

Considering the Spiritual Sense of Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22

For well over a year I have been feeling a need to consider in depth the spiritual sense of Leviticus chapter 18 and most specifically verse 22. This is because this verse is one of the key verses mentioned in debates about homosexuality. Because this verse is not dealt with either explicitly or in detail by Swedenborg, I have found this quite a challenge and it has taken a significant amount of time to look at this.

What I have written here is offered tentatively, but I feel it may be of some use even so. It may be that there are various aspects of this chapter generally and this verse in particular which can be seen in the text and that what I have written is only one way of looking at these matters. I should also emphasise at the outset that I am not going to attempt to comment on the extent to which Leviticus 18.22 can be taken literally, but rather to endeavour to draw out what it may mean for us spiritually.

I should perhaps say at this point that I have endeavoured to see what relevance the spiritual sense may have for each one of us, although I have also included below some examples which I can apply to myself personally by way of concrete examples of an application of the spiritual sense.

The Background to Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22

It is often useful before looking at a specific verse to set it in context in the part of the Word in which it appears. The book of Leviticus as a whole deals chiefly in the literal sense with matters of ritual cleanliness and instructions about worship. However, there are some parts which focus more on everyday life. However, even here, the theme of what is "clean" or "unclean" is present. For example, verse 3 of chapter 18 talks about the people being distinguished from both those in Egypt and those in Canaan. The theme of separation between the Israelites and other nations is an implicit theme in the book as a whole, but it is mentioned explicitly in this chapter (see verse 24). This seems appropriate given that the chapter as a whole deals in the literal sense with sexual liaisons and therefore what is permissible to be combined and what is to be kept apart when it comes to sexual liaisons. This theme of separation (or a lack of it) is also something which Swedenborg points towards in what he says about the spiritual sense of the chapter.

Swedenborg talks about the chapter as a whole as follows:

... and, by the various kinds of adulteries and whoredoms which are related in Leviticus (ch. 18 vv. 6-30), are signified various kinds of adulterations and falsifications of good and truth. Apocalypse Explained 410/11

The Word is violated by those in the Christian church who adulterate its good and its truths. They do this if they separate truth from good, and good from truth. Also, if they take appearances of truth and fallacies for real truths and confirm them. Also, if they know the truths taught from the Word, but live wicked lives; and others who behave in similar ways. These violations of the

Word and the church correspond to the forbidden degrees listed in Leviticus, chapter 18. Conjugal Love 519

Swedenborg says something similar but also slightly different when referring to Leviticus chapter 20, which has similar material in it about sexual liaisons to Leviticus chapter 18 (including Leviticus 20.13 which talks about a man lying with a man "as one lies with a woman"):

Each law in the Word concerning those matters has reference inwardly to the law of the affiliation and joining together of good and truth in heaven, and to the affiliations of evil and falsity in hell, which are separated from the former. For laws to do with permissible and forbidden degrees, see Leviticus 20.

Arcana Caelestia 3703/3

The traditional meaning of the word "adulterate" can remind us that "adultery" can have this sense of mixing one thing with another and therefore that the purity of something is compromised. Swedenborg consistently talks about "adultery" and "whoredom" being about good or truth mixing with evil or falsity.

The Phraseology of Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22

The phrase used for most of the injunctions against specific types of sexual activity in chapter 18 of Leviticus is "to uncover the nakedness" when translated literally, although this is often described as a euphemism for sexual intercourse by biblical scholars and translated along these lines. (The literal translation is used in the Conference version of Leviticus in Pentateuch). I have not been able to find anywhere where Swedenborg deals with this phrase in Leviticus. However, when he looks at it in relation to passages from the Prophets (e.g. in Hosea chapter 2, Isaiah chapter 47 and slightly different but related phrasing in Nahum chapter 3) he links it with what is within being revealed as hellish rather than heavenly. We shall return to this below, but we now need to move on to verse 22, where this phrase is not used. The equivalent phrase in verse 22 is "to lie with". This is used in two phrases, as the injunction is about not "lying with" a man, "as one lies with a woman".

This phrase (the root word is "shakab" in Hebrew) is used elsewhere in the Word about sexual liaisons which almost exclusively have some unsatisfactory aspect about them. Swedenborg takes on this phraseology of "lying with" in discussing them. In the Word, sexual relationships have the symbolism of something being brought together where there is meant to be conjunction or of things being combined which should be kept apart. When Swedenborg uses "lying with", he talks about the latter rather than the former, as in the literal sense of the Word (see, for example, the following references from Arcana Caelestia: 2465, 3398, 4433, 4601, 4989, 9183; the exception to this is Genesis 30.17, in which Swedenborg gives Jacob "lying with" Leah a more positive connotation – see Arcana Caelestia 3952).

Looking at the spiritual sense of Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22

Our starting point for the spiritual sense of verse 22 therefore looks like being a combining of two things which do not belong together. There does seem to be an implication that what belong together are what is represented by "man" and "woman". Arcana Caelestia 4823 suggests that when "man" and "wife" or "man" and "woman" are talked about, "man" represents truth and "woman" good. However, it could also be that we are dealing with "man" representing the opposite of truth i.e. falsity. I confess that my initial reaction to trying to understand this verse spiritually was that good and truth or love and wisdom together form the heavenly marriage and that what is described in this verse is an imbalance in which truth is abundant and good is lacking. Verse 22 would therefore be describing something in our life where combining good and truth is needed but instead we operate only from truth. I tried to imagine the sort of situation that this would remind me of personally. This could be when I stick with my understanding of truth, perhaps, for example, adhering rigidly to principles I hold, feeling that I know how someone should behave towards me or others (and tending to judge them when they fail to live up to this). What is needed rather might be to have more compassion towards that person and to try to understand more deeply what might be happening for them.

