



# Leviticus: The heart of the Torah

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

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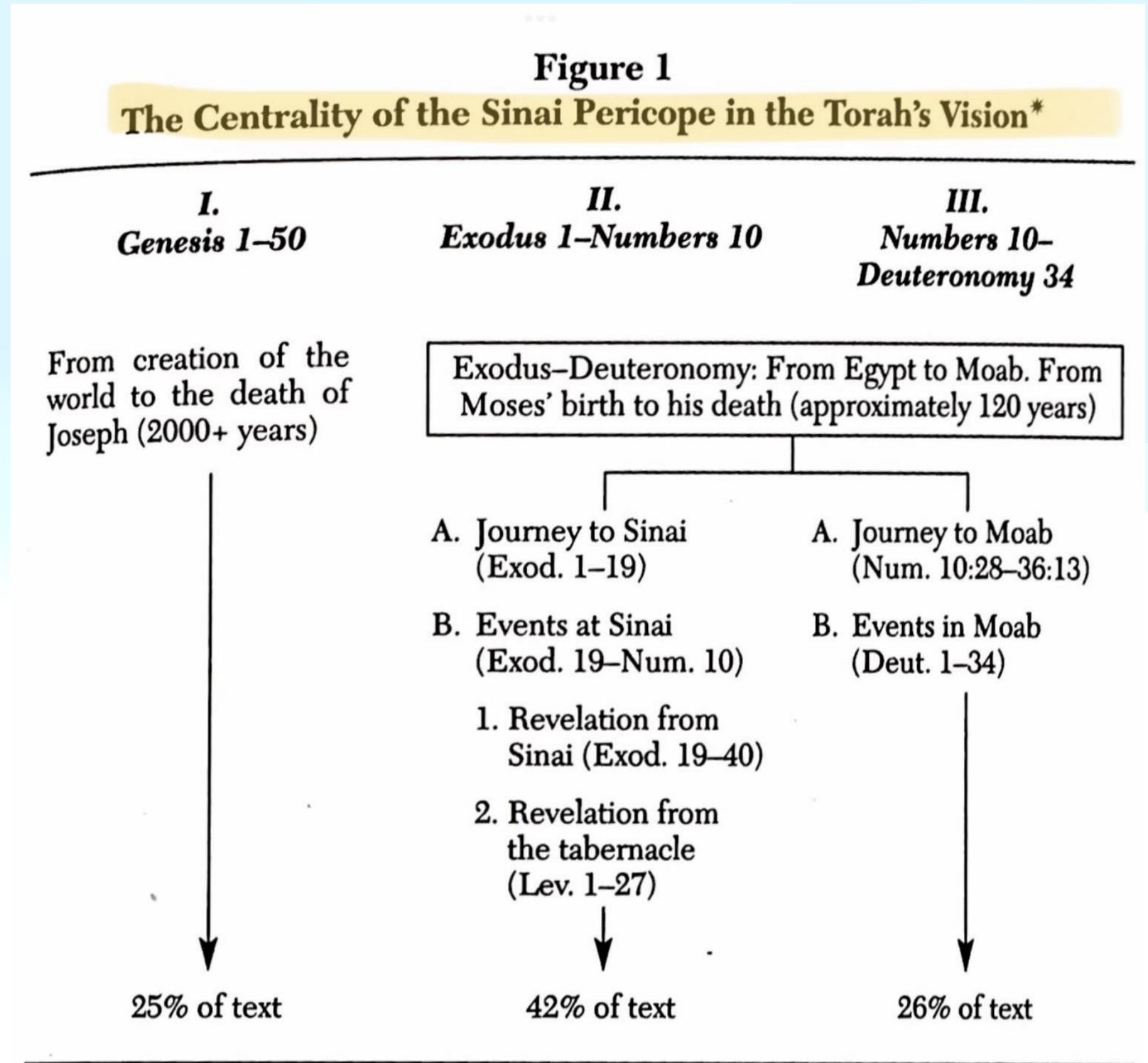
- We will look at:
  - Torah & the place of Leviticus in it
  - The centrality of Sinai to the Torah
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- Law as gift and vocation; law in creation
  - Sacrifice as offering and prayer; more than killing
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- Holiness of God and call to Israel
  - Purity life with God in the midst

