a liter. Others think it was no more than 1/3 of a liter. Some of this oil was later placed in the empty hand of the priest.

Both of these, the sheep and the oil, were “waved before Yahweh as a wave offering.” This was the so-called tēnûpā, which we discussed earlier. Due to this tēnûpā, both the blood and the oil could now be used for the following purposes. First, the priest had to dab some of the blood on the right ear lobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe of the person being declared clean. Next he had to pour some of the oil on his left hand, dip his right index finger into it, and sprinkle it seven times “before Yahweh,” i.e., in the tabernacle, after which the three body parts of the healed leper were to be dabbed with some of the remaining oil. The oil left over after that was poured out on the head of the one being declared clean.

What is remarkable are the line of correspondence between this ceremony and the one accompanying the “installation” of Aaron and his sons, whereby these men were assured that God had accepted them in the priestly covenant and would equip them by his Spirit for the work in that office. Nevertheless there was also a difference. Whereas with the installation of the priest the sprinkling occurred as a single act, apparently with a mixture of blood and oil, with the leper being declared clean, people worked in stages. First, blood was applied to him. Hereby he was being once again lifted up from the status of sojourner and outsider, indeed, from death, to member of the people of Yahweh, the people of life. Then oil was sprinkled on him, for actually every member of the Israelite covenant community was called to the priesthood (Exod. 19:6). Therefore God was guaranteeing him as well, by means of the symbolic action with the oil (which represented the work of the Spirit, Exodus, p. 238), that he would equip him through his Spirit, with his ear to listen to God’s command, with hand and foot to follow him willingly. But that was all. The garment of the person declared clean was not sprinkled with blood and oil, as
happened with the official garments of Aaron and his sons. They too were specially called to that office. But the ordinary person in Israel did not wear any garments of office. Not even the Levites.

2. The other sacrifices for the cleansed leper were a sin offering and a burnt offering, together with the accompanying food offering.

These two—the sin- and burnt-offering—consisted of sheep. The food offering consisted of 3/10 of an ephah of fine flour. Enough has been said concerning the significance of the sin offering, burnt offering, and food offering.

Atonement had now occurred. The “sin” of the one who had been forsaken by the God and the people of life, and the going over to paganism, death, and the devil, was now covered. And the assurance had now been given that God wanted to enable this Israelite to dwell henceforth on the foundation on which he had placed Israel at Horeb, in the midst of the people of Yahweh.

Because it always remained a possibility that the sacrificing of three sheep was somewhat problematic for a person, it was stipulated that the sheep for the sin offering and the burnt offering could be replaced by two doves. Correspondingly, the quantity of fine flour had to be reduced from 3/10 to 1/10 of an ephah. But any changes beyond those were not possible. The lamb for the guilt offering and the log of oil were perpetually required, even in cases of extreme poverty. From this we learn to understand all the more deeply God’s purpose behind the symbolism surrounding biblical leprosy. He wanted to remind his people powerfully that Israel had to abide with him constantly on the basis of Horeb. Anyone who forsook that sinned against him! Beyond that foundation were darkness, paganism, and death. And anyone who had departed from that foundation, even symbolically, could be readmitted to Israel, the people of life, in no other way than the way of bloodshed, whereas by means of the symbolism of sprinkling the oil, God was simultaneously preaching that being led by the Torah, i.e., by the instruction of God’s Spirit, was indispensable, if one wanted to please God with a holy walk and holy conduct.

Having read this discussion of the Law for the cleansing of a leprous person (Lev. 14:1–32), our reader will have no difficulty understanding God’s parallel intention with his Law for cleansing leprous houses (Lev. 14:33–53). Notice how here, more than once, we find the symbolic number seven. Note as well the fact that here we read only of symbolic actions that we discussed earlier under (a). But no sin offerings and no sprinkling with oil, because these naturally were not suited for leprous houses.
Chapter 19

Torah instruction with regard to uncleanness through discharges of males and females (Lev. 15)

Love is resourceful.

God availed himself of every possible means for reminding the Israelite society (“world”) of the foundation on which he had placed her with the covenant at Horeb.

This appears again from Leviticus 15.

Here we have a chapter, the understanding of which must not be complicated by otherwise well-intentioned notions about God’s fatherly care for Israel’s well-being and health, a care that would be imported here in terms of various hygienic prescriptions, as though Israel’s priests would have been doctors.

They were not.

Leviticus 11–15 is not discussing various infectious diseases, but even if it were dealing with diseases (something not at all the case), it would have in view only a few very specific diseases. Leviticus 15 is not dealing with various discharges, like the secretion of mucus, pus, or saliva from the mouth or nose, wounds and ulcers. Nor is it discussing diarrhea or dysentery, sicknesses that have been a concern of military commanders since antiquity, from Caesar to Rommel. We prefer to believe that the command of Moses, that everyone must take care of his need outside the camp, using a shovel to cover his excreta, preserved the Israelites from serious disasters (Deut. 23:12–14). But in Leviticus 15 we read about very specific discharges, namely, discharges from male and female genitalia.

Nor should we think, however, that Leviticus 15 is a chapter dealing with sin, specifically original sin. As though God wanted to teach the church of all ages, Israel and us, about the judgment that has come upon all humanity on account of Adam, falling especially on human sexual activity as being the most defiled and corrupted. Is that really the case? Is the appeal underlying that claim, to Genesis 3:16, the punishment of Eve, valid? Did not that punishment pertain especially to Eve’s role in tempting Adam? Such words were not spoken to Adam and in that way to all people. Did not God always highly esteem marriage, before and after human rebellion in the garden (Gen. 2:22; Eph. 5:22–33)? How could he otherwise have commanded the performance of sexual responsibilities (Exod. 21:10)?

Rather, Leviticus 15 is giving us covenant instruction, teaching about Yahweh (how holy he was), about Israel (that she was his covenant people), and about the relationship between them (that Yahweh wanted to dwell among them in the tabernacle, v. 31).

Leviticus 11–14 discussed these matters as well.

And now again.

This time using such contingencies in the human experience of all of us as ejaculation (with men and boys) and menstruation (with women and girls).

Perhaps at the same time God had in view certain superstitious practices among the pagans. These would have been stopped immediately. But we dare not say a lot about that, since Scripture does not proceed in this direction. But when we view Leviticus 15 as part of the large Scripture book of Leviticus, and specifically of Leviticus 11–15, then we perceive once again God’s raised finger of warning against death! Death was the irrevocable lot of those who find themselves and who move outside God’s communion of promise and life. In Leviticus 11 God
used clean and unclean animals to provide that warning. In Leviticus 13 and 14, it was leprosy. In Leviticus 15 he is referring to such sexual phenomena and ejaculation, in terms of which our thoughts are immediately directed to the source and boundary of life. After all, marriage is very wonderful, but it can present significant challenges as well. Sexual matters occupy a place very near the boundary between death and life.

God used this to remind Israel of the exalted level on which he had placed Israel at Horeb. Whoever forsakes that, lowers himself to the level of paganism. And there he would encounter death.

A number of things will become clearer with the discussion of Leviticus 15.

That context can be divided into two parts. The first part deals with men (vv. 2–18), and the second with women (vv. 19–30). At the end, we find two postscripts. In the first one, God says: unclean Israelites who come near to my sanctuary would have to pay for that with death (v. 31). The second postscript provides a summary of the preceding (vv. 32–33).

In addition, each main part consists of a section dealing with a normal discharge, and a section dealing with an abnormal discharge. In this order:

I. A. Abnormal discharge with men (Lev. 15:2–15)
I. B. Normal discharge with men (Lev. 15:16–18)
II. A. Normal discharge with women (Lev. 15:19–24)
II. B. Abnormal discharge with women (Lev. 15:25–30)

I. A. Abnormal discharge with men (Lev. 15:2–15)

Two things stand out right away.

First, the men are discussed before the women, which does not surprise us. This happens more frequently in the Torah, the leader is first.

But the second thing is that, in Part I, dealing with the men, not the normal but the abnormal is treated first. This fact finds its general explanation in the custom that we mentioned and have observed often in the Torah (Exodus, pp. 197, 220). The most prominent, the most notable, etc., is always mentioned first. This surely explains why the “most serious” defilement of the man is discussed first. But in addition, there would also have been a particular reason, namely, because male ejaculation could occur in relation to the woman, that could better be mentioned in the second place. As a result, verse 18 functions here as a transition, a hinge. It joins together the discussion of both the man and the woman. Moreover, the man himself would be mentioned in the section dealing with the woman’s menstruation (v. 24). The best transition between the various subjects is obtained by arranging the chapter as we now have it.

This section of Leviticus 15, dealing with the abnormal discharge of men, can be outlined this way:

I. A. 1. The cause and extent of uncleanness (vv. 2–12)
I. A. 2. The duration and cleansing of uncleanness (vv. 13–15)

I. A. 1. The cause and extent of uncleanness (vv. 2–12)

1. The cause of defilement is described in verse 2 this way: When “any man” has a discharge “from his body,” his discharge is unclean. Verse 3 says: Whether his body runs with his discharge, or his body is blocked up by his discharge.

What is meant by the expression “any man”? 
Some think that this can mean “any human being.” But in view of the outline of the entire chapter, the original meaning of the Hebrew word for man (ʾîš) must be in view here. In view here is the discharge that occurs with men, not women (dealt with in Part 2).

What is meant by the expression “from his body”?

Some think that this phrase could be referring to a discharge like dysentery. Indeed, the word “body” does not always refer to the male (or female) sex organ. Sometimes the Hebrew word used here for flesh (bĕśār) does refer to “people” (Isa. 40:6), sometimes to a (complete) individual person (in this very chapter, Lev. 15:7), and sometimes to the human abdomen (Exod. 28:42; see Exodus, pp. 262–63, unless there the word is referring to the male private parts of the priests). But sometimes the word “body” is clearly referring to human private parts, especially those of the man (Ezek. 16:26; 23:20). This latter meaning is apparently intended here in verse 2, in contrast with the female’s private parts (v. 19).

We probably should not ask what kind of discharge from the male organ is being specifically referred to here. The expression is far too general to provide us an answer. But for Israelite men and boys the expression was adequate, enough to let them know under what circumstances their access to the sanctuary and participation in the sacred ceremonies were completely forbidden to them. We read nothing about medical assessments being made by the priests. Each person could, and had to, know for himself whether he was allowed to come near to the dwelling of Yahweh.

2. The extent of defilement was not limited to the man himself who had the discharge, but extended to the bed on which he lay, to every object on which he sat, and to everyone who touched him, or on whom he may have spit, or who had sat on something on which he had sat earlier. That person would also be unclean for a day, and would have to wash his clothes.

I. A. 2. The duration and cleansing of uncleanness (vv. 13–15)

1. The duration of the uncleanness, namely, not only as long as the discharge persisted, but also seven days after it stopped, shows us again that in Leviticus 15 we are dealing with symbolic instruction. This means that we should not view the priests to be functioning as doctors and the declarations of cleanness as hygienic measures, but pay careful attention to God’s pedagogical purpose with all of this. That was as follows. God took this opportunity of a man with a discharge as well to remind Israel once more what a holy God she was related to by means of the Horeb covenant. Anyone who kept such uncleanness a secret and nevertheless came near to the sacred dwelling of Yahweh, was risking his life (v. 31). Indeed, such unclean men should not remain within Israel’s camp, just like lepers and persons who had touched a corpse (Num. 5:2). You see here once again the allusion to death.

2. Pay careful attention also to the clear lines of similarity between the cleansing of a man with a discharge and that of a leper. In both cases, this lasted for a period of seven days, after which in both cases a sin offering and a burnt offering had to be brought. Though there were also dissimilarities. For the one with the discharge, the sacrificial animals need not include a sheep. He could suffice with two doves. In addition, no food offering was required. The “sin” of the discharge was not as serious as that of leprosy. But a (symbolic) crossing over the line between death and life had nonetheless occurred. This explains the need for “atonement.”

I. B. Normal discharge with men (Lev. 15:16–18)

Here the text discusses ejaculation, which could occur unintentionally as well as intentionally.
(1) Verses 16–17: this can happen to someone entirely unintentionally, especially during sleep. When this happened to an Israelite male, he was supposed to bathe. Everything brought into contact with his semen, whether clothing or object, had to be washed. The male had to be unclean for a day, and therefore had to abstain from any cultic activities in the forecourt (v. 31).

(2) Verse 18: but it could also result from sexual intercourse between the man and his wife. In that case, the specified regulations apply to both of them.

With this, the woman is mentioned for the first time in our chapter. She will be the focus of attention in what follows.

II. A. Normal discharge with women (Lev. 15:19–24)

Here the subject of menstruation is discussed. We wrote about this earlier, in connection with the initial period of uncleanness for the woman who had given birth. That lasted for seven days, at least if the woman had given birth to a boy. Leviticus 12:2 states: “as at the time of her menstruation,” referring to the menstrual period. We observed that this was to be taken somewhat generally, apparently on account of the intention with the symbolic number seven, the number symbolizing covenant and holiness.

Here, the subject of menstruation is discussed in terms of the sequence of cause, extent, etc. The cause of symbolic uncleanness was the flow of blood “in her body” (v. 19). We have here the same Hebrew word (bĕšār) as in verse 2, though there it referred to the male organ, here to the female organ. For thereby the specific nature of this flowing of blood of the woman is being indicated. She was not (symbolically) unclean as a result of the loss of blood due to a wound or hemoptysis. Nowhere in Scripture will you read that someone was declared unclean because of these, even though these also consisted of a flowing of blood. Rather, with menstruation a sexual flowing of blood had occurred. And that was the focus of this chapter. All of these things are related to the procreation of the human race. And that was something lying very close to the line between death and life.

What is said about the extent of uncleanness is no less symbolic. For everyone knew enough to realize that anyone who touched a woman or girl who was menstruating would not acquire a dangerous infection. That was not the issue. Rather, as the Great Pedagogue of Israel, God was engaged in teaching his people to listen to the sounds of Easter. He wanted to make the Israelite “world” see how great was his love when his placed her on the life-foundation of his Horeb covenant. Therefore he could not tolerate anyone in Israel, man or woman, falling away from or sliding off that sacred basis for life, only then to fall prey to paganism and corruption. This explains all those (symbolic) warnings. Watch out for death! That is what is prowling beyond the line of the covenant. All of you must always stay close to me.

Indeed, God’s fatherly care went a long way.

To reach his goal, he placed under his claim even the monthly discomfort of women and girls; and that goal was that Israel would constantly think about observing his covenant of Horeb. For their own good, for the sake of their lives, for the sake of their eternal life. For we have to, at this point, understand that much of the symbolic preaching of the tabernacle, that everyone will understand what God was intending here with verse 31: “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.”

The tabernacle was a visible guarantee of God’s promise, given already to the patriarchs, that they would once again arise and walk with him in a new world.
But it was being imprinted upon Israel again and again: People of death—pagans and covenant breakers—do not belong there.

This lesson is clear for us as well. Even though we no longer live under the Horeb covenant. Ours is far “better” (Heb. 7:22; 8:6). Therefore the responsibility is that much greater as well (Heb. 2:3; 10:29). How shall we escape if we deny Christ, who has bought us (2 Pet. 2:1)?

If it ever happened that the wife began to menstruate while she and her husband were lying together, during the night, then the period of her husband’s uncleanness did not last for only one day, just as for others who had come into contact with her, but for seven days. This may strike you as strange, because husband and wife “are one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

Once again we meet the number seven. After all, involved here was the covenant of Horeb.

At the same time we find here the second reason why our chapter was arranged as it is: first, concerning the man, then concerning the woman. And in dealing first with the man, starting with the “most serious.” But that is not how the legislation started in connection with the woman, but rather how it ended. As a result, the man could be mentioned in connection with both ejaculation during sleep (v. 18) and with lying with his wife during her menstruation (v. 24).

So that the “most serious” discharge of the woman came up for discussion only at that point.

II. B. Abnormal discharge with women (Lev. 15:25–30)

This last section of Leviticus 15 deals with the case of a woman flowing with blood apart from menstruating. The section proceeds almost parallel with the section dealing with abnormal discharges of men. Here as well three features are discussed: the cause of the uncleanness is mentioned (flowing); the extent of the uncleanness (everyone and everything with which the woman comes into contact); the duration of uncleanness (for seven days after the flowing had stopped and the woman would have been medically clean, she would be cultically unclean); and finally, the purification sacrifices to be brought (a sin offering and a burnt offering).

We are almost finished with Leviticus 15. Just this yet.

In our discussion of Leviticus 11–15, we have repeatedly drawn the attention of our readers to the Sinai covenant, as the life-foundation on which God had established the Israeliite “world” at Horeb. We did that also in connection with the last chapter, Leviticus 15. We had a special reason for doing so.

Does our reader recall the command that God gave to the Israelites even before he began instituting the Horeb covenant, in terms of the announcement of the Ten Words of the covenant? At that time God wanted his people to sanctify themselves beforehand. They had to wash their clothes, etc. And then they heard: “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman” (Exod. 19:15).

By means of that command, God was preparing his people Israel at that point for what would follow.

Israel’s Great Pedagogue and Teacher was acting in these matters in the same way he did with respect to the Sabbath day. That had also been instituted before Horeb, on the occasion of the manna miracle. On the first day when manna fell, the people began to count, and on the seventh day, counted from the day when manna fell the first time. Israel was not allowed to gather manna, but on the seventh day(s) they would have to observe complete rest. We read about this in Exodus 16. That happened earlier on the route to Horeb, as similar preparation for what would later be said at Horeb about the Sabbath. Not only in the “Fourth Commandment,”
(remember the Sabbath day, etc.), but also in the Torah that God would give to Moses regarding the sacrifices, etc. The entire festival cycle of Israel was like an embroidered robe whose main motif was the Sabbath idea. Thereby Israel was constantly reminded of the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. We will return to this in due course.

So then, God did the same thing with respect to what was prescribed later in Leviticus 15. Regarding sexual discharges. Events in human life that were closely tied to the great contrast between being born and dying, between life and death. Very suitable, especially for an Eastern people with an appreciation for symbolism, to bind them to a lesson that constantly spoke of Israel being defined in terms of both Yahweh’s holiness together with his dwelling, and in terms of the life-foundation on which Israel had been placed by Yahweh at Horeb, set by his side, and in terms of the defeat and corruption of every Israelite who forgot this covenant and slid down to the level of the pagans, over whom the devil ruled with his darkness and death.
Chapter 20

“Zealots for the Law”¹

We must always keep our promises. And this one is rather old. We had identified three enemies of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as our complete Savior. These enemies were: (1) Judaizers,² (2) the Greek theory of an immortal soul, and (3) the Gnostic theory of new life-substance.

The latter two promises we have kept. But not the first one, at least not directly. Now and then we have devoted a word or two to this matter. But we have not yet focused our discussion on the matter of Judaizing. That was because we were looking for a more suitable opportunity, and we have found that here, in connection with our discussion of Leviticus 11–15, dealing with the food and the purification laws. Now is a good time for an excursus about Judaizing. For Judaizing was burdensome, and wanted to burden others, especially under the domination of the laws of Leviticus 11–15.

But first this:

Family members can sometimes resemble each other in striking ways. Even distantly related family members. What should a person do, then, in order to avoid confusion? Not only pay attention to those features that such relatives share, but also and especially to pay attention to what they do not have in common, to their differences.

Well, the activities associated with Judaizing bears a family resemblance to those involved in being zealous for the Law, even though this resemblance is only on the surface. It displays far more points of difference than resemblance, however. So we would regret it if those two were confused. All Judaizers are zealous for the Law. But not everyone who is zealous for the Law is thereby a Judaizer.

We encountered an example of zeal for the Law when we looked at Leviticus 8–10. Moses was over-reacting when he demanded that Aaron and his two surviving sons eat the meat of the ram offered as a sin offering, after everything that had happened to their deceased sons and brothers, Nadab and Abihu. When Aaron drew attention to that, Moses fortunately agreed and wisely remained silent.

We encounter zeal for the Law in the New Testament as well, in connection with people we would not have expected. But it cannot be denied that the New Testament tells us about

¹ TRA.SLATOR’S NOTE: the Dutch word appearing as the title of this chapter is Wetticisme, a word that most Dutch-English dictionaries render as Legalism. The English word legalism usually includes the theological notion of synergism, a teaching claiming that the human will cooperates with God in obtaining salvation. The Dutch word wetticisme lacks any notion of synergism, however. Therefore, in order to avoid the negative associations attached to the English word legalism, and to capture the somewhat positive force of Vonk’s discussion, we have chosen the phrase “zealots for the law,” based on Acts 21:20 and the actions of the apostle Paul.