Thinking about it further, however, and with some further reading, I wondered if, for all that what I have just talked about could be a useful reminder, there might be more to it. Having found a reference to one of the prohibitions in Leviticus chapter 18, I wondered if this might be of some relevance. This was actually in Arcana Caelestia 4818. This deals with Judah having a sexual liaison with his disguised daughter-in-law (see Leviticus 18.15), Tamar, in Genesis chapter 38. What this passage suggested was that sometimes what we think may be good is in fact the opposite and what is true is in fact not at all, but that we fail to recognise this:

The nature of this evil is such that people in the world cannot tell it apart from other evils; but in the next life angels recognize it quite clearly. For in the next life the countless differences in the essential nature and the origin of evils and falsities are in full view; and it is also the genera and species to which these evils and falsities belong that mark off the hells from one another. Of these countless differences man knows scarcely anything.

This also seems to link with the Conjugal Love quotation above:

The Word is violated by those in the Christian church who adulterate its good and its truths. They do this if they separate truth from good, and good from truth. Also, if they take appearances of truth and fallacies for real truths and confirm them. Also, if they know the truths taught from the Word, but live wicked lives; and others who behave in similar ways.

What I am left wondering is if Leviticus 18.22 is about some of what we think is true actually being only an appearance or even a mistaken view of truth. What is more, I may even feel that my view of truth is a marriage of love and wisdom, when it is in fact merely a mixture of truth and falsity. Untangling

this is likely to be quite a challenge. It certainly makes truth much more provisional. Is that part of the point? If I can't be sure of what is true and what isn't, it certainly means that I have to deal differently with other individuals or groups whose view of the truth is different from my own. To what extent can I say that I know what the truth is and that they don't?

There are two aspects of chapter 18 of Leviticus that I have yet to consider. The first is to look at the verse before verse 22, namely verse 21, and also the punishments which are referred to in both chapter 18 and chapter 20.

Verse 21 seems to me to confirm the challenging nature of the way I have been seeing a spiritual sense to verse 22. It seems as if "man lying with man" may be a reminder to us that, perhaps even without realising it, we may allow something to influence us that only appears to be true or which even leads away from the truth; the verse prior to verse 22 accentuates the dangers of losing a sense of the truth. Verse 21 emphasises these aspects in the way that Swedenborg talks about the two main images in this verse, namely seed and Molech. Swedenborg relates "seed" (which he talks about rather than "children", as in many translations of the Bible) to truth: "To give of his seed to Molech" signifies to destroy the truth of the Word and of the doctrine of the church therefrom, by application to the filthy loves of the body, as murders, hatreds, revenges, adulteries, and the like, which leads to the acceptance of infernal falsities instead of things Divine; such falsities are signified by "the seed given to Molech." *Apocalypse Explained* 768/25

The word at the end of verse 22 is often translated as "abomination", although some translations are slightly less strong e.g. "detestable" (the Conference Pentateuch has "abhorrence"). The Hebrew word is "toebah". When this word occurs in the Old Testament, it is usually connected with the need for the children of Israel not to follow the practices of other nations, which we looked at in relation to the book of Leviticus and chapter 18 as a whole. This therefore also reinforces this sense of separation from something to be avoided.

Another area that links with this is the punishments listed in relation to Leviticus 18.22 and the similar verse two chapters later, Leviticus 20.13. The punishment in chapter 18 is that of being "cut off from the people", whereas in chapter 20 this is the death penalty ("their blood shall be upon them" literally).

For Swedenborg, both punishments can be related to separation. On several occasions, Swedenborg talks about being cut off from the people having a sense of being separated from heaven and the church and hence spiritual death (see, for example, *Arcana Caelestia* 10289). This is therefore not as different as it might first appear from what is in chapter 20, which relates more obviously to death and is linked specifically with falsity through "blood".

One thing that strikes me about these passages of death and destruction in Leviticus is that they bear some similarity to other passages elsewhere in the Word where we read about destruction. This can be most clearly seen in Revelation, but there are also similar passages in the Gospels and the Prophets. The plagues in Egypt also have something of this feel to them.

The link with Revelation and many of these other passages brings to mind the aspects of necessary separation within the judgment process that we might associate with the Apocalypse and apocalyptic literature. I am therefore left wondering whether part of Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 in general and verse 18.22 and 20.13 specifically have a strong sense of judgment. For Swedenborg much of this is about what lies hidden within us being revealed as resisting our spiritual growth and that this therefore is depicted in terms of scenes of destruction. Once this has been recognised, we then have an opportunity to distance ourselves from something which can block our connection with the Lord. As the Conference Apocalypse Study Group put this in the Introduction to The Apocalypse of John catalogue:
"From the perspective of our individual spiritual development, we are being challenged to look more deeply at what needs to be overcome in us, even to re-examine the basis of our spiritual values."

This could also have elements of the idea suggested above of what appears to be one thing turning out to be another, which is also part of many passages in the book of Revelation, for example, the letters to the seven churches (but which is also in the specific passages from the Prophets mentioned above). This type of passage is one which we tend to use most easily to refer to others, but part of the message of Revelation is that this judgment applies to each of us. It may not be a particularly pleasant thought on which to end, but if that were to be the case, Leviticus 18.22 would then above all be a verse for us to apply to ourselves for the sake of identifying what in us needs to change.