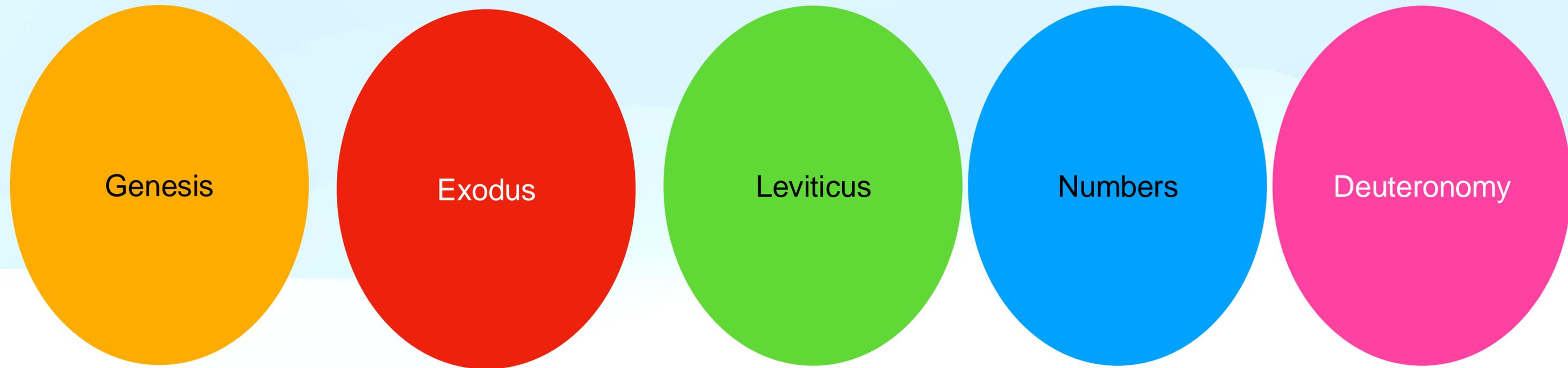
# Torah Overview

## The Significance of Sinai

Source: Samuel Ballentine, *Leviticus* (Westminster, 2011)



# Leviticus: The heart of the Torah



- Beg looks **back** to God: Creator, elector, promise-giver, lawgiver, saviour, ‘blesser’
- End looks **fwd**: Deut ends on plains of Moab, before entry into the land, into ‘today’
- **Sinai** (Exod - Num) is centre, the present, the model for Israel’s life with God

# What is Leviticus?

## Template for Israel's life with God

- **Genesis:** God creates a dwelling for **humankind** and all creation
  - Living in the garden involves *responsibility* and *accountability*
- **Exodus:** at Sinai, Israel make dwelling for **God** (the tabernacle)
- **Leviticus:** how to carry out this vision of living together as Israel with God
  - This also involves *responsibility* and *accountability*



# Leviticus

## The heart of the Torah

- Leviticus is the pattern for all later generations of God's people
- Here Israel is:
  - Shaped by God's almighty deliverance
  - encamped around the tabernacle with God in their midst
  - Given instruction for their health and ongoing life as a community
  - Given instructions vis a vis living as community and living with God (two 'tables' of the ten commandments)

# Structure of Leviticus

- Offerings and sacrifices (Chs 1-7)
- The priesthood (Chs 8-10)
- Issues of purity (11-15)

PRIESTS

- 
- The day of atonement (Yom Kippur) (Ch 16)
  - Various ritual and moral matters (Chs 17-25)
  - Exhortation (Ch 26)
  - Appendix (Ch 27)

DAILY LIFE

The word 'Torah' means teaching or law. What are some other positive words you would use?

