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Leviticus: An Affirmation of Faith

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PART I

When Moses led the children of Israel out of bondage during the Exodus, entire communities were wiped out by plagues attributed to the ire of vengeful gods by the Egyptians, and to the punitive power of Diety by the Israelites. No thought was given to improper public sanitation. The combination of warm climate and fecal contamination made the water and soil excellent culture media for pathogenic bacterial growth. The spread of parasitic intestinal disease due to pin, round, hookworm and a host of other allied worms was rampant.

The Priests of the Temple were aware that the consumption of swine, canine, feline and rodent flesh was somehow responsible for an agonizing death by suffocation. Centuries later, the causative organism was identified as the *Trichinella Spiralis* which inflame the muscles of respiration of its victim's chest. Tapeworm, noted in beef, pork and fish was not associated with the contamination of the soil and water. Intestinal flukes, another form of tropical disease, caused by infected snails, further contaminated the water and added to the plagues of death.

LEVITICAL LAW

Leviticus is a canonical book of the *Old Testament* which relates to the Priests and Levites among the Jews, or the body of the ceremonial law. One section of Levitical Law prohibits the eating of any animal

that does not have divided hooves or chews its cud; fish that have neither fins nor scales yet live or move in the waters; all birds of prey and any mammal that flies; any animal that creeps upon the earth on all fours, like a weasel, mouse, crocodile or lizard shall be an abomination. It further specifies that only certain animals without blemish may be acceptable as a sacrificial offering to the Lord.

Although the sacrificial offerings have been abandoned since the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish dietary laws of abstinence of certain foods and animals selected for slaughter continue in the same manner. The ritual slaughterer (Schochet) must be a religious and God fearing Jew. The animal selected for food must be in good health and without blemish. The death of the animal must be painless and swift. Blood must not be allowed to coagulate in the arteries or veins. The Schochet, trained in gross anatomy and pathology, must examine the carcass, the lungs, large organs, the glands and viscera for any evidence of disease. Finally, the housewife soaks the meat in water and then salts it to remove any vestigial remains of blood or lymph. The procedure of the religious inspection is now augmented by microscopic and other laboratory examinations of the animal by the U. S. Department of Agriculture. However, in spite of all vigilance, pork should be cooked and maintained at a high tempera-

ture to destroy any remaining encysted larvae of *Trichinella Spiralis*, otherwise when the unsuspected contaminated pork is consumed, the cycle of trichinosis repeats itself. One method of controlling outbreaks of typhoid, dysentery and ptomaine poisoning years ago, was to restrict the sale of shell fish during the warm summer months. The signs "Oysters R in Season" displayed during the colder months, containing the letter "R," September to April, can be nostalgically recalled by those of another generation. However, with adequate refrigeration and supervision by the Department of Fisheries prohibiting the raising and harvesting of shell fish in polluted waters, these outbreaks are reduced to a minimum.

ABROGATION OF LEVITICAL LAW?

Did not Jesus abrogate these ancient Levitical Laws? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said these meaningful words: "Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am come, not to destroy, but to fulfill. He therefore that shall break one of these least commandments, and shall so teach men, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."¹ Saint Joseph, his foster father, led the simple and uneventful life of a Jew, supporting himself and the Holy Family by his work and he was faithful to the religious practices commanded by the Torah, the law observed by pious Israelites.² From the days of Saint Joseph to the present, it is just as hazardous to partake of these forbidden foods in those areas because of the warm climate, flies and fecal contamination. American military personnel, stationed in Egypt,

the Near East, the Gaza strip, etc., dare not eat of the local shell fish. Frozen lobster is served as delicacy, flown in by military transport from the United States. While there may be no hygienic reason to continue the observance of these ancient Levitical practices in countries with moderate climates, the adherence of these health rules are just as pertinent now in Semitic Arab lands and are practiced as a religious rite by Moslems as well as Maronite Catholics.

Is it conceivable that Jesus the Healer would advise the people of the new Israel to eat the forbidden pork and contaminated shell fish with the risk of trichinosis, dysentery, plague and death? The Hebrew dietary laws are based upon the ancient laws promulgated 5700 years ago of *Leviticus*. Chapter 11 deals with the distinction of clean and unclean animals for sacrificial offerings at the Temple and for the consumption of food. *Leviticus* mentions mammals, fish, reptiles and creeping animals in that order. While it is quite close to the classification of vertebrates in zoology, *Leviticus* was not meant to teach science. God spoke in the language people understood, as in *Genesis*, where appear the words the "Sun Stopped." God knew the sun did not stop. He knew also that this classification of vertebrates was inaccurate so far as the interpretation by the people of that day. God was simply giving a lesson in obedience, not science.

The spiritual reason for the Jew, Moslem or Maronite Catholic to refrain from eating of prohibited beasts, birds and fishes is most sig-

nificantly described in a commentary of the Douay Holy Bible.³

- 1: To exercise the people in obedience and temperance.
- 2: To restrain them from the vices of which these animals are symbols.
- 3: Because the things forbidden were unwholesome and not proper to be eaten.
- 4: The people of God, being obliged to abstain from things corporally unclean, might be trained to seek spiritual cleanliness. Verse. 3; — "hoof divided and cheweth the cud," signify discretion between good and evil and meditating on the law of God; when either of these is wanting, a man is unclean. In like manner, fishes with no fins and scales were reputed unclean, that is *fins* that did not raise themselves up by prayer and cover themselves with the scales of virtue.³

CONCLUSION

What meaningful words of inspiration and wisdom from the Catholic to the Jew! These are valid spiritual reasons for the continuation of the Levitical laws for the faltering Jew. The Catholic commentary challenges any bankrupt Hebrew reasoning. Like its legal counterpart in civil law, Chapter II allows a floundering business near the brink of bankruptcy to reorganize and restore its financial integrity without closing its doors, so Chapter II of *Leviticus* can revitalize spiritually the faltering Catholic, Moslem or Jew.

