

MESSAGE 24**CIVIL LAWS REQUIRING THE DEATH PENALTY****Leviticus 20:1-27****Introduction**

This MESSAGE does not add new laws. It repeats certain laws in order to specify the death penalty for them. Even though this whole MESSAGE was devoted to listing offenses that required capital punishment, those offenses were not by any means the first ones that required the death penalty. In fact, the offenses that had already been mentioned that required the death penalty composes a considerable list. They are as follows:

- Touching the mount when the Glory was on it (Ex. 19:12)
- Murder (Ex. 21:12,14)
- Smiting father or mother (Ex. 21:15)
- Kidnapping (Ex. 21:16)
- Cursing one's father or mother (Ex. 21:17)
- Killing a woman with child (Ex. 21:22-24)
- Practicing sorcery (Ex. 22:18)
- Bestiality (Ex. 22:19)
- Worshiping another god (Ex. 22:20)
- Oppressing sojourners, widows, or orphans (Ex. 22:21-24)
- Priests failing to wear priestly garments when officiating at the altar (Ex. 28:35,43)
- Priests failing to wash before officiating at the altar (Ex. 30:20,21)
- Working on the sabbath day (Ex. 31:14,15; 35:2)
- Eating flesh of a slaughter-offering when unclean (Lev. 7:20,21)
- Eating blood (Lev. 7:27; 17:10,14)
- Eating fat from the herd or from the flock (Lev. 7:25)
- Priests leaving The Tabernacle during the days of fillings (Lev. 8:35)
- Priests offering strange fire (Lev. 10:1-2; 16:1)
- Priests deserting their duties for mourning (Lev. 10:6,7)
- Priests drinking wine or strong drink on duty (Lev. 10:9)
- Entering The Tabernacle when unclean (Lev. 15:31)
- Entering the inner room of The Tabernacle unauthorized or unprotected from the Glory (Lev. 16:2)
- Offering offerings away from The Tabernacle (Lev. 17:4,9)
- Sex practices of the Canaanites (Lev. 18:29-30)
- Eating flesh of a slaughter-offering on the third day (Lev. 19:8)

The offenses listed in this MESSAGE are additions to this considerable list. The list was still further lengthened by later MESSAGES recorded in Leviticus and Numbers. A study of the entire list shows that each of the offenses for which the death penalty was prescribed was an action revealing rebellion against Jehovah's commands and rejection of the covenant. They were "sins of a high hand," committed in deliberate rebellion against Jehovah's authority (Num. 15:30-31; see comments on Lev. 4:2 in MESSAGE 2). Sins that were committed out of weakness could be forgiven through repentance, expressed by fire-offerings. But, no legal correction or ceremonial offering could obtain forgiveness for deliberate rebellion. A person who deliberately rejected Jehovah's authority rejected the covenant with Jehovah on which the nation of Israel was based. Therefore, he did not belong to the people of God. He had to be removed from their midst by death.

This wide use of the death penalty seems extremely harsh to people of today, who live in an age that has virtually rejected the principle of punishment and a nation that is near to abolishing the death penalty altogether.

However, it was demanded by Jehovah to preserve true faith among the Israelites, who were the one depository for Jehovah's truth in an otherwise totally pagan world. Since everyone in Israel had committed himself to Jehovah, a rejection of Jehovah's authority was a treacherous rejection of a sacred commitment, treason against the nation, and rebellion against Almighty God. Treachery, treason, and rebellion almost universally have been recognized over the centuries as deserving the death penalty.