Neither Jews nor Christians have practiced animal sacrifice for nearly 2000 years. Why read Leviticus on sacrifice today?

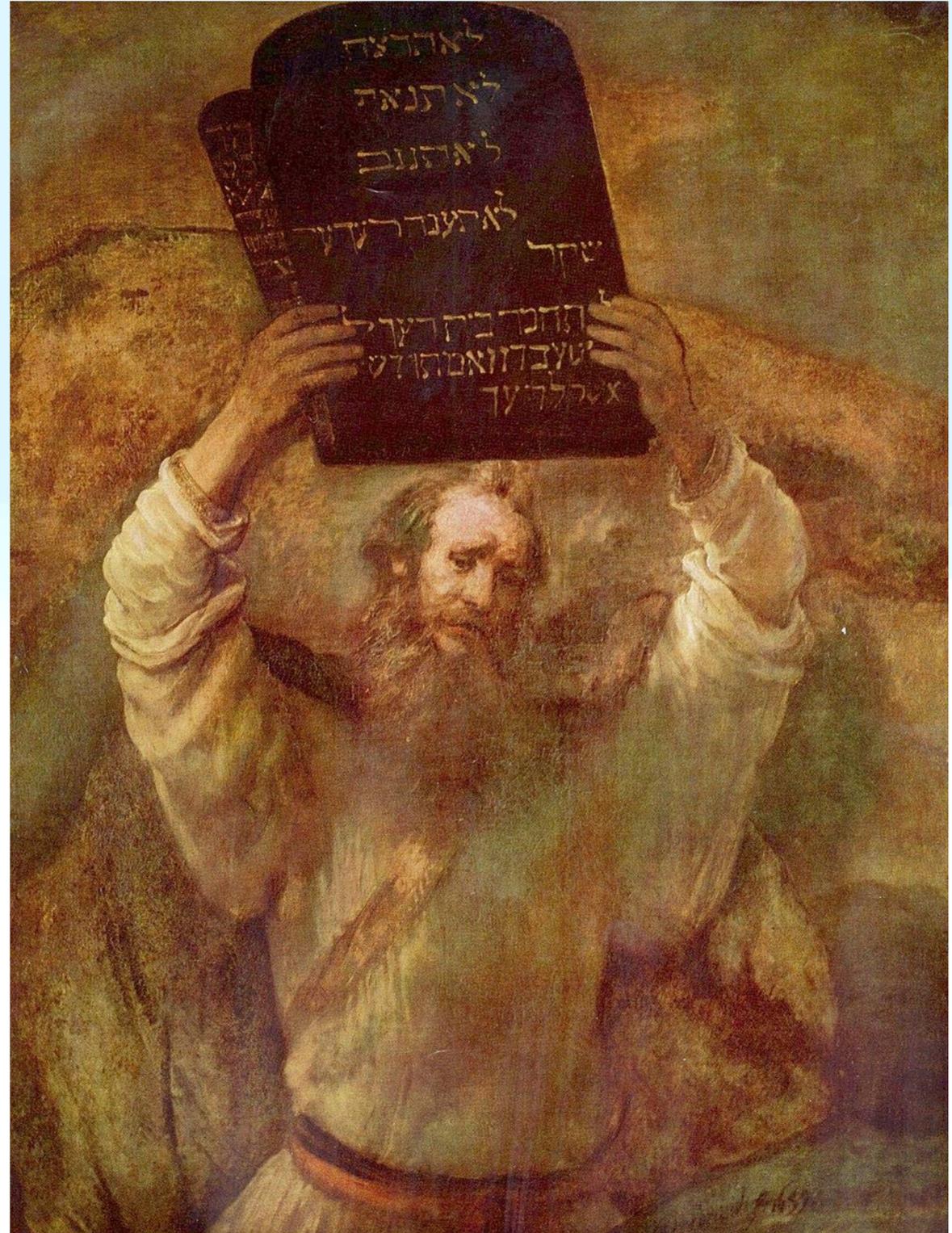
How can we read Leviticus' purity laws today?  
How can Leviticus model for Christians what it means to be the people of God?