Since there is no valid reason for the modern Jew to observe the Levitical dietary laws as a health

measure, they are primarily observed as a religious rite to promote abstinence, self discipline and obedience in order to attain spiritual grace. Eating is a good and necessary act, but habitually to eat to excess is to misuse this tendency implanted in us by God. To our Catholic brethren, the sin of gluttony will similarly lead to the path of religious neglect, intemperance, dullness of the mind, strife, the ruining of health and to premature death.⁴

PART II

While studying the Douay text of *Leviticus*, I was surprised to find two apparently glaring errors in Chapter 12, Verses 6 and 8. This chapter is concerned with the purification of women after childbirth and the Hebrew version traditionally specifies that an animal, such as a lamb, turtle-dove or a young pigeon without blemish, may be an acceptable sacrificial offering to the Lord.

Verse 6 in the Douay text states, "she shall bring a lamb for a holocaust, and a young pigeon or a turtle for sin, to the priest," while Verse 8 states, "she shall take two turtles or two pigeons." What blasphemy to the Orthodox Hebrew! A creeping turtle, a reptile, like the serpent that tempted Eve, the diabolic initiator of original sin, a Levitical abomination, unfit for human consumption, offered as a sacrificial oblation to the Lord!

Surely this must be a printer's error, missed in the galley proof, an isolated mistake; but the word turtle seemed to creep into seven other passages referring to the sacrificial offering of the poor in *Leviticus*, in chapters one—v. 14; five—v. 7 and

11; fourteen—v. 22 and 30, and finally chapter fifteen—v. 14 and 29.

I then turned to the notes of a Greek physician, according to the Gospel of St. Luke, regarding the offering presented by St. Joseph in behalf of the Blessed Mother after the birth of Jesus. He wrote, "and after the days of her purification, they carried him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, and offer a sacrifice, in the law of God, a pair of turtle doves or two pigeons," certainly not a reptile to desecrate the Holy Tabernacle.

Had I found nine errors in the Holy Catholic Scriptures? I asked a few priests to explain the discrepancy of the Gospel of St. Luke and that of *Leviticus*, but they seemed too prudent or aloof to discuss a theological question with an uninformed layman. I then studied the Masoretic text of *Leviticus* chapter 14, verse 30, and the passage read, "and he shall offer one of the 'torrono'," Hebrew for turtle dove, "or of the young pigeons, such as his means suffice for."

The German version of the same text from *Die Heilige Schrift des Alten das Neuen Bundes* reads: "Dann richte er von dem Turteltauben oder Tauben, die er sich leisten kann." Turteltauben is the turtle-dove, Tauben — a pigeon, whereas *die Schildkröte*, a turtle has both a different meaning and another root origin.

In the Latin Holy Scriptures, after the Vulgate, the verse read: "et turturem sive pullum columbae offeret." *Turturem* is the Latin for turtle-dove, *testudo*, the Latin for turtle,

was not in evidence in any of the text.

I triumphantly pointed out the "nine errors" to a patient of mine, a Dominican religious. Who had this good sister to say about these apparent untruthful allegations in the Holy Book of Truth? For a sister, what explanation could she give, except that her faith would not let her question the sense of an Imprimatur. The following are the words of a dedicated science teacher, Sister Mary Benedict, O.P., who taught many years at the Dominican Academy in Fall River, Mass.

"The Douay version of *Holy Scriptures* was placed in my hands, opened at *Leviticus* which read that a turtle could be a sacrificial offering of the poor. Now what is a turtle I asked myself? Biologically, it is a reptile, a creeping animal, unfit for sacrificial offering. According to nomenclature, I had to admit this, but my reverence and my faith in the word of God could not accept it. My aim, because of the significant difference of the turtle and the turtle-dove as the proper choice of a sacrificial offering in the Douay Bible, was to consult other language versions of the Bible.

"In the *Bible of Jerusalem*, so rich in connotations, the same translation of the Aramic for turtle was found.

"The French version from the *Vulgate*, the passage reads: 'il offrira aussi une tourterelle, ou le petit d'une colombe.' There is a significant distinction between *tourterelle* for the turtle-dove and *tortue*, a turtle, the creeping vertebrate, symbolically in the same category as

the serpent, attributed to the downfall of man in the Garden of Eden.

"Then realizing that the *Bible* was not meant to teach science, but religious truth, I asked to be given time to meditate and reflect. I then consulted *Webster's Dictionary* and here found the answer.

TURTLE: from the French *tortue*, altered after turtle-dove.
from the Latin *tutur*, (dove) a turtle dove (Archaic)

1—Any of a large and widely distributed group of land, fresh and salt water reptiles of the Chelonia or the Testudinate.

2—The curved detachable part of the cylinder which hold the plates in a printing press.

3—Applied to a person as a term of endearment, especially to lovers or married folk, in allusion to the turtle-dove's affection for its mate.

"Had my emotions been less stirred, I perhaps would have found an analogy in the Latin *turtur*, turtle-dove which is indeed a becoming sacrificial offering of the poor, the offering chosen by St. Joseph, as a

symbol of the Holy Spirit for the Blessed Mother on her day of purification. It was my great satisfaction to be able to obliterate doubt from the mind of Dr. Schwartz, what was for him and any other doubter a possible sign of error; besides it was a re-affirmation of my profound respect and belief in the Words of God as expressed in Holy Scripture."

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