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Joel Kaminsky
Smith College, jkaminsk@smith.edu

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Loving One's (Israelite) Neighbor: Election and Commandment in Leviticus 19

JOEL S. KAMINSKY

Associate Professor of Religion

Smith College

This essay illuminates a number of nuances implicit in the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” by exploring its connection to Israel's election theology as well as to the larger Priestly theology that forms much of the framework of the Torah.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:17–18)

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33–34)

Often students are astonished to learn that Jesus did not invent the idea that one should love one's neighbor as oneself, and even more astounded to discover that it is first found in Lev 19. When informed that this expression first occurs in the HB, many contemporary readers assume it must come from the prophetic material. How could those rather narrow-minded priests so concerned with cultic details have authored this notion, let alone enshrined it in the center of their corpus? Indeed, lack of awareness of the phrase's original context causes many to import into the phrase modern secular or Christian connotations that obscure aspects of what this verse means.

The command found in Leviticus to love one's neighbor as oneself raises a number of issues. Perhaps foremost is the question of “Who is one's neighbor?” a question already broached in antiquity (Luke 10:29). While both later rabbinic Judaism and classical Christianity understood this verse as applying to all of humanity, the inclusion of the (likely) supplemental passage, Lev 19:33–34, which explicitly applies the same command to the resident alien, strongly indicates that Lev 19:18 addressed relations among Israelites alone. This supposition is further strengthened by the other terms used in Lev 19:17–18, which include “your kin” (literally “your brother”), and “your people.” In fact, the word translated as “neighbor” may be rendered better as “fellow citizen.”

The extension of such loving behavior toward the resident alien should not be taken as a

signal that vv. 33–34 extended this command to all non-Israelites. Resident aliens are a very specific group of people who, according to the Priestly tradents (hereafter designated as P), consist of those non-Israelites who dwelled in the land of Israel with the people of Israel.¹ The theology of the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26, hereafter designated as H) actually requires that these resident aliens obey certain cultic regulations. Thus, Lev 17:15 proclaims that both native Israelites and resident aliens who consume meat from animals that died naturally or were torn by other beasts become impure and are expected to engage in a purification ritual (cf. Deut 14:21, which allows aliens to eat such meat). Failure to purify oneself constituted a sin (Lev 17:16).

Another P text goes further, even allowing those resident aliens who are willing to be circumcised along with all the males in their households to celebrate the Passover ritual, a ritual that marks God's redemption of his beloved people from their sojourn in Egypt (Exod 12:48–49). Here, resident aliens are permitted to participate in Israel's cultic life, likely providing the earliest form of what would later develop into a conversion ritual within Judaism. Yet even while included in some regulations and given the ability to participate in one of Israel's central rites, resident aliens remained distinct and are at some disadvantage. Thus, Lev 25:45–46 permits one to acquire resident aliens or their children as permanent slaves, something one cannot do with fellow Israelites inasmuch as they belong to God (literally, they are God's slaves, Lev 25:42).

Contemporary readers are often upset by the ways in which Israel's theology created distinctions between Israelites and non-Israelites. At the same time, few Westerners would applaud P's requirement that resident aliens observe certain basic Israelite purity rules, even though this is an act of cultural inclusion. Yet even today, cultural inclusion regularly involves gaining rights within the new group but also added responsibilities. Many Americans accept resident aliens, although they are not full citizens and thus lack certain rights. At the same time, resident alien status requires adhering to the American legal system and perhaps more troubling, having to adjust to American cultural norms. It is intellectually incoherent to argue that resident aliens, whether living today or in antiquity, be treated like natives while at the same time advocating that it is wrong to impose upon them any legal or cultural norms stemming from the new society in which they now reside.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOVING ONE'S NEIGHBOR AND HOLINESS IN LEVITICUS 19

What exactly does the term "love" connote in Lev 19? Within the book of Deuteronomy,