² TRA.SLATOR’S NOTE: the Dutch word Judaisme resembles the English word Judaism, and some might be inclined to render it that way. But in Dutch, the word Jodendom refers to the religion that is usually identified, together with Christianity and Islam, as one of the world religions, for which English uses the word Judaism. The field of biblical studies is familiar with the term Judaizing, referring to the phenomenon of Jews who had become Christians seeking to compel non-Jews who had become Christians to live like Jews, which is what we encounter in the New Testament. The Judaizers, then, were those Jewish Christians committed to judaizing the Gentile Christians.
Christians who unfortunately were not free of a certain conservatism and zealotry when it came to the Law.

Consider, for example, the book of Acts.

We usually call this book the Acts of the Apostles, but the title “The Acts of the Ascended Christ” would have been more suitable. Early on in this book, we read that Christ had given his apostles the command to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). But how much time and effort did it take before this command was carried out? And that did not occur particularly through the apostles themselves. The book of Acts is really not at all the kind of book that teaches us to expect the church’s salvation from heroic people. Not even from apostles. Oh, of course, the twelve apostles did preach in Jerusalem (Acts 2–3, etc.). There were Jewish churches established in the region of Jerusalem (Gal. 1:22).

Nevertheless, the gospel was not preached to the Samaritans first by an apostle, but by the deacon Philip. Later, after that happened, two apostles went for the first time to Samaria (Acts 8:14). When it came to preaching the gospel of Christ to a Gentile, to someone from Nubia—someone to whom Christ was really referring when he sent out his apostles to “the end of the earth,” for the eunuch served “Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians”—the first one to do that was that an apostle, but once again it was the deacon Philip. The persecution following Stephen’s death scattered many here and there, but the apostles remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). There, in the ancient city, they would have envisioned their field of labor. In fact, Philip seems initially to have thought it objectionable simply to accept the eunuch as a member of the Christian church. Certainly he did not think that way because of the eunuch’s dark skin, for some ancestors of the Israelites also had dark skin. Joseph’s wife was an Egyptian (Gen. 41:45, 50). Moses took an Ethiopian woman as his wife (Num. 12:1). The name Phinehas means Nubian. Rather, the issue with the Ethiopian was that he was a eunuch, someone who had been castrated. Such men whose genitals had been mutilated were not allowed according to the Law to enter the assembly of the Israelite church (Deut. 23:1). But the eunuch himself had talked Philip out of that legalistic objection with the words: “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36).

It is true, subsequently the gospel of Christ was preached to Cornelius by the apostle Peter. But how much effort did it take before Peter decided to do so! The vision, thrice repeated, of the large sheet filled with clean and unclean animals were mixed together. After that lesson, Peter traveled with the Gentile men to Caesarea, he went inside “without objection” to talk with Cornelius, and he even lodged there (Acts 10:20, 48). But once again, Peter was not persuaded to baptize that Cornelius and his family apart from being compelled by divine facts. By the undeniable, visible gifts of the Spirit given to those people. When he returned later to Jerusalem, and was there called on to given an account, he honestly confessed to what had happened, but as justification for that he appealed to the gifts of the Spirit bestowed upon those Gentiles. At that point I could hardly refuse them baptism! Peter also fortified his argument by pointing his finger to “these six brothers” who had accompanied him to Caesarea (Acts 11:12, 17). At that point the Jerusalem leaders found peace in the situation. Everyone sensed the excitement that had been stirred up in the church by Peter’s baptizing a Gentile family in Caesarea.

Certainly at that point the brothers were glorifying God. “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). Subsequently, however, among the Christians in Jerusalem who were Jews, everything had to remain as it had always been. They believed in the Lord Jesus, to be sure, but at the same time they continued going to the temple and
participating regularly in the worship there. Everything was done according to the Law of Moses. And that occurred not only during the earliest period, but continued for years later.

We learn this from the episode of Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem. As many people know, at that time the apostle was arrested in the temple. But how did he end up there? Earlier he had been visiting James. He occupied a position of leadership in the Jerusalem church. In the presence of all the elders Paul had narrated “what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19). At that point, the Jerusalem brothers had heartily rejoiced about that. “When they heard it, they glorified God” (Acts 21:20). But when Paul had finished his report, they made an urgent request of him. Here in Jerusalem there were thousands of Jewish converts to faith in Christ, although at the same time they had remained “zealous for the Law.” Now those people had been hearing various nasty things about Paul. He had supposedly incited Jews living in foreign cities against Moses, “telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs” (Acts 21:21). For that reason, James and the elders requested Paul to help stop that slander by publicly participating himself once again in the ancient temple liturgy, namely, by joining several other Christians in a sacrifice ceremony associated with their Nazirite vow. Then those slanderers’ mouths would be stopped. Then people could see how much Paul also loved the Law. “That you yourself also live in observance of the law” (Acts 21:24).

As we know, Paul granted that well-intentioned request. With the well-known tragic result: his arrest.

The question is understandable as to whether Paul acted properly in honoring the request of James. Indeed, we might ask whether his participating in the sacrifice ceremony in the temple could pass muster. Or whether he thereby committed treason against the gospel in terms of what he himself had been preaching, namely, that the shadows of the Law had been fulfilled by Christ and had thus come to an end (Col. 2:16–17).

We would not answer those questions affirmatively.

We know very well that the apostle Paul loved his Savior so much that he did not refuse to die for him, let alone that he would have betrayed the truth of the gospel out of fear. The Judaizers discovered just how valiantly he stood up for the full gospel; we’ll say more about them in the next chapter. But from Paul’s conduct in Jerusalem in the episode of Acts 21 we can learn something very beautiful, namely, that we must first of all avoid confusing being zealous for the Law with Judaizing. Judaizers were bloodthirsty fellows. “False brothers” (Gal. 2:4). “Enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil. 3:18). James, who led the church in Jerusalem, was not that. Despite his zeal for the Law, James was a faithful confessor of Christ. And stayed that way to the end. Until his own martyrdom. And James did not distrust his brother Paul. Nor was he out for Paul’s life. Nor did he want to put him out of office. With deep-seated gratitude he listened to Paul’s report of his official labor among the Gentiles. James was no persecutor. So then, we can afford to appreciate such brothers generously, especially during this time of transition. Paul was often very accommodating for such brothers (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 1 Cor. 9:20–23). In fact, he himself did not bid an abrupt farewell to the Jerusalem temple ministry (Acts 22:17; 24:11, 17–18). The second thing we learn here is that we need not react fiercely and violently toward those who are zealous for the Law, making an extremely logical and straightforward appeal to the gospel in such a way that we in turn make this gospel into a Law so that with it we can slap down our neighbor in the church, such that we ourselves fall into . . . excessive zeal for the Law, or worse yet, into Judaizing.

For Judaizing does in fact want to slap people down. To wound. To kill. To murder. But that is not the characteristic of zeal for the Law.
We can learn this from the letter to the Hebrews as well.

For centuries, the proper understanding of this epistle has been hindered by the misunderstanding that it was supposedly written by the apostle Paul. You find this misunderstanding in Belgic Confession, article 4. There is little in the epistle that argues for such a view, however, and much that argues against it. Its word usage and themes are clearly different from those epistles that definitely came from Paul. So much so that people who think they need to retain Paul as the author of Hebrews find themselves forced to take refuge in the assumption that Paul supposedly used a secretary who allowed himself great latitude in putting the finishing touches on this letter. This supposedly explains the great difference in the usage of terms and the line of argument. Even so, although the apostles did indeed use such secretaries occasionally (1 Pet. 5:12), including Paul (Rom. 16:22), the claim that the author of the letter to the Hebrews did so is nowhere to be found in the letter and cannot be inferred from its content.

In fact, the entire scope of this epistle argues against such an assumption. The epistle to the Hebrews does indeed combat a form of zeal for the Law, but it was not opposing Judaizing. Nowhere. Whereas in almost every letter that came indisputably from Paul, the latter danger was warned against. We will come back to this later.

Rather, the danger against which Hebrews is warning shows far greater resemblance to that threat we saw just a moment ago endangering the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, in the episode of Acts 21, the episode of Paul’s final visit to the temple.

Indeed, if we may be permitted to form a hypothesis regarding these things, then it would be this. The similarity between the local situation like this one that we can reconstruct from Hebrews, and the situation forming the background of the church in Jerusalem as that can be determined from Acts and from the church history written by Eusebius, seems to us so striking that there is reason to assume that the letter to the Hebrews was written to Jerusalem, at least to a specific part of the Lord’s church in Jerusalem, apparently a Greek-speaking part of the church in that place (cf. Acts 6:1, 9).

When did this occur?

According to Eusebius, James, the brother of the Lord, was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, who died a martyr’s death in the year 62. Did the author of Hebrews have in view the death of this James and others before him, from the time of Stephen on, when he wrote: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7)? In that case, Hebrews would have been written after AD 62.

But there is reason to think that Hebrews was written before AD 70, the year when the city and temple were destroyed. The basis for this can be found in Hebrews 9:6–10, among other places.

If you come across this passage as it is printed in some English Bibles, then it is easy to skip over it. In some versions, like the KJV, the translation the passage gives you the impression that the author had his eye on the worship that occurred in former centuries in the Israelite sanctuary. We will underline a few words (recall that in the KJV, words added to make good English sense are placed in italic; that is why we will underline):
Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and diverse washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.

Compare the KJV above with the ESV below:

These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes; and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

You will notice that the difference is between the past tense (KJV) and the present tense (ESV). The latter is more accurate in terms of the original Greek text. Following the ESV, we hear the writer to the Hebrews warning his readers against a danger that is threatening them in their own day, namely, the danger of Jewish Christians continuing to hold on to the old covenant, to the Horeb covenant, with its sacred places, sacred persons, and sacred actions. The significance of this passage becomes very different. Much more direct. Then in verses 6–7 the author is telling his readers about current priestly activities. And then what? Why was the author disapproving of the Jewish Christians holding on to the ordinances of the old covenant that were mentioned? Verse 8 tells us. There the author generously acknowledges that the Holy Spirit even today, in his day, was teaching a lesson by means of those ancient buildings belonging to the time of the old covenant. An ancient lesson. But then in the author’s day that was a lesson of warning. “By this the Holy Spirit is indicating that the way into the holy place [here, this means heaven] is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic of the present age).”

That is how we would summarize verse 8. Notice that the sanctuary being referred to here is heaven, as in Hebrews 8:2, 9:12, and other passages in Hebrews. And we must reject any notion suggesting that access to that heaven would be opened to believers for the first time only in the time of Christ. Otherwise, what must we do with all those Old Testament prayers that testify to the opposite? In Psalm 18:6: “He heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears.”

What then does the author of Hebrews mean?

He wants to encourage his readers toward greater confidence. For they were living in an oppressive situation (Heb. 12:12). What explains that? They were Jewish people who had become believers in Jesus and who had endured a lot for the sake of that faith in Jesus as the Christ. The stealing of their possessions, to be sure. And yet they lacked nothing. Nevertheless, they were insufficiently aware of the finished work of Christ. Of what he had accomplished in his suffering and death. But especially what he was doing even now, at this moment, above our
heads, in heaven—serving as our Advocate with the Father (Heb. 5:1–10, 7:25). Oh, if only they
paid more attention to that and had confidence in their wretched situation (Heb. 4:16). But that is
something they did far too little. What explains that? They were still too oriented toward the Old
Testament. They lived far too much as though the Horeb covenant was still in force. The old
covenant with its ancient worship, where sacrifices and offerings were constantly being brought,
up to and including the present time. Proving that the one bringing the sacrifices was not being
definitively helped. Otherwise those sacrifices, along with their accompanying washings, would
not need to be repeated time and time again. So what was the lesson? Those sacrifices had been
instituted by God back then as something temporary. Until the time when Jesus would come,
who would bring a better covenant. And that had now happened.

That is the teaching of Hebrews 9:6–10.

Naturally, we do not want to force upon anyone our assumption that Hebrews was written to
Jewish Christians in Jerusalem or its environs. It would not be fitting for us to bind someone to
that conclusion. Our assumption has the value of a hypothesis only. But it does help us to read
this epistle with flesh and blood people in mind. Jewish people, who, on the one hand, believed
wholeheartedly that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but who, on the other hand, nonetheless
thought they were not permitted to deny their own upbringing. What had been taught them from
youth onward about respect for the Law, that respect required of them, so they thought, a faithful
observance, even now, of everything, of all the commands of that Law, including those regarding
temple worship.

We should not come down on them with wild fervor.

The author of Hebrews does not do that, either. He considered the conduct of his readers far
from safe. They had themselves to blame for their oppressive circumstances. In such a serious
way, they had lost sight of their beloved Lord. The lovely doctrine of his priestly ministry above,
of his daily intercession with the Father for all those on earth who are his, had become far too
much of a forgotten subject to them. How did that happen? Because they were far too busy
walking to the temple and watching the priestly ministry of the old covenant.

Once again, the writer of this letter to the Hebrews admonishes his readers about this, not in a
way that is harsh and sharp, but in a manner gentle and friendly. Does that perhaps explain why
initially we were not irritated with that purpose of the epistle to the Hebrews? An admonition can
be administered in a fashion so friendly that you “feel it” only later.

For Hebrews was intended as an “admonition,” after all (Heb. 13:22). And you’d have to be
an angel of a person for an admonition not to make you feel stung just a little bit. On further
inspection, that would also have been the case with the Hebrews.

Presumably the epistle was written rather early. We personally would be satisfied with the
estimate of sometime between 62 and 70.

Although the author of Hebrews informs us that he did not personally receive the gospel
from the Lord Jesus, but from one of his disciples (Heb. 2:3). On this fact some have based the
assumption that this person was someone who belonged to “the second generation,” such that the
letter was written rather late. But that is not necessary. Someone like Apollos did not personally
hear the Lord Jesus, nor was he personally among the Lord’s circle of original disciples.
Nonetheless he was a contemporary of Paul.

In any case, you cannot date Hebrews all that late, for the author had to be able still to point
his readers to the well-known miracles whereby our Savior had provided extra help to his church
in its initial struggle (Heb. 2:3; Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3). Timothy was still living (Heb. 13:23).
And, something we mentioned earlier, apparently the worship in the Jerusalem temple was in full swing and the temple was still standing. All of which points to pre-AD 70.

In those days the author of Hebrews wrote to the Christians who had been raised with the Law, that the Horeb covenant belonged to the past, and had gone away (Heb. 8:13), and that the Law had been suspended (Heb. 7:19). During those relatively early days. There had not been very much time to get used to this. Therefore the original readers of Hebrews would likely have felt deep pain in their hearts when they began gradually to understand this epistle better. In that letter, someone was coming to take something away from them, something that was intimately precious to them. But they also sensed that he was not writing as a tyrant, to strike and to wound, but to save. He did not accuse them of despising God’s Son. But he made them feel that if they continued along this path, they could very well end up doing that (Heb. 6:6; 10:29).

If you savor the letter thoroughly, you will encounter in Hebrews some terrifying admonitions. For example, these New Testament Hebrews are reminded of the sin that the Old Testament Hebrews, their ancestors, had committed when in the wilderness they faithlessly forsook God’s gospel-of-that-time, but wanted to return to Egypt (Heb. 3). They could sense very concretely the warning embedded in that admonition that the Hebrews’ zeal for the Law—their holding on to the Horeb covenant, their walking to the temple with its sacrifices and altars, priests and earthly high priest—could lead to despising the High Priest in heaven and returning to the synagogue.

The author of Hebrews must have been an eloquent person. The Greek he uses is beautiful. His style is genuinely elegant. He must also have had a mastery of Scripture. What he brings up from the Old Testament is impressive to our eyes, to see that God’s Son, our Lord in heaven, is greater than the angels (Heb. 1–2), greater than Moses, the mediator of the Sinai covenant (Heb. 3–4), and greater than Aaron, whose priesthood was so closely interwoven with that ancient covenant (Heb. 5). Christ was a priest-king like Melchizedek (Heb. 7–10).

But the writer of Hebrews used his wonderful gifts to protect his readers from a great evil, to which their zeal for the Law could have led them. He realized that among them there was living an inner bond with the very impressive worship activities of the Aaronic priesthood. Such worship, however, was far from harmless. This explains the “admonition.” No matter that it was couched in careful language. For it was directed to brothers, holy brothers (Heb. 3:1). And it was during a period of transition. Presumably between A.D. 62 and 70. In that kind of time, people needed to act calmly.

The interim period, when Hebrews was likely written, ended in the year that Jerusalem was destroyed, temple and all. At that time that earthly worship ceased, the worship that had so dangerously distracted the attention of the Hebrews from the daily work of their exalted Priest-King in heaven above. By means of such a shock, the true situation would at that point have become much more clear to them.

In fact, at that time there were more factors in play within Christianity, factors that would have helped clarify matters as well. To that we will now turn.
Chapter 21

PERHAPS THIS CHAPTER MAY BE AN APPENDIX

Judaizing

In our language, the suffix “ism” does not sound flattering, as we mentioned. We observed that rule in our language when we wrote elsewhere about Judaizing in connection with the letter to the Romans. Not everyone does that. But we think that this is preferable in our language. In French the word for Judaizing can refer simply to Judaism, and it contains nothing that is blameworthy. But with the word judaizing the situation is different, in our opinion.

In addition, using the word judaizing has a negative connotation, and embodies a prejudice that is hard to ignore. It puts us in a position to find our starting point, terminologically as well as substantively, in Scripture. Specifically, in Galatians 2:14. There we hear Paul tell us about a reprimand he had to administer to his brother Peter (also called “Cephas”). “But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” We have italicized the last four words, which translate the single Greek verb ioudaizein, from which our English verb judaize is derived.

Anyone who is at all familiar with the Galatians will agree immediately that the Greek verb ioudaizein had an unfavorable meaning. We concur, since for us, the term Judaizing does not refer to a pre-Christian phenomenon, but to something that arose particularly within the Christian church. It refers to a poisonous weed that had crept into the garden of the New Covenant church. Even though it betrays its Jewish ancestry, as something sprouting from a rabbinic plant growing in the neighboring synagogue garden. But there you see the reason why we are discussing this matter now. For us, judaizing is a term that refers to that spiritual disposition whereby the churches of our Lord Jesus Christ ran the risk of being robbed of their evangelical freedom by being brought again under the yoke of some kind of “law,” not only in the first century but repeatedly thereafter.

Please notice that this time, we have placed the non-capitalized word law within quotation marks. Otherwise we might confuse judaizing with being zealous for the Law, this latter being something that Paul tolerated, as we see from Acts 21, as did the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews. They were dealing with Jewish Christians who themselves did not yet dare to abandon the Law of Moses, but who definitely did not lay on Gentile Christians the obligation to observe that Law. This latter is precisely what the Judaizers did. But in so doing, they were mutilating and assaulting the Law of Moses. For God had given his Law at Horeb so that thereby Israel would be led safely to the day of faith in Christ (Gal. 3), but not in order thereafter to continue functioning as a straitjacket for the Gentiles. This latter was to turn the Law into a “Law.” And that is what the Judaizers were doing, for which there was no excuse.

As we deal with this historical phenomenon of Judaizing, we will be discussing the following subjects:

1. Paul and the spiritual background of judaizing
2. The New Testament and the Judaizers
3. Judaizing shows its true nature and joins forces with Judaism
4. The spirit of defeated judaizing takes revenge
5. Judaizing suffers defeat again, but again takes revenge
6. How do we defeat the spirit of Judaizing?

1. *Paul and the spiritual background of Judaizing*

   When Paul thought about the Judaizers of his day, he was not imagining them as ferocious devils. Rather, he saw them as real people. He called them “flesh and blood.” But he leaves no doubt about the question whether he saw clearly the actual impulse driving these people. He tells us very directly that behind judaizing lay the power of demons. In connection with the Judaizers, he even mentions their leader by name: Satan.