# Leviticus as priest's manual for all

- Leviticus reflects understanding from the Solomonic temple (approx 950 BCE - 587 BCE) but probably took its final shape in the exile or after (see Ch 26:34-45)
- Leviticus title is a misnomer; in fact it is 'the priests' manual' (not the Levites').
- However, 'the priests' manual' is not only for the temple elite
- it is a democratising document which teaches the whole community

# Leviticus and Law

**You shall be holy, for I the LORD  
your God am holy. You shall each  
revere your mother and father, and  
you shall keep my sabbaths...you  
shall love your neighbour as  
yourself: I am the LORD.  
Lev 19:3,18**



# Leviticus and the Law

**Source: Terrence Fretheim, *The Pentateuch***

- The law is not a burden, but is a gift of God's graciousness for the sake of life
- Law is not a response to command, but to the whole of God's action for Israel
- Obedience is not how to be saved, but a response from ppl already redeemed
- The law is thus vocational, promoting God's purposes for creation
- God is subject both in law and story, showing a continuity of purpose:
  - 'I am the LORD'

# Tabernacle as Creation (Leviticus & Genesis)

**Source: Terrence Fretheim, *The Pentateuch***

- As across the Ancient Near East, Israel's law was closely linked to creation.
- The number 7 appears in the creation account and Tabernacle building; with sabbath and blessing at the end
- God addresses Israel at Sinai in the way God addresses humans on Day 6
- Leviticus begins with a New Year (tabernacle is completed on New Year's Day, in Exod 40:2)
- Israel is given tasks in dominion and care for the earth in both (Gen 1:26-28)
- God distinguishes and separates in creation; Priests distinguish and separate. (Gen 1:4-7 and Lev 10:10)

# Sacrifice

Interpreting Leviticus today



# The sacrificial system in Leviticus

- Leviticus 1-7 speaks of 15 different types of offerings.
- Neither Jews nor Christians practice animal sacrifice today, but these sacrifices in Leviticus are still important in different ways
- for Christians, sacrifice helps us understand, in the NT and today, atonement, the Eucharist, and worship and prayer in general

Wine

Communion with others

Grain

Process of ritual

# Sacrifice

Animal life

Forgiveness

Thanksgiving

Prayer

# Sacrifices

- Not all offerings were animals: grain, wine, and olive oil also offered
  - Not all sacrifices involved death or 'expiation'; they also involve thanksgiving, freewill offerings, offerings of what is 'due' to God
  - Not all sacrifices were about sin; some were expressions of gratitude, acts of devotion, acknowledgement of dependence on God
  - They were not manipulative gifts to God or food for God, but gifts returned to the Creator in recognition of what God has done.

# Sacrifice and sacrament

- Sacrifices were not 'magic':
  - God set up the ritual
  - God in freedom grants forgiveness through the ritual; this is not automatic
  - Contrition and expression of sin are important (Lev 5:5-6)
  - God's word is often central (Lev 22:23, 25), as in a declaration of mercy
  - Sacrifices could be said to a 'means of grace', like a sacrament

Sacrifice is *not* about substitution for worshipper, penalty, or punishment

# Sacrifices

## Sacrifice, expiation, and atonement

- The object here is sin, not God. Sin is expiated or purged; God is not appeased.
- In the Day of Atonement ritual (Lev 16:19), activity focuses on the cleansing of the tabernacle of sin and sin's destructiveness in the whole community. A goat is ritually cast out into the wilderness (not killed), symbolising sending Israel's sins far beyond the community.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. (Lev 17:11)

# Sacrifice, prayer and worship

- Sacrifice is thus related to prayer in general, and even a form of prayer.
- They are not opposed to one another; Ps 51:17 states that a 'broken and contrite heart' is the crucial element to repentance, sacrifice is ultimately not strictly necessary in OT view.
- 'Sacrifice is a form of prayer in which the tangible element is especially prominent and in connection with which God's gift of life and forgiveness has been promised' (Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, p 131)
- What are some examples of this in your worshipping community today?