In two of the previous references, Jehovah told the Israelites to execute the death penalty (Lev. 17:10; 20:6), but in two others He had promised to execute the penalty Himself (Lev. 17:10; 20:6). In one instance, Jehovah actually executed the death penalty (Lev. 10:2; 16:1). Verses 3-5 of this chapter make it plain that Israel was expected to carry out the execution but that Jehovah committed Himself to do it if the Israelites did not. The fact is that every Israelite at some time or other broke one of these commandments. The result was that eventually every Israelite deserved to die, and every one eventually did die. Death has indeed been the penalty for rebellion against Jehovah's commands from the time of Adam onward, and only two so far have escaped it: Enoch (Gen. 5:21-23) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-18). There was no hope of escape from death in the law God gave to Israel. That harsh reality, which later was stated forcefully by Paul in Romans 1:18-3:31), was made known to Israel by the law. Jehovah had demonstrated that truth by His response to the incident of the Golden Calf, but that event also gave Him the opportunity to teach Israel that escape from death could be obtained through mercy and grace of God (Ex. 32:1-34:9). Both truths were made plainer and more definite with the revelation of each new law.

No evidence exists to indicate that Israel ever enforced the death penalty for all of these offenses. Certain instances of its enforcement by the Israelites did occur in the wilderness (Ex. 32:25-29; Lev. 24:13-23; Num. 15:32-36; 25:6-8; Josh. 7:1-26), and sometimes Jehovah enforced the penalty on rebellious Israelites while they were in the wilderness (Lev. 10:2; 16:1; Num. 11:33-34; 14:26-38; 16:31-35,41-50; 21:4-9; 25:8-9); However, after Israel settled in the Land, no record indicates that they enforced the death penalty for all these offenses with any consistency. Even Jehovah enforced the death penalty instantaneously only in rare instances. Nevertheless, the law stood as an eloquent testimony to the stark truth that rebellion against Jehovah brings death. More importantly, Jehovah's not strenuously enforcing the death penalty demonstrated that Israel could be saved from annihilation through the mercy and grace of God. Over and over again, when the Israelites committed rebellious deeds that deserved the death penalty, Jehovah extended His grace to them because they repented. Thus, the many offenses that required the death penalty had a gracious purpose. They opened the way for God to teach the Israelites that deliverance from death lies in the grace of God.

This MESSAGE may be outlined as follows;

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Critical note

The abundance of laws requiring the death penalty provides another strong evidence against the critical view of the origin of the book of Leviticus and of other books of the Law. According to the critical theories, the law gradually developed over many years. They suppose that Israel's law gradually evolved from the nation's experiences and experiments. . Since no evidence exists that the death penalty ever was actually practiced in Israel for most of the laws requiring it, it is impossible that those laws could have developed from Israel's practice. They did not actually practice what the law required. So how could the law have come out of their practices? Once again the development theory creates a greater difficulty than it solves.

Interpretation

CHAPTER 20

Introductory note (20:1)

Verse 1. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying,**

A new MESSAGE to Moses is introduced by this verse.

1. Giving one's seed to Molech (20:2-5)

Verse 2a. **And you must say to the people of Israel.**

This instruction concerned all the people of Israel. It was to be delivered by Moses to the whole nation. Like the two MESSAGES before it, it contained civil laws that were to apply to everyone in the nation. The purpose of this MESSAGE was to provide a list of offenses that required the death penalty. None of the commandments in this MESSAGE were new, so the purpose of the MESSAGE was to help the Israelites concentrate on the lessons to be learned from the death penalty. Those lessons have been explained in the Introduction to this MESSAGE as: (1) Rebellion against God results in death. (2) God's mercy withholds the deserved penalty of death, and God's grace overrides the penalty of death, if people will repent and turn to Him.

Verses 2b. **A man of the sons of Israel or of the sojourners sojourning in Israel who gives from his seed to Molech must be put to death. The people of the land must stone him with stones.**

The first law listed in this MESSAGE forbade giving one's seed to Molech. This commandment was not new. It already had been stated in Leviticus 18:21. It probably means having sex in honor of the fertility god Molech in one of his temples or shrines. The worship of Molech also required human sacrifice on some occasions (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35; Acts 7:43), but this verse refers to the atrocious practice of fertility rites in honor of Molech (see comments on Lev. 18:21 in MESSAGE 22). No penalty for this offense had been prescribed previously. In this MESSAGE, the penalty is given as death by being stoned by the people. It must be assumed that the execution was to be carried out by the people after the offender had been found guilty by a judge. The penalty applied to Israelites by birth and to sojourners sojourning among them, that is, to people of foreign birth who had accepted Jehovah as their God and who had been accepted by the Israelites as one of them (see comments on Lev. 16:29 in MESSAGE 20; on Lev. 17:8 in MESSAGE 21; and on Lev. 19:10,33-34 in MESSAGE 23).

