

## Covenant consecration, capital crimes or, Cultural customs can lead to generational curses

You shall be holy, because I Yahweh your God am holy. ...  
No servant can serve two masters ...

— LEVITICUS 19:2, LUKE 16:13

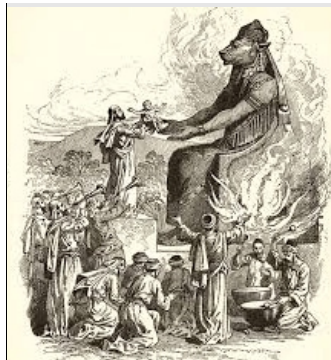
### Analysis

#### A. (20:1-9) Even fathers & mothers can curse their children – while ‘honouring’ their God

[20:2-5] King-gods such as Molech, **Kidner** points out [126], often require the ultimate sacrifice of parents, something that never entered the heart of the true King Yahweh. We might ponder the parallel cost of Christian parents serving 2 masters, God and Caesar. See the cost of hybrid religion – Yahwism and paganism – in 2 Kings 17:29-33. (The Hebrew root *mlk* means “king”).

[20:2] ... as regards the punishment of idolatry with death, we have to remember that, from a theocratic point of view, idolatry was essentially high treason, the most formal repudiation possible of the supreme authority of Israel's King. If, even in our modern states, the gravity of the issues involved in high treason has led men to believe that death is not too severe a penalty for an offence aimed directly at the subversion of governmental order, how much more must this be admitted when the government is not of fallible man, but of the most holy and infallible God? [Kellogg 425]

[20:2,3] Molech was worshipped by revolting cruelties, the cries of the sufferers being drowned in loud noise. An image of red-hot glowing brass was the form in which he was adored, and his arms received the children offered to him, forthwith consuming them by their red-hot touch. The child was put ... "into a gaping hole, full of fire," says a historian. Everything was savage and demoniacal; fiendish tyranny and hellish hate. What a contrast to Jehovah – "God is love!" His everlasting arms take up the little child to bless and to save; and never is his heart satisfied with



#### COVENANT CONFUSION

Do we not offer our children to Molech when we attempt a syncretism of the Lord Jesus and the ‘other Lord and God’ – Caesar?

his worshippers till they believe his love to them. Rather than that they should suffer woe, He stretched out his arms on the cross, and opened his side to the spear, and made a way for the streams of the poured-out vial running over his own soul. [Bonar 361]

[20:4] Prosecution was left to individual initiative, and it was always easiest to ignore and offense and let sleeping dogs lie. Indeed, those most likely to know about someone's apostasy to Molech would be close neighbors and members of the family, who would naturally be most loath to prosecute. But loyalty to God must override ties of blood and friendship (cf. Deut. 13:7-12 [6-11]; Luke 14:26). If a man puts family loyalty before devotion to God, "I myself shall set my face against that man and his family" (v.5). [Wenham 278]

[20:6] An apt comment on the prohibition of spiritualism ... is the story of Saul, whose attempt to stamp out the practice confirms the antiquity of this law (1 Sam 28:3), and whose recourse to it in the end, when God was silent, brings out its character as an attempt to go behind God's back. [Kidner 126-127]

[20:6] The Lord "set his face against that soul; and cut him off." As in the case of king Saul;

He followed him to Endor, and there met him with a message of ruin. Is there not a tendency to this same sin in us when we refuse to sit still under apprehended evils – when we run backward and forward seeking intelligence – when we stop hastily in our prayer or meditation to rush away to some new sources of information that have occurred to us? Is all this running to and fro, this restless, unbelieving haste, this diving into every deep, this pulling at the veil over the future as if we could thus force it aside, – is not all this a going after wizards? "He that believeth shall not make haste." [Bonar 363]

[20:9-21] In a culture where parents represent God's authority to children, as Wenham [279] and others point out, cursing father and mother amounts to blasphemy.