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How would you define holiness?

# Holiness and Purity



**holy**  
**pure**



**common**  
**impure**

# Holy/common and pure/impure

## Basic distinctions in Chs 11-15 and 17-21

- These distinctions are about *boundaries*, not necessarily morality. All sin yields impurity, but not all impurity was caused by sin. Impurity was also the result of sexual relations or coming into contact with a corpse, for example.
- These categories are related to two overarching distinctions:
  - **Life x death**
  - **Order x chaos**

- Holiness is ultimately **about God**: the Holy One of Israel, incomparable, above all other gods, and whose holiness is a force dangerous to human beings:

*<sup>8</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Exod 19:18*

- But holiness is also a **relational** category in which one is drawn into relationship with the one holy God, with its benefits, responsibilities — without becoming divine
- *'I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.'*  
*Lev 11:44-45*

Israel's holiness is a reality; the call to 'be holy' is a call to be true to the relationship the people already has.

# Purity and impurity

- Pure  Impure
- Some categories are like **hygiene** around birth, death, and genital discharges (ritual impurity). But other categories developed from **moral** categories, concerned with sins of idolatry, incest, and murder.
- Impurity affected women and men alike, and priests as well as ordinary people.
- Death and sex as common denominators to impurity? God does not die, nor has a sexual partner.
- Not all impurity was related to sin. Impurity was normal — even commanded, as in procreation.
- Ritual impurity was never permanent, and always had purificatory procedures — including simply waiting until sunset, bathing, washing clothes, and performing rites.
- Forms of purity are still observed by some Muslims and Jews today. **Early Christians prioritised moral purity over ritual purity.**

12 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup> Speak to the people of Israel, saying:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. <sup>3</sup> On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. <sup>4</sup> Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. <sup>5</sup> If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.

<sup>6</sup> When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt-offering, and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering. <sup>7</sup> He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. <sup>8</sup> If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt-offering and the other for a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.

*Note: the impurity 'is cleansed' with time after the period allotted; the sacrifice does not end the state of impurity.*

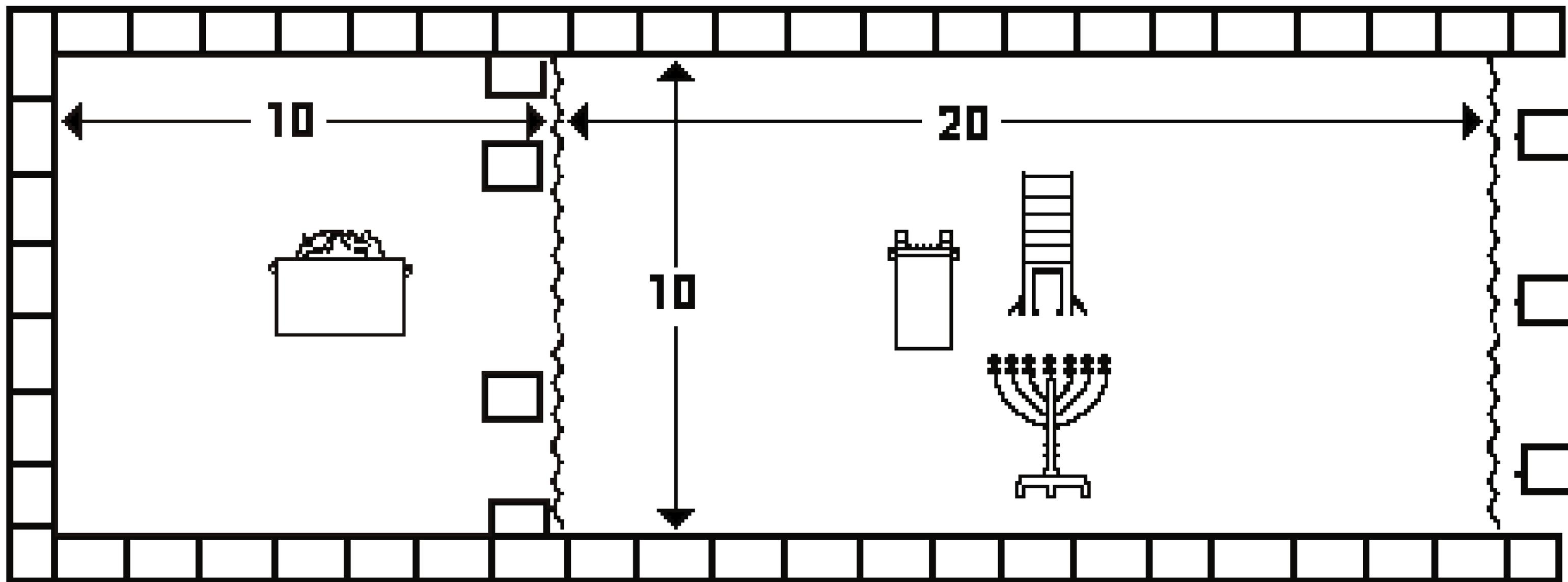
<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