¹ For more detailed study of the meaning of the term "resident alien" in differing biblical texts, see Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (JSOTSup 107; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) and José Ramírez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel* (BZAW 283; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

this term is linked to Israel's covenantal understanding of its relationship to God, a notion that itself was strongly influenced by ancient Near Eastern treaty terminology.² On analogy, one might infer that loving one's neighbor was not simply (and perhaps not even primarily) an affective state, but rather an obligation to act properly towards such an individual.³ The verses leading up to this proclamation contain a number of prohibitions, including several that resemble aspects of the Ten Commandments. Thus, Lev 19:2–4 mentions fearing one's parents, keeping the Sabbath, and not worshipping idols. After some cultic rules surrounding sacrificial procedure, the passage turns to a number of social issues such as: feeding the poor (vv. 9–10), not stealing or lying, not swearing falsely (vv. 11–12), the strong not oppressing the weak and vulnerable (vv. 13–14), rendering even-handed justice to all (v. 15), and not slandering one's fellow Israelites (v. 16). Most interesting is that the immediate context of vv. 17–18 speaks of the necessity of reproofing a neighbor who is acting wrongly even while not taking revenge against him (this perhaps being reserved for the deity). Clearly, the word love in this passage is communicating something more akin to proper treatment of one's fellow citizens. The emphasis on tactfully reproofing a wayward fellow citizen is a far cry from the now widespread idea that loving one's neighbor means not judging them but rather accepting them as they are. It should be noted that the same concern for reproofing one's neighbor occurs in the NT (Matt 18:15–20).

This unusual mixture of laws (e.g., ritual, moral, criminal)—unusual at least to our contemporary sensibilities—continues throughout the rest of Lev 19, fleshing out the complexity of the concept of holiness in the HB stressed in the chapter's opening (Lev 19:2).⁴ Westerners tend to highlight ethics over ritual and view religion as a matter of personal preference, but Leviticus conceptualizes holiness as a unity of proper ethical and ritual conduct and also affirms that religion is not a private matter between each individual and God. Much the same can be said about the NT. While many assume that Jesus elevates ethics over ritual, a close look at the Sermon on the Mount indicates that he does so only when one is faced with a situation in which a person must attend to both an ethical and a ritual duty at the same time. For the moment, the ethical is given priority, but after attending to one's ethical obligation a person is to return and complete their ritual obligation (Matt 5:21–24). Similarly, many imagine that the NT places greater emphasis on the individual's relationship to God. However, a number of NT texts indicate that the early church continued to stress the corporate dimensions of religion so prevalent in the rest of the Bible (1 Cor 12). P as well as other major streams of biblical theology envision life as an ongoing encounter between the sacred community and the divine. An individual who sins against God, whether it be a ritual or ethical

² William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 77–87.

³ Of course, elsewhere in the Bible "love" includes more affective dimensions (Gen 29:18; 34:3).

⁴ On the concept of "Holiness" in the HB see John G. Gammie, *Holiness in Israel* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989). For a survey of the ways in which the concept of holiness changed between the biblical and rabbinic periods see Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (SJLA 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973) and more recently Howard Eilberg Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).

lapse, also offends and endangers his community. And when an individual harms a fellow citizen, be it in a criminal, civil, or moral matter, it is offensive to God as well as to the larger community.⁵ In these texts, religion pervades all domains of life rather than being sequestered, as it frequently is in the modern West.

In Priestly texts, Israel is commanded to be holy because the most holy God lives in proximity to the people of Israel (Num 35:34; Ezek 20:41). Israel's failure to maintain the proper level of holiness will eventually cause God to abandon his dwelling place, the Israelite shrine or temple, thus leaving Israel vulnerable to attack from external forces (Ezek 8–11).⁶ Through maintaining a proper state of holiness, Israel continues to be protected by the divine presence that abides in its midst (Pss 46 and 48).

Israel functions as a mediator for God's holiness by creating an environment in which the deity will become manifest. This requires that Israel construct a shrine and its utensils according to a precise model revealed by God to Moses (Exod 25:9, 40; Num 8:4).⁷ It also necessitates that various ritual procedures be executed correctly. God's environment was affected not only by the actions or inactions of various cultic officials, but also by any Israelite who even accidentally committed a breach of God's law.⁸ On this basis ancient Israel recognized and accepted a type of communal responsibility. Thus the community as a whole was held responsible for harboring a high-handed sinner (Num 15:30–31; see similarly in the NT, Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 5) and for instituting proper penitential and sacrificial procedures for those who recognized that they had sinned unwittingly (Lev 4–5).