Verses 3-5. **3 And I will set my face against that man, and I will cut him off from among his people because he gave from his seed to Molech to defile My Tabernacle and to profane My holy name.**

4 And if the people of the Land hide their eyes from that man in his giving from his seed to Molech to not put him to death,

5 Then I will set My face against that man and against his family, and I will cut them off from among their people and also anyone [following] after him in committing fornication with Molech.

“Gave from his seed to Molech” in verse 3 is equivalent to “committing fornication with Molech” in verse 5, confirming the conclusion that this expression means having sex in honor of Molech in one of his temples or shrines.

If the Israelites failed to carry out the death penalty for this offense, then Jehovah said He would “cut him off from among his people.” In other words, Jehovah would carry out the execution for them. “Cut him off” in verse 3 is made equivalent to “put to death” in verses 2b and 4, strongly supporting the conclusion that “cut him off from among his people” means to put him to death (see comments on Lev. 7:20 in MESSAGE 7 and on Lev. 17:10-16 in MESSAGE 21). Jehovah would not only execute the offender but also his family who defended him and others who followed him into the evil practice.

Jehovah said He would exact this penalty because such actions “made unclean” (see comments on Lev. 5:2 in MESSAGE 2) His Tabernacle (see comments on Lev. 12:4 in MESSAGE 15 and on Lev. 19:3 in MESSAGE 23) and because they “made unholy” (see comments on Lev. 10:10 in MESSAGE 13) His “holy” (see comments on Lev. 2:3 in MESSAGE 1 and on Lev. 6:16 in MESSAGE 5) name. In other words, those actions would profane the place where the man should have been worshiping and the name of the One he should have been worshiping. Disgracing God and His house deserved death.

2. Consulting a practitioner of necromancy or ESP (20:6)

Verse 6. **And the soul who turns to a practitioner of necromancy or of extra-sensory perception, to commit fornication by them, I will set my face against that person, and I will cut him off from among his people.**

This verse forbade two forms of fortune telling. They had been prohibited in Leviticus 19:31, but that verse did not specify a penalty (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 23). Here Jehovah stated that He would enforce the death penalty on a person found guilty of one of these offenses. It must be assumed that the Israelites were expected to carry out the penalty and that, if they failed to do so, Jehovah would execute it, as in verses 2-5. Jehovah called this offense “to commit fornication with them.” That expression means that committing these offenses was unfaithfulness to God, like fornication is unfaithfulness to one’s wife. It was defiance of God, an offense that deserves death.

3. Cursing one’s father or mother (20:7-9)

Verses 7-9. **7 You shall hallow yourselves, and you shall be holy, for I am Jehovah your God.**

8 You shall keep My statutes. I am Jehovah who is hallowing you.

9 So a man who curses his father or his mother must be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother. His blood is on him.

Jehovah’s laws were based on His own nature. His nature is that He is holy. His people were expected to be like Him in holiness. Jehovah said He was hallowing them, and he called on them to hallow themselves. It takes both to enable a person to truly belong to God. When the Israelites committed to be like Jehovah, they “hallowed themselves,” or “made themselves holy.” When they practiced that commitment, they “were holy.” Jehovah called on His people both to commit themselves and to practice their commitment. When they failed to do so, they rebelled. Rebellion deserved the death penalty.

On the basis of God's expectation that His people would be holy like Him, He demanded of them that they honor their father and mother. If instead, someone cursed his father or mother, he defied God. Defying God deserved the death penalty. This commandment already had been stated in Exodus 21:17, and that verse already had specified the death penalty for breaking it. It is restated here to emphasize it was one of the offenses that deserved the death penalty.