- What can purity mean today — in relation to: infectious disease; laws regarding sanitation; dealing respectfully with corpses in medicine; and in Christian worship?

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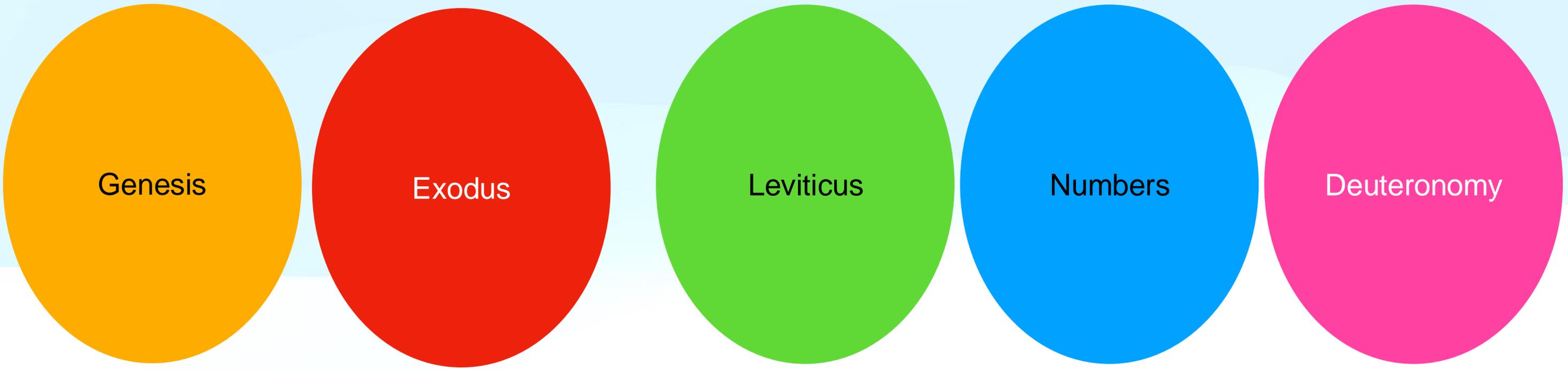
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# What is the Torah?

- Torah as story: Genesis through Deuteronomy
- Torah as commandment, offering instruction
- Torah as 'catechism', teaching about the oneness or unity of the one God
- Torah as 'catechism', teaching a national story and creating a united people

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# How did the Torah come to be?

## Theories of authorship

- Three strands of lit in the Torah: Saga, priestly, and Deuteronomistic styles
- Saga is likely the oldest, arising in the 8th century, perhaps
- Deuteronomistic lit likely arose during the exile and later and has a preacherly, encouraging tone. It is found in Deuteronomy and in small areas beyond Deut
- Priestly lit is likely the latest, arising after the exile in the Second Temple. It features much of the Law in Leviticus but also Gen 1