[20:9] But why was v.9 placed among this set of precepts and sanctions dealing with sexual sins – and at the head of this list? Could it be that this law, which repeats the

**“If a man puts family loyalty before devotion to God, ‘I myself shall set my face against that man and his family’”**



#### What did the Romans do with the murderer of his father?

Cicero, greatest of Roman orators, records that parricides were sewn into a sack with a dog, a cock, a viper and a monkey, then cast into the sea or a river. [see note in Calvin iii 13]

command of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, was the all-embracing principle on matters of the family? If it were, as we suspect it was, the examples that followed were viewed as an attack on the basic command to honor the various relationships found in families, of which honoring one's father and mother was the most foundational. ... "To honor" in Hebrew is literally "to make heavy," "to make glorious"; "to curse" in Hebrew means literally "to make light of", "to lessen [someone in the eyes of others]." [Kaiser 1141]

**B. (20:10-27) Sexual boundaries within family; separation in sex & religion**

(v 27) We note again, as in Ex. 21-23, the juxtaposition of disgraceful sexual standards with sorcery & deceptive religious practices

[20:22-27] An outstanding feature of biblical law is the preeminence it accords to human values, as opposed to the economic considerations of much [Babylonian] cuneiform law. This emerges with particular clarity in Hebrew penal law. In Israel, religious offenses, and offenses against life and the structure of the family, tended to be punished more severely than elsewhere, whereas cuneiform law tended to rate financial loss as more serious than loss of life, or at least see loss of life in economic terms. For instance, Babylonian law punished by death breaking and entering, looting at a fire, and theft; but in Israel no offenses against ordinary property attracted the death penalty. By contrast, in Israel the death penalty was mandatory for murder, because man is made in the image of God (Gen. 9:5-6), whereas other legal systems permitted monetary compensation. [Wenham 282]

**Babylonian law gave pre-eminence to financial loss – not human life**

[20:22-27] To meet this growing evil, the Church needs to come back to the full recognition of the principles which underlie this Levitical code; especially of the fact that marriage and the family are not merely civil arrangements, but Divine

institutions; so that God has not left it to the caprice of a majority to settle what shall be lawful in these matters. Where God has declared certain alliances and connections to be criminal, we shall permit or condone them at our peril. God rules, whether modern majorities will it or not; and we must adopt the moral standards of the kingdom of God in our legislation, or we shall suffer. God has declared that not merely the material well-being of man, but holiness, is the moral end of government and of life;

and He will find ways to enforce His will in this respect. "The nation that will not serve Him shall perish." All this is not theology, merely, or ethics, but history. All history witnesses that moral corruption and relaxed legislation, especially in matters affecting the relations of the sexes, bring in their train sure retribution, not in Hades, but here on earth. Let us not miss of taking the lesson by imagining that this law was for Israel, but not for other peoples. The contrary is affirmed in this very chapter (vv. 23, 24),

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where we are reminded that God visited His heavy judgments upon the Canaanitish nations precisely for this very thing, their doing of these things which are in this law of holiness forbidden. Hence "the land spued them out." Our modern democracies, English, American, French, German, or whatever they be, would do well to pause in their progressive repudiation of the law of God in many social questions, and heed this solemn warning. For, despite the unbelief of multitudes, the Holy One still governs the world, and it is certain that He will never abdicate His throne of righteousness to submit any of His laws to the sanction of a popular vote. [Kellogg 430-431]

[20:25,26] It is instructive to observe that God enjoins the observance of the ritual of worship very strictly; and this is done with the view of severing them more completely (ver. 26) from the people of the land. The form of church government is not in any way the essence of the truth, but it is the fence around the truth. It is not the jewel, but it is the precious case that encloses the more precious jewel. Whatever form of worship is best fitted to effect this purpose is surely the best for our adoption. ... Hell would hate no portion of earth so intensely as Canaan in the days of believing Israel. And yet no region on earth was half so secure; for the strength of heaven – the breadth of heaven's shield, and the edge of heaven's keen sword, became Israel's safety. "The Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him." "Happy art thou, O Israel! O people saved of the Lord!" [Bonar 369-370]

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**C. EXCURSUS I: The critical contrast between village life and modern urban, and consequences for crime and law enforcement**

... the village culture of ancient Israel was very different from Western urban society, and the problems of law enforcement were trivial as compared with ours. They lived in small, closely knit communities in which everyone knew everyone else, and it would

have been extremely difficult, therefore, for any local person to commit an offense without its becoming common knowledge. In the mass anonymity of modern society it is very much easier for criminals to remain undetected. Second, it was a conservative and authoritarian society, and therefore less likely to lead to social deviance. Finally, because society was so much more compact, there was inevitably less specialization. One man could easily play the role of city councillor, judge, and policeman in his spare time, and be a farmer the rest of the week. So we should not necessarily expect to find a professional police force, such as was later introduced into

Imperial Rome by Augustus. [Wenham 287]