The expression "his blood shall be on him" is used here for the first time. It means he was responsible for bringing death on himself. The expression is similar to "he shall bear his iniquity," which means that the offender would suffer the penalty his iniquity deserved (see comments on Lev 5:1 in MESSAGE 2).

4. Adultery (20:10)

Verse 10. **If a man commits adultery with [another] man's wife--if a man commits adultery with his associate's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.**

Adultery had been forbidden in one of the ten basic moral principles Jehovah spoke from the mountain to guide Israel's way of life (Ex. 20:14). In addition, in Leviticus 18:20, Jehovah had made adultery a civil crime (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 22). He used the same word there that is used in this verse for the husband the adulterer offended: "associate." It means anyone with whom the man had any kind of association. The effect was to forbid adultery with every other man's wife. In the previous passage, Jehovah had not specified a penalty. In this verse, He prescribed the death penalty for both partners in the act.

5. Incest with a step-mother (20:11)

Verses 11. **A man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness. Both of them must be put to death. Their blood is on them.**

"Lies with" in this verses clearly refers to sexual intercourse, but it is intercourse with a person with whom it is forbidden. The previous

verse had forbidden adultery altogether, so the adulterous relationship in this verse involved some additional principle. That additional principle was incest. In particular, it referred to committing incest with a step mother. In this verse, "lies with" is equivalent to "has uncovered nakedness," confirming the interpretation in Leviticus 18:7-18 that "uncover nakedness" means sexual intercourse (see comments on Lev. 18:7 in MESSAGE 22). Incest with one's father's wife had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:8, but that verse did not specify a penalty (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 22). This verse identifies the penalty as death. Both the son and his step-mother brought the spilling of their blood on themselves (see v. 9 above).

6. Incest with a daughter-in-law (20:12)

Verse 12. **And a man who lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. They have committed a perversion. Their blood is on them.**

This verse deals with a different form of incest, sexual relations with a daughter-in-law. Leviticus 18:15 had prohibited that form of incest and made it a crime, but it did not specify the penalty. This verse assigns the penalty of death, the same as for the form of incest in the previous verse. The word translated "perversion" is used only here and in Leviticus 18:23. It means "a mixing" and refers to mixing two relationships or objects that do not combine and do not belong together (see comments on Lev. 18:23 in MESSAGE 22). Sexual relations between two close relatives does not bring togetherness. It brings shame, fear, resentment, anger, hurt, separation. Such a crime against the family was rebellion against God. It deserved death. Those committing this crime in Israel brought their blood, their death, on themselves (see v. 9 above).

7. Homosexuality (20:13)

Verse 13. **And a man who lies with a male, like lying with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They must be put to death. Their blood [is] on them.**

This verse deals with the crime of homosexuality. It had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:22, but a penalty was not mentioned there (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 22). This verse specifies the death penalty. The word translated “abomination” is the word used in Leviticus 18:22 and it is correctly translated as “abomination” (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 22). Homosexuality is an act that is abominable or atrocious to God. In Israel, two men who committed it were both to be put to death. By their abominable act, they brought the spilling of their blood on themselves.

8. Incest with a woman and her mother
(20:14)

Verse 14. **And a man who takes a woman and her mother, it is wickedness. They must incinerate him and they in the fire, and wickedness will not be in your midst.**

This verse might be understood to mean that the man committed adultery with his wife’s mother, but it has generally been understood to mean marriage to a woman and her mother. All English translations known to this writer translate the verse in that manner. That understanding is surely correct, because the death penalty is prescribed for all three persons involved. Since all three were to be executed, the offense was not one committed against the man’s wife but one in which she participated. This verse describes a third form of incest, marriage to two close relatives. Specifically it forbade marriage to a woman and her mother. Such a relationship would create all kinds of disruptions in the family. It was an offense against God for a man to create such a disruptive family relationship.