Although all Israel must keep a heightened level of moral and ritual purity, there are indeed gradations of holiness as one more closely approaches the divine presence. One finds a ring-like structure in Priestly texts in which God occupies the holy of holies, with the high priest at the next level of holiness. At a lower level are the other priests who work in the sanctuary, who in turn are followed by the Levites who maintain, move, and guard God's sanctuary. Finally, one has the other Israelite tribes along with anyone else residing in the Holy Land, which is the land made holy by God's presence. While both hierarchical and exclusionary in some respects, it is important to recognize that all Israel as well as the entire world enjoys the benefits of God's presence in the sanctuary and the blessing that accompanies it. Within P, Israel's election is quite literally an election for divine service. P's exclusionary and hierarchical reflexes flow from the belief that Israel is specially charged to preserve God's holiness. Israel's proper execution of its duties toward God and toward each other benefits not only Israel, but also other nations as long as they abide by the standards of human decency implied in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1–17).

⁵ For further discussion, see Joel Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 196; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995).

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (SJLA 36; Leiden: Brill, 1983), 75–84.

⁷ A similar claim seems to be made about David's plans for the temple in 1 Chr 28:11–19.

⁸ As noted above, according to P even a non-Israelite could pollute God's environment if he ate impure things within the land of Israel and refused to follow the Levitical rules of purification (Lev 17:15–16).

Perhaps most interesting is that these hierarchies and exclusions occur even within Israel, and they are not reducible to raw ideologies of power. According to Lev 21, priests may only attend the funeral of immediate blood relatives—thereby being prohibited from attending their own wives' funerals. Further, the high priest cannot even attend the funeral of his mother or father. Clearly these rules were not written simply to benefit those who worked in the most sacred zone. The high priest is in some sense a permanent inmate in the sanctuary complex.

While P is sometimes seen as hegemonic because this corpus maintains certain hierarchies between differing Israelites as well as between Israel and other nations, P, and even more H, did a great deal to democratize various theological ideas. The fact that Lev 19 begins with a call for *all the congregation of the people of Israel* to be holy as God is holy suggests a bold attempt to make Israel a nation of priests, or perhaps better translated, a royal kingdom (Exod 19:5–6). Now every Israelite must maintain not only a higher level of ritual purity but also higher standards of behavior towards each other because they live in close proximity to the divine presence. Furthermore, it may well be that the heavy emphasis within various strata of the HB on Israel's responsibility to care for the poorest and most marginalized elements of their own society flows from this notion. There is a widespread awareness in the ancient Near East that the king was especially charged with maintaining and protecting the rights of the most marginalized groups of people, such as widows and orphans. One sees this theology clearly in Ps 72:12–14, a royal psalm describing the ideal king, as well as in certain biblical narratives, such as the story spun by the wise woman of Tekoa (1 Sam 14). The king is considered God's representative on earth and thus he, like God, is obligated to protect the weak and the poor (Pss 2 and 72).

I would contend that once Israel came to see itself as a royal nation, this awareness carried in its wake the notion that every Israelite, rather than just the king, was now responsible for the most marginalized elements in Israelite society. While it may be tempting to label Israel's conception of itself as a priestly people distinct from other nations as a regressive and elitist notion, one must reckon with the fact that this very feature may have given birth to the Bible's unique insight that Israelites of all societal strata bore responsibility to create a just society in which those most marginalized were neither neglected nor abused.

ISRAEL'S UNDERSTANDING OF ITS SELF-IDENTITY ACCORDING TO THE PRIESTLY WRITERS

In spite of the fact that modern society often operates in a similar fashion, many contemporary readers are disturbed by the propensity to draw communal boundaries, and more par-

ticularly, that one should treat members of one group differently than members of another group. My own suspicion is that we remain hypnotized by a universalistic ideal even though few assume that treating everyone the same way is a good idea. Most would acknowledge that it is normal and even positive to relate more intimately with one's own family than with others. Few believe we bear no additional responsibility toward our closest relatives than we do to any other human being. Fewer yet would say to one's parents or one's spouse, "I love you just like I love everyone else." Such statements are nonsense today, and even more so in antiquity where one's family, clan, and nation bore one's hopes and dreams.⁹