   It was completely understandable that the coming of God’s Son to earth would have brought the demonic world into turmoil. They knew what awaited them: God’s judgment. And they trembled before it (James 2:19). But when Christ was born, at that point the Son of Eve appeared, who came to crush Satan’s head (Gen. 3:15). For they apparently knew what he had come to do to them: to “torment” them (Matt. 8:29), and to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). No wonder, then, that during the time of the Lord’s life on earth, the demonic world was in alarm mode, mobilized in terms of utmost readiness. Never had so many people been possessed by demons as during that time. Against no one had the supreme head of the demons, who was called “the devil” in more than one passage, fired so many arrows as against Christ. In order if possible to tempt him to unfaithfulness toward his divine Sender.

   But in vain.

   Christ won.

   Nevertheless, Satan did not lose confidence thereafter. As a good strategist, he focused all his efforts on frustrating Christ’s victory as much as possible, and on robbing that victory of its effect.

   The success of that opposition was frighteningly great. We mention three results of this demonic scheming against Christ and his gospel. First, most Jews have not accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. For it was at Satan’s instigation that they immediately wanted to put the Lord to death (John 8:44). Secondly, the minority of the Jewish people, who did in fact accept Jesus as Messiah, had been far too large to suit Satan, so he attempted to find a way to inject among these Jewish Christians a view regarding Christ’s work and regarding the Christ’s significance with respect to the Law, whereby virtually nothing of the true gospel survived. With that attempt he fortunately registered no success among those who were zealous for the Law, but among the Judaizers he found complete success. Thirdly, he was able to use people belonging to the latter group for sowing bad seed among the good seed that had been sown, especially by Paul, in the field of the Gentiles. This latter approach really betrays a strategy of polished sophistication.

   So now, when Paul is speaking about the opposition that he had to undergo especially at the hands of Jewish Christians, you will seldom hear him naming names. At least not the names of people. But certainly the names of Satan and his host. Bible readers will recall synonymous names like Satan, the Tempter, and the god of this age (Rom. 16:20; 1 Thess. 2:14, 18; cf. 3:5; Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

   We are not surprised that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, draws our attention so often to the power of Satan over the nations.
It was not just a bluff when Satan took our Savior to a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and said to him: I will give you all of this if you bow down to me and worship me (Matt. 4:8–9). One time Christ himself talked about Satan’s *basileia* or kingdom, rule, and dominion (Matt. 12:26). And when Christ called Paul on the road to Damascus, to be an apostle who would bring the gospel especially to the Gentiles, he used these words: “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

The first Christians presumably were far more aware of this real power of Satan over the pagan world than we are, at least, more than we Protestants. Note the practice of exorcism or expelling demons among the early Christians. Note as well the manner in which Roman Catholics baptize their children, even today. As you might know, Roman Catholics do not draw any attention to any significance of God’s covenant with believers and *their seed*. Every child born to Roman Catholic parents, presented for baptism, they treat in the same way that missionaries did in our own country with the Germanic pagans who wanted to become Christians and requested baptism. They treated, and still treat, such children in the same way they treated a pagan, including adult pagans. This explains why they pray to God: “Break all the bonds of the devil with which he (she) has been bound.” This explains why they have the little one, who is being baptized, make a confession of faith beforehand, something that must be received from the godparent on behalf of the child. This explains as well that they baptize the little one, at least if it is done properly according to Roman Catholic teaching, on the crown of his or her head, because they treat the child as though he were an adult, and because in ancient times such an adult pagan bowed his head above the baptismal font. That custom is prescribed in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church.

It should be obvious that we have brought up these details not because we think the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism is so wonderful. The opposite is the case, although we don’t want to hold to a double standard. Many a Protestant has not progressed one step beyond his Roman Catholic ancestors, because he too lives by the slogan: baptize no one, including children of Christian parents, before they can experience faith in the heart and can make a profession of faith. According to such a Protestant, such a person has no right to the Lord’s Supper, not even a Christian child, unless they first evidence faith and profess faith. This is pure Roman Catholicism. It is really an ancient, old-fashioned misunderstanding of the right of the Christian child to the entire covenant, with all its promises, along with the sealing of those promises by means of baptism and Lord’s Supper. The child of Christian parents is born with the right to baptism and Lord’s Supper, as the Reformers rediscovered.

But we would point to the evident fact that in the Roman Catholic liturgy, especially the ancient liturgy, something survived that reminds us of the early Christian church, where baptism was automatically administered to Gentiles—obviously, adult Gentiles—who were converted to Christ. Only petrified ecclesiastical conservatism would want to keep everything as it was. But we are grateful for this historical note, for we are now reminded through the baptismal practice we mentioned, of the time when the Christian church welcomed a newly converted Gentile as one who had been saved from the domain of Satan. At that time people still talked about Satan as an infamous tyrant over the pagan nations. At that time people still understood that pagan land is Satan’s land.

Well, then, you can read of this in Paul, when, for example, he speaks of Satan as “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). He also writes about Satan: “for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Cor. 2:11). Paul was
thoroughly aware of Satan’s clever tricks. Paul suffered a lot at the hands of Jewish opponents. But he suffered most of all from his Jewish Christian opponents. Nevertheless, he didn’t stare himself blind by focusing on those people, nor do we hear him going hoarse from shouting about that terrible Jewish relative So-and-so. Of course, they were family to him, “flesh and blood.” But at work behind his regrettably all too fanatic Jewish kinfolk, Paul discerned the power of “darkness.” He wrote: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

At least that’s how we read the verse in the ESV.

According to the original text, however, the apostle was not talking about “places” nor about “heaven.” Moreover, the question is highly relevant whether Satan, who before this time appeared to enjoy a certain right of entrance into heaven (1 Kings 22:19–223; Job 2:1–7), had to surrender that right when Christ ascended into heaven, he and his helpers (Rev. 12:7–12).

We should not imagine, then, that in Ephesians 6:12 the apostle had his eye on the superhuman reality in the dominion of the demonic world. This explains why he locates it somewhere high in the air, in the direction of heaven. Just as in the Old Testament, everything that goes beyond the ordinary human level of experience and reality can be described with words like ʾĕlōhîm (gods) or sons of ʾĕlōhîm—names for governments and for angels—so too the apostle provides a place in the heights for the world of wicked angels. Nowadays we would use terms like “supernatural” and “superhuman” to describe this. The apostle would have wanted to express how much the ability of Satan and his helpers surpassed human ability. It went far beyond. In this connection we might think of another passage where he distinguishes between ordinary tribulations, human trials, which we must face with steadfastness, and superhuman tribulations in which Satan has a hand (1 Cor. 10:13). In those, we need special assistance. With that in view, Christ taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer to be delivered from temptation, referring to the demonic snares, and if it should please him that we encounter such, that we might nonetheless be delivered from them by our heavenly Father. For a human being cannot conquer Satan and his hosts.

No one less than this “Satan” Paul identifies as the great opponent of the work of gospel preaching among the Gentiles. He was the source of this ice-cold stream of judaizing that in Paul’s day threatened to quench the love between members of the one body.

Let us learn from that.

Now as well, Satan exists, along with a host of demons. We have not outgrown them. Woe to us if they have it in for us, if they want to sift us. Do they not still have a certain prerogative for doing that (Luke 22:31)? They can indeed tear apart Christ’s flock, if God does not graciously protect us from that.

We must open each other’s eyes for this fearsome danger that this represents for all Christians. We must not forget to make faithful use of the primary weapon that Christ has put in our hands with which to fight against them. Crying out for help from our heavenly Father, with the words of the final petition of the Lord’s Prayer. According to one ancient Christian document, the Didache, the early Christians had the custom of praying this prayer three times daily.

2. The New Testament and the Judaizers
The Judaizers living in the days of the apostles came from “the party of the Pharisees.” That is true at least of the Judaizers we read about in Acts 15. But we would not be far off the mark if we understood that most of the Judaizers the New Testament talks about have come from the Pharisees. But the Pharisees, then, who listened in a certain sense to the preaching of John the Baptist, of Christ, and of his apostles. They seem to have made a good beginning. They gave every appearance of having joined with the reformation of that time. But things went completely wrong from that point on. They lost the right path entirely. They appeared to be crossing their “t’s” quite differently. They stood up for God’s Word and commandment, but as someone once put it: “Time would tell,” so too the outcome of this Judaizing business showed that those people who initially joined the correct reformation of the church had not really seen nor understood the issue. For at bottom, they ended up standing as Judaizing Christians shoulder to shoulder with the ancient party of the Sanhedrin Jews, in opposition toward Christ and his true believers.

How tragic!

Were they therefore traitors? Not really. Of course, there could have been traitors among them, as happens with every movement, often according to the proverb: “Those who run fast trip over their own feet.”

But it seems to us that this was not how things went with the majority of Judaizers. Their ancestry and orientation were not predisposed in that direction. They were “from the party of the Pharisees.” Religious go-getters. They were called “brothers,” those who were fanatic, who expended a lot of effort in spreading their ideas, through travel and visits. But as things turned out, nothing was actually different with them. At most they were different in name, in label.

No, don’t blame these Judaizers for talking a lot about the Law, that ancient Law, in addition to talking about Jesus. They shared that feature with someone like James in Jerusalem. A man who was zealous for the Law, but who enjoyed a heartfelt relationship with his brother Paul. He remained true to his Savior until the end. Just as the author of Hebrews expected to be the case with his readers, even though they too were still zealous for the Law (Heb. 6:9).

James and the Hebrews were, and remained, evangelical believers.

But not the Judaizers.

To be sure, they accepted Jesus as Messiah, as Christ. They were Christians. And at the same time, they observed the Law of Moses. But they turned that Law into a “law.” Please notice the quotation marks! They indicate that the Judaizers robbed that Law of God’s mercy. They read it with Pharisaic glasses. They rendered the real Law—God’s Word!—powerless by their human ordinances (Matt. 15:6; Mark 7:13). That “law” became the be all and end all. It pushed Christ entirely into the background, until he fell away altogether and they alone remained.

So their system looked like this:
First: Christ + Law.
Then: Christ + “law.”
Next: “law” + Christ.
Finally: “law.”

We see this tragic course of events play out when we read through the following New Testament passages.

Acts 15

We have mentioned the book of Acts already. From this book we learned that we who were pagans did not in the least owe our salvation from the power of Satan to men, to any church, not even to highly gifted men like the Twelve apostles. Let him who boasts, boast in God. “Because
of him you are in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:30). The book of Acts opens with a wonderful program of activity (1:8b). Proclaim the gospel in Judea, in Samaria, and in the Gentile lands. But if Christ had not powerfully intervened, nothing would have come of that mandate. Ultimately he passed by the apostles and used a less prominent figure like Philip. Evidently the Spirit of Christ was speaking somewhat impatiently when he said: Separate for me then Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them (13:2). At that point, finally, the gospel went to the ends of the earth. But not from Jerusalem outward, that city of the apostles. But from the pagan city of Antioch. Notice Satan at work.

He now does battle in his own arena, and is attacked within his own fortress. Along the way great things happen. On Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul, becomes a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ. Already then a kind of rivalry emerges among some Jews on account of the conversion of the “Gentiles.” Even though this would not have been a thoroughgoing Gentile, but a so-called proselyte of God-fearers. That is what Luke calls those Gentiles who for a long time had been coming to the synagogue on Saturday to listen to the public reading of Holy Scripture, what we now call the Old Testament. That had been translated into Greek, and was called the Septuagint.

Returning to Antioch, it was reported to the brothers that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27).

Notice Satan’s opposition at this point.

When such Saturday synagogue visitors from the Gentiles received the Lord Jesus as their Savior through the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, what burden was then laid upon them from that time onward? No other burden than that they must continue from that time onward believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. They would certainly have also been told that we must enter the kingdom of God through many persecutions (Acts 14:22). But no obligations beyond that. Circumcision and observing such commandments from the Torah as the food laws and the purification laws of Leviticus 11–15 were not laid upon those Christians coming from among the Gentiles.

But certain other Christians could not agree with that. These were Christians—note well—from Judea. When they arrived in Antioch and came into contact with such Christians from among the Gentiles, they held up to these latter people the formidable requirement that they had to be circumcised “according to the custom of Moses.” Otherwise nothing would have happened to them. Otherwise “you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

There you see it. When this came to the attention of Paul and Barnabas, the conflict erupted.

Look at both parties involved.

On the one side, Jewish Christians who strenuously objected against such Gentiles who believed in Christ remaining uncircumcised. Until now, circumcision was the indispensable portal through which one had to enter in order to belong to the chosen people. On the other side, Paul and Barnabas, with whom “no small dissension and debate arose” in opposition to this argument, no matter how principled it appeared (Acts 15:2).

We are so blessed that God permits us to live today and not back then. Otherwise such principled arguments as those of the Judaizers would surely have made an impression on us. After all, was not the Law of Moses God’s Word? Did it not remain so? (Up until today!) But what was to happen, now people shrugged their shoulders so easily not only toward those ancient
ancestral customs, but even toward the explicit Word of God? For that Word of God issued a pronouncement of curse, after all, upon those who neglected circumcision (Gen. 17:14)!

But God had given Paul and Barnabas two gifts at that point. Not only a clear capacity for analysis, but a confident heart. Both. Simultaneously. For those two gifts don’t always go together. Not everyone who is given to understand the truth dares to stand up for it. But Paul and Barnabas took the risk of being viewed as liberal men. As Jews who did not respect God’s Word. As men who with superficial ease broke with what had been considered divine truth from of old.

This kind of argumentation has always made a deep impression on people. It has the law of inertia on its side. For many people fear change. It is still true, what the wise man of Proverbs warns: “My son, fear thou the LORD and the king; and meddle not with them that are given to change” (Prov. 24:21, KJV). But anyone who applies this saying stupidly, puts revolution and reformation in the same category. People must be able to distinguish issues carefully, to exercise discernment. Something presented as ancient and reliable, upon closer inspection, may be new and of human invention. The apostle Paul did not yield to such argumentation. Not only did he show that people must not turn the Law into a “law”—extracting God’s mercy from it—but he also went back beyond Horeb to Abraham, 430 years earlier. But we will return to this in a moment.

At that point a meeting was called in Jerusalem “to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6). There the conflict was addressed by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Please don’t refer to those meetings in Jerusalem with the word “synod.” For thereby you would unintentionally aid and abet those Christians who think that God’s church cannot survive without meetings of synods, classes [presbyteries], and consistories [sessions]. If that were true, then we would be reading something about such assemblies in Scripture. But that is not the case. Nor that these were anywhere clearly mandated for the churches of the Lord. Nowhere. At all. We want to emphasize this. For the book of Acts instead warns us against the terrible honoring of important people and imposing assemblies. Peter had to be dragged and pushed to bring the gospel to the family of Cornelius and to baptize those people. As far as Acts 15 is concerned, this chapter is not showing us any gathering of delegates from various churches, from here and there, but a gathering of one church, apparently supplemented by the elders and apostles there. People like Paul definitely did not speak there because they were functioning like deputies or delegates who had been sent from the church in Antioch. Nor did they bring credentials. In Galatians 2:2 you can read his protest against that kind of assumption. Moreover, that gathering in Jerusalem was led by the Holy Spirit. If only that could be said about later gatherings that were real synods.

Actually there was not all that much new to report about those meetings in Jerusalem. It appeared to have been a tangled snare of Satan, whereby he wanted to bring the Gentiles under a new yoke, and wanted to turn the Christian church into a church of Jews, rather, a Judaizing church. But the discussion was like a difficult math problem. Once you get the answer, you write it down. The brothers stated rather straightforwardly: No, the Gentiles who become Christians need not live according to the Law of Moses. That was all there was to it. There were only a few guidelines proposed that people hoped Christians from among the Gentiles would observe. That would not be difficult for them to do, for earlier they could have spent their Saturdays in the synagogue in every sizeable city listening to the public reading of Scripture. So they knew that they should abstain from “from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29).
Earlier we discussed this matter, and indicated that those guidelines from the brothers in Jerusalem bore a secondary, temporary character. This explains why in his day, Guido de Brès dared to declare them to be obsolete. A declaration that in the sixteenth century was not superfluous. For unfortunately, Christians living in that early period went on to observe those guidelines as if they were eternal principle of law, unalterable commandments. Recall what we wrote about the faithful Biblias. That lovely martyr should serve all of us as an example on account of her faithfulness to Christ all the way to death. But the fact that she, though evidently imitating her teachers, observed the guidelines of Jerusalem as sacred and unbreakable laws, points to a disposition of faith characterized by being zealous for the law. Later still other commands were added, as we know, delivered by ecclesiastical assemblies. Too many to mention. People were imprisoned and killed because they cooked and ate meat on Fridays. Guido de Brès pointed out that this judaizing lay on a continuum with being zealous for the Law as that was dear to the heart of godly believers in former times, in the days of Biblias.

In this way, Satan lost the battle with flying colors at the main front in Jerusalem. There would be no Jewish church, nor would there be a Judaizing church. But later he did achieve such a victory along a side route, when, sure enough, he was able to braid those guidelines of Jerusalem into a snare for the feet of believers. That explains in part why the church of the Lord entered the Middle Ages crippled.

Galatians

So the apostles and the rest of the brothers did not fall into any trap in Jerusalem. But those who received Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia did. At least partially, a little bit, anyway.

But let’s not come down on them too harshly. People say that those who have been imprisoned for a long time, once they are suddenly freed, are dizzy with joy on account of their recovered freedom, but initially they feel so severely disoriented that they look back with longing to their prison cell.

Something similar happened to the Christians in Galatia. Just freed from prison, namely, from their ancestral paganism, after a brief time they almost ended up in another prison, namely, that of Judaizing.

We need to stop staring too long at this. Formerly the life of the Galatians had been a real imprisonment, for it had been a pagan life. That is always and everywhere the life of slavery. Being bound, from dawn till dusk. Regulated in every detail. For idols are powerful, they lay claim to everything you are and have, they demand complete subjection, the surrender of your most precious possession. Idolatry is burdensome.

Then Paul came with the gospel. Rather, the Holy Spirit had Paul portray before the Galatians the crucified Son of God. That had liberated those people, set them free, and temporarily made them rejoice. For a little while they were happy peace-loving people. They brought forth the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc.

But that paradisiacal period presumably lasted only a short time. For after Paul’s departure, other men arose in the land of the Galatians. They too were Jews. Jews who had become Christians.

How did they arrive there?

Since the time of the Persians, the Jewish people had been very cosmopolitan. Jews spread out across all the countries of the civilized world. Jews must have lived in places ranging from
China to Spain. Their economic activity was international. Their reputation was good in some places, bad in others. Some pagans considered them godless. For those Jews never had any image of their gods. Others appreciated this about the Jews, because they too shrugged their shoulders at all those male and female deities among the nations. In addition, the marital faithfulness of the Jews, and their warm family life, impressed many people. Most of all, they stayed far away from pagan excesses, since they lived rather isolated from that immorality. On the Sabbath days they were not at all involved with people outside of their own group. The Gentiles apparently thought that such complete rest and quietness on Saturday was very remarkable. They had never seen that before. As far as the government was concerned, care was taken that the Jews were not hindered in their Sabbath observance. For example, they were not required to appear in court on the Sabbath. Here and there the Jewish Sabbath observance won followers in the Roman world. There were places where life came to a standstill on Saturday.

Jews lived in Galatia as well, including Jews who had become Christians. People just like Paul. They too called on the name of Jesus Christ. Just as Paul did.

Yet, their voice sounded different. More confident, more somber in tone. But in the ears of the Galatians, not all that unattractive. It had a quality that was old and familiar. Trusted. Serious.

They argued that it was all good and well to become a Christian, but if the men and boys were not circumcised, they would still not be acceptable to God. Anyone not observing the Sabbath day could not possibly belong to Israel, the chosen people. And there were more things in the Law that deserved—nay, required—scrupulous observance.

Today perhaps at first glance we think it to be incomprehensible that the Galatians permitted such commandments to be laid on them. Even circumcision, a very painful practice. Indeed, but for the Galatians, religion and pain constituted no strange combination, for centuries already some Gentiles became emasculated in honor of their gods. Why then not get circumcised, something far less serious compared to castration?

In this way those Jewish Christians attempted to have the Galatian Christians “Judaized” or “Jewish-ified,” which means: compel them to live like Jews, as Paul termed it later (Gal. 2:14). For this reason we call those Jewish Christians “Judaizers”.

Were they successful?