This offense had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:17. The offense is called “wickedness” in both verses, which means it was an evil scheme (see comments on Lev. 18:17 in MESSAGE 22). It could not result in harmony to a family, only jealousy.

Leviticus 18:17 did not specify a penalty for this crime. This verse prescribes the death penalty for the man and both women. They were to be burned with fire, which probably did not mean

burned alive but incinerated to ashes after their execution by stoning. The word translated “incinerate” is the word used in Leviticus 4:12 for incinerating the meat of the sin-offering in a clean place outside the camp (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 2 under the heading And he shall incinerate it). For a person, it meant cremation. Cremation was an awful humiliation and annihilation to the Israelites. It added to the intensity of the punishment and heightened the impression of the awfulness of the offense. By the execution of all three offenders, their wickedness would be removed from the midst of Israel.

9. Bestiality (20:15-16)

Verses 15-16. **15 And a man who lies with a domestic animal must be put to death, and you must kill the domestic animal.**

16 And a woman who approaches any livestock to lie with it, you shall kill the woman and the livestock. They must be put to death. Their blood is on them.

Bestiality had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:23. That verse specifically condemned the act, whether it was participated in by a man or a woman, as do these verses. However, the previous verse did not name a penalty (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 22). These verses specify the death penalty for the man or the woman and for the animal involved. By their evil act, they brought the spilling of their own blood on themselves. The word translated “domestic animal” is the word used in Leviticus 1:2. It means “livestock,” in other words an animal that people could handle (see comments on Lev. 1:2 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading from the livestock).

10. Incest with a half-sister (20:17)

Verse 17. **And a man who takes a sister, his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter and sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace; and they shall be cut off before the eyes of the sons of their people. He has uncovered his sister’s nakedness. He must bear his iniquity.**

The offense in this verse is having sex with a half-sister. This verse has been understood to refer to marriage, but not nearly so unanimously as the relationship described in verse 14. Some English translations translate the verse with the word “marries,” but the literal meaning of the word is “takes.”¹ Since the verse makes “takes” equivalent to “sees the nakedness of,” the meaning really is clear that the reference is to fornication, sex outside of marriage. In either case, it was incest.

This crime was an offense against the family, which was sure to bring jealousy and division. The word translated “disgrace” is used only here and in Proverbs 14:34. It has no known related words, so its exact meaning cannot be known with absolute confidence. It has been understood to mean “shame,” “reproach,” or “disgrace.”² It was a disgrace to the people involved, to the nation, and to God.

The crime of sex with a half-sister had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:9, but a penalty had not been mentioned there. This verse specifies the penalty as “shall be cut off,” an expression that means to be put to death (see comments on Lev. 7:20 in MESSAGE 7 on Lev. 17:10-16 in MESSAGE 21, and on vs. 3-5 above). Both persons were to be “cut off” or executed in public to emphasize the seriousness of the offense. By that means the weight and penalty of their wickedness was to be made to weigh them down.

11. Intercourse during menstruation (20:18)

Verse 18. And a man who lies with a sick woman and uncovers her nakedness has exposed her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people.

¹ KJV, NASB, RSV, ASV, BBE, CJB, and LITV translate the word literally as “takes.” HCSB, CEV, GNB, and MSG translate the word more freely as “marries.”

² KJV translates this word as “wicked thing.” RSV, ASV, and CJB use “shameful thing”; BBE and LITV use “shame”; CEV and GNB, “disgraced”; and NASB, HCSB, and MSG, “a disgrace.”