In this "small is beautiful" society, local government would usually be in the hands of the elders and judges elected by the clan and families. As Wenham points out, the

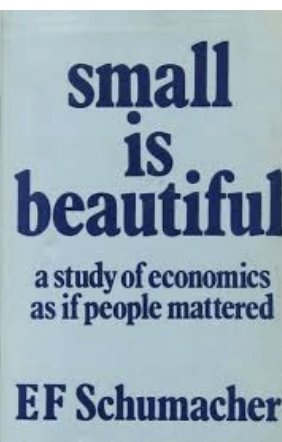
**Village life – one of the best – and most forgotten – checks on lawlessness**

role of "mass media" in Israelite society would be played by the Levites, who would visit the local villages, as well as being easily accessible in their own 48 cities, distributed among the various tribal lands. [see Wenham 287]

**D. EXCURSUS 2: On the 'severity' of the death penalty, and the purpose of punishment in the Law**

We may learn here what, in the mind of the King of kings, is the primary object of the punishment of criminals against society. Certainly there is no hint in this code of law that these penalties were specially intended for the reformation of the offender. Were this so, we should not find the death-penalty applied with such unsparing severity. This does not indeed mean that the reformation of the criminal was a matter of no concern to the Lord; we know to the contrary. But one cannot resist the conviction in reading this chapter, as also other similar portions of the law, that in a governmental point of view this was not the chief object of punishment. ... It is thus, to a Christian citizen, of very practical concern to observe that in this theocratic penal code there is not so much as an allusion to the reformation of the criminal, as one object which by means of punishment it was intended to secure. ... First and supreme in the intention of this law is the satisfaction of outraged justice, and of the regal majesty of the supreme and holy God, defied; the vindication of the holiness of the Most High against that wickedness of men which would set at nought the Holy One and overturn that moral order which He has established. Again and again the crime itself is given as the reason for the penalty, inasmuch as by such iniquity in the midst of Israel the holy sanctuary of God among them was profaned. We read, for example, "I will cut him off ... because he hath defiled My sanctuary, and hath profaned My holy name;" "they have wrought confusion," i.e., in the moral and physical order of the family; "their blood shall be upon them;" "they have committed abomination; they shall surely be put to death;" "it is a shameful thing; they shall be cut off." Such are the expressions which again and again ring through this chapter; and they teach with unmistakable clearness that the prime object of the Divine King of Israel in the punishment was, not the reformation of the individual sinner, but the satisfaction of justice and the vindication of the majesty of broken law. And if we have no more explicit statement of the matter here, we yet have it elsewhere; as in Numb. 35:33, where we are expressly told that the death-penalty to be visited with unrelenting severity on the murderer is of the nature of an expiation. Very clear and solemn are the words, "Blood, it polluteth the land: and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it."

But if this is set forth as the fundamental reason for the infliction of the punishment, it is not represented as the only object. If, as regards the criminal himself, the



According to *The Times Literary Supplement*, this 1973 book is among the 100 most influential books published since World War II.

punishment is a satisfaction and expiation to justice for his crime, on the other hand, as regards the people, the punishment is intended for their moral good and purification. This is expressly stated, as in ver. 14: "They shall be burnt with fire, that there be no wickedness among you." Both of these principles are of such a nature that they must be of perpetual validity. [Kellogg 421-423]

In these days of continually progressive relaxation of the laws regulating the relations of the sexes, this seems indeed to be one of the chief lessons from this chapter of Leviticus; namely, that in God's sight sins against the seventh commandment are not the comparative trifles which much over-charitable and easy-going morality imagines, but crimes of the first order of heinousness. We do well to heed this fact, that not merely unnatural crimes, such as sodomy, bestiality, and the grosser forms of incest, but adultery, is by God ranked in the same category as murder. Is it strange? For what are crimes of this kind but assaults on the very being of the family? Where there is incest or adultery, we may truly say the family is murdered; what murder is to the individual, that, precisely, are crimes of this class to the family. In the theocratic code these were, therefore, made punishable with death; and, we venture to believe, with abundant reason. Is it likely that God was too severe? or must we not rather fear that man, ever lenient to prevailing sins, in our day has become falsely and unmercifully merciful, kind with a most perilous and unholy kindness? ... And God thus judged that it was better that sinning individuals should die without mercy, than that family government and family purity should perish, and Israel, instead of being a blessing to the nations, should sink with them into the mire of universal moral corruption. [Kellogg 426-428]

***Covenant confusion versus Covenant consecration***

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