We don’t know to what extent they were successful. But they had some success, otherwise Paul would never have written his letter to the Galatians.

The stricter the religion, the more successful. Do you want to be successful? Then get into religion, preferably the stricter, the better. Use the whip. Crack the whip: “God wants it! God wants it!” Demand money and possessions and blood. And your success will be guaranteed. Not only among pagans, among people who learned that religion was nothing other than pain. But you will also enjoy success among people in the church. Witness Paul’s complaints in the letter to the Galatians. And witness God’s own complaint in the days of Jeremiah, that his people wanted to be deceived. By their priests, that is: by religious people. For example, by Pashur, that refined churchman who was enraged that Jeremiah foretold God’s judgment on nation and temple. That could not be, that may not be, true. Deceived by prophets, who also were religious people. Among them were Ahab and Zedekiah, popular opponents of the unpopular Jeremiah, but they were . . . adulterers, as we learn after the fact (Jer. 29:21–23). Was it not God who was complaining? Indeed, it was God himself who complained: what is happening in the land is a terrible abomination; the prophets prophesy falsely and the priests acquire gain along with them, and my people want it so (Jer. 5:31; cf. Lam. 4:13).
So just how much success the Judaizers enjoyed among the Galatians we don’t know. But they did register some success. The usual result of strict religion in Galatia seems not to have been lacking in the activity of the Judaizers, namely, disunity. Quarreling and disharmony. Hatred and envy. “If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal. 5:15). Through the gospel, people learn to love each other, to be subject to each other. But a gospel without Christ makes people bossy, demanding, and turns people against each other like police officers and detectives who have caught you transgressing the law before you are even aware of doing so. That feeling of always being under scrutiny, being under numerous bosses, yields a climate of exhausting slavishness, of resentment and bitterness, and sooner or later leads to division and partisanship, if there is no strict leadership capable of suppressing these manifestations and of hiding them under the surface of the straitjacketed style they tyrannically impose on everybody. This will be the outcome, no matter how gradually it emerges.

The Galatian Christians disappeared unnoticed from the land of freedom in Christ, behind the iron curtain of another cyclical religion. Entirely without being forced. In an unobtrusive manner. Relatively quietly. If God had not seen to it that Paul had been on the alert, even this apostle to the Gentiles would have thought: “What I got started in Galatia those Jewish brothers have continued!” With the name of Christ on their lips (the Judaizers were Christians, after all!) and with an appeal to Holy Scripture (what we now call the Old Testament), especially to the Law of Moses, the Judaizers would have nicely led the poor Galatian Christians back under the yoke of another slavery. Paul called it a renewed paganism (Gal. 4:9).

Of course. For God’s Word, with God’s mercy extracted from it, is worth no more than a pagan book.

Law – Christ = 0.

Colossians

If you have understood Galatians, then you will immediately recognize in the background of Paul’s letter to the Colossians the same threat. People were trying to bring the Christians in Colossae, who had just been freed from one yoke, under the bondage of another yoke, the yoke of stoicheia-slavery (2:20). Once again, under “human precepts and teachings” (2:22). Although now they were camouflaged once again with the appearance of being Scriptural, these leaders were full of God’s Word, always talking about things you could read about in the Law. Circumcision (2:11), food, feast days, new moon and Sabbath (2:16).

Only, it seems that in Colossae something else had been added. In the letter to the Colossians we probably possess a proof of how Judaizing and Gnosticism can go together. Gnosticism is paganism, to put it bluntly. And Christian Gnosticism is Christian paganism. Forgive us that strange expression, one that is actually just as foolish as talking about “dry water.”

The apostle John (according to the well-known church father, Irenaeus, who was a pupil of Polycarp) had those so-called Christian Gnostics in view in his letters. These people pretended to enjoy communion with God while living in sin (darkness). John called them very simply: liars (1 John 1:6). Our Savior had the same kind of people in mind in his seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3. In those letters, he warned against the teaching of the Nicolaitans. These people gave the appearance of having come out of paganism into the Christian church. But they thought the separation did not need to be so abrupt. On the contrary. It was just as good if people were
not to break so radically with their former paganism, participating now and then in a sacrifice ceremony and its accouterments, like a meal in one of the temples, along with possible sexual relations with one of the thousands of young women who worked as prostitutes at the various temples. That was okay. The flesh took its delight and would then be killed once again. Along that route, that deep path of suicide, the good residing in every person, the divine spark, that immortal seed, had a chance at that point to escape and to be united to the divine, whereby it could then achieve true communion or gnōsis (the Greek word for knowledge, from which comes the term Gnostic) of the divine.

This view was not being advocated by one or another individual in his ignorance, but was being propagated, expressed, and spread by many. The Savior tells us that the Gnostics even had “apostles,” people sent out to proclaim this wicked piety, but these were not genuine, Christian apostles (Rev. 2:2; cf. 2 Cor. 11:13). It seems there were even female propagandists who were employed for the spreading of this false teaching. One of these women—Christ mockingly calls her Jezebel, though that was not her real name (Rev. 2:20)—was a zealous advocate of the notion that by means of sexual intercourse with a temple prostitute and participating in a sacrificial meal, a person could enter into fellowship with the deity. She belonged to a particular school, for Christ speaks of her “children,” that is, pupils (Rev. 2:23). With a view to that combination of religious fellowship (or knowledge) and religious sexual immorality, Christ called Gnosticism “the teaching of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14). That becomes understandable when you read how Balaam, who was unable to subjugate Israel by means of pronouncing a curse, advised King Balak to bring together Israelite men and Moabite women, and to unite them on the path of “consecrated communion” (Num. 25, 31:16).

Why this dangerous false teaching was called “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 1:6, 15), we do not know precisely. Some have thought that the father of this movement was no one other than the Nicolaus mentioned in Acts 6:5, as one of the seven deacons. That, of course, is not impossible. Highly privileged Christians can fall far. It is also striking that in Acts 6, this Nicolaus is called “a proselyte of Antioch.” So he did have Gentile ancestry. Perhaps he weakened in the face of the syncretistic spirit of those days, a spirit that saw in all religion a path to the divine. But others have thought that people treated Nicolaus very unjustly. He would have preached with great emphasis that one must put the flesh to death. But he would have meant this is a way similar to the apostle Paul in Colossians 3:5. Fighting against sexual immorality, impurity, etc. Others, however, turned this notion into a claim that according to Nicolaus, people had to put their flesh to death by surrendering to pagan sins, among which were orgies in the temple palaces, and religious prostitution. We simply don’t know. It would not be the first time that a good saying was turned into a lie. That may well have happened here. Because the word “flesh” can refer to our flesh that we can pinch between our fingers, but it can also refer to our love and desire for sin and wickedness. Those two may not be confused.

Just as the Gnostics took over the term “flesh” from the Christians, taking it from Scripture itself while at the same time perverting it, they apparently did the same with the word Satan. For as we have already seen, the early Christians knew very well that salvation from paganism meant deliverance from Satan’s dominion. Wallowing in filthy pagan sins was to put oneself thoroughly under the yoke of Satan. But now the Gnostic teachers were preaching that this was actually the only path along which one had to go in order to enjoy communion and knowledge (gnōsis) with the deity. The path that led to “the deep things of Satan,” the path of descending to hell, was the only path to real ascending.
Our Savior wanted nothing to do with this teaching about “the deep things of Satan (Rev. 2:24).

Nevertheless, this corrupting Gnosticism has taken up frightening residence in Christian countries. Even today it is by no means exterminated. We discussed this earlier. We do not encounter it exclusively among ordinary people, with the mysterious question: “Do you know about this?” But we encounter it also where truth and falsehood are communicated with the help of clever, complex arguments to rearrange vice and virtue.

So then, Judaizing as it arose in Colossae—may we mention that Colossae was among the seven churches of Revelation 2–3?—manifested itself with a Gnostic mask covering its face. Or must we say it the other way around? In connection with the carnival of the Gnostics it would have been driven you crazy to see how many kinds of masks people could sport.

In any case, it was a splendid combination.

Judaizing + Gnosticism.

Judaizing, which came along to lay its “law” once again on the neck of the liberated church of our Lord Jesus Christ. And Gnosticism, which came along just as sneakily to denigrate the work of Christ by arguing that for climbing the challenging ladder to reach the knowledge and communion with the pleroma, the fullness of the deity, one did well to stay far away from such earthly things as food and drink, through observing various feast days, new moons, or Sabbaths (Col. 2:16).

Opportunity enough for stumbling.

We can still easily make the same mistake, after so many centuries. For example, by confusing the flesh of the tangible person with the flesh of the wicked heart. And by thinking, for example, that “being devoted to earthly things” happens when we eat and drink something delicious. Earlier I stated that it was exactly the opposite, according to Paul. To force Christ’s church into a judaizing corset—that was to be devoted to earthly things.

In this, Judaizing and Gnosticism were intimately united, namely, in teaching that someone who did not first fulfill this or that condition could not possibly be considered a child of God.

In that a priori, in that “yes-but-first-this,” they met each other. They both displayed their pagan nature.

For it is Christian to believe that it is God who has placed us already in the communion of the promises in Christ Jesus, our Lord, in whom we possess everything. Yes, everything. Along the path of perseverance we will obtain what has been promised.

But all paganism is performance-based, whether clothed in the garments of judaizing or of Gnosticism, or of both simultaneously.

2 Corinthians

Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth is not a rich source for becoming acquainted with the Judaizers and their views. For that, we can better consult Galatians and Colossians. But if you listen carefully, you can hear the Judaizing serpent slithering in the background of 2 Corinthians.

Precisely when things turned sour between Paul and the Corinthians, the Judaizers seemed to have thought to make their move. It was exactly when the flock was very vulnerable that the wolf showed up. But how?

On a business trip? Quite possibly. But these Judaizers could also have been itinerant preachers. The Jews were familiar with that phenomenon, as we learn from Acts 19:13, which speaks about “itinerant Jewish exorcists.” Recall as well the Savior’s saying to the scribes and
Pharisees: “You travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte” (Matt. 23:15). In the case before us, we are dealing specifically with gentlemen who were paid for their services (2 Cor. 1:1:20; cf. 2:17). That points to an organized counter-effort against Paul. This fits nicely with what we will learn later about what happened in Rome.

So apparently this involved Jews (2 Cor. 11:22).


They pretended to be Jewish ministers of Christ (11:23). For that purpose, they apparently had letters of recommendation that they showed (3:1–2), something not uncommon in those days. There were letters of correspondence and instruction between synagogues. For in any case, the wolf appeared in sheep’s clothing. Today we would say: The Judaizers arrived in Corinth feverishly waving a banner with the slogan: “It is written.”

An impressive statement, at least if it were used properly. The Judaizers in Corinth did not do that, however. The apostle deals harshly with them, in chapter 3 already. With that judaizing waving of church papers and with their appeal to the written Law of Moses. The apostle set himself and his colleagues against these people, the former as “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

With these words, Paul was of course not saying anything bad about the covenant of Horeb, nor about the Law of Horeb. But he is now expressing his judgment about their value, and specifically about their use by the Judaizers of his time. Just like our Savior, and the letter to the Hebrews, Paul taught that the time of the Horeb covenant was past, and the time of the new covenant had dawned (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 7:22; 8:6, 7, 10, 13; 9:1; 10:16; 13:20). The Jewish Christians needed to remember that, certainly whenever they were so foolish as to force that antiquated Law of Horeb on the Gentiles who had become Christians. For then it was lethal. For the same reason that he expressly forbade the Galatian Christians to be circumcised. Indeed, earlier, when the covenant of Horeb was in full force, that was appropriate. But not now any more. Now that Christ had come, the shadows of the Law retained no more than historical-evangelical value. But they were not permitted to be enforced any longer. A sacrament like circumcision had become something completely indifferent in the Christian church. God was no longer interested in whether a person was a circumcised or an uncircumcised Christian. As long as a person believed in Christ, he was a child of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). Whether or not one was circumcised made no difference anymore (Gal. 6:15). The issue was whether one should consider that circumcision indispensable for salvation, as the Judaizers did (Acts 15:1). Then it was the case that, if the Galatian Christians would have undergone circumcision, they would have lost Christ (Gal. 5:2). They would then have fallen from grace (5:4).

So it was dangerous to force a Gentile Christian to undergo circumcision. For then that circumcision could kill him.

It was also dangerous to bring Gentile Christians under the yoke of the entire Law. For then they would imagine that they would be justified through observing that Law. An abominable error! In this way, their reliance on the works of that Law could kill them.

Over against that killing Law—the Law from which Christ had been removed—Paul set forth the Spirit who makes alive.

Later in 2 Corinthians, the Judaizers, despite all their (apparent) trust in the “letter” (3:6), are called by the apostle “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (11:13). What strong language! It would have been quite something for simple folk like
the Corinthians to hear the apostle ranting so furiously against people who had made such a refined impression on them. Due to their scrupulosity. Because they appeared to be so incredibly faithful to the letter.

And then to think that all Christians today give applause in connection with the name of Paul. But in his day that was hardly the case. That is what we will see now.

**Romans**

Far too often, Paul’s letter to the Romans is understood as his dogmatics or systematic theology. This is a misunderstanding occasioned by subsequent history, but perhaps also somewhat by the apostle himself.

Following the Reformation, it was Philip Melanchthon who wrote the first Protestant systematic theology. He wrote it in the form of an exposition of the letter to the Romans. Hereby the idea could easily have arisen that in this letter, the apostle himself was giving something of a lecture addressed to everyone in general and to no one in particular, rather than an actual letter. Reading Romans teaches us differently, however. Notice that salutation at the beginning, and that chapter filled with greetings at the end. The letter of Romans bears a local and personal character. One could even say that this letter was sent on ahead by Paul to Rome in order to prepare for his reception there when he would later be traveling to Spain, and would be passing through Rome (15:23–24).

We should not understand this preparing to receive Paul too literally. Later we see that for Paul it was not at all impossible for him to rent a place in Rome (Acts 28:30). But presumably the apostle was concerned about the reception that would be given him by Christians in Rome. This arose in view of the relationships between Christians there, about which he had come to learn a few things. For in Rome, quarreling was evidently going on between Christians from Jewish background and Christians from Gentile background. About what? About the subject we are discussing now. They were quarreling about the Law.

In our opinion, Paul divided his letter to Rome in two large sections by what he writes in Romans 12:1. We want to draw your attention emphatically to this particular verse. It says: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

The apostle is appealing to “the mercies of God.” What did he understand by this?

He had written about this earlier in the letter, in chapters 1–11. There he sought to provide his readers with a sample of his customary preaching. That way, they could get acquainted with him rather well. Look, this is the gospel that I am bringing everywhere. The message that not only Gentiles, but also Jews are justified by nothing but pure grace (Rom. 1–2).

But is that not in conflict with the Law and the Prophets? On the contrary, they always taught the same thing. And they still teach it. If only people would listen. The Law and the Prophets that include—not exclude—God’s grace (Rom. 3–8).

But when people take this very same preaching today to both Gentiles and Jews, are they not doing a great injustice to Israel? For is not Israel the people of the covenants? The chosen people? Indeed, but the Law and the Prophets themselves foretold that one day, the Gentiles would also share in God’s mercy. Now then, that is what we see happening today, in contrast to Israel for the most part turning away from Christ. Into the places on the sap-rich ancient olive
tree of Israel that have opened up, Gentiles are today being grafted as wild branches. How incomprehensible are God’s designs (Rom. 9–11)!

This was section 1 of Romans, and to this section the word “mercies” is referring in 12:1. Note well: Paul is not talking about God’s mercy (singular), but about his mercies (plural). Not only was God so merciful that he sent his Son as a sacrifice for sins, but he was also merciful in having the message of this mercy preached through his Spirit not only, though indeed first of all, to the Jews, but also to the Greeks, the non-Jews, in all lands.

That is how section 2 begins.

What peacemaking! How pacifying in contrast to the partisanship in Rome. Why would we fight against each other with puffed out chests? A native Gentile against a natural Jew? Or the other way around. Did not the one as well as the other owe everything to our merciful God and Father?

That was a review of Romans.

But the remainder of our verse will sound forth a preview of section 2. That remainder goes like this: “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

People generally agree that the letter to the Romans was written in A.D. 58.

Let’s consider several other options along with that date. We know rather firmly that around A.D. 64 Paul and Peter died a martyr’s death. Where, you ask? In Rome.

Remarkable, isn’t it? In Rome, of all places.

We will come back in a moment to that martyrdom of Paul and Peter in Rome. But first we can observe that this terrible suffering—the beheading and crucifixion of two apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ—must have been inflicted on the church in Rome through betrayal from their own group. Through real church fighting, church war. When push came to shove, the real nature of Paul’s judaizing opponents became evident. In the depths of their heart they had never been freed from the Jewish idolatry of “law.” In fact they had continued in the same spirit as Annas and Caiaphas. Just as they had persecuted our Lord Jesus Christ in his own person, and just as many Jews in Judea later assaulted followers of Jesus (Acts 8:1; 1 Thess. 2:14), in the same way those Christian Jews in Rome had surrendered the apostles Paul and Peter to the Romans out of anger. Nero responded.

There was a Judas among the disciples. There were people like Annas and Caiaphas in God’s church. Murderers of God’s beloved ones, even among those confessing Christ. We see how that happens.

But that happened later, in or around AD 64. But Romans was written around 58, about six years before. That was not a long time. In any case, not too long for us to consider the possibility that when he wrote Romans 12:1, Paul already had his eye on relationships and circumstances in 58 that would have led to betrayal in 64. From his letter we see time and again that he possessed his information about the church in Rome.

We consider this not only possible, but highly probable, especially on the following basis.

The largest portion of section 2 consists of Romans 14:1–15:13. That portion of 1.5 chapters gives us a glimpse of the relationships among Christians in Rome. Those Christians suffered from a difference of opinion, one so severe that we should not shrug our shoulders indifferently
toward it. It involved the Levitical food laws. The one party thought that a Christian had to observe them, the other party did not. It also involved observing days, feasts, and what in the Old Testament is summarized with the term Sabbath. The two sides were divided on all these matters. Do you think for a moment, dear reader, that Christians today have outgrown these childish attitudes of the New Testament church?

What did Paul say about all of this? He wanted to allow each one his freedom. “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). Paul simply asked: Why do you follow or disregard these stipulations? Because you think that Jesus wants you to? Well then, keep on doing what you’re doing, in both cases, and let no one be so impolite as to declare you a heretic on that account. Who of us would get it in his head to give a beating to someone whom he knew to be the slave of Mr. So-and-so, who had purchased him from the market for such-and-such a price? The Owner would quickly reply: “Keep your hands off my property. That slave belongs to me.” Similarly, we should not lay a finger on a Christian, that is, on someone whose Owner is Christ. “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?” (Rom. 14:4).

That was the language of peacemaking. Though it shows that the fuel for the fire of church fighting was indeed present. We assume that sensitive relationships existed on account of the presence of three groups of people.

1. Some Christians considered themselves exempt from the Law, people like Paul. 2. Other Christians would have paid more attention to the Law, people like James in Jerusalem, people who themselves still lived according to all the commandments and ordinances of the Law, but who left others free, others from a Gentile background who became Christian, upon whom they did not lay any duties of observing the Law. 3. The third group consisted of fierce Judaizers as we have come to know them, people who manned their post in Rome, as we will see in the following excursus.

We wish to say something about Romans 16:17–20, a few verses that appear almost at the end of the letter. At that point Paul is almost talked out. He has given a number of greetings to this and that person. But he is not yet finished. As happens when someone is filled with deep emotion, something else comes out. The remarkable thing is that, in those short concluding words, we often hear most clearly the intention of all the preceding rather lengthy argument. You need to remember that when you read Romans 16:17–18: “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.”

We would add a few comments.

“Cause divisions and create obstacles.” Those words already lead us immediately to think of the Judaizers, for these gentlemen had already agitated the Galatian churches. Tyranny leads to the opposite of what it seems to provide. Rather than power and unity it provides you with slavish dependence or embitterment or division.