This verse forbids a man to have sex with a woman during her menstrual period. It would apply whether the couple was married or not. The word translated “sick” always was used to refer to the discomfort, pain, and irritability that accompanies menstruation in many women. It could indicate that a man should not impose himself on his wife when she is not feeling well. However, more was involved. The background of this command is found in Leviticus 15:24 and in Leviticus 18:19, where it is declared that contact with menstrual blood made a person unclean (see comments on Lev. 15:24 in MESSAGE 19 and on Lev. 18:19 in MESSAGE 22). A menstruating woman was unclean, because her flow of blood represented sin. Intercourse between a man and a woman during the unclean period showed severe callousness toward the symbols of sin and indicated that the couple also had a calloused attitude toward sin itself. It showed grave indifference to obeying Jehovah’s commands, which amounted to rebellion and rejection of Jehovah’s authority. Therefore, death was the penalty for both partners in this act. This command had nothing to do with the morality, healthfulness, or physical cleanliness of the act itself. The significance of the prohibition and of the penalty was in what the blood symbolized. Ceremonial uncleanness was an important concept in teaching the Israelites the dangers of sin, and defying those symbols was a serious offense. The offense was especially serious in a relationship as close as sexual intercourse.

12. Incest with an aunt by birth (20:19)

Verse 19. And you must not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister or your father’s sister, because it makes naked his [own] flesh. They must bear their iniquity.

This verse forbade another type of incest, having sex with an aunt by birth. This form of incest had been forbidden in Leviticus 18:12-13. This verse says that the act was offensive because “it makes naked his [own] flesh.” “His [own] flesh” is similar to our expression “his own flesh and blood.” It means that the two belong to the same family and have the same inherited characteristics. Sex between people of such close family relationships was not only fornication. It also was

incest, an offense that brought jealousy and division into the family. It was a serious offense against God.

Leviticus 18:12-13 had not specified a penalty for this offense (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 22). This verse says the guilty pair “must bear their iniquity” (see comments on Lev. 5:1 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading then he shall bear). It means that the burden of their guilt must be made to weigh down on them, in other words, they were to receive the penalty due for this offense. Two strong indications show that the due penalty for this offense was death: (1) The death penalty was required for other forms of incest, and the same penalty should be expected for this form of incest also (vs. 11-12,14,17). (2) This whole MESSAGE is devoted to offenses deserving the death penalty, so that penalty must have been intended for this offense also.

13. Incest with an aunt by marriage (20:20)

Verse 20. **And a man who lies with his uncle’s wife has uncovered his uncle’s nakedness. They must bear their iniquity. They must die childless.**

This verse forbade sexual intercourse with an aunt by marriage, another form of incest. Marriage to the man’s uncle had brought her into the family and made her a close relative. Sex between them would be highly disruptive to the family. For their offense, the couple was to die. Adding the word “childless” should not be understood to lessen the command, “They must die.” It should not be understood to mean simply that they were forbidden to have children for the rest of their lives. No way could have been provided to assure that neither would have children if they lived. The word “childless” simply adds to the severity of the death penalty. Thus, the expression should be understood to mean they were to be put to death before they had children. To die without an heir was a special horror to an Israelite. The Hebrew word translated “childless” pictures how serious the Israelites considered being childless to be. It literally means “stripped.” A person without children was bare and alone in the world, as Abraham was before he had a son (see Gen. 15:2). Dying without an heir added to

the severity of the death penalty and to what it taught about the seriousness of the crime.

14. Incest with a brother’s wife (20:21)

Verse 21. **And a man who takes his brother’s wife, that is impurity. He has uncovered his brother’s nakedness. They must be childless.**

This verse forbade sexual intercourse with the wife of one’s brother, another form of incest. “Takes” might be understood to mean taking her away from the brother and marrying her; however, the same word in verse 17 clearly refers to fornication. It must mean the same in this verse. He had offended his brother by exposing nakedness that belonged to the brother. Such an action was highly disruptive to the family and a serious offense against God. “Must be childless” could only be enforced if the expression meant the same as the expression “die childless” in the previous verse. The offending couple was to be put to death before they had children.

Five incestuous relationships that are forbidden in MESSAGE 22 (Lev. 18:6-18) are not mentioned in this chapter: sex with one’s mother, granddaughter, step-sister, step granddaughter, or wife’s sister. Since the death penalty is prescribed for all the cases that are mentioned in this chapter, it should be understood that the cases that are not mentioned required the death penalty also.