Now one might ask why God would command ancient Israelites to love each other and also to love those aliens residing among them, but not order them to love all non-Israelites or to love even their enemies (the latter advocated by Jesus in Matt 5:43–48). To begin with, there is difference between the perfectionist ethic found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (perhaps partially fed by the apocalyptic fervor that was pervasive during Jesus' ministry) as opposed to the much more realistic ethic found in the Levitical code and elsewhere in the HB. Thus I would contend that Jesus as well as Paul set extraordinary standards of behavior that required their followers to live in the most heightened states of purity possible (Matt 5; 1 Cor 7), because they believed that the end time was near. Leviticus recognizes that one regularly moves between states of purity and impurity. Its legislation is designed for a community that resides in God's eternal presence even while living in the everyday terrestrial world. This likely explains why the HB never commands one to love one's enemies, a rather unnatural act. In fact, one may even hate certain individuals and groups, if they are engaging in behavior God hates (Ps 139:19–24). To associate with or be tolerant toward God's enemies is a form of disloyalty toward God. Admittedly one must be careful before presuming to label someone as an enemy of God, but one can also err by refusing to confront evildoers. Perhaps surprising to some, one finds similar ideas in the NT (2 Cor 6:14–7:1).¹⁰

The Pentateuch's master story and how it understands Israel and its relationship to the other nations of the world help illuminate this theology. In Gen 1–11, God attempts to deal with all of humanity, yet these various attempts go awry. With this in mind, God tries a whole new plan in Gen 12 when he calls Abraham. God's relationship with Abraham and his select descendants (i.e., those fathered by Isaac and Jacob) culminates when, after freeing the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, he enters into a covenant at Mount Sinai to make Israel his priestly people and treasured possession from among all the nations of the world (Exod 19:4–6). Israel, as God's immediate family, is held to a higher standard of behavior. Although Israel is separated from the

⁹ Jon D. Levenson has convincingly demonstrated that ancient Israelites saw in their extended family and nation the functional equivalent of the notion of personal immortality. See *idem*, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ For further discussion, see Joel S. Kaminsky and Joel N. Lohr, "Exclusion," *NIDB* 2:362–64.

other nations, the nations may benefit from Israel's blessings depending on how they relate to Israel and its God (Gen 12:1–3; 18:16–19; 20:17; 26:26–33; 39:5).¹¹

Within the pentateuchal narrative, Israel becomes God's firstborn son by passing through a death and resurrection experience similar to those that Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph each had. As Jon Levenson has demonstrated, this (near-) death and resurrection theme conveys that the surviving child is now no longer a natural child but one belonging to the deity.¹² The people of Israel are descended from the supernatural child Isaac (a point stressed by Paul in Rom 9:6–13), a child who is born to an aged and infertile couple and then offered in sacrifice to God. But furthermore, the whole people experience at least two other events in which they are rescued by God from death, indicating God's special claim upon them. The first is when God, acting through Joseph's life, saves the family of Jacob from starvation. The second is God's miraculous redemption of Israel from Egyptian servitude. Egypt itself is associated with death and the underworld. And this redemption is paired with God's care for them in the wilderness.¹³ God's actions on behalf of Israel are closely linked to Israel's acceptance of the *mitsvot*, the commandments given at Sinai. Inasmuch as Israel, like Isaac, is a "supernatural" people who belong to God, God can impose upon them a heightened morality that includes God's command that each Israelite love other members of the community as him/herself.

It is worth exploring why P envisions God proceeding in this fashion. In the P narrative, God at first attempts to hold all of humanity to an equally high standard. Thus Gen 1:29 imagines that ideally humans should all be vegetarians. And it seems that God's wildly unrealistic expectations result in humans acting all the more violently (Gen 4:1–16, 23–24; 6:13). After the flood, God moderates the plan by allowing humans to consume animals as long as they pour the blood of the animal on the ground (Gen 9:2–4). This is preceded by God's acknowledgement that humans have evil propensities from their youth (Gen 8:21) and followed by the covenant with Noah in which God promises not to destroy the world by a flood despite human misbehavior (Gen 9:8–17).

But shortly after the flood, two other troubling incidents occur that suggest that God's relationship with the human community remains fractured: the enigmatic interaction between Ham and Noah, followed by the Tower of Babel episode (Gen 9:20–27; 11:1–9). These two passages indicate that God's attempt to permit humans to engage in limited violence (i.e., God's granting permission to kill and eat animals within certain limitations), while more realistic, is not a cure-all for what ails the world. At this time, God opts to institute another change of plans and decides to create a two-tiered system in which he relates to Abraham

¹¹ Mark E. Biddle, "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations," *JBL* 109.4 (Winter 1990): 599–611.