“Their own appetites.” These words also lead us to think of the Judaizers, as we see from Philippians 3:19. It is certain that Paul has judaizing in view when he writes there (about Jewish Christians): “Their god is their belly.” You must especially not be thinking that the apostle Paul was opposing people eating too much, or that they were behaving like gluttons. No, rather these people were requiring all Christians observe all the commandments and ordinances of the Law of Moses. Consistently. Not only the Ten Commandments and the Sabbaths—that is, not only Saturdays, but all Jewish feast days, which together were called Sabbaths—had to be honored, as
well as the food laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Even circumcision. This explains why in Philippians 3:19 Paul wrote not only: “their god is their belly” (referring of course to the demand that the food laws of Moses be observed), but also: “they glory in their shame” (referring to the male sexual organ, on which circumcision was performed, leading to boasting, whereas a modest person would not speak easily about this organ).

So when in Romans 16 Paul writes about Christians who incite disharmony everywhere, and who serve “their own belly” instead of Christ, he would have been seeking to denounce the judaizing advocates of a dietary religion.

“Naïve.” You can confidently believe that such judaizing language would have made a deep impression on Christians in Rome. Very easily on Christians from a Jewish background, for they had been raised with respect for the food laws. But also on Christians from a Gentile background. Just like in Galatia. Everything those Judaizers brought forward as God’s will they could also prove. They had a verse for everything, a prooftext in Israel’s ancient sacred books. It was written there. The naïve people fell for that, bluffed by such great confidence.

Perhaps an individual sensed that with that “nice-sounding pious talk” (as Paul writes) there was something wrong. But it wasn’t all that easy to identify exactly what the problem was. Therefore Paul’s instruction was so wonderful. He was teaching the naïve to distinguish with wisdom.

If on occasion someone might still doubt whether Paul had Judaizing in view in those closing verses of Romans (16:17–20), he should read this conclusion: The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet (16:20a).

Judaizing is not merely someone’s fancy. It is a false teaching within the church, pushed by a powerful organizer, the grand master of every false teaching: Satan himself.

When the devil is mentioned, shortsighted people think fearfully of a monster walking around on his hind legs in the dark. Satan would find such an image of him useful. But Scripture tells us, however, that Satan was the propagator of a teaching; that he was behind the prophets in Ahab’s palace, against whom Micaiah stood all alone (1 Kings 22:19–23); that he opposed Christ with Bible verses (Matt. 4); and that the Gnostic propagandists also used religious terms (Rev. 2–3).

It is very interesting to see what a beautiful second section of Romans that our verse, Romans 12:1, opens the gate for us. Let us take notice of a few elements of that portion, somewhat in order.

Romans 14–15: an urgent warning against religious quarreling about the Law. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Romans 13: this is no abstract chapter about the government. Romans 13 does not fall like an unexpected meteor out of the sky. It fits precisely in section 2, whose tenor is to urge Christians toward calmness and quietness. In the name of peace, do not draw attention to yourself. See to it that with the governments of the state you have a good reputation. Otherwise you will discover sooner or later that one or another complaint from the Jews or even particularly from the Judaizers will gain a hearing with the governments of Rome. The apostle had suffered such bitter experiences himself with such Jewish agitation (see Acts 13:50; 14:2–7, 19; 17:5–9, 13; 18:12, 13; 24:27). All of these passages involves Jewish agitation.

You could also say that Romans 13 is a continuation of Romans 12, and that both chapters bind upon the hearts of the Christians in Rome the apostle’s urgent desire: Love one another! Do
you really want to fulfill the Law? Then you need only love your neighbor. The entire second section of Romans strives for the peace of Jerusalem. Against those disturbing the peace.

But if that peace were not maintained, and if blows might rain down, perhaps blows administered by the government? What then? Fight back? Of course not.

Paul would have learned from the Torah always to begin with the most important. If God desires it from you, then be ready for martyrdom. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

“Your bodies.” That is what Paul writes literally. With this word “bodies” the apostle wished to express a finely nuanced meaning. The New Testament can use the word “soul” to refer to the whole person, and similarly it can use the word “body” for the same purpose, to refer to the whole person. But that word “body” can also specify further what is visible or tangible about a person, something covered with clothing or something used for prostitution or something that one can permit to be burned for the sake of one’s faith. The word “body” is then being used to draw attention to the person in terms of his observable features, his visible and audible actions and deeds, possibly even his sinful behaviors (Rom. 8:13).

When we pay close attention to Paul’s use of the word “bodies” at the portal of section 2 of Romans, we immediately wonder if, when he wrote Romans 12:1, the apostle perhaps saw the storm clouds hanging over the church in Rome, clouds that he would indeed see burst forth upon it six years later. A teacup usually breaks apart at the crack that was already there. Now, there were various groups in the church in Rome. Indeed, where is this not the case with the church thanks to the judaizing demon? Did Paul suspect in AD 58 already the possibility of severe suffering for the sake of Christ in connection with a particular contact between Jews and the government in Rome? Notice his words: “your bodies” (12:1).

Paul began at the end. If . . . if conflict comes, then be faithful unto death, as “sacrificial lambs of Christ.” After this, however, he did what he could to prevent the worst of it. He warned them to love one another, even their enemies, seeing to it that they maintained a good reputation with the government, not excommunicating each other over issues involving food laws and Sabbath laws (Rom. 12–16).

But it didn’t help. Six years later the catastrophe came. Judaizing Christians apparently made common cause with the Jews against the poor church of the Lord. We are no longer surprised by this.

When you take away people’s idols, they become desperate and enraged. They hold nothing back, and like Micah in Judges 18:24, they complain: “What do I have left?” For that reason, the Judaizers were so angry with Paul when he took away their “law.” At that point they had lost their certainty. Looking back, the reaction of the Judaizers can easily be understood. The mild gospel of Paul had put dynamite under their beautiful edifice of “law.” They had arranged everything so nicely. Nothing was a matter of indifference, and for every domain of living, there was command upon command and rule upon rule. And that odd Paul caused all their pride and glory to crash to the ground.

In AD 64, Paul and Peter showed that they understood what their “spiritual service” consisted of. We could also say: They showed what was required in line with God’s Word in the circumstances of AD 64. The phrase “spiritual service” or “spiritual worship” makes us think of
the work of the priest in connection with the altar. Here Paul is speaking of Christian worship, that we show the readiness about which Paul writes in Philippians 2:17 and 2 Timothy 4:6, from a prison cell, with death staring him in the face, using words strongly reminiscent of Romans 12:1 (thusia, which means sacrifice). In other words, that we be ready, if required, to die for our Savior. That we even—Paul was writing in order to express himself more graphically: our bodies—allow ourselves to be laid upon the altar of persecution.

That is what Paul and Peter did then, as well.

3. Judaizing shows its true nature and joins forces with Judaism

We have just heard, in the New Testament, the Judaizing predator walking about in slippers throughout the tiny little churches of Christ, but we have not yet seen it use force. Or perhaps force was used in connection with Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem on the part of certain Judaizing elements. Ultimately those people were difficult to distinguish from other Jews who wanted nothing to do with that movement identified with Christ and the apostles.

In AD 64, however, the monster showed its true colors. At that time it extended its sharp claws. The first act of the drama, entitled “Christian Freedom Meets Judaizers,” ended with the death of Paul and Peter in Rome. The poor Christian churches would likely have trembled in their shoes.

But the air cleared up at that point. The eyes of many a Christian were now opened to see the miserable spirit that lay hidden behind all that conflict over the “law.”

Finally. Let no one suppose that the effect of the meeting(s) mentioned in Acts 15 had been all that significant. Judaizers were not converted by the advice that resulted.

Satan’s intention of gathering all the Christians from Gentile background into one great Jewish church, where every member was bound upon pain of condemnation to observe the Law of Moses + circumcision, encountered determined resistance for the time being. But Judaizing was not thereby completely conquered. It had too many resources that were far too strong for that to happen.

There was first of all the power of antiquity, the power of nurture, the law of inertia. This overcame even Peter and Barnabas in Antioch so strongly that without giving it a second thought, they were ashamed to share the same meal with Christians of Gentile background, but left them in the lurch when “certain men came from James” (Gal. 2:12).

In addition there was the famous influence that Judaism was known to exercise in all sorts of ways. Commercially and financially. Whenever someone gave the appearance of apostatizing, despising the Law of Moses because he had broken with the ancient Jewish religious ceremonies, then he lost the usual support that Jews loaned to one another. The relief effort for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, about which Paul writes so often, arose for a reason. The “foreigners” would otherwise in many respects have defaulted.

Furthermore, let us not forget that within the Roman state, Judaism had acquired the right of being a “permitted religion.” Thereby it was protected from bad treatment from every side. If you keep this in mind, you will discern the deceitful attempt by the Jews in Thessalonica to portray Christians to the government as innovators, as people who had totally abandoned the ancient paths of Moses and the prophets, and who acted “against the decrees of Caesar” (Acts 17:7). Is it not entirely understandable that in those days, Jewish people perceived that this Jesus of Nazareth had to be the promised Messiah because his words and works fit completely with what the ancient Scriptures foretold about the coming Messiah, and who for that reason wanted
to become Christians, as long as they could remain Jews? They wanted to combine the one with the other. The ancient familiar life under the shield of the Roman government as a “permitted religion,” and faith in the crucified Christ. Becoming a Christian while remaining a Jew. Paul saw clearly through the judaizers in connection with their game motivated by that tempting motive: “only in order that they many not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12).

But we have already identified the strongest resource of the Judaizers. That was the appearance of fidelity to the Word. They had a Bible verse for everything. All of life was divided into cubicles, and a divine commandment was written above each cubicle. Something like this makes a solid impression on a naïve person. A sense of having sailed into a safe harbor. These men did not act like Paul, who was flexible and left everyone far too free. But the judaizing brothers stuck with the letter. With “there it is written.”

We presume that sympathy for the apostle Paul in the Christian churches of his time was not as widespread as we might be led to expect on the basis of the great fame he enjoyed after his death. In two of his so-called prison epistles, Philippians and 2 Timothy, the wretched prematurely aged Paul complained about being left alone. Not on account of the prison, but because he felt abandoned. In Colossians 4:10 he mentions only a couple of names and writes: “the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me” (4:11).

Today flowers are still placed on Paul’s grave. But during his life, Judaizing brothers saw to it that his apostolic path was covered all too often with thorns.

Belonging to the various motives among the Judaizers, under which the apostle Paul had to suffer so severely, was jealousy (Phil. 1:15–18). Just think of what one jealous person can do.

What happened around AD 64 in Rome is not easily determined. For the contemporary and subsequent famous historiographers, Paul and Peter were of course not figures of interest. And because Roman Catholics appeal, in connection with their theory of papal authority over the entire Christian church, to Peter’s presence in Rome around 64, whereas Protestants did not dare to endorse this latter highly disputable fact, attention for the preeminent historical events of those days has been distracted by this controversy. Scholars have shown, however, that both apostles were living in Rome during that time, and suffered martyrdom there, but also that they were victims in particular of betrayal. The prediction of our Savior was fulfilled in their case: You will be handed over, even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends (Luke 21:16). According to Clement of Rome (a bishop of Rome who, according to Irenaeus, must have known the apostles Paul and Peter), both apostles died as a result of “jealousy and envy” in their own Christian church in Rome. In that connection, a certain Jewish compatriot, Poppea Sabina by name, a trollop of a woman, friend of Nero, must have functioned as a collaborator. In order to see to it that those two pillars of support were removed.

This was a wonderful victory for Judaizers and for Jews. And for the poor Christians, it was a fatal blow.

At least that’s how it appeared. But now the spirits were manifest. People could now grasp the real impulse that drove the Judaizers. Anyone who initially had been under the spell of the Judaizers would have none of it anymore. From this time forward, no one in the church would carry the banner of the ancient privileged “permitted religion.” Christianity was now definitively liberated from the deadly danger of becoming a Jewish-Christian sect.

4. The spirit of defeated judaizing takes revenge
Those closing words of the preceding section sounded rather encouraging. Indeed, the curtain between the Christian faith and Judaizing had been drawn back. At least the Judaizing in the form in which it had appeared up to this point. This is why one scholar observed that after the death of the apostles, the world saw the advance of the law-free gospel. The battle lines that existed before AD 70 simply disappeared, because contact with Israel had been broken.

Yes, of course. You might say that in terms of external appearance, Christians no longer had to deal with Judaizers. Anything that looked Jewish had fallen into discredit, for reasons that applied later as well. We don’t wish to incite anyone to hate the Jews. That would simply be unchristian. In fact, just think how much Jewish blood must have coursed through the veins of Christians through marriages during the first centuries, thanks to the intermingling in the apostolic church of Christians from among the Jews and Christians from among the Gentiles. For this reason, ancient Israel continued to exist in the Christian church (cf. Rom. 11:17–18). But even though we may not be vengeful against a people about whom only God knows how closely related we are and how much we owe them, nevertheless truth is truth: what Christians had to undergo at the hands of the Jews in the early period of the church was terrible. Here is one example.

In his *Ecclesiastical History* (IV.15.26), Eusebius tells us about the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. It was not only Gentiles who wept and wailed about the death of that aged man, but Jews as well. When Gentiles from all over brought wood and branches from their place of work and from bathhouses for burning that greybeard at the stake, writes Eusebius, the Jews “being especially zealous in the work, as is their wont,” offered the Gentiles a helping hand (IV.15.29). This happened in AD 166.

Another remarkable example of the constantly harsh treatment that Christians had to endure at the hands of the Jews is found in Book V of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, where he discusses the Montanists. This Christian sect arose in Asia Minor around the same time, ca. 150. When these Montanists were opposed later by the more catholic Christians, this argument was regularly employed against them: of course those Montanists cannot be good Christians, because they were never persecuted by the Jews, were never scourged in the synagogues of the Jews, and never stoned by them (V.16.12). People saw such friendly treatment of the Montanists by the Jews to reflect the former’s objectionable past. It is true that Christians naturally adopted a very defensive posture toward everything Jewish. In Asia Minor one was considered unable to be a good Christian if he lived peaceably with Jews.

The same was true elsewhere. One scholar has observed that in the Syrian Didascalia from the third century, observing the ceremonial law was called disobedience to Christ.

That was the direction things went.

This appeared, for example, in connection with the celebration of the weekly day of rest. As we saw in Paul’s letters to the Galatians, the Colossians, and the Romans, the Judaizers wanted to lay upon the Christian church particularly two practices from the Law: first, the food laws of Leviticus 11–15, and second, the Sabbaths of Leviticus 23–25. In both respects this was a fiasco.

As far as we know, the Christian church never prohibited eating pork. Nor did it tolerate placing on believers a Sabbath commandment. Of course, several Christians tried to accomplish these things. The Ebionites, a Jewish-Christian sect, celebrated two days of rest, just to be sure: one on Saturday and one on Sunday. But the observance of the so-called *dies solis*, the day of the sun, or Sunday, won out ultimately. In the early centuries of the Christian church, this observance of Sunday was never ever motivated by an appeal to the Fourth Commandment. This occurred later
for the first time, during the time of Charlemagne, under the leadership of his palace theologian Alcuin. Before this time, however, the weekly observance of a day of rest was never viewed as something flowing from the covenant or from the Law of Horeb. There is no trace of Sunday replacing the Israelite Sabbath, or to put it differently, observing Sunday by virtue of the Fourth Commandment, but rather the opposite was the case. As late as 538, the Council of Orleans identified the prohibition of traveling on Sunday, or cooking a meal, or decorating one’s housed as something ad judaicam potius quam ad christianam observantiam pertinens (pertaining more to Jewish than Christian observance).

Indeed, all forms of judaizing appeared to be out. At least forms of the judaizing that sought during the apostolic age to bring Christians under a yoke constructed from the hard wood cut from the “law” of Moses.

But Paul had indicated that Judaizing knew how to disguise itself shrewdly. “For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). That became evident.

When you recognize in how many ways judaizing has succeeded in the course of history in tyrannizing the liberated church of Jesus Christ, binding it with fetters and chains, in short, robbing it of the freedom that Christ obtained for the church, then you can come to no other conclusion than this: there is a breathtakingly shrewd spirit at work here.

Always with a single result. The church came to groan under a yoke. Actually, under more than just one yoke.

Always with the same effect. For ultimately what difference does it make to you whether someone imprisons you in a cell whose walls are painted freshly white, or in a cubicle with gray cement walls? In either case you are sitting in prison, and you’ve lost your freedom.

The revenge on the part of the Judaizers was enormous. If only we could speak in the past tense.

Despite this, Christians have not been sufficiently alert soon enough. We say this not to lecture you. Hindsight is always 20/20. But taking a dip in the cold waters of history can be refreshing. Thereby you get to know your own time, and seek a solution for similar difficulties under which Christianity in our own day is being oppressed.

Without judging harshly, we can look back at particular phenomena that appeared in the early centuries, and agree rather unanimously that they were symptoms of a Judaizing spirit. Symptoms of an un-evangelical, loveless spirit. Even though this spirit constantly gave the appearance of being the preserver of the ancient, trusted paths. Judaizing and conservatism are certainly not identical, but they have often lived in the adjacent neighborhoods.

It began unnoticed.

The curtain dividing Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and the curtain dividing Christianity and Judaizing, on the other hand, appeared to have been radically torn apart, but they remained connected by a few loose ends and threads.

Let’s not forget about the group of Christians gathered around James in Jerusalem. Christians who were zealous for the Law, but definitely not judaizers, not tyrannical and bloodthirsty, when push came to shove. If you’d like to read an especially fine book about this kind of Christian, pick up the book by A. Janse, Selections from Church History.

Jewish Christian sects like the Nazarenes and Ebionites survived for a rather long time, the latter until about 535, when the Arabs conquered the Transjordan region. We should probably view these sects as populated by the final remnants of the group of Christians in Jerusalem and
the surrounding region who were zealous for the Law. Except that later they seem to have turned in a judaizing direction. They called Peter “an apostate from the Law.” James of Jerusalem didn’t do that. You can read more about them in Eusebius, as people who had regard for the Sabbath and other Jewish customs (Ecclesiastical History, III.27).

Let’s agree that these sectarian streams eventually dried up. But how long did they survive, entirely apart from any influence on Christians?

There is something else.

A moment ago, we acknowledged the fiasco that the Judaizers living in the apostolic age suffered in connection with their attempt to bring all of Christianity under, first, the food laws of Leviticus 1–15, and second, the Sabbath laws of Leviticus 23–25. With regard to the latter, that fiasco was rather total. At least in that early period. Until the Middle Ages, at least on the European continent, Christianity did not groan under the yoke of sabbatarianism. And Roman Catholic Christians did not yet suffer under this. We must give credit where credit is due. But for the rest? Regarding the first point, indeed, we do not “owe” credit to the apostolic age for the requirement of observing Leviticus 11–15. The medieval prohibition against eating horse meat had an anti-pagan motive. But where did Christians get that prohibition against eating meat on Fridays and the command to observe certain times of fasting? Not from Scripture (1 Tim. 4:3). Nevertheless, it is well-known how rigorously this ordinance, which was of very dubious origin and authority, was maintained during the Reformation period in our countries. Violation of these was punished with imprisonment and death.

Already in chapters 7 and 8 of the very old Didache (dating from the first or second century), it was stipulated that in order to be baptized, a person had to fast for one or two days beforehand, but that the weekly fast was not to occur on the same days as those on which “the hypocrites” (i.e., the Pharisees, the Jews) fasted, namely, the second and fifth days, “but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.” They were obviously distinguishing themselves from Judaism while not being entirely different. This was a family quarrel, since commands for fasting did not appear in the Law. They were neither Mosaic, nor Christian, nor apostolic. They are Jewish, and point to the first Judaizing invasion attempt. At that time it largely failed. But something of it survived, remnants here and there that the church regrettably tolerated, which later grew out of hand. But by then, it was too late.

Then came moralism. Christians have become famous for their good works.

To be sure, they were also slandered. Terribly. People accused them of nothing less than cannibalism and incest, probably because of the love feasts and the accompanying Lord’s Supper, and because Christians called one another brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, for their response Christians relied on their circumspect lifestyle, their marital fidelity, neighbor love, care for the poor. Sensible emperors like Trajan and Hadrian took moderate actions against persecuting Christians without cause, since it was foolish to harass such law-abiding people.

Nevertheless, no matter how much encouragement we receive today by knowing that first-century Christians were praised by the pagans for their generally winsome lifestyle, we may not close our eyes to the silent change that was introduced to the Christian faith when the obedient Christian life was no longer viewed as a fruit of redemption, but as a condition for salvation. Doing good was, in fact, cultivated. Commands were invented that had never been given by God. For example, the unmarried state was highly honored. Heretics like Arius and Pelagius were enabled to spread their ideas by means of their huge popularity that they acquired among the people precisely on account of their ascetic lifestyle. But the process that occurred silently was corrosive. Alongside the ordinary commands that applied to everyone, there arose extra
commands for the specially gifted, which belonged to the new “law” whose observance brought them further than the ordinary person.