14. Reasons for the death penalty in Israel (20:22-26)

Verses 22-23. **If you shall keep all My statutes and all My judgments, and you shall do them, then the land to which I am bringing you to dwell in it will not vomit you out.**

23 And you must not walk in the statutes of the nation that I am casting out before you because they do all these [evils] and I abhor them.

Jehovah gave the Israelites two reasons why He required the death penalty for so many offenses. The first was so they would not be cast out of the Land, as the Canaanite were about to be cast out.

Jehovah said that if the Israelites kept the commandments given in this MESSAGE, the Land would not vomit them out. “Not vomit them out” means they would not be driven out of the Land. The word translated “statutes” is the word used in Leviticus 3:17. It means prescriptions or written laws (see comments on Lev. 3:17 in MESSAGE 1). The word translated “judgments” is the word used in Leviticus 5:10 and Leviticus 18:4. It means the decisions of a judge (see comments on those verses in MESSAGES 2, and 22). The commandments Jehovah stressed in this MESSAGE required the death penalty. That penalty was to warn the Israelites not to practice the ways of the Canaanites, so they would not experience the punishment He was about to bring on the Canaanites.

Verses 24-26. **24 But I have said to you, You will inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Jehovah your God, who separated you from the peoples.**

25 So you shall distinguish between the clean livestock and the unclean and between the unclean flying creature and the clean. You must not make yourselves detestable by the livestock or by the flying creature or by anything that swarms [on] the ground that I have set apart for you to make unclean.

26 And you shall be holy to Me, for I Jehovah [am] holy, and I have separated you from the peoples to be mine.

The second purpose for laws requiring the death penalty was to strongly encourage the Israelites to be obedient to Jehovah and to be like Him in holiness. The first reason stressed in verses 22-23 was negative, to warn the Israelites against being like the Canaanites. The reason stress in these verses is positive, to encourage them to be like Jehovah. Jehovah stressed that they should maintain distinctions between clean and unclean creatures because those distinctions were symbols to teach the Israelites to keep away from sin and to practice righteousness. Jehovah had set the Israelites apart to be His and to live like Him. He expected them to show it in their lives. Jehovah described Himself as “holy,” which means He is set apart and different. He expected the Israelites to be holy, in His likeness. They were a people set apart

from others to belong to Jehovah, and they were to live like it.

This verse is the only reference in Leviticus that uses an expression that is familiar to all know of God’s promises concerning the Land. That expression is “a land flowing with milk and honey.” The expression had been used four times in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 3:8,17; 13:5; 33:3). Later, it was used 10 times in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy. The expression described the land of Canaan that God promised to the Israelites. In the minds of the Israelites, who were living in the wilderness, the expression brought thoughts of pleasure and plenty. “Flowing with milk” required an abundance of herds of cows and flocks of goats, which in turn required well-watered meadows growing an abundance of grass and grain. It implied an abundance of water and milk to drink and of bread and meat to eat. Likewise, honey required many hives of bees, which in turn required fertile valleys growing fields of flowers dripping with sweet nectar for the bees to gather. Many hives of bees implies pollinated orchards growing luscious fruits and productive gardens growing fresh vegetables. Compared to the barrenness of the desert, the gift of a land flowing with milk and honey was the promise of an unparallel paradise. Promising the Israelites such a land gave them a huge reason to keep themselves holy as Jehovah was holy.

Distinctions between clean and unclean creatures had been explained in MESSAGE 14, Leviticus 11 (clean and unclean livestock, Lev. 11:2-8,39-40; clean and unclean flying creatures, Lev. 11:13-28; clean and unclean land swarms, Lev. 11:29-38,41-45). One class of creatures that were to be distinguished as to clean and unclean is not mentioned in this verse. It is water creatures (see Lev. 11:9-12 in MESSAGE 14). No doubt, water creatures are not mentioned simply for the sake of brevity, because the Israelites were expected to be equally diligent in distinguishing among them also.