¹² Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹³ Of note is that Moses himself, the person who redeems God's firstborn sons the Israelites (Exod 4:22–23), undergoes two near death and resurrection experiences (Exod 2:1–10; 4:24–26).

and Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob in a more intimate manner that carries special privileges and extra responsibilities (Gen 17:1–21; Exod 19–24). From P's angle, the people of Israel help create and maintain the ritual/moral infrastructure that allows for God's presence to become manifest in the terrestrial world.

Here it is worth noting a commonly overlooked aspect of P's theology. Many assume that being righteous entails engaging in superhuman feats that take place on the world stage. Generally speaking, the HB affirms that acting justly is something that occurs on a daily basis in one's mundane interactions with one's neighbors. It is sometimes forgotten that the average ancient Israelite may have met fewer people in a lifetime than we meet in a month, let alone a year. Creating a just society in ancient Israel involved acting locally. While today we live in a more closely connected world, P's insight that charity begins at home and that often the most difficult spiritual struggles are those that occur in our quotidian lives deserves renewed emphasis. Many are familiar with the quip often used to describe those who yearn for a just world but treat their own neighbors and relatives with contempt as "those who love humanity but hate people." In the contemporary West, it is frequently easier to have compassion and interact in a just fashion with those who are more distant while ignoring the social injustices so present in our own society, often quite close to our own homes.

Another equally salient point is that even though the Israelites are not commanded to love all peoples like they are to love members of their own nation and those resident aliens living among them, they are not told to hate all other non-Israelites. There is a widespread tendency in both scholarly and popular circles to assume that those streams of Israelite and rabbinic thought that emphasized Israel's unique election, its chosen status, inevitably viewed all non-Israelites/non-Jews as enemies of God who were destined for destruction. For example, Regina Schwartz asserts the following in her recent popular book, *The Curse of Cain*: "The Other against whom Israel's identity is forged is abhorred, abject, impure, and in the 'Old Testament' vast numbers of them are obliterated."¹⁴ Similarly, Gerd Lüdemann's book *The Unholy in Holy Scripture* claims that "as Israel is the holy people, chosen by YHWH, it must totally avoid contact with other peoples; political neutrality and religious tolerance are excluded."¹⁵

Schwartz and Lüdemann seem unaware that the Israelite idea of election presupposes three rather than two categories: the elect, the anti-elect, and the non-elect. The "elect" are God's chosen people, Israel. The "anti-elect" are those few groups who are deemed to be enemies of God and whom Israel is commanded to annihilate, such as the Canaanites and the Amalekites (Deut 7; 25:17–19). While the order to destroy these groups is indeed theo-

¹⁴ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 18–19.

¹⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* (trans. John Bowden; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 71. I have de-vocalized the Tetragrammaton.

logically troubling, it is important to stress that most texts within the HB that affirm Israel's elect status view the vast majority of foreign individuals and nations as members of the "non-elect" rather than the "anti-elect." These non-elect peoples were always considered fully part of the divine economy, and, in a very real sense, Israel was to work out its destiny in relation to them, even if in separation from them.¹⁶

Many foreign figures are treated with great respect and some function as moral exemplars. One need only think of Pharaoh's daughter who saves Moses' life (Exod 2:5–10), Job the wise and righteous man from the east, Ruth the devout ancestress of King David, or the non-Israelite sailors in Jonah's boat who pray, sacrifice, and make vows to the Lord (Jonah 1:14–16). All of these portrayals belie the widespread assumption that Israel's sense of its own election inherently led Israelites to express contempt for the non-chosen. Certain texts in the HB go further yet and assert that the non-elect often have much to teach the elect about how one should act in the world and serve God.¹⁷ Thus Jethro helps Moses and the Israelites institute a more functional legal system (Exod 18).

Now admittedly, the assertion that God relates more intimately to some individuals and groups than others remains highly offensive today, although it is a biblical idea that is difficult to disregard. While not often recognized, the notion that God does not relate to us all in the same fashion is intimately linked to and grows out of the Bible's view that God personally relates to human individuals, families, and even to peoples and nations in their humanity. Will Herberg has perceptively grasped the connection between election and the biblical God's characterization:

[T]o be scandalized by the universal God acting in and through particularities of time, place, and history, is to conceive the divine in essentially impersonal intellectual terms. . . . The insistence on historical particularity contained in the notion of "chosenness" is . . . part of the Biblical-rabbinic affirmation of the "living" God, who meets man in personal encounter in the context of life and history.¹⁸

God's mysterious love for Israel, far from being simply a blunt assertion of unbridled ethnocentrism, is intimately bound to Israel's conception of how God lovingly interacts with the world.

Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, ancient Israel's deepest insights into God's universalism were not arrived at through a weakening of Israel's sense of its identity. Rather it is in those most particularistic texts, such as those written by P and by Deutero-Isaiah, texts that probe the meaning of Israel's chosenness, in which one finds glimpses of the universal implications of Israel's theology. Thus both P and Deutero-Isaiah greatly emphasize that Israel's God is the creator of the whole world (Gen 1; Isa 40:28; 43:14–21; 45:5–8, 18–19). And P, along with certain late texts from Trito-Isaiah that build upon Deutero-Isaiah's insights, begins to make room for those who wish to

¹⁶ For more extensive discussion of this topic, see Joel S. Kaminsky, "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?" *HTR* 96.4 (October 2003): 397–425.

¹⁷ See Frank Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) and Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Will Herberg, "The 'Chosenness' of Israel and the Jew of Today" in *Arguments and Doctrines: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (ed. Arthur Cohen; New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 281, emphasis his.

join themselves to God's people (e.g., Isa 56 and 66).¹⁹ Contrary to the widespread critical consensus of the last century, Mary Douglas has made a convincing case that P's theology appears to contain a critique of certain exclusionary tendencies that may be found elsewhere in the HB.²⁰

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

While many view Lev 19:18 as one of the most central texts in Judaism and Christianity, there are potential difficulties in placing too much weight upon this single verse. Already in late antiquity, one ancient rabbi observed that there might be a problem if one loves one's neighbor only as much as one loves oneself. What happens when one does not love oneself enough and thereby wrongs and degrades himself? Should he treat others as he does himself? This exact point is made in response to Rabbi Akiba's proclamation that Lev 19:18 is the fundamental law in the Torah (indicating that Akiba believes this commandment applies to all humanity not just one's fellow Israelite). Ben Azzai argues that one's treatment of others is better grounded in Gen 5:1 (another P text), which contains the even more fundamental affirmation that humans are created in God's image: "So that one should not say: 'Since I despise myself, let my fellow be despised with me; since I am cursed, let my fellow be cursed with me.'"²¹ Inasmuch as all humans are created in God's image, one must treat them in a dignified manner. To do so is to honor the image of God present in the "Other" and to fail to do so is to degrade that divine image (Prov 17:5; 19:17; Matt 25:31–46).

Before criticizing the author of Lev 19:18 for limiting the command to love one's neighbor to fellow Israelites and resident aliens living in the land of Israel, we should remember that P is responsible for the insight that all humans were created in God's image. But this same school recognized that while all humans were accorded a fundamental dignity and protection that came with being created in God's image (Gen 9:1–6), it was less realistic to expect all to adhere to the more rigorous demand made on God's holy people that they love (and tactfully chastise) their neighbors as themselves.²²

Much of the brilliance of the HB's theology is its keen awareness of working within the real limitations we humans have. Some may assume that P's theology has little, if any, relevance to the contemporary world, either because they are put off by its cultic details or because they see this text's moral vision as incomplete until various NT texts supposedly improved upon it. However, close study reveals that P contains a number of striking theological insights that remain as capable of transforming us and our world as when they were penned over twenty-five centuries ago.

¹⁹ For more on Israel and the nations in Second and Third Isaiah, see Joel S. Kaminsky and Anne Stewart, "God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40–66," *HTR* 99.2 (April 2006): 139–63.

²⁰ Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (JSOTSup 158; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993). However, I believe that her reading of Ezra and Nehemiah as total exclusionists is in need of some nuancing.

²¹ *Sifra Qedoshim* 4:12 cited in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1656. Similarly, *Gen. Rab.* 24:7 and *Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim* 9:4.

²² I reject the notion advocated by some scholars that negative human behavior in Gen 1–11 shatters the image of God which afterwards is only located among Israel. See, for example, John T. Strong, "Israel as a Testimony to YHWH's Power: The Priests' Definition of Israel," in *Constituting the Community: A Festschrift in Honor of S. Dean McBride* (ed. John Strong and Steven Tuell; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 89–106.