Hand in hand with this evil went another wickedness, namely, the veneration of godly people, to whom the church ascribed a place above others. Hand in hand with this went the idolization of office.

Naturally we have nothing but praise for the fact that these Christians lived according to Hebrews 13:7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” But the fact that people began to venerate such martyrs and directed petitions to them after their death was a disappointing harvest. “The dead know nothing” (Eccl. 9:5). If such a martyr for one or another reason escaped death, then already during his life he was venerated highly. He obtained the honorific title of “confessor” and from that point on, his head was graced as though with a halo. As if we would be permitted to swear by any human declaration (Rom. 3:4). When such “confessors” in addition held the office of bishop—something that happened easily, since the leaders of the church had to rise to prominence first as victims of persecutions—then the temptation was very real to honor such men as princes. In fact, the evil of hierarchy entered the church rather early. Of the three kinds of office-bearers—bishops, presbyters, and deacons—the latter was the most subordinate, the presbyters became the priests, but the bishop became the head of everyone, even though according to the Bible, the bishop (episcopos) was nothing but a brother among brothers, one of the presbyters (the elders) or overseers (1 Tim. 3). The terms presbyter and episcopos referred to the same persons. Paul did desire, nonetheless, that the presbyters (older men) who ruled would be honored doubly for their work, which meant in view of their age and their work, which then included preaching and teaching, since this labor demanded the most time and effort, and the persons involved were exposed the most to dangers. But regarding showing honor, that would have had to be shown to such men, like people did in the palaces toward the princes and in the armies toward generals, the apostle said not a word. Nevertheless, the evil of hierarchy deformed the blood-bought church of Jesus Christ to such an extent that it grew into a civil kingdom with higher and lower authorities and governors. You should not suppose that those living at the time viewed this course of events as a deformation. On the contrary. We can see this when we read the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius. This man, you must know, was a contemporary of Constantine the Great, and saw the consequences of his rule for Christianity as a victory. He was enthusiastic about it, even though that was a vulnerable situation. When Eusebius arranged his great work of history, from which we have drawn information more than once, he imitated the example of pagan historiographers before him. Whereas the pagan historians had focused on the royal families and their heirs, Eusebius focused on those who held the office of bishop in large cities like Rome, Alexandria, etc., together with their successors. The place occupied in earlier history books by wars was replaced by Eusebius with attention, in his comprehensive work, to the struggle of the martyrs. The viri illustres of the pagans (the celebrated authors) become for Eusebius the Christian writers. What used to be called rebellion and revolution was described by Eusebius as doctrinal differences and heresy. In short, if anyone followed “the form of this world,” to use Paul’s language (1 Cor. 7:31b), it was Eusebius. Recall that our Savior spoke to his disciples precisely about rulers exercising dominion over their subjects: It shall not be so among you (Matt. 20:26).

The imposing international Roman Catholic mega-power, which emerged more and more clearly in the course of the centuries, did not grow up all at once. With an appearance of legitimacy it can portray itself as the uninterrupted continuation of the early ancient Christian
church. We are not at all surprised, then, that many valuable remembrances preserved by this mighty colossus from those initial glorious days were able to enchant the hearts of artists and historians. Many aspects of that continuous line cannot be denied. That should, however, have made people all the more alert. But now it is too late. Indeed, it was too late a millennium ago. The shortsightedness that caused people not to recognize the unmistakable symptoms of the same church-destroying spirit that animated judaizing has been costly for impoverished Christianity.

Christ’s bride, Jesus’ church, was turned into a bossy woman that stuck her nose into everything. It became, finally, a matter of serving the order of the day. Everywhere bosses called the shots.

For example, the “spiritual” were higher than the “laity.” Not only in the village, but all the way to the church attic. Ultimately it was stipulated that a member of the “laity” was not allowed to be chosen as pope. That would never do . . . in a social context of a judaizing nature. There the rule of the Pharisees functioned. They divided the body of the Lord into two, and said: That multitude that does not know the Law, let them be accursed! (John 7:49).

One “spiritual” person was above the other. The “spiritual” who lived in villages and chapels (of monastery or church) were under higher “spiritual” persons “seated” on cities that had cathedrals (another term containing the notion of “sitting”). Everything constituted one web. The annual visits were brought to every district from the bishopric, if not by the bishop himself, then by his vicar.

Control was everywhere. In monastery and convent, the nun received, in place of the mother whom God had given her, a new mother in her “mother superior,” and the monk received a better father in his “prior”; the prior was under the vicar, the vicar under the general of the “order.” At the top of the pyramid was the “servus servorum,” the most humble servant of all, bearing that humble title, behind which was hidden the highest of arrogance.

Was judaizing able to succeed? It turned the official Christian church into a cacophony of breathtaking heights, from where “the representative of Christ” could look down upon all the kingdoms of the world, in terms of Satan’s offer made in Matthew 4:8. And it succeeded in hammering into the heads of Christians such a power-hungry idea of the church that the need for it will not easily disappear entirely from Christian thinking.

This gigantic bloc made use of two powerful means of propaganda. First, a totalitarian doctrine, and second, totalitarian laws.

The fiction of the pope being Christ’s governor on earth became the cornerstone of the Roman Catholic doctrinal edifice. Hereby, the Christian understanding about Christ as Head of the church, and consequently, about the church, were influenced disastrously.

The fiction we mentioned was not advanced immediately. As the capstone it required a supporting structure. The pyramid of priests served that purpose. We will not discuss this further, but simply urge that you not talk about this as though it possesses a kind of Old Testament aura. If only it did!

Then we have the so-called primacy of Peter. Oh, if only people meant by this that Peter often functioned as leader after Christ’s resurrection (Acts 1:15; 2:14; 3:12; etc.), we could not object. But you really need to be incomprehensibly biased to read in Matthew 18 the appointment of Peter, and only Peter, to be the representative of Christ. For did not our Savior give the very same mandate to the other disciples as well that, according to Matthew 18, he
granted to Peter, namely, to bind and to loose with the gospel here on earth (Matt. 18:18; John 20:23)?

But that bias in connection with the exegesis of Matthew 18 is explicable from church history. It was simply postulated in terms of the highest position to which the bishop of Rome had ascended.

To the extent that this position extended its reach, claim was placed on even more “proof texts” in Holy Scripture in order to sanction after the fact what had existed for a long time. Holy Scripture would later serve to camouflage a carnal Christianity, something totally foreign to Scripture.

That happened this way. In the course of time, the bishop of Rome not only became a very powerful man in the church, but by way of gifts had also acquired large tracts of land as his property. Especially Pepin the Younger (also known as Pepin the Short, 714–768) became famous for this. He transferred to the papacy entire regions that he had conquered from the Lombards in Northern Italy. This is how the ecclesiastical state, or church state, came into being. An entity that played an impressive role in the political history of the Middle Ages, defending and maintaining itself in the same manner as any other state, namely, with weapons and with violence, but also by means of the following ruse. The pope of Rome possessed in fact a dual authority. Not only an ecclesiastical, but also a civil authority. Hereby he was not only elevated above all the spiritual in the church, but he also stood above all the great dignitaries of the world. He was also the head of the civil governments. And from whom had he received this dual authority? From Christ, whose substitute on earth he was. So then, Christ had received from the Father two swords, both the civil and the ecclesiastical swords, and he had granted these to his representative here on earth, who in turn had the right to grant them to others.

The argument was very transparent. Later popes were rather embarrassed by it, at least the version defended by pope Boniface VIII, an enfant terrible, someone who stated all too clearly what he intended. In his famous encyclical, “Unam sanctam,” he argued that no one could be saved who did not believe that the pope possessed all power over all creatures. After all, he was Christ’s substitute. And Christ had received from God two swords. Proof? Luke 22:38. (As you know, Christ told his disciples: you have in times past enjoyed peace, compared to what is coming. A time of grave danger. To which the disciples responded by saying: Master, we have here two swords. Had they just used them for slaughtering lambs? Discouraged about such lack of understanding, Christ said at that point that it was sufficient for the time being.)

Even though people later distanced themselves from this carnal view of Christ, the notion took root in history. It was invented in order to legitimate a situation that had arisen, namely, a pope with ecclesiastical + civil authority. For the convenience of his representative on earth, who possessed so much authority, Christ was (so to speak) turned into a heavenly pope who possessed all authority, who was sovereign over all. An unbiblical claim, but one that had the regrettable continuing result of an imperious view of the church.

We would rather not contradict the clear Scriptural declarations that, after all of his suffering and obedience, to Christ was given “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9), that he is seated “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). But it will not do to talk and act as though this Christ, with and through his ascension, had become completely sovereign over all. He could not possible have been wanting to express that notion in his pre-ascension words known to everyone: All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). For what then would we do with other Scripture passages that identify Christ today as simply an Heir (Rom. 8:17; Heb. 1:2), which narrate the pain of persecution still being inflicted upon him (Acts
9:4; Col. 1:24), which speak about him making his appearance at the end of time as the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14), but who is now waiting until God has placed all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25)? Of course Christ said those words (all authority has been given to me) in full confidence in the Father’s promise. But the day of complete fulfillment of that promise had not and has not yet dawned.

Christ does not simply have control over everyone and everything. The governments do not simply rule by his grace. Christ is Mediator, Servant of the LORD.

In the Middle Ages, however, people talked about Christ so harshly and so cold-heartedly. People saw in him not so much a Savior but an angry Prince and Judge. The literature and paintings of that era demonstrate this.

Is this to say Christ is not a king? Indeed, he is not a king of the fortress of Zion which continues to be very impressive in the eyes of many people. He is not ashamed to be the Head of all his churches and congregations (like Smyrna and Sardis, Rev. 2:9a; 3:8b; cf. Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18), even though they are so heavily persecuted on account of their godly living in him (2 Tim. 3:12).

But does not Christ exercise any great authority at all? Yes, he does, through his Advocate, and through his angels who are sent forth for the sake of those who will inherit salvation. Apparently in the conflict among the spirits, as well (Rev. 12).

Nevertheless, Christ does not employ, for the spread of his church, any iron scepter with armies and violence. He employs only Spiritual means.

If that Roman Catholic notion of Christ does not disappear, the danger will continue to threaten us of an imperious church that wants to have a say in every square inch of every domain of life.

Just as totalitarian as the Roman Catholic notion of Christ and of the church—to speak against the pope is to speak against the church, and both are prohibited—were Roman Catholic laws. The poor church population did not thrive under medieval neo-judaizing. From the phenomenon that usually accompanies Judaizing, namely, contention and dissension, it got its fill.

Anyone who might think, on the basis of infatuation with the patina of attractiveness, that Christianity in the Middle Ages displayed a model of love and unity, a life of peace and harmony, is seriously mistaken. At that time Christians more nearly resembled the Jews in Jerusalem around AD 70. For just as the Roman legions once surrounded Jerusalem, so too at that time the Turks stood at the gates of Europe. And just as within Jerusalem there were two or three Jewish factions, who fought each other during the siege for their very survival, so too medieval Christianity was tested by countless wars, large and small, by deep hatred and far-reaching animosity among those high and low, by division reaching to the highest levels, and even by repeated papal schisms.

The regenerating power of the gospel had departed far from the life of Christian nations. The Spirit was grieved. Christ’s church bride was violated. She lost her honor and freedom entirely. Her proverbial purity shriveled into a laughingstock. Almost every nobleman had his concubine. Every village priest his clandestine wife. Marriage was gradually turned into an ecclesiastical matter with which the state need not bother. Behind this iron curtain of sacramental practice were many unsavory practices involving sexual immorality and relationships that were either tolerated or legitimated by means of ecclesiastical authority. It did not help very much when such immorality was decorated with the regalia of the sacraments. The gospel had become a “law.”
All of this eventually made it possible for even women to surrender to the hysteria associated with the crusades, sending their children to go take back the “Holy Land” from the Turks, because “it is God’s will!”

Under that “law” a kind of “spirituality” was consumed with endless battles. A complex system of ecclesiastical rules had developed that served to create a practice of formal ecclesiastical canonical jurisprudence. A church polity in which one could obtain a doctorate. And if you had become thoroughly immersed in that kind of church polity, well then, you would also need to demonstrate your competence. Church leader against church leader. One spiritual order against another. People fought about the possession of ecclesiastical assets and their associated incomes. No wonder that in the early period of the Reformation, people were deathly afraid of making ecclesiastical laws and regulations. Calvin had seen enough of this in his parental home, because his father used to be consulted frequently as a judicial expert by litigating “spiritual leaders.” These people were always coming and going in his home.

5. Judaizing suffers defeat again, but again takes revenge

It is nothing short of a miracle that the second act of the drama entitled, “Christianity and Judaizing” ended in a defeat for the latter. Except for the fact that those who tolerated Judaizing were powerful and numerous. But the saying of the Preacher applied to the meager remnant: “Behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them” (Eccl. 4:1). The ecclesiastical courts handed over its victims to the civil magistrates for their final sentence because, to put it in the words of the beautiful proverb, the church was not fond of blood. And the magistrates were supposed to obey, even though the blood occasionally crawled where it could not go. But the “law” had little room for mercy. The systems closed like a trap. If God had not preserved the Christian faith, it would have been strangled by the everywhere present tentacles of the religious giant polypus, to which the church of our ancestors had degenerated. Our church. We are not simply blowing hot air. We would be traveling a biblical path if today we would confess our sins committed during the Middle Ages. “We have sinned.” “Do not impute to us the iniquities of our forefathers” (cf. Ps. 79:8; 106:6; Dan. 9:5, 7; Ezra 9:7, 10; Neh. 9:33). Even though we may have forgotten the history of our church, God keeps a diary. It is not fitting for us to be vengeful, and to stare ourselves blind by looking at others. The struggle was not against “flesh and blood,” but against the superhuman power of the prince of darkness and his allies. There is especially every reason to humble ourselves, when we take into account the time following the Reformation. For how stubborn we were back then as well.

Of course, in the purified church buildings of our fathers, it thundered for a long time against Roman Catholicism. Firm protests were lodged repeatedly, especially when the Roman Catholic counter-reformation persisted, from the state church against “papal obstinacies.” But that protest itself proved already that the “Protestants” as well had not yet had their fill of the “law.” Such carnal weapons are not fitting for Christ’s church (2 Cor. 10:3–4).

Our ancestors accused the Roman Catholics and the Remonstrants of turning the gospel into a new law. Nevertheless they too could not avoid this danger themselves. It was embedded in the garments of what many today call “the marks of true religion.” There is no corner or crevice in our land where the destructive mist of this neo-nomism (nomos means law) has not penetrated, attacking initial confidence for living from the promises of God’s covenant with parents and their offspring, given to us in the gospel and sealed through baptism and Lord’s Supper.
The gospel of “sola fide,” that we are justified from and through faith in Christ alone, that was graciously recovered for us in the time of the Reformation, was in subsequent centuries placed under the covering of all kinds of conditions that had to be satisfied before one could appropriate this gospel. These apriori conditions were developed with incredible refinement and erected as barriers that the poor person examining himself had to pass before he could avoid the accusation of “spiritual robbery” when he grasped with the hand of faith the redemptive benefits of Christ. Do I really believe? But may I really believe that I believe? That I genuinely believe? That I am elect? That I am converted? That I have been genuinely converted? You can imagine additional variations of this theme.

In our own time people added, for example, the question of whether I have received the full promise of salvation for the elect and therefore received full baptism—referring to the kind of baptism that sealed the aforementioned promise, and not something less. For the tyranny of this “law” does not belong to the past. Entire generations have lost the joy of faith on account of it. Particular regions of our land have groaned deeply under this “law.” Novels have been written about it. Essays have been written against it. These have possibly identified and removed some of the outgrowth. But the root remained. The suppression of the gospel by means of a “law.” The same evil that Paul, among others, fought against in his letter to the Galatians. That fatal “yes but first . . .”—how the apostle fulminated against that.

We must retrace our steps along the path he indicated. Otherwise we will complete the job only halfway.

When we probe the morass of our problems, we naturally encounter history phenomena like Anabaptism and Roman Catholicism. We can then attempt to shift the blame on those. Based on ecclesiastical movement from Baptist churches to Reformed churches, we could agree that with Baptist blood came Baptist ideas about God’s covenant, the church, activism, and resignation. But how then did those Baptists ever come up with those things?

We could also point to Roman Catholic backsliding among us. In this connection we need not suffice with pointing out numerous small indications. The Roman Catholic paradigm of nature and supernature was translated into Reformed terms, of course with the use of the word “grace.” And the Roman Catholic church-driven system, with their own school, their own political party, etc., seems to have given rise to a Reformed imitation, in which an identical totalitarian “law” prescribed various callings. All this while Scripture lays upon us no other membership than that of the real association and church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, in many respects the Baptists are extremely consistent Roman Catholics. And the Roman Catholics had turned the gospel into a “law.” But are we then not commanded to turn from the “law” back to the Law as it was in reality and as it, according to the New Testament, continues to be valid for us today?

6. How do we defeat the spirit of judaizing?

Satan has always been too smooth for us. He knew how to throw his bones of contention down the church aisle, and incite children of one covenant and those who received one baptism to fight each other like animals. But we can’t just keep on complaining bitterly about this. What is to be done in response? Consider the following.

6.1 First of all, the Law of Moses must be read in no other way than in agreement with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
It is easily said that reformation involves a return to God’s Word. But at that point the question arises immediately: How do you read God’s Word? We advise that people should begin at the beginning. With the Pentateuch and the Law of Moses.

We explained earlier the important place that the Law occupies in the entirety of Holy Scripture. It occupies a place no less important that that of a foundation beneath a building. For in the Pentateuch all the important themes that will be discussed later in the rest of Scripture are to be found. We would mention only these: the redemption of the world through the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the calling of Abraham for the redemption of the nations (Gen. 12), God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15 and 17), and God’s covenant with Abraham’s descendants, Israel, at Horeb (Exod. 19, 20, and 24). All these subjects are mentioned first in the Pentateuch and developed in subsequent Scripture. Thereby the Pentateuch exhibits its character as the substratum, the foundation of all of Scripture.

It is therefore very important to understand correctly the significance of this basis of all of Scripture. It constitutes an inseparable part of that Scripture. It is inseparably bound to all of its parts, from beginning to end, including the New Testament, and including the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, if the Pentateuch is not read evangelically, then Scripture actually gets broken into pieces. For the Law constitutes the base on which the entire sculpture rests. The sagging of that base will have disastrous results for the entire sculpture.

6.2 We may not lose sight of the provisional character of the Horeb covenant. Nobody today is under that covenant any longer, for it no longer exists.

The judaizers in Paul’s day would certainly have swooped down on you for saying something like this. Some of those around James in Jerusalem might possibly have shaken their heads about this as well. Nevertheless we insist on this truth.

If you want to see clearly the provisional character of the Horeb covenant, compare this covenant with the one God made with Abraham. Scripture frequently points us to the permanence of the Abrahamic covenant. For example, the author of Hebrews writes that God bound himself to Abraham by means of “two unchangeable things.” By this he was referring to, first, the promise that in Abraham, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3), and second, the covenant God made thereafter with him in addition, concerning the fulfillment of which God had given assurance in many ways (Heb. 6:17–18; see Genesis, 213–239). The apostle Paul also wrote once that the “testament” that God granted to Abraham was not robbed of its power when, 430 years later, the Law was given at Horeb (Gal. 3:17). On the contrary, Paul pointed to the Galatian Christians themselves as proof that God was continuing to keep his Word given to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). Gentiles like them had become children of Abraham.

Do you suppose that Scripture imprints upon us exclusive respect for the Abrahamic covenant and absolutely no respect for the Horeb covenant?

We are not claiming that. But that is not what we are discussing at the moment. We are discussing the provisional character of the Horeb covenant and we are demonstrating this by comparing it with the Abrahamic covenant. That latter covenant was immutable, as we read in the New Testament. In saying this, the New Testament is not declaring something brand new, since that was also stated in the Old Testament. In the Pentateuch itself.
You should read Leviticus 26. There we read about the sanctions of the Horeb covenant. The possibility is in view that one day Yahweh could visit the Israelites not with blessing, but with covenant wrath. But, if Israel should forget Yahweh, even then Yahweh would not forget Israel entirely, but remember his covenant with Abraham. “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers . . . then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham” (Lev. 26:40–42).