The word translated “detestable” in verse 25 was used in instructions concerning clean and unclean as a substitute word for “unclean” (see comments on Lev. 11:10 in MESSAGE 14). It

means the Israelites were to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean as a sign that they were committed to be holy people, living in the likeness of Jehovah.

15. Practicing necromancy or ESP (20:27)

Verse 27. And a man or a woman among them who is a necromancer or a practitioner of ESP must be put to death with stones. They must killed by stoning. Their blood [is] on them.

This verse seem to be an afterthought, since it appears after verses 22-26, which clearly summarize the commandments of this MESSAGE. Such an occurrence would not be out of character for the conversational manner in which the MESSAGES of Leviticus were delivered. The two forms of fortune telling that are mentioned in this

verse are the same as those mentioned in verse 6 (see comments on that verse above). Probably the reason that Jehovah added this afterthought was that in verse 6 He had commanded that a person who consulted a practitioner of necromancy or of ESP was to be put to death, but nothing had been said concerning the penalty for the fortune teller himself or herself. This added thought made it clear that the penalty prescribed for a person consulting a fortune teller also applied to the fortune teller (compare Ex. 22:18).

The noun translated “stones,” and the verb translated “must be killed by stoning” are from two entirely different roots, but they refer to the same action, executing a person by stoning. In Israel, stoning was the normal method of legally putting a person to death.

Application

This chapter on the death penalty in Israel has a direct application to the intense campaign of the present day to abolish capital punishment in America. Three thoughts from this chapter are especially pertinent.

First, the words of Jehovah in this chapter recognize capital punishment as a valid tool for the control of vicious evil. According to this chapter, as well as other passages in the Bible, Jehovah grants to human government the authority to use the death penalty in cases of depraved crimes. He does not allow it to encourage callousness or lack of respect for human life. He authorizes it to provide society with a necessary weapon for protecting itself against the viciousness, ferocity, and stubbornness of depravity when it has become ingrained in the nature of a rebellious human being. To deny that the death penalty can never be appropriate is to subtract the authority of God from this chapter and to explain its contents as human error in a backward age. Capital punishment for especially heinous crimes either has the sanction of Jehovah, or the Book of Leviticus is a fraud when it claims to have been spoken by Jehovah.

Second, modern governments cannot and should not enforce capital punishment for the same offenses for which Jehovah authorized it in ancient Israel. The death penalty was authorized in Israel for any person who failed to make Jehovah his God or who rebelled against Jehovah’s authority. Modern nations do not have the same commitment of all of their citizens to Jehovah that Israel had. Therefore they must allow their citizens to accept or reject Jehovah without penalty from the government. God Himself will deal with the person who rejects Him. At Sinai God instituted a plan for a political nation to totally set itself apart to Jehovah’s service. That plan failed. It did not fail because the plan was a bad one, but because the people would not follow it. In Jesus, a superior plan was instituted. Today each individual becomes one of God’s people by his own personal choice, not by birth or family descent. God’s people today are not a political entity but a spiritual entity. Therefore, no nation of today is in a position to enforce the death penalty or any other penalty on a citizen simply because he rejects Jehovah. If a nation is to be a Christian nation, it must become Christian through evangelism, and it must remain Christian through the personal commitment of a majority of its people, not through extermination of unbelievers.

Third, nations should be extremely careful not to allow the death penalty to be used for oppression or for extermination of political opposition. It should only be used to control evils that seriously threaten the nation. The authority to use the death penalty includes the obligation to use it in an even-handed and just manner. One of the reasons capital punishment is under serious challenge in America today is the uneven and inconsistent manner in which it has been administered. Because of abuse of the death penalty, today's criticism of the death penalty is fair and just. However, it is the regulation and administration of the death penalty that needs to be challenged, not its legitimacy as a needed tool to control depraved evil.