We italicized those three names: Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. Notice the unusual sequence. In reverse order.

Thereby God was outlining “the way back” in connection with his covenant punishment. Even though the Horeb covenant would fall away, God’s covenant with Jacob, with Isaac, and with Abraham would remain.

(We can see today how true this is with respect to ourselves. For Israel brought forth Christ, and through that Christ we who were at one time pagans have nonetheless become children of Abraham (Luke 1:55, 73; 2:21; Rom. 4:13; 11:17; Gal. 3:29; Eph. 3:6. We have been engrafted into Israel!)

From Kings and Chronicles we know what Israel has done with the Horeb covenant. Israel ultimately experienced various curses of the covenant, including the captivity. Nevertheless the prophet Jeremiah was permitted, during the darkest period of the final deportation, to sound forth this comfort: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:31–32).

You will recall that the author of Hebrews returned twice to exactly this prediction of Jeremiah. Thereby he focused the attention of his (Jerusalemite?) Jewish Christian readers on the fact that according to Holy Scripture, they could expect significant changes. The entire administration according to the Law of Moses, including among other things everything it prescribed regarding sacrifices and altars and what those original readers of the letter were still seeing happen before their own eyes—all of that was going to disappear. (Something that did indeed happen, in AD 70.) For that belonged to the old covenant, to the Horeb covenant. But there was no need for this any longer. This has been replaced by “a better covenant,” one in which the role of the mediator was taken up by Jesus, the better Security and High Priest (Heb. 7:22; 8:6). No one should get angry about this.

When we argue and insist that the Horeb covenant has disappeared and therefore no one today can live under it, for the simple reason that it no longer exists, it could possibly be the case that such a declaration would lead someone to ask out of concern: Are you wishing then to turn the church of Christ into an undisciplined mob? Are we Christians, according to you, entirely lawless?

It seems as though similar accusations were made against the apostle Paul in his day, or at least that he had foreseen the possibility of such. In Romans 8:12, for example, he writes: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” Or he writes in Galatians 5:13: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, . . .”

For many Christians of Jewish ancestry, the new situation would have brought with it a sense of impoverishment and insecurity. A stick alongside a rose vine, a plaster cast on the wrist supply a similar notion of solidity. Just as there are children who want to be brought to school
until they are who knows how old. But the apostle gives us to understand that the childhood of the church is now past (Gal. 3). God’s church no longer lived under Horeb’s Law. Don’t walk any longer holding the hand of the Paidagogos.

Did that signify, however, a life of murder and killing, hatred and envy, quarreling and disharmony? Of course not. The apostle even said that the entire Law was fulfilled when Christians loved their neighbor, when they walked by the Spirit and not by the flesh (Gal. 5:16). To be clear, he mentioned numerous examples of the one as well as the other (see Gal. 5:19–26). Extensive examples!

So then, when Christians live that way, they fulfill “the Law of Christ,” Paul writes thereafter in Galatians 6:2. That expression “the Law of Christ” was surely a constant note of the apostle. We encounter it in 1 Corinthians 9:20–21: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the Law I became as one under the Law (though not being myself under the Law) that I might win those under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law (not being outside the Law of God but under the Law of Christ) that I might win those outside the Law.”

When we live according to the will of Christ, as the New Testament teaches us in thousands of passages to know it, we will hardly constitute an unruly and undisciplined mob.

6.3 But because the Horeb covenant has already borne an evangelical character, today we can learn much from it.

Let us try to remain clear.

We have used the word “covenant” with so many meanings that some readers might find the following overview satisfying.

We would identify three covenants. First, God’s covenant with Abraham. Second, God’s covenant with Israel, established at Horeb. Third, the new covenant, of which Jesus has become the Surety.

When we spoke of these covenants elsewhere (Exodus, p. 87), we mentioned that some have tried to make one covenant out of these three covenants, namely, in a way that God’s one covenant with Abraham would have had two dispensations, an old and a new one. The Horeb covenant then fell under the old dispensation. We could sketch it this way:

- God’s covenant with Abraham

  A
  Old dispensation
  I
  From Abraham to Horeb

  B
  New dispensation
  II
  From Horeb to Christ

  III
  From Christ to the end

We find this arrangement very appropriate. Holy Scripture certainly does teach us to see God’s covenant with Abraham as something that spans centuries and is immutable. And God’s promise to Abraham, that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed, we do see enter into fulfillment at Pentecost in a way more rich than ever before (Gal. 3:6–9). Whereas it will be
completely fulfilled only when Christ, and in him, Abraham, will inherit the whole earth (Rom. 4:13; 8:17; Heb. 1:2).

So we can be quite satisfied with the sketch provided above. As long as we observe two conditions. First, as long as people do not use it to reestablish the Horeb covenant that has passed away, for then they would be showing it *too much* respect. And second, as long as people do not use it to rob this ancient Horeb covenant of its evangelical character, for then they would be showing it *too little* respect. We will comment on each condition.

(a) The Horeb covenant and the Law of Horeb belong to the past. This must remain undisputed among Christians. It must be emphasized continually.

In saying this, we are not throwing overboard any part of Holy Scripture. In the preceding discussion, we have attempted to show, and we will do so again in what follows, what rich lessons the Law of Horeb continues to have for us today. For it was the gospel of shadows. Clothed in many respects in the garment of pedagogical symbolism, that remains something worth our study. The Law teaches us to know God as a gracious Father, as a God of life for his covenant people. Without a good knowledge of that age-old Law, no one is in a position for correctly understanding what the New Testament teaches us about the revelation of God’s salvation in Christ.

Nevertheless, you should not allow yourself to be tempted by all these truths to draw the mistaken conclusion that the covenant of Horeb was transferred, included, or subsumed within the new covenant of which Jesus became the Surety. Such a mistaken conclusion could arise, for example, if you imagined the Horeb covenant to have been merely a phase, a facet, or a developmental stage in God’s covenant with Abraham. Because this covenant with Abraham continues to exist today, and in the aforementioned construal, the new covenant is seen merely as a dispensation, a stage, of the Abrahamic covenant, you could eventually come to suppose that the Horeb covenant actually exists still today. And as we saw, Scripture teaches differently.

The Horeb covenant may especially not be viewed as a developmental stage of the Abrahamic covenant. Thereby you would lose sight of the fact that the Horeb covenant could disappear, while the Abrahamic covenant continued to exist. In that case, you could better picture the Abrahamic covenant like a saucer on which a cup or bowl was temporarily placed. The latter disappeared in due course, but the former, the saucer of God’s covenant with Abraham, remains until today.

(b) But precisely on account of the immense importance for us as Christians of the teaching that the Law offers us about the earlier Horeb covenant, we must be on guard that this covenant not be deprived of its gracious character. Here are some examples of that. Notice how easily we allow ourselves to fall for a certain contrast by means of a naïve statement like this: “On Zion we find the seat of grace, just as on Sinai we find the seat of the Law.” That contrast is not genuine. Everything that was proclaimed on Zion, in the temple ministry, about God’s grace was due to the prescription of Horeb’s covenant and Law. We have also noted earlier what Witsius did at one point (Genesis, 13:2–14:1). He borrowed the material for dressing up the covenant of works (which, according to him, God had made with Adam) from . . . the Law, the Law of Horeb, the ordinances and statutes given by God via Moses to Israel.

Such things don’t square at all. To deal this way with the Law of Horeb, and to talk this way about it, suggests that the Horeb covenant bore the character of a covenant of works. And we definitely cannot allow that to stand unchallenged. Contradicting this is the fact that the Horeb
covenant rested all too clearly on God’s electing love (Deut. 7:7–8), and it rested as well on the underlying foundation of the Abrahamic covenant (Exod. 2:24; Lev. 26:42; Deut. 7:7–8; 10:15). The Horeb covenant was nothing at all like a labor contract. The Israelites were not at all hired by God at Horeb as employees working for wages, let alone as slaves, but they were acknowledged and honored as being what they had been from the time of Abraham: children of the covenant. For this covenant was not annulled by the Law “which came four hundred thirty years afterwards” (Gal. 3:17), but it was confirmed, as Paul wrote.

6.4 Therefore we must object to the idea that the Law must have borne, either exclusively or primarily, an accusing and punitive character.

Whereas we talked about the gracious character of the Sinai covenant and the evangelical character of the Law, perhaps objections have arisen. Perhaps someone is thinking that Scripture passages can be identified that ascribe to the Law not a particularly lovely character, but rather a strict character. For example, one could point to the story of Numbers 15:32–36, about the stoning of an Israelite who had gathered wood on the Sabbath. One could also point to all those declarations in the New Testament where the apostle Paul teaches that the Law was a schoolmaster for Israel, and that it served to teach Israel to know her sins and transgressions (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 5:20; 7:7; Gal. 3:19, 23).

We offer these replies to these three objections.

(a) That act of Sabbath desecration was also an act of wicked covenant breaking. For how had the Sabbath been given to Israel? Like a wedding ring. As a sign of the Horeb covenant (Exod. 31:12–17). Just as a wedding ring reminds us of our obligation of fidelity, so Israel was reminded by the Sabbath institution of the marriage into which God had graciously deigned to enter with Israel at Horeb. Now we would find it scandalous if we were to hear of a husband who whenever he left the house would stick his wedding ring in his pocket and act as though he were unmarried. We call that wicked. But what then are we to call someone who commits a similar act in full view of his wife? When she—note well—was right there? Well, something similar is what the Sabbath violator of Numbers 15 dared to do. A harsh episode, to be sure. Right in the middle of Israel. Amid the smell of constant sacrificing. In full view of the tabernacle of Yahweh.

The act of that Sabbath violator is reported in Numbers 15 as an example of sin “with a high hand” (cf. 15:30). We know how such a sin was judged according to the Law. In the New Testament it is no different (Matt. 12:31–32; Heb. 6:6, 8; 10:28; 1 John 5:16).

(b) We must be careful that we do not merge the other two objections, namely, that the Law was given to Israel as a “schoolmaster,” and that it was given to Israel so that she would know her sins and transgressions. These are two different things.

We think this warning is justified.

We do not want to deny in any way that the Law, among other things, was given to Israel so that she should learn through the Law to know her sins and transgressions. We’ll say more about this in a moment. But please do not make this the be all and end all of the Law. It is understandable that Protestants run the risk of falling into this. The conflict of the Reformation involved the purity, the untaintedness, of God’s grace for our salvation. In that conflict people saw the opposition inventing various laws and commandments, to the observance of which were tied certain merits. No wonder that people objected with the claim that the Law of Moses was not
given so that by keeping it one could be justified (Gal. 3:11); so that people would not expect it from observing the Law (Rom. 4:14). Rightly so. Nor was it any wonder that people argued that the Law was given to cause Israel to know her sins and transgressions. This too was right. See the Scripture passages we have already mentioned. But that people allowed the notion to emerge that the Law in its entirety had been given, at least initially, to hold before Israel an ideal that she could never fulfill, through which to sharpen Israel’s inability and thereby to function as “schoolmaster” unto Christ, this was less correct. For example, when Luther thought the Ten Commandments preached in the first place divine threats and human inability, this was not correct.

Regarding the Law as schoolmaster we hardly dare to say anything more, after everything we wrote about this in our commentary on Exodus. Please do not interpret the word “Law” unsympathetically (see Exodus, pp. 7–8). And please do not view the reference to the Law as a “pedagogue” as something harsh, austere, or threatening (see Exodus, pp. 15–23). The translation of the word “paidagogos” as “schoolmaster” could tempt you to do that. But that would be incorrect. The meaning of the word “paidagogos” is related to “pedagogy,” and involves instruction, teaching, nurture, and discipline. Of course, with all discipline we find, on account of sin, the use of the rod, and of punishment, but not primarily. The fact that people give the word “discipline” the exclusive meaning of a thrashing is a regrettable development.

More important than an issue of translation, however, is what Scripture itself teaches about the Law as a pedagogue. This word is used several times by the apostle in Galatians 3. In verse 24, he writes that “the law was our guardian” until faith came, “but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (v. 25). We discussed what “faith” is referring to here (in Exodus, pp. 21–23). At this point we wish simply to endorse and applaud the rendering of the ESV, as a distinct improvement over, for example, the KJV. The apostle is speaking about Israel’s childhood, and God’s relationship as a Father to Israel. There is no sense here of imprisonment, of being bound, but rather of guardianship until a child reaches the age of majority (cf. Gal. 4:1–3). Paul uses the same word here as he does in Philippians 4:7, where he prays that the peace of God may guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus (see also 1 Peter 1:5 for the same meaning). When a mother has enclosed and guards her child, who has just begun to walk, within her outstretched arms—Paul is writing literally: “we were entirely enclosed under the Law and preserved”—that is very different from the work of a jailer. In the same way as a mother with her child, so God wanted to secure his church of the old covenant by means of his Law, “when Israel was a child” (Hos. 11:1). We hope to discuss many beautiful examples of this in the rest of Leviticus. God imprinted upon his Israelite church at Horeb, in various ways, this message: Be careful for Canaan! Just like our mothers daily warn their children about city traffic: Watch out for cars! That was the purpose of the Law as Paidagogos. Not first of all to teach Israel to see how great her sins and transgressions were, the greatness of her misery (as in part one of the Heidelberg Catechism), but to protect and to preserve them from those sins and transgressions.

(c) It is an entirely different issue, however, to say that by means of his Law, God wanted to teach Israel also a knowledge of sins and iniquities. Of course. We have already read about that in the sacrifice Torah. The atonement of evil that had been committed was not an easy matter. Sin was covered in no other way that by means of a nephesh, which died.

But this did not remove the evangelical character of the Law. For then you would have to conclude that the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ itself is also not evangelical. For this gospel teaches us how great the punishment is that we deserve on account of our sin. How great is
God’s wrath against sin! So great, that rather than leave it unpunished, has punished it in his beloved Son with the bitter and shameful death of the cross. But in the proclamation of this, we hear precisely the voice of divine love resounding. So great was God’s love that he is satisfied with such a sacrifice. The love of God is foremost in John 3:16 and 1 John 4:9. Well, the same is true of the Law, when it preaches to us this same gospel, albeit in shadowy form (Lev. 17:11).

Nor do we have the right to argue that therefore the Law bore a punitive character, because those who transgressed it were threatened with and suffered punishment. In this respect as well, you can compare the Law with the gospel of fulfillment. With the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ it is like the electricity in our home. In our homes this has been installed to illuminate, to warm, and to heal. But if we treat it carelessly, that very same electricity will kill us. So too the gospel was given to us for our wellbeing. But if we are disobedient to it, it becomes a savor of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16). The same was true of the Law. It was given to Israel for the purpose of protection and preservation. But anyone who transgressed the Law, burned his fingers. But this latter result was not the primary purpose of giving the Law.

No matter how deeply Israel learned to know her sins and transgressions from the Law, this does not give us the right to argue that the Law was given primarily for that purpose.

As someone’s firm hand does not exclude a loving intention, does it?

In fact, the same Law teaches how altogether patiently God dealt with the Israelites. For although he actually did not want a man to have more than one wife, he temporarily tolerated polygamy. And although he actually did not want a marriage to be dissolved through divorce, he allowed regulations to be given through Moses whereby, if a divorce nonetheless did occur, this chaotic disruption would be limited to some extent. And although he actually did not want anyone in Israel to touch a dead animal, like a goat or a cow, but leave it to the dogs to finish off, he said through Moses that, if someone could not afford to part with such an animal, apparently on account of the loss, he could sell it to the sojourner. Whereas he nonetheless took into consideration that occasionally there might be Israelites who could not follow through with this and would keep for their own consumption such an animal that had been destroyed or had died on its own. In that case one at least had to wash his clothing, bath with water, and be unclean for a day. Only one who failed to do these things had to be removed from Israel. We will come back to this.

The Law itself teaches how many sins God in his forbearance continued to allow. If we allow ourselves to be instructed by this example of our heavenly Father, we will not at all be the kind of people who mete out the most severe punishment for every sin and, as people say, will not be consumed with dotting every “i” and crossing every “t.”

The Law also teaches us that we must take into account by whom the sin was committed. When many Israelites joined the chorus of the majority of the spies, the adults were punished. But their children younger than twenty years old were not punished. And if there were Israelites who nonetheless ate carrion, God did not immediately inflict capital punishment. But when Nadab and Abihu sinned, they were killed immediately. For they knew better, as teachers among the people.

6.5 The inner unity of Law and Gospel was not denied by Christ and the apostles, but taught by them.

Perhaps after what we have written, there remain a few objections.
For example, someone may wish to point to what our Savior did in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. There he set “what was said to those of old,” this is, the Law of Horeb, in contrast to his own words, when he said: “but I say to you” (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, etc.).

We don’t deny this, in that Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus showed that the Law was not God’s last Word. In ancient times, God was satisfied with circumstances and actions to which eventually an end would have to come. The Law had the feature of being an emergency provision, as you can observe by God’s toleration of polygamy and divorce. But our Savior submitted obediently to all the commands of that Law (Matt. 5:17), defended himself against the unbelieving Jews with an appeal to “Moses” (John 5:46), and pointed to “Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” as his proof of identity and his work agenda (Luke 24:27, 44).

We need to understand in a similar way those Scripture passages where one might, at first glance, think that Paul is speaking about the Law with less respect, when he describes it with the phrase, “the letter that kills,” indeed, a “ministry of death” (2 Cor. 3:6–7), as well as when he cites Moses saying: “The person whose righteousness is according to the Law will live by thereby” and sets this “righteousness from the Law” is direct opposition to the “righteousness from faith.”

We must not forget that the apostle Paul wrote his letters to Rome and Corinth when the gospel had been preached by him for about twenty or twenty-five years, and he had become entangled in a fierce struggle with the Judaizing Christians. So then, the manner these folks were advocating the observance of the Law was no longer tolerable. Because they had turned the observance of the Law into a way of salvation, whereby one could in fact do without Christ. Against such a Law, indeed, even such a circumcision, and such a righteousness, Paul fulminated vigorously and pronounced his curses upon it. Such a Law, from which God’s grace had been removed—a grace that now had been revealed most gloriously in Christ—had become dangerous, a lethal letter. Because no trace of mercy was left, and as a competing way of salvation it was placed alongside, or in fact, over against, Christ. That was impermissible. For that, Paul could not find enough insults. In Galatians he wrote that anyone traveling this futile path was returning to the veneration of the stoicheia. In Philippians 3:8 he called such things as Jewish ancestry and circumcision—at least if people relied on them after the coming of Christ, daring to bring them forward as trophies—he called them “rubbish.”

Nevertheless, when the apostle is not talking about this so-called “law” (note the quotation marks), this quasi-law, but about the Law simply as it was given by God and forms part of Holy Scripture (indeed, forms the foundation of Holy Scripture), then he speaks with reverence, with great love and deep respect. He calls it holy, and in this he includes its various commands: holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). He regularly cites from the Law in order to strengthen his instruction (Rom. 3:31).

The Bible reader might be thinking that the apostle Paul, who enjoyed word plays, used the word law in a rather varied way.

With Paul, the word law can appear not only in a favorable sense, but also in an unfavorable sense. For example, he speaks occasionally about the “law of sin,” and with that phrase he has in view what we might perhaps call “the power of sin” (see Rom. 7:23). In a similar way, he can occasionally talk about what Judaizers had turned the real Law into. They had turned God’s Law into a human “law.” When the word is used that way, we prefer to use quotation marks to indicate the difference.
So then, for the so-called “law” of the Judaizers Paul had not a grain of respect; on the contrary, he cursed it as a new doctrine, and its teachers as well (Gal. 1:8–9; cf. Phil. 3:2). But the genuine Law—that was praised repeatedly by Paul. That Law he called Spiritual (Rom. 8:14). And in a special way he showed his high esteem for this Law, when he summarized everything that God desired from Christians with the following phrase that included a word play: to fulfill the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

In so doing, the apostle showed his complete agreement with all the rest of the New Testament.

For example, with our Savior. Recall how vigorously he argued against the pharisaic “law”, and defended the good evangelical Laws of Moses, when he pointed out that this Law breathed with a spirit of mercy and not with harshness and indifference toward others (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 23:23).

Paul agreed entirely with Stephen as well. Paul had very likely heard Stephen talking to his judges, though at that point he disagreed completely with Stephen. Until he came to know the person and work of our Savior. At that point, Paul would have understood why Stephen accused his judges, despite their apparent zeal for the Law, that it was precisely that Law that they had not observed (Acts 7:53). Before that time, Paul was blind to that reality.

When we do not see God’s mercy in the Law—something that appeared most gloriously in the coming of his Son—we run the risk of failing to understand God’s entire Word. Even though we give the appearance of being driven by zeal for the pathway of the Law. Sometimes a path seems right to a person, but its end leads to death (Prov. 14:12).

The same agreement was true with James in Jerusalem, with whom Paul was united regarding the unity of Law and gospel.

We wrote a few things about this James. Although he was a faithful confessor of our Lord Jesus Christ all the way to martyrdom, he continued to live according to the Law. Thus, what a high honor such a man showed for the gospel of Christ when he called it “the perfect Law of freedom” (James 1:25), indeed, “the royal Law” (James 2:8). James wanted to be a disciple of both Moses and Christ. That was possible. He wrote that it would not do to listen to the gospel but not to act according to it, such as by observing the Law of Moses very scrupulously but showing no mercy to widows and orphans (James 1:22, 27).

As James said to the readers of his letter, he who had been born again as the firstfruits of creation: they now had to live according to this gospel as “the royal Law of freedom” (James 1:18; 2:8), so too Paul wrote once to the Christians in Rome, from whom the gospel had been a power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), that the Law of the Spirit of life had set them free in Christ Jesus from the “law” (i.e., the power) of sin and death. And to the Galatians he wrote that they were called to walk according to “the Law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). In such statements we hear how for the apostles, the Law and the gospel were inherently one.

6.6 We must not view those Christians who show zeal for the Law as judaizing Christians.

All zeal for the Law is not yet Judaizing. If you lose sight of that, today or tomorrow you could be opening fire on your own friends. You could even run the risk of shooting a fly with a cannon. Far too much firepower for such a small target.

Note how good the relationship between Paul and James remained. James was “zealous for the Law,” but he never abused that Law by using it to assault his brothers in Christ who were Gentiles. True, until the end of his life he continued to visit the temple, but at the same time he
continued to love the Lord Jesus and he never persecuted his co-believers. Eusebius tells us that he died after sinking to his knees in prayer for his people, the Jewish people. A priest called out loudly to the crowd that was molesting the poor man: “Stop, the righteous man is praying for you.” But then someone came from washing clothes, carrying a club that he used for beating out clothes, and with it he beat James to death. In this way James died as a real Jew, praying for his people. That is also what Jesus and Stephen did, wasn’t it? But James never persecuted his brothers, including those who were Gentiles. On the contrary. At the gathering of Acts 15, he was the one who conceived the accommodating response regarding the Christians at Antioch coming to Christ from paganism. Perhaps he had written it himself (Acts 15:19, 23). For such brothers Paul had sympathy, in any case (Acts 21).

Nor did the writer of the letter to the Hebrews treat them harshly. He did warn them. They were not supposed to go on living as if the Horeb covenant remained in force, with its holy places, priests, sacrifices, washings—all of which belonged to the past. By not paying adequate attention to this, they ran the risk of failing to live from faith in their praying High Priest above. No wonder that they had so little confidence and reliance upon God. But the author of Hebrews clothed his “admonition” with such friendliness that we might almost have read right past it.

We can learn from this. We need not be afraid that we might be too soft toward Christians who in fact are Judaizers. Sooner or later they will show their true colors.

The first characteristic of Judaizing is that it is absolutely un-evangelical, even though it might talk a lot about the gospel. Judaizers do not know mercy. Just like the Pharisees during the Savior’s earthly life made Moses’ lovely Law powerless by their unmerciful interpretation and regulations, so too the Judaizing Christians later robbed the gospel of its power by muffling God’s grace in Christ. Thereby we can see, looking back, that it was not at all strange for these Judaizing Christians to organize opposition against the faithful confessors of the Lord. Initially that was not evident to everyone. They appeared to be such scrupulous Christians. But Paul saw through them. He understood that in their hearts—despite what came from their mouth or their pen—these folk had stayed on the side of “the present Jerusalem” with its precept upon precept and rule upon rule. And Paul was gradually shown to be right. Especially when these people later in Rome registered a complaint with the government against the Christians who were following the apostles. At that point everyone could see that Paul had put it correctly in Galatians 4. In their heart these people never wanted anything to do with the real Lord Jesus and with the children of “the new Jerusalem” (Gal. 4:25–26).

Another characteristic of Judaizing is that of traditionalism and conservatism. It fights to maintain the appearance of continuing in the old line. Naturally this can happen in a thousand different ways, just like you can turn a thousand and one habits, customs, regulations, and rules into a “law” with great authority and respect. In Paul’s day the Judaizers preferred to be entrenched behind the ancient Law of Moses. But it seems as though the apostle is contending against them with irony when he goes back further behind the Law of Horeb to God’s covenant with Abraham. That was 430 years older than the Law. Perhaps we could learn from this how good it is on occasion, in response to the veneration of one or another ancient “law”—and what cannot be turned into a “law”?—to conduct a historical investigation as to how the venerated rule actually came into existence, and what people originally intended with it (e.g., a church polity regulation about so-called “feast days” or special days).

Characteristic of Judaizing is also that it likes to present its claims as entirely or halfway divine. That belongs inherently and inseparably with heavy, punctilious religion. The Judaizers
in Paul’s time made a deep impression thereby on Christians like the Galatians. Oh what serious folk these were! Such conscientious people! Paul himself also said that they looked like “angels of light” (2 Cor. 11:14), but that it was Satan who was behind them. They appeared to be scrupulously faithful to Scripture, holding closely to the letter of Scripture (2 Cor. 3:3). Paul told them off, those people with their exaggerated literalism, when in Galatians 3:16 he himself appealed to a literal understanding of Scripture. There he wrote that the promises were spoken to Abraham “and his seed.” The word for “seed” was not in the plural (spermasi) but in the singular (spermati), and with this Paul showed with finesse from Scripture that one may not argue: “The promises are for only the descendants of Abraham. For that you need to be related by blood, in the flesh, or at least undergo something in the flesh like circumcision.” Over against this, Paul appealed to a letter, and he proved that we can certainly be heirs of the gospel promises given to Abraham without belonging to his descendants according to the flesh. If only we belong to Christ, as the Galatians did, through faith (Gal. 3:26). Thereby they were the seed (sperma) of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). Without have a single drop of Abraham’s blood in their veins, whereby they would have belonged to his descendants (spermasi).

Today everyone thinks that Paul was right, of course. But someone committed to a kind of Reformed thinking characterized by an emphasis on the marks of the Christian, a kind of somber Christianity, once said that now and then he found Paul to be easygoing. To his credit, he saw sharply the difference the faith of Paul and the faith of his surroundings. On account of that difference, the apostle complained in his last days about loneliness.

Because a person can turn who knows what kind of teaching or rule into a “law” in the area of religion or a related area, Judaizing can surface as a many-headed hydra. The complex system of laws under which medieval Christianity ended up became genuinely comprehensive. An imperious church appropriated to itself at that time the right to determine the “law” for its members for every area of life. In that connection it entrenched itself behind the façade of a Christ to whom every prince and nation was supposed to be subject now. Whereas Scripture teaches by contrast that all authority does indeed belong to Christ and one day he will exercise it, but that now he remains an Heir and is pleased to make use of no other sword than that of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

We may have turned our backs on this Roman Catholic Church but nonetheless in our heart, our ideas, and our understanding may continue to hold to a medieval outlook. That can be seen no more clearly than in those Christians who are referred to with the collective term Anabaptists. In some respects they were more consistent than the Roman Catholics. For example, both Roman Catholics and Anabaptists proceeded from the understanding that we may baptize no one except those who have professed faith. Both of them applied that “law” to adults and children. The Roman Catholics invented the notion of godparents, through whose mouth an infant makes profession, so the infant could be baptized. The Anabaptists rejected this practice (which was indeed a wax nose) and did not baptize children. In a certain sense, this was very consistent. But this was done on the basis of maintaining the same medieval church law regarding baptism: no baptism apart from existing faith. So too, the Anabaptists had their own leaders, especially the Pietists among them with their hierarchies. When the enormous Anabaptist movement gradually waned, and people tended to swing from one side to the other—from fervent activism, fanatic view of the church, and narrow minded isolationism, to passivity, resignation, and individualism—that was simply a swing from one to another aspect that the old medieval church had displayed.
The more things seem to change, the more they remain the same. After the Reformation, a large part of those poor church people were still driven onward under the crack of whips made of laws. Such whip could be constructed for any number of materials! On both sides of the battlefronts, related phenomena surfaced, traditionalism and rabbinism, formalism and imperiousness, partisanship and organizational fever. The contrast of gospel versus “Law” did not coincide with that between the Reformation and Rome, or with that between the Reformational and Anabaptistic. Not a few who left Rome simply exercised similar evils in a different context. Today when we see the consequences manifested in ideas and practices exhibiting zeal for the Law, which could possibly provide people opportunities for various meritorious accomplishments, then we must be warned by the lesson of Scripture and history to exercise patience and be moderate in our judgments.

6.7 We may never yield, however, to explicit judaizing.

Toward Jews who after Christ’s coming, and despite a heartfelt belief in him, nonetheless continued living according to the Law, Paul was always accommodating. In order to win Jews, he sometimes “to the Jews became like a Jew” (1 Cor. 9:20). For their sakes he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). Possibly with an eye to those in Corinth, he made a vow that for a period of time he would not have his hair cut, something that was surely visible to human eyes (Acts 18:18). Later he treated the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem in an extremely conciliatory manner, offering a sacrifice in the temple (Acts 21:20–30). Even though we know Paul’s feelings toward the Law to have been completely different. Its shadows were fulfilled (Col. 2:17). For himself, he considered the observing of Sabbaths not to be obligatory, but he viewed all days as alike (Rom. 14:5; 1 Cor. 9:20).

But Paul never went out of his way to satisfy the demands of Judaizers, in the same way that Christ treated the Pharisees. Timothy was indeed circumcised, for the sake of the Jews. Perhaps also for the sake of the Jews who had already become Christians, but who had remained zealous for the Law.

But Titus was not circumcised, because the relationships had developed to a different point. Because if he had done that, Paul would have given the appearance of caving in to the demands of the Judaizers within the Christian church. Because then he would have allowed the Gentile Christians to be robbed of their freedom in Christ (Gal. 2:1–5). We who are also Gentile Christians may thank God that in this matter he gave Paul wisdom to distinguish well, and along with wisdom, guidance for acting decisively, otherwise Judaizing would have succeeded.

From this we may learn how necessary it is to desire to receive from God a heart that is capable of distinguishing well.

For example, we should not think that we are obligated to be preoccupied with every difference that has arisen by Christians attempting to force a “law” on others, concerning which one person thought this way and another person that way, each claiming the right to be followed. As though we had to choose between two kinds of poison.

History is full of lessons about this.

When the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists both proceeded on the basis of the “law” that no one may be baptized unless faith be present, the Reformed stayed out of this family quarrel (arising from one and the same “law”), rejecting this “law” and returning to the freedom of the
gospel, according to which the promises of the gospel are given not only to adults but also to their children. What liberating effects that insight produced!

You hear some Christians demanding obedience to self-invented “laws” in the arena of religion and in related arenas, such as political and social life, obedience that we are obligated to render only to the Word of God. They run the risk of sacrificing everything and of demanding from others everything for this goal.

We too must beware that we do not turn inherently good things like confessions and regulations for church life into a tyrannical “law.” The history of the so-called synodical oath at Dort can teach us wisdom in this matter, even though this ecclesiastical gathering was far from infallible. Nonetheless, before people began discussing the doctrinal difference between the Reformed and the Remonstrants, all the delegates swore an oath that they would not allow their judgments to be directed by “any human writing, but by God’s Word alone.”

From this we should draw the lesson never to humiliate anyone, including ourselves, under a human “law” on which the aura of divine origin and authority has been placed illegitimately. Let us not force each other into the same mold, from which then no one may deviate. Clichés produce frightened, dull people.

Let us also with fear and trembling stay out of family quarrels that offer us no genuine choice according to the Word. Behind the thick walls of Jerusalem such a quarrel raged in a terrible manner during the siege in A.D. 70. How easily a Jewish Christian could have allowed himself to be tempted to choose sides in that quarrel. But Christians had left the city just in time, whether due to what the Lord Jesus himself had said about this (Matt. 24:16), or due to a special divine revelation. Eusebius seems to indicate the latter (Ecclesiastical History, II.5.3, the flight to Pella).

Whoever thinks that he stands, let him take heed lest he fall. In his struggle against Judaizing, Paul had to fulfill the sad duty of opposing his brother Peter, because he was culpable. That loyal Peter and that gentle Barnabas! You can read about this in Galatians 2:11–14, a Scripture passage that you need to read ten times by yourself before you embark on the road to admonishing another person. For if we ourselves, for example, read the Pentateuch in a more or less un-evangelical manner, then our power for criticizing others who force their “laws” on the redeemed church of Christ has been weakened beforehand.

Before we oppose Judaizing on the part of others, let us first investigate whether perhaps we ourselves use our tools of ecclesiastical life—Scripture, confession, liturgical forms, and church order—in mistaken ways, not sufficiently evangelically. Otherwise we could run the risk of using our own word instead of the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Then we would fall into the same evil as Judaizing, and rely on the flesh.

By means of our own zealous institutions we could delude ourselves into thinking, without saying it out loud, that God cannot possibly do without us. Then we could fall into the sinful zeal that king Saul expressed for Yahweh and the Law (1 Sam. 28:3b). For the faith of Saul later appeared to be a reliance on the flesh, on human strength (1 Sam. 13:11). He placed himself above Yahweh. Therefore he killed the priests of Yahweh at Nob (1 Sam. 22:6–23), when he saw them as standing on the wrong side. Saul could not stand being inferior with respect to Yahweh. Entirely differently than David, who allowed Yahweh to go ahead of him and who followed Yahweh faithfully (2 Sam. 5:22–25; Ps. 20:7; Ps. 131). David had to wait a relatively long time before God settled his claim for justice and unmasked Saul. How long did Paul have to groan under the opposition of zealous Judaizing Christians in his day? He did not even live to see the
resolution of the drama, at which point everyone agreed that Paul had been right. But during his life, Paul had been forsaken by many. At that point he had nothing left but that faith to which our Savior once referred with the words: But when the Son of man comes, will he find that faith on earth? (Luke 18:8b). “That faith”—namely, the special trust that God will give us justice (v. 8a). For that we ourselves need not worry.

When we sincerely guard against appearing to be competing for ourselves, it will become easier for others to listen to us.

We must not expect miracles from human ideas, words, formulations, writings of faithful Christians, not even from confessions and a church order. People can rely on those in a carnal manner, and thereby make God jealous. These are indeed things that can bring much blessing, but they can also become a curse. That depends entirely on the spirit and manner in which people use them. These are good things, but people must continue not to let them gain the upper hand. The church of Christ may not lose her freedom to these things, a freedom that precisely those words and writings allude to so precisely. People must let them occupy their proper place, namely, far beneath God’s Word. Otherwise they begin occasionally to function wrongly, and in the hands of someone who no longer understands their original spirit, sooner or later they are used as hammers and hatchets with which they smash everything to pieces in God’s house. Exactly this was not the intention of those who put them in place. We need to pay attention to the time in which they were given and written, and the purpose behind them. We need to do this constantly in order that our hearts be bound to God and his Christ not through our own ideas but through God’s Word. Originally they pointed away from themselves. But in the eighteenth century people had forgotten the history to a certain degree, such that the old Bible translations were venerated as if they were the Holy Scriptures given by God, and criticism of them was seen as impermissible. Things can go that way. The Reformed synod of Dort (1578) was wise, therefore, in advising preachers to make moderate use of citations from “the old fathers” for persuading their Roman Catholics listeners, “but the names of newer writers”—by this they were referring to Luther, Calvin, etc.—should be omitted entirely from sermons.” How easily it happened that a saying or writing from that time would be lifted out of context and turned into a “law.” When the Judaizers in Paul’s day understood this art with respect to Moses’ Law, then no human saying or writing is safe from a Judaizing reading. Soon such a “law” is maintained along with the coldhearted view about what is legitimate, something the Western world has inherited from the Romans—fiat justitia, pereat mundus, let justice prevail, though the world perish—and what had originally been intended to bind Christians together becomes a sword used for their destruction. And Satan takes delight once again.

In the New Testament we read how the early Christians supported each other. For example, they protected each other against the imperiousness of Judaizing in their day (Acts 15). They also cared for the “saints” in Jerusalem, when the church there was afflicted by desolate circumstances because of persecution (Acts 11:27–30; 12:25; 2 Cor. 8–9; Gal. 2:10; cf. Heb. 10:34; 13:3–6). Paul also warned them to follow the same course of conduct as much as possible, for example, in a practical situation like this, that during the gatherings the women must not interrupt to ask questions, but must save them for asking at home (1 Cor. 14:34–36). If it were to function in this spirit, then a church order can do no damage, in our view. It can help. But if it is abused in order to use it for domineering over the inheritance of the Lord, then it does more bad than good. Then ecclesiastical gatherings will soon degenerate into courts. Then we get a different version of the medieval corpus juris canonici, where lives are exhausted so that no
energy remains for anything better. Then Christians are again bound, because there can hardly be any reversal of papal decrees and ecclesiastical pronouncements. For a “law” possesses something divine, doesn’t it? Therefore ecclesiastical gatherings can hardly reverse themselves.

If God does not spare us in his grace, Satan can braid his whip out of who knows what material. Writings originally given to protect us from the constant danger of a threatening Roman Catholic and Anabaptistic Judaizing can nonetheless . . . be interpreted in a Judaizing manner. And then the confusion becomes great. Saul was originally given in order to deliver Israel from the Philistines. But when an evil spirit overpowered him, he became a danger to Israel, ten times worse than all the Philistines together.

Of course, God is gracious.

He can miraculously preserve his own during church wars. David discovered that. Paul was also preserved time and again. Subsequent church history also supplies remarkable examples of that. A person is converted from harsh service under a “law” to loving service under our good Savior, Jesus Christ, exclusively by the Holy Spirit. If he grants to us the taste of the sweetness of the gospel, then we are freed forever from Judaizing, no matter what its ceremonious form, whether ancient or modern. That extends to the reformation and upbuilding of God’s church, and then believers have fellowship with each other.

Unless the LORD builds the house,
it's builders labor in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain.
In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
Toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves (Ps. 127:1–2).

The Law of Moses was filled to the brim with this sweet gospel. Anyone who has once tasted that in the Law, tastes it everywhere. We can certainly assure our readers of that. Already through the Law, the Israelites were allowed to know our God as a gracious Father, who took no pleasure in their death and destruction. Prophets and Psalms confirm this (Isa. 55; Ps. 103). And Christ and his apostles have preached to us the same good God.

But all Judaizing follows another “law,” another Bible, another “god,” and another religion, other than the true ones. They follow ones that lead back into confusion, darkness, immaturity, slavery. Zealots make Helots. Indeed, says Paul, the end is paganism. Then Satan will finally have his way. For during some periods of history that wolf rages fiercely against God’s people.

Anyone who is able to recognize Judaizing by the characteristics we have studied may well tremble and shake. For we are unable to stand against Satan and his allies. Against them we must immediately cry out for God’s help. “Father, lead us (if you please) not into temptation, but (if it please you) deliver us from the evil one.”

Perhaps the goodhearted Philippians discovered that Paul’s diagnosis was far too sharp. He did indeed make use of qualifiers that were hardly tender. Dogs, bad workers, mutilators, enemies of the cross of Christ (3:2, 18). The apostle did not demand that people see things the way he saw them. He was able to leave some things to the passage of time. As we often say: “Time will teach you.” Paul wrote that God would reveal it (3:15). Now then, God has revealed
it, in AD 64. At that time their eyes were opened. But by that time, Paul and Peter were dead. According to some scholars, they succumbed to ecclesiastical betrayal.